Laying on of Hands

Introduction

We continue examining the foundational stones as listed in Hebrews 6:1-3 with “laying on of hands”. In some churches this whole concept is ignored while in others it suffers abuse and excess. We need to understand and apply this “elementary principle” in a biblical manner.

The laying on of hands signifies one of three things:

1. transmitting blessing or authority,
2. public acknowledgment of blessing or authority already received by the one receiving laying on of hands, or,
3. publicly commit the one on whom hands are laid to God for some special task or ministry.

Old Testament Usage

In the Old Testament it was an accepted practice to lay on hands for blessing or special anointing at the direction of the Lord.

But Israel stretched out his right hand and laid it on the head of Ephraim, who was the younger, and his left hand on Manasseh's head, crossing his hands, although Manasseh was the firstborn. (Genesis 48:14 NASB)

NOTE: It was accepted practice that the right hand was for the greater blessing which normally went to the firstborn.

So the LORD said to Moses, "Take Joshua the son of Nun, a man in whom is the Spirit, and lay your hand on him; and have him stand before Eleazar the priest and before all the congregation, and commission him in their sight. "You shall put some of your authority on him, in order that all the congregation of the sons of Israel may obey him. (Numbers 27:18-20 NASB)

Two things accomplished by Moses laying on of hands:

1. transmitted to Joshua a measure of spiritual wisdom and honor which he had received from God, and
2. public acknowledgment before the congregation of God's appointment of Joshua as leader to succeed Moses.

These two things were essential for Joshua to do the job that God had prepared him to do.

We can see the results or outcome of Moses laying hands on Joshua in Deuteronomy:
Now Joshua the son of Nun was filled with the spirit of wisdom, for Moses had laid his hands on him; and the sons of Israel listened to him and did as the LORD had commanded Moses. (Deuteronomy 34:9 NASB)

Another example is the way that Elisha acknowledged God's appointment of Joash as God's deliverer. Joash received divine wisdom and authority needed to equip him as deliver.

Elisha said to him, "Take a bow and arrows." So he took a bow and arrows. Then he said to the king of Israel, "Put your hand on the bow." And he put his hand on it, then Elisha laid his hands on the king's hands. He said, "Open the window toward the east," and he opened it. Then Elisha said, "Shoot!" And he shot. And he said, "The LORD'S arrow of victory, even the arrow of victory over Aram; for you will defeat the Arameans at Aphek until you have destroyed them." (2 Kings 13:15-17 NASB)

This appointment by Elisha parallels Joshua's appointment by Moses:

1. each acknowledged a leader whom God had appointed for a special purpose, and
2. each received wisdom and authority needed to carry out his God appointed task.

Note: both of these were primarily military commanders.

New Testament Usage

In the New Testament there are 5 purposes for the laying on of hands:

1. Ministry of healing
2. To impart the Holy Spirit
3. Impartation of spiritual gifts
4. To commission ministers, and
5. To commission Elders and Deacons

We will look at each of these in detail.

Laying On Of Hands For Healing

There are 5 supernatural signs appointed by Jesus that would accompany the preaching of the Gospel and those that have faith in His authority.

"These signs will accompany those who have believed: in My name they will cast out demons, they will speak with new tongues; they will pick up serpents, and if they drink any deadly poison, it will not hurt them; they will lay hands on the sick, and they will recover." (Mark 16:17-18 NASB)

The last of these is the laying on of hands for the sick to recover. This shows that this “sign” is for the
unconverted or the newly converted believer.

The Lord has made provision for the healing of the believer also.

Is anyone among you sick? Then he must call for the elders of the church and they are to pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord; and the prayer offered in faith will restore the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up, and if he has committed sins, they will be forgiven him. (James 5:14-15 NASB)

There are several lessons for us in this scripture:

1. Every believer is associated with a church, a gathering of believers;
2. Elders are recognized by the believers as ministers of the Lord;
3. We are in open disobedience if we don't call for the elders when we are sick; and
4. The leaders are ready to minister in faith.

The anointing with oil may or may not by accompanied by the laying on of hands; but the anointing oil is for the believer only. We don't find it used with the unconverted.

When the Elders pray over the sick (with faith) and anoint him with oil, it does 3 things:

1. the sick shall be saved (healed);
2. the Lord shall raise him up; and
3. sins committed shall be forgiven.

Laying On Of Hand To Impart The Holy Spirit

There are 5 cases of receiving the Holy Spirit given in the scriptures:

1. Acts 2: 1-4 Day of Pentecost
2. Acts 8: 14-20 Samarian new converts
3. Acts 9: 17 Saul (Paul)
5. Acts 19: 1-6 Disciples at Ephesus

The Holy Spirit was ministered with the laying on of hands in 3 of these 5 instances. That is more than 50% of the time. The two occasions when the Holy Spirit came without the laying on of hands was the day of Pentecost and the house of Cornelius. Both of these occurrences are special and unique by their nature. While we might have some unique or special occasions when the Holy Spirit just falls, we should expect a similar ratio today as those revealed by the scriptures when we pray for people to receive the Holy Spirit. The expected or normal procedure would be by the laying on of hands to impart the Holy Spirit to the believer.
Laying On Of Hands To Impart Spiritual Gifts

The laying on of hands is frequently used to impart spiritual gifts to others. The clearest example of this is with Timothy.

Do not neglect the spiritual gift within you, which was bestowed on you through prophetic utterance with the laying on of hands by the presbytery. (1 Timothy 4:14 NASB)

For this reason I remind you to kindle afresh the gift of God which is in you through the laying on of my hands. (2 Timothy 1:6 NASB)

Timothy received a gift that was given prophetically and confirmed and imparted by the laying on of hands of the presbytery (elders) and by Paul. The reason for the gift was so that Timothy could wage war with the enemy.

This command I entrust to you, Timothy, my son, in accordance with the prophecies previously made concerning you, that by them you fight the good fight, keeping faith and a good conscience, which some have rejected and suffered shipwreck in regard to their faith. (1 Timothy 1:18-19 NASB)

Paul also wanted to see the Roman believers because he wanted to impart a spiritual gift to them that was for the purpose of establishing them.

For I long to see you so that I may impart some spiritual gift to you, that you may be established; that is, that I may be encouraged together with you while among you, each of us by the other's faith, both yours and mine. (Romans 1:11-12 NASB)

In each of the examples, spiritual gifts were only imparted by the leadership not by the individual believers.

Laying On Of Hands To Commission Ministers

The clearest example of this occurs in Antioch when Paul and Barnabas were sent out.

Now there were at Antioch, in the church that was there, prophets and teachers: Barnabas, and Simeon who was called Niger, and Lucius of Cyrene, and Manaen who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch, and Saul. While they were ministering to the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, "Set apart for Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them." Then, when they had fasted and prayed and laid their hands on them, they sent them away. (Acts 13:1-3 NASB)

The Holy Spirit had called Paul and Barnabas for a special work and had, apparently, spoken to them individually prior to this meeting. The Holy Spirit now spoke publicly (probably through one of the prophets). The other leaders fasted, prayed, and laid hands on them to publicly confirm the Holy Spirit's call to the work. Then, Paul and Barnabas were sent forth to accomplish the work assigned by the Holy Spirit. After this sending forth, Paul and Barnabas are both called apostles.

After fulfilling the work that they were called to do they returned to Antioch and gave a report of all
that the Lord had done.

From there they sailed to Antioch, from which they had been commended to the grace of God for the work that they had accomplished. When they had arrived and gathered the church together, they began to report all things that God had done with them and how He had opened a door of faith to the Gentiles. (Acts 14:26-27 NASB)

This reveals the results of the commissioning Paul and Barnabas:

1. the **purpose** for which the church leaders laid hands on them—commended them to the grace of God;
2. the **outcome** of the work—successfully completed without omissions or failures;
3. the **impact** of their ministry on the Gentiles—an open door of faith.

**Laying On Of Hands To Commission Elders And Deacons**

The scriptures only give us two offices in the local church: elders and deacons.

The commissioning of elders could be placed under the previous purpose of the laying on of hands—commissioning ministers; however, I wanted to keep the church offices together.

While the scriptures don't specifically use the phrase “laying on of hands” in connection with elders, it is a logical assumption.

After they had preached the gospel to that city and had made many disciples, they returned to Lystra and to Iconium and to Antioch, strengthening the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith, and saying, "Through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God." When they had appointed elders for them in every church, having prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed. (Acts 14:21-23 NASB)

As Paul and Barnabas made their trip, they left groups of believers (disciples) behind as they moved on to the next town. As they made their return journey, they visited the groups of disciples and ordained (appointed) elders in each of the towns where they had left the groups of believers.

We can see several principles in these verses:

1. the transition from a group of disciples to a church was the appointment of elders;
2. elders weren't appointed until some time had passed with the group of believers;
3. elders were appointed by the apostles; and
4. when appointed as elders, there was prayer and fasting to commend them to the Lord (this was probably accompanied by the laying on of hands).

The appointment of elders was so important that when Paul couldn't do it in Crete, he left Titus to specifically set things in order and appoint elders in each city (Titus 1:5).
It would appear to me that being without elders leaves a church out of order.

The only example we have in the scriptures of the selection of deacons is in Acts.

Now at this time while the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint arose on the part of the Hellenistic Jews against the native Hebrews, because their widows were being overlooked in the daily serving of food. So the twelve summoned the congregation of the disciples and said, "It is not desirable for us to neglect the word of God in order to serve tables. Therefore, brethren, select from among you seven men of good reputation, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may put in charge of this task. "But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word." The statement found approval with the whole congregation; and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, and Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas and Nicolas, a proselyte from Antioch. And these they brought before the apostles; and after praying, they laid their hands on them. (Acts 6:1-6 NASB)

The deacons were specifically selected to resolve the issue of unequal distribution of help to the different groups of widows. (The word “deacon” comes from a word that means “server of tables”, what we would call a “waiter or waitress”.) They were selected by the group of believers and then confirmed and appointed by the laying on of hands of the elders.

**Warning About Laying On Of Hands**

The scriptures give us a warning about hastily laying hands on people.

Do not lay hands upon anyone too hastily and thereby share responsibility for the sins of others; keep yourself free from sin. (1 Timothy 5:22 NASB)

There are 3 warnings in this verse and I believe the second two are a result of the first.

1. don't lay hands hastily on people;
2. don't be a partaker of other's sins; and
3. keep yourself pure.

Laying on of hands is not just a religious ceremony. It has real spiritual effect. For this to occur then there must be direct spiritual contact. Whenever there is contact between two spirits, there is always the possibility of spiritual harm. That is why we should not be hasty about laying on of hands.

**How to Protect Against Harm**

1. The ministry of laying on of hands should never be exercised lightly or carelessly but with humility and a spirit of prayer.
2. The guidance and direction of the Holy Spirit should be sought at every stage—with whom to pray, when to pray, and how to pray.
3. The one who lays on hands must know how to claim, on behalf of his own spirit, the continual
purifying and protecting power of the blood of Christ.

4. The one who lays on hands must himself be so empowered of the Holy Spirit that he is able to overcome any kind of evil spiritual influence seeking to enter in or through the one on whom hands are laid.