

LAYING ON HANDS: Ordination practices vary widely among Baptists

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Renowned 19th century British Baptist preacher C.H. Spurgeon rejected the practice. Texas Baptist statesman George Truett surrendered to it only at his church's insistence. Christian ethicist T.B. Maston accepted it as a deacon but not as a minister.

Even so, most Baptist churches—not to mention the Internal Revenue Service and the United States Armed Forces—continue to value ordination. And many ministers see the laying on of hands as a vitally important affirmation by God's people of their calling.

But how Baptists practice ordination—who initiates the process, serves on the ordaining council and lays hands on the person being set aside—varies widely.

“Ordination was a part of Baptist history from the beginning,” said Charles Dewese, executive director-treasurer of the Baptist History & Heritage Society in Nashville, Tenn.

Many historians trace Baptist roots to the radical Reformation, but most Baptists weren't so radical that they rejected ordination. John Smyth wrote in 1609 about each congregation's authority to “elect, approve and ordain” its own leaders, Dewese noted.

But unlike some Christian traditions, Baptists have rejected the notion of apostolic succession—an unbroken line of ordained clergy dating back to the apostles—as well as the idea that ordination conveys grace, he said.

“The normative position in our Baptist heritage is that ordination is a symbolic recognition of an individual's giftedness. It does not convey it; it simply acknowledges it,” Dewese said.



Because of that understanding, some Baptists have rejected the practice altogether—most noticeably Spurgeon, pastor of London’s Metropolitan Tabernacle.

“Not only was he never ordained; he saw ordination as a form of ritualism that could easily lapse into popery. He detested the dogma of apostolic succession and refused to endorse the delegation of power from one minister to another,” said Bill Brackney, professor of church history at Baylor University.

“Further, he thought every church ought to have the right to select its own ministers, with no assistance from others in appointing him to the office.”

Some prominent Baptists—such as seminary ethics professor Maston—have rejected ordination for themselves but accepted it for others.

“He really saw his calling as a teacher rather than as a preacher or pastor. He was not opposed to ordination for others, as far as I know, but he did not feel it was appropriate for him. And he wore—with great delight—the cape of ‘layman,’” said Bill Pinson, executive director emeritus of the Baptist General Convention of Texas and a student of Maston.

For the most part, Baptist churches have viewed ordination as a healthy—if not essential—way to affirm an individual’s sense of calling into vocational ministry, church historian Leon McBeth said.

“Most Baptists have seen it as a recognition of God’s calling. It’s an acknowledgement on the part of a congregation they have seen evidence of that calling and way of affirming the person (being ordained) in that call,” said McBeth, retired distinguished professor of church history at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary.

In recent years, the ordination process typically has been initiated by a person who requests a church set him—or her—apart for vocational ministry, he noted.

“But in the past, churches took more initiative,” McBeth said. He pointed to Whitewright Baptist Church, whose members voted to ordain Truett against his wishes because they were so convinced God had called the young man—who aspired to become a lawyer—into the gospel ministry.

The role and composition of the ordaining council also has changed considerably over the years, McBeth observed. The council—sometimes called a presbytery—typically asks the candidate to tell about his Christian conversion and call to ministry and then answer some doctrinal questions.

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“The ordaining council in recent years has been more of a rubber stamp,” he said, noting the questioning of the candidate often is scheduled just an hour or so before the announced ordination service. “For a council now to reject anyone is almost unheard of—but that wasn’t always the case.”

For instance, when William Carey—the shoemaker who sensed God’s calling to missions in India and became known as the father of the modern missions movement—initially appeared before an ordaining council, “the council recommended he go back to his cobbler’s shop,” McBeth noted.

Composition of the ordaining council in the United States—whether a mixed group of laity and ministers from the ordaining church, a group of deacons from within the church or a group exclusively of other ordained ministers from churches in the association or area—has varied widely from time to time and place to place, he added.

White Baptists in the South generally have emphasized local authority in ordination more than African-American Baptists or American Baptists elsewhere in the United States, Brackney noted.

“Most mainstream Baptists outside the Southern Baptist family today ordain candidates to the ministry using both local church and associational resources,” he said. “Frequently, an accrediting list is maintained by a regional or national organization.”

Outside the United States, practices differ even more.

In Atlantic Canada, for instance, a conventionwide ordination council appointed by the associations meets annually and interviews all candidates for ordination.

“Each must receive a two-thirds majority vote to be recommended to their local church,” said John Boyd, pastor of First Baptist Church in Halifax. “The local church would ordain the candidate at a service dedicated to that purpose.”

British Baptist historian John Briggs noted that in the United Kingdom, “we would expect the local church to do the ordaining but with representatives of the wider church taking part.”

In England and Canada, Baptists place great emphasis on ministers being included on the Baptist Union’s or regional convention’s accredited list.

“To appear on the accredited list, a candidate has to have his call tested first for training, and this would be by the local church, the ministerial recognition committee of the association and the appropriate college council.

“At the end of training, the candidate has to be commended by the college principal concerned to the Union’s ministerial recognition committee for settlement. The whole process is only completed when a local church issues a call to the pastorate; all is in suspense until this happens,” Briggs said.

When it comes time for the candidate to be ordained, the laying on of hands involves not only Baptists, but also the larger Christian community, he noted.

“Ordination is to the Christian ministry, and for many years, laity and representatives of other Christian churches have taken part in ordinations,” Briggs said.

The matter of who lays hands on the person being ordained has changed through the years, McBeth said.

“In the beginning (of Baptist churches), all Christians present could lay on hands,” he said. Later, the practice evolved into having only other ordained people—ministers and deacons—participate in the ceremony. “More recently, there’s been a recovery of the old tradition, where any Christian present can take part,” he said.

“It’s never been seen as conveying any special ecclesiastical power. It’s just an intense form of prayer.”

Robert Creech, pastor of University Baptist Church in Houston, agrees the laying of hands conveys no special grace, but he takes one additional step. He maintains ordination is not instructed in the New Testament, and early churches represented a variety of practices—not one prescribed way—for recognizing leaders.

“Despite Baptist claims to root faith and practice in biblical teachings, an honest self-appraisal raises questions about the degree to which we look to Scripture to dictate the practice of ordination versus the degree to which we have assumed a practice and then sought biblical precedence for it,” Creech said.

The Apostle Paul insisted his authority came from God, not from men, and he ministered for about a decade and half before the church at Antioch laid hands on him, he noted.

“Baptists have retained a ceremony by which those who have a vocation and evidence of some ability for the ministerial office are set apart by the believing community for the work of their calling,” Creech said. “We have been less clear about how such a ceremony fits into our doctrine of the priesthood of the believers. We have thus maintained a clergy/laity distinction whose consistency with our doctrine is difficult to explain without sounding like doubletalk.”

The distinction between clergy and laity becomes even greater when a presbytery composed exclusively of ordained ministers from other churches examines candidates and has the authority to recommend or reject them, he insisted.

“Such a practice contradicts our Baptist belief in the autonomy of the local church and of the priesthood of all believers,” Creech said. “Having ordained people determine who gets ordained smacks of the Roman Catholic practice of apostolic succession. When only ordained people determine who is ordained, one struggles to maintain that ordination bestows no special grace or authority. The cleft between clergy and laity is widened.”

Allowing every Christian in the congregation to participate in the laying on of hands rather than restricting it to only ordained people helps narrow the gap, Creech maintained.

“Since the congregation ordains the candidate, the laying on of hands should be open to every person present at the service,” he said.

“To have only ordained persons lay on hands seems backwards to me.”

Rather than looking for biblical proof-texts to support ordination, Creech wishes Baptists would just be honest and admit it is “a kind of ‘union card’ allowing other churches of like faith and practice to know that someone who knew the person has placed their blessings on their ministry.”

When ordination is viewed as that kind of pragmatic practice and as strictly a local church decision, the issue of women’s ordination becomes a moot point, he insisted.

“The question of whether a woman should or can serve as the senior pastor of a congregation is a question settled by a local church when they call a senior pastor. The only question (for a church that ordains a woman) is: Do we believe after observing and examining the candidate that their theology is sound—that their calling, gifts and character are line with the gospel ministry? If so, then are we prepared to lay hands on the candidate in prayer and bless their pursuit of their calling?”

At University Baptist Church, “we have by practice and precedent already determined that we are supportive of women pursuing the calling God places upon their lives in fulltime vocational ministry,” he continued.

“The question of ordination is only the further step of what we have by practice and precedent already established. When the call of God to a particular place of ministry comes along for one who has been following that calling, we have always proceeded with ordination. That should be our practice whether the candidate is male or female.”

Most staff members at University Baptist Church are not ordained, and the church has chosen to ordain only a few people during his tenure—usually for roles such as military chaplaincy in which ordination is required, Creech said.

So, even many critics of ordination practice it and acknowledge its practicality. And some Baptists applaud the practice without reservation.

“I personally favor ordination,” McBeth said. “It’s a good thing to recognize God’s call on a person’s life. It’s a way to say: ‘We recognize God has called and gifted you for ministry. Amen, and more power to you.’”