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Interview of Don Hindsley

Don Hindsley

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This is July 22, in Paris, France. This is Winfred Wright and I am talking to Don Hindsley. Don and his wife, Claudia and their children have been in Paris since 1958.

I appreciate, Don, your talking the time to discuss with us some of your views of mission work and telling us about your work here in Paris. Would you give us a brief outline of the work, the history of the work here in Paris since you came in 1958?

Hindsley: We came to Paris in 1958 in the month of August without our visa and because of this we were forced to leave France and go to Belgium for $4\frac{1}{2}$ months. With the prayers of many brethren and the help that they gave to us in the States, we were able to come back to France and to begin our work here in this congregation. This congregation had already been established by missionaries that had come to France in 1949. When we came there were about 15 faithful members with the French congregation. After several years and after having started another congregation in the city, we have now grown to 35 members.

There were several efforts put forth to teach the gospel to the people here during that time--work in the fair, work in meetings, campaigns and many other such efforts were put forth to reach the people. At one time there were as many as five preachers here and at the present time there are two working with this congregation.

Wright: We hear quite often that the French people are indifferent to religion or to Christianity at least. Would you give us some indication of the religious background of these people with whom you work? You said you had been here for about 12 years. You should know quite a bit how they think religiously.

Hindsley: The French people have, of course, been in Catholicism for many years. We have read in history concerning the religious wars in France and how the people who did not accept Catholicism were persecuted and mistreated and driven from France. Some historians estimate that there were at least 15 million French people that were killed during the inquisitions. The Catholic Church has been the predominating religion in France for many centuries. The people of France have come to realize that the Catholic Church is making merchandise of their soul. Because of this, many French people have turned from the Catholic Church to become atheists. They have turned from the Catholic Church in the sense that they do not practice their religion at all. They still consider themselves Catholic because this is their society. In talking to many many French people they make the statement that they are Catholic atheists. Once they have studied the history of the Catholic Church in France and realize to what degree she has gone to making merchandise of souls, then we can understand how a person can arrive at being a Catholic atheist. Our great problem, of course, in this respect is trying to overcome the disbelief in God because these people have been in this situation for so long and God has come to mean nothing to them. It said by many French people that the Catholic person goes to church four times in his life--when he is to be baptized, to partake of the first communion, to be married and to be buried. This is religion for the majority of the French people.

Wright: As I've been traveling around in France during the last few weeks, we've

noticed a growing economy. How would you describe the economic level of the French people now? How does this affect your work with them?

Hindsley: The economic condition of France has improved very much in the last few years. France is an old country based upon traditions. Because of this, many ways of life are difficult to change. For many years, as an example, French families would not accept the refrigerator but now with the economy growing they have begun to accept this and to put this into use and most French families now have a refrigerator.

Now, the economic condition of the country is hurting our work in some respects. Living in Paris where the economy is doing much better than many other places, many people have bought cars and the thing that most of them look forward to is their week end in the country. For this reason then, it is difficult to make them understand that it is necessary to worship God and to participate in the worship service on Sunday.

Economically the French people as a nation has no need now of economic help. A few years ago economic help was necessary; therefore, many people came hunting religion because they felt a need of religion in their life because of the lack of economic stability. Now, with the economic stability, they have begun to put their faith in this rather than in God and therefore they are becoming independent in this respect. They are becoming more difficult to work with.

Wright: I am sure that during your twelve years of work in Paris you have had several challenges and obstacles that you've had to overcome. What would you name as being the most serious challenges that you've had to meet in your work here?

Hindsley: I think that one of the most serious challenges that we have faced in the work here is the indifference of people toward religion.

Having to learn the French language is probably one of the most serious challenges that we face. However, even though the French language was difficult, being an American we are more readily accepted than even a French person and so we are able to work with many French people that a French preacher cannot work with. What I mean by this is that the French people do not know which class to put us in socially and so they will accept us in any class whereas if a French person comes from a low class, the upper class will not accept him. If he comes from an upper class, then the lower class will be afraid to put their confidence in him.

Aside from this I think indifference is the greatest challenge that we face. The people are just indifferent toward religion. So we first have to show them that they need God in their lives before we can actually begin to show them what is the will of God concerning them. Indifference is very difficult to work with because it is so difficult so many times to find a basis upon which to begin. Once, though this basis is found, some people will accept God. We have to begin with the people here as you would with a first grader in school in trying to teach them concerning God. Because of their indifference, they have just left God completely out of their lives.

Wright: I think as you've described the French mentality and religious beliefs, it is easy for us to see why the work in France is difficult. You have found many people who are interested in being taught. What methods have you used that seemed to be effective in reaching the French people?

Hindsley: One of the best methods that we have found to date is the Bible correspondence work. A special correspondence course was begun by Brother J. Lee Roberts which is called a Bible Contest. Actually, this is not a contest with other people, but the course is destined to be a contest with one's self. If the person who responds has enough interest in the Bible to finish the contest, then a Bible is delivered to that person. The delivery of this Bible affords us of the opportunity to make the personal contact with a person that has showed an interest in the Bible. This has proven to be very successful because after making this personal contact, we then show the Jule Miller filmstrips that have been translated into French and work with them beginning with this. Then after these slide lessons are shown to them, then we have other methods of teaching them--chalk lessons, individual Bible studies--but without that first contact it is very difficult to enter into a French person's home. So after a person has shown an interest in the Bible by finishing the correspondence course, we have this contact and we have several converts who are faithful to the church today as a result of this Bible Contest program that is underway.

We might say that another work that goes hand in glove with the contest work is the campaign work that we have been involved in in the French-speaking world. In the campaign efforts a great deal of our time is spent distributing cards, and invitations and in all the invitations and cards there is a response asked for those who want to receive the Bible correspondence work. As an example, this year with 65 workers for two weeks and other groups that came in for one week we were able to distribute 650,000 cards and in invitations. To date, we have received 420 responses by mail and we had a total of 160 visitors to the gospel meeting that was held in conjunction with the campaign. Of these 420 responses to the Bible correspondence program we have now 27 that have finished the Bible course and that have already received their Bible. Of these 27 there is now a study program or classes are being conducted with seven of these people. At least ten others have promised that they will begin studying with the slide lessons after the vacations in August. So you can see that the campaign efforts are really paying off in the respect that we are advertising and putting the Bible into the hands of many people.

Wright: What methods have you used in the past that you've discarded because they just haven't been very successful in France?

Hindsley: Perhaps one of the things that produced as little results as anything was articles placed in the French speaking magazines. We had several articles placed in these magazines and as far as we know there was only one family in France that was ever converted in this manner. However, by this same method the church was begun in the Cameroons and we have contact with many other people in the French-speaking African countries that have responded as a result of this method.

There is another problem that we have faced and that is with our printed matter. It seems that this has never produced very much visible results because it takes personal contact with the people to actually make them understand that they need the Bible. Even though the French people read a lot, yet, by our printed pages it seems that we have never really been able to contact people and to really bring them to the realization that they need God in their life.

Wright: You mentioned, as you talked about the history of your work in Paris, that at one time I believe there were five different preachers working here with this congregation. I think we could classify this as a group method of evangelism. What words of wisdom could you give us concerning group work, several preachers working together in the same congregation.

Hindsley: I think that all would agree that group evangelism is a very wonderful method. In group evangelism there must be a program outlined and definite plans must be made just as early in the program as possible. When these plans are lacking, then group evangelism is completely ineffective. I believe that many times as we worked here together this was our problem. It seemed that many times each one had a program going that was his own program to the exclusion of all others. As a result, many conflicting works were done and many times we were found not working completely together. So, if we are going to plan group evangelism, we need to plan a program and stick with this program until it is proven by the functioning of this program that something else would be more effective. But by all means have a planned work established just as early in the effort as possible.

Wright: In most new fields there seems to be a problem with training the local people the new converts. What have you done and what are you doing now in Paris towards the training of the new converts?

Hindsley: In the local congregation here we have been having men's training classes to try to teach the men to take part in the worship service and even turn the worship service over to the men. We feel that this is one of the great parts of the work because many times these men here do not know even how to lead a prayer because they have never been taught this in their religious training. Most of them know how to cite a prayer that is already made for them but to lead a congregation in a prayer service is not something that they can do very easily.

In our training program here in this congregation we are also getting the younger members to preach and we now have one young man that preaches almost every Sunday night. We have one other young man that is training now and we hope before long some of the preaching load can also be turned over to him. We are trying to make this congregation a self-supporting congregation in this respect.

Training programs are necessary so that if in the near future something should happen so that no American evangelists is here they can carry on their work and also if they are trained to carry on their work, then this will mean that the missionary will soon disappear and they will be a self-supporting, self-sufficient functioning congregation. We need to train people just as much as possible and to teach them just as much as possible their responsibility in the local congregation and this is one of the efforts that we are putting forth at this time.

Wright: Another problem or at least an enlargement of this same problem is the training of young men or older men who would desire to preach either part time or full time for the church. What is your attitude towards supporting these men from America?

Hindsley: Of course, we realize that in answering this question we cannot lay down a hard and fast rule and say that the support has to be done this way and no other way. We've had some good results from preachers that have been paid from the States. But we have also had some very sorrowful experiences in having preachers on the payroll from the United States. One of the great difficulties is that the French people feel that they are without doubt working in this capacity because of the pay. Of course, we realize that this is always true concerning a preacher, even in the States.

Also the preacher, when he is paid from the States, does not seem to realize his true responsibility to the local congregation. Too often, once they begin to preach in this capacity, then their responsibility is lost and they turn to the idea of preaching for money even among themselves.

And also when there is more than one preacher in an area that is being supported by the church, they get together and compare salaries and then they begin to complain concerning this. Whereas if they were preaching and being paid by the local congregation in the country, then this would be discussed with that local congregation rather than among themselves and a just salary could be arrived at.

Another thing that makes it difficult is because of the difference in economic situations in the two countries. The congregation in the States does not understand that most of the time the needs of the preacher and the preacher in the country does not understand fully the functioning of the church. Therefore, for this reason there is a continual conflict between the native preacher and the local congregations in the States which has his support.

Again, we cannot lay down a hard and fast rule for this, but definitely a preacher should be put on the payroll in the country, paid by the natives of that country just as soon as possible and get away from the support of a preacher with the American dollar just as soon as possible. Naturally, if at all possible, don't put them on the American payroll. When this is necessary in the individual situation, get away from this situation just as soon as possible.

Wright: How do you feel about using American money for the building of church buildings in France?

Hindsley: Again, this is a complex question that we cannot lay down a hard and fast rule to resolve the problem. However, again, it is better when at all possible to let the people of the local congregation decide on the building of the building and also on the paying of the building. We realize, of course, that in many instances a building is necessary to start a congregation. We might say that it is a vicious circle. The building is necessary but how are you going to build the building if you don't have a congregation? So, when at all possible, according to my thinking, it would be better to rent a building until a congregation is sufficiently large enough to take care of their own

building problems and then let them decide what building they want to build, where they want it built, and what they want to pay for the building. In this manner, they will feel a definite responsibility toward this building; therefore, getting away from the idea that somebody else paid for the building anyway so why should we worry about it.

Wright: This has been your experience here in Paris? This building was paid for by American money?

Hindsley: Mostly yes, by American money. But this has not been our problem here in one respect and that is because unfortunately all except one family who was here when the building was built and paid for with American dollars have since left. The ones that are here now naturally have no idea as to how the building was paid for. However, now with the congregation that we have, the congregation is taking care of all the upkeep on the building and all expenses involved in the heating, the lighting and all other aspects of the work here so we are trying to get away from the support from the States and in this way we are giving them a responsibility in the work which they need and because of this they seem to be growing spiritually because they see the need as it arises.

Wright: In closing, would you give us a statement about how you feel concerning the future of the work in Paris and in France in general?

Hindsley: The work as we realize has gone very slowly in France. It is a very difficult field. However, here in Paris, after many years of slow, painful growth, we are now arriving at a situation where the church, except for the support of the preacher, is completely self-supporting. We hope before long that even the preacher's support can be taken care of within the congregation here. This is a healthy situation. This is a situation that puts the people who are here directly before their responsibility. Now, the men here are in on all the planning of the work. As an example, for the campaign that we just had this year with the 65 workers for the two weeks and the others, this congregation paid for all the expenses that were incurred here in the advertising, the printing, and all things like that. They did this because they realized their responsibility, and I firmly believe that as they realize their responsibility the work can grow and so the future in this respect looks good because each one is taking his responsibility. Another indication of the stability in this respect is one of the native preachers was sick not too long ago and had to have an operation. This congregation of 35 members gave the equivalent of \$260 in special contribution to help and thus they accepted their responsibility.

Wright: Don, we are grateful for your work with the church here and for the future that you see with this congregation. Thank you for your time.