



Issues, Etc.TM

Christ-Centered Cross-Focused Talk Radio

TRANSCRIPT

Rev. Todd Wilken, Host

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"A Review/Critique of Eugene Peterson's Bible Paraphrase, *The Message*, Part 1"

Guest:

Dr. Andrew Steinmann

Professor of Theology & Hebrew at Concordia University Chicago
Author of the Concordia Commentaries on *Daniel*, *Proverbs*, and *Ezra & Nehemiah*

Monday, August 6, 2012

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PETERSON AUDIO CLIP: The Bible is not only written about us, but to us. In these pages, we become insiders to a conversation in which God uses words to form and bless us, to teach and guide us, to forgive and save us. We aren't used to this. We're used to reading books that explain things or tell us what to do, or inspire or entertain us. But this is different. This is a world of revelation: God revealing to people just like us, men and women created in

God's image, how God works and what is going on in this world in which we find ourselves.

WILKEN: That's popular author Eugene Peterson. He's written many popular Christian books, and one of the most popular recently is his Bible paraphrase, called *The Message*. If you've read another popular book, Rick Warren's *Purpose-Driven Life*, you read a lot of quotations

from *The Message*. And it's really the quotations that are the problem here. If you think back to your childhood days, when you may have owned one of those red-letter editions of the Bible, where Jesus' own words were always printed in red so you knew what the quotations were – can you do that with a paraphrase? Say, in the Gospel of Matthew, can you put a paraphrase of Jesus' words in quotations and have it be honest, when you're not really saying what Jesus said, but what Jesus meant to say?

Joining us to do a review and a bit of a critique of *The Message* by Eugene Peterson, Dr. Andrew Steinmann, Professor of Theology and Hebrew at Concordia University Chicago, author of the Concordia Commentaries on *Daniel*, *Proverbs*, and *Ezra & Nehemiah*. Dr. Steinmann, welcome back to *Issues, Etc.*

STEINMANN: Always good to be back here with you, Todd.

WILKEN: Is there a time and place for Bible paraphrases, and if so, how would you caution us to do it responsibly?

STEINMANN: Well, I suppose it depends on how you define a paraphrase. When we teach children Bible stories, we often use Bible storybooks, which in a sense are paraphrases of the Bible. And maybe there's a place for that, even with adults. But ultimately it comes down to not distorting God's Word, and not giving people the impression that this is a Bible. And that's one of the fine lines you tread with these paraphrases – not just Peterson's. It gives the impression that this is the Bible, this is the Word of God, instead of saying, "Well, this is what the Word of God says, kind of roughly." And, you know, we all paraphrase at times. Even when I'm in class, I might refer to, "Oh, the prophet Jeremiah said..." and not give the exact words, but the meaning of it. As long as you're not distorting the doctrine of Scripture

when you do that, I suppose there's a place for it. But I think we have to be really careful when we put it in print, put it inbetween the covers, label it "The Bible," and then we know that it's not really an attempt to give something close to the wording and feel of what the inspired writers wrote.

WILKEN: For me, it's the quotation marks. I'm looking at *The Message* right now, the famous – and we'll get to this later in the hour as time permits – the famous Beatitudes. And he has there in the text, "This is what he said," and then there are quotation marks. But that's not what Jesus said. He has the first Beatitude as, "You're blessed when you're at the end of your rope." Well, that may have been what Eugene Peterson thinks Jesus meant, but that's not what Jesus said. It doesn't deserve quotation marks.

STEINMANN: Yeah, it really is more like an indirect quote that we might do: "So and so said that," and we wouldn't put what followed the "that" in quotes, because we're not giving a direct quote.

WILKEN: What can you tell us about *The Message*, this paraphrase?

STEINMANN: It's an attempt to, I guess, put into modern – I would say American English idiom – the meaning of Scripture, not necessarily to put into modern American English the words of Scripture. I think that's a fine distinction, but I think it's an important one to make. Because as soon as you try to say you're putting the meaning without hewing somewhat to the wording of the original, all of a sudden, you have to ask, "Whose meaning is it?" Is it really the meaning that's in the text, or are you going beyond that?

WILKEN: With a paraphrase like this, do you think that people are Biblically literate enough today – Christians, the average church-going Christian – to make the distinction that you've just made for us here

in the last few minutes, between a translation that is reliable to the original text and a paraphrase that may be well-intentioned but isn't?

STEINMANN: I'm not sure that most modern American Christians are Biblically literate enough to do that. I think well-read laymen, well-trained laymen, they might possibly be. And if you've read enough of the Bible, used it all of your life, been to Bible class, heard these things over and over again, maybe know your Catechism really well, you could probably say, "Okay, that type of a person could use this and probably use it wisely and avoid the pitfalls." But I don't think most modern American Christians fall into that category.

WILKEN: When we come back, we're going to hear an excerpt – in fact, we'll hear several excerpts – from Eugene Peterson's *The Message*. The one we're going to hear when we come back – a positive example, perhaps, that we could find here: Exodus chapter 2, the first 10 verses.

That's part of the problem – they always say that if you buy the brand new iPhone, the one that's the latest, the one that's the most current, by the time you walk out of the Apple Store, Apple's already rendered it obsolete. That's probably true with Bible paraphrases that try and put the Bible into the most current colloquial usage of the language possible. By the time it's printed, it's already dated. Maybe translation is a better option here.

We'll look at this Bible paraphrase with Dr. Andrew Steinmann on this Monday afternoon, August the 6th. And I invite your questions and comments: 1-877-623-6943. If you have a question or comment about this paraphrase, *The Message*, 1-877-623-6943. Or send us an email: talkback@issuesetc.org, or a Tweet: @IssuesEtc. We'll get into *The Message* with Dr. Andrew Steinmann right after this.

[BREAK]

THE MESSAGE AUDIO CLIP: A man from the family of Levi married a Levite woman. The woman became pregnant and had a son. She saw there was something special about him, and hid him. She hid him for three months. When she couldn't hide him any longer, she got a little basket boat made out of papyrus, waterproofed it with tar and pitch, and placed the child in it. Then she set it afloat in the reeds at the edge of the Nile.

The baby's older sister found herself a vantage point a little way off, and watched to see what would happen to him. Pharaoh's daughter came down to the Nile to bathe. Her maidens strolled on the bank. She saw the basket boat floating in the reeds and sent her maid to get it. She opened it and saw the child, a baby, crying. Her heart went out to him. She said, "This must be one of the Hebrew babies." Then his sister was before her. "Do you want me to go and get a nursing mother from the Hebrews so she can nurse the baby for you?" Pharaoh's daughter said, "Yes, go."

The girl went and called the child's mother. Pharaoh's daughter told her, "Take this baby and nurse him for me. I'll pay you." The woman took the child and nursed him. After the child was weaned, she presented him to Pharaoh's daughter, who adopted him as her son. She named him "Moses, pulled out," saying, "I pulled him out of the water."

WILKEN: That's an excerpt from Eugene Peterson's *The Message*. A familiar story from the Old Testament, of course: the finding of Moses by Pharaoh's daughter. And it's a paraphrase. It's kind of the – should we say, the corollary to the Ten Commandments version of the story. It keeps with the story rather accurately, but it isn't exactly what the Bible has to say. Perhaps an example of where paraphrase

excels when it's actually doing narrative, when it's actually telling a story.

With us for the next hour to continue our review of the Bible paraphrase, *The Message*: Dr. Andrew Steinmann, Professor of Theology and Hebrew at Concordia University Chicago, author of the Concordia Commentaries on *Daniel*, *Proverbs*, and *Ezra & Nehemiah*.

Dr. Steinmann, you said this is an example of where the paraphrase is not so bad. What do you mean?

STEINMANN: It pretty much not only gives us the story but preserves a lot of the phraseology and even specific thought of many of the sentences in Hebrew. So it's pretty good. And as you said, with narrative, this is probably where paraphrase excels the best. Narrative is probably the easiest place you can do this. Since there's an awful lot of narrative in the Old Testament that's not overtly theological – I mean, all of Scripture is theological, but it's not overtly theological – they don't have to do a lot of theological explanation either, where, of course, you can get into a lot of trouble. So this is a nice paraphrase, and I think if you read it or hear it, you can pretty much get the feel of what is written there in the first ten verses of Exodus 2.

WILKEN: Now, not only does it seem to do a little better with narrative, but I wonder whether or not, since the original style here is simple declarative sentences, there's not a lot of stuff for the paraphraser to embellish upon.

STEINMANN: Yeah. There's just a few things here that they can embellish on, and nothing that needs a lot of embellishment, either, nothing that calls for something that is maybe a little bit more enigmatic or a little bit harder to understand. Nothing like that that the paraphraser would be tempted to maybe over-interpret in a paraphrase.

WILKEN: Now, there's another example that we have, again from the book of Exodus later here, Exodus 20. What should we be listening for, Dr. Steinmann?

STEINMANN: Well, here in Exodus 20 we have the familiar giving of the Law, the Ten Commandments. And we should be listening especially for little things that kind of set off theological alarm bells. You will hear some different wording at times, some of it good because he's going back to something that kind of matches the Hebrew, but sometimes kind of going off and taking a flyer. So we'll see a few of these things as we listen to this.

THE MESSAGE AUDIO CLIP: God spoke all these words: "I am GOD, your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of a life of slavery. No other gods. Only me. No carved gods of any size, shape, or form, of anything whatever, whether of things that fly or walk or swim. Don't bow down to them and don't serve them because I am GOD, your God. And I'm a most jealous God, punishing the children for any sins that their parents pass on to them, to the third and, yes, even to the fourth generation of those who hate me. But I'm unswervingly loyal to the thousands who love me and keep my commandments."

No using the name of GOD, your God, in curses or silly banter. God won't put up with the irreverent use of His name.

Observe the Sabbath Day to keep it holy. Work six days and do everything you need to do. But the seventh day is a Sabbath to GOD, your God. Don't do any work – not you, nor your son, nor your daughter, nor your servant, nor your maid, nor your animals, not even the foreign guest visiting in your town. For in six days God made heaven, earth, and sea, and everything in them. He rested on the seventh day. Therefore God blessed the Sabbath Day. He set it apart as a holy day.

Honor your father and mother, so that you'll live a long time in the land that GOD, your God, is giving you.

No murder. No adultery. No stealing. No lies about your neighbor. No lusting after your neighbor's house or wife or servant or maid, or ox or donkey. Don't set your heart on anything that is your neighbor's.

All the people, experiencing the thunder and lightning, the trumpet blast and the smoky mountain, were afraid. They pulled back and stood at a distance. They said to Moses, "You speak to us and we'll listen, but don't have God speak to us or we'll die."

Moses spoke to the people, "Don't be afraid. God has come to test you, and instill a deep and reverent awe within you so that you won't sin."

The people kept their distance while Moses approached the thick cloud where God was. God said to Moses, "Give this message to the people of Israel: You've experienced firsthand how I spoke with you from heaven. Don't make gods of silver and gods of gold and then set them alongside me. Make me an earthen altar. Sacrifice your whole burnt offerings, your peace offerings, your sheep and your cattle on it. Every place where I cause my name to be honored in your worship, I'll be there myself and bless you. If you use stones to make my altar, don't use dressed stones. If you use a chisel on the stones, you'll profane the altar. Don't use steps to climb to my altar, because that will expose your nakedness."

WILKEN: All right. Dr. Steinmann, there are a lot of things to say here. Where is the most egregious fault, so to speak, in this well-meaning attempt to paraphrase a very key Old Testament passage?

STEINMANN: I think right off, I have a concern about how he translates God's name – the divine name, which in Hebrew is "Yahweh." Translations traditionally have

done something like "Lord" here, although there is also a Hebrew word for "Lord." But here he decides to go with "God" and you can't hear it when it's read to you, but when you see it on the page, he uses "GOD" in all uppercase letters instead of the "o" and the "d" lowercase, where he's translating the actual Hebrew word for God. And I think this lends itself to a lot of confusion. You don't know that God is talking about His name or using His own name in this section, because it just says "GOD." And it seems to me that if he's freeing himself from traditional translation, why not just put in God's name, Yahweh? "I am Yahweh, your God." We heard "GOD, your God" several times here, and I think it just doesn't lend to the gravity of the situation here. So right off the bat, I have a problem with that choice. It seems to me that he had a great choice – just use the name "Yahweh" and be done with it.

WILKEN: What about the – and it sounded peculiar to my ears – the way that he phrased the commandments themselves, starting with "no this, no that." You say it's kind of like a sign – "No smoking, no dogs allowed" kind of thing. Does that or does that not capture the original language here? We're accustomed to "You shall not."

STEINMANN: Right. Yeah, the Hebrew is much more concise. It's more like what he does. It's the strongest way to say a prohibition, like they do on "No parking" signs, or "No smoking" signs. And we know when that sign's up there, "No smoking," it means, "Don't do it, don't even think about doing it. It's not to be done here." And that's what God is saying. So in that sense, he's actually done something pretty good in that case. Because that's kind of the force of this. "Don't even think about doing these things."

WILKEN: There's a point there – let's see, I think it's in verse 7, where Peterson's translation, or his paraphrase, says that

God will not “put up with.” We’ve got a minute before this break – how should that read? Where does that fault?

STEINMANN: It’s not just “not put up with,” like “He’s going to cross His arms and look at you strange and not tolerate” or something like that. The Hebrew is stronger. It’s “will not acquit, will not leave unpunished.” And the whole point here is God is saying, “God will punish. He is indeed a God of wrath as well as a God of grace.” We have to hold to both of those because the Bible presents Him in both ways. And here it’s presenting Him as a God who does not in any sense allow sins to go unpunished.

WILKEN: Dr. Andrew Steinmann is our guest. We’re reviewing and critiquing popular Bible paraphrase, *The Message*, by Eugene Peterson. Dr. Steinmann is Professor of Theology & Hebrew at Concordia University Chicago and author of the Concordia Commentaries on *Daniel*, *Proverbs*, and *Ezra & Nehemiah*. We’ll have more excerpts from *The Message* to play and to critique after this.

[BREAK]

WILKEN: Welcome back to *Issues, Etc.* I’m Todd Wilken. Dr. Andrew Steinmann is our guest.

Dr. Steinmann, I wonder if you’ve detected in your perusal of *The Message* – and it came across in something you said before the break – a tendency to kind of soften or downplay God’s justice or wrath in the message?

STEINMANN: Yeah. I think it’s, from my looking at it, and I can’t say it’s always true, but it seems that whenever God openly threatens punishment in the text of the Bible, that that tends to be downplayed. You do have some places where Peterson does have God displaying His wrath and so forth, but when the words are just an open threat

of punishment, that seems to be downplayed. And I wonder if he just kind of naturally recoils from that, and so that gets reflected in the way he paraphrases.

WILKEN: I noticed in your notes on this that I looked at before we came on the air, there are several times where you say, “Here’s how Peterson paraphrases the thing, and here’s how it probably ought to read as a strict translation.” You say it’s interpretive. Is that one of the downfalls of a paraphrase – that it really can’t help but be interpretive at times? Not translation, but actually engaging in interpretation.

STEINMANN: Yeah. It gets to the point where you’re not just trying to reproduce the feel of the original text, but you’re trying to say, “Well, I’m not sure my audience will get that, so I’m going to add in extra words or a phrasing that goes in a different direction to be interpreted.” Now, in some sense, all translation is interpretive, but translators try to keep the interpretation to a minimum. They all recognize that sometimes, the only way to get it into another language is to do something that makes an interpretive decision. But they try to keep those to a minimum. They try to keep them from being idiosyncratic, and that’s the type of thing you find in a paraphrase like this. You get idiosyncratic things, you get ?? decisions and interpretation that maybe the translator didn’t need to make. They could just leave the text the way it was and let the reader make the interpretive decision.

WILKEN: Well, but then it wouldn’t be a paraphrase, now would it?

STEINMANN: It wouldn’t.

WILKEN: Well, the next excerpt we’re going to hear actually comes from 1 Kings 1 – the story of David, kind of at the depth of his downfall as king of Israel. Why did you choose this one, Dr. Steinmann?

STEINMANN: Well, it's a little bit less familiar, but also it has some kind of unusual, I think, choices of wording that we can talk about.

THE MESSAGE AUDIO CLIP: King David grew old. The years had caught up with him. Even though they piled blankets on him, he couldn't keep warm. So his servants said to him, "We're going to get a young virgin for our master the king, to be at his side and look after him. She'll get in bed with you and arouse our master the king." So they searched the country of Israel for the most ravishing girl they could find. They found Abishag the Shunamite and brought her to the king. The girl was stunningly beautiful. She stayed at his side and looked after the king. But the king did not have sex with her.

At this time, Adonijah, whose mother was Haggith, puffed himself up saying, "I'm the next king." He made quite a splash with chariots and riders and fifty men to ride ahead of him. His father had spoiled him rotten as a child, never once reprimanding him. Besides that, he was very good-looking and the next in line after Absalom. Adonijah talked with Joab, son of Zeruah, and with Abiathar the priest, and they threw their weight on his side. But neither the priest Zadok nor Benaiah, son of Jehoiada, nor Nathan the prophet, nor Shimei and Rei, nor David's personal bodyguards supported Adonijah.

Next, Adonijah held a coronation feast, sacrificing sheep, cattle, and grain-fed heifers at the Stone of Zohelath near the Rogel Spring. He invited all his brothers, the king's sons, and everyone in Judah who had position and influence. But he did not invite the prophet Nathan, Benaiah, the bodyguards, or his brother Solomon.

WILKEN: So what was peculiar in Eugene Peterson's choice of words in his paraphrase, *The Message*, in this little excerpt?

STEINMANN: Well, let's start with the first four verses or so. He uses, when this woman is lying with David, he uses "arouse." "We'll put her with him to arouse the king." Well, in English, that just gives a sexual connotation to it. The Hebrew says she is there to keep him warm. Now, perhaps that's a euphemism for sex in Hebrew, but considering that just a little bit later on in verse 4 it says he didn't have sex with her, I'm not sure it's a euphemism. So we've got to be careful about putting things in that decide for the reader what's going on here. In that same group of verses, he uses at one point "a ravishing young girl" and then the next time he calls her "stunningly beautiful." Well, it's the same word, "beautiful," in both cases. I don't know why "ravishing" is so much better than "beautiful." Then you lose the connection. And then the "stunningly beautiful" – in Hebrew, it's just "very beautiful." I don't know why we have to put "stunningly" in.

So there's a whole choice of words here that you have to ask yourself, "Why is this?" Is "ravishing" really any easier than "beautiful"? I would think "beautiful" is the easier word, myself.

WILKEN: You know, there's an actual historical question at work here, too. And I'm looking at verse 9. He calls this "a coronation feast," but this isn't a coronation feast, is it? And that's key for the actual story.

STEINMANN: Yeah, what this is is more like a political rally. He's trying to rally the troops around him to take over. He's not been crowned yet. This is his way of currying favor with all the influential people to try to make a palace coup with their support. It's not a coronation feast. So here's a clear case where he's putting in meaning that's simply not there in any way, shape, or form.

WILKEN: Is that kind of highlighting another tendency of the paraphraser – not Peterson

in particular here, but he's a good example – of kind of, even when dealing with narrative, trying to spice it up a little bit, maybe make it a little bit more interesting because he knows that his audience might be getting a little bored with even the best of palace intrigue?

STEINMANN: Yeah, I guess so. And I guess, especially in an age where we have all this media and instant stuff at our fingertips, we want everything to cut to the chase, and we don't want to have to read a narrative about, "Oh, he took his time and tried to get all his ducks in a row before he took over the palace." We want to just cut to the end of the story. But that's not what the Bible does.

WILKEN: Here is a very familiar psalm. It happens to be Psalm 1. It's a very short psalm, but one that has probably found its way into the liturgical life of both Old and New Testament Christians. Here's how Eugene Peterson, in *The Message*, renders it.

THE MESSAGE AUDIO CLIP: How well God must like you. You don't hang out at Sin Saloon. You don't slink along Dead End Road. You don't go to Smart Mouth College. Instead, you thrill to God's Word. You chew on Scripture day and night. You're a tree replanted in Eden, bearing fresh fruit every month, never dropping a leaf, always in blossom. You're not at all like the wicked, who are mere windblown dust without defense in court, unfit company for innocent people. God charts the road you take. The road they take is Skid Row.

WILKEN: That's just kind of weird, the direction he decided to go with that familiar psalm, really bearing no resemblance – you have to work pretty hard mentally to make a connection there.

STEINMANN: Yeah, and this is, I think, a general tendency, from what I can see in his rendering of Hebrew poetry. You see it a lot

in the psalms and elsewhere in texts that are poetic or that use a lot of metaphor and similes and other figures of speech. He does the same type of thing.

WILKEN: Does he seem to have a knowledge of the Hebrew idiom?

STEINMANN: Yeah. If you look at it really close and try to compare it word to word, I think he at times does have a knowledge of the Hebrew idiom, but other times, I think he's trying to be too clever. In the first verse, "Sin's Saloon, Dead End Road, Smart Mouth College," it just reminds me of a 40-year-old parent trying to dress and talk like their kids in order to be relevant. And we know that's not appropriate.

WILKEN: What about this thing – the one that stood out to me is "you thrill to God's Word." A little bit of Fats Domino or Chubby Checker in there. What in the world is going on there?

STEINMANN: Yeah, well, the Hebrew is "you take delight in God's Word." The "God's Word" part, actually, is pretty good. The Hebrew word is *torah*, which is usually translated "Law," but it's not simply Law; it's Law and Gospel. It's instruction – that's what that means. So that is pretty good. But the "thrill" doesn't get across the idea of "take delight in." "Thrill" sounds like a passing fancy type of thing to me, and maybe that's just me. But that's what it sounds like, where delighting in something sounds a little bit more permanent, and it's not necessarily an outward show. You can delight in something day in and day out, without always showing it. And "thrill" just sounds more showy – like we have to raise our hands and clap our hands and so forth. Maybe I'm wrong, but that's how it strikes me.

WILKEN: There's something that many, even the casual reader of that first Psalm, have often noticed, that it's a progression of "walk in the way sinners, stand in the way of

judgment, sit in the seat of scoffers,” and that’s pretty much lost with the verbs Peterson chooses there. One minute before our break.

STEINMANN: Yeah. “Hang out, slink, and go” just doesn’t have this idea. You don’t walk there, you don’t stop and stand there, and you certainly don’t sit down there. And he just completely misses that.

WILKEN: Dr. Andrew Steinmann is our guest. We’re talking about the Bible paraphrase, *The Message*, doing some critique, listening to some excerpts. A half hour left on the other side of the break with him. I invite your questions or your comments. If you’re familiar with *The Message*, or if you have a question about *The Message* or paraphrases: 1-877-623-6943, 877-623-MYIE.

It’s Monday afternoon, August the 6th. We’re coming to you live. Stay tuned.

[BREAK]

WILKEN: Welcome back to *Issues, Etc.* I’m Todd Wilken. We’re talking about Eugene Peterson’s Bible paraphrase, *The Message*, and doing a little review with Dr. Andrew Steinmann on this Monday afternoon. Dr. Steinmann is Professor of Theology & Hebrew at Concordia University Chicago, and he’s also author of the Concordia Commentaries on *Daniel*, *Proverbs*, and *Ezra & Nehemiah*. You can find out more about these Christ-centered, cross-focused commentaries at our website, issuesetc.org. Click “Listen on Demand,” or you can purchase the Concordia Commentaries on *Daniel*, *Proverbs*, and *Ezra & Nehemiah* by calling Concordia Publishing House: 1-800-325-3040, 1-800-325-3040.

Let’s go to the phones and talk with Herman in Illinois. Hi, Herman.

HERMAN: Thank you for taking my call. Dr. Steinmann, in one of these examples you

read, there is continually mentioning God by the name “GOD.” Would this be deemphasizing, instead of “Yahweh” or “Jehovah,” the personal revelation of God, the implication of the Holy Trinity, and also the prophetic revelation of Jesus Christ to come? It seems like he’s trying to Unitarianize the concept of God this way.

WILKEN: Well, there’s certainly a potential there, Herman. Thank you very much for your question. Dr. Steinmann?

STEINMANN: Yeah, I think there’s a potential for it to be understood that way. I don’t think that’s Peterson’s intention. I don’t think we can attribute that to him. I do think it somewhat depersonalizes God. That’s why I was just amazed as I read through it, that he wouldn’t use “Yahweh,” His personal name, which kind of personalizes God in a way that I think would work for his audience. I don’t think Peterson would want to deny the Trinity. But I’m sure that his Bible, because of that choice, could be read that way. And that’s kind of where you have to be really careful in Bible translation, because you don’t want people to read into something if you can avoid it. And that’s what might potentially happen here with this type of choice.

WILKEN: We were talking before about Psalm 1, and I take it that there are also issues here in this psalm with the term “the righteous.” He has kind of – either omits it in certain places, or he has workarounds for that term – which is, admittedly, a difficult term for the uninitiated to rightly understand.

STEINMANN: Yeah. He’s trying to get away with that. For instance, he has, at one point in verse 4 or 5, “unfit for company for innocent people.” And he uses “innocent” instead of “righteous.” I don’t know if that’s really the same thing. One’s a negative attribute – “innocent” is “not guilty.” And the other is a positive attribute: you’re right or you’re just. Perhaps there’s a workaround

for “righteous” that would work in a paraphrase, but I’m not sure “innocent” is it.

WILKEN: Isn’t there a point there in verse 6 where he just actually drops the term altogether?

STEINMANN: Yeah, yeah. He just uses “you” instead of “righteous person.” “God knows your way,” or something like that – “God charts your way,” I think it is. And so he kind of loses the point that God knows what the righteous are up to, and the contrast to the way of the wicked, who will perish. And the whole point of this psalm is the contrast between the person who is righteous before God because of the blood of Jesus Christ, and the person who is wicked before God because they refuse to believe in the Son of God, and therefore God sees their sin. And that whole contrast between righteous and wicked is wiped out in the very last verse, which is, of course, where the climax comes in this psalm.

WILKEN: Two other questions on the psalm. First of all, he ends with the term that is, I think, anachronistic, even now: “Skid Row”? I don’t know the average, maybe 25-year-old, reader of *The Message* who’s going to understand what that means. They might have some implication from it, but it seems to me something that belongs maybe a generation or two ago, if you’re going to use it as currency.

STEINMANN: Yeah. It’s really bad. Here, again, I think, in attempting to paraphrase and make it relevant, he’s actually made it harder. The Hebrew is quite clear: “the end of his way is death.” I don’t know why “Skid Row” is better than “death.” I think “death” is a good, current English word. Everybody gets it, everybody knows about it. Why not just use it? Then the other thing is – he says, “at the end of his road is Skid Row,” or “his road ends in Skid Row,” or something like that. But it’s not just the point that he ends up at Skid Row. The psalm says the end of his way, the end of his path, is death

– that even his way perishes. Not only he perishes, but the way these sinners are going, that whole way is going to be wiped out eventually. And that is something that is just completely lost here.

WILKEN: A question about Hebrew poetry, because that’s what we have in the Psalms. Generally speaking, very well-crafted, very economic in the way that – not poetry as we have it in the Western world, but every economic, tied more to parallelism than to meter or rhyme in any sense. And it strikes me that even in this example of Psalm 1, that all flies out the window.

STEINMANN: Yeah, and part of the beauty of the psalms is in their economy of words. And I think this is generally true of a lot of passages in Scripture. And one of the problems with *The Message* here is that it’s very wordy. And sometimes you can say more by being pithy. Those are cases where less is more. And sometimes you lose the beauty, you lose the pointedness, and you lose drawing the reader in by making it more wordy and explaining everything.

WILKEN: Well, here’s another example of the wordiness that tends to take over in paraphrase, and it comes from the famous – it probably applies nicely, Hebrew poetry not spoken in Hebrew – Matthew 5, the famous Beatitudes.

THE MESSAGE AUDIO CLIP: When Jesus saw His ministry drawing huge crowds, He climbed a hillside. Those who were apprenticed to Him, the committed, climbed with Him. Arriving at a quiet place, He sat down and taught His climbing companions. This is what He said:

“You’re blessed when you’re at the end of your rope. With less of you, there is more of God and His rule. You’re blessed when you feel you have lost what is most dear to you. Only then can you be embraced by the One most dear to you. You’re blessed when

you're content with just who you are, no more, no less. That's the moment you find yourselves proud owners of everything that can't be bought. You're blessed when you've worked up a good appetite for God. He's food and drink and the best meal you'll ever eat. You're blessed when you care. At the moment of being care-full, you'll find yourselves cared for. You're blessed when you get your inside world, your mind and heart, put right. Then you can see God in the outside world. You're blessed when you can show people how to cooperate, instead of compete or fight. That's when you discover who you really are and your place in God's family. You're blessed when your commitment to God provokes persecution. The persecution drives you even deeper into God's Kingdom. Not only that; count yourselves blessed every time people put you down or throw you out or speak lies about you to discredit me. What it means is that the truth is too close for comfort and they are uncomfortable. You can be glad when that happens. Give a cheer, even. For though they don't like it, I do, and all heaven applauds. And know that you are in good company. My prophets and witnesses have always gotten into this kind of trouble."

WILKEN: Okay, near the end, I think it sounds more like the Beatitudes as they were originally spoken and inspired and written. But at the beginning, I'm lost, Dr. Steinmann.

STEINMANN: Yeah, well, you don't even get to the Beatitudes by the time you're lost. He goes up with His climbing companions, which sounds like they do rock climbing or something on a regular basis together. But then you get to the fact that he's switched here to the second person: "you, you, you" all the way around. In the beginning, in the Beatitudes, it's just "blessed are the poor in spirit." It's third person stuff. And I think that's important. Jesus doesn't switch to "you" until later on. He draws you in and then makes it second person. And so you

kind of lose that impact. Jesus waits all the way til verse 11 before He does that. And then you get these paraphrases of "Blessed are the..." and what's blessed? "Blessed are you when you're at the end of your rope." Well, that in Greek is "poor in spirit," and admittedly, you've got to stop and think about it. But that's the whole point. What does it mean to be poor in spirit? "Oh, I have a spiritual poverty. I am a sinner. I have no right to stand before God. I'm poor in the extreme sense of that word. I don't have one red cent." And that's what poor is all about. And then it goes on, "Less of you is more of God's kingdom." I'm not sure, in this context at least, how you get more of God's kingdom. The point is, the poor in spirit have God's kingdom because they are relying not on their riches, but on Christ's riches. And so they have the kingdom of God right now, through the faith that the Holy Spirit has worked in their hearts. That's just missing here in the first Beatitude, and if we get off on such a bad start, well, no wonder we're lost.

WILKEN: I keep thinking about this, Dr. Steinmann, that at the beginning you said these paraphrases are intended to make the Scriptures more accessible. But this seems, at least in this case of Matthew 5, the Beatitudes, to serve as a real veil, if not a barrier, between the reader and what the actual text says. With about 30 seconds.

STEINMANN: Yeah, I think by trying to explain, and you take out the poetic imagery that Jesus has put in, what you've done is just make it rather insipid, and therefore there's no meaning to be had. It's kind of like eating bland toast.

WILKEN: When we come back, we'll continue our conversation with Dr. Andrew Steinmann, reviewing the Bible paraphrase, *The Message* by Eugene Peterson.

[BREAK]

WILKEN: Welcome back to *Issues, Etc.* Ten more minutes with Dr. Andrew Steinmann. We're reviewing the paraphrase of the bible, *The Message* by Eugene Peterson.

Let's see what Andy has to say. He's listening in Kirkwood, Missouri. Hi, Andy.

ANDY: Hi, Todd. I help teach the junior high youth at my church, and I have the luxury of having a young pastor with me. But in explaining the Scripture, one has to paraphrase. And since we've been talking about the Beatitudes, I'll just give an example. I would paraphrase: "Blessed are those who recognize their spiritual poverty; theirs is the kingdom of God. Blessed are those who mourn, because they recognize their sin. They will be comforted by God. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. God will feed them with His own righteousness." This would be kind of the way that I would paraphrase. And, of course, you take a risk when you do that. But at the same time, you want the kids to understand and it's – I can remember how confused I was. I used to think that the correct translation or paraphrase would be "Blessed are the poor," or "the poor will be blessed spiritually." That's what I thought that meant. I'd be interested to hear comments.

WILKEN: Andy, thank you very much. Dr. Steinmann?

STEINMANN: We all do that when we teach. There's a way of paraphrasing to explain that sticks with the Word of God and interprets Scripture by using what Scripture says elsewhere. And the examples Andy gave were pretty good – bringing to bear the doctrine of Scripture on a particular passage. That's one thing. It's another thing to just say, "Well, I'm just going to make this understandable and start putting things in, without reference to the rest of Scripture, without using a theology drawn from all of Scripture," to putting in some of the things

that Peterson does and choosing like "at the end of your rope" for "poor in spirit." Where do you find a parallel to that that would suggest that that's what that means elsewhere in Scripture? I think you can find good passages that suggest that poor in spirit, spiritual poverty means that you stand before God without any claim for anything. You can find plenty of Bible passages for that. And that's bringing Scripture to bear on Scripture. So I think there's a fundamental difference between what Andy said he was doing and what Peterson here is doing.

WILKEN: You say, just to put a bow on the Beatitudes, that at several points he loses what you call "the eschatological emphasis" of Jesus' famous words there. What do you mean?

STEINMANN: Well, he misses the point that these are not just kind of promises for here and now to make you feel good, but they are promises that the believer in Christ has for eternity. In verse 5 of the Beatitudes, "you are proud owners of everything that can't be bought," as if somehow getting my newest iPad is going to make me feel better. But the whole point is you are going to inherit the earth – that this is a promise that when the new heavens and the new earth come, you are going to be citizens of the kingdom of God. You're going to live on that new heaven and new earth in your resurrected body. Jesus is pointing us to the ultimate promise, not just something little right here and now. And he misses that, as if the Beatitudes are just made to make me feel better in this particular moment, and not to fix my eyes on the Kingdom of God that has been prepared for me through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

WILKEN: Here are the first 9 verses of Romans 4, according to Eugene Peterson's *The Message*.

THE MESSAGE AUDIO CLIP: So how do we fit what we know of Abraham, our first father in the faith, into this new way of

looking at things? If Abraham, by what he did for God, got God to approve him, he could certainly have taken credit for it. But the story we're given is a God story, not an Abraham story. What we read in Scripture is Abraham entered into what God was doing for him, and that was the turning point. He trusted God to set him right instead of trying to be right on his own. If you're a hard worker and you do a good job, you deserve a pay. We don't call your wages a gift. But if you see that the job is too big for you, that it's something only God can do and you trust Him to do it, you could never do it for yourself, no matter how hard and long you worked. Well, that trusting Him to do it is what gets you set right with God, by God – sheer gift. David confirms this way of looking at it, saying that the one who trusts God to do the putting everything right without insisting on having a say in it is one fortunate man. Fortunate those whose crimes are carted off, whose sins are wiped clean from the slate. Fortunate the person against whom the Lord does not keep score. Do you think for a minute that this blessing is only pronounced over those of us who keep our religious ways and are circumcised? Or do you think it possible that the blessing could be given to those who never even heard of our ways? Who were never brought up in the disciplines of God? We all agree, don't we, that it was by embracing what God did for him that Abraham was declared fit before God.

WILKEN: All right. Now, I don't know what to make of this one, because I could actually recognize Romans 4 in there, whereas with some of these other ones, I was kind of scratching my head. What do you make of it, Dr. Steinmann?

STEINMANN: Well, he does kind of go back and forth between trying to teach what Paul is teaching here – the doctrine of justification – and denying the doctrine of justification. So that's why it sometimes sounds pretty good. But there are places

here where the doctrine of justification, which the Lutheran Confessions call what the church stands or falls on, is subtly or not so subtly denied, or at least not declared in the way that the Scriptures declare it.

For instance, he talks about – in the first three verses already – entering into what God was doing for him. For the Greek is just “believed God.” I don't know what's so hard about “he believed God.” I mean, I think that's pretty straightforward. I don't think you have to do much with it.

WILKEN: Now, I don't want to leave that behind too far, because that's really, really crucial for Paul in Romans, that it is by faith alone that Abraham is justified, not by entering into anything.

STEINMANN: Yeah, you're not entering at all. It makes it synergistic. It makes it sound like you're cooperating with God in your salvation. That's not what Paul is teaching. When I believe God, that's not even my work; that's the work of the Holy Spirit in me. Although it is indeed my faith, that's kind of the mystery of faith – the Holy Spirit works it in me, but it becomes my faith. But it's nothing I can get credit for. And he misses the whole credit analogy here, by the way. Abraham believed God and it was considered to him as righteousness. It was put on his credit ledger as righteousness. Something like that. Not that Abraham didn't believe he could be right on his own. The whole point was I had this huge deficit on my ledger that I could never pay off, and God X-ed it out and gave me a credit. That's the analogy that Paul is working with here. And Eugene Peterson completely wipes that whole analogy out and makes it sound like somehow, I can cooperate with God in my believing and therefore this isn't just a completely passive righteousness that I receive, but it's a mixture of passively receiving and actively doing something at the same time.

WILKEN: There's another one there that I want to get to real quick before our time runs out. In Romans 4, where the phrase he uses, "does not keep score" – how does the original read?

STEINMANN: It's "does not count his sins against him." And that's the problem. "Keeping score" sounds like we can score. We can't score at all – that's Paul's whole point in the first three chapters of Romans – you can't score. It's more like he's saying, "You don't get scored again. God doesn't score against you, which He can do at will. He could, if He wanted to. But He doesn't." The whole point is God doesn't count your sins against you. Not "God doesn't keep score" as if you could somehow at times, get the ball in the goal.

WILKEN: Finally, then, what caution would you issue to pastor, to laypeople, who use the Bible paraphrase *The Message*?

STEINMANN: I would caution, first of all, that wherever you have passages – and this last one we talked about is a good example – where you have overt theological discussion, you should be very skeptical. Because it can sound good, and I think you made a good point – it sounds like Romans 4, until you look at the detail. But

unfortunately, the devil is in the details. So first of all, if there's anything that's kind of overt theological discussion, I think you need to be very cautious. Secondly, we can say it's not bad oftentimes in narrative, although at times even there, you can find some things to be concerned about. And thirdly, I think you need to realize that even though it's attempting to make it easier for the reader, at times it just leaves you scratching your head. I don't think it's any easier at all. In the end, I would caution most people against using something like this. There are Bibles that are easier to read, I think, than the traditional King James Version or something that is written on a high level. And it's probably better to use one of those along with your catechism than it is to try to use something like this, which has problems kind of lurking there that'll jump up and catch you if you're not very cautious about it.

WILKEN: Dr. Andrew Steinmann is Professor of Theology & Hebrew at Concordia University Chicago, author of the Concordia Commentaries on *Daniel*, *Proverbs*, and *Ezra & Nehemiah*. Thank you very much for your time.

STEINMANN: Thank you, Todd.

