

The Laying on of Hands of the Presbytery

By Bill Scheidler

I. Introduction

- A. Key Verse: *“Do not neglect the gift that is in you, which was given to you by prophecy with the laying on of the hands of the eldership.”* [presbytery, KJV] I Timothy 4:14
- B. Key Verse: *“Therefore I remind you to stir up the gift of God which is in you through the laying on of my hands.”* II Timothy 1:6
- C. Key Verse: *“This charge I commit to you, son Timothy, according to the prophecies previously made concerning you, that by them you may wage a good warfare.”* I Timothy 1:18

II. Key Definitions

A. Presbyter

This word comes from the Greek word *presbyteros* and refers to a person who is part of the official leadership team of a local church or an elder. Elders were those who were given the responsibility of overseers in the local church and were made up of those who had the gift of leadership and one of the ministries described in Ephesians 4:11 (i.e. apostle, prophet, evangelist, pastor or teacher).

B. Presbytery

The word “presbytery” is a word that is used primarily in the King James Version of the Bible and literally means a “group of elders.” In more modern translations this word is often translated “eldership” or “body of elders.”

C. Prophecy

Prophecy is a supernatural message that is given through a human vessel under the impulse of the Holy Spirit. Prophecy may be declarative (speaking forth a message from God) or predictive (speaking concerning the future or future events).

D. Laying on of Hands

The Laying on of Hands is a physical act usually performed by those in a position of leadership (except in the case of praying for the sick) for the purpose of identification, impartation and confirmation.

III. The Laying on of Hands of the Presbytery

There seems to be times in the body life of the local church that these elements came together into one function. A group of elders laid their hands on an individual or individuals in a setting that was conducive to the bringing forth of a prophetic utterance that would include some or all of the following:

A. Edification (I Cor. 14:3)

The whole purpose of the prophetic utterance should be to build up or strengthen the person as a believer and help them to achieve God's purpose for their life. The purpose for all of the Gifts of the Spirit is edification (I Cor. 14:4, 5, 6, 22, 24, 31).

B. Exhortation (I Cor. 14:3)

The prophetic word should be one that spurs the believer on toward the mark of the high calling in Christ. The prophetic word will often challenge the believer to keep moving forward on the path of the just and to adjust anything that is hindering his or her progress (Acts 15:32).

C. Comfort (I Cor. 14:3)

The Holy Spirit is the Comforter. Many people need to know that God is aware of their past and that His purposes for them are bigger than the past and that regardless of what has happened to them, they can find the comfort or forgiveness in Him.

D. Guidance/Commissioning (Acts 13:1-3)

The prophetic word can be especially helpful in confirming the direction that God has placed in one's spirit and can also function well to assist in understanding the timing of the Lord concerning His path for our lives.

E. Impartation of Gifts (I Tim. 4:14)

Evidently something supernatural takes place when individuals have hands laid on them in this context. While hands in themselves are not particularly special, the Holy Spirit works in association with the God-ordained means and something supernatural can be imparted (Rom. 1:11).

IV. The Function of a Prophetic Assembly in the Local Church

A. A Platform for the Recognition of Prophetic Ministry

Presbytery gatherings or (as I like to call them) "prophetic assemblies" in the local church give an opportunity for those who function in the seasoned ministry of a prophet to be released to function to the depth of their gift. In the normal service life

of the church this is difficult to accomplish because of the natural restraints of the church schedule and other elements.

B. A Prepared Body of Believers

In order for the local church to experience the full benefit of such a gathering it is advantageous for the entire church to prepare their hearts to receive the word that God may give. The best preparation is a time of prayer, fasting and waiting on the Lord (Acts 13:1-2). In seasons like this, God wants to speak to individuals, but He also wants to speak to the entire local church. People that are prepared will not miss what God is saying to the church, they will have an ear to hear (Rev. 2:7).

C. Prepared Candidates

While prophets should be released to function freely under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, candidates that are presented to the presbyters for personal ministry should be those who are truly saved, water baptized, baptized in the Holy Spirit and walking in the light that they have already received. If candidates are not screened in such ways the prophets often find themselves having to minister in the basic pastoral areas regarding their Christian walk and the person in such a case will not receive the full benefit of the prophetic ministry.

D. An Anointed Setting or Prophetic Atmosphere

As the people of God gather together and create an atmosphere of praise and worship before the Lord there is a release of the prophetic anointing that can be experienced by all. In such a setting there is a greater release among the prophetic ministries and a greater sensitivity to the word of the Lord in both the candidate and in those who make up the congregation.

E. Qualified Ministries

Since the word “presbyter” literally means “elder,” it stands to reason that those who minister in this setting should be elders or qualify as elders according to the guidelines established in I Timothy 3 and Titus 1. Every person who functions in this way should be personally under spiritual authority and should readily acknowledge and cooperate with the authority of the local leadership team.

F. Multiple Prophets

No one ministry has it all. No one human ministry is perfect. Since prophetic ministry is of such a subjective nature, even the Scriptures encourage the prophets to minister in multiples (I Cor. 14:29-30; Acts 15:32). The presence of the local elders is an additional safeguard to be sure that prophecies can be properly judged by those who will bear some responsibility for those being ministered to (Heb. 13:17).

G. An Eldership Team

The best and most scriptural setting for this type of ministry is in the context of the local church under the auspices of the local eldership team. It is here where the pastors of the local church can bear witness and assist the candidate in responding in a proper way to the words that they have received. In point of fact, any time that a group of elders gather in a local church and prays over anyone as a group they are a “presbytery” (See James 5:14).

V. The Benefits of Prophetic Assembly in the Local Church

There are many ways that this type of prophetic ministry can bless and strengthen the local church and its members.

A. Benefits for the individual

1. It help confirms God’s direction and calling in the life of the individual.
2. It helps the individual to “war a good warfare” against the doubts and tests that will surely come after the word has been given.
3. It has the power to bring about deliverance and healing especially from hidden or secret areas or wounds from the past.
4. It renews a person’s confidence in the fact that God knows all and that He has our lives under His control.

B. Benefits for the entire local church

1. It helps the members of a local church to better relate to an individual in the church through the eyes of the Holy Spirit.
2. It helps pastors and leaders to know how to more effectively encourage or counsel individuals in fulfilling their destiny in God.
3. It reminds members of the local church how important each person is to God and how much they need each other in the fulfillment of corporate destiny.
4. It seasonally refocuses the local church on God’s vision and the necessity of hearing and responding to His voice at all times.

VI. Cautions in Relation to this Ministry

- A. This ministry should function in the context of the local church under the auspices of a local leadership team.

There can be serious problems in the area of personal prophecy when it is given out freely in open conferences where there is no true opportunity for the judgment of the prophetic word by those that will share in the accountability for the outworking of that word. People who receive prophecies at open conferences often bring them to their leaders after the fact and can use them to manipulate leaders to give them

opportunities in the church when their life and involvement in the church up to that point have not confirmed what is being prophesied.

B. Prophecy can not be seen as a guarantee that certain things will occur.

Some individual act as if when they get a prophecy about their involvement in some ministry that they can function as if it is a present reality in their lives. Most prophecies are conditional in nature. Prophecy often points an individual in the direction that God wants him or her to go, but the individual is responsible to make their calling and election sure by mixing faith, obedience and diligence to the word that was given. Most prophecies not only deal with the “what” concerning our calling, but they also deal with the “how” indicating the road to get to that destiny.

C. This ministry should not be seen as spiritual “fortune-telling.”

Many people are looking for a quick and painless way to receive guidance from the Lord. The Old Testament form of guidance was external in nature. God often revealed His will through external forms such as the casting of lots, prophecy, Urim and Thummim, fleeces and other signs. However, in the New Testament, since the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost, it is God’s desire to guide His people from within—internal guidance.

As the believer submits to God, opens his or her heart and waits on God, God will speak to them. New Testament prophecy should only confirm what God has already been speaking to the individual. So candidates for prophecy should not try to short-circuit the personal process of getting before the Lord and hearing His voice. They should not be looking to find out what God wants them to do, but they should be looking for confirmation of that which they have already been hearing from God. This is when personal prophecy has its greatest value.

D. This ministry should not be used to fix problems in people that pastors should be fixing.

Pastors can be guilty of putting people in front of prophets to try to expose or deal with issues in the lives of those individuals that they do not want to confront or that they feel they have not been successful in confronting. Not only does this put the prophetic ministries in an awkward position but this practice is also not to be seen as the function of prophecy. It is one thing if God sovereignly comes to someone in this way, but normally those kinds of adjustments in the members of the local church are part of the work of the pastor and the pastoral team.

Unfortunately, many of these types of situations can “backfire” when the pastor does not hear the kind of word for which he had hoped over this particular person. The pastor may actually end up with a bigger problem than he or she had before the prophecy was given.

- E. This ministry should be provided cautiously as opposed to hastily.

The Bible clearly encourages us not to be hasty or impetuous in the application of this ministry (I Tim. 5:22). This is why it is good to reserve this type of ministry for those that are mature in their Christian walk and are fully committed to Christ, to the local church and to the leadership of the church. People who are living on a lesser level do not need a prophecy, they need to walk in obedience to the clear teachings of the Bible. At this point in their development that is all “the word” that they need to hear.

VII. Presbytery Follow-up

Judging prophecy on a pastoral level can have real value. Sometimes people are in confusion about a word that has come to them or they are unsure how they should respond. It is important that leaders do not play the part of the Holy Spirit in this process, but they can make themselves available to the people in the following ways:

A. Contact the Person

When one of your members has received a personal word it might be good to talk with them.

1. Ask them how they felt about the prophecy or how they received it.

Do not ask them if they have anything that they would like to talk about concerning the prophecy. Be careful not to try to bring your own interpretation to them based on what you know about them because it could actually divert them from God’s intended message to them. As the pastor you have your own context into which the prophecy came, however, the person has his or her own context and that is more important than the context of anyone else.

2. Pay special attention to those who seem to be struggling.

It is not the responsibility of the pastor to be the interpreter of the prophecy. The one receiving the prophecy should meditate on it and ask the Holy Spirit to interpret the word to them (I Tim. 4:15). However, if there is confusion the pastor can assist them by encouraging them to pray, listen to God and put the things that they do not understand “on the shelf” believing that at a time when it is needed, God will make it clear to them. Prophecy is not always just for the immediate time, it may apply at some later point in their life in a more specific way.

3. Help them to take personal responsibility for it.

Help them to understand that this is not a word to the leaders of the church or the members of the congregation. It is a word to them. It is the responsibility of the

person receiving the word to act on the word and give himself or herself to it. Because of this they should avoid waving their prophecy around in front of family and friends and asking them what they believe it means. In such cases, this activity will only lead to confusion and will take the focus off of what God was trying to communicate to the individual.

4. Caution them about stereotypical phraseology.

Do not allow them to key in on certain phrases that are used in the prophecy and make unwarranted conclusions. Phrases like “shepherd’s heart” or “missionary spirit” or even the phrase “for I have called you” must not be interpreted to me that you are to be a pastor, a missionary or part of the church staff. The fact is, every person in the body of Christ needs to have the heart of a shepherd as they minister to others. Every person needs to have a missionary spirit as they reach out to others for the sake of the Kingdom. Every person needs to have a sense that they are called to do what they do.

B. Encourage Them to Do the Obvious

When talking to people about a word that they have received, do not focus on the glowing, the exciting and the adventurous (the things that they have underlined). This will be their natural tendency. In addition, do not focus on the unknown or obscure. Instead focus on the things that they may have missed especially in relation to statements that might help them to get to the destination. Work on areas of adjustment or exhortations that deal with the things that they can do to make the rest of the prophecy become a reality in their lives.

C. Point Them in the Right Direction

You can help them fulfill their call by pointing them in the right direction in terms of their local church involvement. There are always areas of need in the local church that can serve as a proving ground for the gifts and callings in the lives of the members. Help them touch base with these departments in the church that will help activate and sharpen their gifts and ministries. Further assist them in making plans and setting goals to measure their progress in the future.

The ministry of the Laying on of Hands of the Presbytery is something that can bless every local church as we keep it in its proper place, in balance and under proper authority.