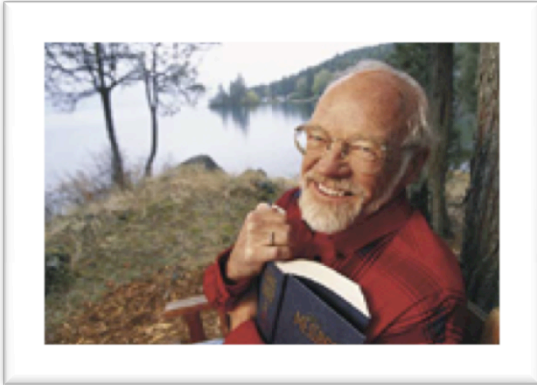


A Conversation with Eugene Peterson

Interviewed by Michael J. Cusick

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In a Christian publishing culture where marketing potential, charisma, and the latest recipe for self-improvement are often more valued than things substantial, Eugene Peterson cuts an ordinary figure at best. But in the world of spirit, integrity, art, and imagination, Peterson stands high above the crowd.

Known for years as a pastor to pastors, more recently he has become a pastor to the English speaking world with the release of *The Message : The New Testament in Contemporary English* (NavPress). In this fresh paraphrase of Scripture, Peterson's exegetical deftness meets headlong with poetic brilliance, forged in the fire of nearly thirty years of pastoring.

“The pastorate,” says Peterson, “is one of the few places in our society where you can live atruly creative life.” Indeed, this man has been creative. With eighteen books, numerous contributions to others, and dozens of journal and magazine articles to his credit, his writing career has been nothing short of prolific. No minor accomplishment for a man who at the same time pastored *Christ Our King Presbyterian Church* in Bel Air, Maryland, for twenty-nine years.

In order to devote more time to writing and teaching, Peterson retired from the pastorate in 1991. He currently is Professor of Spiritual Theology at Regent College in Vancouver, British Columbia.

Mars Hill: You are Professor of Spiritual Theology At Regent College. How is spiritual theology distinct from traditional theological studies?

EP: Spiritual theology has to do with living the Christian life instead of thinking about it. It has a long history both pre and post-reformation. It has an academic tradition

hooked into it: prayer, spiritual direction, and theological underpinnings of how you understand the faith. Up until the time of the reformation, theology was just theology. Theologians prayed and they thought. There was no split between living the Christian life and thinking about it. But then the rise of scholasticism and the polemics of the reformation came about and the two became separate. The systematic theologian became an academic and the spiritual theologian became the chaplain. In Roman Catholic schools there was always a strong leadership in spiritual theology; worship and prayer. But Protestantism pretty much dropped out of sight and left it up to the individual to take care of their own prayer life. People say, "Why the adjective--isn't all theology spiritual?" Actually, here at Regent you are as apt to get spiritual theology in a Hebrew course as in one of my courses on spirituality. The aim is to integrate them both so that all of your thinking becomes prayerful.

Mars Hill: What do you attribute the resurgence of spirituality and intense interest in spiritual direction to?

EP: Part of it is just the end of the so called modern era. It's not enough to think. Rationalism just doesn't work. And activism doesn't work. So the evangelical church is trying to recover its holiness. We have started paying a lot more attention to the older traditions of prayer, spiritual direction, and liturgy. They are not being left as an individualistic thing that can be reduced to whatever you do in your quiet time. So, I think it's a sense of thinness, we have left out something that is very essential. Whenever there is any kind of a movement like evangelicalism which starts out with an incredible amount of energy, the momentum of that energy carries it for a long time. But it's not carrying it now. Suddenly, people are feeling thin, impoverished, and realizing our spiritual ancestors have rich resources which we need to recover. Fortunately, we are recovering them.

Mars Hill: Has the failure of the modern counseling movement to offer something transcendent set the stage for increased interest in spiritual direction and formation?

EP: I think that's part of it. The counseling movement, even within the church became heavily psychologized and became almost exclusively therapeutic, so what people were dealing with were problems. If you had a problem you went to a counselor. In most cases it lost its moorings in the biblical revelation. But spiritual direction in a sense doesn't begin with a problem. You shouldn't have to have a problem before you start dealing with spiritual things. Spiritual direction deals much more out of health, and an identity of Christian holiness, so I think it's an obvious response to the failure to transcend.

Mars Hill: As you referred to holiness here, as well as in your writings, you offer a refreshing picture of holiness that doesn't seem like the typical evangelical definition. How would you define holiness?

EP: Holiness is the Christian life mature. It's gathering all the parts and pieces of your life into obedience and response to God, and living with some energy. Holiness is a

blazing thing, it's an energetic thing. Part of the reason the modern church has lost its taste for holiness is that it was engineered. Although we were really firm about the fact that justification is by faith; holiness was by disciplines, work, arranging. So it became hedging around the rules, hints, regulations, and technology. Therefore, it became very boring and claustrophobic.

Mars Hill: As opposed to what is conveyed in *The Message*, that it's something that naturally grows out of your life as you enjoy relationship with God?

EP: Yes, but I wouldn't say that holiness naturally grows out of your life, I would say that it's the work of the Holy Spirit in your life. It's a work in which there is conscious and intentional participation and obedience. It's living the life of the Spirit under the same theological conditions that you live the life of faith or justification. It's very Trinitarian. Unfortunately, we have lost that Trinitarian wholeness, a sense of relational wholeness. I think it's a result of the culture and the fragmentation of the culture, how we specialize in different things. As Protestants we get nervous at anything that didn't stem from the last revival.

Mars Hill: How has our loss of relational wholeness that we see in the Trinity affected the church?

EP: It's made the church very busy, because if you don't have a sense of a large context in God you get frantic. There's a lot to do and you'd better get at it. It's also affected the church in depersonalizing relationships. We are now defined by our function. You are a good Sunday School teacher or a zealous missionary, so the activity that we generate becomes a substitute for non-Trinitarian idea. The Trinity is a very active concept, if you lose that you just end up with doctrines; a doctrine of God, a doctrine of justification, all propositions that you continually have to reactivate in your life. Traditional Christian spirituality is not taking bits and pieces of doctrine and putting them to use, it's entering into the life of God that is already in motion. There is already movement in the Trinity. It's a matter of shifting your image of what's going on. Are we in a spiritual bazaar where we are picking out verses and texts that we can use, or are we in a home that is ordered by Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, where we can enter into what's already going on? We can learn to be obedient, participant, learn to receive affection and give it. But it's not our home, we're not the ones in charge of this.

Mars Hill: Can some of what's been lost be recovered with a reclamation of the doctrine of the Trinity?

EP: We're never past recovery. The church is always finding itself in some place or another whereby it needs to be rescued, and we currently need to be rescued from this excessively commodity oriented culture. Everything is thingified, and we become thingified. There is a lot of recovery of the doctrine of the Trinity going on right now. But it probably hasn't gotten down to where it's shaping pastors and leaders and teachers where there is evidence yet.

Mars Hill: Regent College calls itself “the un-seminary.” What do you think of seminaries today?

EP: Regent started out as a school for the laity. It was to be an international school for Christian graduate studies. Along the way, pastors started to say, “We want to be able to prepare for pastoral leadership at Regent.” Because of the wonderful faculty that is here, people have been attracted from all over the world to study with these people. The pressure grew to have an M.Div. degree, and we've had one now for over ten years. But there is a strong sense at Regent of resistance to the professionalization of the clergy. So there's a constant attempt to keep parity between the marketplace and the church and parachurch ministries. They both stand on a parity called of God. So when the school advertises as an unseminary I think it is trying to make a statement that says, “This is not a trade school where you come to learn to be an ecclesiastical leader of some kind. It's a place where you're immersed in the Christian mind, the Christian spirit, so that you can be equipped to be a pastor, or an architect.” I just completed a course this last weekend in Ministry and Spirituality with one hundred people in the course. Half of the students were laity and half in church related vocations.

Mars Hill: What a wild concept! To equip people to live for God in their vocation, whatever it may be. You once said that if you were to start a seminary, you would spend the first two years studying literature. Would you elaborate on that?

EP: Even now, in all of my courses, students read poetry and novels. In my course in spirituality they write reviews of the book *Middlemarch*, *The Power and the Glory*, and Walter Wangerin's *Book of the Dun Cow*. The importance of poetry and novels is that the Christian life involves the use of the imagination, after all, we are dealing with the invisible. And, imagination is our training in dealing with the invisible, making connections, looking for plot and character. I don't want to do away with or denigrate theology or exegesis, but our primary allies in this business are the artists. I want literature to be on par with those other things. They need to be brought in as full partners in this whole business. The arts reflect where we live, we live in narrative, we live in story. We don't live as exegetes.

Mars Hill: To use your words again, “existence has a story shape to it,” is that what you meant?

EP: Yes, we have a beginning and an end, we have a plot, we have characters. We are not journalists, we accumulate meaning. If we put it in the larger framework, God has a story. The scriptures are given to us in the shape of a story. I spend a lot of time in what I write, in what I teach, and what I preach, calling attention to this storiedness of our lives. It's pretty natural, most people tell stories, especially in other cultures. My African students have been doing it all their lives. But there's something about North America, and evangelicalism, that wants to package things into a neat little formula.

Mars Hill: Do you consider yourself a narrative theologian?

EP: I welcome all this emphasis on narrative theology, but the trouble with a label like narrative theologian is that the narrative theology movement has lost, or never had, the internal workings of spirit. It finds its meaning in the story, but Jesus is the story, He's the fascination. In their excitement of seeing how narrative works many of them have dropped all theological dimension. I don't see a whole lot of gain with that.

Mars Hill: You speak of the importance of artists and the arts, but it seems there is such a lack of artistry in the Christian...how can we encourage an expansion of the arts: music, literature, drama, sculpture?

EP: Here on the campus at Regent we always have art exhibits with works of art brought in from artists all over Vancouver. There is always a good deal of fresh music brought in. Regent is a very open place for the arts. I think we are encouraging it. It seems there is a lot of the arts going on in the church, it's just that it doesn't get high visibility. It seems there is more of an openness to the arts.

Mars Hill: Tell me about the Chrysostom Society that you are part of. How did it come into being?

EP: Richard Foster, Calvin Miller, and Karen Mains, (one others) got together because they were very isolated in their craft of writing. They felt that as writers, nobody cared if they wrote or not. And nobody cared if they wrote well. Publishers cared if they wrote or not, but only on their terms. They felt it was really important to just get together, write together, and believe in each other as practitioners of a craft to the glory of God. They sat down and wrote down fifteen or twenty names of people who would want to do that. It was a very random kind of thing. I don't think there was much of an election process but Jan and I were invited. I didn't go the first year because I was on sabbatical, but the second year I went very tentatively because I didn't really feel the isolation. I was a pastor. Calvin Miller was the only other pastor, Walter Wangerin had been a pastor, but most of them felt the isolation more. Some of them are teachers, editors. But the minute after I had been there for the first several days, I knew I wanted to be a part of it. Nobody else had ever treated me as a writer. It meant something to me to have the affirmation from peers who cared whether you wrote well or not. They didn't ask questions about how many books or contracts I had going. They just asked, "Are we writers to the glory of God?" We meet every year for four days; they have become wonderful friends.

Mars Hill: What does Chrysostom mean?

EP: Chrysostom was a man, a third century pastor in Asia Minor. I think Chrysostom was a nick name because it means golden mouth, he was an orator, a great preacher. It's interesting because it's one of those names that nobody liked. Richard Foster kept calling it the Chrysostom Society and nobody came up with anything better.

Mars Hill: While on the subject of words, you wrote: "I work with words, in pastoring I work with people, but not mere words or mere people, but words and people as carriers of Spirit. The moment words are used prayerlessly, and people are treated prayerlessly,

something essential seems to leak out of life.” What does it mean to be prayerful with people and words?

EP: It's right at the heart of our theology. In the beginning was the Word. The Word was with God. The revelation comes by Word. And all these words are personal, there is no abstract word. God is himself incarnating himself by word. Words, language is the way in which we reveal ourselves to one another. It's the primary means of deepening and continuing intimacy. The minute language becomes functionalized there is sacrilege going on.

Mars Hill: What do you mean “when language becomes functionalized?”

EP: It becomes functionalized when it is just used for information or getting you to do something for me. Or, getting you to buy something. As Christians we get caught up in that culture and we start using language, albeit necessary, in its lowest sense. The primary sense we were given language is for revelation, for blessing. We've left our heritage, our theology, our scriptures, and taken these same words which began in holiness, a Trinitarian kind of holiness, a relational holiness, and we think just because we have the right words like, “Jesus saves,” or “John 3:16,” we can use them any way we want, but we can't. They have to be spoken in the way they were revealed. At least in the same posture and tone. I think it's time for a great recovery of language, we have to recover the nature of our language because words are holy. People are the same way. As I look at you I can see that you are in the image of God. I've got to be aware of that. If I'm not aware of that then you become a way that I can get a better job or use you. When you are no longer of use to me you're out of here.

Mars Hill: You're implying then that we ought to be far more intentional with our words?

EP: Yes, but I wouldn't want it to sound as if you have to be calculating or shrewd. When you are taking words seriously, when you respect language, you can be quite spontaneous. That's why I used the word prayerful. If the words are coming from who you are, and the relationship you have with God and your friends, you can be quite spontaneous with your words. So if you put the idea of being intentional far enough back I agree with you. It starts with how you perceive language to function and how you conceive people to be. But if when you say, “intentional,” you mean a kind of obsessing whether you should say something, then I would disagree. Words come out of relationship, and prayer. A life of prayer, not just saying your prayers.

Mars Hill: Say more about the idea of “a life of prayer,” as opposed to saying our prayers.

EP: It's a life that you are immersed in. Prayer is the interiority of our life in relationship to the God who has spoken to us. So deep within us there is a dialogic reality. God spoke life into being and we answer it. That is the way our life is. As our life enters this lively word, this revelation, prayer is living our life now in response to that. Prayer cannot be confined to a certain period of time. It is nurtured in those things, and

we realize certain aspects of it during those times. At one point I realized that the time I spend in the external act of prayer, where if someone could see through a knothole and say I was praying, I'm not really praying then--I'm just getting ready to pray. When I get up off my knees or out of or out of my chair at eight o'clock, that's when I start praying. That other time of saying my prayers is just getting ready to pray. It's just getting rid of the distractions and making pre-deciding things about the day which give you room so that you're not just swallowed up by everybody else's agenda. While I was growing up my parents would often invite missionaries to our family home in Montana so they could rest and recover. When I was around fifteen years old or so there was a man who came to visit us one summer. He was a Frenchman named John Wright Follett, a small, bird like man who had never married. He was a teacher of quite acceptance in the Pentecostal movement in the thirties and forties and because his name was a household name in our circles, I was in awe of him. When I met him he was probably seventy years old. One day he was laying in a hammock with his eyes closed and I wanted to talk to him. I told my mother I wanted to talk to him and she said, "Just go up and talk to him, it's okay." I timidly approached the hammock and said, "Dr. Follett how do you pray?" He didn't open his eyes at all. He just grunted and said, "I haven't prayed in forty years!" He stunned me and I walked off totally puzzled. Since then I have realized the wisdom of the man. You see, anything he had told me I would have imitated. I would have gone and done what he said and thought that's what prayer is. He risked something to teach me what prayer was, and I'm glad he did. Prayer wasn't something he did, it was something he was. He lived a life of prayer. It took me about six or seven years to understand what he had done but it was sure better than wasting time trying to imitate what he did.

Mars Hill: Tell me about *The Message* and how it came into being.

EP: Actually, it started with a phone call from John Stein, who is now my editor at NavPress. He said, ""Remember *Traveling Light*, the book you wrote on Galatians? Well, I cut out all the paraphrased parts, Xeroxed them together and I have been carrying them around for ten years showing it to all my friends. I'm just getting really tired of Galatians. Would you paraphrase the whole New Testament?" Well, it took me a year to do Galatians, so I thought how could I ever do the whole New Testament. He called me three or four months later, when in the meantime, for unrelated reasons, I had decided to resign from my parish. Jan and I decided it was time to leave the pastorate, mainly to spend more time writing. We made the decision, and while we were still with the congregation, John called again. I realized that I could do it at that time. But personally, I didn't think I could do it. Maybe I could do Paul, because Paul is easy in a sense because he gets tangled up and you can untangle him. But I didn't think I could ever do the gospels. I agreed to do ten chapters of Matthew at which time John would show it to his colleagues to see what they thought. The first few chapters were really bad, I was just plodding along. But when I hit chapter five, The Sermon on the Mount, something kicked in and I suddenly had that sense of "this is what I do". It was then that I thought I was on to something. To tell you the truth, the whole time I did *The Message*, each month I would send John what I wrote, and think he would tell me to quit. You see, it really didn't seem different to me because this is what I had been doing all my life, it's

what I do. I was always in a small congregation and nobody there thought it was all that great. Because I love language, I love words, I have always read my Bible in Hebrew and Greek as an adult. So I was always trying to get those languages into American, especially in my preaching and teaching. So as I was doing the Message I often had the feeling of harvest. It was if I wasn't even working at it because I was just taking what had been growing and developing. In some ways it was easy, like walking through an orchard and picking apples off of a tree.

Mars Hill: The harvesting resulting from a lifetime of being with people as a pastor, and your academic background?

EP: Yes, but actually, it goes back even before either of those. I've realized that I was prepared for this from a very early age because my Dad was a butcher. We always lived close to his butcher shop, I was always there, I grew up there. My mother made me a butcher apron every year. And because my dad wore a butcher apron, and smiled, and people loved to come into our shop, I always thought of my him as a priest. I knew the story of Samuel, Eli, and Hannah. And I just always figured that as Samuel grew up he wore a butcher apron just like mine. I thought that's what a priestly robe was. So I always had this sense of sanctity and holiness in the workplace. The working place was the place and the language which you talked about God and prayed in. It was a whole new place. We had a preacher who specialized in Leviticus and the Temple and all that went on there. So I knew what went on there; they killed animals, and there was a lot of blood and guts and flies. So all the worship stuff that I would hear in church I would just translate into our butcher shop with my Dad who was a priest. We were in a small western town and there were a lot of misfits and oddballs, so language was colorful. I didn't grow up with sophisticated language.

Mars Hill: So you never grew up with the mindset that the Bible was a ceremonial, Elizabethan kind of book?

EP: That's right it never was. But when I became a Presbyterian pastor all these people were coming into church on Sunday morning and leaving eighty percent of their vocabulary behind them. How could they hear the gospel in this reduced, nice language, much of which they learned in college? So I knew I had to get a language which they used all the time. I was a pastor for thirty years doing it. The tone and the rhythms of your language have to be congruent with the text, which started out as street language.

Mars Hill: To hear how the hand of God was on your life even as you were a boy, and how your early days in your Dad's butcher shop affected how you would translate the scriptures later in life is a powerful picture of Providence.

EP: I really believe that. I can see so many things now, like the fact that I was being prepared to do *The Message* when I was four years old. *The Message* has been so well received, and it just surprises me completely. I had no idea, never even an inkling that this would happen. So, I've started thinking, "How did that happen?" I never sat down to

do it, it just happened. There was a sense in which it was effortless. I worked hard and put in long hours but it wasn't like I was trying to do something that I didn't know how to do.

Mars Hill: Words have been used to describe *The Message* such as, “breathtaking,” “captivating,” “it will stop people dead in their tracks.” How do those descriptions make you feel?

EP: I guess that people get enthusiastic and extravagant. But it seems to me that people are surprised that *The Message* is so ordinary. They didn't know that God was speaking to them where they were, that He entered their lives where they were. We get this dichotomized life. We have a religious life and a secular life. Here's something secular and people are caught by surprise. If that's what they are talking about then I'm pleased, but I think it's the ordinariness of *The Message* that surprise people.

Mars Hill: It seems that it is the ordinariness that is so powerful for people. One pastor has said that he hopes *The Message* will “smash through our comfortable thinking about the Bible.” Why do you suppose we have become so comfortable with the scriptures?

EP: I think it's partly our sin. One of the Devil's finest pieces of work is getting people to spend three nights a week in Bible studies.

Mars Hill: I'm sure that's going to surprise a lot of readers!

EP: Well, why do people spend so much time studying the Bible? How much do you need to know? We invest all this time in understanding the text which has a separate life of its own and we think we're being more pious and spiritual when we're doing it. But it's all to be lived. It was given to us so we could live it. But most Christians know far more of the Bible than they're living. They should be studying it less, not more. You just need enough to pay attention to God.

Mars Hill: You said that we treat the text as if it had a life of its own. Many would say that it does have a life of its own, yet you mean something else.

EP: I think I would want to say it a different way. We treat the text as if it is in a separate world of its own, apart from our lives. This text reveals God lovingly at work in the world. And the intent of the text is to draw us into that world of God's action. Study is normally an over intellectualized process. It takes us out of relationships. And so, I guess I'm just not at all pleased with all the emphasis on Bible study as if it's some kind of special thing that Christians do, and the more they do the better. It needs to be integrated into something more whole.

Mars Hill: So there's a very natural interplay between the text and our lives.

EP: Yes, but as long as we're ignorant of the Scriptures we won't have a clue as to what God is doing. We do need to recover the large world of the Bible. What I see

happening is that when people read the Bible, they reduce the world to something which they call Bible study. But the world of the Bible, the world revealed in Scripture, is a much larger world than anything you get in the newspapers or history books. If we're doing Bible study right we ought to get a glimpse of that. But the way Bible studies are often conducted often ghettoizes the people doing them.

Mars Hill: You wrote *The Message* for “disaffected outsiders and bored insiders.” Who are those people?

EP: Outsiders don't think there is anything that the Christian faith has that has to do with them. They think Christianity is for religious people. And since they aren't religious they're not going to open the Bible. There are also a lot of people who have been intimidated by Christians who don't think they are up to snuff. Unless they pass a prerequisite stage they can't understand what's going on. There's an enormous amount of ignorance about God and the scriptures. Some if it is perpetuated by this intimidation. It's something you've got to be introduced to or have a special introductory course before you know what's going on. The bored insiders are those I meet all the time. They've heard it over and over again, and they've lost touch with the reality of these words. Here again is part of the providence you mentioned. I had a congregation that was a mix of both outsiders and insiders. There were people there who had grown up in the church and had been there all their lives. It was a kind of conventional thing for them. I also had people who had never heard anything Christian. I couldn't say the name Abraham and expect people to know what I was talking about. So, I had to learn how to say it because I had all these outsiders who didn't know anything about religion or Christianity. They forced me to let their language be the language of my preaching and teaching, I had to learn that. But then if you're an insider, it's really easy to get dull ears and I wanted to wake them up. It's what preachers ought to be doing every Sunday and it's what I've been doing all my life.

Mars Hill: I understand you're currently working on paraphrasing the Old Testament. How is that progressing for you?

EP: I just finished Song of Songs which was the last of the Wisdom literature I had to do. Actually, I thought Song of Songs was the hardest thing I've done yet. I'm doing it in chunks, this one being Wisdom literature, and I put it off until last. I think it went really well. My apprehension was that we've lost a language of sexuality. We either have euphemisms or we have vulgarities. But that sweet erotic innocence of the Song of Songs, where can you find that? I didn't know if there was a language left for that. I feel good about what I did there.

Mars Hill: I understand you're more comfortable with the Semitic language of the Old Testament. Is the translation work easier and more natural for you than the New Testament?

EP: I think so but it's hard to tell at this point. I did my graduate school training in Semitic languages. So, technically I know more about Hebrew, but I've been reading

Greek for thirty-five years and feel equally at home with Greek. But there is a real sense of at homeness that is coming to fruition as I work through the Old Testament.

Mars Hill: Are there plans to publish *The Message* as an entire Bible someday?

EP: Yes, if the Lord doesn't return too soon! I just wrote out a schedule for my editor. I hope to have it done in six years. I have it broken down into four sections, with two years per section. I just finished the Wisdom literature. I'll do the history books next, then the prophets, then the Pentateuch. I think I have a schedule that will work well. The New Testament was done in about a year and a half. It was too much, with many long days where that's all I did. When I got done I said I would never keep that pace again. Then NavPress asked if I would do the Old Testament and my first reaction was, "No! I can't live that way." But as the responses started coming in I realized what was happening. After about six months I thought, "Lord, maybe this is my work, maybe this is it." I prayed long and talked about it for a long time. It was an incredible commitment. But I made the decision that this is my work now. This might sound strange, but I'm a writer and writers like to write. But *The Message* isn't writing, it's translating. When you write you may work for an hour or two on a sentence and suddenly it's there. You feel that nobody's ever quite done it like that before and they're never going to do it again. There is a sense of "A-hah! I did that." But I never get that with *The Message*. I'm always second rate to Paul, second rate to Mark, and John. I remember telling Jan once just after I had finished *The Message*, "I'm so tired of coming in second." I didn't want to do it anymore.

Mars Hill: It sounds very humbling, and yet you're keeping pretty good company with Paul, John, and the others.

EP: That's right. But my work on the Old Testament means I'm not writing a lot of things I wanted to write. I'm still writing some things, but I've realized that this is my work. This is what I've been given to do, so, I'll do it.

Mars Hill: With an already prolific career what has it been like to do such a major project and now be known as the man who paraphrased the Bible. Is that a weight to carry?

EP: To tell you the truth I'm not aware of it. You say things like this and I know you're not making it up but I have almost no internal sense of it. In a sense, I feel fortunate that it wasn't my idea. It wasn't something that I had been planning or plotting out. I just did it and it was done.

Mars Hill: J.B. Phillips was reported to have struggled with depression as a result of the acclaim of his translation of The New Testament in Modern English. Has *The Message* affected you personally?

EP: Phillips depression started pretty early after he did it. And he also had a history of depression even before his translation work. He was treated so badly; people really

came down hard on him saying he shouldn't have done it. I think that sent him into a tailspin and it had a major effect in him. I wouldn't say it has had that effect on me except as a distraction. In one sense we've solved that problem because I don't take any speaking engagements now. I don't go anyplace. I just stay here at Regent, teach my classes, and see my students and colleagues. Jan is writing several letters a week and answering phone calls, but if I were to do that it would destroy me. There is something very depersonalizing about that which I find very destructive to the soul. I've always been in a small congregation and all my work has always been done in a place of intimacy. When it started happening that I was being talked about instead of addressed, used as a speaker or something, I found it very alien and hurtful. So we made that decision about three or four months after I came here. I feel very protected as a result.

Mars Hill: How have you responded to your critics?

EP: I've been really fortunate; I've had very little criticism. One person took me on and made a campaign out of it for a while. I didn't do anything, NavPress handled it all. They were very courteous and attentive to his concerns and criticisms. I have a team of scholars who check everything I do. They responded to him very well. I wasn't impervious to it, but they handled it very well. As I understand what happened, the man who had waged the campaign was barraged by people saying, "Don't do that." When we published *The Message*, I knew about J.B. Phillips, I knew about Kenneth Taylor. Taylor really had a hard time, to the point that he received death threats. It was horrible for him. I thought, "Let's just go to the South seas for two years and hide out until it's all over."

Mars Hill: What about criticism at the level where people are uncomfortable with some of the startling language, the rawness and reality of it?

EP: I haven't gotten much response to that and I don't think NavPress has. Once in a while somebody writes a letter but it's very occasional. I've been pleasantly surprised because I get wonderful letters. One lady who wrote was eighty-seven years old. She said, "I'm a King James Bible person, but I've got all these nephews and nieces who won't read the Bible and I thought maybe I could give them *The Message*. So I got a copy and checked it out. I want you to know that I'm never going to read it myself, but I checked it against my King James and I think it's okay. It was right every time so I'm giving it to all my nephews and nieces."

Mars Hill: You should put her on your advisory board!

EP: It was such a dear letter. And she assured me two or three times that she wouldn't be reading it herself!

Mars Hill: You've written a lot about being subversive in the pastorate and spiritual leadership. And, you are a poet. Are poetry and the arts subversive?

EP: Yes. Poetry and the arts are subversive. They come at things indirectly, they aren't

usually frontal. They sneak in on you, they're quiet. And what we have spiritually is that the self is constantly construing itself against God. That's the nature of our sin: we want to be our own gods. So we have all these layers of defensiveness that often take the form of pieties. Religion, is the major defense we have against God. So how do you take people that are heavily defended against God by religion and get through the defenses? Well, you do it by subversion. You get around the defenses. That's what a parable or a proverb is. Jesus did very little that was direct. people were always scratching their heads and saying, "What does he mean?" On another level, a lesser level, culture develops ideologies to protect them from reality. So how do you get past the ideology? Suppose someone says, "All Black people are inferior," and you have been living that ideology all your life, how do you get behind that? You usually don't do it with argument or being rationale.

Mars Hill: You've written that "Jesus was the master of indirection." Are evangelicals too direct with the gospel? Are we too frontal?

EP: I'd hesitate to say we're too frontal because that's part of proclamation: the Kingdom of God is here, repent, believe the gospel. But, yes, we need to do a lot more indirection. That's basically what a poet or a novelist does. I wouldn't say we need to do less frontal work with the gospel, we just need to do more of the subversive stuff.

Mars Hill: I read an article where you wrote, "Every time someone tells a story, and tells it well, the gospel is served." Do you mean that we need to put the gospel into different forms other than, "Here are the steps to be saved?"

EP: I think the key word in what I said is "served," I didn't mean it's proclaimed every time someone tells a story, it's served. When stories are told people begin to get a sense that life has value and meaning, and that they are significant. And then they start looking for the significance, "Where's the meaning?" Where can I find significance? But until people begin to realize their embeddedness in creation, and in suffering, that they aren't just accidents along the way, they really don't hear the gospel story. So, the important word is served. If you were standing on a street corner, and some lonely person comes by, you could ask, "How are you,?" and they might start telling you. If you listen to them, in five minutes, part of their life has come into being again. Your letting them tell their story provides a context to receive Jesus and for the Holy Spirit to work. But if they feel they have no story, there is no context, no embeddedness.

Mars Hill: So it's more of a doorway into proclaiming the gospel?

EP: And, it's also a familiarizing with the way in which the way the gospel normatively comes to us. It comes through the story of Jesus, it doesn't come through the doctrine of Jesus. He was born, he lives, he dies, it's all story. It's very important to keep the story and not distill ideas out of it.

Mars Hill: Evangelism is a word that you're not comfortable with in light of how it's often used. What is evangelism to you?

EP: I'm not comfortable with it in its bullying sense. I'm very comfortable with it in its etymological sense. Evangelism is believing and living as if this is really good news, as if it's incredible news and we have something to say. Evangelism also means that we learned to say it the way Jesus said it and not just the way we want to say it. We have to learn his methods as well as his truth. So we learn to treat people with dignity. I heard a terrible story the other day from one of my students who just came from Rwanda. As she was working amongst the dying, bleeding, and massacred, she was going through the bodies putting a mark on the foreheads of people who needed and could benefit from medical treatment. There were a team of doctors coming behind her to give the care and treatment. But, there was a man, one of her fellow missionaries, who was selling tracts to these people. She said, "What are you doing!" He said, "It's surprising how many of them have a penny or a dime on them. It's amazing how much money these people have." It sounds unbelievable, yet if you think ten seconds you know you've seen it in yourself. Evangelicals need to learn how to do evangelism from Jesus, not just from a handbook. I have a student who is a Hong Kong pastor. He's writing a dissertation for me on evangelism in Hong Kong. Everyone in Hong Kong is panicked because of 1997 and they've got to evangelize the place. They are using every public relations, technological method available. But, you see, there are no people there. No sinner in Hong Kong is a person, they are a target. He is so upset with the depersonalization of the whole city in the name of evangelism.

Mars Hill: And that kind of depersonalization contradicts the whole idea of incarnation.

EP: Yes, it does. The primary thing that we're dealing with is that God is doing something. It's not just that He exists, it's that He's doing something. That's why we say we believe in the Holy Spirit, because we believe He is doing something. If God is doing something, the most important thing I can do is look for it, watch for it, and respond to it. All this charging into the fray and "doing something for Jesus" is getting in the way. We are distracting people from what God is doing. I don't think I'm a quietist in any way, where I'm encouraging people to be spectators. In fact, it's very energizing when you start responding to it. It's also very freeing because you're not from anxiety, you're working from grace. It's interesting; I couldn't read *The Message* after I finished it. I just haven't read it. But, last week, on Palm Sunday, I picked it up and started reading it. I read all four gospels. It was wonderful. I had a sense of, "Things are okay." Because you hear all these things where people are caught up in some bandwagon, and they are not really paying attention to anything at all. By the time you get to be my age you get to be very skeptical about anything where there is a great amount of enthusiasm because it's going to be something else next week.

Mars Hill: What would you like to be remembered for?

EP: (Laughing) Michael, that's not a good question!

Mars Hill: Why not! You don't like to talk about yourself do you?

EP: I would want to be remembered that I was a good husband, a good father, a good pastor. I would want to be remembered in terms of the people I've lived with.

Mars Hill: I think that your answer is a powerful one. A lot of people might think, "He did *The Message*, he wrote sixteen books, he was a pastor...but you know that's all meaningless if those closest to you weren't loved." As a younger man, I'm encouraged by that. If you were giving your last sermon or message, what would some of the themes be of what you would want to say?

EP: I think I would want to talk about things that are immediate and ordinary. In the kind of world we live in, the primary way that I can get people to be aware of God is to say, "Who are you going to have breakfast with tomorrow and how are you going to treat them?" I don't feel like I'm part of the big vision, or the catchy slogan. I just want to pay attention to what people are doing, and help them do it in acts of faith and prayer. I guess I'd want to say, "Go home and be good to your wife, treat your children with respect, and do a good job at whatever you've been given to do."