

# *Sacred Acts For Holy Living - Called And Anointed*

*Bible Reading:*

*Acts 13:1-3*

*James 5:13-20*

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It was October of 1987. A young fellow was called to the front of church and asked to kneel. He did. A group of people got up out of their pew and came forward. They surrounded him and stretched out their hands towards him.

No, it was not some sort of gang swarming. Rather, it was an ordination service. A new pastor was beginning his journey of ministry, called to service in the Christian Reformed Church..... and you poor people have been stuck with me ever since.

Ordained elders, deacons and pastors gathered around me on that day.

I can still remember the feeling of their hands pressing on me. And a sense of weight. Beyond the pressure of their hands, it was almost a feeling of the transfer of responsibility and challenge which comes with ministry.

Those ordained leaders, praying - hands laid on me - they, in their day, had **also** been surrounded by Christian leaders who had prayed for **them**, commissioned **them** to service, and did so through the laying on of hands.

What is this rather unique custom of laying on hands?

Where does it come from?

What does it signify?

And what is its place in the life of the Church? Of Calvin Church?

As I said, those who gathered around me had also been ordained or commissioned through hands laid on them by ordained people. And they by ones who went before them. In fact, it is an unbroken chain that goes all the way back to Bible times.

Walk with me through the book of *Acts* to witness some accounts of this practice.

Acts 6:1 Now during those days, when the disciples were increasing in number, the Hellenists complained against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution of food.

2 And the twelve called together the whole community of the disciples and said, "It is not right that we should neglect the word of God in order to wait on tables.

3 Therefore, friends, select from among yourselves seven men of good standing, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may appoint to this task,

4 while we, for our part, will devote ourselves to prayer and to serving the word."

5 What they said pleased the whole community, and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit, together with Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolaus, a proselyte of Antioch.

6 They had these men stand before the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them.....

Acts 8:14 Now when the apostles at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had accepted the word of God, they sent Peter and John to them.

15 The two went down and prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit

16 (for as yet the Spirit had not come upon any of them; they had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus).

17 Then Peter and John laid their hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit.....

Acts 9:17 So Ananias went and entered the house. He laid his hands on Saul and said, "Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on your way here, has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit."

18 And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and his sight was restored. Then he got up and was baptized....

Acts 13:1 Now in the church at Antioch there were prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Simeon who was called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen a member of the court of Herod the ruler, and Saul.

2 While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, "Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them."

3 Then after fasting and praying they laid their hands on them and sent them off.....

Acts 19:1 While Apollos was in Corinth, Paul passed through the interior regions and came to Ephesus, where he found some disciples.

2 He said to them, "Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you became believers?" They replied, "No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit."

3 Then he said, "Into what then were you baptized?" They answered, "Into John's baptism."

4 Paul said, "John baptized with the baptism of repentance, telling the people to believe in the one who was to come after him, that is, in Jesus."

5 On hearing this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus.

6 When Paul had laid his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came upon them, and they spoke in tongues and prophesied.....

Believers in Jesus Christ, prayerful and active believers, laid their hands on other believers.

They did it to commission them for specific tasks.

They did it to transfer a blessing.

As we see, this holy touch, in the name of God, didn't begin with us.

And it didn't begin with these early believers, either.

They, in turn, were walking in their Master's footsteps.

The gospel of Mark records:

Mark 10:13 People were bringing little children to him in order that he might touch them; and the disciples spoke sternly to them.

14 But when Jesus saw this, he was indignant and said to them, "Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs.....

16 And he took them up in his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them.

Jesus transferred a divine blessing through the touch of His hand.

He also transferred healing power.

Mark 8:22 They came to Bethsaida. Some people brought a blind man to him and begged him to touch him.....

25 Then Jesus laid his hands on his eyes again; and he looked intently and his sight was restored, and he saw everything clearly.

It is the touch of God through which power flows.

It is the touch of mercy.

Why should touching be involved in the transfer of divine calling and commissioning, of divine blessing, and of divine healing?

Why not just words?

Why are hands involved?

The answer is, at least in part, that physical acts are used because we are physical people. The Bible tells us that our bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit. Meaning that God actually,  
physically,  
really  
lives within us.

His power flows through us.  
That is real.

Friends, the human body is sacred.  
That is how God created it.

1 Corinthians 6 talks about this in the context of one of the deepest and most intimate forms of touch that exists - sexual touch. It says in no uncertain terms that wrongful intimate touch - sexual sin - is absolutely devastating. Human touch, sexual touch, is not just something of the outside. Intimate touch connects right to the human spirit.

Touch, in that way, is  
very  
very  
powerful.

When in the right setting,  
the **only** setting God designed for sexual activity  
- marriage -  
it is an absolutely beautiful thing.

Take it out of that setting – premarital or extramarital sex, sexual assault - and sexual touch can distort the connect between the human spirit and God's Spirit like no other sin.  
Touch matters.  
Good touch..... and bad touch.

It is intimate, holy, good touch that is practiced in the Church when hands are gently and carefully laid on a person's head or shoulders or arm in prayer.  
There is a connection that is formed.  
In prayer, it becomes a holy connection.  
A connection through which the blessing and healing of God can and does flow.

The apostle Paul writes to his apprentice pastor, Timothy. He says:

1 Timothy 4:14 Do not neglect the gift that is in you, which was given to you through prophecy with the laying on of hands by the council of elders.

Paul reminds Timothy of this a second time:

2 Timothy 1: rekindle the gift of God that is within you through the laying on of my hands;

When we lay hands on people we pass along the power and the blessing of the Lord. Hebrews 6:2 calls it a basic teaching of the Christian life.

This act of holy touch has deep Old Testament roots.

Numbers 27:22 So Moses did as the LORD commanded him. He took Joshua and had him stand before Eleazar the priest and the whole congregation;  
23 he laid his hands on him and commissioned him-- as the LORD had directed through Moses.

Deuteronomy 34:9 says:

Joshua son of Nun was full of the spirit of wisdom, because Moses had laid his hands on him...

Holy touch - transferring the blessing of God, the Spirit of God, the power of God.

John Calvin says in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* that there is a true, sacramental quality about this act of laying on hands (IV.19.31). He does **not** say that laying on hands is a sacrament - there are only two true sacraments:

Lord's Supper  
Baptism.

Laying on hands is, however, a sacred act and can carry holy power when done in the right way.

Calvin is also very quick, and uses typical 16<sup>th</sup> century bombastic language to emphasize that we shouldn't think that this act is just for a few exclusive upper-crust types in the Church. Nor should we think that this is some magical act which has power in and of itself - *ex opere operato* - "*just do it and good stuff happens.*"

The blessing of God,  
and the power of God,  
and the life-restoring mercy of God  
transfers through this act

**ONLY**

when it is done in prayer,  
and when it is done humbly by repentant sinners who lay their lives and actions before the cross of  
Christ.

Friends,

In the modern era of Western civilization we have come to depend so much on the spoken word and on the power of the intellect that we have minimized or neglected many other instruments of ministry which God has created and mandated to be humbly and prayerfully used as holy agents of mercy.

Gentle, appropriate, prayerful touch is one of them.

In the name of God I commend this practice again to you, believers.

Take hold of it.

Practice it.

Prayerfully trusting that God will, in His sovereign design and purpose, flow though that as He will and when and where.

Let me issue a couple of warning, though.

First - one of the sad realities of our sin-stained age is that touch is not always innocent. There is bad touch. There is inappropriate touch. This reality has to shape how we lay hands on each other in the Church.

There are places and times where it is better not to practice this ritual.

- Across gender lines we want to be very careful.
- Sometimes we will be ministering to people who cannot take touch at all because of a hurtful touch in the past. We must be sensitive to that.

And - remember Calvin's warning:

We cannot pass along what we do not experience and live ourselves.

This act, like all acts within the life of the Church, **even** the acts of the sacraments, will not do holy work if we are living a double life. If we deliberately harbour sin inside, the laying of hands does **not** bring the blessing of the Lord.

In fact, I have reason to believe that we can actually do harm to someone by laying hands on them when our own hearts are dark. A colleague of mine shared how he had received a blessing prayer, with laying on of hands, before a particular chapter of his ministry. Immediately after that he began to have strange struggles with lust - lewd pictures showing up in his mind. He hadn't been struggling with that before, and couldn't figure it out.

He went back to the person who had done the praying, and challenged that individual. Sure enough - that person had been harboring an active use of pornography. He repented. Together they prayed and laid it before the Lord. And guess what happened to the unusual struggles of my colleague..... they ended.

Laying on hands in prayer is not a light thing.

It matters.

There are consequences.

Holy consequences when done in submission to the Lord, under the cross.

But damaging consequences if done sinfully.

As can the act which often comes with laying on of hands.

And that is anointing with oil. Oil is a biblical symbol of dedication to the Lord.

Which is what James 5 speaks of in v.14:

Are any among you sick? They should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord.

Some people suggest that oil is mentioned in James because it was a common medicine. Not true. This passage is not about medicine. It is about prayer.

Oil functions as an outer sign of inner holy work.

It is a visible sign of the invisible prayers that are offered for healing.

In the Old Testament oil is used extensively in acts of consecration. Aaron and his sons are set apart for the priesthood (Ex 29:21).

When the tabernacle was built, it was declared holy for the Lord's use with a sprinkling of oil (Ex 30:26).

The kings of Israel had oil poured on their head (1 Sam 10:1; 16:13).

Psalms 133 speaks of oil pouring down Aaron's robe and beard as an outer sign of God's favor and blessing.

The Psalms also speak of the "*oil of joy*" (Ps 45) - the oil of God's pleasure.

Oil is an outer picture of the inner anointing and flowing of the Holy Spirit.

It is applied in special circumstances,

with prayer,

and in humility.

It often is accompanied by the laying on of hands.

And remember, like laying on hands, while it is a sacred act and has its proper place and use, it is NOT one of the sacraments of the Church.

Laying on hands.

Prayerful anointing with oil.

Both of these acts, friends,

coming from the Word of God;

done in submission to that Word.

The Word which has ultimate direction and control over our lives.

May I encourage you, as dedicated believers, to employ them.

Share them.

Not for their own sake.

And not out of curiosity, or a desire to be innovative or to experiment.

But in a humble realization that this is part of the long chain of outer sacred acts that God has mandated for His people -

a people desiring to live holy lives

a people with damaged corners and chapters which need His healing

a people called and commissioned to go into the world to serve Him  
a people hungry and thirsty for His Holy Presence  
a people open and receptive to His Spirit's guidance  
a people longing to live in, and spread around, the love of Jesus.