

SEVEN PURPOSES OF LAYING ON OF HANDS

By Mark Moore & Mark Scott

We seldom see it, but every once in a while during a particularly potent religious ceremony we observe the church leaders lay hands on someone. It may occur during an ordination service on a Sunday night or in a hospital bed for a dying saint. We watch with wonder as they display their religious authority by touching a fellow human being. In the Bible, however, this religious touch was not so uncommon. God's community in biblical days attached clearer meaning to this esoteric act. It could function in a number of ways.

1. Laying on of hands was used to bestow a spiritual blessing (Gen 48:12ff). A person with God-given authority, like a parent, priest or prophet, could symbolically pass their blessing along. Perhaps it is only mystical or symbolic, but it appears that God recognizes the action and responds appropriately.
2. Sometimes this touch expresses identification as in the case of a sacrifice or the scapegoat (cf. Lev 1:4). By laying his hands on the victim, the priest symbolically passed the sin along to the animal, or at least said, "My touch binds us as one so that as you die, you die vicariously for us."
3. To receive or give healing (Acts 9:12, 17; 28:8). There is great power in the human touch. Just how much we do not know. The ancients often held great superstitions concerning touch and healing as if power flowed from one person to another (Matt 9:21-22). Nevertheless, God has often bestowed physical healing through human touch.
4. Sometimes laying hands on someone was violent, not benevolent (Acts 4:3). It is a way of saying someone was handled roughly, mugged or otherwise mistreated.
5. According to some interpreters Acts 8:14-17 indicates that the Apostles laid hands on the Samaritans to incorporate them into the church as well as to bestow spiritual gifts on them. In other words, in this incident, touching the Samaritans was a sign of acceptance and open fellowship. It would be similar to our action of hugging.
6. Laying on of hands was also used to commission a successor for a task (Num 27:23; Acts 13:3). You are symbolically passing on your task or authority to them as you appoint them or send them out. This is the closest idea to what our action means when we ordain a person into ministry.
7. It was used (exclusively in Acts by the Apostles) to impart spiritual power on the recipients (Acts 6:6, 8; 8:18; 19:6; 2 Tim 1:6). It is questionable whether "any old Christian" would be able to do this same thing today.