



And Sometimes It Works

The amazing thing is that it works at all—human language, that is. Lips and larynxes, tongues and teeth, bodies and breath combine to make animal sounds, and another animal hears them as words filled with meaning.

But one person's meaning is never exactly that of another, because we all bring our own understanding and experiences, cultures and conditioning into the conversation parlor, so we are never sure what will ensue. Indeed, to think we are sure ("God said it; I believe it; that settles it!") is one of the surest indications that we have gotten everything wrong.

Which is to say: we are all translators and interpreters, all the time. Other articles in this issue describe the ongoing and intricate process of translating the Bible, so let me be content with this simple word of thanks: the amazing thing is that it works at all! The gift of language, many have argued, is one of the primary things (perhaps, *the* primary thing) that make us human. Many have seen it as an integral part of what the Bible calls the "image of God" in us.

As a student of language and literature, Sven Birkerts honored the gift eloquently: "Language is the landmass that is continuous under our feet and the feet of others and allows us to get to each other's places."¹ And again, the amazing thing is that it often works—across time, across cultures, across genders. Men are from Mars, and women are from Venus, as we have been told (and probably experienced), but women and men sometimes actually hear one another.² "Bread" connotes something entirely different in American culture than in, say, Uzbek culture,³ but sometimes at least we can break bread together and experience communion. The world of Leviticus was so vastly different from our own that we can do grave damage by assuming its words and customs mean the same now as they did then, yet—nevertheless—its call to love the neighbor as oneself provided and provides a bedrock on which both Jesus and his followers want firmly to stand (Lev 19:18; Mark 12:28–31).

Translation is dangerous when it doesn't work—we say one thing and our

¹Sven Birkerts, *The Gutenberg Elegies: The Fate of Reading in an Electronic Age* (New York: Fawcett Columbine, 1994) 82.

²See John Gray, *Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus: A Practical Guide for Improving Communication and Getting What You Want in Your Relationships* (New York: HarperCollins, 1993). Alas, the "getting what you want" in the subtitle is probably itself a "Mars" thing, so don't expect this book to help you revel in the gift of communication and intimacy for its own sake, much less for the sake of the other.

³Steven Kraftchick borrows this example from Susan Bassnett in his article in this issue, "Mr. Johnston's Axiom: Thoughts on the Tasks of Translation and Preaching," *Word & World* 31/3 (2011) 325.

partner hears something else—but it can also be dangerous when it does, as German theologian Helmut Thielicke noted in his reflections on church life during the Third Reich. In times of crisis, he wrote:

[T]he Bible dare not simply be recited, but rather must be interpreted, that is, the statements which were conditioned by the time in which they were uttered must be listened to so intensely and the proclamatory content so clearly determined that they become transparent for a message that reaches me here and now through the text.⁴

As an example, Thielicke imagines a demonstration in the Berlin Sportpalast put on by the German Faith Movement. A Christian, finally unable to endure the tirades of hate, stands up and shouts, “Christ is the Messiah.” A few people turn with surprise at the interruption, but then return to concentrate their attention on the platform. But then another speaks more clearly: “Christ is the only Lord and Leader [*Führer*] and without him Hitler and all the apostles of this false faith will go to hell.” This man would be torn to pieces. “And yet,” says Thielicke, “he had done nothing more than the other man had done when he spoke out for the Messiah—except that he had interpreted the term. And that made it living preaching, whereas the noninterpreted word disappeared in a vacuum.”⁵

This amazing, promising, daunting, and dangerous task of translation is what the preacher must do in every sermon. It’s a task dangerous not least to the preacher’s own faith, since preachers are called to read the Bible not just for themselves and their own faith formation, but also for the sake of others. That kind of reading (or translation) is something of a violent act, as Alberto Manguel notes when he describes the translator as one who is “able to dissect the text, peel back the skin, slice down to the marrow, follow each artery and each vein.” Ouch! Can we do this? Our text, after all, is Holy Scripture. But Manguel is not finished. The purpose of dissection is to set the interpreted text back “on its feet” as “a whole new sentient being. The ideal reader is not a taxidermist.”⁶ I take that final sentence to mean that “ideal” readers (or preachers) do not just adore or re-pristinate an old text, beautifully stuffed but unfortunately dead, but interact with that text for the sake of self and others such that it becomes a new living word: either the alarming warning of Thielicke’s Christian in the Sportpalast or the clear ringing good news of the gospel: “You are free!” The amazing thing is that it sometimes works, which can only be a true gift of God.

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⁴Helmut Thielicke, *The Trouble with the Church: A Call for Renewal*, trans. and ed. John W. Doberstein (New York: Harper & Row, 1965) 20.

⁵*Ibid.*, 37.

⁶Alberto Manguel, “Notes toward a Definition of the Ideal Reader,” in *A Reader on Reading* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010) 151.