The Gift of the Stranger:
Faith, Hospitality and Foreign Language Learning
David I. Smith and Barbara Carvill, Eerdmans (2000), 233 pages
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Raymond and Cindy Le Clair live in Kiev, Ukraine. Prior to his service with ACSI, Raymond was the director of the Center for Educational Programs, Slavic Gospel Association (Moscow, Russia); a teacher of English and a cultural consultant for Christian and non-Christian refugees from the USSR for the Slavic Gospel Association and World Relief (Ladispoli and Rome, Italy), 1989–1990; and a radio program writer, studio manager, and correspondence coordinator for Russian shortwave radio service, Slavic Gospel Association (Wheaton, Illinois) and HCJB (Quito, Ecuador), 1983–1989.

What role can Christian teachers of foreign languages and culture have in addressing the alarming rise of cultural arrogance and nationalism, and the resulting ethnic tensions that are flaring up around the world? What if anything does the Bible have to do with the teaching and learning of a foreign language? Do Christian methods of teaching really exist, or are methods ethically neutral? From a Christian perspective, why should students study a foreign language, especially when many may never have the opportunity to practice using it?

Authors David Smith and Barbara Carvill, experienced educators and committed Christians, address these and other significant questions as they explore the relevance of the Christian faith to the goals, content, and methods involved in teaching foreign languages and cultures. The framework for this discussion is the authors’ concern for “the interconnectedness of the spiritual and ethical dimensions of being human with all of the other aspects of life” (p. 205). The basic assumption of The Gift of the Stranger is that, like all aspects of the creation (including the products of human creativity), language, culture and intercultural relations, though tragically marred by human sin, are nevertheless “redeemable” in the sense that they can be restored to some measure of God’s original intent for them.

Part I of The Gift of the Stranger sets the stage with several important biblical themes relevant to foreign language study as well as a brief survey of the views of key Christians from past centuries who not only helped to cultivate Christian thinking about foreign language learning but are largely responsible for many positive aspects of modern language teaching. In presenting both of these topics, the authors stimulate the reader to think about foreign language teaching in the light of the Scriptures and Christian values, commitments, and concerns.

Parts II and III of The Gift of the Stranger focus the reader’s attention on educational goals and curricular content that are frequently overlooked, yet very worthy of consideration in foreign language teaching. The goals of the foreign language class, say Smith and Carvill, should include the presentation of a fair and balanced picture of the foreigner and his culture, including as much of the entire spectrum of human experience as possible, not neglecting the ethical and spiritual dimensions of everyday life so obviously prevalent in every culture. It should also motivate and equip students to be hospitable, that is, to have “a loving, welcoming disposition toward foreigners as well as their language and culture” (p. 82). And finally, the foreign language class should enable students to become a blessing to foreigners at home and abroad by helping them affirm what is good and wholesome about the foreign culture they are studying as well as sensitively to raise questions about significant blind spots in values and ethical commitments.

The kind of ethical and attitudinal formation described above, as the authors point out, is more lasting than linguistic proficiency, and it is another valuable reason for studying a foreign language. But here the authors do not have in mind the mere addition of ethical teachings to the teacher’s otherwise academic approach. Virtues, they maintain, should “inform and shape learning.” Moreover, teaching these virtues