

What about Baptist Ordinations?

By Steve Ray

Dear Baptist Friend:

I have enjoyed all your thoughts on the unbiblical nature of Catholicism. They are not only humorous to read, but also instructive. When I speak with you it reminds me how grateful I am that God delivered me from the confusion and chaos of Protestantism. I rejoice daily that God brought me and my family, including my Evangelical brother, into the “one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church.”

You always seem to enjoy challenging me about the Catholic Church so I thought I would challenge *you* a bit to see if you really understand *your* Baptist theology. I am writing to ask if you are aware of the Baptist theology on *ordination*. I am currently writing a short history of *ordination* in the first four centuries and thought I’d pull out the book I bought several weeks ago entitled *Principles and Practices for Baptist Churches* by Edward T. Hiscox. The subtitle is *An Indispensable Guide to the Conduct and Operation of Bible-believing Baptist Churches*. It was originally published by Judson Press in 1894 and has recently been published by Kregel Publications in 1980. I did a bit of checking and found it to be a classic, a leading authority on Baptist politics and theology.

What surprised me in the book, to get right to the point, is the section on *ordination* and how the Baptists understand ordination. As a Baptist I didn’t realize the problems with the exegesis that we used to come to the Baptist position. But before I get to the particular issue, I must first touch again on the source of authority for church polity in apostolic times. Since Hiscox’s book says only that “there is no proof in the New Testament . . .” and then appeals to no other source, he is admitting *sola Scriptura*, and thus the Bible as his only source of binding authority in these matters.

There is “no proof” in the New Testament for a *lot* of things, for example “age of accountability”, the symbolic nature of the Eucharist, *sola Scriptura*, *sola fide*, the Invisible Church, denominations, musical instruments during worship, the canon of the New Testament, the authorship of Matthew or Hebrews, paid pastors, eternal security, etc.

It would seem to me one should be interested in consulting the first and second century Christians to see what *they* accepted as their authority before the canon of the New Testament was even collected into a book, and what proofs *they* used. They knew the apostles and followed their teaching. The New Testament was never meant to be a Church Manual; it was the Church Herself that had the sacred deposit of truth and was, according to St. Paul, “the pillar and foundation of the Truth” (1 Tim 3:15). The tradition of apostles (2 Thes 2:15) was the mainstay of the early believers and the New Testament was a portion of that tradition, eventually written and collected into the canon of the New Testament.

The living Church, under the Holy Spirit and the apostles and their successors, was to be the “living manual” and authority. This is clear from the New Testament itself. The polity of the apostolic Church was passed on verbally by the apostles (Endnote 1) and not committed to writing. The Corinthians, for example, knew how to celebrate the Lord’s Supper (Eucharist), not by reading Paul’s letters to them, but by being taught by him in person while he lived with them. They did not have a written manual only the living manual of the living tradition. Paul’s letter was *ad hoc* and only to correct a particular situation and certainly not to give exhaustive instruction on the celebration.

Now that I made my obligatory comments on authority for spiritual matters, let me relate the things that intrigued me as I read Hiscox’s book. He states, and I am interested to know if you agree him, that the “laying on of hands” and “ordination” actually means “election by vote”? I will quote a paragraph from the book,

“In Acts 14:23 it is said of Paul and Barnabas, when they had ordained (cheirotoneesantes) them elders in every city, etc. This much-quoted word, which has been relied on to prove a ritualistic ordination, by the laying on of hands, the best scholarship decides to mean *the stretching out of the hand or the lifting up of the hand as in voting*. The meaning of which here is, that the Apostles secured the election of elders by the vote of the churches, with no reference to ceremonial induction into office” (*emphasis mine*).

He then lists “authorities” to prove his point. Now, it is agreed that the Greek construction of the word *cheirotoneesantes* could meet “stretching forth the hand” (Endnote 2) as in a blessing, or possibly, as in a vote—although the *voting* aspect seems a little far fetched, especially in Acts 14:23 where it specifically says Paul and Barnabas *ordained* (KJV; in the NASB it is *appointed*). I don’t see a vote here unless Paul and Barnabas voted between themselves. Even the faithful Baptist Kenneth Wuest, in his translation of the New Testament renders this passage “And having appointed for them elders in every assembly . . .” He doesn’t imply it was done by votes. As an Apostle, Paul appoints or ordains men in each assembly by the authority invested in him as an apostle.

It seems that Edward Hiscox really dislikes the understanding that ordination confers any special placement or office. He strives mightily to prove a distinction without a difference. He states for example on page 348 referring to Mark 3:14 “Jesus ordained twelve, that they should be with him. It implies no setting apart, but simply an appointment, a choice.” The Greek word used here for ordained is actually the verb “to make” and is translated by the word “make” 357 times in the New Testament. Why does Hiscox say it simply means “a choice”?

Unfortunately, there are many verses conspicuously absent from his treatise on Baptist polity, and one of them is John 15:16 “Ye have not chosen me, but I have **chosen** you, and **ordained** you, that ye should go and bring forth fruit, and that your fruit should remain: that whatsoever ye shall ask of the Father in my name, he may give it you (KJV). Here we have Jesus *choosing* and Hiscox prefers to define “ordain” as choice. But Jesus did something else. He *ordained* them and sent them, giving them His authority. At other

times He even said if they reject you, they reject Me, recognizing His authority invested in them.

The word *ordain* in John 15:16 is *tithemi* and according to Strong's Greek Dictionary, means "to set, put, place" which is the opposite of what Hiscox wants it to mean. Hiscox says of the word *ordain*, "no setting apart, only an appointment, a choice" and then explains it as a vote of the members of the Church. A perusal of standard Protestant commentaries and Greek lexicons shows that "set apart" is the common understanding of this word. The term is even used in Numbers 8:10 for the ordination of Levites, and 1 Tim. 1:12 for Paul's being set aside for the Apostolic ministry. Edward Hiscox in his Baptist classic must not be aware of the full range of biblical passages and scholarship, or else he is twisting the Scriptures to fit his Baptist tradition.

He then quotes a source, "Dr. J. B. Jeter, a man acute, discriminating and conservative." His quote says, "In the primitive age very little stress was laid on the ceremonies attending the induction into office. The apostles laid on their hands several times to confer the gift of the Holy Ghost; but *never* in confirmation of an appointment to office except in the case of the Seven." (Endnote 3) He then goes on to contradict Acts 14:23.

I would suggest that "very little stress was laid" on *many* things in the "primitive age", e.g. the Trinity (word not even used until 180 AD by Theophilus of Antioch), the canon of Scripture (not finalized until 393 AD), the two natures of Christ (not defined formally for several centuries), the use of musical instruments in worship, *sola Scriptura*, *sola fide*, etc. But how does Jeter know very little stress was placed on anything in the primitive age if the Bible is his only source of authoritative information? But, granting his point, little stress laid on a particular truth within the New Testament does not negate the essence of doctrine as it develops over time nor the apostolic tradition that was present and authoritative in the Church throughout the world.

Do you know how the disciples of the Apostles, and their disciples, understood the apostolic teaching on ordination? Why is so little concern given to this? Is it arrogance, or lack of concern for what the Spirit of God has "shown" others in times past? The New Testament while being the inspired, infallible, inerrant word of God was never meant to be a "User's Manual" for every aspect of the Church's polity and practice. The Apostolic Tradition, taught directly to the Churches, was the basis of the polity of the early Church. Why is the tradition of the early Church ignored by Protestants, especially Baptists, today? It is the Church that is the "pillar and foundation of the Truth" and the preserver of the sacred deposit left by the apostles. This is parallel to trying to understand the form, function and practice of the United States by reading *only* the Constitution, and ignoring all the other writings and "goings on". It is a silly and reactive situation we have in Protestantism today, especially in Baptist theology.

Now there is something funny here and I'm curious to know if you believe all this. Every time the phrase "*laying on of hands*" is used, the *Baptist Guide* seems to say it means "voting". Do you believe this?

Ask yourself this: when the Old Testament priest laid hands on the sin offering, symbolically placing Israel's sin on the ram's head, were they actually taking a vote which ram to use? Hiscox relegates the *laying on of hands* to an old Jewish and Oriental custom, trying to minimize its use in the Church. After breezing over the fact that the Lord Jesus used "laying on of hands" frequently, and for a variety of reasons, he then says the Apostolic Church used the "laying on of hands" only in the act of conferring the Holy Spirit. (By the way, why don't Baptists do this anymore if it is a biblically ordained practice? Was a vote taken to abolish this biblical practice?)

Hiscox then goes through several passages in a convoluted manner to "explain away" the clear intent of the New Testament. He even has to admit that the Seven Deacons in Acts 6, were brought before the Twelve Apostles and "after praying, they laid their hands on them". He dismisses this clear example of ordination by claiming that they were being appointed to a "secular office and not to a spiritual ministry". Since when is serving as deacon not a "spiritual ministry"? It is only a secular office? This is not only stupid and unbiblical, but it belies the Platonic and Gnostic basis for much of Fundamentalist thought. We can discuss this at length some other time.

Do Baptists today still ordain deacons by the laying on of hands in the conferral of an office? If not, why not? In the last centuries Baptists taught that the "laying on of hands" after baptism was an ordinance of Christ "and ought to be submitted unto all persons that are admitted to partake of the Lord's supper." (Endnote 4) Hiscox says,

"Our most orthodox Baptist churches formerly practiced the laying on of hands upon persons baptized. Some still practice it; not a few believe it of apostolic origin. Dr. David Benedict, the historian, declares, This was a practice of high authority in our denomination in other countries, and in this country it formerly prevailed much more extensively than at the present time. "

I don't remember this practice at Calvary Baptist Church where I was raised and where you are now an elder. It would seem that if we held the view that Scripture is the sole authority upon which we could base church polity, we ought to have followed it closely. I don't understand the confusion or neglect in this biblical matter, or if neither of these descriptive verbs apply, then I don't understand the basis on which Baptists develop or reject Biblical doctrine to fit their own traditions and preferences.

Well enough of this. Even though I have read only a section of the *Principles and Practices for the Baptist Churches* I was intrigued by the things Baptists believe, and wondered if you, as a Baptist, believe them as well. It always amazes me that Fundamentalists (like you are and I once was), with such a log of contradictions, divisions and traditions in their own eyes, are always so anxious to help the Catholics get the speck out of their eyes. The arrogance of such an attitude now makes me weep for Baptists and others who have rejected the historical Catholic Church.

After I am finished with your book I will get it right back. I will also try to pick up duplicate literature at the debate for you. I know there is a new magazine that will be

available for the first time on Sunday; I'll grab a copy up for you. I am also looking forward to having lunch again in the near future, but this one is on me. Give me a call or I'll call you soon to see if we can pull it off.

May the grace, mercy, and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord be with you. In the Blood of the Lamb,

Steve Ray

Endnotes:

1. 2 Thes. 2:15; 3:6; 1 Cor. 11:2; 2 Tim. 2:2, etc..
2. This long Greek word is used twice in the New Testament, the second occurrence being in 2 Co. 8:19. "Stretching out of the hand" could easily mean holding one's hand over someone's head in a gesture of blessing, as Jesus did on several occasions recorded in the Gospels (Lu 24:50, Mk 10:16). It could also mean pointing someone out as in selecting or appointing. In Kittel's *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Vol. 9, pg.437) it says, "In Acts 14:23 the reference is not to election by the congregation. The presbyters are nominated by Paul and Barnabas and they with prayer and fasting they are instituted into their offices." Vine's says, "It is also said of those who were appointed (not by voting, but with general approbation) by the churches in Greece to accompany the Apostle" and "of the appointment of elders by apostolic missionaries in the various churches which they revisited."
3. He is here referring to the seven deacons of Acts 6, one of which, Stephen, I was named after.
4. When the Philadelphia Association adopted the London Baptist Confession of 1689, they added in Sept. 15, 1742, the 35th article cited. It was afterward omitted.