

The Presbyterian JOURNAL

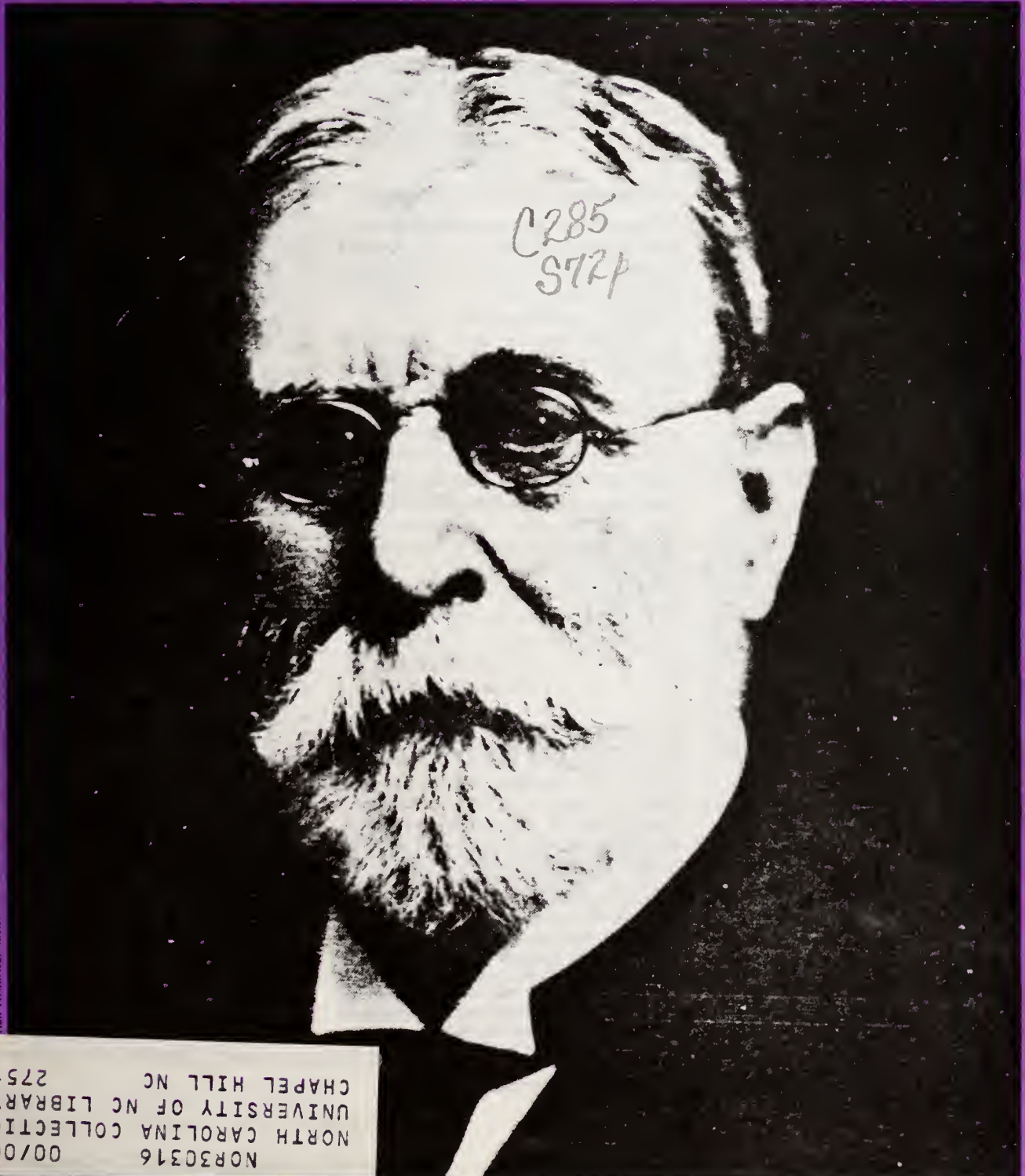
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• Sunday School Lesson for June 2

• Vol. 44, No. 3

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Benjamin B. Warfield on Women Deacons



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From Historical Society

ACROSS THE EDITOR'S DESK



Throughout the world Marxist leaders are backing off the rhetoric and the restrictive laws on commerce and are beginning to allow legal access to limited market behavior—China is an excellent example. The only two institutions that still hold Marxism as Truth are western colleges and universities and western “Christian” churches. I am sorry that Mr. Smith cannot see the failures of Marxism, and am further saddened that he believes this bogus philosophy can somehow be wedded to his Christian faith.

—Bill Anderson
Chattanooga, Tenn.

“REQUIRED READING” FOR S.S. STAFF

Many times in our circles of Christian leadership, we make an unspoken “assumption” that the children, youth, and adults with whom we minister know the Savior. “Assumption,” written by Christopher Harris (April 24), was a gentle reminder that we often act on a false presupposition. My Sunday-school teachers received this article with the following inscription—“required reading.”

Thank you for publishing this creative, poignant piece of work.

—Becca Mitchell, Christian Ed. Dir.
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Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield (1851-1921) was one of the stalwarts of the old Princeton Theology, which ran from Archibald Alexander through Charles Hodge, A. A. Hodge, Warfield, and J. Gresham Machen, who contended for the orthodox faith in the Presbyterian Church, USA in the 19th and early 20th centuries. Because of Warfield's commitment to the inerrancy of the Scriptures and to the Reformed confessional statements, it is interesting to see his arguments in favor of women deacons, as described by Ronald Lutjens in this week's issue. We also have a report from Donald Codling on the new confessional statement adopted last year by the Presbyterian Church in Canada. This statement is modeled to a degree on *A Declaration of Faith*, which was proposed in 1978 for the PCUS.

Our February 27 issue had two articles treating the use of small groups in the local church. We were glad to hear of a facility which is being designed to assist small groups in renewal efforts. Called Onesimus House, it is located about 20 miles west of Shelby, N.C. in the old Hollis School, which is being renovated for use as a retreat house. In charge of this development is Mitchell Beddingfield, member of the Lakey Gap PCA church near Black Mountain, N.C., and a graduate of Belhaven College and Gordon-Conwell Seminary. For information write to Onesimus House, Inc., Rt. 1, Box 110-A, Ellenboro, NC 28040.

The Cono Christian School choir completed an eventful tour during its spring recess. One unusual event, according to the Cono Bulletin, occurred in the Pinelands PCA Church in Miami where Cono headmaster David Dupee had to fill the pulpit in place of Pastor George Brengle, who fell ill. The pastor's scheduled sermon: “I Didn't Make It.”

The academic deans of the Christian College Coalition recently shared information on the books that had most influenced their Christian thinking. Topping the list of authors for the 29 deans who participated was C. S. Lewis, with his *Mere Christianity* receiving most votes and his *God in the Dock*, *Surprised by Joy*, and *The Screwtape Letters* also being mentioned. H. Richard Niebuhr's *Christ and Culture* was next on the list, and then came Arthur Holmes' *All Truth Is God's Truth* and *The Idea of a Christian College* and Oswald Chambers' *My Utmost for His Highest*. Nicholas Wolterstorff was fifth, with *Until Peace and Justice Embrace* and *Reason Within the Bounds of Religion*. Among the remaining 14 authors mentioned by at least two deans were Henry Blamires, John Calvin, J. I. Packer, Francis Schaeffer, and Henry Zylstra.

I've heard of wealthy people leaving an inheritance to a pet, but UPI recently reported on a funeral service, with communion, held for a dog at Calvary Presbyterian Church in Berkeley, Calif. Joan Beth Newman, founder of the International Society for Religion and Animal Rights, conducted the service. She thanked the animals in attendance (six dogs and a cat, along with 25 human mourners) and said, “God loves what she has made. . . . God's love extends to all creation, not just to people. Churches for the most part have not allowed us opportunities to grieve our animal friends. Up to now that was thought to be eccentric.” A guest said the pets were leashed and well-behaved and showed no emotion, although many of the humans wept. I think I would have too. □

B. B. Warfield on Women Deacons

RONALD G. LUTJENS

It is striking that an orthodox Presbyterian body in the 1980s has had to grant a special dispensation—in order to prevent disciplinary action—to those who hold a view that was championed in the 1890s by that great father of Presbyterian orthodoxy, Benjamin B. Warfield (1851-1921), professor at Princeton Theological Seminary from 1887 until his death. In 1983, in a discipline case, the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA) went on record as forbidding a minister to believe that the office of deacon should be open to women. The General Assembly in the following year (1984) reversed this judgment, passing a resolution to the effect that an officer could not be disciplined for holding such a view of the diaconate. B. B. Warfield would have been pleased; that was his view of the diaconate too.

The myth still persists that this issue is the brainchild of theological liberalism. It is true, of course, that historically those who have lost the theological center of the gospel have often been the ones in the vanguard of the battle to open all the offices of the church to women. But George Will is right: Ideas tend to come in clusters, like grapes, and sometimes they need to be disentwined. There was a whole host of conservative Presbyterians in the 19th century who believed that there was warrant in Scripture to open the diaconate to women. But they believed that this was the *only* office for which there was Scriptural warrant to include qualified women. And, as surprising as it may seem to some, B. B. Warfield was one of the leaders of this movement.

The author is pastor of Old Orchard Church (PCA) in Webster Groves, Mo. He has a B.A. from Bowling Green State U., M.A. from Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, and M.Div. from Covenant Theological Seminary.

As far as I have been able to tell, Warfield wrote three pieces on this subject: an article in 1889 for the *Presbyterian Review*; a committee report in 1890 for the General Assembly of the PCUSA; and an article in 1903 for a Baltimore congregation.

The 1889 article was called "Presbyterian Deaconesses." It is a response to what Warfield called "the revival of the office of deaconess" among Presbyterians and Anglicans and in the Church of Scotland. Warfield sees some problems with how the office of deaconess is being defined by some in these other groups; and while in the first article he is raising questions and encouraging caution on certain organizational questions, nevertheless he is quite comfortable with the possibility of reestablishing the office of deaconess and suggests that Presbyterians, with their high view of the church, might well make a lasting contribution to the wider Christian community:

The Presbyterians have by no means been the first of Protestants to move in this effort to revive a primitive office or to organize the work of woman for Christ, but they may prove, in accordance with their genius, to be the first to organize this work under general church authority and in complete ecclesiastical control, and perhaps they may be the first to revive the office of deaconess in a truly Scriptural form (p. 283).

Warfield cites in this article Presbyterians such as Thomas Witherow and W. Fleming Stevenson who believed that there was Scriptural warrant for deaconesses. We meet also Professor Alexander T. McGill, of Princeton Seminary, who in the pages of the first issue of the *Presbyterian Review*, in 1880, made an appeal to the church for the revival of deaconesses in her midst.

Warfield, careful and fair scholar that he was, didn't try to twist the Scriptures to his advantage: "For it need not be denied that the office of deaconess is a Scriptural office, although it must be confessed that the Biblical warrant for it is of the slenderest" (p. 284). In fact, Warfield didn't think that the much controverted pas-

sage in I Timothy 3:11 speaks about deaconesses at all! We are not told what Warfield thinks it *does* speak of, but he tells us that he thinks the Biblical warrant for deaconesses is found only in Romans 16:1: "I commend unto you Phoebe our sister, who is a deaconess of the church in Cenchrea" (Warfield's translation). Warfield is aware that the Greek noun in that passage can be used in a general sense to mean simply "a helper," but he thinks this is unlikely. Warfield argues that the translation "deaconess" in this passage finds confirmation in a sentence written by the Roman governor Pliny to the Emperor Trajan around A.D. 112 which refers to two women as "ministers," i.e. official servants in the church.

But when Warfield uses the term "deaconess," does he refer to a separate office for women, or simply to female deacons? Warfield says that what we know of deaconesses in the New Testament era and the first few centuries after it, is that "they constituted a female diaconate similar to and of like standing with the board of deacons which, in the New Testament, we find in every church" (p. 286). Hence deaconesses are the same as deacons, only with a difference: there is one office, but two parts to it—a male part and a female part, each organized separately, so Warfield seems to suggest. But he quotes Alexander McGill's 1880 article which said:

If the people of a particular church would simply elect women as well as men to the office of deacon, making one board or two separate boards, at their pleasure, of course ordained with the same vows and responsible to the same authority [as male deacons] . . . the order is restored (Warfield, p. 287).

This parallels Warfield's statement we have just quoted, although it makes it explicit (a) that there is only one office, (b) that it is a matter of expedience whether male and female deacons are organized separately, and (c) that the right of ordination belongs also to women deacons. Warfield would have ap-

preciated the action of the Reformed Presbyterian Church, Evangelical Synod (RPCES) in 1977 when it allowed congregations to elect Spirit-filled women as deaconesses. But the Synod's insistence in 1978 that deaconesses are not really part of the diaconate, Warfield probably would have regarded as much ado about nothing.

Warfield goes on to give a very brief summary of the development of the office of deaconess down through the following centuries, remarking that it was the English congregationalists of the 16th century who were the first to reinstitute the office. Warfield then turns to the contemporary debate of his day. On one side were those who were arguing that deaconesses should be particular deacons in the diaconate of a particular congregation and under its ecclesiastical oversight, and on the other side, those who argued that the primitive apostolic office of deaconess was much more like the independent-of-ecclesiastical-authority sister-houses (as Warfield calls them) first set up in Kaiserswerth, Germany, in 1836, by a Lutheran pastor, Theodor Fliedner. Warfield comes down very clearly on the first side in that debate. At the same time, he argues that the establishment of deaconess orders on the Kaiserswerth model is not *ipso facto* unbiblical. Here is the reason:

That an example of a Kaiserswerth Deaconess-house may not be found in the New Testament need not be fatal to its claims to ecclesiastical recognition or establishment, any more than the like failure of an example of an associated Presbytery' is fatal to the ecclesiastical erection of Presbyterian government—provided only that the one as well as the other can be shown to be a further application of principles involved in the institutions appointed by God for the church. . . . All that concerns the associated activities of the churches—held together in that day by the universal authority of the Apostles—is to be defended only on the ground of "legitimate development"—that is, of the further application of the divinely embodied principles of church organization (p. 292).

In the same year that Warfield published this article, the General Assembly of the PCUSA established a study committee to look into an overture "calling for a consideration of the question of constituting an Order of Deaconesses." B. B. Warfield was made the chairman of the committee. In 1890 Warfield brought back the findings of this committee, which included several recommendations to the Assembly. The report begins with the

committee's conclusion: "After full conference they [the Committee] found themselves strongly of the opinion that the time is ripe for the reconstitution of the office of deaconess in the Church" (PCUSA *Minutes*, 1890, p. 119).

Warfield lists four reasons why the committee was persuaded that women should be admitted to the diaconate: 1) "It appears to have been an office of the Apostolic Church." The example of Phoebe (Rom. 16:1) is given as probable evidence for this; and Pliny's letter to Trajan is cited as corroborating evidence. 2) "It has never been without recognition as such in the Reformed Churches." In support of this, Warfield claims the views of John Calvin, an attempt to revive the office of deaconess in the Reformed Church of the Netherlands in the 16th century, and Puritan practice in England from the time of Queen Elizabeth. Warfield also names Thomas Chalmers, Charles



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Hodge, and Alexander McGill as Presbyterian scholars who supported the committee's position. 3) "It is being successfully revived by many of our sister Presbyterian churches." Here Warfield cites the Lebanon Classis of the Reformed German Church in the U.S. (1866), the Church of Scotland (1888), the (Covenanters') Reformed Presbyterian Church (1888), and the Alliance of the Reformed Churches (1889 or 1890). About the PCUS's view of deaconesses, Warfield says that they "practically reestablished the office without the name." He refers to the *Book of Church Order* provision which allowed a Session to appoint women to help do diaconal work. (See the PCA's present *Book of Church Order*, 9-7, for this same provision.) 4) "There is a strong practical demand for this office, both in the needs of our

churches, the presence of suitable gifts for it in our women, and their readiness to perform the functions of the office even without its honors. The work is immense: it must be done; it is being done; and the only question is whether the church will give its official recognition to the abundant labors already being performed voluntarily. Shall we not here too say, 'Honor to whom honor is due.' "

With the caveat that each of these four arguments is "capable of almost illimitable enlargement," Warfield, on behalf of his committee, presses on to recommend the Assembly "to take steps for the immediate revival of the office of deaconess in our congregations." The committee then proposed these changes in the Form of Government:

chapter 6, section 2 to read: Women also served the Apostolical Church as deaconesses, whose office and duties were similar to those of deacons.

chapter 13, section 9 to read: Deaconesses may be elected to office in a manner similar to that appointed for deacons, and set apart by prayer (PCUSA *Minutes*, 1890, p. 121).

The report ends with a plea that the General Assembly might undertake to establish sister-houses for the training of women deacons who wanted to give their lives in service of Christ.

Some will want to make much of the fact that Warfield's committee recommends that women deacons be set apart only by prayer—not ordination. What is behind this? I am convinced that for Warfield, only a timely expedience is behind this. He had written at the outset of the report that the committee has

less confidence in their own power, to determine and arrange beforehand the details for the reconstitution of this order, than they have in the living church gradually redeveloping the order in its essential features, privileges, duties and honors, under the spur, guidance and checks, on the one hand, of the the practical demands of the Church's work, and on the other, of the directing and governing hand of the Church's courts. They have thought it wise, therefore, to recommend the revival of the office of deaconesses with the least possible legislation on the subject, and to leave it to the future to add details. . . . (PCUSA *Minutes*, 1890, p. 119).

It should be noted, however, that when Warfield cites the revival of deaconesses in the (Covenanters') Reformed Presbyterian Church, he specifically states that that body had pronounced in favor of the *ordination* of women to the office of deacon, and mentions an article defending that action. It was

written by T. P. Stevenson in that church's official organ *Our Banner*, in November, 1888, and was entitled, "Women and the Deacon's Office." In that article, Stevenson argues that there is no intelligent reason to deny women ordination, if they have been found qualified and are duly elected to the diaconate. To Stevenson, it is a matter of simple logic: Ordination belongs to the office, not to the gender. If a woman is elected to the office, she has a right to be ordained into it. There is no rational argument for

excluding women from ordination, only from office (i.e., the ruling/teaching office). Since Warfield cites this article and specifically mentions in his report the Covenanters' decision to *ordain* women deacons, in support of his committee's contentions, it is most reasonable to assume that Warfield—or a majority of the committee—left ordination out of its recommendations to the General Assembly for reasons of ecclesiastical expedience and not of theological scruple. In his 1889 article, "Presbyterian Deaconesses," Warfield

had quoted Alexander McGill who thought that women deacons should be "of course ordained with the same vows" as men deacons. And Warfield offers him no contrary argument. Warfield, it seems, was careful not to try and ask for too much too soon.

The recommendations were adopted by the General Assembly, but in a series of votes very difficult to interpret, lost at the presbytery level.

The last article I know of which Warfield wrote on the subject of women deacons came out in 1903 in *Our Church Work*, the tabloid of First Presbyterian Church, Baltimore, Maryland. It was entitled "The Deaconess as a Part of the Church," was extremely short, and consists mostly of a distinction between the words "organism" and "organization."

But as a good churchman, Warfield wasn't just a man of words either. In 1905 the Presbyterians of Baltimore established the Presbyterian Deaconess Home and Training School in that city, as a sister-house for the training of women to serve Christ and his church by caring for the poor and the needy. Benjamin Warfield served on its first Board of Directors.

In light of the rich legacy of thought, argument, and action on the subject that we have inherited from our orthodox Presbyterian forebears in the 19th century, it is a pity that many of us conservative Presbyterians in the last part of the 20th century are unwilling even to talk about it. The General Assembly of the PCA this last year voted down a proposal to establish a study committee to look into the question of women deacons. B. B. Warfield would have been disappointed. These were his last words in the last article he wrote on the subject, in 1903:

A living church cannot do without Deaconesses as its organs for doing good. Deaconesses cannot do without the church as the appointed organization for doing good in the world. Is it not time that Presbyterians should realize these things?

True, B. B. Warfield was not deity. But neither is the Book of Church Order of the PCA—which now prohibits women deacons—given by divine inspiration! At least let us sit down and study the whole question together. ☐

'Warfield means there is no example in the New Testament of one presbytery associating with another presbytery as we have it today. His point is that we justify distinct presbyteries on the basis of Biblical polity *principles*, not on the basis of explicit New Testament *example*.

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