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March 08, 2013

Is Ordination a Requirement for Ministry?

In the Bible, we find multiple examples of men and women who occupied various offices and functions for God's people. They received their calls for ministry or service from God, often through the community of believers, and it can also be said that God is the one who qualified them for their ministry. Appointments were confirmed or symbolized in various ways, and not all of them were by means of a laying on of hands. This raises the question as to whether ordination to ministry is the only required mode to install someone into an office or function and to give authority to that person to perform that function.

Old Testament Examples

In the Old Testament, there appears to be only two instances of "ordination" to an office. The Levites were ordained to the priesthood by a ceremony of laying on of hands and prayer done by Moses and representatives of the people ([Num 8:5-26](#)). As the divinely chosen successor of Moses, Joshua was installed as the next leader of the people of Israel by a service of prayer and laying on of hands ([Num 27:12-23](#); [Deut 34:9](#)).

But numerous other leaders of Israel were not ordained. Abraham received a direct call from God to become the first leader of the people of God ([Gen 12:1-3](#)). Aaron and his sons, who were to serve as high priests, were consecrated to God by a special ceremony and sacrifices, and the special garments they wore symbolized the authority they had ([Exod 28-29](#)). The two skilled craftsmen Bezalel and Oholiab who designed and constructed much of the earthly tabernacle in the wilderness were also divinely chosen by God ([Exod 31:1-11](#)).

Judges and prophets of Israel were directly raised up by God for their tasks also without apparent ceremonies of installation. The prophet Samuel, as the last of Israel's judges, received a direct call from God for his appointment to ministry ([1 Sam 3](#)). Other prophets of Israel also received their appointments directly from God: Isaiah ([Isa 6](#)), Jeremiah ([Jer 1:5](#)), and Ezekiel ([Eze 1:3](#)).

The appointment of kings of Israel, however, followed a different pattern. Samuel anointed Saul as the first king of Israel ([1 Sam 10:1](#)) and later David ([1 Sam 16:12-13](#)). Solomon was also anointed in a ceremony that included riding a mule ([1 Kgs 1:38-39](#)). Riding a mule or colt was still a powerful symbolic gesture of the investiture of a king of Israel when Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a colt ([Luke 19:29-40](#)).

New Testament Examples

As in the Old Testament, the New Testament provides a variety of ways in which someone was appointed to an office or task. After a night spent in prayer, Jesus appointed twelve apostles from a larger group of disciples ([Mark 3:13-19](#); [Luke 6:12-16](#)). The text does not tell us that Jesus ordained or laid his hands on the Twelve.

A larger group of disciples of Jesus, the Seventy, was also appointed by Jesus to minister in his name ([Luke 10:1-20](#)). Later, after the ascension of Jesus, the disciples, led by Peter, selected from among them another apostle, Matthias, to replace Judas. This appointment was done by the casting of lots (a verb that can also be translated as voting by lots; [Acts 1:15-26](#)).

A few chapters later in the book of Acts, the assembly of believers in Jerusalem selected seven men, filled with the Spirit and wisdom, to take part of the responsibilities that the apostles were no longer able to fulfill adequately. Their selection by the

assembly was completed by a prayer and the laying on of hands, the first such example of this ceremony in the New Testament (Acts 6:1-6). Barnabas and Paul were also set apart in the same manner for their missionary ministry (Acts 13:1-3). But we have no record that elders were ordained, rather it seems that they were simply appointed (Acts 14:23). Timothy seems to have been ordained by Paul and a group of elders but we are not told for which ministry (1 Timothy 5; 2 Timothy 1:4). The New Testament is silent on how people in many other forms of ministry such as teachers, pastors, evangelists, were installed into their functions.

Conclusion

This brief and incomplete survey indicates that there was a variety of ways in which one's ministry was affirmed and initiated. And it is clear that few people were installed into their functions through ordination or laying on of hands.

In the Seventh-day Adventist Church, appointments to offices and functions combine a number of the attributes we see in Scripture. The church community does most appointments by a process of selection done through various committees or boards that appoint or make recommendations for the appointments of people to various functions. The authority to exercise these functions is thus granted at the moment the constitutive committees or assemblies make the decisions for appointments.

Following a decision made to appoint someone to an office or a function, by the respective church boards or conference/union executive committees, some officers are installed or ordained through a ceremony of prayer and laying on of hands, as in the case of deacons, elders, and pastors. Other officers are appointed to their ministry simply by the vote of a committee (e.g. conference and union directors of departments; college and university presidents), while others by the vote of a general assembly of believers (e.g. conference and union presidents; GC and Division officers).

During the ordination of deacons, elders and pastors, the ceremony of prayer and laying on of hands is a confirmation or symbolic representation of a decision to give them authority made prior to the ceremony. Seventh-day Adventists do not believe that ordination is a sacrament; rather, the ceremony of laying on of hands is a form of blessing in which the community recognizes the calling of God in the life of the individual and asks for God's blessing of wisdom and spiritual strength on the individual to be able to perform the functions the person has been elected or nominated to do. The ceremony itself does not grant authority to exercise the functions of deacons, elders, or pastors; rather, it confirms that the church has already granted authority.

Of course, there is more to this ceremony. In the Adventist church, only an ordained elder can perform a baptism and the Lord's Supper. Ordination is how we authorize someone to perform these functions on behalf of the church.

We have many examples of biblical persons who were appointed to their ministries without having been ordained, and many Adventist leaders are asked to do ministry without having to be ordained. As I see it, ordination is not for the primary purpose of granting authority but it is asking for God's blessing on the individual who is asked to do a particular ministry on behalf of the community. Realizing the benefits of this service of prayer and laying on of hands, the Church Manual recommends that for functions and offices that do not require a service of ordination and laying on of hands, churches are invited to consider having a service of prayer and induction for all new officers to mark their installation to their new functions. I think this recommendation reveals the true spirit of what the Bible intends laying on of hands to mean. So perhaps we should reflect more carefully on the meaning of ordination as an induction and a prayer for blessing as the Seventh-day Adventist Church wrestles with its theology of ordination. It may be that we are giving too much sacramental meaning to a ceremony that for us should be an ordinance.




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Posted by Denis Fortin on March 08, 2013 in Adventist Ministry and Ordination, Missions and Ministry | Permalink

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So what exactly is "ordination"? Is it specifically the laying on of hands? Or is it the appointment? Or is it the consecration prayer? Or...?

All of the article's aforementioned examples represent a setting apart for leadership. None of them use the word "ordination". So how exactly did we decide that "laying on of hands"="ordination"? Or is the ordination the conferring of the credentials that takes place during the service? Which piece of what we do "is" the ordination part?

And does our specific attachment of that word to that particular action therefore invalidate the other methods described in the Bible?

Posted by: Lorena Ray | March 08, 2013 at 05:31 PM

Thanks for sharing this overview and your reflections Dr. Fortin.

To me it shows biblically that there are other ways for us as a Christian church - besides the laying on of hands in an ordination service - to equally affirm the calling of deacons, elders, and pastors.

While there is no indication that these other ways would be any less definitive in God's eyes, the reality that they would be in ours validates the final statement in your post.

This may be semantics, but if a biblical non-sacramental view is an induction and prayer of blessing (rather than their reception of authority through the ceremony), is it possible we might be shifting the locus of authority from the ceremony to the voting boards thus sacramentalizing the committees?

Of course this is not being suggested and it depends upon how one defines 'authority' when attaching the term to the work of the relevant boards. It just seems that if the role of the board is appointing the leader to a particular function rather than granting the leader authority that it might more accurately capture the essence of what you are suggesting?

If the conversation is about where the authority resides, then in effect some may unknowingly embrace a sacramental committee instead of a sacramental ceremony.

Posted by: Anthony WagenerSmith | March 08, 2013 at 05:39 PM

Good article, however, by using the word ministry, it seen to cover many facets of gospel work/witness. Is the Ordination subject about one's preparedness for ministry or is it a subject of one's preparedness for the pastoral/priestly role? If it is just about ministry, then a resounding NO, one does not need to be ordained to do ministry. However, if it is about the pastoral/priestly role/ministry, then that is another discussion all together. I think Pastoral Ministry should be the focus of the discussion and not just ministry as is used in the article. And if Pastoral Ministry is the focus, then the answer could be different.

Posted by: Leon | March 08, 2013 at 05:41 PM

Lorena, you are accurate in asking these questions. Christian tradition has come to equate ordination with the service of prayer and laying on of hands. I don't think it was that way in the early years of the Christian church. The laying on of hands service was simpler and more a commissioning to a ministry, a prayer of blessing asking God to be with the person. In Acts 13:1-3, we are told that Barnabas and Paul were set apart by the church at Antioch for their missionary ministry. The setting apart was done by prayer and laying on of hands. Later, at the end of their missionary journey. when they returned to Antioch, Luke says that Antioch was "where they had been commended to the grace of God for the work which they had fulfilled" (Acts 14:26). I think Luke gives us the interpretation of what the

laying on of hands meant in Acts 13:3. It was a way to commend the apostles to the grace of God for a particular ministry. I think this is an interesting insight we may have forgotten.

Posted by: Denis Fortin | [March 08, 2013 at 05:45 PM](#)

Leon, I use the words ministry and service interchangeably in this article. I think we are creating confusion by differentiating ministry and service, and pastoral ministry from other kinds of ministry or service. Jesus did not seem to make a hard distinction between these words when he referred to the kind of ministry or service his disciples were to do. The Greek word used in Matthew 20:26 translated servant or minister (depending on the translation) is diakonos, which is also translated deacon elsewhere. All church members who do some ministry in the church are servants and ministers. Some are appointed by the church to do a specific work of pastoral ministry to supervise the church. But the point is that in the OT and NT different people had different kinds of ministry and not all of them were ordained yet they were still genuine servants of the gospel.

Posted by: Denis Fortin | [March 08, 2013 at 06:15 PM](#)

Some questions that your research raised in my mind:

To what extent are the biblical rituals of induction to leadership culturally conditioned, and to what extent are they broadly applicable? Clearly, we would not ask North American pastors to ride a colt as a symbol of their induction.

Is there a taxonomy of biblical leadership induction rituals? For example, in the OT anointing seems to have been reserved for priests and kings. Jesus fulfills the role of priest and king, having received the anointing of the Holy Spirit. I propose that the NT church did not anoint their leaders because (1) that would have made the leaders priests and kings, when all believers were considered a royal priesthood and (2) the ritual of anointing was spiritualized on the basis of Jesus anointing by the Holy Spirit. Is there anything else to be learned along these lines?

1 Tim 4:14 and 2 Tim 1:6 indicate that spiritual gifts can be bestowed on church leaders through the laying on of hands. Is this sacramentalism? How can we incorporate these verses into our theology of ordination? For me personally, this was the benefit that I most desired out of my ordination service, and the main reason why I went through with it.

2 Tim 5:17 says that effective elders should be given double honor. Recognizing the diakoinia is the basis of all church leadership, how can we incorporate higher levels of respect in our church structures for those deserving of them. I worry that many of us who come from Western cultures have a cultural blind spot to biblical honor because we value equality so highly.

Posted by: [David Hamstra](#) | [March 13, 2013 at 02:08 PM](#)

Anthony and David raise good questions that need further reflexion. First, in Adventism church committees make a lot of decisions regarding who has authority but I can't say the committees take on some aura of sacramental purpose. It is the community that makes the decision to give authority to someone and to ordain that person. I think the point of cultural influence on how a church understands and values the authority given to a pastor is a valid observation. Our western biases are at play here and we need to be careful not to take away what God gives. But I think we are giving more to the rite of ordination than what is really said in Scripture. The references to Timothy's laying on of hands by Paul and the council of elders are not clear passages. Some understand Paul to refer to Timothy's baptism and the laying on of hands to receive the Holy Spirit. The reference to the council of elders is more likely a reference to his ordination. But it doesn't say what he was ordained for, what task or function. So there is something missing and we wish for more details.

Posted by: Denis Fortin | [March 14, 2013 at 07:48 PM](#)

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