

LUKE-ACTS AND THE ISSUE OF ORDINATION IN THE SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTIST CHURCH

*By Reimar Vetne, Ph.D.
University of Montemorelos, Mexico
vetne@um.edu.mx*

Introduction

The Seventh-day Adventist church is currently engaged in a worldwide study of our theology of ordination. Since most Bibles do not use the word 'ordain' or 'ordination',¹ we are dealing with an issue that is not explicitly discussed in the biblical material. We thus have to work backwards from the current Adventist practice of ordination, isolate the most significant elements and functions in our current practice, and evaluate those elements in the light of Scripture.

In the New Testament people are several times appointed to positions of leadership and other forms of ministry, sometimes with the laying on of hands. The current Adventist practice of ordination is however not completely identical or coextensive with these biblical cases. We appoint people to ministry on many occasions which we do not designate as an 'ordination event'. For instance, the events of appointing an Adult Sabbath School superintendent in a local church, electing or hiring conference and union personnel, or sending missionaries from one part of the world to another are not – even if a communal prayer of blessing with the laying on of hands take place – considered an 'ordination'. When preaching at a camp meeting in Norway in 2011, a month before I moved to Mexico to begin teaching at Montemorelos, Norwegian church leaders

¹The exception is KJV which in the NT uses the word 'ordain' and cognates in Mark 3:14; John 15:16; Acts 1:22; 10:42; 13:48; 14:23; 16:4; 17:31; Rom 7:10; 13:1; 1 Cor 2:7; 7:17; 9:14; Gal 3:19; 2 Tim 2:7; 4:22; Tit 1:5; 3:15; Heb 5:1; 8:3; 9:6; Jude 4. Other translations usually prefer the more general words 'appoint' or 'choose' since these texts do not deal with ordination in our sense of the word.

and members spontaneously gathered around me and laid their hands on me and prayed for my protection and blessing. It was not called an 'ordination'. So what exactly are the distinguishing elements that mark an appointment to ministry with the laying on of hands as an 'ordination' in our church?

First of all, the visible rite takes place in a solemn and spiritual atmosphere with church leaders *laying their hands* on and praying for the ordainee.

Secondly, it is limited in our church to the appointment of a *very small number of positions*: the ministry of local church deacons, local church elders, and full-time pastors. The majority of our members serve the Lord and our church in functions outside of these categories, and thus they are not ordained when they begin serving.

Thirdly, while ordination to ministry as deacons and elders takes place at the beginning of their service, ordination to pastoral ministry does not take place until several years later. In the Adventist church ordination to pastoral ministry thus functions as recognition of a "job well done so far" and *promotion to a higher professional rank*. Moving from non-ordained ('ministerial license') to ordained ('ministerial credentials') is not unlike the promotion of college teachers from the level of assistant professor to associate professor and full professor.

Fourthly, while ordination to service as a deacon and elder is gender neutral in the Adventist church, ordination to pastoral ministry is *reserved for the male pastors only*. Our female pastors are not ordained.

These are probably among the four most important aspects of ordination in the Seventh-day Adventist church, distinguishing ordination from non-ordination appointments. It is conducted with a laying on of hands, limited to a few select ministries, functions as a promotion to a higher rank, and some ordinations are gender universal while others are gender exclusive.

This short paper will examine if material in Luke and Acts can throw any light on the usefulness and validity of these elements of our current practice of ordination.

Laying on of hands in Luke-Acts

So what are the contexts of the laying on of hands in Luke and Acts? Who were laid hands on, and in what situations?

In Luke's gospel Jesus laid his hands on people as part of a healing event (Luke 4:40 and 13:13). In Acts the laying on of hands takes place as part of a healing (Acts 9:12,17 and 28:8), as part of the baptismal rite where new Christians received the Holy Spirit (8:17-19 and 19:6),² and as part of a dedication for a new ministry (6:6 and 13:3). The latter two passages are interesting for our purpose dealing with ordination.

Acts 6:6 Appointment of the Seven

The twelve apostles decided to focus on teaching and preaching the Word of God and stop spending time 'serving tables' (διακονεῖν τραπέζαις, v. 2).³ This either refers to the actual waiting at tables,⁴ the financial and practical management of the church's charity program,⁵ or both⁶. A group of seven was appointed to take over this task from the Twelve. Since the occasion for the

²It is possible that all new Christians were prayed for (that they might receive the Holy Spirit) with the laying on of hands in conjunction with water baptism. This might be what Heb 6:1-2 refers to.

³'Serving' is only used in the verbal form here. The noun 'deacons' (διάκονος) about the group of seven does not appear. "It is noteworthy that Luke does not refer to the Seven as deacons; their task had no formal name." I. Howard Marshall, *Acts* (Tyndale NT Commentaries 5; Leicester, England: InterVarsity, 1980), 126.

⁴C. K. Barrett, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles* (International Critical Commentary; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1994), 311.

⁵F. F. Bruce, *The Book of the Acts* (New International Commentary on the NT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 120.

⁶John B. Polhill, *Acts* (New American Commentary; Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1995), 180.

appointment was a complaint that the Hellenistic widows received less support than the Jewish widows (v. 1), it is likely that the task of the Seven was with the fair management of the charity program and not only literal cooking and table waiting.

After the selection of the Seven someone⁷ prayed and laid their hands on the Seven: "These they set before the apostles, and they prayed and laid their hands on them" (Acts 6:6). The Seven, chosen from the minority of Hellenists, were invested with authority to decide on a more just program of resource allocation.⁸ This appointment of the Seven is a story of transfer of authority. Whether the laying on of hands itself was an expression of that transfer,⁹ or whether the laying on of hands was just a petition to God for a blessing on the new leadership team (similar to laying hands on new converts at their baptism), is not possible to settle from the text.

We also do not know from the text whether the laying on of hands of the Seven was an isolated procedure being done just this once (and not meant to be repeated later), whether it was meant as a model of what to do for a unique group (that we should always lay hands on appointed charity workers), or whether it is a general lesson of spiritual life in the church (always gather around and pray for all new leaders and new teams).

Acts 13:3 Barnabas and Saul sent on first missionary journey

In Acts chapter 13 we find the story of the Holy Spirit telling the church to send Barnabas

⁷"It is not quite as clear as NIV makes out who prayed and laid their hands on them. If the grammatical agreements of the Greek are any guide, then it was done by the whole church acting 'in the presence of the apostles'." David J. Williams, *Acts* (New International Biblical Commentary 5; Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1990), 123.

⁸"Those with political power generally repressed complaining minorities; here the apostles hand the whole system over to the offended minority. This may thus be the first recorded instance of what we might today call 'affirmative action'." Craig S. Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1993), 338.

⁹As Roman-Catholic scholars usually assert: "*laid their hands on them*: the gesture symbolized the transfer of power." Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Sacra Pagina 5; Collegeville: Liturgical, 1992), 107.

and Saul abroad as evangelistic missionaries (v. 2). By this time the two had already worked for many years as preachers and leaders in Antioch in Syria, a city that served as an important center for the Christian movement. Before sending them on their journey the church in Antioch "fasted and prayed and laid their hands on them" (v. 3).

Since Saul had been preaching the message about Jesus since his conversion in Acts 9 and until now, for at least ten years,¹⁰ the laying on of hands was not an appointment of the two to be pastors or preachers. The laying on of hands in Acts 13:3 was specifically related to their upcoming missionary trip into new territories.¹¹ Concerning the ceremony of appointment itself, it is worth noting that the laying on of hands took place in connection with *fasting* (νηστεύσαντες) and prayer. Like in Acts 6 it is not clear who literally put their hands on the appointees. There is nothing here about leaders or apostles being in charge of the prayer, so as the passage is written it appears as a communal event where the whole congregation took part.

Of relevance for our practice of ordination today, we notice that once again (just as with the Seven in Acts 6) the laying on of hands takes place at the beginning of a new form of ministry. It was an initiation and approval from the church at the *start* of their new ministry, not

¹⁰The *Seventh-day Adventist Bible commentary* dates the conversion of Saul to AD 35 and the beginning of the first missionary trip to AD 45. Francis D. Nichol, ed. (Washington, DC: Review & Herald, 1956), 6:101-2. F. F. Bruce dates the conversion to AD 33 and the first missionary trip to AD 47. Bruce, *Paul: Apostle of the Free Spirit* (Carlisle, UK: Paternoster, 1980), 475. Thus Paul seems to have had a last a decade of preaching experience before he accepted the call to travel abroad.

¹¹"The departure of the missionaries was preceded by a further session of prayer and fasting, this time no doubt a period of intercession for their *future work*... an act of blessing in which the church associated itself with them and commended them to the grace of God (14:26), and not an ordination to life-time service, still less an appointment to the apostolate." Howard Marshall, *Acts*, 216 (emphasis added).

"Luke does not portray this event as an ordination to some sort of church office, and certainly nothing is said here about the two being ordained as apostles at this juncture. Both men were already teachers and prophets in the congregation and so were already leading proclaimers. They are simply being set aside for a specific missionary task, and the laying on of hands indicates the recognition and endorsement by these church leaders of the call of God in this matter." Ben Witherington, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 394-5.

as part of an evaluation of the outcome or success of a ministry some years into the service. We notice that it was concerning missionary work to take the gospel abroad, not concerning pastoral work 'at home'. And we observe that fasting went along with the laying on of hands.

Apparently, this story has not been seen by the Adventist Church as a detailed model to follow for our 'ordination services'. We ordain pastors as part of an evaluation and confirmation process a couple of years into our pastors' service. We ordain pastors who serve in their home country, not just those being sent to preach and teach in foreign territories. And we do not prescribe fasting as part of our ordination events – neither for the congregation, for our leaders who 'ordain', or for the 'ordained'. The Adventist church has probably read the story in Acts 13 as an *example* of a ritual of laying on of hands, and then adapted the *who*, *when*, and *how* to better suit our own ecclesiastical needs.

Events without laying-on of hands

The two passages above are the only instances in Luke-Acts where some form of leadership appointment is combined with a laying on of hands. Maybe more than these two appointments involved a session of laying on of hands, but for whatever reason Luke did not mention it.

There is no mention of Jesus laying hands on the Twelve disciples: "And when day came, he called his disciples and chose from them twelve, whom he named apostles" (Luke 6:13).¹² Judas was replaced by Matthias as a member of the Twelve without any mention of laying on of hands (Acts 1:26). During the first missionary trip Paul and Barnabas appointed elders throughout Asia Minor with no description of placing hands on them. "When they had appointed

¹²But see Ellen G. White, *Desire of Ages*, 296.

elders for them in every church, having prayed with fasting, they commended them to Lord in whom they had believed" (Acts 14:23).

Implications for us

There are no positive commands to the readers to lay hands on and pray for people in Luke or Acts. What we have are two stories where laying on of hands happened in a context of appointment to service. We do not know if these are meant as universal examples to be followed today. If they are, they could either be a general call to often gather around and pray for people appointed to new tasks in the church, or they could be a call to lay hands only on specific types of leaders in the church.

My personal belief is that the stories in Acts are not meant as an exhaustive list of which types of leaders we should lay our hands on. I believe they only illustrate the need for a vibrant spirituality in our communities where we often get together and pray for blessings on people with important tasks. But if we are meant to read the stories as mandates for which exact groups of leaders we should lay our hands on, then it is noteworthy that neither Jesus' twelve disciples nor church elders were laid hands on in Luke-Acts. The two groups that were appointed with a laying on of hands are the Seven in charge of the charity work in Jerusalem, and two preachers before they would embark on a foreign missionary trip. We ordain three groups of people today, but the two types of leaders appointed in this way in Acts (charity managers and foreign missionaries) are not among them.

If we prefer to continue using the word 'ordination' for our sessions of laying hands on newly appointed officers in the church, then we should consider expanding our practice for other ministries and positions than those of our modern day deacons, elders, and pastors. The group of seven in Acts was given the financial and practical responsibility for the church's charity

program. Many of our ADRA workers have the same responsibilities as these Seven. Some of the financial responsibility of treasurers in local churches and conferences – fairly allocating money according to needs – is also not unlike that of the Seven. We have traditionally not laid hands on and prayed for these groups.

A formal hierarchy of rank

Let us turn to the aspect of our practice of ordaining pastors that involves a hierarchy of rank. Allow me to explain what I see taking place in our current practice. A system of rank is not inherently good or bad. First of all, some difference in rank is due to a difference in our *nature*. God is above angels and humans, and an adult human is above a child. Secondly, some difference in rank is due to different job *functions*. A leader in charge of God's church in a larger area (like a union or conference president) can be said to be hierarchically above someone in charge of a few churches (a pastor or elder). We need leaders who are coordinating and equipping the church on a central basis, so an organizational structure involving some hierarchy is unavoidable and useful, as long as we remember that someone 'higher' in the church hierarchy is never supposed to abuse power for one's own selfish wants, just like our Lord did not come to be served but to serve.

A third type of rank is more artificial in nature: awarding titles of rank based on merit and accomplishments. In academic situations we give students different grades (from A to F) and teachers different titles (like Assistant Professor, Associate Professor, and so on). Since schools and colleges operate within national and secular environments where this is common, we have no choice but to use the same if we want to offer accredited and accepted degrees.

We have however more freedom to design how we operate within the church structure itself, so a more pertinent question is whether we want to award different rank to our church pastors. Our current practice of distinguishing between ministerial licenses (non-ordained) and ministerial credentials (ordained) functions as a professional career promotion. What is the

purpose of this ranking system? It is to inspire the non-ordained pastors to work harder than they would without the possibility of promotion to a higher rank? Is it to give the newly ordained new energy for further hard work after receiving the recognition? Do we want it to be a guideline for members, inviting them to trust the teaching of the ordained and vetted pastors more than the non-ordained? Whatever our good reasons might have been for having a 2-tier pastoral accreditation system (and the reasons might be quite different from what I have imagined), we have to weigh the possible negative side effects.

The danger is that the motivation for service becomes less than pure and ideal. It might foster a desire to "please the brethren" who hold the path to promotion to credentials in ways that are not healthy; the desire to please men and receive honor and recognition and not just the desire to serve the Lord and His church.

In Luke the driving motivation of our Lord was to leave status and honor aside and focus on serving. Jesus voluntarily chose the path of demotion, from Supreme Being of the universe to that of a rejected human being. His only motivation was to serve, not to receive honor.

In Luke Jesus repeatedly warned against a love for honor and human recognition ("Now he told a parable to those who were invited, when he noticed how they chose the places of honor." Luke 14:7-11).

Love of money, the ultimate human system of recognition and awards, should not fuel our actions. "No servant can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money" (Luke 16:13).

We are warned against desiring to "be great" in ways that the world considers greatness. "A dispute also arose among them, as to which of them was to be regarded as the greatest. And he said to them, The kings of the Gentiles exercise lordship over them, and those in authority

over them are called benefactors. But not so with you. Rather, let the greatest among you become as the youngest, and the leader as one who serves. For who is the greater, one who reclines at table or one who serves? Is it not the one who reclines at table? But I am among you as the one who serves" (Luke 22:24–27).

This saying deals with the abuse of power for selfish reasons ("the Gentiles lord it over them"), something all of us in leadership positions in the church must constantly reflect on. But it also deals with the desire for human recognition and greatness. Jesus admonishes us to only focus on serving others well, since this was Jesus' own supreme motivation.¹³

I do not think our two-tier system is overly problematic for the spirituality of most pastors and conference administrators, but I do want us to at least remember that any human system of awarding recognition must be handled with care. God's Kingdom operates primarily on other values than those of rank and honor.

The gender of church leaders

Finally we come to the issue of gender of church-leaders. Numerically, the great majority of leaders in the early church (like it is in most places still today) were male. But does God have a place for women in church leadership? Is there anything in Luke or Acts that can help us decide whether leadership is reserved for one gender or whether it is open to both?

¹³Few have summarized this statement of Jesus better than Richard Hays: "The continuing attempts of the disciples to scramble for position in a pecking order ([Mark] 9:33-34, 10:35-37) show that they have not yet grasped the nature of God's kingdom or of their calling. Those who are called into the community of Jesus' disciples are to be servants, and the pattern for this servanthood is definitely shown by Jesus, who came to give up his own life for the sake of others. . . . To be Jesus' follower is to share his vocation of suffering servanthood, renouncing the world's lust for power. Among 'Gentiles,' domination and self-assertion are the rule, but in the new community of Jesus' followers, another logic is at work." Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics* (San Francisco: Harper, 1996), 82.

Witnessing and proclaiming. In Luke 24:1-9 women are the first to know about and to proclaim Jesus' resurrection from the dead.¹⁴

Prophesying. In Joel 2:28-29 the future outpouring of the Spirit and gift of prophecy is promised to both genders: "Your sons and daughters will prophesy ... on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit on those days." On the day of Pentecost in Acts 2 Peter quotes this prophecy and claims it is being fulfilled in his day (Acts 2:17-18). God wanted to use both genders in His communication with mankind. In Acts 21:8-9 we find an example of four women having been called by God to this prophetic ministry: "We reached Caesarea and stayed at the house of Philip the evangelist, one of the Seven. He had four unmarried daughters who prophesied."

Facilitating. In Luke 8:3 two prominent and affluent women followed Jesus and the disciples and helped them practically and financially: "Joanna, the wife of Chuza, Herod's household manager, and Susanna, and many others, who provided for them out of their means [δικονούν αὐτοῖς ἐκ τῶν ὑπαρχόντων αὐταῖς]." ¹⁵

In Acts 12:12 Mary, the mother of John Mark, is the patron of a house church.¹⁶ During politically dangerous times for the fledgling church in Judea, this woman took a great risk by opening her house and facilitating gatherings.

¹⁴"The apostolic lack of belief in the report in 24:11 shows that the women were way ahead of the disciples." Darrell L. Bock, *Luke: Volume 2: 9:51–24:53* (Baker Exegetical Commentary on the NT; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 1896.

¹⁵"Διακονέω ('to provide') is a general expression for various services both in Luke and in early Christian literature, in the case of women usually hospitality and the leadership of the household (as with Peter's mother-in-law in 4:39)... These women are responsible for providing for Jesus' community and dip into their own resources to do so." François Bovon and Helmut Koester, *Luke 1: A Commentary on the Gospel of Luke 1:1–9:50* (Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2002), 301.

¹⁶Since Peter knew where to go after his release from prison, the group must have had a regular meeting place (Barrett, *Acts*, 584). Maybe Peter belonged to this house church himself (Bruce, *Acts*, 238).

Correcting and equipping. In Acts 18:25-26 Priscilla authoritatively corrected the teachings of Apollos and equipped him for a stronger evangelistic ministry.¹⁷ (In 1 Cor 16:9 Priscilla and Aquila are patrons of a church meeting in their home, and in Rom 16:3 they are called 'fellow workers' [συνεργός] of the apostle Paul.)

To sum up this section, there is nothing in Luke or Acts that suggests that women cannot hold important positions of teaching and leadership in the church. Our current practice of appointing and ordaining female elders, yet appointing female pastors but not ordaining them, is due to a disagreement among us over whether or not God equips and uses women for leadership. If God does not, we should stop inviting women to serve as elders and pastors. If God does call women to leadership, there is no reason to treat women differently in the practice of ordination. As for the witness of Luke and Acts, God seems to use both genders as prophets, teachers, and leaders in His church. I believe God wants to do the same today.

Conclusion

The current practice of ordination in the Seventh-day church is not modeled directly on Luke or Acts. The word ordination is not used in these two books (except in the KJV where it has a different denotation). More significantly, the laying on of hands in connection with leadership appointments was done to slightly different types of leaders than we do (in Acts to charity managers and foreign missionaries, not to local church deacons, elders, or pastors serving in their home district), it took place at the very outset of the new ministry (not a few years later as an evaluation of the ministry), and it was accompanied with fasting (which we do not practice).

¹⁷Since Apollos had a faulty understanding of baptism, knowing only about the baptism of John and not baptism in the name of Jesus (Acts 18:25), scholars have debated extensively whether he should even be categorized as a Christian at this time. Most scholars think he should. For a summary of the discussion see Witherington, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 564-66. In any case, Apollos benefitted greatly from the private correction and tutoring of Priscilla and Aquilla.

We have seen that our two-tier rank of ministerial accreditation (non-ordained license versus ordained credentials) is a modern invention not found in our biblical material. Human recognition and greatness should not be a driving motivation for Christian disciples and leaders, so any church structure should be careful not to invest too much importance in rank and honor. Hopefully, most of our pastors handle this issue well.

Regarding the gender of teachers and leaders there is nothing in Luke or Acts that should suggest that God does not want to fully use both men and women. While the majority of leaders were male, women did serve in the early Christian movement as patrons, leaders, teachers, and prophets.