

Chapter 8

The Laying on of Hands

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The fourth chapter of *Women in Ministry* dealing with ministry in the Bible concentrates on the laying on of hands.¹ The author of the chapter presents a thorough study of the biblical meaning of laying on of hands. In view of a common notion that the laying on of hands is nothing more than a gesture, the author shows from the Old and New Testaments the important symbolic meaning of the laying on of hands and demonstrates that it is central to the ordination service.

The intended result of the hands-laying, he points out, had to do with “obedience.” The man who received the laying on of hands “was to obey the voice of God in his leadership,” while the people “were to obey him.”²

In his conclusion, the author discusses the connection between the laying on of hands and ordination to the ministry. Here he raises the question whether women should receive the laying on of hands. His immediate reply is, “Most definitely. The withholding of the laying on of hands may well be a refusal to recognize heaven’s call and the individual’s appropriately positive response.”³ “Furthermore,” he adds, “to place a woman in the position of pastor or elder is to affirm that she is indeed called by God to ministry. Without the laying on of hands, she lacks an important biblical authorization to fulfill her responsibilities. Laying on of hands identifies her before the congregation as its minister, sets her apart from the congregation, empowers her to be a representative of the congregation, and appoints her to office.”⁴ He ends his appeal by asserting, “If the gesture is important at all, it should be equally important to pastors of both genders.”⁵

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The Laying on of Hands and the Office of an Elder or Minister

The author has limited his study of the laying on of hands only to the act itself and its significance. But the act of laying on of hands in ordination is part of the process of setting someone apart to a certain mission or office. The author does not discuss whether it is biblical to appoint a woman to the office of an elder or minister. He simply takes it for granted that it is biblical. Unfortunately, one cannot simply assume that this is correct, as the present volume shows. This means that, despite its helpful information about the laying on of hands, the author's study is not useful in determining whether women may legitimately officiate as ministers.

One does not get the whole biblical picture of the laying on of hands in ordination until one studies the matter in the light of *officiation*, which is the act of setting apart a person to a specific office. This is the area where current disagreements on women's ordination to the office of elder and minister come to a head. Therefore, any study of laying on of hands in ordination must take into consideration the crucial question: "Ordination to what office or function?" Studies and research neglecting to address this point cannot claim to reveal the biblical meaning of the laying on of hands for the issues now facing the church.

The author's chapter, therefore, is only a partial study that provides partial answers. He needed to address the question of what the biblical roles or functions of men and women mean for the laying on of hands. Although the chapter brings out some meaningful thoughts on the action of the laying on of hands, the fact that it does not deal with the legitimacy of appointing women to the New Testament offices of church leadership that are set aside for qualified men (1 Tim 3:1-7 and Titus 1:5-9) leads to serious errors of judgment.

Again we see the unfortunate results when an author makes a selective use of Scripture on a particular topic. By contrast, Adventists have always advocated withholding judgment and conclusions until all texts that have any bearing on a particular subject have been consulted. Before making a strong recommendation for women's ordination, the author should have explained how the passages in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1 that are publicly read during the laying on of hands ceremony for elders and ministers can be applied to women.

The Meaning of the Laying on of Hands

Much has been written on the meaning of ordination and the laying on of hands. Some have suggested that ordination bestows on a person special spiritual gifts and powers originally only given to the apostles, while others see ordination simply as an act affirming persons in the work they are already involved in. It will be helpful to investigate what Ellen White has said on this subject.

Mrs. White illustrated the meaning and importance of ordination when she discussed the ordination of Paul and Barnabas. Before their ordination both men "had already received their commission from God Himself."⁶ Their work had been

abundantly blessed. Yet they had not yet been “formally ordained to the gospel ministry.”⁷ Now they had reached a point in their Christian experience when God was to give them further responsibilities, in the execution of which “they would need every advantage that could be obtained through the agency of the church.”⁸

With fasting and prayer and laying on of hands by the “ministers” of the church of Antioch, Paul and Barnabas were “solemnly dedicated to God.”⁹ By this action the ministers “asked God to bestow His blessings upon the chosen apostles in their devotion to the specific work to which they had been appointed.”¹⁰

The result of this action were far-reaching. Now “they were authorized by the church, not only to teach the truth, but to perform the rite of baptism and to organize churches, being invested with full ecclesiastical authority.”¹¹ This act of ordination, Mrs. White said, was “a public recognition of their divine appointment.”¹²

Did this ordination ceremony bestow special virtues on Paul and Barnabas? Mrs. White stated that “there is no record indicating that any virtue was imparted by the mere act of laying on of hands.”¹³ She explained that “the ceremony of the laying on of hands added no new grace or virtual qualification. It was an acknowledged form of designation to an appointed office and a recognition of one’s authority in that office. By it the seal of the church was set upon the work of God.”¹⁴

The understanding that ordination, setting one apart by the laying on of hands, is the church’s recognition of individuals to perform certain functions for the church suggests that, within the guidelines set by Scripture, both men and women may be set apart by the laying on of hands to perform certain functions. With this understanding, Ellen White had no difficulty in recommending that women be set apart by the laying on of hands. She wrote about the part-time work of some laywomen:

“Women who are willing to consecrate some of their time to the service of the Lord should be appointed to visit the sick, look after the young, and minister to the necessities of the poor. They should be set apart to this work by prayer and laying on of hands. In some cases they will need to counsel with the church officers or the minister; but if they are devoted women, maintaining a vital connection with God, they will be a power for good in the church.”¹⁵

Since, through an act of consecration (“the laying on of hands”), both male and female can be authoritatively appointed or commissioned to perform certain specific functions, the debate over women’s ordination is not whether women can or cannot be ordained in this sense. Both men and women may be commissioned to do certain assigned tasks on behalf of the church.

The key issue to be addressed is whether, among the varied ministries of the church, women may legitimately be appointed or commissioned through ordination to perform the leadership functions of elders or ministers. Can the church ordain a woman to the leadership office of elder or minister and be in harmony with Scripture?

“Women Elders” and “Women Ministers”?

When it comes to selecting church elders and ministers, Mrs. White specifically stated the necessity of following the Bible requirements and not to rush *men* into the office of elder or minister (1 Tim 5:22). The candidates for this office must have proven that they are mature and fully qualified. She urged that the “Bible rule” should be followed in the ordination process so that it is clear that the men selected to be ordained are fit for this office.

Commenting on the selection of church leaders, she said: “Set in order the things that are wanting, and ordain elders in every city, as I had appointed thee: if any be blameless, the husband of one wife, having faithful children not accused of riot or unruly. For a bishop must be blameless, as the steward of God.” (Titus 1:5-7) She stressed, “It would be well for all our ministers to give heed to these words and not to hurry men into office without due consideration and much prayer that God would designate by His Holy Spirit whom He will accept.” She continued:

“Said the inspired apostle: ‘Lay hands suddenly on no man.’ [1 Tim 5:22] In some of our churches the work of organizing and of ordaining elders has been premature; *the Bible rule* has been disregarded, and consequently grievous trouble has been brought upon the church. There should not be so great haste in electing leaders as to ordain men who are in no way fitted for the responsible work—men who need to be converted, elevated, ennobled, and refined before they can serve the cause of God in any capacity.

“The gospel net gathers both good and bad. It takes time for character to be developed; there must be time to learn what men really are. The family of the one suggested for office should be considered. *Are they in subjection? Can the man rule his own house with honor?* What character have his children? Will they do honor to the father’s influence? If he has no tact, wisdom, or power of godliness at home in managing his own family, it is safe to conclude that the same defects will be carried into the church, and the same unsanctified management will be seen there. It will be far better to criticize the man before he is put into office than afterward, better to pray and counsel before taking the decisive step than to labor to correct the consequences of a wrong move.”¹⁶

It is clear that Ellen White considered vitally important the quality of family leadership of the man to be ordained as church elder or minister. Failure of the man as a successful head of his family would disqualify him for church leadership. A woman could not qualify for elder or minister because she is not called to rule her family.

Conclusion

The author needed to take into consideration that a study of the laying on of hands is not complete without addressing the question, Ordination to what office or role? However, in the light of *Women in Ministry’s* assumption that “church organization is not spelled out in the Bible”¹⁷ one might understand why he does not feel a burden to discuss this point.

The author's assertion that the Bible approves the laying on of hands for women as well as men cannot be used as evidence that women must be ordained as ministers. If the Bible assigns the office of an elder or minister to men, what right do church administrators have to appoint women to that office, as our author suggests?

According to the Bible requirements for church leadership, only those with successful leadership experience in their families qualify for the laying on of hands for ordination to the office of elder and minister. For women to be ordained to this office by the laying on of hands violates the clear Bible requirements. In spite of this, the author argues that "placing a woman in the position of pastor or elder is to affirm that she is indeed called by God to ministry."¹⁸ This call, he stresses, needs to be affirmed with laying on of hands, because without it "she lacks an important biblical authority to fulfill her responsibilities. Laying on of hands identifies her before the congregation as its minister . . . and appoints her to office."¹⁹ The legitimacy of placing women in such an office is the point that needs to be proved. Our author, however, appears to assume it.

In response, we say that since women do not meet the qualifications for the position of elder and minister, they should not be put into this office. It is unbiblical to appoint, ordain, or commission them as elders or ministers. It is doubly unbiblical to conduct the laying on of hands ceremony for those women already placed in the office of elder or minister because the laying on of hands is a sign of investing these women with biblical authority to function in an office of leadership that the Bible assigns to men! It is difficult to understand how anyone who claims to follow the Bible could participate in such a service that is contrary to the Bible, expecting God to bless.

If the Seventh-day Adventist church continues to appoint women as elders and ministers, the confusion that already exists among its members will increase. An immediate moratorium on the ordination of women as elders is the first step administrators ought to take to return the church to the only firm foundation for Seventh-day Adventists as God's prophetic remnant, who claim to follow the Bible and the Bible only for all their teachings and practices.

Endnotes

[Except as noted, Scripture quotations in this chapter are from the New King James Version.]

1. Keith Mattingly, "Laying on of Hands in Ordination: A Biblical Study," *Women in Ministry*, pp. 59-74.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 71.
3. *Ibid.*
4. *Ibid.*, pp. 71, 72.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 72.
6. Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 161.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 160.
8. *Ibid.*
9. *Ibid.*, p. 161.

10. Ibid., p. 162.
11. Ibid., p. 161.
12. Ibid., p. 160.
13. Ibid., p. 162.
14. Ibid., pp. 161, 162
15. Ellen G. White, "The Duty of the Minister and the People," *Review and Herald*, July 9, 1895, emphasis mine.
16. Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, 5:617, 618, emphasis mine.
17. Nancy Vyhmeister, "Prologue," *Women in Ministry*, p. 3.
18. Mattingly, *Women in Ministry*, p. 71.
19. Ibid., pp. 71, 72.