Ministering to the Deaf

About one in every one thousand children born today is deaf. Hearing loss due to disease, injury or age increases the prevalence of deafness in successively higher age groups until in the range over sixty-five about twenty-five per cent of the population has marked hearing impairment. Any large city will have a deaf community which would represent no small parish but which is often ineffectively ministered to and may be largely untouched by the gospel message. Good ministers for the deaf are desperately needed.

A ministry to the deaf has many characteristics of any other ministry, yet is decidedly different.

The ministry to the deaf is a preaching ministry. The pastor is challenged by the necessity of presenting a message which is clearly and simply constructed and vividly illustrated. In many cases he finds it necessary to preach in two languages at once: in the language of signs for those who do not speech-read, and orally for those who do. Since the deaf congregation will include many levels of communication ability, educational achievement, and spiritual maturity, it is imperative that the proclamation be accompanied, in some way, by dialogue that will make the preacher aware of the points at which he failed to communicate and give him opportunity to clarify, if possible, anything that remains in question.

Non-Christian Religions

Scholastic theologians customarily begin with a doctrine of God and go on finally to a doctrine of the Holy Spirit and the church. Existential theologians begin with the human situation, man's sense of estrangement, the tensions in which we live, the human predicament, as Paul Tillich called it. Such theologians rarely deal with the problem of the existence of God, since they feel it is a question which should not even be asked.

A third option begins with a concept of the church as the living, toiling, suffering body of Christ in the world and the bearer of God's good news in Christ to the world. This approach dictates that Christian faith be communicated in words and deeds to men of other faiths, particularly in language which these men can understand.

Christian theology which begins with such a concept learns that the life of the Christian community is important and is patterned after Jesus of Nazareth. Men of other faiths witness the "deeds" and hear about him through words. Those who come to regard Jesus with great respect proceed to a knowledge of themselves on the one hand and to a knowledge of God on the other. Christians are unable expertly to communicate the gospel to men of other faiths by trying to create an awareness of sin. How can a man who is a sinner discover his sin when it is his sin which tells him he is not a sinner? By the same token, men of other faiths
The ministry to the deaf is a teaching ministry. The pastor makes it his business to organize and teach classes for Bible study in which some people may come to know Christ for the first time and in which all who participate may grow in Christian maturity.

The ministry to the deaf is largely a ministry of counselling. The most effective evangelism is done in personal, spiritual counselling. Deaf people have few to whom they can go with the everyday problems of life confronted at home and on the job. Serious emotional problems can develop when there is no one with whom to talk. But deaf people are not the only counselling subjects of the pastor of the deaf. He is also concerned with the deaf person’s non-deaf family, friends, teachers, and minister, seeking to interpret for them the needs of the deaf individual and their responsibilities to him, trying to resolve any tensions that arise through the failure of communication.

Good ministers for the deaf are needed. They must have: (1) a humble willingness to work with the few rather than the many, (2) a sympathetic and loving concern for people as individuals, (3) great patience, (4) an aptitude for language and a pair of flexible hands, (5) a knowledge of the principles of education and an aptness to teach.

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may have to relinquish whatever concepts they once had of God before they can accept with Paul, "... it is ... God who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ" (II Cor. 4:5-6).

An area of creative challenge is open to theologians who would endeavor to dialogue with men of other religions. This means theological schools will have to prepare specialists not only in Christian theology but in the theologies of other religions as well. Such specialists must know as much or more about Hinduism as those who are themselves expert Hindus. The same is true of Islam, Buddhism, or any other faith.

This kind of Christian theologian, in other words, must build bridges. In addition, he must seek an invitation to cross the bridge he himself builds to converse with a person of another faith. As a Christian, he must make Christ known from within the other man’s faith, because this is the only area of thought and allegiance that man knows. Further, the Christian must return the invitation of his host so that the latter becomes the Christian’s guest, walks across the bridge the Christian has built to the Christian community to experience there the kind of life and worship which loyalty and obedience to Jesus Christ demands.

This is how the early church acted. The early Christians did evangelism in the Greek, Roman, and Jewish marketplace. They borrowed and transformed words whenever it suited their purpose. Jesus became Lord (Kurios) to the Roman, the (Continued on next page)