

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF EUGENE NIDA

A look at the proliferation of Christian Scriptures over the last fifty years of the 20th century reveals that millions of people worldwide gained access to the Scriptures in ways that would previously not have been thought possible.

In large measure, this came as a result of an increase in the number of languages where translation was carried out and the revolution that was taking place in the field of Bible translation. As new resources became available, new methods of translating were taught, and translators were better trained, Bible readers across the globe benefited from translations that were clear, understandable, and faithful to the original texts.

While the Bible translation revolution used several great minds to attain the prominence it now receives, one name stands out as a pioneer and champion in the development of theory and praxis, that of Eugene A. Nida.



Born on November 11, 1914, in Oklahoma City, OK, Eugene Nida and his family moved to Long Beach, California when he was 5 years old. He began studying Latin in high school and was already looking forward to being able to translate Scripture as a missionary. By the time he received his Bachelor's degree in 1936 from the University of California at Los Angeles, he was well on his way. Having earned his degree in Greek, *summa cum laude*, he enrolled in the Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL) and discovered the works of such linguists as Edward Sapir and Leonard Bloomfield. Nida then pursued a Master's degree in Greek New Testament at the University of Southern California. In 1941 he began a Ph.D. in Linguistics at the University of Michigan and completed it in two years. His dissertation, *A Synopsis of English Syntax* was, at that time, the only full-scale analysis of a major language according to the "immediate constituent" theory.

The year 1943 was a busy one for Eugene Nida. In addition to completing his Ph.D., he was ordained in the Northern Baptist Convention. He married Althea Nida, nee Sprague, and joined the staff of the American Bible Society (ABS) as a linguist. Although his initial hiring was experimental, Nida was made Associate Secretary for Versions from 1944-46, and from then until he retired in the 1980's, he was Executive Secretary for Translations.

Upon joining the ABS staff, Dr. Nida immediately set out on a series of extended field trips in Africa and Latin America. On these visits he worked with missionary translators on linguistic problems, and searched for potential indigenous translators, often using his SIL connections. These site visits led him to see that his most important role for ABS Translations' interests would not be limited to checking translations for publication, but of educating translators, and providing them with better models, resources, training, and organization for efficiency. This he managed to do through on-site visits, teaching and training workshops, and through building a translations network and organizational structure that became the global United Bible Societies Translations Program through which work in hundreds of indigenous languages is constantly in process around the world.

Nida was determined to produce a theory that would foster effective communication of the Good News across all kinds of cultural and linguistics barriers. A prolific writer, his book *Toward a Science of*

Translating (Brill, 1964), and later *The Theory and Practice of Translation* (Brill, 1969, with C.R. Taber) helped him achieve this objective.

These two very influential books were his first book-length efforts to expound his theory on what he called dynamic equivalence translation, later to be called functional equivalence. How significant, revolutionary, and convincing this new approach proved to be can be seen in the fact that hundreds of Bible translations have now been effectively carried out with this methodology. In essence, this approach enables the translator to capture the meaning and spirit of the original language text without being bound to its linguistic structure.

His 1986 publication, with Jan de Waard, *From One Language to Another* (Nelson) is the summative explication of functional equivalence translation. Over the years his many other books and articles covered such important subjects as exegesis, semantics and discourse structure, and a thorough semantic analysis of the vocabulary of the Greek New Testament – Nida and Louw, *The Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament based on Semantic Domains* (UBS, 1988).

Nida's work with indigenous language translations had shown that in order to reach people who bring no prior knowledge to their encounter with the Bible, the translation needs to place the highest priority on clear communication in easily understood language and style. Thus, under the leadership of translator William Wonderly, a Spanish New Testament, called the *Versión Popular*, a contemporary translation, was published in 1966.

At almost the same time, the *Good News Bible New Testament, Today's English Version* (TEV), under the leadership of Robert G. Bratcher, a Nida colleague, was published. Both of these books were enormously successful publications, with sales in dozens of millions even before the Bible editions were published in 1976.

The success of these translations led to many churches endorsing the effectiveness of the functional equivalence approach for clarity of communication of the message of the Bible. In 1968, the United Bible Societies (UBS) and the Vatican entered into a joint agreement to undertake hundreds of new interconfessional Bible translation projects around the world, using functional equivalence principles. Again, Nida was one of the principals on this collaborative work.

A scholar, teacher, leader, influencer, conceptualizer, innovator, and influential theoretician, Eugene A. Nida is very possibly unsurpassed in the history of the Bible Society movement in terms of global impact. His work, his organization, his ideas and the organization he put into place represent a watershed for the movement and for Bible translation. Thanks to him, the world of Bible translation and translation studies has been enriched and challenged into an exciting field of study and discourse.

Retired since the early 1980s, Dr. Nida currently lives in Brussels, Belgium.

MILESTONES IN THE LIFE OF EUGENE A. NIDA

- 1914 Eugene Nida born on November 11th in Oklahoma City, OK
- 1936 Nida graduates University of California at Los Angeles, summa cum laude, B.A. in Greek, earning one of the highest ratings in the University's history.
- 1937 Begins teaching Morphology and Syntax at the Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL) and continues teaching every summer through 1953.
- 1939 Receives Master's degree in New Testament Greek from University of Southern California.

- 1943 Completes Ph.D. in Linguistics at University of Michigan at Ann Arbor in just two years.
- Ordained in the Northern Baptist Convention.
 - Marries Althea Sprague.
 - Joins American Bible Society staff as Associate Secretary of Versions.
- 1946 Delegate to United Bible Societies founding conference.
- Publishes Morphology: The Descriptive Analysis of Words.
- 1949 Finds the journal The Bible Translator and served as its editor. The journal continues to serve today as a major resource for practical and theoretical treatment of Bible translation issues.
- 1953 Begins to build team of translation consultants to carry out field work.
- 1960 Nida sponsors first official Triennial Translation Workshop in Pennsylvania. Two informal meetings were held prior to this one.
- 1964 Toward a Science of Translating (TASOT) introduces Nida's theory of Dynamic Equivalence
- 1966 Publishes first edition of the Greek New Testament with critical apparatus (UBS publication) which provided a standard text for scholars to use and which facilitated them in their work.
- American Bible Society publishes a New Testament, Good News for Modern Man, in the Today's English Version. This translation project which was spearheaded by Robert Bratcher followed dynamic equivalent principles.
- 1967 Key figure in forging UBS/Vatican agreement to undertake hundreds of interconfessional Bible translation projects worldwide, using functional equivalence principles.
- 1968 Co-authors The Theory and Practice of Translation (TAPOT) with Charles R. Taber. This refined and simplified the TASOT theory.
- 1969 Initial meeting of Hebrew textual scholars whose groundbreaking work on the Hebrew Old Testament Text Project, chaired by Nida, led to a new concept and method in text criticism. The project lasted 11 years.
- 1970 Appointed United Bible Societies Translations Research Coordinator.
- 1976 Good News Bible (Today's English Version) is published.
- 1978 Christian Herald magazine editors hail Nida as one who "has done more than any one person to provide people with Scripture they can read in their own language..."
- 1986 Co-authors From one Language to Another, an explication of the functional equivalence translation, with Jan de Waard.
- 1988 Co-authors The Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament based on Semantic Domains with Johannes Louw.
- 1993 Althea Sprague Nida dies.
- 1997 Nida marries Dr. Elena Fernandez- Miranda, translator and interpreter.

2001 The American Bible Society salutes Nida's contribution to the Bible cause at a Translation and Similarity Conference in New York City and names its Eugene A. Nida Institute for Biblical Scholarship in his honor.

Reference: <http://www.nidainstitute.org/>