

ORDINATION

A Protestant Stronghold among Baptist Churches

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At the risk of creating a straw man, and realizing the diversity of practice that exists among Bible-believing Baptist churches, I want to preface this article with a description of a typical Baptist ordination service — at least in terms of my experience.

A man who is to be ordained has acknowledged his surrender to a divine call and his desire to preach the Gospel. He has passed through a period of Bible training and has gained some practical experience along the way. He is judged by others as now ready to be ordained.

An ordination council, comprising several ordained ministers, is called for. These ministers privately interrogate the candidate by asking him questions relating to his call, his character, his qualifications, and his doctrine. Then, having judged the man to be suitably qualified, the council reports its findings and recommendation to the church. As a matter of formal church business, a vote to proceed with the candidate's ordination is taken.

The ordination service itself is usually a very special meeting. Often conducted in the presence of distinguished guests, the meeting is filled with curiosity, anticipation, and the singing of praises to God. The candidate may undergo some additional (public) questioning, and he and his wife are usually asked to give their testimonies. A charge is preached by one of the pastors (often from II Timothy 4:1-5). Then the candidate is asked to kneel at the front of the meeting while the preachers of the ordination council gather around him, lay hands on him, and pray for him. The candidate arises ... as an ordained minister of the Gospel.

The man thus ordained is considered ordained for life. In fact, at some point in the proceedings he is usually asked the question: "If you ever cease to believe the doctrines that today you said you believe in, will you turn in your ordination papers?" As long as he remains true to the Word of God, his ordination stands. Even if he moves on to another church or another field of evangelism, he is not ordained again. Most Baptists view ordination as a credentialing act or an investiture or sorts, whereby a man is accorded the status of an ordained minister and admitted to the ranks of the ministry.

How does this scenario line up with the Word of God? For Bible-believing Baptists, that is ever the critical question. It is not a matter of tradition — it's a question of truth!

Some Baptists have struggled with the whole concept of ordination — asking, in view of the great Baptist distinctives of "soul competency" and the "priesthood of believers," whether there should even be such a thing. These doubts, however, are answered by two New Testament scriptures:

“And when they had ORDAINED them ELDERS in every church, and had prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord, on whom they believed” — Acts 14:23.

“For this cause left I thee in Crete, that thou shouldest set in order the things that are wanting, and ORDAIN ELDERS in every city, as I had appointed thee” — Titus 1:5.

The word “ordain” (or “ordained”) occurs in the New Testament 22 times, and is used in a variety of ways. However, these two references clearly teach that elders (pastors, bishops) are to be ordained in ALL the churches.

The purpose of this article is to examine and determine what the Bible teaches concerning ordination — specifically as it relates to Baptist churches and the Baptist ministry. The *thesis* of this article is that some of the ordination traditions commonly practiced among Bible-believing Baptist churches are more Protestant than Bible.

THE GENERAL MEANING OF ORDINATION:

Our English word “ordain” comes from the Anglo-Norman *ordeiner*, which in turn came from the Latin *ordināre*, meaning to order, to arrange, to set in place. The basic meaning of the word “ordain” is just that — to appoint, to set in order, to establish ... by selecting or choosing.

The Biblical use of the word is no different. To ordain means to choose. A comparison of Mark 3:14 (“*And he ORDAINED twelve*”) with Luke 6:13 (“*of them he CHOSE twelve*”) shows this to be the case. Choosing, appointing, and ordaining are words that are used interchangeably in our English Bible.

In the two passages that actually refer to the ordination of pastors, two Greek words are translated “ordained” and “ordain” respectively. In Acts 14:23 the word is χειροτονήσαντες (cheirotoneō-santes), which means “*to stretch forth the hand for the purpose of giving one’s vote in the assembly,*” “*by show of hands,*” “*appoint,*” “*span with the hand,*” to “*vote.*” (This Greek word is translated “chosen” in II Corinthians 8:19.) In Titus 1:5 the word is καταστήσης (kata-stēsēs), which means to “*appoint,*” “*set in place,*” “*set in order,*” “*set in array.*” This word is derived from the preposition *kata* (down) + *stēsēs* (from ἵστημι, *istēmi*, meaning to “*make stand,*” to “*stand,*” “*set up,*” “*set,*” “*appoint,*” “*determine,*” or “*bring about*”).

The meaning is clear. Both etymologically and philologically, to “ordain” means to choose or to elect. Ordination is NOT a ceremony, an induction, a consecration, or an investiture — it is the simple act of a church appointing men to an office or ministry.

THE GENERAL PRACTICE OF ORDINATION IN CHRISTENDOM:

If scriptural ordination is essentially a vote to appoint or choose a man, where did all the false notions and ceremonial traditions about it come from? To answer this, we turn to history.

As many ancient churches drifted away from the simplicity that is in Christ, the concept of a sacerdotal priesthood began to emerge. It started, first with the division of God’s people into the clergy (*kleros*) and laity (*laos*) classes (in violation of the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers), then with the further division of the clergy-class into a hierarchy. Finding no supportive scripture for these changes in the New Testament, men such as Cyprian, bishop of

Carthage (200-258 A.D.), turned to the Old Testament where there *was* a mediatorial priesthood. What's more, the Aaronic priests underwent an elaborate ritual pursuant to undertaking their ministry.

“And the priest, whom he shall anoint, and whom he shall CONSECRATE to minister in the priest's office in his father's stead, shall make the atonement, and shall put on the linen clothes, even the holy garments” — Leviticus 16:32.

“For every high priest taken from among men is ORDAINED for men in things pertaining to God, that he may offer both gifts and sacrifices for sins” — Hebrews 5:1.

Resorting to the OLD Testament for the faith and order of NEW Testament churches is an unwarranted and dangerous practice. It has introduced many corrupting evils into Christendom: notably the errors of the universal church, sacramentalism, infant baptism and a hierarchy of clergy.

In the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox religions, ordination is known as Holy Orders and is considered a sacrament (a means of grace). The *cheirotonia*, or the laying on of hands by the bishop, is held as the most solemn moment of the ordination ritual and the essential act in the sacrament, because it is at this moment that priestly power is imparted and the apostolic connection is made. From that point, the priest is able to act in the person of Christ and to administer the sacraments. Ordination is seen as an indelible mark conferred upon those who enter an exclusive society of clergy.

The rite of ordination as practiced by most of the Protestant daughters of Rome finds its roots in their Catholic heritage. Protestants may have moved in a “back to the Bible” *direction*, but in most mainline denominations ordination continues to be the ceremonial initiation of someone into the ministry, and ordained ministers are the ones considered qualified to minister the Word of God and the sacraments.

Ancient Baptists were sometimes called Acephali, which means “headless.” Their enemies called them this because they refused to adopt any form of ecclesiastical hierarchy. Baptists had their pastors, but they were seen Biblically as the shepherds, rulers, and guardians of individual congregations. In the 17TH century, English Baptists avoided the word ordination altogether — preferring words such as “set apart” and “appointed” when referring to their leaders. Over time, however, the influence of Protestant (particularly Calvinistic) thought led many Baptists to adopt more formal ways to credential their ministers.

Protestant thinking has always been the bane of Bible-believing Baptists. The notions of a circumscribed, life-tenured, “ordained ministry” and the necessity of a ceremonial component to ordination are more Protestant than Bible. This is why most Baptist ordination certificates (incorrectly) state that the man is ordained to the GOSPEL MINISTRY rather than to the office of pastor. It is CHRIST Who puts a man into the ministry (I Timothy 1:12); a church puts him in the office.

Many years ago I remember being told about George Beauchamp Vick (1901-1975), pastor of Temple Baptist Church in Detroit, Michigan for 40 years, and founding president of Baptist Bible College in Springfield, Missouri. It was quite a marvel to some that he was never ordained!

After all, he was such a great preacher and a wonderful pastor — how could this be? What was meant by this was that Vick *never* had a group of ordained preachers lay hands on him. So, was he ordained or not? Let's see.

THE TRUE MEANING OF ECCLESIASTICAL ORDINATION:

Edward T. Hiscox sets forth the following primary propositions that accurately reflect the New Testament doctrine of ordination as it applies to pastors:

“PROP. I. That the ordination of the New Testament was an *election*, or appointment, to the ministerial office, and not a ceremonial *setting apart*, or consecration to that office.

“PROP. II. That there is no proof in the New Testament that persons chosen to the office of elder, pastor or bishop in the apostolic churches were designated for, or inducted into, that office by any formal service or ceremony whatever.

“PROP. III. That, though the laying on of hands was common on many occasions, as an ancient Oriental Jewish and early Christian form of blessing, especially in the bestowment of the gifts of the Spirit, yet there is neither precept nor precedent in the New Testament to require its use in the ordination of Christian ministers.”

[Hiscox, E. T. The New Directory for Baptist Churches. Grand Rapids, Michigan: 1970, Kregel Publications: Pg. 345. (Now published under the title Principles & Practices for Baptist Churches)]

Ordination, then, is an election. It is the deliberative vote of a church body to appoint a man to the office of pastor — something that can be done without ceremony in a regular business meeting.

The two scriptures actually relating to the ordination of pastors (Acts 14:23; Titus 1:5) are set in the context of *organizing* all the churches planted through the evangelistic efforts of Paul and his fellow laborers.

Question: What was needed to “set in order” these assemblies of baptized believers? The answer is leadership, scriptural leadership — and scriptural leadership is always provided through the pastors of a church (I Thessalonians 5:12; I Timothy 5:17; I Peter 5:2-3).

Question: Were the elders who pastored the churches in Pisidia and Lycaonia, and later on in Crete, first chosen and appointed by Paul and Barnabas (and later by Titus) — then *imposed* upon those respective churches? To answer “yes” would support the notion that clergymen are ordained by bishops (the Catholic way). Baptists, however, hold to the truth that ecclesiastical authority resides in each church (Matthew 18:17-18). Undoubtedly Paul, Barnabas, and Titus *saw to it* that elders were set in the churches they organized, for that is part of the work of an evangelist. But before that could take place, the men who became elders must first have been called of God into the ministry, then trained for the ministry, then chosen by the congregations (no doubt under the guidance of the evangelists) for the office of elder.

When a mission is organized into an independent Baptist church, the first two decisions made should be: (1) the vote to organize (often accomplished by the unanimous signing of the charter), and; (2) the vote to ordain (appoint, choose) a pastor.

What about the Laying on of Hands?

As Hiscox correctly observed, there is no hint of any ritual or ceremony being connected with the ordaining of elders in either scripture. The “cheirotônēsantes” was not the laying *ON* of hands, but the *RAISING* of hands (in affirmation).

So exactly what does the “laying on of hands” signify?

In the Old Testament, the act signified either the imparting of a blessing (Genesis 48:14) or the identification with something. Jewish priests laid hands upon the heads of animals about to be sacrificed, signifying their identification with that sacrifice (thereby symbolically declaring: “This is what I deserve, but an innocent sacrifice is taking my place”).

In the New Testament, the laying on of hands also signified a benediction (Matthew 19:13-15), and it was also occasionally associated with the sign gift of healing (Acts 28:8) and the [temporary] apostolic communication of the Holy Ghost (Acts 8:17-19; 19:6).

When it comes to the Lord’s churches, the laying on of hands was associated with the choosing of deacons by the church (Acts 6:5-6) and a church’s sending forth two of its pastors (Barnabas and Saul) as evangelists (Acts 13:3). In these instances, the laying on of hands (though not prescribed by scripture) was a demonstrative act — seeking the divine *blessing* upon men who have been set apart for special service and the *identification* of that church with their ministry. In the latter case, both Barnabas and Saul had already been actively engaged in the work of the ministry for many years.

An objection to this explanation is often raised on the basis of I Timothy 4:14 and II Timothy 1:6.

“Neglect not the gift that is in thee, which was given thee by prophecy, with the LAYING ON OF THE HANDS of the presbytery.”

“Wherefore I put thee in remembrance that thou stir up the gift of God, which is in thee by the PUTTING ON OF MY HANDS.”

Neither scripture actually mentions ordination. What, then, are they teaching? Two things: first, that Timothy *had* a spiritual gift; secondly, that this spiritual gift was imparted through prophecy (preaching) — *not* by the laying on of hands. Putting both of these passages together it seems Timothy was not only converted to Christ through the ministry of Paul, but was also called to preach through the preaching of Paul. Paul undoubtedly recognized God’s call upon his son in the faith and thus laid his hands on him; subsequently, the pastors of the church at Lystra also noticed this gift and calling (see: Acts 16:2). The laying on of their hands upon Timothy did not impart the gift, but was done in recognition of his gift — and thus was an act of identification and benediction. The Baptist theologian John Gill, commenting on I Timothy 4:14 says: “And since gifts have ceased being conveyed this way, the rite [sic] of laying on of hands in ordination seems useless and of no avail.”

What about I Timothy 5:22? Surely this verse cautions a hasty ordination!

“Lay hands suddenly on no man...”

Again, ordination is not mentioned here. Hiscox is right on target when he asserts: “It has usually been taken for granted that the primitive ministry was inducted into office by formal services, and that “prayer with the laying on of hands” was the essential part of such ordination. But this has been accepted as scriptural, not because it is found in the Scriptures, but because Prelatical and Presbyterian authorities have interpreted the Scriptures by their own ecclesiastical usages, rather than adjusted their usages to the New Testament teaching. They have seen Episcopal and Presbyterian ordination in the New Testament because they saw it in their Church standards and practices. Their scholars have largely so interpreted the text, and Baptists have accepted their conclusions without even their justification.” [Ibid. pg. 353.]

While it is true that its neighboring context (I Timothy 5:17-20) refers to pastors, the immediate context of the verse charges Timothy with the way he is to carry out the instructions contained in the chapter. “Do nothing by partiality” he is told — especially when it comes to the contentious issues of dealing with the widows of the church (young and old) and to accusations brought against pastors. Do not be quick to take sides.

The significance of the laying on of hands as it relates specifically to the Lord’s churches and the work of the Lord is that it has to do with imparting a blessing and/or identifying with a man’s ministry. Nothing more, nothing less!

THE TRUE PRACTICE OF ECCLESIASTICAL ORDINATION:

How should the process of ordination work in a Bible-believing Baptist church?

Ordination is the appointing of a qualified man to the office of pastor. The act is effected by a church vote. Whether it is accompanied by a public meeting of the church designed to make it a notable and memorable occasion is of no great matter. A couple may be lawfully married at the courthouse with two witnesses before a judge, or be wed in an elaborate, lavish “church wedding.” Either way, they are married!

Here are some thoughts on how the Lord’s churches ought to go about ordaining their pastors.

To begin with, there are three possible scenarios to consider.

The first is where a new church is being established. In this case, evangelists sent from and by the “mother” church preach the Gospel, baptize the converts, and eventually organize a church. Their labors also include training men who have been called by God into the ministry. Example: During his three-year ministry in Ephesus, Paul and his team not only planted a church in that city, but also trained its pastors (Acts 20:17) and the evangelists that were evidently sent forth to plant other churches in Asia (Acts 19:10).

The second scenario is that of an established church being led by a group of pastors who are in turn training God-called men for the ministry.

The third case is when an established church is bereft of any pastor due to death, disablement, departure, discipline, or congregational decline.

Most things said below will apply to all three situations, but some unusual circumstances may require special treatment.

1. God calls men into the ministry (Acts 9:15). It is neither a chosen nor an inherited vocation. Men thus called *are* preachers. Of course they must be trained and prepared — that is why we often refer to them as “preachers-in-training.” See: II Timothy 2:2; 3:10-11; Titus 2:9.
2. Pastors and evangelists are *gifted* by the Lord Jesus Christ to His churches (Ephesians 4:11). It therefore becomes a church’s responsibility to discern those whom Christ is placing over the body as its shepherds. Ideally, these are men who have been raised up in the church, trained by the pastors of the church, and brought into the office as the LORD directs and leads — thus assuring the church of a continuity of scriptural leadership. The practice of a pastor “hiring” associates from outside sources is not found in scripture.
3. Having had sufficient opportunity to judge a man’s calling, desire, gifts, qualifications, and commitment to Christ, a church can properly vote to elect him as a pastor. By this action he is duly “ordained” and no further steps by the church are required.

When a man has been brought up and trained in his church, he should be well-known and “well reported of by the brethren” by the time he is ready for the pastorate. Any interrogation of the man should be unnecessary (though the church certainly has liberty to publicly question him if it be considered instructive to the congregation).

In the case of a mission work, the training of men and the guidance provided by the church-planting team will be key factors in helping the new church elect its pastor(s).

In the instance of a church having no pastor (and being a spiritually immature body), receiving assistance from pastors of other like faith and order churches can be beneficial and even necessary. These men can examine a candidate and advise the church as to his suitability — acting in an advisory capacity only, and openly conducting their work in the presence of the membership. This should be the *only* time an “ordination council” (not a good term) is called for. It has absolutely no authority over the church that called for it.

4. In keeping with the exact meaning of the word, a church sets apart a man by the simple gesture of its members (or men) lifting up their right hands.

It is a separate matter when men are called away to engage in evangelistic ministry (as in Acts 13:1-3). It is appropriate for the church to publicly identify with them and seek God’s blessing upon their labors by the laying on of hands if it so desires. This can properly be done on behalf of the church by its presbytery (not pastors from other churches) and/or its men.

5. Should a pastor of a church move to another church of like faith and order for the purpose of becoming its pastor (or one of its pastors), the process of scriptural ordination should be repeated. He carries with him no invested right or authority to simply assume the pastorate of that church. He brings only his calling and his reputation, experience, faith, and God-given abilities. What he yet needs is a vote! I was ordained a pastor by Bethel Baptist Church in Springvale, Victoria on November 26, 1971 (the traditional way); I was ordained as pastor of Willetton Bible Baptist Church in Willetton, Western Australia on March 3, 1985 (by vote); and I was ordained (in absentia) a pastor of Bible Baptist Church in Oak Harbor, Washington on November 16, 1988 (by vote).

6. Since the majority of Baptist preachers have been ordained in the traditional way described at the beginning, what of the validity of their ordination? Thankfully, undergoing the private inquisition of an ordination council and the public laying on of hands (and everything in between) does not invalidate an ordination IF, in the midst of all the pageantry, there was a church vote.

Ordination is a wonderful thing, and it should never be minimized or scorned. It represents the tenderest care of Bible-believing Baptist churches by their risen Head, Who continually calls and endows faithful shepherds to feed, lead, and give heed to His flocks.

The issue of this article is not about the man so much as it is about the misleading nature of traditional ordination and its tendency to promote denominationalism and a clergy class. Scriptural ordination magnifies the sacred *office* rather than the man — Romans 11:13.

Let us who are called Baptists, who claim to be the people of the Book, examine all our traditions and phraseologies in the full light of divine revelation — lest we, too, slowly drift off into a darkening apostasy that has afflicted so many Baptist churches from the days of the apostles to the present.