Oral History Interview of Dr. Boyd Rist

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Name of Interviewee: Dr. Boyd Rist

Name of Interviewers: Lowell Walters, Dr. Cline Hall

Interview Length: (1:06:25)

Notes:

Walters: (0:01) Welcome to this interview in the oral history project of the Liberty University archives. This is interview is being conducted on June 16, 2011. Today we're continuing the second part of a two part series with Dr. Boyd Rist. My name is Lowell Walters and I'll be conducting this interview today along with Dr. Cline Hall; greetings Dr. Hall.

Hall: (0:21) Good afternoon.

Walters: (0:23) And greetings Dr. Rist.

Rist: (0:24) Well hello. I'm glad to be with both of you again.

Hall: (0:27) Okay, Dr. Rist we have covered a lot of material yesterday and but maybe it would be a good time to go back to the beginning and could you tell us something about the administrators and the faculty that you remember from the very beginning?

Rist: (0:41) Yes, I'd be glad to do that. I think in terms of administrators I think particularly of Dr. Henry and Dr. Fitzgerald in the very early days of the institution they were the first the two first chief academic officers, with whom I work. And I think both of them had a strong influence on me. Dr. Henry had a delightful sense humor; he had a great capacity for work and really a very singular focus on making Liberty University a quality institution academically. And I always view Dr. Henry as the person who laid the foundation for Liberty receiving regional accreditation. Dr. Fitzgerald likewise who was his successor has been a faithful and a longtime friend. Dr. Fitzgerald was a careful and meticulous planner and it was his work which really on the academic side for Liberty led to our initial accreditation with the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools. And I have another reason for thinking fondly of Dr. Fitzgerald because he was the person who helped me carve out time that allowed me to do the research necessary to complete my PhD at the University of Virginia. And without that kind of understanding and support the work would have been a lot more burdensome than it was. Later Dr. Earl Mills became our provost and chief academic officer and he certainly was a valued colleague and

friend as well. I think he taught me humility and the importance of working closely with the deans to achieve the educational goals of the institution. When you turn to the faculty side they're so many that come to mind, when you start naming names you're in evidently going to overlook some people but I think certainly in my own department because as long as associations and friendships I think particularly highly of Dr. Hall and Dr. Steinhoff. And then across the university others that I've worked with for a long time and individuals I admire would include people like Dr. Garth Runion, Dr. Jim Stevens, Dr. Terry Spohn. They've all served this institution for a long time and with great distinction. Then in recent years I think of some significant additions to the university Dr. Roger Shultz who came as a history professor was chair of the history department when I was dean of the college of arts and sciences. I think of Dr. Emily Heady who came in the English department and then headed up university writing programs and is now going to be the dean of the college of general studies. They come to mind particularly as individuals in recent years who not only are excellent teachers but also individuals with the exceptional administrative skills. And of course we could add to this list and keep it going on and on, but I think the general point I would make is that really God has drawn to Liberty University over the years an impressive diverse group of academics who are passionately committed to the mission of the institution. And in the names that I've given you I really see those just as examples of many others that we could name, who share that common commitment and common passion.

Hall: (4:18) We talked about the senate the faculty senate the other day. Who are the which do I say the founders the early leadership in the senate?

Rist: (4:30) Yes. Well I think when we were talking yesterday I mentioned that Dr. Robert Littlejohn had shared with the committee that drafted the senate constitution. He served as the first moderator of the faculty senate and got us off to a very good start. I also think in the early years of moderators like Dr. Glenn Wooldridge, Dr. Terry Spohn they really set a model I think that others followed for principle dedicated leadership. And it was individuals like Dr. Littlejohn, Wooldridge and Spohn that really served as role models for others who have served in leadership positions in the senate.

Walters: (5:16) Yesterday we talked at length about the ensuring that the school maintained its conservative roots, and we talked about mostly about recruitment of new faculty. Could you speak to other strategies taken or developed in to ensure that as well in the highest administrative levels or in other areas of the university?

Rist: (5:44) I'd be glad to do that. Dr. Falwell always had a favorite saying that academic institutions, if you took your hands off the wheel they gravitated naturally to the left side of the ditch. In other words they tended to serve in a liberal more permissive direction. He felt therefore it was important that at the highest levels of the institution we have individuals and at the board level in particular that would always have the kind of commitment that the founders of the institution had. And so a number of years ago policies were passed at the board level that

required that every member of the board of trustees of Liberty University would ultimately be reviewed and affirmed by the board of deacons of Thomas Road Baptist Church and the sense there was and I think it is probably a correct one. That church boards generally stay truer to an institutions purpose and mission overtime then perhaps college and university boards do. So it was Dr. Falwell's thinking that if a board member had to pass not only the test of being selected by the university board itself upon recommendation by Dr. Falwell but also had to pass mustard with the deacon board of the Thomas Road Baptist church, that was just another means to help ensure and perpetuity that we would always have a board directing university policy at the highest level consistent with the founding mission and vision.

Walters: (7:36) Then how's the deacon board at Thomas Road? Are they appointed or are they elected or are they?

Rist: (7:42) I believe they're appointed I believe they're appointed. And exactly how that process works, but I know it involves certainly the senior pastor, but pastoral staff and it probably also involves recommendations from sitting members from the board of deacons. But I have not been involved in that process. I know how things work at the university but I'm not as conversant with how it works in the board of deacons.

Hall: (8:08) I don't whether we've had any vacancies on the school board in recent years, but is that still following you think?

Rist: (8:16) Fireside? I know it still followed, I know we've had some turnover in the board over the last five to seven years. And while I was involved with the board going to meetings and so on I always knew that when a new board member was presented the individual was presented based not only on Dr. Falwell's recommendation but that individual also had been vetted and approved by the board of deacons of the church.

Walters: (8:52) Well so then as provost how much weight was given to student concerns and how much interaction did you have with student government? Can you speak to that?

Rist: (9:04) I think in terms of student concerns I always took them seriously. Student concerns fell into all sorts of categories and all types of appeals on fairness to respect to grades, and everything in between. Generally speaking anonymous concerns as you might expect were ignored, because there was really no way to follow up with an individual who might make an anonymous complaint against a faculty member or against a particular policy. But if an individual had a concern and had an appeal we looked at it, we looked at it very carefully. And in many cases I would investigate it personally, there were times when I would involve a dean or a department chair in the investigation, sometimes a university committee a faculty senate committee. In terms of student government involvement and interaction that was very hit and miss over the years. Some student government presidents were much more interested in interacting with the chief academic officer than others. I was always happy when there was one who liked to do that, and then as a matter of policy when Dr. Borek was president he regularly

invited the student body president to cabinet meetings so we got input from the SGA (Student Government Association) on a regular basis there, and if anything came up in those meetings that was an academic concern I always followed up on it with the student body president. So yes we took such matters seriously and took appropriate actions. Sometimes after you did all that investigation the answer was fairly black and white, and it was easy to make a decision. But I'd have to say more often it was some shade of gray and what you did was take council from as many sources as possible that had direct knowledge of the situation and then you made a decision frankly on the preponderance of the evidence using your own best judgment.

Walters: (11:22) In the student senate or the student government what can you think of some significant initiatives that they came up with that we reacted to and were gang changers so to speak?

Rist: (11:37) You know off the top of my head I don't remember any particular ones in recent years. I know there have been from time to time certain issues that student government has been interested in pressing. Those typically would go directly from the student government to the president of the institution and be decided at that level in terms of direct interaction between the president and the president of SGA. So unless it touched on an academic matter and I can't recall any that really did, I really did not have direct involvement in those kinds of things.

Hall: (12:22) You held several offices but could you describe what's the difference between a dean of academic affairs and provost?

Rist: (12:31) Okay. Well that's a question I'm frequently asked and there is not an easy answer because the term provost means different things at different institutions. For example at some institutions the provost in the absence of the president really serves the presidential function while the president is away for whatever reason, and it's typically if the president is away for a short period of time. That's really not how the office of provost functioned or not how it functions today at Liberty University. When I was appointed provost I asked Dr. Falwell made the appointment and I asked that I also be able to retain the title of vice president for academic affairs so that I would continue to have responsibility and oversight of all things academic. I would say the role of provost here at Liberty in my experience put me at the table in terms of strategic planning for issues which went beyond academics so that I would have a voice from an academic perspective of anything having to do with facilities, strategic plan, you name it. And it allowed me to have a little bit more global perspective on everything that was involved in running a large university then being strictly limited to the academic domain. So it was more a shaping of a broader focus for the institution as provost then had been my experience as chief academic officer, and I enjoyed that added experience. It gave you a sense for an appreciation of what the financial people were dealing with, what student affairs was involved in administering, and so on. That would not typically have been a part of my experience just as academic officer.

Hall: (14:44) Now you've step down from those positions is there acting as advisor, I think that's the correct terminology?

Rist: (14:49) The formal title is senior academic consultant of the provost.

Hall: (14:55) Okay what does that mean?

Rist: (14:56) Okay well that means that whatever service that I can be to the provost on matters based on my experience and my history with Liberty University I'm available to provide that service. I meet with Dr. Godwin at least once a month and we go over discuss all kinds of issues and he briefs me on what's happening and what's moving forward in terms of the planning process. Asked my thoughts on various matters and we made it very clear when this position was created that everything that I provided in terms of advice would remain confidential, and that he and the chancellor for that matter were free to accept any of it or none of it. And that I would not talk about any of it out of school so to speak. So it's working well and the thing that I've spent quite a bit of time on in this new role at least in the first half of the current year. It is working with a small committee that is developing a fifth year report for SACS, which is really amongst almost in many a self-study that we must submit early in 2012 and probably will result in a visit to the campus. Not on the scale of the ten year visit but still a visit that looks at a number of the important indicators of how we're doing as an university.

Walters: (16:30) Well I can't decide here whether to go to the community side or, let's go on to commencement celebrations and we'll come back to the community questions. Tell us about the evolution of commencement, the commencement ceremony or celebration. We're you involved in the decision of picking commencement speakers and has it always been a part of graduation for graduates to be able to shake Dr. Falwell's hand? When did that I know we haven't done that for several years, but what brought that to a close, and could you just speak in general to those things?

Rist: (17:08) Well let me talk in general first and then we'll talk about some of the specifics. One of the favorite times of the year for me is commencement weekend. I always enjoy the pomp and pageantry associated with commencement, and I think Liberty puts on a very fine commencement. It's a really great time of celebration for parents for students for guest at the university. And it's time for the university to put its best foot forward, and of course they've grown in size. I remember the early commencements were at Thomas Road Baptist Church, and then of course we came to this campus and we used various venues. For a long time we used the Vines Center, but then several years ago we grew out of the Vines Center and moved to William Stadium. Now we're really on the verge of are is Williams Stadium becoming too small for our commencement exercises, and where do we go from here? And I suppose one answer is if unless you want to limit the number of people who could come and there's been a reluctance to do that, at least up to this time. In other words giving each graduate a limited number of tickets that kind of thing, the overflow crowds going to have to be accommodated somewhere. And that might be

the ceremony may be video streamed to the Vines Center or to the Thomas Road Worship center, or perhaps both. But that'll be a challenge in years ahead. Now you asked Lowell about my involvement in the selection of speakers, and was I involved in. The simple answer to that is not really, that was always something that was decided largely by the chancellor. From time to time I would hear names floated as possibilities of commencement speakers. But in general I heard the name of the speaker about the time that the rest of the university community did. So that's the story on how commencements speakers were selected and my role in it, which was essentially a non-role. You asked also about the part of the ceremony where graduates shook hands with Dr. Falwell and that was most empathetically a long tradition here at Liberty University until in fact even after we had become a very, very large institution. In fact I remember and Dr. Hall maybe Lowell you'll even remember this. For many years Dr. and Mrs. Falwell had their individual photos taken with graduates at the chancellor's reception following baccalaureate, the night before the graduation ceremony. Now this matter of shaking hands individually at graduation became quite an ordeal, as we got larger and larger. There was an attempt to stop the practice I think around 2003, and there was such a hue and cry from the graduates that year that Dr. Falwell eventually relented and said well I'll continue doing it. But I do remember vividly after the 2006 ceremony when he and I shook every hand that he told several of us that that was the last time he was going to do that. And of course as we all know the Lord called him home just days before the 2007 ceremony. I think you also asked or at least you implied how have commencements changed with the size of the university, and we've also already looted to the fact of having a venue or a space large enough to hold the ceremony. The other major change that has occurred in recent years is that we now confer the degrees in mass in the large ceremony by degree level and by degree type rather than reading every name at the ceremony and what we do now is that we have these follow up ceremonies where each college and school meets and in those ceremonies every name is read every hand is shaken and there's individual attention to the graduates and the challenge there is several of these college and schools ceremonies are now becoming so large that it's difficult to contain them in the venues we have. So not too far behind the challenge of where to hold the large ceremony will be the challenge of where to hold the ceremonies for some of the bigger colleges and schools. There are few times in the history of these ceremonies where the weather has been a factor but not very often. Generally we haven't had any major missteps or mishaps that kept commencement ceremonies. I think they've generally been well planned and well implemented. The couple weather related commencements that I remember many years ago we held a commencement actually out in the parking lot area adjacent to the dining hall. And Charles Hughes was the commencement speaker, and that year we had a thunder and lightning storm. And I can remember as Charles Hughes got to the most dramatic parts of his commencement address the thunder peeled the lightning came down and we almost all evacuated, but somehow the Lord spared us and lightning didn't strike close enough for us to all run in fifty different directions. So that was one memorable weather related commencement, the other one which was more recent in the late 1990's was the one where Reverend Billy Graham was the speaker. The weather was not particularly nice that day in fact it

was quite a bit of wind, not a small amount of rain throughout the ceremony. We all got wet but our spirits stayed high.

Hall: (23:17) Is there a favorite commencement speaker over the years?

Rist: (23:21) Well Billy Graham certainly would be high on the list, President George H. W. Bush I think in 1990, James Dobson. Sort of in terms of the ones that come to mind immediately those would be probably highest on my list.

Walters: (23:40) Well you no doubt, did you have opportunity to meet each and everyone these or were there some that snuck by and you didn't get to see them?

Rist: (23:47) Got to meet most of them. I did not get to meet personally Billy Graham and of course the president flew in and flew out, so I didn't get to meet him. But I think all of the others got to at least meet face to face, shake hands and more often than not get a picture taken as well so.

Walters: (24:10) Now a lot of times there have been protestors at the gate of the university on these days. Any recollections then in particular there, I know that when we had Karl Rove here even as recently as that a few years ago there were protestors out there in regard to him; any memorable events due to that sort of thing?

Rist: (24:32) No I guess I missed the protestors, usually we had to get to campus so early the protestors had not yet arrived, and by the time the ceremony was over they were gone. So I any protest that were held I had to watch on television rather than see up close and personal.

Walters: (24:51) Now tell us about the former formal academic convocations that we use to start the year and that sort of thing. What were they like and how did they come to not being executed or administered any longer?

Rist: (25:10) We did it for many, many years hold a formal academic convocation at the beginning of each year, and typically the faculty came into the convocation in full academic regalia at times teaching awards or other special recognitions were given at those ceremonies. Dr. Falwell always spoke and it was usually one of his vintage sermons and one of his challenges to not just the first time students here but to those who were returning as well. And so he would always the speaker at those formal convocations. Why did we stop them? Dr. Falwell of course passed away in 2007, the new chancellor Jerry Falwell Jr. decided that he didn't want to continue that particular tradition that was associated with his father and it seemed to be a natural time with the transition to new leadership just to have our regular chapel services rather than mark it with some kind of a formal event at the beginning of the year. So it really happened with the transition to the leadership of the new chancellor

Hall: (26:30) Did you mention what traditions. Are there any particular traditions you think is being started now that will live on as far as the history of this school?

Rist: (26:41) Well certainly I mean the commencement ceremony and everything associated with that is a powerful tradition. I would hope that the idea of having convocations or what we used to call chapels will remain a part of the Liberty University experience. Chapels or convocations have changed a bit over the years. It used to be almost exclusively a preaching type of an exercise in which ministers spoke to the students. Now there is still a great deal of that but now there are also people who come in from the political world, from the business world to provide their perspective to our student body as well. But in that sense I think that's a fine addition in an broadening of it, that's a tradition that I hope will continue to be a part of university life here at Liberty for the for as long as there is such an institution.

Walters: (27:50) Is there ever been consideration given to having commencement at in December?

Rist: (27:56) We've talked about that often. There are a lot of challenges associated with it, they typically do not tend to be well attended, they are at the time of the year when weather can at least be an issue. They don't have quite all the trappings typically that the May commencement would have. And so we've not moved in that direction yet, but that's certainly another option that I think we'll continued to be looked at, particularly as we are larger and larger. And it would make perhaps take a little bit of the pressure off the May commencement, even though I think most the of people who come in May would still continue to come in May even though we would have a December commencement. But no we have definitely looked at it but for a variety of reasons some of which I've mentioned no decision has been made to go in that direction.

Walters: (28:59) Different topic that comes to mind even as we sit here, could you speak to our intersections with athletics? And how we go to the different protections that are there in addition to the NCAA standards? The academic intersection with athletics, have there ever been issues with that you've had to deal with or do we have any safe guards in that regard to ensure scholarliness in our athletes, degree completion?

Rist: (29:30) Well we have a I know there's a faculty senate committee a standing committee of the faculty senate that deals with academic side of athletic eligibility. So they're very involved in working with the athletic director and the coaching staffs, in terms of making sure that the academic rules for student athletes are not any different than for regular students. We've always emphasized at Liberty University the idea that athletes are student athletes and I think the word student in front of athlete is very important. Because it states the priority that you're students first that you're here to get an education yes you're here to compete on the highest level possible on the athlete field, but ultimately here you're here to get an education in a Christian context. Now from time to time I would interact with individual coaches on particular problems where a student might have an academic eligibility issue. I can say quite honestly that I never remember an occasion where I was pressured to bend a rule or change anything. It was moral along the lines of if there is room within the rules to give this student some extra time or extra consideration. Could we do it? And certainly if there would be room within the rules we would

do that but it wasn't pressure to bend rules. And I've appreciated that attitude through the years from all of really form all of the athletic directors we've had, and the coaches that occasionally have interacted with us as well.

Walters: (31:21) Well as a spectator and as a fellow student and then later as a fellow faculty member with other individuals it seems like Dr. Falwell when he was around used to try his best to give everybody a fair shake at getting their degree. If they're willing to put in the attempt we'll go every mile to help them get that. Could you speak to that? I know that in recent years the INFT or the technology side of academics in regard to competencies and working with computers and such was one of those areas where a person would test into their correct level of scholarship if you could call that scholarship, but like in mathematics we have certain. Could you speak to some of those things as far as what we've done with folks to for lack of a better term remediate those who may not have made it in other colleges but we got them a degree if they were willing to put in the time?

Rist: (32:25) Yes. If we admit a student who has some academic deficiencies we have an obligation to create a climate to at least maximize their chances for success. So indeed we do have a number of vehicles to do that. One of them certainly is the Bruckner Learning Center, they teach a variety of courses in learning skills, study strategies and they're designed really for students who perhaps haven't had the motivation or really don't know how to study and how to allocate the appropriate amount of time and to use the time effectively to study. I think that helps a number of students. We have a whole range of developmental math courses we offer for students who are not yet ready for mainstream college level mathematics. And frankly it takes some students you know two or three times through various levels of developmental math before they're ready for college level mathematics. There's a basic English course that is offered for those that are not ready for the basic or the English, grammar, and composition course that is the mainstream course for students. So across the university and of course you mentioned INFT as well and there they've created structures where if you can pass portions of that competency then you could really hone in on where your weaknesses are and they have tools that you can study with and use online or even face to face to prepare to meet those competency. So we really do our best overall to help a student succeed who may not have all the skills he or she needs coming in.

Hall: (34:19) There's been a compartment of discussion within the community about Liberty of course some pro some con. Could you speak to the conflicts that have gone on between the university and well Dr. Falwell in general I guess with the local community? And how has that I think improved over the years?

Rist: (34:38) Well yes there's certainly been times in which the university and the community have been at odds. I would say generally speaking the situation has improved in recent years. There's certain individuals and it's not important to name names but I'd say categories of individuals that I that I tend to label the irreconcilables in the community who would always

view this institution as a glorified Sunday school, not a legitimate institution of higher learning. Those same individuals are also individuals who probably have never set foot on the campus, and have never taken the time to research what the reality of Liberty University is. But I think the broad spectrum of people in the community are fair minded and are willing to look at the university in an objective way. And I think it's not so much any formal actions that the university has taken although that's helped from time to time. I think what's really helped change the climate over the years has been the kind of one on one involvement of faculty members, staff members, students in the community in all sorts of ways. As people get to know us outside of the university settings, some of those preconceptions and some of those misconceptions begin to fall away. I can speak from our personal experience; Norma Jean and I for example have always been interested in the fine arts so we've regularly attended the symphony programs at the academy of fine arts. We've made good and lasting friends through those kinds of associations. Our daughter attended the public schools here in Lynchburg and was involved very much in the strings program. And those kinds of associations also helped very much to create a positive climate. And then we've been involved in various organizations. Norma Jean's a member of the American association of university women. That's an organization that allows her to interact with others socially and professionally who are interested in advancing the cause of women in higher education. And she's made many friendships, and I think many in-roads for Liberty because of just her personal involvement and the way she conducts herself in such a positive enthusiastic manner in that organization. We've been members of the bird club for a number of years, and that puts you in contact with other individuals who become longtime friends. Recently I became member an member of an organization called SPHEX the letters are actually SPHEX and I won't go into what all the acronyms means, but it's basically an educational and philosophical enrichment organization. It's made up of about thirty five individuals who are a cross section of business and civic and educational leadership in the city and again that's just another place where one on one you can get to know people and break down barriers. And so as all of us do those kinds of things, and I know we do as we go out in the community beyond the university I think we forge new bonds of friendship and respect. And I think with much of that tension dissipated, it'll never be completely gone, but the climate is generally healthy today I think.

Hall: (38:55) We mentioned yesterday a little bit about the financial crisis that the school had in the 1990's, but I don't know whether we went into any detail or not. Can you speak to that? Was there any particular time that you felt that well the university won't make it?

Rist: (39:14) Well the financial crisis of the late '80's early '90's was a difficult time for the university. In some ways it was the worst of times in other ways it was the best of times, I suppose. The hardest part of it certainly was that when you are in financial crisis sometimes you're forced to make tough decisions in terms of personnel. And I remember very vividly that during that time of crisis there began to be layoffs initially in areas outside the university. They might have been in old time gospel hour; they may have been at the church. But then later they

came into the university. And first it touched staff and then ultimately it touched faculty. I know that I personally at the time I was dean of the college of arts and sciences had to meet with somewhere between twelve and fifteen faculty members. Not at one time but over a period of two to three years, twelve to fifteen faculty members face to face and tell them for economic reasons that we could not renew their contracts. And I knew that when I had that conversation that what was happening was that we would wreak havoc on those families, at least in the short term. That it's not just the individual that was impacted but it was children, it was a spouse, and those were anguishing times. We fortunately came out of that time I think better and stronger than ever. And so while I say in a certain sense it was the worst of times in another sense I think it was the best of times. Because I do think for those who stayed at the university through those years there was a kind of recommitment and a kind of persevering faith that people who went through that particular crisis have that's probable unique among those who are currently employed at the university. They just simply went through a crisis time that had a lasting impact and I think most of those individuals who did ultimately stay with the university just made a fundamental recommitment to making it work and to making it sure that it was a success.

Hall: (41:59) Recently there's been some reorganization of the university bringing back I believe it was called the college of general studies?

Rist: (42:09) Yes.

Hall: (42:09) Which we had several years ago and then disappeared and is now coming back. How has all this reorganization affect the students and faculty?

Rist: (42:18) I've of course that reorganization has taken place sense the time I was provost so I've not been involved in a detailed way, but I do know that I do know a little bit about the development of that particular college. I think the aim of the college is to draw into it a group of faculty in the core liberal arts disciplines who have a strong commitment to teaching, that that's their primary emphasize. They're not interested in research; they're not interested necessarily in that kind of an aspect to their careers. But they really want to help students succeed and to get a firm grounding in the liberal arts. So this is an under taking that will be headed by Dr. Emily Heady, whose the new dean. I know she has pretty well completed the process of selecting faculty who will be in that college, and there will be faculty certainly from the math department, from the English department, from the history department who will have in many cases dual appointments. That is they will have and appointment in the college of general studies as well as an appointment in their own department. But their primary task really is to assist students to succeed in getting started well at the university, so that they can move on as quickly as possible into their desired major and completed degree successfully at the earliest possible time.

Walters: (44:05) Lets switch over now a little bit to the legacy of the university and specifically Dr. Falwell who passed away several years ago now. What's your favorite memory of Dr. Falwell?

Rist: (44:23) Well I can't focus on any single things, but I would say the memory is multifaceted. I think of his great sense of humor, his infectious smile his on question his love of people. He had an indomitable spirit; it was very, very difficult to get him down. In fact I never really saw him down. I'm sure there were times in private when he had to go to the Lord in anguish, but he always kept a positive face when he was out with individuals in this university community at the church and so on. He was really a visionary; he was not interested in the details of making something happen. But he loved to cast a broad vision and then leave it to others to implement the vision. But it was usually a very action oriented practical vision for the university and the overall ministry. And he was the kind of a person who really the greater the challenge I think the greater was his reliance on the Lord for wisdom and direction. A remarkable individual and we will not see his kind walk here again anytime soon. I think he was one of a kind.

Walters: (45:53) Now you describe a person that seems like they might have a bent towards impatience if you weren't getting the details accomplished. Did you ever have to say well Dr. Falwell this is going to need some time or how did those things take place?

Rist: (46:09) I think he understood that, but I think he could also become impatient. Another one of his favorite sayings once he had made a decision was, "It isn't whether the rabbit can climb the tree, the rabbit must climb the tree." This decision's been made we're going to make it work now, and there's no turning back. And you know that had a way of focusing you on the task before you and you probably got things going and in motion faster than you might otherwise have if you hadn't had that little prod behind you. Because you knew you would have it sooner or later.

Walters: (46:48) So is it safe to say than that maybe get a motor going and we'll worry about making it run smoothly after it gets going?

Rist: (46:58) That's right. It may sputter for a while but then it's going to run on all cylinders sooner or later.

Norma Jean Rist: (47:03) Was that the sort of the deal with the law school? He wanted that to be.

Rist: (47:08) He did.

Norma Jean Rist: (47:10) You were very involved with that.

Rist: (47:10) And this is my wife Norma Jean coming in on the conversation. Dr. Falwell surprised me really when he made a decision oh now almost a decade or so ago I think that he wanted to have a law school at Liberty University. I mean in the early days we heard all these grand visions about a law school and other professional schools and of course I think many of us listened to that but we really sort of took it with a grain of salt. But here it was one of those big

undertakings and he was doing it at the time when we had a lot of other things on our plate and a lot of other things keeping us busy. So but he wanted a law school and so as chief academic officer I was very much involved with the appointment of the initial dean of the law school; Bruce Green. And of course Matt Staver is now dean of the law school. It was not a only a tremendous commitment in terms of time and energy but a tremendous financial commitment for the university, and also because we dealt with another accreditation entity the American Bar Association. And we knew that they were very prescriptive on many things; on the kind of faculty you hired, on the size of the facility that you have to have, even in almost in terms of square footage, in terms of the library and not only the number but the kind of volumes. So there was a lot to be accomplished in a short period of time, and there were times in fact in which we said well let you know this doesn't look possible. But then again it was Dr. Falwell there in the background who said we're going to climb this tree, and we're going to do it. And you know he never let down the pressure on that and of course the law school received provisional accreditation by the ABA in record time. And then ultimately just about a year a year and a half ago full accreditation. And so that's a testimony not just to his vision and his legacy but to the hard work of many people to make it a reality.

Hall: (49:27) In terms of organization was the law school sort of a separate entity but did that programs come under you as provost academic dean or how did?

Rist: (49:39) Yes, yes, yes, yes it did. Just like any other college or school of the university,

Norma Jean Rist: (49:42) The dean of engineering?

Rist: (49:44) The dean of the law school reported directly to the chief academic officer.

Norma Jean Rist: (49:50) And engineering?

Rist: (49:50) And engineering that was another school that was established about three years ago; engineering and computational sciences. So no everything academic ultimately falls directly under the chief academic officer so.

Hall: (50:08) Then was roomers and statements about medical school and all of that. What do you see the possibilities of that?

Rist: (50:16) Well I think it's certainly possible. I know there's been serious conversations about a medical school over recent years and even in recent months. On that subject I would simply just say stay tuned and don't be surprised if something happens along those lines.

Walters: (50:35) What do you see as your greatest accomplishment here at Liberty?

Rist: (50:38) Well let me go back if I might to the first message we heard Dr. Falwell speak when we came to what was then Lynchburg Baptist College in August of 1973. Dr. Falwell spoke at faculty orientation there were about thirty of us on the faculty at that time, and he uses

his text and I always remembered the text, I did not remember necessarily any of the substance of his message but I do remember his text. He spoke on Psalm 37:4; Delight thyself also in the Lord, and He shall give you the desires of your heart. And I really what I've worked hard to do all my years at Liberty is to follow that guidance. And it'd be easy to point to lots of things, I've worked on many projects; the expansion of the faculty, the expansion of the physical facilities of the university, improvement of salaries and we could go on and on. But I think these don't really get to the heart of the matter, my aim consistently throughout my time at Liberty and whatever position I've held and most recently that of chief academic officer has been to act with integrity and with honesty in whatever position I've occupied. And really I hope my accomplishment ultimately is that I would be perceived by my peers as having acted in that manner. That if you were able somehow to magically turn a person inside out and truly see his spirit, his soul, his heartbeat that what you saw on the outside was the same as what you saw on the inside. So being a person of integrity and honesty that along with lots of other things that don't really matter in the long term; I hope that's my greatest legacy and my greatest accomplishment.

Hall: (52:46) Well as one who has been here almost as long as you have I can personally say that you have lived up to that honesty and integrity so far as the relationship with faculty and with others on the university staff. What do you say is the role of the university in the future?

Rist: (53:06) Well you know the university in recent years has just moved forward I think in ways that few of us could have imagined even four or five years ago. I think our future is a bright as the promises of God. Certainly we're going to see and we are seeing the physical remaking of the campus right now. A new visitor center, a new and more mature and unified architectural style, we're going to have Lowell I know your happy about this a separate state of the art library. I think we will have new schools we've already talked about the college of general studies, which will launch formally this fall. Not far behind it I believe will be a college of health sciences, and just everything that will be in that I'm not sure but I'm pretty sure we will have such a college relatively soon. And I wouldn't be surprised to see other professional schools and colleges founded. I think we will also begin to do a little bit more in terms of some of our applied degrees. There are a lot of people in and around Lynchburg who are pursuing certifications and degrees in building and construction trades for example who might want to tie that to an associate's degree. And I know that's actively being looked at for people in that category. So what I really see happening today is that we're seeing the vision of Dr. Falwell in the founding of Liberty University being realized before our eyes now under the leadership of his son, these are exciting times to be involved in the life of the university.

Walters: (55:04) What do you think is the major impact that Dr. Falwell had in the nation and even now in his first years of leading the university; Jerry Jr. and even Jonathon as he has taken over the pastorate of Thomas Road. Can you speak to the impact of Dr. Falwell and his sons now as well impacting the nation?

Rist: (55:27) Well certainly first with respect to Dr. Falwell, if we go back to moral majority days the 1980's would be the heyday of that experience. I think Dr. Falwell has a lasting legacy there in terms of calling the nation back to its spiritual roots to reminding the nation along with many others of the special place that the United States of America has in the world's nations. But I think Dr. Falwell would ultimately say that his greatest and his lasting legacy was as a preacher of the gospel. That his first and greatest calling was to be a pastor and that it is in that realm that his most important and most enduring work was done. Jerry Jr. is a lawyer by training he loves very much I think the whole idea of the development side of the university and the physical remaking of the campus, I think he does have an interest in seeing Liberty branch out into other new programs as well. But his focus Dr. Falwell is unique in that you know his interest were across the spectrum. He was senior pastor of the church, he was chancellor of the university, and he worked in both domains. Now the sons have had a divisional of labor so to speak; Jerry Jr. leads the university as chancellor and I've said a little bit about what his interest are. Jonathon of course senior pastor at Thomas Road, doing an excellent job I think he's a wonderful preacher he certainly has a strong appeal and a ministry I think to particularly to young families and drawing them into the life of the church and the broader ministries that Thomas Road has to offer. And I think that division of labor is a good one and each man is gifted in the areas that they have responsibility for and I think both the church and the university are in good hands.

Walters: (58:03) Just to wrap it up here I suppose. Let me ask you a question as a constitutional historian here where are we really at as a nation? In your opinion I mean getting away from Liberty in your own experiences talk to you an academic person. Where do you think we're really at as a nation and where are our greatest threats and that sort of thing? I'd just like to hear you speak to that as to what looking backward and then looking forward.

Rist: (58:39) Well first as a constitutional historian I would lean more toward the idea that the constitution and the powers granted under the constitution should be read to the maximum extent possible, in terms of the originally intent of the framers of the document. So in that sense I'm kind of an originalists like Justice Scalia, or like some of the more conservative members of the court. I think you get into a very, very slippery slope when you begin to interpret and reinterpret the constitution in light of the changing moods or needs at the time. Because then the constitution just becomes a document that can be stretched and pulled like taffy in almost any direction you want to pull it. There has to be a foundational sense in which the framers basic wishes and intentions are maintained. Now there's some room certainly for interpretation but I think when you get to the more liberal side of constitutional interpretation you're really getting almost in the judicial law making and that's the providence of the legislative branch of the government and that's one of the reasons we originally had and I think the founders wisely put in separation of powers and check and balance. And in terms of the general body politic today just beyond constitutional thinking, I think the unfortunate tendency today is very much in politics and national circles to think short term. There this is by no means original with me but there are very few true statesmen in public life at the national level anymore. People who are willing to

take the long view; we had them at one time and we had them in recent times in our own history. And they were on both the conservative and liberal sides of the spectrum, and I think

Walters: (1:01:04) Who would you say were some of those in the past?

Rist: (1:01:06) Well if I go back into the 19th century you know if you look in the congress you could look at people like Henry Clay, Daniel Webster. Frankly and this may surprise you even John C. Calhoun who is today pilloried as a secessionist. Really he loved the union now he had his own unique definition of what the union was, but he loved the union as he understood it. In recent times we've had I think people like Senator Henry Jackson a democrat from the state of Washington who was a liberal on domestic issues but a strong, strong minded pro defense democrat who understood that the nation had to be defended against external threats on the more conservative side. You could mention lots of names I think to some degree Senator Helms was a statesmen. I think to some degree even Senator McCain today would fall into the category of a person who looks more broadly and more long term at the general interest of the country. A senator like Senator Leibovitz, from Connecticut who was a democrat is now an independent. There's just very few of those types and there's much, much more short term thinking.

Walters: (1:02:54) Do we need a term limits amendment? Do we need amendments dealing with abortion or same sex marriage or homosexuality? Or would that be like the prohibition days?

Rist: (1:03:09) Well I don't know let me limit my comments maybe to the term limits part of it because I think we all have strong convictions on some of the others. There are people of course who have run on platforms where if elected I'm going to limit myself to so many terms either in the House of Representatives or the Senate, who have then after a period of time ignored those and apparently the electorate has forgiven them because they have gotten reelected beyond term limits. I think term limits are overblown on one in one sense you would be able to have leave congress and leave public life from time to time people who do take that short term view but you would also rob yourself of some people who are truly gifted and truly can take a broader view. And I think I'd probably not tamper with that and leave it very much like the founding fathers did and not impose that kind of a limit.

Walters: (1:04:28) Any last thoughts coming from you I think Dr. Hall and I are at the end of our questions for you, anything that you would like to give us as concluding statements or comments?

Rist: (1:04:37) Well there's one thought that comes to me because we were just very positive a few minutes ago about the growth of the university the blessings that we've had, and that we've been materially blessed, we've had large numbers of students and the student body has grown on a consistent basis. But I think in the mist of all that we need to be cautious that as God blesses the university in so many material ways as we experience this unprecedented growth that we keep our guard up, because historically nearly every Christian college has strayed from its mission at some point in its development. The reasons are varied but whatever the reasons those

results stand as a powerful warning, it seems to have had happened almost universally over and over again. So I think how I would conclude is saying that our fervent prayer must ever be that Liberty University remains true to its historic mission.

Walters: (1:05:56) Well thank you very much and I sure appreciate your time and I'm sure Dr. Hall and even the future listeners and readers of the transcript of this oral history will appreciate the insights that you've given us in the history.

Rist: (1:06:12) Well thank you. I've enjoyed it very much.

Walters: (1:06:14) And with that we'll conclude todays interview with Dr. Boyd Rist. This interview has been conducted as part of the oral history project of the Liberty University archives.

[End of Interview]