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THE LAYING ON OF HANDS AS A PARADIGM FOR
ECCLESIASTICAL ORDINATION: A BIBLICAL,
HISTORICAL, AND THEOLOGICAL STUDY

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THE LAYING ON OF HANDS AS A PARDIGM FOR
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To King Jesus and in service to him. I love you, Lord (Eph 3:8).

And to my wife, Stephanie. This project would not be possible if it were not for you and your constant support, encouragement, and prayers. Following Jesus with you is the greatest joy of my life! Here's to whatever may be next!

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

BTCP	Biblical Theology for Christian Proclamation
BTNT	Biblical Theology of the New Testament
CCC	<i>Catechism of the Catholic Church</i> . New York: Doubleday, 1995.
CCNT	Calvin's Commentaries on the New Testament
ECNT	Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament
FET	Foundations of Evangelical Theology
ICC	International Critical Commentary
<i>Institutes</i>	<i>The Institutes of the Christian Religion</i> . Edited by John T. McNeil. Translated by Ford Lewis Battles. Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 2006
LG	Vatican. "Dogmatic Constitution on the Church <i>Lumen Gentium</i> Solemnly Promulgated by His Holiness Pope Paul VI on November 21, 1964"
NAC	New American Commentary
NICNT	New International Commentary on the New Testament
NICOT	New International Commentary on the Old Testament
NIGTC	New International Greek Testament Commentary
TNTC	Tyndale New Testament Commentaries
TOTC	Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries
WBC	Word Biblical Commentary

PREFACE

My study of the laying on of hands for ordination began from a growing concern in seminary. Surrounded by young, enthusiastic seminarians, I often heard that many were off to plant a church after seminary. I found this intriguing and disconcerting. I wondered, “How can you plant a church on your own?” “How can you plant a church without being sent from a local congregation?” “Is this ‘calling’ from you or from God?” There is, of course, nothing wrong with a *desire* to pastor and plant a church. After all, desire is the first qualification that a pastor should have (1 Tim 3:1). My concern was more focused on the validation of the individual’s “call” to ministry. Since then, I have noticed a gap in ecclesiology: many contemporary resources fail to mention ordination and the intricacies of ordination such as the laying on of hands.

Further, I believe that some of the issues that we have today within our churches are directly associated with a lack of formal ordination, which, as I will argue, affirms the call of an elder and commissions him to service. There is, simply put, a lack of clarity and a lack of commission as it relates to the installment of elders in today’s churches. However, this is not just an issue for the contemporary church. Somewhere along the way, church order and the significance of both ministry calling and ministry confirmation lost their place of prominence within ecclesiology. Charles Bridges, in *The Christian Ministry*, maintained this very point roughly two hundred years ago: “We may sometimes trace Ministerial failure to the very threshold of the entrance into the work. Was the call to the sacred office clear in the order of the church, and according to the will

of God? This question bears with vast importance upon the subject. Where the call is manifest, the promise is assured.”¹

I have written this thesis with the goal to bring a greater theological awareness to the laying on of hands for ordination. Specifically, this thesis aims to demonstrate that the laying of hands is the mechanism for ordination and acts as the external and corporate affirmation of a church toward an individual who is called to ministry. Further, this thesis validates that the laying on of hands for ordination is crucial to church polity; attempts to fill the void in contemporary ecclesiology; and demonstrates that the Bible presents the laying on of hands as paradigmatic for ordination to the office of elder. I hope that my findings will equate to a more faithful interpretation of ordination, leading to greater vigor in practice.

Finally, I wish to thank my family, friends, colleagues, and fellow students who have engaged in conversation with me concerning the laying on of hands for ordination. I am particularly thankful to Alex Tibbott—PhD candidate at Southern Seminary—for his prodding, poking, and clarifying questions. Thanks for pushing me to clarify my ideas, brother. I am also especially thankful to Dr. Gregg Allison—my thesis advisor—whose expert advice and care guided me along the way. He has truly been a model of careful, biblical scholarship and I am deeply thankful to have been his student! This thesis is for King Jesus and the purification of his church.

Patrick Thomas Galla

Toronto, Ontario

December 2021

¹ Charles Bridges, *The Christian Ministry* (East Peoria: Versa Press, 2018), 90. While the Banner of Truth Trust first reprinted this edition in 1959, the first edition was published in 1830.

CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

Orientation to Subject

The ecclesiastical tradition of the laying on of hands (LOH) can be one of ambiguity and obscurity. To compound this issue, the meaning and significance of the LOH can vary among different traditions. What may be true within the Roman Catholic tradition is altogether different within the Protestant tradition. Further, a Baptist or congregational church would have a high emphasis on ordination and thus the LOH, whereas a Brethren or Quaker church would not. Traditions aside, a cursory glance at the Christian Scriptures reveals a clear biblical precedent. One will see the biblical practice of the LOH when blessings were pronounced, when miraculous healings took place, and even when the Holy Spirit was bestowed by the apostles (though the paradigmatic particularities of these instances are rightly disputed).¹ Within the New Testament (NT), however, one will see that the LOH is directly associated with a commissioning into ministry or ecclesiastical ordination (Acts 6:6, 13:13; 1 Tim 4:14; 2 Tim. 1:6).²

It is a fair assumption to say that while the NT presents instances of the LOH hands for ordination, the contemporary evangelical church lacks a robust understanding of the significance of the practice—in both orthodoxy and orthopraxy. The same is unfortunately true of the academy, and the gap within contemporary scholarship reveals

¹ John Fleter Tipei, *The Laying on of Hands in the New Testament: Its Significance, Techniques, and Effects* (Lanham: University Press of America, 2009), 2.

² W. L. Liefeld, “The Laying on of Hands,” in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Daniel J. Treier and Walter A. Elwell, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017), 433.

this to be the case.³ While the LOH may be ambiguous for today's contemporary church, the annals of church history indicate a clearer understanding of the practice. Further, it seems that the church of the past saw the LOH as intimately connected to ordination.

While the Bible is the supreme and sole authority that holds the final say on all things pertaining to theology and faith, it is helpful, and at times necessary, to study the writings of faithful men and women who help shed light upon the correct interpretation of Scripture. There is, perhaps, no greater resurgence in theological thinking than that of the Reformation period. And of the Reformation period, many label John Calvin as the most influential thinker and writer of the Protestant Reformers.⁴ His commentaries cover nearly the entire Bible, and his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* stands to be one of the highest authorities on Christian theology. Much can be gleaned from his writings.

Particularly as it relates to the LOH for ordination, Calvin's understanding of this biblical practice demonstrates a distinction from that of the Roman Catholic view and, I will argue, provides a more faithful interpretation. A theological retrieval of Calvin's writings thus provides the clarity needed for a more faithful way forward. Further, Calvin's interpretation emphasizes that the LOH is intimately connected to ordination and is an essential practice for today's church.

The goal of this work is fourfold: (1) to present biblical categories that help better understand the practice of the LOH, (2) to clarify the relationship between the LOH and ordination, (3) to demonstrate that the LOH has both scriptural and historical precedent, and (4) to demonstrate that the LOH for ordination is a biblical practice and thus should be practiced in today's congregations.

³ Tipei, *Laying on of Hands*, 2. Tipei's work appears to be the most comprehensive work on the topic. He states, "This topic has received little scholarly attention."

⁴ Stanley M. Burgess, *The Holy Spirit: Medieval, Roman Catholic, and Reformation Traditions* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1997), 162.

Thesis and Methodology

In this thesis, I will argue that the Bible presents the LOH as paradigmatic for ordination. I will further argue that the LOH is not a conferral of power—as understood from within the Roman Catholic tradition—but a symbolic expression performed by a church community that validates the calling of an individual to the pastoral office. Additionally, the LOH for ordination symbolically acts as solemn consecration of an individual to that pastoral office. I will demonstrate that though the LOH for ordination is not a rite that is on par with the ordinances of the church, the scriptural evidence presents it as a sacred practice from the Lord and thus establishes it as an essential aspect of ecclesiastical polity.

This thesis will establish the LOH for ordination in four ways. First, a survey of contemporary ecclesiology will expose the deficiency within modern thought. Here, the LOH will also be examined from both a Roman Catholic tradition and a Protestant tradition; doing so will highlight the vast difference in the understanding of the LOH from each respective hermeneutical lens. Second, I will assess the biblical witness from both the Old and New Testaments; this will demonstrate that the LOH was an outward symbolic act that is used in sacrificial ceremonies, healings, cleansing ceremonies, and commissioning to service or office. Third, this thesis will investigate and retrieve the practice as understood by John Calvin. A theological retrieval of the LOH for ordination from this corresponding church period will inform contemporary dialogue and help create a theology for today. Fourth, implications will be drawn, and a way forward will be presented for the church and for the academy, thus producing a more theologically robust understanding of the practice.

CHAPTER 2
ASSESSING CONTEMPORARY ECCLESIOLOGY
AND THEOLOGICAL TRADITIONS

What is the actual significance of the laying on of hands in the ordination process, and does the practice convey any special divine power?¹ Different traditions and streams of interpretation attempt to answer this question—namely Roman Catholics and Protestants. We will begin with a survey and assessment of the LOH from the Protestant tradition and then move into a survey and assessment of the LOH from the Roman Catholic tradition.

Contemporary Protestant Texts

Evangelical ecclesiology has certainly undergone a resurgence within more recent years in both general attention and publication. While one must applaud this effort, ecclesiology is still a rather neglected area of study. In their book *Raising the Dust*, Gregg Allison and Ryan Welsh affirm “that a deficient ecclesiology is prevalent today in both the local church and the academy. . . . Many pastors-in-training have a lack of interest in the governance of the church and are far more interested in ‘sexier’ theological studies.”² It follows, then, that a deficient ecclesiology leads to an anemic understanding of the ordination process and the mechanism for ordination; that is, the LOH. A survey of contemporary ecclesiology quickly validates this fact and exposes a lack of a robust theology concerning the LOH for ordination within evangelical thought.

¹ W. L. Liefeld, “The Laying on of Hands,” in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Daniel J. Treier and Walter A. Elwell, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017), 433.

² Gregg Allison and Ryan Welsh, *Raising the Dust* (Louisville: Sojourn Network Press, 2019), 1.

I begin with single-volume works. Alexander Strauch's *Biblical Eldership* is an indispensable volume for the study of eldership. He affirms the public installation of elders but rejects the use of "ordination" language. Indeed, he argues that the Greek word *cheirotoneo* (Acts 14:23) means to "appoint" or "designate."³ According to Strauch, to practice ordination is to impose church history back onto the NT text; thus, he argues that "no one needs to be ordained to preach Christ or administer the ordinances."⁴ He argues positively, however, that the NT indicates that elders were formally installed by the LOH before the congregation and that the LOH, along with prayer, "would signal the start of the new elder's ministry."⁵ At the same time, Strauch struggles to articulate the precise significance of the LOH and feels that the NT gives scant instruction concerning the issue. He therefore does not understand it to be a prescribed practice, such as baptism and the Lord's Supper.⁶ Strauch expresses the similar sentiment in his work *Minister of Mercy: The New Testament Deacon*. He writes, "The New Testament contains no normative regulations for the laying on of hands. It is not a prescribed practice such as baptism or the Lord's Supper, nor is it restricted to a particular person or group in the church."⁷

In his book *Why Elders?*, Benjamin L. Merkle gives a helpful overview of the NT view on the significance of the elder, but he does not address the installation of elders.⁸ Likewise, Gene A. Getz's book *Elders and Leaders* misses this significant piece

³ Alexander Strauch, *Biblical Eldership: An Urgent Call to Restore Biblical Church Leadership* (Littleton: Lewis & Roth, 1995), 285.

⁴ Strauch, *Biblical Eldership*, 287.

⁵ Strauch, *Biblical Eldership*, 287.

⁶ Strauch, *Biblical Eldership*, 288.

⁷ Alexander Strauch, *Minister of Mercy: The New Testament Deacon* (Colorado Springs: Lewis & Roth, 1992), 39.

⁸ Benjamin J. Merkle, *Why Elders? A Biblical and Practical Guide for Church Members* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 2009).

of ecclesiology. He addresses the appointment of elders but does so with three broad categories tracking the NT witness: (1) self-appointed leaders, (2) leader-appointed leaders, and (3) congregation-appointed leaders. He does not address the LOH for elder installation. In fact, he writes, “It’s clear from the biblical story that there is no specific methodology spelled out for appointing spiritual leaders, either for elders/overseers or deacons.”⁹ Wallace M. Alston Jr.’s book *The Church of the Living God: A Reformed Perspective* also misses the installation of elders.¹⁰

Mark Dever’s *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church* devotes one chapter to biblical church eldership, within a congregational context. He believes that the NT witness gives the congregation the authority to install elders. While providing ample aid toward a robust understanding of elders, Dever does not address the mechanism for appointing elders. Instead, he briefly writes, “If it becomes clear that God has so gifted a certain man in the church, and if, after prayer, the church recognizes his gifts, then he should be set apart as an elder.”¹¹ *Elders in the Life of the Church* by Phil A. Newton and Matt Schmucker is a helpful resource for those seeking to transition toward a plurality-of-elders model. They make two pertinent points: (1) Elders should be “installed” not the “ordained;” and (2) This formal installation process should include the congregation. Helpfully, they note, “The installation process gives both the elders and the congregation a chance to affirm God’s hand upon the leaders and the people.”¹² While Newton and Schmucker give helpful anecdotal evidence from Capitol Hill Baptist Church (Washington, DC), where newly installed elders perform vows before the congregation,

⁹ Gene A. Getz, *Elders and Leaders: God’s Plan for Leading the Church* (Chicago: Moody, 2003), 208.

¹⁰ Wallace M. Alston Jr. *The Church of the Living God: A Reformed Perspective* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 2002).

¹¹ Mark Dever, *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church*, 3rd ed. (Wheaton: Crossway, 2013), 241.

¹² Phil A. Newton and Matt Schmucker, *Elders in the Life of the Church: Rediscovering the Biblical Model for Church Leadership* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2014), 195. See also pp. 139-44.

there is nothing of the installment of elders through the LOH and prayer. Indeed, details of the installation process are altogether lacking.¹³

Gregg Allison's *Sojourners and Strangers: The Doctrine of the Church*, is one of the most robust ecclesiology resources within contemporary protestant thought. It details offices of the church, the qualifications needed for those church offices, and different types of church government, arguing for a plurality of elders within elder-led congregationalism.¹⁴ There is not, however, any mention of the LOH for ordination. The installation or ordination process for elders is missing altogether.

John S. Hammett has a brief section on ordination within his work *Biblical Foundations for Baptist Churches*. He makes a positive note that ordination is a typical Baptist practice for both elders and deacons, but he is quick to explain that there is little biblical basis for this practice.¹⁵ Hammett alludes to several Old Testament passages as potential biblical precedents for ordination—e.g., Joshua's succession of Moses (Deut. 31); the consecration of Aaron, his sons, and the Levites (Lev. 8)—but he does not see these as preludes to contemporary ordination. He eventually refers to Acts 6:1-6 as the

¹³ In *A Theology for the Church*, ed. Daniel L. Akin, Bruce Riley Ashford, and Kenneth Keathley, rev. ed. (Nashville: B&H, 2014), Dever pens the chapter on ecclesiology ("The Church," 603-68). While Dever does indeed give a careful ecclesiological overview, he does not explicitly address either ordination or the LOH for ordination. He addresses leadership within the church and demonstrates the clear scriptural warrant for both elders and deacons. He addresses a macro view of church polity across the different church traditions. He addresses the character qualifications of said elders/pastors. But Dever does not address the mechanism through which men are installed into the office of overseer. He briefly mentions, in passing, the ordination of women within some traditions, but the fullest expression of ordination is relegated to a footnote. Concerning "the call to full-time ministry," Dever writes, "historically, Christians have spoken of two aspects of the call to full-time ministry, the internal and the external. The external call is provided by an individual's church, which confirms the individual's gifts" (625n.72). These sentences are indeed helpful, but a nuanced understanding of the external affirmation by the individual's church is necessary. One additional resource from 9Marks needs to be mentioned: Jeramie Rinne, *Church Elders: How to Shepherd God's People Like Jesus* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2014). This book, however, is intended to present more of a "biblical job description for elders" (p. 15). So, it is less focused on the theology of the church and more focused on the practice of the elder within his office.

¹⁴ Gregg R. Allison, *Sojourners and Strangers: The Doctrine of The Church* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2012), 206-317.

¹⁵ John S. Hammett, *Biblical Foundations for Baptist Churches: A Contemporary Ecclesiology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Kregel Academic, 2019), 236.

“closest parallel and clearest basis for ordination to a church office.”¹⁶ Hammett argues that seeing the LOH as synonymous with ordination is problematic because, though Timothy was commissioned to a special ministry, it is not clear whether Timothy was installed as an actual pastor/elder.¹⁷ He does, however, see positive pragmatic reasons to continue with the practice of ordination within the local church.¹⁸

Perhaps the most helpful, albeit brief, contemporary resource that sheds light upon the LOH is Cornelis Van Dam’s *The Elder: Today’s Ministry Rooted in All of Scripture*. Unlike the previously discussed books on ecclesiology, this resource offers a biblical theology of the office of elder as seen within both the Old and New Testaments. Van Dam assesses the relevant LOH passages and demonstrates a rich biblical paradigm. He concludes that the LOH does not offer any special gifting that equips the office bearer. The biblical witness instead underscores that the person involved is separated for a special service unto the Lord.¹⁹ Van Dam writes, “One could therefore say that the laying on of hands was a sign of consecration, of being offered up in holy service to God.”²⁰

Next, I assess whole-volume systematic theologies. Michael F. Bird’s *Evangelical Theology* and Millard J. Erickson’s *Christian Theology* both completely omit the topic of LOH.²¹ While both resources address church governance, neither addresses

¹⁶ Hammett, *Biblical Foundations for Baptist Churches*, 237.

¹⁷ Hammett, *Biblical Foundations for Baptist Churches*, 237.

¹⁸ Hammett, *Biblical Foundations for Baptist Churches*, 239-41.

¹⁹ Cornelis Van Dam, *The Elder: Today’s Ministry Rooted in All of Scripture* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 2009), 134.

²⁰ Van Dam, *The Elder*, 133. Van Dam’s assessment, therefore, stands against Rome’s interpretation of the LOH, which sees the practice as a conferral of power via apostolic succession. More on this below.

²¹ See Michael F. Bird, *Evangelical Theology: A Biblical and Systematic Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2013). This section on whole-volume systematics is not meant to adjudicate the differences in the ecclesiological perspectives between these different authors. Rather, I am highlighting the lack of engagement with the laying on of hands in contemporary evangelical discussion.

the installation of elders. Erickson does briefly mention the LOH within his treatment of the episcopal form of government, but he does not theologically assess the practice.²²

Neither author produces a theological position for ordination.

John M. Frame's *Systematic Theology* likewise omits the LOH, the LOH for ordination, and the ordination of men to an office of the church altogether. He addresses church governance, albeit very briefly, and his treatment on governance emphasizes the role of biblical discipline within the church. Where Frame addresses the episcopal structure, he writes, "The bishop has power to consecrate and appoint officers following the model of the apostles in Acts 14:23 and Titus in Titus 1:5."²³ Frame makes no mention of how this consecration and appointment of officers takes place. In a passing comment regarding the lack of scriptural clarity on which governance is right, he suggests that Timothy served in his role via a gift from God that was given to him through the hands of several elders.²⁴ However, Frame offers no clarification or elaboration on whether he views this to be a conferral of power for Timothy's office.

Wayne Grudem's *Systematic Theology* explicitly attempts to answer the question "How should church officers be chosen?" Grudem helpfully remarks that, historically, the church has seen "two major types of process for the selection of church officers—selection by a higher authority, or selection by the local congregation."²⁵ He readily affirms that church officers are either installed or ordained in office and that they need public recognition in order to fulfill their responsibilities.²⁶ Grudem concludes:

²² Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013), 992.

²³ John Frame, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Christian Belief* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 2013), 1027.

²⁴ Frame, *Systematic Theology*, 1027.

²⁵ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2020), 1132.

²⁶ Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 1135.

Although Scripture does not explicitly command one specific system of choosing church officers, it would seem most wise to have a system whereby the entire church has a significant role in selection and recognition of the officers of the church . . . or through some process whereby congregational recognition is required before church officers can assume office.²⁷

Contemporary Roman Catholic Texts

Within the Roman Catholic Church, the LOH is performed through the sacrament of Holy Orders under the banner of The Sacraments at The Service of Communion, which includes the sacraments of Holy Orders and Matrimony.²⁸ These two sacraments are directed toward the salvation of others and “confer a particular mission in the church and serve to build up the people of God.”²⁹ As it relates to the sacraments of Holy Orders, priests are “consecrated in Christ’s name ‘to feed the Church by the word and grace of God.’”³⁰

As the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* explains, “Holy Orders is the sacrament through which the mission entrusted by Christ to his apostles continues to be exercised in the Church until the end of time: thus, it is the sacrament of apostolic ministry. Further, ordination within the sacramental system “confers a gift of the Holy Spirit that permits the exercise of a ‘sacred power’ which can come only from Christ himself through his Church.”³¹ It includes three degrees: episcopate, presbyterate, and diaconate” (or bishop, priest, and deacon).³² Only the bishops and priests participate in the priesthood of Christ; the deacon is meant to assist and serve them. All three offices,

²⁷ Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 1134.

²⁸ For an excellent Evangelical assessment on Catholic doctrine see Gregg R. Allison, *Roman Catholic Theology and Practice: An Evangelical Assessment* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2014).

²⁹ CCC, 426.

³⁰ CCC, 426.

³¹ CCC, 427.

³² CCC, 427.

however, “are conferred by a sacramental act called ‘ordination,’ that is, by the sacrament of Holy Orders.”³³

The *ministerial* priesthood is divided into two categories: (1) the episcopacy (i.e., the order of bishops) and (2) the presbyterate (i.e., the order of priests). Both types are ordained via Holy Orders, but it is only the episcopacy that receives the “fulness of the sacrament of Holy Orders.”³⁴ And it is only the bishops who, “according to the witness of tradition,” form an unbroken succession back to the apostles and thus “are regarded as transmitters of the apostolic line.”³⁵ According to Catholic doctrine, the early apostles were given a special “outpouring of the Holy Spirit,” and it was through this unbroken line of succession that the apostles passed along this special outpouring (i.e., “the gift of the Spirit”), which they did through the “imposition of hands.”

The sacrament of Holy Orders is to be celebrated on Sunday within the Eucharistic liturgy.³⁶ The bishops ordain the priests to be with the “imposition of hands on the head of the ordained.”³⁷ Accompanying the LOH is the specific “consecratory prayer,” which requests of God “the outpouring of the Holy Spirit and his gifts proper to the ministry to which the candidate is being ordained.”³⁸ Catholic theologian Ludwig Ott explains this to be a transferring of spiritual power “to one of the faithful by the imposition of hands and prayer of the priest.”³⁹ This LOH of the priesthood—via the sacrament of Holy Orders—allows the ordained minister to act in *persona Christi*, that is,

³³ CCC, 433.

³⁴ CCC, 433.

³⁵ CCC, 433.

³⁶ CCC, 438.

³⁷ CCC, 438.

³⁸ CCC, 433.

³⁹ Ludwig Ott, *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma*, ed. James Canon Bastible, trans. Patrick Lynch (St. Louis: B. Herder, 1962), 450.

“in the person of Christ.”⁴⁰ The *Catechism* explains, “Now the minister [priest], by reason of the sacerdotal consecration which he has received, is truly made like to the high priest [Jesus Christ] and possesses the authority to act in the power and place of the person of Christ himself.”⁴¹ Only through Holy Orders may the ordained administer the sacraments, especially that of the Eucharist. For the Catholic Church, Jesus’s ministry is successively passed down through the LOH and is “a visible and external priesthood, a hierarchy instituted by Divine ordinance, and a special priesthood and a special priestly status.”⁴²

Ott reads scriptural passages such as Acts 6:6, 1 Timothy 4:14, and 2 Timothy 1:6 as representative of visual expressions of a transferring of sacerdotal power: “Acceptance into the church hierarchy took place by a procedure perceptible to the senses, consisting in imposition of the hands and prayer. By this external rite a spiritual authorization of office was conveyed to the ordained, and an inward grace communicated to him.”⁴³ Ott likens this spiritual change to that of the Roman Catholic Eucharist. He appeals to the words of Gregory of Nyssa, who explained that the inward change is brought about by the imposition of hands, which makes the recipient “sublime” and “venerable.”⁴⁴ Gregory writes, “As to the outside he remains the same as he was, but by an invisible power and grace his invisible soul has been changed for the better.”⁴⁵ Just as the bread and wine of the Catholic Eucharist undergo a substantial change to become the

⁴⁰ CCC, 431.

⁴¹ CCC, 431.

⁴² Ott, *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma*, 450.

⁴³ Ott, *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma*, 451.

⁴⁴ Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Baptism of Christ: A Sermon for the Day of the Lights*, translated by H.A. Wilson. From *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Second Series, Vol. 5*, edited by Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Buffalo: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1893), quoted in Ott, *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma*, 451.

⁴⁵ Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Baptism of Christ: A Sermon for the Day of the Lights*, translated by H.A. Wilson. From *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Second Series, Vol. 5*, edited by Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Buffalo: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1893), quoted in Ott, *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma*, 451.

body and blood of Jesus, so too the ordained man undergoes a substantial change by the laying on of hands of bishops.

The Roman Catholic Church understands the LOH to be a sacramental conferring of sacerdotal powers through the imposition of hands for all three degrees of service: bishops, priests, and deacons. Here, the LOH, along with prayer, serves as the essential mechanism for equipping those ordained with the gifts and powers needed for the role, namely, a special outpouring of the Holy Spirit (“the grace of the Holy Spirit is so conferred”⁴⁶). Within the Roman Catholic tradition, the LOH and Holy Orders consecrates the life of the one who is serving in office to the point where one’s very nature is altered and sanctified.⁴⁷ The ordained individual receives the conferred authority necessary to serve the church, and the sacrament is an indelible mark of the priests ordination.

It is also important to note that within the Roman Catholic Church, only bishops receive the fullest expression of the sacrament of Holy Orders, while priests and deacons share in a lesser degree. Through the highest degree of Holy Orders, “Bishops in an eminent and visible way sustain the role of Christ Himself as teacher, shepherd and High Priest, and they act in His person.”⁴⁸ Thus, the LOH for ordination via Holy Orders (1) confers sacerdotal power for the office, (2) changes the essence of the one ordained, (3) consecrates the ordained to ministry, (4) forms a successive line back to the apostles (for bishops only), and (5) confers upon the ordained the authority of the Catholic Church.

⁴⁶ *LG*, 3.21.

⁴⁷ *LG*, 3.21.

⁴⁸ *LG*, 3.21.

Conclusion

As we survey a sampling of both Contemporary Roman Catholic and Protestant thought, what emerges is a sharp distinction: the Roman Catholic Church sees the LOH as sacramental conferring of sacerdotal power to perform ministerial acts, according to apostolic succession. Holy Orders is a scriptural rite and a “true Sacrament” instituted by Christ.⁴⁹ The Roman Catholic texts are quite clear about this position.

The Protestant view, however, lacks clarity. Where some affirm, albeit briefly, that ordination is an outward affirmation of an inward call, others omit ordination and the LOH for ordination altogether. Clearly there is room within contemporary evangelical ecclesiology to further assess the LOH and the LOH for ordination. While the above-surveyed resources are helpful guides through the contours of ecclesiology, the gap within this area of study is prevalent. Aside from Cornelis Van Dam’s *The Elder*, the LOH and the LOH for ordination appear to have lost their place of significance within contemporary evangelical ecclesiology. The next chapter will assess the biblical data to confirm whether this trend in evangelical ecclesiology is faithful to the scriptural witness.

Several questions still remain. First, is the LOH for ordination a sacramental conferring of sacerdotal power, or is it an outward affirmation of an inward call by God? Second, is the LOH a scriptural rite and paradigmatic for ordination? Third, if the LOH is indeed paradigmatic for ordination, then is it absolutely essential? We will turn next to interact with the biblical witness. Here, the biblical data will demonstrate that the LOH for ordination is not a transfer of sacerdotal power but (1) an external symbol performed by a community that confirms an individual’s call, or (2) the installment to a ministerial office. Once this conclusion is validated, we will assess whether the LOH is paradigmatic for ordination and thus essential for contemporary church polity.

⁴⁹ Ott, *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma*, 450.

CHAPTER 3

THE BIBLICAL WITNESS

The practice of the laying on of hands takes several forms of significance within the Old and New Testaments. In the OT, the LOH can communicate blessing (Gen 48:14-16), is a sign associated with healing (2 Kgs 4:34; 5:11; 13:20-21), can be seen as a sacrificial rite as in the Day of Atonement (Lev 16:20-22), can act as commissioning for ministry (Num 27:12-23), accompanies the consecration of the Levites (Num 8:9, 10), and is associated with the passing of judgment on an offender (Lev 24:13-16).¹ Scholars also see an emphasis of the ritual's taking place in many different sacrificial contexts and in ordination to OT offices.²

The NT witness demonstrates that the LOH can be associated with blessing and healing and, in particular cases, is even accompanied by the bestowal of the Spirit (though it is debated whether this is normative). To gain a broader understanding of the context of the LOH, I will survey different biblical categories that are associated with it.³ After my assessment of biblical categories, I will move into a more in-depth analysis of pertinent OT and NT passages that deal with the LOH as associated with ordination. Here, I will argue that the LOH finds its greatest expression in the ordination and commission to ministry.

¹ John Fleter Tipei, *The Laying on of Hands in the New Testament: Its Significance, Techniques, and Effects* (Lanham: University Press of America, 2009), 18-39.

² Craig S. Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary, New Testament*, 2nd ed. (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2014), 335, 343; Tipei, *Laying on of Hands*, 65.

³ Tipei's treatment of the LOH as seen from within different biblical contexts is invaluable. See Tipei, *Laying on of Hands*, 16-40.

Biblical Categories of the Laying on of Hands

The LOH as a Sign of Blessing

The first mention of the LOH in Scripture is found in Genesis 48, and there it carries the connotation of blessing. At the end of the Joseph narratives, Jacob is pictured as blessing his sons. This act of blessing conveys a blessing of the father that is passed along to the next generation.⁴ While familial blessing is consistent within the prior patriarchal narratives, this is the first reference where the LOH is involved.

Jacob, the Jewish patriarch, had adopted his grandsons, Ephraim and Manasseh (Joseph's sons), as his own sons and thus includes them in his familial blessings: "And Israel [Jacob] stretched out his right hand and laid it on the head of Ephraim, who was the younger, and his left hand on the head of Manasseh, crossing his hands" (Gen 48:14).⁵ Here, the younger son, Ephraim, was blessed as the firstborn rather than the older brother, Manasseh—a well-established and continued theme that blessing does not always follow the natural descent of family lineage.⁶

More important to our discussion concerning the LOH is Joseph's rebuttal to his father, Jacob, regarding the use of his right hand in the blessings over his younger son, Ephraim (v. 17). Sailhamer argues that this act communicates that the right hand was seen to have a greater significance than the left hand.⁷ Further, Tipei writes, "Although this is the only text in the OT to treat the laying on of the right hand as superior to that of the left hand, there are numerous passages, especially in the Psalms, which describe the right hand as a symbol of power and victory."⁸ The imposition of hands is expressed in

⁴ John H. Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative: A Biblical-Theological Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 229.

⁵ Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations come from the *English Standard Version*.

⁶ Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 229.

⁷ Tipei, *Laying on of Hands*, 19.

⁸ Tipei, *Laying on of Hands*, 19. See also Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 16-50*, WBC, vol. 2 (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2000), 464.

two separate verbs: תָּשׂ (vv. 14, 17) and נָשָׂא (v. 18). Both carry the same meaning and can be translated as to “put, place.”⁹ The LOH is then followed by a pronouncement of blessing and a petition of blessing whereby Jacob “invokes the divine favor on the children.”¹⁰

There are two points important to the advancement of our discussion concerning the significance of the LOH. First, the placement of Jacob’s hand over the younger son clearly demonstrates the greater significance of Ephraim over Manasseh. Hamilton observes, “Through placing his hands on Joseph’s children, Jacob simply engages in an act by which he designates who the recipients of blessing are, and an act by which the actual blessing is bestowed.”¹¹ This bestowal of blessing is a major reversal in normal tradition wherein the firstborn is to receive the full birthright. Second, the LOH as a blessing is also associated with a pronouncement and petition. The mere act of the LOH is not the blessing itself; rather, it is accompanied with a pronouncement and petition. Therefore, the LOH along with the pronouncement and petition should be taken together as the formal blessing. The LOH does not bestow any special grace or gift. Rather, it is a symbolic expression and petition that blessing will come to Ephraim—a theological theme of divine blessing that is based solely on God’s grace and choice.¹²

The LOH in Association with Atonement

Central to Judaism was the sacrificial system that dealt with the atonement for the sins of Israel and her leaders. Several different offerings are associated with the sacrificial laws as outlined in Leviticus 1:1-7:38: burnt, grain, peace, sin, and guilt

⁹ Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18-50*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 636.

¹⁰ Tipei, *Laying on of Hands*, 19.

¹¹ Hamilton, *Genesis 18-50*, 637.

¹² Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 233.

offerings. The practice of sacrifices was well known up to this point in Israel's redemptive history (Exod 18:12), but this section of the Pentateuch codified the specifics of how the ceremonial sacrifices were to be practiced, thus making them regulatory.¹³ The book of Hebrews sheds light on the broader role of sacrifice within the context of ancient Israel: "Under the law almost everything is purified with blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins" (Heb 9:22). Gordon Wenham writes, "According to Leviticus . . . sacrificial blood is necessary to cleanse and sanctify. Sacrifice can undo the effects of sin and human infirmity. Sin and disease lead to profanation of the holy and pollution of the clean. Sacrifice can reverse this process."¹⁴

Particular to the LOH were the offerings that dealt with animal sacrifices. Take burnt offerings for example (Lev 1:3-17). With a burnt offering, an Israelite who wanted to bring an offering to the Lord (v. 2) would bring a male bull before the Lord at the entrance of the tabernacle (v. 3). Here, the one offering the sacrifice would place his hands on the heads of the bull (the burnt offering), and if it were accepted, it would then make "atonement" for him (v. 4).¹⁵ The person offering the sacrifice would then kill the bull, and a priest would then place it on the alter to burn all night as a "pleasing aroma to the Lord" (vv. 9, 13, 17).

The same practice is associated with peace offerings and sin offerings, though it is not mentioned with guilt offerings. A peace offering, while it does not act as a part of the atonement rituals, acts as an expression of thanksgiving (7:12), as a result of a vow (7:16), or as a freewill offering (7:16). Still, with a peace offering, the Israelite who was offering the sacrifice would lay his hands on the head of the offering and then kill it at the entrance of the tabernacle (3:2, 8, 13). The same is true with a sin offering. When an

¹³ Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 324.

¹⁴ Gordon J. Wenham, *The Book of Leviticus*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 26.

¹⁵ Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 324.

individual sins unintentionally, he would come to the entrance of the tabernacle and offer “for the sin that he has committed” a bull to the Lord. Here, the Israelite would “lay his hand on the head of the bull and kill the bull before the Lord” (4:4). Likewise, this is true if the entire congregation would sin unintentionally. Here, the “assembly” shall bring a bull before the Lord at the entrance of the tabernacle, and the elders of Israel would “lay their hands on the head of the bull before the Lord, and the bull shall be killed before the Lord” (4:15). Through the sin offering, the priest would make “atonement” for the people of Israel, and they would be “forgiven” of their sins (4:20). “Atonement” and “forgiveness” are extended to any Israelite who offers an acceptable sin offering via the LOH (4:26, 31).

One of the most well-known passages that is associated with the forgiveness of sins is Israel’s Day of Atonement (Lev 16; 23:26-32; Num 29:7-11), a ritual that took place once a year. According to Wenham, “The main purpose of the day of atonement ceremonies is to cleanse the sanctuary from the pollutions introduced [sin] into it by the unclean worshipers The aim of these rituals is to make possible God’s continued presence among his people.”¹⁶ Just as the previous sacrificial ceremonies demonstrated, the Day of Atonement also includes the LOH. Aside from the burnt offerings and sin offerings offered on the Day of Atonement, this particular day also includes the ritual of the scapegoat:¹⁷

And Aaron shall lay both his hands on the head of the live goat and confess over it all the iniquities of the people of Israel, and all their transgressions, all their sins. And he shall put them on the head of the goat and send it away into the wilderness by the hand of a man who is in readiness. The goat shall bear all their iniquities on itself to a remote area, and he shall let the goat go free in the wilderness. (Lev 16:21-22)

¹⁶ Wenham, *Leviticus*, 228.

¹⁷ Tipei, *Laying on of Hands*, 29.

This passage in Leviticus is the only context where the transference of sin is mentioned in direct connection with the LOH.¹⁸ As Tipei observes, the text stresses the fact that “the rite is executed with both hands and this is the key to understanding the function of the Azazel goat.”¹⁹ As the high priest, Aaron confessed Israel’s sins and symbolically placed the nation’s “iniquities” upon the goat. The goat was then sent away from the camp and eventually into the wilderness and would “bear the sins of the nation.”²⁰ The goat’s departure from the camp signifies the removal of sin from the community, thus “ensuring for another year that the people can co-exist with a holy God” (Lev 16:22).²¹ Both the ceremony of the scapegoat and the Day of Atonement are done by the high priest, who alone has access to God. He symbolically represents Israel to Yahweh.²² And through the priest, Israel’s sin is symbolically transferred onto the goat via the LOH.²³

Contra Tipei, who understands the transference of sins to be “quasi-physical,” the context of Leviticus 16 and the entire Levitical priesthood indicates that the transference and atonement of sins possesses a more spiritual or symbolic nature.²⁴ In order for the transference of sins to the goat to be physical or “quasi-physical,” Aaron would first have to have the sins of the people transferred to him. Nowhere in the text is this indicated. Instead, the nature of the priesthood is that Aaron and the Levitical priests symbolically or spiritually act on behalf of the people. This symbolic nature of the LOH

¹⁸ Tipei, *Laying on of Hands*, 28.

¹⁹ Tipei, *Laying on of Hands*, 29.

²⁰ Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 341.

²¹ Stephen G. Dempster, *Dominion and Dynasty: A Theology of the Hebrew Bible* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 108.

²² Dempster, *Dominion and Dynasty*, 108.

²³ Dempster, *Dominion and Dynasty*, 108. See also Wenham, *Leviticus*, 233.

²⁴ Tipei, *Laying on of Hands*, 29.

is validated Leviticus 24. Here, a man is said to have blasphemed and cursed the name of the Lord. Those who witness this grievous sin take this man outside of the camp to stone him. There, they lay their hands upon the head of the blasphemer, thus affirming his sin, and proceed to stone him. Within Judaism, the sin of one person could incriminate the entire camp. Thus, by the congregation's placing their hands on the blasphemer's head, they are acknowledging his sin and symbolically ridding themselves of their corporate guilt. In both instances, the LOH is symbolic.

The LOH as seen in association with Israel's different sacrificial ceremonies, including the Day of Atonement, carries great theological significance. It is through the LOH, and the rites that are associated with it, that God offers atonement, appeasement, and forgiveness for the sins of the people. But this act merely symbolic—there is no propitiation achieved, grace applied, or righteousness imputed through the physical placement of hands. The OT passages associated with the LOH and atonement make no indication that this is the case. Sin is indeed “exterminated from Israel.”²⁵ But “all the iniquities of the Israelites, all their rebellions and all their sins are symbolically placed on the scapegoat.”²⁶

The greater biblical narrative helps readers understand that the LOH within the OT context offers no imputation of righteousness or transfer of power leading to atonement. The author of Hebrews writes, “For it is impossible that the blood of bulls and goats should take away sins” (Heb 10:4). It would be only through the blood of the sacrificial Lamb of God—the Son of God—that sin would be atoned for once and for all. The priests and the sacrifices of the OT sanctified the people and made them acceptable to come into God's presence, albeit for a time and in a limited way.²⁷

²⁵ Wenham, *Leviticus*, 234.

²⁶ Dempster, *Dominion and Dynasty*, 108.

²⁷ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2020), 769.

The NT witness validates that the LOH within the OT sacrificial ceremonies, including the Day of Atonement, is a symbolic act. The apostle Paul writes that within the OT period, God had “passed over former sins” (Rom 3:25). God had “passed over” the sins of the Israelites via their sacrificial system, but the penalty for their sins had not been paid. Propitiation is a theological concept reserved for the new covenant. Thus, the atonement found in these OT sacrificial rites foreshadow what was to come with the Messiah. The LOH, then, is a symbolic participation in this “divine forbearance.”

The LOH in Association with Healing

The next biblical category that is associated with the LOH is the category of healing. The OT does not yield any data concerning the LOH as associated with healing. There are three accounts within 2 Kings that allude to a connection between a healing and physical touch but not in the same manner that is consistent with the rest of the data on the LOH. First, Elisha heals a young boy by physically laying on him and matching his mouth, eyes, and hands with the boy’s mouth, eyes, and hands (2 Kgs 4:34). Second, Naaman, a commander of the Syrian army, thought that Elisha would heal him by waving his hands over him (5:11); instead, Elisha commands him to wash in the river seven times. Third, a man is healed by touching the bones of Elisha (13:21). Again, these three accounts are not consistent with the rest of the OT’s use of the LOH and do not yield any conclusive results.

There are, however, many instances of the LOH as associated with healing in the NT. Space does not permit an exhaustive study of this category. However, several passages that connect the LOH with healing will be assessed to determine the ultimate significance. While Jesus’s healing ministry took several approaches (he performed healings by pronouncement, by touching others, and even by having others touch him),

he would sometimes lay his hands on those whom he healed. Indeed, the LOH in connection with the healing ministry of Jesus is mentioned eight times.²⁸

Jesus “stretched out his hand and touched” a leprous man, thus healing him instantly (Matthew 8:2 cf. Mark 1:40-45). The standard phrase “laid his hands” is not used here in this reference, but the connotation is similar. R. T. France observes that Jesus’s touch is not always essential when dealing with healings (Matt 8:5-13), but that the double expression here “stretched out his hand and touched him” draws significant attention to the fact that this man was a leper who would have lacked physical touch.²⁹

In Matthew 9:18 a Jewish ruler, Jairus asks Jesus to come and “lay your [Jesus’s] hand” upon his daughter that she may be healed and live. When Jesus arrived at the home of this dying girl, he would take her “by the hand” and raise her up to life. France again calls attention to the fact that Jesus disregards cultural taboos by touching the body of a dead body.³⁰ Further, as Tipei points out, each Synoptic Gospel references the healing of a hemorrhaging women (Matt. 9:20-22, Luke 8:42-48), a story placed in the middle of the account of the healing of Jairus’s daughter.³¹ Here, Jesus does not place his hands upon her, rather, she makes the effort to touch Jesus’s garment (v. 21). It was not the mere touch that brought healing to this woman; however, it was her faith in Jesus that made her well (v. 22).

The LOH as associated with healing prominently arises in three passages in the Gospel of Mark. First, Mark 6:5 is a general synopsis of Jesus’s early ministry, and it explains that Jesus “laid his hands on a few sick people and healed them” when he was in Nazareth. The account here in Mark highlights the rejection of Jesus within his

²⁸ Tipei, *Laying on of Hands*, 118.

²⁹ R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 307.

³⁰ France, *Gospel of Matthew*, 362.

³¹ Tipei, *Laying on of Hands*, 122.

hometown. R. T. Frances observes, “If [faith] has been the key to at least some of the preceding miracle of deliverance (4:40; 5:34, 36), what is to be expected where it is absent?”³² Mark 6:1-6 highlights the fact that certain people “took offence” at Jesus (v. 3), who was unable to do a “mighty work” (v. 5) in Nazareth because of the people’s “unbelief” (v. 6). Second, Jesus laid his hands upon a blind man, who begged Jesus to “touch him.” Jesus laid his hands once on this blind man’s body and then again on his eyes specifically (Mark 8:23, 25). Here, Jesus incorporates the use of mud and water in the healing process. Third, in Mark 7:32, Jesus is requested by people within the Decapolis region to “lay his hands” upon a man who was deaf and had a speech impediment. Jesus would eventually place his own fingers in the ears of this deaf man and heal him of both his hearing and speech impediments.

The LOH is also seen within Luke’s Gospel. After Jesus heals Peter’s mother-in-law from a “high fever,” Luke tells us that Jesus then tended to many of the sick, poor, and afflicted in the area: “he laid his hands on every one of them and healed them” (Luke 4:40). Jesus, restored upon a woman who had a “disabled spirit” that kept her hunched over for eighteen years. This woman was healed immediately when Jesus “laid his hands” upon her (Luke 13:10-13). Accompanying the LOH here is a pronouncement of healing made by Jesus: “Woman, you are freed (or set free) from your disability” (v. 12), which takes place prior to the imposition of hands. According to Garland, the verb “set free,” in the perfect passive tense is a “theological passive,” meaning, “that Jesus has not worked a cure, God has.” The LOH, then, is an action that “is more likely a compassionate act of assurance than the final touch ‘to complete the physical cure.’”³³ Joel Green likewise interprets this interaction to be a healing from the God the Father and through his power,

³² R. T. France, *The Gospel of Mark*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 241.

³³ David E. Garland, *Luke*, ECNT (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 547.

which is seen both in the woman's response as well as the nature of Jesus's pronouncement: "you are set free [by God]."³⁴

It is apparent that the LOH is associated with healing. Jesus is clearly seen laying hands upon the sick, poor, and those in need of a demonic exorcism. The account of Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead (John 11:38-44), however, demonstrates that Jesus does not require the use of his hands to heal the sick, let alone raise the dead. With three words Jesus raised Lazarus from the grave: "Lazarus, come out" (v. 42). This divine act of healing was done void of the LOH.

In most healing cases, a strong faith is present from the one who is looking for healing—this is the case with the leper (Mark 1:40; Luke 5:12-13), the hemorrhaging woman (Mark 5:24-34), and two blind men looking for healing (Matt 9:27-31). Jesus no doubt possesses the power to heal through either touch or verbal pronouncement, but the scriptural data does not indicate that it is the LOH alone that offers healing. Rather, it is an expression of faith and belief in God by the recipient, accompanied with the LOH, prayer, or a pronouncement from Jesus that brings about the healing of individuals.

The Laying on of Hands as Ordination and Commissioning

The main emphasis of the ritual undoubtedly finds its greatest expression in the ordination and commission to ministry.³⁵ Both the OT and NT validate this claim. The LOH for ordination to office is clearly found within the ancient practice of Israel and is perhaps most visibly seen in (1) the consecration of the Levites to office and (2) the installment of Joshua to office as Moses's successor. Many NT passages also validate the paradigmatic practice of the LOH for ordination (Acts 6:6; 13:13; 1 Tim 4:14; 2 Tim 1:6). We begin first with an assessment of the LOH for ordination from an OT

³⁴ Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 523.

³⁵ W. L. Liefeld, "The Laying on of Hands," in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Walter A. Elwell, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001), 677.

perspective and then move into a survey of the NT data. The following exegesis will further confirm that the LOH is paradigmatic for ordination across both testaments.

Old Testament References

The ordination or consecration of the Levitical priests. Accompanying the details given for the building of the OT tabernacle, or the Tent of Meeting (Exod 25-31, 35-40), was the consecration and ordination of Arron and his sons as priests (Exod 27:21; 28:1). They were chosen to serve as priests “in the tent of meeting,” which was to be continually observed throughout Israel’s generations (Exod 28:1). Exodus 29, Leviticus 8, and Numbers 8 outline in detail the installment of the Levites to their office. In Exodus 29:1, Arron and his sons were shown to be consecrated to their office via a public ordination process: “Now this is what you shall do to them to consecrate them, that they may serve me as priests.” The Israelites are literally told to make Arron and his sons “holy” (שִׁׁׁ) —the same verb used in 19:44: “I will ‘consecrate’ the tent of meeting and the alter. Aaron also and his sons I will ‘consecrate’ to serve me as priests.” It is perhaps important to note that another word is used in this chapter to describe the ordination or consecration process. The verb אָׁׁ (“set, install”) is used five times in this chapter alone (29:22, 26, 27, 31, 34) and speaks to the sacred instillation of priests.³⁶

The consecration process in Exodus 29 included ceremonial cleansings (v. 4), ceremonial dressings (v. 5), an anointing with oil (v. 7), and burnt offerings as well as wave offerings (vv. 10-34). The fact that ordination process was a public event that took place over a seven-day period (v. 35) also communicates the formality and seriousness of the entire occasion. Two major aspects were demonstrated in this ordination: (1) atonement was made for the Levitical priests via the “ram of ordination,” and (2) Israel symbolically affirmed that the Levitical priests would serve as a substitute for the first-

³⁶ Frances Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles Briggs, *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2015), 571.

born children of Israel. R. Alan Cole captures the significance of these details and this moment well:

The priests must be cleansed symbolically, both by washing and by his sin-offering, before he can be installed in his new robes: he must be solemnly anointed for his task: hand, foot, and ear must be dedicated to God. All this ritual must be repeated for seven days, both to emphasize its sacred importance and to give the sense of completeness.³⁷

Significant to this consecration is a sacrificial bull and two sacrificial rams. First, Aaron and his sons place their hands on the head of the bull and the ram separately. In both instances, the animals are then killed and burned; the bull is burned outside the camp and acts as a sin offering (29:14) while the ram is burned on the altar of the Lord as a food offering (v. 18). In both cases, the blood of the animals is thrown against different portions of the altar. The second ram used in the ceremonial sacrifice is referred to as the “ram of ordination” (v. 22). Here, portions of the ram are placed first in the hands of Aaron and his sons and are then waved before the Lord as a wave offering, which communicates that they shall receive, as priests of the Lord, portions of the Israel’s sacrifices (v. 26). Those portions are then placed on the altar of the Lord as a burnt offering. Cole helpfully elaborates the significance of all that is involved here: “Identity for the purpose of sacrificial substitution was accomplished in the Israelite ritual of laying of one’s hands upon a sacrificial animal, whereby the rendering of the life of the animal signified the rendering of one’s life unto God in consecration, atonement, or celebration.”³⁸

Leviticus 8 and Numbers 8 shed additional light on the consecration of the Levites. In Leviticus 8, the text elaborates on the consecration of Aaron and his sons with reference to the application of blood to both parties involved: the Levitical priests and God. Much like the Covenant ratification ceremony of Exodus 24 between Israel and

³⁷ R. Alan Cole, *Exodus*, TOTC (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 211.

³⁸ R. Dennis Cole, *Numbers*, NAC, vol. 3B (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2000), 150

Yahweh, the blood placed on the Levites, which is then thrown against the alter, can be seen as a solemn vow. The Levites are making this solemn vow of service to Yahweh.

Numbers 8 further confirms the significance of the Levitical consecration. After the ceremonial cleansings, God commands Moses to bring both the Levites and the “whole congregation” of Israel before the Lord at the tent of meeting (vv. 9-10). Then, before the Lord, “the people of Israel shall lay their hands on the Levites” (v. 10). Aaron would then offer the Levites as a wave offering on behalf of Israel, which set the Levites apart for priestly service. Then, as an act of atonement for their sin, the Levites would place their hands on the heads of two bulls, which would become a sin offering and the other a burnt offering (v. 12). Cornelis Van Dam captures well the significance of this moment in Numbers 8:

The Levites were being offered to God as a wave offering so that they could totally committed to their task (Num. 8:11-14). They took the place of the firstborn sons of Israel (Num. 8:16-19). By laying their hands on the Levites, the Israelites indicated that the Levites were their gift to God instead of their firstborn. In this way the Levites were set apart and consecrated to the Lord’s service.³⁹

When the Levites were consecrated to the office of priesthood, Moses was then tasked with making them ceremonially clean. After these cleansing rituals, the Levites were brought before the entire congregation of God’s people who then laid their hands on them. Van Dam notes that the context of this passage indicates that the LOH was similar to “placing one’s hand on a sacrifice.”⁴⁰ Without going as far as actually sacrificing the Levitical priests, Israel’s LOH upon them acts a symbolic sacrifice of their lives via their service. Numbers 8:16 conveys this very fact: “For they are wholly given to me from among the people of Israel.” This entire ordination process acts as a “separation” of the Levites from the rest of Israel for the purpose of serving within a specific office (v. 14).

³⁹ Cornelis Van Dam, *The Elder: Today’s Ministry Rooted in All of Scripture* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 2009), 130.

⁴⁰ Van Dam, *The Elder*, 130.

The consecration of Aaron and his sons into the Levitical priesthood can very much be understood as an ordination to a particular office and therefore acts as a forebearer to the NT elder ordination.

Joshua’s commissioning. The LOH for a particular office is also seen within the account of Joshua’s commissioning, which is recorded in both Numbers 27 and Deuteronomy 31. The parallel accounts inform readers (1) that Moses could no longer continue to lead Israel because he was 120 years old and physically unable to continue to lead and that (2) he would not enter the promise land because he did not uphold God as holy at the waters of Meribah and Kadesh (Num 27:14; Deut 31:2). Therefore, Moses would die before he experienced the fullness of God’s blessing within the promised land.⁴¹

In Numbers 27, Moses requests that a man to be chosen to lead the congregation of Israel as his replacement, so that they may not be “as sheep that have no shepherd” (v. 17). Important here to this passage is to note that Moses asks God to “appoint a man over the congregation” (v. 16). It was not Moses who selected Joshua as the next generation’s leader. Rather, it was Yahweh who had selected and appointed Joshua to lead. As Cole explains, the expression used in Moses’s request “the Lord, the God of the spirits of all mankind,” is a rare expression the denotes Moses’s affirmation of God’s sovereignty over all creation— including over those who would lead Israel.⁴² So, Moses cares for the future well-being of God’s people and he entreats a sovereign God to appoint a new leader. Yahweh grants Moses’s request and provides a successor.

Yahweh responds to Moses’s requests and sets apart for him Joshua, “a man in whom is the Spirit” (Num 27:18). The second noteworthy point to mention is that Joshua

⁴¹ Cole, *Numbers*, 437.

⁴² Cole, *Numbers*, 468.

already had the Spirit and was equipped for the task.⁴³ As Van Dam writes, Joshua's "suitability came from the Spirit of God" not via a supernatural dispensation of grace via the hands of Moses.⁴⁴ Joshua had demonstrated that he was a suitable candidate to lead. He had successfully scouted out the promised land and brought the report back to Israel (Num 13:30-14:38). He had directed the army of Israel against the battle with the Amalekites (Exod 17:8-16), and he had acted as Moses's assistant when Moses would meet with Yahweh at the tent of meeting. When Moses met with God, Joshua would stand outside and "he would not depart from the tent" (Exod 33:10).⁴⁵ Joshua had proven himself to be a man of faithfulness, zeal, and dedication, thus, demonstrating himself to be the right man to lead Israel. Yahweh's selection of Joshua validates this point.

Next, Yahweh commands Moses to commission Joshua in the sight of the entire congregation (Num 27:19). Moses does "as the Lord commanded him" (v. 22). He takes Joshua, brings him before Eleazar the priest, as well as the entire congregation, and proceeds to lay hands on him: "And he laid his hands on him and commissioned him as the Lord directed through Moses" (v. 23). The LOH here would act as the final confirmation and validation of Joshua's ministry and leadership. Yahweh had selected Joshua to lead—a man who had demonstrated to be full of the Spirit and capable of leadership. The final piece of Joshua's commissioning was to publicly affirm this leadership role before all of Israel. Cole writes, "The conferring of command was accomplished by the laying on of the [right] hands, symbol of power and authority, in the people's presence and under the supervision of Eleazar, the high priest." The LOH does not demonstrate transfer of power or gifting, but acts as a public validation.

⁴³ Van Dam, *The Elder*, 130.

⁴⁴ Van Dam, *The Elder*, 130.

⁴⁵ Cole, *Numbers*, 468-69.

In this commissioning service of Joshua, we see God's sovereign choice of Joshua as successor. Joshua was not Moses's selection. Rather, Joshua was hand selected by Yahweh to lead His people. This choice is then followed by the obedient confirmation of both leadership as well as the entire assembly seen through the LOH. Moses lays his hands upon Joshua as a sign of God's choice and indeed commissions him to his future office of leadership over the people. Later, just before the death of Moses, Joshua is said to be full of the "spirit of wisdom" (Deut 34:9). Joshua possesses this wisdom because God had made it clear that he was the man for the office, a selection which took place in the earlier Pentateuchal narrative (Num 27:18).⁴⁶ The public commissioning service also serves as a validation before the people of Israel that Joshua was now the man who they were to follow.

First, the LOH as seen in reference to both the ordination of the Levitical priests and within the commissioning service of Joshua carries a symbolic expression and meaning. In neither account does the LOH give a special power or grace needed for the office. The symbolism takes on several aspects, however. Within the ordination ceremony of the Levites, the LOH acts as a symbolic consecration of the Levites to their office. "The Levites were being offered to God as wave offering so that they could be totally committed to their task (Num. 8:11-14)."⁴⁷ It is a sacred rite that acts as a communal consecration. Further, through the LOH Israel symbolically "conveyed identification" with the Levites and understood them to serve in place of their firstborn.⁴⁸

⁴⁶ Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Acts*, ECNT (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 334. Schnabel's treatment and understanding of the LOH within Acts parallels the narrative found within Deuteronomy. Just as Joshua was God's divine choice to lead, which was evidenced through Israel's communal affirmation (the LOH), so too is the case with those who are called to lead pastorally in the new covenant church. The adage rings true that God does not call the qualified; he qualifies the called. This is very much true in the case of Joshua.

⁴⁷ Van Dam, *The Elder*, 130.

⁴⁸ See also Cole, *Numbers*, 150.

The LOH in Joshua’s commissioning service acts a symbolic affirmation—before the community—that he is the man whom Yahweh has chosen to lead Israel. Through the LOH, and by instructing and commissioning him in the presence of Israel, Van Dam writes, “The nation would understand that they should now obey him as they obeyed Moses.”⁴⁹ The LOH acts as an outward affirmation of an inward call that Yahweh had placed upon Joshua. Sacred consecration and affirmation are central to the LOH in these accounts.

Second, the LOH is intimately tied to ordination and commissioning to ministry service. Yes, it is symbolic, but it carries great theological significance. In the case of the Levitical priesthood, the entire ceremony is predicated on the command from Yahweh to “consecrate them [Levites], that they may serve me as priests” (Exod 29:1). As previously mentioned, the consecration process included ceremonial cleansings (v. 4), ceremonial dressings (v. 5), an anointing with oil (v. 7), and burnt offerings as well as wave offerings (vv. 10-34).⁵⁰ The sacrifice of the “ordination ram” acts as atonement that prepares the Levites for office (Num 8:12). But it was the LOH by Israel over the Levites that affirmed their special calling and commitment to Yahweh as substitution in the place of Israel’s firstborn. Further, the ordination process was a public event that took place over a seven-day period, which communicates the formality and seriousness of the entire occasion. The entire ordination process acts as a “separation” of the Levites from the rest of Israel for the purpose of serving within a specific office (v. 14). In this vein, the LOH for ordination of the Levitical priests acts as a forerunner for NT ordination.

The LOH is also central to Joshua’s commissioning. The ceremony acts as a public recognition that Joshua is now the man who will lead all of Israel. The LOH here acts as a public display and affirmation that Joshua was “set apart for a special office of

⁴⁹ Van Dam, *The Elder*, 130.

⁵⁰ See also Cole, *Numbers*, 148-49.

leadership.”⁵¹ Though this public commission ceremony, authority was passed on from Moses to Joshua. Moses, through the LOH, was affirming this very point. Additionally, it is noteworthy to point out that both cases—the consecration of the Levites and Joshua’s commissioning—were both public affairs before the entire assembly. The public display of the LOH, coupled with the theological symbolism of affirmation and consecration, validates the very point that the LOH is a valid biblical paradigm for instalment of individual to a ministerial office. We will now turn to assess the NT data.

New Testament References

The LOH for ordination is most clearly seen in Acts 6:6, Acts 13:2, 1 Timothy 4:14, and 2 Timothy 1:6. I will assess each passage individually and then draw conclusions.

Acts 6. Acts 6 marks a significant transition in the church as it begins to expand beyond Jerusalem. Prior to this expansion, however, trouble arises within the Jerusalem church. The believing Hellenists began to feel that their widows were being neglected and perhaps even that the Hebrew widows were being favored as it was related to the daily distribution of food. The twelve apostles “summoned” the “full number” of the disciples to sort out this major issue (v. 2). The twelve apostles felt that, to give up preaching to “serve tables” would be a gross error. Preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ and evangelism—“the ministry of the word” (v. 4)—was indeed their primary calling. The solution to this problem, then, was to have the rest of the disciples pick or “pick out” (ἐπισκέψασθε: literally, “make a careful inspection, examine, inspect”) seven men to serve (v. 3).⁵²

⁵¹ Van Dam, *The Elder*, 130.

⁵² Frederick William Danker, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000, 881.

While some see Acts 6 as the establishment of the diaconate, to think such is error.⁵³ Space here does not permit a theological construction of NT offices. Suffice is to say, however, that to see Acts 6 as the establishment of the diaconate should be cautioned. Steven and Phillip, two men of the seven who were chosen to serve, would go on to do ministerial work that typically falls outside of the scope of the diaconate office. Steven would go on to preach and be martyred for his faith, while Phillip would preach amongst the Samaritans and to the Ethiopian eunuch as well as perform exorcisms.⁵⁴ Rather, the selection of the seven men to serve is consistent with the Jewish practice of setting up boards of seven men for a specific service or duty.⁵⁵

Important to the selection of these men was that they would be men of godly character. Particularly, the seven were to be men of “good repute,” that is, held in high opinion, and “full of the spirit and of wisdom” (6:3). After these seven men were chosen, they would be appointed (καταστήσομεν) by the apostles to serve. The Greek verb here for “appointed” or “put in charge” is often used to express an “appointment to an official position such as the appointment of a judge or governor” (7:10).⁵⁶ The apostles would then devote themselves “to prayer and to ministry of the word” (6:4). This decision pleased the whole gathering (6:5).

The men chosen were to be well-known for their possession of wisdom and the Spirit, which Marshall writes is the expression of a wisdom that is inspired by the Spirit.⁵⁷ That is to say, that the wisdom that these seven men possessed was God given. The selection of the seven is then followed by their installation and commission to

⁵³ See Alexander Strauch, *Minister of Mercy: The New Testament Deacon* (Colorado Springs: Lewis & Roth, 1992), 15-24.

⁵⁴ Gregg R. Allison, *Sojourners and Strangers: The Doctrine of the Church*, Foundations of Evangelical Theology (Wheaton: Crossway, 2012), 240-41.

⁵⁵ Marshall, *Acts*, 135.

⁵⁶ Strauch, *Minister of Mercy*, 38.

⁵⁷ Marshall, *Acts*, 135.

service. This act is seen via a public display of the LOH accompanied with prayer. While the text is clear that it was the broader congregation of believers who chose these seven men, it was the apostles who laid their hands upon them, approved of this calling, and publicly validated their new role.

While our current study aims to assess the LOH for ecclesiastical ordination and this passage does not directly address ordination or the instalment of a bishop, it is still relevant to our broader study for several reasons. First, the LOH is accompanied with prayer and displayed in a public fashion. Second, the LOH acts as an endorsement of the individual selected. While it was the congregation—all the disciples present in Jerusalem—who made the selection of the seven, the decision was validated and confirmed via the LOH. Third, the LOH was an action done publicly. The pericope expresses the great care taken to prioritize both the ministry of the word (via the apostles) and the practical ministry of the church (via the seven chosen). Organization, structure, and order is clearly perceived. The public display of the LOH and the broader situation validates this very point. The LOH via the apostles publicly validated the new ministry of the seven men and officially committed them to service. The LOH, then, within this passage acts as a public installation.⁵⁸ And the LOH commissioned the seven men to serve the needy.⁵⁹ Fourth, as Marshall observes, the commissioning service here in Acts 6 closely parallels the commissioning of Joshua as Moses's successor.⁶⁰

Acts 13. This pericope is important for several reasons. First, it marks Paul's first missionary journey, together with Barnabas. Second, it acts as the first missional service that was established not by an individual group of people but by a local church.

⁵⁸ John B. Polhill, *Acts*, NAC, vol. 26 (Nashville: B&H, 1992), 182.

⁵⁹ Strauch, *Minister of Mercy*, 40.

⁶⁰ Marshall, *Acts*, 135. These parallel accounts further validates that the OT ordination/commissioning services acts as a forerunner for the NT practice. The text here makes no mention of a transfer of power needed for their role, nor does it speak of an apostolic succession.

Third, the missionary journey was derived from an intentional decision, inspired by the Holy Spirit, and not via the impetus of church persecution.⁶¹ John B. Polhill observes, that chapters 13-15 “begin the story of the mission to the ‘ends of the earth.’”⁶²

Amid “worshipping the Lord and fasting,” God speaks to the church and commands them to “set apart” Paul and Barnabas. We are not told whether this was an audible voice to be heard or some kind of impression felt, but we are clearly told that it was the Holy Spirit who “spoke” to them. Marshall and Polhill both assume that it was one of the prophets of the church who received this message and then passed it along to the larger body.⁶³ Regardless of the medium, the Spirit commands the church in Antioch to “set apart” Paul and Barnabas “for the work that I have called them.”

The word προσκέκλημαι deserves special attention. The middle indicative verb carries the meaning to call in a legal or official sense; in particular here in Acts 13:2, to “call to a special task,” which is issued by the Holy Spirit.⁶⁴ The Holy Spirit is the subject of this verb, so it was God, specifically the third person of the Trinity, who “called or summoned” these two men to a specific ministry task. “Luke’s main point is to emphasize that mission is inaugurated by God himself.”⁶⁵ The same verb for “called or summoned” is also used in Acts 16:10: “And when Paul has seen the vision, immediately we sought to go on into Macedonia, concluding that God has called (προσκέκληται) us to preach the gospel to them.” God is also seen there too as the divine initiator.

Polhill rightly observes, “As throughout Acts, God took the initiative in every new development of the Christian witness; however, the church did its part. It fasted and

⁶¹ See Marshall, *Acts*, 227-28.

⁶² Polhill, *Acts*, 182.

⁶³ See Marshall, *Acts*, 229; Polhill, *Acts*, 290.

⁶⁴ Danker, *Greek-English Lexicon*, 881.

⁶⁵ Marshall, *Acts*, 230.

prayed, seeking the divine leading in a mode of expectant devotion.”⁶⁶ Though God divinely initiated the call of Paul and Barnabas, the church had to respond. After fasting and prayer, the church “placed their hands on them and sent them off” (ἐπιθέντες τὰς χεῖρας αὐτοῖς ἀπέλυσαν). The passage is not clear whether it was the entire church who laid their hands on Paul and Barnabas or if it was a select group of leaders, namely the prophet-teachers (v. 1). What is clear, however, is that the church responded in faith and used the LOH as a communal affirmation. While Polhill does not understand this to be an ordination service, he does see it as a commissioning of the two missionaries to a specific task on behalf of the church.⁶⁷ The LOH, then, was the congregation’s symbolic “endorsement” of Paul and Barnabas’s missionary work.

This passage does not narrate an ordination to an ecclesiastical office. It is clear, however, that the LOH here is practiced in light of a particular missionary endeavor that is specific to the salvific historical development within the book of Acts. God chose Paul and Barnabas for a specific missionary journey that would be for a limited time. It could be understood, then, in that sense, much like a commissioning service. The context does, however, affirm that the LOH is used for the communal affirmation of a decision, much like that of the seven chosen to serve in Acts 6. The communal affirmation is a symbolic endorsement of these two missionaries. And, just as in Acts 6, there is no mention nor indication that the LOH acts as a conduit for a special dispensation of grace needed for the work. There is an internal call of God on Paul and Barnabas and that call is then confirmed and validated by the external act of the LOH by the broader congregation. It was through the LOH that the Antioch congregation commissioned Paul and Barnabas. As it relates to the aforementioned organization, structure, and order of the

⁶⁶ Polhill, *Acts*, 290.

⁶⁷ Polhill, *Acts*, 290.

early church community, it is clear that God sovereignly directs his church via the installment and validation of church work and church leaders.⁶⁸

1 Timothy 4. The Pastoral Epistles provide clarity on the episcopate and diaconate and are a valuable source for “guidance in the pastoral matters during the ensuring history of the church.”⁶⁹ 1 Timothy 4 is divided into three sections. Verses 1-4 include a denunciation of false teaching and heresy, verses 5-10 emphasize personal godliness and sound teaching, and verses 11-16 acts as a final exhortation toward the life of a godly teacher. Regarding verses 11-16, Philip H. Towner highlights Paul’s use of the ten imperatives as a structure that “establishes the genre and sets the tone.”⁷⁰ The urgency for these letters to be received and emulated is clear.

Central to this pericope is a call for Timothy to remember his “gift” (χαρίσματος) and ministerial calling (v. 14). Paul calls Timothy to not neglect the gift that he received from God when the elders of the church of Lystra prophesied over him (cf. Acts 16:1-3). This prophecy was accompanied by the LOH: “the council of elders laid their hands on [Timothy]” (1 Tim 4:14). We garner from the book of Acts that Timothy was “spoken well of” (Acts 16:3) and respected by the leaders in Lystra. Thus, Paul wanted Timothy to accompany him on their missionary journey (16:3).

Timothy’s “gift” can carry one of two meanings. The first possibility is that Paul is referring to the Holy Spirit. While Timothy is undoubtedly filled with the Holy Spirit as a post-Pentecost Christian, and the Spirit certainly empowers Christians for

⁶⁸ See Darrel L. Bock, *A Theology of Luke and Acts*, BTNT (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 387. While Bock does not see a distinct program given for how the church should conduct its worship services, he does affirm that Luke takes great care to demonstrate that when it comes to church organization, “Luke-Acts mostly highlights how the Spirit empowered the community to live, engage, pray, and preach with faithfulness and boldness.”

⁶⁹ Donald Guthrie, *The Pastoral Epistles: An Introduction and Commentary*, TNTC, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 62.

⁷⁰ Philip H. Towner, *The Letters to Timothy and Titus*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 313.

ministerial activity, this possibility does not fit the immediate context nor the context of the NT. Instead, a second possibility is more likely. Marshall observes, “a general equipping of Timothy for ministry is meant.”⁷¹ The context speaks to Timothy’s own unique gifting for ministry. This own unique gifting is apparent especially within the context of Paul’s ten separate imperatives which are directly applied to Timothy. It is as if to say, Timothy’s unique spiritual gifting (and calling) will be the fuel to help him preserve in the exhortations that Paul has given him. This does not negate the fact that Timothy’s charismata stem directly from the Holy Spirit—this of course would be in alignment with biblical texts like Romans 12:5-6, 1 Corinthians 12:4-11, and 1 Peter 4:7-10. The Holy Spirit gives spiritual gifts and “apportions to each one individually as he wills” (1 Cor 12:11). In 1 Timothy 4:14, then, Paul is referencing Timothy’s unique gifting that he received for his role within the church.⁷²

Having understood Timothy’s “gift” to be his own unique spiritual gifting given to him by the Holy Spirit who empowers him for his ministerial tasks within the church, we can turn our attention to the accompanying prophecy and LOH. In 1 Timothy 4, Paul reminds Timothy of his time back Lystra and the ministerial confirmation that took place there amongst the elders of the church. Here, the elders or “council of elders” (πρεσβυτερίου), presumably of Lystra or Iconium, prophesied (προφητείας) over Timothy and laid their hands (ἐπιθέσεως τῶν χειρῶν) upon him. Paul mentions this experience previously in 1 Timothy 1:18: “This charge I entrust to you, Timothy, my child, in accordance with the prophecies previously made about you, that by them you may wage the good warfare.” The LOH acts both as a validation of the prophecies previously made about Timothy’s ministerial giftedness and as a reminder of his commission. There is no transference of power that Timothy needed for his role, rather,

⁷¹ Marshall, *Pastoral Epistles*, 565.

⁷² I. Howard Marshall, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Pastoral Epistles*, ICC (New York: T&T Clark, 1999), 565.

the LOH is as an outward and symbolic confirmation which validates that God has set him aside and given him what he needs.

Nestled within an exhortation to a life of godly teaching is a call for Timothy to remember that he was both called and commissioned—he was marked and set apart for ministry. This was a calling upon Timothy’s life that was specific to him. Timothy was also uniquely gifted for this calling, which was communicated via prophecy. It is against this backdrop that the LOH here in 1 Timothy 4 can be seen as analogous to Joshua’s commissioning service. Just as Moses selected and commissioned Joshua—one whom possesses the Spirit (Num 27:18)—so Paul, and the elders of Lystra, selected and commissioned Timothy—one who was spoken well of by the brothers (Acts 16:2). Paul indeed looked to Timothy as his heir apparent.⁷³ Paul reminds Timothy of the prophecies previously told of him (1 Tim 1:18) and reminds him to fan into flame this gifting given to him (2 Tim 1:6); that is to say, cultivate the unique gift and calling. First Timothy 4:14 is an exhortation for Timothy to not neglect his gifting, which as given to him by God. The LOH, then, though it accompanied the prophecies, is a symbolic act which confirms Timothy’s unique calling and role. It is an outward identifiable mark or an “identificational rite” that separates Timothy’s unique ministerial calling.⁷⁴

2 Timothy 1. Second Timothy 1:6 is situated between Paul’s thankfulness for Timothy (vv. 3-5) and a further development of the gospel (vv. 8-9). Here, Paul, “reaches back into his and Timothy’s personal histories to establish the heritage of faith that they share.”⁷⁵ Verses 3-5 constitutes a single sentence.⁷⁶ We learn in verse three that Paul is

⁷³ Andreas J. Köstenberger, *Commentary on 1-2 Timothy and Titus*, BTCF (Nashville: Holman Reference, 2017), 154.

⁷⁴ Köstenberger, *1-2 Timothy and Titus*, 155n263.

⁷⁵ Towner, *Timothy and Titus*, 444.

⁷⁶ William D. Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles*, WBC, vol. 46 (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2000), 467.

thankful, but it is not until verse five that we learn for what is Paul thankful: he is thankful for Timothy's "sincere faith."⁷⁷ Second Timothy 1:6 is a reminder for the young apostolic emissary to not forget his calling. Further, Paul reminds Timothy of the nature and essence of this "calling" and the necessary consecration for this calling that took place through "through the laying on of hands." Paul's reminder encourages Timothy to remember the power of the Spirit of God that is within him, even during the times of ministerial discouragement that he will face.⁷⁸ Further, the Spirit of God and the "power of God" is on display in both the saving and calling of Timothy (v. 9).⁷⁹ The connection of these verses, as Philip H. Towner aptly overserves, "develops into an authentication of the Pauline ministry to which Timothy is ultimately linked and called to continue in."⁸⁰

The imagery of a stoked flame dominates this section. While Timothy is called to "guard the good deposit entrusted" to him, it is through the continued power of the Holy Spirit and through the gifts given to him by the Holy Spirit that Timothy is to serve and minister in Ephesus.⁸¹ But, just like that of a normal fire, Timothy must stoke the spiritual fire needed for the ministry requirements that lay ahead of him. As Mounce observes, the verb ἀναζωπυρεῖν ("fan into flame") is a compound verb that means to "rekindle, kindle afresh."⁸²

The "for this reason" connects readers with the apostle's assurance regarding Timothy's faith: Timothy is a man of deep and sincere faith who has been commissioned by God for a particular minister. This ministry calling is uniquely connected to the LOH.

⁷⁷ Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles*, 467.

⁷⁸ Towner, *Timothy and Titus*, 444.

⁷⁹ Towner, *Timothy and Titus*, 444.

⁸⁰ Towner, *Timothy and Titus*, 445.

⁸¹ Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles*, 467.

⁸² Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles*, 476.

So, Paul is encouraging Timothy by reminding him of God's commission to him.⁸³ But the question arises: Is the LOH of hands used here to mean a special dispensation of grace given to Timothy through Paul and others?

The answer to this question is no. First, within the context of the broader Pastoral Epistles, Paul's reminder of Timothy's unique ministerial calling indicates that Timothy already possessed the supernatural gifts that he needed for the role (1 Tim 1:18), which was confirmed by the external act of the LOH of the body of elders (1 Tim 4:14).⁸⁴ Second, as Donald Guthrie observes, the "in Timothy" is specific and indicates that "the true gift of God is an internal grace and not an external operation."⁸⁵ Third, within the context of 2 Timothy, it is entirely possible that Paul has Timothy's specific gift of evangelism in mind (4:5), which, when Timothy exercises faithfully, he fulfills his ministry (4:5b).⁸⁶

Taken together, 1 Timothy 4:14 and 2 Timothy 1:6 demonstrate a selection, ordination, and commission to ministry—a process which Paul himself was intimately connected to, and a process in which Paul would call Timothy elsewhere not to practice too hastily (1 Tim 5:22). While Timothy has clearly been endowed by the Holy Spirit (2 Tim 1:14), and possess a unique ability to lead, which was previously revealed in a prophecy concerning him (1 Tim 1:18), this unique gift that Paul speaks of in 2 Timothy 1:6 is Timothy's ministerial calling. This conclusion fits the analogy of the flame. Timothy was not necessarily waning in the use of his gift, but Paul clearly encourages him to use the gift more and more (fan into flame). Therefore, the act of the LOH "seems to have been related to the ministry into which the act admitted him."⁸⁷ Guthrie captures

⁸³ Guthrie, *Pastoral Epistles*, 138.

⁸⁴ Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles*, 476.

⁸⁵ Guthrie, *Pastoral Epistles*, 139.

⁸⁶ Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles*, 475.

⁸⁷ George W. Knight III, *The Pastoral Epistles*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013), 370.

the ethos of this entire passage: “Every Christian minister needs at times to return to the inspiration of his ordination, to be reminded not only of the greatness of his calling, but also of the adequacy of the divine grace which enables him to perform it.”⁸⁸

Conclusion

As we conclude this section on the biblical witness, the findings are clear. The broader biblical categories and the exegesis of the above four most pertinent NT passages that deal with the LOH, demonstrate that the LOH takes its fullest expression within a commissioning ceremony or installment into a ministerial role—both in the Old and New Testaments. Further, there is no biblical precedent for a particular dispensation of grace, or an extra abundance of power given through the LOH. Rather, the LOH acts as a symbolic representation of God at work and can associate one thing (or person) with another, as in the case with the Israel’s Day of Atonement and the Levitical priest’s installment and consecration into office. Even within the case of 2 Timothy 1:6 (a text that, at first glance, may seem to indicate that the LOH itself dispenses a special power), the gift that Paul calls Timothy to remember was the gift of his ministerial calling. Taken in this sense, the LOH was a bestowment of the office and an apostolic commissioning. Finally, the LOH also evokes community affirmation and acts as a mechanism for ministerial decision making.

Next, we shall turn to a theological retrieval of John Calvin and assess how he reads and understands the LOH. This theological retrieval of Calvin will produce three outcomes: it will (1) bring further validation to the above exegesis, (2) deepen the dialogue concerning the subject matter and root it within church history, and (3) further solidify the overall thesis put forward in this work.

⁸⁸ Guthrie, *Pastoral Epistles*, 139.

CHAPTER 4

A THEOLOGICAL RETRIEVAL OF JOHN CALVIN'S UNDERSTANDING OF THE LAYING ON OF HANDS FOR ORDINATION

John Calvin's view on LOH for ordination to ministry stands in stark contrast to the Roman Catholic teaching, as he does not take any of the NT passages that deal with the LOH be a transferring of sacerdotal power to the one who receives the sacrament of Holy Orders. Instead, according to Calvin's interpretation, each NT passage demonstrates that God initiates a sacred calling of a man to ministry. This is referred to as the *internal call*. Next, accompanied with prayer, and sometimes with fasting, the local church elders and congregants are led by the Holy Spirit to lay hands on said recipients. This practice acts as the affirmation of God's internal call and is referred to as the *external call*. Calvin sees no biblical case for a transferring of sacerdotal power given to the recipient of the act of LOH.

A study of Calvin's writings supports the above theological claims. Further, a theological retrieval of Calvin's understanding of the LOH for ordination will fill the void in contemporary ecclesiology and practice. According to Calvin, the LOH is a ritual that has OT origins and is taken up by the apostles, who reflect their ancient historical custom. Thus, the LOH for ordination is a sacred biblical rite (not a sacrament) and is paradigmatic for the contemporary church. The following analysis of Calvin will begin first with his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* and then move to his interpretation of pertinent NT passages.

John Calvin's Theological Analysis of the Laying on of Hands in the Ordination to Ministry

Calvin writes extensively concerning the ministry of the church. In chapter three of *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Calvin deals with the ministers of the church and their election and office. He tackles questions like, “Why does God needs men’s service?”¹ He also addresses issues such as the significance of the ministry for the church, the role of the office of preaching, the scriptural offices as outlines in Ephesians 4, and the biblical qualifications needed to be an elder. Helpful pertaining to this study, however, is Calvin’s teaching on, the calling, authorization, and ordination of ministers.

Calvin begins this section in his *Institutes* by referring to 1 Corinthians 14:40, “all things should be done decently and in order.”² While Calvin understands Paul’s words here to apply to the entire assembly of believers, he thinks it ought to be more “diligently observed” in the establishing of church government. The idea of order strikes a deep note within Calvin. Indeed, many Calvin scholars have rightly perceived Calvin’s understanding of God establishing order within the cosmos.³ Benjamin Miller Jr. records that Calvin’s principle of order is established in the creation narrative.⁴ For Calvin, God brought order to chaos in the creation narrative. Man, himself reflected this principle of order. Because God is a God of order, man is therefore a being of order made in God’s image. Since the fall, God has been seeking to re-establish order in man and in creation. Calvin, therefore, holds the concept of order, reflected in all of creation, in the highest regard, and rightly applies the principle of order to the establishment of church government.

¹ John Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.3.1.

² Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.4.10.

³ Benjamin Charles Milner Jr., *Calvin's Doctrine of the Church*, ed. Heiko A. Oberman (Leiden: Brill, 1970), 9-45; Wilhelm Niesel, *The Theology of Calvin*, trans. Harold Knight (London: Lutterworth Press, 1956), 199-209.

⁴ Milner, *Calvin's Doctrine of the Church*, 9-45

For Calvin, the act of LOH for ordination speaks of the establishment of order.⁵ Calvin first notes a difference between the outer and inner call. For Calvin, the inner call must be present necessarily, “if we would have our ministry approved by God.”⁶ He explains that some speculate whether or not a lay man is called into the office because he is a man who possess great skills and sound reason. But for Calvin, while learning and piety are essential, the inward call of God is what approves and sustains a man in ministry. This inner call—or “secret call”—is only fully known by God and the conscious of the man called.

Calvin also has much to say regarding the actual ordination process, arguing that the LOH must be present. He roots this idea in the biblical precedent of the practice of the apostles: “It is clear that when the apostles admitted any man to the ministry, they used no other ceremony than the laying on of hands . . . [T]his was the solemn rite used whenever they called anyone to the ministry of the church. In this way they consecrated the pastors and teachers, and the deacons.”⁷

The outward call to ministry incorporates human agency. “No sober man will deny for men to appoint bishops is in every respect consonant with a lawful calling, since there are many scriptural passages that attest to this practice.”⁸ In response to Acts 13:2 regarding the practice of laying on hands for ordination, Calvin asks, “What was that purpose of setting apart and laying on of hands after the Holy Spirit attested his choice, except to preserve church discipline in designating ministers through men?”⁹ Calvin’s concept of order is established by his exegesis. He wholeheartedly affirms that men are called and chosen by God alone for a church office, but he sees the outward act of laying

⁵ Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.4.11.

⁶ Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.4.11.

⁷ Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.4.16.

⁸ Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.4.14.

⁹ Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.4.14.

on of hands as a community's orderly affirmation of this choice. Again, Calvin explains, "for nowhere [establishing church government] is there greater peril if anything be done irregularly."¹⁰ He cites the choosing of Matthias in Acts 1:23 to validate this claim: "Thus the choice had an open testimony from heaven, yet church order was in no respect neglected."¹¹

The question posed at the beginning of this work was: Is the LOH for ordination a conferring of sacerdotal power or is it an outward affirmation of an inward call of God? To this question, Calvin responded that the rite is not a conferring of sacerdotal power, but a symbolic rite for consecration:

He [Paul] put the ceremony for the very act of ordination; and therefore, the meaning is, that Timothy—having been called to ministry by the voice of the prophets, and having afterwards been solemnly ordained—was, at the same time, endued with the grace of the Holy Spirit for the discharge of his office. Hence, we infer that it was not a useless ceremony, because God, by his Spirit, accomplished that consecration which man expressed symbolically by the laying on of hands.¹²

He anchors this understanding in Old Testament practice, and writes, "I judge that this rite derived from the custom of the Hebrews, who, as it were, presented to God by the laying on of hands that which they wished to be blessed and consecrated."¹³ He cites the blessing of Ephraim and Manasseh by Jacob (Gen 48:14), and the Jew's practice of the Old Testament law in sacrifices (e.g., Lev 1:4; 8:13; Num 8:12; 27:23).

An additional question is raised: If the LOH is a scriptural rite and thus entirely appropriate to practice, is it essential for ecclesiastical ordination? To this question, Calvin would respond, yes. Calvin views the practice of LOH for ordination as scriptural and thus necessary. He holds this view for two reasons. First, Calvin views the rite as a

¹⁰ Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.4.10

¹¹ Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.4.13.

¹² John Calvin, *1 and 2 Timothy*, CCNT, vol. 21, trans. William Pringle (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1979), 116.

¹³ Calvin, *Institutes*, 4:4:1067.

command: “Although there exists no set precept for the laying on of hands, because we see it in continual use with the apostles, their very careful observance ought to serve in lieu of a precept.”¹⁴ Second, Calvin views the rite as an establishment of church order: “What was that purpose of setting apart and laying on of hands after the Holy Spirit attested his choice, except to preserve church discipline in designating ministers through men?”¹⁵

Concerning Calvin’s ecclesiology, George Plasger writes, “the primary and most decisive statement by Calvin concerning the church is that it is elected by God.”¹⁶ Christians are chosen by God, in Christ, before the foundation of the world (Eph 1:3). Those who are chosen for salvation, find salvation in Christ, and those who find salvation in Christ then minister for Christ. Calvin adamantly affirms this soteriological order. Calvin’s draws a theological parallel between those elected for salvation and those elected for ministry. Those who are elected by God for salvation bear true fruit (Matt 7:15-20). Those who are elected by God for a ministerial office bear the fruit of ordination. This consecration for ministry is affirmed by the *order* of the church through the laying on of hands. Plasger writes concerning Calvin’s view of congregational order, “the decisive factor for church organization is that God alone rules the church so that various offices in the church are seen as God’s instruments (*instrumenta*).”¹⁷ For Calvin, the laying on of hands for ordination is important because those who have been called and affirmed in ministry are now understood to be the very instruments of God.

¹⁴ Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.4.16.

¹⁵ Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.4.14.

¹⁶ Georg Plasger, “Ecclesiology,” trans. Randi H. Lundell, in *The Calvin Handbook*, ed. Herman J. Selderhuis, trans. Henry J. Baron et al. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 323.

¹⁷ Plasger, “Ecclesiology,” 330.

John Calvin's New Testament Interpretation

We now turn to an assessment of Calvin's NT interpretation of the LOH for ordination. The main NT passages that deal with the LOH for ordination to ministry are Acts 6:6, Acts 13:2, 1 Timothy 4:14, and 2 Timothy 1:6, and so, to limit our focus, we will assess these specific passages that Calvin treats. Each passage will be assessed with a focus on Calvin's interpretation. Calvin's interpretation of these passages will provide further clarity on the scriptural practice, and thus provide a clear avenue forward for the practice to take place within the contemporary church.

Acts 6

The first passage in view is Acts 6:6: "These [the seven chosen to serve] they set before the apostles, and they prayed and laid their hands on them." The first point that Calvin notes here is that the LOH was a "solemn sign of consecration under the law."¹⁸ He derives his understanding of this symbolic sign of consecration—that is to set aside for a sacred or holy purpose—in his treatment of Leviticus 8:10-14 and Numbers 27:18.

Leviticus 8:1-15 details the consecration of Aaron and his sons to the Levitical priesthood. In verse 14, Aaron and his sons lay hands on the head of a bull, which is then slaughtered. The slaughtering of the bull as a sin offering acts as a sort of expiation and atonement for their sin, cleansing them and rendering them fit for their priestly duties. Concerning this passage, Calvin writes, "Now, the imposition of hands in the sacrifices was not only a symbol of presentation, but also a testimony of guilt transferred to the victim. . . . This is the reason why Aaron and his sons put their hands on each of the sacrifices, in order that this kind of atonement might be the beginning of their consecration."¹⁹

¹⁸ John Calvin, *Acts 1-13*, CCNT, vol. 18, trans. William Pringle (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1979), 238.

¹⁹ John Calvin, *Harmony of the Law*, vol. 3, trans. Charles William Bingham (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1979), 434, Christian Classics Ethereal Library, accessed October 13, 2021, <https://ccel.org/ccel/c/calvin/calcom05/cache/calcom05.pdf>.

Numbers 27:18-23 details the account of God naming Joshua as the eventual replacement for Moses. Here, God calls Moses to lay his hands upon Joshua in the sight of Eleazar the priest and the entire congregation, commissioning him as Israel's new leader (vv. 18, 22, 23). Calvin writes that Joshua received his consecration "by the imposition of hands."²⁰ This consecration, however, was symbolic of the already predetermined call of God. He writes, "Moses, therefore, in order to testify publicly that Joshua was no longer his own master, but dedicated to God, and no longer to be regarded as a private individual, since he was called by God to the supreme command, laid his hands upon his head."²¹ In his commentary on Numbers 27:18 regarding the act of the laying on of hands, Calvin writes, "for thus the holy patriarchs blessed their sons... We have seen that the priests were inaugurated in their office, and that victims were offered to God, with this ceremony. The apostles followed this custom in the appointment of pastors."²² So, God calls Joshua to replace Moses as Israel's leader (v. 18). Later, Moses affirms this calling before the entire congregation of Israel by laying his hands upon Joshua and "commissioned him as the Lord directed through Moses" (v. 22).

I will now turn our attention back to Acts 6:6. Regarding this sacred sign of consecration as seen in the law, Calvin writes that apostles laid their hands upon the seven men who were chosen to serve as a sign of affirmation both to the seven themselves and to the local assembly: "To this end do the apostles lay their hands upon the deacons, that they may know that they are offered to God."²³ Calvin also makes special note that it was only the apostles who laid their hands upon the seven, not the entire assembly of believers, to keep the "order" of the assembly: "Hence we gather that

²⁰ John Calvin, *Harmony of the Law*, vol. 4, trans. Charles William Bingham (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1979), 283, Christian Classics Ethereal Library, accessed October 13, 2021, <https://ccel.org/ccel/c/calvin/calcom06/cache/calcom06.pdf>.

²¹ Calvin, *Harmony of the Law*, 283,

²² Calvin, *Harmony of the Law*, 283,

²³ Calvin, *Acts 1-13*, 238.

the laying on of hands is a rite agreeing unto order and comeliness.”²⁴ For Calvin, the LOH helps establish order in the church and in the church’s practices. Against the background of the Old Testament Law, Calvin concludes that the act of laying on of hands here in Acts 6:6 is an outward expression which confirms an inward call of God. “And yet that it [laying on of hands] has of itself no force or power, but that the effect dependent upon the Spirit of God alone, which is generally thought of all ceremonies.”²⁵

Acts 13

Acts 13:1-3 details the commissioning of Paul and Barnabas by the church in Antioch. Here, several church leaders were called by the Holy Spirit to “set apart” Paul and Barnabas “for the work to which I have called them” (v. 2). “Then after fasting and praying they laid their hands on them and sent them off” (v. 3). For Calvin, Acts 13:1-3 mirrors Acts 6:6: “The laying on of hands which Luke reckoneth up . . . was a kind of consecration, as we have said, (Acts 6:6).” Calvin lends additional insight, saying, “For the apostles retained the ceremony, which was used amongst the Jews, according to the old custom of the law; as also kneeling, and such rites, which were profitable to exercise godliness.”²⁶

Calvin also sees the act of LOH as the church’s affirmation of the internal call of God. While God calls the men to a specific ministry, the church looks on with affirmation, and indeed “offers them to God” for ministry:

In sum, this is the end why they laid their hands upon Barnabas and Paul, that the Church might offer them to God, and that they might with their consent declare that this office was enjoined them by God; for the calling was properly God's alone, but the external ordaining did belong to the Church, and that according to the heavenly oracle.²⁷

²⁴ Calvin, *Acts 1-13*, 238.

²⁵ Calvin, *Acts 1-13*, 238.

²⁶ Calvin, *Acts 1-13*, 502-3.

²⁷ Calvin, *Acts 1-13*, 502-3.

Calvin's thinking developed into the Protestant understanding of an internal and external call of God for the ordination to ministry. The act of ordination (the laying on of hands) is a scriptural rite which does "belong to the church," Calvin explains. First, the church *declares* that there is a special calling upon their lives—those who receive the rite. This process is much like that of the rite of baptism as an outward proclamation—or declaration of sorts—of an inward change. This internal change is something entirely wrought by God but affirmed in some sense by the rite of baptism (Rom 6:3-6; 1 Pet 3:21). Second, the church declares that the office to which Paul and Barnabas were called was *enjoined* on them by God. The call of God upon their lives, which is necessary and first in order, is followed by the external affirmation of the local church.

1 Timothy 4

Paul exhorts Timothy to remember his ministerial calling that came through prophecy and that was affirmed when "the council of elders laid their hands on you [Timothy]" (1Tim. 4:14). What does Paul mean by "prophecy?" Calvin takes this to mean that there was a divine revelation by God showing that Timothy's life was to be consecrated to the office of pastor: "The Holy Spirit marked out Timothy by revelation, that he might be admitted into the rank of pastors; for he had not only been chosen by the judgment of men, in the ordinary way, but had previously been named by the Spirit."²⁸

Acts 16:1-5 sheds additional light on the background of Timothy's calling. Here, Paul came to Derbe and Lystra and found a younger man in the faith who was spoken well of by the community. Paul must have recognized that Timothy was fit for pastoral ministry, thus wanting Timothy "to accompany him" on his missionary journeys (Acts 16:3). That Timothy's conduct was looked upon by the local church as godly, and thus rendering him fit for ministry, is what Calvin means when he says that Timothy was

²⁸ Calvin, *1 and 2 Timothy*, 115.

chosen by the sound judgment of men “in the ordinary way.”²⁹ Perhaps Timothy was the embodiment of the elder qualifications as seen in 1 Timothy 3:1-7.

In his commentary on 1 Timothy 4:14, Calvin explains, Timothy’s office “was conferred ‘with the laying on of hands;’ by which he means, that, along with the ministry, he was also adorned with the necessary gifts. It was the custom and ordinary practice of the apostles to ordain ministers ‘by the laying on of hands.’”³⁰ It is difficult here to assess whether or not Calvin understood that a conferral of power was given through the imposition of hands for the work of the ministry in this passage. As noted, prior, he clearly sees the internal call of God with an external affirmation of local church elders. Calvin does address, however, this specific point in his commentary on 2 Timothy 1:6. To this passage we now turn.

2 Timothy 1

Paul calls Timothy to “fan into flame the gift of God” that “is in you through the laying on of my hands” (1:6). Calvin notes that, just as a fire is easily extinguished, so too are the spiritual gifts. For Calvin, the metaphor calls Timothy to stoke the fire by “blowing upon it and supplying new fuel,”³¹ which simply means to use the gift, and use it often. The LOH is the act “ordination, that is, of the solemn act of conferring the office of the ministry, and not of election.” While this was an act by the elders of a local church, Calvin affirms that it was specifically Paul who “was the chief actor in it.” Further, Calvin draws parallels between how the apostles practiced this rite to how ancient Israel practiced this rite. The laying on of hands was “borrowed . . . from an ancient custom of their nation.”

²⁹ Calvin, *1 and 2 Timothy*, 115.

³⁰ Calvin, *1 and 2 Timothy*, 117.

³¹ Calvin, *1 and 2 Timothy*, 189.

Calvin addresses the question: Was special grace given through the outward sign of the laying on of hands? He responds, “whenever ministers were ordained, they were recommended to God by the prayers of the whole church, and in this manner grace from God was obtained for them by prayer and was not given to them by virtue of the sign [the laying on of hands].”³² In other words, it was not the actual practice of the laying on of hands which dispensed a special grace for ministry; rather, it was special grace given to the ordained man by God himself. Calvin’s interpretation here stands in stark contrast of the Roman Catholic understanding of the sacrament of Holy Orders. Calvin goes on to write, “the sign was not useless or unprofitably employed but was a sure pledge of that grace which they received from God’s own hand.”³³ Further, “the ceremony was not a profane act, invented for the sole purpose of procuring credit in the eyes of men but a lawful consecration before God, which is not performed but by the power of the Holy Spirit.”³⁴ Calvin appears to draw his interpretation from Old and New Testaments references listed above, which demonstrate that the internal call of a man to a ministerial task is initiated by God first. Then, the calling of a man to ministry is seen and affirmed by elders of a church congregation through the laying on of hands.

Calvin raises additional questions: Did Timothy possess the pastoral giftings before the elders laid their hands upon him? While a “special grace” was not given for the office through the LOH, what about more personal giftings? Were special ministerial giftings given to Timothy through the laying on of hands? To these questions, Calvin responds, no: “I answer, it was not then so given to him that he had it not before; for it is certain that he excelled in both doctrine and in other gifts before Paul ordained him to

³² Calvin, *1 and 2 Timothy*, 189.

³³ Calvin, *1 and 2 Timothy*, 189.

³⁴ Calvin, *1 and 2 Timothy*, 189-190.

ministry.”³⁵ Acts 16:1-3 demonstrates that Timothy was well liked and respected by both his church leaders and his local congregation. So, according to Calvin, the gifts needed for the office of an overseer were already present in Timothy. Calvin does affirm, however, that there seems to be a spiritual “awakening” of already present gifts when Timothy is consecrated and ordained. He explains, “it does not therefore follow that Timothy had not formerly any gift, but it shone forth the more when the duty of teaching was laid upon him.”³⁶

Calvin concludes that Paul employs a figure of speech—“fan into flame the gift of God, which is in you through the laying on of hands”—that stands as “a part . . . taken for the whole.”³⁷ Just as eye glasses are a *pars pro toto* name of something for more than two pieces of glass, so “fan into flame the gift of God, which is in you through the laying on of hands” speaks of the entire process of Timothy’s ordination. This process was initiated by God and then affirmed by men.

Conclusion

As we draw our conclusions regarding the retrieval of Calvin’s biblical exegesis and theological understanding, three main tenets emerge regarding the LOH. First, the LOH is symbolic—he sees no biblical case for an example of a sacramental power given to the recipient of the act of LOH. A careful analysis of Calvin’s exegesis demonstrates that, nowhere within the Bible, does he understand the LOH to express a sacramental transferring of power. Instead, Calvin views the LOH as a symbolic, albeit sacred, act. While he draws clear parallels between how the early church used the rite and how ancient Israel exercised the rite, he views the LOH as a mere symbolic expression. The spiritual gifting needed for a ministerial office, as in Joshua’s case (OT) and

³⁵ Calvin, *1 and 2 Timothy*, 190.

³⁶ Calvin, *1 and 2 Timothy*, 190.

³⁷ Calvin, *1 and 2 Timothy*, 190.

Timothy's case (NT), is already present prior to the imposition of hands. Then, the LOH symbolically affirms those who are divinely qualified for the role.

Second, the LOH is communal and external. The LOH acts a community affirmation and recognition that God has particularly gifted an individual for a ministerial role. Further, it acts as a mechanism for a community to "set aside" those called to a specific office or ministerial work. In this sense, Calvin views the LOH as a significant part of an ordination or installment into the pastorate. For Calvin, God is always the divine initiator behind one's call into ministry. Subsequentially, the external affirmation of a community via the LOH validates this divine selection. Calvin uses the language of "internal call" and "external call" to refer to this distinction.

Third, the LOH acts as an establishment of divine order within the local church. Calvin understands that God's establishment of order applies to the church. As God is seeking to re-establish order, the church should seek to establish order in everything that it does. As it pertains to the establishment of church government, Calvin writes, "all things should be done decently and in order"³⁸ Calvin clearly sees this order expressed in the establishment of church roles. The LOH clearly delineates those who are set aside for ministerial work, and who are installed or commissioned into office. This delineation creates an established order. A theological retrieval of Calvin's understanding of the LOH has yielded helpful results that are in alignment with the scriptural witness. We turn now to the implication and application of these results to the contemporary church.

³⁸ Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.4.10. Here, Calvin quotes 1 Cor. 14:40.

CHAPTER 5
IMPLICATIONS AND APPLICATION FOR TODAY'S
CHURCH: A CLEAR WAY FORWARD

Before we can apply our findings to the contemporary church, we must first deal with the error of the Roman Catholic (RCC) position and the deficiency of the modern Protestant practice. First, the RCC understanding of LOH as a sacramental conferring of sacerdotal power to preform ministerial acts finds no scriptural precedent. Though the Catholic Theologian, Ludwig Ott, cites three primary scriptural citations (Acts 6:6; 1 Tim 4:14; 2 Tim 1:6) to validate the RCC position, our exegesis has demonstrated, that the passages do not support the RCC position.

Instead, as the biblical evidence suggests, leaders like Joshua (OT) or Timothy (NT) already possessed the spiritual gifting needed for a ministerial office prior to the imposition of hands. The LOH was the mechanism which symbolically reveals those who are divinely called and qualified for the role. The RCC position fails to understand the symbolic nature of the LOH for ordination. Take Timothy as an example. He was respected man who possessed the qualities needed for his ministerial role (Acts 16:2; 1 Tim 1:18). In line with these qualities and gifting (cf. 1 Tim 1:18; 4:14; 2 Tim 4:5), the elders laid hands upon him, thus commissioning him to his role. In a sermon on 2 Timothy 1:6, Calvin explains, “Now as we see, well before he was chosen Timothy possessed outstanding gifts. Even so God enhanced those gifts in him when he chose to make him a minister. Those, therefore, whom God chooses must already have given a sign that they are fit for office.”¹ It is for this reason (and for this special calling that is

¹ John Calvin, *Sermons on 2 Timothy*, trans. Robert White (East Peoria: Versa Press, 2018), 38.

upon his life), that Paul would remind Timothy of his unique gift and urge him exercise his ministerial calling with vigor and confidence (2 Tim 1:6).

Second, the contemporary Protestant church lacks clarity on the nature of the LOH as well as whether this is a scriptural practice for today. As evidenced above, most contemporary ecclesiology's omit the LOH or the process of ordination altogether. Calvin noted a similar trend of neglect in his day when expositing 2 Timothy 1:6-8: "Would to God that the church had kept to so simple a practice [LOH for ordination]! If it had simply set aside pastors and ministers to be servants of God's word, we would never have seen the hellish priesthood which is now found among the papists."² We must call the contemporary church back to this scriptural practice in order to prevent a continuation of the ecclesiastical pitfalls that are so prominent today.

Third, John Calvin's view of the LOH for ordination is the most faithful in theology and practice and the contemporary church would do well to follow in his theological footsteps. A theological retrieval of Calvin, validated through the Christian scriptures, demonstrates that the LOH for ordination possesses three main tenets: (1) the LOH is symbolic; (2) the LOH is external and communal, and (3) the LOH establishes ecclesiastical order. But what does this mean for today's contemporary church and what are the benefits of faithfully heeding this scriptural practice? My proposal of a Calvinistic LOH offers four benefits.

First, and most importantly, the LOH for ordination is a biblical practice, and by requiring and practicing the LOH for ordination, churches are faithfully heeding the biblical witness. Calvin writes, "The laying on of hands was a necessary act. This was the normal ceremony by which men were made ministers By this means those chosen to bear God's word were made to see that they were no longer their own."³ To return to the

² Calvin, *Sermons on 2 Timothy*, 37.

³ Calvin, *Sermons on 2 Timothy*, 37.

practice of the LOH for ordination is to return to a faithful reading and interpretation of the Scriptures. And a close and faithful reading of the Scriptures, produces a careful, well thought-out, biblical ecclesiology. A faithful ecclesiology is sorely needed; perhaps now more than ever before.

Second, the LOH for ordination establishes ecclesiastical order and clarity, both for the ones leading and those being led. For Calvin, the LOH acts as an establishment of order within the local church. Ordination brings clarity to those who to lead, thus empowering them to lead with greater precision and intention. In a world that rejects authority, the LOH for ordination clearly demarcates those who have been installed in the authoritative role of pastor/elder. Not only does ordination bring order to the polity of a church by clearly demonstrating who has been placed within the office of elder, but it also provides clarity by way of scriptural command for those who rule within the office. Those who have been ordained and qualified for the role of elder, now have clarity to heed the pastoral commands: pay careful attention to oneself and “all the flock” and “shepherd the flock of God” (Acts 20:28); keep a close watch on yourself and your teaching (1 Tim 4:16); present the church mature in Christ and equip them for the work of the ministry (Eph 4:12-13); warn and teach everyone “with all wisdom” (Col 1:28-29); preach, teach, and publicly read Scripture (1 Tim 4:13; 2 Tim 4:2); and set an example for the flock (1 Tim 4:12).

Further, the LOH for ordination brings clarity and order for congregants, which allows the church to flourish. The author of Hebrews calls readers to “remember” their leaders and to “submit” to them (Heb 13:17). In its simplest form, church members cannot remember and submit to their leaders if they do not know them. The LOH for ordination proves helpful in that it affirms and installs biblically qualified men. It is through a rigorous vetting process, as men are assessed against the backdrop of the biblical qualifications of pastors/elders (1 Tim 3; Titus 1), that men may be proved qualified for the office. An ordination process, then, acts a careful vetting process and

validates who is truly called by God to serve in this office. A biblically qualified pastor will no doubt be a blessing to his church community.

Third, the LOH for ordination invites community discernment. The Christian faith and experience are, at its very heart, communal. When God redeems people from their sins in Christ, he saves them *to* a people; that is, the church. Indeed, one of God's greatest gifts is his gift of Christian community and fellowship. Here, we garner all the "one another's" of the New Testament: we love one another (Rom 13:8; John 13:34); bear burdens with one another (Gal 6:2); serve one another (Gal 5:13); instruct one another (Rom 15:14); are patient with one another (Eph 4:2); submit to one another (Eph 5:21), and many more. We are designed by God to be in community together—each local church is to live as one body of Christ (Rom 12:4-5; 1 Cor 12:12-31).

The choice of elders should be no different. We see the very essence of community discernment evidenced in the NT passages that we exegeted above. The choosing of the seven men to serve the widows of the early church in Acts 6 was a communal decision that "pleased the whole gathering" (Acts 6:5). While the church of Antioch was "worshiping the Lord and fasting" they responded to God's call to set apart Saul and Barnabas for ministry by coming together, as a community, and laying their hands upon these called men (Acts 13:1-3). The mission work of Paul himself was indeed a communal commission. Calvin, too, encourages Christian to have clarity on what is involved in pastoring faithfully, in order that they may choose carefully: "All Christians in general should consider what is required of a good pastor, so as not to choose carelessly or to act in a partisan, self-interested or thoughtless way."⁴

Fourth, LOH acts as a reminder for the one ordained. As we have previously observed, Guthrie captures the ethos of 2 Timothy 2:6: "Every Christian minister needs at

⁴ John Calvin, *Sermons on Titus*, trans. Robert White (East Peoria, IL: Versa Press, 2015), 71.

times to return to the inspiration of his ordination, to be reminded not only of the greatness of his calling, but also of the adequacy of the divine grace which enables him to perform it.”⁵ There is no doubt that hard times will come for the pastor. A difficult year can turn into a difficult prolonged season. What is the pastor to do when he faces these trials? He would do well to remember his commission; he would do well to remember his call; he would do well to remember his ordination unto the faithful service as an under shepherd to the Chief Shepherd. The apostle Paul was reminded of Timothy’s sincere faith (2 Tim 1:5), his good conduct and character (Acts 16:2), and the prophecies that were uttered of him and his future ministry (1 Tim 1:18), and for this reason, Paul encourages timothy to remember his gift and his calling, which took place through the LOH. Timothy’s commission was to remind him of his calling and to inspire him to continue to “fight the good fight of faith” (1 Tim 6:12). Likewise, contemporary pastors can remember their initial ordination, if done faithfully to the Scriptures, as a divine stamp of approval upon their ministry. Thus, they can remember their calling, “fan into flame” the gift that is within them, and preserve in their work. As Calvin explains, the calling of the pastor reminds him of his duty. He writes, “...we must remember that those who are called to declare God’s word should be clear about what their task and office involve, so that they may faithfully do their duty to both God and his church.”⁶

⁵ Donald Guthrie, *The Pastoral Epistles* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 139.

⁶ Calvin, *Sermons on Titus*, 71.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

By requiring and practicing the LOH for ordination, churches are faithfully heeding the biblical witness. The scriptural rite of the LOH for the installment into a ministerial office permeates the entirety of Scripture, thus establishing it as an essential aspect to ecclesiastical polity. Unlike the RCC position, the LOH for ordination is symbolic—there is no “special outpouring of the Holy Spirit,” nor does it act as a supernatural “sacerdotal consecration.” Instead, the scriptural practice symbolically validates those who have been divinely chosen for a ministerial appointment and symbolically consecrates those chosen to serve.

Our theological retrieval of John Calvin’s understanding of the LOH for ordination calls the contemporary church back to a faithful theology and practice of the scriptural rite. John Calvin’s language of the “internal call” versus the “external call” proves to be both scripturally faithful and prudent. While it is only God who makes a minister (divinely calls a man to serve as elder), he providentially includes the church, to confirm this calling through the LOH. And while the Bible presents the use of the LOH within many biblical categories, the practice finds its fullest expression within an ordination (installment) service. Here, the LOH is biblically understood to be symbolic, communal, and external and to provide ecclesiastical order. In sum, the Bible presents the LOH as paradigmatic for ordination.

APPENDIX

ADDITIONAL PROTESTANT VIEWS

Protestant Views in Favor of Ordination

Dutch theologian, Herman Bavinck, represents the Reformed tradition of Protestantism. First, Bavinck sees the LOH as a special connection to ordination. He affirms that the LOH is deeply rooted in the tradition of the early church and that it was understood as a symbolic sign.¹ But eventually, what was understood to be a symbolic sign would eventually become a sacrament “which *ex opera operato* effected an indelible mark.”² Bavinck notes that Jesus never laid hands on his disciples to install them into the apostolic office, but he does see the LOH as consistent with “ordination to an ecclesiastical office” within the NT.³ In his view, the LOH does not act as the source of a special gifting needed for office, rather, it validates the gifting that is present: “For according to Scripture it [LOH] does not bestow, but rather presupposed the charismata required of office.”⁴ While Bavinck does not see the LOH as essential to ordination, he views it as a public recognition of someone who is “called” to a church office and a “solemn introduction into and consecration to that office.”⁵

The twentieth-century Protestant theologian, Louis Berkhof sees a distinction between an inward call and an external call. The inward call to ministry can include three

¹ Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 4, *Holy Spirit, Church, and New Creation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 382.

² Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 4:382.

³ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 4:382.

⁴ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 4:383.

⁵ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 4:383.

things: (1) a deep conviction and love for God and his church, (2) a person who possess the spiritual and intellectual ability to lead in the office, and (3) a clear path made by God to this ministry goal.⁶ For Berkhof, the external call comes through the “instrumentality” of the local church, which is the ordination process.⁷ The ordination process is an affirmation of the inward call by prayer and the laying on of hands of the local church community. The ordination unto ministry is not a calling given by the Pope or a bishop, instead it consists of an internal call of God, which is confirmed by a local church congregation. For Protestants, the laying on of hands is not a transferring of sacerdotal power by a church hierarchy, but that “it is merely a symbolical indication of the fact that one is set aside for the ministerial office of the church.”⁸

Dissenting Protestant Views

When assessing the Protestant position, it is important to note that, due to the schismatic nature of Protestantism in general, there are, at times, varying views of ordination. Further, there are those within the Protestant tradition who reject ordination altogether. The Quakers and Plymouth Brethren are of this belief. These two traditions reject ordination and argue for a simplified model of church governance. Both groups deemphasize all forms of church governance and emphasize the inner working of the Holy Spirit upon each individual Christian who guides and directs His people.⁹ Because each believer has the Holy Spirit who guides them in all matters of life and faith, a more formal church structure is not needed. Similarly, decisions are usually made not by vote but by a “mutual agreement produced by the Holy Spirit.”¹⁰ While they rightly emphasize

⁶ Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 587.

⁷ Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 587.

⁸ Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 587.

⁹ Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013), 1002.

¹⁰ Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 1002.

the priesthood of all believers and the Holy Spirit's guidance upon the life of a Christian, they totally disregard the NT's teaching of the office of elder and they do so in great error. Their system of governance does not square with the biblical data.

It is equally important to address the fact that, perhaps the most famous Baptist in history, Charles H. Spurgeon, also rejected ordination on that grounds that it was "unmitigated Popery."¹¹ Indeed, Spurgeon was never ordained and did not care for ordination. His grounds of rejection, however, seemed to be rooted in his wholesale rejection of Catholicism. In his view, ordination was intimately associated with the Catholic Church, and so, he rejected the LOH and special ordination services stating that the practice held a "Babylonish sound" in his ear (Dissenters of his time period often referred to the Catholic Church as Babylon in reference to the book of Revelation).¹² Spurgeon rejects the idea that the LOH's bestows a particular gift; and he rejects the apostolic succession view of the Catholic Church. Thus, he concludes, "...why in any case [practice] the laying on of empty hands?"¹³ He further rejects the view that only ordinand or recognized ministers can perform ministerial functions like administering the ordinances or presiding over a wedding or funeral. Here he argues for the priesthood of the believer as the rite to minister openly in all church functions. Spurgeon's overall conclusions of ordination, however, stems more from his rejection of the Catholic tradition and less from his interaction with the scriptural witness.

¹¹ Charles H. Spurgeon, "Ordination and Religious Titles," *Sword and the Trowel* 4 (1874): 111-17, Eldership Center, accessed October 1, 2021, http://eldership.org/resources/spurgeon_ordination.html.

¹² Spurgeon, "Ordination and Religious Titles."

¹³ Spurgeon, "Ordination and Religious Titles."

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ABSTRACT

THE LAYING ON OF HANDS AS A PARADIGM FOR ECCLESIASTICAL ORDINATION: A BIBLICAL, HISTORICAL, AND THEOLOGICAL STUDY

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The tradition of the laying on of hands (LOH) can be ambiguous in both essence and practice. Further, the contemporary evangelical church and the academy lack a robust understanding its significance in both orthodoxy and orthopraxy. The goal of this work is threefold: (1) to clarify the essence of the LOH, (2) to clarify the relationship between the LOH and ordination, and (3) to demonstrate that the LOH for ordination has both scriptural and historical precedents. This thesis argues that the Bible presents the LOH as a paradigm for ecclesiastical ordination, establishing it as an essential aspect of polity. A theological retrieval of John Calvin's view of the LOH for ordination demonstrates historical precedent and further bolsters the above claim. My findings are threefold: (1) the LOH is a symbolic expression, (2) the LOH is external and communal, and (3) the LOH brings order to church governance and church life.

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