THE POSITION AND WORK OF THE EARLY DEACONESS

First, then, as to the duties of the Deaconess. The general principle is laid down at the outset in the words of the “Syriac Didascalia” [The doctrines set forth by Apostles, compiled in the fourth century.] ... The work of the Deaconess lay primarily among those of her own sex, and her service was specially needed in the East, where women lived in greater seclusion than did their sisters in the West. The most important of the functions of the Deaconess was that which related to the administration of baptism. The rites connected with this sacrament were elaborate. Immersion was preceded by the anointing of the whole body. Where the candidates were women this ceremony was performed by the Deaconess. She also received them as they came up out of the water, and to her was committed their further instruction in the faith.

Another of her principal duties was the visitation of the women in their homes. These early ordinances state that “to the houses of the heathen, where there are women that believe, it is required that a Deaconess should go in and visit those that are sick, and minister to them in whatsoever may be required for them.” ...She like the Deacon was also the Church’s almoner [i.e.; care-taker of social and material needs of patients, as in a hospital], reporting cases of distress to the Bishop, and distributing to each “the ministration that is right.” In the case of women who were unable through sickness to attend the services of the Church, it was the duty of the Deaconess to take the consecrated bread and wine to them. No doubt much of the teaching of the women and children was entrusted to her, and she was the means of communication between them and the Bishop (pastor).

The “Apostolic Constitutions” [Didascalia] add to these duties that of door-keeper in the Church. It was customary in the East for the men and women to occupy separate parts of the Church, and it is directed that “the doorkeepers should stand at the entrance of the men to guard them, and the Deaconesses at those of the women,” ready to welcome strangers, and find places for them. ...the “Apostolic Constitutions” show that there was ample scope for her activity. Its directions as to the duties of the men and women deacons conclude with the words: “let both of them [be zealous] in matters concerning bearing tidings, travelling, service and bond service.” These expressions suggest a wide sphere of usefulness and recall to our minds the Deaconess Phoebe of the Apostolic age, travelling from Corinth to Rome.

Such were the services rendered by the Deaconess. What then was her position among the ministers of the Church? A careful comparison of the documents we possess shows that this varied at different periods. The further back we get, the higher is the conception of the office of the Deaconess. She is regarded equally with the Deacon as the servant of the Bishop, who delegates to both alike his responsibility for the sick and poor of his flock.

It is clear that the Church gave her a recognized place in the “cleros.” [clergy] Her ordination is as carefully provided for as that of the Deacon; and a special form of prayer is prescribed, which is not found in the case of the other inferior clergy. ...the “Apostolic Constitutions” also mark clearly the distinction between the Deaconess and other women holding any position in the church. [It is an ordained position of authority over the other categories of women in the church, that is; widows and young women.]
DEACONESS TRAINING

There is little doubt that the rite by which women were admitted to the Diaconate was regarded by the Church as *ordination*. The Greek words used to describe it are the same as those employed in respect to the rest of the clergy.

The [early] Deaconesses were attached to separate Churches, their number, as in the case of the Deacons, being “proportionate to the size of the congregation.”

QUESTIONS & DISCUSSION

- In this session we move from the early church to the more structured church found in the fourth century. In this snapshot of the church, there are seven ministries given to the deaconess. Please list them:

- What variation of these duties do we see in the church today?

- To perform these seven ministries in the church today; what preparation do you feel the deaconess would need to have?

- How can you envision these ministries being performed at Canaan?

- The deaconesses of the fourth century were ordained, what does this tell us about their position in the church?

- What is the practical side of having a female contingent to a help-ministry also done by men?

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

*The seven ministries mentioned here are:*

1. Ministry of Baptism
2. Home Visitation
3. Liaison to the Pastor/Bishop
4. Ministry of Communion to female shut-ins
5. Teacher to women and children
6. Greeter/Hostess at the Church Gate
7. Travelling Representative of the Church

*Note: A ministry arm of different genders allows for better empathy which is critical in a compassion ministry. It also allows protection, protecting both genders from having to minister in what could become, compromising situations.*