

# Towards a Transformational Theology of Deaf Sportspersons

ANTHONY MARANISE  
Christian Brothers University

## Abstract

This paper examines deafness not as a disability, as it is often misconstrued, but rather as a trait around which a unique culture has developed and flourished. Within any culture, common elements which solidify the bonds uniting its members include a common language, set of values, and even particular interests. The popular cultural phenomenon of sports has not escaped the interest of members of the d/Deaf community and instead serves as both an element of entertainment as well as a valuable vehicle for socialization and the transmission of values. While there are literature bases pertaining to d/Deaf culture, d/Deaf sports, and even d/Deaf theology from a Judeo-Christian perspective, little to no academic literature exists which explores the intersections of sports, spirituality, and religion for d/Deaf sportspersons. In this paper, after providing an overview of d/Deaf theological views in general, I propose a transformational theology for members of the d/Deaf community who are also sports participants and/or enthusiasts. Virtually absent from Christian d/Deaf ministries or inclusivity efforts is any form of evangelical sports ministry similar to the primarily hearing Fellowship of Christian Athletes (FCA). Therefore, I emphasize the need for expanded ministerial, liturgical, and academic research and application within this sorely neglected demographic.

**Keywords:** *deafness, inclusivity, socialization, sports, theology*

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**Anthony Maranise, OBlSB** is with the Master of Arts in Catholic Studies cohort affiliated with the Department of Religion and Philosophy at Christian Brothers University and a Certified Sports LifeCoach through the International Sports Professionals Association. He is the author of *Sport & the Spiritual Life: The Integration of Playing & Praying* (Order of Saint Benedict, 2013). [amaranis@cbu.edu](mailto:amaranis@cbu.edu)

## A Note Before Reading

The author of this essay is not a member of the Deaf<sup>1</sup> community. Please forgive any faux-pas or indiscretions, with the understanding that they were not intended with any ill-will or purposive ignorance. The primary aim of this work is an effort in religious studies; however, the author warmly welcomes—particularly from the Deaf community or Deaf studies scholars—correction of any errors which would aid in improving the precision of this essay.

## Introduction

Christian theology is nothing if not adaptable. Throughout its intellectual and practical history, various demographic groups have situated their hopes, dreams, struggles for understanding or acceptance and, certainly, their faith in the scripturally-based and often systematically constructed message of Jesus Christ. Frequently seeking to “give voice” to a collective experience of injustice, isolation, or marginalization within their specific demographic group, the faithful look to Christ’s examples of care and concern for the weak, downtrodden, and poor (either in wealth or in spirit)—finding within his example a means not simply of “dealing with” or “accepting the fate” of their situations, but rather of triumphantly overcoming their plights just as Christ did the two greatest barriers of all: sin and death. Further, members of the faithful who apply their struggle to be freed, or “liberated,” from their marginalization generally choose not to identify so much with the person of Christ himself, but rather the persons to whom Christ shows mercy in his interactions with them. In this way, the marginalized view themselves not as Christ the Redeemer, but as a reflection, indeed, a transformed image through whom Christ the Redeemed might be seen and encountered in this life. In this essay, I will focus on a specific and oft-neglected demographic of persons—the deaf—within the even more specific context of those among the deaf community who are involved in sports, particularly as participants. To date, little to no literature or research exists which addresses or considers the unique spiritual perspectives of deaf sportspersons. The aim of this paper, then, is to lay a foundation for a theology for deaf sportspersons in the hopes that what is written here will serve as a catalyst to add to a very thin literature base.

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1. Following standard usage in the literature, I adopt the convention of using a lower-case ‘d’ when the impairment of deafness itself and/or persons who are physically deaf (regardless of how they think of or identify themselves) is being referred to, and an upper-case ‘D’ to refer to those who explicitly identify themselves as members of the “Deaf community.” When both groups are in view, the locution ‘d/Deaf’ is used.

## Deafness in Brief

### Disability or Cultural Difference

At the outset of any discussion on deafness, we must confront the question: *Is deafness a disability or not?* According to a position statement on cochlear implant use released by the National Association of the Deaf (NAD) in 2000, “Many within the medical profession continue to view deafness essentially as a disability and an abnormality and believe that deaf and hard-of-hearing individuals need to be ‘fixed’” (paragraph 7). The use of the term “fixed” (along with its quotation marks) indicates an aversion to such a term because of the consequences which would likely proceed from following the meaning of “fixed” to its logical end. Of these ends, there are two: (1) if something is in need of “fixing,” it is because it is broken; and (2) inanimate, un-ensouled objects are described as “broken” and in need of “fixing.” To label a human person as “broken”—perhaps outside of the spiritual sense (especially in Judeo-Christian colloquialisms referring to human sinfulness)—because of one’s differing physical abilities is a clear example of stigmatization and leads to profound marginalization in almost all cases. It seems clear, based on the NAD’s statement, that the Deaf community prefers not to be counted among those who may be categorized as having a disability, but rather “consider deafness as a trait, not a disability” (Jones 2002, 51). Despite the NAD’s statement, stigmatization and marginalization of deaf persons persists in a society which views normalcy through the lens of the simultaneous and uninhibited use of all five senses. Aware of their marginalization, deaf persons, like so many other demographic groups throughout history (e.g., African-Americans with a history of enslaved family members, Latino/a-American immigrants, etc.) began to seek normalcy apart from common societal standards, emphasizing that “an individual who cannot hear is potentially a member of a rich cultural heritage that separates the individual from any non-Deaf members of their family or community” (ibid.).<sup>2</sup> In their book *Deaf in America: Voices from a Culture*, Carol Padden and Tom Humphries (1988)—both of whom are members of the Deaf community themselves—offer a definition of what comprises a culture. They note that culture is “a set of learned behaviors of a group of people who have their own language, values, rules for behaviors, and traditions” (1988, 4). As with all cultures, the transmission of values, rules, behaviors, and traditions is not possible without a concrete

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2. Perhaps most clearly, this was illustrated in the “Deaf President Now” (DPN) movement at Gallaudet University in March of 1988.

system of communication. In the Deaf community, this system of communication—their language—is known as “sign language.”

Having considered deafness in terms of its distinct cultural elements to this point, let us look now more specifically at the ways in which religious belief informs the worldview and actions of those within the Deaf community, bearing in mind that religious beliefs and the practices associated with those beliefs are part of what comprises and solidifies a culture.

## Theological Implications and Deafness

Any effort to construct a meaningful theology must necessarily include “our being, our relationships, and our practices, for these three constitute our humanity” (Holt 2005, 22). From the Judeo-Christian perspective, neither being nor relationship nor practices of any sort emanate *ex nihilo*, but instead have as their entire source and substance an essential Truth found within the sacred scriptures of both the Old and New Testaments of the Bible. It cannot be too farfetched to infer that among the Deaf community in North America, a significant number of persons are situated within the Judeo-Christian religious tradition, especially given the statistics which show that 70.6% of the North American population identifies as Christian (cf. Pew Research Center 2016). There is, however, a problem. As of 2010 “over ninety percent of deaf children are born into hearing families, yet most of these families never learn enough ASL to talk and teach about matters of faith” (Weber 2010). Add to that alarming statistic yet one more which states that “only one percent of American deaf children will attend church as adults” and “[l]ess than seven percent will ever have the gospel presented in a way that is accessible to them” (Weber 2010). Further corroborating this statistic, Dr. Gregory Ernst, Executive Director of St. Rita’s School for the Deaf, a private Catholic-Christian school in Ohio which instructs d/Deaf and hearing-impaired children from kindergarten to high school ages, says, “In my opinion, the Church has not made accessibility for the Deaf to attend services a priority. That said, a Deaf child isn’t going to sit through a service that means nothing to him/her.”<sup>3</sup> He also adds that “the majority of parents with Deaf children do not communicate well enough with their children to discuss religion.”<sup>4</sup> While church attendance is not necessary for one to cultivate a rich spiritual life, it is, for most (including those outside

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3. E-mail interview with author, May 5, 2016.

4. Ibid.

the Deaf community) the primary source by which the guiding principles of Christian theology—as contained in the scriptures—is transmitted. This reality leads to the next cause for concern as it pertains to Christian theological implications for deaf persons: *improper scriptural context*.

### **The Role of Scripture in Deaf Theology**

Although a rather trite statistic, the Bible continues to be one of the best-selling books throughout the world, and it has been practically since the advent of the printing press when it could be distributed *en masse*. Part of the reason for its long-enduring success is undoubtedly the fact that the faithful view it not simply as an authoritative moral guide, the inerrant word of God, or even a “good read” from cover to cover, but rather because within its pages they find answers to both collective and personal struggles encountered in their lives. The vast majority of Christian denominations, and thus Christians themselves, believe the scriptures to be authoritative—which can pose a problem of insensitivity to its d/Deaf readers. Because the d/Deaf characters in the scriptures are apparently shown to be lacking in some way by virtue of their inability to hear, this seems to create a need for them to be “fixed.” A portrayal of this kind can be and often is offensive to d/Deaf persons. For this reason, proper scriptural interpretation is paramount. Because “the Bible is not simply one book, but a whole library... it must be interpreted with care, considering the purpose of the writer and the cultural situation in which it was written” (Holt 2005, 35). Here, I would like to examine three passages from the Gospels which may be particularly difficult for deaf persons, not so much in terms of comprehension, but in terms of faith development (or lack thereof), and offer interpretations of those passages which may well be viewed more warmly and optimistically by deaf readers.

### **Metaphorical Problems with “Ears for Hearing”**

In both Matthew 11:15 and Mark 4:9, Jesus, speaking to his apostles, says, “Whoever has ears ought to hear” (NABRE).<sup>5</sup> On the surface, due to the fact that “the Bible emerges out of hearing people’s experiences and makes use of hearing language and images for God” (Morris 2008, Ch. 5, para. 4), this passage among others “does not say much that is affirming of Deaf people nor does it portray Deaf characters in a very positive way” (ibid.). Even if this passage is interpreted properly for the d/Deaf reader, making clear that

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5. All scripture quotations in this paper are from the New American Bible Revised Edition (NABRE), published by Fireside Catholic Publishing.

Jesus' statement is a metaphor which implies that *all* persons should receive his message because *all* people have ears, special care should still be taken to ensure that d/Deaf readers understand that their impairment is not at the crux of the metaphor. For example, the overwhelming majority of deaf persons "has ears," as the scripture literally says. However, the problem becomes two-fold when taking these verses literally from the d/Deaf perspective. In the first place, the deaf may be perplexed as to why God (incarnate in Jesus Christ) would alienate them from himself, because the deaf reader does, in fact, have ears but cannot hear. Secondly, if God is saying they ought to hear, but they cannot, does this indicate a limit to God's omnipotence? In both cases, it seems that "the Bible is alienating and exclusive of the deaf, in terms of the theology, language, and imagery it contains" (Morris 2008, Ch. 5, para 6). Thus, the importance of establishing not only a proper interpretive contextual lens, but also of developing a more effective liturgy and ministry to deaf persons of faith, an issue which will be treated in greater depth later in this section. In addition to feeling isolated or marginalized in terms of *being* deaf in a hearing world, there is likely also the concern of a chasm between *relating* to an incarnate God in Jesus who was, by all scriptural accounts, a hearing person. Deaf persons may well question whether or not Jesus can "sign," given that the scriptures portray him as a hearing person. However, scripture indicates that Jesus could see as well, and because seeing and witnessing sign is the means of communication and the transmission of meaning for d/Deaf persons, it can be reasonably inferred that Jesus may, in fact, also be able to "sign." Allow me now to offer a counter-interpretation of this verse, one that takes a step towards a more inclusive reading of this scripture.

### **Miracles as Communicative Signs**

Jesus was not an oppressive figure. Thus, when Jesus said "whoever has ears ought to hear," he was speaking within a context—that of his own experience at the time; in no way was he deliberately trying to alienate anyone from his redemptive work. The fact that Jesus was a hearing person was merely one manifestation of his physical incarnation, so when Jesus speaks of "hearing," he means making one's self receptive to his redeeming, salvific, and compassionate "mission of mercy" which is most profoundly fulfilled not within the physical body, but within the soul. Relating to Jesus as a deaf person must necessarily be accomplished interiorly, but because we are all embodied persons, our interior disposition must be acted upon within the body. Critical to this relationship for deaf persons is the ability to communicate in sign,

which recalls the earlier question: *Can Jesus sign?* I would submit: “Yes! —and he does so repeatedly in his miracles.” The non-synoptic gospel writer, John, even “refers to Jesus’ supernatural workings as ‘signs’” (Maranise 2014, 4). Here, the objection might be raised that Jesus’ “signs” were merely gestures and that, though miraculous, they were, to deaf persons, superficial at best since they did not indicate a “more profound teaching in a language [deaf persons] can understand” (Lewis 2007, Ch. 7, Para. 25). However, Jesus’ real transformative power lies not in profound teaching, but in his simplicity. To expect Jesus to have been able to “sign” as we know it today would be to project our understanding of a much more modern and complex systematic language form, which developed at a much later time, back onto a time and place in which it simply did not yet exist. A truly liberating view of this passage for deaf persons rests in understanding that “not only did Jesus want to be in communication [on any level possible] with Deaf people, He could communicate with them” (Lewis 2007, Ch. 7, Para. 17), and he did so not primitively but in miraculous sign.

### **Interaction with the Deaf-Mute**

Perhaps the most famous example of Jesus’ miraculous “signing” is his direct interaction with the deaf man in Mark 7:31-35. In this passage, Jesus is traveling from Tyre to the Sea of Galilee. Along the way, townspersons intercept him and bring to him a man who is both deaf and has a speech impediment. Interestingly enough, many Christians are quick to call the man healed by Jesus in this narrative a “deaf-mute,” that is, one who both does not hear and who cannot speak at all. The scriptures, however, make no mention of the man being mute, or unable to utter sounds; simply, they state that he has a speech impediment. According to Meyer’s Biblical Commentary and Concordance, the root Greek of the word “mute” found in verse 32 is actually *μογιλάλος*, which means “to speak with difficulty” (100). This might seem insignificant on the surface, but the widespread misconception regarding his abilities both reflects and implies a larger social stigma regarding d/Deaf persons—namely, that if they cannot hear, then they cannot properly form words to speak or even utter intelligible sounds. Here, it is noted in the examination of the Greek text and its translation that this man could, in fact, speak, but may not have been able to do so clearly.

When the townspersons bring the deaf man to Jesus, he doesn’t work any miraculous “signs” in front of the crowds, but instead leads the deaf man away from the crowd where they can be alone. This is of enormous significance in advancing a liberating and transformational theology of d/

Deaf persons. After bringing the man to an isolated place, Jesus places his fingers in the man's ears and on his tongue. He then pauses briefly to pray, and with eyes raised to heaven, says, "*Ephphatha*," which means "be opened." Jesus does not say that the man then became a hearing person or even that he could hear (though the crowds do, in v. 37). Though many will argue that this is a foregone conclusion or that it is implied, the scripture merely reads: "And [immediately] the man's ears were opened..." (Mark 7:35, NABRE). This also is significant. But why?

Recall the first point of significance from this passage: Jesus leading the deaf man away from the crowds. This is a liberating experience because among the ordinary crowds of the time, in a region dominated by primarily Jewish adherents, many would have viewed the man's deafness as a sign of uncleanness or sin and thus would have ostracized, even derided, him. But not Jesus! Abounding with mercy, compassion, and human sensitivity, Jesus "identifies with the deaf man, who must have felt excluded... ignored by the crowd and unable to access the teachings" (Lewis 2007, Ch. 7, Para. 33) and removes the man—literally—from his marginalization into the realm of personal transformation. No longer is the man the butt of cruel jokes from passersby or a "sideshow spectacle." In this moment, the man comes face-to-face with God incarnate. This moment is not only touching, but also evidences Jesus' ability to reach d/Deaf persons in a way that is both comfortable and accessible to them. Lacking hearing, they rely on sight, sign, and/or touch—all which Jesus does, and not from a passive position, but from an active and deeply personal one. In that same vein, it must be acknowledged that Jesus had always before him his knowledge of his own impending ostracism, derision, and being pushed to the periphery. He does not simply see the deaf man's plight from a distance; he encounters it personally in his own life. Thus, for this deaf man, who "must have given up trying, must have been feeling bad about himself, maybe even sitting alone most days" (ibid.), it is not because of the man's own efforts that Jesus comes to transform him, but rather those of Jesus, who freely "comes over to him [and] takes him aside... as if to say 'I know you can't hear me and can't speak, but it doesn't matter, [because I love you]'" (ibid.).

Earlier in this essay, we learned that d/Deaf persons often feel alienated from relationship with Jesus because Jesus was not himself a d/Deaf person. However, this passage alone illustrates that Jesus is not now, nor has he ever been, distanced from the d/Deaf community. He reaches out to all who seek after him. In fact, the deaf man did not seek Jesus; Jesus instead sought after him. Also of importance here is what is *not* said—namely, the



passage does not explicitly use the language of “cure” regarding the man’s deafness. Instead, it merely states that his ears were “opened” (though, as noted previously, the crowds do describe the event in terms of “cure”; see v. 37). The Deaf community of believers may be encouraged to note the absence of terminology regarding “healing” in this passage, for “healing” indicates a recovery from sickness, illness, injury, or some other deviation from what might otherwise be considered “normal.” Within the d/Deaf community, however, “deafness is not seen as a problem which needs to be eliminated”; instead, “it is the social attitudes towards deafness which are in need of transformation” (Morris 2008, Ch. 5, Para. 13). A further liberating and/or transformational view has been espoused by English (British) d/Deaf theologians, to the effect that “Jesus did not make the Deaf man to hear at all” (Lewis 2007, Ch. 7, Para. 32), but instead when he says “be opened,” this “applies not to his ears and mouth, but to his heart and mind” (ibid.), thereby emphasizing the “universal availability” of the gospel regardless of cultural differences, barriers, or obstacles.

### **The Spirit Made Flesh**

The third scripture passage we will consider here (though these are by no means the only biblical texts of relevance to d/Deaf persons) is from the only non-synoptic Gospel and is found in the Prologue of John. John 1:1 and 1:14 speak about the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ, stating “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God” (NABRE), as well as “[a]nd the Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us...” (NABRE). In the original Greek in which the New Testament was written, “Word” is not fully adequate to convey the depths of meaning in these verses. The Greek word *Λόγος* (pronounced *Logos*) used in John does not precisely translate in English to “Word,” but rather carries a more abstract meaning and is better understood as “reason itself” or “rationality.” The Anglican theologian N.T. Wright argues that the assignment of any human meaning to *Logos* is somewhat of an effort in futility, because ultimately the real meaning of this word is beyond comprehension in any human language (Wright 2006). While this may at first seem alienating to all believers, there is hope in the reality of the Incarnation for our comprehension, because this word beyond human comprehension becomes fully human in the person of Jesus, while ever maintaining the identity and form of the divine God. Precisely because the full divinity of God deigned to become human “and made his dwelling among us” (John 1:14), human persons have an *embodied access* to that which was once beyond all human comprehension.

While d/Deaf persons may initially find John's Prologue off-putting—given its translated usage of “Word,” which indicates both hearing and speaking abilities, taken together with the fact that “in the Deaf world, communication begins with seeing and being seen” (Lewis 2007, Ch. 7, Para. 17)—this passage and the hope it conveys becomes much more hospitable when reflecting on the fact that God, through his own free choice, became human in Jesus. In the Incarnation, “the abstract conceptual speech or word of God, in the person of Jesus, is understood as a physical reality that can be seen and touched” (Morris 2008, Ch. 5, Para. 20). Though the Greek Λόγος is translated in the scriptures as “Word,” it is ultimately the *word* which matters least, precisely because God chooses not to remain merely as “Word” or even as “reason,” but rather takes on our human form and thus is able to be seen, touched, and perceptibly sensed outside of the abstract. Undoubtedly, in this view, “Deaf people begin to glimpse a more accessible picture of God,” who “does not try to escape the body, but instead chooses to become present within it” (Morris 2008, Ch. 5, Para. 21) and among us so that we can both encounter and be ultimately transformed by him.

### **Deaf Ministry and Hearing-by-Encounter**

Transformation is without doubt a goal of ministry, no matter what demographic group is in view. Any efforts towards promoting cultivation of the spiritual lives of human persons and their relationships with Jesus can be marked as failure if stagnation occurs. Though clergy, academics, and lay ministers may be skilled in spiritual formation or guidance, the fact remains that these individuals are mere instruments of a salvific work that is accomplished only by God within the soul of each person who seeks after him. That said, it may prove beneficial for us to assess ministry to the d/Deaf in view of the *paradox of the Kingdom of God*. The paradox can be understood by contemplating these questions: (1) *Is it the d/Deaf who need healing, or do we?* (2) *Who truly hears, and how?* (3) *Is God's kingdom a place where all human differences are dissolved into indistinguishable sameness, or are these differences merely irrelevant?* What makes these questions paradoxical is that each can and, in my opinion, should be answered in a “both-and” fashion. We have already noted earlier in this essay that members of the d/Deaf community do not find themselves in need of healing, so from this perspective, the answer to the first question seems to be that we (those who are not hearing-impaired or culturally Deaf) are in greatest need of healing, but why? The founders of a United Kingdom-based web magazine entitled *Disability and Jesus* offer this poignant insight: “A transformational God turns our disability to

advantage; this is not the same as healing or cure, this is ministering from our brokenness” (Bravinier and Tupling 2015). While some of the language used in this statement may seem insensitive to d/Deaf persons who do not view themselves as disabled, context should dissolve any offense. The operators of this magazine live with emotional disability (depression and anxiety), blindness, and cerebral palsy, respectively. For these individuals, God is the one who liberates them from the marginalization of their respective disabilities by using them in a prophetic sense, that is, as “mouthpieces” seeking to compassionately reorient a society hardened-in-habit toward a systemic favoritism of the majority who are non-disabled. By their mere existence, members of the d/Deaf community embody and make manifest the liberating and transformative theologies advocated by Rosemary Radford Ruether, who argues that “it is not enough to formulate new metaphors for Christ and God that are inclusive; they must also challenge the status quo and enable new ways of thinking” (Ruether 2004, 14).

Regarding who *truly* hears and how it is possible, we return to the narrative of Jesus’ interaction with the deaf man in Mark’s Gospel, bearing in mind that Jesus knew his own fate as he interacted with those who were marginalized. The *Stabat Mater*, a thirteenth century hymn expressing the emotional sorrows encountered by the virgin Mary as she followed the torture and death of her son Jesus along the way of the cross, is among the medieval period’s best examples of imaginative spirituality in that “different moments of our spiritual lives parallel the experiences” (Holt 2005, 45) of Mary. The seventh stanza reads: “Bruised, derided, cursed, defiled / She beheld her tender child / All with bloody scourges rent” (Ligouri 1956). This solemn chant gives us a heart-wrenching and detailed visual of both the physical pain Jesus endured and the emotional pain experienced by him and his mother. He was beaten, mocked and made fun of mercilessly, insulted, and exposed before a frenzied crowd of onlookers. Utilizing this valuable example of imaginative spirituality, we might be able to place ourselves into the marginalized plight of the deaf persons with whom Jesus interacted in the scriptures. Is it inconceivable to believe that the deaf man Jesus encountered had been kicked and beaten by passersby as he sat outside the city, ostracized by those who thought him unclean or who simply thought him to be dumb, stupid, and/or good-for-nothing? Is it farfetched to assume that he was made fun of by less-than-compassionate persons? Is it not intellectually sound *enough*, if perhaps too emotional, for us to imagine this deaf man being subjected to insults of the cruelest sort? Is it unreasonable to think that the crowds who brought the deaf man to Jesus did so not out of concern for the deaf

man, but to make a spectacle of him? I contend that not only are these valid questions, but that they were likely realities encountered by this man—that is, until Jesus came along.

Jesus, the simultaneously human and divine God-man, recognized himself in this deaf man and saw in his sufferings reflections of what he would ultimately endure on the most horrific level. The deaf man, I argue, could *truly* “hear-by-encounter” the compassionate message of God in the ways he suffered because of his trait. He was a co-sufferer trudging through his own *Via Dolorosa*, who was transformed interiorly by having both seen and touched “the Word made flesh.” So, then, it is the d/Deaf who truly “hear-by-encounter,” and they do so through the ways in which they identify with the One who faced the ultimate marginalization.

Lastly, our questions of ministry to d/Deaf persons concerns whether or not in God’s kingdom we will all be indistinguishably similar or whether it will even matter. This question is perhaps most profound, and once again this is because of its simplicity. Jesus, in his earthly ministry, encountered, interacted with, blessed, and loved the blind, the deaf, the ill, the sinful, the sorrowful, the demon-possessed, the corrupt, and the righteous. He treated no person as if he were superior to them, even though he was. He made the most unlovable persons feel wanted, loved, and necessary. Apparently, in God’s kingdom, we maintain our individuality and our differences—but, it seems clear... it just doesn’t matter.

By way of a sort of appraisal of ministerial attitudes towards d/Deaf persons, I would like to make three recommendations corresponding to the questions just pondered. First, it is in fact *hearing* persons—those in the “majority” population—who stand in greater need of spiritual healing, who have much both to “heal” and “be healed” from. We ought to develop attitudes of inclusivity toward our d/Deaf sisters and brothers, seeking not to heal the very trait that is a fundamental part of their identity and culture, but to heal the wounds of avoidance, stereotyping, and societal ostracism which we have inflicted upon their community. Secondly, we as hearing persons would do well to recognize the unique ways in which d/Deaf persons encourage us by their very lives to avoid singularity in relational experience to Jesus. In other words, there are avenues worth exploring whereby we might cultivate our spiritual lives beyond listening to sermons or reciting prayers. Sermons could, for example, be interactive through our embrace of those who are isolated, lonely, or alienated, and dynamic in that they need not always follow a set ritual, but could instead be ever open to change in liturgical styles, ministerial methods, or academically theological disciplines. Lastly,

and paradoxically, there could be great benefit in embracing our differences because that, after all, is our first and most obvious commonality—the mere fact that we are all different is what unites us. Paul, in his first letter to the Corinthians, exhorted the faithful to remember this valuable advice, writing that “we were all baptized into one body” (12:13), thereby emphasizing our collective unity and oneness in Christ. He explains further that all parts of the body are valuable, and not only in an individual sense—the physical body—but, more importantly, in the sense of the mystical body of Christ, which consists of all believers. He even asks a question rather apropos of our present discussion: “If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be?” (12:17). In applying this question to the mystical body of Christ, if all believers were “hearing” persons, how would we grow as a church, in terms of both the discovery and the exercise of other spiritual talents and gifts?

### **Deaf Theology Meets Deaf Sports: An Untapped Opportunity**

Perhaps more efficiently and emphatically than other faith traditions, Christianity has exercised well its talent and gift for evangelization and spiritual formation by harnessing the power of the sports world. From the entertainment that sports provide to the opportunities for character-building and physical fitness, Christians as early as St. Paul—in the use of his numerous “athletic metaphors” (e.g., Galatians 5:7; Philippians 3:14; 1 Timothy 6:12; 2 Timothy 4:7; and 1 Corinthians 9:24-27)—have utilized examples of participation in sports to express preparation for and engagement with the spiritual life. These metaphors often helped to reveal Paul’s view of the physical body in relation to the spiritual body—two characteristics unopposed to one another, but ever so central in the aforementioned discussion of Deaf theology. For d/Deaf persons, interaction, communication, and relationship depend almost entirely upon embodied and perceptible sense-experiences. Were a d/Deaf athlete new to Christian spirituality or seeking to deepen their faith involvement, Paul’s athletic metaphors might well provide a valuable point of departure because of the universally understandable nature of the metaphors themselves. Each of his athletic metaphors listed above reference physical activities such as running, boxing, or persevering when one is tired. Lack of hearing (or of hearing clearly) does not impede a d/Deaf athlete’s abilities to successfully accomplish those physical activities, and as Paul might argue, neither should their impairment hinder the successful accomplishment of spiritual activities. According to Hopsicker (2015), “The obvious middle ground here is Paul’s conception of body—made for God and

consisting of both flesh—indispensable to the athletic experience—[and] an expression of the spirit of God” (157).

At a basic level, “the realm of sport provides numerous opportunities to bring together for the common good individuals” (Maranise 2016, 142) who may otherwise have no regular interaction. Furthermore, regular sports participation instills within its participants a sense of “camaraderie that extends well beyond the playing field” (Australian Catholic Bishops Conference, 13). These benefits of sports participation are not exclusive to hearing persons only. In fact, sport provides an even *richer* opportunity for cementing cultural identity within the d/Deaf community, given the highly interactive visual and generally touch-sensitive means of participating in its various forms. Stated another way: d/Deaf persons communicate best via other senses, including sight and touch. Both senses are critical in all sporting performances, far more so even than sound or speech. According to David Stewart, who authored *Deaf Sport: The Impact of Sports within the Deaf Community* (the first book of its kind), “Deaf sport is a microcosm of the Deaf community” (1991, 2) and thus, from the point of view of the types of attributes valued most by d/Deaf sportspersons, we within the hearing population can better understand the d/Deaf community. However, this type of approach should be met with a view to the reality that “Deaf sport reinforces certain values that are not subscribed to by society in general” (Stewart 1991, 9).

At the outset of any discussion of d/Deaf sport, it is of vital importance to reaffirm the fact that that d/Deaf persons do not consider themselves disabled because (on their view) they are not limited by that trait. Together, d/Deaf persons have developed a language, a culture, and a particular set of social mores, all of which serves as evidence to support the fact that they do not allow their lack of hearing to impact negatively their quality of life. One element of culture—whether d/Deaf or hearing—which seems to add to one’s quality of life is involvement in sports and recreation. From this involvement flows a plethora of opportunities for holistic human growth and development. Here, I would like to concentrate on some of the positive benefits of sports participation for both members of the d/Deaf and hearing communities in an effort to show the commonality and unifying potential of sports.

## **Socialization**

Life in a world dominated by the needs of a hearing majority can certainly pose its share of difficulties for d/Deaf persons. Loneliness and isolation can become two of the most daunting psychosocial issues, especially for d/Deaf

children born into hearing families or surrounded by hearing peers their own age. Stewart (1991) suggests that d/Deaf persons examine their trait in a more positive light, fixating upon “what deaf individuals get from life rather than what they supposedly miss” (Ch. 3, Para. 2). One of the benefits available to the d/Deaf is their own cultural community, out of which has emerged d/Deaf sports leagues and organizations. Participation in sports “shifts the focus from a ‘me’ to a ‘we’...” such that the loneliness and isolation felt at times by d/Deaf persons in a hearing world is replaced by “the importance of contributing to a group effort” and “opportunities to form friendships based on similar interests” (Kerrigan 2008, 25). This is socialization in action. An outgrowth of socialization is interactive conversation. For the d/Deaf, this occurs in sign and in shared experiences; as friendships develop, it seems reasonable to suppose that increasingly personal questions and topics will be raised and discussed. Having persons with whom one can socialize—or, more simply, having friends—provides not only a remedy to loneliness and isolation, it also provides someone to whom one can be held accountable. Accountability in friendship and in team relationships often opens pathways leading to personal self-discovery; it “entices its participants, among other things, to seek out a sense of closeness with others, to attain self-respect and high self-esteem, and whenever possible, to do things that fit their capabilities” (Stewart 1991, Ch. 4, Para. 29). Apart from sport’s ability to assist in the socialization of persons, the “power” within the “playing” can also be harnessed to reveal another positive benefit, that which I have elsewhere called *positive educational value* (PEV) (cf. Maranise 2009, 3; Maranise 2013, 55, 105).

### **Educative Potential**

While often thought of as being transmitted in classrooms, lecture halls, and/or study groups, there emerges out of participation in sport “what educational sociologists refer to as the ‘hidden curriculum’ and it is a most powerful shaper of the values and attitudes” (McNamee 2008, 41) of persons d/Deaf and hearing alike. Among the lessons taught in this “hidden curriculum” of sport are “the chief moral educational powers” (McNamee 2008, 45) such as: “the role modelling of elite sportspersons” (ibid.), “accepting and appreciating the ‘otherness’ of [one’s] opponents, reaching out to those who might appear ‘different’” (Nanni 2009, 21), and the ways in which it “encourages holistic well-being” (Constantini and Lixey 2009, 24), and “cultivates both repetitive training and attention to details such as plays or rules” (Maranise 2009, 3). Moreover, these general moral lessons also come with their own share of

practical lessons embedded within this “hidden curriculum.” We might refer to these as *life skills*, which can include, but are not limited to, the ways in which sportspersons learn to tolerate loss and gains in life via the internalization and acceptance of winning and losing, perseverance through times of adversity, awareness of one’s physical and emotional limitations, and/or healthy processes of emotional release (e.g. *catharsis*) (cf. Maranise 2013, Ch. 4; Watson and Parker 2014, 125-30). Taken together, these positive values obtained through participation in sports provide d/Deaf persons “unparalleled opportunities to fulfill their physical, social, and emotional needs” (Stewart 1991, Ch. 8, Para. 6). And while that seems all-encompassing for holistic human development in a secular sense, what about d/Deaf persons of faith who hope to be nourished also spiritually from their participation in sports?

### **(Calling) Signing an Inaudible (Audible): Deaf Sports Ministry as Unrecognized Frontier**

In American football terminology, “calling an audible” means to make a last-moment change in what play or strategy will be run. This often occurs when the quarterback recognizes a last-minute change first implemented by the opposing team, usually when the opponents are preparing to blitz. While the phrase itself seems exclusive of d/Deaf sportspersons because of their inability to hear a quarterback’s call and the general resentment toward the word “audible” (which literally means “able to be heard”), I propose, as an alternative, the inclusive phrase “signing an inaudible.” According to Warren Keller, head football coach of the California School for the Deaf “Eagles,” whose team was featured in the 2015 CNN film *All-American Family*, d/Deaf football players have no special sign for this term, nor do they call it anything other than what hearing teams would.<sup>6</sup> As his explanation suggests, the specific wording used here (“calling an audible” versus “signing an inaudible”) is not as important as what can be signified by its use.

In the fields of academic spirituality, theology, religion, philosophy, and sociology, much (although still not enough) has been written about the ways in which d/Deaf persons come to know and experience God, but reflections on these issues in the context of sports are glaringly absent from the literature. Recall, if you will, the statistic offered earlier in this essay—namely, that only about 1% of d/Deaf children will attend church as adults because they are not ministered to or given the gospel message in a manner that is accessible to them. How might this percentage change if ministries

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6. E-mail interview with author, Apr. 18, 2016.



to deaf sportspeople were available as they are for the hearing majority? Christian organizations like the Fellowship of Christian Athletes (FCA), Catholic Athletes for Christ (CAC), and Athletes in Action (AIA) are well known among both public and private school sports leagues, teams, and individual athletes throughout much of the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom. These parachurch ministries act in the context of a *culture-of-encounter*; that is, they seek to meet sportspeople where they are along their path of faith and spiritual development by dynamically and creatively interweaving the Christian message with the popular cultural medium of sports participation. Much of the success of these ministries is attributed to the ways in which they bring the gospel message outside of the routine sermon or church service into a more interesting, innovative and, certainly, interactive context. Imagine, then, if we employed the same form of sports ministry to d/Deaf sporting groups.

While no specific statistics exist which show the percentage of d/Deaf people involved in sport, it seems that reaching this population would be an improvement in terms of seeking to cultivate richer spiritual and faith lives among members of the d/Deaf community. There are presently no formal d/Deaf sports ministry organizations like the hearing FCA, CAC, or AIA operating in the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom. This largely unexplored area of ministry presents both an opportunity for d/Deaf chaplains to explore the interior spiritual lives of fellow members of this cultural community and for d/Deaf laity to grow in faith. However, as much of an opportunity as may exist in this unexplored ministerial territory, the lack of coverage within and general awareness of it reinforces the realities of marginalization, isolation, and alienation of the d/Deaf community from the hearing majority—and, surprisingly enough, even of d/Deaf sportspeople within the community itself. Were an organization or outreach ministry launched to facilitate sports-related messages of the gospel to d/Deaf athletes, it would seem most reasonable, given the pride many d/Deaf people have in their culture, to have that organization be distinct from organizations for the primarily hearing already in existence. Grafting a d/Deaf sports ministry onto an already existing sports ministry might potentially run the risk of making members of the d/Deaf community seem to be an afterthought, thus reinforcing their societal isolation.

### **Framing the Moral Dilemma**

It seems, then, to follow that d/Deaf sportspeople are significantly marginalized when it comes to dialogue and discussions regarding their roles

as Christian witnesses. Granted, this could be because the bulk of academic and colloquial literature related to d/Deaf persons in Christianity focuses on the broader themes of d/Deaf liberation theology, especially that of a culture seeking inclusion, as well as the fact that there is still too little research on d/Deafness and Christianity in the first place. However, other areas of theological research where the Christian witness or reflective experiences of d/Deaf sportspeople might be valuable seem to “gloss over” this small but still relevant group.

Though not viewed as a disability by the d/Deaf community, academia still largely categorizes this cultural trait as a type of impairment, grouping deafness together with other disabilities. This is evidenced by the number of academic articles written on various aspects of d/Deaf life which are included in disability studies journals. Furthermore, and most obviously, course offerings at universities are often labeled as being within a “Deaf & Disability Studies” department rather than being two separate entities. When treated separately, however, “interpersonal relationships in sport settings,” which address d/Deaf sportspeople’s view of God’s role in their sporting lives, “remains largely unexplored territory” (Jowett and Wylleman 2006).

## Conclusion

In a recent short film produced by the news outlet CNN, entitled *All-American Family* (Jenks 2015), viewers are introduced to two brothers who are members of a four-generation d/Deaf family, both of whom play American football for one of the most elite teams (both hearing and d/Deaf) in the state of California. The twelve-minute long documentary features interviews—conducted entirely in ASL—with the parents as well as the brothers themselves. Viewers also see how the brothers—one of whom is a senior high school quarterback for the team—interact with members of their team. The film ends by showing their remarkable defeat of an opponent by a score of 48-0. While the object of this film is clear enough—to transmit d/Deaf cultural awareness within the mainstream and dispel preconceived notions or prejudices about the d/Deaf community as “the other”—it would be interesting to inquire, as so often witnessed in mainstream hearing news coverage and entertainment media, as to whether any of the d/Deaf sportspeople offer prayers before, during, or after their contests, and whether this is done collectively or individually. The head football coach of the team featured in this documentary, Warren Keller, agreed to an interview with me regarding this very question. When questioned whether he had ever witnessed or noticed any of his players

praying, meditating, or seeking to unite their spiritual lives with their athletic lives, his answer confirmed my suspicions. He said, “Though we are a public school, we have a very religious coach and I am myself. We cannot lead prayers, but you can absolutely tell that some of our guys are praying in the locker room or before the game. They’re asking for strength, to be kept from injury, and to play their best.”<sup>7</sup> Coach Keller’s statements support the claim that there is a need for further conversation about and research into the valuable perspectives on and relationships between sports and spirituality among members of the d/Deaf athletic community.

In closing, both the d/Deaf and hearing communities would benefit from further research—in the form of qualitative and subjective interviews—on the relationships between d/Deaf sportspeople and Christian religiosity. In these interviews, we might consider the following questions: *What might the prayers of the Christian d/Deaf sportsperson “sound” like from that very unique perspective? How do d/Deaf sportspeople view the fairness of God in competition against a hearing team? What unique spiritual insights can d/Deaf sportspeople add to reflective literature concerning God’s “place” in the sporting realm?* These questions are valuable not simply because they represent an unfortunately overlooked cultural facet of an already marginalized culture, but also because their perspectives can bring others within and outside their community to more accessible reflection on and encounter with God. In this way, Christian d/Deaf sportspeople can move from beyond the periphery, to a place where they are no longer in need of a transformative relational experience with God; instead, having experienced it themselves, they can now stand as prophetic witnesses to others who seek to “be opened” to the liberating encounter of “the Word made Flesh.”<sup>8</sup>

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7. Ibid.

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