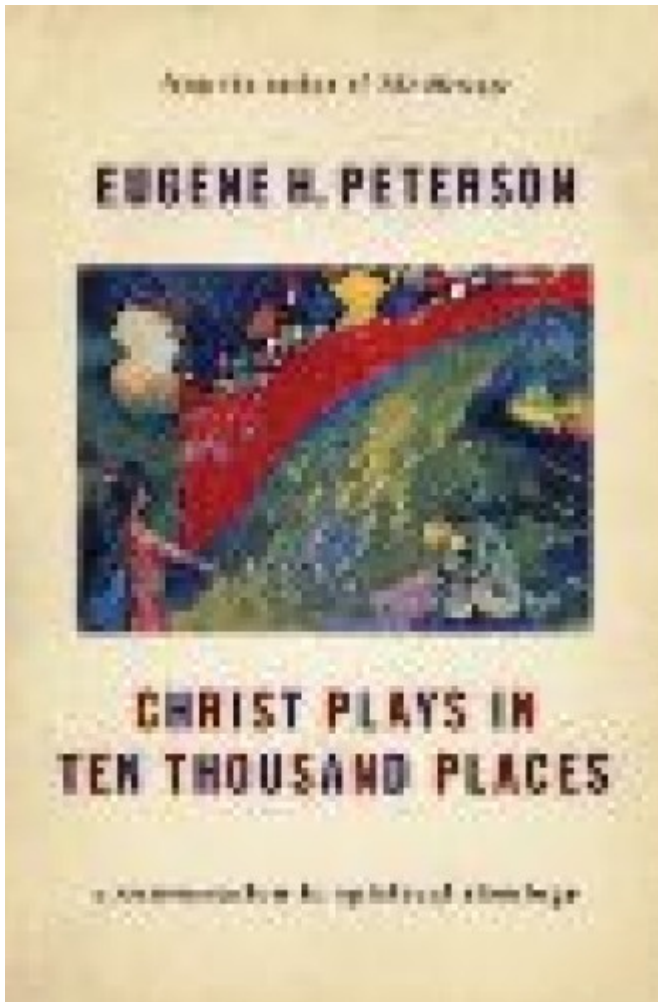


Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places

reviewed by [Arthur Paul Boers](#) in the [August 9, 2005](#) issue

In Review



Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places: A Conversation in Spiritual Theology

Eugene H. Peterson
Eerdmans

For an author who celebrates a sabbath pace of life and ministry—he once wrote commending the “unbusy pastor”—Eugene Peterson continues to be astonishingly productive. As well as having a fruitful Presbyterian pastorate for three decades and then teaching at Canada’s Regent College, he has penned some of the best contemporary theological reflections on pastoring and ministry. He is most famous for his best-selling contemporary translation of the Bible, *The Message*.

And he is not finished. The substantial *Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places* is projected to be the first installment of a five-volume work. The ambitious goal of publishing five volumes looks small beside Peterson’s self-appointed task in this series: to renew spiritual theology, overcoming the centuries-old sundering of “what we think about God (theology)” from “the way we live with God (spirituality).” This is about “the attention that we give to living what we know and believe about God. It is the thoughtful and obedient cultivation of life as worship on our knees before God the Father, of life as sacrifice on our feet following God the Son, and of life as love and being embraced by the community of God the Spirit.” The evocative title is a quote from a Gerard Manley Hopkins sonnet. (Unfortunately, a small press published an earlier book by Peterson under the same main title, so that will surely lead to confusion.)

Peterson does not take a systematic approach. Rather, his theological exploration of three spheres of God’s work—creation, history and community—weaves many elements and themes together. His literate dance involves theological ideas, experiences in his family and as a pastor, encounters with literature and deep engagement with scriptures, always keeping the Old and New Testaments in lively conversation with each other. Peterson’s love of language, revealed not just in numerous and revealing excursions into the meanings of particular words but also in the brilliant ways he forms sentences and phrases, easily keeps one reading for hundreds of pages. He exemplifies the happy truth that nonfiction can be creative and literary.

While Peterson’s name is associated with the rising interest in spirituality, he himself notes that much that goes under the guise of spirituality is distorted, disconnected, unreal, nebulous and, not occasionally, heretical. Popular spirituality is too often elitist, focused on self-help rather than being rooted in scripture, and “theologically amnesiac . . . isolated from any awareness of the grand and spacious God horizons, the truly vast landscapes in which we are invited to live out the Christian life.”

He penetratingly shows how consumerism and overreliance on technology distort Christian faith and life. Technology, he opines, “is one of the primary promoters of idolatry today.” Lamenting “a life in which the wonder has leaked out,” he commends artists, poets and musicians, such as John Muir, Annie Dillard, Wendell Berry and Luci Shaw. Along the way, he sheds new light on terms that we may take for granted but that still have much to reveal: soul, exile, time, work, sabbath, wonder and resurrection.

Though Peterson eloquently demolishes idols of gnostic and consumerist spirituality, I had hoped he would offer other iconoclastic initiatives. Readers would benefit if he were more explicit about the social implications of his longing for fully enfleshed and engaged Christian faithfulness. He is disappointingly coy about taking on prevailing American idolatries, such as the identification of Christian faith and priorities with the business and security interests of American empire. This ought to be at the heart of his work because, in his words, “a major concern in spiritual theology” is “the critical passage involved in the transition from one sovereignty to another.”

Eugene Peterson keeps surprising us. It is hard to imagine where he will go next with his spiritual theology, and it would be good to have some projection of what is ahead in the upcoming volumes. We do not know what his unwillingness to become unproductive says about the state of his soul, but his resistance to laying down the pen hugely blesses the church.