

LETTERS

— to a —

YOUNG

PASTOR

*Timothy conversations
between father and son*



ERIC E. PETERSON

EUGENE H. PETERSON

Eric Peterson's *Letters to a Young Pastor* is a must-read for every person in ministry . . . really, every Christ follower. In this collection of heartfelt letters from Eugene Peterson to his son, we get a look behind the curtain, a glimpse at the heart of one of our generation's most esteemed pastors. The letters reveal Eugene Peterson's passion for ministry, contemplative nature, and longing for authentic worship. He eloquently addresses the balance required of young pastors trying to maintain a strong family and marriage while dealing with the never-ending demands of clergy. Each turn of the page is filled with fresh insight and candid advice for the challenges every pastor faces—from the changes in society and technology to dealing with difficult people. Peterson has left behind a treasure chest of wisdom—don't miss out!

PALMER CHINCHEN, PHD, speaker; author of *Justice Calling*, *True Religion*, *Barefoot Tribe*, and *God Can't Sleep*

Letters to a Young Pastor is an amazing opportunity for you to be personally mentored by Eugene Peterson, one of the most significant spiritual leaders of our time. In this must-read book, Eric Peterson gives us a peek into the very special relationship he had with his father, Eugene, and in the process allows us to access to the wisdom that was passed down from one generation to the next. Every pastor and church leader, young and old, needs to read this book!

DAVE FERGUSON, lead pastor at Community Christian Church; author of *Hero Maker*

Preserving the words between a father and a son is priceless, especially when they are pastoral, brilliant, graced, and insightful. Herein we have Eugene the elder speaking to Eric the pastor, unlocking the keys to personal and pastoral identity with relational, theological, and incarnational wisdom. How kind of Eric to preserve these intimate and trusting letters for a wider audience. I'm refreshed by their authenticity and blessed by their depth.

STEPHEN A. MACCHIA, founder and president of Leadership Transformations; author of fifteen books, including *Legacy*, *Crafting a Rule of Life*, and *Becoming a Healthy Church*

From the days of Aaron, the Lord has preserved a priestly line. Such lines are always preserved by the transference of wisdom from one generation to the next, so having Eugene and Eric Peterson's letters in our hands is a gift. They are tender and thoughtful, witty and wise, and you will be the better for reading them. This family continues to shape the pastoral imagination in America.

DANIEL GROTHE, pastor at New Life Church; author of *Chasing Wisdom*

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*Dedicated to the women and men who
carry on the noble work of pastoral ministry.*

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INTRODUCTION

IT WAS A BIG SKY DAY in the summer of 1980 as my dad and I made the round-trip drive from Lakeside, Montana, to Spokane, Washington. Ostensibly, the purpose of the trip was to visit Whitworth University to see if it might be a good fit for a liberal-arts education. (It was, and I spent three delightful and deeply formative years on its campus.) However, as is often the case, there were purposes beyond purposes; the presenting opportunity to check out a college led to something much more significant and durable. Namely, it was the seed for a deepening relationship that would develop between a father and a son.

The eight hours we spent in the car together created an undistracted container for continual conversation that spanned a broad range of topics. I forget many of the details of that day from many years ago, but I do recall that we talked about geography, particularly the glacial carvings from the last ice age and the Great Missoula Flood, both of which shaped the topography of that area—slowly in the former case, rapidly in the latter. We spoke of love and relationships;

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I was in love with a beautiful girl who had just moved away, and I was feeling the sting of separation. And we talked about the prophet Jeremiah, with whom I had come to identify, both because he was called by God as a young man and because his dad was a pastor. That part of the conversation led Eugene to preach a sermon series the next fall which later developed into *Run with the Horses*, the book he dedicated to “Eric, also the son of a priest.”¹

The next morning, while swimming together in Flathead Lake, I told him how much I had enjoyed the previous day and asked if we could find a way to continue the conversations when we got home. Once we returned to Maryland that fall, we had a standing date. Every Tuesday afternoon during my senior year of high school, I rode my bicycle to his study at our church. The pattern was simple: We read a paragraph from one of the Pastoral Epistles, using it as a springboard to reflect on our respective ministries (I was involved with Young Life at the time), and we prayed. Our “Timothy conversations,” we called them.

Sixteen years later, I found myself in the intense and demanding environment of the first year of a church plant. Although I had gone to good schools and received a solid theological education, I had learned nearly nothing about organizing a church from scratch. I was overwhelmed. I felt incompetent. Failure was a frequent fear. Secretly, I was quite sure that they had called the wrong guy. On a whim, I picked up the phone and called the only person I trusted to guide me through the maze. “Dad, I’ve been ordained for seven years, and I still feel like I don’t know what I’m doing.

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Would you write me some letters, reflecting on the pastoral vocation?”

During the brief pause on the other end of the line, I imagined that he might say something like “Actually, I’ve written several books on pastoral theology; you might read those.” Instead, he unreservedly said, “Sure!” as if he had just been standing by, waiting for the phone to ring.

His enthusiastic response to the proposal immediately reminded me of a moment in my teen years. It was a season of life when I was doing my own thing and he was doing his own thing, but we were doing precious little of it together. But one afternoon, I walked through the front door of the house to find him lying on the sofa, reading a thick volume of Barth’s *Church Dogmatics*. I sat down in a chair opposite him, and he immediately popped upright, slammed the book closed, and pushed it aside. He then leaned in, giving me his full attention for whatever I might have to say. He didn’t even mark the page. It was as if he were killing time with a dead German theologian, just waiting for me to show up.

His response to me from the other end of the phone that day, three Northwest states away, felt much the same, as if he had just been frittering away his time, waiting for an invitation to enter my life, my world.

And so began the intentional correspondence in which we reflected together on the pastoral vocation. “Timothy Letters,” we called them. Like Paul writing to the younger pastor, his “true son in the faith,”² letters full of advice, encouragement, and mentoring with respect to the pastoral life.

Over the course of his long life and ministry—it’s

impossible to refer to one without the other—Eugene preached a lot of sermons, delivered a lot of lectures, and wrote a lot of books. Lots and lots of words can be found in the wake of his life. But to be in a conversation with Eugene Peterson was to get the man at his best. Whatever else might be said about him, he was inherently relational. His life was grounded in the doctrine of the Incarnation: In matters of salvation and liberation, everything is getting worked out in the context of relationships—life in the flesh, life together in community. To have a leisurely hour or two over a meal, to sit with him and to engage in an uninterrupted conversation . . . well, there's nothing quite like it. However, that not always being possible, a correspondence in letters was the next best thing. For most of my adult years, I never lived closer than a four-hour drive from him. But the letters we exchanged became the continuation of our less frequent face-to-face conversations. Moreover, that we had to settle for letter writing because of distance resulted in a preservation of words that would have, otherwise, been lost.

In 1929, Franz Kappus published a collection of ten letters he had received, over a period of five years (1903–1908), from the esteemed writer and philosopher Rainer Maria Rilke. *Letters to a Young Poet*, as they are now known to us, are personal, brilliant, insightful, even pastoral. But we only get one side of the correspondence, and the reader is required to infer what was written from the missing side of the exchange. As if to explain why he omitted his own part of the conversation, Kappus, in his introduction, wrote, “When

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a truly great and unique spirit speaks, the lesser ones must be silent.”³

What follows, with only minor edits, are thirty-seven letters from the greater side of a ten-year correspondence which, I believe, may have some lasting wisdom for other younger or older pastors who need the steadying guidance from a sage. Eugene H. Peterson was my dad. But he was also the holiest man I have either known or known of. His life formed me to be the person and pastor I am more than I would even venture to guess. I hope that, in the pages that follow, you will allow the legacy of his enduring spirit to converse with you, as well.

Eric Eugene Peterson
Pentecost, 2020

TIMELINE

- 1962–1991 Eugene founded and served Christ Our King Presbyterian Church in Bel Air, MD.
- 1963 Eric was born in Bel Air, MD.
- 1976 Eugene published his first book: *Growing Up with Your Teenager* (later retitled as *Like Dew Your Youth*).
- 1980 Eugene published *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction: Discipleship in an Instant Society* (InterVarsity Press) and *Five Smooth Stones for Pastoral Work* (John Knox).
- 1981 Eric graduated from Bel Air High School.
- 1983 Eugene dedicated *Run with the Horses: The Quest for Life at Its Best* (InterVarsity Press) to Eric, “also the son of a priest.”
- 1985 Eric graduated from Whitworth University in Spokane, WA.

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- 1990 Eric graduated from Princeton Theological Seminary and was ordained.
- 1990–1997 Eric served as associate pastor at Marine View Presbyterian Church in Tacoma, WA.
- 1991–1992 Eugene was a visiting professor at Pittsburgh Seminary, where he translated much of the New Testament.
- 1993–1998 Eugene served as the James M. Houston Professor of Spiritual Theology at Regent College in Vancouver, BC.
- 1993 Eugene published *The Message: The New Testament in Contemporary Language* (NavPress) and *The Contemplative Pastor: Returning to the Art of Spiritual Direction* (Eerdmans).
- 1997–present Eric founded and served Colbert Presbyterian Church in eastern Washington.
- 1998 Eugene and Jan retired to Flathead Lake in Montana.
- 1999 Eugene and Eric began the correspondence that follows in this book.
- 2000 Eugene published *The Unnecessary Pastor: Rediscovering the Call* (Eerdmans), coauthored with Marva Dawn—the first of his books to be published during his correspondence with Eric.
- 2001 Eugene contributed two lectures, on “The Gift of Time” and “The Gift of Place,” to the Regent

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- College lecture series “Creation & Gospel: From the Garden to the Ends of the Earth.”
- 2002 Eugene completed his translation of the Old Testament, publishing the full text of *The Message* (NavPress).
- 2005 Leif Peterson (Eric’s brother) published his novel *Catherine Wheels* (Waterbrook).
- 2005–2010 Eugene published his Eerdmans series on spiritual theology: *Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places: A Conversation in Spiritual Theology* (2005); *Eat This Book: A Conversation in the Art of Spiritual Reading* (2006); *The Jesus Way: A Conversation on the Ways that Jesus Is the Way* (2007); *Tell It Slant: A Conversation on the Language of Jesus in His Stories and Prayers* (2008); and *Practice Resurrection: A Conversation on Growing Up in Christ* (2010).
- 2006 Eugene published *Living the Resurrection: The Risen Christ in Everyday Life* (NavPress).
- 2011 Eugene published *The Pastor: A Memoir* (HarperOne).
- 2018 Eric published *Wade in the Water: Following the Sacred Stream of Baptism* (Cascade).
- 2018 Eugene died Monday, October 22, in Lakeside, MT.
- 2019 Jan died Friday, May 10, in Kalispell, MT.

THE FIRST LETTER

—
Christmas Day 1999

Dear Eric,

I can't tell you how pleased I've been since you suggested that I write these letters to you, reflecting on our common pastoral calling. (Jan is too!) And I've been writing and rewriting (in my head) this first one ever since your telephone call, trying to get it right. And I can't. I guess I'm thinking I've got to come up with something like Paul to Timothy and Titus. And I can't—so this is what you get—just your old dad, trying to make sense of what we've both been given to do.

I think what strikes me most forcibly as I go over this is how different your world is from the one I grew up in

and tried to learn how to be a pastor in. And in the light of that, realizing how context-specific pastoral work is: There is not much that can be generalized and passed on from one generation to another. The substance, of course, is the same—prayer and the Scriptures, obedient love and the holy sacraments, honest preaching and teaching. But the details—and pastoral work is almost nothing but details—are so different that practically everything has to be worked out from scratch, on the job. People’s expectations, their views of what is involved in marriage and parenting, and their attitudes toward work and jobs, music and worship, the use of money and nature of commitments—all of these things and more are not totally different, but just enough so that leading people into a life of worship and discipleship requires paying attention to all these details so that we don’t impose a spirituality on them from without but develop it from within.

Something, for instance, as simple and common (now) as the Internet throws a monkey wrench into the works by almost totally depersonalizing knowledge, reducing it to a cataract of mere information. This reduction of knowledge to information has always been possible, and the forces that exacerbate it have been growing ever since Gutenberg, but now, with the prevalence of quick access to virtually everything there is to know, the link

between person and knowledge is, if not destroyed, at least weakened to an extent that is most troubling. Knowledge is less a personal exchange and more a commodity than ever before. And that makes it more difficult to preach the gospel and teach the Scriptures and direct personal growth than ever before—more difficult for you, I think, than for me.

I don't think for a minute this is new, but the scale is new, and it is that scale which affects pastoral work. The area where I notice it most is in what people unconsciously look for in their pastor: The pastor is not one to whom we look for knowledge or truth; the pastoral office is perceived in emotional terms—feelings of reassurance and comfort, a source of inspiration and good cheer, a figure of advocacy.

One of the great elements of distinction in the pastoral office is that it is personal. Everything—administration, teaching, healing, counsel—is represented in a named person who people can listen to and touch, speak the pastor's name and expect the pastor to speak their name. But when this personal dimension is then reduced to merely functional and emotional areas, the implicit authority of the office is diminished greatly.

I've reflected on this in the matter of Melody.¹ This might not be the best example, since I don't know the details. And if I have it wrong, just censor this

out. But my outsider impression is that Melody was brought into your ministry with a great deal of personal attention; early misunderstandings were worked out in a lot of detail; there was a great deal of investment in relationship as you took her into your confidence in what the leadership of worship involved and what working with those worship leaders means. Lynn² worked hard at this, setting herself aside and working for a common good. And then the whole thing falls apart because she understands her basic place in that worshipping community as a matter of status and money, and these function entirely apart from personal relationships. The most telling detail for me was in her threat to hire a lawyer and take the matter to a civil court. That kind of conflict is not so unusual, but I think the volatility, the quick fuse, the seemingly total absence on her part of relationship with you and the congregation—I think that is a sign that assumptions have changed considerably. The overwhelming context out of which she is working has to do with function and status and money—depersonalized categories. As we live in a world of the Internet (and related phenomena), this kind of thing happens more and more.

It is the pastor, whose work is nothing if not personal, and whose God is nothing if not personal, who is at the front line of experiencing this shift in sensibility and

THE FIRST LETTER

has to be thinking strategically all the time, devising language and approaches to counter it.

The good news is that the pastor in the congregation is probably in the most effective place in the world to counter these cultural demons. The act of Sunday worship, the access to homes, the almost total lack of commercial and commodity considerations in your work, the cultural “uselessness” of your work—all these put you in an enviable and strategic way of life to develop a community in which people discover and develop lives that are lived in response to the God who reveals himself in Jesus and works by the Holy Spirit to customize every part of the revelation of salvation and holiness to the uniqueness of each person.

Well, this is some of what I’ve been thinking about on Christmas morning as I am appreciating the way you pursue your calling and praying for wisdom and grace for you this week.

Dad