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The New Testament Basis for Ordination

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The process by which the church identifies spiritual leaders is called ordination. Ordination is an essential function of the body of Christ, and has its basis in the teachings of the New Testament. While every believer is “ordained” to eternal life and the responsibilities of general Christian service, God has set apart some believers to carry out special functions in the church. The church has the responsibility and the privilege of identifying those who are called into the ministry and acknowledging that call through ordination.

New Testament Terms for Ordination

Several New Testament terms carry the idea of ordination, or appointment, to a position or task. A very common New Testament word for ordination is *tithemi*, which can be translated to put, to place, to make, or to establish.¹ This term is sometimes used in the special sense of appointment to a task. Jesus “appointed” His followers to go and bear fruit (John 15:16). God has “arranged” the parts of the body of Christ just the way He wants them to be (1 Corinthians 12:18). He has also “appointed” certain members of the church to serve in special positions, such as apostles, prophets,

and teachers (1 Corinthians 12:28). Paul described ordination as the work of the Holy Spirit by which He “made” certain Christians overseers, or pastors (Acts 20:28). Paul also considered his own ordination to apostolic ministry as an “appointment” from Jesus Christ (1 Timothy 1:12; 2:7; 2 Timothy 1:11).

A second common New Testament term for ordination is *kathistemi*, which can be translated to appoint, to put in charge, or to ordain.² This term was used for the appointment of Israel’s high priest (Hebrews 5:1; 8:3). The apostles instructed the early church to select seven deacons to whom they would “turn over” the responsibility of caring for needy widows (Acts 6:3). Paul used this same term in instructing Titus to “appoint” elders, or pastors, in the churches in Crete (Titus 1:5).

Another term for ordination is *tasso*, used only eight times in the New Testament. It can mean to appoint, to establish in an office, or to put someone in charge of something.³ Acts 13:48 uses this term in describing believers as being “appointed” to eternal life. The church in Antioch “appointed” Paul and Barnabas to represent them at the church council in Jerusalem (Acts 15:2). Romans 13:1 says that governing authorities are “established” by God.

A fourth term for ordination, used only twice in the New Testament, is *cheirontoneo*, meaning to choose or to elect by raising hands.⁴ It could also refer to the appointment of leaders to church ministry. Acts 14:23 says that Paul and Barnabas “appointed” elders in the churches they had started during their first missionary journey. Second Corinthians 8:19 describes a servant who was “chosen” by the churches to help safeguard the churches’ financial gifts.

The Ordination of Ministry Leaders in the New Testament

From the four primary terms for ordination in the New Testament we can conclude that ordination can refer to general tasks or to specific functions. In general usage, ordination referred to the appointment of believers to eternal life, the appointment of Christians to bear spiritual fruit, the appointment of servants to carry out a function such as a financial task, and even the appointment of governing authorities to serve in public office. In special usage, ordination referred to the appointment of certain Christians to

specific church functions or offices such as apostles, pastors (elders, overseers), teachers, and deacons.

Ordination in its special sense, therefore, refers to a function of the church whereby God's people appoint certain individuals to specific leadership functions. Ordination, however, is first and foremost a function of the triune God. Appointments to spiritual leadership are based on the fact that God the Father has ordained these leaders (1 Corinthians 12:28), that Jesus Christ ordains spiritual leaders, placing them in ministry (1 Timothy 1:12), and that the Holy Spirit ordains elders, or pastors, to shepherd the church (Acts 20:28).

Ordination is a work of the triune God. However, God calls the church to recognize those called into special service and to ordain, or appoint them, to ecclesiastical office. The early church often demonstrated this recognition of divine appointment through the laying on of hands. "Laying on of hands seemed to be the visible symbol of 'ordination.' That rite has its roots in the Old Testament where it has the ideas of (a) setting apart for office (Num. 27:23), (b) blessing (Gen. 48:14), (c) dedicating to God (Lev. 1:4), and (d) transfer and participation in the action (v. 4, the verb means to lean on)."⁵

The Modern Practice of Ordination

The modern practice of ordination most often refers to the public recognition and appointment of spiritual leaders to the office of pastor or elder, though it need not be limited to this position. Ordination today should still reflect the biblical concept of recognizing a divine appointment to special service. "Ordination is the setting apart of a person divinely called to a work of special ministrations in the church. It does not involve the communication of power,—it is simply a recognition of powers previously conferred by God, and a consequent formal authorization, on the part of the church, to exercise the gifts already bestowed."⁶

Over the centuries, different titles became associated with ordination. Many protestant churches have adopted the title "Reverend" to identify those who have been ordained to pastoral ministry. Reverend simply means "worthy of reverence" and, as a title for a pastor it is usually "preceded by *the* and followed by a title

or a full name" such as "the Reverend John Doe."⁷ The title "Reverend" is not found in the Bible in reference to pastors, but is "an epithet of respect applied to the clergy since the 15th cent[ury]."⁸ The Bible, however, uses terms such as elder, overseer, or pastor to describe the primary spiritual leaders of a church. Many pastors today find these terms more appealing.

Ordination is an essential aspect of the church's overall responsibility. God calls out certain individuals to perform special functions of spiritual leadership in the church. These individuals must prove over time their call based on their faithfulness and effectiveness in Christian service. Then the church should recognize the calling of God in the lives of these individuals and ordain them, appointing them to fulfill their God-appointed leadership roles. Ordination is a great privilege and responsibility for the church. Ordination is also a great privilege and responsibility for those whom the church ordains. It is for this reason that 1 Peter 5:2-3 warns those who are appointed to pastoral leadership, "Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, serving as overseers—not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not greedy for money, but eager to serve; not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock."

¹ Bauer, Walter; Arndt, William F.; Gingrich, F. Wilbur; Danker, Frederick W. *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1958, pp. 815-816.

² Bauer, Arndt, Gingrich, and Danker, p. 390.

³ Bauer, Arndt, Gingrich, and Danker, pp. 805-806.

⁴ Bauer, Arndt, Gingrich, and Danker, p. 881.

⁵ Ryrie, Charles C. *Basic Theology*. Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1986, p. 418.

⁶ Strong, Augustus H. *Systematic Theology*. Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1907, p. 918.

⁷ Webster's *New Collegiate Dictionary*. Springfield, MA: G. & C. Merriam Company, 1977, p. 991.

⁸ Livingstone, Elizabeth A., Ed. *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1977, p. 439.