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Reuel Lemmons

(July 8, 1912-January 25, 1989)

by Thomas H. Olbricht

In the halcyon days as the Great Depression of the 1930s was winding down and before most Americans anticipated another major war, Reuel Lemmons held a gospel meeting in Mammoth Spring, Arkansas. It was August of 1940. Mammoth Spring was in North Central Arkansas, just across the border from Thayer, Missouri, the place of my birth. We looked forward to the arrival of Reuel for the two-week meeting, which by tradition began on Sunday and ended on Sunday two weeks later. We were excited about Reuel's meeting because we had heard that he had developed into a highly skilled evangelist. He was then twenty-eight years old and energetic, yet experienced.

Meeting preachers usually stayed at my grandparents. My grandfather ran a Standard Oil Station (now Exxon) and also sold groceries. I still remember him on a warm day sitting under his large canopy over his gas pumps and discussing some matter, often esoteric, with the meeting preacher. One day as we sat there I listened in on the conversation of Reuel and my grandfather. After a time the conversation wound down. Reuel turned to my grandfather and said, "What about Tom here? He should be baptized." I was a bit mortified because though I had considered seriously a response to the invitation, I was far too reticent to carry it out. My grandfather soon had me off the hook by replying, "He is big for his age. He is only ten." Reuel said, "Oh, . . . well I thought he looked older than that."

What impressed me about Reuel in 1940 was the vitality of his language. There was a certain freshness about it. I had learned the cadences and words of the previous meeting preachers, but Reuel broke those molds. What especially affected me,

were his early morning sermons at 7:00 a. m. before people went to work. Reuel's sermons were both devotional and challenging. He called for a dedicated and vigorous life for Christ. I had not heard many sermons of that sort. He especially emphasized the abundant living in which Christians participated, a theme which he emphasized much down through the years.¹ He frequently repeated the words of Jesus, "I have come that they may have life, and have it abundantly" (John 10:10). Most of the sermons I had previously heard highlighted the significance of the church and the importance of baptism. But Reuel called us to a new personal and congregational intensity and discipleship. He also challenged the congregation to employ a full-time preacher and launch upon various good works. The congregation initiated several of his suggestions and started growing, maintaining a steady attendance and not simply in summers at the time of the gospel meetings.

A Biographical Statement

Reuel Lemmons was born in Pocahontas, Arkansas, July 8, 1912. In 1923 the family moved to Tipton, Oklahoma, partly because of Reuel's rheumatic fever.² Reuel attended church regularly but was not baptized until he was seventeen and started to preach almost immediately. Reuel's great, great grandfather, John Lemmons, was interested in a form of restorationism in Virginia in the late 17th century. This great, great grandfather moved to Tennessee in 1818 (Warren County) and settled near McMinnville.³ His son, John Lemmons, Jr. (born in Virginia in 1816), put in a bid on a four hundred acre farm, but twelve slaves went with it. He tried to purchase the farm without the slaves, but the court

ruled that he had to retain the slaves. So Reuel's great grandfather sold the farm and moved to Arkansas near Pocahton in 1850. He served as a preacher. Reuel's grandfather preached as well, as did several of his uncles.

Upon reaching college age in 1931, Reuel determined to enter Harding College, which was then located in Morrilton, Arkansas. It was the heart of the depression. Reuel arranged to work for a local newspaper. By the time he got there, however, he learned that the student who had previously held the position wanted to stay on so, disappointed, he returned to Tipton.⁴ Within a week he decided to go to Abilene to see what employment might be available. According to Lila Cathey:

... a day after his arrival there, he had a job—washing dishes for Conrad Hilton, the second in the chain of the Hilton Hotels. [The first was founded in Cisco, forty miles east of Abilene.] He worked on the night-shift, grabbing a few winks in the early morning hours before dashing off to his classes. Toward the end of the first year, the hotel business began to fail, and layoffs were necessary. Reuel, being one of the last people hired, was one of the first to be without a job. He quickly obtained another job washing dishes and serving as a bus boy. In an effort to economize, he and three other young men rented a furnished house together for \$80.00 per month. . . .⁵

He lived with four other boys in a house, one of whom was J. Harold Thomas. Reuel also became the business manager for the school paper, **The Optimist**, in 1933. At the end of the year it was discovered that as the result of selling advertising Reuel had made more money than some of the professors, so Lawrence Smith took him off commission and put him on a salary. Reuel was also active in debate and teamed up with Norvel Young, and together they were highly successful. In 1933 at age 21 Reuel married Imogene Mayes with whom he had grown up in Tipton. Reuel also kept busy preaching in small towns out of Abilene. In 1935 he graduated from Abilene Christian, cum laude.

At age twenty-three Reuel and Imy returned to Tipton on a visit. Upon discovering that they were without a preacher Reuel offered to preach for them, which he did until 1943. In 1943 he moved to the Central Church in Cleburne where he stayed for twelve years until moving to Austin to edit the **Firm Foundation**. He lived in Austin for thirty-five

years, twenty-nine of them as editor of the **Firm Foundation**, that is, until 1983.

Reuel became editor of the **Firm Foundation** in 1955. The **Firm Foundation** was the second most important journal in the brotherhood when Reuel took over. The older and more widely distributed religious paper was the **Gospel Advocate** founded in 1855 in Nashville, exactly one hundred years before Reuel became editor of the **Firm Foundation**. The **Gospel Advocate** was founded by Tolbert Fanning and edited from 1866 to 1917 by David Lipscomb. G.H.P. Showalter was owner-editor of the **Firm Foundation** from January 1908 until his death, October 17, 1954, or almost 47 years.

Reuel Lemmons developed a friendship with Showalter ten years before Showalter's death. Reuel convinced Showalter that children's homes should be under one eldership, rather than a board from many churches. Reuel was therefore designated as editor heir apparent. Reuel started editing immediately upon Showalter's death, and was listed on the masthead as editor in the January 11, 1955 edition. Though Reuel probably took a cut in pay from his Cleburne preacher's pay, he decided for the **The Firm Foundation**. He probably soon made up the difference through preaching meetings. He was also frugal and made many wise investments throughout his adult years.

I now turn to those aspects of the life of the church which especially interested Reuel Lemmons and upon which he wrote much in **The Firm Foundation**.

Worldwide Evangelism

Reuel, on his own account, was interested in good works everywhere, especially in missions. One of his earliest interests was Africa. It is not too clear specifically why he first directed attention to Africa. Probably the best answer is that he became involved because of the interests of the church in Cleburne, and he was approached to record sermons to be preached in southern Africa. Tex Williams described the invitation.

In the mid-1940's, Brother Eldred Echols, then a missionary in what was then called Southern Rhodesia, managed to get 30 minutes prime radio time over Lourenco Marques Radio out of Mozambique in southeast Africa. The station was a popular station and covered, by short wave, most of Africa. The central church in Cleburne, Texas, where Reuel was preaching, accepted the challenge and financial responsibility and had Brother Lemmons

cut records (no tape recorders then) and mailed them to Africa for a weekly, Saturday broadcast. He had to stay up all Sunday night to cut the first record to get it there in time. The program helped to stimulate and instigate the work of the Lord in a number of places.⁶

In the fall of 1959 I moved to Natick, Massachusetts, to preach and to work on a S.T.B. at Harvard Divinity School. I soon met Abraham Malberbe. I asked Abe about his background in South Africa. He reported he had been taught by Eldred Echols, but he had also been impressed with the preaching of Reuel Lemmons over the radio. He said when he first heard that nasal, somewhat high-pitched and Ozark-cadenced voice, he thought, "how dreadful." But the more he listened, he became accustomed to the voice and more and more impressed with the message.

In the 1959 **Preachers of Today** Reuel wrote about himself, "Extensive radio work nationally and internationally . . . Holds 26-28 meetings per year. Has great interest in mission work, having visited many of the fields, especially promoted establishment of work in South Africa." In the 1982 **Preachers of Today** Reuel wrote, "Extensive radio work in South Africa, planting churches in the Union. Instrumental in beginning work in Nigeria."

Because of his long-standing interest in Africa and knowing the results of the Bible correspondence courses there through the years, Reuel was an obvious heir apparent to the World Bible School founded by Jimmy Lovell. When Jimmy died in 1984 Reuel took over the direction of the World Bible School and the editing of **Action**. When Reuel lost his editorship of the **Firm Foundation** in 1983, one of the reasons he was not too eager to take up the editing of a new journal was his work with **Action** and the World Bible School.

Reuel supported any work that accomplished growth. Despite the criticism of some, he spoke at various Crossroads evangelistic seminars in Gainesville, Florida, and elsewhere. He continued to be supportive of the Boston Church efforts until it became obvious that the leaders were rejecting rule by elders and local autonomy. In a 1976 editorial, he wrote:

They have a great work going on the campus of the University of Florida at Gainesville. We saw some of it last week, and had a part on the program of the Florida Evangelism Seminar, designed for college students, high school seniors, church leaders and adults of varied inter-

ests. . . .

The first thing we noticed was that almost every single one of the more than 500 college students present had three items: a note pad, a pencil and a Bible. Our first thought: that's more people with Bibles in their hands than we ever saw in a worship service! And when the speaker quoted a scripture—and they quoted them by the dozens—more than most preachers use—they all opened their books and read the verses.⁷

In the early 1960s when certain of our churches became interested in Central and South America, Reuel saw the opportunity to encourage these interests. He therefore founded the Panama Lectures in 1962. The first lectures were held in Guatemala. For the next twenty years he promoted, publicized, registered and made travel and hotel arrangements for the lectures. In 1983 Jim Frazier of Minden, Louisiana, began to assist in the arrangements. The object was to bring church leaders together with missionaries for mutual encouragement and counsel, and to help those who hoped to undertake new works. Later he also helped found the European lectures.

By 1986 Reuel was afraid that the Churches of Christ were losing evangelistic zeal, which in turn was severely repressing world missions. In an editorial in **Image**, after which he supplied data about the world's population, and those unevangelized, he wrote,

We have become almost totally non-evangelical. We seem to have lost our knowledge of how to convert people. Long range planning of evangelistic priorities is badly needed. We have been on a course of division and alienation from each other for twenty-five years. Isolation and suspicion have made our task much harder. If we are going to reach the world we are going to have to learn to practice more openness and flexibility. We have lost the art of personal preaching, and have substituted church programs for preaching the gospel. We are depending entirely too much on professionals and have forgotten the priesthood of the individual believer. As the result we are losing ground numerically, and are reaching a smaller percentage of the world's population every year.⁸

Reuel was truly an early world Christian among the members of the Churches of Christ. In the 1982 *Preachers of Today*, Reuel stated that he had held over 1,100 gospel meetings.⁹ In about sixty years of preaching he probably averaged above twenty a year. Tex Williams declared that Reuel preached in seventy-nine nations in his lifetime.¹⁰

The Unity of Believers

Reuel Lemmons was of a strong conviction that the restoration of New Testament ways would bring unity to Christian believers. For Reuel this effort represented not a minimalist perspective, but a broad one,

This is not a narrow view. It is the broadest religious view under heaven. We plead for the doing away with all creeds, catechisms, confessions of faith, disciplines, manuals and constitutions, and for a uniting of us all on the broad, undenominational, non-sectarian basis of the word of God. Churches of Christ can never be successfully classified as a denomination because of the very broadness of their plea. They have no private doctrines to preach, nor pride in a purely human organization to uphold. They seek to be Christians only, and only Christians.¹¹

Reuel was of the conviction that any effort at unifying believers was a worthy cause. In the 1960s meetings were held with leaders among the Independent Christian Churches and our churches. Reuel attended and spoke at most of these. I went to the one in St. Louis held September 18-20, 1969. Some of us drove over to Dallas and once assembled there, flew to St. Louis on R. S. Bell's private plane, a refurbished Lockheed Lodestar.

In St. Louis I was assigned a room with Reuel. Two items impressed me. The night before Reuel was to give his address he proposed that we go back to the room early since he wanted to ask some questions. He was interested in certain matters having to do with the history of various protestant groups. I provided such details and insights as I was able. Reuel never took a note, but seemed attentive to everything I said. Through the years I have supplied information to speakers and even though they wrote it down they tended to get it mixed up or distorted in some manner, so I was not too confident that Reuel, if he did use the information, would get it right. I was therefore amazed the next day when Reuel without a single note repeated almost verba-

tim everything I had said for some thirty minutes in response to his questions.

That night as we sat talking, Reuel decided to take the polish cloth provided by the hotel and shine his shoes. Tex Williams stated that his shoes never shined.¹² It is true that he did not have much polish on them, so the shining effort did not accomplish a whole lot. After he got through he said to me, "Tom, stand over here and put your foot up here on the arm of this chair and I will shine your shoes." I was somewhat embarrassed and told him I did not know that they needed shining. But he insisted. I felt at that moment somewhat like Peter who was not sure that he should, out of deference, permit Jesus to wash his feet.

In the 1980s, unity meetings, especially with the leaders of the Independent Christian Churches, began to be severely criticized by persons on the right. Reuel let them know in no uncertain terms that such meetings were appropriate since even the critics agreed that divisions are wrong and sinful. The occasion was a recent unity meeting at Pepperdine which he had attended. He wrote of his involvement in such efforts through the years,

We have a fifty-year-old history of meeting with estranged brethren whenever and wherever we felt there was an opportunity to resolve differences that separate us. We make no apology for that. In the famous Brownfield debate we were there. In the famous Arlington meeting we were there. In five such meetings, dating back to 1969, with the Independent Christian Churches, we were there. We have no intention of buckling under criticism or shrinking from an opportunity to unite the shattered elements of the Restoration heritage. God's children need to recognize that they are all family.

I was influenced as a young man by what I read of the Witty-Murch unity meetings of almost fifty years ago. I read mostly the attacks of their critics, and unlike most of the brethren who are profoundly influenced by critics, I was not—and am not. I resented then their unfavorable, unfair and prejudiced appraisals of efforts they did not participate in and were not present to witness, but felt an obligation to pontificate on.¹³

Reuel could think big on the topic of unity. He never served as the main organizer of any multifaceted unity meeting of which I am aware, but he

was always ready with his advice; whether through his pen in promotion and support, or through his personal presence in making presentations. Reuel did not limit these meetings to those within the restoration movement. In a 1976 editorial he mentioned having attended a luncheon of independent, non-affiliated Bible church preachers. He thought others should do the same. So he wrote:

It will be heresy to some, but we would advocate that members of the Lord's church attend functions and congresses, especially of conservative groups such as the National Association of Evangelicals, and maybe even the World Council of Churches. Such great ecumenical gatherings bring together the minds that rule the religious world. You find some ultra-conservatives attending even the liberal World Council. You never know when one of them might be influenced by a word of truth, as were Campbell, Stone and Scott influenced in the ecumenical meetings they attended.¹⁴

Loyalty to People

He stood by people he believed in. Reuel and Norvel Young were debate partners at Abilene Christian. According to Norvel, Reuel encouraged him to undertake all his major endeavors including preaching at Broadway in Lubbock, founding Lubbock Christian College, and coming to Pepperdine as president. In 1976 Norvel was involved in a tragic accident. Since Norvel, it was discovered, had alcohol content in his blood, he was criticized widely, though not openly. But Reuel stood by him. According to Norvel,

Reuel Lemmons was a true friend. He would stick with his friends through thick and thin. When you had difficulties, Reuel was there. I'll never forget when I had a tragic accident thirteen years ago, Reuel was one of the first to show up at the hospital and to be there to help my family.¹⁵

Norvel reported to me that the board of Pepperdine would no doubt have fired him after his accident had it not been for Reuel.

In 1966 I was being considered for a teaching position in the Bible Department at Abilene Christian. Conflict existed within the department and without over the liberalism of certain faculty members. Considerable exterior criticism contended that the Bible faculty was becoming increasingly liberal

and trained at Northeastern seminaries. Since my theological degree was from Harvard, I was placed in the liberal category in some quarters, among those on the faculty and board of Abilene Christian and right wing preachers. All of this was behind the scenes. When I finally received an offer it was for a year later. Don Morris explained to me that the situation was not right to employ me that coming fall. I never knew too much about the discussions, and I assume they did not consume much time in any public meetings, but it was intimated to me later by both Otto Foster and Reuel Lemmons that they spoke in support of my appointment. I presume that Reuel felt comfortable with my appointment because he knew my upbringing. But he had also printed several articles I had written which were not far out, but on the other hand, were not exactly traditional brotherhood statements. I am sure he received criticism for some of them because I received responses from right wing preachers who took umbrage at my interpretation of various biblical texts.

Landon Saunder's Heartbeat program began in 1975 with a flurry of criticism charging that no Bible was being taught. Reuel supported Heartbeat in an editorial because, I think, he knew Landon and was familiar with his work in Corning, Arkansas, a town near Pocahontas where Reuel spent his early years.

One effort we especially like is HEART-BEAT. This is a very short radio door-opener presented by Landon Saunders of Abilene. We like it because, first of all, we have complete confidence in the speaker—in his soundness in the faith, and in his love for lost souls. The one aim of his life is to reach people whom the rest of us cannot reach. The best research and planning that money can buy have preceded HEARTBEAT'S presentation. Entirely too many of our efforts to reach the outside world have been unresearched, unplanned and unproductive. . . .

. . . Landon Saunders' three-minute programs are not an attempt to preach sermons and quote scripture; they are attempts to sift the population, find the interested, and then privately preach sermons through private correspondence and contacts.¹⁶

His Own Man

While Reuel liked people and wanted to get along with others, he had to do so in his own way. He supported works he did not fully agree with, but he

was never interested in becoming part of a special interest group or a good old boys' network. He was his own man. He called the shots as he saw them even when he disagreed with his friends. He was careful, however, to camouflage his criticisms so that it was not immediately obvious against whom his rhetoric was directed. In 1988 at age 76, he wrote:

One thing I decided early in life as a preacher: nobody was going to own me—no eldership, no membership, no boss, no brother clique—no nothing. I developed several different skills for making a living just so no one could cut off my thinking processes by intimidation. I do not have to parrot a party line. I count my freedom in Christ a precious thing and will be free to do so or die. I will not live in slavery. Any time I find myself in a situation where I feel that my ability to act in good conscience is being limited, I will change it and do something else. I will wear no blinders. I will tread no mill. I still feel that way about it.¹⁷

Middle of the Road

Whatever one thinks of a middle-of-the road point of view, that is where Reuel positioned himself. In the first issue of *Image* Reuel wrote,

We have always followed a "middle of the road" course. We like it there because on either side there is a dangerous ditch. We have no more use for the legalistic right than we do for the liberal left. Both are lunatic fringes that should be avoided. Both have done immeasurable harm to the body of Christ.¹⁸

It might be well to pause here for a moment and notice how Reuel attacked both the right and the left. Because of his middle-of-the road stand, Reuel was often attacked from either side of the spectrum and accused of inconsistency. He was well aware of this criticism. One time in speaking at a preacher's forum in Abilene he mentioned this charge, and with a deft reply brought smiles. He stated that when one is playing pool it is necessary to shoot from both sides of the table.

While Reuel was supportive of starting a new journal after he left the **Firm Foundation** he refrained from having an active part in meetings leading to that end. Early in 1986 we were informed that Alton Howard would fund a journal to be named *Image* and that Reuel Lemmons had consented,

somewhat reluctantly, to serve as the first editor though the work, except for his editorials, would be done in West Monroe with Denny Boultinghouse directing the efforts. Denny, now editor of *Image*, was a key leader in the founding of the journal from the beginning.

Grace and Faith

Toward the end of his career Reuel tended to emphasize the importance of grace and faith, a continuing current interest among our churches. He did not suppose that he had always thought appropriately on these matters. In the last editorial Reuel wrote for *Image*, which the magazine office received seven days before his death, he stated:

As a young preacher, I was sure that I knew what I knew. As I grew older, I wasn't so sure about some things. I notice that most young preachers today are dead sure that they have all the answers on all the issues. The older they get, the less sure they are. After you swim in the ocean of faith, the little knowledge pools are really shallow.

It takes a while, seemingly, to learn that what appeared as black and white isn't always pure back and white. There are many points of view and many shades of black and white upon closer examination. It takes a while to recognize the rainbow.¹⁹

In the editorial Reuel highlighted the importance of faith.

There is a very dangerous built-in flaw in the contention that by pure and simple reason—the use of logic—one can convert people to the truth and free them from all error. While faith mixes well with logic, faith goes far beyond to grasp the transcendence that logic can never grasp.²⁰

We can still use a voice such as that of Reuel Lemmons. He wrote a word of encouragement. He wrote a word of experience. He wrote a word of grace, of compassion and caution. He excluded no one. He eventually spoke to all, though not alike. He tailored his message to fit the fault. He encouraged love and brotherhood and dedication to Jesus Christ, and to change, so that the kingdom would continue to push its borders outward.

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