

**[Side A]**

Dr. Thomas McDill [TM] interviewed by Lynn Wilkinson [LW]  
January 29, 1983 at Trinity Western University.

Summary

Born in the Chicago-land area and raised by his lay scholar father, Dr. Thomas McGill grew up in a very close family. The strong Christian influence of his father was especially important in the upbringing of the children. After his conversion, Dr. McDill improved in his studies at the Philadelphia School of the Bible before obtaining his ThB at Northern Baptist Theological Seminary. He dropped out of the masters' program at Northwestern University, though, to obtain his BA and then his MDiv there. Seeing an increase in social problems, he entered into the area of counselling and soon obtained his doctorate in that field. While excelling at his studies, he pastored the Community Bible Church in a suburb of Chicago. Over the next twenty-five years, he would pastor at Grace Evangelical Free Church, Liberty Bible Church, and the Crystal Evangelical Free Church. It was not long before he was asked to fulfil the role of moderator on the Home Missions Board in 1973-74. And then in 1976, he was elected to the position of president of the Evangelical Free Church of America, a position that sometimes overwhelms him.

Dr. McGill goes on to explain the historical roots of the Evangelical Free Church of America by describing its Norwegian, Swedish and Danish roots, in preparation of the Church's centennial celebration. The Church's unique attributes have brought tremendous growth in both Canada and the U.S. Part of the attractiveness is that there is some openness to different doctrines; the church adheres to a core set of beliefs, and allows for the peripheral issues to remain just that, creating an atmosphere of freedom and tolerance.

McDill sees unique opportunities for young people to use modern technology to build success, but more importantly, to solve the modern world's many social problems. The young should, in McDill's view, prepare to live in this world while living a lifestyle that addresses itself to the needs of their generation.

LW – We're with Dr. Thomas McDill on January the 29<sup>th</sup> at Trinity Western University. I'm very happy to have this opportunity to interview you, Dr. McDill.

TM - Thank you very much. I am very happy to share together in this way.

LW - And I wonder if we could start, my first question would be something on your background as a boy and you could tell us about your family life (TM: um-hm) and how you grew up.

TM - Oh surely. I was really born and reared in the Chicago-land area. My father was a plastering contractor and an excellent student. Though he had had only a fourth grade education, because he was born in Scotland and brought over as a baby and settled with his parents in Punxsutawney (??), Pennsylvania. As was customary, he was taken out of grade school at the end of his fourth year and put into the mines, the coal mines of Pennsylvania.

[1:00]

And though he had limited education he had a great thirst for knowledge and developed a tremendous library so that he had choice volumes from-- that he had gathered over the years and many many people in the Chicago-land area would borrow his books. So, the heritage that I have from father and from my mother is a very rich heritage. I was the youngest of five children. My oldest sister is still living. The next oldest is deceased and then the, my brother is living [cough] at the present time and we grew up as a family – we were a very close family. But I think that

[2:00]

the prayers of my parents along with their godly example and my father’s thirst for knowledge and understanding of both the Scriptures as well as the world in which he lived was great model for those of us who were his children and, consequently both my brother and I ended up in the, the ministry, and he’s in the counselling ministry at the present time. I am, of course, active in the more traditional ministerial role. My [cough] one sister was also married to a pastor. So, you can see the kind of influence and impact that my parents had upon our lives.

LW - Now, I’m not surprised, then, that you’re in the position that you’re in with

[3:00]

that kind of a background and I guess it’s probably been really expected and that’s very nice. People that come from Christian homes always seem to do better somehow in their lives so many times. I wonder if you could tell us a little bit about what you’re doing now in the Evangelical Free Church. It must be a very heavy load as president—and uh—

TM - Yes actually, I sensed a call to Christian ministry when I was sixteen years of age and at that point it was really a redirection of my entire life. Up until that point I had really not been a very good student; although I had had a good model in my father, I was not a good student, nor because I was just lackadaisical I guess, and more of a typical teen in many ways. When I committed my life to Christ, that gave me new focus and a new view of life and I became more

[4:00]

of a serious student. I went away to a [cough] Bible institute where I received some excellent Bible training over a three-year period of time.

LW – Which institute was that?

TM – The Philadelphia School of the Bible, it was called in those years. [continuing crackling, popping noises] It is now called the Philadelphia College of the Bible. Two schools merged together to form the school that is there at the present time. From there I went to Northern Baptist Theological Seminary where I obtained a ThB degree, which was quite popular following World War Two. It was two years of college and three years of seminary. Then I went to Northwestern University and started on a Masters program in speech communication. When I was about a third of the way through that--

[5:00]

I was involved as a pastor by this time, and as a pastor I became involved in a building program, so I dropped out of the graduate studies and went back-- when I went back I decided to go back and get my regular BA and then my MDiv degree, so I progressed in that direction instead and then began to take studies after that in the area of counselling because I had a real interest in knowing how best to relate to people and help people.

Many problems were beginning to arise in the late 50s and 60s in terms of personal relationships and marriage conflict and so forth. And I just found that I needed some help and so I began to take some further work in clinical psychology

[6:00]

and then, ultimately, decided to enter into a doctoral program to work on that further. So that has sort of has been my educational pilgrimage. All during this time I was also a pastor, so that my education had to be sort of squeezed into my pastoral responsibilities. And I pastored the Community Bible Church, which was an independent church, during my seminary years. [geese honking] And then there was also in a suburb of Chicago, and then went on to my first full-time church the Grace Evangelical Free Church, which I pastored for seven and a half years, and that was in Chicago. And then went out to Valparaiso Indiana, where I pastored the Liberty Bible Church, which is an Evangelical Free Church, and I was there for eight and a half years and then went

[7:00]

on to Minneapolis to the Crystal Evangelical Free Church and was there for nine and a half years. And, uh, so following that, or during that time, I really should say, I became very active in denominational affairs, serving on the Home Missions Board and serving on many committees, and as a result of all these contacts, in the providence of God they asked me to be the moderator in 1973-74, or at least to be a candidate, and I was elected. And I think it was that-- off of that experience that many began to think in terms of me being a candidate for the presidency, because the president who had been president for about twenty-three years

[8:00]

at that time was to retire in two years and complete his twenty-fifth year and while I really wasn't thinking in terms of the presidency at all, more and more people began to suggest that God was preparing me for that office. And then in 1976 I was elected to my present position as president.

LW – Um, I see, um-- You really had a good background then, working in all this denomination—

TM – Yes, both within the denomination and within the pastorate, I feel that I had a very excellent background to prepare me for leadership within the denomination.

LW – And how is it at the head of the Evangelical Free Church? [both laugh]

TM – Well, actually, I really enjoy my responsibilities very much. It has been a growing experience, a broadening experience, a humbling experience.

[9:00]

Sometimes you feel terribly inadequate for the challenges, and uh, and yet it's been very enjoyable. There are some things that I miss about the pastorate: I miss the in-depth development of human relations, because when you're travelling as much I am, you don't have an opportunity to really build bridges to people on a longer term basis and, consequently, your relationships tend to be much more transitory and superficial, whereas in the pastorate you have the opportunity to build human relationships and to relate to people at those levels.

LW – I, I guess its quite a satisfaction, too, to see people grow (TM: yes, exactly, exactly) in the things you have done and see churches grow.

TM – Yeah, to see the church grow, to nurture people and feed people from the Word of God week in and week out

[10:00]

is a tremendous satisfaction. Now I do as much preaching, perhaps more preaching, than I did in the pastorate, but it's a different kind of ministry and I enjoy that ministry very much, but I, I do miss a couple of things about the pastorate but feel that God has placed me here in my position at the present time. I am enjoying the position, I am challenged by it, and sometimes overwhelmed by it.

LW – Well, I heard you give a little message last night, it wasn't very long, but I had the feeling myself that you are a very sincere and very loving person, and that came across in your message, so—and I think that comes from your pastorate background. And even though you might not get the thank you's and hear the, and see what happens to people after you leave, because you're only with them a short time, I really think they make quite an impact.

TM – Well, thank you very much.

[11:00]

Those words are comforting and encouraging. I, I, uh, I do feel that being in the pastorate has helped me to develop a pastoral heart and viewpoint. And I want to be a caring person, and feel that I have been, and want warmth to be related to an audience.

LW – I think that is (both speaking at once) what is related, and so often that is lost in the hustle and bustle and I just didn't feel that it was, with you, so that's nice (laughs), and I think that's appreciated. But what is happening in the church these days now? Are there a lot of things that maybe you would like to do but just aren't able to?

TM – Well actually, (both speaking at once) we are at present in preparations for celebrating our one hundredth birthday as a denomination. The Evangelical Free Church of America is really a combination of the Swedish Evangelical Free Church and the

[12:00]

Norwegian and Danish Evangelical Association. These two came together and merged in 1950, but both of them stretch back to 1884, and-- that is, here in America, and in Canada it came somewhat later, but on the American side they trace the roots back to 1884. So, in 1984 we will celebrate that one hundredth birthday. In 1983, this year, we will be celebrating the Norwegian-Danish roots and then next year we will be honouring the Swedish roots. Now during, during these years, the Lord has blessed and prospered the ministry of the Free Church. For example, when the merger took place in 1950, they were primarily an ethnic group. And the Norwegian-Danish group had ninety churches,

[13:00]

and the Swedish group had a hundred and sixty-five churches so that together they had two hundred and seventy-five churches. And at that time they had a constituency of about twenty thousand. Today we have about eight hundred and fifty churches, and we have a constituency in excess of one hundred thousand, so there has been significant growth. And in the last five years, we have planted a hundred and ninety-six new churches, so we're in a very aggressive church planting and extension ministry and expect to continue that. Church planting is one of our priorities, both in the United States and Canada. And, for example, the Canadian Church has really caught the vision for this. In 1977, when I became, or '76, when I became president they had

[14:00]

seventy-seven churches here in Canada, and it had been that for many years. Since that time, they have grown to ninety-four churches and they are aggressively planting

churches now across Canada and now with a full time director, executive director, I'm sure that the church planting operation will even take greater dimensions in the future. On the American side, we are very hopeful of planting a church a week is (LW: [inaudible]) what we would really like to do. And fifty-two new churches each year. And we feel that that's possible, we feel the Free Church has some unique distinctives to offer the Christian community that many other denominations do not have. We have an inclusive spirit in the Free Church that

[15:00]

is quite unique. We often say 'believers only' but all believers, so the exclusive dimension is that the local church should char—be characterized by believers. But on the other hand, it should be characterized by all believers, there should be that inclusiveness, so that we don't get hung up on minor areas of doctrine and use those as tests of fellowship in the local church. Many times, groups get hung up on these little points of doctrine and can't show tolerance for differing opinions. We major on the majors and we try to minor on the minors. And so, we feel that this presents a very attractive option to the Christian community and consequently, there is a sense of openness

[16:00]

and freedom within the Evangelical Free Church that many of the Christian communities lack. And we feel we provide a very substantive package for, uh, for those in between a more liberal church on the one hand, that is theologically liberal, and those that are more legalistic on the other hand. We sort of would fit in the middle. We are thoroughly evangelical in our doctrine and yet at the same time there is the open spirit and tolerance in legitimate areas where Christians may differ.

LW – That really is interesting. And of course it's the-- Evangelical Free Churches follow the word of God quite closely, and that is where you preach.

TM – Oh yes, absolutely. We are one (both speaking at once) of the few denominations

[17:00]

that have made a commitment to the inerrancy and authority of the Scripture. We feel the Scripture is the basis upon which we, we, for both faith, or what we believe, and practice, how we should live, and that, that becomes the authority and it's up to us to study the Scripture and bring ourselves into compliance with the Scripture. But yet, there are these areas in which the Scripture does not speak explicitly, and where it speaks explicitly we must obey explicitly, but where doesn't speak expliciti—explicitly we have to give latitude for differences of understanding.

LW – Um-hm. Excellent. So now, just in conclusion, Dr. McDill, would you have a word for young people today?

TM – Yes, I think that young people today

[18:00]

are facing challenges that my generation certainly did not face. There are complexities today that are part of our age that are significantly different from the 30s and 40s and 50s and 60s, and yet the opportunities are tremendous. It is an exciting era in which to be alive, and I think that for the Christian, for the Christian young person, he has a unique opportunity to be aware and take advantage of the high technology on the one hand. On the other hand, to really address the problems in our society in a way in which they're not being addressed by others-- There is a great degree of despair and cynicism all across, not only campuses but all across

[19:00]

most of the nations of the western world. And I think that here is where the Christian can come in with a message of hope, a message of optimism, and we know that God is in control, that God has a plan. He is working out His plan, we are part of that plan, and that He is bringing the world to its ultimate destiny of the return of Jesus Christ to rule and to reign here on earth. And so for the Christian, he should prepare himself well to live in this world, from the standpoint of its technological advancements, but at the same time, he, he has a message and a lifestyle that can address itself to the desperate, crying needs of our generation.

LW – And people are really looking for [inaudible]

TM – Oh, no question about it. Any

[20:00]

individual or any church that is attuned to what’s happening today, and are actively reaching out to others is having a tremendous impact upon the lives of others. In my own church that I pastored for nine and a half years, the Crystal Church of Minneapolis, uh, it, uh, for many years now has just exploded in growth from one cycle to another, and a great deal of that is conversion growth among couples whose lives have been in many cases shattered by divorce or by drink or by drugs or by all kinds of things and now they see their lives coming together by the grace of God and the power of Christ in their life, and it turns them around, it makes them excited, it puts

[21:00]

their lives back together, and they in turn go out and share what’s happened to them with their friends and it’s an ever-going cycle in which more and more lives are being changed. I think today is an exciting day for the Christian.

LW – It sounds like it’s a revival time almost.

TM – In many ways that’s true.

LW – Thank you very much.

TM – Thank you. It’s nice to chat with you, and the Lord bless you.

LW – And you.

[21:26]

**[End Side A]**

**[Index]**

Childhood, 0:40

    closeness of family, 2:40

    role of father, 1:20

Education,

    Northwestern University, 4:50

    Philadelphia School of the Bible, 4:20

Evangelical Free Church of America,

    distinctiveness, 14:45

    growth of, 13:00

    history of, 11:50

*Aud. 229*

*Side A Dr. Thomas McDill and Lynn Wilkinson – “Oral History Interview”*

in Canada, 13:50

Pastorship at various churches, 6:45

Presidency of Evangelical Free Church of America,  
comparison to pastorate, 9:30  
election, 8:40

Youth, 17:55