

## The Deaf and Christianity

Written by K B Napier

Tuesday, 24 February 2015 20:06

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Many people, when they meet someone who is deaf, will wave their hands about and shout, very slowly. Just like when the English go overseas - after all, it is the *privilege* of 'foreigners' to speak English! And it is every Englishman's right to be understood, even if it means shouting (in English) very slowly.

Unfortunately, many people think this is the way to speak to the deaf. We tend to forget all about them because they cannot hear, or they hear very poorly. But, when we try to speak to them, we treat them like those hapless 'foreigners' we meet on holiday (forgetting that it is we who are foreign!).

Those with temporary, observable, physical ailments get much sympathy. But, those who have chronic conditions are treated shabbily. No-one is interested in long-standing problems, because they require long-standing attention. This applies to many conditions, including deafness. It *particularly* applies to deafness because we cannot see it. But the deaf do not want sympathy - they just want a little understanding.

### **A Christian deaf person wrote the following to a magazine:**

*"A lot of us use sign-language. It is not a 'word-for-word' interpretation of your verbal language. One sign can express a whole phrase or idea.*

*We'll be very happy to teach you.*

*Please use your faces to express what you feel. If you are pleased to see us, start with a smile!*

*Oh, if you could, please do not shout. Those of us who are totally deaf will not hear anyway, and those of us who use a hearing aid will just hear a horrible noise.*

*Most of us find it easier to talk to one hearing friend at a time and would venture to suggest that you may find it easier to talk to one deaf person at a time.*

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*If you would like ideas to help deaf and hearing people worship together, or information on loop systems in churches, then contact:*

*Don Mason, Berks, UK"*

### **Other hints include:**

Look directly at the deaf person. Use your face and body to express things. Stand where the light is on your face so that lip-reading is made easier. Remember that if you have a moustache or beard, the deaf cannot 'read' hidden lips! So, if you are likely to meet with deaf people regularly, trim that hair!! Don't put your hand in front of your face, or any other distraction. If the deaf person does not understand something, then patiently say it again, but use different words: for the deaf, learning words can be a very long and complicated process. Just to learn *basic* words can take a very long time. Thus, many deaf Christians only have a fundamental grasp of language.

Don't shout or make exaggerated lip movements. Whenever you can, use an overhead projector as part of your church services, and do not stand immediately behind a microphone, or anything else that can block your face; and lift up your head when praying, otherwise even the lip-reader will wonder what is going on!

One Sunday I switched on the television to watch the morning service. I did not know it was a service for the deaf, because the preacher spoke normally. Then the visiting choir was introduced and the organ began to play. I was mystified because the choir didn't make a sound! Then I saw they were using sign language! My amazement doubled when I saw different sections '*harmonizing*'! I could not believe it, but there they were, twenty deaf Christians singing in silence. The choir came from a totally deaf church. How strange the hearing Christian would find such a place - total silence except for the moving of a chair.

Then I started thinking... that this totally silent church could be more alive and more spiritually vibrant than any hearing church! True communication takes place when two people understand each other, and deaf people commune happily and directly with God. No problem there, for God immediately understands what the silent speech means. He can hear those silent prayers and He reads those quiet hearts. What is silence to us, is a 'joyful noise to the Lord'!

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As a writer I have had to learn how to rewrite articles meant for the deaf. It is a fallacy that deaf people are not intelligent. Our former director for the deaf, Ian Funnell, is totally deaf but he works as a highly qualified draughtsman in the aerospace industry. He is also able to read most literature, only requiring explanations of new words now and then. Whenever possible, I have to use simpler words for deaf readers. Ian may understand, but many deaf people do not, because of their limited ability to learn words quickly enough. And have you thought how difficult it is for deaf people to understand *concepts*? Concepts usually require manipulation of words and ideas. If one has a very limited vocabulary, then the ability to understand concepts is very much reduced.

If you preach, or teach, the Bible, can you communicate the concept of, say, the Trinity, to a deaf Christian, using very simple words? What about 'salvation'? Or, 'election'? It takes great patience. In articles for the deaf, we have to provide pronunciations for some words. Sometimes this can be hard, because certain sounds are not easy to show in letter form. An example of this difficulty is the following sentence: "*Jesus Christ is alive today*".

If we were to write the pronunciation for this entire sentence, it *could* be put thus: "Jee-zus Kr-eye'st iz al-eye'v too-day". Of course, in most cases only a

*few*

words require such painstaking work, but the above sentence will suffice as an example. Bear in mind, also, that when providing these phonetic equivalents, we must remember to be consistent in their definitions. We must also provide examples of the sounds in other words known to the deaf. With certain words or letters, we may have to provide

*similar*

sounds, that do not exactly match the

*actual*

sound (if one exists at all). For example, how would

*you*

show how to pronounce the letters 'th'? At times we cannot find an exact sound to match, so the

*nearest*

sound must be used.

What we are saying is this: be patient when talking with a deaf person. He already has to struggle with words, so don't make it harder for him. Use simple language if you are not sure about his level of understanding, but don't treat him like a moron! This is certainly a challenge, but do not shirk it; Jesus Christ saves the deaf as well as the hearing. Many ecumenical and cult groups are now trying to entice the deaf, by learning and using sign-language. True

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Christians must be vigilant on behalf of the deaf...we must not let them down!

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