



The Foundations – The Laying On of Hands

Introduction

Therefore, leaving the discussion of the elementary principles of Christ, let us go on to perfection... And this we will do if God permits. For it is impossible for those who were once enlightened, and have tasted the heavenly gift, and have become partakers of the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come, if they fall away, to renew them again to repentance, since they crucify again for themselves the Son of God, and put Him to an open shame.
Hebrews 6:1-6

Having come halfway through the elementary principles – to this matter of laying on of hands – it seems a good time to recognize that the writer of Hebrews was guided by the Holy Spirit to write in a particular and orderly way.

It is for very good reason that the encouragement to move beyond the elementary principles is followed by a warning. In it, he is saying, “Move on! Otherwise, you are endangering your very salvation. Move on, or you risk falling away, and becoming impossibly lost.”

This begs the questions: Why aren’t these principles taught regularly from every church pulpit? Why aren’t they a part of every new member orientation? Do we – Pastors and Elders – understand and believe God’s warning here?

Furthermore, it should be noted that every follower of Jesus Christ is commissioned to make disciples. Shouldn’t we be careful to begin with the elementary principles? Is there a better place to start in the establishment of a strong foundation?

This issue of foundation building is a critical one for the Western church. Consider this for a moment: One of the largest denominations in the United States has neglected or ignored at least two of the six elementary principles. I know because that denomination is where I spent what were supposed to be the formative years of my walk with Christ.

Statistically speaking, that denomination has increased, by thirty-three percent, the probability of their members falling away into eternal damnation! And that’s assuming the other four principles are taught correctly, and in their fullness.

Perhaps this is not an issue in your church fellowship and denomination. If so, you are a rare and blessed exception.

The laying on of hands was one of the principles ignored by the denomination I grew up in. Strangely, that didn’t keep people from doing it. I know they meant well, but I still wonder if they knew God’s purpose in the practice. Were they just mimicking what they had seen others do? Did they know that there were reasons not to lay hands on another; and not to allow another to lay hands on them?

Practicing the principles of God without adequate understanding and faith in God’s work through them is, at best, detrimental to the outcome. Attempting to wield God’s power in a careless and presumptuous way is supernaturally dangerous to all involved (e.g., the sons of Sceva). We must become careful, and prayerful.

It is no coincidence that you are reading this now. God has a purpose in it for you. He is stirring up the desire in your heart to know – and make known – this lost foundational truth. So, let’s take a look at what He has to say about the laying on of hands.

Passing on Authority

And the Lord said to Moses: “Take Joshua the son of Nun with you, a man in whom is the Spirit, and lay your hand on him; set him before Eleazar the priest and before all the congregation, and inaugurate him in their sight.” Number 27:18-19

When I was ordained as an elder for my church, my pastor and another elder laid their hands on me, praying for the anointing of God for my service to His body. In doing so, the physical act produced a spiritual outcome: God’s authority and power were delegated (*exousia*) to me. Before this occurred, great care and much prayer were invested to make sure God’s will was being accomplished in the laying on of their hands.

The laying on of hands, for the passing on of authority, should occur – with the same care – for every Biblically recognized office in the church: Elder, deacon, apostle, prophet, evangelist, pastor, and teacher.

Furthermore, a case could also be made for the laying on of hands with every believer. We are, after all, kings and priests, commissioned disciple makers and ambassadors of reconciliation. We find such an example in the confirmation and commissioning practiced in missional work of the early church.

Confirmation and Commissioning

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. So, being sent out by the Holy Spirit, they went down to Seleucia and from there they sailed to Cyprus. Acts 13:1-4

Barnabus and Saul (aka, Paul) did not set out on their mission trips on a whim. They were both confirmed and commissioned through the process of laying on of hands. Notice that this process included “ministering to the Lord”, fasting and prayer. Great care was taken by those who would lay hands on them. We will discuss this in more detail later in this article.

Bestowing the Holy Spirit

Then they laid hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit. Acts 8:17

And Ananias went his way and entered the house; and laying his hands on him he said, “Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as you came, has sent me that you may receive your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit. Acts 9:17

While the laying on of hands is not the only way to impart the Holy Spirit (see John 20:22), these passages warrant our serious consideration. Were these exceptional situations, or examples that should be uniformly followed? My first inclination is to assume the former. However, given the lack of Holy Spirit power, gifts and fruit in the church today, I find myself leaning toward the laying on of hands for the bestowing of the Holy Spirit for everyone in my fellowship.

Bestowing Spiritual Gifts

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. 1Timothy 4:14

For this reason I remind you to kindle afresh the gift of God which is in you through the laying on of my hands. For God has not given us a spirit of timidity, but of power and love and discipline.

2Timothy 1:6-7

It was most likely during Timothy's ordination as an elder in the church that the presbytery prophetically bestowed the gifting he was to exercise in his duties as a leader in Ephesus. It is important to note that the bestowing also included the necessary power, love and discipline to lead.

Some may argue that this gift was the Holy Spirit; others, that it was a particular gift or gifts (e.g., prophecy, healing, and teaching). My experience has been the latter. I keep the list of gifts prophetically uttered over me in my Bible, near this very verse. I also remind myself that these gifts have been given for the body of Christ, not for my own profit (1Corinthians 12:7).

Healing

In the account of Acts 9:17, Paul was not only given the Holy Spirit; his sight was returned to him. He was healed by the laying on of Ananias' hands. Of course, he was not the only one healed in this way.

And behold, one of the rulers of the synagogue came, Jairus by name. And when he saw Him, he fell at His feet and begged Him earnestly, saying, "My little daughter lies at the point of death. Come and lay Your hands on her, that she may be healed, and she will live." Mark 5:22-23

And these signs will follow those who believe: In My name they will cast out demons; they will speak with new tongues; they will take up serpents; and if they drink anything deadly, it will by no means hurt them; they will lay hands on the sick, and they will recover. Mark 16:18

The laying on of hands for healing may be the most common expression of this principle. Though it has not been taught, somehow we know that the laying on of hands is an important part of our prayers for healing. In this case, action without teaching, prayer and careful consideration can leave us exposed to spiritually dangerous forces.

Be Careful in Laying on of Hands

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

The laying on of hands is not a symbolic performance. It is a spiritual act that engages the spiritual realm; both good and evil. There is a spiritual transference that occurs. Positively, this transference takes the form of the Holy Spirit and His gifting, healing, and authority for ministry. Most do not realize that evil can also be transferred.

In this verse, the responsibility for the sins of others can be shared – presumably to the one that is laying on their hands. Similarly, if you are laying on hands without God's purpose and direction, you may "get" something – an evil spirit may use your carelessness as a gateway to a foothold of oppression in your life.

This is a mystery to me – I cannot explain how this happens. The spiritual realm is, many times, beyond our understanding; and we should not have a spirit of timidity. However, this passage should give us pause; to pray – and even fast – before laying hands on someone for any reason.

Conclusion

As mentioned previously in this article, I was not raised in a stream or denomination that taught or practiced the laying on of hands. Consequently, it is possible that I have missed something significant in regards to this

elementary principle. I hope that you will not allow my limited understanding to distract you from seeking the truth for yourself, and your fellowship, regarding the importance of this practice.

And a practice it must be. The laying on of hands is something we must exercise for the principle to be effectual in the life of the church.

Working It Out

As it is with all of the elementary principles, the leadership of each church fellowship must come to terms with the meaning and application of the laying on of hands. It is morally negligent to ignore the importance of such an effectual practice. If we cannot understand, believe and apply the elementary principles, how can we hope to move on to perfection?

1. Determine, with your leadership team, what the Holy Spirit is revealing to you about the laying on of hands for your fellowship.
2. Teach the laying on of hands (and the other elementary principles).
3. If you have not already done so, develop the practice of relational prayer with God. Learn to hear the voice of the Lord for the laying on of hands. A good starting point: *The PAPA Prayer*, by Larry Crabb.

These assignments are directed at the leadership of church fellowships. However, there is a personal application for every follower of Jesus Christ.

If the Lord has impressed you to receive something that God offers through the laying on of hands, you should seek His direction for that blessing. Hopefully, one of your pastors or elders will be able to help you. If not, ask the Lord to send someone that will; remembering that the laying on of hands must be done with caution and much prayer.

Recommended Reading

The following are some of my favorite books on this subject. Most can be found at your local Christian book store, or at one of the many online distributors.

The Laying On of Hands; T. Austin Sparks

Laying On Hands (Foundation Series Book V); Derek Prince

Now may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Humbly Yours and Forever His,

Rob