

Elders, Ordinations, and the Laying On of Hands

What Is the Meaning of All This?

Is it possible that the time-worn institutions and beliefs of defining elders, ordaining people to positions of authority, and the laying on of hands are not fully understood by God's people? Is it possible that the use of these terms and procedures, which are in several places mentioned in Scripture, have been expropriated by the Adversary to his own purposes, in an attempt to thwart the proper functioning of the brethren within the ecclesia, and limit their power, spiritual development, and gifts, just as a hierarchy of people in most institutions of men place a few at the top of the authoritarian structure, while the masses are positioned below in subservience to the master above?

It seems that the modern churches of God have not done an excellent job of coming out of this world. Our world is defined by a hierarchy of men, within government, industry, education, and nearly every organization at federal, state, and local levels. The system of men ruling over men is a pagan system, one that Jesus Christ graphically outlined and condemned in Matthew 20:25-28 and Luke 22:25-27.

“And He said to them, ‘The kings of the gentiles exercise lordship over them, and those who exercise authority over them are called benefactors. *But not so among you; on the contrary, he who is greatest among you, let him be as the younger, and he who governs as he who serves. For who is greater, he who sits at the table, or he who serves? Is it not he who sits at the table? Yet I am among you as One who serves*’” (em-

phasis mine; Luke 22:25-27).

This desire for position has been implanted among people of all nations since birth, the desire to rule over others rather than serve and boost them up. This infection has greatly influenced the people of God, in particular in the area of declaring members as elders or deacons, and ordaining them to positions that implicitly infer greater worth than others because of the title. This process is an abomination to our Creator, the opposite attitude the elect are to express in their love for one another. The following discussion will bear this out.



The term “elder” [presbyteros] in New Testament Scripture means an older person, in the ecclesia or outside of it, and nothing more.

Elders: Who Are They?

Let us first of all embark on an understanding of who elders are as defined in the New Testament. In the New King James Version the word *elder* or *elders* is used 69 times. The word in all but a few cases comes from the Greek *presbyteros*, and in a few

cases the word *presbyterion*.

presbyteros (used 66 times), “elder, senior, older, more advanced in years.”

presbyterion (used 3 times), “a body of old men, an assembly of elders, the Jewish Sanhedrin.”

The words apply to people both inside and outside the body of Christ. For instance, older people (*presbyteros*) within the ecclesia are mentioned in Acts 11:30, 14:23, 15:2, 4, 6, 22, and in many other places, whereas earlier in Acts the same word *elders* (*presbyteros*) is applied to older people of Israel in general, especially to those allied with the high priest, scribes, and Sanhedrin (Acts 4, 8, 23, Acts 5:21, Acts

6:12, Acts 22:5, Acts 23:14, etc.)

The word *presbyterion* (*elders*) is used in Luke 22:66 and Acts 22:5 in reference to the Sanhedrin, whereas this same word is translated *eldership* in I Timothy 4:14, and refers to a group of older people in the ecclesia:

“Do not neglect the gift that is in you, which was given to you by prophecy with the laying on of hands of the eldership [*presbyterion*].”

Here we see that Timothy was given the spiritual gift of *prophecy* (*propheteia*, “a gifted faculty of setting forth and enforcing revealed truth; divine teaching set forth by a special gift”) that was acknowledged by the laying on of hands by the older members of the ecclesia. Only God through His spirit can grant spiritual gifts, and that is not the choice of any man. *Another person in the fellowship of the saints cannot confer to a fellow man some spiritual gift, but rather “... God has set the members, each one of them, in the body just as He pleased”* (I Corinthians 12:18). The giving of gifts is not any man’s doing.

Note that Timothy was not an elder before or after this event; he was a young man, not an elder (I Timothy 4:12), showing that being an elder is not an office or position in the body of Christ, but rather an age designation.

Some might say, did not Paul and other disciples “ordain elders”, or “make them elders through laying hands on them”? Some have claimed that I Timothy 4:14 is saying this, but as discussed above it is seen that not neglecting “... the gift that is in you, which was given to you by prophecy with the laying on of hands of the eldership” does not mean “making” a person an elder by the laying on of hands of older elders. ***Older people cannot make a young person like Timothy older so he might be as elder, nor can these older people impart a spiritual gift, because that has been given by God Himself. ALL THESE ELDERS CAN DO IS SHOW RECOGNITION THAT THE PERSON HAS A RESPONSIBILITY TO PERFORM, IN THE SIGHT OF OTHERS IN THE FELLOWSHIP.***

Being an elder has nothing to do with position within an organization, but has everything to do with

service as an older person who has gained wisdom in life through experience, to better serve as an example to others and help elevate the younger people to the stature of Jesus Christ. In fact, Paul made it clear in Acts 20:28 that the elders [*presbyteros*, or older brethren; see verse 17] to whom he was speaking should “Therefore take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the holy spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood.” This idea is expressed nearly word-for-word in I Peter 5:2. Here Paul is speaking of all of the older brethren as shepherds, and made shepherds through the spirit of God, not through some “ordination” ceremony or the laying on of hands. They were shepherds because they were older and more mature in the faith and experiences in life, knowing the scriptures more perfectly than the younger brethren and thus able to teach and encourage them to gain that same ability to shepherd the flock as they grew older.

A Close Look At “Elders” in the Ecclesia

The term “elder” is not used in reference to anyone in the ecclesia until the book of Acts, since in all four Gospels the most noted disciples — the 12 apostles — were fairly young men, presumably about the age of Jesus who was 30 years old when he began his three-year ministry. While older people were certainly among the followers of Christ, none are mentioned in reference to any older age, except perhaps Simeon and Anna (Luke 2:25-38). We first find the term “elder” used in reference to church people in Acts 11:30 and Acts 14:23. “This they also did [sent relief items to the brethren in Judea], and sent it to the elders by the hands of Barnabas and Saul” (Acts 11:30).

“So when they had appointed elders in every church, and prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed” (Acts 14:23).

Thereafter in Acts, the elders are mentioned usually alongside the *apostles* (*apostolos*, “one sent as a messenger or agent, the bearer of a commission, a messenger”), showing that some members of the ecclesia were sent from somewhere else to associate

with the older members whom God had selected to constitute new fellowships in various locations. Note the “apostles and elders” in Acts 15:2, 15:4, 15:6, 15:22, 15:23, and 16:4. Then Paul associated with the elders in Acts 20:17 and 21:18. Paul gave guides regarding the conduct of elders to Timothy in I Timothy 5:17 and 19, and to Titus in Titus 1:5. Paul also mentions elders in Hebrews 11:2, and James does in James 5:14, Peter talks of elders in I Peter 5:1 and 5:5, and John does in II John 1 and III John 1. John also speaks of the 24 elders in Revelation 4:4, 4:10, 5:5, 5:6, 5:8, 5:11, 5:14, 7:11, 7:13, 11:16, 14:3, and 19:4.

In these various citations of “elders” in the early ecclesia, the reference to older brethren is usually straightforward, but in Acts 14:23, quoted above, some individuals have erroneously interpreted the verse as indicating the Paul somehow “made” certain brethren elders ... as if he could by some sleight of hand increase the age of certain people! The verse says, “So when they had appointed elders in every church ...” The word *appointed* is the Greek *cheiro-toneo*, meaning “to stretch out the hand, to constitute by voting, to appoint.” There is every indication here



The laying on of hands shows recognition of a person to do a certain job within the ecclesia, and is not to pronounce “eldership” or any office within a corporation, nor does it grant spiritual gifts. These have already been given at baptism and the laying on of hands at some time earlier.

that, while Paul and Barnabas were the major catalysts in organizing the leadership for these congregations, they may have enabled the selecting process through voting, the “stretching out of the hands” by the brethren in these groups. After all, who would

best know the older people in the groups than the people themselves, who would respect certain ones as being capable leaders with gifts appropriate for the tasks that lay ahead.

The one thing that is clear in Acts 14:23 is that elders were not made elders by a decree of someone else. ***They were elders because of their older age, and the term was in no way a position or office within the ecclesia ... and in no way did it impart an added measure of God’s spirit; that is given full measure at baptism and the laying on of hands. Having hands laid on a person, an older or a younger person, was merely a sign to others in the fellowship that the person had a specific responsibility.***

Older church members were to be highly respected, especially those who “ruled” well [*rule = proistemi*, “to set over, appoint with authority, superintend”]; they were to be given “double honor” if they did their job well (I Timothy 5:17). Elders were not to be accused of untoward behavior “... except from two or three witnesses” (I Timothy 5:19), but were to be respected by those younger than them.

Then Peter makes this impressive point that reveals the true nature of God’s government and His character: ***“Yes, all of you be submissive to one another, and be clothed with humility, for ‘God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble’”*** (I Peter 5:5). The key to the interaction amongst God’s people is to be servants to one another (John 13:3-15; I Corinthians 12:25; Philippians 2:1-5; Romans 12:1-21; Luke 22:23-27; etc.), for “... to this man will I look, he who is poor and of a contrite spirit, and trembles at My word” (Isaiah 66:2). Ephesians 5:21 restates this command by being submissive to one another, not trying to show one’s superiority in some way such as being appointed to the “position” of an elder!

What About the Laying On of Hands?

The issue of laying on of hands is covered in many New Testament scriptures, and can mean different things depending on the context. Note the following instances.

- 1. Laying on hands to bless children.*** In Matthew 19:15 and Mark 10:16, Jesus laid his hands on

children and blessed them. *Bless* = *eulogeo*, “to speak well of, to ascribe praise and glorification, to invoke a blessing upon.”

2. *Laying on hands (or touching) for healing the sick.* Many instances of this can be found: Mathew 8:3, 15, 18, Matthew 9:25, Mark 1:31, Mark 1:41, Mark 5:41, Mark 6:5, Mark 7:32, Mark 8:23-25, Mark 9:27, Mark 16:18, Luke 4:40, Luke 8:54, Luke 13:13, Acts 3:7, Acts 4:30, Acts 9:17, Acts 9:41, Acts 28:8, James 5:14 (implied, with oil).

3. *Laying on hands to impart the holy spirit.* Acts 2:38 (implied; see Hebrews 6:2), Acts 8:17-19, Acts 9:17, Acts 19:6, Hebrews 6:2.

4. *Laying on hands to appoint or recognize for a certain task.*

a. Saul and Barnabas appointed by the spirit of God for His work (Acts 13:3).

b. Timothy to prophecy [*propheteia*, “divine teaching], by the elders (I Timothy 4:14, II Timothy 1:6).

5. *Laying on hands to comfort and cast out fear.* Revelation 1:16.

Among all of these situations only the laying on of hands after baptism involves the giving of the spirit to an individual, though certainly the activity of the spirit of Elohim is implied in all cases of healing, blessing, or appointment to a specific task. The laying on of hands for Timothy by the elders cannot be said to impart a particular “extra” spirit to do a particular function, for we know that the spirit is given in full measure at baptism and the laying on of hands. Along with that spirit comes the gifts God imparts, given at the Eternal’s discretion: “But now God has set the members, each one of them, in the body just as He pleased” (I Corinthians 12:11,18).

Thus, when Paul was writing to Timothy in I Timothy 4:14 by saying, “Do not neglect the gift that is in you, which was given to you by prophecy with the laying on of hands of the eldership,” he was implying that this gift of inspired speaking was given after baptism when God’s spirit was granted, a fact restated in II Timothy 1:6, “Therefore I remind you to stir up the gift of God which is in you through the laying on of my hands.” It is not possible to know if these were two different events, but more than likely it is speaking of the same event in which Paul was one of the elders who laid hands on Timothy ... not

to impart an “extra” measure of the spirit beyond what God granted, but to have it recognized by all of the brethren that Timothy had a special job to do. ***MEN CANNOT GRANT GOD’S SPIRIT TO A PERSON; THAT IS ONLY POSSIBLE BY GOD HIMSELF!***

Once the spirit of God is implanted it hopefully will have its full expression through the gifts that spirit imparts. Laying on hands or pouring oil on one’s head by a prophet of God has been shown to be *a recognition of God’s intent* throughout Scripture, such as Saul’s anointing as king in I Samuel 10:1, David’s anointing as king in I Samuel 16:13, and Jehu later on (II Kings 9:16). Even *rocks* were anointed with oil by Jacob (Genesis 28:18; 35:14). Aaron and his sons were anointed during the priestly ceremony (Exodus 29:7,21), and of course oil was used in several of the sacrifices, for example in the grain offering and the thanksgiving offerings (Leviticus 2:15; 7:12). We understand that oil, like water, is in many cases symbolic of the spirit of Elohim.

The Conclusion ...

An elder is not a position or office. It is an age designation for an older person. An older person being selected and having had hands laid on him shows publicly that the person has a particular responsibility within a fellowship of the saints. That responsibility may be to lead discussions, organize where to meet for fellowship, or to generally help expedite an environment within which everyone can best utilize his or her spiritual gifts ... for all of the elect are required to use them (I Peter 4:10).

An elder is generally wise and respected because of his age and wealth of experience in the world, a world fraught with heartaches and disappointments because of Satan having polluted most everything in it. Thus, the older people amongst the brethren ought to be highly respected.

An organization or corporate fellowship that uses the title of elder as a “credentialed” position is playing into the hands of Satan, for such a position helps insure that the State-sanctioned charter controls that person. The “laying on of hands” of a person within the ecclesia is not the initiation to an office of men, but a commission given by Almighty God to serve in some capacity. ***The laying on of hands***

within a corporate fellowship to an office is the work of men; the laying on of hands to a responsibility of service within the ecclesia is the work of God, and that does not produce an “elder.”

Incidentally, nowhere in Scripture (NKJV) is the word “ordain” used in regard to the responsibilities of God’s people within the ecclesia. The word *ordain* [*horizo*, “to settle, appoint definitively, to decree”] is used in the New Testament only in reference to Jesus Christ, who was appointed by the Father to be Judge of the living and the dead (Acts 10:42), and to judge the world in righteousness (Acts 17:31).

Of course, we as the saints have the responsibility to follow in the footsteps of Jesus Christ, and become like Him (I Peter 2:21; I John 3:6), so in this sense we are ordained, but we are not ordained to positions within the ecclesia today except as the spirit of God directs through the gifts He has bestowed within us through His spirit (I Corinthians 12). We are all to become shepherds of the ecclesia, as stated earlier:

“For I have not shunned to declare to you

the whole counsel of God. Therefore take heed to yourselves and to all the flock among which the holy spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood” (Acts 20:28).

As a final thought, note Acts 1:26.

“And they cast their lots, and the lot fell on Mathias. And he was numbered with the eleven apostles.”

Lot here is the Greek work *kleros*, meaning “a lot, die, a thing used in determining chances. The apostles essentially “rolled their dice,” and let the Eternal decide who would be the twelfth apostle to replace Judas Iscariot. This is the spirit in which we as the elect should select people to perform the various tasks within our midst: allow God to work through us, and allow us to use His spirit to His glory in our lives!

