

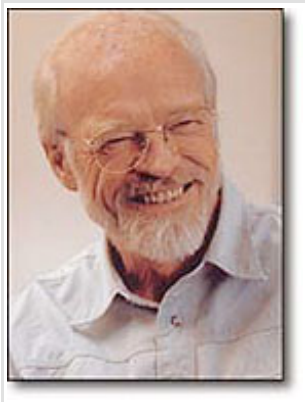
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Eugene Peterson: U2 Connections

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by [Angela Pancella](#)

What can I give back to God for the blessings he's poured out on me? I'll lift high the cup of salvation -- A toast to God! I'll pray in the name of God; I'll complete what I promised God I'd do, And I'll do it together with his people.



Sound familiar? Bono recited these lines, or some variation on them, before "Where the Streets Have No Name" throughout the Elevation tour. U2-watchers online quickly traced them to Psalm 116. You'd be hard-pressed to find an expression like "a toast to God!" in the Bible on the family bookshelf, however. Most fans, if they gave the matter any thought, probably assumed Bono had done a little creative paraphrasing. Bono putting an ear-catching spin on Biblical passages is, after all, nothing new. (He once described Jesus summing the law into "Love God and love your neighbor as you love yourself," then saying "That's what I'm about! That's my Greatest Hits!") But just like all those uncredited lyrics from other people's songs that end up sung during U2 concerts, this translation of Psalm 116 was not a Bono original. It is the work of Eugene Peterson, poet, Professor Emeritus at Regent College in Vancouver, and for 35 years a pastor.

Does the name sound familiar? Bono's been [dropping it in interviews](#) for the last several years, even mentioning that he'd been reading Peterson's translation of the New Testament to his dying father. However, the fact that he swiped Peterson's Psalm 116 for the introduction to Streets hasn't come up.

Peterson's complete American English translation of the Christian Scriptures, The Message Bible, hits bookshelves in July. In the promotional materials heralding this, a story is told of Peterson and U2: "Once, while teaching in Vancouver, some of

Peterson's students became very excited because Bono of the rock band U2 said The Message was the most important book he'd read in his whole life. The students thought this a great triumph. Eugene didn't recognize either Bono or U2."

So when interviewing Peterson for @U2 (a project which went through most communications media: I emailed the questions to NavPress, publisher of The Message, and they mailed me the answers Peterson faxed back to them), I asked first if he had learned any more about the band. "Yes, I am familiar with Bono and U-2 [sic]. A year or so ago (maybe less) their chaplain/pastor who was traveling with them at the time, called and asked me to come to Chicago to meet them. I wasn't able to get away at the time but I had a lovely conversation with him. And many of my younger friends and ex-students keep me posted on the latest from U-2. When the Rolling Stones [sic] interview with them came out a few months ago, I got clippings sent to me from all over the world!"

(Presumably he's referring here to the [Rolling Stone interview in December of 2001](#), where Bono was asked about his favorite reading materials: "...there's a translation of Scriptures -- the New Testament and the Books of Wisdom -- that this guy Eugene Peterson has undertaken. It has been a great strength to me. He's a poet and a scholar, and he's brought the text back to the tone in which the books were written.")

What did he think about having a quote from his work recited, uncredited, in front of 20,000 concertgoers at a time?

"My reaction? Pleased, very pleased. Bono is singing to the very people I did this work for. I feel that we are allies in this. He is helping get me and The Message into the company of the very people Jesus spent much of his time with."

The seed for The Message was planted during his pastoral work, Peterson says in a press release. He was trying to get across the fire and wild words of Paul's letter to the Galatians in a Bible study class, but his parishioners were paying more attention to the pot of coffee in the church basement. "It was just awful. They'd fill up their coffee cups and stir in sugar and cream and look at their cups and they weren't getting it. It was just really bad. I went home after the third week and said to my wife that I was going to teach them Greek. If they could read it in Greek they would get it, they'd understand what a revolutionary text it is and couldn't just keep living in their ruts. She agreed that would empty the class out fast."

Instead, Peterson translated Galatians himself. In the interview with @U2 he explains his approach to this and other books of the Bible: "The largest influence on the work of The Message, after the Greek and Hebrew text itself, was 35 years working as a pastor, listening, listening, listening to people, trying to get these original texts in their idiom, their imaginations, the way they talked. I always felt I was on the border of two countries where they spoke different languages -- the bible language and the American language. I kept asking myself, if Isaiah or John were writing what they wrote for these people I am living with, how would they say it?"

Here's an example of that approach, from the sixth chapter of Galatians: "Make a careful exploration of who you are and the work you have been given, and then sink yourself into that. Don't be impressed with yourself. Don't compare yourself with others. Each of you must take responsibility for doing the creative best you can with your own life."

All of Paul's letters have this vibrancy in Peterson's translation. How did working these (which, being letters, have a built-in immediacy) into contemporary language compare to working on the other books, with their variety of moods and tones?

"Paul is an extravagant, inventive poet. His syntax is sometimes wild. It's an adventure to enter into his imagination and get the same sounds and meanings in American. The gospels were very different, much more difficult because there is a simplicity and directness that is a real challenge to get across into American English. By the time I got to the Old Testament I was prepared for the variations in style and the long stretches of poetry."

It would be interesting to find out from Bono just why he has been so impressed by this translation. Peterson can't speak to that, but he can talk about reactions from people in similar circumstance to Bono's. "When I started this, I really had in mind people who had never read the Bible before," he says. "What took me by surprise and continues to please me is how many speak or write to me as 'having read the Bible all my life and now, finally, I get it.'"

Bono's familiarity with the Bible is evident through his lyrics, but he doesn't seem to have been calcified by custom into the "my Bible is the only Bible" syndrome. This can happen when someone is brought up to read the Bible, or certain passages, so many times that the word choices of a given translation are confused

with the Holy Writ itself. Bono's unusual religious upbringing and allergic reaction to fundamentalism may have helped keep him from thinking that Jesus spoke in, say, King James English. A similar trap, which I confess colors my ability to fully appreciate The Message Bible, opens up because most translations have been made in the best and most literary writing possible. One can come to love the language so much, the meaning becomes secondary. For example, there is a passage in the twelfth chapter of Hebrews which is rendered in exquisite prose in "my" Bible:

"You have not approached that which could be touched and a blazing fire and gloomy darkness and storm and a trumpet blast and a voice speaking words such that those who heard begged that no message be further addressed to them..."

The Message Bible's take on the same words seems flat by comparison:

"Unlike your ancestors, you didn't come to Mount Sinai -- all that volcanic blaze and earthshaking rumble -- to hear God speak."

When asked, Peterson says he has received very few complaints that he tinkered with well-loved language. "I was prepared for an all-out assault but I have received very little opposition or criticism. Maybe there has been a shift in our population from a bible reading people who know their bibles well and have no reason to want something different, to a non-bible reading country with a huge population of people who go to U-2 concerts who didn't know that anything like this bible even existed. And when they learn about it they are ready to read."

(For more information about The Message Bible, visit www.messagebible.com. To order online, visit Amazon.com.)

Postscript: In June 2002 the Navigators, the ministry group behind "The Message"'s publication, held a celebration which included showing videotaped testimonials from various fans of the book. Bono sent this greeting:

"Hi Mr. Peterson, Eugene. My name is Bono. I'm a singer with the group U2. I wanted to sort of video message you my thanks, and our thanks in the band, for this remarkable work you've done translating the Scriptures. Really, really a remarkable work."

"As a songwriter, it was very clear to me that you were a poet as well as a scholar. You brought the musicality to God's Word that I'm sure was there, was always there in intention.

“There have been some great translations, some very literary translations, but no translations that I’ve read that speaks to me in my own language. So I want to thank you for that.”

“And it’s been ten years, that’s a long time, so take a rest now, won’t you? Bye.”

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