

A Historical and Biblical Examination of Women Deacons

Chapter 1: The Historical Evidence

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Introduction

The modern debate regarding the ordination of women to the diaconate began in the 1880s, about twenty years after the rise of what has been called "Christian feminism." During the late 1880s a move to ordain women to the diaconate failed in the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America (PCUSA) but passed in the Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America (RPCNA). The debate over women deacons re-emerged in the 1980s, about twenty years after the rise of secular and pagan feminism. The fact that the push to ordain women as deacons occurred in both the nineteenth and twentieth centuries after certain types of feminism became popular in our culture is very interesting. The arguments set forth by those on both sides of the debate during the 1980s bore a striking resemblance to the arguments offered during the 1880s. At this writing there are a number of ministers in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church and Presbyterian Church of America who believe that women should be ordained to the diaconate. There are ministers within the RPCNA who do not believe that ordaining women to the diaconate has biblical warrant. Can the debate over women deacons be resolved within these orthodox Presbyterian bodies? Are the biblical passages used in the debate so difficult that the best one can hope for is an "exegetical standoff"? Does the evidence from church history support the pro-women deacon view, as many assert? Is it possible that in certain ways both sides have been wrong and that there is a third alternative? Since these questions are important, and since most of the material dealing with these issues is brief and somewhat superficial, I have endeavored to examine the historical evidence and the biblical passages used in the debate in greater detail. I hope and pray that this little book will help Bible-believing Reformed and Presbyterian pastors and elders have a better grasp of these issues.

I. The Historical Evidence

Those in favor of ordaining women to the diaconate argue that the early church had deaconesses, as did Calvin's Geneva and the early French Reformed churches. The Reformed Presbyterian scholar Rev. T. P. Stevenson was instrumental in convincing RPCNA elders and ministers that women should be ordained to the diaconate, by pointing to the example of the

early church. The authors of the OPC Minority Report¹ also use the example of the early church and Calvin's Geneva as reasons that women should be ordained as deacons. There is no question that deaconesses existed in the early church, in Calvin's Geneva and in the French Reformed churches. But these deaconesses were modeled after the order of widows in 1 Timothy 5:9ff. and *not* after Acts 6:1-6 or 1 Timothy 3:1-10, 12. Those who argue in favor of women deacons who are of the same office and function as male deacons should note that the evidence from church history starting with the earliest church fathers and ending with the 19th century is *overwhelmingly against* women deacons who are in the same office and have the same function as male deacons. There is not a *single instance* in the entire history of the Christian church of women deacons who are of the *same* office and function as male deacons, until the 19th century. The evidence will show that women deacons, whether ordained or not, were in a completely *separate* office from the male diaconate. These women had different functions, different qualifications and a different authority than the male diaconate.

The Old Dispensation

While the New Testament church office of deacon is distinctive to the new covenant administration, there were church officers in the Old Testament administration which had similar responsibilities. The officers in charge of managing the temple (Levites) and synagogue (*chazanim*) funds, and caring for the poor, were always men. James M. Willson's description of the synagogue *chazan* shows that the New Testament office of deacon was probably patterned after the Jewish *chazan*.

The organization of the Jewish synagogue confirms the view just presented of the moral character of the principles imbedded in the constitution of the church, during the former dispensation, in regard to the management of fiscal concerns. In the language of Dr. McLeod, "There were several officers in the Jewish synagogue, and these were authorized to conduct the public worship, preserve the order, *and manage the finances of the congregation.*" This latter officer was the *chazan* or deacon of the synagogue: and in the words of Prideaux, "the *chuzanim*, that is, overseers, who were also fixed ministers, and under the rulers of the synagogue, had the charge and oversight of all things in it, kept the sacred books of the law, and the prophets, and other Holy Scriptures, as also the books of their public liturgies, and all other utensils belonging to the synagogue." The order of the synagogue was, as all Presbyterians hold, the model of that of the church under the New Testament dispensation. In the synagogue was an officer who attended to the poor, had the oversight of the place of worship, and managed the finances. This fact furnishes additional evidence that the deacon's office is not *solely* the care of the poor. The *chazan* of the synagogue had the care of the poor as a part only of his charge: the oversight of the fiscal affairs of the synagogue belonged to him. Such officers as the trustee or

¹ Report of the Committee on Women in Church Office (Docket of the OPC General Assembly, 1988 [note: the Majority and Minority Reports were commended for study by the 55th General Assembly but not adopted; they may be found in the bound Minutes of the 55th G.A., pp. 310-373]).

committee-man of modern days, were not known either in the order of the synagogue, or of the churches.

The scripture argument for committing all the ecclesiastical goods to *deacons*, may be briefly stated thus: Both under the Old and New Testament dispensations, the Bible contains frequent allusions to the funds devoted to ecclesiastical uses—in *all cases* these were managed, until the canon of divine revelation was completed, by *ordained* officers, and such officers only; during the Old Testament dispensation by priests and Levites, during the new by *deacons*. Nor does the Bible contain any account of officers distinct from these, and *unordained*, to whom the fiscal concerns of the church either *were* or *might* be committed. The consequence is plain. Any other officers for the management of church funds are of human invention, and where they exist, occupy a place which should be occupied by officers chosen and set apart for this service according to Christ's institution.²

This does not prove that the ordained diaconate established by the apostles in Acts 6:1-6 is restricted to men. But if God intended to bring women into an office and function reserved solely for men for several centuries, one would expect clear warrant for it somewhere in the New Testament. The fact that the office was restricted to men in the old dispensation, coupled with the clear restriction of the diaconate to men in Acts 6:1-6, is strong evidence against the idea of ordained women deacons in the same office with the same responsibilities as male deacons. If God established women in the ordained diaconal office sometime after Acts 6:1-6, we would expect something clear, because it was such a change from past practice. Romans 16:1-2 and 1 Timothy 3:11 are considered to be difficult passages. (And in fact are better interpreted in other ways, as we shall see.) If women were in an ordained office which was very similar to the diaconate in the old dispensation, the lack of clear warrant would not be so serious. For example, infant baptism is obviously a continuation of infant circumcision with some minor changes. If the covenant with Abraham and circumcision were non-existent we would need more information in the New Testament regarding it. Therefore, those in favor of opening the ordained diaconal office to women bear the burden of proof.

The Didache (The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles, c. A.D. 100)

The *Didache*, in a section which deals with the affairs of the church, shows that the office of deacon is restricted to men.³ “Appoint, therefore, for yourselves, bishops and deacons worthy of the Lord, *men* meek, and not lovers of money, and truthful and proved; for they also render to

² James M. Willson, *The Deacon: An Inquiry into the Nature, Duties, and Exercise of the Office of the Deacon in the Christian Church* (Philadelphia: William Young, 1841), pp. 30-31. Mr. Willson was pastor of the Reformed Presbyterian congregation in Philadelphia; one of his primary concerns in writing this book was to oppose the innovation of trustees.

³ The earliest reference to the diaconate in the post-apostolic church is found in the writings of the apostolic father Hermas (c. A.D. 90-150). In his *Similitude* 9-27, he says that deacons are "such as have been set over inferior ministries and have protected the poor and the widows" (cited in Samuel Miller, *An Essay on the Warrant, Nature and Duties of the Office of the Ruling Elder in the Presbyterian Church* [New York, 1831], p. 221).

you the service of prophets and teachers. Despise them not therefore, for they are your honoured ones, together with the prophets and teachers.”⁴ The word *aner* is used, which can refer only to the male sex. The placing of *deacon* alongside of *bishop* (and in other early Christian literature, presbyter) indicates that very early in the church male deacons had authority. They, along with the bishop, are the "honored ones." There is no record of an official order of deaconesses in the church at the time the *Didache* was written.

Pliny's Letter to Trajan (c. A.D. 113)

An early possible reference to a woman deacon comes not from Christian literature but from a secular source: Pliny the governor of Bithynia's letter to the emperor Trajan. “Pliny wrote to Trajan at the beginning of the second century that he had subjected women to the torture in persecution that he might extort confession: "*Ex duabus aucillis quæ ministræ dicebantur.*" Evidently one of these nouns, *ancilla*, is the common designation of handmaid, and the other, *ministra*, the official name of a female servant. And this term translates the Greek *diakono* in patristic Latin.”⁵ The patristic Latin could be translated: "I have judged it necessary to obtain information by torture from two servicing women (*ancillae*) called by them 'deaconesses' (*ministrae*).”⁶ This may be the first reference to female deaconesses. It is likely that these women had some sort of special service to the church. But we are given no information as to the role or function these women had in the church. This instance sheds *no* light on whether deaconesses are patterned after Paul's order of widows in 1 Timothy 5:9-12 or held the same office with male deacons.

The Epistles of Ignatius (c. A.D. 115)

Ignatius, who was said to be a disciple of the apostle John, wrote several epistles to the churches in Asia Minor while on his way to Rome to be martyred. This occurred under the persecution of the emperor Trajan. His description of the diaconate is inconsistent with the idea of deaconesses who function in the same office as male deacons.

First note that he assumes that deacons are men: "...it will become you, as a Church of God, to elect a deacon to act as the ambassador of God [for you] to [the brethren there], that he may rejoice along with them when they are met together, and glorify the name [of God].”⁷

Second, Ignatius attributes an authority to the office of deacon that women are clearly not permitted to have. "I exhort you to study to do all things with a divine harmony, while your

⁴ *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, revised and chronologically arranged with brief notes by A. Cleveland Coxe (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, [1886] 1994), 7:381.

⁵ Alexander T. McGill, *Church Government: Treatise Compiled from His Lectures in Theological Seminaries* (Philadelphia, PA: Presbyterian Board of Publication and Sabbath-School Work, 1890), p. 380.

⁶ OPC Majority Report, p. 927.

⁷ *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 1:85.

bishop presides in the place of God, and your presbyters in the place of the assembly of the apostles, *along with* your deacons, who are most dear to me, and are entrusted with the ministry of Jesus Christ."⁸ "Let the laity *be subject* to the deacons; the deacons to the presbyters; the presbyters to the bishop; the bishop to Christ, even as He is to the Father."⁹ "Fare ye well in the Lord Jesus Christ, while ye *continue subject* to the bishop, and in like manner to the presbyters and to the deacons."¹⁰ "My soul be for theirs that are *submissive* to the bishop, to the presbyters, and to the deacons, and may my portion be along with them in God!"¹¹

Obedience and submission are due to not just the bishop or presbyters but to deacons as well. The theory that women and men held the same office of deacon in the early church, until at some time the office of deacon was given more authority than the Scripture warrants, forcing women into a separate office, does not have a shred of historical evidence. It is true that as time went on deacons became part of the sacerdotal class and had more responsibilities and duties than warranted by the word of God. But even the earliest historical evidence sets male deacons apart from female servants giving them an authority that women deacons should never attain in the church.

In all of Ignatius' writings there is not a single mention of deaconesses. Given Ignatius' weighty influence and authority in Asia Minor, it is highly probable that the two deaconesses mentioned in Pliny's letter to Trajan were of the order of widows. Ignatius does mention widows in such a way as to imply an "order."

The Epistle of Polycarp to the Philipppians (c. A.D. 115)

A close friend of Ignatius was Polycarp of Smyrna. His epistle to the Philipppians reveals that Ignatius' teaching on the authority of the diaconate was common at this time in the church. "Wherefore, it is needful to abstain from all these things, being subject to the presbyters and deacons, as unto God and Christ. The virgins also must walk in a blameless and pure conscience."¹²

Deacons are placed in a position of authority alongside the presbyters. Like Ignatius, Polycarp gives no indication of a female diaconate at this time. His reference to virgins may refer to an order of virgins or of widows who, according to Paul, were required to be celibate. Ignatius referred to widows as virgins in his *Epistle to the Smyrnaeans*: "I salute the households of my brethren with their wives and children and the virgins who are called widows."¹³ The church fathers referred to widows as virgins because they were "virgins in God's sight" or "virgins a second time." They were virgins in heart and spirit.

⁸ Ibid., 1:61.

⁹ Ibid., 1:90.

¹⁰ Ibid., 1:72.

¹¹ Ibid., 1:95.

¹² *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 1:34.

¹³ *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 1:92. A footnote referring to this statement by editor A. Cleveland Coxe reads: "The *deaconesses* seem to have been called *widows*."

Polycarp does not mention deaconesses but he does instruct widows: "Our widows must be sober-minded as touching the faith of the Lord, making intercession without ceasing for all men, abstaining from all calumny, evil speaking, false witness, love of money, and every evil thing, knowing that they are God's altar..."¹⁴ It is likely that at this time there was an order of widows in the church. At least one of their responsibilities was making intercession for all men. When we examine the qualifications for women deacons in the fourth and fifth centuries it will become clear that deaconesses evolved from the order of widows. The qualifications for deaconesses are virtually identical to Paul's qualification given in 1 Timothy 5:9-12 except that over time the age limit of sixty was dropped to fifty, then to forty. The female diaconate was restricted to godly widows who made a vow of perpetual chastity for the sake of church service. Remarriage could result in excommunication. To argue that these deaconesses belonged to the same office as male deacons makes no sense whatsoever, as will be seen in a moment.

The Epistle of Zephyrinus to the Bishops of Sicily (A.D. 201)

Zephyrinus, the archbishop of Rome, wrote to all the bishops of Sicily, instructing them on the ordination of presbyters and deacons. Keep in mind that the term *Levite* was used synonymously with deacon in the early church. "Ordinations of presbyters and *Levites*, moreover, solemnly perform on a suitable occasion, and in the presence of many witnesses; and to this duty advance tried and *learned men*, that ye may be greatly gladdened by their fellowship and help."¹⁵

When the epistle to Sicily was written there was no mention of deaconesses at all in the western church. The archbishop restricts the diaconal office to "learned men." If women deacons existed at this time one would expect them to be mentioned alongside the male deacons. If a non-ordained order of widows existed, it would be quite natural to leave them out of a discussion on ordination.

The Epistles of Cyprian (A.D. 250)

Thascius Cyprian, who became the bishop of Carthage in A.D. 248, is considered by scholars to be important with regard to the development of church government in the western church. The important thing to note for our study is that deacons are men. Deacons rule along with presbyters. And deacons at this stage have evolved into assistants to the bishop.

Cyprian to the elders and deacons, brethren abiding at Rome, sends greeting.¹⁶

¹⁴ *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 1:34.

¹⁵ *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 8:611-612.

¹⁶ *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 5:281.

For I am grieved when I hear that some of them run about wickedly and proudly, and give themselves up to follies or to discords; that members of Christ, and even members that have confessed Christ, are defiled by unlawful concubinage, and cannot be ruled either by deacons or by presbyters....¹⁷

But deacons ought to remember that the Lord chose apostles, that is, bishops and overseers; while apostles appointed for themselves deacons after the ascent of the Lord into heaven as ministers of their episcopacy and of the Church. But if we may dare anything against God who makes bishops, deacons may also dare against us by whom they are made; and therefore it behoves the deacon of whom you write to repent of his audacity, and to acknowledge the honour of the priest, and to satisfy the bishop set over him with full humility.¹⁸

Once again we note that deacons are men who rule along with the presbyters. There is not one mention of deaconesses in Cyprian's writings (which is important considering he often dealt with church government).

The Apostolical Canons (c. A.D. 300 to c. A.D. 350)

“[I]n the main the Apostolic Canons represent the very early canon-law of the Church, that the canons which make up the collection are of various dates, but that most of them are earlier than the year 300, and that while it is not possible to say exactly when the collection, as we now have it, was made, there is good reason for assigning it a date not later than the middle of the fourth century.”¹⁹ In the eastern church the *Apostolical Canons* were generally considered to be an authentic work prepared by the holy apostles. The eighty-five canons were ruled authentic and authoritative at the Synod of Trullo (A.D. 692).²⁰

The *Apostolical Canons* are important for our study because they clearly establish that in the eastern church women deacons were considered to be of a completely separate and inferior office to the male diaconate. This will be proved by the description of the male diaconate in the *Apostolical Canons*. Keep in mind that the women diaconate flourished in the eastern church after the fourth century. The same churches which had women deacons in the east also wholeheartedly accepted the *Apostolical Canons*.

Canon II—Let a presbyter, deacon, and the rest of the *clergy*, be ordained by one bishop.²¹

Canon IV (V)—But the bishops and presbyters should of course give a share of these things to the deacons, and the rest of the *clergy*.²²

¹⁷ Ibid., 5:282.

¹⁸ Ibid., 5:366.

¹⁹ *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, ed. by Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, [1900] 1994), 14:593.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid., 14:594.

²² Ibid.

Canon VI (VII)—Let not a bishop, presbyter, or deacon, undertake worldly business; otherwise let *him* be deposed.²³

Canon VIII (IX)—If any bishop, presbyter, or deacon, or any one of the *sacerdotal* list....²⁴

Canon XV—If any presbyter, or deacon, or any other of the list of the clergy, shall leave *his* own parish, and go into another, and having entirely forsaken *his* own, shall make *his* abode in the other parish without the permission of *his* own bishop, we ordain that he shall no longer perform divine service....²⁵

Canon XVII—*He* who has been twice married after baptism, or who has had a concubine, cannot become a bishop, presbyter, or deacon, or any other of the *sacerdotal* list....²⁶

Canon XVIII—*He* who married a widow, or a divorced women, or an harlot, or a servant-maid, or an actress, cannot be a bishop, presbyter, or deacon, or any other of the *sacerdotal* list.²⁷

The deacons described in the *Apostolical Canons* are men. They are part of the clergy, part of the sacerdotal class, perform divine service, and are permitted to marry. On the other hand, deaconesses were not part of the clergy. They were never part of the sacerdotal class. They never took part in the divine service or sacerdotal ritual. And they were *never* permitted to marry.

The Council of Neocaesarea (c. A.D. 315)

The Council of Neocaesarea, which met in Pontus, reveals that at this time the church fathers considered Acts 6:1-6 to be the foundation of the diaconal office. "The deacons ought to be seven in number, according to the canon, even if the city be great. Of this you will be persuaded from the Book of the Acts."²⁸ "This canon was observed in Rome and it was not until the eleventh century that the number of the Seven Cardinal Deacons was changed to fourteen."²⁹ This canon was not strictly observed in the eastern church.³⁰ The western churches, which were large, got around this canon by appointing sub-deacons (all men).

The Council of Nicea (A.D. 325)

The first ecumenical council of Nice in Bithynia (A.D. 325) was the largest assembly of bishops help up to that time. The church historian Eusebius places the number of bishops at 250. Athanasius places the number at 318. The difference in numbers is probably due to the fact that as the council progressed bishops were still arriving from various places in the Empire. If the

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid., 14:595.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid., 14:86.

²⁹ In fact, the Council of Nicea (A.D. 325) declared: "The number of presbyters and deacons is to be adapted to the work of the church and to its means" (Canon LXII). In A.D. 451 the church at Edessa had thirty-eight deacons.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 86.

number of presbyters, deacons and other attendants is counted there were as many as 2,000 clergy present.

Nicea is important to our study because it was primarily an eastern council (the Latin or western church had only seven delegates present).³¹ It was in the eastern church that the female diaconate flourished. Nicea gives an indication of the eastern church's view of deaconesses throughout the empire. This was the general view of the church. This canon does not mean there cannot be localized exceptions (e.g., in the Syrian church order, the *Didascalia Apostolorum* [c. A.D. 300] women deacons were already being ordained). Canon 19 of the council of Nicea indicates that in A.D. 325 the *general* practice of the church as a whole was *not* to ordain women deacons. "Likewise in the case of their deaconesses, and generally in the case of those who have been enrolled among their clergy, let the same form be observed. And we mean by deaconesses such as have assumed the habit, but who, *since they have no imposition of hands, are to be numbered only among the laity.*"³²

Did the early church have women deacons? Yes, absolutely. Were these women deacons in the same office with male deacons? No, clearly not. Male deacons were ordained from the very beginning. Women deacons were not ordained throughout the east until the latter half of the fourth century. Can we assert that women deacons were in a separate (i.e., to women), but parallel, or equal office to men deacons? No, not at all! For as late as A.D. 325 a church council declared that women deacons "are only to be numbered among the laity." From the beginning male deacons were ordained, were part of the clergy and had authority.

The Teaching of the Apostles [*Didascalia Apostolorum*] (c. A.D. 250-300)

The first clear reference to deaconesses in the early church is found in the Syrian church order called the Teaching of the Apostles. There are many similarities between the Teaching of the Apostles and the Apostolic Constitutions (A.D. 381) because the authors of the Apostolic Constitutions incorporated (with minor changes) some of the *Didascalia* into their work. Thus the teaching with regard to deaconesses is very similar.

Wherefore, O bishop, appoint thee workers of righteousness as helpers.... Those that please thee out of all the people thou shalt choose and appoint as deacons: a man for the performance of the most things that are required, but *a woman to the ministry of women*. For there are houses whither thou canst not send a deacon to the women, on account of the heathen, but mayst send a deaconess. Also, because in many other matters the office of a deaconess is

³¹ Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, [1910] 1989), 3:624.

³² *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 14:40. "It moreover has been suggested that the 'widows' of 1 Tim. 5:9 may have been deaconesses, and this seems not unlikely from the fact that the age for the admission of women to this ministry was fixed by Tertullian at sixty years (De Vel. Virg., Chap. ix.), and only changed to forty, two centuries later by the Council of Chalcedon, and from the further fact that these 'widows' spoken of by St. Paul seem to have had a vow of chastity, for it is expressly said that if they marry they have 'damnation, because they have cast off their first faith' [1 Tim. 5:12]" ("Excursus on the Deaconesses of the Early Church" in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 14:41).

required. In the first place, when women go down into the water, those who go down into the water ought to be anointed by a deaconess with the oil of anointing.... Where there is a woman, and especially a deaconess, *it is not fitting that women should be seen by men*: but with the imposition of hand do thou anoint the head only.... Let a deaconess, as we have already said, anoint the women. But let a man pronounce over them the invocation of the divine Names in the water.

And when she who is being baptized has come up from the water, *let the deaconess receive her*, and teach and instruct her how the seal of baptism ought to be kept unbroken in purity and holiness. For this cause we say that the ministry of a deaconess is especially needful and important.... And thou hast need of the ministry of a deaconess for many things...to go into the houses of the heathen where there are believing women, and to visit those who are sick, and to minister to them in that which they have need, and to bathe those who have begun to recover from sickness....”But let a woman rather be devoted to the ministry of women, and a male deacon to the ministry of men. And let him be ready to obey and to submit himself to the command of the bishop.”³³

Note that the deaconess's ministry is solely to women. Deaconesses are needed to visit poor women because it would look inappropriate before the heathen to send a man. Deaconesses would baptize women, because it would be improper for men to see women naked (baptism in the early church was immersion in water, apparently with little or no clothing, to represent the new birth). Deaconesses also instructed new female believers in the faith. The intimacy involved in nursing a sick Christian woman back to health can only be done properly by a deaconess.

The Constitution of the Holy Apostles (A.D. 381)

In a section of the Constitution of the Holy Apostles which deals with assembling in the church, it is clear that male deacons are in a totally *separate* office from the female diaconate:

When thou callest an assembly of the Church.... In the middle let the bishop's throne be placed, and on each side of him let the presbytery sit down; and let the deacons stand near at hand, in close and small girt garments, for they are like the mariners and managers of the ship: with regard to these, let the laity sit on the other side, with all quietness and good order. And let the women sit by themselves, they also keeping silence....³⁴

The deacons are placed with the clergy separate from the laity. The deaconesses stand with the women of the church who are segregated from the men: “Let the deaconesses also stand at those of the women, like shipmen. For the same description and pattern was both in the

³³ The Teaching of the Apostles, quoted in Jean LaPorte, *The Role of Women in Early Christianity* (New York: Edwin Miller, 1982), pp. 112-114; and in Tony Cowley, "Women Deacons" (*Cornerstones*, September/October 1989, p. 6).

³⁴ *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 7:421.

tabernacle of the testimony and in the temple of God. But if any one be found sitting out of his place, let him be rebuked by the deacon.”³⁵

The deacon rebukes those out of place. The male deacon seats the men of the congregation and male strangers. The deaconesses do the very same thing, except for the women: “Nay, if a poor man or one of a mean family, or a stranger, comes upon you, whether he be old or young, and there be no place, the deacon shall find a place for even these, and that with all his heart; that, instead of accepting persons before men, his ministration towards God may be well-pleasing. The very same thing let the deaconess do to those women, whether poor or rich, that come unto them.”³⁶

The idea that deaconesses belong to the same office as the male deacon but minister solely to women is destroyed by an examination of the responsibilities of the male diaconate in the church:

...and afterwards let a deacon or a presbyter read the Gospels.... As to the deacons, after the prayer is over, let some of them attend upon the oblation of the Eucharist, ministering to the Lord's body with fear. Let others of them watch the multitude, and keep them silent.... After this let the deacon pray for the whole Church, for the whole world, and the several parts of it, and the fruits of it; for the priests and the rulers, for the high priest and the king, and the peace of the universe.... If any brother, man or woman, come in from another parish, bringing recommendatory letters, let the deacon be the judge of that affair, inquiring whether they be of the faithful, and of the Church? whether they be not defiled by heresy?³⁷

In these quotes let it be noted that deacons read the Scriptures in public worship, they assist with Eucharist and are of the sacerdotal class. They pray in the public worship service, and are involved in the governmental-judicial affairs of the church. This judicial aspect with regard to judging heresy involves judging both men and women.

Section II sets forth the specific reason that deaconesses were ordained by the bishop:

Let not therefore either a bishop, or a presbyter, or a deacon, or any one else of the sacerdotal catalogue, defile his tongue with calumny, lest he inherit a curse instead of a blessing; and let it also be the bishop's business and care that no lay person utter any curse: for he ought to take care of all,—of the clergy, of the virgins, of the widows, of the laity. For which reason, O bishop, do thou ordain thy fellow-workers, the labourers for life and for righteousness, such deacons as are pleasing to God, such whom thou provest to be worthy among all the people, and such as shall be ready for the necessities of their ministration. *Ordain also a deaconess who is faithful and holy, for the ministrations towards women.* For sometimes he cannot send a deacon, who is a man, to the women, on account of unbelievers. Thou shalt therefore send a woman, a deaconess, on account of the imaginations of the bad. For we stand in need of a woman, a

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid., 7:421-422.

deaconess, for many necessities; and first in the baptism of women, the deacon shall anoint only their forehead with the holy oil, and after him the deaconess shall anoint them: for there is no necessity that the women should be seen by the men; ...and shall dip them in the water; and let a deacon receive the man, and a deaconess the women, that so the conferring of this inviolable seal may take place with a becoming decency. And after that, let the bishop anoint those that are baptized with ointment.³⁸

Deaconesses were needed *not* to perform all the functions of the male deacon's office, but only to perform certain responsibilities toward women. Deaconesses visited women in the church to avoid the appearance of evil. Deaconesses baptized the women while deacons baptized the men, since baptism was done in the nude.

While it is true that by A.D. 381 the ordination of deaconesses had become the norm throughout the eastern church, it was not the norm prior to A.D. 325, as we have seen. During the fourth century ordination was applied to many servants in the eastern church. Deaconesses were ordained, but so were readers, singers and porters. The ordination of deaconesses was an innovation of the eastern church. It was never universally accepted in the western church. "We do not permit presbyters to ordain deacons, or deaconesses, or readers, or ministers, or singers, or porters, but only bishops; for this is the ecclesiastical order and harmony."³⁹

The deacon has special authority as a messenger and prophet of the bishop:

For now the deacon is to you Aaron, and the bishop Moses. If, therefore, Moses was called a god by the Lord, let the bishop be honoured among you as a god, and the deacon as his prophet. For as Christ does nothing without His Father, so neither does the deacon do anything without his bishop; and as the Son without His Father is nothing, so is the deacon nothing without his bishop; and as the Son is subject to His Father, so is every deacon subject to his bishop; and as the Son is the messenger and prophet of the Father, so is the deacon the messenger and prophet of his bishop. Wherefore let all things that he is to do with any one be made known to the bishop, and be finally ordered by him.⁴⁰

While the deacon has a special authority, he is not to act independently of the bishop.

The deaconess has a ministry *only* to women. She is not equal in authority to the male deacon, but is directly under the authority of the male deacon:

But let the deacon minister to him, as Christ does to His Father; and let him serve him unblameably in all things, as Christ does nothing of Himself, but does always those things that please His Father. Let also the deaconess be honoured by you in the place of the Holy Ghost, and *not do or say anything without the deacon*; as neither does the Comforter say or do anything of Himself, but gives glory to Christ by waiting for His pleasure. And as we cannot believe on

³⁸ Ibid., 7:431.

³⁹ Ibid., 7:430.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 7:411.

Christ without the teaching of the Spirit, so let not any women address herself to the deacon or bishop without the deaconess.⁴¹

The deaconess functioned as an intermediary between women in the church and the deacon and the bishop; thus, any appearance of impropriety was avoided. Keep in mind that deaconesses were widows, older women whose children had grown up. For over three centuries deaconesses were required to be sixty years of age and were required to take a vow of perpetual celibacy. The age requirement was eventually lowered to forty. Celibacy was always required of the deaconesses. The point is that bishops and deacons could interact with the deaconesses who were elderly women without any sense of impropriety both within and without the church.

The Council of Chalcedon (A.D. 451)

The Council of Chalcedon contains the last statement on deaconesses among the great ecumenical councils: “A woman shall not receive the laying on of hands as a deaconess under forty years of age, and then only after searching examinations. And if, after she has had hands laid on her and has continued for a time to minister, she shall despise the grace of God and give herself in marriage, she shall be anathematized and the man united to her.”⁴² Women deacons are still being ordained at this time. The age of deaconesses is officially lowered from 60 to 40 years of age. If a deaconess give up her vow of celibacy, both she and her husband shall be anathematized (i.e., excommunicated). The fact that the female diaconate is based on 1 Timothy 5:9 is proof positive that deaconesses are not the same as deacons but should be regarded as helpers who function under the authority of the deacons. Those who point to deaconesses in the early church in order to justify female deacons are comparing apples to oranges. The early church's record on deacons and deaconesses clearly and consistently sets forth two separate, distinct offices. Deaconesses are really of the order of widows. The fact that they are called deaconesses has caused much confusion. Here is a summary of the differences in the early church between deacons and deaconesses:

Deacons	Deaconesses
1. The scriptural basis and origin of the office is Ac. 6:1-6.	1. The scriptural basis and origin of the office is 1 Tim. 5:9ff.
2. The requirements for office are derived from 1 Tim. 3:1-10, 12.	2. The requirements for office are derived from 1 Tim. 5:9ff.
3. There is no age requirement for the deacon.	3. The deaconess must be at least 60 years of age (this requirement was

⁴¹ Ibid., 7:410.

⁴² *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 14:279.

	lowered to 40 at Chalcedon, A.D. 451).
4. The deacon is permitted to marry.	4. The deaconess must be a godly widow. She must take a perpetual vow of celibacy.
5. The deacon has authority over the deaconess.	5. The deaconess must submit to the deacon.
6. The deacon was ordained from the beginning (Ac. 6:1-6) and continues to be ordained to this day.	6. Deaconesses began to be ordained only locally in the third century. Ordination of women deacons was widespread in the eastern church by A.D. 381 but was eventually discontinued.
7. The deacon ministers to the whole church in worship. He reads, prays, assists with Eucharist and, in some geographical areas even preaches. The deacon handles church finances, oversees charity to the poor, gives personal counsel, and has judicial responsibilities.	7. The deaconess works under the authority of the bishop and the deacon and handles charity, aid and assistance to women only. The deaconess baptizes women (immersion while in the nude), and she instructs new Christian women in the faith.
8. Deacons had authority in the early church. They were considered part of the sacerdotal clergy class. By the fifth century arch-deacons were more powerful than presbyters.	8. Deaconesses were never part of the sacerdotal clergy class. But they did have some authority over women.

While there is no question that the male diaconate in the early church over time was given more responsibility and authority than Scripture warrants, it is still very clear that the female diaconate arose out of the order of widows (1 Tim. 5:9ff.) and is a completely separate and lesser office than the male diaconate. To argue otherwise is to ignore the clear testimony of history.

Concluding Remarks on the Early Church

The study of deaconesses in the patristic age is liable to different interpretations. Some writers (who favor deaconesses in the same office as male deacons) base their argument on the word deaconess without a careful analysis of its meaning or intent. These writers argue that the early church had deaconesses, and so should we. But they are arguing by equivocation. What modern women-deacon advocates are advocating is not women deacons who serve in a separate office from men deacons, who have different qualifications that are based on 1 Timothy 5:9ff. They are advocating something totally foreign to the early church. They believe women deacons would have the same qualifications and serve in the same office as male deacons. They are

comparing apples to oranges. They do not bother to carefully examine the character, qualifications and duties of the office of deaconess in the ante-Nicene age but simply rest their case on the name deaconess. They presuppose that their modern conception of a deaconess is the same as the church fathers and councils, despite evidence to the contrary.

The scholars (that favor women deacons in the same office as male deacons) who actually go into some detail regarding the testimony of the ante-Nicene age are forced by their presuppositions into an awkward and unlikely reading of the relevant data. Warfield follows the interpretation given by Moller:

Female deacons (deaconesses) certainly spread freely abroad, but the official institution of Deaconesses, which is referred to as early as Pliny's letter to Trajan, apparently wholly disappears in the second century until the third,⁴³ while the institution of Widows (*khrai*), who, supported by the congregation, occupy a position of honor and perform their service, is witnessed to everywhere. They bind themselves to live henceforth unmarried, receive a seat of honor, and (at least by Tertullian) are reckoned among the clergy and assist in the instruction of female catechumens. They doubtless also assisted in the labors of the diaconate. Lucian testifies to the visits paid to imprisoned confessors by widows and orphan children in their service. Their chief function seems the guidance and instruction of the female part of the congregation, though it is to be noted that public official teaching in the assembled congregation was excluded from this.

It is only toward the end of the period that an *ordo* of deaconesses appears in the Greek Church. The widows, as a body supported by the congregation, who should give themselves to prayer, recede from that official position, which is transferred to the deaconesses.⁴⁴

Dr. Warfield, Dr. Charteris and others who argue that Phoebe (Rom. 16:1-2) and the women mentioned in Pliny's letter are deaconesses in the same office with male deacons must explain the fact that deaconesses are not mentioned in any of the early church literature until around A.D. 350. They must argue that the deaconesses which were established by the apostles, and therefore should be found in almost all the churches, somehow vanished from all the churches within a very short time. These scholars do admit that widows as an order are found from the beginning and are universal to both east and west. Eventually in the eastern churches one finds deaconesses, widows and overseer-widows (*prokathymenai*). Most scholars argue that deaconesses received no acceptance in the western church. The interpretation of early church history given by Warfield and others regarding deaconesses is very unlikely. If deaconesses were accepted by the apostles and were part of normal church life during the first century, how did they vanish? Why were they never accepted in the western church? Would they not at least have survived somewhere in the empire? Why is it that every time we do encounter deaconesses, their

⁴³ Pliny's Letter to Trajan is dated A.D. 115. Moller apparently accepts the earlier date of A.D. 270 for the *Apostolorum Didascalia*. There is not one mention of deaconesses from A.D. 115 to A.D. 270 in any church literature in any part of the empire.

⁴⁴ B. B. Warfield, "Presbyterian-Deaconesses" (*Presbyterian Review*, May 26, 1890, p. 285); Warfield quotes Moller.

qualifications are those of Paul's order of widows given in 1 Timothy 5:9ff.? If women served in the same office as male deacons would they not have the same qualifications? Presbyterian scholar A. H. Charteris (a leading advocate of ordaining women as deacons in the nineteenth century) is dismayed and annoyed that the qualifications for the servant widows in 1 Timothy 5:9ff. were forced by emperors and the church upon deaconesses. "Emperors and Councils tried to prevent evils by fixing the age for ordination. We see their perplexity when we find the age fixed at 60, 50, and 40; and legislators quoting St. Paul on widows as though he were regulating the age of deaconesses!"⁴⁵

The advocates of ordaining women and placing them in the same office as male deacons in the nineteenth century (e.g., B. B. Warfield, A. H. Charteris, and T. P. Stevenson) as well as modern advocates (e.g., the OPC Minority Report) are so convinced that women should be in the same office as male deacons that their presuppositions blind them to the most natural interpretation of the rise of deaconesses in the early church.

The most plausible explanation of the appearance of the office of deaconess in the early church is that the office developed out of the biblical order of widows. This view explains why in *every* instance where deaconesses are discussed in the Ante-Nicene Fathers and councils, they always have the exact same qualifications as Paul's servant-widows (1 Tim. 5:9ff.). Given the testimony of church history, it is probable that as time went on, the order of widows became specialized into different functions (for those who find this scenario hard to accept, keep in mind that during this same period of time the male diaconate developed into deacons, sub-deacons and arch-deacons). Some widows were given tasks similar to the men deacons but *only* toward women. These widows were eventually designated deaconesses. Other widows were given the task of teaching and counseling younger women. These were eventually designated as elder-widows or *prokathymenai*. Other servant widows, who were probably of a more delicate physical condition, were given the task primarily of prayer, of intercession for the saints. These prayer warriors were still referred to as widows. (And to make matters even more confusing there were women called widows who did not serve at all but only received charity.) Different specialized functions over a great period of time do appear as separate offices. But given the identical qualifications from 1 Timothy 5:9ff., and the universality of servant widows from the beginning in both the eastern and western churches, and given the fact that the qualifications are given in Scripture to only one office, the interpretation that deaconesses and elder widows evolved from the order of widows makes good sense. It at least avoids the *very unlikely* contention that a scriptural office, deaconess, which was universal to all the New Testament churches, somehow vanished overnight and was not properly restored until the nineteenth century.

John Calvin (1559)

John Calvin's view of deaconesses is almost identical to the view held in the early church. Like the early church, Calvin taught that deaconesses were founded not upon Acts 6:1-6 but on 1

⁴⁵ A. H. Charteris, "Women's Work in the Church" (*Presbyterian Review*, April 1888), p. 289.

Timothy 5:9-10. Calvin believed in two separate functions for deacons and deaconesses. The male deacons administered church finances and the affairs of the poor. This no doubt included oversight of the deaconesses. The deaconesses were not involved in the administration of the church's financial affairs but were involved "in caring for the poor themselves."

The care of the poor was entrusted to the deacons. However, *two kinds* are mentioned in the letter to the Romans: "He that gives, let him do it with simplicity; ...he that shows mercy, with cheerfulness" [Rom. 12:8, cf. Vg.]. Since it is certain that Paul is speaking of the public office of the church, there must have been *two distinct grades*. Unless my judgment deceive me, in the first class he designates the deacons who distribute the alms. But the second refers to those who had devoted themselves to the care of the poor and sick. Of this sort were the *widows* whom Paul mentions to Timothy [1 Tim. 5:9-10]. Women could fill no other public office than to devote themselves to the care of the poor. If we accept this (as it must be accepted), there will be *two kinds* of deacons: one to serve the church in administering the affairs of the poor; the other, in caring for the poor themselves.⁴⁶

For Calvin, the authoritative aspects of being a deacon (i.e., taking care of the financial affairs of the church, and the counseling-judicial aspect) are reserved for the men deacons alone. The women deacons function somewhat like nurses.⁴⁷ The food, water, clothing, and medicine, etc., set aside by the deacons are delivered and administered by the deaconesses. This does not mean that deacons were not involved in similar activities. It only means that deaconesses were limited to separate non-authoritative activities. The only difference between Calvin and the church fathers is that there is no indication by Calvin that the deaconess's ministry was limited to women. And women clearly were not permitted to baptize other women. (Since immersion while in the nude was no longer practiced but was replaced by sprinkling while remaining fully clothed, one could see why deaconesses were no longer needed to baptize.) Once again it is necessary to point out that those who are arguing for women deacons at the present time are arguing for something completely different in character and function than was permitted in the early church and by Calvin. The early church and Calvin had an order or office of widows who happened to be called deaconesses. They were not the same as deacons, as modern advocates of deaconesses assert. The qualifications and functions of the deaconess were the same as the widow of 1 Timothy 5:9-10. "I say it was unlawful to receive women into the vow of continence *before the age of sixty*, inasmuch as the apostle admits only women of sixty years [1 Tim. 5:9] but bids the younger women marry and bear children [1 Tim. 5:14]."⁴⁸

Paul says that the widows who married after having been once received into public ministry violated their first pledge [1 Tim. 5:11-12]. I by no means deny to them that the widows who

⁴⁶ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* 4:3:9, ed. by John T. McNeill, trans. by Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 2:1061.

⁴⁷ "Two classes of deacons were employed in the church of Geneva: one for distribution of charities, and the other for service to the sick" 2:1062, ftn.

⁴⁸ Calvin, *Institutes* 4:13:19, 2:1274.

pledge themselves and their services to the church took upon themselves the state of *perpetual celibacy*. But they did so, not because they regarded it as something religious of itself (as afterward began to be the case) but because they could not carry on their function without being their own masters and free of the marriage yoke.... Those widows who were at that time received into public ministry took upon themselves the condition of perpetual celibacy.... But first, I deny that they professed celibacy for any reason except that marriage did not agree with the work which they undertook; and I deny that they bound themselves at all to celibacy except in so far as the necessity of their calling demanded.⁴⁹

In the next section Calvin makes it very clear that he is talking about deaconesses. For Calvin, widows and deaconesses are one and the same. Did Calvin believe in an order or possibly an office of deaconess in the church? Yes, absolutely. Were they considered by Calvin to be in the same office with the same function as the male deacons? No, not at all! While Calvin may have considered the deaconess a subset of an auxiliary office to the deacon, he makes it very clear that deaconesses are fashioned upon Paul's order of widows in 1 Timothy 5:9-10, and not upon Acts 6:1-6.

Developments before the Nineteenth Century

The pattern of the deaconess (servant—i.e., widows) which existed in the early church and in Calvin's Geneva was imitated by the French Reformed churches for about twenty-five years. It was discontinued because of various abuses.

When the Prince of Sedan, for example, turned Reformed in 1559, he established the 'Sisters of Mercy' with formerly monastic revenues. Similarly in La Rochelle there was a deaconesses' house. Women in these Protestant Orders lived communally by an agreed upon order or rule. They were not bound by lifelong vows, but for however long they were part of the movement they devoted themselves to the care of the sick, the aged, and the poor. Aspects of the French and Walloon diaconate influenced the Dutch Reformed tradition (Report 32, p. 506).

In 1556 the Reformed leaders in Amsterdam designated twelve deaconesses to run a home for aged women, an orphanage, and to do a form of house visitation two by two and to report anything needing their attention to the Amsterdam deacons. *These were elderly women of proven Christian virtue*. As in France, however, the deaconesses of Amsterdam seem to have been an institution which was not part of, yet which was in some sense under the direction of, the consistory (Report 32, p. 508).

The Convent of Wesel, 1568, chaired by Datheen, marks the generally accepted point of departure for the shaping of the Dutch church order. Formulations from earlier Walloon assemblies gave way for various reasons to those of Wesel and subsequent gatherings. Wesel's nineteen statements on deacons included such positions as defining the office as a ministry of mercy, *recognizing Calvin's two types of deacon*, and allowing local latitude on many issues related to implementing the office. Because of its significance for today's discussion of women

⁴⁹ Ibid. 4:13:18, 2:1272-1273.

in office, Wesel's provision for women deacons is noteworthy. It allowed that where appropriate, older women of proven and honorable behavior could, following apostolic example, be appointed as deacons.

In the church of Wesel four women were elected by the presbyters and ordained for the period of one year. Problems arose when married women (not only widows), and some of them even younger than sixty years of age, also were elected, this being contrary to what Paul wrote in 1 Timothy 5:9. When the matter was brought to the Synod of Middleburg in 1581, it was decided not to introduce women into the office of deacon 'for the sake of several inconveniences,' except in times of danger, e.g., plagues (Report 39, p. 580).⁵⁰

Note that when women were appointed as deaconesses who did not meet Paul's requirements in 1 Timothy 5:9ff., it led to problems serious enough that the whole office of deaconess was rejected. If these churches had not introduced innovations by ignoring Paul's explicit instructions for deaconesses in 1 Timothy 5:9ff., then perhaps the office would not have been discontinued. It is most unfortunate that the order of widows was not continued by the Reformed church because of unbiblical abuses. Godly widows have been denied the God-sanctioned opportunity to serve in this official capacity. The Reformed churches of the Netherlands and some very important Scottish Presbyterian divines favored the idea of having deaconesses fashioned according to the office of widow, but unfortunately the idea was never adopted.⁵¹

The consistent pattern of deaconesses who have a different office and function than male deacons was also followed by the English Baptist John Smyth. "In the seventeenth century, the Baptist John Smyth classified deaconesses and widows in the same office and admitted only women over 60. These were ordained and took a vow of celibacy. Their duties were visiting the sick and poor."⁵²

The Westminster Assembly

The Westminster Assembly of divines (arguably the greatest gathering of Reformed pastors, elders, and theologians the world has ever seen) debated the office of deacon between December 15 and 28, 1643. Out of the numerous and somewhat diverse pastors and theologians present, *not one* argued that women should be ordained into the diaconate. But many eminent divines (including Rutherford, Gillespie, and Goodwin) argued that the widows of 1 Timothy 5:9ff. were church officers. The issue of widow-servant officers was debated from December 29,

⁵⁰ CRC Report 32, p. 506; Report 32, p. 508; Report 39, p. 580; cited in OPC Majority Report, pp. 929-930.

⁵¹ J. L. Shaver (*The Polity of the Church* [Chicago: Church Polity Press, 1947], 1:144) comments on the reception of the office of deaconess in the Netherlands: "In the time of the Reformation the Reformed churches of the Netherlands for a short time favored the institution of the office of deaconess, but already in 1581 they decided not to introduce it. On the whole, Reformed churches in the Netherlands favor the employment of women *in support* of the deacon's office when this is needed, but they are opposed to placing women in official service" (quoted in OPC Majority Report, p. 930).

⁵² Report 32, p. 504, quoted in OPC Majority Report, p. 930.

1643 to January 1, 1644. Here are some examples of the arguments given by those in favor of official servant-widows.

Mr. Gibbon: Widows are church-officers, 1. Because in 1 Tim. 3 there is mention of church-officers, and widows come in among [3:11]. 2. These things agree not to an eleemosynary widow, 1 Tim. 5:9,10. 3. She must have a salary from the church: *ergo*, an officer. 4. Me' *katalegestho*. This catalogue was of the officer.⁵³

Gibbon goes on to argue that widows should be "comprehended under the deacon's title." Gibbon argues that widow-servants should be used to help sick and pregnant women:

Mr. Bridges proved by her being chosen at sixty, and not before, that she was an officer....

Mr. Sympson would prove her an officer by these reasons: 1. Here are her qualifications: 1. Some gradually different from other saints: one hopes in God, *id est*, like to her that is unmarried.... 2. Some qualifications common with bishops and deacons.... 3. She an officer, because reckoned up among officers.... 4. There is her election, *katalegestho*; a special register.... 7. Phoebe was *Diakonos*. Then did he cite divers authors, that hold the widow an officer, as Cajetan, Estius &c., and Protestants, Calvin, Beza, Cameron, &c....

Mr. Gillespie: There were some widows that were eleemosynary, and not church-officers; and there [were] those that were both.

Mr. Goodwin urged this phrase of forsaking her first faith, to infer that she had an office: for that it was not unlawful simply to marry. The office of this widow, was not only to attend the sick, but to attend on God in devotion in some singular way....⁵⁴

Then fell we upon Rom. 16:1, 2. Dr. Temple: Two things do here require proof: 1. That Phoebe was a widow. 2. That she was a deacon, "*proprio sensu*" but nobody undertook it, and so it was speedily desired to be waived. But Mr. Sympson answered, That she was a widow, is the common consent of interpreters; and it appears, by that her husband is not named. 2. She is said to be a deaconess of the church of Cenchrea.

Mr. Bridges.... If Phoebe was the same widow that is mentioned, 1 Tim. 5, then this proof is pregnant; but she is so. The widow in Tim. is a church-officer. 1. Because the apostle spends so much time in describing, and requires such prerequisites in her. 2. Divers things in her hold some proportion with other officers. As the bishop and deacon must be husband of one wife, and so she the wife of one husband. 3. Younger widows, if they wax wanton, will marry: but it is no wantonness to marry: *ergo*, it is because they that are devoted may not marry.

⁵³ John Lightfoot, *Journal of the Proceedings of the Assembly of Divines* (London, 1824), p. 94.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 94-95.

Now that Phoebe was such a one. 1. She is *Diakonos tys ecclysias*.... And withal he...concluded with the testimony of Origen, Theodoret, Calvin, Osiander, Gualter, Bucan, holding Phoebe to be a church officer....⁵⁵

After a very long debate, the business was put to the question, and voted negatively, viz.: that this place, Rom. 16:1, 2, shall not be brought to prove the proposition; and so we adjourned.⁵⁶

Lightfoot ends the discussion of servant-widows at this point. (Samuel Rutherford's viewpoint regarding servant-widows is taken up under the section in this book dealing with 1 Timothy 5:9ff.) In order to avoid confusion a few things need to be discussed. First, although Phoebe is referred to as a deaconess, it must be borne in mind that the divines did *not* regard deaconesses as holding the same office as male deacons. A deaconess refers to the servant-widow class referred to in 1 Timothy 5:9ff. Thus the comments of the assembly regarding Phoebe should not be misconstrued by those in favor of placing women in the same office as male deacons. The only reason this point is raised is that those who argue in favor of women deacons (in the same office as male deacons) have consistently misrepresented the testimony of the early church, the Puritans, and Calvin.

A second point that needs to be addressed is the issue of ordination. When the divines refer to servant-widows as officers of the church, does this entail ordination? Not necessarily. Calvin and Rutherford both advocated a servant-widow "office." But both were against the ordination of women. Rutherford says so explicitly in his comments on 1 Timothy 5:9ff.⁵⁷ Calvin actually had servant-widows functioning in Geneva. Yet, unlike men deacons, the servant-widows (i.e., deaconesses) were not ordained. (The issue of ordination will be discussed in detail later.)

Alexander T. McGill (1889)

Alexander T. McGill, the distinguished professor of ecclesiastical history, homiletics and pastoral theology at Princeton Seminary from 1854 to 1889, wrote a book on church government where he devotes a whole section to the deaconess. McGill favors having deaconesses in the church. He regards Phoebe of Romans 16:1 as the first named deaconess in the church. McGill quotes with approval a list of commentators who regard Phoebe as an official deaconess: "From John Calvin to Charles Hodge, inclusively, we have a singular succession of learned and illustrious men affirming the official meaning of "deaconess" in its application to Phoebe. Some

⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 97.

⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 98.

⁵⁷ Samuel Rutherford, *The Due Right of Presbyteries, or a Peaceable Plea for the Government of the Church of Scotland* (London, 1644), p. 174.

of these are Beza, Van Mästrict, MacKnight, Bingham, Suicer, Schleusner, Parkhurst, Kitto, Brown, and last—not least, by any means—Thomas Chalmers of Scotland....”⁵⁸

McGill also regards 1 Timothy 3:11 as a reference not to wives but to deaconesses: "It is only female deacons as a distinct variety in the office, enumerated here for the purpose of showing their distinctly similar and proper characteristics."⁵⁹ While McGill believes in and exalts the office of deaconess, he (as the early church and John Calvin) looks to 1 Timothy 5:9ff. as the foundation of the office:

Everything in such language of the apostle is explicable only on the hypothesis of an instituted order being the main drift of these verses, into which the younger widow could not be admitted then lest another marriage would interrupt her usefulness in office and bring condemnation on herself and the order also for mutability in vows and dereliction of engagement on which the giving of charity had relied.

Thus we have an official name, official qualifications and official devotement fairly given by Holy Scripture for the office of deaconess in the Church wherever and whenever God gives the gift on which it is founded. It is for us to interpret the gift when it comes, and the rule of this interpretation is furnished by God's own word.⁶⁰

McGill (unlike the early church and Calvin) thinks that the age requirement was not meant to be taken literally because "...such a widow...could not be found—one among a thousand—in any generation; and even if she could be, she would be too old to last long in the work of distribution."⁶¹ McGill's statement is puzzling because the historical evidence suggests that the age requirement was kept in the early church for over four hundred years.⁶²

McGill deals extensively with the decline of the women diaconate within the church which he attributes to spiritual decline, unbiblical innovations and syncretism with paganism:

The first cause of decay and discontinuance, therefore, in the female diaconate, was the abatement of her own qualifications by reason of spiritual decline....

The invasion of monachism and virginity was another evil which largely accounts for the decline of church "business" in the hands of women. When we consider the model of a deaconess, furnished at first by the Spirit of inspiration (1 Tim. v. 10), and observe that she was a widow who had brought up children, etc., we can see how baleful and subversive to her office must have been the fanatical rage of anchoretic life, in which marriage was avoided and despised as a lower sanctity, if sanctity at all of any degree. The widow might be still a beneficiary, as the vilest wretch might be, but the notion of an office in the Church for any one that ever had been a wife must be exploded. The succession of widows with such contaminating antecedents, or of maidens who vowed never to be married, and of course never to gain the

⁵⁸ Alexander T. McGill, *Church Government, A Treatise Compiled from His Lectures in Theological Seminaries* (Presbyterian Board of Publication and Sabbath School Work), pp. 380-381.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 382.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 388.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 385.

⁶² It was changed at Chalcedon (A.D. 451) and by Emperor Justinian to 40 years of age.

experience which the office required at the first institution, would be a departure from the original far enough to make it soon an obsolete office entirely.

Another cause of abolition was the exaltation of male deacons to a position which female deacons could never attain—that of preachers.⁶³

McGill notes that the exaltation of virginity among young women who would serve the church as virgins (and later as nuns) removed an essential aspect of what made deaconesses so important particularly in their service to other women and mothers. The godly wisdom, progressive sanctification, and superior knowledge gained from raising up a godly family from start to finish is something young virgins do not have. And it is precisely this superior wisdom and knowledge that makes the deaconess (i.e., widow) so vital to church life. The unique delicacies of mothering—the sublime mothering instinct and the nurturing-nursing aspect of motherhood, coupled with the unique feminine homemaker skills that are acquired over a lifetime, place the women deacon (i.e., widow) in a special class all her own. No pastor, elder or deacon can adequately replace the deaconess, let alone an inexperienced virgin.

McGill contends that the exaltation of the deacon into a preacher also contributed to the demise of deaconesses. While the author agrees with McGill that the great expansion of the male diaconal role after the third century helped the decline of the female diaconate, he does so for different reasons. It was not because male deacons became something women deacons could not become; the record of the early church and 1 Timothy 5:9ff. indicates that women deacons were never to become like male deacons in the first place. But what occurred with the exaltation of the male diaconate was the elimination of the close supervision and guidance that male deacons had over the deaconesses. When various problems and abuses arose because the biblical pattern was discarded, the church's response was to eliminate the office of deaconess rather than return to the biblical pattern of church government. This also occurred among the French Reformed churches when married younger women were admitted to office as noted above. The reason that modern churches which neglect the biblical pattern of 1 Timothy 5:9ff. do not have similar problems is because modern deaconesses do little other than collecting offerings, making deposits and writing checks, etc. The down-and-dirty diaconal work of old has been obtruded upon by the secular humanistic state.⁶⁴ “Idleness of the deacons, either male or female, at such a time as this, when we are confronted in the world with the gravest problems of modern civilization—the management of work and money for the good of men and the glory of God—will put to hazard the triumphs of the gospel itself.”⁶⁵

⁶³ McGill, pp. 390-391, emphasis added.

⁶⁴ In the 20th century the highly personal diaconal work of old has been replaced by a highly bureaucratic impersonal work of the modern state (no offense intended to many dedicated deacons who are presently serving the church; it is just that our goal should be to expand the diaconal role to its former role, and thus to slow the advance of the welfare state).

⁶⁵ McGill, *op. cit.*, p. 393.

Thomas Withrow (1889)

Thomas Withrow (professor of church history in Magee College, Londonderry) wrote a book on church government which was published in 1889. Withrow's book makes a clear departure from the views held with regard to deaconesses by the early church, Calvin, Rutherford, the French Reformed churches, John Smyth, McGill, Shedd and others. Withrow rejects the view that deaconesses are a separate or lesser office that is based on 1 Timothy 5:9ff. rather than Acts 6:1-6:

Some doubt has been entertained whether the widow of 1 Tim. 5:9, 10 was a deaconess, or only a person to be entered on the list as eligible for the charity of the Church. Calvin thinks that these widows were deaconesses, and that there were two degrees in the order. The same view was taken by some in the post-apostolic Church, and led to their exacting from deaconesses some peculiar qualifications. But the opinion is open to question. From the deaconess an amount of active service would be expected to which a woman of sixty would be scarcely equal. Paul does not assign to the widows any active duty, but speaks of those only drawing support from the Church. On the contrary, the glimpse of their condition given by the apostle conveys to us the idea that they were merely pious women, who, in their day were hospitable and useful; but who, having been left desolate, were comforted by the Church's charity in the evening of their days. There does not seem to be anything in the passage of Scripture cited obliging us to believe that these women held any Church office whatever.⁶⁶

While it is true that 1 Timothy 5:9ff. does not necessarily justify the ordination of widows, if taken in context it does refer to a definite order. The idea that a 59 year old woman (i.e., under 60) or a 65 year old who never married could not receive church funds is absurd. Withrow's interpretation of 1 Timothy 5:9ff. is clearly off the mark (for a closer look at this passage see the section on 1 Tim. 5:9ff.). He, like McGill, has a problem with the age being too old for service. But that is a pragmatic rather than an exegetical consideration. The church was served quite well for over 400 years while it held to the 60-year-old limit. This fact destroys the pragmatic objection because of the age requirement.

Withrow seems to believe that Phoebe was a deacon in the same office as a male deacon:

The case of Phoebe, "a servant of the Church (*diakonon th ekkhhsia*) that is at Cenchreae," proves not only that females were eligible to the diaconate, but that one at least filled that office with the approval of Paul. It does not, however, require us to believe that a female diaconate was universal, or even general in the Churches, and still less that the deaconess filled a distinct and separate office of her own. Women, we may infer, were appointed only in cases where female ministrations were wanted, and where some of the sex developed the necessary qualifications. In the discharge of duties to the sick and poor, cases no doubt often occurred

⁶⁶ Thomas Withrow, *The Form of the Christian Temple, Being a Treatise on the Constitution of the New Testament Church* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1889), p. 87.

where females could minister most tenderly to their own sex, and where men might be practically useless.⁶⁷

With regard to Phoebe (likely a wealthy widow patterned after 1 Tim. 5:9ff.), see the section on Romans 16:1. That Phoebe was a deacon in the same office and with the same function as a male deacon cannot be ascertained from the text. Withrow's "proof" is only conjecture. The best policy for interpreters is not to differ from nineteen hundred years of church interpretation and practice unless it can be demonstrated that the passage in question has clearly been misunderstood. As has been seen, the almost unanimous consent of the early church and the Reformers who discussed the issue was that Phoebe was a "servant" from the order of widows.

If Phoebe was a deacon in the same office with the same responsibilities as a male deacon, then Withrow's hedging comments are inappropriate. If God teaches that women have the right to the same diaconal office as male deacons, then the churches do not have the option of calling women to this office "only in cases where the female ministration was wanted." The basis of choice according to Withrow's own definition of the diaconate should be based solely on qualifications and not gender preference.

When Withrow considers the passages which discuss the institution of the diaconate and the qualifications of this office he contradicts his assertions regarding female deacons:

There is no sufficient reason, therefore, for departing from the common belief, that the sixth chapter of Acts records the institution of an order, and that "the seven" were the first deacons.... At the time when the institution was founded, Peter stated that the persons selected *must* be "*men* of good report, full of the Spirit and wisdom...." Let us note the minuteness with which Paul describes the qualifications it requires (1 Tim. 3:8-13).... That he requires to *rule his* own family, shows that the office carried in it some authority, and must be filled by persons of firmness and decision....⁶⁸

When Withrow discusses the clear passages regarding the diaconate, he properly reports that the first seven deacons selected were all men. The first deacons chosen were men because that was the command of the apostles. It was not an arbitrary decision on the apostles' part or merely a coincidence. When Withrow discusses the qualification for deacons he speaks of a male head of household who rules his family well. Unless Withrow attempts to circumvent the regulative principle, as others have, or unless he flatly rejects it, as Papists, Episcopalians and Lutherans do, then he cannot have ordained women deacons who are in the same office with the same function as male deacons. (1 Tim. 3:11, as noted below, is either referring to the wives of deacons or more probably refers to the servant-widows [1 Tim. 5:9ff.] who assist the deacons.)

⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 86.

⁶⁸ Ibid., pp. 84-85.

B. B. Warfield

Among American Presbyterians in the nineteenth century B. B. Warfield was one of the strongest advocates of placing women in the ordained diaconate. The fact that Warfield was an excellent scholar and theologian and orthodox in his view of inspiration should focus our attention on his arguments. If there was an orthodox Presbyterian scholar who could make a well-reasoned case for placing women in the diaconate, it would be the distinguished professor from Princeton.

In a lengthy article written for the *Presbyterian Review* (1890) Dr. Warfield sets forth his case for women deacons. The article was important to Warfield because he was on "the Special Committee on Deaconesses" which recommended "the revival of deaconesses" to the General Assembly in 1889. Warfield, unlike other advocates of women deacons, admits up front that the scriptural evidence for women deacons is very small: "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*. We cannot bring ourselves to believe that the Apostle means to speak of deaconesses, in the midst of the requisites for the deacon, in 1 Tim. 3:11, since this would require us to assume in that passage a double sudden transition from one subject to another, of the harshest and most incredible kind."⁶⁹ Dr. Warfield rejects the pro-deaconess interpretation of 1 Timothy 3:11 and in the same article rejects the servant-widow interpretation of 1 Timothy 5:9.⁷⁰ For Dr. Warfield the whole argument must be based on Romans 16:1. Dr. Warfield says, "When we seek Biblical warrant, we have only the isolated phrase, 'Phebe the deaconess.'"⁷¹

After asserting that the whole case for women deacons rests upon the phrase "Phebe the deaconess" Warfield admits that there is no way to know from Scripture whether or not Paul meant *diakonos* in the general sense of servant or in the technical sense of a church officer (i.e., an ordained deacon):

This [Rom. 16:1] is no doubt a narrow, not to say a precarious foundation on which to build much of an ecclesiastical structure. The term here employed (*diakono*) is of very broad connotation; and Phebe might conceivably have been only an humble "servant" of the Cenchranean church, or indeed, for all that the term itself declares, only a Christian belonging to that church (cf. John xii. 26). Nor is there any compelling reason apparent in the context, shutting us up to the technical sense of "deaconess."⁷²

Since Dr. Warfield admits that no one can determine from the context exactly what Paul had in mind, he does what most women-deacon advocates do: he looks to the history of the early church. "Nevertheless this [the technical designation] seems the more likely meaning of the phrase; and this interpretation receives confirmation from a clear indication, coming to us from

⁶⁹ B. B. Warfield, "Presbyterian Deaconesses" (*Presbyterian Review*, 1890), p. 283, emphasis added.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 283-284, 286-287.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 286.

⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 283-284.

the earliest post-apostolic times, that 'deaconesses' were then already an established order in the church."⁷³

Dr. Warfield does not give one scriptural reason why he prefers the technical designation. Given his knowledge of Latin, his choice of Pliny's letter to Trajan (A.D. 112) as proof is truly puzzling. He argues, "...it is clear that *ministrae* (doubtless, as Dr. Lightfoot points out, Pliny's own translation of *diakonoï*) was already a *terminus technicus*, designating a well known office. But this is pretty nearly the only very early reference we have to that office."⁷⁴ Warfield rests his whole case on one word (*ministrae*) taken from an extra-scriptural account. Yet the Latin word *ministra* (plural: *ministræ*) has virtually the identical range of meaning in Latin as does *diakonos* in Greek.⁷⁵ In other words, Pliny's letter to Trajan is just as ambiguous as Romans 16:1. As will be noted in the section dealing with Romans 16:1, the Latin *ministra* has such a broad range of meaning that Jerome invented a Latin word (*diakonus*) to avoid the confusion in his translation of the Greek into the Latin Vulgate. Jerome deliberately left Romans 16:1 ambiguous by translating *diakonon* as *ministra*.

Dr. Warfield (like the modern women-deacon advocates) is locked into the view that the reference to a female servant in Romans 16:1 and to female servants in Pliny's letter must refer to a female diaconate identical to the male diaconate. In a stunning admission that his case was based only upon the slenderest of scriptural evidence he wrote:

When we seek Biblical warrant, we have only the isolated phrase, "Phebe, the deaconess"; when we ask after the testimony of the first age of the church, we have only Pliny's witness that the church in Bithynia had *ancillae* which they called *ministrae*; after that all is darkness until the deaconess emerge into light again as part of the already considerably corrupted ecclesiastical system of the third century. We have no Biblical account of the qualifications for the office or its duties, and no very early account of the functions it actually exercised. We are left only to the meagre inferences that as Phebe was "a deaconess of the church that is at Cencreae," the office was a local one and inhered in the individual congregation; that as Pliny tortured two *ancillae*, there may have been a plurality of deaconesses in each congregation; and that as the name was primitively the same and the functions exercised by them from the third century were parallel, 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. Theories aside this is all we know of primitive deaconesses.⁷⁶

If Dr. Warfield and the authors of the OPC Minority Report had a proper understanding of 1 Timothy 5:9ff. then perhaps they would not attempt to force Romans 16:1 (and 1 Tim. 3:11, for the authors of the OPC Minority Report) into an interpretation which contradicts Acts 6:3, 1 Timothy 3:12 and the testimony of church history. If 1 Timothy 5:9ff. refers to an ecclesiastical order, then the whole argument given by Dr. Warfield and others concerning Romans 16:1 and

⁷³ Ibid., p. 284, emphasis added.

⁷⁴ Ibid., p. 284.

⁷⁵ *Ministra* (fem.), a female attendant, maid-servant, assistant, servant, handmaid, accessory, etc.

⁷⁶ Warfield, *op. cit.*, p. 286, emphasis added.

the women of Pliny's letter falls to the ground. Why? Because Paul sets forth a female order with very specific qualifications that both explains Romans 16:1 and the testimony of church history. And because the servant widows that Paul describes were not ordained and only ministered to women, it fully harmonizes with both Acts 6:3, 1 Timothy 3:12 and church history. Our goal when interpreting Scripture should be to avoid contradictions; interpretations that harmonize should be preferred.

The Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America (Covenanter), 1888

The first Presbyterian denomination in the United States to ordain women as deacons was the RPCNA. This was the result of an R.P. church's decision to elect a woman, Miss McConnell, to the diaconate. The congregation, located in McKeesport, Pennsylvania, referred the matter to the Pittsburgh Presbytery which passed the matter on to the Synod of 1888. The decision of the McKeesport congregation is recorded in the R.P. magazine *Our Banner* by the Ladies Missionary Society of the North Cedar congregation. Note the postmillennial enthusiasm implied in their statement:

The McKeesport congregation recently at an election for elders and deacons, elected to the latter a lady, Miss McConnell. The question is referred to Synod for its decision. At the December meeting of the North Cedar L.M.S., the following resolution was adopted: We, as the Ladies' Missionary Society of North Cedar R.P. congregation, send congratulations to Miss McConnell on her election to the office of Deaconess by the McKeesport congregation, urging her conscientious acceptance and faithful performance of the duties of that office; while we hope that the Synod of the R.P. Church will lay no obstacles in her way, and pray that the glories of the millennial morning may be withheld from us all until our Church can glory in her Deborahs, Huldahs, Annas, and Phoebes as her Deacons.⁷⁷

These women are apparently saying that the beginning of the millennium should be postponed until the church allows women to be deacons. This statement reflects the "reforming" spirit of nineteenth century American evangelicalism.

The motion to ordain women as deacons was passed by a four-fifths vote. The R.P. seminary in Pittsburgh unanimously supported the motion. Some prominent R.P. seminary professors argued for women deacons at Synod and were instrumental in bringing about the almost unanimous vote. Dr. James Kennedy was on the committee on discipline which recommended to Synod that the motion be approved. "Your committee would reply that such ordination is in our judgment in harmony with the New Testament and with the constitution of the Apostolic church."⁷⁸ Some of the dissenters' names are listed in the Minutes of Synod for that year:

⁷⁷ "For Christ's Crown and Covenant," *Our Banner* XV:1 (Jan. 1888), p. 29.

⁷⁸ "Minutes of Synod Report," *Reformed Presbyterian and Covenanter*, July/August 1888, p. 287.

The motion under discussion at the hour for recess was taken up, and the item, as amended, was adopted. D. S. Faris asked leave to enter his dissent from the decision of Synod because the step was taken without due deliberation. D. C. Faris, Isaiah Faris, and J. C. K. Faris joined in this dissent. R. J. McCracken also offered his dissent from this action, as it is a departure from the law and order of the church and contrary to the word of God. J. F. Crozier, with elders Joseph Wallace, John E. Willson, and Robert McIsaac placed their names on record as dissenting from this decision.⁷⁹

In order to understand how the RPCNA made such a quick and radical departure from hundreds of years of past church practice we must consider the Synod's decision in its historical context. The movement among Presbyterians in American and in Scotland to ordain women as deacons reached its peak during the 1880s. The movement in the PCUSA, led by B. B. Warfield, to introduce women into the diaconate reached its peak from 1888 to 1890. The PCUSA, unlike the RPCNA, was very cautious regarding the matter, took its time deliberating, and the motion was not approved at that time. Why was the ordination of women as deacons so popular among a number of Presbyterians during the 1880s? Romans 16:1 and 1 Timothy 3:11 have been in the Bible since the first generation of Christians. Why the 1880s—not the 1580s, 1680s or 1780s? There is no reason to believe that the biblical exegesis done in the 1880s was superior to Calvin's, Knox's, Rutherford's, Gillespie's or Alexander Shield's.

The reason that many Presbyterians wanted to open the office of deacon to women had very little to do with the biblical evidence, which is lacking, and very much to do with the cultural climate at that time. There were a number of trends during the nineteenth century which placed women into the forefront of church activism: revivalism and its emphasis on human innovations for results (e.g., altar calls, women preachers), theological deterioration among congregationalists, the holiness or "second blessing" movement, the shift toward sentimentality and the feminization of Christianity, the fact that women composed most of the church members during the nineteenth century (in many areas women "constituted three-quarters of those joining some of the major churches"⁸⁰), the prominent role that women had in the social reform movements (especially among abolitionist and temperance groups), the de-emphasis on theology and the emphasizing of experience, and the rejection of the regulative principle in favor of pragmatism. Church historian Mark A. Noll says of this period:

In the early nineteenth century, women remained the majority of those who adhered most closely to the churches. And it was at this point that changing social conditions and new theological emphases began to offer them more opportunities for public ministry. A more fluid social setting on the seaboard as well in the thinly populated regions newly opened to settlement and the rhetoric of democracy from the Revolution both served to advance women in the public practice of religion. In many areas of the country it soon became conventional to look upon women as the prime support for the nation's republican spirit. Mothers, it was thought, were the

⁷⁹ Ibid., p. 286.

⁸⁰ Mark Noll, *History of Christianity in the United States and Canada* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), p. 181.

ones who could most effectively inculcate the virtues of public-spiritedness and self-sacrifice that were essential to the life of the republic. And such notions were increasingly linked to the idea that women had a special capacity for the religious life, as individuals who could understand intuitively the virtues of sacrifice, devotion, and trust that were so important to the Christian faith.⁸¹

Nineteenth century feminism was the direct result of women's involvement in the various reform movements coupled with the decline of biblical theology in America:

Intense female involvement especially in the areas of temperance (liberation from the bondage of drink) and abolition (liberation from the bondage of slavery) seemed almost naturally to spill over into growing concern for liberation from the social bondage of women themselves. The religious factor in that move was always prominent. The first formal call for fuller women's rights in society, including the right to vote, was issued from Seneca Falls, New York, in July 1848, when active abolitionists, men and women, white and black, issued an appeal for the public rights of women. Conveners of the meeting were Lucretia Coffin Mott (1793-1880) and Elizabeth Cady Stanton (1815-1902), both of whom had long been nurtured in centers of religious reform, Mott having served as an "acknowledged minister" in the Society of Friends and Stanton having taken a more conventional path through evangelical nurturing to social reform.⁸²

In 1853 the first formal ordination of a woman as a preacher occurred in America. Antoinette Brown was ordained to the ministry of a congregational church. In 1859 the first book to defend a woman's right to preach was published. The book, written by Phoebe Worrall Palmer (1807-1874), was entitled *The Promise of the Father*. Mrs. Palmer, like modern feminists, based her argument on Galatians 3:28 and Joel 2:28. Mrs. Palmer was a product of the holiness-second blessing "revivalism."⁸³ While many Presbyterians were not taken in by revivalism, many were involved in the reform movements. The various revivals in the nineteenth century and the "outward" success of many reform movements became equated in many Presbyterian minds with the dawn of postmillennial glory. Covenanter D. P. Willson equated the freeing of slaves and the larger role of women with the postmillennial hope:

In all this organizing, Christ Jesus is the Head, the Head of the body, the church, and in him there is neither bond nor free, there is nether male nor female, "we are all one in Jesus Christ." It took long years and much counsel to realize the first declaration.... The second declaration is realized as a fact today, but hardly fully as a doctrine; the last is coming.... And the working forces of God's people shall yet bring this rebellious and suffering world into the peace of God, under Christ our Lord.⁸⁴

⁸¹ Ibid., p. 181.

⁸² Ibid., pp. 184-185.

⁸³ Ibid., p. 183.

⁸⁴ D. B. Willson, *Reformed Presbyterian and Covenanter* XXVI:11 (Nov. 1888), pp. 394-407.

Since women were becoming more educated and were actively involved in the reform of society, and were even speaking effectively to large groups and holding positions of authority within reform societies, why withhold the office of deacon? While there is no question that pro-deacon Presbyterian church leaders attempted to prove *from Scripture* that women should be deacons, it was the "spirit of the age" which led them in the pro-women deacon direction to begin with. To get an idea how far the RPCNA was infected with "Christian feminism," listen to these comments by R.P. pastor Thomas Wylie:

We have had theorizing enough. Now let the exemplification go on. Christians love and treat their children alike in the family, public school, Sabbath school, and many of the privileges of the church. Why stop, when in Christ Jesus there is neither..."male nor female," &c.

As I have always striven to be in the vanguard in every moral and beneficial reform, I hope and pray for the time when nothing but physical or moral deficiencies will exclude women more than men from *any position in church* or state which they are found qualified to fill, and I hope that our church will "mount higher," until she at least awards to our brave missionary, Miss Wylie, of Latakiyeh, the position she richly deserves. I have seen some women in the pulpit, and *could not raise any valid objection* to any but one, and that one was one of the most noted women in the country, a leader in the temperance movement. But as she was an accomplished barrister, she acted and treated her subject in such a political and lawyer-style and spirit, that I thought such a one should not be allowed to speak in church, or usurp authority, but learn piety at home.

So we see that Paul is right yet, that while in *some* cases one rule will apply, in *others it should not be enforced*.⁸⁵

Wylie hopes for a time when women can hold "any position in the church." Of all the women he has seen in the pulpit he only objects to one. The apparent reason is that she presented herself too forcefully. She preaches like a man. He apparently thinks that Paul's injunction that "women are to remain silent in the church" applies only in "some cases" but not in others.

The contention that ordaining women to the diaconate was more a product of the spirit of the times rather than an outgrowth of careful exegetical considerations is supported by an eyewitness and participant at the R.P. Synod of 1888, the Rev. D. S. Faris. In an article entitled "The Female Deacon and the Sentimental Overflow of Synod" Faris documents that what occurred at the Synod of 1888 was a rush to judgment based on sentimentality and an "overflow of enthusiasm."

...I wish to state those facts which, to my mind, prove that Synod reached its conclusions, not by means of deliberate and sober examination of the whole subject in all its bearings, but by "sentimental overflow." This word "overflow" was used by Dr. Kennedy himself to designate

⁸⁵ Wylie, *Reformed Presbyterian and Covenanter* XXVII:6 (June 1889), p. 194, emphasis added. That Wylie could make such blatantly unbiblical statements in the denomination's magazine is clear evidence of a negative cultural influence.

Synod's method of dealing with the subject. The Synod was borne along by the wave of popular sentiment, and did not act like a deliberative and judicial body. The only scholarly and effective argument in the case was that of Dr. Stevenson. The argument consisted, first, of a construction of certain passages of the New Testament, and second, of an argument based on allusions to the matter in the early fathers. No one was prepared to answer the patristic argument, on the spur of the moment; yet as Dr. Kennedy admitted, this line of argument is worthless, unless a foundation can be found for it in the word of God. The Doctor went about establishing the Scriptural foundation, evidently not with the deliberation and research of a scholar and a theologian, but as one borne along by the tide of sentimentalism. His first statement was that the direct Scriptural proof was wanting; but there are important things that are and must be taken for granted. He said that there is no direct proof that women were baptized or admitted to the Lord's table. This has always been taken for granted, and women's rights to these privileges have never been questioned. So, he said, women have been found doing work belonging to the deacon's office, and therefore we ought to presume that they were ordained. The Doctor in the rush of the overwhelming tide forgot the account of the baptism of Lydia and her household, recorded in Act 16:15. He would not have made such a mistake, if he had been following the matter in a cool, deliberate desire to obtain the truth. He knew better as soon as he had time to think, but he made his argument under the influence of what he himself called an "overflow," and not as a person searching and expounding the word of God deliberately....

Prof. Willson gave us no argument, but intimated, that from a thorough examination of the matter as a theologian, he had views that corresponded to the sentiment of Synod. He was surprised at the unanimous report of the committee, and equally surprised at the mind of the large part of Synod. The Professor should have given us the benefit of his theological researches, but contented himself by saying that he had heard no argument on the other side. Thus he brushed away what had been brought from the word of God, which seemed to demand some answer; and under the influence of the overflow, the Synod was willing to take for granted that the Professor was right, without hearing his reasons or exercising their own private judgment in the case. A few of us were not ready to vote for a measure which, to Presbyterians generally, will seem to be an innovation, at least without time to make up our minds prayerfully and carefully.

Another evidence of the overflow of enthusiasm, was the form in which the committee presented the matter at first, substantially as follows: "That we find nothing in nature nor in the word of God, to prevent a woman from holding the deacon's office." The second member of the committee was Dr. Kennedy, a well-known scholar and theologian, and would have known better than to have agreed to such a report, if at all sober and in his right mind. But being carried away by the enthusiasm in the committee, he agreed to it, and after the prelatial form of it had been objected to by myself, tardily found objections to the negative form of the report of his own committee. The Synod then changed it into the positive form, substantially as follows: "That we find it is agreeable to nature and the word of God that a woman should be ordained to the office of deacon."

Another fact showing the undeliberative character of the proceeding, was the statement by some of the advocates of the measure, in reply to the ground taken by Dr. George, that no authority is conferred in ordination to the office of deacon, but there would be in ordination to that of elder or preacher, and that authority on the part of woman is usurpation, *that they were*

willing for woman to have her equal place with man in all offices, both in church and state. Thus no provision was made against the pressing of the matter further, in future, and the tide rushed onward overflowing the more cautious ground occupied by a few. Doubtless this flood-tide, if it be not checked, will carry women into all places of authority in church and state. Again, I would mention an argument of someone on the majority side, that it was necessary for us to take this step now, so as to continue to lead the churches in reform as heretofore. Reflection ought to convince such enthusiasts that leadership is not desirable unless in a Scriptural progress, and this ought to be first determined in a deliberate and constitutional manner.⁸⁶

Faris's comments reveal a number of troubling things regarding the debate at Synod to ordain women as deacons. Faris reveals that there were members of Synod that wanted to open *all* church offices to women. This indicates that the feminist rhetoric of the preceding thirty years was having an effect on some members of Synod. (We can reach no other conclusion, considering the overwhelming and very clear scriptural evidence against women being pastors or elders in the church.) Other members of Synod argued that women should be ordained as deacons so the R.P. Church could lead other churches in the cause of reform. This supports the view that the popularity of putting women into the ordained diaconate was not based on a new, clearer, more objective understanding of Scripture, but was a direct result of the nineteenth century reform movements, especially the new Christian feminism. The fact that the R.P. committee which recommended women deacons to Synod originally rejected the regulative principle in favor of a "prelatical" argument further indicates that the motivating factor for ordaining women as deacons was not in the first place Scripture but was the cultural environment. These men had good intentions and believed they were doing a good thing for society and the church but in reality they were just following the latest "evangelical"⁸⁷ fad.

Faris's warning that "this floodtide, if not checked, will carry women into all places of authority in church and state" has to a large extent already taken place. The sentiments of R.P. pastors such as Thomas Wylie who wanted to open *all* church offices to women apparently was held by a number of R.P. pastors. Even as late as 1938-39, there was a concerted effort to ordain women as ruling elders: "The Synod of 1938 appointed a Committee on Ordination of Women Elders, which reported to Synod the following year. The committee report recommended the ordination of women to the ruling eldership. Philip W. Martin and Johannes G. Vos responded with a paper entitled *Are Women Elders Scriptural?* etc."⁸⁸

J. G. Vos, who was an excellent scholar and highly respected within the denomination, was largely responsible for stopping the effort to ordain women to the eldership at that time. The present movement within the RPCNA to open all church offices to women is led by Faith Martin. This movement is a product of the feminism of the nineteen sixties and seventies.

⁸⁶ D. S. Faris, "The Female Deacon and the Sentimental Overflow of Synod," *Reformed Presbyterian and Covenanter* XXVI:10 (Oct. 1888), pp. 357-359, emphasis added.

⁸⁷ The term "evangelical" is used loosely here.

⁸⁸ Tony Cowley, "Women Deacons" (*Cornerstones*, March/April 1989).

Another interesting aspect of the Synod of 1888 from a constitutional point of view is "that the Synod...made an addition to the constitutional law of the church, without overture, and thus the rights of the sessions and the people have been invaded."⁸⁹ In order for a change to the constitution of the church to be made, a motion must be approved at Synod and then sent to the sessions for approval. If less than two thirds of the sessions approve of the change the constitution remains unchanged. The new constitution of the RPCNA, which was sent down in overture and approved in 1945, did state that: "Both men and women are eligible for the office of deacon." Thus, from 1888 to 1945, a period of 57 years, the ordination of women as deacons was a violation of the R.P. Church's own constitutional law.⁹⁰ Why did the Synod of 1888 refuse to send their approval of the ordination of women as deacons down to the sessions for approval? We know that it was not a mere matter of oversight on their part for the Rev. D. S. Faris brought the issue up twice in articles published in the denominational magazine. There is the possibility that the ordination of women as deacons, while popular among a majority of ministers at Synod (23 R.P. churches were not represented at the 1888 Synod), was not popular at the local session level. There is no way, however, at the present time to determine the cause of the 1888 Synod's usurpation of the sessions' and people's rights.

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⁸⁹ *Reformed Presbyterian and Covenanter* XXVI:10 (Oct. 1888), p. 357.

⁹⁰ "No change shall be made in the fundamental law of the church until the proposed change has been sent down in overture and has been approved by two-thirds of all the sessions of the church (not including provisional sessions) that cast votes and a majority of the elders voting. The Synod shall canvass the vote and declare the decision" (Constitution of the RPCNA, p. D38.)