

## A study in ordination (with an apology for incomplete footnotes)

I think I want more sacraments, don't you? But the bumper sticker that told me "Don't believe everything you think" sounds wiser, even if it's an odd piece of advice on a car in San Francisco. I'm not saying I want to go backwards to a superstitious sevenfold sacramentality. No, I'm following a different impulse I hope – like when Moses said to Joshua that he wished everyone would prophesy. I want more of grace and I want more avenues for that grace to run through, and although multiplying sacraments probably wouldn't get us there, it's fun to daydream. Ordination as a possible sacrament has more credibility than most, after all, it's the gateway position for the administration of the sacraments themselves. Even Calvin was sympathetic to an sacrament of office for just this reason.<sup>1</sup>

This does expose a problem that Reformed sacramental teaching must deal with. In what sense, and to what degree, are the different activities and actions of the Church a means of grace? We understand a fullness to the multiformity of expression and relationships and activities in the Church that communicate God's grace fully and freely. These are bible studies, fellowship groups, discipleship groups, and prayer meetings, etc. Then, beyond the everyday work of interpersonal connection, exist a set of Church functions and rites that aren't sacraments, but we regulate and administer them selectively and appropriately for the occasion. These are the elements of worship, foot washing, diaconal offerings, and membership vows, etc. The laying on of hands is one of these kinds of actions, and these will look different depending on locality. Thinking this way, Calvin advised that the actual action of touching people for ordination, by the laying on of hands, should be changed in practice – if there's a local superstitious attitude about the action.<sup>2</sup>

Because of its physicality, the laying on of hands visually signifies temple presence. It's an application of temple spirituality and locality for the kingdom. The OT builds a vocabulary for this practice that is intriguing, drawing from this tactile action rich and suggestive concepts for ordination, concepts which the NT seems to gather together and deploy in its practice of the rite. Through an analysis of this expression and practice I hope we can grow in wisdom and our application of the rite as an expression of the ascension ministry of Christ now.

This paper will examine OT and NT usage of the "laying on of hands" expression, exploring the usage and meaning of this idiom, and mining the practice of the Scripture for a sharper understanding of how ordination functions as a means of grace, without being elevated to the status of a sacrament.

We will examine two expressions for ordination in the OT, *samek yad 'al* – leaning/laying on of hand, *mille et yad* – filling up of hand. *Shith yad 'al* and *sim yad al* – which are both used interchangeably for place a hand on, are briefly examined to differentiate different kinds of touch and their implications. In the LXX, the *tithemi* word group is used for *samek*, *shith*, and *sim*, while *mille* is translated by *pleroun* and *teleioun*. In the NT the *tithemi* word group is generally used with the word *cheiras* to form the still

---

<sup>1</sup> Torrance, 228. SJT

<sup>2</sup> Torrance

used expression “laying on of hands.” NT usage is a continuation of the *samek*, *sim*, and *shith* expressions, without any direct NT equivalent to the *mille* group.<sup>3</sup>

## OT usage

### 1. Laying on of hands

*Samek yad 'al* is used in three different ways. At times it is used to describe the consecration of a sacrifice. At another time it is used to describe an ordination to service, and at still another point it is used to describe the act of judgment.<sup>4</sup> The grammatical form is *samek* with the accusative + *'al* and is used exclusively in a ritualistic sense in all of these instances.<sup>5</sup>

a. When Aaron is first consecrated, along with his sons in Exodus 29, we first come across this practice of laying hands on the sacrifice (Ex 29:10, 15, 19.) When the priest offers either a peace offering (Le 3: 2, 8, 13) or a sin offering (Le 4:4, 15, 24, 29, 33) there is this laying on of hands on the animal. It also happens with the scapegoat in Leviticus 16:21.

*“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” (Le 16:21)*

This first usage is uniquely typological, prefiguring the idea that matures in the NT as imputation. It serves as a model for understanding redemption, creating a visible word picture. Here the concept of transference is clear, although no transference could be said to actually occur. The writer of Hebrews tells us that these figures were ineffective in and of themselves, except as they preach Christ (Hebrews 10:11ff.) They are accessed, and in turn access, the actual work of Christ as types by faith.

This makes the laying of hands an act of consecration, an outward visible sign of an inward spiritual reality, a spiritual reality made real in the promise and plan of God. There is no inherent sacramental reality in the sacrifice. It is a word picture of imputation, activated and applied to the believer when received by faith. The mystical and sacerdotal error of the church is to attach to the rites of our covenant community more than they should bear. They then become a form of spiritual magic. This interprets the “laying on of hands” as a true transference, imparting some intrinsic authority. This tendency will think of the rite as having an empowering effect, somehow transforming the person or imbuing them with some spiritual headship.

There is also, in a number of these instances, a corporate sense. Sometimes many people are laying their hands on the sacrifice, or the sins of many are confessed. It seems that the laying on hands rite also affirms covenantal solidarity. It is a sense of union as a part of the expression of faith, as the community shares in the act itself, and the benefit of the act. This is a part of what the consecration rite says to the

---

<sup>3</sup> David Daube, *The New Testament and Rabbinic Judaism*, Athlone Press (1956), 225.

<sup>4</sup> Tipei

<sup>5</sup> *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, X, Eerdmans (1999), 280.

covenant community. There is federal headship in our redemption, uniting us in the benefits of faith and salvation.

b. Next we see how *samek* is used in the ordination rite for priests and leaders. First is the consecration of the Levites,

*“When you bring the Levites before the Lord, the people of Israel shall **lay their hands** on the Levites, and Aaron shall offer the Levites before the Lord as a wave offering from the people of Israel, that they may do the service of the Lord. Then the Levites shall **lay their hands** on the heads of the bulls, and you shall offer the one for a sin offering and the other for a burnt offering to the Lord to make atonement for the Levites.”* (Nu 8:10–12)

Note that we see here both the consecration of the Levites and their sacrifices at the same time. Next is Moses as he commissions Joshua,

Numbers 27:18–23

*<sup>18</sup> So the Lord said to Moses, “Take Joshua the son of Nun, a man in whom is the Spirit, and **lay your hand** on him. <sup>19</sup> Make him stand before Eleazar the priest and all the congregation, and you shall commission him in their sight. <sup>20</sup> You shall invest him with some of your authority, that all the congregation of the people of Israel may obey. <sup>21</sup> And he shall stand before Eleazar the priest, who shall inquire for him by the judgment of the Urim before the Lord. At his word they shall go out, and at his word they shall come in, both he and all the people of Israel with him, the whole congregation.” <sup>22</sup> And Moses did as the Lord commanded him. He took Joshua and made him stand before Eleazar the priest and the whole congregation, <sup>23</sup> and he **laid his hands** on him and commissioned him as the Lord directed through Moses.*

The second use of *samek* has the same distinctive of the first. In fact, the usage in Numbers 8:10-12 seems to affirm the similarity by a natural conflation of ordination with consecration. They are paralleled in the text and their connection is explicit. The Levites are a wave offering itself. The laying on hands is, first and foremost, a recognition outwardly of an inward spiritual reality. Great care is taken to affirm that the Spirit is in Joshua already, creating the actual warrant for doing this activity. What we have here in the ordination of the Levites and of Joshua is a “ratifying” and “consecrating” work. This is the language that Calvin uses to describe the nature of Paul’s usage of the term in I Timothy 4:14, and it is helpful here to keep us from the persistent error of sacerdotalism.<sup>6</sup> The idea of a blunt or mystical transference of authority is not here.

If a causal claim was to be made for the rite, that the laying on of hands imbues with power, it would rest on v. 20, or in the later report of this event in Deuteronomy 34:9:

*<sup>9</sup> And Joshua the son of Nun was full of the spirit of wisdom, for Moses had **laid his hands** on him. So the people of Israel obeyed him and did as the Lord had commanded Moses.*

---

<sup>6</sup> *Sermons on the Epistles to Timothy and Titus*, John Calvin, Banner of Truth Trust, (1983) 426.

Deuteronomy appears to make the rite the direct cause of Joshua's "spirit of wisdom," but reading the Exodus 29 version clears that up. The rare OT word *hod* is used in Numbers 27:20, translated in the LXX by *doxa*.<sup>7</sup> This might seem to suggest some theory of transference, but the *hod* deposit or investment from Moses to Joshua is external. The public action of the rite in the presence of all Israel, with their participation in it, is the setting. The rites use the open display before many witnesses to create a clear visual picture: Joshua succeeds Moses. This is the *hod* that Moses is imparting, it is in the eyes and hearts of the people.

Again we also see the participation of the community, with either a group action of "laying on of hands" or the action before witnesses. This is for, with, and by the group. The laying of hands affirms again the covenant solidarity of the actions of the community.

- a. The third sense of *samek* is used in judgment.

*"Then the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, "Bring out of the camp the one who cursed, and let all who heard him lay their hands on his head, and let all the congregation stone him." (Le 24:13–14)*

This was specifically for a case of verbal blasphemy against the Name. For those who teach a transference theory of the *samek 'yad* expression, this is the most difficult passage to explain. Transference does not make sense of these actions unless the whole community is confessing the sin of the accused. But this is fanciful, it is the command of God as His agent that commissions the community to act as judge, jury, and executioner.

Here the framework used above is explanatory. The laying of hands is the affirmation not of what anyone in the group has done, or is doing. It is an external sign of the spiritual reality of judgment. It is the whole community now acting out the judgment that God has already done, witnessed and affirmed by the laying on of hands. Here is some of the basis of the NT description of the covenant community participating in the judgment of the world and angels (I Cor. 6:3.) There is also a consecrative element which is often expressed in the *herem* commands of the book of Joshua, the items "set aside for destruction." A kind of reverse consecration occurs here, which seems to function as an anti-type.

So community solidarity is described and practiced. It is congruent with the practices of sacrificial and ordaining consecration, the work of the people of God together. The covenant community enacts this same unity in NT excommunication, so that Matthew 18 describes the final part of discipline,

*"If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector." (Mt 18:17)*

---

<sup>7</sup> Tipei

The event in Numbers is anticipatory of the function and role of the church as a revelation of the grace and judgment of God.<sup>8</sup>

What do all of these usages have in common? That isn't easy to say, but I must give credit to my administrator Stephanie for this. When I explained the three uses to her, describing the focus of this paper, she immediately commented that death is the unifying element in the three descriptions of *samek yad* we've looked at. That insight makes sense, and it itself presages and anticipates the saving sacrifice of Christ and how we are made participants in it, prepared for ministry. Paul makes use of this idea when he described his own work as a drink offering being poured out in Philippians 2:17. The rites and rituals of the OT are source material for ministry for him, and his usage teaches us how to use them.

One positive part of the broad usage of *samek yad* is borrowing from one use to help explain another. Because we understand from Hebrews how a rite can function without actual doing anything in and of itself, we can use that same framework for the ordaining function of the rite. We are thereby being warned off of any attempt to confuse the sign with the thing signified. That's definitely what's happening on the Day of Atonement and so we can use that same interpretive handle when we examine the ordination of Joshua and the priests.

The final synthesizing element in the three uses is that of ratifying. There is a public sense of publishing the "laying on of hands" as an open action for the community. The community enacts God's judgments, purposes and will as they have been described in the law. The outward rite is then describing a spiritual reality in these instances. The application of the rite seals the statements of the law and makes them visible in practice.

## 2. Placing on of hands

The word *shith* is used for blessing. When Jacob blesses his progeny in Genesis 48:14 we get this sense:

*And Israel 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 (for Manasseh was the firstborn.)*

*Shith* is a common OT word otherwise, generally having a locative sense of "lay, put, place."<sup>9</sup> This potentially becomes a way of discerning the breadth of the NT use of the laying of hands. Not all touch has the consecrating and confirming sense, or the representational and imputative symbolism. The weakness of this differentiation is the infrequency of this expression in the OT, making it difficult to see if there was a technically differentiated "laying on of hands" versus "placing on of hands."

The strongest antecedents to a healing "touch" in the NT are in the OT ministries of Elijah and Elisha, where their touching actually raises dead children (1 Ki 17:17-24; 2 Ki 4:18-37; Lu 7:17, 8:40-56; Mk 5:21ff!). These OT pericopes, including the resurrection of a man by merely bumping Elisha's bones in the grave (2 Ki 13:21) do not inform usage of these word groups. There does not seem to be any special

---

<sup>8</sup> In Numbers 15:30 is the description of a sin "with a high hand." It may be fruitful to consider this as a rejection of the laying on of hands, the antithesis of participating in the community and the works of God.

<sup>9</sup> *TDOT*, XIV, 652.

language or usage of our key idiomatic expressions, so there seemed to be no role or function in the cultus for this kind of activity.

The healing of Naaman hints that there was a cultural expectation of some kind of physical action.<sup>10</sup> He complains that the prophet could have at least “waved” his hand or something! (2 Ki 5:11) Naaman seems to have expected some kind of magical action or motion from Elisha to effect healing the leprosy. Elisha doesn’t even meet him but sends a messenger (Mt 8:5-13?) The significance of this event is the way it distances itself from an sort of manipulation of magical forces. The “rite” of something appears superfluous in these contexts, consistent with an analysis that will not elevate any ritual to a mechanical work of grace and spiritual power.

### 3. Filling up of hands

The next Hebrew expression is *mille ‘yad* which was an exclusive OT term for setting aside for office.<sup>11</sup> This particular expression occurs 16 times in reference to priestly consecration (Ex 28:41; 29:9, 29, 33, 35; 32:39; Le 4:5; 8:33; 16:32; 21:10; Nu 3:3; Jg 17:5, 12; I Ki 13:33; 2 Ch 13:9; 29:31.) These particular passages are translated by LXX as *teleios*. In Exodus 32:39 *millu yedcem* – “your hands have been filled,” is translated in the LXX with *pleroun*. Usage of *mille ‘yad* goes outside of the consecration reference, and is used elsewhere in the OT for military equipping and donations to the temple (2 Ki 9:24; I Ch 29:5)<sup>12</sup>

In Leviticus 16:32, after the *samek yad* description is used for the atonement offering, the priest is described as consecrated using *mille yad* (which is usually the translation of the *qdsh* word for holiness.)

*And the priest who is anointed and **consecrated** as priest in his father’s place shall make atonement, wearing the holy linen garments.*

In Exodus 29 we get a fuller sense of the *mille* usage. The construction of the idiom varies with *mille yad*. Sometimes it stands alone and sometimes with *yad*, with *samek yad* also being used. To show how these expressions are used together and how they differ, I have annotated the following passage in this way: the translation of *mille* is in **bold**, *mille yad*\* is in bold with an **asterisk**\*, and *samek yad* is underlined:

<sup>9</sup> *and you shall gird Aaron and his sons with sashes and bind caps on them. And the priesthood shall be theirs by a statute forever. Thus you shall **ordain**\* Aaron and his sons.* <sup>10</sup> *“Then you shall bring the bull before the tent of meeting. Aaron and his sons shall lay their hands on the head of the bull.* <sup>11</sup> *Then you shall . . .* <sup>15</sup> *“Then you shall take one of the rams, and Aaron and his sons shall lay their hands on the head of the ram,* <sup>16</sup> *and you shall kill the ram and shall take its blood and throw it against the sides of the altar . . .* <sup>19</sup> *“You shall take the other ram, and Aaron and his sons shall lay their hands on the head of the ram,* <sup>20</sup> *and you shall . . . and the right thigh (for it is a ram of **ordination**),* <sup>23</sup> *and . . . “You shall take the breast of the ram of Aaron’s **ordination** and wave it for a wave offering before the Lord, and it shall be your portion.* <sup>27</sup> *And you shall*

---

<sup>10</sup> Tipei

<sup>11</sup> “Consecration and Ordination” Torrance, *SJT* (1958), 228.

<sup>12</sup> *TDOT*, VIII, 303.

consecrate the breast of the wave offering that is waved and the thigh of the priests' portion that is contributed from the ram of **ordination**, from what was Aaron's and his sons'.<sup>28</sup> It shall be for Aaron and his sons as a perpetual due from the people of Israel, for it is a contribution. It shall be a contribution from the people of Israel from their peace offerings, their contribution to the Lord.<sup>29</sup> "The holy garments of Aaron shall be for his sons after him; they shall be anointed in them and **ordained\*** in them."<sup>30</sup> The son who succeeds him as priest, who comes into the tent of meeting to minister in the Holy Place, shall wear them seven days.<sup>31</sup> "You shall take the ram of **ordination** and boil its flesh in a holy place."<sup>32</sup> And Aaron and his sons shall eat the flesh of the ram and the bread that is in the basket in the entrance of the tent of meeting.<sup>33</sup> They shall eat those things with which atonement was made at their **ordination\*** and consecration, but an outsider shall not eat of them, because they are holy.<sup>34</sup> And if any of the flesh for the **ordination** or of the bread remain until the morning, then you shall burn the remainder with fire. It shall not be eaten, because it is holy.<sup>35</sup> "Thus you shall do to Aaron and to his sons, according to all that I have commanded you. Through seven days shall you **ordain\*** them . . .

In this passage *mille* and *mille yad* seem to be used interchangeably, with *mille* being used without *yad* in two ways. It is used as a shorthand for the whole process in the abstract (v. 3, 26, 34) and then it is used adjectively for the description of the ram (v. 20, 23, 27, 31.) *Yad* is then added to *mille* and this construction is used for the event of ordaining in general (v. 9, 29, 33, 35.) This leaves *samek yad* describing the actual action as performed (v. 10, 15, 19.)

The usage of *mille* for ordination only intersects with *samek yad* when the *samek* construction is about ordination in the OT. This pairing, with the complementary images of hands and touch, prepares the way for ordination itself being a prophetic type. Adding to the physicality of *samek* and its "leaning" sense of pressure, *mille* rounds out a thorough redemptive historical analysis. The idea of a "filling" implies a privation, a lack. The filling of hands is, idiomatically, an abstract expression of this. One sense of this filling seems to be the idea of a group action. Ordination doesn't ever happen privately, it directly relates to the structures of the community, and sometimes the community is actively participating. This is the covenantal community acting in solidarity. In another sense, however, an even greater solidarity exists in this language. In the prophetic and redemptive dimension, this privation invites its only real completion in Christ. He is the "filler" of all hands, and here especially as the ordained person acts as a visible representative, the ordained person prophetically reveals Jesus and the gospel in their need for filling – as they also need grace. And they are the filling itself – God's hands in the world, the church as the temple presence of Jesus.

The *samek 'yad* expression is used for consecration, confirmation of God's work, and covenantal solidarity. The *mille* word usage is the more exclusively ordaining word for the OT, without the other uses that *samek 'yad* must semantically bear. The semantic and praxis elasticity of the *samek 'yad* expression covers rich ground for covenant types, signs, symbols, and community. *Mille 'yad* picks up the slack, but then appears to become its own anticipatory type for all of the completing and filling work of the Holy Spirit in the NT. *Pleroma* is also used as an image of consecration in the NT.<sup>13</sup> This

---

<sup>13</sup> Torrance, 229.

complements the sense of the priesthood of all believers, a fulfillment of the typological sense so pregnant in the “filling up of hands” image.

### Rabbinic Practice

There simply isn't clear evidence one way or the other about Rabbinic practices from the NT times. Academic discussion is split on the evidence available and the extent of its practice as a rite.<sup>14</sup> The prima facie presumption has been for some continuity in the laying on of hands as a practice since the Pentateuch. The objection is raised that no example of the laying on of hands exists after Aaron, the Levites, and Joshua. Arguments from silence being what they are, it's just difficult to say. Interpretively it does not shed real light on whether it informed or shaped NT practice.

### NT usage

In the NT we meet the act of laying on of hands is an established practice and an assumed idiom, with the *samek* and *shith* words have been absorbed by the *tithemi* word group, with the *mille yad* phrase disappearing altogether. Having observed this, the LXX translation of *mille - pleroun* and *teleioun*, become broadly significant words for the NT, but beyond the scope of this paper. Usage of the *mille yad* construction might be hiding in plain sight, underneath the Greek in the original Aramaic. In John 3:35 Christ says the Father has “*given everything into His hands.*”<sup>15</sup> It will be helpful to look at the appearances of the *tithemi cheiras* expression in the places where it appears, and then follow that up with general ordination passages not expressed by this phrase.<sup>16</sup>

Three sets of usages of the “laying on of hands” language appear in the NT, along with a fourth group of different words used for appointment.

1. On a number of occasions the laying on of hands is done with the purpose of healing (Mt 9:18; 19:15; Mk 6:5; 10:16; Ac 9:12,17; 28:8.)

*“While he was saying these things to them, behold, a ruler came in and knelt before him, saying, “My daughter has just died, but come and **lay your hand** on her, and she will live.”” (Mt 9:18)*

*“And he **laid his hands** on them and went away.” (Mt 19:15)*

*“And he could do no mighty work there, except that he **laid his hands** on a few sick people and healed them.” (Mk 6:5)*

*“And he took them in his arms and blessed them, **laying his hands** on them.” (Mk 10:16)*

*“and he has seen in a vision a man named Ananias come in and **lay his hands** on him so that he might regain his sight.”” (Ac 9:12)*

---

<sup>14</sup> Tizei

<sup>15</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Differentiating between *tithemi*, *epitithemi*, and *epithesis*, will not be considered.

*“So Ananias departed and entered the house. And **laying his hands** on him he said, “Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus who appeared to you on the road by which you came has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit.” ” (Ac 9:17)*

*“It happened that the father of Publius lay sick with fever and dysentery. And Paul visited him and prayed, and **putting his hands on him** healed him. ” (Ac 28:8)*

2. Another set of uses is the imparting of spiritual benefit, whether it is the Holy Spirit or spiritual gifts (Ac 8:17-20; 19:6; 1 Ti 4:14; 2 Ti 1:6.)

*“Then they **laid their hands** on them and they received the Holy Spirit. Now when Simon saw that the Spirit was given through the laying on of the apostles’ hands, he offered them money, saying, “Give me this power also, so that anyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit.” But Peter said to him, “May your silver perish with you, because you thought you could obtain the gift of God with money!” (Ac 8:17–20)*

*“And when Paul **had laid his hands** on them, the Holy Spirit came on them, and they began speaking in tongues and prophesying. ” (Ac 19:6)*

*“Do not neglect the gift you have, which was given you by prophecy when the council of elders **laid their hands** on you. ” (1 Ti 4:14)*

*“For this reason I remind you to fan into flame the gift of God, which is in you through the **laying on of my hands**, ” (2 Ti 1:6)*

3. A third usage is that of direct commissioning (Ac 6:6; 13:3; 1 Ti 5:22)

*“These they set before the apostles, and they prayed and **laid their hands** on them. ” (Ac 6:6)*

*“Then after fasting and praying they **laid their hands** on them and sent them off. ” (Ac 13:3)*

*“Do not be hasty in the **laying on of hands**, nor take part in the sins of others; keep yourself pure.” (1 Ti 5:22)*

The only extraneous passage is Hebrews 6:2, which mentions the laying on of hands in the abstract. Such reference could have been to any of the three usages above.

4. There are also NT ordination passages that do not use the “laying on of hands” formula (Mk 3:14; Jn 15:16; Ac 14:23.)

*“And he appointed twelve (whom he also named apostles) so that they might be with him and he might send them out to preach ” (Mk 3:14)*

*“You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide, so that whatever you ask the Father in my name, he may give it to you. ” (Jn 15:16)*

*“And when they had appointed elders for them in every church, with prayer and fasting they committed them to the Lord in whom they had believed.” (Ac 14:23)*

*“And not only that, but he has been appointed by the churches to travel with us as we carry out this act of grace that is being ministered by us, for the glory of the Lord himself and to show our good will.” (2 Co 8:19)*

Except for Acts 14:23 and 2 Corinthians 8:19, the Greek words, translated by “appoint” in English, are all different. These last two instances of “appointed” use the word *chairotoneo*, a Greek word for raising your hand to vote. There appears to be some synergy or congruency between the OT practice of laying on of hands and the NT show of hands described here. These passages serve to tell us that ordination was a fluid and dynamic activity in the NT, changing its application to meet the different demands and needs of different situations. *Chairotoneo* might also be telling us something of the practical procedures used in elections.

The division used above of the three usages of “laying on of hands” is based on practice, as if certain assumptions are already in place. The OT usage creates a framework for understanding the NT practice, as the NT church took the OT rites as a starting and defining point. There is still a similar diversity to the OT in practice, continuing to affirm the importance and significance of the rite for initiation into office and service.

The persistent sense from the NT, if read without the Old, could be a case for “magic hands.” This is the heart of a sacerdotal understanding, mistaking the sign for the thing signified. Nevertheless, the rite seems more rich and powerful in the NT than the OT. One reality in the advent of the gospel kingdom is that while some of the ceremonial pictures become obsolete, some rites take on a new and larger significance in the NT economy. This expansion is not a reinvention of the Old, but a renewing and fulfilling of the OT’s practices, taking them to their spiritual realization in Christ and the NT community. This is the essence of OT typology and the framework for applying Christ’s ascension ministry.

The first laying on of hands is for healing.<sup>17</sup> The ruler who comes for his sick daughter in Matthew 9:18 seems to have an idea of the rite himself. It is what he asks Jesus to do. Healing is then referred to once

---

<sup>17</sup> It might also be helpful to look at the antithesis of the “laying of hands” in the laws of the unclean in Leviticus 13-15, leading up to the “laying on of hands” on the scapegoat of Leviticus 16. In the ceremonial law there is no touching of the unclean, or you yourself become unclean. This is especially vivid in the touching of those with “bodily discharge” or menstruation. Here there is no touching, and in essence it is the opposite end of the spectrum from the “laying on of hands.” Here we can see the elements of our argument so far. If you become unclean by touching the unclean, how much more do we also consecrate what consecrated hands lay upon? “Uncleanness” as a ceremonial designation is an external sign of an inward reality. Christ makes that finally clear when He says “it is not what enters a man that makes him unclean, it is what comes out.” Uncleanness and the command not to touch are really representational figures, anticipating the real touch of Christ in the incarnation. Finally, separation from others is the result for the unclean person. They must announce it and separate themselves from community, and the solidarity of the covenant community is now visibly broken. It is the direct converse of the “laying on of hands” rite, and in its contrast it affirms the definition and usage of *samek yad*.

more from Christ, then from Ananias, and then finally from Paul. The other two referents outside these are to the blessing of children. This usage bleeds into the second set, since these are all the communication, via the rite of the laying on of hands, of some benefit to the receiver, whether spiritual or physical. The idea that the references in 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Timothy are ordination passages does not mean that they are not also spiritual benefit types as well. These purposes are not mutually exclusive and they complement one another. One way or another a positive benefit is communicated, whether it is physical health, the Holy Spirit, or a spiritual gift.

How does this line up with the OT usage? First, it still only accompanies faith. There is no magic, a fact that Simon finds out quite painfully in Acts 8. There still seems to be something of the consecrating work present, but now it is incidental to the act of the laying on of hands. The Holy One Himself is touching them, and now the Holy Spirit is present. The laying on of hands as a prophetic type is truly fulfilled. The incarnation is the ultimate laying on hands on us, directly by our God. It is interesting that where there was little faith in Mark 6:5, there is only the laying on of hands on a few. As the rite becomes clearer to us, these kinds of implications make sense. Ratification is also a part of some of these benefits, affirming and confirming the truth of some people's testimony in the presence of the Holy Spirit or the gifts to Timothy, although this sense comes to the forefront in the ordination passages. One final fulfillment is in the new healing by this touching, so that the laying on of hands is for the unclean (Mt 8:3; see also Re 1:17! Is 6:5-7.)

As we move to the texts that specifically refer to ordination, we see these basic OT commitments even more clearly. 1) The laying on of hands sets aside folks for ministry as a form of consecration. 2) It identifies and confirms what is already made clear by the Holy Spirit, fasting, and prayer. 3) In these usages we see the OT rite even more clearly, and especially the sense of community solidarity in the plurality of action. It is the whole community that lays on hands in Acts 6.

By clarifying and analyzing these usages of the words, two things become apparent. First, we must reject any claim that the laying on of hands was a transference of authority in and of itself. There is no "sacrament of order" in the Scripture, and the broad usage of the term "laying on of hands" keeps us from confusing the sign with the reality it signifies. The second is to take the expression in its fullness as an affirmation of the community's unity, and the recognition of the Lord's work. As such it is not the imparting of authority, nor could it ever be. Any authority resides in the office or calling itself, not in the rich and rewarding rite of the laying on of hands. The implication is that our use of the word ordain, if it is indeed realized by the laying on of hands, is truly not a man centered action. It is God centered, confirming and setting aside those whom He has called to a particular work.

Secondly, the "whatever works" bias of a methodological perspective must become obedient to the "laying on of hands" as a part of the covenant community consecrating people to service, confirming the works and calling of God on the officers of His church. Disregarding the "laying on of hands," the rite of ordination, seems out of accord with the practice of the church from ancient Israel to Acts. The rite has

this normative force for the kingdom. On the other hand, those with a theological bias will sometimes seek to affirm more than the biblical practice, making the rite a special imparting of authority in and of itself. To use a worldly example, it would be silly to say that inauguration makes the President the President. No, it is a public ratifying and confirming of a particular person to an office. The office and the inauguration to that office are not confused. On the other hand, no one would suggest that it was not essential to the work, that it was optional. Inauguration is the public and secular rite by which all consent to the process, roles, and responsibilities of the office. It would seem that doing away with ordination to an office is this sort of mistake. Thinking too much of ordination is another sort of mistake. We cannot afford to make either one.

### **Office of deacon**

The discussion of the ordaining rite of “laying on of hands” does not address the specific roles, responsibilities, or potential authority of an office. It serves as a framework and a foundation for the discussion. In our tradition the office of deacon seems to be in some jeopardy. It has become the practice of many churches to no longer ordain this office at all, but to rather commission or assign the roles and responsibilities of the office instead. Sometimes this is a methodological bias at work. But at best this seems to create a pious fiction, where men and women function as officers of the church in everything but name. At worst it eliminates and denigrates the office to the point that ordination and the office itself are irrelevant parts of the organizational structure of the church, which stands in sharp contrast to the previous exegesis and argument. Sometimes an actual biblical conviction is at work, believing the diaconate does not exist as an ordained NT office.

The OT does not have the explicit antecedents of the diaconate that the elders have. Having said this, there is a role and responsibility assigned to the Levites in Numbers 1 which may be instructive:

*“But appoint the Levites over the tabernacle of the testimony, and over all its furnishings, and over all that belongs to it. They are to carry the tabernacle and all its furnishings, and they shall take care of it and shall camp around the tabernacle. When the tabernacle is to set out, the Levites shall take it down, and when the tabernacle is to be pitched, the Levites shall set it up. And if any outsider comes near, he shall be put to death.”* (Numbers 1:50–51)

We see here what the “laying on of hands” is going to consecrate them to do. Their roles and responsibilities are the physical maintenance of the worship center. Numbers 3 describes a step by step breakdown of the different parts and pieces of the tabernacle to each clan of the tribe of Levi, assigning each a set of physical duties and jobs. This is not the same as the actual priestly duties associated with Aaron and his sons. There is a special division of labor in the OT specifying varying degrees of responsibility.

In the NT Acts 6:1-6 seems to be a continuation of this division of labor. The specific problem with this passage is that the word “deacon” is not used to describe an office, but instead is used in 6:1 to refer to the conflict issue itself, i.e. food “distribution” (*diakonia*) When the diaconate is fleshed out and

described by Paul to Timothy it appears to already exist in the churches' experience, without any necessary explanation. This makes the appeal to Acts 6 more compelling:

*“Now in these days when the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint by the Hellenists arose against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution. And the twelve summoned the full number of the disciples and said, “It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables. Therefore, brothers, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we will appoint to this duty. But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word.” And what they said pleased the whole gathering, and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, and Philip, and Prochorus, and Nicanor, and Timon, and Parmenas, and Nicolaus, a proselyte of Antioch. These they set before the apostles, and they prayed and laid their hands on them.” (Acts 6:1–6)*

There are some problems, however, with a strict interpretation that this is the formation of the diaconate. 1) These men are distinguished from the Apostles, not from elders. This contrast would seem to mean that they could possibly be elders or deacons. 2) They do the work of service in caring for the physical needs of the body, but Stephen demonstrates his aptitude to teach, which is one of the characteristics listed in I Timothy 3:2 as a qualification for elder. 3) Finally, and perhaps most painfully to this interpretation, there simply is no reference to deacons in Acts 6. Although this is not fatal to this argument, it does prevent real certainty.

Nevertheless, these objections can be responded to adequately. 1) Peter identifies himself as an elder in I Peter 5:1, and it may well be that the apostolic commission is best seen as a unique tier in the office of elder in redemptive history. In this case the contrast made in Acts 6 would likely seem to be diaconal. 2) Being able to teach would not *disqualify* you for the diaconate. That does not make any sense. He could still be an unusual and talented deacon. 3) In the organic and tumultuous origins of the church, its self-organizing work isn't named in Acts as the diaconate until later, in Paul's letters.

Exegetically these conclusions are debatable, but taking into account the OT Levitical responsibilities, along with the later NT descriptions of the diaconal office, it seems appropriate to see the Acts 6 passage as filling in the blanks between Numbers 1 and I Timothy 3. When we come to Philippians 1:1 and I Tim 3:8-13, we see an assumed and established presence to this office, without explanation of its creation. That would seem to strongly suggest the Acts 6 event is the establishment of a diaconate. This would also mean that this office was functional and in place before Paul is even converted, so that his assumptions would follow the already existing church practice. This practice would be comfortable for the NT believers because it would represent an appropriate continuation of OT precedents in the Levitical work assignments.

This argument makes its point that the diaconal office has this long standing covenantal perpetuity. Disregarding the antiquity of its responsibilities is a rejection of the proper rule of the church over its own rule. Self-organization cannot and must not be only according to immediate needs and concerns, or cultural adaptability when it comes to the establishment and organization of offices. The covenant

community must continue to administrate itself, at its basic formative level, according to the offices that have always been a part of its organizational governance. This honors the conviction that these structures are not merely wise or efficient, but that they image forth our Savior and His work in His kingdom.

Our study of the laying on hands reveals this “imaging forth” in the breadth of the offices and responsibilities. As Christ inhabits the temple, the workers who carry and store and set up the tabernacle are all His hands now. The laying on hands then has this transitive property as it were. God’s hand is on Moses and the people. They in turn lay their hands on the Levites, and they in turn pick up the tent pieces with their hands. In their roles and responsibilities – as differentiated from the Aaronic commission – we seem to see the fullest antecedent to a diaconal ministry. If this connection is biblical and demonstrable, then the ordination of deacons could be the sine qua non of the laying on of hands. Their ordination itself pictures the manual calling they enact. Because of this we can see some normative force behind a desire to ordain folks to physical work in the kingdom.

### **Final thoughts**

When Christ comes down the mountain, after His first sermon in Matthew, we have the first touch mentioned in the NT. It’s Christ, and as He descends a leper begs for His healing (Mt 8:3.) Matthew is quite explicit that Jesus reached out and touched this leper to heal him.

This is meant to be jarring, especially to the Jewish reader. It defies the ceremonial law! It outrages the status of the unclean! It rejects social decency! And it’s just nasty, isn’t it? But we’re faced with something else as well. The laws and rules and rituals of touch are changing. Something new has happened.

The incarnation itself is this touch. It is the leaning and filling and the laying on of Divine hands, as the Presence is now enfleshed in Jesus. The anticipation of the physical ritual was the actual touch of God on man and in man. The “filling of hands” expression demands a “filler” and something to fill it with. In this way Christ is being predicted and described. In turn, in the ordaining rites of the church, we use our hands as His hands – and via this rite we affirm and describe how our hands now become His hands for the work of ministry, with the promise that He will fill them. He will complete and fill up His work through our hands as we are also filling it up. The OT usage also makes sense of NT ideas that describe filling up Christ’s suffering (Col 1:24.) The ordination idioms of the OT provide a framework for this sort of theological language in Paul and may lay behind his thinking.

It is this sense of fullness that drives the sacramental instinct of the believer. There is a sacramentality to all that we do and say, so that kisses are holy and hands can deliver the Holy Spirit. The promises of Zechariah go all the way down to the bells that have inscribed on them “Holy to the LORD.” Nothing escapes being a means of some grace. But how far can we push this broad understanding of sacramentality and keep the sacraments of communion and baptism unique? Is that something to even be concerned about?

In Hughes' book *Sacramentality* he wrestles with these questions. He builds a concept of sacrament which defines "sacrament" as expressing the human need for the physical to be inhabited by the spiritual. Beginning with man as his starting point, he tries to understand the old reformed distinction that separates the sacraments from other activities in worship. He can only see it as an arbitrary division, and plots everything on a continuum. With metaphysics not on the table for exploration (there's no academic credibility down that road), there are no dangers in sacramentalizing (is that a word?) as much as possible. This is a logical extension of his assumptions and arguments. To differentiate between baptism and communion and other activities of the church, he distinguishes between a *diffused* sacramentality and a *concentrated* sacramentality.<sup>18</sup> The distinction between them is one of degree, on a spectrum of grace experienced spirituality.

With the biblical sense of laying of hands and ordination, it's easy to see how attractive working out these kinds of distinctions are. Protestants disagreed with the multiplied sacraments themselves, but perhaps not the sentiments that lay behind them. The church was simply applying its old metaphysical Medieval world view consistently, guarding the dispensing of grace in the church and then mediating all of that sacramental reality in the total life of the believer, from birth to confirmation to marriage to death, etc. Pastorally I do envy that. We all want those kinds of connections with the stages and episodes of a member's life. The call to eldership or diaconate is another one of those journey points, where the work of the kingdom affirms vocation. The laying on of hands seems to even bridge some of the sacred and secular division, as the idea of "calling" and "office" are merely spiritual types reflecting the breadth of work in the world itself. Would it be inappropriate to have a "laying on of hands" for all sorts of callings? Our practice has been to do it when anyone is moving away. A part of our identity that we celebrate is sending, and we have the whole church lay on hands to encourage, pray, and send a person out. Would it be misleading or wrong to do this for our accountants and code writers and teachers?

If we are inhabiting the ascension ministry of Christ the way that the laying of hands pictures and describes, then ordination and its rites become living pictures of an integrated work and faith. We are modeling the ascension ministry in this manner by enacting the rites and office biblically, and not adding to them a special spiritual power that leads to abuse and fanciful flights of clerical fiction, where men come to believe some authority or power resides personally in them.

Working from Hughes' helpful thinking, it seems we might discover a better framework to work from. The terms *diffused* and *concentrated* aren't as helpful. Perhaps a distinction between *suffused* and *signifying* would make more sense. God's grace doesn't seem to lend itself to qualitative measuring when it's dispensed into our lives. Is there more grace in the table than in praise? One is a sacrament and one isn't, but we don't think one's a trickle and one's a fire hose. They both share a sacramentality that we recognize by the grace flowing through them at the same amount! The classical reformed distinctive about the regulative principle might help us here. One of the purposes of that principle is to guard against new "signifiers" in worship.<sup>19</sup> The many parts and pieces of a believer's life and worship

---

<sup>18</sup> Hughes, *Sacramentality*,

<sup>19</sup> Cunningham

take many different cultural and local flavors that are full of grace. What we are forbidden to do is to create a new “action” of the church’s worship that has some “signifying” power to reveal truth.

As an example, I have lifted up the elements when praying over the communion table. It’s an easy reflex, enacting praise. I mean nothing by it and I’m free to do it. In the Roman Catholic mass the action of lifting up of the body and blood of Christ physically by the priest has it’s own special sacred spiritual meaning. And so the priest is instructed how to do the many gestures and rites, because all of the incidentals of worship are not cultural, they are spiritual lessons revealing truth in their forms. That’s what we’re not permitted to do by the regulative principle. Or to say it better, that’s what we’re free *from* in the regulative principle! (It’s a lot of stress doing your first mass I’ve been told.) According to our reformed principles, the only thing that can signify spiritual truth through physical actions are the sacraments. Which is why we also regulate how we present and administer them practically. There is a direct correlation between the sign and the thing signified.

To pick on a different tradition as an example, one of the local California charismatic churches teaches that they directly “empower” people by their actions. The person seeking this must physically go to their home church and be anointed by them. That is the only legitimate way to do it. They promise that this person will be clothed with spiritual power and authority because of them. For them, ordaining is effectively a magical rite that only they can do. In this instance, ordaining is a meta-rite, unleashing God’s grace and power in the world and making it more important than almost any other ritual. This is probably why they regulate dispensing this work to their location and their leaders, demanding that any such ordained folks submit to their authority. It’s kind of fascinating to see a sacerdotal error coming out of Pentecostalism, but it makes sense. It’s a logical extension of magical/spiritual assumptions. This is where using the OT usage to inform the NT application is so helpful.

By describing the means of grace as first suffusing the work and worship of the church, we don’t treat any part of worship as “better” or more “spiritual” than another. This preserves the sacramentality that broadly enhances and beautifies all of life and worship. The sacraments are a part of that whole, except that they bear a special burden in their basic actions, they reveal the heart of the gospel in their actual mechanics. The laying on of hands is no sacrament of order, but it is a celebration of the sacramental nature of our life, worship, and calling. With some of these distinctions helping us, perhaps we can apply this rite more and more effectively and freely. What it teaches us about ordination itself mirrors this truth and expands it. It has no magic or spiritual power in and of itself. No, it’s really quite simple. It’s us putting our hands where His hands have already been and now are, confirming and revealing and honoring the pierced hands that saved us. That hold us even now. Praise Him.