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Interview of Philip Slate

Philip Slate

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Philip Slate who has been engaged in evangelistic work in England for the past 18½ years was interviewed by Joe Hacker and Winfred Wright on February 17, 1970.

Hacker: Brother Slate, could you give us a brief historical outline of the work where you are now engaged from the beginning to today?

Slate: The area where I am working is in southeastern England, now especially in Oxford, but prior to that 7 years in London. That isn't the history of the work in that area because the church goes back 200 or 300 years in Britain which is much earlier than it does in this country. Our work in the London area started in 1961 when the Hillsboro church in Nashville asked an older man, E. P. Lake, and me to go over there to help start a congregation in the suburbs of London. At that time we had a campaign. Since then, in fact two years later, we had another campaign with two men always working in this work. That's the way in which it started. We had just a scratch and then from that we pressed on. Now the congregation has about 100 members. About half of this number would be transient people or people who are there for two or three years. You find many people like this in London; they are from all over the world. This is the thing which we didn't anticipate when we started. This is generally the history of what we have done at Wembley as far as starting a congregation. They have their own building and the Bible School has been started. I think you plan to ask something about this a little later, but this is for the training of local people. Did you have in mind more concerning the history of the work in England as a whole?

Hacker: No, just your work.

Wright: Could you comment briefly concerning the religious background of the people with whom you work?

Slate: In background, of course, England was for many years Roman Catholic, but from the time of Henry VIII it has been Church of England which has a lot of the earmarks of Roman Catholicism, especially the high church. However, in more recent years England has not been in actuality a religious country. It has been characterized by irreligion. Perhaps not the iconoclastic type of irreligion that you might find on the Continent or Scandinavia but it has been more of a social phenomenon than something that really meant a lot to the people. Consequently you have people who otherwise are quite knowledgeable about history and current events, but, who concerning religion in general and the Bible in specific, are very ignorant.

In working in that area one must wrestle with people who have a cultural religion. The Church of England serves the purpose of bringing a baby into the world, as it were, initiating it, christening it and of performing marriages and of conducting funerals. It is interesting to see how the people still hold on to this while at times very vigorously opposing the theology of the Church of England to whatever

extent they may understand it. A person can maintain membership in the Church of England by going to communion three times a year; some hold membership without going that frequently. A Church of England clergyman speaking rather disparagingly of his work in referring to this matter of christening the babies, performing weddings and funerals, as being largely a matter of hatching, matching and dispatching. I suppose that indicates the way in which it is a social thing and yet it isn't something that permeates deeply into the lives of the people.

Hacker: This leads us then to a question concerning the cultural and economic background of the people and its relationship to the work. I wonder if you could talk a bit about that and perhaps bring in this interesting point that you raised in the beginning about the possibility of the church of the New Testament existing in England prior to what we have come to know as the restoration movement in America.

Slate: This can be documented. We know of a few congregations in the north of England and the south of Scotland who were following the New Testament order of things well before the time of the Campbells. This didn't represent much of a movement. It represented more isolated pockets of people who were trying to go back to the New Testament way of doing things. This was not really a very big movement until the last century and a digressive movement which came through this country went through England some 20 or 30 years later. The toll it took there was much greater than here. There was only one full time worker left, named Walter Crosswaite, to regather the fragments. They have been slower to regather or collect their forces after this destructive period, but a number of buildings are left and a few groups of people are left whose history goes back quite far. The old church in London, the Kingstown congregation, goes back certainly 150 years. Its building is almost 100 years old.

Now, the cultural background of the people as a whole--I think it wouldn't be fair to say that the culture in Britain had been significantly touched by New Testament Christianity. There was a time when they were much more religious than they are now. Culturally, of course, the people are comparatively well educated. Perhaps across the board they would be generally more knowledgeable, but as I said earlier, there is a sort of a vacuum when it comes to religious knowledge.

Wright: I am sure that even though there are similarities between the cultures in England and in America, you have had several challenges or obstacles that you had to meet. Could you comment on these?

Slate: Most of these have been cultural ones. Whenever an American goes over, and he is initially met by England people or English people are met by him, they, as anybody, will meet him with certain pre-suppositions and expectations. A lot of time, service people who have gone over there (not Christians), have, of course, let their hair down as service people from all countries do when they are away from home. Generally the type of American tourist who goes over there and hits a place like London --this is where we had mostly our cultural barometer--are people who have quite a lot of money and who may or may not intentionally show it off.

When one works over there, he has to work initially under this rather unfavorable situation or climate until they get to know him. That means in any sort of work which one plans to do in a month, go over and have one great big splurge in a month, having to overcome these longstanding cultural barriers is destined to be less effective than

we would really want it to be. This is the reason why when we originally went knowing limitedly about this, we planned to stay a minimum of five years because we felt that although we could pick up certain idioms of speech rather quickly and learn certain habits that it would take a long time to get into thought patterns and to gain their confidence and to know that we were not doing what seems to be typically American: Come in and rush through it and you go out with less than the best quality. We felt this to be very necessary and indispensable to what we wanted to do in getting our congregation started and in getting it on its feet.

But there are, of course, a number of these cultural things which vary: the outlook to economics, the outlook to tradition, the outlook to life habits and the way one lives. Oh, there are just a lot of little things which seem to be intangible when you start, but later they become paramount as far as being able to have a rapport with the people with whom you work.

Hacker: As you consider these things that relate to the culture of the people and so forth, what methods are you using now that you find successful with these people?

Slate: Well, first of all, as I have already hinted, the methods which do the most good are the ones that are of a long standing nature. In other words, nothing that goes in at one blurb to do a thing over a period of a week or two weeks. I have tried this in gospel meetings, for example, in some of the older churches. Probably one reason I have is that their tradition or their existence is so long that they remember clearly the times when the buildings were full, and Brother Crosswaite or someone else would do a fine job and the building was packed and they had so many baptisms. They still assume that the same thing can be done. When it doesn't happen, they assume that you are not preaching the way Brother Crosswaite preached, which I think is an assumption that is wrong.

The methods we have used which have been most successful have been variations of personal work. About three and a half years ago when I was in the States the last time, a man who was very active in personal work asked me if we were doing any personal work in England. I told him we just wouldn't teach the gospel to anyone if we didn't. That isn't because we haven't tried other things. We tried to be pragmatic about it when we started. We didn't assume that just because it worked here in the States that it would work there, but we did have to have some way of deciding what would work.

We distributed handbills door to door. We distributed pamphlets from door to door. But, when in the suburb of London you distribute 15,000 pamphlets and you get no more than two or three measurable responses, we felt that wasn't quite tangible enough although we had hopes that maybe somebody would read those pamphlets. We tried various types of newspaper articles and got maybe five responses to the whole lot. We tried gospel meetings. We tried campaigns.

But, for sheer force of work, man hours put into it, and tangible long range results, nothing has succeeded like variations of personal work whether it is going out and meeting people in a cold way, door to door work and that's bad enough. People resent your invading the privacy of their castle. One man referred to the working man in

the suburbs of London as commuting to London, coming home at 5:00 and pulling up the drawbridge because he doesn't want anyone to go in there. It doesn't matter what he is selling or what he is giving away. He just doesn't want it. Using the method of referral, one person to another when one becomes a Christian, is the best way which we can do it. I say long range because so many questions must be answered that you cannot do it all within the scope of a week. I think I can count on both hands the number of people I have studied with in England in eight and a half years with whom I could study on the assumption that there was a mutual respect for the scripture. In the case of all the rest of them it has been necessary to deal in some phase of Christian evidences. When you are talking about evidences, you are talking about something that requires some time--time to sink in as a process of growth. That's the reason why I say it has to be a prolonged method where there can be a two way flow of information and you can monitor what they are thinking, what their questions are.

Wright: You've indicated that some methods are more successful than others in England. Are there specific methods that you have abandoned because they are extremely ineffective or even offensive to the people?

Slate: Yes, I think so. There are some variations. Some of the older congregations still hold on very zealously to gospel meetings. I would say there are little pockets in England where they can still have effective gospel meetings but only when these meetings have been prepared for by personal work.

The thing that I have tried effectively and some of the others have tried is a variation of the gospel meeting. After you speak, have a time for questions and perhaps abandoning an invitation song. If you have the odd person to come, and you cannot assume that he has a respect for the Bible, you don't know what he is--to use a British expression, "a really tub thumping atheist" or whether he is a disgruntled member of the Church of England. You cannot know and that, of course, has a lot to do with the type of message that you would present to him. British people resist any form of pressure, so anything that would look like pressure whether it is an emotional appeal, an invitation song or something of that nature, they resist very sharply. We are much happier about people being taught and coming to us and saying, "Look, I want to become a Christian." We are much happier about that because we have found that kind stick and the other kind do not stick.

I've been a part of several campaigns in England and I personally have my doubts that they are worth their money. I feel if the same amount of money or indeed half of that money were spent in sending people there to work over a long period of time then in the long run local congregations would be stronger and more people would be taught the gospel more adequately than in the campaigns. Now, I make the comment only from the point of view of the effect that it has in Britain. I'm not talking about the value of a campaign for what it does to the campaigners, and I know that must be taken into consideration as well. If people are going there to learn the situation with the view perhaps of going there or some other place, then I think that also needs to be computed as to whether or not it is financially viable. Generally speaking, I would think if people are counting on a campaign to do their evangelizing for them, it is a mistake in Britain. I say that from the point of view of helping organize some of them and conducting personal work in them; I would say the same thing for gospel meetings as well.

Wright: Are there any negative effects of these campaigns that lead you to your statement?

Slate: Yes, we could roll together a number of these things that I just made. Within a scope of three weeks, it isn't really possible for an American to get rid of a lot of the aggravating little habits he has to an English person. Now, I know certainly from the point of view of London, this would be at a peak. That is, they will have seen more Americans with more offensive habits than people in other parts of the country. The clothes you wear and other little habits of endless faux pas in the restaurant and in the homes. Some of these words are very serious to these people. They are swear words to them whereas to us they are little off-the-cuff endearing remarks that we might make to children. So while they can make good friendships with them they are not able always to get over some of the idiosyncrasies or characteristic American things which prevent them from teaching adequately. That is one of the big things. The time is not sufficient.

Hacker: What do you think about the training of converts and the developing of training schools?

Slate: This is imperative in Britain. We started one of these in Wembley in London about three years ago and it is working out very well. For the reasons that are usually given for this we are not trying to teach the students there English and history and things of that nature which they can get in a local school perhaps better than we can give it to them any way. We are trying to train them in doing the Lord's work in a way that otherwise they wouldn't get it. We feel that the culture is different enough between Britian and America for that reason. For that reason we shouldn't send them to the United States. We run the same risks that are run elsewhere--boys marrying American girls or falling in love with the way of life here and just may not want to go back. Furthermore, for reasons I have just mentioned, the training he would get here wouldn't necessarily equip him as adequately for the work in Britian as it would for work over here. So that is the idea of having men teaching in this training program who have their finger on the pulse, who know the situation in order to give that type of training.

Wright: What special approaches have you used in England to reach the people?

Slate: I have mentioned this long range approach in whatever it is. A thing that has dawned on me slowly and which only in recent years I have been trying to do is the importance of a small group, not so much along the lines of group dynamics, as it is to meet in people's homes for studies because the British people do not make friendships very easily. Once they make a friendship, it is lasting. We have really been astounded at the way in which British people have been impressed with the closeness which exists between Christians. They really value it in a cold society where people keep aloof from each other. Of course, there are a lot of jokes illustrating this British aloofness, many of which you have probably heard. As far as the method of evangelism is concerned, we have found that meeting in small groups in homes for just a Bible study has turned out very well indeed because it gives them an opportunity to know each other better in a way that they are not able to know each other at a building.

Hacker: You mentioned a moment ago that you were concerned about the possibility of young men from Britian coming here to study. What do you think of American support for national preachers remaining in Britian to work?

Slate: Well, for the same reason, we try to keep that as a second choice. A problem we face right now in the other churches in Britian is that they have had an idea of mutual ministry which means they wouldn't have a full time preacher working with them. A lot of them are unwilling to support a man unless they get some blood out of him; that is, unless he preaches a certain amount of time where they are but not as a full time preacher.

Some of these churches are very slow about supporting preachers. The time is coming and we feel this deserves priority of trying to get these churches to assume responsibility for supporting their own men. This is being done. I am much happier about an older man in Britian receiving support from American than a young man because he doesn't always know how to take it and for the same reasons that I have heard others voice this concern from other countries--we would rather local churches accept their responsibility in supporting him although we may not run quite as many risks as certain other countries do but still we feel this is second down the line.

Right now we need some support but only because we have exhausted as far as we know local resources. We are happy that some of the local churches are buckling in and even being willing to support some of the young men who study at the Wembley Bible School.

Wright: Brother Slate, I understand that you are doing some research at Oxford in the area of communications. What suggestions would you have concerning language training for someone planning to go to England as a missionary? Could you give something of your research?

Slate: Well, of course, you can go and communicate immediately, but a lot of the things you just have to learn as you go along. I mean substitute words. You can't learn those in advance. On a car they do not talk about the hood, but talk about the bonnet. They don't talk about the trunk, they talk about the boot. This proliferates out over all of life. No one can give an official list of these because sometimes they even vary within the country itself. You pick these up as you go along and that's the reason why it just takes some time to do it.

More apropos here is the work I am doing on communications at Oxford now is in essence a cross pollination between contemporary communications research and the life and work of the local church as it does its evangelistic work. This cross pollination has been done by people in other walks of life--educators, journalists, politicians, business people and the church--with regard to mass communication, but I am concerned about this on the local congregational level.

What I have come up with so far has to do with getting priorities organized correctly rather than coming up with a lot of new methods. In other words, when do you use the mass media and for what purpose? You can use a medium for the wrong purpose and be deflated and conclude that the medium is wrong when in point of view we may be just using it wrongly. This seems to be going in the direction of preventing a lot of this. People sacrifice a lot of money to get a program of just

straightforward preaching on television or radio when in point of fact that will not do the job. They go away deflated and say, "Well, we've got to give up television" or "These people aren't interested in the gospel." If they used television for another purpose and recognized that they are going to reach more people by talking to them personally, then, of course, the results would be better and there would be less discouragement.

I am trying to come up with some rules of thumb by which we can say in this sociological situation that is more likely to reach the people than this. In an emergent nation like one of the African countries or in Brazil where people treat radio differently to the way they do in the old state societies of Europe, you can do different things with it. So you can say if there is an emerging nation where there is interest in learning, then we are likely to do some significant evangelism by the mass media. Where people are detached and they have as reference groups small local groups rather than being a part of the whole nation, then it means we need to penetrate reference groups or provide counter reference groups for these people. These are the lines along which my communications has gone.

Hacker: I hope you will make this paper available to us for our library when you get it finished. What do you feel needs to be done to improve the approach that we may have to work in Britian?

Slate: I think first I would encourage you to do what I understand you are already doing--of having some of the men from these fields to come and speak like Keith Robinson. I think this is invaluable because a lot of what people like this have to offer just cannot be written up.

I think probably taping a lot of it is probably the next best thing, but in the nature of the case, a lot of these fellows are so bogged down with teaching and certain administrative work that they do not have time to write.

I think to have a real flesh and blood story here, and where there can be, is to have an exchange with the students. Of course, there is no substitute for being there and feeling this a bit one's self. Recently, well indeed in the last two summers, we have had a young man who is going to Abilene to spend two summers in Britian working. He raised his own money, but he went as a part of their program. He had to write papers as a result of his going. He had textbooks with him and he was graded on it. He worked among the people for the purpose of finding out the situation. Now he is determined to come back. I think this is very good. There is a financial problem here, but I think it is very good indeed.

Hacker: We are developing this with our internship program here. We appreciate very much your willingness to take this time with us and to share these point of view on our tape. We hope you will have success in your work in the church and in your research. We are looking forward to the opportunity when we can be back together again. We want to wish you Godspeed.