

The Laying On Of Hands

(Compiled by Paul R. Blake)

Introduction:

- A. The laying on of hands was a custom practiced in all three dispensations of Bible history.
- B. In Hebrews 6:1-2, it is included as a part of the elementary principles of Christ along with repentance, faith, baptism, the resurrection and judgment. It is a Bible matter worthy of examination.
 - 1. What was its purpose?
 - 2. Was it just a custom of those times?
 - 3. Does it have a role in the church today?

I. OLD TESTAMENT

- A. Bestowing blessings
 - 1. Jacob laid hands on his grandsons - Gen. 48:14
 - 2. Apparently intended to represent the communication of some beneficial virtue - Gen 48:17-20
- B. Offering sacrifices
 - 1. Those practiced on normal occasions - Lev. 3:1-2, 8, 13, 4:4
 - 2. Practiced at the ordination of the Aaronic priesthood - Lev. 8:14, 22
 - 3. Practiced at the Levites' dedication - Num. 8:12
 - 4. During the annual day of atonement - Lev. 16:21
 - a. Laying hands on the head of the scapegoat
 - b. Confessing the iniquities of the children of Israel
 - c. On the Day of Atonement, the laying on of hands involved transference of guilt; on other occasions, the practice simply implied consecration.
- C. Ordaining leaders to service
 - 1. The appointment of Joshua - Num. 27:18-23; Deut. 34:9
 - 2. In this case, one who already demonstrated godliness was blessed further with ability to serve his new role.
- D. Rendering judgments
 - 1. Witnesses were to lay hands on a blasphemer prior to stoning to show their acceptance of the verdict - Lev. 24:14

II. NEW TESTAMENT

- A. Ministry of Jesus
 - 1. Blessed children through laying on of hands with prayer
 - a. Matt. 19:13-15; Mark 10:16
 - 2. Healed people by the laying on of hands
 - a. Raised Jairus' daughter - Matt. 9:18, 25
 - b. Sick people in Nazareth - Mark 6:5
 - c. All of the sick that came to Him in Capernaum - Luke 4:40
 - d. The woman loosed from her infirmity of 18 years - Luke 13:13

B. The early church

1. The apostles healed by the laying on of hands.
 - a. Foretold by Jesus in the Great Commission - Mark 16:18
 - b. Described by Luke in the book of Acts - Acts 5:12, 28:8
2. Ananias restored Saul's sight by the laying on of hands - Acts 9:12, 17
3. Spiritual gifts were imparted by the laying on of hands.
 - a. The Samaritans, by Peter and John - Acts 8:14-17
 - b. The Ephesians, by Paul - Acts 19:6
 - c. Timothy, by prophecy with the eldership - 1Tim. 4:14
 - d. Timothy, by Paul - 2Tim. 1:6
4. Appointment or dedication to service by the laying on of hands.
 - a. By the apostles appointing the seven to serve tables - Acts 6:1-6
 - b. By prophets and teachers sending out Paul and Barnabas - Acts 13:2-3
5. Caution was urged regarding the laying on of hands - 1Tim. 5:22
 - a. Laying on hands implied endorsement - 1Tim. 5:19-21

III. IN THE CHURCH TODAY

A. In many respects, its purpose has ceased.

1. There is certainly no need to lay hands on sacrifices as in the OT
 - a. That could not truly remove sin - Heb. 10:1-4
 - b. That came to an end with the sacrifice of Christ - Heb. 10:5-14
2. The purpose for miraculous spiritual gifts has been fulfilled
 - a. To reveal and confirm the Word - Mark 16:19-20; Heb. 2:3-4
 - b. Designed to be temporary - 1Cor. 13:8-10

B. In other respects, its symbolism can have some meaning.

1. In ordaining those who serve indicating acceptance and approval of those who have been selected by the congregation
 - a. Acts 6:1-6; 1Tim. 5:22
2. In beseeching God's blessing and protection on those who serve
 - a. Acts 13:1-3

3. "...The imposition of hands, accompanied by fasting and prayer, was, in this case, as in that of the seven deacons, 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 Acts 13:1-3)

4. In praying for those who are sick - James 5:14-15
 - a. Nothing is said about laying on of hands in this passage, but its practice could certainly symbolize the blessing from God for which we pray.

- b. "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 Heb. 6:2)

Conclusion:

- A. The Biblical evidence for this practice is rather scarce.
 1. One tendency can be to make more of the practice than God intends,
 2. Another can be to ignore it all together.
- B. Based upon what the Bible reveals, it is useful to have some symbol or sign that indicates endorsement and separation for a good work that has as similar a meaning today as laying on of hands did in the first century.
 1. Like the holy kiss and washing of feet, the laying on of hands does not communicate what it did in the first century. However, we have practices that represent the same thing in our time as those things did in their time.
 2. Services for the recognition of appointed elders and deacons
 3. The right hand of fellowship
 4. Holding the hands of those in hospitals
 5. Embracing those who are suffering or sorrowing
- C. Since we still need to endorse good people for good works, and since we must still comfort the sick and sorrowful, let us use the means that speak to these purposes.