

“Bono’s Prophetic Vox”
The Message Author Says U2’s Message is Refreshing, Faithful, and Honest

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Eugene Peterson has never been to a U2 concert and he says he isn't particularly interested in going to one. Once, he was invited to Chicago to spend a day with the band but because he had work to do, he declined the invitation. Peterson enjoys classical music, specifically Baroque, and the folk singers of the 20th century. "U2's music is just not a part of my life," Peterson admits, but when it comes to U2's message, he's a Bono-fide fan.

Outside the U2-fan world, Peterson is known as a retired pastor of 35 years, Professor Emeritus at Regent College, author of over thirty books written primarily for pastors and, most famously, the author of *The Message*. Peterson labored for a decade on his English paraphrase of the Bible to capture the earthy, dynamic language present in the original writings of Scripture. In the 1990s, he published the Psalms and Proverbs and then the New Testament. In 2002, he completed the rest of the Old Testament and the entire Message Bible was published. Then began his unlikely journey from Baroque to Bono.

To U2 fans, Peterson is known first and foremost as the guy whose Bible Bono likes. After the National Prayer Breakfast on February 2, Bono shared with reporters that he gets inspiration from reading *The Message* "by the very gifted scholar and poet Eugene Peterson." During the Elevation Tour, Bono recited from *The Message* a portion of Psalm 116 as the introduction to "Where the Streets Have No Name." When his father was near death, Bono said he would sit at his bedside and read aloud from Peterson's translation. (@U2's Angela Pancella's reported on the [U2-Peterson connection](#) in 2002.) Bono sent Peterson a video thank-you when he finished work on the whole Bible, to share "...my thanks, and our thanks in the band, for this remarkable work you've done translating the Scriptures. Really, really a remarkable work. There have been some great translations, some very literary translations, but no translation that I've read that speaks to me in my own language. So I want to thank you for that."

The appreciation goes both ways, Peterson said. He's thankful for U2's remarkable work of spreading a message, calling people to forsake lives of selfish pursuits fueled by destructive delusions. In U2's songs, he hears the sound of truth and love. Peterson can hear, when Bono sings, the voice of the prophet in pop culture.

In the foreword to Raewynne J. Whiteley and Beth Maynard's, *Get Up Off Your Knees, Preaching the U2 Catalog*, Peterson wrote:

"Is U2 a prophetic voice? I rather think so. And many of my friends think so. If they do not explicitly proclaim the Kingdom, they certainly prepare the way for that proclamation in much the same way that John the Baptist prepared the way for the kerygma of Jesus ... Amos crafted poems, Jeremiah wept sermons, Isaiah alternately rebuked and comforted, Ezekiel did street theater. U2 writes songs and goes on tour, singing them."

I asked Peterson if he would take some time to listen to songs from U2's recent albums, *All That You Can't Leave Behind* and *How to Dismantle an Atomic Bomb*, and then talk with me about why he thinks U2 is doing the work of a prophet. Though still hard at work at 73 -- Peterson is writing a five-volume series on what he calls "theology-lived," of which the second volume, *Eat This Book: A Conversation in the Art of Spiritual Reading*, was published last month -- he graciously accepted my request.

I.

Would you call yourself a fan of U2?

It would be not accurate to say I'm a fan of their music; I'm a fan of them. I've heard about U2 from my students, actually. They are the ones who introduced me to their songs and a little bit about them. I heard my first Bono song in Munich. I was there visiting a former student and she took me and my wife into her apartment and said, "You've got to listen to this." I think it was "Grace."

What did you think of the song?

I loved it. That was my first U2 song. She played it three or four times, actually, and her appreciation evoked my appreciation. I heard things that I probably wouldn't have heard on my own. That was my first introduction.

If it's not their music, then what do you like about U2?

I guess what really impresses me about U2 -- what I like, what I respond to -- is the way they have used their position in the world. They seem to me a very ingenuous group of people, without pretension or pose, who live out their convictions in a way which has nothing to do with their fame.

How so? How are they acting without regard for fame?

Well, I don't know the world of rock and roll music at all, but songs like "Peace on Earth" and "Yahweh," I can't believe they could anticipate that people would like those songs. [The lyrics] are words that I use in the pulpit and classroom, not the common vocabulary of the extra-church crowd. But they are used in such a way, said and sung, so that their meaning is conveyed in a way that reveals their truth: they commune and not just communicate, they evoke a responsive intimacy that can't be extracted from a dictionary. This is what art does, it gets beneath or within essential aspects of our lives.

Why do you call them prophets?

U2 doesn't seem to be calculated in what they are doing. It just comes out of who they are, and maybe that's why people respond to them, because they are so unconventional in the rock music world. And then there is the social passion they have evidenced in the African world, and the effort that they go to to speak to people of influence in order to try to convince them that pain and suffering and impoverishment are the responsibility of those who are in positions of influence and power -- such people are not to just make war and do public relations and win elections and develop strategies to get people to be better consumers.

So I've used the word prophet for them. Walter Brueggemann describes prophets as uncredentialed spokesmen for God. Well, I think that fits them pretty well. They don't have any authority in the world of faith.

But many people of faith respect U2. What do you mean, "they have no authority"?

In the professional world of faith; in the conventional, established world of faith. They say unconventional things and use unconventional language. When the Rolling Stone interview came out ("People of the Year: Bono, November 2001"), one of my former students sent it to me. My friend told me I was in there someplace, so I read it through and I was hoping that when he got to me, he wouldn't use the f-word on *The Message*. [Laughs.] My daughter was reading it too, and she said, "I thought they were Christians?" and I said, "Well, I think that's the way Irish Christians talk."

That's funny, but you know that is a question which in one way or another has followed them their whole career: Are they capital "C" Christians or not? Do you think that's even a valid question to ask?

No I don't. I don't think it is.

What is the valid question to ask, then?

Maybe we shouldn't even be asking prophets questions. They are asking questions of us. Maybe the question we ask should be, "Is God using these words, this stance, to say something to me, to my society, to my neighborhood?"

A prophet, almost by definition, doesn't fit into the categories you expect, which is what gives them bite, and clarity, and the sense of grabbing us by the scruff of our neck, and saying, "Listen to this: this is truth, this is what's going on." The whole authority of prophets comes not from what people say about them or the credentials that they have, it's from the truth of what they are saying. This is true of the Biblical prophets and of prophetic voices all through history. Often prophets use the name God but sometimes they don't. It is interesting to reflect that no Hebrew prophet ever was referred to as "messiah," but the pagan Persian king Cyrus was. God used him in what I would refer to as a prophetic way to free the Hebrews from their exile and return them to their homeland, but Cyrus had no idea that he was issuing edicts under the sovereignty of God.

It is my job as a pastor and professor to speak the name of Jesus and proclaim the news of the gospel into whatever reality the prophets expose and call attention to. If they also do it, that's fine, but if they don't that doesn't mean that they aren't speaking/acting on God's behalf.

Have any popular musicians acted as prophets in your life?

Probably the most pervasive one in my life is Pete Seeger. I think he's a prophet. I very much doubt whether he would call himself a Christian, but he spoke truth and called attention to the things the Christian faith is committed to in a way that nobody else could do during his time.

What was Seeger calling your attention to?

Social justice issues, economic things, racial issues, peace. But he was doing this, and continues to do it -- he's done it all his life -- not in ways that the Christian church wasn't doing it, but he was getting the ear of people who would never go to church, and maybe of a lot of those who do go to church because they hadn't heard it from their own pulpits. I guess that's all I'm saying. I was a little offended, to tell you the truth, in the *Christianity Today* article on Bono there was an editorial and they complained that he didn't go to church! [["Bono's Thin Ecclesiology,"](#) March, 2003]

Yes, I remember that one.

And I thought, "Oh, c'mon now. That's not what prophets do." Sometimes they sneak in, but they get out so they won't be recognized. I guess one of the prophetic voices that I think is very strong and has meant a lot to me is Wendell Berry. But as far as I know he doesn't go to church either.

Do you think a prophet loses something if he or she were to become "churchified" in some way?

Yes, I think so. I guess he'd lose the edge of surprise. I've been a part of the institution of religion all my life and have been quite happy doing it. I felt that's what I was called to do. But I depend for a lot of my insights and language on people who are outside the Church. That doesn't mean they are outside of Christ, but they are outside of the conventional expectations. I need that. If I'm just around people who talk the way I do, I lose perceptive accuracy, sharpness. And I think Bono is doing that for many.

You think he's helping people keep their perspective in focus?

Yes. To be honest with you, he doesn't do it for me. I loved David Dark's *The Gospel According to America* and I learned a lot from it, but in all his sections on music didn't know what he was talking about. My children love contemporary music and they could pick out the artists who were saying something that had to do with how to live our lives -- I would say in Christ. They noticed it and they heard those things, then they brought my attention to it.

It seemed you were careful to say the prophet may be outside of the Church but not outside of Christ.

Right.

Can you explain how the prophet may be connected to Christ while at the same time be outside the Church?

Um...that's a complex question!

Well, I'm interested because Christians often are trained to think that life outside of the church is a life of drifting away, of going away from Christ.

Prophets don't have anything that Christ hasn't given them. Some of them find a vocation that is apart from the visible Church, maybe by accident or maybe deliberately or maybe not intentionally. But they are following the Spirit in some unarticulated way.

Sometimes I think God has to find a person who isn't carrying a lot of baggage or bad religion with them. John the Baptist, for example, where did he come from? He didn't fit the categories of the first century. And that happens over and over and over again. Simone Weil, the French woman who sometimes called herself an atheist, was a very prophetic voice in a time when prophetic voices were very rare in France.

These people come up here and there, and also in the Church -- there are plenty of strong, clear voices in the Church. But I think we are always a little surprised, those of us who make our home in the Church. We say, "Oh! Here's somebody. I wish I had thought of that. I wish I could say it that way." But they are getting the ear of people who wouldn't listen to us or wouldn't come to our churches.

Do you think U2 didn't have any bad religion? Was that why God took notice of them?

I wouldn't say they don't have any "bad religion." It's pretty hard to get through life without picking up at least some of it. I'm a pastor and pastors learn soon enough not to have illusions about anyone, in or out of "religion."

From what you know of U2's background, do you see anything that would indicate they were "prophets in the making"?

No, to tell you the truth, I think they started out pretty confused and were kind of just messing around. I think they must be as surprised about this -- that people like me are calling them prophets -- as maybe as I am. But doesn't that happen a lot? When we're living with any kind of authenticity, we don't know what we are doing until, suddenly, moments come of clarification -- catalytic moments -- and we see suddenly this is what I am, this is what I'm doing. But in the spiritual life, calculation doesn't work.

Why not?

Well it's because most of it is about the Holy Spirit, not our spirits, and we're in on something much, much bigger than we have any idea of. If we try to contain it, or try to work with boundaries or containers that we understand, we miss 98 percent of it.

II.

What do you like about the U2 songs you've heard?

Bono's a good poet. He uses words in fresh ways and juxtaposes metaphors in ways that help you see things that you hadn't seen before. The songs all seem to be very expressive in collecting images and metaphors that are out of our lives.

Do you find them compelling or stirring songs to listen to?

I guess the thing that makes them compelling is they don't use religious language. But you don't listen to them for very long before you realize we're working in the realm of God and relationships, of goodness and evil, and so suddenly he gets through our defenses and we're listening to something that is very, very important to us but that we've insulated or inoculated ourselves against.

What's in a U2 song that you think we have insulated ourselves from hearing in the day-to-day world?

I think I would say it a little differently. I think the non-church crowd, through Bono's music, find things which they had either idealized or dismissed as unwelcome intrusions now raised to a new level in which they can be perceived as included in the operations of (what I would call) salvation: grace, peace, etc.

For example, in the song "Peace on Earth": "Jesus sing a song you wrote, the words are sticking in my throat." Well, I start paying attention to that. And I love this line: "But hope and history won't rhyme." They are saying to me that I can't separate life into religious and secular, spiritual and ordinary: the dissonance between hope and history are the context in which we live life honestly and courageously, not by eliminating one or the other but by feeling or hearing that dissonance and living in a way that bring them into harmony.

What do you think motivates someone to sit down and write such a song, or any song? As a pastor and teacher, when someone came to you expressing what they had been thinking or feeling about God, were you able to see what was going on inside that person?

Well, yes, I think so. One of the ways we use language most accurately is when we are in some kind of broken, or uncomfortable, or confusing relationship, because the conventional words aren't working. People often use language very colorfully and very accurately when they don't know what they are talking about, when they are trying to tell the truth and reveal who they are. Pastors are really in a very fortunate position in that we are with people in those times a lot, and so we hear a lot of poetry from people who

would be embarrassed to be called poets. I never would take notes when I was with people, but afterwards I would write down these phrases and sometimes would remind them of what they said.

Now, it seems to me that the gift of people like Bono is that they hear those phrases, or the phrases occur to them, and they can make art out of them. They can make a song and get them into our imagination and our way of life so that we start seeing what is going on around us with fresh eyes and fresh ears.

Bono's put two things together with "Hope and history won't rhyme" which we usually keep apart, and they start working on each other, don't they? That's what poets do and what musicians do and that's why we need them. And if they come from outer space like Bono and U2, then you take notice and appreciate it and thank God.

As a Bible scholar and translator, do you think Bono has run afoul of Hebraic tradition by singing the song "Yahweh"?

The only people I think who would be offended by that are the Orthodox Jews, because they normally don't use the name, out of reverence. But I think that now, because the word has been used much more by scholars, preachers, and others, I don't think it's surprising. Outside the Church it might be a surprising word because people haven't heard it. The way he uses it is as an invocation. The genus of the name, Yahweh, is that it is not a noun, it's a verb, and so you can't objectify a verb and therefore you can't make an idol out of it. It is most naturally understood in the vocative, as an address. A name is that way, as an address. The Bible has a lot of metaphors for God but Yahweh is the unique Biblical word for the Presence -- the One who is present to us and we have to be present to Him. I thought the song "Yahweh" uses the word in a way that partakes of its genius, its uniqueness. It's a personal address: "Yahweh, Yahweh." He's not talking about God, he's talking to God, or calling out to God.

III.

Are you surprised by U2's enormous success?

Yes, I am.

Why? Because of what you said earlier, about them acting with conviction and not calculation?

I don't have a whole lot of respect for popular culture -- too much of it seems to me to be reductive, escapist, and trivial. But none of those adjectives fit Bono and U2 as far as I know. And by this time, they have proven that they are not a fad -- they have staying power. That surprises me, and pleases me.

I couldn't appreciate Peter Seeger's fame when he was at the peak of his popularity, but does U2 seem to transcend the level of fame the folk singers of your generation had?

I think they do, yes, but it's a different world sociologically. The youth culture today is so huge and has such a mystique about it. They inhabit a common world, it seems to me: They all know the same music, they dress the same way. You, know, friends of mine, and not just young people but 40- and 50-year-olds, go to U2 concerts and they talk of this as religious experiences.

You've heard that before? They tell you that?

I have, a lot, yeah. They say it's like church.

What do you make of that?

I think there's a deep commonality of spirit when people are open to the beauty and the truth and the goodness of God that communicates itself to us. And if it's the genuine thing you can put a name to it: it's religious, it's spiritual, it's God. Not everybody puts the name to it but it doesn't mean they don't participate in it somehow or other.

Have you had religious experiences while watching the kind of shows you enjoy?

Oh yes, I've had it in the live theater, and we used to go regularly to concerts in Baltimore, where we lived for 30 years. I've seen Itzhak Perlman in concert several times. It's an awesome thing, it really is. Yes, I've had that kind of experience quite a lot, but for me it's mostly in the concert theater or live theater. Not so much with movies; I like them and appreciate them but I can't say they've ever shaped my life.

When your friends describe their U2 concert experiences to you, a declared non-fan, how do they try to get it across?

[Laughing] They say, "You'd love it, you've got to come! I'll get you tickets." But I live in Montana and I'm a long ways away from them...

Would you ever want to go to a concert?

I don't know...I don't think so. I don't think I would.

Why not?

They sing out of and into a world that I am not immersed in. I celebrate and honor what they are doing and the way they are doing it, but I have been given a different assignment.

Have you ever met Bono?

No. I spoke with his chaplain once. I had a lovely conversation with him.

That's sort of odd, don't you think, that a rock band travels with a chaplain?

Isn't that wonderful!

He invited you to Chicago once, right, when U2 were in town?

Right, it was to come and spend a day with them. At the time, I was finishing up *The Message* and I was behind and trying to keep deadlines. I just didn't see how I could do that, so I said no.

Do you recall what you spoke about with their chaplain?

Not really, I can't remember. He just told me that he had been with them since they were young and had kind of been their pastor all of their musical lives, and he said how much he respected him.

Bono has said he often read aloud from *The Message* at the bedside of his dying father. You know he is really fond of your translation—he's called you a poet and a scholar, and he quoted from your rendering of Psalm 116 in concert on their Elevation tour. What does that mean to you, when you hear that something you made is being shared in such an intimate way between two people, or being shared with 20,000 people at a rock 'n roll show?

Yeah, how did I get that pulpit, huh? [Laughing.] Well, it pleases me. I was hoping when I was doing *The Message* that I was going to return the Bible to its basic orality, which is how it started out -- as a story-like thing, with the poetry of it -- which has gotten kind of smothered in a lot of academic work and in overly pious contexts. So, it pleases me immensely. I had hoped that something like that would happen and I would get it read outside of church.

I guess that thing that surprised me most is that *The Message* has had so much acceptance within churches. I wasn't thinking about churches, I was thinking about people on the street. I was lucky in a way because I had a congregation of misfits -- a lot of recovering drug addicts and alcoholics -- they didn't fit in church and somehow found their way into my congregation. Those are the people I was doing translation for.

So, when somebody like Bono responds and a lot of other people like him -- I get a lot of letters from prison -- I think, "O, thank you Lord, this is where I wanted it to get read and listened to." And when Bono read it to his father I felt very honored to be in on that.

In 2002, Bono sent you his thanks and congratulations on the completion of *The Message*. This year, U2 was inducted into the Rock 'n Roll Hall of Fame, recognizing the past 25 years of their work. If you were sending a greeting to U2, what would you say?

"Thank you for preaching to all the people who will never listen to me or read anything that I write! And for doing it with such integrity." I think that's what I feel, I just feel grateful to them for being obedient to the gifts that God has given them.

Obedience seems like an unusual word to use when describing a rock band. How do you think they've been obedient? I guess I'm asking, more generally, to what degree must someone be obedient to be used by God?

Well, I think I'd put it a little differently. This is true of virtually everybody: when you listen to what they're singing and you are watching them perform, what you are seeing and hearing is the product of a long process of growth. That doesn't just happen and you don't make it up. You don't say, "I'm going to be a rock star," and then start figuring out how to do it. In fact, one of the engaging things about U2's story is how they didn't know what they were doing for a long time. They weren't very good at it either, from what I read. But there's a certain authenticity of sticking at this.

You know, none of us are very good at what we're doing when we start out. The difference is, some of us keep doing it and finally everyone gets tired of saying "no" to you and they start listening.[Laughing.] I love to delight in finding companions who develop focus and consistency that carries through the years. It is easy to be heroic in a crisis or be a celebrity for a season. They have been in this for the long haul.

Would you expect that if U2 had not been interested in, or obedient to, God and still wrote songs about grace, peace, or Yahweh, they would have been very different songs?

It would be interesting to have somebody study their lives and follow the spiritual development in their lives. But you just know there's a lot of soil that has been nurtured and worked on, and other people have contributed to, and other influences of family and friends have all worked into that. But they have been the ones that have said yes. I used the word obedient, but maybe faithful is a better synonym. They stuck at it and stayed with this one thing that has become defining for their lives. I don't know if I'm still with the thread you started out on or not....

Yes, that makes sense. You're saying you don't just stumble upon writing lyrics like those lyrics.

Right, they come out of something lived.

Let me just throw in one more thing. When I was listening to the music you sent me, I thought that with some of the music I grew up on -- Frank Sinatra, Bing Crosby, all those people -- when I compare Bono and U2 -- the way they're singing and the lyrics -- it seems so much more honest. All that Frank Sinatra crowd, they weren't telling the truth, they were just spinning fantasies. There's something very refreshing about U2. It's honest music. There's an honesty and that's why I think the word prophetic is accurate for them. They are not saying things that people want to hear to make them escape from their ordinary lives. They push us back into the conditions in which we have to live.