

A Biblical Theology of Ordination

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The question of ordination to the gospel ministry is a vexing one in a world church that encompasses every continent with diverse cultures, languages and historical perspectives.¹

Beside the distance of time, culture and language between the early Christian community and the global Seventh-day Adventist (SDA) community of faith, the problem is found in the scarcity of language in the Old and New Testament that clearly articulates what ordination is and the lack of a coherent service of ordination in the New Testament. We will examine the Scriptural data in the recognition that it is the Spirit who leads into all truth (John 16:13).

The key questions that will be addressed in this paper include: What is the meaning of ordination? Does ordination confer on an individual a unique status or does ordination symbolize a community's recognition and selection of a person to provide spiritual leadership within the community? What would a preliminary theology of ordination look like? According to Rowan Williams "the theology of Christian ministry is an area in which we are too readily tempted to avoid discussion of first principles" since practical urgencies unsettle and distract us.²

Hence this paper will first engage in a lexical analysis of important words in an attempt to articulate the "first principles" of the New Testament in relation to the matter of ordination. Second, the notion of "laying on of hands" will be discussed and relevant points will be made from the analysis undertaken in steps one and two. In the final section of this paper a preliminary biblical theology of ordination will be proposed.

¹ The significance of this topic in the Seventh-day Adventist church is attested by the publication of numerous monographs and articles on the subject. The following is only a sampling of published works on the matter. Patricia A. Habada and Rebecca Frost Brillhart (eds.), *The Welcome Table: Setting a Place for Ordained Women* (Langley Park: Team Press, 1995) and Nancy Vyhmeister (ed.) *Women in Ministry: Biblical and Historical Perspectives*, (Berrien Springs: Andrews University Press, 1998); *Searching the Scriptures: Women's Ordination and the Call to Biblical Fidelity* (Berrien Springs: Adventists Affirm, 1995); Raoul Dederen, "A Theology of Ordination: A Seventh-day Adventist Interpretation," *Ministry Magazine* (1978): 24K-240; Keith A. Burton, "A Practical Theology of Ordination," *Ministry Magazine* (1996): 26-27, 29; Nancy Vyhmeister, "Ordination in the New Testament?" *Ministry Magazine* (2002): 24-27; Thomas Blincoe, "Needed— A Theology of Ordination," *Ministry Magazine* (1978): 22-24; Willmore Eva, "Should Our Church Ordain Women? Yes," *Ministry Magazine* (1985): 14-22; Bernard E. Seton, "Should Our Church Ordain Women? No," *Ministry Magazine* (1985): 14-22; Floyd Bresee, "Women in Ministry," *Ministry Magazine* (1988): 22-23; John Brunt, "Ordination of Women: A Hermeneutical Question," *Ministry Magazine* (1988): 12-14; Samuel Koranteng-Pipim, *Searching the Scriptures: Women's Ordination and the Call to Biblical Fidelity* (Berrien Springs: Adventists Affirm, 1995) and Mercedes H. Dyer (ed.), *Prove all Things: A Response to Women in Ministry* (Berrien Springs: Adventists Affirm, 2000) and Eddy Johnson, "Women's Ordination: The Flaw in the Debate," *Spectrum* 37 (2009): 24-27.

² Rowan Williams, "Women and the Ministry: A Case for Theological Seriousness," in Monica Furlong (ed.), *Feminine in the Church* (London: SPCK, 1984), 11.

A. The New Testament Background

There is no unambiguous and uniform evidence in the New Testament that supports the concept of ordination as it is currently practised in the SDA church. In fact the New Testament writings do not have a single word for “ordain.” The word “ordination” comes from the Latin *ordinare* which means to arrange, regulate or set in order.³ The first evidence for commissioning known as ordination comes from Hippolytus's *Apostolic Tradition* in the early third century A.D. Surprisingly, for all he wrote about the church, Paul makes no reference to ordination or the laying on of hands in relation to any of the leaders he worked with in the churches under his care (cf. 2 Cor. 8:19).

Furthermore, there is no evidence for ordination or the setting apart of an individual for ministry in the Johannine church. Jesus' consecration of the disciples in John 20:22 did not involve the laying on of hands. This act of Jesus is also not limited to the disciples, but indeed every believer possesses the Spirit (1 John 2:27). While there may have been some sort of installation service for the elder (2 John 1; 3 John 1) nothing is explicitly mentioned.⁴ In sum, the early Matthean, Pauline, Johannine and Petrine churches may have conducted an ordination service of some kind, but no evidence of it has survived. While historical evidence is lacking a lexical analysis of key words can aid in understanding the concept of ordination.

1. Lexical Analysis

There are four different Greek words found in different contexts in the New Testament writings that point to the idea of “ordain.” The King James Version (KJV) is most helpful in this regard.

1. Mark 3:13, 14 – “And he goeth up into a mountain, and calleth (προσκαλεῖται) unto him whom he would: and they came unto him. And he ordained (ἐποίησεν) twelve, that they should be with him, and that he might send them forth to preach.” Jesus goes up into mountain which is traditionally the place of communion with God and for receiving authoritative revelation in Jewish tradition (Exod. 19:3-6, 16-25; Deut. 32:48-34:9 and Mark 9:2; 13:3). The word προσκαλεῖται is translated “calleth” in the KJV and “summoned” in the NIV. The NIV translation better reflects the intent of the word as it is stronger than the verb “call” (καλεῖν) used in the previous call narratives (Mark 1:20; 2:17). The word προσκαλεῖται has connotations of a summons to teach or

³ Vyhmeister, “Ordination in the New Testament?” 24.

⁴ Alan R. Culpepper, *Review & Expositor*, 78 (1981): 471-484 (477).

instruct or of an invitation or call to a special task (see also Mark 3:23; 6:7; 7:14; 8:1; 10:42; 12:43; 15:44).⁵

The word ποιέω, from which ἐποίησεν derives, means “to do” or “make” and is repeatedly used to portray the creative, historical and future eschatological action of God.⁶ The word has overtones of a new creative act here in Mark. The choosing of twelve disciples is not arbitrary, but evokes biblical connections with God’s covenant people in the Old Testament.⁷ By a sovereign act Jesus appoints the twelve as the eschatologically renewed people of God, to be with him and to proclaim His kingdom to Israel and the world.⁸

2. Acts 1:22 – “beginning from the baptism of John, unto that same day that he was taken up from us, must one be ordained (γενέσθαι) to be a witness with us of his resurrection.” This verse does not indicate any service or any activity on the part of the disciples other than that of casting lots after two names are put forward. The practice of casting lots has precedent in Judaism.⁹ The *SDA Bible Commentary* argues that while some suggest that the word γενέσθαι reflects the view of church government held by the KJV translators, this argument is invalid since the disciples were already ordained.¹⁰ It is interesting, however, that the disciples do not lay hands on the newly chosen disciple. The word used by Mark (ἐποίησεν) to portray what Jesus did for his disciples in Mark 3:13-14 is closer to the idea present here in Acts 1:22 and may have been used to demonstrate continuity between the eleven disciples and the new disciple.

⁵ K. L. Schmidt, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Vol. 3, Gerhard Friedrich (ed.), translated and edited by Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 500.

⁶ W. Radl, ποιέω, *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament*, Vol. 3, Horst Balz and Gerhard Schneider (ed.) (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 124.

⁷ M. Eugene Boring, *Mark*, The New Testament Library (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 100.

⁸ For a discussion on the eschatological implications of Mark 3:13-19, within which our passage is found, see Adela Yarbro Collins, *Mark*, Hermeneia – A Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007), 215-18. Ellen White, *The Desire of Ages* (Boise: Pacific Press, 1963), 296, writes: “When Jesus had ended His instruction to the disciples, He gathered the little band close about Him, and kneeling in the midst of them, and laying His hands upon their heads, He offered a prayer dedicating them to His sacred work. Thus the Lord’s disciples were ordained to the gospel.”

⁹ F. F. Bruce, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 47.

¹⁰ Francis D. Nichol (ed.), *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*, Vol. 6 (Hagerstown: Review and Herald, 1980), 130.

3. Acts 14:23 – “And when they had ordained (χειροτονήσαντες) them elders in every church, and had prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord, on whom they believed.” Longenecker maintains that χειροτονεῖν means “to choose” or “elect by raising hands” but it can also mean “to appoint” or “install.” It seems that it is the latter that Luke has in mind since it is coupled with prayer and fasting.¹¹ This conclusion is strengthened since it is doubtful that Paul and Barnabas would have left the election or choosing of an elder to a new congregation that were still infants in the faith.¹²
4. 1 Tim 2:7 – “Whereunto I am ordained (ἐτέθην) a preacher, and an apostle, (I speak the truth in Christ, and lie not;) a teacher of the Gentiles in faith and verity.” The emphatic *I* used here expresses a sense of wonder that God would call Paul as his herald.¹³ Further the verb ἐτέθην is in the passive, indicating that Paul’s ministry “was not of his own choosing but of God’s.”¹⁴ The same root word, τίθημι, is also used in 1 Tim 1:12: “And I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who hath enabled me, for that he counted me faithful, putting (θέμενος) me into the ministry.”¹⁵ The word τίθημι has the general meaning of “put” or “place” and is used here in the sense of appoint. The word is in the aorist tense indicating that this placing or appointing was completed at a specific time or point in the past.¹⁶
5. Titus 1:5 – “For this cause left I thee in Crete, that thou shouldest set in order the things that are wanting, and ordain (καταστήσης) elders in every city, as I had appointed thee.” According to Knight, the word καταστήσης is an aorist subjunctive and means here appoint.¹⁷

From this brief excursion into the New Testament literature we can conclude the following: First, the call of the disciples, not just to follow Christ, but to be *with* Him, is in its primary sense a call to witness to His ministry and be able to pass on authentic traditions about Him

¹¹ Longenecker, *The Book of Acts*, 439.

¹² This is a convincing argument made by Nichol (ed.), *SDA Bible Commentary*, 301.

¹³ Donald Guthrie, *The Pastoral Epistles*, TNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 83.

¹⁴ Gordon D. Fee, *1 and 2 Timothy and Titus*, NIBC (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1988), 69.

¹⁵ See also 2 Tim 1:11 where the same word is used once more.

¹⁶ George Knight III, *The Pastoral Epistles*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 125.

¹⁷ Knight, *The Pastoral Epistles*, 288, understands this passage as pointing back to Acts 6 and Acts 13 and suggests that the verb χειροτονέω could be rendered “lay on hands” or “ordain.”

(see Luke 1:2).¹⁸ In a plenary sense I would argue that this summons in Mark 3:13-14 is what SDA's call the "inner call" of God that a man or woman receives to gospel ministry. This call is a call to devote and surrender one's life to Jesus – to be *with* Him – and to engage in the specific task, flowing from this "being with," of proclamation and service. At its core this "inner call" is to continue the ministry of Jesus and to proclaim Him, the Living Word.

Second, the placing of Paul in ministry was a sovereign act of God just as the placing of the disciples was a sovereign act of Jesus. This putting or placing of Paul, on the basis of the letter to Timothy, suggests that it also corresponds to the inner call. Paul asserted that God enabled him, counted him faithful and put or placed him in ministry at a set time. This inner call of God established Paul in the ministry of herald or proclaimer of Jesus and His truth.

2. Laying on of Hands

After careful research on the subject of "laying on of hands" in both the Old and New Testament Keith Mattingly concluded that 1) laying on of hands is an act of identification; 2) it sets an individual apart from the community for a specific task; 3) it mediates a transfer from God and the community of faith; 4) it indicates that an individual represents the community and 5) it identifies an individual as appointed to an office.¹⁹ In examining the role and function of the laying on of hands in relation to Joshua, Mattingly concluded that the laying on of hands was a public gesture that confirmed and authorized the spiritual gifts God had already bestowed on Joshua.²⁰

It would be surprising if the New Testament evidence did not lean in the same direction as the New Testament writers inherited the idea of laying on of hands from their Old Testament counterparts. There are five texts (Acts 6:6; 13:3; 19:6; 1 Tim 4:14; 5:22 and 2 Tim 1:6) that speak of a commissioning or installation service of some kind. In fact these texts have traditionally been interpreted as referring to ordination. The NIV will be used in this section of the paper.

1. Acts 6:6 – "They presented these men to the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them (προσευξάμενοι ἐπέθηκαν αὐτοῖς τὰς χεῖρας)." This is the first mention of the

¹⁸ David E. Garland, *Mark*, NIVAC (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 129.

¹⁹ Keith Mattingly, "Laying on of Hands in Ordination," in *Women in Ministry: Biblical and Historical Perspectives*, (ed.) Nancy Vyhmeister (Berrien Springs: Andrews University Press, 1998), 70.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 66.

act of laying on of hands in the New Testament.²¹ The laying on of hands here recalls Moses' commissioning of Joshua in Num 27:18-23. Through this act of commissioning Moses conferred some of his authority on Joshua. Similarly the laying on of hands here in Acts 6 is indicative of the apostles delegating their authority to the seven selected by the church.²² The episode in Acts 6:1-6 is the first time that the concept of the ministry of the word is mentioned. The apostles state clearly that they have a "ministry of the word" which they cannot neglect and hence it is imperative that they find others to engage in the ministry of service. The phrase ἐπέθηκαν αὐτοῖς τὰς χεῖρας indicates that the apostles set the seven men apart for the work of ministry.

2. Acts 13:1-3 – These verses recount the sending of Paul and Barnabas as missionaries to Cyprus. In all likelihood one of the prophets received the message from God about ordaining Paul and Barnabas while the whole church were fasting and praying.²³ F. F. Bruce avers that the "laying on of hands" imparted to Paul and Barnabas no authority or spiritual gift that they did not already possess. The church at Antioch expressed its fellowship with and recognition of these men and their spiritual gifts. They were sent out by the whole church and returned to the whole church to report on their missionary exploits.²⁴
3. 1 Tim 4:14 – "Do not neglect your gift (ἐν σοὶ χάρισματος), which was given (ἐδόθη) you through a prophetic message when the body of elders laid their hands on you (μετὰ ἐπιθέσεως τῶν χειρῶν)." In this instance Timothy's gift is given through a prophetic message while in Acts it is also a prophetic message that is the catalyst to send Paul and Barnabas on their first missionary journey. Timothy's case is unique in Scripture since his gifting was given to him prophetically. It was confirmed and accompanied by the laying on of hands.²⁵ A number of scholars have drawn attention to the fact that the laying on of hands (ἐπιθέσεως τῶν χειρῶν) is preceded by μετὰ in

²¹ Nichol (ed.), *SDA Bible Commentary*, 191. Further, the commentary suggests that this first use of the laying on of hands is the blueprint for all the other occasions where there is reference to the laying on of hands. It also equates the laying on of hands with the later practise of ordination referencing 1 Tim 4:14; 5:22 and 2 Tim 1:6.

²² Richard N. Longenecker, *The Acts of the Apostles*, The Expositors Bible Commentary, Vol. 9 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981), 331. So to Jon Dybdahl (ed.), *Andrews Study Bible* (Berrien Springs: Andrews University Press, 2010), 1428.

²³ See Ellen White, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Boise: Pacific Press, 1948), 160, Idem., *The Story of Redemption* (Boise: Pacific Press, 1948), 303

²⁴ F. F. Bruce, *The Book of Acts*, 246.

²⁵ The aorist passive ἐδόθη indicates the gift was given by God.

1 Tim 4:14. C.K. Barret asserts that the laying on of hands is not a means but rather “an accompanying act” for the endowment on Timothy of *charism*, for “μετα with the genitive must mean ‘with’ not ‘through.’”²⁶ Timothy is given a gift that comes with prophecy rather than through the laying on of hands which only accompanies the prophecy.²⁷

An important question emerges in our study. Is what took place in the early Church normative for the church at all times? Can someone in the local church today have their gift confirmed prophetically? Can what happened in the book of Acts, for example, happen again? Every feature in the early Church does not function as the norm for practice and experience in the contemporary church. A lot of what the early Church did was for pragmatic reasons rather than following any specific theological injunction.

Fee and Stuart maintain that “unless Scripture explicitly tells us to do something, what is only narrated does not function in a normative way – unless it can be proved that the author intended for it to function in this way.”²⁸ What is normative in Acts is therefore what Luke explicitly and intentionally wanted to teach. An example of something that would not happen today, unless sovereignly willed by God, is the experience found in Acts 8. Luke reports that Peter and John came to verify that the Samaritans had accepted the word of the Lord (Acts 8:14-16). They laid hands on them and they received the Holy Spirit. While they had been baptized into Christ they had not yet received the Holy Spirit. It is not God’s normal purpose for the reception of the Spirit to be an experience subsequent to conversion and baptism. In Peter’s sermon in Acts 2 forgiveness and the gift of the Spirit are twin blessings that one receives upon repentance and baptism (see Acts 2:38; Romans 8:9, 14-16; 1 Corinthians 6:19; Galatians 3:2, 14; 4:6).

Since this was the first time the gospel was going out of the boundaries of Jerusalem, God delayed the gift of the Holy Spirit to ensure “the acceptance of these

²⁶ C. K. Barret, *The Pastoral Epistles*, NCB (Oxford: Clarendon, 1963), 71-72. Gordon Fee, *God’s Empowering Presence: The Holy Spirit in the Letters of Paul* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1994), 775, also notes “the preposition μετα has no known instance in the *Koine* of an instrumental sense.

²⁷ Benjamin Fiore, *The Pastoral Epistles: First Timothy, Second Timothy, Titus*, SP 12 (Collegeville: Liturgical, 2007), 96, writes: “Here the preposition *dia* (through) indicates that the prophecy was effective in the transmission of the charism and task to Timothy, although the imposition of hands appears to be an ‘accompanying’ (*meta*) act rather than an effective gesture...”

²⁸ Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, 2nd edition (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993), 106.

converts by believers in Jerusalem.”²⁹ God worked in ways that were conducive not only for the reception of the gospel but also to promote the unity of the church and the preparation of the apostles for the expanding Gentile mission. This occurrence in Acts 8 is an historical exception. The question of biblical precedent must then be handled with careful exegesis and a consideration of the overall message of the Scriptures to determine Luke’s or any other Bible writer’s actual intent. However, since “all Scripture is inspired by God” (2 Timothy 3:16) we can discover truth for Christian life and practice from those passages that may have been incidental to the author’s primary intent. God provides the inner call to a person through His Spirit and the church, seeing the fruit of ministry, confirms this call.

The *SDA Bible Commentary* states unequivocally “Timothy’s gift of church leadership was not bestowed on him at the time of his ordination. No special power flowed through the hands of the ‘presbytery.’ Rather, the ordination service recognized Timothy’s abilities and consecration and thus expressed the church’s approval of his appointment as a church leader.”³⁰ The prophetic message of Timothy’s gifting, however, is an exception.

4. 1 Tim 5:22 – “Do not be hasty in the laying on of hands, and do not share in the sins of others. Keep yourself pure.” The wider context of 1 Tim 5 suggests that Paul is speaking to Timothy about how to handle public accusations and appoint leaders. He advises Timothy that the accusations must be guided by the objective criteria of two or three witnesses and that those who commit sin must receive a public rebuke. The whole process must be done without prejudice or preference. In verse 22 Paul is admonishing Timothy not to lay hands on someone aspiring toward leadership too quickly since he could share in their sins. This reference is important in demonstrating that there needs to be a time of examination and reflection and that stringent cautionary measures need to be put in place for someone aspiring to leadership who has been involved in a damaging public or personal dispute that jeopardizes the advancement of the kingdom.

The New Testament evidence suggests on the basis of Acts 6 that the concept of “laying on of hands” refers to the delegation of a specific task and the authority to function and carry out

²⁹ Longenecker, *Acts*, 359.

³⁰ Nichol (ed.), *SDA Bible Commentary*, Vol. 7, 307.

the duties required for that task. In Acts 13 it is the whole church that sends Paul and Barnabas out into the mission field, a task initiated by the Holy Spirit. The laying on of hands functions in this text to confirm the direct message of the Holy Spirit and functions to set Paul and Barnabas aside for missionary work. While the prophetic confirmation of Timothy's leadership in 1 Tim 4:14 is a historical exception, there is no reason for a prophetic message not to be given to a contemporary leader in relation to a person who may be considering gospel ministry.

Toward a Theology of Ordination

A biblical theology must be grounded in the *whole counsel of Scripture* and must seek for principles that are germane to the inspiration of Scripture in an ability to discern the divine will. The overall thrust of Scripture is that every member of the church must have the opportunity for Jesus to shape and transform their lives into conformity to His plan and will (Rom. 8:29; 12:1-2; Eph. 4:23-24). It is at the time of baptism, as in the case of Jesus (Matt 3:13-17), that the Holy Spirit fills all believers and grants them His gifts for ministry. This act of granting spiritual gifts is the prerogative of the Spirit and He grants them according to His purpose and with no distinction (1 Cor. 12:4-11; 1 Cor. 11:11-12; Gal 3:13, 28, 5:1).

The New Testament evidence seems to suggest that God is sovereign in calling a person to a specific ministry. Ordination is the setting apart of an individual for service to God and His people. God sovereignly calls an individual to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ – the ministry of the Word – to the church and the world. This inner call is then authenticated by the body of Christ as the examples in Acts and the later witness of the New Testament demonstrate. There is no evidence that the authenticity of the inner call is questioned or debated in the New Testament. The body of Christ is nurtured and grows by the presence and power of the Holy Spirit and it is in staying sensitive to the voice of the Spirit that the church is able to discern who is to be ordained. The fruit (character and soul winning) of a person's life is normally an important step to consider in the process of ordination (Gal 5:22; John 15:1-11).

There is no evidence in the New Testament that the inner call of God is gender biased. The cross eradicated class and racial distinctions of "Jew and Gentile, slave and free" (Gal. 3:28).³¹ Christ came to establish a new community built on mutual respect and mutual

³¹ Ben Witherington III, *Grace in Galatia: A Commentary on Paul's Letter to the Galatians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 280-81, states that "Gal 3:28 has been called the Magna Carta of Humanity and there is a sense in which that label is apt, but it is also well to be aware that Paul is not suggesting here the obliteration of

submission (Eph. 5: 21) through a new covenant.³² The Old Covenant was a sexually distinctive one in that the mark of entrance into it was by circumcision. However, in the New Testament the mark of entrance into the new community is by baptism, a non-sexual distinctive. Both sexes enter the Christian community on an equal footing based on accepting Christ as Lord and Saviour.

While there are different roles and functions for God's leaders in the New Testament (Eph. 4:11-13) there is no evidence that there are different levels of ordination or that ordination meant something different to those that had different roles. The church is a worshipping, serving and discipling community for everyone.

Conclusion

This paper has examined the New Testament evidence and found that the strongest evidence for ordination is the inner call which comes sovereignly from God and the fruit of a person's life. The early Church practised ordination by "laying hands" on the individual and in so doing set them apart for service. Furthermore, ordination does not grant a person a higher status or a "direct line" to God, but simply refers to being called by God to proclaim the Living Word in a life of service to the church and the world. The ordained person should indeed be deeply humble and grateful for the privilege and joy of proclaiming Christ.

the distinctions he mentions in this verse, but rather their redemption and transformation in Christ. The new creation is the old transformed and transfigured. These ethnic, social and sexual distinctions continue to exist but in Christ they are not to determine one's soteriological or spiritual or social standing in the body of Christ. It is also fair to say that being in Christ and being led by the Spirit also affects what roles one may play in the Christian community..."

³² John Stott, *Ephesians*, BST (Downers Grove: IVP, 1979), 213-220, argues passionately that there is to be mutual submission of men and women in the home and the church on the basis of equality. Even though the husband is head of the home just as Christ is the head of the church this does not preclude the submission of husbands to their wives.