

Laying On of Hands

What is it, why is it? Is it still relevant today? Let's have a quick look. The 'laying on of hands' is basically when people physically put their hands onto other people, usually to pray for them, in order to 'commission' them for something, or for healing. Does it exist today and if so, how?

Be aware this is a long talk and so choose your audience carefully!

THE OLD TESTAMENT

In the Old Testament we see several incidents of laying on of hands. These were varied, so let's look at a few of them. Most of them refer to either sacrifice, atonement (getting right before God) and in helping enforce God's order and rule.

Being blessed

In Genesis 48.13-14, we find Israel praying for and laying hands on Joseph's sons, in order that they may be blessed:

"And Joseph took both of them, Ephraim on his right toward Israel's left hand and Manasseh on his left toward Israel's right hand, and brought them close to him. But Israel reached out his right hand and put it on Ephraim's head, though he was the younger, and crossing his arms, he put his left hand on Manasseh's head, even though Manasseh was the firstborn."

Setting apart the priests / Levites

The priests had to go through various things in order to be set apart ('consecrated') to God. For example, in Exodus 29.10, we read, *"Bring the bull to the front of the Tent of Meeting, and Aaron and his sons shall lay their hands on its head."*

Numbers 8.10-11, "You are to bring the Levites before the LORD, and the Israelites are to lay their hands on them. Aaron is to present the Levites before the LORD as a wave offering from the Israelites, so that they may be ready to do the work of the LORD."

Burnt offering before God

In Leviticus, we read about laying on of hands to an animal, to become right before God...

Leviticus 1.4, "He is to lay his hand on the head of the burnt offering, and it will be accepted on his behalf to make atonement for him."

This was the same for 'peace offerings' to God, 'sin offerings' and offerings on the annual Day of Atonement.

Leviticus 8.22 says, "(Aaron) is to lay both hands on the head of the live goat and confess over it all the wickedness and rebellion of the Israelites—all their sins—and put them on the goat's head. He shall send the goat away into the desert in the care of a man appointed for the task."

In witnessing blasphemy against God

Leviticus 24.14, "Take the blasphemer outside the camp. All those who heard him are to lay their hands on his head, and the entire assembly is to stone him."

Blessing directly from God

We learn from the Psalmist in Psalm 139.5 that God directly blesses us, protects us and surrounds us with himself by laying his hand upon us. This may not be physically, but it is spiritually and that can be obvious in physical ways! "You hem me in—behind and before; you have laid your hand upon me."

Lifting up hands in blessing and prayer

We find this in both the Old and the New Testament.

Leviticus 9.22 says, "Then Aaron lifted his hands toward the people and blessed them. And having sacrificed the sin offering, the burnt offering and the fellowship offering, he stepped down." In Luke 24.50, we find Jesus doing something similar, "When he had led them out to the vicinity of Bethany, he lifted up his hands and blessed them."

Transference of God's Power

We have a great example of Moses commissioning Joshua to take over from himself, at God's request. Moses was to pass some of God's authority given to him, to Joshua who was to lead the people of Israel when Moses died. Moses, as was common, did as the Lord commanded him – exactly. Note that Moses placed hands on Joshua, who was a man 'in the spirit'.

Numbers 27.18-23 – So the LORD said to Moses, "Take Joshua son of Nun, a man in whom is the spirit, and lay your hand on him. Have him stand before Eleazar the priest and the entire assembly and commission him in their presence. Give him some of your authority so the whole Israelite community will obey him. He is to stand before Eleazar the priest, who will obtain decisions for him by inquiring of the Urim before the LORD. At his command he and the entire community of the Israelites will go out, and at his command they will come in." Moses did as the LORD commanded him. He took Joshua and had him stand before Eleazar the priest and the whole assembly. Then he laid his hands on him and commissioned him, as the LORD instructed through Moses.

Prophetic utterance and symbolism

Elisha placed his hands on the hands of the King of Israel, before encouraging him to fire an arrow out of the window, and then declare victory in the upcoming battle. Interestingly, we find a prophetic word leading to an action where the prophet (or the pray-er) lays their hand on someone, before the person does something. We find this pattern repeated in the New Testament. It is symbolic, but it is also powerful.

2 Kings 13.15-17 – Elisha said, “Get a bow and some arrows,” and he did so. “Take the bow in your hands,” he said to the king of Israel. When he had taken it, Elisha put his hands on the king’s hands. “Open the east window,” he said, and he opened it. “Shoot!” Elisha said, and he shot. “The LORD’s arrow of victory, the arrow of victory over Aram!” Elisha declared. “You will completely destroy the Arameans at Aphek.”

THE NEW TESTAMENT

The New Testament is seen as more relevant to us today, because now we are under the New Covenant with Jesus. What does this mean? Put simply, we now have one mediator between us and God. Jesus is the one who stands between man and God so that through him, we can become right with God, if we accept Jesus to be Lord over / in charge of our life. Of course, the Old Testament is relevant, but seeing as we no longer have to make sacrifices like the people of Israel did to make up for their wrongs and sins, we can see that things are different today. Instead, we must come before Jesus and say sorry and truly mean it.

Miracles and healings of Jesus

What a great place to start – Jesus! As Jesus is our perfect example, we can look at the ways he did things, to give us ideas, examples and patterns for how we should behave and live the Christian life.

Jairus Daughter and the Unclean Woman

Mark 5.22-23, we learn that the people of the day associated Jesus and healing with the laying on of hands. “Then one of the synagogue rulers, named Jairus, came there. Seeing Jesus, he fell at his feet and pleaded earnestly with him, “My little daughter is dying. Please come and put your hands on her so that she will be healed and live.”

As Jesus went to heal Jairus’ daughter, something that I find quite moving happened. Mark 5.24-34:

A large crowd followed and pressed around him. And a woman was there who had been subject to bleeding for twelve years. She had suffered a great deal under the care of many doctors and had spent all she had, yet instead of getting better she grew worse. When she heard about Jesus, she came up behind him in the crowd and touched his cloak, because she thought, “If I just touch his clothes, I will be healed.” Immediately her bleeding stopped and she felt in her body that she was freed from her suffering. At once Jesus realized that power had gone out from him. He turned around in the crowd and asked, “Who touched my clothes?” “You see the people

crowding against you," his disciples answered, "and yet you can ask, 'Who touched me?' "But Jesus kept looking around to see who had done it. Then the woman, knowing what had happened to her, came and fell at his feet and, trembling with fear, told him the whole truth. He said to her, "Daughter, your faith has healed you. Go in peace and be freed from your suffering."

So, as Jesus went to heal Jairus' daughter, a woman touched his cloak and he felt power go out from him. When he turned to see who it was, the woman fell at his feet. Jesus told her that her faith had healed her. The woman mixed her faith and determination with one touch of Jesus, and she was healed by his words. The same can be true today. If we mix faith, determination and have one touch of Jesus, through the words of believers, from the Word of God – we can see healings today. But we also learn that power went out from Jesus. So, the woman was healed because of the power of Jesus, and his power alone. Today, it is not the laying on of hands that is some magic trick for healing. Instead, it is the power of Jesus in and through us.

Jesus in Nazareth

In Mark 6, we find Jesus in his home town of Nazareth. Jesus found he was without honour in his hometown and found they had a real lack of faith in him. (Question – is your faith in the 'baby' Jesus, or in the real, risen Jesus who is Lord..?) But here we find a way in which Jesus healed people – by laying his hands on them.

So, in Nazareth we learn that, "(Jesus) could not do any miracles there, except lay his hands on a few sick people and heal them. And he was amazed at their lack of faith." (Mark 6.5-6).

As we have seen, the laying on of hands is effectively an outward appearance of the transfer of Jesus' healing power into people's bodies. I believe that as Christians, we have the same power and authority given to us today, via the Holy Spirit in us. How do we know this? Well, we have the words of Jesus who says this himself.

In John 14.12, he says, "I tell you the truth, anyone who has faith in me will do what I have been doing. He will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father."

Healing by laying on of hands

Luke 4.40 says, "When the sun was setting, the people brought to Jesus all who had various kinds of sickness, and laying his hands on each one, he healed them." So we see that Jesus had the ability to heal all those with many varied sicknesses. Each person has Jesus lay hands on them and they were healed.

The Blind Man Healed

(Jesus) took the blind man by the hand and led him outside the village. When he had spit on the man's eyes and put his hands on him, Jesus asked, "Do you see anything?" He looked up and said, "I see people; they look like trees walking around." 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.

Again, we find Jesus laying his hands on someone for their healing. Interestingly, this time Jesus spat on the man's eyes. He did this twice. Spitting on people's eyes is not necessarily a good idea, and not always essential for people's healing! Unless God specifically and very clearly tells you to do so!!

The Great Commission

If there were any doubt about the fact that we have the authority in the name of Jesus to heal people today (by the laying on of hands among other ways), the Bible is very clear in Mark 16.15-18:

He said to them, "Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation. Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned. And these signs will accompany those who believe: In my name they will drive out demons; they will speak in new tongues; they will pick up snakes with their hands; and when they drink deadly poison, it will not hurt them at all; they will place their hands on sick people, and they will get well."

The Crippled Woman

On a Sabbath Jesus was teaching in one of the synagogues, and a woman was there who had been crippled by a spirit for eighteen years. She was bent over and could not straighten up at all. When Jesus saw her, he called her forward and said to her, "Woman, you are set free from your infirmity." Then he put his hands on her, and immediately she straightened up and praised God.

Once again, Jesus showed an outward touch by placing his hands on her. Interestingly, he had spoken to her that she was free from her infirmity. Yet it was only when he put his hands on her that she straightened up and praised God. Sometimes we should not just pray for people, but lay hands on them, symbolising the power of God flowing from the Holy Spirit in us, to that person.

Saul's Conversion

We find the disciples continuing the practice of laying hands on people, as led by God in the story of Saul's conversion in Acts 9.11-12.

Ananias was told by God to, "Go to the house of Judas on Straight Street and ask for a man from Tarsus named Saul, for he is praying. In a vision he has seen a man named Ananias come and place his hands on him to restore his sight."

In Acts 9.17-19, we see the result of Ananias' obedience and of laying on of hands. "Then Ananias went to the house and entered it. Placing his hands on Saul, he said, "Brother Saul, the Lord—Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as you were coming here—has sent me so that you may see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit." Immediately, something like scales fell from Saul's eyes, and he could see again. He got up and was baptized, and after taking some food, he regained his strength."

Paul uses laying on of hands to heal (in Malta)

Acts 28.7-8 – There was an estate nearby that belonged to Publius, the chief official of the island. He welcomed us to his home and for three days entertained us hospitably. His father was sick in bed, suffering from fever and dysentery. Paul went in to see him and, after prayer, placed his hands on him and healed him.

Blessing

We find that Jesus prayed for and lay hands on the children, to bless them (pray good God things and protection for them).

Matthew 19.13-15 – Then little children were brought to Jesus for him to place his hands on them and pray for them. But the disciples rebuked those who brought them. Jesus said, "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these." When he had placed his hands on them, he went on from there.

Mark 10.16 – And he took the children in his arms, put his hands on them and blessed them.

Dedication for service

Acts 6.2-7 tells us the disciples choosing men of God who would serve the widows in the daily distribution of food. Because the disciples were over-worked, they wanted to make sure the ministry of the Word of God was not overlooked. So they chose 7 other men to serve the widows. In doing so, the apostles laid hands on the men (all men 'full of faith and the Holy Spirit') to 'dedicate' them for this service. The result of this was that the 7 were given opportunity, the widows weren't neglected, the number of disciples increased rapidly in Jerusalem and a large number of priests became Christians! Read for yourself below..

The Twelve gathered all the disciples together and said, "It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables. Brothers, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word." This proposal pleased the whole group. They chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit; also Philip, Procorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas from Antioch, a convert to Judaism. They presented these men to the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them. So the word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith.

Setting aside and sending Saul and Barnabas

Acts 13.1-3 – In the church at Antioch there were prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Simeon called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen (who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch) and Saul. While they were worshiping 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.

On several occasions, we find that laying hands on people is preceded by prayer. This is the case above. The sending of Saul and Barnabas was after worship and fasting, when the Holy Spirit spoke. The Spirit spoke for Saul and Barnabas were to be set aside. They were also called from within and by the church. The apostles placed their hands on them as an act of commissioning and of sending the 2 in their new ministry to the Gentiles (people who weren't Jews, like me and probably like you!) The apostles were obedient to the Spirit and so must we be. This sending is the reason why we are Christians today! Some Bible scholars believe that it is Biblical for apostles to be sent by a church and to lay hands of them before they go. This Bible passage is why many people believe this or think it's good practice to follow.

To receive the Holy Spirit

An interesting story in Acts 8.14-23 with Peter and John.

When the apostles in Jerusalem heard that Samaria had accepted the word of God, they sent Peter and John to them. When they arrived, they prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit, because the Holy Spirit had not yet come upon any of them; they had simply been baptized into the name of the Lord Jesus. Then Peter and John placed their hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit. When Simon saw that the Spirit was given at the laying on of the apostles' hands, he offered them money and said, “Give me also this ability so that everyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit.” Peter answered: “May your money perish with you, because you thought you could buy the gift of God with money! You have no part or share in this ministry, because your heart is not right before God. Repent of this wickedness and pray to the Lord. Perhaps he will forgive you for having such a thought in your heart. For I see that you are full of bitterness and captive to sin.”

We learn a few things from this Bible bit. Again, we find that apostles were sent. We see that Peter and John prayed for the believers to receive the Holy Spirit. Again, the prayer is first and then comes the laying on of hands. With the laying on of hands, the believers received the Holy Spirit. Amazing how once again, Almighty God wants and does use people like you and me to enable and heal others!

However, a sorcerer called Simon saw that the Spirit was given 'at the laying on of the apostles' hands' he wanted some of that power too. How did Simon see that the Spirit was given? Well, there must have been some physical manifestation (something visible happened) to show that the Spirit had been given. So, we know that sometimes when the Holy Spirit is given, something physical and very real happens that others can see, hear and maybe even sense. But Simon could not lay on hands or be given this because he was

full of bitterness and captive to sin (no doubt greed was one motive). So, those 'spiritual' people who believe we have power in us to lay hands on others (all the new age type false religions) are wrong. Only believers have this power because only believers have God's Holy Spirit in them.

Paul was able to lay on hands so people received the Holy Spirit

While Apollos was at Corinth, Paul took the road through the interior and arrived at Ephesus. There he found some disciples and asked them, "Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?" They answered, "No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit." So Paul asked, "Then what baptism did you receive?" "John's baptism," they replied. Paul said, "John's baptism was a baptism of repentance. He told the people to believe in the one coming after him, that is, in Jesus." On hearing this, they were baptized 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. There were about twelve men in all.

It seems that some people had become Christians, but had not fully received the Holy Spirit. Maybe the same is true today of you, or of other Christians. When Paul placed his hands on the believers, the Holy Spirit 'came on them' and they spoke tongues and prophesied. The evidence that the Holy Spirit had come was them speaking in tongues and prophesying. The Holy Spirit makes things happen!! Maybe this was the same reaction that happened to the believers in Jerusalem (above).

Timothy's Gift

We learn from 1 Timothy 4.14 that Timothy was given a gift by the laying on of hands by the elders of his church. Paul remembers this in some of his words to Timothy in 1 Timothy 4.12-16:

Don't let anyone look down on you because you are young, but set an example for the believers in speech, in life, in love, in faith and in purity. Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to preaching and to teaching. Do not neglect your gift, which was given you through a prophetic message when the body of elders laid their hands on you. Be diligent in these matters; give yourself wholly to them, so that everyone may see your progress. Watch your life and doctrine closely. Persevere in them, because if you do, you will save both yourself and your hearers.

We do not directly know what the gift was that Timothy was given. We only learn that it was given through a prophetic message when the body of elders laid their hands on him. So, laying on of hands can also be associated with prophecy and even the impartation (the giving) of a spiritual gift. If it is true of Timothy, it is true for us today and this may be one way God uses to prophecy and give gifts.

Paul talks about this gift more in 2 Timothy 1.6 – “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.”

From what Paul says here, and from 1 Timothy 4, we learn that we may have been given gifts, but we must continue to work on them, persevere, be diligent, give ourselves to them, fan them into flame. This means keep growing, expanding in your gifts and allow them to come to full maturity, width and depth.

Be careful

In 1 and 2 Timothy Paul wrote of Timothy's having been given a spiritual gift by prophecy with the laying on of the hands of the assembly of elders (1 Timothy 4:14). He also referred to a gift of God that was in Timothy through the laying on of Paul's hands (2 Timothy 1:6). Paul warned against laying hands on any one hastily (1 Timothy 5:22).

An elementary teaching – Hebrews 6.1-3

“Therefore let us leave the elementary teachings about Christ and go on to maturity, not laying again the foundation of repentance from acts that lead to death, and of faith in God, instruction about baptisms, the laying on of hands, the resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment. And God permitting, we will do so.”

The fact that the Bible considers ‘laying on of hands’ an elementary teaching shows that it should be part of our Christian life. It's ranked alongside repentance from sin, faith in God, instruction about baptism, resurrection of the dead and eternal judgment! It is relevant today!