

THE LIFE OF DR. ROBERT L. THOMAS

Robert L. Thomas, Jr., M.Div.
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Robert Lewis Thomas was born on June 4, 1928 at Piedmont Hospital in Atlanta, Georgia. He is the third of four children born to Thelma Hopkins Thomas and Frank Garret Thomas. They were of Welsh descent, and raised their children Frances, Frank, Robert, and Ruth in Decatur, Georgia while living in the same house for 22 years.

Dr. Thomas grew up enjoying all sports – particularly basketball. Neighborhood boys formed a team called the Hampton Lane Celtics, named for the alley behind their house. He was known for his speed and given the nickname “Rabbit,” which some friends and family still call him today. He attended Decatur Boys’ High School (1941-1945) and participated on the school basketball team, which was runner up in Georgia during his junior year.

His other interests in high school included R.O.T.C. where he served as Commanding Officer, Lieutenant Colonel. Upon graduation from high school, Dr. Thomas enrolled in Georgia Institute of Technology where in 1949 he received his B.M.E. While in college, he became Lieutenant Colonel, Commanding Officer of the Ordnance Corps which placed him on call as an officer in the Army.

Upon completion of his college degree, Dr. Thomas moved to Chicago, Illinois where he worked at the Wilson meat packing plant while attending Moody Bible Institute evening school. In 1950, he was called into active duty in the Army and served as a First Lieutenant in Korea and in Japan.

After two years of active service, Dr. Thomas returned home and enrolled in Faith Seminary in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. He taught himself Greek and did well enough on the entrance exam to be placed in a refresher course. He attended Faith Seminary from September, 1952 to January, 1953 before moving to Dallas, Texas and enrolling at Dallas Theological Seminary, where in 1956 he completed his Th.M. degree and his Th.D. degree in 1959.

Upon graduation, Dr. Thomas was hired by Talbot Theological Seminary in LaMirada, California as Professor of New Testament Literature and Exegesis. He was the first full-time faculty member hired by the Dean,

Dr. Charles Lee Feinberg, and soon became Chairman of the New Testament Department, in which capacity he served for 28 years (1959-1987). In 1987, he became Professor of New Testament at The Master's Seminary, where he presently teaches. Dr. Thomas also serves as the Executive Editor of *The Master's Seminary Journal* (1990 – present).

As a child, he attended First Methodist Church of Decatur with his family. After moving to Chicago at age 21, he attended a Wednesday night service at Moody Memorial Church where he was exposed to the claims of the gospel and committed his life to Christ. He then attended Lorimar Conservative Baptist Church while in Chicago.

Dr. Thomas first met Joan Drain in 1950 at a Youth for Christ rally. The friendship began well, but he was soon called into active duty and Joan went away to school. Although not much communication occurred, they were not far from each other's thoughts. In the summer of 1952, after his release from active duty, they were reunited and became engaged several months later. Dr. Thomas and Joan were married on July 17, 1953 and they headed off to Dallas Seminary.

Three of their five children were born while they were in Dallas. Barbara Louise, Robert Lewis, Jr., and Jonathan David accompanied Mom and Dad as they moved to California, soon to be joined by little brothers Mark Timothy and Michael Andrew. Since those early years, his "tribe" has increased:

- 1 son-in-law: Jay Erselius married to Barbara
- 4 daughters-in-law: Nellie Hardison Thomas married to Bob, Jr.
 Janet Carlson Thomas married to Jon
 Lynda Thomas Thomas married to Mark
 Carrie Thomas Thomas married to Mike
- 11 grandchildren: Jason, Jamie, and Jaclyn Erselius
 Drew, Landon, and Amy Beth Thomas
 Kaci and Jonathan Thomas
 Ryan, Melanee, and Madison Thomas

Dr. Thomas' scholarly activities have been in research and/or professional presentations, publications, memberships and activities in professional organizations, and some conference and project work.

His memberships and activities in professional organizations have included:

- Member, Society of Biblical Literature, 1961-1970.
- Member, Evangelical Theological Society, 1961-present.
- Member, Board of Directors, Orinoco River Mission, 1966-1971.

Member, Independent Fundamental Churches of America, 1966-present.

Chairman, Pre-ordination Committee of the Southern California Regional of the Independent Fundamental Churches of America, 1968-1971; assisted in rewriting standards for ordination to the gospel ministry for this group.

Member, Board of Directors, Bible Church Mission, 1968-1982.

Secretary-treasurer, Far West Section, Evangelical Theological Society, 1969-1970.

Vice-Chairman, Far West Section, Evangelical Theological Society, 1970-1972; planned and arranged for two programs of scholarly presentations per year during this period.

Chairman, Far West Section, Evangelical Theological Society, 1972-1973; led in the formation of a new section for the Pacific Northwest, which was named the Northwest Section of the Evangelical Theological Society.

Member, National Membership Committee, Evangelical Theological Society, 1979-1982, 1984-1988.

Vice-President, President-Elect, and President of the Evangelical Theological Society, 1988-1990.

Member, Executive Committee of the Evangelical Theological Society, 1990-1994.

Several notable conferences and projects include:

1. Inerrancy Conference

Dr. Thomas was one of the participants in the conference sponsored by the International Council on Biblical Inerrancy in the fall of 1978. This body of evangelical scholars formulated the well-known “Chicago Statement” which serves as the standard evangelical position on the inspiration of Scripture.

2. Translation Project

Translation work began on the *New American Standard Bible* in 1960. Dr. Thomas was invited to join the translation team in the fall of 1961. The entire work was done in committee. This resulted in extensive interaction, both personal and written,

between scholars from a wide variety of backgrounds. With the completion of the New Testament, Dr. Thomas was one of the New Testament specialists asked to remain on the committee so as to provide continuity in the translation of the Old Testament. His background in the languages of the Old Testament was especially beneficial here. His length of service in this particular project was exceeded only by that of the chairman of the editorial board.

3. Concordance Project

The *New American Standard Exhaustive Concordance* project was a fascinating scholarly challenge. It took James Strong thirty-five years to prepare his concordance for the *King James Version* of the Bible. Dr. Thomas convinced the Lockman Foundation that the same type of concordance was needed for the *New American Standard Bible*. As a result, the board of that foundation appointed him to head up the work. He located qualified proofreaders, computer specialists, and linguists, most of whom were part of the Talbot Seminary family, and trained them for specific tasks in this project. The whole process took only four years because of the use of the latest technology in computer hardware, software, and typesetting. The resultant volume is the only such concordance that cross-references each English word with the Hebrew, Aramaic or Greek word that it represents, with the exception of Strong's concordance and others which are geared to the *King James Version*. No other versions except the *King James Version* and, at that point, the *New American Standard Bible* had this type of concordance available. The *New American Standard Exhaustive Concordance* was awarded the Gold Medallion Book Award as the outstanding Bible reference work of 1981-82 by the Evangelical Christian Publishers Association.

Most people would consider Dr. Thomas' greatest contributions to include the translation of the *NASB*, the *NASB Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible*, *A Harmony of the Gospels*, *Understanding Spiritual Gifts*, *Revelation: An Exegetical Commentary*, 2 vols., and *The Jesus Crisis*. When asked what he considers to be his greatest accomplishment, he paused and then responded, "Maybe I haven't done it yet. Maybe my greatest is yet to come." And therein lies a glimpse into what has driven this man who has served God's purposes in his generation; one whom God has used to build His truth into the lives of

students for the past forty years; one who has raised his family to fear and love the Lord; and one who has seen each of his children come to faith in Jesus Christ and be actively involved in the local church.

To Dr. Thomas, we say thank you for your faithful study and teaching of God's Word. To Dad, we say thank you for the sacrifices, years of Little League coaching, carefully chosen discipline, and wonderful childhood memories. And to Grandpa, we say, "We are not done with you yet!"