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ORDINATION TO MINISTRY

SELECTED TEXTS

ONE OF MANY PHENOMENON THAT HAS OCCURRED IN Church History—one that has, in fact, resulted in some damaging effects—is that of preachers who, while in some cases truly called and serving well, were not ordained by a local church (or even any other institution). As we will see, this step is crucial not only as a confirmation of a man’s qualifications, but also serves to help safeguard from error. Without giving specific names, here are a couple of examples, and we will see another later.

While one such man did preach the Gospel, his preaching was driven by stories and anecdotes and devoid of doctrine. To him “the Bible was a source of simple quotes, often treated without reference to their contexts.”¹ He was untrained, never ordained, and actually rejected theological studies. After an offer of ordination by one church, in fact, he boasted, “I have never been through college or a theological seminary, except to go in one door and out the other. I therefore cannot accept your offer and do justice to your rules and my own judgment.”² The following summary is dead on target:

[He] was a wonderful servant of God. But his work, without his intending it, added to a gradual transition in the culture of American Christianity, changing it from a theology-grounded faith to an emotion-based event. We see the long-term result in our day. Feelings rather than doctrine rule the roost in American Christianity.³

Another example was a famous revivalist, who with no theological training—he was, in fact, totally unteachable and refused to attend any school where he could receive training—and with zero qualification for ministry and no ordination, took it upon himself to start conducting “revivals.” The damage he did still reverberates today.

Tragically, this disregard for ordination has become a far more common occurrence today, as we will see. To address this question, let us examine what ordination is, the biblical evidence for it, who is to be ordained, who is to do the ordaining, and why all this is critically important.

What Exactly Is Ordination?

It is here, in fact, that the confusion begins. During the third century, for example, it became customary in the Roman

Catholic Church “to apply the term ‘priest’ directly and exclusively to the Christian ministers. . . . Solemn ‘ordination’ or consecration by the laying on of hands was the form of admission into the . . . *sacerdotalis* [priestly office].”⁴ Completely ignoring the unambiguous fact that the priesthood was *exclusively* OT and nowhere implied in the NT, Roman Catholicism adopted the Aaronic priesthood. Worse, it maintains that, “Ordination is the solemn consecration to the special priesthood. . . . It confers the capacity and authority of administering the sacraments and governing the body of believers . . . ordination imparts, according to the later scholastic doctrine, a *character indelebilis* [indelible character].”⁵ But Scripture, of course, nowhere says any such thing.

In stark contrast—and this is crucial—biblical ordination is not the *bestowing* of power or authority but a *recognition* of the power and authority already given by God. Theologian Augustus Strong (1836–1921) put it well: “Ordination is the setting apart of a person divinely called to a work of special administration in the church. It does not involve the communication of power; it is simply recognition of powers previously conferred by God and a consequent formal authorization, on the part of the church, to exercise the gifts already bestowed.”⁶

Now, with the highest respect for him, it is that very confusion that muddled the thinking of another famous and beloved Gospel preacher, who was not only never ordained but who was also very vocal in his condemnation of it. He offered three reasons (to hide his identity I do not cite the source):

I object to ordinations and recognitions, as such, (1.) Because I am a minister, and will never receive authority and commission from man; nor do I like that which has the shadow of such a thing about it. I detest the dogma of apostolic succession, and dislike the revival of the doctrine by delegating power from minister to minister.

But this dear preacher clearly confused a Roman Catholic *invention* with a biblical *instruction*, which we will see in a moment. In his revolt against “the sacramentalism of the Church of England, which seemed to hold that in the imposition of hands in ordination divine grace trickled down through a

bishop's finger ends and he felt moved to protest against it,"⁷ he failed to see his own inconsistency. After all, Catholicism and the Church of England completely perverted the Lord's Supper and Baptism, but he still observed both of those. He further confused the issue with this statement: "Since there is no special gift to bestow, why in any case the laying on of empty hands?" But again, nothing is *bestowed* in ordination, rather what God has already given is *recognized*.

He went on to write: "(2.) I believe in the glorious principle of Independency. Every church has a right to choose its own minister; and if so, certainly it needs no assistance from others in appointing him to the office." But, as we will see, ordination is not to a specific *church* but to the *ministry*. Finally, he added: "(3.) If there be no authority inferred, what is the meaning of the ceremony?" But, as we will also see, the purpose of ordination is *recognition* and *confirmation* of a man's call, qualifications, and training.

What Is the Biblical Evidence for Ordination?

While some oddly insist that there is little evidence for ordination, there are verses that clearly indicate it. The first passage that seems to imply it is Acts 13:2-3, where we see the Church at Antioch sending out Paul and Barnabas. That is unlikely, however. Of the several Greek words that are rendered "ordain" in the NT, none of them appear here. Further, they had already been serving in the ministry for several years. These verses simply indicate that this church sent them out as church-planters.

Acts 14:21-25, however, is a clear precedent: Paul and Barnabas "ordained them elders in every church" in Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch in Pisidia. The Greek *cheirotoneō* is a compound comprised of *cheir* (hand) and *teinō* (stretch), so in Classical Greek it means "to vote or elect by a show of hands, as was regularly done in the Athenian assembly. From this the verb came to mean appoint." So, here in Acts 14:23, "it refers to the appointment by Barnabas and Paul of elders in the Galatian churches, from whence, apparently, it became the standard term for ordination in later ecclesiastic Greek."⁸ Another authority adds that "the reference is not to election by the congregation," such as in a show of hands. Rather, these men were "nominated by Paul and Barnabas and then with prayer and fasting they are instituted into their offices."⁹

While some commentators quite oddly say that it is likely that the apostles presided over the proceedings while the congregation voted, the text clearly does not say that. It *explicitly* states that the apostles did the appointing. Why? Simply because they could recognize the qualifications that Paul would later write down in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1, and they alone could properly train these men for ministry. That, in fact, leads us to our next verse.

Paul instructed pastor Titus that he too should "ordain elders in every city" (literally, "city by city," i.e., all those that had a Christian congregation), just as Paul "had appointed" him (1:5); that is precisely why Paul then listed the necessary qualifications in the following verses. The Greek here for "ordain" is *kathistēmi*, from *kata* (down) and *histēmi* (to stand), and so "to set down, to put in place." So, in light of the list of qualifications, there can be no doubt that Titus was to "ordain" (that is, put in the place of leadership) men who met those

requirements. John Calvin comments here: "In the spiritual building this nearly comes next to doctrine, that pastors be ordained, to take charge of governing the Church; and therefore Paul mentions it here in preference to everything else."¹⁰

In the same vein, the list of qualifications for leadership in 1 Timothy 3:1-7 is then followed first by 4:14: "Neglect not the gift that is in thee, which was given thee by prophecy, with the laying on of the hands of the presbytery." One commentator well explains: "Timothy's call to the ministry was thus confirmed *subjectively*, by means of his spiritual gift, *objectively*, through his prophetic call, and *collectively*, through the affirmation of the church."¹¹

What is the "laying on of hands"? "Laying" here is *epitithēmi*, from *epi* (upon or besides) and *tithēmi* (to put) and so to put or lay on, in this case "hands" (cf. Matt. 9:18; 23:4). Once again, it is not a mystical or magical ritual that bestows power or authority. Neither does this dub the man with the title "Reverend." That, in fact, is part of what gives ordination a bad reputation. It implies that this is a "holy man" or a "cleric," all of which has come to us via Romanism. The word "reverend" appears only once in Scripture and then only of God: "He sent redemption unto his people: he hath commanded his covenant for ever: holy and reverend is his name" (Ps. 111:9).

The laying on of hands, then, is a purely symbolic act. It was common to lay on hands in imparting a blessing (Mk. 10:16) or in setting apart to any office (Acts 6:6; cf. Num. 8:10; 27:18-23; Deut. 34:9). It descended from the practice of laying hands on a sacrificial animal to identify with it (cf. Ex. 29:10, 15, 19; Lev. 4:15). Calvin is again extremely helpful here. He wrote in his *Institutes*:

It is clear that when the apostles admitted any man to the ministry, they used no other ceremony than the laying on of hands, I judge that this rite derived from the custom of the Hebrews, who, as it were, presented to God by the laying on of hands that which they wished to be blessed and consecrated. So Jacob, about to bless Ephraim and Manasseh, laid his hands on their heads (Gen. 48:14). Our Lord followed this practice when he prayed over the children (Matt. 19:15). With the same meaning, I suppose, the Jews laid their hands upon their sacrifices according to the prescription of the law (Num. 8:12; 27:23; Lev. 1:4; 3:2, 8, 13; 4:4, 15, 24, 29, 33; etc.). The apostles, accordingly, signified by the laying on of hands that they were offering to God him whom they were receiving into the ministry. However, they used it also with those upon whom they conferred the visible graces of the Spirit (Acts 19:6). Anyway, this was the solemn rite used whenever they called anyone to the ministry of the church. In this way they consecrated the pastors and teachers, and the deacons.

Although there exists no set precept for the laying on of hands, because we see it in continual use with the apostles, their very careful observance ought to serve in lieu of a precept. And surely it is useful for the dignity of the ministry to be commended to the people by this sort of sign, as also to warn the one ordained that he is no longer a law unto himself, but bound in servitude to God and the church. Moreover, it will be no empty sign if it is restored to its own true origin. For if the Spirit of God establishes nothing without cause in the church, we should feel that this ceremony, since it has proceeded from him, is not useless, provided it be not

turned to superstitious abuse. Finally, we must understand that the whole multitude did not lay hands upon its ministers, but pastors alone did so.¹²

Further on in 1 Timothy, again in light of the qualifications in 3:1–7, we read in 5:22: “Lay hands suddenly on no man, neither be partaker of other men’s sins: keep thyself pure” (“lay” is again *epitithēmi*). This verse truly reaffirms the importance of ordination by warning that it must not be done hastily or prematurely. A man must be proven qualified before he is appointed for ministry. This is not only because of the damage he can do if he is not qualified, but it also makes those who ordained him share in culpability. God might not only chastise the man for his sin but also the ordaining body. By being careful in this, we “keep [ourselves] pure.”

Finally, Paul mentions ordination to Timothy once again in 2 Timothy 1:6: “Wherefore I put thee in remembrance that thou stir up the gift of God, which is in thee by the putting on of my hands.” The words “stir up” translate *anazpureō*, “to revive or stir up a fire.” Paul urges Timothy to keep stirring the fire that was ignited at his ordination so it will continue to blaze hot and bright. He goes on in chapter 4 to remind him that this fire consists of the diligent “[preaching] of the word,” to “reprove, rebuke, exhort with all longsuffering and doctrine” (v. 2). Why? “For the time will come [and it is certainly here] when [people] will not endure sound doctrine; but after their own lusts shall they heap to themselves teachers, having itching ears; And they shall turn away [their] ears from the truth, and shall be turned unto fables.” What an admonition to every preacher today! *Never let that fire die!*

Who Is to Be Ordained?

The first requirement is a man’s calling, which we examined in a previous TOTT years ago.¹³ With all due respect again to the dear preacher quoted earlier, when he asks, “Is not the Divine call the real ordination to preach, and the call of the church the only ordination to the pastorate?” we are compelled to courteously respond, “No, it is not.” Anyone can say they are called, but that is not enough. Second, he must meet the qualifications listed in 1 Timothy 3:1–7 and Titus 1:6–8. These are not the *ideal*, as some teachers insist—“We just have to look for as many of these qualities as we can find in each person,” they say—rather these are the *standard*. Third, then, the man must be adequately trained in doctrine and duty so he can carry on biblical ministry. The purpose then of the final step, ordination, is to examine and verify those three areas before appointing this man to ministry.

The question also arises here concerning deacons in Acts 6:6, whom the apostles appointed to take care of temporal matters (see “The Deacon” section of ch. 5). The apostles “prayed [and] laid their hands on them” (“laid” is once again *epitithēmi*). While deacons do not have the same responsibilities as pastors, the qualifications are high and their appointment to that office is momentous.

Who Is to Ordain?

The answer here is obvious—the Local Church is to ordain men to ministry, not a denomination, seminary, or other ecclesiastic body. I would also interject that neither should

this be done by a so-called “ordination council.” A common practice is that a council of men interrogates the candidate, who basically just recites memorized doctrine. (I still vividly remember mine on a stifling hot July day in 1975). But there is no NT precedent for that because it ultimately proves very little. Anyone can memorize answers. The elder(s) and the church body ordain a man they know personally. They know and verify his calling, qualifications, and training. It is then the church, in a public meeting, that ordains this man by the laying on of hands by the elder(s). What a blessing and thrill to a Local Church! That ordination, of course, is not confined to that single church, rather it is to the calling itself.

Why Is Ordination Important?

I would submit finally that all we have seen is not just *important* but *critically* so. Over the last couple of centuries, there has been a long list of self-appointed preachers and teachers with little or no biblical qualifications and no verification whatsoever through ordination. And the damage they have wrought against the cause of Christ and His Word has been virtually apocalyptic. Further, the situation is even worse today than ever before. *Literally anyone* can say, “I am called to preach, so I’m going to do it.” No testimony, no training, no testing, no nothing. If I may respectfully submit, this is also an inherent problem with “lay-preaching” and “lay-teaching” They simply do not have the calling, qualifications, or training and should not be doing so. That is not a popular position nowadays, but it is the biblical one because the preaching and teaching role carries with it enormous responsibility and greater accountability (Jas. 3:1).

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NOTES

- ¹ Timothy Paul Jones, *Christian History Made Easy* (Rose Publishing, 2009), 162.
- ² John V. Farwell, *Early Recollections of Dwight L. Moody* (The Winona Publishing Company, 1907), 21.
- ³ Rick Cornish, *5 Minute Church Historian* (NavPress, 2005), 245.
- ⁴ Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, Vol. 2, 126, 127.
- ⁵ Schaff, Vol. 3, 489.
- ⁶ Augustus Strong, *Systematic Theology* (Justin Press, 1907), 918.
- ⁷ *Ibid*, 920.
- ⁸ Colin Brown (Gen. Ed.), *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* (Zondervan, 1975), Vol. 1, 478.
- ⁹ Gerhard Kittel (Ed.), *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Eerdmans, 1964; reprinted 2006), Vol. IX, 437.
- ¹⁰ *Commentaries*, Titus 1:5.
- ¹¹ John MacArthur, *New Testament Commentary: 1 Timothy* (emphasis added).
- ¹² *Institutes* (Battles translation), Book IV, Ch. III. Sec. 16). Scripture references are enclosed in parentheses instead of brackets and are abbreviated.
- ¹³ See Issue 18 (Jan. 2007) “Is There a So-Called ‘Call’ to Ministry?” on the website or chapter 14 in the TOTT book.

NO spoken word, or collection of words, in all of human history can come even remotely close to the meaning, magnificence, and resulting meditation of the seven solemn sentences uttered by the Lord Jesus Christ on the Cross.” So begins the new book, *Solemn Sentences: The Seven Statements of Christ on the Cross*. This small volume (100 pages) plunges deep into these solemn sentences, as the excerpt below briefly demonstrates. These solemn sentences do not merely *recount* the events that purchased our salvation, but they also *reflect* our Lord’s character, and they *reveal* to us how we should live. [Single Copy, \$10.00; 2–3 copies, \$9.00 ea.; 4+ copies, \$8.50 ea. It is also on Amazon.com and for Kindle Reader.]

EXCERPT FROM THE INTRODUCTION

The Nature of His Statements

While we will plunge deeper into each of these solemn sentences, it is a valuable study first to get an overview of them to see their basic nature and character. There are at least two ways to get such a birds-eye view.

The Truth They Demonstrate

First, Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do (Lk. 23:34) are the words of *forgiveness*. Theologically, forgiveness is primarily a legal transaction. We who were under the legal sentence of death according to the Law, are now forgiven by legal transaction between the Father and the Son.

Second, To day shalt thou be with me in paradise (Lk. 23:43) are the words of *salvation*. The Greek most often rendered as “salvation” (*sōtēria*; e.g., Rom. 1:16; 10:9–10; Eph. 1:13; Heb. 5:9; etc.) means safety, deliverance, and preservation from danger or destruction. What is salvation? Sadly, this is being diluted in our day. A definition is required, so I respectfully offer this one: *Salvation is the sole act of God whereby He by His mercy and grace eternally redeems His elect believers and delivers them from their sin and the resultant spiritual death through the once-for-all redeeming work of Jesus Christ on the cross.*

Third, Woman, behold thy son! and then to John, *Behold thy mother!* (Jn. 19:26–27) are the words of *love*. In His affection for His mother, Jesus passed on her care to the Apostle John. Likewise, those who stood by the Cross, while they obviously could not relieve His agony, could at least reflect godly love by just being there.

Fourth, My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me? (Matt. 27:46) are the words of *misery*. With the world’s crash into darkness and our Lord’s cry of despair, we see here the reality and depth of His indescribable misery as the Father in His holiness turns His face away from the Son because He has become sin for us.

Fifth, I thirst (Jn. 19:28) are the words of *agony*. These words prove the humanity of Christ, paint a vivid portrait of man’s depravity, and demonstrate the prominence of Scripture authority.

Sixth, It is finished (Jn. 19:30) are the words of *completion*. Wrapped up in this single word in the Greek text is the whole Gospel. The purpose of God was carried out, the point of the incarnation was complete, the payment for the atonement was covered, the penalty for sin was carried, and the power of Satan was crushed by our Lord’s cry from the Cross.

Seventh, Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit (Lk. 23:46), are the words of *communion*. While the Father had to turn away because Jesus had become sin and communion was broken, we finally see the Son returned to the previous unfettered communion.

The Person They Display

It is also fascinating to see a different aspect of our Lord’s person in each of these statements. We can see this at a glance:

- In **Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do**, we see Him as Mediator.
- In **Today shalt thou be with me in paradise**, we see Him as King.
- In **Woman, behold thy son!** and then **Behold thy mother!** we see Him as the Son of Man.
- In **My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?** we see Him as the Substitute.
- In **I thirst**, we see Him in His humanity.
- In **It is finished**, we see Him as Savior.
- In **Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit**, we see Him as the Son of God.

The Necessity of His Statements

As the nature of these statements was two-fold, so was their necessity. *First*, they are necessary to show us the *fullness* of our salvation. From the first statement to the last, we see that salvation in Christ is consecrated, complete, and confirmed. *Second*, these statements are necessary because each is a *fulfillment* of prior revelation. What a wondrous truth! Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness (Num. 21:4–9), so was it necessary for the Son of Man to be lifted up (Jn. 3:14). We can again see this at a glance:

- **Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do** fulfills Isaiah 53:12: He “made intercession for the transgressors.”
- **Today shalt thou be with me in paradise** fulfills the angel’s prophecy to Joseph: “thou shalt call his name Jesus,

for he shall save his people from their sins (Matt. 1:21).

- **Woman, behold thy son!** fulfills Simeon's prophecy: "A sword shall pierce through thy own soul also" (Lk. 2:35).
- **My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?** fulfills the identical words of Psalm 22:1.
- **I thirst** fulfills Psalm 69:21: "In my thirst they gave me vinegar to drink."
- **It is finished** again reflects Psalm 22, for its closing words are "he hath done this."
- **Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit** come right from Psalm 31:5: "Into thy hand I commend my spirit: Thou hast redeemed me, O Lord God of truth."

Oh, the wonder of the Cross! We can never exhaust its truth.

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