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Interview of Bob Vance and Tom Watson

Bob Vance

Tom Watson

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This is Joe Hacker speaking. Today I will be interviewing Bob Vance. Brother Vance has engaged in extensive mission work in America, in Germany, and is now working in Austria. Today is July 3, 1970. We are seated in the church office located in the meeting place for the United Christian people on 6 Schliefmuhlgasse, Vienna, Austria.

Hacker: Brother Vance, I wonder if you would give us a brief historical sketch of your work on the mission field, both in America and abroad?

Vance: Yes, I would be glad to, Dr. Hacker. I grew up in the Portland, Oregon, area, and, consequently, it was only natural for me to begin there, being interested in preaching. After graduating from music school, I stayed in the area for two years preaching full time after which I moved to ACC and studied there in the field of Bible. Upon graduation, we went back to the Portland area. I had married in the meantime. We worked there from 1955 to 1959. Then in 1959, we moved to Nashville, Tennessee, where I preached for the UNA church and also taught high school at Lipscomb. In January, 1963, we moved to Kaiserslauten, Germany, with UNA still sponsoring us. We worked there from 1963-1966 and witnessed, we believe, a good growth in both the German and American congregations in Kaiserslauten, Germany. Kaiserslauten consisted of 90,000 Germans and about 75,000 Americans considering the big group of American personnel there for military reasons. Then we moved back to Texas in 1966. This was a pivotal year for me. We had to come back because of the serious illness of my mother-in-law. While we were in the area, I took a one year job on a twelve month campaign with ACC in the fund raising work. I worked for them 1966-1967. Then in 1967, I moved to Commerce, Texas, where I preached from 1967-1970. Then, only about two and a half or three months ago, we moved to Vienna and have been here since that time. Presently, of course, we are engaged in a campaign here with the Harding group. We are witnessing some very encouraging things and this encourages us here because we can see the possibility of a lot of good growth. I have been privileged to work in campaigns in Oregon, Sidney, Australia, and in Europe. This one in Vienna promises to be one of the best.

Hacker: Thank you very much. Now, I wonder with your experience if you could tell us what you see as the major difference between doing mission work in America as compared to doing mission work in Europe.

Vance: Yes, that's a rather difficult question, but there are, of course, some glaring differences. One is the different culture. In America we are dealing with people that are automatically more receptive as a whole. The people in Europe are a little more cautious. They hold back a little more. They are a little more on the conservative side. They just do not open up to you quite as fast. It takes longer to get into their hearts. We also believe that once a convert is made that he will be very stable and he will continue on but it is rather difficult to get close to people here. Once this barrier has been broken down, of course, this disappears. For the most part it is slow work. For example, I was engaged in cottage meeting work quite heavily in the States. I am not at all proud of my ratio. I have gotten three out of ten with the Lord's help. Upon moving to Europe, I intended to do the very same thing. I was discussing this

in personal evangelism. Now, I would like to ask you something about your personal preparation, the things which relate to your family and the adjustment. What would you advise a young person to do if he is 18-21 years of age to prepare for work in the States on the mission field and then secondly for work on the foreign field?

Vance: Dr. Hacker, that again is a question that has a lot of sides. We all have different personalities and although there may be one blanket answer to that, there are some principles that we can lay down. Of course, the obvious that always comes back is language preparation. I don't believe this has been emphasized as much as it should have been. For example, I was being interviewed by one of the missions committees at one of the congregations in the Nashville area that helped send us to Germany the first time and one of their first questions was: "Brother Vance, do you know the language?" My response was to say, "No, I don't, but..." Then I went on to give a very convincing argument that I didn't need to know the language. I was going to learn it on the field. As it turned out, I did learn it on the field, but I still don't recommend it and wouldn't now. If I had it to do over again, I would learn the language as well as possible first and then go. This doesn't mean, however, that we can't come over and learn the language on the scene, but it simply means that when we try to couple language learning with all of the other adjustments that have to be made then we have something that is quite difficult. Of course, it is obvious that this difficulty increases when one has a family. Now, for young people in their teens and in their late teens, this would be a different matter altogether. They aren't burdened down and tied to the responsibilities of supporting a family and of keeping their family well adjusted and happy and so on. This would be different in their case, I would say. In other words, if they could come over and get themselves fitted into a situation where they could work under a responsible leadership somewhere and grow and develop with someone else that is wiser and has more years of experience on the field, then this encourages them and they go back and then the next time they come, for example, if they come on a tour or a campaign or a special work even over a period of months, why they come back with a great deal more ease of adjustment and flexibility. I believe it helps them. There are some things that only time seems to settle. I don't know if this answers all the things you had in mind or not but these are a few principles at least.

Hacker: In your family adjustment what particular problems do you feel that you and your wife and your children have had to face in adjusting to the European culture and what advice would you give to help a young person to prepare to face these adjustments?

Vance: Here again we have a problem and all families are different I suppose in this regard. Some missionary families have a very keen advantage in that they have lived a number of years on the scene. Some of our young people were even born and reared on the field. This, of course, lightens their task and eases their ability of adjustment. But, with others, it is not so easy necessarily. There is always a culture change. Next to language, I believe we would have to put the culture change. The age of the young people in the family, of course, has a lot to do with this. I would strongly advise pre-school children to be brought along and for parents to have no regrets at all about bringing them along and to begin them in the German speaking school system. This is good because, of course, they grow right along into it. There is a difficulty involved, of course, in coming over and bringing teenagers for the first time. This does not mean that the

with one of our native missionaries in Europe. He said, "Well, if you got three out of ten in America, then here you might get three out of fifty." This sounded a little discouraging to me and I thought he was being a little pessimistic about his analysis, but time proved him to be correct. The work is slower here. For the number of man hours actually spent in personal work, in holding home Bible studies and cottage meetings and being on the field, I think we can expect a smaller amount of response here, at least numerically here than we can in the States.

Hacker: In your work in the States, you mentioned that you were involved primarily in personal evangelism and that you are doing that here. What are some of the specific methods that you have applied in the States which have worked in Oregon and how have the people in Europe reacted to that? What methods have you applied here which have proven particularly successful?

Vance: Of course, in the States, some of the so-called cottage meeting systems that we have worked quite well. In the end, every one works out his own system any way. We have found that here it is better to have an open Bible study or a study that isn't oriented to a certain pattern of study that we go through. I am speaking, of course, our brotherhood has produced a number of good things and I use them all and I think they are all good. On the European field we run into a different situation altogether. For example, in Kaiserslautern, I was showing something similar to the Jule Miller series and the Germans that saw this at first were a little taken back, you might say. Their first reaction was, "Why, I learned all of this in Sunday School. This is something I already know." They missed the entire point of what I was trying to get across. Much of that was lost. Finally, when I saw that this was almost insulting to some of them, I was forced to change the tactics considerably and to adopt a more relaxed and flexible approach. Just an open Bible study around the table works best here in the main.

Hacker: In so far as your development in Kaiserslautern in the cottage meeting work, would you tell us some of the techniques you may have used in trying to encourage the Germans themselves to participate in this work?

Vance: The Germans, of course, are like the Americans in this respect. It takes a great deal of encouragement and they are working to some extent under the idea that they have to be professionally trained in order to do this with the old idea that unless you have years of training theologically that you are not in the position to go out and teach others. This, of course, is the same problem we face on both sides of the Atlantic. We try to break down this barrier and try to adopt a little more flexibility with regard to their willingness to go out. In other words, when they see that they can go out and do it without necessarily being what they call a preacher or priest, in their minds, then we have broken down a great barrier. I must admit that this is more difficult with Europeans than Americans. Americans are much more apt to want to go out and try their wings, sharing their belief with others, but not necessarily so here. This is something that is quite difficult and frankly, in Kaiserslautern, where we worked and here in Vienna, with a very few exceptions, we have been unable as yet to get a large number of the native people really interested and on fire, going out and doing it themselves. I do believe, however, that the time will come when this development will take place and that will encourage all of us.

Hacker: I might mention that we have noticed in Cologne that one of the by-products of our campaign is to see the German people becoming more interested

adjustment can't be made. It just makes it more difficult and there will be emotional problems that will develop and psychological barriers and problems, but, if the missionary's family has fellow missionary families who can help them over the hump and ease them as in the group evangelism concept, if we can work together and encourage one another in that way, I think this is a great help. In other words, if we learn to lean on one another and encourage one another more.

Hacker: Now, let's discuss for a few moments methods. How do you feel about the group evangelism approach as opposed to the person attacking a mission point on his own?

Vance: I have rather strong feelings on this and I might be a little one-sided. I have not tried it alone. I have witnessed several cases where it was attempted. This will sound a little critical of this but it is not meant to be at all because I highly respect anyone that has the grit and the fortitude to go on and to strike out on his own, but he, of course, is attempting something that is much more difficult. This creates emotional problems for himself and for his family and it creates difficulties that wouldn't be there otherwise. This is not wrong in principle. It can be done, but I think the group approach is by far the best. I think this has been demonstrated on several continents. If we learn by this, I think that if we work out the problems that are created by group evangelism and here again I don't deny that group evangelism creates its own special set of problems and difficulties but in the main when these are worked out I think that in the end this has proven to be the most effective. We have witnessed, of course, a very wonderful work here in Vienna with the group approach. We have seen it in other places and in the main I am sold on the group evangelism approach or at least having a plurality of workers in one place. There is an advantage to this that you just don't have when you are by yourself.

Hacker: How do you work out your job descriptions and keep yourselves oriented toward common objectives in the use of this group approach?

Vance: This would have to be listed, of course, as one of the special difficulties created by the group evangelism approach. There has to be a certain amount of flexibility, but, on the other hand, there also has to be clean cut lines of responsibility which would avoid injured feelings and misunderstandings that would come, for example, for someone appearing to take too much authority upon himself as opposed to those that are newer on the field. These problems have to be worked out by themselves, of course, with each individual situation. There are problems that come as a result of assignments. In other words, I heard one missionary say and I think he is probably right in this that "I came to work in a certain field and I find myself being used in related fields or in other fields that aren't directly related with what I came to do." Others have found that they have had to change their entire approach. Some came, for example, to do personal work in a certain field and found out that they were better fitted to do something else. Some came to preach in a certain area and found out that they had to change their entire approach. Admittedly, there has to be, of course, a better organization. The more you have working together, the better the organization has to be. The more working together you have to have and though this might be a little distasteful to some to have to march in ranks so to speak and to have to fit in and work with the group though it may be distasteful to some, it is a necessary thing. You just can't have something working together unless this is worked out and preferably by the entire group meeting say every so often in a meeting to try to work these things out together. The secret, I think, is in the word together. We are going to have to sacrifice a lot of our own personalities and individual approaches and individual ideas for the sake of the group. When that is done, I think the

machinery will be a lot better oiled.

Hacker: There is a great deal being said in some books especially about the problem of identity with the national Christians and developing a congregation to where it can be considered at least in some degree indigenous. I wonder what your experience has been in this identity problem and in developing a local leadership to the point of a congregation being able to function.

Vance: Of course our goal is for a congregation to be not only self-supporting but self-perpetuating and to go on on its own. One main criticism of our work in the entire European field has been that we helped them too much to the detriment of their own growth and development, that we have spoon-fed, for example, many of our congregations and local people. This criticism is just. I don't think we have let them try their wings enough. We need to develop them to the extent that they can stand on their own. Perhaps we can help dissolve this idea of being a particular kind of worker, an American worker, a German worker, an Austrian worker and so on. Some of the natives feel very keenly that the Americans try to sell Americanism too much in Europe. Some, of course, go to the other extreme. We have had workers that have come over and tried to go native all the way, the way they walked, the way they talked, the way they dress, act and think and so on. Then, we have had others that have come over and gone to the other extreme and have tried to act as if the Lord's cause and Christianity itself stands or falls with America. I am 100% American. I never apologize for being an American. At the same time I try not to be offensive in bringing out this fact. In the main, I try to play down the idea of nationality in this respect but this is the problem. With each nation in Europe, the problem is a little different. Here in Austria the problem is a little different than it was in Germany. The Austrians themselves are quite conscious of a large group of Americans here, especially in Vienna. This tends to swallow them up. For example, one of the local native Christians told me the other day that it looks as if we are developing here an American colony. She didn't mean this with any idea of being caustic at all. But this reflects the thinking of a good many of our Austrians and a good many of our local people. This is a problem and we try to work it out as much as possible, to dissolve the idea of nationality and to let them handle more of their own responsibilities to develop themselves.

Hacker: As you reflect on your work in Germany and in Austria, what do you consider to be the most difficult problem in so far as the attitude of the people is concerned about the faith? What are the doctrinal problems that you see a person should prepare themselves to face when they come to work with German speaking people?

Vance: The entire background of the German speaking peoples and all of Europe for that matter has been state-church oriented. They have grown up in a spiritual atmosphere of there is a right way and a wrong way and their little notches and niches that we fit into and all the blocks have to fall into a certain place and this has been the pattern of their thinking. Consequently, they look upon the church of Christ as a made-in-America organization or what they call a sect. They use this term sect quite freely in referring to us. Without hesitation, I would say to this that the main difficulty that we have to overcome is this concept that we are a sect, that we are made in America, that we are bringing something new in the way of religion, this is another church and so on. The best weapon I

have found to fight this with is that when someone refers to us as an American sect I answer by saying, "Well, what is it that we teach or believe that originated in America? Was it the name? Was it the Lord's supper concept? Was it baptism?" I don't let them off the hook. I want them to tell me what we believe or practice or teach that started in America. Don't let them get away with saying that. Force them to say it. Obviously they can't do it. The organization was made in Jerusalem. This becomes obvious. Still in their minds I say is the main doctrinal problem. This old idea that we have to be protestant or Catholic. One of our young Christians in Germany was being interviewed or registering for some sort of position. They asked him which church he was, the Catholic or Protestant. In answer to that he said, "Just Christian. I am a Christian." They retorted by saying, "This we know, but what denomination, what church?" He said, "Just a Christian, neither one." They felt he was trying to get a little fresh with them, so they argued with him for about ten minutes and finally, in desperation and exasperation, perhaps, the gentleman wrote down the word Christian and said, "If this is what you insist on, then this is what I will put down." This problem is not unlike the problem we face in America with some of these concepts.

Hacker: We can see then that there are some similarities here. I would like to get back to the adjustment of your family again. Do you feel that there are some particular things a young lady should consider before she comes over here out of the experience that you have observed and the adjustment of your wife?

Vance: Yes, are you thinking here of say teenagers and working for a while?

Hacker: No, say a young girl comes over married to a fellow like you.

Vance: I mentioned the cultural changes but that is a little general and you might want me to get a little more specific in that area. There is, of course, the adjustment in associating with the native people, both Christian and non-Christian. When I say the customs are different that covers a lot of territory and a lot of ground. One of these is perhaps the great formality that they have. When we go to see someone in America, we simply pop in on them or come in unannounced without telephoning necessarily, and it is rather an informal thing and we are very flexible in adjusting to the situation such as that. We go in and see someone, we visit with them. Here it is considered not in best taste if we do that. It is considered in poor taste here also if we come and don't bring a bouquet of flowers and without necessarily having to sit down to tea and cake. Also, if you visit someone, they consider it a mark of poor upbringing if you don't sit down with them and provide some cake and coffee or tea or something to drink and to have a little discussion or talk with them in that way around the table. These things are very hard for them to break. Of course, we are not here to break their habits or change their habits but we are here to adjust to theirs. Just the other day someone told me that it was quite offensive in this area, for example, for Americans to come and to give a speech or talk with their hands in their pockets or to sit down in a seat rather than sitting up straight in a rather precise and correct manner. Some of these things I hadn't even thought of. I am so accustomed to doing these things that I didn't realize that this was a problem with them, but he criticized many of the Christians in the Vienna area of not paying enough attention to local customs and being willing to change and do what they do. I mentioned a moment ago that we have the two extremes of staying American all the way

or going native all the way. I will say that if you try to go native all the way, they will still know that you are an American.. If you try to do that invariably you wind up as looking like some kind of odd or foolish American rather than a native. It is obvious and clear that unless you spend twenty or so years, you are not going to talk or sound or walk and act and dress like a native. The dress is one problem. Here again it varies from area to area. This is something that changes. We have to change our wardrobe every so often any way. If we adjust to some small thing with regard to the way we dress so that we won't become so offensive to them, then this will help.

In a day or two we plan to go over into Bratislavia and take this group of young people. Already someone has come to me and approached me with the idea of telling the girls to go a little lighter on the make-up and the eyebrow pencil and all this sort of thing with the idea of making them less offensive to those people over there. This is one problem.

The school that they attend, of course, is one major adjustment. There is already the obvious language change and the fact that they are young people, when they send them to school here, they take religious instruction. Now, I've changed my thinking a little on this. In Kaiserslautern, for example, we had some of the young people in school that were exempt from this religious instruction which is, of course, either Catholic or Protestant. They are exempt from that and we got them exempted and we found that this getting them exempted from this created more problems in the end than if we had just let them go on and take the instruction. Frankly, I just don't believe that their faith in God even doctrinally would have been damaged by their going on and taking this instruction. I realize this is a controversial area, not every one agrees with me and not all the missionaries agree with me on it. Here again, if my children were going to the German speaking school and beginning in the early grade and here again, depending on the teacher and the situation, I think I would rather let them go ahead and let them take the religious instruction much of which is of a very general nature. They are not so interested in what these kids think about sprinkling or pouring or immersion. In fact, I doubt if this is even discussed. They are teaching them about the general things of God, Christ and so on. I believe that at home we can combat this idea. For example, if they tell them something that they find in their catechism, then we can combat that and explain that. Children are a lot more perceptive than we think they are.

Hacker: Thank you very much for giving us these very candid remarks. Our time is limited and I want to tell you that we do appreciate your work here in Vienna. There is one more question I would like to ask in that relationship. What do you see as the goals that you have in mind for the work here and the future of the church here?

Vance: I am glad you asked that question because here I am very optimistic about a bright future. We have, of course, this Iron Curtain work right across the border. Vienna, Austria, is perhaps the eastern most place that we can be based so to speak. We believe that we can do a great work in Vienna even if we never crossed any border. We were going along the other day and we saw a truck driver with an empty truck that had delivered some fruit near Vienna coming out of Czechoslovakia. We gave him a handful of coupons to write in and get a free Bible or correspondence course or tracts or literature if he wanted them. This is the way

the church got started there. There are trucks from Bulgaria. There were 20,000 Poles in Vienna just a few weeks ago to attend a football game. These things are constantly going on. We are just amazed at the opportunities that abound even if we never got out of this city. Of course, we plan to get out as much as possible. I believe that we can build a strong local group here, not only of native Christians in Vienna, but in the so-called districts around us. I believe the future looks bright. It looks good and I believe the Lord is going to help us. We have a lot of problems that are peculiar and special to the area but this is true with every work.

Hacker: Again let me say that we appreciate your taking the time to talk with us. I hope that what you have said will be of some real help and encouragement to our students at Harding College. Thank you very much and God bless you in your work here.