

Office of Elder: Affirmation or Ordination?

I would have to agree with Marjorie Warkentin in her treatise on the history of ordination that all kinds of suppositions about ordination abound, from propositions that Jesus did it, that it is scripturally warranted, and/or that it transmits grace.

So what are the elements God uses to raise up and place into service those whom He has called and gifted for eldership? How are these elements recognized?

The discussion is often convoluted with the various meanings of terms and the different ways in which people use those terms, often applying different nuances. We must be careful to study the way Scripture develops their meanings, even studying the cultural context of various terms down through history. For instance, does affirmation of elders include ordination or the laying on of hands, both, or can there be affirmation without ordination? Furthermore, is there a distinction made between those serving as vocational elders and those who serve their Lord in eldership while in full-time secular employment? Whom do we ordain? Do we lay hands on them, and if so, why? Warkentin begins her book, *Ordination: A Biblical-Historical View*, with an account that illustrates the quandary surrounding ordination. She writes:

When the German Baptist leader and evangelist J. G. Oncken visited the Southern Ukraine in October 1869, he was asked by the newly established Mennonite Brethren congregation at Chortitza if he would ordain Abraham Unger as elder, Aron Lepp as minister, and two men as deacons. Since the Brethren could not very well call upon the “old” Mennonites, from whom they had just separated, to perform this function, Oncken complied with their request. In the controversy that resulted, some of the Brethren claimed that since Oncken was a Baptist, those ordained by him were now also Baptists. To add to the difficulty, a Baptist had ordained a Mennonite elder, even though at that time Baptist polity admitted of no such office. Obviously, the act of laying on of hands in ordination was believed to have affected the candidate in some way. No one seemed to be quite sure what had happened, if indeed anything had happened at all. Over one hundred years later, evangelicals still have no carefully articulated doctrine of ordination, though traditionally they lay hands on their candidates for office in the church. Why they do so and what the rite is intended to signify is the theme of this inquiry.¹

These sorts of questions have to be reckoned with. If no prophets, priests, kings, or elders received laying on of hands for endowment or installation into office, save Joshua, then why do we practice it? Some suggest that the laying on of hands in the OT always symbolized a real transfer from one person to another. Furthermore, if we don't take the sacramental view, what is the purpose of laying on of hands and ordination? Warkentin suggests: “Through the hand of Moses Joshua was imbued with power from on high to lead the Israelites in taking the Promised

¹ Marjorie Warkentin, *Ordination: A Biblical-Historical View* (Eerdmans Publishing Co, 1982), vii.

Land. The occasion is historically unique and the act sacramental.”² She sees a real transference of grace, a divine enablement, not merely symbolism. This was a unique time in the history of Israel, unlike any other in the old covenant.

Selection

Let’s start by looking at the selection process. Though some argue for congregational participation³ in the process, even using Acts 6:3 as a proof-text, elders select future elders. The rationale for elder governance is established elsewhere and discussed further under “Installation.” So let’s move on. When men are considered for eldership, their eligibility is based on both objective standards and subjective desire. The objective standards are clearly set forth in 1 Timothy 3:1-7 and Titus 1:5-9. These are the inviolable standards set forth in God’s inspired Word, the standards for what the church is and how it is to operate in this world for His glory. The subjective desire, also established by God in 1 Timothy 3:1, is that innate desire to serve the Lord in this capacity.

John MacArthur gives a helpful explanation of the intent of this verse when he says,

In other words, we are not to go out and recruit men to become elders. One who is qualified to be an elder will be eager to teach the Word of God and lead the flock of God, without any thought of gain at all. He will desire the office, pursue being set apart, and devote himself to the Word. No one will have to talk him into it; it is his heart’s passion. Furthermore, he serves ‘voluntarily, according to the will of God.’ His service as an elder is a calling from God.”⁴ The desire to serve as an elder is in his heart because God put it there.

Since God is the one who places the desire in men’s hearts, this confirms the fact that God raises up elders. Man does not and cannot make biblically qualified elders. We can confirm and recognize God’s calling and gifting and can even develop them and help equip them in the Word to carry out their teaching and protection of the flock, but we cannot make them. Elders cannot affirm and force into the office of eldership those whom God Himself has not called, raised up, and qualified. In other words, elders should only select as potential candidates, those who fulfill God’s objective qualifications in His Word, and those whom God has placed the desire in their hearts to serve Him in this capacity. Thus, we must examine them.

Examination

What about the examination of elders’ moral and spiritual qualifications? Since their service is public, it follows that their examination be formal and public. One scriptural example and principle would be in the fashion that deacons gain approval. They are, first of all, to be tested, then to serve in an official capacity if they are beyond reproach (1 Tim 3:10). There is also the instruction in 1 Timothy 5:24-

² Warkentin, 14.

³ Alexander Strauch, *Biblical Eldership: An Urgent Call to Restore Biblical Church Eldership*, (Lewis and Roth Publishers, 1995), 282.

⁴ John MacArthur, *The Master’s Plan for the Church*, (Moody Publishers, 2008), 217

25 of assessing character and deeds in order to avoid appointing the wrong people or even overlooking qualified men.

Before any false assumptions are made in regard to the congregational input, keep in mind that the members are not passive spectators. Yes, elders take the lead in examining the candidates' doctrine and character, but they also consult with and seek the wisdom of fellow believers who know these men well. Congregants can inform the elders of any character blemishes that would potentially disqualify men from being examples to the flock (1 Pet 5:3). Yet, their interaction does not serve as a popularity contest. It is not "the man who gets the most votes wins" kind of scenario. Either a man desires the office, is able to teach, and is qualified according to the character assessment, or he is not. He is to be tested in biblical, systematic, and practical theology. He should be asked from a broad array of questions to determine his qualifications. He should be asked things like:

- What does the Bible teach about marriage, divorce, and remarriage?
- Where in the Bible does it teach Christ's divine nature? His humanity?
- What is the Gospel message?
- What does the Bible say about male/female roles?
- What does the Bible say about church discipline?
- Etc

Installation

Now that we've looked at elders' selection and examination, we come to the point of officially placing them in the office. It would appear that there is nothing in the OT and very little detail in the NT on this aspect of the process. Though eldership can trace its roots back to the OT, NT church elders function differently than the city elders of OT Israel. They do not serve in a priestly way nor in a socio-political way like they did in that agrarian culture.

However, there is a process and an order to be observed. Again, we can begin with the principle in 1 Timothy 3:10 of first be tested, then serve. So there is the examination, then the affirmation (even congregationally, as they have interacted with the elders on any issues, if need be), and finally the placing into office officially. Though this serves as the official recognition of those whom the Lord has placed over the congregation, they are simply recognizing what the men (now recognized as elders) have been doing right along. They are those who have been teaching, shepherding, caring, instructing, correcting in love, and serving.

Strauch has a helpful discussion of this "appointment" terminology.⁵ He also insightfully cautions about not sacralizing these positions. In doing so, he leans heavily on Darby in his endnote (and probably his Brethren heritage too), suggesting that churches cannot rightfully appoint elders because of no God-given authority to officially appoint. Though he uses Darby to make his point on not sacralizing the office, he also corrects a couple of Darby's false premises. Overall, his conclusion is that elders appoint elders. Though there are no more apostles to appoint elders, as we see taking place in the NT, the closest we have for the selection

⁵ Strauch, 285-86.

of future leaders of the church are those who are already serving as elders—those who have been called and qualified by God and confirmed in their serving capacity.

Before looking at ordination as it relates to being installed into office, let's think simply in terms of appointment. Strauch, well known for his tome on biblical eldership, says to speak of ordaining elders is as confusing as speaking of ordaining judges or politicians.⁶ Does this come from exegesis or his Brethren heritage? Paul and Barnabas “appointed” elders for newly founded churches (Acts 14:23). Luke uses *cheirotoneo* which simply means “appoint” or “designate,” though it would later become a technical term for church ordination and laying on of hands; but at the time of Luke it didn't have that range of usage. Titus's mandate was to “appoint” (Titus 1:5). Again, *kathistemi* has no special religious connotation. Therefore Strauch argues that these terms do not express nor imply the modern, ecclesiastical ordination concepts, as even admitted by Bible scholars who support clerical ordination, agreeing that the NT vocabulary only speaks of general appointment. Notice, for example, what Leon Morris and Alfred Plummer, both Anglican clergymen, have to say. Plummer says the Greek words used in these passages (Titus 1:5; Mk 3:14; Jn 15:16; 1 Tim 2:7; Heb 5:1; 8:3) might equally be used of the appointment of a magistrate or a steward.⁷

Further, Warkentin states, “installation into office in the early postapostolic period apparently involved little in the way of ceremony or protocol.”⁸ Strauch concludes, “For the Christian community, in which all family members are priests, holy ones, humble ministers, and family members...the word ‘appoint’ best expresses placement of elders and deacons into office. In the NT, no exclusive class of men is admitted into ministerial office by rite of ordination.”⁹

So, the term “appoint” seems to be the overall best term to use in referring generally to elders being installed into office in an official capacity in the church. But what about ordination? Is there a place for it?

Ordination

Some have opted to translate the same Greek word for “appoint” in Titus 1:5 as “ordain.”¹⁰ They also suggest that Jesus “ordained” twelve men as His disciples (Mk 3:14), setting them apart for specific duties. There is also the nontechnical sense in which denominations ordain ministers, usually accompanied by laying on of hands. The Catholic and Orthodox churches view ordination sacramentally, as conferring grace. Yet, this sacramental view was condemned by the Reformer John Calvin. Even though reformed traditions still practice ordination, they do so to stress the need to be called by God.

⁶ Strauch, 285.

⁷ Ibid, 286.

⁸ Warkentin, 33.

⁹ Strauch, 287.

¹⁰ R.P. Lightner, “Ordination,” in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Walter Elwell, (Baker Book House, 2001), 869.

Richard Mayhue gives a helpful survey of the usage of ordination in the Scriptures.¹¹ In the OT Moses “ordained” Aaron and his sons to the priesthood (Ex 29:9, 29, 35) and symbolically represented God’s will for Aaron by laying hands on him, thus authenticating Aaron for priestly ministry (cf. Lev 16:23 and Num 3:3). In the NT, since there’s the divine side of appointment, not just the human side, God “ordained” Paul to the ministry (1 Tim 2:7) and the Holy Spirit raised up the Ephesian elders to shepherd the church (Acts 20:28). Robert Saucy has helpful and succinct comments on this dual dynamic for those God has called and equipped for an ordained ministry in the church. It is merely “the *recognition* by the church of those whom God has called and equipped for a regular ordered ministry in the church. That it does not confer authority or spiritual gifts is evident from the fact that these are given sovereignly by God (1 Cor 12:11, 18; Eph 4:17, 11)...There is in all these uses OT ceremonies of laying on hands) the fundamental meaning of *identification and representation*. The laying on of hands by the church leaders is an act which the whole church identifies itself in solidarity with those who are ordained as one with them in their ministry.”¹² And as already stated by Lightner, humanly speaking, Jesus “ordained” His disciples (Jn 15:16; Mk 3:14; see also Acts 6 and Titus 1:5).

In the NT we do not see any reticence of the first Christians to simple, public ceremonies for appointing or commissioning fellow members to special positions or tasks (Acts 6:6; 13:3; 1 Tim 4:14), but there is a question as to how ordination fits in. There is no longer a cultus in the Temple and sacrificial system like we see in the OT with the priesthood. Instead we have the priesthood of the believer and our Great High Priest, the Lord Jesus. Not only are there no priests to ordain, but there are no more apostles, like Paul, to be ordained.

Yet it seems fitting to have some kind of public, official recognition of new elders that are brought on board to serve Christ and His Church. This essentially says “You now officially begin your responsibilities to God and His people; you’re now part of the eldership team, and pastoral care of the flock rests on your and your fellow-elders’ shoulders.” That would be more of the church’s affirmation and installation to service, not ordination.

Since we do see the precedence of ordination in Scripture, it can and should be used but be clearly delineated as to its application. It is not used to set some elders above other elders in a hierarchical form. An elder is an elder, regardless of whether he is a “tentmaker” like Paul or has the privilege of vocational ministry. But maybe we should look at ordination as a “credentialing” feature to be used to set apart men for the ministry of the Word. Though teaching is a qualification for all elders, that they be able to instruct in sound doctrine as well as confront those who contradict it (Titus 1:9), there are ones God has given to the church who are especially gifted in their teaching and pastoral roles (Eph 4:11-12). There are those among us who have given themselves to seminary training to learn the original languages and theology to prepare for ministry as a vocational preacher. The

¹¹ Richard L. Mayhue, “Ordination to Pastoral Ministry,” in *Rediscovering Pastoral Ministry*, (Thomas Nelson, 1995), 136-37.

¹² Robert L. Saucy, *The Church in God’s Program*, (Moody Press, 1972), 164-65.

ministry of the Word that they are devoted to is patterned after the apostolic ministry of the Word and prayer (Acts 6:1-6), which is the main job of vocational ministry. It is a ministry that is to be freed from other demands and distractions. The ministry of the Word is that which they labor at tirelessly in preaching and teaching, in which they are to be considered worthy of double honor (1 Tim 5:17-18). These particular elders who are the main teaching pastors of local congregations have devoted their main life-efforts to the public proclamation of the Word and are to be supported by those churches. As Mayhue asserts,

Ordination is to church leadership as the bar exam is to the legal profession, the C.P.A. exam to accounting, or state board examination to medical practice [or ACBC certification is to biblical counselors]. All these examinations serve to verify genuine qualifications for service in the respective fields. Ordination serves to identify and certify men...for fulltime pastoral ministry, give a congregation great confidence that leaders are appointed by God, and commend a man publicly.¹³

Though ordination conveys no grace, as in a sacramental use, it still pictures well those who have attained appropriate commendations and ratifying of their gifting and calling by God to shepherd His people in the Word. These men serve not because of priestly authority, nor magisterial authority, but by ministerial ministry of the Word. In essence, the only authority they have is delegated authority from God as they serve the Lord of the Church, teaching His requirements for lives of godliness to His glory, as expressly taught in Holy Scripture.

Laying on of Hands

This picture, though not as exclusive as ordination, could be used at the public installation service to constitute the approval, blessing, prayers, recognition, and fellowship of the church. As with ordination, there are few instructions in the NT (1 Tim 5:22). Unlike baptism and the Lord's table, it is not a prescribed practice to be perpetuated, though it can be used with explanation (that there is no conveyance of grace, etc). This practice, too, needs to be studied to determine the range of biblical meaning, as seen in various contexts. Any standard Bible encyclopedia surveys its three basic uses.¹⁴

This act was used in burnt offerings and sin offerings of the sacrificial cultus, laying hands on the victim before it was slain (Ex 29:10; Lev 1:4; 4:4, 24, 29, 33; 8:14; Num 8:10, 12; 2 Chron 29:23) and signified *the transference of guilt*, as in the case of the scapegoat (Lev 16:21).

The practice was also used *to impart blessing*, as in Jacob to the children of Joseph (Gen 48:14) or Jesus to children (Matt 19:15; Mk 10:13, 16). Within this particular range of meaning, it was used in healing (Mk 5:23; 6:5; 16:18; Lk 4:40; 13:13) and in the conveyance of the Holy Spirit (Acts 8:18-19; 19:6).

¹³ Mayhue, 138.

¹⁴ M. M. Shepherd, "Hands, Laying on of", in *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, (Abingdon Press, 1962), 2:521.

Finally, it was used *formally in rites of ordination*, as in Moses ordaining Joshua as successor (Num 27:18, 23; Deut 34:9) and in conveying to him a commission. It was an outward sign of recognition of Joshua's spiritual qualifications, and it gave him authority to exercise the office of leadership in the congregation of God's people. There is also the question of whether laying on of hands imparts a spiritual gift (1 Tim 4:14; 2 Tim 1:6), though Paul does not say this conveyed such.

Historically there is no suggestion in post-apostolic times that the appointing involved any laying on of hands. The earliest evidence of induction into office by laying on of hands is in the documents underlying the *Apostolic Constitutions*. The first and earliest mention, on *Church Order*, is disorderly. The second on *Church Order* doesn't even mention laying on of hands and the best evidence in *Apostolic Constitutions* itself only indicates its possibility.¹⁵

Laying on of hands seems to have been understood sacramentally from the inception of the rite, which led to the laying on of hands to the higher orders of clergy.¹⁶ So the hierarchy of the OT priesthood was being used deliberately as a pattern for the church office (*Apostolic Constitutions*, VIII.23.6). Thus, it behooves us to teach very clearly on what exactly laying of hands pictures and what it definitely does not convey. It is simply a meaningful, precious expression of blessing, approval, and partnership in ministry. It expresses that we are in the same cohort for the King, nothing more, nothing less.

From the moment elders have hands laid upon them at the public congregational installation service, they are affirmed to serve until they die, until they no longer "desire" the office, or until they are disqualified. They must always live in accord with 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1 qualifications, manifesting the objective moral qualifications and being compelled by the internal desire, or step down from their place of service. Otherwise, there are to be no terms of service limitation. To do so could be both harmful to the church by depriving them of the service of shepherd elders, or demeaning to those elders who desire a good work. Presbyterian minister and author of *The Elders of the Church*, Lawrence R. Eyres, reasons why he warns against setting such arbitrary elder quotas and term limits, saying:

Then there is the matter of competition for office, as when there are more nominees than there are offices to be filled. This is an inherent danger where sessions (elderships) are organized with term-eldership and a fixed number of elders is a dangerous precedent...if a man is ready to serve Christ's church as an elder, by what arbitrary rule is he to be kept back because another man is also ready? If the Holy Spirit makes men elders, then the church ought to be ruled by those men the Spirit has prepared.¹⁷

Scripture is clear on the criteria for objective testing, as seen in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1 but it says little else in regards to the how-to's. The church, then, is at

¹⁵ Warkentin, 34.

¹⁶ Warkentin, 35.

¹⁷ Strauch, 289.

liberty to design a practical process from the selection of elders to their placement in an official serving capacity in the local assembly.

Let's express gratitude to the Lord for those whom He gifts and calls to serve such a vital role in the church, His plan for this age. Let's remember those who rule over us and speak the Word of God to us, following their faith (Heb 13:7). So much as lies within us, let us obey them in the Lord and make it a joy for them to serve the Head of the Church (Heb 13:17). Let's even pray for the Lord to graciously raise up more elders to shepherd His Church (Matt 9:38), knowing that it is through their ministry that the Lord protects, provides for, and feeds His sheep!

For Further Discussion on Ordination:

Robert Anderson, *The Effective Pastor*, 57-67

Miall Edwards' "Ordain, Ordination" in Jas Orr's *Intl Standard Bible Encyl*, 4:2199-200

Homer Kent, *The Pastor and His Work*, 194-202

Robert Saucy, *The Church in God's Program*, 161-65

David Hegg, *Appointed to Preach* (Mentor, 2010)

Brian Biedebach, *What to Look for in a Pastor* (Day One Publications, 2011)

Brian Croft, *Prepare Them to Shepherd: Test, Train, Affirm, and Send the Next Generation of Pastors* (Zondervan, 2014)

John MacArthur, *Pastoral Ministry* (Thomas Nelson, 1995), 134-47

Marjorie Warkentin, *Ordination: A Biblical-Historical View* (Eerdmans, 1982)

Culpepper, "Biblical Basis for Ordination" in *Review & Expositor*, 471-84
Journal of Ecclesiastical History

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