

+ FEATURE

THE DEAF

AN UNREACHED PEOPLE UNLIKE ANY OTHER

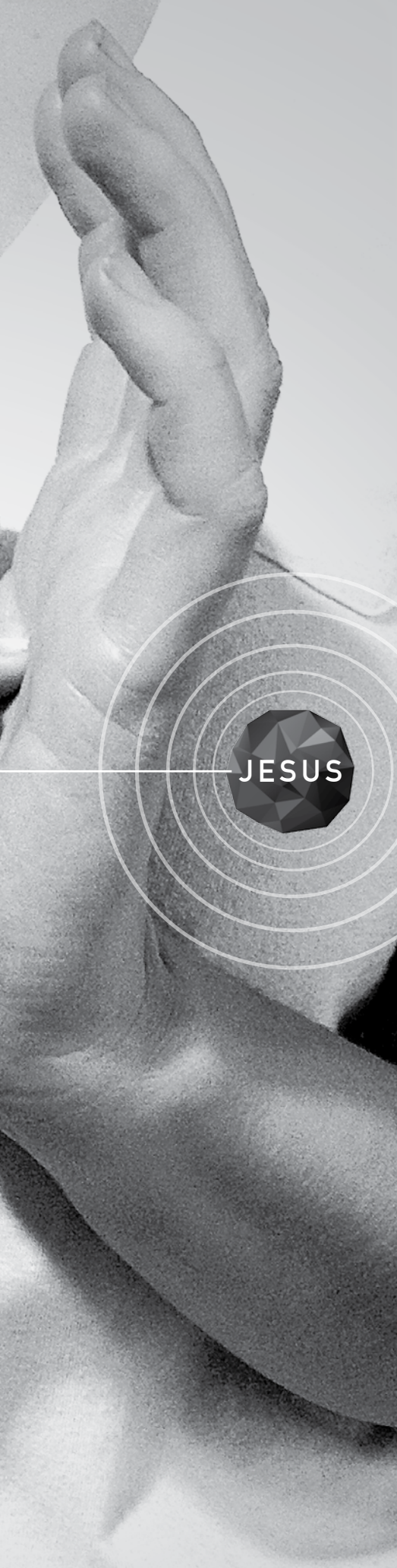


CHAD ENTINGER

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I often tell people that there are advantages to being Deaf. With my hearing aid, I have “selective hearing.” I can turn my hearing aid on, but I can turn it off, too! How well do you think I sleep at night? Great! I take my hearing aid off so I don’t hear anything when I sleep. And Deaf people have an advantage with sign language—we can talk about other people and they don’t know it!

While there are advantages to being Deaf, the sad reality is that many Deaf people do not know they have a tremendous disadvantage—they do not know Jesus as their Lord and personal Savior. It has been reported that out of an estimated 250 to 300 million Deaf people in the world, only 2% of them are Christians. That means 98% of Deaf people will miss out on the blessing of eternal life with Jesus in heaven. Deaf people are among the largest unreached people groups in the world.

You may be wondering, “Why is it that so many Deaf people do not know Jesus?” Here’s a story that may help you understand, and within this story you will see some of the obstacles to Deaf people learning about Jesus.

Years ago, I witnessed to a Deaf man, Chuck*, who was not a Christian. While visiting with Chuck, he shared that his parents always brought him to church, but he never understood what was going on. Apparently, he did not have an interpreter and no one in the church communicated with him in sign language. His impression from the church, while growing up, was that the preacher’s main job was to make money from church. Why did he think this way? All he saw, and clearly understood, was the offering plate going around and people putting their money in there. Then, the offering plate would be given to the preacher in front of the congregation and he had a big smile on his face as he talked. He was probably praying for God’s blessing upon the offering, but the Deaf man did not understand this, as he couldn’t hear. Because of his negative experiences growing up in the church, he wanted nothing to do with Jesus and his church.

This is an all too common experience for Deaf people. Deaf people are often abandoned, neglected and isolated, even within the church. Outside of the church they experience the same in their families and work places. In some countries where there is a lack of social and government services, parents abandon their Deaf children because they don’t know what to do and where to go for help. Some parents also see Deafness as a curse to get rid of. This explains why there are many Deaf orphans. Deaf people are often looked down upon, too. In many countries, Deaf people do not have equal rights. For example, in some countries Deaf people are not allowed to drive. When I was in the Philippines years ago, I could only drive if I had a hearing person in the passenger seat.

Nine out of ten Deaf children are born to hearing parents. In the United States of America, only 23% of parents with Deaf children learn to communicate through sign language. The percentage is probably much less in many other

countries. Family, friends and churches often do not learn sign language skillfully enough to clearly communicate God's Word to Deaf people. Again, like Chuck, many Deaf people have felt isolated within their own families and churches. We need a better way to reach the Deaf.

I have shared another challenge in reaching Deaf people in my personal narrative in *Deaf Diaspora* by Bob Ayres. The Deaf community is a scattered population. Deaf people are not concentrated in one specific geographic area; they are scattered and live all over the world. I have asked hearing children to name different countries around the world. Answers have included China, Austria, Afghanistan and Russia, among others. I remember one four-year-old boy answered, 'Texas!' (Yes, Texas isn't a country, but it sure is big enough to be its own country!) My point in asking children to name different countries is that Deaf people live in each of these countries. Hence ministry to this scattered population is extremely difficult. It would not be like having a Chinese ministry and going to China to reach Chinese people.

Exacerbating the challenge is that spoken and written languages, such as English, are often a second language for Deaf people. Therefore they find it difficult to read and understand the Bible in spoken and written languages used by a majority of churches. Deaf people want, and need, God's Word in a language that they can see and understand, in their first and heart language—sign language.

A desire to overcome the challenges outlined above is why there are churches, ministry organizations and people active in ministering among Deaf people. God is on the move, working through many to overcome these communication, language and geographic barriers to bring Deaf people to him.

THE ULTIMATE GOAL: THE DEAF REACHING THE DEAF

All of us have the God-given opportunity and blessing of making disciples who disciple others. Jesus said in Matthew 28:19, "Therefore go and make disciples of all nations..." We see this come to fruition in the Book of Acts when his disciples made disciples who made disciples. God's kingdom multiplied.

With the Deaf being a widely dispersed unreached people group, traditional mission approaches do not work best. As is the case with any other unreached people group, the Deaf are uniquely gifted to evangelize and disciple their own people. One of the best approaches is the development of movements of "disciples reproducing



THE BIBLE, GOD'S WORD AND ETERNAL LIFE-SAVING GOSPEL MESSAGE, IN SIGN LANGUAGE, IS THE GREATEST RESOURCE FOR DEAF DISCIPLES WHO EVANGELIZE AND DISCIPLE OTHERS. DEAF PEOPLE ALSO NEED TO BE TRAINED ON HOW TO UTILIZE THESE TYPES OF RESOURCES.

CHURCH

disciples" led by Deaf people among the Deaf around the world. Hearing people can be catalysts and supporters in making this happen, as we need both Deaf and hearing people working together to reach Deaf people.

It has been estimated that there are 400 to 500 different sign languages around the world. The Bible has not been translated into most of these sign languages. There is a huge and critical need for more Deaf people to get involved in this kind of work so that one of Deaf people's barriers—language access—can be removed. The Bible, God's Word and eternal life-saving gospel message, in sign language, is the greatest resource for Deaf disciples who evangelize and disciple others.

Deaf people also need to be trained on how to utilize these types of resources. That's why there are discipleship-training programs specifically for Deaf people, including the Deaf Missions Training Center. Through this training program, Deaf people are being trained and equipped with the Bible in American Sign Language, among other resources, to become more effective in evangelizing and reproducing Deaf disciples who will then disciple others, too. Students are being mentored and taught by Deaf instructors. They are seeing firsthand how Deaf and hearing people work together in a ministry environment. Rancho Sordo Mudo in Mexico has a disciple-training program, too, where Deaf Mexicans are being trained so they can go out and effectively disciple Deaf people

throughout Mexico. Deaf Opportunity OutReach (DOOR) is doing the same in Africa and India.

Deaf and hearing people can support this kind of movement by praying faithfully, getting Deaf people involved in Bible translation work, sending Deaf people to these unique training

experiences and with financial gifts.

BRING THEM TO JESUS

The Gospel writer, Mark, tells the story of Jesus healing a Deaf man in Mark 7:31-35 (NIV).

Then Jesus left the vicinity of Tyre and went through Sidon, down to the Sea of Galilee and into the region of the Decapolis. There some people brought to him a man who was Deaf and could hardly talk, and they begged Jesus to place his hand on him.

After he took him aside, away from the crowd, Jesus put his fingers into the man's ears. Then he spit and touched the man's tongue. He looked up to heaven and with a deep sigh said to him, "Ephphatha!" (which means "Be opened!"). At this, the man's ears were opened, his tongue was loosened and he began to speak plainly.

What does this passage teach us? This passage teaches us to bring Deaf people to Jesus! There is a particular phrase in this passage that stands out to me. It's in verse 32, "There some people brought to him [Jesus] a man who was Deaf and could hardly talk..." There some people brought to Jesus a man who was Deaf. It doesn't matter who these unnamed, unsung missionaries were, what truly matters is what they did. They brought the Deaf man to Jesus. I personally believe that when Jesus said, "Ephphatha!" (which means "Be opened!"), the man was not only physically healed, he was spiritually healed. He had met Jesus and now knew him.

SO, HOW DO WE BRING DEAF PEOPLE TO JESUS?

First, *communicate* with Deaf people. As mentioned above, Deaf people are a scattered people group and we do not all live in one geographic location. So, you might meet a Deaf person that those of us involved in Deaf ministry

may never meet. You might meet a Deaf person where you work, or perhaps your friend's brother is Deaf. Maybe a neighbor down the street is Deaf, or could it be someone you'll come across at a restaurant. This Deaf person may not know Jesus. I want to encourage and challenge you to step out of your comfort zone and find ways to communicate. Be creative. You could try using whatever sign language you know. Write back and forth using paper and pen or type back and forth on your laptop or phone. Or use gestures. When you communicate with Deaf people, be genuine and sincere. Don't show pity but approach with a loving and respectful attitude. Spend time with them and build relationships. As the Holy Spirit leads, share the gospel of Jesus with them.

Second, *connect* the Deaf people you meet with churches and ministries serving Deaf people. Look for a church in your area that ministers among Deaf people, whether a Deaf church or church with a Deaf ministry. Some Deaf ministry organizations, including Deaf Missions, offer resources especially for Deaf people and their families. On Deaf Missions website (www.Deafmissions.com) there are online videos available for Deaf people to view. These videos include sermons and daily devotions for Deaf people of all ages and Bible stories for Deaf children in sign language (some have voice-overs/subtitles). Deaf Video Communications' website (www.Deafvideo.com) offers hundreds of online Bible videos in sign language, too.

Various organizations and people are working faithfully and diligently to translate the Bible into the native languages of Deaf people throughout the world. In the United States, Deaf Missions has been translating the Bible from the original Hebrew and Greek texts into American Sign Language (ASL). Since this work began in the early 1980s, the entire New Testament and portions of the Old Testament have been completed and are now available to Deaf people in ASL, their first and preferred language. Through the partnership of Deaf Missions and Deaf Bible Ministry and rapid advances of technology, people can now download this version (ASLV) of the Bible onto their iPhones, iPads and Androids. Since this was made possible in November, 2012, more than 100,000 people have downloaded the ASLV onto their portable media devices!

Different ministries, including Deaf Missions, Silent Blessings, Deaf Opportunity OutReach (DOOR) and DeafTeen Quest (DTQ), conduct programs and conferences to train and equip Deaf and hearing people to become more effective in Deaf ministry. Furthermore, many sponsor camps and mission trips reaching out to Deaf people throughout the world.

GOSPEL




Third, *contribute* to churches and ministry organizations serving Deaf people with your prayers and finances. Like gasoline for an automobile, God can use your prayers and finances to enable those of us working on the front-line of Deaf ministry to become more effective in bringing Deaf people to Jesus and discipling them.

You might meet one Deaf person in your lifetime. Jesus talked about the importance of one in Luke 15. This entire chapter shares three of Jesus' parables that all have the same theme—the shepherd who found his lost sheep, the woman who found her lost coin and the father whose lost son came back home—all rejoiced over one!

One time I had the tremendous joy and honor of sharing Jesus with a Deaf woman, Katie*. She shared that she had read the Bible in English but was frustrated because she had a hard time understanding God's Word. Furthermore, she recounted her negative experiences of growing up in the church. Her parents had taken her to church every Sunday morning. But similar to Chuck, she didn't get much out of the church. People there did not know sign language skillfully enough to communicate God's Word to her. She felt lonely and isolated.

After listening to her story of growing up in the church, I knew right there and then that she needed God's Word in her first and native language, American Sign Language. She was shown different verses from Deaf Missions' ASLV Bible on a television screen. Her eyes literally lit up as she watched the verses that communicated God's plan of salvation. The Word of God "spoke" clearly to her in her heart language, a language she could understand. As a result, she committed her life to Jesus, repented and was baptized in Christ.

Katie now has an advantage—through the Word of God in her native language she can now look forward to eternity in heaven with Jesus. There are millions out there with a terrible disadvantage. What will we do to reach them? 

*Names changed intentionally.