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Tipei, John Fleter

The Laying on of Hands in the New Testament: Its Significance, Techniques, and Effects

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This book is the most comprehensive examination in English of the gesture of imposition of hands. It is a doctoral dissertation at the University of Sheffield, supervised by Ralph P. Martin, Stephen D. Moore, and Loveday C. A. Alexander. The author is Associate Professor of Biblical Theology and Rector of the Pentecostal Theological Seminary of Bucharest, Romania, and ordained bishop with the Church of God, Cleveland, Tennessee.

After an introductory chapter surveying modern studies of the laying on of hands in the New Testament (Behm, Coppens, Daube, Gross, and Kanamori), the second chapter examines the gesture in the Jewish environment. Of the various contexts in which the laying on of hands was employed in the Old Testament (blessing, healing, sacrificial rites, ritual on the Day of Atonement, commissioning of Joshua and the seventy elders, consecration of the Levites, and sentencing an offender), only the LH (Tipei's abbreviation) in blessing and commissioning is paralleled in the New Testament. He rightly rejects Daube's interpretation of the rite as pouring one's personality so as to make a substitute, but the acceptance of Mantel's conjecture that the rabbinic ordination of students by LH was pre-70 is doubtful, for such does not fit the historical situation.

Chapter 3 discusses the LH in Greco-Roman and Near Eastern literature, where the rare occurrences in healing and installation to office provide no valid analogy to the Christian rite.

Chapters 4–7 examine the New Testament texts bearing on the four situations in which early Christians employed the LH: in healing; as a mark of favor; in the reception of the Spirit; and in commissioning/ordination. Each chapter offers a helpful classification of main interpretations and their weaknesses on controverted points as well as the author's own exegesis and interpretation of the texts.

With reference to the manner of the LH in healing, Tipei makes the useful observation that Mark employs the verbs *epitithenai* (to lay on) and *haptesthai* (to touch) interchangeably. He concludes that “the question of the origin of the LH in healing remains unsolved,” but he understands the physical contact as a “transfer of healing power” (154).

The author fails fully to appreciate the significance of Mark 10:16, “he blessed them by laying his hands on them,” only saying that the gesture was a symbol of the transfer of a blessing.

Tipei outlines four views on the significance of the LH in connection with reception of the Spirit: incorporation into the church, invocatory prayer, ordination of prophets/missionaries, transmission of the Spirit. I observe that each applies to some texts; the error comes in trying to make one purpose narrowly interpreted fit all the texts. In regard to Acts 8:18, although one of the few texts that states the transfer of something by the LH (in this case the Holy Spirit), Tipei gives his typical insistence that the gift is from God and “The LH was, at best, the channel through which such gift was transmitted” (217). Such is a theological, not an empirical, distinction, yet it accords with Luke's statement that the gift was in response to prayer (Acts 8:15). Tipei would have done well to follow his insight here through in regard to other texts. To my mind, the author reads too much into Heb 6:2 by understanding the LH on the basis of verses 4–5 as the established rite for the reception of the Holy Spirit following baptism. He accepts my view that the association of LH with prayer “breaks any necessary connection between the gesture and the bestowal of the Holy Spirit” and adds his observation that the act “was used only occasionally for the reception of the Spirit” (229). He, however, does not adequately acknowledge that this association with prayer (even when not explicitly stated) unifies all the occurrences of the Christian usage.

Tipei presents the three accounts of the LH in Acts related to a church function as commissioning, not ordination. On Acts 6:1–6, he concludes that Luke did not treat the

appointment of the Seven as the beginning of the diaconate or presbyterate, nor did he intend it as a prototype for future ordinations. The first part of the conclusion is correct, but the second part fails to take into account Luke's pattern of giving early in his narrative a full prototypical account of something (e.g., Acts 2) for which subsequent references pick up only a part or spell out some supplementary details. I judge him wrong to follow Campbell in interpreting *cheirotonein* in Acts 14:23 to mean the recognition of elders by the LH. My word study shows this meaning to be anachronistic for Acts.

The author finds the LH in the Pastoral Epistles to involve an effective means of appointing to a new responsibility and imparting a spiritual endowment to fulfill the responsibility. To reach this conclusion, he has to dodge the clear meaning of the preposition *meta* in 1 Tim 4:14 as "an attending circumstance," weakly claiming that the phrase "does not necessarily rule out" an instrumental function (267). This may be so, but where then does one find an instrumental function for the LH in this text? The preposition *dia* does have an instrumental meaning in 2 Tim 1:6, where a *charisma* is given by Paul's LH, but Paul's role puts this verse in the same category with Acts 8:18 (an imparting of the Spirit by apostles) with presumably the same accompanying circumstance of prayer.

Tipei presents his contribution as offering a unified explanation of the New Testament rite. In contrast to my thesis that the LH in early Christianity was a "sign of prayer and a symbol of blessing," he concludes that "the gesture always signifies transference of some positive *materia*: blessing, 'life force,' the Spirit and *charismata*" (296). In response, I say that imparting something tangible, such as the Spirit, does not contradict the meaning of blessing, which does cover all the situations (the different kind of blessing in each case specified by the accompanying prayer). In contrast, one has to read the meaning of transference into many of the texts and/or to stretch the meaning of transference to make it fit all the circumstances (notably healing, benediction, and commissioning); moreover, the idea of transference fits uncomfortably with the author's emphasis on the sovereign action of God, which better accords, as he acknowledges, with the notion of petition for divine favor.

Aside from this central point of disagreement, two general observations may be made. A limitation of the work is its minimal use of post-New Testament literature, which would provide a broader context of word usage and meanings. The work was not copyedited as carefully as it might have been.

Nonetheless, this important work offers much of value as well as much to argue with. It will be the starting point for future studies of the LH in the New Testament.