

# Deacons and/or Trustees?

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**I. The Question:** Should unordained persons handle the finances and physical upkeep of church property?

## II. The Biblical Teaching:

A. In the OT, the Levites and priests handled all contributions and materials used in the worship of God. (Cf. Hodge, *What Is Presbyterian Law?* for much of this material.)

- *Exodus 38:21*. Priests kept track of everything connected with the building of the tabernacle; of course they utilized non-Levites (22,25)
- *Numbers 1:50-53*. The Levites carried the tabernacle and took care of it.
- *Deuteronomy 26:12-15*. It is difficult to determine if gifts to the poor were handled individually or if the Levites handled these funds as they did others.
- *I Chronicles 9:26*. Levites handled the treasuries for the new temple.
- *I Chronicles 23:4,5*. The Levites oversaw the building of the first temple.
- *II Chronicles 24:5*. Priests collected money for repairs to the temple.
- *II Chronicles 24:12*. Priests hired people to repair the temple.
- *II Chronicles 29:16*. Priests cleaned the temple.
- *II Chronicles 31:11,12*. Priests collected the tithes.
- *II Chronicles 34:9ff*. Levites collected and distributed money for repairs of temple and houses (v. 11) which needed repair. Levites utilized non-Levites in the work (vs. 10-13).
- *Ezra 3:8,9*. Priests and Levites oversaw actual rebuilding of the temple upon return from exile.
- *Ezra 8:24-30,33*. Levites and priests in charge of gifts of money and materials for the new, rebuilt temple.

B. **The synagogue example** (cf. Hodge, p. 61). There were three officers: elders who conducted the public worship (pastors); rulers who preserved order (or ruling elders); and attendants who managed the finances of the congregation, had charge and oversight of all things belonging to it (our deacons). The person mentioned in Luke 4:20 appears to be such an attendant.

C. Finances appear to be always handled by ordained men.

- *Acts 6*. Seven men were appointed by the Apostles to help them in the work; the work of helping the poor, handling finances, etc. was definitely seen to be spiritual; therefore, the qualifications for this position are spiritual. The NT church took over the structure of the synagogue's government in setting up the diaconate.
- *Acts 11:20*. When the church in Antioch sent money to the Christians in Jerusalem to help in famine relief, ordained men were used to carry the money—Barnabas and Paul. More importantly, note that ordained men received the money in Jerusalem—the elders.
- *I Timothy 3:8ff*. Paul instructs Timothy to ordain two types of officers who were to take charge of the churches: elders and deacons. No unordained equivalent of a Trustee was mentioned.
- *Philippians 1:1*. Evidently deacons now are appointed to help overseers (same as elders, Titus 1). Cf Rom. 12:7, I Pet. 4:11

## D. Conclusions

1. Finances and building upkeep were always handled by ordained men.
2. Such work was seen to be spiritual work, requiring men with spiritual training and qualification.

## III. The Experience of Churches in this Matter

A. In *What Is Presbyterian Law?* J. A. Hodge says that the role of deacons “to take care of the poor, and to distribute among them the collections which may be raised for their use. To them also may be properly committed the management of the temporal affairs of the church... The temporal affairs of the church would include all money raised for the support of the ordinances of the church and for the erection and preservation of the buildings belonging to it. All this may properly be committed to the Deacons” (p. 63).

B. Hodge cites the Church of Scotland which makes provision for deacons to do this.

C. Hodge also cites the then Presbyterian Church in the USA’s ruling of 1833: “The temporalities of the church generally may be committed to their (the Deacons’) care.” The constitution of that church in 1953 read, “The Deacons may be entrusted, in addition, with the care and management of the temporalities of the church, and when so entrusted, they shall report at least annually upon the same to the session, being subject also to the supervisory authority of the presbytery.” E. C. Blake gave his interpretation of this as Stated Clerk: “If it is desired by the session and the congregation, it is proper and possible for the deacons to be elected the trustees of the church and to be entrusted by the session with the care and management of the temporalities of the church.” (*Presbyterian Law for the Local Church*, ed. E. C. Blake, Board of Christian Education of the Presbyterian Church in the USA, 1953, p. 54.)

D. The Reformed Presbyterian Church, Evangelical Synod, makes provision for this: “Since the ministry of these deacons is a temporal one, it has been thought appropriate in some churches to delegate to the deacons the office of trustees, an office required of every corporation by the state, to represent the corporation before the state, particularly in holding and maintaining property.” (*Biblical Government*, K. Horner Jr., p. 31).

E. The Presbyterian Church in the US (Southern) has used its deacons for trustees for years and found it to work successfully. Their book, *Chosen to Serve: the Deacon* spells out in detail how it all works.

F. The *Form of Government* for the OPC makes provision for the ordained men to perform the tasks normally associated with trustees; in fact it assumes that this normally will be the situation: “The board of trustees of a particular church shall ordinarily consist of the acting ruling elders and the deacons, or the acting ruling elders, in that church, but other communicant members of the church may be elected as trustees if it is desirable, provided, however, that the number of such members shall be less than one-half the total membership of the board. Its duties shall be confined to the discharge of the business described in section 1 of this chapter” (*Form of Government* 31.3).

## IV. The Benefits of Having Ordained Men Handle “Trustee” Functions

A. You would then have men trained in the doctrine of the church leading the congregation in matters financial. It would be especially beneficial to have men trained in the doctrine of the church handling the budget planning. When decisions must be made about spending for missions and/or local needs, you will have men trained in what the function of the church really is.

B. The work of the “trustees” will be seen for what it really is—a spiritual work and thus extremely important. Too often, such work is thought to be “secular”, separated from the

spiritual function of the church. Little thought is then given to any spiritual qualifications for the office. Emphasis upon the spiritual nature of the work will encourage people to do those tasks often thought of being second-rate in the kingdom. (What would you have thought of the Levites if they were slow in keeping up the temple? Would you have excused them for not fulfilling a “secular” task, or would you have encouraged them to fulfill their spiritual ministry?)

C. There will be less competition between ordained men of the session and unordained men of the trustees.

D. Having this type of church government will cut down the number of organizations one belongs to and the number of meetings one must attend.

V. Possible Questions A. Would this limit the number of men participating in the life of the church? No, for just as the Levites employed unordained men in the various tasks around the temple, so too the deacons would employ anyone with helpful gifts. It’s simply that the oversight is in the hands of men who have been trained for such oversight.

B. Would the pastor have to moderate such deacon meetings? Our form of government would require this, at least part of the time. However, some church deacons’ boards elect a president who alternates with the pastor in this duty.

C. What would be the role of the elders on such a board of trustees? They would be members (see quotation from *Form of Government* above); but it would be understood that they would not be over-burdened with this job. For as Acts 6 would teach, such men need to be relieved of such (important) tasks in order to spend time in study and prayer, etc.

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