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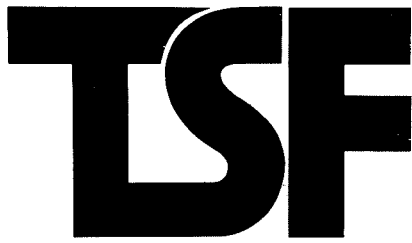
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# BULLETIN

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# On Pentecostals, Poets and Professors

## An Interview with Eugene Peterson

*Eugene Peterson is the pastor of Christ Our King Presbyterian Church (PCUSA) in Bel Air, Maryland, and the author of several books including Five Smooth Stones for Pastoral Care, The Long Obedience, Traveling Light and Run with the Horses. Peterson was interviewed by Bill Mangrum, who is on staff with TSF in California.*

**TSF:** How long have you been out of seminary, Eugene?

**Peterson:** Twenty-six years.

**TSF:** Was seminary a positive or negative experience for you?

**Peterson:** Well, for me it was mixed. The seminary I went to was the old Biblical Seminary, a non-denominational school in New York which is now New York Theological Seminary. I hadn't really planned to go to seminary. I grew up in a pentecostal church and it was very anti-intellectual. I was afraid of higher education and I had stretched the limits by going to college. Pastors and people had filled my head with warnings: "You are going to lose your faith; you are going to leave the Lord." But I ended up at seminary, really kind of through the back door because other things fell apart. I didn't know anything about the place, except a college professor got me there. In some ways I was fortunate because I had plenty of intellectual curiosity and motivation. I didn't need anybody to stimulate me intellectually, I just needed a library. Biblical Seminary at that point was in its decline, and it really didn't have very much going for it in theological studies. But it was a spiritual community and so I found my theological education in a place where prayer was central and important.

**TSF:** How exactly did that spiritual community operate?

**Peterson:** There were daily prayers, and a service of prayer. Through the year there were retreat days and there was an encouragement to prayer. Many of the faculty really believed in prayer. It was important to them and they showed it in their own lives. Part of the spiritual community emphasis had to do with the student body. We had many missionaries on furlough. It wasn't a large student body, so these people had influence. The way they lived and prayed made a difference.

**TSF:** If you were going to seminary today, what type of theological education would you seek?

**Peterson:** I don't see any seminary that's doing what it seems to me is essential—providing encouragement and direction for the life of faith, training people in the traditions which have always been part of that life, and in the process providing theological structure by which to articulate it. But the whole *guts* of the material have been dropped out and we still have the intellectual, theological stuff, but it's out of context. I know there are seminaries that are trying to repair that. But some of the repairs seem to me to be only cosmetic surgery, and I don't know how it's going to turn out.

**TSF:** You found a balance of spirituality and scholarship among your teachers in seminary?

**Peterson:** No. I found the interest in the spiritual life, the commitment to the spiritual life. I didn't find the intellectual rigor, which I had to pursue on my own; but, no, I didn't find the balance.

**TSF:** You were pursuing an academic career?

**Peterson:** Yes.

**TSF:** Then you planned to complete a Ph.D. in what area?

**Peterson:** In Semitic languages. I went to Johns Hopkins and studied with William Albright in the field of Semitics.

**TSF:** How did you personally try to maintain that balance of scholarship and piety?

**Peterson:** Well, I don't know, Bill. A lot of this you do by dumb luck. My background, the church, the environment I grew up in, was very intense spiritually, and so I developed through my childhood and adolescence a life which was passionate in terms of spirituality. While much was extravagant and some of it was beside the point, the one thing that was communicated to me was that this Christian life had to do with intensity, with passion, with depth. And so I was spoiled. I never was able to put up with anything that was devotionally dilettante. What I had to fight for was some intellectual rigor. And I didn't find that for a long time. You see, I just had that hunger myself for learning, for knowing, and knew it was possible because I got in touch with some of the old masters who had been dead for a thousand years.

**TSF:** Who were some of those masters?

**Peterson:** Well, Augustine was one, Bernard was one, Gregory, Thomas Aquinas. Those were the people who attracted me early. Later I discovered others who were more protestant and puritan, but these earlier masters were the ones who inspired me. They were in a sense prereformation, they were pre-controversial, and so my pentecostal background had no labels for them. The kind of spirituality that I grew up with had to do with passion and intensity and inwardness—so these masters fit into that style. As I left the culture of the pentecostal church, I was able to leave the stuff that never fit, mainly entertainment—and there is a great deal of charlatanism in that whole business. But somehow because of the home I lived in I escaped that.

**TSF:** Do you teach now?

**Peterson:** Yes, I teach in both a secular university and a Roman Catholic seminary.

**TSF:** Tell me about the seminary teaching.

**Peterson:** Well, it's been very stimulating to me. I'm working with a community that I have never been close to before, the Roman Catholic community. I've found that in terms of ministry there's not

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that much difference. We're dealing with the same material. I've been very heartened by the fact that they've wanted me, that they've looked to me for something they are missing themselves—a theology of ministry and an interpretation of Scripture which has spirituality at its base. They have been caught up in this whole secularizing syndrome too—ministry as a career option and Scripture as kind of an academic exercise. They've been very receptive and warmly accepting of an approach to ministry which has spirituality at its core—along with intellectual integrity.

**TSF:** It seems to me that a lot of students today are viewing seminary as a place to study faith and to work out some types of belief system even though they do not have any kind of special calling or desire to enter ministry. Do you think that's a good trend among Christian students?

**Peterson:** The students I have for the most part aren't really there to learn. They're there to get a job or get equipped for a job, and it's very discouraging for a professor who gets excited about the material and wants to teach what's there to have the primary concern of most of the students be "how can I pass this course?"

I think the motivation you mention is okay. Any place is a good place to get started. But if I'm reading the signs rightly, I don't think the seminaries have adjusted to that desire, so that they are not developing the kind of community that meets that expectation or that need. I don't see anything wrong with going to seminary with that desire, but I think it would be better if the seminary said, "our primary task is to be a spiritual community which develops theological skills." Because thinking about learning theology is not a spiritual task. I had a student at St. Mary's who left his preparation for the ministry several years ago, but continued to maintain his interest in theology. He kept coming to St. Mary's Seminary just because he loved theology even though he didn't go to church and didn't believe in God. And during a course I taught last fall, he came to faith, and he ended the course by making a commitment to both the Christian faith and the ministry. It was the first time he had been in a course which had anything to do with his personal life and his vocation. Now that's hard for me to believe, that someone can go to a theological school for four years and never find oneself addressed at a personal level in order to integrate life with thinking.

**TSF:** Would you consider yourself an evangelical?

**Peterson:** Yes.

**TSF:** Given the state of that term today, could you briefly describe that for us.

**Peterson:** Evangelical for me, Bill, means two things. One, it has to do with a certain commitment to Scripture and the gospel as life-changing. It also has to do with culture, with a certain culture of the church which comes out of the pietistic, revivalist, sectarian tradition, and often has moved into other parts of the church. That's the church I grew up in, it's the movement I grew up in. Even though I'm part of an establishment denomination at this point, the evangelical church in both the theological and cultural sense is what I'm at home in. I'm not denominationally a part of it, but it is where I find my natural allies and friends and community.

**TSF:** What future do you see for evangelicalism in this country?

**Peterson:** Well, I think it's a very positive, strong future because evangelicalism has become, I think, much less sectarian, much less defensive, more confident. Evangelicals no longer understand themselves as a beleaguered band of believers holding the truth, but are really quite confident that they are in the main stream of things and are willing to become part of other denominations, cross denominational lines. I can be part of a Roman Catholic faculty without any sense of betrayal or leaving the faith or anything like that. So I think it's a very strong position. It's having a fermenting influence on the church.

**TSF:** Do you see any dangers in the movement?

**Peterson:** The dangers in evangelicalism seem to me to stem from an unreflective pietism. The pietistic element of the past is not understood in all its depth, so just little parts of it are taken. The dangers also stem from sectarianism which develops a minority mentality

of being-against and has a kind of paranoia. I still observe that feistiness, but it seems to me to be less and less. I'm encouraged.

The danger is that there is a strength that comes from paranoia. You can marshal a lot of energy if you are paranoid enough, and so as the evangelical movement becomes more ecumenical or open there is a natural danger that it lose its sharp edge. I am not a good enough cultural analyst to know if that's happening. I'm not aware that it is, but I should think theoretically that would be the danger.

**TSF:** As an evangelical in the Presbyterian Church (USA), what struggles have you had?

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***Doubt pushes me past the intellectualizing, past the superficial, and makes me deal with issues on a life basis where I can't understand and control everything.***

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**Peterson:** I haven't had any struggles, I don't think. But I've never felt at home. I've always been an outsider. That's part of my background. I didn't grow up in this, so I've never been part of the club, but that's not their fault. The Presbyterian Church has been very good to me. They've given me a place to work, a congregation to be pastor of, so I've never felt like my sense of being an outsider was their fault. I've never felt particularly at home with the national trends, but I feel very much at home with the historical developments, the whole rootage of the Presbyterian Church, so I'm willing to live through fashions which aren't congenial to me if I sense that the whole basic structure has a good foundation, and I think it does.

**TSF:** Have you learned any particular lessons working within a mainline denomination that you would like to pass on?

**Peterson:** The Presbyterian Church is pluralistic. For some people, of course, that's a negative. For me, because I'm a minority person, it's a positive. And if you're a black person in a mostly white world, you're glad when they're pluralistic. And as an evangelical and somebody from a sectarian background, I'm glad that my church is pluralistic.

**TSF:** Would you encourage more students from evangelical backgrounds to pursue mainline seminary education and ordination?

**Peterson:** You're asking two different questions. I don't have any opinion about where to go for your education. But it seems to me that it is always better to live out of your own tradition than it is to leave it. That wasn't possible for me. I tried and it didn't work. They didn't accept me; I didn't fit the pentecostal denomination, so I really had to leave. I think it would have been wrong for me to stay because I would have always been a malcontent. I would have always been disrupting things. That takes a lot of emotional energy. I envy people who are in the denomination in which they grew up and are able to build out of those roots and work out of that kind of tradition. I think it gives you a certain strength. So if it's possible, I think you should stay where you were born, but it's not always possible.

**TSF:** So for students who go off to college and deepen their commitment to the faith through various evangelical parachurch organizations, you would encourage those students to stay within the Presbyterian Church or the United Methodist Church or the United Church of Christ?

**Peterson:** By all means. Yes.

**TSF:** What dangers lie in mainline churches as opposed to the independent Bible church tradition?

**Peterson:** Well, I think there is more danger in the establishment churches assimilating to a bourgeois culture or a church culture. There's more danger in assimilating to a kind of professionalism, a clerical professionalism. In the mainline denominations, congregations generally let you get by with anything you want to do, as long as you are competent. However, evangelical congregations often

have well-defined theological expectations and sometimes spiritual expectations and perhaps there's a higher degree of accountability. That's just a hunch I have. On the other hand, the danger in the independent churches is for the pastor to become some kind of a superstar or a dictator, and see oneself as the leader of the church rather than the servant or the pastor of the church. I think it's a very strong danger.

**TSF:** You read widely. And not strictly within the religious or philosophical field?

**Peterson:** Right.

**TSF:** It seems to me that more students today lack a "classical" liberal arts education, and thus they seem to lack that imaginative-creative capacity. How would you suggest a seminarian correct this imbalance? You get your chance, Eugene, to correct all those students who are going to read the *TSF Bulletin*.

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***It is very discouraging for a professor to have the primary concern of the students be "how can I pass this course?"***

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**Peterson:** The theologian's best ally is the artist. I think we need to awaken an interest in literature, which is natural to most people but which gets suppressed. We must see the imagination as an aspect of ministry. What we're really talking about is creativity. We're participating in something that God is doing. He is creating new life. He created life and he's been creating life. Now how does the creative process work? The people who attend to that question most frequently are writers, artists, sculptors, musicians. People involved in church leadership should be passionately interested in how the creative process works—not in how to say things accurately. This great emphasis on how to communicate accurately is a dead-end street. Communicating clearly is not what we are after. What we are after is creating new life. The creative writer isn't interested in saying things as simply or as accurately as possible, but in touching the springs of creativity and letting the imagination work in analogical ways. I think if I were going to set up a seminary curriculum, I would spend one whole year on a couple of poets. I would insist that students learn how to read poetry, learn how words work. We don't pay enough attention to words—we use words all the time but we use them in a commercialized, consumer way. That consumer-oriented use of words has little place in the church, in the pulpit, in counseling. We're trying to find how words work, their own work.

I'm not insisting on any particular poet here. I've just finished reading a volume of poems of William Stafford. I've read Stafford for years, and a book of collected poetry which just came out would be helpful. He's a Christian. His Christianity is indirect and unobtrusive, and he uses words with great skill. I would want to pay attention with people to how that worked, how the creative imagination deals with common experience and learns to express itself rightly. I'd use some poets who've been involved in ministry. George Herbert was a pastor; Gerard Manley Hopkins was a priest. I'd take people who were involved at the core of the gospel and were trying to understand it, but paid attention to the way words worked.

And I would also want to learn from the literary critics. We're involved in the study of Scripture and we've been completely buffaloes by the whole movement of historical criticism which has insisted on looking at Scripture analytically, historically, objectively. You cannot read imaginative literature analytically. You have to be a participant. And the whole revolution in hermeneutics which has taken place in the last thirty years is unattended to by both. Our best allies are the literary critics—people like Northrop Frye, C. S. Lewis in the critical works he does, and George Steiner—people who teach us how to read with our whole selves. It's not enough just to read with our minds. We've got emotions, we've got bodies, we've got histories, we've got jobs, we've got relationships, and we

need to come to these texts with our whole beings—with our elbows and knees as well as our brain cells. And some of these men teach us how to do that or show us the way and insist that we follow. That's the way Scripture was read up until the Reformation and through the Reformation. But in the post-Reformation we got such an overweening desire to be respectable intellectually. We have such a fear of superstition and allegory that we squeezed all the imaginative stuff out of Scriptures so we could be sure that it was just precise and accurate. If it's the infallible Word, well then you've got to have the exact meaning and nothing else, so all ambiguity goes. Well, all good language is ambiguous. It's poetic. It has levels of meaning, so which one of those levels of meaning is infallible? We've got to squeeze all of that out and get one level so we have the exact truth. It's not just the evangelical or conservative church that did that, that was liberal scholarship, too. They had a different theological reason for it, but it worked out to the same thing.

**TSF:** And with that has come this over-burdening emphasis upon doctrinal and theological formulations at the expense of spiritual formation.

**Peterson:** I have nothing against the emphasis on doctrinal and theological formation; in fact, I insist on it. But that's part of a family and we've killed off the kids, eliminated all the imaginative stuff which people like William Faulkner or Walker Percy bring back. You cannot read a good artist just with your analytical mind. You've got to use your imagination. And Scripture is no different, but we insist on reading Scripture in a sub-literary way, and thereby lose much of its genius.

**TSF:** In speaking and writing, you talk about "wholeness." What do you mean by that term?

**Peterson:** I mean something Christian. I mean the whole Christian thing where we're in a conscious and growing relationship with God and an insistence that our life as described in Scripture and as experienced in grace be developed on those terms. I don't mean "wholeness" in terms of psychological subjectivism, what makes me feel good. And I don't mean "wholeness" in terms of meeting cultural expectations of what it means to be a well-rounded person, so there's tension in the way I use the word. I insist on the validity of the word for the Christian, being in touch with all reality. But I am also conscious that it is easy to be misunderstood, because a lot of people when they talk about "wholeness" mean just "I have it all together the way I want it to be."

**TSF:** How would you suggest a seminary student pursue "wholeness"? It's one thing to talk to seminary students about the fact that they need to read more, it's another thing when seminary students have jobs, a spouse and perhaps children, and seldom enough money. In the midst of all that, we want them to come out of seminary at least pursuing the direction of wholeness.

**Peterson:** I think the only thing that's realistic in terms of suggesting "wholeness" to the seminary student is to get a vision of it and an appetite for it. "Wholeness" is a quest and we have to know what we're questing. It's not reasonable to say, "Okay, now get a well-balanced life and get it all put together." It is possible to get a taste for it and to see what's possible. It's important to read the best writers. It's important to know the people who had some "wholeness." We need to know something about Gregory and Bernard, Thomas, Calvin, and Luther, to go to the best instead of fooling with the secondary literature. The mystics, I think, were often the whole people in our past. If we can develop a taste for them, so at least we know what it sounds like, what it looks like, then we might be dissatisfied with any substitute thrown our way as we go along.

**TSF:** You've somewhat touched on this, but maybe you could follow this through again: what qualities would you like to see in today's seminary graduates? If you were to hire someone freshly out of seminary to be an assistant pastor, what kind of person would you be looking for?

**Peterson:** I'd want somebody who had a basic conviction that the heart of pastoral work or leadership in the church has to do with developing a lifelong relationship with Christ which involves all of life. In other words, I would want somebody committed to the task

of spiritual formation. I would also want somebody who had some intellectual discipline and curiosity about how to understand and imagine the different ways in which life is experienced. Without that intellectual curiosity, the early experiences become clichés and are not reapplied in fresh ways in new situations. What starts out as a vital experience deteriorates into platitude. And so spiritual formation and intellectual curiosity are reciprocal because they keep each other growing and alive and fresh. That's what I'd look for. I said earlier that the twin pillars of ministry are learning and prayer, and I'd look for a desire for that.

**TSF:** You have talked about the temptation in ministry to lie about God. Do we lie about God out of a lust for power or out of a fear concerning an inability to answer questions?

**Peterson:** Both. I would think both of those things, but I think they're subtle. I think they would probably be unrecognizable if we were accused that way. We would say, "No, I don't want power, I'm not afraid." But I think part of that, Bill, comes because most people who go into ministry want to help people. We really are programmed to help people and that's good. When people ask us to do things, we want to do what they want to do. If they want answers, we give them answers because that's what they requested. So a lot of what I call lying about God, answers about God that obscure or distort certain ambiguities of life or a certain wholeness in the doctrine of God, is very well intentioned. I think we do it out of the best of motives which makes it very difficult to detect in yourself, because if your motives are right then you think what's coming out is going to be okay, too, especially if it's orthodox.

**TSF:** What part does doubt play in your own spiritual development?

**Peterson:** Doubt pushes me deeper. Doubt pushes me past the intellectualizing, past the superficial, and makes me deal with issues on a life basis where I can't understand and control everything. I

have to plunge in anyway. Doubt has never functioned in my life as a way to get out of things. It has always pulled me in further. I know it makes spectators out of some people but somehow it has never worked that way for me. It's caused me to be involved in dimensions of faith that I wasn't aware of before.

**TSF:** You spoke recently about the balance between striving for excellence and humility. How does that work? You say, "I really want to be an excellent people-helper," but you are always forced into the position of marketing yourself and your ability to help other people.

**Peterson:** That question, Bill, can't be dealt with very adequately in this setting, but it's one of the key questions for ministry because there's no area of the spiritual life that's more subject to pride, to ambition, to self-assertion, to non-humility than leadership positions in ministry. Yet there's no area in which the pursuit of excellence is more important either. Learning how to discriminate between excellence and ambition is a very difficult task. It requires lifelong scrutiny and a sense of discernment. I certainly think it's possible to learn how to do our best, discipline our lives in such a way that we get the best out of them (or the Lord gets the best out of them), and at the same time shut the door to self-assertion, to self-aggrandizement, to self-promotion. The problem is that most of the models for excellence that our culture provides feed ambition, so we don't have any models to work on. That's why we really need to saturate our imaginations with people like Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross, Francis of Assisi, Gregory of Nyssa; these people who really did pursue lives of excellence in incredible humility and a complete indifference in terms of what people thought about them or whether they had any standing in life at all. It's too bad you have to go back five hundred years for your models, but that's better than nothing. Some helpful models are still around but we have to be very alert to spot them.

## Comparative Methods in Old Testament Studies Ecclesiasties Reconsidered

by Tremper Longman, III

Repeatedly in the Old Testament the Lord exhorts his people Israel to stay as far removed from the nations which dwelt around them as possible. The Canaanites were to be utterly destroyed, and the Israelites were to stay at home for fear that by coming into contact with other nations they would be led astray (Deut. 7:1ff). How surprising it is then to see so many similarities between the literature of the OT and that of the surrounding nations: details of the biblical flood story occur in the eleventh tablet of the Gilgamesh Epic; Yahweh is described in language reminiscent of Baal, the Canaanite god of the thunderstorm; and biblical covenants are similar to Hittite and Assyrian vassal treaties.

The task of comparative studies as it relates to the study of the OT is to describe and hopefully explain the relationship between the Bible and its environment. At its best, comparative studies provide a deeper understanding of the OT, helping the interpreter to bridge the vast temporal and cultural chasm which separates the modern reader from the OT. Methodological and theological issues are raised by the comparative approach to the study of the OT, and the best way to approach these problems is to begin with a survey of three different attitudes toward the use of Near Eastern literature to illuminate the OT. Afterwards, the benefits of the comparative method will be illustrated by placing Ecclesiastes in its proper Near Eastern genre.

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*Tremper Longman, III, is Associate Professor of Old Testament at Westminster Theological Seminary.*

### 1) *The Traditional Comparative Approach*

Mesopotamian tablets began to be deciphered in the middle of the nineteenth century. From the start the primary interest in these documents was the light they could shed on the Bible. Among the early discoveries of Assyriology were the Babylonian creation (Enuma Elish) and flood stories (Tablet XI of the Gilgamesh Epic), both of which were immediately compared with the biblical stories of creation and flood. Indeed, George Smith, one of the early pioneers of Assyriology and a comparativist, raised financial support for further explorations in the Near East by sharing with potential donors his hope of finding more of the flood story, a hope which he fulfilled!

The point of the traditional comparative approach is to find "parallels" with biblical materials. The focus is on similarities. Thus defined, this approach to comparative issues has a long history and continues to the present day. Indeed, new discoveries have frequently fueled the impetus for such studies. The discovery of the archives of Ugarit (1929 A.D. and following) led to a new barrage of comparative studies (especially in the work of M. J. Dahood). The discovery of Mari prophetic texts and the Nuzi archive in the 1930's resulted in comparisons with biblical prophecy and the patriarchal period respectively. Most recently the uncovering of Tell-Mardikh (Ebla) has led to new attempts to find parallels with the biblical text.

But extreme forms of the traditional comparative method characteristically lead to distorted views of the material. The classic case of an extreme approach to biblical near-Eastern comparative research is the so-called pan-Babylonian school represented by Friedrich