

## Laying on hands, ordination and anointing

### Laying on hands

It is sometimes claimed that the practice of "laying on hands" provided divinely appointed successors to the apostles or in some way conveyed authority or power to those who previously did not have it. There is also a mistaken belief that laying on hands can achieve a transfer of anointing or gifting from one person to another, sometimes accompanied by physical manifestations (see section on anointing below). Even the phrase "laying on [of] hands" itself has come to signify far more than the intention. We could just as meaningfully use the words "put my hands on you" or even "hold you."

Some people assume that laying on hands is a foundational doctrine of the church by misreading **Hebrews 6**<sup>1</sup>

In the Bible, the "laying on hands" has a variety of meanings, unrelated to the idea of succession or transfer:

- Commissioning

Paul and Barnabas were commissioned through prophecy and laying on hands. It was a sign of approval and recognition of their calling and gifting to perform a specific task for which they had been chosen (**Acts 13**<sup>3</sup>).

- Pronouncing blessings

Laying on hands was a custom of the Jews that dated back to Genesis. Jacob laid hands on his children and pronounced various blessings on them (**Genesis 48**<sup>17</sup>). Laying on hands was done to invoke blessings on someone. The Biblical laying on hands is a blessing rather than a rite that transfers authority or office.

- Association

Under the Old Testament sacrificial system, the priest would lay his hands on the animal being sacrificed, symbolically to transfer the sins of the people to the animal (scapegoat) There was no physical or spiritual transfer of sin, it was purely symbolic (**Leviticus 16**<sup>21</sup>).

- Healing

There are many New Testament examples of Jesus and the apostles laying hands on people for healing. **Mark 16**<sup>18</sup> states that all believers can lay hands on the sick for healing and in **James 5**<sup>14</sup> we are told to call for the leaders, who would pray for us and anoint us

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<sup>1</sup> The main issue being addressed here is assurance of salvation. The only foundational item referred to is that of repentance from sin. Laying on hands is simply listed with the elementary or simple truths.

Therefore let us leave the elementary teachings about Christ and go on to maturity, not laying again the foundation of repentance from acts that lead to death, and of faith in God, instruction about baptisms, the laying on of hands, the resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment. **Hebrews 6**<sup>1-2</sup>

This passage is a continuation of the previous chapter as can be seen from the word "therefore" at the start of the passage.

We have much to say about this, but it is hard to explain because you are slow to learn. In fact, though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you the elementary truths of God's word all over again. You need milk, not solid food! Anyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is not acquainted with the teaching about righteousness. But solid food is for the mature, who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil. **Hebrews 5**<sup>11-14</sup>

The writer is concerned that individuals are not growing in their faith and they are constantly revisiting and consequently doubting the veracity of their faith. Particularly mentioning "teaching about righteousness". He goes on to explain the fruits of apostasy and of moving on in their faith and says that he is confident of them being in the latter category. **Hebrews 6**<sup>4-12</sup>.

with oil if we are sick. Whilst this may not involve laying on hands, it would still involve touching the sick person. It is not wrong to lay hands on someone when praying for their healing but contact is not necessary for healing to take place. It is God who heals with or without human contact.

- A sign of receiving the Holy Spirit or spiritual gifts

There is no transfer of the Holy Spirit from person to person, since it is God who gives of His Spirit (**Luke 11<sup>12</sup>**). There are times when laying on hands was the sign, but not the means, of the Holy Spirit coming upon people (**Acts 8<sup>17</sup> & 19<sup>6</sup>**). It was not the only way that the Holy Spirit came on people (**Acts 10<sup>44</sup>**), so laying on hands is not necessary for this to happen. Timothy received a gift from God, which was announced by a prophetic word and recognised at the same time by the local church leaders when they laid hands on him.

Do not neglect your gift, which was given you through a prophetic message when the body of elders laid their hands on you. **1Timothy 4<sup>14</sup>**

Paul make another reference to the receipt of this gift and it would appear that he either laid hands on Timothy at the same time as the other leaders or separately.

For this reason I remind you to fan into flame the gift of God, which is in you through the laying on of my hands. **2Timothy 1<sup>6</sup>**

The Contemporary English Version of the Bible places a clearer emphasis on the fact that the gift was given by God rather than imparted through Paul laying hands on Timothy.

So I ask you to make full use of the gift that God gave you when I placed my hands on you. Use it well. **2Timothy 1<sup>6</sup>** (CEV)

Laying on hands has a number of symbolic meanings and is the natural response of one person to another when pronouncing, recognising or associating with their calling, gifting, healing etc through the power of God and the work of the Holy Spirit. It has no more or less significance than this.

## Ordination

If the word "ordination" means the public recognition of someone to a particular role and ministry in the church, this would not be an issue. In that case, perhaps a more appropriate, and biblical, term would be "appointment" or "commission." The appointment to a role in the early church was sometimes accompanied by prayer and fasting and laying on hands. These public acts drew attention to the seriousness of the appointment.

The present meaning of ordination should not be confused with what the early church practiced. In the present day, ordination is seen as the process by which individuals are consecrated or set apart (as clergy) to perform various religious offices, rites and ceremonies. In the worst cases, ordination is seen as simply distinguishing between paid and unpaid church leaders.

The idea of ordination would appear to have its roots in **Acts 13**.

While they were worshipping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, "Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them." So after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off. **Acts 13<sup>2-3</sup>**

Paul and Barnabas were commissioned through prophecy and laying on hands. It was a sign of approval and recognition of their calling and gifting to perform a specific task for which they had been chosen. What followed was a response in obedience to the Holy

Spirit rather than a worldly assessment of natural abilities or an attempt to bestow gifting or authority.

Ordination is a religious rite that perpetrates the unbiblical distinction between, so-called, clergy and laity. The doctrine of the Nicolaitans is mentioned in the book of Revelation (**Revelation 2<sup>6&15</sup>**) in the prophecies to the seven churches of Asia. It is the symbolic name of a group that represents the hierarchy of a ruling class over the rest of the people. Jesus warns the Church in Pergamum:

Repent therefore! Otherwise, I will soon come to you and will fight against them with the sword of my mouth. **Revelation 2<sup>16</sup>**

The same warning is applied to those who abused grace, leading to licentiousness, seducing Christians to sexual immorality and idolatry (using the example of Balaam). In contrast, the Church of Ephesus was commended for hating the deeds of the Nicolaitans.

The root of the word Nicolaitans comes from Greek *nikao*, to conquer or overcome, and *laos*, which means people and is where the word laity comes from. The two words together means the destruction of the people and refers to the earliest form of what we call a priestly order or clergy. A good translation of Nicolaitan would be "those who prevail over the people." The separation of the "clergy" from the "laity" is a false one and is not supported anywhere in the New Testament. It is not so much a question of the role rather the separation into a hierarchy over the people. Frequently this leads to an ungodly spirit of pride, which is a controlling, manipulative, dominating and intimidating, in rebellion against the rightful authority of Jesus.

To the elders among you, I appeal as a fellow elder, a witness of Christ's sufferings and one who also will share in the glory to be revealed: Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, serving as overseers - not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not greedy for money, but eager to serve; not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock.  
**1Peter 5<sup>1-3</sup>**

Early church leaders were established as overseers, not as a ruling hierarchy. Evidence from church history indicates that by the middle of the second century AD the practice of separating bishops<sup>2</sup> from elders had already developed. Bishops were elevated to a position where their role was that of master or lord rather than servant. At about the same time there was the emergence of a separate priesthood, which began to assume certain features of the Old Testament priesthood. Elaborate rituals developed connected with religious services and the ordination of church officials developed. Soon there were special buildings, clothing and language that still distinguishes much religious activity today.

In many churches since New Testament times, the biblical truth of the priesthood of all believers has been undermined by the traditions of men to produce a ruling "ordained" class of clergy, mimicking the priesthood of the of the Old Testament<sup>3</sup>, where the people needed a priest to intercede between them and God. This had been done away with by the work of Jesus on the cross.

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<sup>2</sup> In some versions of the bible, the word for overseer is translated as "bishop" but it must be remembered that this was done retrospectively by the translators, who were living within a hierarchical church system, which included bishops, and sought to justify their existence to a greater or lesser extent. There is no distinction between an elder or an overseer in the New Testament, other than in a descriptive sense.

<sup>3</sup> Either in the doctrine or in the practice, even though they may assent to the "priesthood of all believers".

But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. **1Peter 2<sup>9</sup>**

For there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all men - the testimony given in its proper time. **1Timothy 2<sup>5</sup>**

The Apostle Paul was very concerned that none of the Old Testament practices were adopted by Christians (from either a Jewish or a gentile<sup>4</sup> background) because he knew the consequences.

You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? Before your very eyes Jesus Christ was clearly portrayed as crucified. I would like to learn just one thing from you: Did you receive the Spirit by observing the law, or by believing what you heard? Are you so foolish? After beginning with the Spirit, are you now trying to attain your goal by human effort? **Galatians 3<sup>1-3</sup>**

There was great concern that no one person or group of people should dominate the fellowship of believers. To suggest otherwise would effectively dethrone the Lord as head of the church.

And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy. **Colossians 1<sup>18</sup>**

This is not to say that there are not godly men and women in "clergy" positions throughout the worldwide church, who can be effectively used by God, but this false division of God's people is not supported by the bible and is unhelpful in many ways, especially in terms of all of God's people being seen as all having an equally valuable part to play in the mission of the church and in the extension of God's kingdom.

## **Anointing**

The Old Testament understanding of anointing was the physical act of pouring oil over someone's head, indicating God's choice of them for a special function or office in Israel.

It was usually prophets, priests and kings (**1Kings 19<sup>16</sup>**, **Exodus 28<sup>41</sup>** and **1Samuel 10<sup>1</sup>**) who were thus anointed. With the physical and ceremonial act of anointing, done according to God's will and upon only those chosen by God, went the special endowment of the Spirit or divine enablement to carry out the functions of the office for which they were being anointed.

The patriarchs, especially Abraham, are referred to as 'my anointed ones' and 'my prophets' (**Psalms 105<sup>15</sup>**, **1Chronicles 16<sup>22</sup>** and **Genesis 20<sup>7</sup>**). These "anointed ones" were chosen by God and warnings are given to those who would maliciously attack them.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> The word gentile is from the Latin, *gentilis*, meaning of, or belonging to, a clan or tribe and refers to non-Israelite tribes. It is the usual translation of the Hebrew words *goyim* (people, nations) and *nochri* (heathen, pagan) in the Old Testament and the Greek word *éthnē* in the New Testament. Today, the primary meaning of *gentile* is a non-Jew.

Male gentiles, wishing to convert to Judaism, have to undergo circumcision. Some early Christians, known as Judaizers, demanded the same for gentile converts to Christianity. The Apostle Paul was clear that circumcision, along with other Jewish practices, was unnecessary and, if undertaken, would be detrimental to a person's faith. Paul was so incensed with the Judaizers that he called them "dogs" and "mutilators of the flesh." (**Philippians 3<sup>2</sup>**)

Do not touch my anointed ones; do my prophets no harm. **Psalm 105<sup>15</sup>**

The Old Testament also predicted a special Anointed One, who would come and bring salvation and deliverance to Israel (**Psalm 2<sup>2</sup>, 45<sup>7</sup>** and **Hebrews 1<sup>9</sup>**).

In the New Testament the understanding of anointing is quite different. The Greek words *chrisma* (ointment), *christos* (christ) and *chrio* (to anoint) are used concerning anointing. By far the most often used and most important form of the word is Christ, the Anointed One.

The Jews understood that a promised One was coming who would be the anointed Messiah. The New Testament claims that Jesus of Nazareth was that person. God Incarnate came in fulfilment of prophecy. The Greek word *christos* is translated Christ over 500 times in the Bible. Most references concern the person of Jesus. Otherwise it means Messiah. It is used a couple of times of false christ's. Peter called Jesus *christos* in his famous confession of **Matthew 16<sup>17</sup>**. Peter was calling Jesus literally "the anointed one" which was "the Messiah."

As Jesus is the "Anointed One," the term "Christ" should be uniquely His. Thus the Bible warns of other "christs", who are impostors.

Jesus answered: "Watch out that no one deceives you. For many will come in my name, claiming, 'I am the Christ,' and will deceive many." **Matthew 24<sup>4-5</sup>**

"At that time if anyone says to you, 'Look, here is the Christ!' or, 'There he is!' do not believe it." **Matthew 24<sup>23</sup>**

Christians have the anointing of the Holy Spirit, so should not be misled by false christs and spiritual teachers offering secrets that can only be learned from those elite teachers.<sup>6</sup> All Christians are anointed with the same Holy Spirit so they are not lacking access to any truth which has been revealed by God. The following verses are the only references in the Bible where the word anointed is used of Christians:

Now it is God who makes both us and you stand firm in Christ. He anointed us, set his seal of ownership on us, and put his Spirit in our hearts as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come. **2Corinthians 1<sup>21-22</sup>**

As for you, the anointing you received from him remains in you, and you do not need anyone to teach you. But as his anointing teaches you about all things and as that anointing is real, not counterfeit - just as it has taught you, remain in him. **1John 2<sup>27</sup>**

According to each of these verses, all Christians are anointed. John uses this fact as a reason that the false teachers and antichrists can be refused. By definition, a supposed "christ" is claiming to have a special anointing that sets him apart from everyone else. Since all Christians have an anointing that they received as a gift from the Anointed One, Jesus, the false teachers have nothing legitimate to offer them. Thus John can say, "you have no need for anyone to teach you."

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<sup>5</sup> The context of **Psalm 105<sup>15</sup>** shows that it is a reference to Israel (see verses 9-14). Here and in **Exodus 19<sup>6</sup>** are indications of God's plan, which would find its fulfilment in the New Testament. God would have a people, all of who would be "anointed ones," priests unto God. **Psalm 105<sup>15</sup>** is often quoted to deflect legitimate criticism from, so-called, "anointed ministries" or abusive/insecure leaders. The warning about not touching God's anointed ones refers directly to the patriarchs and their descendants, who wandered among the nations. God told other kings not to attack them nor to do them any physical harm.

<sup>6</sup> See the articles on Discernment and the Discernment checklist

There were people called by God to teach in the New Testament, but they had the same anointing as other Christians and do not have a bigger portion of the Holy Spirit, are not privy to secrets or special revelations. They are merely more learned in Scripture and can help others in their study and encouragement in the Word of God. John himself was teaching as he wrote his epistle. The teaching of Scripture is not being forbidden in 1John, rather the claim of some of an exclusive or better anointing that causes certain special teachers to have unique revelations, unavailable to the rest of the people. Rather ironically, Paul referred to them as "super apostles":

I am afraid that just as Eve was deceived by the serpent's cunning, your minds may somehow be led astray from your sincere and pure devotion to Christ. For if someone comes to you and preaches a Jesus other than the Jesus we preached, or if you receive a different spirit from the one you received, or a different gospel from the one you accepted, you put up with it easily enough. But I do not think I am in the least inferior to those "super-apostles." 2Corinthians 11<sup>3-5</sup>

By comparing the Old and New Testaments, we can see a change, which is a fulfilment of Old Testament prophecy. During the Old Testament era, priests and kings were anointed. Aaron and his sons were anointed to be a perpetual priesthood before God (**Exodus 40<sup>15</sup>** and **Numbers 25<sup>13</sup>**). The general population of Israel was not so anointed. In the New Testament, Jesus Christ is the Anointed One. No one else will ever legitimately be so designated, since He alone possesses the divine attributes of Messiah and He alone was chosen and sent by the Father as the promised One.

Our High Priest has chosen us and anointed us to be priests unto God. Peter says:

You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. **1Peter 2<sup>9</sup>**

When God poured out His Spirit on the disciples, Peter interpreted the event as the fulfilment of Joel's Old Testament prophecy:

This is what was spoken by the prophet Joel: "In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams. Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days, and they will prophesy." **Acts 2<sup>16-18</sup>**

No longer was the anointing of the Spirit going to be only for priests, prophets or kings. Everyone will receive this gift if they "call upon the name of the Lord." (See **Romans 10<sup>13</sup>**). Men, women, young, old, slaves and even Gentiles are called and anointed by God. A kingdom of priests was established by the sovereign action of God in fulfilment of Old Testament prophecy. Each believer receives the Holy Spirit (**Romans 8:9**) and equally has access to God through the one mediator between man and God, Jesus Christ. This fulfilment of prophecy is a tremendous and consequential truth upon which the church is built. Jesus is the Christ (Messiah, Anointed One) and he has chosen us and poured out the anointing of the Spirit upon us all that we may be a part of God's royal priesthood.

**1Corinthians 12**, **Romans 12** and **Ephesians 4** all teach that there are different giftings and callings. Yet it is the same Spirit who empowers every believer. The anointing of the Spirit produces various gifts, callings and manifestations in different members but no member can boast of a "special anointing." It is the same Spirit who anoints all members of the body of Christ whatever description, gifting or calling they may have.

Whilst most people would rightly steer clear of individuals claiming to be the “reincarnation” of Jesus or to have the “spirit of Jesus” for their age, some individuals claim, or have it claimed on their behalf, that they have been given an “anointing” above that of their fellow Christians. Some Christians may be particularly gifted in certain areas or called to ministries that others are not. They may have outgoing (or even outrageous) personalities, which can draw a crowd or inspire others, but each and every one of them of them is anointed by the same Spirit when they were born-again.

The message of the New Testament is different gifts, different callings, but one Spirit and one anointing. All Christians have the Holy Spirit, are anointed and are a part of God's royal priesthood. Nowhere in the New Testament does it refer to some individuals having a “special anointing”<sup>7</sup> above other Christians.

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<sup>7</sup> In fairness, some people may use the term “anointing” as a kind of “spiritual jargon” to mean a particular gifting or gifted individual, without thinking about what it really means. The danger here is that there is a tendency amongst human beings to worship “the created rather than the Creator” and the end result is to exalt men rather than God.