The 2003 Benjamin Eby Lecture

Rethinking the Meaning of Ordination: Toward a Biblical Theology of Leadership Affirmation

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Introduction

I have been interested in and involved in church leadership my entire adult life. I come from a family with a long history of influential and significant church leaders. I have taught in three different Mennonite colleges where we worked hard to nurture young people into church ministry. I worked for nearly twenty years in a seminary setting where the clear mandate was the training of ministers for the church. I personally have been involved in church leadership roles – local, national, bi-national, institutional. I believe in the importance of clearly defined and strong church leadership. Yet throughout this forty-five year history I have struggled with the concept of ordination as the means of affirming and legitimating church leaders. The theology and the practice of ordination seems out of sync with an Anabaptist-Mennonite understanding of the church and church ministry.

The ordination of ministers is a long-time practice in the Christian church whereby the church "sets aside" selected individuals and both recognizes them as ministers and empowers them to be leaders. The act of ordination in many churches is viewed as a sacramental event – it confers lifetime grace, authority, and status. While many Protestant churches, including Mennonite churches, have tried to de-sacramentalize ordination, the long-time underlying assumption and reality is sacramental. It continues to confer lifetime status, it is understood as "a life-shaping and identity-giving moment" (*Mennonite Polity*, 30), it places one into a special "office of ministry," and it confers special privileges and status.

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The tradition and practice of ordination is increasingly being questioned in the ecumenical church. Thomas Talley, in an assessment of the state of ordination thinking in the Episcopal Church, asserts that "hardly any area of liturgical and sacramental theology and practice is more disputed" (Talley, 4). John Brug says the same is true in the Lutheran tradition (Brug, 263). The questions are multiple: What is ordination? What does it mean? Who should be ordained? Who ordains? Is laying on of hands an essential part of ordination? Is there a biblical basis for ordination? What does ordination give?

The Mennonite Church traditions (MC and GC) reflect a long practice of ordination for the threefold offices of the church – bishop, preacher, deacon. While the polity of the traditions has changed significantly over the years, the practice of ordination has remained constant (see *Mennonite Polity*, 32-72). The "recovery of the Anabaptist Vision" movement, especially the Concern Group and the Dean's Seminar at Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminaries, did raise questions about ordination. John H. Yoder, one of the key theologians of both groups, stated that "there is . . . no ground for seeing in the New Testament usage a clear conception of ordination as applying to some Christians and not to others" (Yoder, 1969, 61). Selected individuals in the 1960s and '70s refused ordination because of these questions, but the larger church continued the practice. More recently it has even strengthened the practice of ordination by linking it to the "office of ministry" and by the use of oil in the service of ordination in some parts of the church. The introduction of anointing with oil, or Chrismation, is an OT tradition associated with the coronation of kings and the consecration of priests, and was deemed to impart a holy character to the anointed by removing them from the realm of the profane. The early church did not practice anointing with oil because of its rejection of priestly conceptions of church leadership. The practice was not introduced into the Christian tradition until the Middle Ages (see Ferguson, 1974, 282). Its recent use in the Mennonite Church is puzzling.

The recent emphasis on ordination and the increased "sacralization" of the practice did not involve any careful review of the biblical texts. The *Mennonite Polity* document quotes Erland Waltner to say that the practice of ordination has "a clear biblical basis" (35), but does not examine the relevant texts. John Esau, one of the key leaders in the drafting of *A Mennonite Polity for Ministerial Leadership*, informs me that the committees

formulating the document thought the biblical texts were too early to be helpful (July 7, 2003, email).

The most recent *Mennonite Church Ministers Manual* acknowledges the lack of New Testament teaching, but then makes a most interesting move. "The roots of ordination," it asserts, "go back to the Hebrew Bible and the instructions given to Moses to consecrate Aaron and his sons as priests for the congregation of God's people (Ex. 29 and Lev. 8-10)" [see *Ministers Manual*, 1998, 144]. That is a hermeneutical move not made in the history of the church until the sacradotalization of church ministers as priests in the Constantinian church.

Mennonite Brethren, the second largest Mennonite body in North America, began to "ordain" ministers in the late 1860s with a great deal of reluctance, due to questions about the biblical foundation for ordination and concerns about the hierarchical values and structures implicit in the practice of ordination (see Heidebrecht, 62ff.). This early ambivalence has continued to characterize Mennonite Brethren thinking. F. C. Peters initiated the most recent round of study and discussion in his 1969 keynote address to the General Conference by asking, "If in theory we do not have a sacramental view of ordination are we in danger of operating functionally on such a premise?" (Peters, 4). Peters's question resulted in four study conference papers (Orlando Wiebe, 1970; John Regehr, 1976; Victor Adrian, 1980; Tim Geddert, 1994), one thesis (Harry Heidebrecht, 1971) and one General Conference resolution (1981). All of the studies and the resolution struggle with the theological problematic of ordination. The 1981 resolution was barely approved before there were renewed calls for a study of the question of ordination. By 1987 the restlessness was so great that the Board of Reference and Counsel publicly announced that it would again study the question (the 1994 Study Conference).

Two issues create uncertainty in studies on ordination: the weak biblical foundations, and the relation of ordination to the gifting of all believers for ministry.

A series of biblical scholars since the 1970s have raised serious questions about the biblical basis for ordination, e.g., Giles, Ferguson, Flemming, Kilmartin, Morris, Peacock, Schweizer, Warkentin, D.F. Wright. Martin Kilmartin asserts that "almost every issue related to the subject remains unresolved" (Kilmartin, 45). David Wright stresses that "uncertainties attend much of the New Testament material supposedly germane to ordination. Only one text, 1 Timothy 4.14, can with firm confidence be regarded as attesting an observance

recognizable in subsequent church history as ordination to 'the ministry'" (D.F. Wright, 7). Wright goes on to claim that "a yawning gulf is exposed between the Pastorals and the *Apostolic Tradition* of Hippolytus over a century later" (Wright, 7). Dean Flemming states that "there is no evidence that ordination to office was a regular practice in the early church" (Flemming, 244). Kevin Giles adds that "the fog is almost impenetrable" regarding ordination (Giles, 173).

The problem is that the NT outlines a clear theology of church ministry based on charisma, but says little about the affirmation or installation of people for ministry. Christ gives gifts to all believers for the well-being and ministry of the church. Some people are given special gifts to equip and order the many diverse gifts in the church (see Rom. 12; 1 Cor. 12; Eph. 4). But there is very little evidence for rites to commission or affirm these people for ministry. The first evidence for commissioning known as ordination comes from Hippolytus's *Apostolic Tradition* in the early third century. There is no unanimity among scholars about the use of anything resembling ordination in the first two centuries of the church. The reason is the scarcity of textual evidence for commissioning services or procedures. Any confidence in the use of commissioning procedures in those centuries is based on the assumption of uniformity with the understanding and practice of the orthodox churches in the third century.

The primary purpose of this lecture is to examine the biblical evidence claimed in support of ordination to church ministry. It begins with the texts considered foundational, 1 and 2 Timothy, and then moves to other NT texts that have been viewed as relevant or supportive of ordination. The paper concludes with a brief a proposal for affirming people in the church for ministry.

The Foundation Texts

1 Timothy 4.14 Continuously do not neglect the gift (*charisma*) in you which was given you by means of prophecy (*dia* = ablative of means) in association with the laying on of the hands (*meta* = genitive of attendant circumstances) of the elder group.

This is the anchor text for the Christian theology and practice of ordination for ministry. Most commentators see here a clear teaching and practice of ordination. Donald Guthrie links the gift with the event of ordination to ministry (Guthrie, 98). Martin Dibelius and Hans Conzelmann see the event as a sacramental act in which the grace of office is transferred. The hands serve as a means of transferring power (Dibelius and Conzelmann, 70). Raymond Collins asserts that "this is a ritualized gesture signifying a transfer of power. . . ." (Collins, 130; see also Bassler, 87; Knight, 209).

A closer look at the text raises serious questions about this interpretation. The purpose of 1 Timothy is to instruct Timothy on dealing with false teachers within the church who are leading astray some Christians in different house churches. The larger text unit for this particular text is 4.6-16. Timothy's personal responsibility is the agenda. The unit consists of two paragraphs, vv. 6-10, 11-16. The first paragraph offers instructions vis-à-vis the false teachers. In contrast to these teachers, Timothy must guard his own life and teaching. The second paragraph instructs him to function as a model (vv. 15-16) in godly living despite his youth (v. 12), in the public reading and teaching of scripture (v. 13), in the nurture of the spiritual gift (charisma) given him (v. 14). Timothy has received a charisma, a spiritual gift. A charisma denotes a special endowment of the Spirit that enables a believer to carry out some function or ministry in the community. What the precise gift is we are not told. All we know is that Timothy is to nurture the gift he received.

The gift is associated with prophecy. In fact, it was given through a prophecy that was associated with the laying on of the hands of the leadership body of the church (*presbyteron* is singular). That is, Timothy's gift involved a charismatic communication and community affirmation; the Spirit communicated something and the church responded affirmatively. A prophecy involving Timothy has already been referred to in 1.18, "prophecies leading to you." That prophecy seems to involve "Paul's" finding Timothy, and so is probably not the same prophecy as in this text ("Paul" is in quotation marks to indicate uncertainty and debate about the authorship of the Pastoral Letters).

Not only does the text not define the nature of the charisma, it does not define the relationship of the charisma to the prophecy and the laying on of hands. Further, the whole event only confers a gift; it does not confer authority or office. The text says nothing more than that Timothy received an undefined

charisma that is to be nurtured as a model for other believers. The text does not say this charisma is for office or of office, nor that the charisma is the ground for the authority of Timothy. Furthermore, charisma and prophecy are features associated with charismatic leadership, not with leadership of office. Timothy is never called an elder, so ordination to the presbytery is hardly the suggestion here. In fact, he is not even a local church leader or model of a particular office in this letter. He is certainly not "the pastor" of the church, as in so much popular literature. Rather, he is "Paul's" missionary assistant who visits the churches as "Paul's" personal representative with the intent of returning to "Paul" soon. He simply represents "Paul" to the churches in the apostle's absence.

1 Tim. 4.14 does not indicate the nature of the gift Timothy received or what the referent of laying on of hands is. It could be Timothy's conversion/baptism as much as his gifting for ministry. I. Howard Marshall correctly argues that "it is important not to interpret the passage anachronistically in the light of later concepts of ordination" (Marshall, 569).

> *1 Timothy 5.22* And do not be hastily laying (present imperative) hands on, nor participating in another's sins; continuously keep yourself pure (present imperative).

The context and text have puzzled scholars for centuries. What is the relation of vv. 21-25 to vv. 17-20? Do we have one text unit addressing presbyters or two text units addressing presbyters and sinners as two different groups? How does the personal admonition to Timothy in v. 23 fit into the logic of the structure?

Interpreters are divided over the meaning of v. 22. Does it refer to ordination or to the restoration of a disciplined believer? The issue has to do with the relationship of v. 22 to the preceding. V. 20 indicates that there are elders in the church who are sinning. V. 21 says they must be rebuked publicly. If v. 22 is linked to the preceding, then it outlines some guidelines for the replacement of rebuked elders. V. 22 consists of three imperatives. The first follows from what has just been said in v. 21. Do not be hasty in laying on hands for leadership ministries in the church. Exercise caution in the laying

on of hands because of the problem of sin in people's lives. The problem of covering up the sins of leaders leads to the next imperative, Take no part in the sins of others. The last imperative, Keep yourself pure, suggests that the second one means Do not involve yourself in the kinds of sins that have caused some leaders to be rebuked (so Fee, 1984, 91-2; Guthrie, 107; Kelly, 127; Meier, 234-36).

The alternative interpretation argues that vv. 22 and 23 are not linked to the preceding. Instead, they represent individual and separate items of counsel to Timothy. V. 22 is then interpreted to mean the reconciliation of a disciplined believer, an interpretation that links the concerns of v. 22 with 24. The restoration of penitent sinners was part of early church practice (2 Cor. 2.6-11; Jas. 5.15), and was accompanied in the later church (third century on) by the laying of hands (so Dibelius and Conzelmann, 80; Collins, 149; Hanson, 103; Marshall, 621). Both Tertullian and Nicholas of Lyra understood the text in this way.

What is clear is that the text instructs caution in the laying on of hands because of the problem of human fallenness. V. 25 adds a positive reason for such caution: it takes time to discern the good works of some people. The specific referent of this caution is unknown, but probably has more to do with restoring repentant sinners than with any kind of appointment to church ministry.

> *2 Timothy 1.6* On account of which I am reminding you to be rekindling the gift of God which is in you by means (*dia* = ablative of means) of the laying on of my hands.

The purpose of 2 Timothy is to call Timothy to "Paul's" side and to appeal to his loyalty. V. 6 is the opening statement of the first appeal, vv. 6-14. It follows the thanksgiving of the letter, vv. 3-5, which concludes with gratitude for the faith Timothy has received from his maternal lineage. The text unit urges Timothy to be steadfast and loyal.

While most interpreters see in v. 6 a reference to Timothy's ordination, nothing in the text suggests such a referent. The "therefore, I remind you to rekindle the gift of God" must refer to what precedes in the text, that is, to the faith Timothy received and owned personally ("which is in you"). The gift of God is the gift of trusting the gospel. That gift is linked to the Holy Spirit at the

beginning and end of the text unit (vv. 7, 14). The Spirit gives power, love, and self-control, and "dwells within you." What follows only supports this interpretation. The concern is faithfulness to the gospel. The "by means of the laying on of my hands" refers to an initiatory event akin to the incidents in Acts in which the Spirit was received through the laying on of apostolic hands (so Marshall, 698; Wright, 6). The point of v. 6 is an affirmation of initial faith, not an affirmation for church ministry or office.

Summary of Teachings in the Pastoral Letters

The Pastoral Letters, the foundational texts for the church's doctrine and practice of ordination, turn out to say little about it. Wright suggests that only one biblical text, 1 Tim. 4.14, resembles the church's understanding and practice of ordination. This study raises questions if even that text can be claimed for this matter. 1 Tim. 4.14 tells us only that Timothy received a charisma through the laying on of hands. We do not know what the gift was, nor what the relationship between it and prophecy and the laying on of hands might be. If church leadership is involved it is charismatic leadership, not the leadership of office or position. 1 Tim. 5.22 says only that Timothy should be cautious in the practice of laying on hands, whether church leadership or restoration of an excommunicated believer is involved. 2 Tim. 1.6 refers to Timothy's initiation into the Christian faith, not his affirmation for church leadership.

On close examination the foundation texts prove to be sand, not stone. We therefore would do well to practice the admonition to Timothy to be cautious about using these texts to construct a theology and practice of ordination.

Other Relevant New Testament Texts

A series of other texts in the NT describe the practice of "the laying on of hands" and have been used to make the case for the practice of ordination.

Acts 6.5-6 describes the selection of seven leaders to assist the apostles by serving tables:

and the word pleased the whole multitude, and they chose . . . and they set them before the apostles, and having prayed they laid the hands on them.

Acts 8.17 pictures an apostolic mission to new converts in Samaria:
Peter and John prayed with them . . . and they laid the hands upon them and they received the Holy Spirit.

V. 18 adds that "through the laying on of the apostle's hands" the Spirit was given."

Acts 9.17 narrates the healing and commissioning of Paul following his encounter with the risen Christ on the road to Damascus:
Ananias . . . entered the house, and having laid his hands upon him, said, 'Brother Saul, the Lord sent me, Jesus who appeared to you in the way by which you came, in order that you may see again and may be filled with the Holy Spirit.'

Acts 13.3 describes the calling of Barnabas and Saul from the churches in Antioch to a special but undefined ministry:
And there were in Antioch in the church prophets and teachers . . . and while they were worshipping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, 'Set apart to me Barnabas and Saul for the purpose of the work to which I have already called them.' Then having fasted and prayed and having laid hands on them, they loosed them (apoluo).

Acts 19.6 pictures Paul's mediation of the Spirit to disciples in Ephesus:
And when Paul laid the hands on them the Holy Spirit came upon them, and they were speaking in tongues and prophesying.

Hebrews 6.2 urges that the elementary doctrines be left behind, one of which is "the laying on of hands." The context makes it clear that initiation into the Christian faith is described by "the laying on of hands."

Commentary
There are three types of "laying on of hands" texts in the NT. One type describes healings. Jesus healed by laying on hands, e.g., Mark 8.25; Matthew 19.13, 15. The same language is used in Acts 19.11 and 28.8, and perhaps also in Acts 20.10 and James 5.14-15. Touch is the primary element in this

laying on of hands, as in actions of blessing in the OT. The second type is associated with initiation and incorporation of people into the Christian church. The third type is connected with affirmation for church ministry.

The other relevant texts deal with two of these types. Four of the texts deal with initiation into the Christian faith and church, e.g., Acts 8.17; 9.17; 19.6; Hebrews 6.2. All are linked to prayer and to the coming of the Holy Spirit into the lives of believers. This use of the laying on of hands is without parallel in the OT and in Judaism.

Two of the texts deal with affirmations for church ministries, e.g., Acts 6.6 and 13.3. The narrative of Acts is clearly concerned with affirming people for ministries in the church, but the affirmation takes place in different ways. People are selected by community election in chapter 6, by the calling of fellow leaders in chapter 13, by the appointment of the apostles in 14.23. The selection of leaders in 13.3 and 14.23 involves preparatory prayer and fasting, but not so in 6.6 and 13.3. There is laying on of hands in 6.6 and 13.3, but not in 14.23. There is no suggestion in 6.6 and 13.3 that the laying on of hands involved the imparting of spiritual gifts. Rather, it was an act of recognition of gifts already possessed. The seven were required to be "full of the Spirit" prior to their commissioning (vv. 3, 5). The laying of hands on them is a "lay" commissioning to a particular service. The appointment is not unlike that of the Levites. Like the latter, the seven are dedicated by the entire congregation for acts of service that are subordinate to the apostles, as the Levites were subordinate to the priests. Barnabas and Saul were already among the prophets and teachers of the church before the laying on of hands. They are simply commissioned for a specific "work" (*ergon*) [so Barrett, 599; Fitzmyer, 351; Witherington, 393-94].

The act of laying on hands is a corporate affair in both texts. It involves the whole church in chapter 6. The subject of "they set . . . having prayed, they placed their hands on them" is the people (the Codex Bezae, D, sixth century, [in its] shift of responsibility from the people to the apostles reflects later church ecclesiology). The community elected and accredited the seven to the apostles. The latter made the seven representatives of the whole community by laying hands on them. In chapter 13 the laying on of hands is by the body of prophets and teachers. Barnabas and Paul are equals among these leaders now detailed for a special task. They are representatives,

shaliachs, of the whole released (*apoluo*) for a special assignment. The release language may be significant. Barnabas and Saul are not "sent off," as in most translations, but "cut loose." They are freed from one ministry for another.

Neither Acts 6.6 or 13.3 look like ordination texts. Leaders are blessed for the gifts of the Spirit they already have, and are affirmed and released for specific ministry assignments by the laying on of hands.

Summary of New Testament Evidence

The practice of laying on hands for initiation into the Christian faith and community is clear: 2 Tim. 1.6, Acts 8.17; 9.17; 19.6; Hebrews 6.2. Hands are laid on new believers to bless them. This blessing is associated with the gift of the Holy Spirit to the new believers.

Two texts link the laying of hands and affirmation for church ministry: Acts 6.6 and 13.3. Both are narrative texts. They report that people already gifted by the Spirit or already active in ministry were corporately affirmed for specialized ministries. No special gift, power, or position is involved in the laying on of hands.

The 1 Tim. 4.14 text is so ambiguous that it is not obvious if initiation into the Christian faith or affirmation for ministry is the subject. Whatever the occasion, Timothy receives a charisma by means of a prophetic word.

In addition, other texts specifically speak of appointment to leadership tasks but say nothing about the "laying on of hands" or refer to any kind of ordination procedure. Barnabas and Paul "appointed (*xeirotoneo*) elders from among them (the disciples, v. 22) in every church" (Acts 14.23). Titus is appointed (*xeirotoneo*) to accompany Paul to Jerusalem with the offering that symbolizes the pilgrimage of the Gentiles to Jerusalem (2 Cor. 8.19). Titus is instructed to appoint (*kathistemi*) elders in every town (Titus 1.5). Leaders are being appointed for local congregational ministries and for very important trans-local, inter-congregational, even cross-cultural people-to-people ministries, without any known legitimation by ordination. Or, there are texts that list leaders in local churches (e.g., Rom. 16, Phil. 4) that say nothing about ordination or commissioning to these ministries.

Light from the Old Testament and Judaism

The New Testament offers little evidence to support the church's practice of ordination for ministry. But are we missing something by starting with the NT? Was not ordination practised in the Old Testament? And was not that practice continued in Judaism, for example, in the ordination of rabbis? It is not clear that ordination was practised in the OT. But the laying on of hands was practised. Could not that practice illumine the similar practice in the early church?

Laying on of Hands in the Old Testament

The laying on of hands is associated with four different events in the OT: 1) the transfer of the people's sin to the scapegoat (Lev. 16.21); 2) the consecration of the Levites (Num. 8.10); 3) Moses's appointment of Joshua as his successor (Num. 27.18, 23; Dt. 34.9); 4) the communication of blessing or healing (Gen. 48.14ff.; 2 Ki. 4.34; 13.21).

The four events are described with two different words, *samakh* for the first three, *sim* for the communication of blessing. David Daube has proposed that the two words denote quite different things. *Samakh* means "to lean upon for the purpose of transferring something in order to create a substitute or replacement." It involves the pouring of one's personality into the substitute (see Daube). *Sim*, in contrast, is a gentle term that means "to place on in order to bless." It carries no connotation of transferring one's personality or creating a substitute. When associated with sacrifice or the scapegoat offering of the Day of Atonement, *samakh* means to transfer one's sins to a substitute so that it can bear the punishment instead of the person. *Samakh* is used for the consecration of the Levites because they as a class are created as a substitute for the firstborn in Israel (Lev. 8.15-19). *Samakh* also is used for the appointment of Joshua as Moses's successor, suggesting that Joshua is his replacement or substitute.

M.C. Sansom has qualified the Daube thesis. *Samakh*, he argues, is a much more nuanced term than Daube suggests (Sansom, 323-26; see also D.P Wright, 433ff.). It has two meanings, "transference" and "acknowledgment or identification." The term involves a transference only in two cases, the Day of Atonement ritual and the appointment of Joshua, and acknowledgment or identification in the other uses.

The two texts that narrate the appointment of Joshua do not indicate what, if anything, he received in the event. Deuteronomy 34.9 says he received the spirit of wisdom through the laying on of Moses's hands. But Num. 27.18 says Joshua was commissioned because he already possessed the divine spirit. Furthermore, whatever was "transferred" in the laying on of hands, it was not in full measure as with Moses. God spoke face-to-face with Moses but Joshua will be instructed by Eleazar; Moses was the servant of God but Joshua is Moses's minister (Joshua 1.1). N.H. Snaith asserts that the "laying on of hands" here "has nothing to do with any sort of ordination. Joshua already has the God-given ability. Moses lays his hands upon him before Eleazar in order visibly to lay his last commands on him" (Snaith, 311).

It is doubtful if the laying on of hands in *samakh* can be used as any basis for a theology and practice of ordination in the OT. The term and the practice is used in very restricted cases. The practice is never used for the appointment of priests or other religious leaders in the OT, e.g., the 70 elders of Israel (Num. 11.16ff.), prophets. Allen Guenther argues that "the word has nothing to do with the concept of 'ordination,' as we think of it" (Sept. 6, 1991 written note). Furthermore, none of the *samakh* passages influenced the practice of the early church. The same can be said of Judaism, as will soon be shown. The subsequent influence of the Joshua narrative is so minimal that J.K Parratt can say that the Joshua commissioning "has not exercised a normative influence upon either Judaism or Christianity" (212; cf. Warkentin).

What Happens in Judaism?

Most NT scholarship simply assumes that Second Temple Judaism continued an OT practice of ordaining by the laying on of hands, and that the early church adapted its practice from Judaism. Textual evidence, however, does not support this assumption. *Samakh* is used 150 times in the Mishnah, the authoritative Jewish interpretation of the Torah compiled around 200 CE, but all references deal with sacrifice, not with ordination to ministry (see Hoffman, 15-16). There also is no evidence in this or later literature for ordination by the laying on of hands. The texts are so silent that Lawrence Hoffman concludes "there was never any laying on of hands" (Hoffman, 17).

Leaders are ordained in Judaism. Three stages of the practice are discernable. Up to around 135 CE individual rabbis ordain their disciples. From 135 to 200 the Patriarch of Judaism alone is authorized to ordain. From

about 200 on, the Patriarch and the rabbis of the Scholar Class together ordain. But three things must be noted. Evidence for the practice is too late (post-70 CE) to have influenced the early church. Secondly, it is never by the laying on of hands. The dominant practice seems to have been by proclamation, but even the evidence for this is not clear. Thirdly, while many kinds of shaliachs (representatives or delegates) are appointed during this period, the procedures for such appointment are not obvious. In short, Judaism has an active practice of selecting and appointing leaders, but the procedures for affirming leaders is not at all clear. And there is no evidence for the laying on of hands.

Reading Back through the New Testament

Leaders are necessary for any movement; the life of the church depends on leaders. Therefore, Jesus called people "to follow" him and appointed them "to go preach, heal the sick, cast out demons . . . ." Christ gifts every church with ministers to enable and order the many gifts of the Spirit within the body so that the whole can be greater than the sum of the parts. Missionaries appoint leaders in young churches so that the church can be centered and grow (Acts 14.23; Titus 1.5).

What is striking in this theology and practice of church ministry is the absence of any clear teaching or practice for the affirmation of leaders. Leaders are important and necessary. Ministers are chosen or appointed. Except for the missionary situation, the selection process always seems to involve the whole congregation or the collective leadership of the church (*presybyteron*). But there is little evidence for how these ministers were affirmed (or ordained), and certainly no clear teaching on how this should be done. There is no evidence for something like the later church's practice of ordination. Jesus did not "lay hands on" those whom he called and charged. The gift texts (Rom. 12, 1 Cor. 12, Eph. 4) say nothing about laying on of hands or any other form of public legitimation. The historic "foundation texts" for the practice of ordination to ministry are ambiguous at best. Timothy received a charisma through prophetic utterance and the laying on of hands at some point in his life, but that experience is not linked to a church leadership role. The two "laying on of hands" texts in Acts describe public blessing for gifts already given by the Spirit.

New Testament scholars are agreed that the few "laying on of hands" texts that we have do not suggest any creation of substitutes, or the transference of authority, or the imparting of personality. The laying on of hands is linked to the Spirit, corporate prayer, and blessing, not appointment to office or role. A series of scholars argue that the only OT linkage in laying on of hands is *sim*, blessing, not *samakh* (see Daube, 238-40; Ferguson, 1975, 2, and 1974, 284; Parratt, 213-14; Culpepper, 481). The laying on of hands accompanied by prayer confers a blessing and petitions the favor of God on the leaders gifted for ministry. The laying on of hands is an enacted prayer. This reading is reinforced by one of the early translations of the Greek New Testament: the Syriac translation used the equivalent of *sim* rather than *samakh* for the laying on of hands.

Ordination through the laying on of hands as the transference of charisma, power, and authority is not taught or practised in the NT. What is practised is the affirmation of the gifts of the Spirit to the church for ministry and the blessing of God for those gifts.

One other body of NT evidence is relevant and important here. Scholars are agreed that apostles, prophets, teachers, and pastor-shepherds were not offices in the early church. They were not appointed or initiated by the community. These roles were gifts of the risen Christ to the church. What about the role of "elder"? Is this not a church office to which people were appointed by the laying on of hands? Alastair Campbell, following A.E. Harvey, has demonstrated that "elders" were senior men in the community and the leaders of influential families. Their position was recognized by custom, not by any kind of official appointment to a definable office. It denoted prestige, not office (Campbell; Harvey; see also Marshall, 172). So, again, laying on of hands recognizes what is; it does not confer anything new or empower for a new role.

So What?

This paper argues that ordination for ministry through the laying on of hands as practised in the church is without biblical foundation. There is no specific and clear textual basis for the theology and practice of "setting aside" for full-time ministry, for giving special status, and for legitimating authority and power for church office. Furthermore, the practice serves to divide clergy

from laity, to undermine the teaching of the NT that leaders must be servants, and to contradict the NT's repeated emphasis that all believers are called to and gifted for ministry.

In addition, there is no biblical linkage of personal call to ministry and ordination through the laying on of hands, as practised in the protestant church. The laying on of hands on the seven in Acts 6 and on Barnabas and Saul in Acts 13 were not the community's responses to an inner call sensed by these people; at least no call language is used in the texts. If the 1 Tim. 4.14 text speaks about laying on of hands for ministry, an interpretation challenged in this paper, no personal call to ministry is mentioned. The notion of an inner call to ministry and the ordination through the laying on of hands are never connected in the Bible or the early church. Affirmation for ministry is based on giftedness and community selection, not an inner sense of call. The seven in Acts 6 and Barnabas and Saul in Acts 13 first learned of a call from the church, not from an inner experience. If the call of the church was later confirmed through an inner sense of call, we are not told about it. The church called, the church affirmed through the laying on of hands, the people so called and affirmed ministered (see Falk for a thorough biblical challenge to the idea of "call" to ministry, and Culbertson and Shippee for the skepticism of the early church about personal calls).

If laying on of hands does not mean ordination as sacrament – the view of the Roman Catholic Church and many protestant churches that it communicates grace and gifts that profoundly shape character and confer special rights and duties, or ordination as authorization – the view of Luther and Calvin that it confers authority to preach the Word and administer the sacraments, what does it mean? It could mean commissioning for service. The seven in Acts 6 and Barnabas and Saul in Acts 13 had hands laid on them to commission them to a particular "work." The laying on of hands in commissioning says that the church believes that God has gifted "these people" with gifts for a particular ministry, and the church commissions "these people" for this ministry.

Or, the laying on of hands could mean church confirmation and blessing. Again, the seven in Acts 6 and Barnabas and Saul in Acts 13 were gifted by the Spirit before the call of the church. The laying on of hands is a confirmation of the gift(s) of God and a prayer of blessing to God for the fruitful exercise of these gifts in ministry.

A careful reading of the biblical texts would hardly permit meanings other than commissioning or confirmation/blessing. But that is to address the issue only on the basis of specific texts. The question of how the church selects and affirms its leaders must be based on more than specific texts whose meaning is ambiguous. It must ultimately be based on a theology of church. If the church is a peoplehood, a community, a body, a family of God (see Toews, 1989), then that theology must shape its theology of ministry affirmation. Such a theology calls for both a theology of ministry and a practice of ministry affirmation that is consistent with the nature of the church discerning/calling and affirming people. Ministers in the church cannot be self-chosen but must be called out by the church. The criteria for such discerning and calling are a servant spirit, giftedness for ministry, and godly character. The ministers are publicly commissioned and blessed by the church. The churchly laying on of hands together with prayer is an appropriate way to bless and commission for a specific ministry.

Because ordination language is so loaded with "sacramental," "authorization," and "proper succession" baggage, the church should not use it to describe or to understand the meaning of the laying on of hands. Such a desacramentalization will free the church from a host of problems – e.g., ordination as status and power, ordination for life, clergy-laity distinctions – and free it to lay hands on many people to confirm and bless them for ministry in and for the church.

An Historical Postscript

If ordination to church ministry is without clear biblical foundation, what is the origin of the theology and practice? It emerged in the third century of Christian history. The development of a theology and practice of ordination is part of a much larger ecclesiological development, the centralization of church power and authority, the development of a clergy (priestly) class distinct from the other members in the church (laity), the sacramentalization of the Lord's Supper (see Culbertson and Shippee, Faivre, Hinson, Volz). David Bosch makes the case that "the institutionalization of church offices" was one of the characteristics of the Constantinian dispensation. "The clericalization of the church," he continues, "went hand in hand with the sacerdotalizing of the

clergy" (Bosch, 467-68). The history of this development is very instructive, and alone should give churches in the believers or free church tradition pause in the use of a practice that fundamentally contradicts their theology of church and church ministry.

What Then Shall We Do?

If we grant the argument of this paper, what shall we do practically in the church? I suggest the following: 1) discontinue the use of ordination language and practice, and unhook affirmation for church ministry from all forms of privilege and status (e.g., offices, titles, special tax deductions). 2) Teach that ministry belongs to the whole people of God; every Christian is gifted for ministry. 3) Teach that there are ministry gifts whose function is to enable and order the many different gifts in the church. 4) Practice the discernment of gifts in the church. 5) Base selection for church ministry on the discernment of the church, not on the notion of personal call. 6) Recognize that authority in ministry derives from the character of the minister and the ministry accepted and discharged, not from status or official legitimation. 7) Develop a creative ceremony to bless and commission people called by the church for specific ministries.

Blessing/commissioning services would thus replace ordination services. By definition blessing/commissioning services are both more inclusive and more limiting. They are more inclusive in that the many ministry gifts in the church can be blessed/commissioned regularly, e.g., Sunday school teachers, school teachers, administrators, healers, pastors, evangelists. They are more limiting because the blessing/commissioning would be for a specific task, e.g., pastoring a specific church, shepherding a conference of churches, administering an institution or agency of the church, teaching Sunday school for the current year, planting a church in a specific location.

I conclude with an email exchange with John Esau, formerly of the Ministerial Office of the US General Conference Mennonite Church. He was one of the people to whom I sent a draft copy of this lecture for feedback. He recognizes the nonexistence of biblical foundations for the practice of ordination. But he wants to keep the practice and reframe it "in the direction of a blessing of the church," and thereby "endow it with meanings appropriate to Anabaptist Mennonite theology" (Oct. 7, 2003 email). My response to

John was that "the practice of 'ordination' undermines, even contradicts, that goal. Ordination theologically, historically, ritualistically, and practically sacerdotalizes the role of church ministry – it confers special status and privilege by the state, by society, and by members of the church, if we like it or not. The ritual of ordination itself creates a world view and value system. That is, rituals are more than external signs of inner realities. They, in fact, define realities, and the reality created by the ritual of ordination is a sacerdotal one – it sets a person apart and grants special status and privilege. Add to that the problematic of the Constantinian baggage, and I think we have a practice that we cannot 'endow with meanings appropriate to Anabaptist Mennonite theology.' We need a new ritual that defines what we want to say in 'blessing' or 'commissioning' a person for ministry in the church" (Oct. 24, 2003 email).

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