**THE WORK AND INFLUENCE OF REX A. TURNER, SR**

Raymond Elliott

I first met brother Rex Turner, Sr. in the summer of 1948 when he came to my home congregation in Summerville, Georgia to preach in a gospel meeting.  Brother Turner also informed the brethren of a new Christian school that was located in Montgomery, Alabama, having begun in 1942.  As a result of his encouragement, there were six of us from the South Commerce Street congregation who attended the Montgomery Bible School in the fall of 1948.  As a lad of 13, I rode down from north Georgia with a newly wed couple, James and Foy Watkins.  I entered the 8th grade while James and Foy enrolled in the college department.  Thus, brother Turner was a part of my life for 53 years until his death in January 2001.

Brother Turner was born on February 13, 1913 in Corner, Alabama.  His parents were Elijah Jesse and Odessa Fikes Turner.  He married his high school sweetheart, Opal Shipp, also of Corner, on December 24, 1931.  They were married for 64 years.  She passed from this life on July 24, 1995.  Brother and sister Turner had three children, Jacquline (Jackie), Rex and Mary.

I want to consider the work and influence of brother Turner from three distinct yet related viewpoints.  First of all, he was a gospel preacher.

**AS A GOSPEL PREACHER**

J. H. Horton baptized Brother Turner in July of 1928.  His home congregation was the Antioch church in Jefferson County, Alabama.  He preached his first gospel sermon on March 29, 1932 at the Corinth Church of Christ in Cullman County, Alabama.   In 1936, the Chisholm church (Now Eastern Meadows) in Montgomery, Alabama invited brother Turner to work with them as their preacher.  He preached for the Highland Avenue congregation 1937-40.    In 1940, he began preaching at the Panama congregation in Montgomery and with the exception of a couple of years (1943-45) remained their preacher for 25 years.  He also served as an elder for several years.  During the 1940s and early years of the 1950s, he had a daily radio program over Montgomery stations.  The coverage of this radio program was extensive, reaching to the counties in south Alabama.  While working with the Opp, Alabama church during the 1970s, I baptized an elderly couple.  The gentleman remarked that he had listened to brother Turner preaching on this radio program and knew then that he was preaching the truth, however, he did not obey the gospel until the middle of the  1970s.  But, the seed of the kingdom had been planted in his heart by the preaching of brother Turner.  Here was a man who had never seen brother Turner, yet he had heard him preach many times the gospel over the radio.  Brother Turner was a firm and fiery preacher in his early years.  In fact, it is my understanding that the Montgomery Ministerial Association exerted its influence to have his program be canceled by the radio station.  In the October 25, 1944 edition of SOUND DOCTRINE, brother Turner mentioned this in an article entitled:  WE ARE OFF THE AIR.  The primary blame for his program being canceled, he wrote, are the “Catholic “Fathers”” and the cowardly Ministerial Alliance.”

Brother Turner, along with brother Joe Greer, conducted a weekly training class for young boys each Sunday afternoon before the evening worship assembly at the Panama Street congregation.  It was in this class that many boys and young men made their first talks.  I remember well when I made my first talk as a lad of 13.  I had to memorize the first chapter of I John and recite the verses during this class.  I remember that a haze came over my eyes and I could not see the people seated in front of me. However, I did survive the experience.  There is no way to know fully how many boys and young men got their first experience and training in leadership in this weekly training class.

Brother Turner never attended a Christian college to acquire his biblical knowledge.  Although men like Gus Nichols, John T. Lewis, G.A. Dunn, B.C. Goodpasture, Foy E. Wallace, Jr. H.Leo Boles aided him in the search for a greater knowledge of the word of God, Brother Turner, like so many other men of his generation, was self-taught.  He purchased valuable books that became most important in his search for additional knowledge.  His library grew to contain some 5,000 books.  I have a vivid memory of seeing him sitting in his chair by the fireplace in the den.  Beside his chair were piles of books that he had been studying and researching for some lesson he was preparing or for an article he was writing.  His sermons were always well-prepared and contained material that was both logical and truthful.  His voice was powerful and clear.  He possessed a good use of the English language.  The Bible he used for many years contained so many additional notes to the margin that it became a commentary as well as the inspired Word of God.

Brother Turner was zealous for the spread of the gospel of Christ and the establishing of new congregations in central Alabama.  He often preached in tent meetings in towns and communities where there was not a church of Jesus Christ.  He helped to begin new congregations in Alexander City, Camden, Tuskegee, and Lightwood in Elmore County and in Prattville, all in Alabama.  I felt his influence in the last city because I preached in Prattville for nearly 17 years.  Also, the brethren of the Panama Street church began the congregation on Narrow Lane Road in Montgomery that became known as the Druid Hills church of Christ.  Several of the members of the Panama Street congregation started attending Druid Hills to help establish the work in that part of the city.  Druid Hills later merged with the Lakewood church to form the Vaughn Park congregation.

Brother Turner was used extensively in gospel meetings and by the various Christian Colleges during their lectureships.  His lessons have been published in at least 42 books.  I walked into his office one day and he had books stacked everywhere on his desk.  Each book was opened to the place where his sermon or lecture was.  He said, as he often did, “I wish someone would take all these lessons and publish them in one book.”  Perhaps, in the future, someone will do that very thing.  It would be a treasure to have for the serious student of the Word of God.

**AS AN EDUCATOR**

Permit me at this time to go back to the middle of the 19th century when Justus McDuffie (Mack) Barnes was born on February 10, 1836 in the community of Sellers that is located in southern Montgomery County.  J. M. Barnes attended Bethany College and studied under Alexander Campbell.  He received the A.B. Degree in 1856 and the A.M. Degree in 1861.  Brother Barnes fell under the influence of David Lipscomb and was conservative in his views regarding the innovations adversely affecting the body of Christ.  He returned to south Alabama and established the Strata Academy in 1856.  In 1881, the school moved to Highland Home and became the Highland Home Institute.  Later the school became known as the Highland Home College in 1889 and offered the A.B. Degree.  Barnes left the school in l898 to establish a secondary school in Montgomery.  The Highland Home College continued until 19l6.  Before it closed, the school was reorganized as a Bible College.  The school in Montgomery that Barnes established continued until 1942.  His son, E. R. Barnes became the principal of the school in 1910.  The cause of Christ in Alabama was greatly enhanced by the teaching and influence of J.M. Barnes.  Let it be noted that he was willing to educate any man who wished to be a preacher free of charge.

In September of 1941, brethren Rex A. Turner, Leonard Johnson, Joe Ben Greer and a few other brethren met for the purpose of discussing the possibility of beginning a Christian school in the city of Montgomery. On the back page of the April 25, 1942 edition was the announcement of the beginning of the MONTGOMERY BIBLE SCHOOL that was set for September 14th of that year.  This group of Christian had in promise the amount of $235.00 to insure the establishment of a Christian school.  The Montgomery Bible School (College) began on September 14, 1942 with 23 students, 19 students in high school and 4 in the college department.  This was the same year the school that J.M. Barnes had established in Montgomery and closed its doors.  The Montgomery Bible School was located on Ann Street.  I believe the first address was 914 Ann Street.  It is my understanding that when the brethren made the proposal to begin a Christian school that the location was uncertain at that time.  But, the establishment of the  Montgomery Bible School was one of the greatest decisions ever made by these Christian gentlemen.  This one decision would impact our brotherhood for generations to come.  Brother Turner served as co-president with brother Leonard Johnson for six years and as president for 25 years, making a total of 31 years of leadership of the institution known as Montgomery Bible College, Alabama Christian College and now Faulkner University.  In 1967, the Christian Academy became a separate legal entity; with its own board for accreditation purposes.  Brother Turner was President also of the upper division of Alabama Christian College that was called the Alabama Christian School of Religion.  The primary purpose of this upper division of the college was to prepare and train men to become gospel preachers.  In 1973, ACSR relocated from the College Church building to the Landmark Church building on the Atlanta Highway.  Later, the school would move to its present location on Taylor Road near the AUM campus.  This institution attained university status and is presently called Amridge University.  He served as president until November of 1987 when he became Chancellor.  He served in this capacity until his death on Tuesday, January 16, 2001.  Brother Turner attended the University of Alabama, Jacksonville State University, Samford University, and Harding Graduate School of Religion.  He earned degrees from the following institutions:  Samford University (B.A), Jones Law School (LI.B) Auburn University (Ed.D).

Brother Turner will be remembered, not only for being President of these institutions but also for his teaching in the classroom, especially his class on the prophets. Numerous gospel preachers have gone forth from his classes to teach others of the knowledge that they received from brother Turner.  Like J.M. Barnes before him, brother Turner made every effort to make a Christian education affordable and accessible. Scores of preachers will testify that they perhaps would not be preaching today had it not been for brother Turner’s philosophy. If a student was willing to work, he/she could get an education.  Brother Turner was a man of vision.  He began the ‘Cluster system’ while President of ACC.  He and other teachers would travel to various locations throughout the nation to teach classes in church buildings where students would gather. Then ACSR began to send videotapes of classes taught on campus to students throughout the country.  There are men who have been preaching the gospel for over 50 years who attended the Montgomery Bible College, Alabama Christian College.  Brother Turner’s influence continues to live on through their teaching and work.  Brother Turner had the ability to recognize the potential in young men and would encourage them to preach.  Many will testify that he was the one who influenced them the most to preach the gospel.  Others have become college professors and presidents of preacher schools and Christian Universities.  In memory of Rex and Opal Turner, Amridge University has established the TURNER SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY.

**AS AN AUTHOR AND WRITER**

Brother Turner was a prolific writer.  He knew how to use the colon and semi-colon.  He also knew where and how to use adjectives, adverbs and verbs.  In June of 1941, a bi-weekly periodical was begun and brethren Rex Turner and Leonard Johnson served as co-editors.  The name of the paper was SOUND DOCTRINE.  The subscription rate per year was one dollar; however, the special rate that was offered occasionally was in the amount of fifty cents.  Brother Turner was one of the main writers of this publication.   Brother Turner was writing on some of his favorite subjects in the journal, namely, “The Inspiration of the Bible”, “The Resurrection of Jesus” and other articles that would strengthen the faith of a Christian.  This paper was discontinued after several years; however, in 1975, SOUND DOCTRINE was revived and became an extension of Alabama Christian School of Religion.  Because of the lack of funds, the paper was discontinued after several years of publication.

Brother Turner had three books published.  They were:  FUNDAMENTALS OF THE FAITH (1972); SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY (1989). This book was revised by brother Don Shackeldford in 2010 and is now called BIBLICAL THEOLOGY. He wrote DANIEL A PROPHET OF GOD (1993).  The book, SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY, has been and is being used as a textbook at Southern Christian University.(Amridge University)  He completed a commentary on the Minor Prophets, HAGGAI, and ZACHARIAH AND MALACHI that remain unpublished at this time.  He also finished work on the book of JEREMIAH.  He has completed works on ISAIAH and other subjects that have not been published.  In his latter years, he began a commentary on the book of Ezekiel.  But, time had caught up with him and his mental faculties did not permit him to stay focused on his work.  It was a sad time for us all to see him failing in such a manner.

Brother Turner was the editor of the GOSPEL ADVOCATE TEACHER’S ANNUAL LESSON COMMENTARY for 5 years, 1975 – 1979.  His Perspectives and Homilies contained in these commentaries are invaluable.  He probably wrote more extensively than any other editor of these annual publications used by members of the churches of Christ.  I remember him saying that the publishers of the Gospel Advocate series did not want him to write as much material as he had done in the past.  This saddened him very much.

There were occasions when brother Turner would be somewhat discouraged and would wonder how much good he had accomplished in his life.  I would respond by saying something like this:  “Brother Turner, you will never know and fully realize in your lifetime how much influence you have exerted for good in the lives of so many men and women.”  I want to close my brief lesson on this great and good man by reading from his hand some remarks found in the ALABAMA CHRISTIAN REPORTER of December 1956.

“*When the burden of maintaining Alabama Christian College has been extremely pressing, I have reflected upon the spirit and tenor of the poem,* ***“The Bridge Builder”,*** *as a means of acquiring strength and courage to carry on.  The spirit and tenor of the poem has propelled me on in the face of seemingly insurmountable obstacles.”*

**THE BRIDGE BUILDER**

*An old man going a lone highway*

*Came at the evening cold and gray*

*To a chasm vast and deep and wide.*

*The old man crossed in the twilight dim,*

*The sudden stream had no fears for him;*

*But he turned when safe on the other side,*

*And built a bridge to span the tide.*

*“Old man,” said a fellow pilgrim near,*

*“You are wasting your time with building here.*

*You never again will pass this way.*

*Your journey will end with the closing day.*

*You have crossed the chasm deep and wide,*

*Why build you this bridge at evening tide?”*

*The builder lifted his old gray head.*

*“Good friend, in the way that I’ve come,” he said,*

*“There followeth after me today*

*A youth whose feet must pass this way.*

*This stream that has been as naught to me,*

*To the fair-haired youth might a pitfall be.*

*He, too, must cross in the twilight dim,*

*Good friend, I am building the bridge for him.”*