

In Others' Words

The Shadow of Eugene Nida

The recent passing of Eugene Nida at the age of 96, one of the most prominent Bible translation experts of the 20th century, has gone almost unnoticed. His revolutionary impact on translation has much to do with the advocacy of “dynamic equivalence” translation, a ‘meaning-based’ approach that focuses on translating “thought-to-thought” versus “word-to-word”. For the long and distinguished career of this ‘premier linguist and translation consultant’, see Morgan Feddes’ article at www.christianitytoday.com/ct/help/info.html#permission. Also, in a very informative interview with Nida in 2002 (www.christianitytoday.com/ct/help/info.html#permission), David Neff asked what Nida believes to be his most important contribution to Bible translation, to which he replies, “To help people be willing to say what the text means—not what the words are, but what the text means.” When Neff asks this scholar of biblical languages whether it was difficult in practice to communicate the meaning and message of Scripture, and not just repeat the words, Nida responded:

“When we bring together a group of folks who want to be translators, it takes a month to get them willing to make sense intellectually. It takes another two weeks to make them willing to do it emotionally. They can accept it intellectually but not emotionally because they’ve grown up worshipping words more than worshipping God.”

The 400th Anniversary of the King James Bible

Mark Noll, the preeminent historian of American religion, has written a review of a representative number of books published this year in commemoration of the King James Bible (“Long Live the King”, in *Books and Culture*, Nov./Dec. 2011, pp. 11-14). He handles four questions in relation to these new perspectives on the KJB, which provide a fascinating backdrop for considering the ‘terms of translation’. In his first question, as to the circumstances in which the KJB was created, Noll’s review embellishes Roy Ciampa’s reference to ideology in the origins of the KJB (see p. 140 in this issue). But it’s Noll’s third question, “What kind of translation is the KJB, and why should we care?”, that provides another slant on the use of terms in translation. He cites Leland Ryken’s emphasis on the virtues of the “essentially literal” KJB, with its verbal equivalence and its incomparable “grandeur” and “eloquence”, which Ryken believes makes the KJB more accurate than modern dynamic equivalence translations. But on the latter question of “why care?”, Noll refers to the 1611 “note to the reader” made by the theologian Myles Smith. He claims “the very meanest translation of the Bible in *English* ... containeth the word of God, yea, is the word of

God.” This theologian presses us beyond linguistics, reckoning “that version is best through which the Spirit works most directly to communicate life in Christ.” This especially seems the question when a society treats the Bible as a “monument of English prose”, but fails to consider the Bible, in the words of Myles Smith, as “a fountain of most pure water springing up unto everlasting life”.

Race, Ethnicity and the Church

The second volume of the *Great Commission Research Journal* raises the issue of multi-ethnic congregations, a subject relevant to any and every urban context of the world (*GCRJ*, Vol. 2, No. 2, Winter 2011). The editors are willing to face the social complexities which complicate the original thesis of ‘homogenous unit’ thinking. This is significant since this very periodical carries at least part of Donald McGavran’s legacy (formerly *The Journal for the American Society for American Church Growth*). The editors clearly respect the power of ethnic identity, and do not just uncritically affirm some kind of popular multiculturalism. They seem to resist any simple meltdown of cultures, yet also engage the contextual realities of urban life.

But, maybe even more importantly, they take on the hypersensitive mix of race, reconciliation and ethnic legitimacy in certain of the articles. Especially note worthy is the article by Dirke Johnson, “Multicultural and Racial Reconciliation Efforts Fail to Attract Many in the Black Church”. (*GCRJ*, Vol. 2, No. 2, Winter 2011, pp. 221-234; [www.journals.biola.edu/gcr/volumes/2/issues/2/articles/221](http://journals.biola.edu/gcr/volumes/2/issues/2/articles/221)) Underneath the resistance of some Black churches to any effort at racial reconciliation and multiculturalism in their churches is the sense that ‘most multiracial groups are monoculturally white’, and that ‘confusing race and culture provides the seedbed for the dominant culture of the group to subordinate other participating cultures’ (p. 225). The bottom line is that racial reconciliation ‘unintentionally promotes subordination’, and ‘(blacks) don’t want non-black culture changing what is a core value to them’ (p. 224). This is a bold assessment, one that fundamentally challenges an superficial emphasis on multiculturalism, and halts any minimalist view of cultural identity in our inter-racial cities. **IJFM**