

Oral History Interview of Dr. Elmer Towns

Date of Interview: July 13, 2010

Location of Interview: Recording Studio of the Student Radio Station, 90.9 The Light

Name of Interviewee: Dr. Elmer Towns

Name of Interviewers: Lowell Walters and Cline Hall

Transcriber: Jesse Ronda

Interview Length: (1:56:01)

Notes:

Walters: (0:01) Welcome to this interview in the oral history project of the Liberty University archives. This interview is being conducted on July 13, 2010. Today we are interviewing Dr. Elmer Towns. My name is Lowell Walters and I will be conducting the interview today along with Dr. Cline Hall. Greetings Dr. Hall.

Hall: (0:21) Good afternoon.

Walters: (0:23) And greetings to you Dr. Towns.

Towns: (0:24) Good afternoon.

Walters: (0:25) Well, let us start off asking you a few questions about your personal history. Where were you born? Were you raised in a Christian home? What's your family's denominational background? Can you tell us a little bit about your childhood and your upbringing?

Towns: (0:41) My mother met my father at a dance in 1930 during The Depression years and they fell in love and they got married. And as a young kid, when I was born in 1932, two years after later to them, I can remember being dragged around to the bars and the

SpeakEasy, so Savannah, Georgia, and I always remember my dad taking the drink...and by the way, my dad died an alcoholic. He would take the drink and hand the bottle back to my mother and she would put it in her purse and therefore in my first recollection, I can remember being afraid of the revenuers who might burst into a place like Johnny Harris in Savannah, Georgia where they like to go and eat and drink and dance. And that's my life. And I was sprinkled as a little kid in a Presbyterian church because my mother had been brought up in South Carolina in a Presbyterian church and so that didn't mean anything other than the fact that I was sprinkled in a Presbyterian church and I assume I was a member there, I don't know about that.

Walters: (1:49) Ok, and then what did your parents do for a living?

Towns: (1:52) My father worked for forty-two years as a clerk at White Hardware Company in Savannah, Georgia. Now, interesting, every time I see Paula Deen on television, you know, she's the food chef from Savannah, Georgia, her restaurant is in the White Hardware Company and some of the original hardware, like the old cash register, is still there and as a little boy way back in the late '30s, I was in that restaurant. So, that just kind of makes my heart beat a thump when I see it. My dad was a clerk. He was a drinking man. They kept him on because he was indispensable. My father had a photographic memory. He could walk up to the fourth or the fifth floor, pick up a bag of screws and on his way down he would take inventory; he was a walking computer. And he could take inventory, come down, write down the number and the kinds and the amount of screws and send off an order blank and so, because he was indispensable, they paid him until he couldn't work anymore and then they paid him until he died and my

father made two or three professions of faith but could not, could, could never get over drinking and so he died an alcoholic.

Walters: (3:11) And then when would that have been?

Towns: (3:13) My father died in nineteen...oh, that's a good question, sixty-three...

Walters: (3:18) So you were an adult?

Towns: (3:19) Yes, yes.

Walters: (3:20) He didn't die early?

Towns: (3:21) No, he didn't die as a child, no. I had parents all the way through my childhood.

Walters: (3:25) Ok, and then who were your closest friends when you were growing up then?

Towns: (3:29) Well, let me tell what happened. In September we moved to Wagner Heights, September 1938. And I walked into the living room and my mother was being presented with coffee. There was a man on his knees in the living room floor and he had bags of coffee on the floor. He was trying to sell my mother coffee. He was a door to door salesman. Jimmy Breland was from South Carolina, the only job he could get was selling wares door to door; a Jewel-Tea Coffee man. And I said, "What are you doing?" And he says, "Where do you go to Sunday school?" I said, "What's Sunday school?" He said, "Son, you don't know what Sunday school is?" I said, "No sir," and he began to tell, "It's a place where we have fun." He talked about singing and talked about stories and talked about coloring and he was talking about all these things and he said, "And, we'll, we'll use a sand..." "A sand table? What is a sand table?" He said, "Son, it's a table with sand on it." I can still remember me saying, "But doesn't it spill on the floor?"

“No,” he said, “it’s got a ledge around it.” And he saw he had me hooked and he used that for the gospel. He said, “If you come to Sunday school,” he kind of put his hands together like he was making a mountain, a small mountain. He said, and he walked his fingers, like, you’re walking your fingers, he said, “and I’ll show you how Jesus walked over the mountain.” I said, “Really?” And he said, “We’ll take a mirror and we’ll put it in the sand and we’ll make it like a lake and I’ll show you how Jesus walked across the...” I said, “Right on top of the water?” “Yes sir.” “He didn’t sink?” “No sir.” And then I said, “Like walking across the Savannah River?” “Yes.” “Mom, I want to go to Sunday school, I want to go to Sunday school.” And mother said, “Well, I guess you can go.” But she was skeptical. She said, “Now, what kind of Sunday school is it?” In the providence of God it was Presbyterian...

Walters: (5:21) Right.

Towns: (5:22) Eastern Heights Presbyterian Church. And mother said, “Oh, I don’t know. Where is that?” And he said, “It’s over on East 37th street.” That was about five miles away. She said, “Well, he’s a little kid. He could never find it, he’d get lost.” He said, “Oh, don’t worry. Son, look out.” And I looked through the screen door and there was a big black Jewel-Tea truck with gold letters, “Jewel-Tea Coffee.” He said, “You want to ride my truck to Sunday school?” What kid doesn’t want to ride a truck...

Walters: (5:48) Right.

Towns: (5:49) “Yes sir! Yes sir! I want to go to Sunday school.” Mother said, “Wait, wait, wait. He’s too young. I know that neighborhood you’re talking about on 37th. They built all those houses and they’re half built and it’s dangerous over there. If he goes to your Sunday school, he’ll sneak out and play in those houses and he’ll get hurt. No,

you wait until he's old enough to go to regular school." And that was about two, three, or four months from then. And so in September, 1938, I went to regular school and that was the day after Labor Day and I don't know whether it was the day before Labor Day on a Sunday or whatever, but I went to school, I went to Sunday school. I was waiting on the front porch. I had short pants on, I remember the short pants. And I was, they had a good crease on them, very clean with a crease and I was standing there and it was a rainy day. Not heavily rain but just a misty day. But all the street, we lived on a, a dirt street, had mud puddles in it and I watched him come down the street splashing through the mud puddles. And I ran down and mother said, "Wait! Get back up here." "Yes ma'am." "Wait until he gets here." And when he got there I ran down, jumped in the back of his truck. I expected to see piles of coffee and boxes everywhere but every Saturday night he would take all the things out of his truck, put in his living room, and then he would go around and pick up children and take us to Sunday school. He picked up my sister and me, went the next block and picked up the four Amot boys, went five blocks and picked up the two Drigger children, and then there was a park, there was a housing project. He lived in one housing project and he went through this housing project to pick up some children. And I never missed for the next thirty-seven, I said thirty-seven? I never missed for the next fourteen years.

Walters: (7:42) Wow.

Towns: (7:43) Now, mother said, "If you're going to go to Sunday school, I want you to get a pen like all those good people out in the Victory Drive area." That's where mother wanted to live, with the rich people. We lived in a, pretty close to a shotgun house. Didn't have any hot running water, didn't have any closets, and we put nails on the wall

and hung our clothes up and so it was, we were just poor folks because daddy's drinking kept us poor. And so mother said, "Now, I want you to get that pen." So she said, "If I send you to Sunday school and you don't go to Sunday school, " she said, "I'll just beat you to death." Now, you laugh at that phrase. My mother used to say that to me; "If you don't do that, I'll just beat you to death." She didn't mean it, she loved me. I never doubted my mother loved me but I never doubted that she'd beat me [*chuckle*] and so...

Walters: (8:29) So did you have siblings or you an only...

Towns: (8:31) I was the oldest. I had a younger sister who was five years younger and, that's than me, and then I had a brother who was twelve years younger than me. There were three of us and all three of us were saved later in life and my mother was saved later in life and we'll talk about those conversions later on.

Walters: (8:47) Sure.

Towns: (8:48) But Jimmy Breland became my substitute father. He took me to Sunday school. He counseled me. I can remember on Easter Sunday mornings I could hear this scratching on the screen, of course it would be hot in our house; the windows would be open, and I could hear him yelling or whispering through the window, "Elmer, get up. We got to go to sunrise service." And so I always went to sunrise service. Jimmy Breland was there for me. He, he had eighth grade education, he never had a job bigger than driving a truck, but he, he had a great impact. A man later wrote a doctrinal dissertation about that little church, Eastern Heights Presbyterian Church, and he documents that there were about nineteen young people from that church who went off into fulltime Christian service. We went off to Bible colleges, we went to Moody, we went to Bob Jones, Columbia Bible College, Presbyterian College; several colleges. And

these young people later were saved in revival and there was something about Jimmy Breland. He really made an impact on children. His reward will be great in heaven. And so...

Hall: (9:58) Out of those, out of those people that you're talking about um...did any of them go into the ministry?

Towns: (10:03) Oh yes. Of those nineteen, nineteen went into ministry. Matter of fact, I was telling this story just recently up in Detroit and I mentioned one of these persons who did it, I mentioned Frank Perry, and this lady she, she, I could just see her face in the audience, she just almost...like she, she had a revelation. She just went like this and afterwards she said, "I knew Frank Perry. He was my pastor in Atlanta, Georgia." I said, "That's right." She said, "He changed my life," and she began to talk about it. So, many of these young people, they went into Presbyterian churches, Independent Baptist churches, Southern Baptist churches, Pentecostal Holist churches, and Christian Missionary Alliance churches. So, it was a Presbyterian church but its commitment was much broader than Presbyterian; it was to Jesus Christ.

Walters: (10:48) And so this fellow had a truck ministry before the bus ministry maybe [*laughter*].

Towns: (10:52) That's exactly right and he put us in the back of the tuck until I was old enough to ride my bicycle to Sunday school.

Walters: (10:59) So, can you tell us about your conversion experience? I assume it was fairly early on in your teen years or sometime in there or...?

Towns: (11:05) Well, let me tell you. Easter Sunday, 1944 I was twelve years old and I joined the church because you were expected to join the church at twelve. At that time,

there were about fourteen of us in the pastor's office. And the pastor...we had all memorized the children's catechism and we had memorized verses and Jimmy Breland was a magnificent Bible teacher and he had taught us the Word of God. But on this particular Sunday, the pastor went around, he had questions and he would ask the first one, "Do you believe the Bible is the authoritative Word of God?" And the first student, or pupil, said, "Yes," and all the rest of us agreed. He got to me, I was about half way around, "Do you believe in the virgin birth; that Jesus was born of a virgin, He was the son of God?" "Yes sir." I wasn't even sure what it was but if I was supposed to believe it, I believed it. And he got to Frank Perry and when he got to Frank Perry he said, "Frank, do you believe that Jesus is coming again?" He said, "Yes," and then he looked at the rest of us and we nodded our head but I was saying, "I sure hope it's not soon. I'm not ready." The Bible says, "Two shall be sleeping in the bed." I slept with my brother, he said, "He's going to go and I won't." He said, "Two shall be working in the fields." In the summertime, I went back to my grandfather's home up in South Carolina and worked on the farm. It said, "Two shall be in the fields." Now, I've always assumed they were picking cotton because I picked cotton. And it said, "One shall be taken and the other left behind." I said, "I'll be left." Maybe in my high school years, maybe two, three, four dozen times, I would say, "Oh God, save me. I want to go to heaven." I might have even said, "Oh God, save me. I don't want to go to hell." I even said the words, "Jesus, come into my heart," but in my heart after I prayed them, I knew I wasn't different and so I had prayed that many times. And then after I had graduated from high school, I went to a revival meeting. Our church had a mission church, it was called Bonna Bella Presbyterian Church, which was about twelve miles from downtown

Savannah out in a fishing community; a little Presbyterian mission. And two twin brothers from Columbia Bible College finishing their junior year came as pastor that summer; a little church, twenty, thirty people. They had a building that would seat about a hundred and fifty, a hundred and sixty, a hundred and seventy; typical church, small church. And these boys were living in a garage apartment above a double car garage and they did something I heard about later. They had a prayer meeting every morning from five o'clock to eight o'clock. They would invite anyone in the community to come to that screen porch and pray on your way to work, before you start working, before you start your day, come and pray. And the, and the twins said, "One of us will be here to meet you. You don't have to stay the whole time. Just come and pray and then go about your work." And they had a, a typed list of about sixty-three teenagers on that list and the people would pick up that uh...it was about two or three pages and they would pray, "Save Art Winn, save Frank Perry, save Elmer Towns," and I can see, one brother would be there, it was Bill Harding from five to six thirty and Burt, his twin brother, from six thirty to eight o'clock and the people would come and pray. And then they invited a, a friend from Columbia Bible College, Joel [Ortendahl], to hold a revival meeting in the last week of July, 1950. Every night people got saved. It was really a true revival. I say revival is God pouring his spirit out on his people, "I will pour out my spirit onto all flesh," Joel 2:29. So, we had revival; God was there. You could walk into that church and you knew that...kind of like Thomas Road was in the founding of Liberty; God was there. And every night there was five, six, seven, eight, nine people going forward to get saved. Half way through the revival, I remember vividly, this man standing up, I didn't recognize him, I was on a different mail route. He said, "Folks, I'm your postman. I can

call most of you here by name and your box number.” And he said, “I want you to know,” he said, “I’m a Baptist.” And he said, “I want you to know that I’ve attended a Baptist church all my life.” He said, “I went to Sunday school, I’ve been a Baptist Sunday school teacher, deacon but tonight, I got born again. Let me tell you why;” he said, “I come up Durant Avenue and the closer I got to this church, I felt something.” He said, “I could feel something and it was God. And when I passed and went away, I felt Him go away. And I said, ‘If God is there, I’ve got to go find out.’ I came and I heard the gospel and I went forward and I’m born again.” I thought, “Wow, just like the book of Acts.” Well, God was there. They went a second week and on Thursday night, July the 25th, 1950, no one went forward for the first time in a week and a half. And Bill Harding walked down by the communion table...you got to understand, he’s probably a kid now, twenty years old. He said, “Someone here, God wants you to get saved tonight. You’re supposed to get saved and you won’t come forward. You’re breaking the revival.” He said, “You’re hanging on to that pew.” And I looked down and I saw my knuckles hanging on to the pew and I let go immediately, I was under conviction. He says, “You won’t come forward. Here’s what I want you to do. Go home, kneel by your bed, look into heaven. Say, ‘Jesus, I have never done it before,’ and He will save you.” I said, “I’ll do it.” So when I got home that night, I was sleeping in the back bedroom. I was sleeping in the room with my father by this time and Richard and I had separate beds and so I was sitting by myself. So, I got down by my bed looking to heaven. So I looked out the window passed the trees into heaven and I said, “Jesus, I’ve never done it before.” And I said, “Yes I have. I said that a lot of times; Jesus, come into my heart and save me. I’ve said it. It doesn’t work.” So I prayed the Lord’s Prayer sincerely as I could and

went and got in bed and I was under conviction. I think God and Satan were wrestling for my soul that night and want to just tell you, God won. I got back out, I looked into heaven, and I said, "Lord, I've never prayed it before. Yes I have. It just doesn't work." And so I prayed, I know what I'll pray, "Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep." I came to that part of it and I prayed it over and, "Lord, keep my soul, keep my soul. I don't want to die when I'm sleeping." Got back in bed and I was convicted. I said, "If you really are going to do it, go the whole way." So I went and got back out of bed a third time, I looked into heaven, I said, "Lord, I've never done it before." And he said, well, I said that I felt the horrors of hell. I, and then I just quickly, "Oh Jesus, come into my heart and save me," and He did. I, matter of fact, I didn't finish my prayer, I kind of jumped up and I did the fist pump before it was popular...no [chuckle], I said, "He did. He saved me." People said, "How do you know you were saved?" I said, "Let me tell you something. If a man's been blind all of his life and suddenly he sees, how can you prove he sees? He's, he knows he sees because he sees." I said, "I know I'm saved because I'm saved." And from that moment to today, I have never once doubted my conversion. I know I'm saved. And so, just immediately, I had thought several times in my life about being a preacher. That was talked about but I, I never said yes but immediately I knew God was calling me into fulltime Christian service.

Walters: (19:22) Well, that's a question we'll get into here. How did the, how did baptism pan out for you then? You, you alluded to being sprinkled before this. Did, did you go back and investigate that issue or was that...?

Towns: (19:37) I was baptized five years later, after I went to Dallas Seminary. And so, that's a whole...

Walters: (19:44) In '49 then or...?

Towns: (19:46) Oh, this was 1950...

Walters: (19:47) Ok, that's right.

Towns: (19:48) and I was baptized in 1955...

Walters: (19:50) Ok.

Towns: (19:51) and I went back to my wife's home church at that time, Hope Congregational Church in St. Louis. It was an Independent Bible church and I was baptized there. But when I got saved, I didn't even think of baptism because at that time, I'm still thinking Presbyterian. I'm still thinking everything I've learned in the Presbyterian church. I was a fully um...full bred Presbyterian when I got saved.

Walters: (20:13) Sure.

Towns: (20:14) God saves Presbyterians...

Hall: (20:15) [*laughter*]

Walters: [*laughter*]

Towns: (20:16) just like he saves Baptists I want you to know.

Hall: (20:19) Ok.

Walters: (20:20) Well, you started to go into your decision to go into Christian ministry. So why don't you expand on that and tell us about your early mentors in that time period.

Towns: (20:30) Alright. You know, I knew God had called me. My best friend all the way through high school was Arthur Winn. And Arthur had lost his mother along about his freshman year in high school and we had always been friends. And his father raised

him, single parent family, you know, and I, I had a mom and dad and he'd eat over my house all the time. We were just good friends. And we were at the revival meeting the night I got saved and Arthur got saved about two nights later, it was a Thursday night, he got saved maybe Friday night or maybe Saturday, I'm, I forget exactly when he got saved. We talked about it but in my mind there was nothing to do but go to Columbia Bible College. Now, I had applied for a scholarship at Armstrong Junior College, see, that's Armstrong Atlantic State University, a fairly big college and I had won a scholarship. It was sponsored by one of the men's club. Whether it was Lions or the Kiwanis, I forget right off hand. But in that scholarship, that they were to pay all, there was no room and board, it was just tuition. Plus, it was kind of like a, I forget, maybe a blue, blue ribbon. All of the businessmen who belonged to that men's club would give you a suit and shoes and so it was all these other things and so it was kind of a prestige kind of a thing to win and you got your picture in the paper. But I, hardest thing I ever had to do was, I think it was Monday after I was saved, I went down to the office and I told them, "I'm not going to take the scholarship. God's called me to go to Columbia Bible College." "How are you going to pay for it?" "God'll take care of it." So I just knew that God had called me and that was probably the, the most difficult decision I made as a young Christian; to turn down money to trust God to take care of me.

Walters: (22:23) Did your father give you any flack over that?

Towns: (22:26) Mom was gone at the time. I'm glad she was not there. She was up at my grandpa's farm. And my dad uh...I don't think he, he said too much about it. I was just going to go ahead and do it and then tell my parents later, you know, that's, that's a seventeen year old for you.

Hall: (22:47) So actually, you, you applied to Columbia and you was planning on going there, did you go to Columbia?

Towns: (22:50) Yes.

Hall: (22:51) Because you wound up in Minneapolis [*chuckle*]. How...

Towns: (22:53) Ok, I went to Columbia Bible College and I went there for three years.

Hall: (22:57) Ok.

Towns: (22:58) Great, great experience. I thought it was heaven on earth, I thought it was the greatest college I had ever seen. I went to college, enjoyed studying, uh...I can remember the, the devotional life, the spiritual life was the greatest impact on me. It was a faith institution. We prayed for money for, to pay the faculty. My great hero in those days was Robert McQuilkin; the founder and president of Columbia Bible College. He taught a course on the spiritual life or the Christian life, whatever it was called, and assignments such as you have to pray for one hour and I remember praying for one hour as a young kid, as a young seventeen year old, and I remember having my devotions and...I, I started then writing down my prayer list and I still, to this day, I have my prayer lists that go back to January, 1951. I have all those sheets of paper and just yesterday I was in my file folder filing my sheet for last month in with all of those other sheets. And so, I, I learned to discipline at Columbia Bible College. Get up in the morning, meet God. Pray at night before you go to bed, meet God. And it was just a great college and um...I, I felt I met God there and I began, I learned the Bible in a great and new way, I was a Presbyterian. In the, in my third year I went to Savannah, Georgia on a weekend and I was leading singing in Youth for Christ and this lady comes up to me and she says, "Would you preach at my church tomorrow?" It was another little mission down in the

slums of Savannah called West Minster Presbyterian Church and I knew about the church and I said, "Sure, I'll come and preach for your church." And so, her name was Silla Hair, and Silla Hair uh...I said, "But I got to go to my church first." My Sunday school class was giving me twenty-five dollars towards my tuition and so I had to go and say something there. And soon as I finished speaking to my Sunday school class, the door opened, she put her hand in it, cocks her finger, and says, "Come on." And so I get in her car and we go across town and I preach a sermon. And she said, "Would you come back tonight and preach?" And I went back that night and let me tell you, the church had been closed. Silla Hair had a key, I never asked her where she got the key. She got about five ladies, cleaned the church, and said, "A church ought to have a Sunday school," and went up and down the street and she got about fifteen children and they had Sunday school. So, I preached to about five ladies and a bunch of children my first sermon there. "Will you come back tonight? We'll go up and down the streets and get more people to come," and that night there were probably around twenty there, "and we'll take up an offering and pay..." I had to hitch hike from Savannah to Columbia Bible College, about a hundred and fifty miles. I went back and forth and she said, "We'll pay your train ticket we'll go and get." So they went down and got me a train ticket and gave it to me for preaching and I went back home on the train that night. And I got in late and I should have got demerits but I don't think I did because I was preaching. And so, the last things she said, "Would you come back next week?" "Yes," and so next week I come back and she said, "We just want you to pastor." So, when I was nineteen years old, I was pastoring West Minster Presbyterian Church. Now, this church was an old Victorian lady. I want you to think of a big white frame building with four columns out front, big

steeple and a bell in it. They come out of a steam engine train. Think of ten stained glass windows, five down each side, dedicated to prominent families in Savannah. Think of old pulpit and platform and old, old oak and mahogany up there. Quite a beautiful lady but it was like a lady, a beautiful lady with a lot of wrinkles; hadn't been painted, it was in terrible condition. And so, I pastored that church for almost a year. It was a great experience for me. I learned more, I learned more than the people learned because I, God was speaking to me when I was putting sermons together. As a matter of fact, what I heard in chapel, I came back and preached the next Sunday. What I heard in the Bible class, I, I didn't know how to put a sermon together. I just heard it good and I preached it again, you know, and I added and I took away. And the next summer, when chapel was over, I had to learn to read books. And so I went down and I bought several homiletic, not homiletical books, sermon books, books of sermons and I preached a few Moody sermons and a few Spurgeon sermons and a few other people's sermons. And then, one day I just took a passage, I forget what passage I took, like ten verses and I went through and I taught. And that changed my preaching forever. I quit being an expositor, I quit being a person who liked to three points. I became a verse by verse expositor long before I went to Dallas because that's the only way I learned how to preach. And I went, "Wow, I enjoyed that." There was something in the Word that fed me before I fed the people. And the people began saying, "We like your preaching better. Better than all the, the shouting and the hollering and..." what I did when I first was there. That church, the story is in a book called *Stories About My First Church* and I tell all the stories of what happened, the mistakes I made. The Presbyterians sent three preachers out on a Saturday afternoon. They had made an appointment and they came out and informed me that I was

breaking the rules, that I had no right to preach in a church, I had no right to open a church; that has to be voted on by the Presbyterian and I remember these two preachers who were just kind of chewing me out. But there was another man there, Carroll Stegall. He had been a Presbyterian missionary in the Belgian Congo, retired, came home to my old church, Eastern Heights Presbyterian Church. He was on my side. And he said, "Now, gentlemen, listen," he said, "let's go easy on this boy." He said, "Do you realize that in the last four or five months he's won more people to Christ and sprinkled them than all the rest of the Presbyterian churches in the Presbyterian?" There were about seventeen or nineteen churches. And so they endorsed me at that time to keep going in the church and so, that was a great experience. I, I learned how God would take care of me in that experience.

Hall: (29:48) Now, so you were there at Columbia for approximately three years, three years...

Towns: (29:52) Yes.

Hall: (29:53) How did you wind up in North Western?

Towns: (29:55) Columbia was non-accredited. Now, there was another church in Savannah, it was called Independent Presbyterian Church. Charles Woodbridge had a Ph.D. from University of Berlin and he was a great Bible expositor, well-known Bible teacher, traveled all over America, and he was in the founding faculty at Fuller. And he went to Fuller in, I think it was 1949 to be a founding faculty member there. And so I wanted to follow Dr. Fuller, so I applied to Fuller. They turned me down. They said, "It's a non-accredited school." And I wrote to Dr. Woodbridge and he did what he could and finally he wrote me a letter and said, "Sorry," because Fuller was trying to be

accredited, they couldn't accept non-accredited students from non-accredited schools so they said no. They said, "My advice is to transfer to an accredited school." So I went to North Western College where Billy Graham had been president. When I got there he had just resigned and the worst thing I found out, the day I got there and the day I registered for all of my classes, North Western was not accredited. Now, sometimes some people give you advice and the advice is wrong but God is in the details. Remember Jerry Falwell always said, "God is in the details. The world said the devil's in there but watch out, for Romans 8:28, all things work together for good." And so I went to Columbia, I mean I went to North Western and I couldn't get into Fuller. Frustrated, I just, you know, you could imagine your dream, frustrated, but, one of my teachers who made a great impact on me said, "Now, why don't you go to Dallas?" And so I applied to Dallas. They had a Dallas Seminary reunion there at North Western. I went to it, I met my friends, I met some of the teachers. There were a couple of teachers at North Western who had graduated, so applied to Dallas and was accepted. And so I went to Dallas because it was an open door and Fuller was a shut door. So, I did not know that...while I was at North Western it was a whole different culture. You have to understand, I had never seen snow in my life until I was a freshman, until I was a senior in college. And one day I woke up and it was snowing and, "It's snowing!" I ran outside and just couldn't believe, you know, what it was...and I had to make a snowman; first thing you do when you're at that time, twenty, twenty-one years old; have to go make a snowman. And at North Western college, I still had my enthusiasm. The, the director of Christian service was, we called him Jiggs, Forest Williams. And Forest Williams was a great leader and he, he called me his minuteman. He said, "I could call you on the last moment and you'll

go preach anywhere. And so I was his minuteman and I preached all over the place. And he would call somebody and he said, "Can you go up here?" and I would drive twenty and thirty miles and preach here or forty miles here and preach or, "We need someone tonight to go do a rescue mission." And I was always ready to preach and so since I had pastored a church and, and I had a reservoir of sermons, I got called on. It was a great experience. North Western was not Columbia Bible College. Columbia Bible College was the victorious Christian life. Some people called it the deeper life or Keswick, it's a Keswickian type of a school; the crucified life, the abiding life. But Columbia, North Western was different. It was evangelical, they were conservative, they were fundamental, but they just didn't have that bent to holiness that I saw at Columbia Bible College. I've never gotten away from the impact of Columbia on me. But the classes I had to take, I had all my classes, all my Bible done so I had to take course after course in history, philosophy, logic. All these courses I had to take to graduate and I had mine, I had managed to finish in one year. So I graduated in 1954 from North Western College with a B.A. in Bible.

Hall: (34:11) Now, somewhere along the line, well, I've heard you tell the story many times about a Sunday school museum that you had in Savannah, I believe...

Towns: (34:18) Oh, you're getting way down the line now.

Hall: (34:20) No, well, I'm not, I just wanted to think...they're not in chronological here.

Towns: (34:23) Yeah, that's way out of order, ok.

Hall: (34:25) Wait? Ok.

Towns: (34:26) I went uh...I left North Western in Minneapolis...

Hall: (34:31) Ok.

Towns: (34:32) and for the summer I went to St. Louis, Missouri. My wife lived there, I lived with her parents, got caught up in money, and he put me to work and he paid me union wages to be a carpenter. So I worked all summer building houses. Basically, all I could do was swing a hammer so I, I put on sheathing for sub-floors and sheathing for roofing and I, I did all the, the grunt work...

Walters: (34:54) And when was this again?

Towns: (34:56) That was in summer of 1954.

Walters: (34:58) Ok.

Towns: (34:59) And then we went to Dallas in the fall, probably along about the last week of August, I showed up and spent four weeks at Dallas from 1954 to 1958. I went to Dallas and I loved every part of it. I loved Hebrew. I took Greek. Greek always stumped me. I don't think my mind thinks like the Greeks think but my mind thinks like the Hebrews think. And I sat in Hebrew class and I aced it. It was just, I don't ever remember making anything other than an A at any quiz, anything. And all the guys would say, "Towns, you walk in, you don't study at all, you open the book and you can ace every quiz. Why is that?" The Hebrew stuck with me, which is very easy. And one of the world's leading Hebrew scholars was Merrill Unger, Ph.D. from Johns Hopkins. And I just admired him for all the books that he wrote; one of the reasons I went there. I got in his class, he was a terrible teacher. I mean, most of the guys hated Hebrew and they'd get him off the subject and he'd talk about any and everything and it dawned on me, "I'm not, I'm not learning a thing from this guy." And so I switched my major, although it, Hebrew was...I switched to systematic theology and Dr. Charles [Lowrie]

and John [Wolvin] were my major professors and I wrote my thesis under them. But I enjoyed my experience at Dallas. While at Dallas, in the, about the second week I was there, I became a Baptist. Now that's the story you wanted to ask. In the second week of Dallas, my wife had severe pains in the middle of the night. Had to take her to the hospital and she had a cyst removed from her ovary, major surgery. The hospital was only four blocks away from my house. And while she went into surgery, I'm sitting there and they said, "Well, let's fill out the papers." I went to the admissions office and the lady asked me, "Where are you a church member?" I said, "I'm not." "Uh..." she said. "Well, I'm, I'm Presbyterian but I haven't found a church yet." She said, "What do you mean?" I said, "This morning I went to an Independent Presbyterian Church but I didn't like it but last, but this morning, last night I went to First Baptist Church where Dr. W.A. Criswell is." She said, "Why'd you go there?" I said, "I saw an ad in the paper that said the Dallas Symphony Orchestra would be playing and so I went to hear the Dallas Symphony Orchestra. I also heard they had an eight story building; seven stories of parking and one story of a gym. I just had to see that. That was unbelievable." And so I went to that church and she said, "Well, I'm going to put down Baptist." So when I finally got to see my wife when she came out of surgery, there was a Dr. Schaeffer, a medical doctor, retired, standing by her bed. He said, "I understand you kids don't have any money." And I said, "That's right." "How are you going to pay for this?" I said, "God's going to take care of it. I trust God. I serve God." And he laughed and he said, "Don't you worry," he said, "First Baptist will pay this, it's not that much money." I thought, "Wow, the, the whole operation, the whole operations, everything was going to be about a hundred and fifty dollars." To me, that's the world. And he said, "We'll take

care of that.” And I thought, “Wow.” He said, “Now, when you get home tonight, I’m going to call you Sunday school teacher. He’ll be at your front door and I’m going to tell him to have his wife bring supper and eat at your house.” And that’s the way it happened. I walked up to the front door, this man got out of a car, he said, “I’m your Sunday school teacher.” I met him he, she went in, cleaned the house. She brought in the casserole, we had dinner. The next night, they were going to come back, but let me tell you; I trusted God but I also trusted my mother-in-law. See, I was, I was very poor but my, my wife’s folks had money; one of the reasons I married her. She was good looking, she had a great library, and her folks had money. So, I knew that the mother-in-law wouldn’t leave her daughter in the hospital. I knew that God would take care of it through the mother-in-law.

Hall: (39:07) Where’d you first meet Ruth?

Towns: (39:09) At Columbia Bible College.

Hall: (39:10) At Columbia Bible College, ok.

Towns: (39:11) We were freshmen there together and uh...anyway, so, the mother-in-law came but I said to my wife, “Let’s go over to First Baptist. Can you imagine them wanting to pay our bill? Let’s go to First Baptist but let’s don’t become a Baptist. But let’s learn how to build a great church, now that’s key. Let’s learn how to build a great church.” I think that night, when I saw that great church and the compassion, there’s something in that that created a spark. I want, I want to build something big, I want to be a part of a big church. And so we went and we went, matter of fact, I tell people, I went to First Baptist in Dallas from Romans 4 to 1 Corinthians 1. It took him twelve or thirteen years to preach through the whole Bible. I got in for Romans 4 to 1 Corinthians

1. We went for about two or three months and Dr. Criswell said, "Now, tonight, tonight," he said, "I'm going to preach on Romans chapter 6; buried with Him by baptism into death that like as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the father," he said, "there is not water in Romans chapter 6." I said, "I don't believe that. It's all..." I walked in about six rows back, had my Greek New Testament wide open. I was ready to hear what he had to say. And he preached a great sermon for twenty-five minutes. "When Jesus died, you died. When Jesus was buried, you were buried. When Jesus was raised, you were raised. He put me into death and that's called the vicarious substitutionary; Christ died for my sins. He put me into the grave of separation of the old from the new. He put me in resurrection where Christ gave me a new life," and I kept saying, "I agree with that, I agree with that. That's great." And then he came to the end and he said, "If," I can remember this great voice, "if, if when Jesus died you died," and he repeated again, "if when Jesus was buried you were buried, if when he was raised you were raised," he stopped and leaned over the pulpit and said, "why not tell the world in water?" And I can remember sitting there slapping my New Testament shut and said, "Ok, I'll do it." At that moment I became a Baptist. I was a dry Baptist, not a wet Baptist but I became a Baptist. And that changed my life, that sermon. Dr. Criswell, by the way, the letter I'm, what I'm telling you right now, I wrote him on a Monday, for the Wednesday he died. I wrote him on a Monday and told him this story again. He knew this because we've talked about it several times, but I wanted to thank him; I heard he was sickened to death. And, and he got the letter on Tuesday. I said to my secretary, "Go to the Post Office, I'd like this, him to get this as soon as he can." It was left, it mailed here on Monday night, he got it Tuesday in Dallas, read it, died on Wednesday,

and the letter was read at his funeral on Saturday. They thought it was that important; here is a man whose life Dr. Criswell touched. And let me tell you this, a second story, that little Presbyterian church, the same month that I became a Baptist, they became a Baptist. That little Presbyterian church, I, you know, started with a hand of five ladies and a bunch of children. When I left it, it was a huge church. I mean, we had forty or fifty people and as much as sixty there; when you're, when you're a nineteen year old preacher, that's a lot of folks. And, but most of them had been saved, born again people. And...

Walters: (42:50) This is the one that you were the minister at, at Columbia.

Towns: (42:53) Back in Savannah, Georgia. Yeah, no...Columbia...

Walters: (42:55) While you were at, yeah.

Towns: (42:57) but I went down to Savannah every weekend...

Walters: (42:58) Right.

Towns: (42:59) yeah. And that little church um...I had preached at a rescue mission and there was a county policeman, we call them deputy sheriff today but they were county policemen, he came and heard me and I said to him, "Would you help me out? Would you preach some time?" And so I got him helping me and when I left the church to go to North Western, I turned the church over to him and he was not that good of a preacher, very faithful man. And the church went from sixty down to about, about twenty. And people kind of drifted away, they moved for different reasons, some died. It just didn't grow. Cecil Hodges, good friend of Jerry Falwell and mine, had begun Bible Baptist Church in Savannah, Georgia; little old church not too far away from the slums of where my church was. And Cecil Hodges was a great powerful preacher. He came to preach a

revival there simply because this, this county sheriff, this county policeman came over and said, he had already preached and said, “Why don’t you come over and preach at my church?” So he preached a Friday night revival and God moved. Preached a Sunday night revival and God moved. And he, he, many people became followers, got, got dedicated; many people got saved. And he said, “When are you folks going to get baptized?” He said, “I’ll tell you what, if you come to my church tomorrow night, you don’t have an evening service, you come tomorrow night. I’ll just teach a lesson, I won’t preach, I’ll teach a lesson on baptism.” And so they all said, “Yes.” And so, of the people he got saved and dedicated, about fifty or sixty came to his church. He preached on baptism, gave an invitation, they all went forward, and he immersed them that night. And the next Sunday, the county sheriff only had about twelve people and the next Sunday, five, and the church is closed for good. Today, that building belongs to a Pentecostal church that’s been built nearby and it’s probably the education wing of this Pentecostal church.

Walters: (45:03) So, we talked...we’ll come back then to the Sunday school museum initiative [*chuckle*]...

Towns: (45:07) Ok, that’s, that Sunday school museum, that comes all the way after we begin Liberty University.

Hall: (45:13) Oh.

Walters: Oh, ok.

Towns: (45:14) Ok?

Walters: Well, we’ll come back to that.

Towns: (45:15) Oh, ok.

Walters: (45:16) We kind of left off when you were at Dallas and you eventually go into teaching at Midwest Bible College in St. Louis. Tell us about that transition and...

Towns: (45:26) Well, uh...

Walters: (45:27) Is that where your writing career began?

Towns: (45:29) No, it didn't start...

Walters: (45:30) Ok, ok.

Towns: (45:31) until the next college. When I was at Dallas, I was working hard, my first baby was born, when I was there my second baby was born, and the third one was conceived, all in Dallas. So we had three children inside of four years.

Walters: (45:47) And their names were?

Towns: (45:48) Ok, the first one is Debbie and then Steven, we all called him Sam, you would call him by Sam, and then Polly. And Debbie and Polly still live here in Lynchburg, Virginia. And we had all of those born in that same Baptist hospital that we talked about earlier, where my wife had the operation. And while I was there, the first couple of years um...the first year I, I went to First Baptist Dallas. Then I was asked to be a Sunday school superintendent out at Oak Cliff Baptist Temple. And so I went out and I served for a year as a Sunday school superintendent and then out in west Dallas again in a slum situation, Faith Bible Church, for two years I was the teacher there. Well let me tell you, when I was there, I was under conviction I was going to be a teacher. The way I was preaching was not your typical preacher; I was teaching. And I knew that God wanted me to be a teacher. Going back to my North Western days, one day in Bible exposition, I gave a lecture the teacher had assigned all of us to do, to teach a lesson. And it was in 1 Peter the Greek exegesis. And so Dr. Simpson said to me, "Elmer, what

are you going to do when you graduate?" I said, "Well, I'm going to be a pastor for maybe twenty years, get some experience, and then become a college teacher." He said, "No, go immediately become a college teacher." I said, "You got to have experience." And he said, he said, "Elmer, you don't teach your experience, you teach the Word of God." I never forgot that. My brother Cline, you are a teacher here. Let's never forget that what we say in class can influence a student forever. And so that stuck with me. So when I went to Dallas Theological Seminary, I said, "If I'm going to be a teacher, I need education." And I, and I was still stung by the fact that Dallas was non-accredited, North Western was non-accredited. So I go out to Southern Methodist University, bold, and say, "I want a degree." I just happened to walk into the office of the dean of the School of Education at SMU, Southern Methodist University. And he's an old fashioned fundamentalist who didn't dance, who didn't drink as a kid but he got more liberal as life went along and he took kind of a liking for me. And so he took my transcript and looked at what I had and he said, "I'll tell you what," he said, "I'm going to stick my neck out for you." He said, "We shouldn't take a non-accredited degree into SMU but I think you're going to do fine." And so he, he rolled out a, he said, "If you'll go here and take these courses and get it." And so he, he plotted a course for me. And I went, and so, I went to two schools at the same time. I went to Dallas and SMU. And in my final year, I wrote two theses at the same year; one for Dallas and one for SMU. And I graduated at the same time with a Th.M., master of theology, from Dallas and a master in arts from Southern Methodist University. And so, with that in mind...by the way, that last year I was writing two theses, going to Dallas, going to SMU, being a pastor fulltime, and a small Bible college right there in Dallas called Dallas Bible College, they usually pick

out one student whose superior, whatever, and ask them to come over and teach a course. Now, they paid fifteen dollars for the whole semester. And so they asked me to come over and teach a course for them. Of course I was willing to do it and then he called back and said, "We need a second course. We can't find anybody to teach our course in Introduction to Philosophy. Can you do that?" I said, "For another fifteen dollars, sure."

Hall: (49:39) [*laughter*]

Walters: [*laughter*]

Towns: (49:40) And so I taught Introduction to Philosophy at Dallas Bible College back then. So with that background, I got hired at Midwest Bible College in St. Louis, Missouri. Now, that's an IFCA school; Independent Fundamental Churches of America. So that was my wife's background, that was my background, and so I went to North Western College uh...excuse me. So I went to Midwestern Baptist Coll...so I went to Midwest Bible College and began teaching in the fall of 1958.

Walters: (50:12) Ok.

Hall: (50:13) So what did you teach there? Was it religion, philosophy, or...?

Towns: (50:19) At a Bible college, you teach what nobody else will teach. When you're the youngest and last on...

Hall: (50:24) Yeah.

Towns: (50:25) you just go along like a broom and a big waste can and pick up...and so, my first year, I taught seventeen hours and my second semester I taught nineteen hours. And it was like John, Intro. to Theology, Personal Evangelism, Christian Education Introduction, Introduction to Young People, Christian Ed. of Young People, uh...several courses like that. And the, the second semester I, I'll tell you, that first year of teaching, I

call it teaching by the seat of your pants. I went home every night and for one year it was final exam week every week. And in final exam week, you just, you just kill yourself to get ready and when you're, I just killed myself every night; studying until two or three, next morning teach, next night until two or three, and it was finally a relief when you got to the third year. You were beginning to get some things under your belt to teach. But at Midwest Bible College, I taught there for, for three years from '58 to '61. And I taught um...mostly, I, I was called an assistant professor of Christian education. That's where they needed me. And, although I had not majored in Christian education, I had an M.A. from Southern Methodist University in education so that qualified me. I had the only accredited degree at Midwest Bible College. The only accredited degree, which was my M.A. from Southern Methodist University. So, the first year at Midwest, I go off to the National Sunday School Association. I go off to a meeting with the leaders who were my heroes. Here was Henrietta Mears, Lois [Labarre], Mary [Labarre], uh...people who had written books in Christian education that I used. I sat in a room with them and they began to discuss about this new thing called the Accrediting Association of Bible Colleges. And they said, "Come over to my house tonight." One of them then said, "We're going to discuss it further and plan and organize this thing." So we go to this, I go to this house, they're organizing it and I bring pencil and paper and I start taking copious notes about what's going on. And so they put together this study committee to get it in operation and they put eleven people, and finally said, "Put Elmer on. He'll make our secretary. He'll do all our work for us." So I tell young people, when you are just, when you're just starting out, be willing to do any and everything and work harder; outwork everyone else. And so I got onto this accreditation committee. And then we

began to study accreditation, put together standards; we met two or three times. And that lifted my whole self perception. You know, that kind of made me a leader among my...and then we divided up America and Canada into twelve different sections. Gene Getz, who became a great leader at Moody Bible Institute, and I were assigned western Canada. But they kind of thought that was the, the throw away, the trash bin of all the places because they had a lot of little Bible colleges up there but not much. And so they sent us up there to lead, here I am, twenty-six years old, leading some of the great college leaders in accreditation. I went to Three Hills which is called Prairie Bible Institute, the biggest Bible institute in the world. L.E. Maxwell his, his great book *Crowded for Christ*, well known leader. He sat there and listened to me talk about how to meet standards of accreditation there. And then I went over to Briercrest Bible Institute, Henry Hildebrand, the second largest Bible College in the world. And, you know, and western Canada is the breadbasket of the world. It's the breadbasket as far as growing wheat but it's also the breadbasket as far as missionary because in those four provinces, there are about sixty Bible colleges and among, really only four million people in those whole provinces. And out of that, I, it's a long, long story, but I ended up at Winnipeg Bible College as the president when I was twenty-seven. Now understand, I have always been too young to do everything I've done. I was too young to pastor a church but I did. And now I'm too young to be a college president. Would you like me to tell you the story of how I became a college president?

Hall: (55:06) Yes.

Walters: (55:07) Yes, that's the next item on the list here.

Towns: (55:09) Ok. I was in St. Louis, teaching. It snows there once in a while and we had a slight snow and I always had to go maybe seven or eight miles out of my way to go home because of the, the hills there and the snow and the ice. And so I'm going way out of my way and I'm going down Brown Road where my wife's church, Hope Congregational Church, the church where I was baptized, was located. And I look in and there's the pastor's car. And I passed the church and for some reason, I turned around. I don't know why. I said, "I'm going to go talk to the preacher." And so I turned around and I went into the preacher's office...it wasn't snowing that much, not a heavy snow, just a very, but it was slick. So we went inside and we got some coffee, we were talking, and he had served on the accrediting committee. We had gotten Midwest Bible College accredited while I was teaching there; great accomplishment, was one of the first Bible colleges to be accredited. And he was on the, the Board of Directors and the Committee of the Board of Directors Supervisor Accrediting. So, we got to talking about that and he said, "Elmer, why don't you become a college president?" I said, "Oh, I'd like to do that someday." He said, "You'd make a good one." He said, "You understand accreditation, I saw you on the Committee. You'd make a good college president." And I'm there, sitting there thinking back to my freshman year at Columbia Bible College, McQuilkin, who I wanted to be like. And I prayed many times, "Lord, I'd like to be a Bible college professor." So he's, he's right up my ally. He's just talking to me, you know, talking to the choir I wanted to say. And the phone rang and he picked it up and it was a friend of his from Toronto. And so the friend of his, he said, "I've got a man here in my office. His name is Frank Frogly. He's Chairman of the Board of Winnipeg Bible College and he's looking for a Bible college president." And my pastor says, "Well, I've got the man

sitting right here who ought to be your Bible college president.” He said “Is that right?” And so he says, “Elmer,” he told them how I was qualified and then the other man told him, I said, “Why don’t we put them on the line together and let them talk.” So I get on the line, he gets, Mr. Frogly gets on the line and we talk about the college, Winnipeg Bible College. And I tell him how I know about it, I’ve been to western Canada, I’ve been to Winnipeg. I had been working with the Bible colleges there. And he began to, he said, “You’re my man.” He said, “I’m going to get in my car. It’ll take two days to drive. I’ll meet you for lunch two days from now.” And two days later we met, we talked, and he said, “I’m going to go back and I’m going to get them to make you the next president.” It was one of the oldest Bible colleges in Canada with the, with one of the youngest college presidents.

Walters: (58:02) And does it have a denominational affiliation or anything like that?

Towns: (58:04) It, it, if anything, it was almost Plymouth Brethren.

Walters: (58:08) Ok.

Towns: (58:09) It was very interdenominational. Almost like the IFCA in Canada but they’re called Plymouth Brethren Independent Churches. It was, it was not denomination for sure. And so he went back, I came, I came up to Canada, they interviewed me, and they called me to be a college president. But, it’s very interesting, in that first meeting with this board, now, there was not a board member who was under sixty years old; all very old men. And I’m twenty-seven so they said, “We want to ask you some questions.” I said, “Fine.” They asked me this question, that question; we’re getting along fine. And the last question they said, “Last question we want to ask you,” he said, “why should we appoint a man as young as you to be the president? Who can trust a man as young as you

to run a college president, a college?” I looked at him, I said, “Let me ask you. Who’s going to trust you as a board that would go out and hire a twenty-seven year old kid to run their college? They don’t trust me, they won’t trust you either.” They laughed and laughed, they said, “You’re our man.”

Walters: (59:13) [*laughter*]

Towns: (59:14) And then they said, “Ok, now let’s go on.” I said, “Wait a minute. I’ve got questions.” I had prepared a paper on my philosophy of college governance, new word governance. I said, “Let me tell you about this.” So I said, “I know this college has some problems and I’m going to speak to them right now.” So I went in and I talked about delegated leadership into the office of the president, that the Board shouldn’t be worrying about light bills and paying bills. They should delegate all these duties. And so, I laid out to them what I felt. I said, “Now, if you’re going to call me to president, you’re going to give me the authority to run this school. It’s going to be a radical change. The Board will not come in and look at the bills every week and then pay the bills. I’ll pay the bills.” I said, “I’ll be re, I’ll be accountable to you. We’ll have a Board meeting every month and so we’ll change the whole governance of the school.” And so they agreed to it and I went to Canada. I spent five years there. We got the college accredited with the AABC. We got it chartered with the province of Manitoba, that was the first college ever to have a provincial charter to offer Canadian recognized degrees. And so God, God was in that thing. I keep telling my story but notice; God was in that telephone call. God was in that telephone call and I went up there and took the college over and it was really tough. It’s a different culture, it’s a different background. Almost the same as America but the differences seemed to be greater. And um...and even the money was

different in color. And I, I loved the Canadians. I loved the first...when I went there the college had forty-two students. And the first year we had sixty, the next year we had eighty, the next year almost a hundred. So, the college grew. It was never a big college. But I enjoyed the college experience of running the college. I, we got it accredited, as I said, and we got it chartered. Now, it's an interesting story what happened. My daughter played with, this is Debbie, had a friend, Marcy, down the street, played with her. And her father was a lawyer. And one day, we met from time to time, and we would take them down to a bowling ally on Saturday morning for the girls to go bowling together. And Don said to me one Saturday, "Why don't I write a bill and let's get your college chartered?" He said, "If it's chartered, you get government recognition," and I knew that would have a lot of pluses but I also knew it was minus; that people were anti-government, didn't want a government putting their nose in. And he said, "Duff," as he called him, was the premiere of all Manitoba. He said, "he's my friend. We grew up together. If I write it for him, he'll do it." I said, "Ok." So I went to this, this meeting, this caucus meeting. The Democratic Progressive Party, no...the Democratic Conservative Party. They were the very conservative party. And what you do if you don't, it's a polymetric form of government. They agree on what they're going to do ahead of time. And so I'm sitting there and they asked me to come up to the, to the rostrum, the die. And, "Mr. Towns?" "Yes." "Are you president?" "Yes." They said, "We're not going to read this bill but what we're going to do is just uh...are there any questions?" And no questions. And then there were about five Frenchmen all along the Assiniboine River. One guy puts his hand up, he says, "What about the theological seminary? You don't have anything about a seminary here." And I go into this long

explanation why Roman Catholics send their priests with seminary and to college with seminary but we don't have seminaries. We're just a Bible college; we could do the same work of ministry as a priest does. We can do missionary work. So, we don't need that. And I got finished and I, I satisfied him, I thought. He said, puts his hand up again, "What about the seminary?" And I went through this whole thing again and I could see him shaking his head. And I said, "Would you like me to put the seminary in?" And he got, "Yeah." "Ok," I turned to the secretary, I said, "would you write in Winnipeg Bible College and Theological Seminary?" So they wrote in and I thought, "I started a seminary without a, a report, without a, a vote by the Board or any research. Just, just because a Frenchman said, 'Do it.'"

Walters: (1:03:44) That was practice for the future for you.

Towns: (1:03:46) Absolutely.

Walters: (1:03:47) *[laughter]*

Towns: (1:03:48) Today, that's the largest seminary in Canada. Now, the good thing about it, boy, it was really tough. The money just didn't come in. I lived by faith like Columbia Bible College did. We had a day of prayer once a month, praying for money. We prayed and I just felt the frustration. My, my prayers just don't work. Money's not here. The school is just struggling. Where in the world, how can, how can we do this thing? Every Friday, I would bring all of my staff, we're talking about nine people, we'd stand around my desk and I'd say, "Alright, everybody write down," I'd put a piece of paper, "write down how much money you've got to have." They knew we didn't have much money. We would put it all down and everybody, we would find out how much everybody absolutely had to have. We'd draw two numbers, what's in the, in the bank, in

the bank account, the other is what we had to have. And if there was a little extra money, we would divide it by nine and everybody got a little extra. And so, it was touch and go, week to week living. In those days there were no credit cards but there were gasoline credit cards. And you could go to the gas station some place to get food. So, you, you learned to, you know, to barely get by. And then every once in a while somebody would die because this was an old, old school. And the lawyer would call and he would say to me, "So and so has died and you're in the will." I want to know two things; how much and when will I get it? Because when the money came in, that I would tell everybody, "Hey," we'd go back and we'd make up all those checks that we didn't pay or what we didn't get, and so, I, we lived from funeral to funeral, so to speak, and, and God, God provided for the school. I learned an important lesson. The important lesson is, when you dream a dream, be careful of what you think is your dream. Look on the backside and the underside. I loved the thought of being a college president until I was one. After one year, with all the headaches and all of the pressure and strain, I didn't care about being a college president ever again. Now, this is going to become important when we start Liberty University. God had to get me to a place where I didn't want to be a college president. Why? I'm sitting in my office and this man walks in and wants to sell me fire alarms. This next man wants to walk in, you know, salesmen come in all the time. And here I want to study the Bible, I want to put a sermon together, I want to get my lectures. The first year, I taught what I already learned. The second year, I taught what I already learned. And after about three or four years, my lectures were getting thin and thinner and thinner and my sermons were getting slick and slicker and by the fourth year, I'm looking for a way to get out. I wanted to be a college president but I didn't realize what I

wanted wasn't what I should have. And I think that's the way with a lot of young guys picking out a girl. They pick out a girl who's good looking and when they get her, they realize, you know, what she is and what she looks like are two different things. Same thing with a girl picking out a guy. A lot of things in life, we, we don't like what we get when we finally get it, so make sure you know what you want when you want something. Anyway, to make a long story short, I also learned uh...L.E. Maxwell built a big Bible college. And Henry Hildebrand built a big Bible college. And it dawned on me, their spiritual stature determined the size of their school. And I saw myself as a pigmy. Pigmies produce pigmies, giants produce giants. In the back of my mind, when I'm talking to Jerry about starting a college, "You're going to be the leader," because I knew that Jerry Falwell was a giant in the making. And I knew that this giant in the making would make a college into a giant college. And so that had a great impact, failure has great lessons. I, I didn't fail; the college in Winnipeg today is the largest evangelical school in Canada. Now what happened is, about two or three years after I get the college chartered, we find out that we're supposed to get a check from the government. Now, in Canada, the separation of church and state is not the same as in America. So in Canada, they come up and they say, "Well, we want to give you four hundred and fifty-eight dollars per student per year." "Wow, if I had that much money when I ran it, I could have done a much better job." But that college in Canada, because of the charter and that Frenchman, yeah, we had a charter not only for our college but for a graduate school and a seminary. So, Winnipeg Bible College, today it's called Providence Bible College, excuse me...Providence College and Seminary, Theological Seminary. They have graduate classes all over Canada because they're chartered. They have graduate classes

in Alberta, Saskatchewan, Manitoba, and Ontario. That's why they're so large. And people want their classes because they're chartered, recognized throughout Canada. That becomes important. Well anyway, let's talk about phone calls again. I was in Canada, I was saying, "God, I'd like to get out of here." And I had a, a man come and lecture for me on neo-Orthodoxy, Ken [Konser]. In that day he was president of Trinity Evangelical Divinity School; a growing, very popular seminary in Chicago. He was lecturing for me and staying in my house. And so he came out for breakfast one morning and he said to me, "Elmer, why don't you leave here and come to Trinity and help us build a great seminary there?" And I said, "I'd love to but I own a house." And I said, "I could never sell the house." The phone rang. And it was a man, his name was [Charot]. He was a Frenchman. And he said, he said to me, "I've been looking at your house a long time. I want to buy it." He said, "Can I come and see it?" I said, "Well, what time?" He said, "Eight o'clock." And this was like seven thirty in the morning and I was just getting ready to leave and take Dr. [Konser] down to the television station for an interview for him. And I said, "Sure." And so my wife says, "We'll make it happen." So I leave the house and by the time I get to school, the house is sold. So now I'm free to go to, so I'm free to move to Chicago. So God was, God put me there on phone call and took me back in a phone call. So, I spent five years in Canada and then I came to Trinity Evangelical Divinity School. Again, a non-accredited, but a great school; non-accredited. And when I was at Trinity, we got that school accredited. Now, I did not serve as the ramrod for that accreditation like I did up in Canada. But, when we came to Trinity, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, great time. And so I, I learned many lessons there.

Hall: (1:11:00) Ok, so you were at Trinity what, three or...?

Towns: (1:11:03) I was there six years.

Hall: (1:11:04) Six years?

Towns: (1:11:05) Yes.

Hall: (1:11:06) Ok. Alright, so...

Towns: (1:11:07) When I got to Trinity, I was at a Sunday school convention and when I was at this Sunday school convention, I was talking to this gal and she said, "You know, we're looking for a Sunday school editor for *Christian Life* magazine. In those days, *Christian Life* was the biggest, the biggest circulation of all Christian magazines. And I said, "Whoo," I knew it was big. She said, "Would you be interested in doing an interview?" And I said, "I sure would." So I went for an interview and we've sat and I planned to write for *Christian Life* magazine. They wanted me to write three articles every month, thirty-six for a year. And I had been writing articles up in Canada and by that time, I had done two books. I had done a book on youth work in, in Midwestern in St. Louis and I did a book on the gospel of John up in Canada. So, here I was, I was writing an article and I began to do Sunday school articles. And I was still teaching Christian Education but one day I was teaching this class and as I was teaching this class, it was something in probably Introduction to Christian Education. I just happened to mention to this class that was full, probably, oh my goodness, seventy, eighty seminary students there. I said, "The biggest church in America is the First Baptist Church in Dallas, Texas." And I began to talk about Dr. Criswell. Young boy, his name was Ron, I think it Ron, it was Ron, I forget his last name, Ron Reed, I think, put up his hand and he said, "No," he said, "I believe the biggest church in America is Dr. Jack Hyles, First Baptist Church of Hammond, Indiana. I said, "I don't think so. I think Dallas beats it."

He said, "I think so." So we kind of disagreed. I said, "Well, let me...how big is Hammond?" He said, "Dr. Hyles in Hammond has about two thousand, seven hundred." I said, "Dr. Criswell in Dallas has four thousand, three hundred. So there." And a guy in the back of the room said, "I think you're both wrong." He said, "There's a hillbilly preacher out in Ohio and he's got over six thousand." I said, "Ok." I dropped the subject, went on teaching; forgot about it. And the next Sunday afternoon, I'm reading the *Chicago Tribune* and I always look up to the ten best selling books. And it dawns on me, what would be the ten largest churches in America? I'm going to find them. And so I just make a commitment and I said, "I'm going to find them and I'm going to find them for Christian Life magazine." And I told the editor and he said, "Let's do it." And so I began to write...how, how do you find when nobody knows where the largest is? You start with every denomination and get a list. Denominations do not list churches in size, except membership, but they do have Sunday school in attendance. So I got Sunday school attendance from all denominations and then we spent about six months advertising in the magazine, "We're looking for the biggest Sunday school in every state, in every city. There may be some Sunday school hidden someplace in some little alcove that's really big. Let us know who you are." And so as we began to go through city by city the ministerial association, I put together, after about a year, a list of the, at that time, the twenty largest Sunday schools. That hit America like a thunderbolt; pow! The biggest Sunday schools. People were not thinking big Sunday schools. Here were Sunday schools of five thousand, six thousand, a lot of excitement. And the old fashioned invitation of walking an aisle and getting saved still worked. And so here the ten largest

Sunday schools and then I said, "I'm going to write a book on the subject." and so I write this book called *The Ten Largest Sunday Schools and What Makes Them Grow*.

Walters: (1:15:03) And for the record, that was what year?

Towns: (1:15:06) 1969. And um...now, it used to mean a lot to me to be the best selling book. But I've learned since that really has a lot to do with politics and who you know. And I was selling that book like crazy because everywhere I would go, I would phone the publisher and they would drop ship a box or two of the books there. Now, in those days a paperback sold for two dollars and I would sell them out. And so, I'm, I'm, here I'm selling just on my own, six, seven, eight hundred, a thousand sometimes a month in the churches because everybody had to have it. And so, I'm at *Christian Life* magazine, I said, I said, "You know, I keep waiting to make the best selling list." He said, "How many are you selling?" He said, "You sell that many? Wow?" Dr., Mr. Walker picked up the phone, he called the editor of the Christian book seller, he says, "Put this book in next month on about the seventh list."

Hall: (1:16:07) [*chuckle*]

Towns: (1:16:08) Seventh? It wasn't...but I stayed in that list now for almost two years because the book was, it was selling that much. They, they confirmed it. They did go back and confirm it. And so, that book became so popular, I ended up preaching in every state in the Union. People wanted me to come and speak about Sunday schools, tell about how Sunday schools could grow, how you could grow a Sunday school. And of the hundred largest Sunday schools, I think it was either like eighty-four or eighty-six of those churches I preached in. They would have me come and, and, you know, and honor

their people and congratulate them and give them a certificate and all that kind of thing.

That's how I met Jerry Falwell.

Hall: (1:16:51) Sure.

Towns: (1:16:52) When I, when I put the list together, Jerry Falwell was on that first list.

Here in Lynchburg, Virginia, I had never heard of, was Jerry Falwell and he had the ninth largest Sunday school in America. So here Jerry Falwell enters the story. Now, I looked

at the ten churches and I go to all of them and of the ten men, I felt Jerry was the

youngest, the most inexperienced, but also the most powerful as far as conversions were

concerned. Before we started the college, I came to the church and looked at the church

and I said, "Jerry, we ought to do a book." And we talked about it. "We ought to talk

about one church, not ten churches, one church. Let's do it. Let's call it *Church of*

Flame." Billy Graham had a very good book called *World of Flame*; let's talk about

church of flame. And, so he stood up on Sunday morning and he said, "Now, I want all

of you who are saved in this church to grab an offering envelope, tear it open, grab a

visitor's card, write your testimony of how you came to know Jesus Christ and give it to

Mrs. Hogan, Janet Hogan." And he said, "Mrs. Hogan, get that to Elmer Towns," he

said, "at tonight's service. He's going to put this in a book." Well, at the evening

service, Mrs. Hogan handed me a cigar box, remember how cigars used to come in a

box? Packed full, there must have been seventy-five. And I went over to Harvey's Motel

that night. And I can remember sitting on the floor, making a number of piles around me.

This is the only way before the days of computer classification. And I was going to put

people who were saved by LCA, people who were saved by bus ministry, people who

were saved by the invitation. And I put all these different piles and I remember sitting

there thinking, “No one’s come to this church by transfer growth. People don’t come into this church just because they joined it because it’s the fashion. They come because they’re born again.” I, I read of drunks who were saved, prostitutes who were saved, people, you know, saved in jail coming to the church. And I remember sitting on the floor just weeping of what God was doing. And I said, “God, Your hand’s upon this church.” And, you know, “I don’t know what it is God but I want to be a part of that church.” And so those were my early recollections of talking to Jerry Falwell, of seeing all the conversions. Whether it was Dave Hoarsely, you know, who was saved. He was just a, a man on a surveying team and they were surveying the church to build another building and Jerry goes down and wins this surveyor to Jesus Christ and he brings his whole family. The stories are all there, they’re in a book called *Church of Flame*.

Walters: (1:19:41) Ok.

Hall: (1:19:42) Now, this is all while you were still at Trinity?

Towns: (1:19:44) This is while I was still at Trinity, right.

Hall: (1:19:46) Ok. Can you tell us the story again about how Dr. Falwell called you up and...

Towns: (1:19:50) Ok, yeah. Oh yeah. Oh, that’s, that’s, again, see, my life turns on telephone calls.

Walters: (1:19:57) [*laughter*]

Towns: (1:19:58) And so, the last Saturday night in January of 1971, I’m getting ready to preach at Canton Baptist Temple, that’s about the fifth largest in the nation. Dr. Harold Henniger had had open heart surgery and was recuperating at home. So I go to his house and have dinner together. He looks across the dinner table and said, “Elmer, I

want you to go and start a college for Jerry Falwell.” And I said, “No, Jerry’s not ready for a college. I, I’m writing a book on him. He’s only got grades one to six. He’s not going to start a college until he gets all twelve grades and that’s six years if he’s going to add a grade a year.” He said, “No. I know Jerry. He’s impetuous. He wants to do it yesterday. Now, I want you to go back to the room.” I was staying in a prophet’s chamber in the Sunday school building. And it had a unique telephone system; you could call out but you couldn’t call in. He said, “On my nickel, go back and call him tonight and talk to him about that college.” And then he made that statement, “You and Jerry are two peas in a pod; you’re just alike. You ought to go start it.” I said, “Ok.” And we talked about other things and as I’m going out the door with my overcoat on, he takes his finger and pounds on my chest, “Will you promise me to do it tonight?” I said, “Yes.” So when I walk in, I walk in, and without taking my overcoat on, I pick up the phone and dial Jerry’s number. And Jerry says to me, “Elmer,” he says, “what are we going to call this college?” I said, “Jerry, you don’t start with a name, you start with a purpose. You start with an aim, an objective, what you want to do, what kind of a college it’s going to be.” He said, “Ok, let’s talk about objectives.” I said, “Well first of all, I’ve got this idea that a college ought to be like a three legged stool.” He said, “Alright, tell me what you’re talking about.” I said, “Alright. The fist leg, academic excellence. I want a college that will be committed to all of the liberal arts.” “I don’t want a liberal school, not, not liberal...”

Walters: (1:22:08) [*laughter*]

Towns: (1:22:09) Then he said, “No, not liberal arts but it’ll, ok, I’ll call it arts.” It took Jerry about a year to call it a liberal arts school. He didn’t understand the word liberal

didn't mean liberal but arts college. I said, "I want it to be like Wheaton." Now, Wheaton, I said, "I want it to be as academically excellent as Wheaton. They have a great reputation for academic integrity. But, I don't want their compromise. For instance, they have co-ed dorms." He said, "Yes, I agree with you." "Second of all, I want it to be sharp, streamline, up-to-date. Jerry, you're the only church of the largest ten that have all of your records on a computer. I want this college to be just as academically up-to-date with computer or whatever; streamline, like Bob Jones. But, I don't want their legalism." He said, "Right." I said, "The third thing, the third leg, I want it to be local church and evangelistic like Baptist Bible College. But, I don't want it to be a hillbilly school." And we laughed and I didn't mean to put them down but I was just describing, we could say they were culturally challenged. But he said, "That's right." I said, "Ok, now what..."

Walters: (1:23:18) And that's Jerry's alma mater.

Towns: (1:23:19) Yeah, that's right. He went there and he got a great passion for souls because of that. I said, "One more thing Jerry." I said, "I wrote a paper recently when I was in Canada. And this paper, let me tell you what the thesis is. A Christian college should be the extension of a local church at the collegiate level. Everything that a church is to its members, in passion, in standards, in spirituality, a college should be to its students." Jerry said, "I love that, I love that." I said, "I want to build...Jerry, I don't want to build a denominational college, a Baptist Bible college, a fellowship college." He said, "Granted." "I don't want to build an independent college like a, a Bob Jones where you don't belong to anybody. I've been there, I've done that." I said, "I was president of a college up in Canada, Winnipeg Bible College, and I always felt like I had

fourth loyalty when I talked to anyone.” He said, “What do you mean by that?” I said, “Their first loyalty was to their family, their second to their church, their third to the college they may have done, and then they may have listened to me for money and anything else. I always felt I was recruiting without loyalty. I want the, I want loyalty of the church. I want the people, I want all of our students to join the church, to work in the church, to grow in the church. Everything the church is to these members, I want Thomas Road Baptist Church to be to all of our students.” I said, “I want to produce students who will change the world.” He said, “I am with you, I’m with you.” I said, “One more thing,” I said, “you’re going to be the president.” He said, “Oh, no Dr. Towns, you’re the academic man.” I said, “No, no, no. Listen carefully,” I said, “you’re going to be the president. I, I’ve been a president. I don’t need to be a president again. I don’t want to be a president. It’s not what God has called me to be. But more than not wanting,” I said, “I’m convinced that giants build giants and midgets build midgets. And Jerry, I know you; I’ve compared you to all of the pastors of the ten largest; you’re a giant.” I said, “You are a Spurgeon.” He said, “Oh no, no, don’t say it. Please don’t say that.” You know, Jerry had a humility about him even though he had a strong ego about him. I said, “You’re a Spurgeon,” he said, I said, “and if you are the leader, we can build a great college.” Now, I was the leader uh...so the first year, I was the executive vice president, he was the president. And for the first four years he was the president. And so I think that was the, that’s the key to making Liberty great. A great man, a great champion builds great champions. And so if you can find a copy of the very first charter that we filed with the state, we, we later revised it, but that very first charter began with this preamble, “Lynchburg Baptist College is an extension of Thomas Road Baptist

Church at the collegiate level. Everything that Thomas Road Baptist Church is to its people, it's spirituality and influence and whatever ministry, Lynchburg Baptist College will be to its students." That's the very first sentence we started with.

Walters: (1:26:41) Now, I know we're trying to cover this chronologically, but since we're on it, how has that evolved over the years with the University? The, the students don't have to go to Thomas Road at...

Towns: (1:26:54) No.

Walters: (1:26:55) this point.

Towns: (1:26:56) That had to...

Walters: (1:26:57) So tell us how we got from there, from that point to this, as best you can.

Towns: (1:27:00) Ok, you're getting way ahead. Well, first of all, after, after two years, I left and I was gone for three and a half years. And when I left, I said, "Let's get Pierre Guillermin." Pierre Guillermin was the original man, Jerry's man to start the school system. Jerry and Pierre conceived of a system from kindergarten through Ph.D., as they would say, "So that no student would have to sit in front of a teacher who believed in evolution. They would always be under an evangelical teacher who would be born again." And so, when we started the college, Pierre decided to go off on his own into consulting work. And he went as a consultant into South Carolina and then he ended up with Jack Dinsbeer in Jacksonville, Florida.

Walters: (1:27:53) Ok.

Towns: (1:27:54) And, what was the name of that school? I think it was Temple Baptist College, he went...

Walters: (1:27:57) We have that in another oral history interview, so we can look that up.

Towns: (1:28:00) With him?

Walters: (1:28:01) Yeah, yeah.

Towns: (1:28:02) Ok, ok. Well, he went down and so I said to Jerry, “Jerry, let me talk,” I’m getting ahead of myself, but I said, “Jerry, I’m going to leave.” I said, “I came here to teach. But you know what just happened to me? I came here to teach, to write, to stay fresh,” I said, “to stay with the, the churches,” I said, “and I’m running a college and I don’t want to run a college.” I said, “I’ve, I’m back in the same rut I was in before.” I said, “I’m seeing salesmen all the time.” I said, uh...Sam Pate was the treasurer of the church, “Sam’s dragging me off all the time to see all these...” I said, “I don’t care about air conditioners. I don’t care about plumbers.” You know, “I don’t care about all of that. I, I do not want to be a college president and that’s not what God called me to be. And so, I’m going to, I’m going...” I never got mad. And I said, “It’ll be fine. Let’s get Pierre. He is a wonderful manager. He is the man for you for this job. Pierre is a manager. A manager puts the right person at the right place at the right time to do the right job in the right way; that’s Pierre.” And he said, “Ok. If you can get Pierre to come back, hire him.” So I went down to Pierre, went down to Jacksonville, made a trip down, sat down with him, and I said, “I’m offering you the job.” He said, “Well,” he said, “I want to talk to Jerry.” So he came back and he took the job. Now, Pierre’s emphasis, he twisted Jerry’s arm by saying, “I’ve got to be the president because accreditation, SACS, will not let a college, will not let a pastor of a church be a college president. And that’s a true fact and therefore, I...” Now, let’s jump way ahead to, let’s go back ten years ago.

Walters: (1:29:44) Ok.

Towns: (1:29:45) Ten years ago, there were certain lawyers who filed suit against SACS to make Dr. Falwell the president of the school. And we filed suit, we had intended to file suit and we notified SACS based on the Archbishop of Boston who was over all of their colleges and therefore if their pastor could be over their colleges, why cannot a Protestant be over...and SACS agreed and agreed to it and therefore it was one of those court cases that the suit was never filed. We intended to file suit and therefore it was agreed to out of court and therefore SACS agreed to Jerry becoming the president.

Now...

Walters: (1:30:26) And though is that after Dr. Borek then?

Towns: (1:30:28) That's exactly after, when Dr. Borek left.

Walters: (1:30:29) Ok, ok.

Towns: (1:30:30) Now, during all these years however, Jerry has acted like a president. You know, we always know that um...Pierre had the name president but Jerry had the power. Pierre had the office president, but Jerry had the authority. And he, he could walk into chapel and say, "We want this to be done," and whatever he wanted he got done. So, I go back to say, it all goes back to L.E. Maxwell in western Canada; the greatness of those schools were men who were great leaders and Jerry was the great leader and I like to say that I opened the door and pushed him through.

Walters: (1:31:03) Sure. Tell us what it means...I believe I remember hearing Dr. Falwell, when he was around, talking about you having a co-founder's ring and him himself having a...

Towns: (1:31:16) Yeah, he would always hold up, he said, "Elmer, hold up..."

Walters: (1:31:17) Right.

Towns: (1:31:18) “your ring.”

Walters: (1:31:19) Right.

Towns: (1:31:20) There are two rings in existence. He has one and I, today, Macel has the one and neither of the boys has it. And I’ve asked her, “What are you going to do with it?” And she just smiles and won’t answer me.

Walters: (1:31:30) Yes, but...

Hall: (1:31:31) [*laughter*] Now, what was on the ring actually? What, what, what insignia?

Towns: (1:31:33) Well, in the first year, about the second month, I decided, “We’ve got a college here.” And I was facing something with a new college. We lived from weekend to weekend with absolutely no tradition, nothing to look forward to. And so, you’d find you, you’d get all the kids excited and then Monday morning we’d go to the blahs again. We’d go from weekend to weekend and so I, I said, “I’ve got to build up some college tradition. We always give rings when you graduate. Let’s give wings, rings to everyone who started.” So, I called in the ring company, they came in and I said, “We’re going to sell them rings.” And so we sold rings and so...Jim Moon has one called “Founding Faculty” on his.

Hall: (1:32:18) Oh, ok.

Walters: (1:32:19) [*laughter*] Ok.

Towns: (1:32:20) And every, students have “Founding Class...”

Walters: (1:32:24) In the first class?

Towns: (1:32:25) Yeah, everyone who wanted, who could buy a ring has a founding first class ring. I would think that there are a lot of those that have been lost and if you could find one, it would be fairly expensive. But there were two that said “Co-Founder” on it; mine and Jerry’s. Now, along about the twenty fifth anniversary, somebody talked Jerry into anybody who gave a thousand dollars could get a co-founder’s ring. And so they said to me, “Can we use your ring as a model?” I said, “No way. You’re not getting it off my finger.”

Walters: (1:32:55) [*laughter*]

Towns: (1:32:56) And so they, they probably used Jerry’s and gave it back to him...

Walters: (1:32:58) Well and, so then Dr. Guillermin missed out on that because he wasn’t here at that time?

Towns: (1:33:01) That’s right.

Walters: (1:33:02) And he was down with Dr. Dinsbeer?

Towns: (1:33:03) That’s right.

Walters: (1:33:04) Ok.

Towns: (1:33:05) Yeah, but uh...but I do not want to, by any means, dismiss the influence the influence of Dr. Guillermin because...

Walters: (1:33:10) Right.

Towns: (1:33:11) that first summer, I...let’s go back to that night of the telephone.

Walters: (1:33:16) Ok, sure.

Towns: (1:33:17) Remember that telephone call I...

Walters: (1:33:18) I think we’ve covered that other aspect fine, so yeah, let’s go on.

Towns: (1:33:20) Ok, we covered...that, that telephone. When I got finished, Jerry said, "Oh, by the way, I want a college catalog by Monday morning." I said, "Jerry, you have no idea what you're asking for. You're asking somebody on Sunday night to write a college catalog by Monday morning and have it on your desk." I said, "You have no idea what you're asking for. You don't understand education. It can't be done." And the whole time I said, "But I can do it, I can do it, I can do it." I said, "Give me one or two weeks." And he said, "Ok." And I sat down that night, I started at about nine o'clock and I wrote until about three o'clock in the morning and by the Monday morning I had it done. Our, and the catalog we, we wrote then, and the curriculum we wrote then is pretty much the core curriculum as it is today. One thing about a college; some things get in stone and they never get changed. And so that college catalog is just about the same, that core curriculum is about the same as what it was in the first days.

Hall: (1:34:17) Now, this was what, '71 or...?

Towns: (1:34:19) '71.

Hall: (1:34:20) Ok, alright.

Towns: (1:34:21) And so, we got the college catalog printed and we began mailing it out and I showed up here on January the 1st, 19...excuse me, June 1st, 1971. I showed up here June 1st ready to go to work. And I had a budget. I remember going in to see Jerry Falwell and putting a budget that was, it had a hundred and fifty-two thousand to a hundred and fifty-four thousand. I said, "Jerry, one of the first things I want to do is to open a bank account and I'll need a check and here's my budget for the year and can you give me a check for five thousand dollars?" "I don't have any money." "What do you mean you don't have any money? This church is big." He said, "Everything that came in

yesterday is already spent. We don't have anything." I said, "Jerry, I got to have money to start a..." He said, "Well, let's just, for the summer, let's just pay all the expenses through the church and let's not start a bank account yet." And so I did. Then he said, "Let's go get the money tonight." I said, "What do you mean?" He said, "What are you doing tonight?" I said, "Nothing." He said, "Let's go get the money." So we got in his Buick and we drove a hundred miles west of here. Up in the Blue Ridge Mountains, there was a church called Colonial Baptist Church, I don't know which town it was in. It was a church, a Southern Baptist church, your typical church with your columns and your steeples and very colonial looking. And that night, that church, there were about three hundred, had about a hundred and fifty people there. Doug Oldham was there first and he sang for about half an hour. Now, people were thrilled; he drew the crowd. And then I stood up and for about ten minutes I pitched this college. "We're going to create a college, a different college. It's going to be a world changing college, academically excellent. It's going to be streamline, using computer, using television. We're going to train young people to use all the media. It's going to be local church. It's going to be evangelistic. We're going to change the world." And then Jerry preached and then he held up this packet; this ugly, obscene packet of fifty-two envelopes that had been stapled with a commercial stapler. Now, I want you to see, these were business reply envelopes. Mail it to, you know, Thomas Road Baptist Church. And back the business reply probably cost us three, four cents each to get it, maybe a little bit more than that. But, we held it up and he said, "Now, notice their called doorkeepers. Will you be a doorkeeper in the house of God?" And we read that verse with Solomon, when he built the temple, assigned certain people to be doorkeepers, to keep the door. "Will you keep the door

open? Will you put a dollar a week in one of these envelopes?" Now, the envelopes were all marked by a different week throughout the year, fifty-two of them. "Would you, would you, would you commit yourself to a dollar a week to help reach the world for Jesus? And put your hand up." And I would walk up and down the aisle and Doug would walk up and down the aisle and that evening we got about seventy people committed and Dr. Falwell said, "Now, would you like to hear Jerry, would you like to hear Doug Oldham sing *The King is Coming Again*?" "Yeah! Yeah! Yeah, we want to hear him sing!" "Ok, when we get five more," and hands went up like that. And so, Doug got up and sang and we got cards. And so going home, I said to Jerry, "Well how, much did we get?" He said, "A lot more than you think about." He said, "We got seventy-five dollars, but think of seventy-five dollars times fifty-two." And so the next night we went over here into the Shenandoah Valley, that was a Tuesday night, and I think we got like thirty five envelopes. And the next night we went to Richmond and I think on Richmond we went to a big church over there. And I think we got like two fifty, three hundred envelopes. And that first summer, night after night we would go out, hold up the envelopes, and get people to mail us a dollar a week. And that became the backbone that built a great university. That became the backbone that put Ronald Reagan into office. That, that contact, that was a platform that was a powerful platform because Jerry had one of the most powerful mailing lists in the nation.

Walters: (1:38:35) Well in 1971 then, how did he go about, was he already scheduled to speak because of his large church size and...

Towns: (1:38:44) Large church size, radio, and television. He was already scheduled...

Walters: (1:38:46) Right, right.

Towns: (1:38:47) to speak in these and so they already had him set up and we just went and fulfilled...

Walters: (1:38:51) Sure.

Towns: (1:38:52) what we already had set up throughout the summer time. And of course lots of summers have revivals and those kinds of meetings and so sometimes, we went and we were part of a, a whole week's revival but we were only one speaker during the week but still...and, and some of the night I remember, we only got maybe a dozen or, sure was a dozen envelope signed but, that became a very powerful tool and I'll talk about those people later on.

Hall: (1:39:21) Now, a minister did the uh...the logo and the uh...seal of the church with the flame coming out of it, who designed that and how did that come about?

Towns: (1:39:30) Ok. Well that happened about um...the first month of school. I figured, you know, the school needs a seal and so I began to think about it. Now, the front cover of the book that Jerry and I had done was called *Church of Flame*. It had a flame coming out of a local church which was the front sketching or drawing of Thomas Road Baptist Church. So I took that and put it down and then I drew an eight sided octagon around it; it was a frame. And that eight sided octagon stands for the eight sides of the old Thomas Road Baptist Church, you remember? Jerry had a, a drawing by Thomas Jefferson of a chapel that was going to be eight sided and Jerry took that drawing and made it much larger. So, here was symbolism. I put a Bible at the bottom; we were Bible based. I took a church at the center; we're going to be a church centered university. I put a flame; we're going to be evangelistically flamed with eight sides. And then I put a ribbon around it. I took it in to our art room, Bud Fisher. I said, "Clean this up, make it

look nice.” He did and so that’s the symbol on our ring and that’s the symbols of the school’s to this day. And so it really came out of those three things; Bible, evangelism, church. Those three things became, made Liberty great. Now, it that first year, uh...let me go back to that summer. When I showed up, we had five applications. This is June 1st; we’re going to open school on September 1st. I went to Jerry and I said, “Jerry, you and I are going to be embarrassed.” I said, “All of your friends are going to think you’re going to start a college?” And he said, “If you only have ten or twelve or fifteen, they’re going to talk, they’re going to laugh at you behind your back.” I said, “Back at Trinity, they’re going to laugh at me.” Because at Trinity, when I told them I was leaving Trinity to come, they said, “Elmer, don’t go to West Virginia.” I said, “I’m not going to West Virginia. I’m going to Virginia.”

Walters: (1:41:37) [*laughter*]

Towns: (1:41:38) They said, “Don’t go up to those mountains, the Appalachians.” I said, “I’m going to the Blue Ridge.” They said, “Don’t go to, who’s that?” I said, “Jerry Falwell.” “Never heard of him.” They said, “Don’t you know that there are three or four Bible colleges that close every year up in the hills?” I said, “We’re not starting a Bible college. We’re starting a liberal arts college.” And I remember Ken [Gango], the man who was taking my place at Trinity said, “Elmer, you’ll bury yourself in those hills and you’ll never be heard from again. Stay here in Chicago. This is the center, this is the helm of everything God is doing in the world.” I said, “God has called me. I feel it. I’ve got to do what God has told me to do.” And I said, “I’m going to go because I believe God is in this thing.” So I came and we started and I said, “Jerry, we, we got to do something. We go five applications.” He said, “Well, Elmer, you say that this college is

going to be the extension of a church. If this was a church deal, I'd say, 'Let's have a contest.'" And he said, "What kind of contest can we have now to get people to..." He said, "I'll tell you what. I'm going to go to Israel. Let's say every pastor who sends us five students, we'll give them a free trip to Israel." And I said, "Jerry, if a pastor gets five people to go with him to Israel, he'll get his free trip." And he said, "Ok. Every pastor who sends us one student, let's give him a free trip." I said, "No, no, no." I said, "Let's give the free trip to the students." He said, "Do it. Done, done." And I think we shook hands on it and so we were happy for that. So, Jerry had a pastors conference the end of June. He always used to have one about the time of his church anniversary. Lots of pastors came and the first day of the pastorals conference, I picked up about sixteen or twenty applications. The next day it was sixteen or twenty, I forget the exact...but, you know, by the time that appli, that conference was over, I had fifty and, and growing. And so...

Walters: (1:43:36) Did that evolve into Super Conference eventually?

Towns: (1:43:38) Yes, it did.

Walters: (1:43:39) And change on the calendar then to the fall?

Towns: (1:43:41) Yes, it became a super conference, we changed it into the church year so the students could come to it.

Walters: (1:43:46) Right.

Towns: (1:43:47) And, and anyway, that first year, we talked about how many we were going to have. I remember going out to lunch one day with Jim Moon, and I said, "Jim, how many students are we going to have?" He said, "Well, what did Jerry say?" I said, "Jerry said we're going to have a hundred." He said, "Elmer, if Jerry says we're going to

have a hundred, we're going to have a hundred." I said, "Wait a minute. I'm not going to manipulate the numbers. I..." He said, "No, no, no. You don't understand. You're not dealing with just an average pastor. God listens to Jerry and does what Jerry asks." I went, "Whoa, that doesn't fit my theology." He said, "But Jerry, when he says something, God does it." He said, "We'll, if he says we'll have a hundred, we'll have a hundred." Well I said, "If we have fifty we'll be lucky." Now, that's my non-Calvinistic statement and we had more than my fifty or his hundred. We had a hundred and fifty four students that first year, honest count. And all of them came in and, and so to start, we only started with one semester of a freshman year. That's all we offered the first. Didn't try to offer the whole college; just one semester. And so I went over to the CVCC and I found a professor, an old retired professor, who was teaching there; had been a president of a president...president of a Presbyterian college. And he had a Ph.D., I think from Princeton, in history. And he taught our, our History of Western Civilization. I went to Roanoke College, found a man who had been a president of a Southern Baptist college. And he had a Ph.D. in psychology and he came and taught my Intro to Psychology. And I taught two or three courses and Jerry taught one and Jim Moon taught one. And so, we put together just one semester; that's all. This first semester of a freshman year, that's all we had to offer, and two or three electives. And we started out with four college presidents. Now, Pierre Guillermin was one, I was one and the professor, the Presbyterian was one, and the Southern Baptist was one. So we started out with four, I said, "We are going to be a good college." And I said from day one to all of our faculty, "I want you to start out with prayer, with your best lecture; teach as though it's the last day of your life. Teach as though it's the best, you had the very best lecture

on your very first day. Start at the highest level you can start at and the second day, give a quiz. Let them know that we mean, we're serious here. We mean business about education." And so we started with the one fifty-four and we only took ninety of them to the Holy Land. So, not everyone that we started with actually came.

Walters: (1:46:30) Well and so, you only had your, your freshman offerings then, what degrees were these kids hoping to get at the end of their four...I, I know you wanted to establish a liberal arts college, but were they going to get a Bible degree or an education degree or...?

Towns: (1:46:48) We had Bible, we had education, uh...I forget what the liberal arts degree was called, I think we had a history major, we had about six different majors there. But we offered enough electives that other people came in, we had quite a few students come in who had taken work at other colleges. And they came in and we just moved them around and pushed them through that series that first year.

Hall: (1:47:12) Now how is this, was there any type of organization...I know we had divisions at one point and then, of course, later, departments. But was it split up into any type of divisions or...at the beginning?

Towns: (1:47:23) At first we just all came into my office and had a faculty meeting.

Hall: (1:47:27) Ok.

Towns: (1:47:28) Excuse me [*coughs*].

Hall: (1:47:31) And then was there anybody who filled the function of academic dean or did you do that?

Towns: (1:47:37) Oh, I was, I was called, I was called executive vice president and academic dean.

Hall: (1:47:37) Ok.

Towns: (1:47:38) I was called both positions. Toward the end of that first year, Dr. Jim Henry...

Hall: (1:47:42) Ok.

Towns: (1:47:43) came and he had his Ph.D. from University of Kentucky and had taught in the department of education in Eastern Kentucky University and he came and I hired him on the spot. He was here one night and he said, "Well, sure I want to work," and so we hired him and he became, I gave him my title; academic dean. And he was there for, for ten years. And I think you served under Dr. Henry didn't you?

Hall: (1:48:12) Yes...

Towns: (1:48:13) Ok.

Hall: (1:48:14) my first year here he was the dean.

Towns: (1:48:15) Yes, he was an excellent dean. In fact, he gave, he, he was the one who got us accreditation.

Walters: (1:48:21) I wanted...

Hall: Now...ok. Go ahead.

Walters: (1:48:22) We're coming to near the end of what's obviously going to be a multiple part interview here but I wanted to cover a couple things here before we end up closing this part if you, if you can do that for us here. A general question; what is the, what is the most trying experience in founding a Christian college, specifically Liberty in those days? What was the number one thing? Was it the finances? Was it the recruiting students, the faculty? What was your greatest burden in that first couple months? Or maybe it, maybe you have already answered that with the finances but...

Towns: (1:49:03) I remember about the...by the way, the, the tuition was really cheap that first year. I think that first semester it was a hundred dollars a semester for everything. Room was a hundred or a hundred and fifty and...ok, room was a hundred and fifty and the meals were like two hundred twenty-five a semester. And this student came to me and he brought me this thing on a napkin; "Give such and such student free tuition." And then another student came and, "Give this student free tuition, room and board." And we ended up that first year giving seventy-five percent of tuition away free and maybe seventy-five percent of room and board free. And Liberty has had a tradition for the first twenty years of almost having seventy-five percent scholar-shipped students. Now, accreditation put a stop to that. But let me tell you what happened in that first year. I go and I said, "Jerry, you're giving away all my money. How in the world do you expect me to run a school if you're going to give these scholarships?" And I remember Jerry saying, "Elmer, it's easier to raise money than recruit students." See, this is the wisdom of Jerry Falwell. He said, "Now listen," he said, "when somebody gives you money, they right you a check and forget about it. But when a student comes, he gives you thirty-six weeks of his life. It's very, very hard to get the students and I can easily give away scholarships and money to students because I can raise the money. But it's hard to get students to come and give us their whole life. If they're coming, let's keep them." So that's been, for the first twenty years, almost a principle. It's easier, it's much easier to raise money than it is to scholarship, we were raising money every night with those one dollar offering plates.

Walters: (1:51:01) Sure. Ok, and then was there a particular event that...you had talked about talking with that pastor in Ohio about, "Oh well, Dr. Falwell was going to go one

grade at a time until he built,” but then all of the sudden ’71 comes and he wants to establish it. Do you, was there a particular event for that, that caused that or was Dr. Falwell just getting impatient [*chuckle*]?

Towns: (1:51:30) I don’t know the answer to that because I don’t know Dr. Falwell’s mind.

Walters: (1:51:32) Ok.

Towns: (1:51:33) He called me...oh, by the way, I didn’t tell the whole story. Let’s go back, God is in the details. Do you remember when Dr. Falwell, he told me to call Dr. Falwell, he said, he said to me, “Let’s start a college.” I said, “You don’t start with a college.” I forgot to tell you that fifteen minutes before he called, I called him, he called my wife and he began to talk to my wife. He said, “Would Elmer be interested in coming to Lynchburg and starting a college for me?” Now, this is out of the blue. And she said, “Why do you ask that?” He said, “Well, I just think Elmer would...” She said, “Do you know he’s been a college president?” He said, “No.” She said, “Do you know he’s been on the Board of Accrediting, the AB...” He said, “No.” Jerry, she said, “Jerry, he’s your man. He can do it better than anybody else can in the world.” And she convinced him and he convinced her and he had her on her side, he had her on his side before I was even involved in the process. And she began to pray, “Lord, make Elmer call me. Lord, touch Elmer’s heart. Lord, touch Jerry’s heart.” She was praying for an hour and fifteen minutes while we were discussing all of these crucial decisions that made Liberty as great as it is. So when you talk about the greatness of Liberty, I may have a co-founder’s ring...

Walters: (1:52:52) Sure.

Towns: (1:52:53) But Ruth, Ruth is important.

Walters: (1:52:55) Sure.

Towns: (1:52:56) Her prayer made it happen.

Walters: (1:52:57) Sure. One last question and I think we're going to wrap up part one. You've talked about leaving Trinity in Chicago and the kind of their attitude with things, how did other large evangelical schools respond to the University's creation at that time, even as a potential competitor? Specifically, BBC, Bob Jones, Tennessee Temple, and any other of those that were...

Towns: (1:53:21) I don't think that there, I don't think anyone took us seriously. We were just another school. There were a lot of little schools around. Ok. I don't think anyone took us seriously. There were a lot of small schools around. As a matter of fact, when we talked about how big the school would be, Jerry and I, we kind of came up with a number; five thousand. Maybe it was my number, but I think it was his too. Because we said, "Bob Jones has four thousand, five hundred and Tennessee Temple has four thousand, five hundred and why not be the biggest? Why not be five thousand?" And so, there was a little signal that went on between Jerry and me. I'd walk on the platform, I'd catch his eye and I'd go, and for you who can't see what...I'm just holding my two fingers, my, my pointer and my thumb about two inches apart. I would hold it up, we're, we're that far apart. And he would smile because that meant, well, just a little bit bigger. That meant, let's be a little bit bigger than five thousand. Let's do something for God.

Walters: (1:54:25) And with that we'll conclude today's interview with Dr. Elmer Towns. This interview has been conducted as part of the oral history project of the Liberty University archives.

[End of Interview]