

THE TEACHING
LEGACY
 OF DEREK PRINCE

The Laying on of Hands

Imparting blessing, authority and healing

Had it been left merely to human understanding to decide which are the six basic doctrines of the Christian faith, it is quite probable that this doctrine of laying on of hands would never have been included. However, in the last resort, the best commentary on the Bible is the Bible itself. In this teaching letter, we will be examining the aspects of the fourth of these doctrines—the laying on of hands.

What precisely are we to understand by this phrase, “laying on of hands”? It is an act in which one person places his hands upon the body of another person, with some definite spiritual purpose. Normally this act is accompanied either by prayer, a prophetic utterance, or both.

Outside the sphere of religion, this act of laying on of hands is not something strange or foreign to normal human behavior. For example, in some parts of the world, when two men meet who are friends, it is normal for them to lay their hands upon each other's shoulder. This act constitutes an acknowledgment of their friendship and of their pleasure at meeting each other. Or when a mother has a child complaining of a headache or fever, it is quite natural—in fact, almost instinctive—for the mother to place her hand upon her child's brow and in this way soothe or caress the child.

Within the sphere of religion, the practice of laying on of hands may thus be considered as an extension or an adaptation of what is basically a natural human

action. As a religious act, the laying on of hands normally signifies one of three possible things.

First, the person laying on hands may thereby transmit spiritual blessing or authority to the one upon whom hands are laid; second, the person laying on hands may thereby acknowledge publicly some spiritual blessing or authority already received from God by the one upon whom hands are laid; third, the person laying on hands may thereby publicly commit to God for some special task or ministry the one upon whom hands are laid. At times, all these three purposes may be combined in one and the same act of laying on hands.

Two Old Testament Precedents

If we now turn directly to the Bible, we find that the laying on of hands was already an accepted practice in the earliest records of God's people, as provided by the book of Genesis. For instance, in Genesis 48:14 we read how Joseph brought his two sons (Ephraim and



Manasseh) to his father Jacob to receive Jacob's blessing:

Then Israel [Jacob] stretched out his right hand and laid it on Ephraim's head, who was the younger, and his left hand on Manasseh's head, guiding his hands knowingly, for Manasseh was the firstborn.

At first, Joseph thought his father had made a mistake, and he tried to make his father switch his hands, placing the right hand upon the head of Manasseh, the firstborn, and the left hand upon the head of Ephraim, the younger. However, Jacob indicated that he had been conscious of divine guidance in placing his right hand upon Ephraim and his left hand upon Manasseh. With his hands still crossed in this position, he then proceeded to bless the two boys, giving the first and greater blessing to Ephraim and the lesser blessing to Manasseh.

This passage shows plainly that it was an accepted practice that the blessing of Jacob should be transmitted to his two grandsons by laying his hands upon their heads; and, furthermore, that the greater blessing was transmitted through Jacob's right hand and the lesser through his left hand.

For our second example, we read that as Moses came near to the end of his earthly ministry he asked the Lord to appoint a new leader over Israel who should be ready to take Moses' place. The way in which the Lord ordained

for Moses to make provision for this need is recorded in Numbers 27:18–20:

And the LORD said to Moses: "Take Joshua the son of Nun with you, a man in whom is the Spirit, and lay your hands on him; set him before Eleazar the priest and before all the congregation, and inaugurate him in their sight. And you shall give some of your authority to him, that all the congregation of the children of Israel may be obedient."

The way in which Moses carried out this commandment of the Lord is recorded in verses 22 and 23 of the same chapter:

So Moses did as the LORD commanded him. He took Joshua and set him before Eleazar the priest and before all the congregation. And he laid his hands on him and inaugurated him, just as the LORD commanded by the hand of Moses.

The result produced in Joshua is recorded in Deuteronomy 34:9:

Now Joshua the son of Nun was full of the spirit of wisdom, for Moses had laid his hands on him; so the children of Israel heeded him, and did as the LORD had commanded Moses.

From these passages we see that this act of Moses laying his hands upon Joshua was one of great significance both for Joshua individually and for the whole congregation of Israel collectively.

By this divinely ordained act, Moses accomplished two main purposes. First, he transmitted to Joshua a measure of the spiritual wisdom and honor that he had received from God; second, he publicly acknowledged before the whole congregation of Israel God's appointment of Joshua as the leader who was to succeed him.

New Testament Ordinances for Healing

Let us now turn to the New Testament and see what part this ordinance of laying on of hands plays there. We shall find that there are five distinct purposes for which laying on of hands may be used, according to the precepts and examples of the New Testament. They are: the laying on of hands for physical healing, to impart the baptism in the Holy Spirit, for imparting spiritual gifts, for sending out Christian workers from the local church, and for the appointment of deacons or elders.

The first of these purposes (which is the only one we will be looking at in this study) is directly associated with the ministry of physical healing. It is authorized by Jesus Himself in His final commission to His disciples at the close of His earthly ministry, as recorded in Mark 16:17–18. In these verses Jesus appoints five supernatural signs that are to accompany the preaching of the gospel and which may be claimed by all believers through faith in the name of Jesus.

The fifth of these supernatural signs appointed by Jesus is:

“And these signs will follow those who believe: In My name they will . . . lay hands on the sick, and they will recover.”

Here the laying on of hands in the name of Jesus is appointed as a means whereby physical healing may be ministered to those who are sick. Later on in the New Testament, in James 5:14–15, another slightly different ordinance is appointed:

Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise him up. And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven.

The ordinance here appointed is that of anointing the sick with oil in the name of the Lord.

Both of these ordinances alike are effective only through the exercise of faith in the name of the Lord Jesus. In the case of anointing with oil, it is specifically stated that prayer must accompany this act. In the passage about laying hands on the sick in Mark’s gospel, no specific mention is made of prayer. However, in most cases it would be natural to pray for the sick person as well as lay hands on him.

Again, when anointing the sick with oil, it often seems natural—indeed, almost instinctive—to lay hands upon them at the same time.

In this way the two ordinances are combined in one. However, this need not necessarily be so. It is perfectly scriptural to lay hands on the sick without anointing them with oil. Likewise, it is perfectly scriptural to anoint the sick with oil without laying hands on them.

The question naturally arises: Is there any difference in use or purpose between these two ordinances—that is, laying hands on the sick and anointing the sick with oil? Are there times or situations when it is more appropriate to use one ordinance rather than the other? And if so, what are the scriptural principles guiding their use?

For Christians

The passage in the epistle of James about anointing with oil begins with the following words: *“Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church.”* Since the epistle of James is addressed primarily to professing Christians (although among the Jewish people), the phrase *“among you”* would seem to refer mainly to believers. This fits in also with the commandment that immediately follows: *“Let him call for the elders of the church.”*

A person who made no profession of faith and was not associated with a Christian church would not be included in the phrase *“among you”*; nor would such a person know who the church elders were for whom he should send. It would seem

therefore that this ordinance of anointing with oil is intended primarily for those who already profess faith in Christ and are associated with a Christian church.

The second important lesson contained in this passage from the epistle of James is that God expects Christians to associate themselves with a church and that the leaders of this church should be ready to minister in faith, according to the Scripture, to the physical needs of their church members. The phrase, *“Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord”* carries both of these implications: first, that every Christian is associated with a church in such a way that its leaders both know him and are known to him; and second, that these leaders are ready to minister physical healing to its members in faith, according to the ordinances appointed by God for the church.

If we now turn back to the other ordinance of laying hands on the sick, as set forth in Mark 16, we shall see that the context suggests that this ordinance is intended to go together with the preaching of the gospel to the unconverted—that its primary use is therefore for those who are not yet converted or who have newly come to the faith.

We form this conclusion from the fact that this, like the other supernatural signs ordained by Jesus, follows immediately after His commandment to evangelize the whole world, as given to His

disciples in Mark 16:15–17:

And He said to them, "Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature. He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned. And these signs will follow those who believe . . ."

Jesus then goes on immediately to enumerate the five supernatural signs, ending with the healing of the sick through the laying on of hands. This indicates that each one of these supernatural signs, including the healing of the sick, is intended by God to bear testimony to the divine truth and authority of the gospel message in places where this message has not previously been heard.

This is in line with the account of the disciples' evangelistic activity with which Mark's gospel closes—that is, in Mark 16:20:

And they went out and preached everywhere, the Lord working with them and confirming the word through the accompanying signs. Amen.

This indicates that the primary purpose of these supernatural signs—including the healing of the sick through the laying on of hands—is to confirm the truth of the gospel message among people who have not previously accepted it. It seems clear, therefore, that the method of ministering to the sick through laying on of hands in the name of Jesus is primarily intended not for established Christians who

are members of churches, but rather for the unconverted or for those who have newly come to the faith.

In what way will healing come as a result of the laying on of hands? The Scripture does not give any precise or detailed answer to this question. Jesus says merely, "They will lay hands on the sick, and they will recover." In place of the phrase "they will recover," we might translate alternatively, "they will become well," or more simply still, "they will be well."

By these words of Jesus, two things remain within the sovereignty of God: the precise way in which healing will be manifested, and the precise length of time that the process of healing will take. Side by side with this we may set the words of Paul in 1 Corinthians 12:6: "And there are diversities of activities [operations], but it is the same God who works all in all." In this matter of laying hands on the sick, there are what Paul calls "diversities of operation." That is, the process of healing does not always operate in the same way each time.

In one case, the laying on of hands may be a channel through which the supernatural gift of healings operates. In such a case, the person who lays on hands by this act transmits the supernatural healing virtue, or power, of God to the body of the one on whom hands are laid; and very often this latter person actually feels within his own body the supernatural power of God.

Gradual process?

At other times, however, there is no sensation of power at all, but the laying on of hands is simply an act of naked faith and of obedience to God's Word. However, if there is genuine faith, healing will follow even though there may be no dramatic or supernatural experience.

Again, Christ does not specify the length of time that the healing process will take. Sometimes complete healing is received instantly, as soon as hands are laid upon the sick person. At other times, however, healing comes only as a gradual process. In this latter case it is most important that the person seeking healing shall continue to exercise active faith until the process of healing is complete.

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