

Laying on of Hands

INTRODUCTION

1. A custom practiced in Bible times was that of "laying on of hands"..
 - a. Observed in Patriarchal times as well as during the Mosaic period
 - b. Administered during the ministry of Jesus as well as during the early church
 2. Questions naturally arise regarding this "custom"..
 - a. What was its purpose?
 - b. Was it just a custom of those times, or does it have a role in the church today?
 3. In He 6:1-2, it is included a part of the "elementary principles of Christ"..
 - a. Along with repentance, faith, baptism, the resurrection and judgment
 - b. Yet one often hears little taught on this subject in some churches
- [Perhaps a good place to start is with a survey of its use as found in the Bible, beginning...]

I. IN THE OLD TESTAMENT A.

IN BESTOWING BLESSINGS...

1. As when Jacob laid hands on his grandsons - Gen 48:14
2. Apparently intended to convey some beneficial virtue (ISBE) - Gen 48:17-20

B. IN OFFERING SACRIFICES...

1. Such as peace offerings, sin offerings, and burnt offerings
 - a. Those practiced on normal occasions - Lev 3:1-2, 8, 13; 4:4
 - b. That practiced at the ordination of the Aaronic priesthood - Lev 8:14, 22
 - b. That practiced at the Levites' dedication - Num 8:12
2. Such as during the annual day of atonement, by the high priest - Lev 16:21
 - a. Laying hands on the head of the live goat (scapegoat)
 - b. Confessing the iniquities of the children of Israel
 - c. On the day of atonement, the laying on of hands involved actual transference of guilt; on other occasions, the practice may have simply implied consecration

C. IN ORDAINING TO SERVICE...

1. As in the inauguration of Joshua - Num 27:18-23
2. Already possessing the Spirit, but who would be given the spirit of wisdom - Num 27:18; cf. Deut 34:9

In this case, one who already demonstrated godliness was blessed further with ability to serve his new role (similar to Ac 6:1-8)

D. IN RELATION TO JUDGMENT...

1. Witnesses were to lay hands on a blasphemer prior to his stoning - Lev 24:14
2. Perhaps to show acceptance of the verdict (ISBE)
 [Remarkably, this is all that is said about "laying on of hands" in the Old Testament. Yet we see its use continued...]

II. IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

A. DURING THE MINISTRY OF JESUS...

1. Blessed children through laying on of hands with prayer – Mt 19:13-15; cf. Mk 10:13-16; Lk 18:15-17
2. Healed people by the laying on of hands
 - a. Raised Jairus' daughter (though He actually "took her by the hand") - Mt 9:18, 25
 - b. A few sick people in Nazareth - Mk 6:5
 - c. All who came to Him in Capernaum - Lk 4:40
 - d. The woman loosed from her infirmity of eighteen years – Lk 13:13

B. IN THE LIFE OF THE EARLY CHURCH...

1. The apostles healed by the laying on of hands
 - a. As foretold by Jesus in giving the Great Commission - Mk 16:15-20
 - b. As described by Luke in the book of Acts - Ac 5:12; 28:8
2. Ananias restored Saul's sight by the laying on of hands - Ac 9:12, 17
3. Spiritual gifts were imparted by the laying on of hands
 - a. E.g., the Samaritans, by Peter and John - Ac 8:14-17
 - b. E.g., the Ephesians, by Paul - Ac 19:6
 - c. E.g., Timothy, by prophecy with the eldership - 1 Ti 4:14
 - d. E.g., Timothy, by Paul - 2 Ti 1:6
4. Appointment or dedication to service was accompanied with the laying on of hands
 - a. By the apostles in appointing the seven to serve tables – Ac 6:1-6
 - b. By prophets and teachers in sending out Paul and Barnabas - Ac 13:1-3
5. Caution was given regarding the laying on of hands
 - a. Which some take to refer to the ordination of elders
 - b. While others take to refer to the restoration of elders - cf. 1 Ti 5:19-21

[To my knowledge, this exhausts what is revealed about "laying on of hands" in the Bible. With this information fresh on our minds, here are some thoughts regarding its use...]

III. IN THE CHURCH TODAY

A. IN SOME RESPECTS, ITS PURPOSE HAS CEASED...

1. There is certainly no need to lay hands on sacrifices as in the Old Testament
 - a. Which sacrifices could not truly remove sin - He 10:1-4
 - b. Which sacrifices came to an end with the sacrifice of Christ - He 10:5-

2. The purpose for miraculous spiritual gifts has been fulfilled

- a. Which was to reveal and confirm the Word - cf. Mk 16:19-20; He 2:3-4
- b. Which was designed to be temporary - cf. 1 Co 13:8-10

B. IN OTHER RESPECTS, ITS SYMBOLISM CAN HAVE MEANING...

1. In ordaining those who serve

- a. Indicating acceptance and approval of those who have been selected by the congregation - cf. Ac 6:1-6; 1 Ti 5:22
- b. Beseeching God's blessing and protection on those who serve - cf. Ac 13:1-3
- c. "...the imposition of hands, accompanied by fasting and prayer, was, in this case, as in that of the seven deacons [Ac 6:6], merely their formal separation to the special work to which they had been called. This, indeed, is sufficiently evident from the context. What they did was doubtless what they had been told to do by the Holy Spirit. But the Holy Spirit simply said to them, 'Separate me Barnabas and Saul to the work to which I have called them.' The fasting, prayer, and imposition of hands was, then, merely their separation to this work. It was a ceremony deemed by infinite wisdom suitable to such a purpose; and, therefore, whenever a congregation has a similar purpose to accomplish, they have, in this case, the judgments and will of God, which should be their guide." - J. W.

McGarvey, commenting on Ac 13:1-3

2. In praying for those who are sick - cf. Ja 5:14-15

- a. Nothing is said about laying on of hands in this passage
- b. But its practice could certainly symbolize the blessing from God for which we pray
- c. "The laying on of hands was accompanied by prayer, the imposition of hands being the outward symbol of the prayer." - Neil R. Lightfoot, commenting on He 6:2

CONCLUSION

1. The Biblical evidence for this practice is rather scarce...

- a. One tendency can be to make more of the practice than God intends
 - b. Another can be to ignore it all together
2. Based upon what the Bible reveals...

a. I believe the practice can have a useful place in the lives of Christians and the church

b. Its rich symbolism can have meaning, if for no other purpose

- 1) In appointing those selected to serve as elders, deacons, etc.
- 2) In praying for those who are sick

In the absence of such a practice, we are likely to adopt other customs which symbolize and convey similar things as did the laying on of hands (e.g., a

handshake, a pat on the back, a hug, a holding of the hands). Why not utilize a Biblical custom to symbolize and convey such things...?

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