DEACONESS TRAINING
SESSION 1

Pastor’s Note:
A Biblical study of the Deaconess cannot be removed from church history. As the church evolved in detail and structure, the role of the deaconess evolved as well. In fact, it evolved differently in the Eastern and Western churches, and through certain times of history, became a distant reflection of what it was first designed to be. In some parts of history, the office was diminished to near insignificance, and in modern times reinvented into something indistinguishable from the ministries of their male counterparts. To define “equal” as “indistinguishable” is a distortion of Scripture and reality in general. Men and women are obviously different, and the loving creative richness of God did not make them indistinguishable, but something far better; complimentary. It is in the spirit of balanced truth and common sense we begin this study in the great ministry of the Deaconess.

DEACONESS IN THE EARLY CHURCH

“Diakonos” (servant) is used of Phoebe, ...though giving the alternative ‘Deaconess’ in the margin. (Rom 16:1,2) In its simplest and most literal meaning diakonia had reference to the supply of bodily wants, and it is in this sense that the Apostles use it when they speak of “serving tables” (diakonein trapezais). But it frequently has a wider meaning and includes every kind of service, whether temporal or spiritual. ...And in the Gospels this word is used to describe the loving service rendered by women to the Master and His disciples.

It was only after the lapse of some considerable time, when the need arose of organizing and defining the different kinds of service which the Church required, that the word “diakonia” became restricted to a special form of ministry... whether men or women.

The Church from the beginning recognized the duty of caring for the temporal wants of her poorer members, and in Jerusalem these were provided for by a common daily meal. As the number of the Christians increased, the Apostles saw the need of appointing special officers to take charge of this department. ...The work was important; and the more so as the neglect of it was threatening the unity of the Church.

We cannot fail to observe at once the remarkable degree of activity shown by the first Christian women. The position they occupy, and the influence they exercise is without a precedent in the history of the world up to that time. Heathen religions had their priestesses and vestal virgins, but they afforded little scope for the work of women generally. Nor did the Jewish Church allow them a share in its ministry. Here and there a striking figure stands out, a Deborah or a Huldah, (2 Kings 22:14) raised by unique personality, in spite of her sex, to a position of great influence. But this was the exception. ...It was, therefore, one of the most notable features of the Christian religion that it assigned to women a high place in the life and work of the Church.

In other parts of Palestine also, women are at work. Dorcas, “full of good works and almsdeeds [habitual practice of giving charity to the poor], constitutes herself the patroness of the “widows” at Joppa. (Acts 9:36) ...When the Church was planted for the first time in Europe, the Gospel found in women its earliest adherents. ...Lydia, a “seller of purple”, a woman evidently of wealth and importance, was won for Christ with her household. (Acts 16:14)
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Writing to the Roman Christians Paul says, “I commend unto you Phoebe our sister, who is a servant (diakonos) of the Church that is at Cenchreae [a port of Corinth]: that ye receive her in the Lord, worthily of the saints, and that ye assist her in whatsoever matter she may have need of you: for she herself also hath been a succourer [assist in times of difficulty] of many, and of mine own self.” (Romans 16:1,2) This is the only instance in the New Testament in which the word “diakonos” is explicitly used of a woman, and it is valuable as proving that women as well as men had a recognized share in the ministry of the Church. Phoebe is as much a deacon as Stephen or Philip is a deacon.

QUESTIONS & DISCUSSION

- The cultures of the ancient world were extremely male-dominated. What message does that send us today, that women were given a revolutionary role of authority?

- The earliest “deaconesses” were often Greek women of some wealth. Scripture reports that they; habitually supported and engaged in helping the needy, what does that teach us about the primary ministry of the deaconess?

- Can you name some physical needs which spiritually mature women might be called to meet?

- There was a call of men and women to the ministry of “diakonia”, how, in the Biblical sense, are deacons and deaconesses the same/ different?

- From our study so far; sum up the ministry of the deaconess in one word.

After describing the qualifications of a Bishop (Over-seer of the church), the Apostle [Paul] continues: “Deacons in like manner must be grave [reverent], not double-tongued, not given to much wine, not greedy of filthy lucre (that is, of petty gains) [greedy or dishonest], ...women in like manner must be grave, not slanderers, temperate [circumspect], faithful in all things.” (1 Tim 3) Clearly the reference here, as almost all commentators now agree, is to the women-deacons... We have in fact here the Man-Deacon and the Woman-Deacon coordinated side by side, in the same general ministry, just as we find to be the case afterwards in the post-apostolic age.

The qualifications required of both men and women Deacons refer to character, rather than to fitness for special duties. Their lives must be simple and well-disciplined, commending the faith which they profess. But it is not required of them as of the Bishop, that they should be “apt to teach” or able to rule. Their mission is to serve. Seriousness, sincerity, self-denial, trust-worthiness, these are what the Church requires of her servants. “Faithful in all things” is the motto of the diaconate.

The Deaconess of the fourth century lived in a stirring period. She witnessed the last great struggle of paganism, under the emperor Julian... Christianity became fashionable, and a gradual lowering of its high standard was the result. The Christians “mingled among the heathen, and learned their works.”
QUESTIONS & DISCUSSION

Read 1 Timothy 3: The qualifications for Bishop and Deacon are implied to the Deaconess as well. Look for the qualifications:

1 Timothy 3

8. Likewise deacons must be **reverent, not double-tongued, not given to much wine, not greedy for money**, holding the mystery of the faith with a pure conscience.
9. But let these also **first be proved**; then let them serve as deacons, being **found blameless**.
10. Likewise their wives must be reverent, not slanderers, temperate, faithful in all things.
11. Let deacons be the husbands of **one** wife, **ruling their children** and their own houses well.
12. For those who have **served well** as deacons obtain for themselves a **good standing and great boldness in the faith** which is in Christ Jesus.

• There are ten qualifications here, list them in your own words:

• What do all of these qualifications have in common?

• What is the reward for “serving well”? What does that mean in your own words?

Closing notes to read after you have answered the questions for yourself:

Consider these definitions of “Diakonia”:
1. service, ministering, esp. of those who execute the commands of others
2. of those who by the command of God proclaim and promote religion among men
3. Christian affection esp. those who help meet need by either collecting or distributing of charities
4. the service of those who prepare and present food

In these definitions, the second is really the ultimate goal of the deacon/deaconess, the other three are the means by which this ministry is called to do it. It is a ministry of compassion and hospitality.

When we look through the qualifications of deacon/deaconess, we see that they are all qualifications of character. Even the mention of action is simply indicators of what kind of person we are talking about.

Good standing refers to credibility that is earned. Great boldness comes from competence in God-given skills, and confidence in the God who gives them.