

Biblical Ordination of Pastors

By Joel Breidenbaugh, PhD

Growing up in a small school and being involved in my grandmother's small-town community gave me a front-row seat to several skirmishes where one kid "laid hands on" another one as they wrestled each other. Some of my friends regrettably experienced an abusive father "lay hands on" them. Because those occurrences of "laying on of hands" can conjure up negative feelings, some people wonder what the New Testament practice of "laying hands" on others means. I want to look at some biblical passages and argue that the laying on of hands, appointments, designations, and setting apart are all elements of biblical ordination to pastoral ministry.

So what do we mean by ordination? While ordination has taken on newer meanings today where just about anybody can be ordained, the New Testament provides some clarity. The term "ordain" in Scripture refers to designating someone or setting them in place. Ordination can include churches appointing certain individuals to a particular task. The clearest New Testament examples of designating or appointing others for a task pertains to the office of pastor. This appointment may be expressed in the "laying on of hands" to symbolize a transfer of authority from the Lord through His church to the individual being set apart. Several places in the New Testament highlight these matters.

God Calls and Equips Pastors

While churches may vote on their pastors, the ultimate call on a man's life for pastoral ministry (whether vocationally for remuneration or as laity) comes from God. Luke records God's call on Paul's life (Acts 9:15). God equips those He calls to ministry with gifts such as shepherding, teaching, leadership, administration, and the like (see Ephesians 4:11; 1 Corinthians 12:27-31; Romans 12:6-8; 1 Peter 4:10-11).

Early Examples of Ordaining Pastors

As the Evangelist Luke gets ready to tell about Paul's missionary journeys in Acts 13-28, he informs us that the Holy Spirit directed the leaders of the church of Antioch to "set apart Barnabas and Saul (Paul)" for missionary work among the Gentiles "and they laid their hands on them" (Acts 13:2-3). While some may argue Paul was a missionary first, it seems clear he was an evangelist who planted churches and served as a pastor until other pastors could be raised.

Once Paul and Barnabas were on their missionary journeys, they regularly appointed or ordained pastors to shepherd the new church plants. They "appointed elders for them in every church" in Galatia (Acts 14:23). New Testament "elders" refer to church pastors when used in the context of church leadership (see James 5:14; Acts 20:17-28; 1 Peter 5:1-4; etc.).

Likewise, Paul reminded Titus to "appoint elders in every town as I directed you" (Titus 1:5). Titus himself had "been appointed by the churches" (2 Corinthians 8:19) in the work of pastoral ministry, assisting Paul on at least one of his journeys. These appointments were for pastoral leaders in the churches.

Laying on of Hands

While the practice of laying on hands occurred in the Old Testament for transferring guilt to the scapegoat or for priestly ministry, those practices are beyond the scope of this study. Furthermore, the New Testament sometimes mentions laying on hands by Jesus or an apostle for healings (see Luke 4:40; Acts 28:8) or for new converts where the apostles signified their reception of the Holy Spirit (see Acts 8:17; 19:6; Hebrews 6:2). Those references, too, are outside the focus of this paper.

The two kinds of laying on of hands that are most pertinent to this topic are for leadership (see Numbers 27:18-23; Deuteronomy 34:9) and pastoral ministry (Acts 6:6; 13:3; 14:23; 2 Corinthians 8:19; 1 Timothy 4:14; 5:22; 2 Timothy 1:6; Titus 1:5). The LORD commanded Moses to lay hands on Joshua to appoint him as the next leader of Israel as the people would soon enter the Promised Land (Numbers 27:18-23; Deuteronomy 34:9). God was with Joshua because Moses had laid his hands on him.

When we turn to the pages of the New Testament, we find an issue that arose in the Early Church where the Greek-speaking Jewish widows were being overlooked by the Hebrew-speaking Jewish apostles. The apostles realized they needed to remain focused on the ministry of the Word and prayer. Thus, the apostles called for seven godly men to be chosen (“appointed”) among the Greek-speaking converts and the apostles laid hands on them (Acts 6:6). These men appear to be preachers because the two Luke describes—Phillip and Stephen—are men who declare God’s Word to others (see Acts 6-8).¹

The Acts 13-14 passages, where church leaders (and members?) laid hands on Barnabas and Saul, have been covered above. Let me add here that the word translated “appoint” (Acts 14:23) means “through the laying on of hands.” A different term is used for Paul’s instructions to Titus to “appoint elders in every town” (Titus 1:5), but the concept is similar. Thus, the newly planted churches would have pastors lead them.

When the Apostle Paul wrote to Timothy about pastoral leadership, he called him to be an example to others in every aspect of his life. He also commanded him, “Do not neglect the gift you have, which was given to you by prophecy when the council of elders laid their hands on you” (1 Timothy 4:14). It seems obvious here that a group of pastors laid hands on Timothy as he began his work as a pastor. Paul had been part of that group, as noted in 2 Timothy 1:6—“I remind you to rekindle the gift of God that is in you through the laying on of my hands.”

In another discussion about elders, Paul reminds Timothy, “Do not be hasty in the laying on of hands” (1 Timothy 5:22). Evidently, Paul had either seen such a practice or knew the consequences of laying hands on someone who wasn’t ready for pastoral ministry.

¹ While many people have assumed these 7 men were the first deacons, I have argued they are more like pastors or associate pastors, assisting the apostles (see Joel Breidenbaugh, “Give Me a D-E-A-C-O-N! What’s That Spell? It Depends on Whom You Ask!” *The Journal of Florida Baptist Heritage*, vol. 15 [Graceville, FL: Florida Baptist Historical Society, 2013], 22-33; idem, “Who Gave Deacons the Authority to Make Major Decisions for the Church?” *The Journal of Florida Baptist Heritage*, vol. 15 [Graceville, FL: Florida Baptist Historical Society, 2013], 71-85). That Luke describes their ministry as centered on the Word seems they are some of the first preachers after the apostles.

Finally, Paul instructed Titus to “appoint elders in every town” (Titus 1:5), probably through the laying on of hands. Titus himself had members from other churches, or maybe pastors from those churches, lay hands on him for the work of pastoral ministry when he traveled with Paul during some of his mission work (see 2 Corinthians 8:19).

Observations

Now that we have considered an overview of the pertinent passages on appointing and laying on of hands, let me make a few observations about biblical ordination.

1. God calls men to lead His church and equips them with the necessary gifts (see Acts 9:15; 20:28; Ephesians 4:11).²
2. Other pastoral leaders and church members recognize God’s clear leading and embrace it (Acts 13:1-4; cf. leadership in Numbers 27:18-23; Deuteronomy 34:9). This recognition may mean calling out some of the best pastors to become missionaries or lead elsewhere in the kingdom as Barnabas and Saul left one church to plant other churches among the Gentiles.
3. After praying and fasting, pastors (and possibly church members) laid hands on those men God had called to ordain them to the task of pastoral ministry (Acts 13:3; cf. Acts 6:6; 2 Corinthians 8:19; 1 Timothy 5:22).

The Symbol of Laying Hands on Another

Before concluding this study, it seems appropriate to address what laying on of hands means. While the Scripture is not as clear on this matter, it seems the significance of “laying hands” on one’s head or shoulders portrays several things. First, it symbolizes the unity of the body of people praying together, joined by touching the one being ordained.

Second, it demonstrates prayer and blessing. Prayer is connected with ordination (see Acts 13:3) and blessings are often a part of prayer (see Numbers 6:24-26; Psalm 20:4; Philippians 1:9-11; 2 Thessalonians 3:16).

Finally, laying hands on another symbolizes support. When you touch someone to pray for and bless them, you cannot help but show your support and encouragement for them in their work.

Yes, I’ve seen my fair share of kids “laying hands on” each other as they wrestled around and fought. But the best memories of laying hands have been witnessed when I watched men ordained as a kid, or when I was ordained to the gospel ministry, or when I have had the privilege of ordaining others. May we be found faithful carrying out the teaching and practices of the New Testament Church, including the practice of ordination, until the Lord Jesus returns.

²God’s Word restricts the office of the pastorate to qualified men (see 1 Timothy 2:12-14; 3:2). The numerous examples listed above always refer to the ordination of men.