

The Laying On of Hands in Ministry

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Two weeks ago, Shamash Steve Caldwell led an after-service prayer and body ministry and, at the time, I asked that only elders lay hands on those being prayed for. Several of you questioned me about that and, after praying and studying the Scriptures, I have decided to revise my previous instruction. I'm not going to tell you now what my revised instruction is, but I will tell you at the end of this message. Hopefully, by keeping you in suspense until then, you will stay attentive to the rest of what I have to say, some of which is fairly technical. The title of this message is "The Laying on of Hands in Ministry."

First, I want to point out that the ministry of "laying on of hands" is biblically "foundational." The New King James version (messianized a bit) translates Hebrews 6:1-2 this way:

"Therefore, leaving the discussion of the elementary principles of Messiah, let us go on to perfection, not laying again the foundation of repentance from dead works and of faith toward God, of the doctrine of baptisms, of laying on of hands, of resurrection of the dead, and of eternal judgment."

In his "Complete Jewish Bible," David Stern does not use the term "laying on of hands" in this verse, as do most other English translators. Instead, he uses the Hebrew word "*s'mikhah*," that literally means "leaning." Stern translates Hebrews 6:1-2 this way:

"Therefore, leaving behind the initial lessons about the Messiah, let us go on to maturity, not laying again the foundation of turning from works that lead to death, trusting God, and instruction about washings, s'mikhah, the resurrection of the dead and eternal punishment."

There are several occurrences in the Bible where hands are laid on persons by other persons, and there are several reasons for doing it. Stern's choice of the Hebrew word "*s'michah*" here in verse 2, appears to indicate that the kind of "laying on of hands" that is foundational is the kind used in performing ordinations rather than the kind used for other ministry purposes such as for healing. I am inclined to disagree because I see nothing in the Greek text of Hebrews 6:1-2 that suggests a need to narrow its meaning that way. The operative Greek words are ἐπιθέσεως τε χειρῶν (*epithéseōs te chairo-u*), which literally translates to "assaulting with a hand" (ergo "laying on of hands), and so the Greek words allow for broad meaning and broad application.

When he chose "*s'mikhah*," Stern was more than likely thinking of Numbers 8:10-11 which he translates:

"You will present the L'vi'im before ADONAI, the people of Isra'el will lay their hands on the L'vi'im, and Aharon will offer the L'vi'im before ADONAI as a wave offering from the people of Isra'el, so that they may do ADONAI's service."

The operative Hebrew words here, וְסָמְכוּ בְנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶת־יָדֵיהֶם עַל־הַלְוִיִּם (*v'samch'u v'ney yisrael et-y'deyhem al ha-l'viyim*), were commanded by God in the context of His giving instructions for ordaining the Levites, and the words literally mean "the house of Israel will lean the hands on the Levites." Notice that although Aaron is the one who offers the Levites to the Lord, it is not Aaron who lays hands on them. Hands are laid by the people of Israel themselves, which makes perfect sense since in Exodus 19:6, God declares Israel to be a "kingdom of priests":

"... 'and you will be a kingdom of cohanim for me, a nation set apart.' These are the words you are to speak to the people of Isra'el."

Numbers 8:10-11 is the primary Scripture from which we derive the word "*s'michah*" for ordaining rabbis, elders, *shamashim*, and other spiritual leaders. There are other Scriptures as well in which derivatives of the word "*s'michah*" are associated with ordinations, a prominent one being Numbers 27:22-23, in which Moses ordains Joshua to be his successor:

"Moshe did as ADONAI had ordered him. He took Y'hoshua, put him before El'azar the cohen and the whole community, laid his hands on him, and commissioned him, as ADONAI had said through Moshe."

Our understanding is that this laying on of hands was accompanied by a partial transfer of the Holy Spirit from Moses to Joshua, because we read in Deuteronomy 34:9:

"Y'hoshua the son of Nun was full of the Spirit of wisdom, for Moshe had laid his hands on him, and the people of Isra'el heeded him and did what ADONAI had ordered Moshe."

Derivatives of "*s'michah*" are used in other ways as well, such as laying hands on a *korban* – an animal sacrifice; we find an example of this, in Leviticus 1:4:

וְסָמַךְ יָדוֹ עַל רֹאשׁ הָעֹלָה וְנִרְצָה לוֹ לְכִפָּר עָלָיו
V'samach yado al rosh ha-olah v'nirtzah lo l'chapeir alav.

"He is to lay his hand upon the head of the burnt offering, and it will be accepted on his behalf to make atonement for him."

This common association of "laying on of hands" with ordination or "*s'michah*," and my assumption that one must be in authority in order to "lay on hands" for transferring the Spirit, were the reasons why, two weeks ago, I asked that only elders "lay on hands" during prayer. Another reason was that, when I was a new believer, I was taught that "laying on of hands" can be dangerous because an unclean spirit can be transferred in the process. Here is an excerpt from an article I found on the Internet that expresses that teaching:

"A supporter of QR [a well-known minister who was defrocked due to sexual sin] recently suggested that I might want QR to pray for me. My answer is "NO!" I would NOT want QR to pray for me. I am very careful who I ask to pray for me because one of my mentors taught me that with the Laying on of Hands can come the transference of spirits. (See also: Transference of

Spirits, Alexander William Ness, 1981, Welch Co). Pastor Ness says: "Few people realize the dangers involved in laying on of hands. There is great danger in having just anyone laying hands on you. I don't want what is in QR to transfer into me. I don't want what is in QR to transfer into anyone. Ness observes: "A homosexual evangelist laid hands on people and soon some of his admirers had like problems" (Page 120, Ness, 1981). The way to avoid transference of spirits is to be careful with laying on of Hands (Hebrews 6:1, 1Timothy 5:22). If the fruit of person's life is suspect then avoid prayer by him or for him involving laying on of hands. Avoid it."

Until this week, I had had no occasion to review the correctness of what I was taught back in the late 1970s. Now that I have re-studied the matter, I have come to the conclusion that I was not taught correctly, because I can find no teaching or example in the Bible of something bad resulting from the "laying on of hands" in ministry. What is more, in the few books and Internet articles I reviewed that warn against "laying on of hands" during ministry, the warnings seem to be supported by nothing more than anecdotes, and what I believe to be an incorrect interpretation of 1 Timothy 5:22 from the King James Version of the Bible:

"Lay hands suddenly on no man, neither be partaker of other men's sins: keep thyself pure."

In my opinion, the correct meaning of 1Timothy 5:22 is more accurately rendered in the Complete Jewish Bible and the New American Standard Bible as referring to ordaining unwisely; in the NASB it reads:

"Do not lay hands upon anyone too hastily and thus share responsibility for the sins of others; keep yourself free from sin."

Despite the many books and articles warning against it, Scripture endorses the laying on of hands by ordinary believers in order to heal unbelievers who are sick, in sin, and possibly even carrying demons. This is implied in Yeshua's words in Mark 16:15-18:

"Then he said to them, 'As you go throughout the world, proclaim the Good News to all creation. Whoever trusts and is immersed will be saved; whoever does not trust will be condemned. And these signs will accompany those who do trust: in my name they will drive out demons, speak with new tongues, not be injured if they handle snakes or drink poison, and heal the sick by laying hands on them.'"

Yes, Yeshua expected his disciples to lay hands on sick and possibly demonized sinners, and yet He never warns them that there is any danger in doing it.

There is also an occasion in the Book of Acts, where Paul heals a man through the "laying on of hands" and, as a result, many others came and were similarly healed. Here too, there is no mention of any danger to Paul. We read about this in Acts 28:7-9:

"Nearby were lands belonging to the governor of the island, whose name was Publius. He received us in a friendly manner and put us up for three days. Now it so happened that Publius'

father was lying in bed, sick with fever attacks and dysentery. Sha'ul went in to him, prayed, placed his hands on him and healed him. After this happened, the rest of those on the island who had ailments came and were healed."

There are also examples of Yeshua healing people through the "laying on of hands" and, although we understand that Yeshua is not ordinary as we are, His example is nevertheless instructive:

Mark 6:4-5

"But Yeshua said to them. 'The only place people don't respect a prophet is in his home town, among his own relatives, and in his own house.' So he could do no miracles there, other than lay his hands on a few sick people and heal them."

Luke 4:40-41

"After sunset, all those who had people sick with various diseases brought them to Yeshua, and he put his hands on each one of them and healed them; also demons came out of many, crying, 'You are the Son of God!' But, rebuking them, he did not permit them to say that they knew he was the Messiah."

Notice that in the Luke Scripture, demons came out of many of those upon whom Yeshua laid His hands, and in no case did any of the demons attempt to enter Yeshua.

For completeness, I will mention just a few other occasions in Scripture where hands are laid on others with positive results:

Acts 6:3-6

"Brothers, choose seven men from among yourselves who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will appoint them to be in charge of this important matter, but we ourselves will give our full attention to praying and to serving the Word." What they said was agreeable to the whole gathering. They chose Stephen, a man full of faith and the Ruach HaKodesh, Philip, Prochoros, Nikanor, Timon, Parmenas and Nicholas, who was a proselyte from Antioch. They presented these men to the emissaries, who prayed and laid their hands on them."

Acts 8:14-17

"When the emissaries in Yerushalayim heard that Shomron had received the Word of God, they sent them Kefa and Yochanan, who came down and prayed for them, that they might receive the Ruach HaKodesh. For until then he had not come upon any of them; they had only been immersed into the name of the Lord Yeshua. Then, as Kefa and Yochanan placed their hands on them, they received the Ruach HaKodesh."

Acts 13:1-3

"In the Antioch congregation were prophets and teachers- Bar-Nabba, Shim'on (known as "the Black"), Lucius (from Cyrene), Menachem (who had been brought up with Herod the governor) and Sha'ul. One time when they were worshipping the Lord and fasting, the Ruach HaKodesh said to them, "Set aside for me Bar-Nabba and Sha'ul for the work to which I have called them." After fasting and praying, they placed their hands on them and sent them off."

And we should not forget how Jacob blessed Ephraim and Manasseh with the laying on of hands:

Genesis 48:10-19

"Then Israel stretched out his right hand and laid it on Ephraim's head, who was the younger, and his left hand on Manasseh's head, guiding his hands knowingly, for Manasseh was the firstborn. And he blessed Joseph, and said: "God, before whom my fathers Abraham and Isaac walked, the God who has fed me all my life long to this day, the Angel who has redeemed me from all evil, bless the lads; let my name be named upon them, and the name of my fathers Abraham and Isaac; and let them grow into a multitude in the midst of the earth." Now when Joseph saw that his father laid his right hand on the head of Ephraim, it displeased him; so he took hold of his father's hand to remove it from Ephraim's head to Manasseh's head. And Joseph said to his father, "Not so, my father, for this one is the firstborn; put your right hand on his head." But his father refused and said, "I know, my son, I know. He also shall become a people, and he also shall be great; but truly his younger brother shall be greater than he, and his descendants shall become a multitude of nations." So he blessed them that day, saying, "By you Israel will bless, saying, 'May God make you as Ephraim and as Manasseh!'" And thus he set Ephraim before Manasseh."

In Scripture, the hands (and especially the right hand) are very important for imparting (1) blessing, as in the case of Israel blessing Ephraim and Manasseh, (2) authority, as in the case of Moses ordaining Joshua, and also the Israelites ordaining the Levites, (3) healing, as in the case of Yeshua's disciples (and later Paul) laying hands on the sick, and (4) the Baptism or filling of the Holy Spirit. The one thing all of these have in common is that the laying on of hands accomplishes a transference of the Holy Spirit from one person to another. In fact, I have been unable to find any occurrence in Scripture of hands being laid on someone for general prayer, where there is no expectation of transference of the Spirit.

It seems natural to want to touch a person that one is praying for – body language (if you will) that conveys affection, and identifies the person for whom the prayer is intended. There is nothing wrong with it, but it is not what Scripture means when it speaks of "laying on of hands." For true "laying on of hands" to occur, there must be an intention to transfer a portion of the Holy Spirit from the one who is anointed, to another who is in need. An example of this would be, a person who has the gift of healing, laying his or her hands on someone who is sick with the expectation that the person will be healed through the touch. Merely touching someone affectionately while praying to God for healing is not wrong, but it is not what Scripture means by "laying on of hands."

Touching during ordinary prayer as well as for the "laying on of hands" are authorized at Ohev Yisrael, to minister healing, the Baptism of the Holy Spirit, and other Holy Spirit impartations. Ministering deliverance from unclean spirits is, however, in a category of its own and should not be attempted without the knowledge and covering of elders. In all cases of body ministry, the person who is doing the praying and the touching should have the recipient's permission, and also the anointing to perform whatever ministry he or she intends to perform.

So to summarize, I hereby rescind my words of two weeks ago, and say instead that we can lay hands on others during public prayer and Holy Spirit impartation provided (1) we first ask the others' permission, (2) we believe that we are anointed for whatever ministry we are offering, and (3) that any touching of another be done with holy propriety and discretion.