

Key Bible Doctrines

Part 6: The Church / Baptism and The Lord's Supper / The Laying on of Hands

The Church

The word *church* is the English translation of the Greek word *ekklēsia* which refers to a congregation of people, the *ekklētoi*, called together by a herald for a particular purpose. When the New Testament was being written, the Christian community was called the *ekklēsia* (church) to differentiate it from the Jewish community, the *sunagōgē* (synagogue). This reflects the change in God's plan for the salvation of mankind from dealing with a chosen nation, Israel, to a chosen people from every nation, the church. While the faithful from both congregations are the children of God, yet for now, they are quite distinct and will remain so until the return of Christ at the end of the age. The nature and purpose of the church is described in this paper along with the key Christian sacraments of baptism and the Lord's supper.

The Church and Israel

The church of Christ and the faithful remnant of Israel both comprise the elect of God destined for salvation, but by different paths.

Paul discusses the relationship between Israel and the church in Romans 11. He begins by pointing out that while many in Israel have been passed over by God because they hardened their hearts towards him, yet his promise still stands that he has reserved for himself "a remnant chosen by grace" (v. 6). Paul goes on to explain that Israel is like the trunk and roots of a cultivated olive tree which has had some of its branches broken off and replaced with branches from a wild olive tree (vv. 17-24). The cultivated olive tree represents the natural descendants of Israel, and the wild olive tree represents the peoples of other nations (the Gentiles). But Paul reminds the Gentiles that "if you were cut out of an olive tree that is wild by nature, and contrary to nature were grafted into a cultivated olive tree, how much more readily would these, the natural branches, be grafted into their own olive tree!" (v. 24). This shows that the remnant of Israel, whom God has chosen for salvation, will be reunited with the whole family of God at a future time (e.g., Jeremiah 23:3; Micah 4:6-7; Zechariah 8:7-13).

Conversely, Paul explains that the Christians are the "spiritual" descendants of Abraham because, "it is not the natural children who are God's children, but it is the children of the promise who are regarded as Abraham's offspring" (Romans 9:8). In regard to the promise, which is the gift of salvation, Paul says "the promise comes by faith, so that it may be by grace and may be guaranteed to all Abraham's offspring – not only to those who are of the law but also to those who are of the faith of Abraham. He is the father of us all" (Romans 4:16). In one sense, therefore, the church and Israel together comprise the elect of God who have been set aside for salvation. And yet, for a time, they remain distinct congregations travelling along different paths until they are united in Christ. At that time, God "will pour out on the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem a spirit of grace and supplication. They will look on me, the one they have pierced, and they will mourn for him as one mourns for an only child, and grieve bitterly for him as one grieves for a firstborn son. ... On that day a fountain will be opened to the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem, to cleanse them from sin and impurity" (Zechariah 12:10, 13:1).

The Nature of the Church

The church of true believers is visible only to God.

The church is not a physical building or an institution or a denomination. Rather, it is the

community of all true believers in Christ. The word *church* can be applied to a group of believers at any level, ranging from a very small group meeting in a private home up to the group of all true believers, throughout all ages, comprising the universal church. The church is invisible to man, because no man can see into people's hearts or know their spiritual state; it is visible only to God because, "The Lord knows those who are his" (2 Timothy 2:19).

The New Testament includes a wide range of metaphors and images to help us understand the nature of the church. Paul compares the church to a family when he tells Timothy, "Do not rebuke an older man harshly, but exhort him as if he were your father. Treat younger men as brothers, older women as mothers, and younger women as sisters, with absolute purity" (1 Timothy 5:1-2). This image reflects Jesus' own teaching that, "whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother" (Matthew 12:50), and with God's promise that, "I will be a Father to you, and you will be my sons and daughters" (2 Corinthians 6:18; cf. Hebrews 12:5-6). Paul also refers to the church as the bride of Christ in Ephesians 5:22-33 where he commands husbands to love their wives "as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her" (v. 25), and wives to submit to their husbands in everything because "the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church" (v. 23).

The church is also compared to a flock of sheep (Matthew 25:31-33; John 10:1-16; 21:15-17), a crop (Matthew 13:23; 1 Corinthians 3:6-8), a harvest (John 4:35; Revelation 14:14-16), and "God's temple" founded upon Jesus Christ (1 Corinthians 3:9-17). Peter pictures this temple as being composed of Christians who are "living stones" built upon the "cornerstone" and the "living Stone" who is Christ (1 Peter 2:4-8). But this temple is also "a holy priesthood" (v. 5), and a "chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light" (1 Peter 2:9; cf. Revelation 1:6). We are also viewed as God's house: "But Christ is faithful as a son over God's house. And we are his house, if we hold on to our courage and the hope of which we boast" (Hebrews 3:6). Paul also referred to the believers as "God's household, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and foundation of the truth" (1 Timothy 3:5).

Paul also used the human body in two different metaphors for the church. In 1 Corinthians 12:12-27, it is "the body of Christ" (v. 27) which "is a unit, though it is made up of many parts; and though all its parts are many, they form one body" (v. 12). Because of this we cannot say that any one part is more important than any other, or that the stronger parts of the body do not need the weaker parts. Instead, "those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and the parts that we think are less honourable we treat with special honour" (vv. 22-23). Paul concludes, "God has combined the members of the body ... so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other. If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honoured, every part rejoices with it" (vv. 24-26).

In the other body metaphor, Paul pictures Christ as the head and the rest of the body as the church: "God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, which is his body" (Ephesians 1:22-23). In regard to the wayward, he says that they have "lost connection with the Head, from whom the whole body, supported and held together by its ligaments and sinews, grows as God causes it to grow" (Colossians 2:19). And in Ephesians 4:1-16, Paul encourages the believers "to live a life worthy of the calling you have received" (v. 1), and to use the gifts that God has given us "to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up" (v. 12). In this way, "we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ. From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work" (vv. 15-16).

Each metaphor for the church has a particular message for believers. For example, seeing the church as a family should inspire us to greater love and concern for one another. Seeing ourselves as members of one body should cause us to have greater humility and respect for each other. And as the bride of Christ or as his body, we should be motivated towards greater

purity and holiness for fear that we might dishonour the one who “chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight” (Ephesians 1:4).

The Purity of the Church

The purity of the church is its degree of freedom from wrong doctrine and conduct, and its degree of conformity to God’s revealed will for the church.

It is clear from the New Testament that the *visible* church will not always be as pure as the *invisible* church. We have already discussed Jesus’ parable of the wheat and the weeds in Matthew 13:24-30 which illustrates the way in which Satan attempts to corrupt the church with false believers (refer to *The Perseverance of the Saints* in the previous paper). The Pauline epistles also contain many corrections to doctrinal error and immoral behaviour in the early church. For example, the church at Corinth was being influenced towards unrighteousness by the Greek culture of the time leading to gross sexual immorality, idolatry, divisive philosophies, a spirit of litigation, and rejection of the bodily resurrection (1 and 2 Corinthians). The church in Galatia, on the other hand, was being unsettled by false apostles teaching salvation by works (Galatians 1:6-9; 3:1-5), and the church in Thessalonica was disturbed by false prophecies concerning the return of Christ (2 Thessalonians 2:1-2).

Peter also gave strong warnings against listening to false prophets and false teachers who “secretly introduce destructive heresies, even denying the sovereign Lord who bought them – bringing swift destruction on themselves” (2 Peter 2:1). And John warned, “as you have heard that the Antichrist is coming, even now many antichrists have come” (1 John 2:18).

Similarly, in chapters 2 and 3 of the book of Revelation, Jesus pronounces various commendations, rebukes and warnings to seven churches in Asia Minor which speak to the universal church. The following table provides a brief summary of these important messages.

Summary of Jesus’ Messages to the Seven Churches

Church	Commendation	Criticism
Ephesus	Hard work, perseverance, doctrinally sound	Loss of love
Smyrna	Poor, afflicted, persecuted	
Pergamum	Faithful in the face of persecution	Tolerant of false teachings leading to sexual immorality and idolatry
Thyatira	Love, faith, service, perseverance, growth	Tolerant of a false prophetess leading to sexual immorality and idolatry
Sardis	Some who are faithful	A reputation for being alive, but actually is dead
Philadelphia	Faithful in the face of persecution; patient endurance	
Laodicea		Luke warm; financially wealthy but spiritually poor

The reason why churches go astray is because the world in which we live is filled with deceitfulness and rebellion against God. Peter warns believers, “Be self-controlled and alert. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. Resist him, standing firm in the faith, because you know that your brothers throughout the world are undergoing the same kind of sufferings” (1 Peter 5:8-9). And Paul reminds us that “our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against

the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms” (Ephesians 6:12). This is why the true believers, that is, the *invisible* church, remain in Jesus and his words remain in them so that they “go and bear fruit – fruit that will last” (John 15:16).

The Unity of the Church

The unity of the church is its degree of freedom from division among true believers.

Jesus’ goal is that “there shall be one flock and one shepherd” (John 10:16). He prayed for the church “that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one: I in them and you in me. May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me” (John 17:21-23). This unity is also pictured in the parable of the vine and the branches in John 15:1-17. Jesus said, “I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. If anyone does not remain in me, he is like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned. If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you. This is my Father’s glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples” (vv. 5-8). He concluded with the command, “Love each other” (v. 17).

Similarly, Paul wrote to the church at Corinth, “I appeal to you, brothers, in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another so that there may be no divisions among you and that you may be perfectly united in mind and thought” (1 Corinthians 1:10). He also appealed to the Philippians, “make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose. Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others” (Philippians 2:2-4). And he urged the Ephesians, “Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit – just as you were called to one hope ... one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all” (Ephesians 4:2-6). Like Jesus, Paul’s goal was that the church “be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God” (Ephesians 4:12-13).

It is clear from these scriptures that unity in the church stems from a godly love for one another and humility because of what Christ has done for us. Thus, Paul commands Christians to, “Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ” (Ephesians 5:21). But Jesus also made it clear that the way in which we remain in him and in his love is by obeying his commands: “As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you. Now remain in my love. If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love” (John 15:9-10). Therefore, a unity based on the tolerance of false teachings and sin in the church will be a *false unity* that cannot last. It must inevitably lead to a loss of genuine love, to greater unrighteousness, and eventually to a loss of salvation. In this regard, it is worth repeating the warning of Jesus in John 15: “If anyone does not remain in me, he is like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned” (v. 6).

The Purpose of the Church

We can understand the purpose of the church in terms of the three areas of ministry to God, ministry to believers, and ministry to the world.

1. Ministry to God. The church is called to worship God: “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God. And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in

the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him” (Colossians 3:16-17). Paul encouraged the believers to “be filled with the Spirit. Speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. Sing and make music in your heart to the Lord, always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ” (Ephesians 5:18-20).

2. Ministry to believers. The church has a responsibility to nurture believers and to build them up to maturity in the faith. Paul said that his goal was not simply to bring people to an initial saving faith, but also to “present everyone perfect in Christ” (Colossians 1:28). And he taught that Christ “gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God’s people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ” (Ephesians 4:11-13). The children of God are also expected to take care of each other in whatever way they are able (e.g., Acts 11:29; 2 Corinthians 8:3-4; 1 John 3:17).

3. Ministry to the world. Jesus instructed the disciples to “go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you” (Matthew 28:19-20). This evangelistic work of declaring the gospel is the primary ministry that the church has toward the world. But the church is also called to minister God’s mercy to the world, even to our enemies: “But love your enemies, do good to them ... Then your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High, because he is kind to the ungrateful and wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful” (Luke 6:35-36). Jesus himself ministered to everyone although many of those he healed and taught were not saved (Luke 4:40; cf. 17:11-19; John 6:66).

Baptism and the Lord’s Supper

Baptism and the Lord’s Supper are two ceremonies that Jesus commanded his church to perform. Baptism symbolises the beginning of the Christian life, while the Lord’s Supper is carried out regularly in churches as an ongoing reminder of what Christ has done for those who have faith in him. They are sometimes called *sacraments* because they represent a sacred and solemn pledge of commitment to Christ.¹ They are also sometimes called *ordinances* because they were “ordained” by Christ. Either term is acceptable provided that they are understood to be ceremonial and are not invested with supernatural powers (cf. 2 Kings 18:4).

While baptism and the Lord’s Supper can bring great blessing to true believers, they are not necessary for salvation. This is evident from Paul’s teaching on salvation by faith alone in Christ alone (refer to *Part 4: Justification*). We also have an example in the case of the penitent criminal crucified with Christ (Luke 23:39-43). This man died without participating in any sacrament, but was nevertheless saved by Jesus because of his faith. However, the sacraments are important for strengthening the faith of the believers and for honouring God. Jesus promised that, “If anyone loves me, he will obey my teaching. My Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him” (John 14:23). In the same way, participation in the sacraments brings believers closer to God.

Baptism

Baptism is a ceremony to mark the beginning of the Christian life. It involves the brief immersion of a believer in water to symbolise the believer’s union with

¹ The word *sacrament* comes from the Latin *sacrāmentum* which means “an oath” or “pledge” and is itself derived from *sacrāre* which means “to consecrate”, and *sacer* which means “sacred”.

Christ in his death, burial and resurrection, and is appropriately administered only to those who believe in Jesus Christ.

The word *baptise* comes from the Greek word *baptizō* which means “to plunge, dip, immerse” something in water. Thus, baptism involves the momentary immersion of a believer in water (cf. Mark 1:10; Acts 8:39). The symbolism of baptism is twofold. Firstly, it symbolises our union with Christ in his death, burial, and resurrection: “Or don’t you know that all of us who were baptised into Christ Jesus were baptised into his death? We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life” (Romans 6:3-4; see also Colossians 2:12). Secondly, it symbolises the washing away of our sins: “And now what are you waiting for? Get up, be baptised and wash your sins away, calling on his name” (Acts 22:16; cf. Titus 3:5). This symbolism, and also the meaning of the word itself, shows that sprinkling with water does not constitute an adequate baptism, but rather that full immersion in water is required.

The pattern in the New Testament is that only those who have heard the gospel call and have believed in Christ are to be baptised. For example, after Peter had preached to a crowd in Jerusalem he told them, “Repent and be baptised, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins” (Acts 2:38). After saying this, “Those who accepted his message were baptised” (v. 41). Similarly, when Philip preached the gospel in Samaria, we read, “But when they believed Philip as he preached the good news of the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptised, both men and women” (Acts 8:12). And again, when Peter preached to the Gentiles in Cornelius’ household, he allowed baptism for those who had heard the message and had received the Holy Spirit (Acts 10:44-48). This is often called a “believer’s baptism” since it holds that only those who believe in Christ should be baptised.

Paul taught that baptism signifies the end of our old way of life and entry into a new life in Christ: “You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptised into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:26-28). And since we have this new life in Christ, we are now “a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!” (2 Corinthians 5:17). Also, since we have died to our old life through the ceremony of baptism, we can join with Paul in proclaiming, “I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me” (Galatians 2:20).

The practice of infant baptism, often referred to as “christening”, is not supported in the New Testament. Babies cannot have a believing faith, and no teachings or examples in support of infant baptism are given. There are three occasions noted when the apostles baptised whole households, but there is no indication in these instances as to the age of the people involved. In the case of the Philippian jailer (Acts 16:29-34), we are told that Paul “spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all the others in his house” (v. 32), and that he and his whole family had “come to believe in God” (v. 34). Similarly, in regard to the household of Stephanas (1 Corinthians 1:16), Paul notes that “the household of Stephanas were the first converts in Achaia, and they have devoted themselves to the service of the saints” (1 Corinthians 16:15). These comments suggest that the members of the families in these cases were of sufficient age to believe the gospel. The third case is the household of Lydia (Acts 16:14-15), but no information is provided about her family and no conclusions can be drawn either way.

The Lord’s Supper

The Lord’s Supper is a ceremonial eating of bread and drinking of wine by those who believe in Jesus Christ to commemorate his life, death and resurrection.

The ceremony of the Lord’s Supper was instituted by Jesus on the night before he died while

sharing the Passover meal² with his disciples: “While they were eating, Jesus took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to his disciples, saying, ‘Take and eat; this is my body.’ Then he took the cup, gave thanks and offered it to them, saying, ‘Drink from it, all of you. This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. I tell you, I will not drink of this fruit of the vine from now on until that day when I drink it anew with you in my Father’s kingdom.’” (Matthew 26:17-30). According to Luke, Jesus commanded his disciples to do this “in remembrance of me” (Luke 22:19). Paul adds, “For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes” (1 Corinthians 11:26).

The Lord’s Supper³ involves the breaking and eating of bread to symbolise the breaking of Christ’s body on the cross, and the drinking of a small amount of red wine or grape juice to symbolise his blood shed on the cross for the forgiveness of sins. In this way, Christians remember what Christ did for them in bringing them to salvation. They also give thanks to God that they have entered into a new covenant with him through the death and resurrection of his Son.⁴ The ceremony is repeated regularly throughout the lives of Christians until Christ returns to fulfil its meaning and purpose. Jesus said to his disciples, “I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer. For I tell you, I will not eat it again until it finds fulfilment in the kingdom of God” (Luke 22:15-16).

The most profound symbolism in the Lord’s Supper is that of the unity of the believers with Christ. Since the bread represents his body and the wine his blood, the eating of the bread and drinking of the wine symbolise our taking into ourselves the very person of Christ himself, thereby becoming one with him as he was one with the Father (John 10:30). This is what Jesus meant when he said to the Jews, “I tell you the truth, unless you can eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day. For my flesh is real food and my blood is real drink. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me, and I in him. Just as the living Father sent me and I live because of the Father, so the one who feeds on me will live because of me. This is the bread that came down from heaven. Your forefathers ate manna and died, but he who feeds on this bread will live forever” (John 6:53-58). He also said, “I am the bread of life. He who comes to me will never go hungry, and he who believes in me will never be thirsty” (John 6:35).

The unity symbolised by participation in the Lord’s Supper is not just personal, it is also corporate. Paul said, “Is not the cup of thanksgiving for which we give thanks a participation in the blood of Christ? And is not the bread that we break a participation in the body of Christ? Because there is one loaf, we, who are many, are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf” (1 Corinthians 10:16-17). Therefore, the ceremony symbolises and celebrates both the intimate relationship that individual believers have with Christ and also their unity with fellow believers throughout the world, and through all ages, as the body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12:27).

The Lord’s Supper is both a solemn and a joyful ceremony. It is an opportunity for those who have been saved to give praise and thanks to the Lord because of what he has done for them. But believers should also participate in it in the “fear of the Lord” (Psalm 111:10). Paul

² The Passover meal was eaten on the evening before the Jewish Festival of Passover to commemorate the escape of the Israelites held captive in Egypt (refer to Exodus 12).

³ The Lord’s Supper is also called the *Eucharist* from the Greek word *eucharistia* which means “giving of thanks”, and *Communion* which means “fellowship”.

⁴ A covenant is an agreement between two parties, usually based on each party meeting certain conditions. The “new covenant” which Jesus spoke of is between God and us, whereby God agrees to forgive our sins and grant us eternal life provided that we repent of our sins and believe in Jesus (Hebrews 8:7-13).

warned the church at Corinth, “whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord. A man ought to examine himself before he eats of the bread and drinks of the cup. For anyone who eats and drinks without recognizing the body of the Lord eats and drinks judgment on himself” (1 Corinthians 11:27-29). This teaching reflects the words of Jesus to his disciples: “Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift” (Matthew 5:23-24). Thus, Paul encouraged the believers to judge themselves to avoid the Lord’s discipline: “But if we judged ourselves, we would not come under judgment. When we are judged by the Lord, we are being disciplined so that we will not be condemned with the world” (1 Corinthians 11:31-32).

The Laying on of Hands

The laying on of hands is the act of one or more people placing their hands upon another person so as to impart to that person a special blessing or commission from God.

The laying on of hands was an accepted practice from the time of the patriarchs. For example, when Jacob was very old he blessed his grandsons Ephraim and Manasseh, the sons of Joseph, by placing his right hand on the head of Ephraim, who was to receive the greater blessing, and his left hand on the head of Manasseh, who was also given a great blessing but not as great as that of Ephraim (Genesis 48:1-20). Jacob, at this time called Israel, asked God to bless the boys and to make them both great, but also prophesied that Ephraim, the younger brother, would be greater than Manasseh the elder.⁵

Another example is when Moses asked God to appoint a new leader over the people of Israel to replace him. So God told him, “Take Joshua son of Nun, a man in whom is the spirit, and lay your hand on him. Make him stand before Eleazar the priest and the entire assembly and commission him in their presence. Give him some of your authority so that the whole Israelite community will obey him” (Numbers 27:18-20). The effect of this was that “Joshua son of Nun was filled with the spirit of wisdom because Moses had laid his hands on him. So the Israelites listened to him and did what the Lord had commanded Moses” (Deuteronomy 34:9).

A third example from the Old Testament is when the mighty prophet Elisha blessed the nation of Israel through its king, Jehoash. Elisha was suffering from an illness from which he would soon die, and Jehoash, “who did evil in the eyes of the Lord” (2 Kings 13:11), had come to pay his last respects. Elisha told him to get a bow and some arrows and “When he had taken it, Elisha put his hands on the king’s hands” (v. 16). He then commanded Jehoash to “Open the east window” and shoot an arrow through the window towards the east to symbolise “the Lord’s arrow of victory” over the Aramaeans who were Israel’s enemy at the time (v. 17). Elisha then told Jehoash to strike the ground with the arrows to symbolise the number of times that he would defeat the Aramaeans (v. 18-20). This incident shows that God can anoint even sinful people to carry out his will provided that the anointing is from a righteous man.

In the New Testament there are five main purposes associated with the laying on of hands. The first of these is physical healing. There were many occasions when Jesus healed people by placing his hands on them. For example, when “A man with leprosy came and knelt before him and said, ‘Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean.’ Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man. ‘I am willing,’ he said. ‘Be clean!’ Immediately he was cured of his leprosy” (Matthew 8:2-3). When Peter’s mother-in-law was sick with a fever Jesus “touched her hand and the fever left her” (vv. 14-15). A woman of great faith only had to touch the edge of his cloak to be healed (Matthew 9:20-22). But in order to heal a blind man, Jesus had

⁵ Some Bible scholars have proposed that Ephraim was the father of Britain, and Manasseh the father of the United States of America. While this is hard to prove from historical evidence, it does have scriptural credibility in Genesis 48:15-20, 49:22-26 and Deuteronomy 33:13-17.

to lay hands on him twice. After Jesus had “spat on the man’s eyes and put his hands on him”, his sight was only partially restored, so “Once more Jesus put his hands on the man’s eyes. Then his eyes were opened, his sight was restored, and he saw everything clearly” (Mark 8:22-25). Jesus also promised the disciples that when they preach the good news they will “place their hands on sick people, and they will get well” (Mark 16:18).

The next main purpose for the laying on of hands, as recorded in the New Testament, is to impart the Holy Spirit to new believers. In Samaria the apostles Peter and John prayed for some new believers “that they might receive the Holy Spirit, because the Holy Spirit had not yet come upon any of them; they had simply been baptised into the name of the Lord Jesus. Then Peter and John placed their hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit” (Acts 8:15-17). In Damascus the disciple Ananias laid hands on Saul, who was to become the great apostle Paul, so that he “may see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit” (Acts 9:17). This case shows that any disciple of Christ can lay hands on new believers and pray for them to receive the Holy Spirit since Ananias was not a leader in the church, but simply “a disciple” (v. 10). Some time later, Paul himself ministered to twelve men at Ephesus who had only received a baptism in water from John the Baptist (Acts 19:1-7). Paul told them that “John’s baptism was a baptism of repentance” and that they now needed to believe in Jesus, and “On hearing this, they were baptised into the name of the Lord Jesus. When Paul placed his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came on them, and they spoke in tongues and prophesied” (vv. 4-6).

In this last example, the believers at Ephesus, when they received the Holy Spirit, were also given the spiritual gifts of speaking in tongues and prophecy.⁶ The impartation of spiritual gifts from the Holy Spirit is the third main purpose of the laying on of hands. Paul wrote to the church at Rome, “I long to see you so that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to make you strong” (Romans 1:11). He also commended the church at Corinth, “because our testimony about Christ was confirmed in you. Therefore you do not lack any spiritual gift as you eagerly wait for our Lord Jesus Christ to be revealed” (1 Corinthians 1:6-7). These statements show that the spiritual gifts are given for the purpose of strengthening the church and are received by hearing and believing the testimony about Christ. That the spiritual gifts are impacted by the laying on of hands is shown in Paul’s instruction to Timothy: “Do not neglect your gift, which was given you through a prophetic message when the body of elders laid their hands on you” (1 Timothy 4:14). At a later time he again urged Timothy to, “fan into flame the gift of God, which is in you through the laying on of my hands. For God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power, of love and of self-discipline” (2 Timothy 1:6-7). These statements show the reliance that Paul placed on the spiritual gifts and the empowering of the Holy Spirit for the strengthening of Timothy’s faith and the effective exercise of his ministry.

The fourth main purpose for the laying on of hands is for sending out apostles from the church.⁷ In Acts 13 we are told that certain of the church leaders at Antioch, “While they were worshipping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, ‘Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.’ So after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off” (vv. 2-3). It is likely that this instruction from the Holy Spirit came through a word of knowledge from one of the other men present and that the group continued to fast and pray to confirm the message before laying hands on Barnabas and Saul to anoint them for the mission.

The last of the five main purposes for the practice of the laying on of hands is the ordination

⁶ The spiritual gifts are discussed in more detail in the next paper.

⁷ The word *apostle* comes from the Greek word *apostolos* which means “one sent forth”. Today we tend to refer to such people as *missionaries*, but in the early church the apostles had the highest authority in the church (e.g., 1 Corinthians 12:28), while today this tends to reside with the pastor-teacher.

of elders and deacons.⁸ This is demonstrated in Acts 6:1-7 where we read of the selection of seven men from among the first group of disciples who were “known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom” (v. 3) to carry out the administration of the church so that the apostles could give their “attention to prayer and the ministry of the word” (v. 4). These men were presented to the apostles “who prayed and laid their hands on them” (v. 6). An example of the ordination of elders is recorded in Acts 14:21-23. While this does not specifically refer to the laying on of hands, it is reasonable to expect that they were ordained in the same way as the apostles and the deacons, especially given the much greater responsibilities afforded the elders compared with those of the deacons.

In regard to the ordination of believers, Paul warned Timothy, “Do not be hasty in the laying on of hands, and do not share in the sins of others. Keep yourself pure” (1 Timothy 5:22). This verse has been incorrectly interpreted by some people to suggest that a righteous person participating in the laying on of hands with an unrighteous person might in some way share in that person’s sin. This is completely untrue. The main purpose of Paul’s letter to Timothy was to instruct him on various matters of church leadership of which this verse contains two such instructions; namely, “Do not be hasty in the laying on of hands”, and “Keep yourself pure”. In the context of the letter, it is likely that the former instruction was a warning for Timothy to give careful consideration to the qualities of believers seeking positions of responsibility in the church before ordaining them into a leadership role by the laying on of hands. Nowhere in Scripture does God warn that a righteous person can be contaminated by an unrighteous person in this way. Rather, they assure us that God is well able to protect his own (e.g., Psalm 91; Proverbs 26:2; Isaiah 50:2; Ephesians 5:29). This false teaching comes from the Enemy of God who would love nothing more than to see Christians, through fear and ignorance, neglect their authority in Christ to minister the Holy Spirit to one another by the laying on of hands.

These teachings show that the laying on of hands is a vital Christian ministry in which God empowers his children to administer his blessings to one another. When believers lay hands on other believers, or even on unbelievers, the person being ministered to can receive physical healing and the anointing of the Holy Spirit. It is by the laying of hands that believers are given spiritual gifts from the Holy Spirit, and words of knowledge and prophecy for their lives, and it is by this means that some are ordained for ministry and works of service. These blessings come through the power of the Holy Spirit which is released by the faith of those administering the blessings in the name of Jesus Christ to the glory of God.

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Acknowledgments

Bible quotations are from the New International Version, 1984 unless otherwise indicated. Other versions referred to from time to time are:

Hebrew-Greek Key Study Bible, New American Standard Bible, 1977 (NASB).

The Spirit Filled Life Bible, New King James Version, 1991 (NKJV).

⁸ In the early church there were just these two administrative positions. The *elders* (Greek *presbus*) are also called *overseers* (Greek *episkopos*) (Acts 20:17, 28) from which we get the English word *bishop* (Old English *biscop*). The word *deacon* (Greek *diakonos*) means “servant”. The qualifications required for elders and deacons are set out in Acts 6:3, 1 Timothy 3:1-13 and Titus 1:5-9 with both positions requiring very high moral standards.