

LAYING ON OF HANDS AT THE ORDINATION OF ELDERS

Rev. Dr. R. Dean Anderson (Last Revised: 28 November 2014)

It is clear from the form for the ordination of ministers of the Word that our churches acknowledge the laying on of hands at the ordination of office bearers as a biblical symbol. This symbol should be used when ministers of the Word are ordained. It is a good biblical gesture that shows that an office bearer, in name of the Lord, sets this person apart to his appointed task and symbolically transfers the necessary authority. (As Reformed churches we also know of other biblical gestures—think, for example, of the raising of the hands when the blessing is announced).

The question is: why are we obliged to use laying on of hands when ministers are ordained and not when elders (and deacons) are ordained? In the beginning the laying of hands for the ordination of all office bearers even had a place in the Belgic Confession. The first sentence of article 31 of the Dutch translation from 1562 read:

*We believe that the ministers of God's Word, elders and deacons ought to be chosen to their office by lawful election, with prayer and the votes of assent of the churches: thereafter to be confirmed in their office with the laying on of hands, just as God's Word teaches us such things.*¹

As is shown below, Scripture makes no distinction in the laying on of hands between ministers and elders. Why do we find that distinction in the Church Order? We shall see that this is because of practical problems which can arise in larger congregations, which is why churches are not compelled to ordain elders and deacons with the laying on of hands. But whenever the situation allows for it, it is indeed a good biblical gesture. Furthermore, by this gesture it becomes so much clearer for the congregation that ...

- a) Christ separates each office bearer to a special task. Christ requires that the congregation see this man from now on as His special representative.
- b) The consistory (represented by the minister, if it is he who performs the laying on of hands) is ordained by Christ as the means through which He rules the congregation. In the name of Christ, the consistory (and not the congregation) installs the new office bearer.
- c) This separation to the office is just as seriously meant for elders and deacons as it is for the minister. All elders (including the minister) have the same responsibility before the Lord (Hebr. 13:17); by virtue of their office they all speak in the name of Christ, have the same authority, and must in the same way keep the example of Christ before the congregation.

What does the Bible say about the laying on of hands?

In 1 Timothy 5:17 Paul speaks again about the elders in the congregation (he had already spoken of them in chapter 3). In verse 22 he warns Timothy with the following words:

Do not lay hands on anyone hastily, nor share in other people's sins; keep yourself pure.

When Paul admonishes Timothy not to lay hands hastily on any man, he means to say, “don't be too quick to install anyone into office.” In the New Testament, separation of someone to a special task, i.e. the office, was almost always attended by the laying on of hands, cf. Acts 6:6 (the ‘seven’); 13:3 (Paul and Barnabas before their first missionary journey) and 1 Timothy 4:14 (Timothy himself). As we already said above, no distinction was made between the several offices.

The apostles' command to use laying on of hands has both a biblical background as well as an analogy in the custom of their day. The rabbis who sat on the council of elders (Sanhedrin) in Jerusalem were also

¹ “Wij gelooven, dat de Dienaers des Woords van God, Ouderlingen en Diakenen in haren dienst behooren verkoren te worden door wettige verkiezing, met aanroeping van den Naam Gods ende koerstemmen der Kercken: daer na met oplegginghe der handen, in haren dienst beuesticht worden, ghelijck als ons sulcx het Woord Gods leert.”

appointed by the laying on of hands.² When we take account of the fact that this practice had deep roots in the Old Testament it becomes clear it was not something only pertaining to the culture of the first century. The Lord Himself had charged His people to use the laying on of hands.

When we study what the Old Testament has to say about the laying on of hands, we are at first confronted with the fact that there are two distinct Hebrew expressions used which are often translated as “laying on of hands.” These two distinct expressions, however, actually denote two different gestures, namely, a) the simple placement of the hands on someone, and b) the leaning or pressing of the hands on someone. A study of these two gestures shows that they are used in quite different contexts. Placing one’s hands on someone is a gesture whereby a particular person is deliberately indicated and is used when praying for that person or speaking a blessing over that person. Leaning one’s hands on someone not only serves to indicate a particular person, but also symbolises the transfer of something from oneself to the person upon whom the hands are pressed.

In biblical studies concerning the laying on of hands, this distinction has often been missed because in the New Testament the same Greek expression is used to translate both gestures. This can naturally lead to some measure of confusion.³

a) The simple placement of the hands on someone

A good example of this gesture is found in Genesis 48 where Jacob lays his hands on the sons of Joseph to bless them (see esp. vv.14 and 18). Although two different verbs are used to describe this action, both indicate the placement of the hand on the head of the person concerned. In this way Jacob indicates the persons over whom he will speak the blessing.

Of course when a multitude of people were blessed then the one who is blessing can no longer place his hands on all the individual heads. Instead of this the hands are raised to indicate that the blessing is intended for all those at which the palms of the hands are directed (cf. Lev. 9:22; Luke 24:50). This gesture is commonly used in Reformed worship services.

In the New Testament Jesus placed his hands upon the children who were brought to him and spoke a blessing over them (Mark 10:13-16). In Matthew 19:13-15 the same incident is told, but here Jesus is described as praying for the children while placing his hands on them. It would seem probable that Jesus spoke this blessing in the form of a prayer.⁴

We should probably interpret some of the examples of the use of hands when healing in a similar way. The person engaged in healing uses his hand to indicate the person whom he wishes to heal. In many of the relevant texts there is no suggestion of prayer being offered or of a formal laying on of hands to symbolise some kind of transfer; compare for example Mark 5:23 where Jesus is asked to lay his hands on Jairus’ daughter, and the actual healing in Mark 5:41 where he simply takes the girl by the hand and tells her to get up. There are also many healings which take place without touching the person concerned. And yet it is clear that many other healings did take place with some kind of formal laying on of hands, see the discussion below in the following section.

² “Ordination” of rabbis was ordination to a seat in the council of the Sanhedrin. The ordination itself was probably not carried out by the whole Sanhedrin, but by a legal minimum of three other council members (M. *Sanh.* 1.3). See S. Safrai, “Jewish Self-Government” in *The Jewish People in the First Century* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1974) 1.390-91; cf. A. Ehrhardt, “Jewish and Christian Ordination,” *The Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 5 (1954) 131. Ehrhardt (135-36) correctly points out that Christian ordination was not simply an exact copy of rabbinical ordination. There is, however, a direct analogy with a common Scriptural precedent.

³ Contra E. Ferguson (“Jewish and Christian Ordination: Some Observations” *Harvard Theological Review* 56 [1963] 13-16), who suggests that the lack of distinction in the Greek New Testament suggests that the difference between laying and leaning was not maintained. We should recall that the common language of Jesus, the apostles and the Jewish people in the time of the New Testament was Aramaic. Both the Hebrew and Aramaic languages make this distinction.

⁴ Normally, in Biblical times, the hands of a person engaged in prayer would be lifted with the palms facing toward God (directed either at the temple in Jerusalem or towards heaven) to whom the prayer is made, cf. 1 Kgs. 8:54; Ps. 28:2; 63:4; 134:2; 141:2; Lam. 2:19; 3:41 and 1 Tim. 2:8.

b) The leaning or pressing of the hands on someone

If we summarise the data from the Old Testament we see that the leaning or pressing of hands always had something of a symbolic transfer.

i) When sacrificing, the hands had to be pressed upon the head of the sacrificial animal (cf. Exod. 29:10, 15, 19; Lev. 1:4; 3:2, 8, 13; etc. and esp. 16:21). This had to do with the symbolic transfer of the sins of the one bringing the sacrifice to the sacrificial animal. The animal was then punished by death for these sins. It is clear from these texts that the use of one hand was sufficient.

ii) When a curse had been heard, the hearers (= eye witnesses) had to press their hands upon the head of the one who cursed (Lev. 24:14). Hereby the guilt of the curse that had been heard was symbolically transferred to the one who cursed. In later times, whenever there was a court case, all eyewitnesses had to lay their hands on the head of the accused while they testified.⁵

iii) The Israelites had to press their hands on the heads of the Levites when they were installed for the service of the Lord instead of the firstborn sons from other tribes (Num. 8:10). Here we have the symbolic transfer of the task which was originally given to the firstborn sons.⁶

iv) Moses pressed his hands upon Joshua when he was installed as his successor (Num. 27:18-23). The authority to lead the people was here symbolically transferred.⁷ This text is of particular importance. Note that the leaning on of hands occurred at the moment that Joshua received his mandate. The symbolic transfer does not, however, mean that Moses lost his authority at that moment. It is this text which was later used as the basis for the practice of the ordination of rabbis to the Sanhedrin (ruling council of chief priests and elders) and therefore also functions as an analogy for the New Testament practice of the laying (i.e. leaning) on of hands at the installation of office bearers.

It is remarkable that with the installation of the three great offices in the Old Testament (king, high priest and prophet) no use is made of the laying on of hands. Instead of this they were anointed. Yet elders in the New Testament are not a continuation of the Old Testament kings, high priests or prophets. These three offices are fulfilled in Jesus Christ (cf. Luke 3:21-22 with 4:14-21). It would therefore be improper to anoint elders and deacons to office.

As noted above, a formal laying on of hands was used in some (but not all) of the examples of miraculous healing in the New Testament (i.e. healing granted by someone with a special gift of healing, such as Jesus, his apostles, and those upon whom the apostles had granted such a special gift of the Spirit by the laying on of hands). We can see this in texts such as Luke 13:13; Acts 9:12, 17; 28:8 and in general Luke 4:40 and Mark 16:18. Given that the New Testament does not verbally distinguish between the placement and the leaning of hands it is difficult to say which category this formal use of the hands in healing falls under. But the context would suggest some kind of transfer of healing power (from God's Spirit?) and therefore this kind of laying on of hands should probably be interpreted in terms of pressing the hands to symbolise transfer. It is clear from Acts 28:8 that this use of the hands is separate from prayer for the person to be healed. Paul first prayed for the father of Publius and thereafter laid his hands on him for the purpose of healing.

Of course, as already suggested in connection with the installation of Joshua (Num. 27:18-23), the laying on of hands for the installation of office bearers in the New Testament should be considered to come under this category of leaning the hands to symbolise a transfer.⁸

⁵ The first evidence of this practice (that I know of) is the intertestamental book of *Susanna* (and thus before the time of the New Testament).

⁶ See further my article on this website: *The effect of the sin with the golden calf*.

⁷ Moses' "glory" in this passage has the meaning of "authority."

⁸ The Reformers in the time of the Reformation did not generally see the distinction in the Bible between leaning and placing the hands, nor did they note the significance of Joshua's installation in this respect. This led Calvin and others to suggest that the laying of hands at the installation of office bearers was to take place during the blessing instead of during the charge to faithfully execute the office.

In 1 Timothy 5:22 Timothy was told not to lay hands hastily (i.e. install elders into office). Of course, Timothy was a special office bearer in the church of Christ. He was a prophet and therefore had special authority. Yet it is not so that the authority to use the laying on of hands was only given to these special office bearers. Timothy himself was installed into office by the laying on of hands of the local elders (1 Tim. 4:14). Here we see the Biblical principle that the consistory (= joint elders, see Art. 36 C.O.) has the responsibility to appoint new office bearers and install them into the office. It was for sake of wisdom that the churches have decided to ask for advice from the congregation via the call for names and also via voting (Art. 3 C.O.) But after the advice of the congregation has been given through their vote, the consistory must make the decision and bear the responsibility of appointing men to office.

The content of the Church order and liturgical forms on the laying on of hands

The Church Order of Dort of 1618/19 has always required the laying on of hands at the ordination of ministers. Although this has for some reason been deleted in the church order of the FRCA, the requirement is still present in the form for ordination of ministers and missionaries. Laying on of hands is not required in the form for the ordination of elders and deacons.

This difference was discussed in the Netherlands by deputies for the revision of the church order serving the General Synod of 1975. The deputies grounded this distinction between the ordination of ministers and elders in their remarks. There they say:

The laying on of hands is a Scriptural symbol. The regulation concerning this remains restricted to art. 4 (Dutch C.O.).

One can think of the separation of the office of the minister of the Word for all of his life. In other respects too the entry into this office receives a heavier accent than with elders and deacons.

Moreover the laying on of hands at the annual ordination of elders (often of more than one office bearer) makes for liturgical difficulties and this can lead to loss of meaning.

With this the deputies made known why it would not be wise to require the laying on of hands for elders and deacons. The regulation for the laying on of hands was therefore restricted to the office of minister. Regulations for the laying on of hands for the offices of elder and deacon were left to the local churches. And the deputies were right. In large congregations the laying on of hands at the ordination of a great number of office bearers could meet with practical problems. That is why we should not plead for a change to the forms for ordination. The deputies hereby made an attempt to explain the omission of the laying on of hands for the other offices. This explanation was only given as suggestion. The reason for this is not hard to discover. The Bible makes no distinction in the laying on of hands between the office of minister and the office of elder.

Conclusion

According to the form for ordination every minister must be ordained with the laying on of hands, but the laying on of hands at the ordination of elders and deacons is left up to the local churches. Our forms and Church Order do not prohibit laying on of hands for the latter offices. A small church does not necessarily have the same practical problems as a larger congregation. For this reason the laying on of hands at the ordination of elders and deacons in a small congregation could symbolically enrich the meaning of what is actually going on (see above). This Scriptural symbol also underlines the fact that the offices of minister and elder have an equal worth.