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Our Cloud of Witnesses

Leonard Allen

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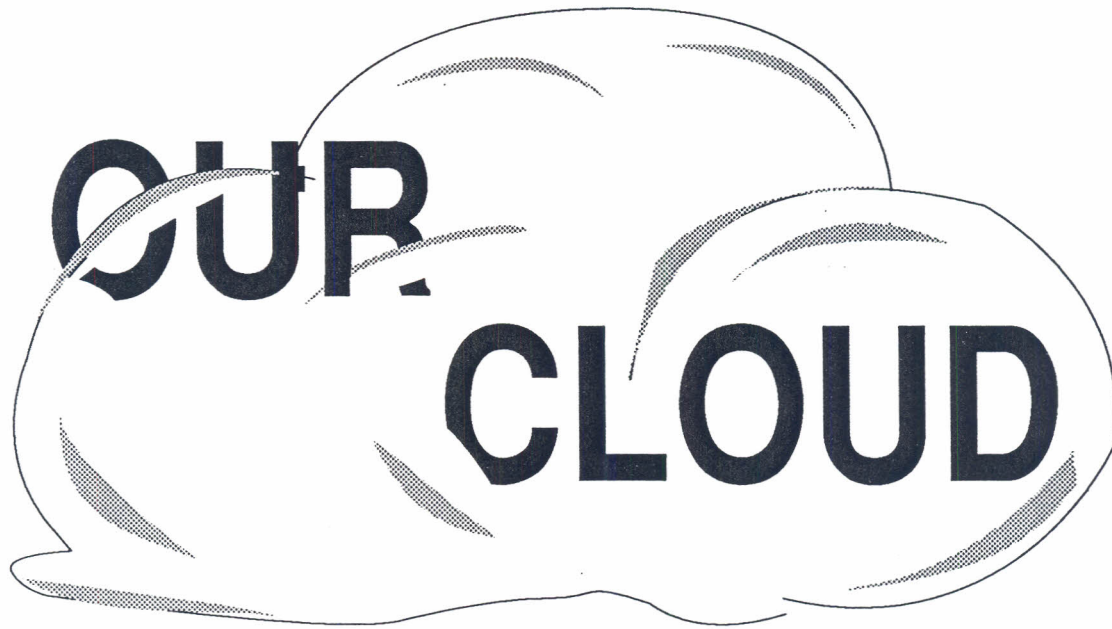


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OF WITNESSES

by Leonard Allen

In the mid-nineteenth century, religious debates were a popular form of entertainment. As one observer remarked in 1851, "Theological champions meet with burnished swords and cut hew each other to the wondrous gratification of their respective partisans, who gather in hundreds to these scenes of religious combat."

Leaders of Churches of Christ in this period excelled at debating and controversy. They shared Alexander Campbell's judgment that "a week's debating is worth a year's preaching." The debating emphasis produced a hard, sometimes bombastic style of preaching and teaching. It brought success in the rough and tumble world of the frontier. But it also spawned bitterness and division.

In the midst of this controversial period, one man sounded a different note. His name was Robert Richardson. By training he was a medical doctor, but he spent much of his life teaching at Bethany College. He was a close friend of Campbell, and wrote what remains today the major biography of Campbell.

In a time of controversy and harsh debating, Richardson was unique in stressing the things of the

Spirit and the devotional life. The controversial spirit, he believed, produced a deadly spiritual vacuum. Too many people, he wrote, "are ready to argue, debate, discuss at all times, . . . and will spend hours in the earnest defense of their favorite theories" but will not spend five minutes meditating "upon the character, the sayings, and perfections of Christ, or upon their own inward spiritual state."

Richardson recognized that some people went to emotional excess in their religion, but he felt the opposite extreme was an even greater evil. He opposed those, including Campbell, who tended to reduce the Spirit's influence to the Bible alone. Throughout his many writings he called his brothers and sisters to a religion of the Spirit, a faith empowered by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit.

Richardson's concern for the life of the Spirit and the heart's communion with God appears most clearly in a little book entitled **Communings in the Sanctuary**, published in 1872. It consists of 24 Lord's Supper devotionals that Richardson presented over the years at the old Bethany church. He wrote of the great and glorious mystery of divine things, of

the delight and beauty of communing with the Lord, of the depths of divine love and forgiveness.

“But, alas! how shall a man return a love which he can not even adequately conceive?” Richardson asked. “It is high as heaven; it is vast as the universe! How can he attain it? . . . [But God’s love] requires not equal measure, it demands not more than can be given However imperfect our efforts, the Divine Comforter can shed abroad the love of God in our hearts, enlarge our capacities, transform all our feeble nature, and render us par-

takers of the divine fullness!”

The supreme goal of the Christian religion, Richardson said, is this: “to unite the soul to God; to erect in the human heart a living temple for his abode; [and] to secure the enjoyment of that divine presence which is the earnest of eternal blessedness.”

Richardson’s has been a minority voice in the history of Churches of Christ. But no voice from the past offers us more encouragement today in our search for a deeper spiritual life.