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Interview of Bob Douglas (Lebanon)

Bob Douglas

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HARDING COLLEGE LIVING HISTORY OF MISSIONS

Volume II, No. 9

This is Volume II, No. 9 of the Harding College Living History of Mission series. I am Everett Huffard, visiting professor of missions at Harding College. I have with me Brother Bob Douglas who is presently preaching for the College church in Abilene, Texas.

Huffard: Brother Douglas, why did you decide to go to Beirut?

Douglas: We went to Beirut, first of all, because the Egyptian government insisted that we leave Egypt. Secondly, because we had years before decided that any time we were compelled to leave a country, if such developed, we would go to a neighboring country rather than return to the States. We had this understanding with the eldership in America. Third, we went to Beirut because Lebanon was a country we could enter without any difficulty, a country where we could secure a resident's permit and could carry on what we hoped would be an effective work.

Huffard: Did the strategic location of Beirut have anything to do with it as far as the Arab countries?

Douglas: Very definitely. We felt that Beirut was centrally located. From Beirut, not only American missionaries but national Christians could readily travel to most other Arab countries and carry on a work for the Lord.

Huffard: There was some work going on in Beirut at the time that you went, but perhaps you are not acquainted with all of the work. Could you tell us something about what you know of the beginning?

Douglas: Brother Carl Matheny went to Beirut in the late summer of 1961 and worked there by himself until the fall of 1965 at which time we came to Beirut. Throughout this time I believe the church, for the most part, met in his home. There probably were 8 or 10 converts over this initial period of about 4 years. Brother Robert Taylor came to Beirut and spent a number of months in 1964 while Brother Matheny returned to the United States.

Huffard: What is the religious background of the people in Beirut?

Douglas: The city of Beirut, like the country of Lebanon, is religiously divided. The country is about 51% Christian and 49% Moslem. When you think of the Christian segment of the population, probably 55% of the total Christian population is Merinite Catholic and something like 35% Eastern Orthodox. That would leave about 10% that would be of various Protestant bodies.

Huffard: What do you mean by Merinite Catholic?

Douglas: The Merinite Catholic Church is an indigenous church that grew up in the mountains of Lebanon, dating from about the 6th or 7th century. It gets its name from a man by the name of Maron who is counted as the patron saint of this movement. This church developed on its own in the isolation of the Lebanon

mountains in maybe the 12th or 13th century when a Jesuit Catholic missionary came to Lebanon. They encountered this Merinite church, and you have maybe the only case in history of the conversion in mass of a religious body, a conversion in the sense that the Merinite church entered into a unique association with Rome. They agreed to recognize the supremacy of the pope and in return their patriarch was given the rank of a cardinal. They were allowed to maintain their own liturgy in their own language, Syriac, and their priests always were married and have remained so throughout the centuries.

Huffard: Is there a great deal of difference in the belief of the Merinites and the Roman Catholics?

Douglas: Generally, I think there is not other than these two or three points that I have just mentioned, liturgy, the language of the liturgy and the question of the celibacy of the priest. Of course, the Merinites are an exceedingly fanatic people. Though they profess an allegiance to Rome, they believe their church is far, far superior to the Roman Catholic Church. They disdain the Roman Catholic religion generally.

Huffard: What would you say about the cultural and economic situation in Lebanon?

Douglas: Lebanon is a very small country, about two million people total population. It is the most economically and educationally advanced of all the Arab states. The standard of living is higher. A Western influence, particularly the French influence, is very strong and has remained very strong following Lebanon's independence. In fact, of all the Arab countries, Lebanon is the only Arab country that has allowed the foreign dominated schools to continue after independence. The Lebanese people tend to be very sophisticated. Their standard of living, does not compare with that of the United States, but it is high enough that they are effected by a definite materialism. The attitude that you encounter in most people is one of general indifference toward religion as you would find in many people in the States at this time.

Huffard: What percent of the population lives in the city of Beirut?

Douglas: Well, if you consider Beirut and the immediate suburbs, you have about 50% of the total population in the city.

Huffard: What approach did you make in the work when you went to Beirut? How did you start?

Douglas: Brother Matheny had secured a meeting place and was attempting evangelistic work through conducting occasional gospel meeting type services, a correspondence course was being carried on, but the primary source of contacts remained on a individual basis. My main effort in the city of Beirut was to try to begin a Bible training school. This eventually occupied the whole of my time there.

Huffard: From where did the students come?

Douglas: The Bible training school drew its students from several Middle Eastern countries, one or two from Lebanon, several from Syria. The largest number actually came from Jordan, from the east bank and a number from the west bank from the city of Jerusalem which was then in Arab hands, the old city of Jerusalem.

Huffard: About how many students did you have the first year of the school?

Douglas: The first year we had about 12 students. The next year the number doubled that or maybe even closer to 30.

Huffard: As you look back on the first years of the school, what would be some of the mistakes that you think were made that others might profit from?

Douglas: I think that we possibly did not set up a system of rules and of communication with the students adequate to letting them know exactly what we expected of them. Consequently, there was some confusion. This created a tendency on the part of some students to attempt to play student against student, student against administrator, and teacher against administrator causing some undue confusion.

Huffard: What language was used there?

Douglas: The language of Lebanon is Arabic. In the Bible training school we either taught in English as we had a few students proficient enough in English to do this or we used a translator who translated into Arabic.

Huffard: What are some of the strongest methods or some of the best work that you feel was done in the school?

Douglas: I think the school provided a unique opportunity for grounding young men in the Christian faith, giving them the Bible background they would need to go back to their home communities to share Christ. We insisted that any of those who came to school there should also pursue a secular education whether it be an education moving toward a university degree or learning a trade. This was done for the purpose of eliminating the possibility or the need of any foreign support for these young men when they completed their education. I think this was a very sound move and is a very sound policy now.

Huffard: Did you pay the students to come to school?

Douglas: No, the students were not paid to come to school. The school building was such as allowed us to have a couple of classrooms and offices and there were boarding facilities. The students who came to the school were provided with this place to live and their meals. In return for this they were expected to attend so many hours of Bible classes per week and to help in the general work of maintaining the school all the way from working in the kitchen in preparing meals to caring for the building and grounds and to putting in a limited amount of time each week in administering the correspondence course or distributing tracts or some other aspect of evangelism.

Huffard: This was called the Middle East Bible Training School. Was it a part of the purpose of the school to prepare preachers that might receive support from America or what was the aim?

Douglas: The aim of the school was to prepare Arab Christians, giving them sufficient Bible knowledge that they might go back home and support themselves and yet have the biblical background necessary to preaching and doing effective personal work and carrying on the Lord's work. One of the stated aims of the school was to make

foreign support of these men absolutely unnecessary.

Huffard: As you observed the school through these years, and how many years has it been since the beginning?

Douglas: It began in September, 1966.

Huffard: And you have been away from it how long?

Douglas: About two years.

Huffard: Do you feel that you can form any opinion now as to whether this is a solid direction that is planned for the school?

Douglas: I believe it is. Mistakes have been made as I suppose they will be in all works and especially in any new work. I think we can see in some of the young men who have finished the school real possibilities. No doubt, there have been some who have taken advantage of the situation and no doubt there will be others in the future. In view of the circumstances in the Middle East as a whole, I believe this is a very solid and positive way to approach that area of the world.

Huffard: Did you find any problem in getting support for the school?

Douglas: Originally, there really was no problem as support was coming to us in Egypt and as we came to Beirut with this idea we were able to secure additional support from many of the places that had known of the work in Egypt earlier. In the past two years or so some problems of support have developed but these, it seems to me, have come about largely because of the absence of adequate communication.

Huffard: Could you give us an idea about the curriculum of the school?

Douglas: The curriculum of the school involved approximately 30 different Bible courses if my memory serves me correct. These were taught as Bible courses would be taught in the college, say a three hour course would meet three hours in a week in one hour sessions. These 30 courses which would amount to about 90 hours covered all of the books of the New Testament in so far as the textual study. The curriculum was a bit weak in terms of Old Testament study but then in view of the Middle East situation this seemed advisable or not really so necessary. Bible related topics or subjects were also taught such as the great doctrines of the Bible, and denominational teachings, how we got our Bible and Christian ethic, matters of this kind. Basically, I think it was a fairly well balanced program.

Huffard: I believe that there has been an indigenous movement among the Arabs in addition to the school. Do you know anything of this effort?

Douglas: Only a little. In connection with the Bible training school we attempted to carry on evangelistic efforts. One young man in the village where the school was located was converted and through his influence, combined with one or two men connected with the school, a movement or a congregation has begun in one of the suburbs of Beirut. From the outset we pretty well insisted that anything these men did in beginning a new congregation should be done on their own initiative and should be confined to whatever resources financially and otherwise they had available. This

indigenous movement thus began and my understanding is it has continued and may well be one of the best works in connection with Beirut.

Huffard: What would you say are the opportunities as far as Beirut or Lebanon at the present time?

Douglas: As far as freedom to do as you would in carrying on an evangelistic program, I think they are virtually unlimited. There are several sizeable blocks of people that could be explored. You have a large section of Palestinian people. There is a considerable Syrian community in Beirut. There is a Greek community of 30,000. There is an Armenian community that is at least that large or larger and each of these groups of people represent tremendous opportunities. I especially think of the Syrian people as being a means of reaching back into Syria where mission work today can be carried on only with great difficulty.

Huffard: Can you foresee the possibility of Beirut being more of a launching pad than to the other Arab countries because of this freedom and because it is designated as a Christian country?

Douglas: Yes, I think this is the way most of us have always looked at it and always dreamed of using Lebanon as such a launching pad. This was the reason for establishing the school there. Arab students could with greater freedom come to Lebanon than to any other country and from Lebanon, why, of course, the students can go back to their own country plus there are these sizeable Arab communities that are not Lebanese who hopefully will go back to their homelands.

Huffard: Now for any student who would have as a goal going to Lebanon, what recommendation would you make?

Douglas: I would recommend that that person take all of the mission courses and do all of the advanced reading that he can with regard to mission efforts around the world and that he make himself acquainted with the history of the Arabs and the history of Lebanon and with the Moslem religion. I certainly believe he ought to plan study Arabic and thus to allow himself time to do that after he arrives on the field.

Huffard: For students who might be going anywhere in the Middle East, would there be an opportunity to make Beirut a training ground, studying in the American University of Beirut and so on?

Douglas: Very definitely so. In fact, Lebanon would offer the best possibility of doing something like this. The American University is an excellent school. The student could study Arabic or Persian. They may offer even other languages than those two. I am not really aware of that.

Huffard: Would there be any summary that you would like to make concerning the work in Beirut and Lebanon?

Douglas: I believe that the Bible training school will offer one of the greatest hopes for the Middle East in general. I think a work among the native Lebanese is going to come only very slowly and with great difficulty. However, as I have already mentioned there are these sizeable other Arab populations in the country who are much more receptive.

Huffard: Did you have any government difficulty while you were in Beirut?

Douglas: No, the Lebanese government has not really created any difficulties for the work there.

Huffard: I understand at the present there is some recognition of the church by the government, but do you know any details on this?

Douglas: No, I am sorry I don't.

Huffard: We appreciate your contribution, Brother Bob Douglas, to Harding College Living History of Missions.