

What is the Purpose of ‘The Laying on of Hands’?

by Raymond C. Faircloth

Used as a Symbol

With reference to the ‘laying on of hands’ *The Hastings Dictionary of the Bible* states that:

This is a piece of natural **symbolism** with the central idea that through physical contact the person performing it identifies himself with the other person in the presence of God ... In the New Testament, ...the general idea is always that of blessing, p. 537.

IN THE HEBREW SCRIPTURES

There are many instances recorded in the Hebrew Scriptures of the ‘laying on of hands’ which are used for three different purposes:

1. Identifying with someone or something.
2. Imparting something to someone.
3. Commissioning someone.

1. IDENTIFYING WITH SOMEONE OR SOMETHING

This is the main significance of the laying on of hands in Israel. So when an Israelite laid his hand on the head of his sacrificial animal it signified that he was identified with that sacrifice and the sacrifice identified with him. In Psalm 50:10 God makes it clear that He is not concerned with the animal as such: *“For every beast of the forest is mine, the cattle upon a thousand hills.”* So what was the point of an Israelite bringing an animal sacrifice to offer to Him? Simply put, the **animal substituted for the Israelite**, rather than his becoming a human sacrifice in the way that was carried out by the pagan nations when they offered their children to their gods. By the Israelite’s placing of his hands on the head of the animal and offering a prayer of sacrifice, it served as another way for the Israelite to effectively have said: *“This animal is me because it is me who should be sacrificed and consumed on this altar for my sins.”* This principle of identification is carried through into aspects concerning the sacrifice of Jesus for mankind’s sins.

2. IMPARTING OF A BLESSING

Isaac laid his hands on **his two sons** to bless them.

Jacob laid his hands on **his two grandsons**, Ephraim and Manasseh to bless them.

3. COMMISSIONING SOMEONE

❖ *“And you will bring the Levites before Yahweh, and the **Israelites** will lay their hands on the **Levites**, and Aaron will offer the Levites as a wave offering before Yahweh from the **Israelites**, and they will do the work of Yahweh” (Num. 8:10-11 LEB).*

❖ *“Then Yahweh said to Moses, ‘Take **Joshua** son of Nun, a man in whom is the spirit, and place your hand on him. Have him stand before Eleazar the priest and before the entire community, and *commission him in their sight*. You will give to him from your authority so that the entire community of Israel will *obey him*”’ (Num. 27:18-20 LEB).*

IN THE CHRISTIAN SCRIPTURES

For Imparting a Blessing and physical healing

Jesus laid his hands on those he blessed e.g. the little children (Matt. 19:13-15). Then both Jesus and Paul laid their hands on those who were sick:

- Matthew 8:2-4, 14, 15; 20:34;
- Mark 1:41; 6:5; 5:3; 7:32, 33; 8:23, 25; 16:18
- Luke 4:40; 13:13; 22:50, 51

However, this was not Jesus’ only way for healing. Sometimes he simply touched the ill person, or said a word.

❖ *“It happened that Publius’ father was in bed suffering from fever and dysentery. **Paul** went to him, and praying and *laying his hands on him*, he healed him” (Acts 28:8).*

ANANIAS' LAYING OF HANDS ON PAUL

Jesus later gave Ananias [*also not an apostle*] authority to lay hands on Saul for the purpose of Paul's regaining his sight:

- ❖ “Now there was a disciple at Damascus named Ananias. The Lord said to him in a vision, ‘Ananias.’ And he said, ‘Here I am, Lord.’ And **the Lord said to him**, ‘Rise and go to the street called Straight, and at the house of Judas look for a man of Tarsus named Saul, for behold, he is praying,¹² and he has seen in a vision a man named Ananias come in and *lay his hands on him* so that he **might regain his sight**’ ...¹⁷ So **Ananias** departed and entered the house. And *laying his hands on him* he said, ‘Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus who appeared to you on the road by which you came has sent **me so that you may regain your sight** and be filled with the Holy Spirit.’¹⁸ And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and he regained his sight. Then he rose and **was baptized**;...” (*Acts 9:10-12, 17, 18 ESV*).

Please notice that Paul had already received the spirit as a believer (Eph. 1:13), and that he had been commissioned directly by Jesus. Also that this was a “*laying on of the hands*” before Paul got baptized. So the laying on of hands was so that Paul could recover his sight and then he could get baptized so that he might receive the spirit in the special way to empower him for his mission.

For Imparting the Spirit Immediately after Baptism to Empower for Mission

PETER'S AND JOHN'S IMPARTING OF THE SPIRIT

- ❖ “Even Simon [*the magician*] himself believed and, after being **baptized**, became devoted to **Philip**; and when he saw the **signs and mighty deeds** that were occurring, he was astounded. Now when the apostles in Jerusalem heard that Samaria had accepted the word of God, *they sent them Peter and John* [*both apostles*], who went down and prayed for them, **that they might receive the holy Spirit**, for it had not yet fallen upon any of them; they had only been baptized in the name of the Lord. Then *they laid their hands on them* and they received the holy Spirit. When Simon **saw that the Spirit was conferred** by the laying on of the apostle's hands, he offered them money and said, “Give me **this power** too, so that anybody *upon whom I lay my hands* may receive the holy spirit” (*Acts 8:13-18 NAB*).

Rather than being the Apostle Philip, this Philip was one of the seven chosen by the apostles (Acts 21:8). He had received the gifts of the spirit when the apostles had laid their hands upon him (Acts 6:3, 5, 6). But why did these Samaritans not receive holy spirit until two apostles had prayed and laid their hands on them?

USE OF SECOND KEY OF THE KINGDOM

Jesus had given Peter “**the keys of the kingdom of heaven**” (Matt. 16:19) and later Jesus showed what the occasions would be for their use: “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea (*Jews*) and Samaria (*Samaritans*), and to the end of the earth (*Gentiles*)” (*Acts 1:8 ESV*).

So after Philip's initial work he now **deferred to Peter**, as the holder of the second figurative key (see NOTE 1) and as representative of the apostles, so that now holy spirit could be poured out on the Samaritan believers and thereby opening the Samaritan door with the Kingdom key. However, these Samaritans were really saved when they believed Philip and did really receive the holy spirit at the time of conversion when they were regenerated, but were only empowered with special gifts of holy spirit when the apostles Peter and John laid their hands on them. (see NOTE 2).

NOTE 1: Peter was the leading spokesman at: (1) Pentecost to welcome the Jews into Christianity, and (3) later at the home of Cornelius to open the door for the Gentiles.

NOTE 2: The 7 chosen men (Acts 6:3, 5, 6) already were “full of the Spirit” before the apostles laid their hands on them. So the laying on of hands empowered them with the powerful “gifts of the spirit.”

PAUL'S IMPARTING OF THE SPIRIT

- ❖ “On hearing this, they were **baptized** in the name of the Lord Jesus. And when **Paul** had *laid his hands on them* (*the 12 in Ephesus*), the Holy Spirit came on them, and they began to speak with [other] languages and to prophesy. Now there were about 12 men in all” (*Acts 19:5-7 HCSB*)

REGARDING TIMOTHY

- ❖ “Do not neglect your gift, which was given you through a prophetic message when the **body of elders** *laid their hands on you* [*Timothy*]” (*1Tim. 4:14 NIV*).
- ❖ “For this reason I [**Paul**] remind you [*Timothy*] to fan into flame the gift of God, which is in you through the *laying on of my hands*” (*2Tim. 1:6*).

These two comments about Timothy seem to refer to the same event when Timothy received “the gift of God” and so this would be a case of an apostle leading a body of elders in the *laying on of hands* so that Timothy would have been empowered for the mission ahead with Paul.

For Commissioning and Empowering of Baptized Individuals to Services

- ❖ “Therefore, brothers, select from among you seven men of good reputation, **full of the Spirit** and wisdom, whom we can appoint to this duty ... So they chose *Stephen*, a man **full of faith** and the **Holy Spirit**, and *Philip*, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolaus, a proselyte from Antioch. They had them stand before **the apostles**, who prayed and *laid their hands on them*” (*Acts 6:3, 5-6*).
- ❖ In Antioch “as they were ministering to the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, ‘Set apart for Me **Barnabas and Saul** for the work that I have called them to.’”³ Then, after they [**the prophets and teachers**] had fasted, prayed, and *laid hands on them*, they sent them off” (*Acts 13:2, 3*).
- ❖ “When they [**Paul and Barnabas**] had appointed **elders** in every church and prayed with fasting, they committed them to the Lord in whom they had believed” (*Acts 14:23*).
- ❖ **Timothy** “Do not be hasty in the *laying on of hands* [for appointment], and do not share in the sins of others” (*1Tim. 5:22*).

This was written some time between 62 and 64 AD showing that “laying on of hands” was still practiced up to that time, at least for appointment of elders.

SUMMARY

Those who laid hands on others **to impart the spirit** were always:

- Of the 12 apostles (mainly Peter using the keys of the Kingdom).
- The apostle Paul. (and along with the body of elders in Timothy’s case).

Those who laid hands on others to **heal** or to **set apart for a mission** were:

- Ananias who was directed by “the Lord” to do so.
- The brothers [*probably elders*] in Antioch who set Paul and Barnabas aside for the work

So the laying on of hands was performed only by those **given authority**.

Moving On from the Basics

In about AD 68 the writer to the Hebrews stated the following:

- ❖ “Therefore, **leaving the** elementary message about the Messiah, let us go on to maturity, not laying again **the foundation of repentance from dead works, faith in God**, teaching about ritual washings, *laying on of hands*, the resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment” (*Heb. 6:1-2 HCSB*).

The writer here does not mean that these things are no longer to be believed or practiced, but simply that a Christian cannot stand still in his progress. Furthermore, in his *Epistle To The Hebrews* F.F. Bruce commented that:

We are given some insight into what was regarded as a suitable foundation of Christian teaching in a non-Pauline church, and one which had a Jewish basis. When we consider the “rudiments” one by one, it is remarkable how little in the list is distinctive of Christianity, for practically every item could have its place in a fairly orthodox Jewish community. Each of them, indeed, acquires a new significance in a Christian context; but the impression we get is that existing Jewish beliefs and practices were used as a foundation on which to build Christian truth. *The New International Commentary on the New Testament*, p. 139.