

TOWARD A THEOLOGY OF ORDINATION

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3 The task assigned to us was to prepare an introductory study on the topic of a theology of
4 ordination that would be used by this Committee as a starting point for the discussion of the
5 topic. The assignment also stated that we were to place the emphasis on the practice and
6 significance of the laying on of hands as it relates to ordination. This we have done. We
7 approached the biblical text in its final canonical form paying attention to contextual, linguistic,
8 and grammatical matters related to the biblical passages chosen for analysis. Backgrounds were
9 taken into consideration whenever it was concluded that it was important to do so. Footnoting
10 has been kept to a minimum in order to keep the paper as short as possible.
11 We begin with a study of the biblical passages where the laying on of hands is part of a ritual of
12 ordination and from them we try to draw some theological conclusions. Since we are examining
13 this topic from an Adventist perspective, it is important to take into consideration the
14 contributions of Ellen G. White regarding ordination. We conclude with a section on the
15 theology of ordination as it derives from these two primary sources.

I. Laying on of Hands in the Old Testament

17 The “hand” plays a significant symbolical role in the Old Testament and the ancient Near
18 East. Body parts were actually thought to have served “as seats of various attributes, even as the
19 seat of life itself.”¹ The Hebrew noun for hand, *yad*, denotes individuality, ability, possession,
20 power, authority, and creativity. The Lord spoke, gave commandments, acted, and ordained by
21 the hand of human agents. Thus, “hand” became a symbol of agency and of the presence of the
22 Lord. The word *samak* (“to lay”) suggests leaning, a gesture by which pressure is applied to the

¹ Foster Roland McCurley, “A Semantic Study of Anatomical Terms in Akkadian, Ugaritic, and Biblical Literature” (Ph.D. dissertation, The Dropsie College for Hebrew and Cognate Learning, 1968), 6-7.

1 recipient and strongly includes the concept of sustenance and support. A combination of the
2 symbolism of hand (*yad*) with that of *samak* results in a picture of either a hand that powerfully
3 leans on something or supports it, or hand as an expression of power or support.

4 The Old Testament phrase for laying on of hands, *samak yad* appears twenty-five times
5 in a variety of contexts. Eighteen times hands are laid on animals in the context of sacrifice or of
6 the scapegoat,² five times on people,³ one time on an inanimate object,⁴ and another describes
7 the Lord's support of one who stumbles.⁵ The laying on of hands texts connected with blessing
8 use different verbs.⁶ The phrase is rarely used in the context of ordaining someone to serve in a
9 particular office. In the Old Testament we only find two such instances. These are the laying on
10 of hands on the Levites and on Joshua.

11 **A. Levites and the Laying on of Hands**

12 The tribe of Levi was the only one that remained loyal to the Lord during the incident of the
13 golden calf at Sinai. The Lord recognized this loyalty by entrusting to them the services of the
14 sanctuary which originally were going to be in the hands of the firstborn sons of Israel. In order

² The usage of one hand, eight times: Leviticus 1:4 (“and he shall lay his hand on the head of the burnt offering”); 3:2, 8, 13 (“and he shall lay his hand on the head of his offering”); 4:4 (“and he shall lay his hand on the bull”); 4:24, 29, 33 (“and he shall lay his hand on the head of the male goat”). The usage of two hands, one time: 16:21 (“and Aaron shall lay both of his hands on the head of the live goat”). The usage of one or two hands, nine times; Exodus 29:10, 19 (Aaron and his sons shall lay their hands on head of a bull); 29:15 (Aaron and his sons shall lay their hands on the head of ram); Leviticus 4:15 (the elders of the congregation shall lay hands on the bull's head); 8:14 (Aaron and his sons laid hands on the head of a bull); 8:18, 22 (Aaron and his sons laid hands on the head of a ram); Numbers 8:12 (Levites shall lay hands on the heads of bulls); 2 Chronicles 29:23 (the king and assembly laid hands on goats).

³ Three passages refer to Moses laying hand(s) on Joshua (Num 27:18, 23; Deut 34:9), one passage refers to the Children of Israel laying hands on the Levites (Num 8:10) and one passage refers to the congregation laying hands on a blasphemer (Lev 24:14).

⁴ Someone laid his hand on a wall, Amos 5:19.

⁵ Psalm 37:24.

⁶ The verbs used for laying on of hands in blessing are the verbs *sîm* (to put) and *shîth* (to place). For example, see Genesis 48:12-14 where Israel placed his hands on the heads of his grandsons to bless them. In the New Testament does not make such linguistic distinctions. There are no cases of healing through the laying on of hands in the Old Testament.

1 to officially entrust to them this most solemn task they went through a ceremony of
2 consecration/ordination to the Lord.

3 1. Ceremony of Ordination

4 The ceremony of the Levites' ordination, recorded in Number 8:5-26, commenced with a
5 divine command to "take" (v. 6) the Levites from among the other Israelites. The Lord had
6 chosen them and Moses is expected to reveal the divine election by setting them apart. The
7 command further instructed Moses that after purifying them he was to summon them to a public
8 ceremony to be held in front of the Tabernacle. "The whole congregation of the sons of Israel"
9 were to "lay their hands on the Levites" (v. 10). Having received the laying on of hands (*samak*
10 *yad*), the Levites were then to lay their hands on bulls used for a sin offering and a burnt offering
11 to make atonement for themselves. Aaron then presented the Levites to the Lord as a wave
12 offering. They were "set apart/separated" (v. 14) from the rest of the Israelites and dedicated (v.
13 16, "wholly given to Me") to the Lord that they might work in the tabernacle in place of the
14 firstborn males and make atonement for the whole congregation.

15 2. Significance of the Rite

16 The significance of hand laying on the Levites can be organized into five categories:
17 identification, setting apart, transfer, substitution, and appointment to office. *First*, the laying on
18 of hands identified or designated the Levites as the specified ones to become an offering of the
19 whole congregation. Or, through the laying of hands, the people identified themselves with the
20 Levites or their service. *Second*, the hand laying rite distinguished the participants from the rest
21 of the community. The Levites experienced an act of consecration in which they were set apart
22 from the rest of the congregation in order to be completely dedicated to cultic service. *Third*, by

1 laying hands on the Levites, the congregation of Israel symbolically transferred to the Levites
2 their obligations in connection with the tabernacle service which also included authority to act on
3 behalf of the whole nation. *Fourth*, as a direct result of transfer, hand laying also expressed an
4 act of substitution, indicating that the Levites substituted for/replaced the firstborns and
5 represented the rest of the congregation. *Fifth*, the hand laying rite marked an appointment to
6 office, the office of exclusive work in the Tabernacle on behalf of the people.

7 In this particular case, the laying on of hands assumes divine election—God took the
8 initiative in selecting a group of people for this office. The ceremony was not only an
9 acknowledgment of the divine decision but also the public proclamation of the divine intent. The
10 people laid their hands on the Levites as an act of obedience to the Lord. The only thing that is
11 transferred to the Levites is the authority to function within the assigned office. They will
12 represent the people of Israel. There is no reference to any special manifestation of the power of
13 God during the ceremony. Obviously, the Lord had or will endow them with the knowledge and
14 skills they would need for the task.

15 **B. Joshua and the Laying on of Hands**

16 Joshua’s ordination by Moses has been interpreted as the prototype for all ordinations to
17 follow. Two texts describe the laying on of hands in the installation and ordination of Joshua,
18 Number 27:12-23 and Deuteronomy 34:9. We will examine both texts in the course of our
19 discussion.

20 1. Instructions

21 The instructions in Numbers 27:18-20 read:

22 So the Lord said to Moses, “Take Joshua son of Nun, a man in whom is the spirit, and lay
23 your hand on him; and have him stand before Eleazar the priest and before all the

1 congregation and commission him in their sight. You shall put some of your authority on
2 him, in order that all the congregation of the sons of Israel may obey him.”

3
4 One of the extended meanings of the Hebrew word for “take” (*laqah*) is that of “select”
5 or “summon.” Often the imperative “take” designates an initiative that leads to subsequent
6 actions. Verses 18-20 contain a series of verbs which describe the intended subsequent actions:
7 “lay” (*samak*), “stand” (*amad*), “commission” (*tsawa*), and “put/give” (*nathan*). The laying on of
8 hands, as one of the intended subsequent actions, provided a physical means by which Moses
9 became personally involved in the selection process of Israel’s next leader.

10 The Lord commanded Moses to lay his hands on Joshua, “a man in whom is the Spirit.”
11 Joshua’s history reveals a man who had a close walk with his God. Not only was Joshua a man
12 with an indomitable and courageous spirit, but the Lord had given him a special gift of the Spirit
13 that changed him and endowed him for leadership. Hand laying is thus associated with a man
14 filled with the Spirit of the Lord.

15 Laying on of hands was to come together with the formal presentation of Joshua to the
16 high priest Eleazar and to the congregation. The formal presentation (“to stand before”) had,
17 first, the purpose of introducing him to the congregation in a legal setting. A second implication
18 is that the hand laying was associated with the physical gesture of standing in order to indicate
19 Joshua’s acceptance of his responsibilities and the congregation’s acceptance of Joshua. Third,
20 “to stand before,” is associated here with cultic terms, priest, and congregation, suggesting that
21 hand laying was part of a cultic and covenantal event emphasizing service. A fourth implication
22 is that the term “stand before” also indicates where Joshua’s ordination ceremony took place. It
23 took place at the tent of meeting.

24 Two further observations about laying on of hands are in order: (1) it seems to be more

1 important than the other actions and (2) it happens before the other actions in the ordination
2 ceremony. The sense of the imperative of v. 18, “take,” continues with each of the verbs
3 syntactically connected to it. At the same time a hierarchy is established: (1) lay, (2) stand, (3)
4 command or charge, and (4) give (some of Moses’ honor; Heb. *hod*, “majesty, authority”). Each
5 command becomes contingent on the previous command. The primary action of this series of
6 commands is the laying of Moses’ hand on Joshua.

7 In the divine instructions given to Moses, hand laying is associated with a four-part
8 charge spelled out in three parallel passages to Numbers 27:12-23: (1) Deuteronomy 3:21-28; (2)
9 31:1-8, 14, 23; and (3) Joshua 1:1-9. First, Moses was to speak words of encouragement
10 calculated to make Joshua strong and resolute in his leadership. Second, Moses was to spell out
11 Joshua’s twofold task, to conquer the land and to distribute it equitably to all the tribes. Third,
12 Moses was to express assurance of divine aid: God would personally support him. Fourth, Moses
13 was to exhort Joshua to keep the law. Hand laying is associated with a commission verbally
14 spoken by a human but effected by the Lord.

15 2. Implementation

16 In the implementation of the Lord’s orders (Num 27:22-23), Moses stood Joshua before
17 Eleazar and the congregation, laid hands on him, and gave him a charge, but the implementation
18 narrative made no mention of giving him honor or authority. Why not? An answer to this
19 question may lead directly to the laying on of hands. The divine command of v. 20 instructed
20 Moses to place some of his honor/authority “on him,” meaning on Joshua. Use of “on him” in
21 the placement-of-honor command corresponds directly to the “on him” of the hand laying
22 instruction of v. 18. The transfer of honor is associated with the laying on of hands. The

1 combination of laying on of hands with public presentation and giving a charge became the
2 actions which transferred some of Moses' honor to Joshua. Sharing some of Moses' honor with
3 Joshua was important for Joshua as the new leader. The divine support was confirmed by the
4 appearance of the Lord on that occasion in a cloud (Deut 31:15). After that moment Joshua had
5 the respect and support of the people.

6 The second text describing the laying on of hands for Joshua is Deuteronomy 34:9:

7 Now Joshua son of Nun was filled with the spirit of wisdom, for Moses had laid hands on
8 him; and the sons of Israel listened to him and did as the Lord had commanded Moses.

9
10 Again, the laying on of hands receives special prominence and importance. This passage
11 is placed near the end of the conclusion of the book of Deuteronomy. The final four chapters of
12 the book focus on Moses' death and Joshua's ordination. The laying on of hands becomes the
13 gesture summarizing and giving meaning to the entire ordination event. Deuteronomy 34:9
14 accords further importance to the laying on of hands by noting two results of the ritual. First,
15 Joshua received the Spirit of wisdom as a direct result of the gesture. The Lord had already
16 poured out on Joshua a measure of the Spirit, but during the ordination Joshua received the Spirit
17 of wisdom—the Spirit as the source of wisdom. It appears that at his ordination, the Lord gave
18 him a new and special outpouring of the Spirit of wisdom that will give him the insight and
19 administrative ability necessary for his new role. Second, Joshua also received the support and
20 obedience of the children of Israel as a direct result of the ceremony.

21 3. Interpretation

22 We should look more carefully at the ritual of ordination in order to explore its full
23 import as presented in both, Numbers 27:12-23 and Deuteronomy 34:9. We will organize the
24 discussion into three sections: (1) the procedure, (2) the symbolic implications, and (3) the

1 objective results.

2 *Procedure:* The procedure Moses followed was similar to that used for the Levites. Both
3 ceremonies took place before the tent of meeting and before the entire community. Moses
4 represented both the Lord and the congregation. The presentation informed the congregation that
5 Joshua was the new leader and identified for him the people he was to lead. Joshua was also
6 presented to the high priest, possibly to remind him that they were to work in close harmony.
7 Joshua was not to forget his connection with his God. The ceremony included a four part charge:
8 (1) words to encourage Joshua's resolution, (2) words describing Joshua's task, (3) words
9 promising divine assistance, sufficiency, and companionship, and (4) words exhorting Joshua to
10 read, preserve, and carefully keep the law.

11 *Meaning: First,* laying of hands indicated identification. Joshua was identified as
12 dedicated to the Lord and as His choice for the next leader of Israel. The hand-laying gesture was
13 a public act confirming and ratifying the spiritual gifts the Lord had already given Joshua. The
14 gesture was an act of validation recognizing that the Lord gave Joshua the capacity to lead. Thus
15 hand laying confirmed an inner endowment by an external recognition.

16 *Second,* laying on of hands indicated initiation to an office. The gesture set Joshua apart
17 from the rest of the congregation and distinguished him from all other potential leaders.
18 Furthermore, the gesture signified an official investiture of responsibility and authority, a
19 dedication to leadership, and a conferral of formal and public appointment to that office.

20 *Third,* hand laying symbolically transferred to Joshua power to act on behalf of the Lord
21 and of the nation. While Numbers notes that Joshua already had the Spirit, Deuteronomy clearly
22 states that Joshua received the Spirit of wisdom *because* Moses laid hands on him. The role of

1 Moses was not to give him the Spirit but to lay his hand on him. At that moment the Lord gave
2 Joshua the Spirit of wisdom that enabled him to better function as leader.

3 *Fourth*, laying on of hands in no way established a dynasty or created circumstances that
4 could be used today to argue for “apostolic succession.” Moses may have laid his hands on
5 Joshua, but Joshua’s authority was rooted in the Lord who had worked through Moses.
6 Joshua’s authority was founded in his connection with God rather than his connection to Moses.
7 Besides, there is no indication that Joshua laid his hand on his successor before his death.

8 *Objectives Results:* The effects of laying on of hands finds its primary importance in the
9 fact that God Himself instructed Moses to lay his hands on Joshua. The physical gesture of hand
10 laying finds its root in a command from the Almighty. The whole congregation observed Moses
11 physically touching his successor, thus identifying him as such. Because the hand-laying gesture
12 was rooted in a command from the Almighty, the gesture is associated with the Spirit of wisdom
13 manifested in leadership skills and the congregation’s receptivity and obedience to Joshua’s
14 leadership.

15 **C. Conclusion**

16 By way of conclusion and summary we ask, what does the laying on of hands accomplish
17 in the two narratives discussed above? We suggest five accomplishments. *First*, laying on of
18 hands is an act of identification, establishing horizontal as well as vertical communication.
19 Vertically, God identifies a Spirit-filled individual (Joshua) or a group of faithful individuals
20 (Levites) chosen by Himself. Horizontally, the congregation identifies through the hand gesture
21 those it recognizes as chosen by God. *Second*, laying on of hands sets some persons apart from
22 the community in order to be completely dedicated to a specific task. In keeping with the

1 meaning of support attributed to the Hebrew phrase, hand laying also becomes a physical gesture
2 by which the congregation and God indicate a pledge of support to those on whom hands are
3 laid.

4 *Third*, laying on of hands mediates a transfer to the individual from both God and the
5 ecclesiastical community. To Joshua, God gave the Spirit of wisdom and authority to function in
6 His name. The community, on the other hand, transferred authority to act on its behalf. To the
7 Levites God transferred the role of the firstborn sons of Israel and the Israelites accepted them as
8 their representatives. *Fourth*, as a direct result of this transfer, hand laying indicates that some
9 people are appointed to stand for the community.

10 What are the important features of the laying on of hands ceremony? *First*, it should be a
11 public event, thus symbolically reminding those ordained to whom they are accountable.

12 *Second*, the public place should be carefully selected. Both the Levites and Joshua received the
13 gesture at the door to the Sanctuary thus indicating the importance of a place dedicated to the
14 public worship of God. *Third*, hands must be physically placed on the individual. Those
15 performing the gesture represent both the congregation and God. In the case of the Levites the
16 congregation was involved. *Fourth*, it would be correct to include a four part charge: (a) words
17 of encouragement based on past experiences with God, (b) description of the task for which the
18 individual is being set aside, (c) assurance of divine aid, and (d) an exhortation to keep God's
19 law.

20 **II. Laying on of Hands in the NT**

21 The practice and significance of the laying on of hands as a rite of ordination in the New
22 Testament is somewhat difficult to ascertain. We do not know much about the origin of this rite,

1 which is mentioned only five times in the New Testament. Most of what theologians say about it is
2 based on inferences derived from their reading of the biblical text. Drawing inferences from the
3 biblical text is not necessarily wrong but we should be careful not to read into it what is not there or
4 what became standard practices in the post apostolic church. In what follows, we will say
5 something about the origin of the ritual, will also analyze the passages in which it is explicitly
6 mentioned, and finally draw some theological and practical conclusions.

7 **A. Origin of the Ritual**

8 The New Testament does not explicitly tell us when ordination through the laying on of
9 hands was first introduced into the Christian church. The first time it is mentioned there is no
10 attempt to explain its origin (Acts 6:6). It is logical to assume that it was instituted by Jesus
11 following the Old Testament antecedents of Joshua and the Levites. But this is difficult to prove
12 conclusively from the biblical text. We know that Jesus formally established the church by
13 authorizing the baptism of believers (John 3:22-30; 4:1-3; Matt 28:19-20) and by appointing the
14 twelve apostles, echoing His original establishment of Israel more than a thousand years before.
15 The apostles were set apart from a larger group of disciples to form a new beginning for the
16 people of God. To them the Lord assigned some more specific tasks. And it could be that at that
17 moment He laid His hands on them.

18 According to the Gospel writers, after praying all night (Luke 6:12-13), Jesus “went up
19 on the mountain and called to him those whom he desired, and they came to him. And he
20 appointed [*poieō*, “to make, do;” here in the sense of “appoint” (e.g., Heb 3:2)] twelve (whom he
21 also named apostles) so that they might be with him and he might send them out to preach”
22 (Mark 3:13-14, ESV). The rather compact descriptions in the several Gospels make it difficult to

1 know the details of the appointment of the Twelve. Using the language of other New Testament
2 writers we could say that it is Jesus, as *the* Apostle par excellence sent by God the Father (Heb
3 3:1; Matt 10:40; Luke 4:43; John 20:21), who appoints the Twelve.⁷ In Mark and Luke Jesus
4 names them “apostles” (Mark 3:14; Luke 6:13) and the work appointed them in all four Gospels
5 indicates that they will fulfill that role—He is sending them (*apostellē*, 3:14), just as He was sent
6 by the Father.

7 John summarizes the appointment of the apostles saying, “You did not choose Me but I
8 chose [*eklegomai*, “to choose, elect”] you, and appointed [*tithemi*] you that you would go and
9 bear fruit” (15:16, NASB). The verb *tithēmi* means “to assign to some task or function.” A verb
10 from the same root, *epitithēmi* (“to lay/place on or transfer to”), is used in the New Testament
11 (e.g., Acts 6:6; 13:3; 1Tim 5:22) and in the LXX (Num 8:10; 27:18, 23; Deut 34:9) in the phrase
12 “laying on of hands,” but the verb does not by itself express the idea of ordination.⁸ Whether in
13 this passage it includes that idea is a matter of debate.

14 Perhaps we could say that the passage in John provides, if at all, a vague hint to or does
15 not exclude the possibility that Jesus laid the hands on the Twelve when ordaining them. Also
16 important for our purpose is that Jesus elected, appointed, and entrusted to them a specific work:

⁷ It should be indicated that the Greek verb *poieō*, translated “to appoint,” is never used in the LXX or in the New Testament in conjunction with the laying on of hands. In other words, it does not help us to establish whether the appointment was accompanied with some ritual act.

⁸ It is useful to notice that in Mark 3:16, the passage discussed above, the verb *epitithēmi* is used by Jesus but not to refer to the laying on of hands on the Twelve but to the moment when He gave them new names. This is a different usage of the verb (*epitithēmi onoma*, “to give a surname [to someone]”). What is unexpected is that the practice of Jesus laying hands on people for healing (e.g., Matt 9:18; Mark 5:23; 6:5; 7:32; Luke 4:40) and blessing (e.g., Matt 19:13-15) is frequent in the Gospels but is not mentioned in the selection and appointment of the Twelve. Interestingly, after the resurrection the disciples felt the need of selecting someone to take the place of Judas among the apostles (Acts 1:15-26). In this case the apostles, working together with a group of over a100 believers, made the decision. They selected two names and they used lots to know which one the Lord wanted to select. The lot fell on Matthias and “he was added to the eleven apostles” (1:26). There is no reference to the laying on of hands on him but it is clearly affirmed that it was the Lord who chose him “to occupy this ministry [*diakonia*] and apostleship [*apostole*] from which Judas turned aside” (v. 26).

1 preaching, casting out demons, and healing. In other words, they were chosen not only as the
2 Twelve but also for mission, a mission that was a continuation of and a participation in the
3 mission of Jesus. In doing this, Jesus was conferring on them authority as His personal
4 representatives (Matt 10:1, 7-8). After His death and resurrection, Jesus bestowed the Holy Spirit
5 on the apostles, making them His undershepherds, instructing them, and authorizing them to act
6 on His behalf (John 20:21-23).

7 **B. Explicit References to the Laying on of Hands**

8 The phrase “to lay hands/hand on” (*epitithēmi tas cheiras/tēn chiera*) is used a total of
9 twenty-one times in the NT but it only occasionally designates installment to an office or setting
10 apart for a specific ministry. It is used thirteen times in connection with healings and blessings and
11 three times in connection with baptism (Acts 8:17, 19; 19:16). The book of Acts reports two
12 exceptional cases in which the Holy Spirit was not received with baptism as was common (2:38).
13 In such cases the apostles laid hands on the believers and they received the Spirit. The laying on of
14 hands is not regularly associated with baptism. In the other three cases the laying on of hands
15 occurs in the context of appointing a person to a particular ministerial function. We will examine
16 these cases in detail.

17 1. Appointing the Seven

18 After Pentecost, with thousands being added to the church and social and religious
19 tensions rising between Hebrew-speaking and Greek-speaking Jewish converts to Christianity,
20 additional leaders became necessary, resulting in the appointment of seven person to *serve*
21 [*diakonein*] in the needed *ministry* [*diakonia*] (6:1-2). The process of appointing them is
22 described as follows. The apostles invited the congregation of believers in Jerusalem to join them

1 in solving the situation they were facing. The congregation was asked to select from among them
2 seven individuals “of good reputation, full of the Spirit and of wisdom whom we may put in
3 charge of this task”—“the daily serving of food” (6:1), serving tables (6:2). This implies that the
4 congregation examined and evaluated several candidates and finally chose seven. They were
5 brought to the apostles “and after praying, they laid their hands on them” (v. 6). It is not clear
6 who laid the hands on the seven, but it was probably the church and the apostles. The seven were
7 appointed by the church to their specific ministry through the laying on of hands. The historical
8 background for this ordination is most probably the ordination of the Levites (Num 8:9-10). In
9 both cases the congregation was involved and those ordained were to minister on behalf of the
10 people of God.

11 Whether these individuals were appointed to the role of deacons or whether we are
12 dealing here with something different is not clearly indicated by the biblical text. Although they
13 are not called “deacons” (*diakonoi*), the use of the verb *diakonein* in this passage (6:1, 4) goes
14 well beyond the Christian service all are to render as followers of the preeminent Servant and
15 could refer to the office of deacons as distinguished from the apostolic office.⁹ But this is not
16 clearly stated in the text. In fact, at least two of the deacons are subsequently involved in
17 *teaching* and *preaching* (Stephen, 6:10; Philip, 8:4). If the reference is to the function of deacons
18 in the church, then this would be the only passage in the New Testament associating deacons
19 with the laying on of hands. Later the functions of elder and deacon were clearly differentiated (1
20 Tim 3:10, 13) and both ministries became widely established (Phil 1:1; cf. 1 Cor 16:15-16).

21 2. Ordaining Barnabas and Paul

⁹ See Mark 10:45; John 12:26; 2 Timothy 1:18; Hebrew 6:10 for examples of the more general use of the verb compared with a more specific sense in 1 Timothy 3:10, 13; Philemon 13; 1 Pet 4:10-11.

1 In the ordination and commissioning of Barnabas and Paul we find an almost complete
2 description of the rite of the laying on of hands. The meeting took place in the church of Antioch,
3 where there were prophets and teachers. The Spirit indicated that they should be sent out as
4 missionaries of the gospel, saying through one of the prophets: “Set apart [*aphorizō*, “select,” “set
5 apart,” “appoint”] for Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them” (Acts
6 13:2). As a response the congregation fasted and prayed, laid their hands on Barnabas and Paul,
7 and sent them away. The call preceded their being set apart through the laying on of hands.
8 Following their ordination, they were sent off to fulfill their specific mission. The text does not
9 state whose hands were laid on Barnabas and Paul. It could have been the prophets and teachers
10 (mentioned in v. 4) or the church.

11 The verb *aphorizō* is used two other times in the New Testament to refer to a divine setting
12 apart. In one case Paul uses it to refer to his divine calling to proclaim the gospel to the Gentiles
13 (Rom 1:1; cf. Acts 26:16-18) and in the other he speaks about God who “had set me apart even
14 from my mother’s womb and called me through His grace” (Gal 1:15). The setting apart for a
15 particular mission takes place before the ordination or the laying on of hands, suggesting that the
16 laying on of hands is a ritual through which the church acknowledges that these two persons were
17 set apart and called by God to a particular mission. In this case Barnabas and Paul are ordained not
18 to serve a local congregation but the Gentile world in many nations. They were ordained as
19 missionaries.

20 3. Laying on of Hands upon Elders

21 Paul counsels Timothy: “Do not lay hands upon anyone too hastily and thereby share
22 responsibility for the sins of others” (1 Tim 5:22). To whom does “anyone” refer? Most

1 interpreters tend to believe that the reference is to church elders. The main reason for this
2 interpretation is that in the previous verses Paul is discussing the role of church elders; the leaders
3 in the local congregations. Although this interpretation is not absolutely certain one could support
4 it on the basis of the immediate context. If this reading is accepted, this would be the only passage
5 in the New Testament indicating that local church elders were ordained through the laying on of
6 hands. This carries important implications for our purposes.

7 The appointment of elders (*presbyteroi*),¹⁰ as the ones charged with managing the affairs
8 of the church in Jerusalem developed fairly early. If Peter is to be regarded as typical (9:32; cf.
9 8:14), the apostles were beginning to labor outside of Jerusalem following the stoning of
10 Stephen. That would explain the reason for this leadership transition, attested by Luke as
11 occurring no later than A.D. 46 (see Acts 11:30). Some consider that the function of elder in the
12 early Christian church was patterned after the heads of the Jewish synagogues. Although this
13 may be possible, it seems unlikely since the mention of this office in Acts comes only midway
14 through the narrative. It is quite probable that by the mid-40s every church had locally-appointed
15 elders, as Acts 14:23 suggests.

16 In Acts 14:23, Paul and Barnabas “appointed [*cheirotoneō*, “to choose, appoint, install”¹¹]
17 elders for them [the believers] in every church, having prayed with fasting, they commended them

¹⁰ Throughout the Gospels, the title always refers to Jewish leaders, in particular those who opposed Jesus and eventually joined with the chief priests and scribes to have him crucified (e.g., Mark 8:31; 11:27; 14:53; 15:1 and parallels; but cf. Luke 7:3). There is some evidence that the elders whose jurisdiction included the temple were the preeminent authorities in Jerusalem, both inside and outside the meetings of the Sanhedrin, as they are the one constant in the various mentions of authorities there (e.g., Matt 21:23; 26:3, 47, 57; 27:1; Mark 7:3; Acts 4:5, 23; 6:12).

¹¹ Originally the verb *cheirotoneō* designated the act of stretching out the hand in voting and then it was used to mean “to choose, to appoint, to install” someone for a definite task (BDAG 1083). The idea of choosing someone by raising the hands may still be present in 2 Corinthians 8:19 in the selection of a person to accompany Paul to Jerusalem with an offering.

1 to the Lord in whom they had believed.” No explicit reference is made in this text to the rite of the
2 laying on of hands. It is impossible to determine whether at this early time in the history of the
3 church elders were ordained through the laying on of hands but 1 Timothy 5:22 seems to suggest
4 that later on they were ordained. That may have been the case from the very beginning.

5 The New Testament also refers to church elders as “overseers” (*episkopoi*). Paul speaks to
6 the elders (*presbyterioi*) of the church in Ephesus (Acts 20:17), where the Holy Spirit appointed
7 them as overseers (*episkopoi*) to shepherd (*poimainō*) the church of God (v. 28). Peter also seems
8 to use overseer and shepherd (or “pastor”) synonymously when he speaks of Jesus as “the
9 Shepherd and Overseer of your souls” (1 Pet 2:25), as well as in his exhortation to the leaders of
10 the churches of Asia Minor to “shepherd the flock of God, . . . exercising oversight
11 [*episkopountes*]” (5:2).¹² It would appear that during the time of the apostolic church the terms
12 overseers, elders, and pastors were used interchangeably for those appointed to watch over God’s
13 “flock” and to protect it from danger and deception (Acts 20:29).

14 It is important to know that the term pastor (*poimēn*) is used only once to designate a
15 church leader (Eph 4:11), although as indicated above, the related verb is used several times in
16 this sense (also in John 21:16). While there is no command in the New Testament requiring the
17 ordination of pastors to the ministry, if an elder is a pastor then at some point in the apostolic
18 church the pastor was ordained. Although this suggestion is based on a limited amount of
19 evidence and logical inferences it does appear to be correct.

20 4. Ordination of Timothy

21 There are two passages in which the biblical text uses the noun *epithēsis* (rather than the

¹² Although *episkopountes* is bracketed in the Greek editions, there is widespread and early manuscript evidence as well as internal considerations that favor its being regarded as having been present in the original text.

1 verb *epitithēmi*) in conjunction with hands to mean “the laying on of hands” (1 Tim 4:14; 2 Tim
2 1:6).¹³ Both refer to the experience of Timothy. Paul counseled Timothy not to neglect “the
3 spiritual gift within you, which was bestowed on you through prophetic utterance with the laying
4 on of hands by the presbytery” (1 Tim 4:14). In 2 Timothy 1:6, Paul establishes that at that
5 moment he also was involved in laying his hands on Timothy. This is similar to what took place
6 at the ordination of Barnabas and Paul. The work assigned by the Lord to the person is revealed
7 through a prophetic utterance followed by the laying on of hands. In this case Timothy received a
8 gift from the Spirit probably related to the work assigned to him. This is different from the
9 experience of Barnabas and Paul but similar to the experience of Joshua. The laying on of hands
10 is not the means through which Timothy received the gift but the accompanying circumstance.

11 Those who laid their hands on Timothy were Paul and the “presbytery” (*prebysterion*), a
12 Greek term meaning “council of elders” used three times in the New Testament. In Luke 22:66
13 and Acts 22:5 the term is used to designate the Jewish Sanhedrin.¹⁴ Unfortunately, we do not
14 know anything more about this Christian council of elders. It may have consisted of local elders
15 responsible for the administration of the church. By laying hands on Timothy they acknowledge
16 the divine election and call and officially grant him authority to fulfill his mission in the church.
17 Timothy was to function as an apostolic delegate or emissary to the churches in different
18 provinces of the Roman empire and therefore was more than a local elder.

19 **C. Significance of the Laying on of Hands**

20 We should now examine the practical and theological implications of the laying on of

¹³ There is a third one in Hebrews 6:2. Scholars debate the meaning of this unexpected phrase in Hebrews without final agreements. It could be that the reference is to the laying on of hands at baptism.

¹⁴ The term refers to “an administrative group concerned with the interest of a specific community” (BDAG, 861), whether Jewish or Christian.

1 hands as a rite of ordination in the New Testament.

2 1. Limited Evidence

3 What is surprising is that the New Testament does not say more about the practice of the
4 apostolic church regarding ordination to leadership through the laying on of hands. The lack of
5 emphasis on the topic in the New Testament can be interpreted in various ways. Some may argue
6 that it is not emphasized or more explicitly described because it was a very common practice in
7 the church. Others may consider the lack of emphasis due simply to the rite being unencumbered
8 by the theological baggage it has today. In other words, it was a simple and common rite by
9 which a person was authorized to exercise a particular divine call and not an appointment to a
10 seat of power over the rest of the community. Another possibility is that ordination to ministry
11 did not always include the laying on of hands. Other verbs or formulas were used to express the
12 same idea. We have already indicated that the New Testament uses several different verbs to
13 express the ideas of setting apart or appointing someone to a particular task (see the selective list
14 in the charts on pp. 53-54). The fact remains that the text does not provide an answer to our
15 question.

16 2. Elements of the Ritual and the Participants

17 Concerning those who were ordained, the New Testament explicitly mentions the Seven,
18 Barnabas and Paul, Timothy, and probably church elders/overseers/pastors. If the ordination of
19 the Seven is about deacons, then deacons were also ordained. With respect to those who
20 participated in the laying on of hands the biblical text does not provide a definite pattern.
21 Sometimes the apostles were involved, at another times it was the whole church, or the elders, or
22 both the apostles and the elders. In some cases prayer and/or fasting are mentioned while in

1 others they are not. This suggests that during the apostolic period there was no prescribed or
2 detailed liturgy to be followed in setting apart believers for specific ministries. The biblical
3 instances include several different components, some of which we have already mentioned:
4 election/appointment by the apostles or by the church, prayer and fasting. The laying on of hands
5 was performed by the apostles or by the apostles and elders or by the church, as was the sending,
6 although there is no single instance of ordination in which all these elements are found together.
7 This suggests that the different practices were not prescriptive but descriptive of what was done
8 at particular instances in specific place.

9 3. Nature of the Appointment

10 We can confidently say that ordination in the New Testament is the means of appointing
11 a person for some specific service. Defining the service is not as straightforward. If we look at
12 the chart on pp. 53-54, those appointed for service were the Twelve, the Seventy, the Seven,
13 Matthias, Barnabas and Paul, and Peter. Those who received the laying on of hands were the
14 Seven, Barnabas and Paul, Timothy, and possibly the elders/overseers/pastors. If we look at all
15 of them as a group, the functions assigned to them include: apostleship, prophecy, teaching,
16 administration, preaching, missionary work, distributing food to needy members, oversight of the
17 church, defender of the faith, being a witness, being an evangelist, being a delegate to the
18 apostolic council, and exercising spiritual gifts.

19 If we concentrate our analysis only on those upon whom the laying on of hands was
20 performed the functions are a little more defined. The *Seven* were assigned the *service* of church
21 members' temporal needs. Two of the later were involved in the ministry of the *word* (Acts
22 6:2-3, 8-10 [cf. 2 Cor 12:12]; Acts 8:4-7, 35-38). The *apostles'* ministry focused on *prayer* and

1 in *proclaiming* the word (6:4). These two ministries—service (*diakonia*) and the teaching of the
2 word—are permanent in the church and inseparable from each other. The ministries of Paul,
3 Barnabas, and Timothy are very broad. As *missionaries* they would teach, preach, establish
4 churches, and appoint local leaders (elders). Their ministry went beyond service to a local
5 church.

6 According to 1 Timothy 3:1-7, the functions of the *elders* involved the administration or
7 *oversight* of the local congregation and *teaching* the word (3:2, 4-5). The teaching responsibility
8 is clearly stated in Titus 1:9: “Holding fast the faithful word which is in accordance with the
9 teaching, so that he will be able both to exhort in sound doctrine and to refute those who
10 contradict.” The elder is to know well the teachings of the church in order to exhort believers and
11 to protect the truth from false teachers. If the term “pastor” is another way of referring to an
12 “elder,” then it is logical, as Paul did, to connect the teaching function to the gift of pastoral
13 ministry (Eph 4:11). Elders also had an *evangelistic* function (1 Tim 5:17).

14 If we were to assume that *deacons* were also ordained through the laying on of hands,
15 their ministry is not too different from that of the elders. They, like the elders, should manage
16 well their household (1 Tim 3:12), implying that this would enable them to *manage* well the
17 church. The difference between the two seems to be that the elder as overseer has larger
18 administrative functions. The deacons *may* have also had a *teaching* responsibility. Like the
19 elders, they were expected to hold “to the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience” (3:9; cf. 1
20 Tim 1:19, as applied to Timothy). This is more a qualification than a description of a task but it
21 seems to *imply* a teaching role. If all it means is that they should adhere to the truth of the
22 message of Christ in faith and practice then it is not that significant because this would have been

1 expected from all church members. In this case the *implication* is that this is important enough to
2 mention it because they too will have to teach and defend the truth.

3 From the qualifications given for elders and deacons it would appear that the teaching
4 responsibility in the local church was primarily in the hands of the elder/overseer/pastor but that
5 they were not the exclusive holders of the teaching ministry of the church. Of course all
6 Christians were to be teachers of the truth because the teaching authority of the church rested in
7 the community of believers, but the gift of teaching, mentioned in 1 Corinthians 12:28 and
8 Romans 12:7, could hardly be restricted to church elders. At least the apostles and prophets had
9 teaching authority within the church and presumably the evangelists did too (2 Tim 1:11; James
10 3:1; 1 Cor 14:3; Eph 4:11).

11 The task assigned to *Timothy* after the laying on of hands is not specifically mentioned
12 but is to some extent similar to that of Paul. He was to *oversee* churches in different countries,
13 which could imply that he *organized* them and, like Titus (Titus 1:5), *appointed* church elders
14 (2Tim 5:22). He was expected to *teach, preach, evangelize, and defend* apostolic teaching (2 Tim
15 1:13-14; 2:2; 4:5). If he was ordained as an elder, his functions or tasks went far beyond that of a
16 local elder. This would allow us to suggest that there were elders/overseers/pastors who minister
17 to the larger community of faith. In some case the term “elder” would then have a broader
18 connotation than that of a local church leader. This seems to be supported by the fact that the
19 apostles, at least Peter and John, also refer to themselves as “elders” (1 Pet 5:1; John 1:1; 2 John
20 1; 3 John 1).

21 We should not overlook the fact that the important tasks of officiating at the communion
22 and baptismal services are not assigned to a particular church worker. We can only postulate that

1 they were performed not only by the apostles but by church elders/overseers/pastors. This is
2 understandable when we recall that baptism was to be preceded by teaching. Nevertheless, we
3 cannot exclude the possibility that early in the history of the church there may have been more
4 flexibility. We know that one of the Seven (Philip) baptized a new convert (Acts 8:38). This is
5 definitely an issue that is not clearly defined in the New Testament.

6 4. Nature of the Rite

7 Finally we need to examine the nature of the ritual of ordination in the New Testament:
8 What is it and what happens when it takes place? *First*, those who are ordained had been chosen
9 by the Lord to a particular work. Ordination is preceded by the freedom of divine election and
10 call. This was the case in the Old Testament and this is the case in the New Testament. This
11 hidden election is realized or manifests itself in the divine call. *Second*, those who will be
12 ordained have accepted Jesus as Lord and Savior, received the Spirit, and are living exemplary
13 lives. The divine election is effective in lives consecrated and fully dedicated to the Lord and His
14 church. *Third*, the church is made aware of the divine election and call of the individual through
15 a revelation given to them through a prophet or by searching among themselves for those who
16 revealed in their lives the work of the Spirit and the gifts needed to perform a specific ministry.
17 In this last case the guidance from God's word and the Spirit as well as the manifestation of the
18 gifts of the Spirit in the lives of those called will play a significant role in guiding the church to
19 identify those elected and called by the Lord for a particular ministry. Spiritual gifts cannot be
20 separated from the practice of ordination because what the individuals need to perform the
21 mission assigned to them is granted to them as a gift of the Spirit.

22 *Fourth*, the role of the church in the ordination process is to witness to the work of the

1 Lord through the Spirit by acknowledging that a particular person has been chosen and called by
2 Him to a specific ministry. This includes making sure that the life of the person reveals and is in
3 agreement with the calling. The selection of the individuals was so important that, at least in the
4 case of elders/overseers/pastors and deacons, the candidates were examined and appointed only
5 if they were found to be “beyond reproach” (1 Tim 3:10). *Fifth*, the laying on of hands sets the
6 person apart for a particular ministry and therefore delegates to them ecclesiastical authority for
7 the fulfillment of that ministry. The prayer that usually accompanies the ceremony suggests that
8 those being set apart are being consecrated to the mission given to them. The nature of the
9 authority delegated or its extent will vary according to the function assigned to the individuals.
10 The church is also designating such individuals as properly endowed to represent and speak for
11 the church.

12 *Sixth*, if ordination is preceded by divine election, calling, and the individuals’ reception
13 of the Spirit, ordination would fundamentally be an acknowledgment of the previous work of
14 God in the life of the person. Therefore, it does not involve the infusion of any special grace
15 coming through those who lay their hands on the person. In the New Testament the Spirit rarely
16 manifests Himself in some powerful way during the ceremony. But in such cases the laying on of
17 hands is not instrumental in evoking and activating such a power. It takes place through the
18 freedom of the Spirit. Both the divine and the human activities coincide at that moment. The
19 impartation of the gift that the Spirit may bring at that time is *associated with*, rather than
20 *conveyed by*, the laying on of hands. Therefore the sacramental understanding traditionally
21 attached to the laying on of hands as a rite of ordination is not supported by the New Testament.

22 **D. Conclusion**

1 It is difficult to speak about a theology of ordination in the New Testament. We have
2 specific cases of the practice and valuable insights about its significance. What we have found is
3 enough to guide the church in gaining a proper understanding of it and in evaluating deviant
4 understandings developed throughout the history of the Christian church that have been
5 incorporated in many contemporary theologies of ordination. The biblical text clearly excludes
6 any sacramental understanding of ordination to the ministry. It also indicates that only certain
7 ministries require ordination. In some cases the church, under the guidance of the Spirit, had to
8 make some decisions. Some ministries such as elder/overseer/pastors and deacons were created.
9 But questions still linger. For instance: Are deacons to be ordained? Should local elders who are
10 later appointed as pastors be ordained again? Should only elders and pastors officiate in the
11 Communion Service and baptism? What should be the role of the local congregation in the
12 ordination of individuals? Such decisions should be made following the spirit of the biblical
13 instructions and making an effort to stay as close as possible to the biblical injunctions.

14 The New Testament also makes clear that ordination is directly connected to church order
15 and ecclesiastical authority. Church order is indispensable for the church to fulfill its mission by
16 working unitedly as the body of Christ under the guidance of the Spirit. The ordained ministry
17 proclaims the everlasting gospel, instructs and nurtures the church, protects the church from false
18 teachers and teachings, and equips members for evangelism. The authority of those exercising
19 ministerial functions was the authority to serve and minister to the church and to the world. The
20 supreme expression and paradigm of such an authority is Jesus, who revealed it in His ministry
21 even to death, the death of the cross. This authority does not take the form of an office that
22 places its recipients high above the rest of the church. Rather, it makes them humble instruments

1 of the Lord who are willing to place their gifts for ministry and their God-given wisdom,
2 knowledge, and experience at the service of others in order to build up the church as the body of
3 Christ.

4 **III. Ordination in the Writings of Ellen G. White**

5
6 As part of our attempt to construct a theology of ordination we need to turn to the
7 writings of Ellen G. White. Since we affirm her prophetic role, we believe that their guidance is
8 indispensable for our task. To this end we seek answers to questions such as: How does Ellen
9 White define ordination? What is the biblical and theological context in which she discusses
10 ordination? Is it connected with church authority? Who is to be ordained? And, who decides who
11 is to be ordained? Therefore, our purpose is to study Ellen White's writings on the subject of
12 ordination and come to some conclusions as to what ordination meant for her. Since ordination
13 has traditionally been part of the doctrine of the church, we will briefly consider her thoughts on
14 ordination in the context of her overall understanding of what the church is and its purpose in the
15 plan of salvation. But first a word on her use of the verb "ordain."

16 In her published writings, this verb in its various forms appears close to a thousand times.
17 Although it often refers to the Christian rite of appointing someone to a church office by means
18 of the laying on of hands ceremony, the verb does not always refer to this ceremony. Reflecting
19 the biblical usage, the word frequently refers to God's decision to order or organize. She also
20 uses it in her writings in the sense of His command or decree, such as the command that
21 Christians should go and bring forth much fruit for the kingdom of God.

22 **A. The Church as Representative of God on Earth**

23 One of Ellen White's basic theological notions regarding the church is that it is the

1 representative of God on earth.¹⁵ Within the context of the great controversy theme, Christians
2 are the instruments that God uses to witness to the universe that He is a God of love, mercy, and
3 justice.¹⁶ “God has made His church on the earth a channel of light, and through it He
4 communicates His purposes and His will.”¹⁷ In this context, her comments about the church
5 emphasize the pragmatic functions of the church, its role and purpose. Although ordained
6 ministers, as servants of God and of the church, are no doubt to act as God’s representatives on
7 earth,¹⁸ they are not the only ones. Every Christian has a role to play within the great
8 controversy and is a representative of Christ.¹⁹

9 **B. Priesthood of All Believers**

10 While in the Old Testament only certain men ordained to the priesthood could minister
11 within the earthly sanctuary,²⁰ according to Ellen White no one is ever restricted from serving
12 God even though one is not an ordained priest or minister. All Christians, regardless of their
13 vocation, are servants of God. Even though, in her published writings, she never mentioned it as
14 such, she nonetheless affirmed the protestant concept of the priesthood of all believers. Two
15 passages of Scripture are foremost in her understanding of this concept: 1 Peter 2:9 and John

¹⁵ *Desire of Ages*, 290.

¹⁶ *Testimonies for the Church*, 6:12.

¹⁷ *Acts of the Apostles*, 163. Two chapters, in particular, clearly present her understanding of the purpose of the church: “God’s purpose in the Church,” *Testimonies for the Church*, 6:9-13, and “God’s purpose for His Church,” *Acts of the Apostles*, 9-16.

¹⁸ One good example of this is the chapter “A Consecrated Ministry” in *Acts of the Apostles*, 359-371.

¹⁹ Indicative is the following passage in “A Preparation for the Coming of the Lord,” *Review and Herald*, November 24, 1904, “Brethren and sisters, how much work have you done for God during the past year? Do you think that it is those men only who have been ordained as gospel ministers that are to work for the uplifting of humanity?-- No, no! Everyone who names the name of Christ is expected by God to engage in this work. The hands of ordination may not have been laid upon you, but you are none the less God’s messengers. If you have tasted that the Lord is gracious, if you know his saving power, you can no more keep from telling this to someone else than you can keep the wind from blowing. You will have a word in season for him that is weary. You will guide the feet of the straying back to the fold. Your efforts to help others will be untiring, because God’s Spirit is working in you.”

²⁰ See Ellen White’s comments in connection with the rebellion of Korah in *Patriarchs and Prophets*, 398-399.

1 15:16. Many times she referred to or quoted parts of these passages in support of dedicated
2 Christian service and to insist that all Christians are called, commissioned or ordained by God to
3 serve him.²¹

4 This concept of the priesthood of all believers underlies her understanding of both
5 Christian service and ordination. Throughout her ministry, Ellen White made repeated appeals to
6 church members to engage in wholehearted Christian service. According to her, it is a fatal
7 mistake to believe that only ordained ministers are workers for God and to rely solely on them to
8 accomplish the mission of the church.²² “All who are ordained unto the life of Christ are
9 ordained to work for the salvation of their fellow-men.”²³ “Those who stand as leaders in the
10 church of God,” she adds, “are to realize that the Saviour’s commission is given to all who
11 believe in His name. God will send forth into His vineyard many who have not been dedicated to
12 the ministry by the laying on of hands.”²⁴ Every Christian is thus a minister for God.²⁵

13 Consequently, every Christian is ordained by Christ for ministry. Emphatically she asks,
14 “Have you tasted of the powers of the world to come? Have you been eating the flesh and
15 drinking the blood of the Son of God? Then, *although ministerial hands may not have been laid*
16 *upon you in ordination, Christ has laid His hands upon you* and has said: ‘Ye are My
17 witnesses.’”²⁶ Thus, she could add, “many souls will be saved through the labors of men who

²¹ Concerning 1 Peter 2:9 see, for example, *Testimonies to Ministers and Gospel Workers*, 422, 441; *Testimonies for the Church*, 2:169; 6:123, 274. For John 15:16 see, *Testimonies to Ministers and Gospel Workers*, 212-213.

²² “The Great Commission; a Call to Service,” *Review and Herald*, March 24, 1910.

²³ “Our Work,” *Signs of the Times*, August 25, 1898.

²⁴ *Acts of the Apostles*, 110.

²⁵ “A Preparation for the Coming of the Lord,” *Review and Herald*, November 24, 1904.

²⁶ *Testimonies for the Church*, 6:444 (italics supplied).

1 have looked to Jesus for their ordination and orders.”²⁷

2 **C. Ecclesiastical Organization and Ordination**

3 We could ask if all Christians are ministers for God, ordained by Him to serve, what is
4 the purpose of the church’s ordaining some? A look at how Ellen White described and
5 encouraged the development of early Seventh-day Adventist church organization or “gospel
6 order,” as it was called then, will provide some answers to this important question and will shed
7 further light on her understanding of ordination. Within the context of the church, ordination is
8 closely related to her concept of order and church organization.

9 1. Nature of Church Order

10 Order in the church is, *first*, a reflection of the order that prevails in heaven.²⁸ This
11 earth-heaven connection profoundly impacts how the church on earth should be organized.
12 Already in 1850, in Ellen White’s first vision dealing with what she calls “Bible order,” she was
13 taken into the throne room of the heavenly sanctuary and saw how “everything in heaven was in
14 perfect order.” Then the angel instructed her that the church on earth should likewise “move in
15 order.” “Behold ye,” the angel continued, “and know how perfect, how beautiful, the order in
16 heaven; follow it.”²⁹ A subsequent vision in 1852 dealt with the subject in much more detail.
17 Ellen White stressed again that heaven’s order should have its counterpart in God’s church on
18 earth, particularly now, in these last days:

19 There is order in heaven. There was order in the church when Christ was upon the
20 earth, and after His departure order was strictly observed among His apostles. And

²⁷ “Words to Our Workers,” *Review and Herald*, April 21, 1903.

²⁸ She wrote, “The more closely we imitate the harmony and order of the angelic host, the more successful will be the efforts of these heavenly agents in our behalf. If we see no necessity for harmonious action, and are disorderly, undisciplined, and disorganized in our course of action, angels, who are thoroughly organized and move in perfect order, cannot work for us successfully” (*Testimonies to Ministers and Gospel Workers*, 28).

²⁹ 13MR 299.

1 now in these last days, while God is bringing His children into the unity of the faith,
2 there is more real need of order than ever before; for, as God unites His children,
3 Satan and his evil angels are very busy to prevent this unity and to destroy it.³⁰

4
5 *Second*, order in the church should be a return to the order of the church as depicted in the
6 New Testament. The title given to the vision, “Gospel Order,” underscores the establishment of the
7 church by Jesus and the importance of returning to the New Testament model. She finds the
8 foundation of that order in the ordination of the Twelve by Jesus. What was not clearly affirmed or
9 denied in the biblical text is now clear stated: “When Jesus had ended His instruction to the
10 disciples,” she describes, “He gathered the little band close about Him, and kneeling in the midst
11 of them, and laying His hands upon their heads, He offered a prayer dedicating them to His
12 sacred work. Thus the Lord’s disciples were ordained to the gospel ministry.”³¹

13 According to Ellen G. White this ordination is highly significant for several reasons: (1)
14 At that moment “the first step was taken in the organization of the [New Testament] church.”³² (2)
15 It demonstrates the essential continuity of God’s people: “As in the Old Testament the twelve
16 patriarchs stood as representatives of Israel, so the twelve apostles stand as representatives of the
17 gospel church.”³³ (3) Being eyewitnesses of the words and works of Jesus, “their office was the
18 most important to which human beings had ever been called, second only to that of Christ
19 Himself.”³⁴

20 *Third*, the order initiated by Jesus’ ordination of the Twelve continued to be perfected
21 through the work of the apostles. For Ellen White, the ordination of deacons and elders in the

³⁰ *Early Writings*, 97.

³¹ *Desire of Ages*, 296.

³² *Acts of the Apostles*, 18.

³³ *Ibid.*, 19.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

1 New Testament and the ordination of ministers in the early Adventist movement were important
2 steps in the development of church organization, provided under the guidance of the Holy Spirit,
3 to face moments of crisis. Even though the early and elementary ecclesiastical structures of both
4 movements (or lack thereof) did not provide for new ordained ministries, she believed that these
5 structures were adaptable and allowed for the creation of new ministries, as in the case of
6 deacons in Acts 6. These ordinations to ministry in the New Testament church and in the early
7 Adventist movement demonstrate the organizational principles of harmony and order, and
8 adaptability.

9 2. Harmony and Order

10 Soon after the Millerite disappointment, the little flock of Sabbatarian Adventists was
11 confronted with many divergent views that threatened its survival. In a vision given to her in
12 1854, Ellen G. White inquired of an angel as to how harmony could be brought within the ranks
13 of this new fledgling group and how the enemy with his errors could be driven back. The angel
14 pointed to God's word and gospel order as the solution. These would bring the church into the
15 unity of the faith and would secure the members from false teachers. But how would early
16 Adventists do this since they had no church organization? Scripture had the answer. They, as
17 already indicated, were to follow the example of the early Christian church.³⁵

18 Thus, as Jesus and the apostles chose qualified men to serve as leaders and ordained
19 them, so the early Adventist church was to proceed. The solution to false teachings and anarchy

³⁵ She specifically stated, "I saw that in the apostles' day the church was in danger of being deceived and imposed upon by false teachers. Therefore the brethren chose men who had given good evidence that they were capable of ruling well their own houses and preserving order in their own families, and who could enlighten those who were in darkness" (*Early Writings*, 100, 101).

1 was the ordination of able men who would supervise and look after the interest of the people.³⁶
2 Building upon the experience of the early church, and in the midst of much disorganization and
3 lack of structure, she counseled the church that God desires His people to follow the New
4 Testament model in the ordination of its ministers. The brethren were to select men “and set
5 them apart to devote themselves entirely to His work. This act would show the sanction of the
6 church to their going forth as messengers to carry the most solemn message ever given to
7 men.”³⁷ Harmony and order could thus be preserved in the Adventist movement through the
8 ordination of ministers.

9 3. Adaptability

10 Also building upon this biblical model for the ordination of officers, Ellen White
11 articulates that the structure of the church should be adaptable to changing needs and placed at
12 the service of the people. She refers to the moment of crisis in the New Testament church
13 recorded in Acts 6:1-6. Murmuring arose among Christians of Greek origin when they saw their
14 widows neglected in the daily distribution of food. As the rapid growth in membership brought
15 increasingly heavy burdens upon those in charge,
16 [no] one man, or even one set of men, could continue to bear these burdens alone,
17 without imperiling the future prosperity of the church. There was necessity for a
18 further distribution of the responsibilities which had been borne so faithfully by a
19 few during the earlier days of the church. The apostles must now take an

³⁶ Ibid., 101,

³⁷ According to Ellen White, ecclesiastical organizations should also follow the biblical principle that “God is not the author of confusion, but of peace” (1 Cor. 14:33). This principle was the basis for the ordination of the seven deacons to a new ministry in the New Testament church. She argued in reference to their ordination that, “[the] order that was maintained in the early Christian church, made it possible for them to move forward solidly, as a well-disciplined army, clad with the armor of God. The companies of believers, though scattered over a large territory, were all members of one body...” (*Acts of the Apostles*, 95, 96). Worldwide unity and harmony of action are natural and, consequently, required a biblical ecclesiastical structure. God “requires that order and system be observed in the conduct of church affairs to-day, no less than in the days of old. He desires His work to be carried forward with thoroughness and exactness, so that He may place upon it the seal of His approval” (ibid., 96).

1 important step in the *perfecting of gospel order* in the church, by laying upon
2 others some of the burdens thus far borne by themselves.³⁸

3
4 This *perfecting of gospel order* was accomplished when “the apostles were led by the
5 Holy Spirit to outline a plan for the better organization of all the working forces of the church.”³⁹

6 They gathered all the disciples together, explained to them the situation and then suggested that
7 seven men be chosen to oversee the daily distribution of food. This proposal pleased the whole
8 assembly. They chose the seven deacons and presented them to the apostles who in turn ordained
9 them to this new ministry.⁴⁰ Commenting on this decision, Ellen White affirms that

10 [the] organization of the church at Jerusalem was to serve as a model for the
11 organization of churches in every other place where messengers of truth should
12 win converts to the gospel.... Later in the history of the early church, when in
13 various parts of the world many groups of believers had been formed into
14 churches, *the organization of the church was further perfected*, so that order and
15 harmonious action might be maintained.⁴¹

16
17 Her description of the events indicates that changes to the organizational structure of the
18 church (such as the institution of a new ordained ministry) were made as the apostles and the
19 church, guided by the Spirit, came to realize that new needs required changes to existing church
20 order. This, in some sense, meant the “perfecting” of the structure they had inherited from Jesus;
21 it also meant that it had not achieved a static rigidity. The earlier organizational structure could
22 be modified or “perfected” if, through the guidance of the Holy Spirit, the membership and the
23 leadership thought it needed to. This understanding of the adaptability, or the further
24 “perfecting,” of the organizational structure of the church is an important concept to understand

³⁸ *Acts of the Apostles*, 88-89 (italics supplied).

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 89.

⁴⁰ Here we see a pattern for effecting changes in the organizational structure of the early church that is repeated in other places in the New Testament. First, the church encounters a need which may bring about a crisis; second, the church meets together to find a solution; third, the Holy Spirit guides the believers toward the best solution possible at the time; and, fourth, the apostles and the church approve of the propose solution.

⁴¹ *Acts of the Apostles*, 91-92 (italics supplied).

1 how early Seventh-day Adventists viewed the development of their own model of church
2 governance.⁴²

3 Consequently, with the theological understanding that church structures must reflect
4 order and harmony and be adaptable to new needs, Seventh-day Adventists have been able,
5 through the years, to set up new ministries and move forward solidly and united in spreading the
6 gospel.⁴³ We can also conclude from these two organizational principles that the church, guided
7 by God’s word and the Holy Spirit, can determine what changes to church order may be needed
8 and who is to function as an ordained officer in the church. The ordination of officers becomes a
9 function of the church guided by the Spirit and grounded in the Word.

10 **D. Ordination and Authority**

11 1. Ecclesiastical Authority

12 If, as Ellen White affirms, one of the basic reasons the Seventh-day Adventist church first
13 ordained ministers was to ward off doctrinal errors, do they have some authority within the
14 church? If so, where does this authority come from and how is it related to ordination? Ellen
15 White’s understanding of the purpose of ordination varies greatly from the episcopal model;⁴⁴

⁴² For further thoughts on the relationship between the development of New Testament ecclesiology and the Seventh-day Adventist organizational structure, see Raoul Dederen, “A Theology of Ordination,” *Ministry*, February 1978, 24K-24P.

⁴³ The implementation, in the 1860s, of systematic benevolence which later became the tithe system, and the reorganization of the General Conference structure in 1901 and 1903 illustrate how we have “perfected” our own ecclesiastical organization through the years. This is also reflected in the institution of various credentials and licenses issued to church workers.

⁴⁴ Roman Catholicism and other episcopal churches believe that “[by] the laying on of hands in the ceremony of ordination, the authority of the apostles has been transmitted down through history to the bishops of today. According to this theory, which is known as the theory of apostolic succession, modern bishops have the authority which the apostles had, authority which the apostles had in turn received from Christ” (Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology* [Grand Rapids, Baker Book House, 1983-1985], 1071). This view of apostolic succession closely associates ordination and divine authority. There is no ecclesiastical authority without ordination. Furthermore, ordination within the apostolic succession confers upon the recipient a sacramental power to perform the rites and ceremonies of the church. Without the proper ordination, the minister cannot efficaciously perform the sacraments of the church.

1 her clearest comments on this are found in connection with the ordination of Paul and
2 Barnabas.⁴⁵ These two apostles had seen their labors abundantly blessed by God during their
3 early ministry in Antioch even though “neither of them had as yet been formally ordained to the
4 gospel ministry.”⁴⁶ But they had reached a point in their ministry when God desired to entrust
5 them with the carrying of the gospel message to the Gentiles. For this purpose, and to meet the
6 challenges of the task, “they would need every advantage that could be obtained through the
7 agency of the church.”⁴⁷

8 Here Ellen White’s concept of ordination suggests a close relationship between God and
9 His church. As we have already seen, God ordains all Christians to ministry first; in addition,
10 under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, the church recognizes the special call of God to some
11 chosen individuals through the laying on them. “The circumstances connected with the
12 separation of Paul and Barnabas by the Holy Spirit to a definite line of service, show clearly that
13 the Lord works through appointed agencies in His organized church.”⁴⁸ Before being sent forth
14 as missionaries, Paul and Barnabas were dedicated by the church at Antioch which, in this case,
15 became God’s instrument in the formal appointment of the apostles to their God-given mission.
16 It was from his ordination at this time that Paul “dated the beginning of his apostleship in the
17 Christian church.”⁴⁹

⁴⁵ Ellen G. White presents a clearly non-sacramental non-episcopal concept of ordination. Writing about the ordination of Paul and Barnabas she says, “At a later date, the rite of ordination by the laying on of hands was greatly abused; unwarrantable importance was attached to the act, as if a power came at once upon those who received such ordination, which immediately qualified them for any and all ministerial work. But in the setting apart of these two apostles, there is no record indicating that any virtue was imparted by the mere act of laying on of hands. There is only the simple record of their ordination, and of the bearing that it had on their future work” (*Acts of the Apostles*, 162).

⁴⁶ *Acts of the Apostles*, 160.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 162.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 165.

1 According to Ellen White’s description of this event, the ordination of Paul and Barnabas
2 fulfilled five inter-related purposes. *First*, the church invested them with full church authority to
3 teach the truth, perform baptisms, and organize churches.⁵⁰ *Second*, foreseeing the difficulties
4 and the opposition ahead of them, God wished for their work to be above challenge and, thus,
5 receive the sanction of the church.⁵¹ *Third*, the ordination was a public recognition to the church
6 at large that they had been chosen by the Holy Spirit for a special work to the Gentiles.⁵² *Fourth*,
7 “the ceremony of laying on of hands added no new grace or virtual qualification,” it was the
8 action of the church setting its seal of approval upon the work of God.⁵³ And *fifth*, hands were
9 laid upon the apostles to ask “God to bestow his blessing upon them.”⁵⁴ Thus we see that Ellen
10 White’s definition of ordination is altogether pragmatic: It is a public recognition of divine
11 appointment and an “acknowledged form of designation to an appointed office.”⁵⁵

12 Returning to the question of the relationship between ordination and authority, according
13 to Ellen G. White the church grants authority to the ordained minister to preach the gospel and to
14 act in its stead in the organization of churches. As far as the performance of some church rites is
15 concerned, her comments indicate that only the church can authorize an individual to perform
16 these rites. Therefore, the church does confer authority upon some chosen individuals through
17 the ordination ceremony. Here we find that the laying on of hands is a ceremony to serve the
18 purpose of the church. It is also the church, based on God’s word and under the guidance of the

⁵⁰ *Redemption: or The Teachings of Paul, and his Mission to the Gentiles*, 5. In *Early Writings*, 101, Ellen White indicated that ordination in the early church conferred also the authority to perform the Lord’s Supper. She also indicates that ordination is the “acknowledged form of designation to an appointed office and a recognition of one’s authority in that office” (*Acts of the Apostles*, 162).

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 6-7.

1 Holy Spirit, which ultimately decides who is to be given authority through ordination.

2 2. God-given Authority

3 Yet, our understanding of the relationship of authority to ordination would be incomplete
4 if we were to consider only the church authority conferred upon a minister at ordination. Ellen
5 White presented also another aspect of authority that is shared by all Christians, and ordained
6 ministers in particular. As a Christian, ordained ministers not only possess ecclesiastical
7 authority to perform their duties for the church, but possess also authority granted by God to
8 preach the gospel and serve as His ambassador. This divine authority seems to be more
9 fundamentally related to the priesthood of all believers.

10 Speaking about ordained ministers as Christ’s ambassadors on earth, Ellen White affirms
11 that from “Christ’s ascension to the present day, men ordained of God, *deriving their authority*
12 *from Him*, have become teachers of the faith. . . . Thus the position of those who labor in word
13 and doctrine becomes very important.”⁵⁶ Elsewhere, again speaking about ordained ministers,
14 she adds, “He has ordained that there should be a succession of men who *derive authority from*
15 *the first teachers of the faith* for the continual preaching of Christ and Him crucified. The Great
16 Teacher has delegated power to His servants. . . .”⁵⁷

17 Although, at first glance, the phrase “a succession of men who derive authority from the
18 first teachers of the faith” may seem to validate a belief in episcopal apostolic succession, Ellen
19 White did not say that ordained ministers receive their authority directly from Peter, through a
20 direct succession of laying on of hands ceremonies. Rather, she affirmed that the authority of
21 God’s servants is *derived* from God and the first teachers of the faith. This derivation of

⁵⁶ *Testimonies for the Church*, 4:393 (italics supplied).

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 4:529 (italics supplied).

1 authority is based upon a converted heart and faithfulness to the Word of God. Her comments
2 concerning apostolic succession are explicit:

3 Descent from Abraham was proved, not by name and lineage, but by likeness of
4 character. So the apostolic succession rests not upon the transmission of
5 ecclesiastical authority, but upon spiritual relationship. A life actuated by the
6 apostles' spirit, the belief and teaching of the truth they taught, this is the true
7 evidence of apostolic succession. This is what constitutes men the successors of
8 the first teachers of the gospel.⁵⁸
9

10 As long as any servant of God is faithful to God and His word, this person has divine authority to
11 “labor in word and doctrine.” This ties in with what we have seen in regard to the priesthood of
12 all believers. This is what the church acknowledges when ordaining a person to ministry. The
13 authority of an ordained minister is, consequently, first, derived from God and, secondly,
14 conferred by the church. The first gives authority to teach the faith, while the second to act on
15 behalf of the church.

16 **E. A Diversity of Ordained Ministries**

17 Within the theological perspective we have outlined thus far, one that is founded on the
18 priesthood of all believers and that recognizes the organizational structure of the church as
19 adaptable to new needs, we can understand why Ellen White allowed for the church to decide
20 whether some people, other than ministers, should be ordained or set apart by the laying on of
21 hands on other ministries. She emphasized that the ordained ministry alone was not sufficient to
22 fulfill the gospel commission, that God is calling Christians of all professions to dedicate their
23 lives to His service.⁵⁹ Since the church can branch out into different kinds of ministries to meet
24 the needs of the people, she favored, for instance, the ordination of medical missionaries. She

⁵⁸ *Desire of Ages*, 467.

⁵⁹ *Medical Ministry*, 248-249.

1 considered the work of the medical profession as a great means of proclaiming the gospel and for
2 this reason she believed medical missionaries ought to be set aside by the laying on of hands to
3 God's service.⁶⁰

4 **F. Qualifications and Selection of Gospel Ministers**

5 Ellen G. White places a significant emphasis on the qualifications of the person who is to
6 be ordained to the ministry. We can only provide here a brief summary of them. First and foremost,
7 ministers must appreciate the infinite sacrifice made by the Son of God to save human beings and
8 be imbued with "the spirit of undying love."⁶¹ They should cherish a spirit of prayer "at all times
9 and in all places, that they might better know the will of God."⁶² They should also be competent
10 and discreet in working with interested people, thus bringing honor upon the cause they represent
11 and "should be examined especially to see if they have an intelligent understanding of the truth for
12 this time, so that they can give a connected discourse upon the prophecies or upon practical
13 subjects."⁶³

14 Besides evidencing evangelistic abilities they should also be "men of deep experience,
15 tried and proved men of sound judgment, men who will dare to reprove sin in the spirit of
16 meekness, men who understand how to feed the flock."⁶⁴ They "should know how to speak with
17 power and expression," so that the hearers cannot but feel the weight of their words.⁶⁵ They must
18 have discrimination when to speak or keep silent, and be teachable and meek, with refined,

⁶⁰ *Evangelism*, 546.

⁶¹ *Testimonies for the Church*, 4:442.

⁶² *Testimonies for the Church*, 4:443.

⁶³ *Testimonies for the Church*, 4:406-7.

⁶⁴ *Testimonies for the Church*, 1:209.

⁶⁵ *Testimonies for the Church*, 6:381.

1 elevated manners and deportment.⁶⁶ Their lifestyle also should witness to the faith they preach.
2 Teaching and example must not contradict “the testimony God has given His servants to bear in
3 regard to diet, for this will bring confusion.”⁶⁷ Furthermore, they must “realize that the Saviour’s
4 commission is given to all who believe in His name” and especially encourage those members
5 upon whom God “places a burden for souls.”⁶⁸

6 Ellen G. White does not provide a detailed description of the ordination service but she
7 does provide a list of its most important components.

8 Brethren of experience and of sound minds should assemble, and following the Word of
9 God and the sanction of the Holy Spirit, should, with fervent prayer, lay hands upon those
10 who have given full proof that they have received their commission of God, and set them
11 apart to devote themselves entirely to His work. This act would show the sanction of the
12 church to their going forth as messengers to carry the most solemn message ever given to
13 men.⁶⁹

14
15 The simplicity of the instructions is impressive and reminds us of the ordination of the
16 Twelve by Jesus. The order of the service is unadorned and straightforward. What is important is
17 the act of ordination itself.

18 **G. Conclusion**

19 Ellen White’s concept of ordination can best be described in connection with her
20 description of the church and its purpose and the priesthood of all believers. In the organized
21 church, however, some Christians are appointed to functionally different kinds of ministry such
22 as ordained gospel workers, local church elders, and deacons. Church ordination, far from being
23 sacramental, is a means of publicly recognizing God’s will and call for an individual. Since the

⁶⁶ *Testimonies for the Church*, 2:557.

⁶⁷ *Testimonies for the Church*, 6:378.

⁶⁸ *Acts of the Apostles*, 110.

⁶⁹ *Early Writings*, 101.

1 ordained minister is a representative of God and His church, ordination to ministry in the
2 Seventh-day Adventist church is a serious matter and its ministers are to be carefully selected
3 according to spiritual and practical qualifications.

4 Furthermore, Ellen White's teaching regarding ordination is related to her understanding
5 of church organization and to the function of the church as the representative of God on earth.
6 From the beginning of the Seventh-day Adventist church organization she counseled to follow
7 the example of the New Testament church and to draw from it principles needed to establish the
8 proper gospel order. In that context, ordination to ministry was needed to keep order and
9 harmony in the church and demonstrated the adaptability of church structures to meet the needs
10 of the people thus facilitating the fulfillment of the mission of the church.

11 **IV. Laying on of Hands and Theology**

12 In this last section of the paper we will bring together the main findings of our investigation
13 and attempt to integrate them into a biblical-theological-pragmatic profile of ordination. We will
14 begin by placing ordination within ecclesiology and then discuss the role of the church, the nature
15 of ordination, and ordination for service. During the discussion some repetition is practically
16 unavoidable but hopefully it will contribute to a more integrated view of the subject under
17 consideration.

18 **A. God, the Church, and Laying on of Hands**

19 In the Bible or in the experience of the church ordination to the ministry is not a subject and
20 practice that exists by itself. It is part of the biblical doctrine of the church and its ministry
21 (ecclesiology) and should be investigated taking into consideration such a connection. The church
22 came into existence as a result of the work of the Godhead. It is a community of believers saved

1 through the Son, who was sent by the Father, and which is sanctified by the power of the Spirit.
2 The church is a new creation brought into existence from above in order to be God's instrument in
3 the proclamation of the saving power of the cross of Jesus, our Lord. It is called the "body" of
4 Christ, the "bride" of Christ, the "flock" of God to indicate, among other things, that the church is
5 God's property. The church is conceived to be universal and each local community of believers is
6 an expression this universality.

7 In order for the church to fulfill its divine intent, God has graced each believer with
8 spiritual gifts. The gifts of the Spirit, as manifestations of God's grace within the church, are
9 consequently an expression of God's care and concern for His people. Without the gifts the church
10 would not be the church. The diversity of gifts satisfies the multiple needs of the community of
11 believers and points to the complexity of the mission. It is the Spirit who gives gifts as He pleases
12 to build up the church and enables it to fulfill its mission. These gifts were given to contribute to
13 the orderly function of the church. Each believer has a task to fulfill and this is to be done in union
14 with the others. When the gifts were divorced from the element of order, almost becoming an end
15 in themselves, the result was conflict and chaos within the church as was the case in the church at
16 Corinth.

17 Taking into consideration the previous comments we can suggest that ordination is an
18 expression of the order that belongs to the very essence of the church. God selected some
19 individuals to receive certain gifts that would directly contribute to preserving ecclesiastical unity.
20 The priority of the divine decision says something important about the nature of the church and of
21 ordination. It is not the church who decides who will receive specific gifts, particularly gifts of
22 leadership, but God. He set them apart for specific venues of service in and through the church to

1 accomplish His purpose and will. God has not handed the church over to human beings to do as
2 they please. The theology of ordination establishes that the church continues to be under the
3 leadership of Christ as its head. He is Lord over the church. The involvement of the church in the
4 rite of ordination, as we will suggest, is by its very nature one of obedient submission to the will of
5 the Lord of the church. In other words, the church, which came into existence through the saving
6 power of God revealed in the Son and made effective in the life of believers through the Spirit,
7 belongs exclusively to God. Therefore, the rite of ordination testifies to God's exclusive ownership
8 of the church.

9 The connection between ordination and order is also important. Through ordination order
10 is firmly established within the community of faith. God is seeking to integrate the church into the
11 order that characterizes the heavenly family. But since ecclesiastical order functions in a context of
12 opposition to the message it proclaims, the ordained ministry preserves order in the setting of a
13 cosmic conflict that threatens the unity of the church, its mission, and its message. The gospel
14 order, directly related to the laying on of hands on those chosen and set apart by God for leadership
15 positions, equips the church for the fulfillment of its mission in the midst of conflict. In order for
16 leaders to be truly effective they have to be chosen and set apart by the Lord for the function
17 assigned to them.

18 **B. Ordination and the Church**

19 The divine election begins to express itself through the gifts of the Spirit and becomes
20 effective at the moment the divine call to ministry reaches the individual.⁷⁰ God is constantly
21 calling individuals to salvation; therefore, no child of God is a self-appointed member of this

⁷⁰ See Raoul Dederen, "A Theology of Ordination," in Supplement to the *Ministry*, February 1978, 24, for further discussion of the subject of calling.

1 family. But there is a divine call addressed to certain individuals to fulfill a particular ministerial
2 task. In this call God does not violate human freedom. In fact, the call implies freedom to reject it.
3 The recipient of such a summons is increasingly grasped by a sense of urgency to become one with
4 the preaching of the gospel. Although, like the election, the call has a hidden component—the
5 silent work of the Spirit in the human heart—it manifests itself in a life that is lived in commitment
6 to the Lord and service to His people. This type of life witnesses to the fact that the Spirit is
7 working in a particular way in the life of such a person. The church, under the guidance of God’s
8 Word and His Spirit, is able to perceive that the divine election is becoming effective in the life and
9 call of such individuals.

10 At this point the church and the Spirit work together in identifying those called by the Lord
11 to specific ministerial functions. Although the gifts of the Spirit will help the church to identify
12 these individuals, that is not enough; there is the biblical injunction to examine carefully those who
13 will be ordained to the ministry. Though the church is not by nature infallible it must do all it can to
14 identify itself with the mind of the Spirit. The act of the laying on of hands, or the ordination of
15 those called to the ministry, takes place in the church and is performed by the church and for the
16 benefit of the church. As the church is led by the Spirit to recognize that certain individuals have
17 been called by the Lord to certain work, it comes to a consensus to approve such people for
18 ordination. Accordingly, we believe that God works through a synergy of actions: One’s inner call
19 to ministry from God is authenticated by the church, who then recognizes the call and provides,
20 through ordination, opportunities to exercise the divine call.

21 But the church is also bound by the Scriptures in determining who should be ordained and
22 to what positions. The problem the church confronts in this particular instance is that the cases in

1 which the laying on of hands is mentioned in the Bible are related to particular circumstances
2 within the apostolic church. Therefore it is difficult to create a final biblical list of individuals upon
3 whom the laying on of hands can be performed. The New Testament nowhere *explicitly* states that
4 church elders, pastors, and deacons should be ordained. Yet, the church has to work with the
5 insights provided by the Scriptures. We indicated that the biblical evidence *suggests* and may even
6 point to the fact that that church elders were ordained and that, since pastors and church elders
7 seem to designate the same person, pastors were also ordained. If the ordination of the Seven is in
8 some way also applicable to church deacons, then they should be ordained. The three levels of
9 officers (pastors, elders, deacons) is not explicitly found in the New Testament. It could be argued
10 that the ordination of Timothy was the equivalent of what we would today call the ordination of a
11 pastor, thus distinguishing between local elders/overseers and pastors/overseers.⁷¹ Although the
12 distinction between elders and pastors is not explicitly stated in the New Testament, it has
13 contributed significantly toward the establishment and preservation of order in the church without
14 violating any biblical injunction.

15 But there is at least one more thing that should be taken into consideration as the church
16 decides who should be ordained. Our study has made clear that ordination has to do with setting
17 apart individuals for leadership positions to establish and preserve order within the church. This is
18 clearly indicated in the few cases where ordination is mentioned in the Bible and in the writings of
19 Ellen G. White. Here the fundamental principle seems to be that of preserving order in the church.

⁷¹ It is Ignatius of Antioch who first refers to the three levels of officers in a local church similar to what we have in our church, with a group of deacons, a group of elders and one bishop/oversee in each church. This bishop/overseer is very close to what we have in our pastor. While Paul writes about elders and deacons to Timothy and Titus, he does not write about the pastoral function we have today, unless we see the roles of Timothy and Titus as precursors to that of our district pastors. Timothy and Titus seem to have been supervisors of a district of churches: Timothy in Ephesus, Titus in Crete. So, maybe their roles in Ephesus and Crete could be the precursors to the role of our pastors, and it may be that Ignatius began to see this. Timothy and Titus then would have been overseers.

1 The divine election and call aims at selecting individuals who can nurture the church, motivate for
2 mission, be involved in evangelism, and protect the church from false teachings. This type of
3 ecclesiastical leaders, based on the Scripture and the counsel of Ellen G. White, can and should be
4 ordained to the ministry if their lives reveal the operation of the gift of the Spirit and they give
5 evidence of the divine call. Unquestionably, the church has to make some decisions on this matter.

6 The church must also decide who should be involved in carrying out the rite of ordination.
7 The biblical evidence provides several options. Sometimes one person did it (Moses in the case of
8 Joshua), or representatives from the people (the congregation in the case of the Levites), or the
9 apostles, the church, the church and the apostles, the council of elders, or other leaders. There is no
10 one particular group of individuals exclusively appointed by the Bible to carry out the laying on of
11 hands. This means that the church can make a decision on how this is to be done. Here the counsel
12 from Ellen G. White has been useful to the church: “I saw that God had laid upon His chosen
13 ministers the duty of deciding who was fit for the holy work; and in union with the church and the
14 manifest tokens of the Holy Spirit, they were to decide who should go and who were unfit to go.”⁷²

15 By restricting participation in the laying on of hands to ordained ministers the church is not
16 suggesting that ordination is under the control of the ordained ministry. The church has stated that
17 ordination “is not something ministers do for each other, but something the whole church does for
18 its ministry.”⁷³ This is based on an ecclesiology recognizing that the authority of the church is not
19 in the hands of the clergy but of the whole church as the community of believers. The church
20 delegates authority to some individuals as leaders and ministers to act on its behalf. When
21 ministers lay hands on a person they are representing the church and not themselves. “Adventists

⁷² *Testimonies for the Church*, 1:209.

⁷³ *Seventh-day Adventist Minister's Manual* (Silver Spring, MD: Ministerial Association, 1992), 83.

1 teach that ordination is the church-at-large setting aside its ministerial leaders.”⁷⁴ That being the
2 case, it is important for the church to participate in the ordination service.⁷⁵

3 **C. Nature of the Rite of Ordination**

4 The question of the significance of the laying on of hands during the rite of ordination has
5 been debated throughout the history of Christianity. The sacramental view is the predominant
6 one.⁷⁶ Seventh-day Adventists do not find in the Bible any indication, event, or description of a
7 religious ceremony that would legitimize the concept of a sacrament. Consequently, for
8 Seventh-day Adventists, ordination is not a sacrament but rather a religious rite. It is a highly
9 significant service and the inspired writings provide some important theological components
10 related to its meaning.

11 At its most basic level ordination is an *acknowledgement of God’s presence and activity* in
12 the life of the church in the election and call of certain individuals to ministerial service. The
13 community bears witness to the work of the Lord in calling some members of the church to a
14 special work. This conviction is the result of the work of the Spirit who endowed some members of
15 the community with the gifts needed for the specific ministry, enabled them to live a life of

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ The *Minister’s Manual* offers four suggestions for increasing the involvement of the congregation where the ordination is taking place in the ordination ceremony (Ibid.).

⁷⁶ For instance, in Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy, ordination is one of seven sacraments and one of the three most prominent ones. While priests administer six out of seven sacraments, it is a bishop who presides over the ordination of a priest. Examination of candidates is followed by the laying on of hands by the bishop flanked by ordained clergy. “The bishop then anoints the hands of each candidate with chrism [olive oil consecrated by the bishop] and delivers him the paten and chalice with the bread and wine” (F. L. Cross and E. A. Livingstone, *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* [London: Oxford University Press, 1974], 1004-1005). This last act is nothing else than the Eucharist, the central core of the sacramental ordination. The indelible character of sacramental ordination is delivered by the Eucharist (ibid., 1005). It is the virtual, veritable body and blood of Christ that marks the priest indelibly, and thus he remains a priest even if he falls and becomes degraded (ibid., 1004). Once a priest, always a priest. One significant difference between sacramental and non-sacramental ordination is that the former places its focus and legitimacy on the ceremony, while non-sacramental focuses on the work of the Holy Spirit in the life and heart of the candidate.

1 commitment to the Lord and of fruitful service to the church, and moved the church to recognize
2 that the Lord was calling these individuals to a life of ministerial service.

3 Through the laying on of hands the church speaks to the Lord and to itself. At that moment
4 a *dialogue takes place* in the life of the church. God has spoken in the selection and call of a
5 member and now the church answers Him in an act of obedience. In other words, in the dialogical
6 nature of the ordination ceremony the previous speaking of the Lord finds a response from the
7 church when it sets apart through ordination those called for the mission the Lord assigned to
8 them. In that dialogue the church also speaks to the fullness of the community of believers
9 testifying that what is taking place is the manifest will of the Lord for those being ordained. But the
10 church also speaks to those who are ordained reaffirming their call and sending them away to
11 fulfill the mission assigned to them by the risen Lord.

12 The ritual of the laying on of hands is sanctified through the Word and the *presence of the*
13 *Spirit*. They have been instrumental in instructing the church, in bestowing the gifts, in sanctifying
14 those who have been elected to the ministerial service, and in moving the church to see and listen
15 to the work of God among them. Now, when the divine intention for these individuals is fully
16 manifested, the Spirit sanctifies the moment with His presence. His presence manifests itself in the
17 reading of the Word, the words spoken, the prayers offered, the solemnity of the occasion, and
18 above all in the act of consecrating those being ordained through the laying on of hands. The Spirit
19 blesses in a unique way those called to make their ministry effective, powerful, and fruitful.

20 It is through the laying on of hands that those called by the Lord are officially *constituted*
21 *into representatives* of the church and enabled to speak in the name of the Lord and to act on behalf
22 of the church. They are invested with ecclesiastical authority delegated to them by the church.

1 They will proclaim the gospel, exercise administrative functions as overseers of the church, teach
2 and nurture the faith of the believers, oppose false teachers and teachings, organize churches, and
3 preserve the unity of the church.⁷⁷ In order to contribute to church order, they have been entrusted
4 by the church with the responsibility of officiating during the Communion Service and in
5 baptismal ceremonies.⁷⁸

6 They are ordained to *serve the world community of faith*. We have affirmed that
7 “ordination to the ministry is the setting apart of the employee to a sacred calling, not for one local
8 field alone but for the world church.”⁷⁹ Biblical antecedents for this understanding are not readily
9 available but we do find some hints. We know that in the case of Paul and Barnabas the laying on
10 of hands enabled them to minister as missionaries anywhere in the world. In the case of Timothy,
11 he was also ordained to serve beyond his local congregation. But perhaps the point is not as
12 complex as it seems to be. Since in the New Testament the local church is an expression of the
13 universal church, it could be theologically argued that to be ordained to serve a local congregation
14 was in principle the same as being ordain to server the universal church. What we as a church may

⁷⁷ The *Minister's Manual* states, “Ordination endorses the individuals thus set apart as authorized representatives of the church. By this act, the church delegates its authority to its ministers to proclaim the gospel publicly, to administer its ordinances, to organize new congregations, and, within the parameters established by God’s word, to give direction to the believers (Matt. 16:19; Heb. 13:17). In short, ordination invests ministers with full ecclesiastical authority to act in behalf of the church” (76-77).

⁷⁸ As indicated above, the New Testament does not assign these functions to the ordained ministry suggesting that this is something that the church should decide. Ellen G. White has provided some guidance that has guided the church in its decision. Nevertheless, neither Ellen White nor the church has exclusively assigned the performance of the Communion Service and baptism to the ordained ministry. We have stated, “The communion service is to be conducted by an ordained pastor or elder. Deacons, although ordained, cannot conduct the service” (*Church Manual*, 122). With respect to baptism we have indicated that the pastor is to officiate but that “in the absence of an ordained pastor, an elder shall request the conference president to arrange for the baptism of those desiring to unite with the church. An elder should not officiate in the service without first obtaining permission from the conference president” (ibid., 73). This is done for pragmatic reasons but is also based on the fact that the church recognizes that the Bible does not explicitly indicate who should be in charge of these services. Although they are specifically assigned to ordained ministers, we do not find a dogmatic ruling.

⁷⁹ *GC Policy L 45 05*, quoted in *Minister's Manual*, 79.

1 have been stating is that once individuals are ordained as pastors they could function as such
2 anywhere in the world church without having to be ordained again or acknowledge as such by the
3 local congregations. This statement is primarily a theological one rather than a statement of fact. It
4 is theological in that it recognizes that the divine call to minister aims at the service of God's
5 people no matter where the individual members find themselves. It is a statement of fact because
6 this is what should always happen, but the truth is that this is not always the case. There are
7 countries in the world where it is forbidden by law to have foreign pastors officiating in the
8 churches. The theological statement remains valid and consequently we continue to ordain pastors
9 for the world church but due to circumstances beyond the control of the church in some cases it
10 cannot be implemented.

11 **D. Ordained to Serve**

12 This exploration of the theological and functional significance of ordination could give the
13 impression that the ordained are a peculiar group of people to whom certain authoritative offices
14 have been assigned in order to rule over the church. This is far from the truth. The biblical evidence
15 does not allow for this particular understanding of leadership through ordination. *First*, Jesus
16 contrasted the worldly role of leaders with His understanding of leadership: "The kings of the
17 Gentiles lord it over them; and those who have authority over them are called 'Benefactors.' But it
18 is not this way with you, but the one who is the greatest among you must become like the youngest,
19 and the leader like servant. . . I am among you as the one who serves" (Luke 22:25-27). Jesus
20 introduced among His followers a revolutionary model of leadership grounded in His own
21 ministry. He announced it when He said: "For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but
22 to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45). But above all He modeled it when

1 He died on the cross in the service of salvation for the human race. He who provided the very
2 foundation for Christian ministry defined it as service to others and not as a quest to be served.

3 *Second*, Christian service is a gift of the Spirit and participates in the nature and purpose of
4 the gifts of the Spirit. According to Paul, each church member receives from the Spirit a gift “for
5 the common good” of the church (1 Cor 12:7) and for the unity of the church (12:12-26). Therefore
6 there is no ground for boasting and self-aggrandizement: “For who regards you as superior? What
7 do you have that you did not receive? And if you did receive it, why do you boast as if you had not
8 received it?” (4:7). The individual who receives a gift from the Spirit is a steward at that gift,
9 equipped for service to others. This is explicitly stated in Ephesians 4:11-13:

10 And He gave some *as* apostles, and some *as* prophets, and some *as* evangelists, and some
11 *as* pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the
12 building up of the body of Christ; until we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the
13 knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs
14 to the fullness of Christ.

15 *Third*, those ordained to the ministry should always remember that, although the Lord
16 elected and called them to the ministry, the Lord used the church to set them apart. The authority
17 they bear and exercise is delegated authority. Christ invested His church with authority and
18 therefore it is diffused throughout the community of believers. When the church, under the
19 guidance of the Spirit and the instruction of the Scriptures, delegates some of that authority to the
20 few, the church is not in that act relinquishing its own God-given authority. Those who will
21 exercise ecclesiastical authority do so on behalf of the church and are accountable to God and to
22 His church for its proper exercise (cf. 1 Tim 5:19). The church who appoints them can also
23 un-appoint them.
24

25 *Fourth*, the priesthood of all believers remains within the church and functions effectively

1 when leaders see themselves as servants. This is the very foundation for the cooperation of church
2 members with those who have been ordained to the ministry. It is because of the ministers' work of
3 service that the congregation is exhorted to "esteem them very highly in love" (1 Thess 5:13).
4 Church members are instructed to submit to "everyone who helps in the work and labors" in the
5 church of Christ (1 Cor 16:16). It is disinterested service that motivates submission and not an
6 ecclesiastical office. The reason for being obedient and submissive to leaders is that "they keep
7 watch over you souls as those who will give an account" (Heb 13:17). The divine election, call,
8 and the laying on of hands transform ecclesiastical leaders into servants of the Lord and of His
9 church.

10 **E. Conclusion**

11 We are now ready to begin our conversation, as requested by the church, in examining the
12 main issues in a theology of ordination. The biblical precedents examined and the biblical
13 principles identified are of great value to the church in defining its understanding and practice of
14 ordination. What we have done until now has served the church well and directly contributed to its
15 unity, order, and growth. Revisiting the topic has made us aware of the need to gain a better
16 understanding of the nature and role of ministry within the church; a task that has remained
17 unfinished. For the time being, let us together reflect much more on the theology of ordination.

18 January 2013
19 Silver Spring, MD

Greek Term	Translation	Occurrence in NT	Reference to Appointment	Appointed Persons	Office or Task	Accompanying Ritual (as found in text or context)
<i>anadeiknymi</i>	To show clearly, appoint, choose	2 times	Luke 10:1 Acts 1:24	The Seventy Matthias	Missionary Apostle	Pre-selection by church, prayer, casting the lot
<i>aphorizō</i>	To set apart, exclude	10 times	Acts 13:2 Rom 1:1 Gal 1:15	Paul, Barnabas Paul Paul	Missionary Apostle Apostle	Fasting, prayer, laying on of hands
<i>eklegomai</i>	To choose, select	22 times	Luke 6:13 Luke 9:35 John 6:70; 13:18 Acts 1:2 Acts 1:24 Acts 6:5 Acts 15:7	The Twelve Jesus The Twelve The Twelve Matthias The Seven Peter	Apostle Messiah Apostle Apostle Apostle Organization of welfare, evangelist Missionary	Prayer Pre-selection by church, prayer, casting the lots Election by church, prayer, laying on of hands

<i>kathistēmi</i>	To bring, conduct, take, appoint	21 times	Acts 6:3 Tit 1:5 Heb 7:28	The Seven Elders Jesus	Organization of welfare, evangelist Elder Elder, High Priest	Election by church, prayer, laying on of hands
<i>keimai</i>	To lie, stand, be laid, be appointed	24 times	Luke 2:34 Phil 1:16	Jesus Paul	Savior Apologist	
<i>horizō</i>	To determine, appoint, declare	8 times	Acts 10:42 Acts 17:31 Rom 1:14	Jesus Jesus Jesus	Judge Judge Son of God	

Greek Term	Translation	Occurrence in NT	Reference to Appointment	Appointed Persons	Office or Task	Accompanying Ritual (as found in text or context)
<i>procheirizō</i>	to choose for oneself, appoint	3 times	Acts 3:20 Acts 22:14 Acts 26:16	Jesus Paul Paul	Messiah Witness Servant, witness	

<i>tassō</i>	To order, appoint	8 times	Acts 15:2	Paul, Barnabas, and others	Delegates to council In Jerusalem	Sent by church
<i>tithēmi</i>	To put, place, lay, make, appoint	100 times	Matt 12:18 Acts 13:47 1Cor 12:28 1Tim 1:12 1Tim 2:7 2Tim 1:11 Heb 1:2	Jesus Paul, Barnabas Apostles, prophets, Teachers, etc. Paul Paul Paul Jesus	Messiah Missionary Apostle prophet teacher etc. Ministry Preacher, apostle, teacher Preacher, apostle, teacher Heir, Creator, Sustainer, King	
<i>chriō</i>	To anoint	5 times	Luke 4:18 Acts 4:27; 10:38 Heb 1:9	Jesus Jesus Jesus	Proclaimer of gospel Proclaimer, Healer Creator, King	Enthronement, being worshipped