***THE CONTRIBUTION OF EUGENE PETERSON TO PASTORAL THEOLOGY***

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***John E. Johnson***

There was a time the terms pastor and theologian were interchangeable. As theologians, they studied, reflected and systematized revealed truth—and as pastors they passed along the wisdom of God’s revealed truth to their congregants. But over the centuries, a gap began to grow. The roles became dissimilar. Theologians conformed more and more to the demands of the academy. And those pastors without the academic credentials were often left out.

Eventually a legal separation of sort occurred between the two, leaving pastoral ministry to seek a more receptive home in other disciplines that included psychology, sociology, and business.[[1]](#endnote-1) Pastors became more enamored with secular goals, as well as techniques of care. Over time, the “theological red-blood-cell count” within the pastoral community fell markedly.[[2]](#endnote-2) And as went the theological capacity of the pastor went, so went the theological depth of the conformed church.[[3]](#endnote-3)

Thankfully, a recovery began near the end of the twentieth century. Pastoral theologians like Thomas Oden and Andrew Purves—and movements like the Center for Pastor Theologians—have enabled ministry and theology to once again sit at the same table. The pastor is becoming a contributing member of the theological community.

To the list of influential pastoral theologians, one must also add Eugene Peterson. Jason Byassee and Roger Owens, in their book *Pastoral Work: Engagements with the Vision of Eugene Peterson*, write, ”Perhaps more than any single author, his vision has shaped the understanding of the pastoral vocation across denominational and theological lines.”[[4]](#endnote-4) Over the years, Peterson has been described as “a rock star” with the gravitas of an elder statesman and the elusive mystique of an artist—equal parts pastor, poet, and pioneer—as well as theologian.

**A BRIEF BACKGROUND OF EUGENE PETERSON**

Peterson’s academic training, as well as his thirty years as a pastor, have built a core conviction that pastor and theologian are inseparable. In his Under the Unpredictable Plant, Peterson speaks to the divide and its costs: “For too long, pastors have not been treated as theologians; theology has been leached from our lives. At the same time, pastors have been told that they’re not pastors but counselors and people who run churches.”[[5]](#endnote-5)

It’s not that Peterson has always come to the defense of the pastor. He grew up in the “sacred ground” of Montana in the early thirties, listening to the biblical story-telling of his mother. She was much more impressive than the pastors who came through. Most of them did not last more the two years. After a while their stories took on a “patina of banality.”[[6]](#endnote-6) Most were full of themselves and empty of theology. Their work seemed like a grab bag of religious miscellany. As far as Peterson was concerned, being a pastor was one step above unemployed.[[7]](#endnote-7) These early “cheap parodies of sideshow barkers” and later ”dull parodies of corporate executives” dissuaded Peterson from becoming a member of the clergy.[[8]](#endnote-8)

Instead, Peterson attended seminary in New York with the single aim of becoming an academic. He did graduate work at John Hopkins in Baltimore, sitting under men like W.F. Albright, who taught him the practice of thinking, imagining, formulating, and testing for truth. For a brief time, Peterson considered a career in Semitics.

But something unexpected happened. Over the course of time, he was exposed to other pastoral models, forming him at “the ten thousand interstices of life.” He began to immerse himself in the writings of church fathers like Gregory and Bernard, Luther and Calvin. He was influenced by men like George Buttrick, Harry Fosdick, Karl Barth (the “epitome of a pastoral theologian”), John Henry Newman, Alexander Whyte, and Baron Friedrich von Hugel—and pastoral theologies such as Martin Thornton’s *Pastoral Theology: Reorientation* (the “sanest pastoral theologian” in the 20th century). All embodied pastoral imagination and contemplation.

In time, Peterson realized he was more fitted for the parish than the academy, though he remained committed to the intellectual world. He became an academically trained pastor determined to straddle the division between the parish and the seminary.[[9]](#endnote-9) He planted a small Presbyterian church in Bel Air, Maryland, and this experience profoundly shaped his pastoral theology.

If one wants to go deeper into the influences that shaped Peterson, one should read his *Take & Read*. Here one finds an annotated list of books that have molded his life. He acknowledges that writers like Wendell Berry (*The Unsettling of America*) taught him “more usable pastoral theology” than all of his academic professors.[[10]](#endnote-10) Books like *Diary of a Country Priest* and *The Country Parson* taught him to reimagine the pastoral life in terms of simplicity and guts and rejection. They kept Peterson from becoming a pastor in the ways most evident and most rewarded in the American consumerist and celebrity culture. Rather, he pursued a far humbler calling where he found himself working at the borderland of the supernatural.[[11]](#endnote-11)

**THE WORKS OF PETERSON DEVOTED TO PASTORAL THEOLOGY**

Peterson has described his vocation as “bipolar.”[[12]](#endnote-12) He has been both a pastor and a writer, twin strands of a vocational identity formed by God and passion. The pastorate formed the context from which he wrote, ever mindful to be theologically precise. He has written to address an age in which much of the church’s leadership is “neither pastoral nor theological.”[[13]](#endnote-13) Because the theological dimensions of the church’s leadership have been marginalized by therapeutic and marketing preoccupations, Peterson has advocated a “theologically authorized” church that is free from the world’s allure, a church that unashamedly stands for the gospel.[[14]](#endnote-14) He has written out of a conviction that most pastors have lost their way, hammering out a vocational identity from models given to them from the principalities and powers.[[15]](#endnote-15)

Unlike other pastoral theologians, one will not find a book with the title *A Pastoral Theology*. Peterson’s titles are far subtler. They come directly out of his time in scripture, where he discovered “embryonic outlines” of his pastoral vocation, ones replacing the sociological base with a theological one.[[16]](#endnote-16)

Like an Elijah calling Israel back to God, Peterson began to call pastors back to a biblically informed pastoral theology. His *Five Smooth Stones for Pastoral Work*, written in 1980, was one of his first attempts to lay the right theological foundation. Here he seeks to bring pastors back to the integrity of their calling using the Megilloth, the five scrolls that comprise Song of Songs, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, and Esther. They unpack five areas of pastoral work that develop organically out of worship: praying, story-telling, pain-sharing, saying no, and community building.

Seven years later, Peterson wrote *Working the Angles*, perhaps his most distilled description of pastoral work. Here he set forth a “triadic” vision for ministry using a metaphor from mathematics—what he refers to as a “trigonometry of ministry.” There are three basic pastoral acts that form the angles of ministry—praying, reading Scripture, and giving spiritual direction. Working these angles is what gives shape and integrity to what pastors do.[[17]](#endnote-17) Getting these angles right gets the lines (preaching, teaching, administration) right. Without these practices, there can be no “developing substance” in pastoral work.[[18]](#endnote-18)

Five years later, Peterson turned to another unexpected biblical source, Jonah and wrote *Under the Unpredictable Plant* .[[19]](#endnote-19) Like the Megilloth, this prophetic book informs pastoral theology, clarifying the vocation of pastor. Jonah is good working material, for numerous pastors face the same temptation to leave their divine calling for the allure of Tarshish. Peterson’s work speaks to an age where pastors are more and more intent on “meeting people’s religious needs on demand at the best possible price,” reducing the pastoral vocation to religious economics.[[20]](#endnote-20)

These three books form a trilogy of sort, written over the span of twelve years. Together, they provide a biblical orientation and theological understanding “to subvert, to restore, to challenge, and to inspire pastors who work in a context that is antithetical to the gospel.”[[21]](#endnote-21)

After twenty-nine years. Peterson left one pastoral ministry for another. He became a pastor-writer-in residence at Pittsburgh Presbyterian Seminary, translating the Scripture into *The Message*. It grew from the soil of thirty years of pastoral work and significantly broadened his pastoral influence.

He would later join the faculty at Regent College. Teaming up with Marva Dawn, they wrote *The Unnecessary Pastor* in 2000, using the pastoral epistles as their working text. They were written by the most enduringly authoritative theologian, who was also a pastor—Paul*.* In contrast to other texts chosen by Peterson, this portion of Scripture is a more obvious and more centering place to do pastoral theology. Other Pauline letters serve as good working material, including Romans, which Peterson notes is a premier theological text, best understood and put to use when read as a pastoral theology.[[22]](#endnote-22)

**THE PASTORAL THEOLOGY OF PETERSON**

This is where pastoral theology must begin. The self-understanding of a pastor precedes and shapes all pastoral acts.[[23]](#endnote-23) Unfortunately, pastors have lost this understanding. They have not remained true to their calling. In Working the Angles, the opening words are written with the passion of a pastor who feels betrayed by his peers. In Peterson’s judgment, all too many pastors have “metamorphosed into a company of shopkeepers.”[[24]](#endnote-24)

Pastoral work must return to the basics. By definition, pastoring is a ministry of word and sacrament.[[25]](#endnote-25) Pastors are called to serve one holy, universal church, as well as a specific congregation. It’s here they speak God’s word and enact the sacraments. Such attention will guard them from responding to the “siren voices” that distract and tempt one to take on other identities *(e.g. program director rather than spiritual director*).

A particular competence is required to serve this calling, beginning with the capacity to be unbusy. “A pastor must take the time to know God if he or she is to retain one’s identity and minister the things of God.”[[26]](#endnote-26) This explains Peterson’s deep commitment to Sabbath keeping. In the quiet one becomes more immersed in God’s story and makes fuller use of the imagination.

***THE MAIN WORK OF A PASTOR***

***1-THE PROPHETIC WORK OF A PASTOR***

As noted, ministry has three angles. These angles are congruent with the ancient ministries of prophet, priest, and sage, to which pastors are heirs. A pastor is called to take one’s stand as a prophet, lighting fires that will clear the underbrush and make the way for growth.[[27]](#endnote-27) To be this prophetic voice, the unbusy pastor must first attend to God and be “drenched” in His speech. “For Peterson, attentiveness to words and the Word is at the heart of his vision of the pastoral vocation.”[[28]](#endnote-28) His *Eat This Book* serves as a manual on the practice of careful Scripture reading, one of the three basic pastoral acts.[[29]](#endnote-29) One must respect the language and reflect on the words, learning how to spiritually read—leisurely, repetitively, and reflectively.[[30]](#endnote-30)

Prophetic pastors not only pay attention to words—they use their imagination. Like good novelists, they see how everything fits the larger narrative. Without this, pastors are just giving lectures and distributing mere moralisms. They must also use their ears. Peterson calls this contemplative exegesis (which is more than the mere use of the critical tools grammar, literary structure, historiography, etc.). The aim is to ultimately hear God’s voice.

Out of this discipline of reading and hearing, one must then speak as a prophet. Pastors owe it to their congregations to speak rightfully and skillfully and truthfully.” [[31]](#endnote-31) Prophets can be unnerving and dangerous, so like the prophets of old, pastors must be prepared to take their lumps. Like Peterson’s prophetic voice, they may occasionally have to be “equal-opportunity critics” screeching at church, pastor, and academy alike.[[32]](#endnote-32) Such a task will make pastors unnecessary—unnecessary to what the culture presumes is important. But this is just fine. Prophetic preaching prevents one from becoming a paragon of goodness and niceness, a mere custodian of moral order and social stability.[[33]](#endnote-33)

***2-THE PRIESTLY WORK OF A PASTOR***

The priest stands between God and his people. Representing God, he calls people to worship. Representing his people, he prays, interceding on their behalf. In Peterson’s theology, these are core pastoral acts. Prayer (*and worship*) are what maintain the essential shape of ministry; they keep pastoral work true to itself.[[34]](#endnote-34)

The pastor must first come to God on behalf of his people. This has implications for the size of a congregation. Pastors need to know those they pray for. The single most significant phrase a pastor can speak is “I will pray for you.”[[35]](#endnote-35) Before, during, and after conversations, prayer must be made. Prayer is the quiet force behind ministry. God works in the quiet, through the minority, and working from the margins. This holds the greatest possibility for penetrating the world.[[36]](#endnote-36)

The other part of priestly work is one of representing God. A pastor comes to the people on behalf of God, and this takes place principally in worship. It’s here, according to Peterson, that pastors carry out one of their most significant tasks. He notes, “The single most important thing I did for thirty-five years was stand before a congregation each Sunday morning and say, ‘Let us worship God.’”[[37]](#endnote-37) In this moment, pastors are calling people into the real world and out of the false world. It is bringing people back to reality and away from the world’s lies and distortions, its puny politics and paltry appetites.

***3-THE SAGELY WORK OF A PASTOR***

The pastoral task is carried out not only on Sundays, but on the days in-between. The pastor is called to be a wise spiritual director (as opposed to a psychologist/therapist). He is called to the work of curing souls. This involves listening to what God has been doing. People are not problems to be fixed, but mysteries to be honored and revered.[[38]](#endnote-38) They are men and women requiring the attentive work of listening, leading them in the worship of God, and calling them to holy and skillful living.

It has become less and less common, but this work of being with another person in Spirit and Truth is at the core of a pastor’s work. Much of it takes place spontaneously and informally (and often without being noticed). Being with people, be it in a pastor’s study, in a family living room, or next to a hospital bed, these encounters are occasions for original research on the stories being shaped by the living Christ.[[39]](#endnote-39) Long before we arrive on the scene, the Spirit is at work.

This requires that pastors stay rooted in their congregations. They know individuals as individuals, which takes time. They take a vow of stability, staying for the long term, setting aside the careerism that can engulf them.[[40]](#endnote-40). And Peterson did, maintaining a deep obedience in the same place.

***THE CHALLENGE OF PASTORAL WORK***

It’s one thing to understand the nature of the call and the work of a pastor. It is another to carry this out. It is not easy. Contemporary American culture does not offer congenial conditions in which to live out the pastoral vocation. To begin with, many things combine to get in the way of a contemplative life. Even schools tend to “conspire to ignore the wisdom of the ancient spiritual leaders who trained people in the disciplines of attending to God, forming the inner life so that it was adequate to the reception of truth, not just the acquisition of facts.”

The church presents its own challenge. Many congregations want pastors the way the Israelites wanted a king. They want someone glamorous—who will take charge and manage the religious company. Increasingly, churches seem to place their value on finding religious entrepreneurs with business plans who “get it done”—as opposed to those who call attention to “what is going on.”[[41]](#endnote-41) Peterson’s warning is that the church has become an impersonal, ecclesiastical business with a mission to market spirituality to consumers.[[42]](#endnote-42)

And too many pastors are falling prey to this, desecrating their calling—“something on the order of a vocational abomination of desolation.”[[43]](#endnote-43) This is why Peterson writes with such a fierce vigilance, aiming to guard the pastoral vocation from cultural pollutants that have become so dangerously toxic.

Our egos are also part of the test. Pastoral work, for the most part, is not glamorous. Peterson notes that most pastoral work “takes place in obscurity: deciphering grace in the shadows, searching out meaning in a difficult text, blowing on the embers of a hard-used life.”[[44]](#endnote-44) We must live close to the broken people for whom Jesus died. Our assignment is to the one thing needful, the invisible, quiet center—God. And behind this is this hard work of mucking out the stalls—not riding white stallions in parades.

Our theology of ministry is a strong defense against the huge hawser that keeps pulling us away from vocational holiness.

**ASSESSING PETERSON’S PASTORAL THEOLOGY**

In reviewing Peterson’s works, and reading them through the lens of thirty-two years of pastoral ministry, as well as sixteen years as a professor of pastoral theology, here are a few observations—

First, on a more critical side, some would say Peterson does not give enough attention in his pastoral theology to the to the leadership aspect of ministry. He barely mentions administration. Little is said of the ecclesiastical institutions that have shaped his life.

At times, he seems to dismiss the necessity of structures and strategies. Studying Peterson, Will Willimon concludes: -“I do not believe that Peterson sufficiently accounts for the power and the inevitability of institutional Christianity (is there any other form of Christianity?).”[[45]](#endnote-45)

It would, however, be unfair to say that administrating ministry has no place in Peterson’s theology. He writes, “I am not contemptuous of running a church, nor do I dismiss its importance…I try to do it well.”[[46]](#endnote-46) But he also acknowledges in his books that he eventually delegated most of this work to his board and other volunteers. He did this so that he could remain faithful to his calling and not fall into the trap so many pastors have fallen into—defining ministry as running a church.

In all of his years as a pastor, Peterson refused to take his cues from the corporate world, reducing ministry to business plans, vision statements, and strategic initiatives—skills for running a church and growing the size of a church. He determined that his parish would be a location for spirituality—not a place to further his advancement. Whatever leadership is required, he would not become a “branch manager in a religious warehouse outlet.”[[47]](#endnote-47)

There is also minimal emphasis given to evangelism and missional activism. It’s not that Peterson discounts the necessity of sharing one’s faith, but he again expresses caution. He warns against evangelism in a “bullying sense.”[[48]](#endnote-48) We are given a mandate to share really good news, but not when it depersonalizes people; not when it looks different than the evangelism Jesus did. A pastor is committed to sharing the gospel, but his main work is in the building up of the saint. He writes: “Planting seed is fine, but the hard work of cultivation and harvest is what pastors are called to do.”[[49]](#endnote-49)

Second, on the positive side, Peterson’s pastoral theology offers a clear and compelling vision of the life and work of a pastor.[[50]](#endnote-50) He has brought a needed corrective to contemporary ministry that is largely distracted and off course. He underscores the necessity *of once again* being pastoral theologians. He challenges pastors who are enamored with hurry and speed and secular models of leadership to embrace a more reflective pietism—to prayerfully soak in the biblical imaginations of ministers like Ezekiel and John and Paul—and Jesus. Here we will become re-centered. We discover that the pastoral task is not to initiate so much as to respond--respond to God’s Word and God’s work and God’s people.

1. Thomas Oden in his Pastoral Theology discusses this at length, 4ff. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Note Gerald Hiestand and Todd Wilson, The Pastor Theologian, 13, for a good summary of the break [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Ibid., 57 [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Stephanie Paulsell, “The Pastor and the Art of Arts,”in Pastoral Work, 11 [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Eugene Peterson, The Unpredictable Plant, 61 [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Eugene Peterson, The Pastor, 3 [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Ibid., 81 [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Peterson, Unpredictable Plant,120 [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Byassee, “The Scholar-Pastor,” in Pastoral Work, 76 [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Eugene Peterson, Take & Read, 63 [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Peterson, Unpredictable Plant, 122 [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Ibid., 49 [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Ibid., 60 [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Will Willimon, “Eugene Peterson,” in Pastoral Work, 54 [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Peterson, Unpredictable Plant, 50 [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Eugene Peterson, Five Smooth Stones, 2 [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Eugene Peterson, Working the Angles, 4 [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. Ibid., 10 [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. It should be noted that just prior to Unpredictable Plant, Peterson also wrote The Contemplative Pastor, which calls pastors to be attentive and shaped by prayerful engagement with Scripture [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. Peterson, Unpredictable Plant, 3-4 [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. Tee Gatewood, “All Who Follow Jesus,” in Pastoral Work, 42 [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. Peterson, Unpredictable Plant, 61 [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. Thomas Oden, Becoming a Minister, 11 [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. Peterson, Angles, 1 [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. Ibid., 16 [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. Ibid., 14 [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. Byassee, “The Scholar-Pastor,” in Pastoral Work, 78 [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. Byassee and Owens, in Pastoral Work, ix [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. Peterson, Angles, 2 [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
30. Peterson, Take & Read, x. [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
31. Owen Strachan, “Eugene Peterson on the Reading and Writing Life of the Pastor,” Gospel Coalition Blog, April 19, 2012 [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
32. Byassee,”The Scholar-Pastor,” in Pastoral Work, 78 [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
33. Eugene Peterson, The Unnecessary Pastor, 2-3 [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
34. Peterson, Angles, 18 [↑](#endnote-ref-34)
35. Ibid., 61 [↑](#endnote-ref-35)
36. Peterson, The Pastor, 16 [↑](#endnote-ref-36)
37. Peterson, Take & Read, 27 [↑](#endnote-ref-37)
38. Peterson, The Pastor, 137 [↑](#endnote-ref-38)
39. Peterson, Unpredictable Plant, 127 [↑](#endnote-ref-39)
40. Carol Howard Merritt, “Leadership and the Christianity and Cultural Dance,” in Pastoral Work, 95 [↑](#endnote-ref-40)
41. Peterson, The Pastor, 4 [↑](#endnote-ref-41)
42. Ibid., 111 [↑](#endnote-ref-42)
43. Ibid., 112-113 [↑](#endnote-ref-43)
44. Peterson, Unpredictable Plant, 86 [↑](#endnote-ref-44)
45. Willimon, Pastoral Work, 59 [↑](#endnote-ref-45)
46. Peterson, Contemplative Pastor, 68 [↑](#endnote-ref-46)
47. Ibid., 38 [↑](#endnote-ref-47)
48. Eugene Peterson, Subversive Spirituality, 213 [↑](#endnote-ref-48)
49. Peterson, Unnecessary Pastor, 185 [↑](#endnote-ref-49)
50. Byassee and Owens, vii [↑](#endnote-ref-50)