

Ordination And Installation in The Scriptures

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Ordination has been a controversial topic throughout church history. It remains so today. Who should be ordained: pastors? professors? teachers? deacons? elders? deaconesses? Who ordains: bishops? pastors? congregations? What is ordination? Is laying on of hands an essential part of ordination? What does ordination mean? What does it give?

This article will not answer all these questions or trace the answers which have been given throughout church history. It has a much more limited aim. It will provide a foundation for further discussion by gathering the scriptural information about "ordination" and other ceremonies through which individuals entered various forms of public ministry in the Bible. It will also direct special attention to the role of "laying on of hands" in Scripture.

The Term "Ordain"

There are no biblical words which correspond closely to the English words "ordain" or "ordination." The King James Version used the word "ordain" as a translation for ten different Hebrew verbs and thirteen different Greek verbs (see Young's concordance). Some of these verbs refer to appointment to office, both in the Old and New Testaments; others refer to acts of God's providence, as in the hymn, "What God Ordains Is Always Good."

The NIV uses "ordination" as a term for entry into an office of ministry only in the case of the Aaronic priests (except for the "ordination" of the guardian cherub in Ezekiel 28:14). The NIV does not use this term in connection with any New Testament office.

Entry Into Office in the Old Testament

Melchizedek

The first priest we meet in Scripture is Melchizedek. He was appointed as a priest of the most High God. We know nothing more about how he entered his office. Note that priesthood existed before the earliest biblical accounts concerning a ceremony for entering into the office of priest.

Aaron and the priests

Aaron and his sons were "ordained" to the priesthood. This ceremony is described in detail in Exodus 29 and Leviticus 8 and 9. The Hebrew expression rendered "ordain" is "fill the hand" (מָלֵא יָדַי). "Ordination" is מְלִאָּה, literally "fillings." These terms seem to refer to the handing over of the duties of the priesthood to those who had been chosen by God. Their duties were now "placed into their hands." The terms thus have the same connotation as our English term "installation." Leviticus 16:32 and 21:10 imply that successors to the office of high priest were also "ordained." Priests were also "consecrated" (שָׁדַד, Ex 29:1, Lv 8:10-12) and "appointed" (מָסַד) to the priesthood (Nu 3:10) and to specific tasks (Nu 3:32,36).

As part of their rite of ordination Aaron and his sons were washed, dressed with special clothing, anointed with oil, and daubed with blood. Special offerings were made for them, and they ate a special meal. There is no record that they received any laying on of hands. Their ordination/installation was validated by God when the glory of the LORD appeared, and fire from heaven burned up the offerings.

The Levites

The main account of the installation of the first Levites is in Numbers 8. The Levites were not "ordained" (that is, the term *מִלֵּא* is not applied to them). They were "appointed" (*פָּקַד*, Nu 1:50) and "consecrated" (*שָׁדַד*). They were purified (*טָהַר*, Nu 8:7) by washing with water. The people of Israel laid their hands on the Levites to transfer their duties to them (Nu 8:10). The Levites were then presented (*נָתַן*) to the LORD as a substitute for the first-born Israelites. Since the successors of the first Levites were born to their office, it was not necessary that this rite be repeated with each generation of Levites when they took up their duties at age 25. We do not know if any ceremony marked the entry into service of successive generations of Levites.

Joshua

Joshua received the laying on of hands when he was installed as Moses' successor (Nu 27:18, Dt 34:9). He was not a priest or Levite (Nu 13:8). He already had the Spirit before the laying on of hands (Nu 27:18), so the laying on of hands was primarily to signify the transfer of Moses' authority to him (Nu 27:20). However, an increase in the Spirit of wisdom is also attributed to the laying on of Moses' hands (Dt 34:9). Joshua's installation is also called a "commissioning" (*צִוָּה*, Nu 27:19,23).

Other leaders

Other leaders of various types were appointed during the Old Testament. Appointed officials included judges (Ex 18:21), artisans (Ex 31:6), tribal leaders or elders (Nu 34:18 1:16), army commanders (Dt 20:9), and kings (Dt 17:15). There is no record that they received laying on of hands. Prophets and kings were anointed just as the priests were.

Among the verbs used to describe such appointment were: call—*קָרָא*, appoint—*פָּקַד*, make—*עָשָׂה*, establish—*כִּוֵּן*, command—*צִוָּה*, set—*שָׂם*, and give—*נָתַן*. Note especially the verb *קָרָא*, which is parallel to our term "called." The tribal leaders of Israel were "called" (Nu 1:16).

In the New Testament

Apostles

The apostles were "made" (*ἐποίησεν*) by Christ (Mk 3:13-16). The KJV translated *ἐποίησεν* "ordained," but the NIV's "appointed" is more accurate. The NIV's inclusion of the words "designating them apostles" in Mark 3:14 is debatable since most Greek manuscripts do not have these words. The UBS and the NIV include these words because *א* and *Β* have them. The majority reading is "He appointed twelve, that they might be with him and that he might send them out to preach."

Luke 6:13 is the most precise statement of the apostles' calling. Literally translated, it says, "He summoned his disciples and having chosen from them twelve, whom he also named apostles." Luke separates the commissioning of the Twelve (Lk 9:1) from his account of their calling.

In Matthew 10:1 Jesus simply calls twelve disciples to him, gives them authority, and sends them. There is no record in any of these accounts that the apostles received a laying on of hands. At a later time when he gave them authority to forgive sins, Jesus breathed on them (Jn 20:22). The twelve were already disciples before Jesus called them as apostles.

The Seventy

Jesus appointed or presented (*ἀπέδειξεν*) seventy [two] other disciples to go out as missionaries, but there is no record of a specific ceremony or rite (Lk 10:1).

Other leaders

Acts 1

When a replacement was needed for Judas, the congregation nominated (ἔστησαν) two qualified candidates, prayed over them, and, by casting lots (ἔδωκεν κλήρους), left the final choice up to the Lord. No ceremony of ordination or installation is reported.

Acts 6

Seven "deacons" were chosen (ἐπισκέψασθε/ἐξελέξαντο) by the congregation and presented to the apostles, who appointed them (or turned over responsibility to them) (καταστήσομεν), prayed over them, and laid their hands on them (ἐπέθηκαν τὰς χεῖρας). The deacons' duties were not in the ministry of the Word, but in administration of the congregation's charity work.

Acts 9

After Paul was called by Jesus on the road to Damascus, he received laying on of hands from Ananias, but it is unclear if this was a sign of his entry into his office of apostle. The text connects the laying on of hands with healing from his blindness and receiving of the Holy Spirit.

Acts 13

At the direction of the Holy Spirit, Paul and Barnabas were set apart (ἀφορίσατε) for their missionary journey by the congregation at Antioch or by its prophets and teachers. After fasting and prayer, the prophets or the members of the congregation laid their hands on Paul and Barnabas and sent them on their way. It is not clear which of the actions during the commissioning were carried out by the congregation and which were done only by the prophets.

Acts 14:23

Paul and Barnabas appointed (χειροτονήσαντες) elders for each church and, with prayer and fasting, committed them to the Lord, in whom they had put their trust.

χειροτονέω means to elect by a show of hands, to elect, or simply to choose. It is not the New Testament term for "laying on of hands."

Titus. 1:5

Paul left Titus in Crete to straighten out what was left unfinished (ἐπιδιορθώση τὰ λείποντα) and appoint (καταστήσης) elders in every town. The respective roles of Titus and the congregations in this process are not specified.

Acts 15:22

The apostles and elders, with the whole church, decided to choose (ἐκλεξαμένους) some of their own men and send them to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas. They chose Judas (called Barsabbas) and Silas, two men who were leaders among the brothers. Note that the role of the congregation in choosing the delegates is specifically mentioned.

2 Corinthians 8:19

A brother was chosen (χειροτονηθείς) by the churches to accompany Paul's group as they carried the offering to Jerusalem. The role of the congregation is again explicit.

Summary

We have looked at elections and installations to various offices. We have seen that sometimes laying on of hands was associated with these rites. At other times it was not. Now we need to examine the practice of laying on hands in more detail.

The Laying On of Hands In the Old Testament

In the Old Testament the laying on of hands was associated with blessing (Ge 48:14 et al.), with the transfer of guilt to a sacrifice (Lv 4:4 et al.), and with the imputation of guilt to a blasphemer condemned to death (Lev 24:14). When the act is associated with blessing, the Hebrew verb is תָּשַׁב or שָׁב . When the transfer of guilt is involved, the verb is שָׁמַט .

The Levites and Joshua received laying on of hands at their installations. The Hebrew verb is שָׁמַט , implying that the transfer of responsibility is the main implication of the laying on of hands.

In the New Testament

The laying on of hands ($\text{\epsilon}\pi\iota\theta\epsilon\acute{\iota}\nu\alpha\iota \chi\epsilon\acute{\iota}\rho\alpha\varsigma$) is referred to twenty-four times in the New Testament. Fifteen of these occurrences are associated with healing acts by Jesus or the apostles (Mk 5:23, 8:23; Lk 4:40) or the giving of a blessing (Mk 10:16, Mt 19:13). Jesus could, of course, heal without laying on of hands, indeed without being present. On one occasion he declined a request to heal by laying on of hands (Mk 7:32). Instead he privately touched the man's tongue and ears, put spit on him, and healed him. For Jesus the laying on of hands was often a way of displaying his healing power, but he was in no way tied to this method.

In two cases the laying on of hands was associated with giving gifts of the Spirit to new converts. Peter and John placed their hands on the Samaritans, and they received the Holy Spirit (Ac 8:17). When Paul placed his hands on the Ephesians, the Holy Spirit came on them, and they spoke in tongues and prophesied (Ac 19:6).

This leaves seven instances of laying on of hands which have been associated with ordination.

"They presented these men to the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them" (Ac 6:6). This laying on of hands is associated with entry into church office, but the men who received the laying on of hands were not ministers of the Word, but "lay-workers" of the church, so this incident cannot be associated with our concept of ordination, which traditionally has been limited to pastors and, at times, other ministers of the Word.

"So after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off" (Ac 13:3). Paul was already an apostle, and he and Barnabas were already pastors of a congregation before this rite, so it is more like our "installation" or "commissioning" than our "ordination."

"Then Ananias went to the house and entered it. Placing his hands on Saul, he said, 'Brother Saul, the Lord—Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as you were coming here—has sent me so that you may see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit'" (Ac 9:17). It is not clear if this laying on of hands is associated with bestowal of office. It seems very unlikely that it is, since Paul stresses that he did not receive his apostolic office from any man (Ga 1 & 2). This leaves healing and the giving of the Spirit as the main functions of this act.

"Do not be hasty in the laying on of hands, and do not share in the sins of others. Keep yourself pure" (1 Tm 5:22). This could refer to ordination/installation, but it could also refer to absolution or reception of new

members (i.e. our confirmation). It thus provides no specific information about ordination, other than that it was likely accompanied by laying on of hands.

"Do not neglect your gift, which was given you through a prophetic message when the body of elders laid their hands on you" (1 Tm 4:14). This appears to be the only passage in the New Testament which makes an unambiguous connection between the laying on of hands and ordination. The laying on of hands was done by the elders, which may be a group of pastors, but which may also approximate our church council. The gift Timothy receives is most likely his pastoral office. It was given by means of (διὰ) a prophetic message at the time when (μετὰ) the elders laid their hands on Timothy.

"I remind you to fan into flame the gift of God, which is in you through the laying on of my hands" (2 Tm 1:6). This could refer to Timothy's ordination, but it seems more likely that this passage is parallel to Acts 8 and 19 in which the apostles give special gifts of the Spirit to converts. Here the agent is different than in the preceding passage (Paul, not the elders). The function of the laying on of hands is also different (here it is a means [διὰ] of bestowing gifts; there it is symbolic accompaniment [μετὰ] of a prophetic message).

"Let us not lay again the foundation of...instruction about baptisms, the laying on of hands, the resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment" (He 6:2). Everything in this list seems to have been part of the Hebrews' pre-Christian experience in Judaism. The "baptisms" are probably the ceremonial washings associated with cleansing and forgiveness. The "laying on of hands" then refers to the transfer of guilt to the sacrificial victim. At any rate there is no clear connection of this verse with ordination.

This is the scriptural evidence for ordination. What answers does it provide to some of the key questions?

What is ordination?

Scripture gives no definition of ordination. Nor is there any scriptural word which corresponds to the English term "ordination." Nor is there any systematic description of a rite for entry into the public ministry of the Word. There is no scriptural command that ordination be observed as a rite marking entry into the pastoral ministry. (It is, of course, a scriptural principle that no one should serve in the public ministry without being properly called.)

Who should be ordained?

Scripture gives no command concerning the ordination of any New Testament ministers of the Word. The Old Testament priests received an ordination of sorts. The Levites received a similar rite, which was simpler and was called by a different name. The installation of Joshua as political and military leader bore some similarities to the consecration of Levites, as did the anointing of kings and prophets.

In the New Testament historical books there is no record of an ordination for any New Testament ministers except the deacons of Acts 6, who were not ministers of the Word. Paul and Barnabas received an installation before their first missionary journey. Timothy received an "ordination/installation" of some sort from the elders. The time of this rite is not specified.

Who ordains: bishops? pastors? congregations?

Moses ordained/installed the priests and the Levites. He installed Joshua into his office. The people laid their hands on the Levites at their consecration. Either the prophets and teachers of the congregation at Antioch or the members of the congregation laid their hands on Paul and Barnabas. The Jerusalem congregation chose the first deacons and presented them to the apostles, who laid their hands on them. The elders of the church laid their hands on Timothy. On some occasion Paul also laid hands on Timothy. Titus took the lead in providing pastors for the congregations in Crete, as Paul and Barnabas had done in Galatia.

Is laying on of hands an essential part of ordination?

There is no such command; nor is there even clear precedent for making it a universal custom.

Laying on of hands was received by the Levites, by Joshua, by Paul on two occasions (once with Barnabas), by the "deacons" in Acts 6, and by Timothy.

What does the laying on of hands give?

Joshua received a transfer of prestige and authority and an increase of the Spirit from Moses. The Levites received a transfer of duty from the people of Israel. The deacons received a transfer of responsibility from the apostles (it appears that they had the gifts of the Spirit before this laying on of hands). It is interesting that in these three cases the person or persons whose responsibility was being transferred did the laying on of hands, but it would be hazardous to draw sweeping conclusions from this limited evidence. Timothy received a gift through a prophetic message when the elders laid hands on him. He received a gift through Paul's laying his hands on him. The Samaritans and others received spiritual gifts when the apostles laid their hands on them. The laying on of hands was also associated with acts of healing, blessing, and cursing.

There is, however, no scriptural statement that commands the ordination of pastors and other ministers as a rite through which they receive special gifts upon their entry into the ministry.

Summary

Ordination is not commanded in Scripture. The church is free to use the custom of laying on of hands in connection with a man's entering the public ministry for the first time, as well as for his entering into a specific calling within the public ministry. In Scripture such ceremonies are not limited to what we would call the pastoral ministry.