

An Early Baptist on the Laying on of Hands

ONE would perhaps be justified in saying that the references to the laying on of hands in the New Testament have been something of an embarrassment to the twentieth-century Baptist, and that the spirited exchanges concerning the rite which have characterised certain of the other denominations have largely been ignored in Baptist circles. It is salutary to note, however, that the imposition of hands has not always been relegated to so obscure a place in Baptist thought, and that to several of the outstanding Baptists of the seventeenth century the act was highly valued—so much so that it was to some a question of urgency whether its rejection afforded legitimate grounds for breaking communion. Among the several treatises which indicate how fruitful a source of controversy the imposition of hands was during this period perhaps that of Benjamin Keach is the most interesting and illuminating. Keach's work was first published in 1678, and revised some twenty years later as *The Laying on of Hands as such proved to be an ordinance of Christ*. It is, as the title implies, a vigorous defence of the use of the laying on of hands after the baptism of believers.

After a refutation of the abuse of the rite in "sacramentalist" churches Keach deals fully with its practice and significance in the Baptist churches of his day. The high claim made for the imposition of hands is seen in that for Keach it has the same authority as baptism itself.¹ It is of primary importance that the dominical origin of the rite should be established.² While conceding that there is no specific command of Christ recorded which would warrant this, Keach points out (surely with justification) that this of itself is not sufficient ground for its rejection—for on the same argument from silence we would be compelled to exclude the equally well established practice of the laying on of hands upon church officers at ordination. There is, furthermore, clear apostolic precedent for the laying on of hands after baptism in such passages as Acts 8 : 17 and 19 : 6. The objection that John did not lay hands upon Christ Keach will not allow, as it would have been quite improper for the lesser to have imposed hands upon the greater. Nor can we oppose the use of the rite by arguing that the Gospels say nothing of an imposition of hands upon the disciples; to reason along these lines could equally well lead us to conclude that the disciples were not baptized either.

Great importance is attached by Keach to Heb. 6 : 1-2.³ Here the laying on of hands is part of the "beginning of the doctrine of

Christ" along with repentance, faith and baptism. Comparing these verses with Acts 2 : 42, Keach reasons that the laying on of hands after baptism was regularly practised in the primitive church. There is, to be sure, no compelling reason why it should have been specifically mentioned in every case. Like other aspects of early church practice (e.g. the Lord's Supper) one could well argue that the imposition of hands is tacitly assumed in the bulk of the New Testament writings.

On this basis Keach next attempts to demonstrate that "prayer, with the imposition of hands, remains for ever as a standing or perpetual administration". For Keach this is true since the ordinance was often, in apostolic times, witnessed by the extraordinary manifestations of the Holy Spirit, in just the same way as the preaching of the Gospel was (Heb. 2 : 4). In Heb. 6 : 2 furthermore the laying on of hands is regarded as a "foundational principle" of the church. Again, the rite is clearly associated with the gift of the Spirit; since this gift is not limited to apostolic times (Acts 2 : 38-39) the accompanying rite is also incumbent upon all—the ceremony is annexed to the promise and is thus coextensive with it.

At this point a practical objection has to be faced: are there not those who have never submitted to the rite who possess the Holy Spirit in as great a measure as those who have? Such a criticism, however, Keach will not allow. The Christian needs to take advantage of all of Christ's ordinances wherein he can "meet with more of Christ and his Spirit". Since, therefore, the laying on of hands is a sure means of bestowing this Spirit, it becomes us to make use of this medium of grace. That God has many ways of bestowing the Holy Spirit upon his people Keach does not deny; nor does he deny that faith itself implies possession of the Spirit. His point rather is that the laying on of hands is an appointed means for granting, not the initial gift, but a "further increase" of the Spirit of God. We do not, he argues, neglect the celebration of the Lord's Supper because we may feel that those who partake less are sometimes more sanctified than those who partake more often; in similar manner this "great ordinance for the distributing of the (gift of) the Holy Spirit to baptized believers" merits our use also.

For Keach the ordinance has a deeply experimental significance, and the "sealing" of the Holy Spirit in Eph. 1 : 13 is referred to on several occasions.⁴ There is no indication here that the charismatic gifts are the primary implication of the imposition of hands—indeed Keach, like Rider, strongly opposes such a view.⁵ The great benefit of the rite is for him what might be termed "an assurance of salvation":

"'tis the great benefit received and enjoyed by believers to be sealed by the Spirit: 'tis not a matter of rejoicing to work miracles, as 'tis to know our names are written in heaven."⁶

The eschatological terminology of Eph. 1 : 13 furthermore suggests that the apostle refers the sealing of the Spirit to the future fulfilment of a salvation already in part possessed—it is a kind of foretaste of eternity.⁷ Keach is concerned too to bring all this into a christological context, in that it is the purpose of “this excellent and unspeakable gift” to reveal Christ “in all His beauty”. This gift of the Spirit further enables the word of God to be applied profitably to the heart, and inspires and lends efficacy to prayer. Keach here refers us to Rom. 8 : 26ff., and it would appear that he sees an important aspect of the bestowal of the Holy Spirit by the laying on of hands as the awareness of sonship, the Spirit of adoption by which we cry “Abba”.⁸ Although Keach does deal in passing with the charismatic gifts of 1 Cor. 14, it is clear that the primary emphasis is upon the possession by the believer of the Holy Spirit in the heart as an “earnest” or seal of future felicity (Eph. 1 : 13-14).

The high claims made by Keach for the use of the laying on of hands after baptism fall perhaps a little strangely upon modern ears, and several of his arguments certainly seem naïve—his attempt to establish the dominical origin of the rite in particular will scarcely satisfy us any more than it did John Gill.⁹ It ought, however, surely to be of more than antiquarian interest to note that Keach was not alone in the advocacy of the ordinance, nor was it uncommon among early Baptists.¹⁰ The fact that there were influential figures who were at pains to defend the rite should perhaps cause us to reflect upon its comparative neglect in our day. It could well be that these early defenders of believers' baptism possessed an insight into its complement in New Testament initiation which has largely eluded their present day successors.

NOTES

¹ p. 2.

² Keach's defence of the dominical origin of the laying on of hands bears striking similarity to that of his predecessor at Park Street, William Rider, *Layings on of Hands asserted (or a plain discovery of the truth thereof, under those several considerations minded in the New Testament)* (1656, pp. 21-33).

³ This text provided the foundation stone for Thomas Tillam's *The Fourth Principle of the Christian Religion, or the foundation doctrine of the laying on of hands* (1695).

⁴ It is interesting to note that there is nowhere any hint that the “sealing” texts are to be understood of baptism, as in the bulk of modern scholars, e.g. Cullmann, Flemington, Lampe, and among Baptists, G. R. Beasley-Murray and R. E. O. White.

⁵ Keach did not apparently believe that glossolalia always followed the laying on of hands in New Testament times. In this he is at variance with those who follow the exegesis of Calvin, for whom the imposition of hands was a medium of conveying only the special and charismatic gifts.

⁶ p. 58.

(Concluded on p. 320)