

Faith comes by hand

Throughout scripture, human bodies are not an obstacle to righteousness; they are its location.

by [Sarah Hinlicky Wilson](#) in the [April 2023](#) issue



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Lately I've been thinking about hands. It started last summer, when I realized I was shaking someone's hand for the first time in two years. Even before COVID, hand shaking was dropping out of my repertoire. I moved to Japan in 2018, and they bow here instead of shaking hands. Nothing tells you you're a Westerner like the compulsion to shove your sweaty palm into a stranger's.

Cultural cluelessness is one thing. Pandemic germs are another. But hands-off has increasingly been the norm in polite society—including in the church. Hands are essential to God's work in scripture. Yet, other than the once-in-a-lifetime ordination rite for a very small subset of Christians, you'd never know it from going to church.

This is not without reason. Too many ministers have taken advantage of their position and mishandled those in their care. Better to rule out any risk of unholy

hands at all, the reasoning goes. I sympathize with this concern. But I suspect the ease with which hands have been eliminated from ministry also reveals a practical gnosticism at work: the unexamined notion that bodies are obstacles to righteousness rather than its location.

Hands need to be disciplined, to be sure—but not deleted. Faith comes by hearing, and the things worth hearing about come by hand. To put it another way: the ministry of God’s gracious reign is handed down and handed off, one generation to the next, by the laying on of hands.

Hands enact the priestly ministry in Leviticus, that encoding of God’s grace for the people of Israel. This much despised and poorly understood book speaks its own symbolic language, one which Christians can’t usually be bothered to decode. But many obscure mysteries of Jesus-centered faith are illuminated in its light.

Sacrifice, for instance. Leviticus begins with sacrifice, just as the Gospels end with sacrifice. It is not an inexplicably bloody demand on God’s part but an invitation and a concession: come into my home, says the Lord, and let us make things right between us.

Levitical sacrifice is a strictly demarcated business. The overwhelming majority of animals are off-limits (a better translation than “unclean”) to Israel. In fact, you could consider Leviticus to be a conservation policy that any 21st-century ecologist would envy. Only a very narrow selection of herd animals may be handed over to pay the real cost of real sin in the world. Their blood is shed but not consumed by either God or the penitent. Blood is life, so it goes back into the ground to sustain life. The Lord takes only the aroma. A few items are set aside—fat, kidneys, a lobe of the liver—and the rest of the meat goes to feed the family and the priesthood.

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But here’s the key: what transforms a bull from secular to sacred use is the laying on of hands. The Lord instructs Levitical priests, “He shall lay his hand on the head of the burnt offering, and it shall be accepted for him to make atonement for him” (1:4). This point appears early in the book, in the very first set of instructions, and recurs again and again (3:2, 8, 13; 4:4, 15, 24, 29, 33; 8:14, 18).

The famous scapegoat of Leviticus 16 receives the same laying on of hands, this time to bear the sins of Israel and take them away, out of the camp, to dissolve in

the chaos of the wilderness and trouble God's people no more.

Hands are also central to the action when Moses consecrates Aaron and his sons to the priestly work of sacrifice. Over the course of seven days, Moses bathes, clothes, crowns, and anoints them by hand. The incipient priests lay hands on the bull of the sin offering. The ram of the sin offering is set apart by their hands, and the ram of ordination as well. Moses uses the blood of the latter to anoint "the lobe of Aaron's right ear and on the thumb of his right hand and on the big toe of his right foot" (Lev. 8:23), and he does the same for Aaron's sons. Then their hands are ready to receive fat and meat, the wafer and unleavened bread, to present to the Lord as wave offerings. When the consecration draws to its close, "Aaron lifted his hands toward the people and blessed them" (Lev. 9:22).

Similarly, in Numbers, the whole people of Israel lay hands on the Levites when they are presented to the Lord as a wave offering—rather suggesting the ancient equivalent of a mosh pit—and the Levites in turn lay hands on the bulls to prepare them for sacrifice (Num. 8:10–12). And Moses lays hands directly upon his successor, Joshua, to invest in the younger man some of the elder's authority (Num. 27:23, recalled in Deut. 34:9).

In short, it's the priests and the sacrificial animals who receive the laying on of hands. That twinning is as good a foreshadowing as any of what ministers of the gospel should expect: "As for yourselves, beware, for they will hand you over to councils" (Mark 13:9).

The laying on of hands is as well attested in the New Testament as baptism or communion, possibly even more so than the latter.

The book of Acts, which is particularly concerned with the dissemination of the Good News in Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth, abounds in hands. Stephen and the other six deacons are the first ones to be set apart for service by the apostles, who pray and lay hands on them (6:5–6).

The laying on of hands by Peter and John summons the delayed Holy Spirit upon two Samaritan believers (Acts 8:14–19). It's the one such case of delay, probably because the first baptism of not-quite-Jews required broad apostolic endorsement. Simon Magus, unfortunately, draws the wrong conclusion from this, offering the apostles money in exchange for the power to do the holy hands trick himself, thereby giving us the name of a uniquely ecclesiastical sin: simony.

Paul, for his part, humbled by an intervention of the risen Jesus, receives the hands of former enemy Ananias in order to gain the Holy Spirit and regain his sight (Acts 9:12, 17). He receives hands again under less humbling circumstances when he and Barnabas are set apart for their mission labors by the church of Antioch in Pisidia (Acts 13:1-3). Later Paul passes the favor along, laying hands on the Ephesian disciples, whose inadequate baptism by John the Baptist could not deliver the Holy Spirit (Acts 19:6).

The seeds of Christian ordination practice are plainly there, and the practice may already have been in effect. Another commissioning story reports how, “when they had appointed elders for them in every church, with prayer and fasting they committed them to the Lord in whom they had believed” (Acts 14:23). The English translation conceals more than it reveals: that word “appointed” (in Greek *cheirotónésante*) contains the word for “hand,” *cheír* (hence *chiropractor*).

Paul uses the same word with reference to his coworker Titus, who “has been appointed”—or perhaps we should say, picked by hand—“by the churches to travel with us as we carry out this act of grace that is being ministered by us” (2 Cor. 8:19).

And again, consecration for ministry by hand is assumed in the pastoral epistles. Timothy is told not to neglect the gift given to him “when the council of elders laid their hands on you” (1 Tim. 4:14), or maybe Paul himself (2 Tim. 1:6). He is also warned not to be hasty in laying hands on others who are not yet ready for either the burden or the privilege of being set apart in that way (1 Tim. 5:22).

Hebrews ranks knowledge concerning the laying on of hands as part of the “elementary doctrine of Christ” along with repentance, faith, washings, resurrection, and eternal judgment (6:1-2). No hands, no ministry, no church, no gospel.

Exhaustive and attested though it is, this work of priestly and apostolic hands is not the whole story. There is a parallel story running underground beneath this one, another form of consecration and commissioning, just as deeply rooted in Levitical grace: Levitical grace for lepers, to be exact.

First things first: Levitical leprosy is not modern leprosy, also known as Hansen’s disease. As a matter of fact, what we call leprosy may not have even existed in the Middle East and points west until well into the Christian era.

Biblical leprosy is also a skin condition, but its significance is not infection per se. The issue is the issue: a seepage that indicates a breach in the tabernacle of skin that holds a human being in place. For analogous reasons, breaches in garments and homes are similar cause for concern. It's not as strange as it sounds: you approve of the holes in your home in the form of doors and windows, but not in the form of holes in your roof.

For Leviticus, intact skin is a metonymy for every kind of integrity that maintains life. Live a lie or sneak a sin and it will catch up with you, sapping away the life God gave you—just like a hole in your skin where there isn't supposed to be one will drain your health away.

That is why, in Leviticus 14, the restoration of sufferers of leprosy disease is dealt with at such great length, even though by any medical standard the condition is not that serious. The integrity of the physical and spiritual whole that is a human being is so significant that the rite of healing rhymes and resonates with another in the code.

The requirements for healing from leprosy include bathing, a seven-day wait, burnt offerings, and anointing of a very specific kind: "The priest shall take some of the blood of the guilt offering, and the priest shall put it on the lobe of the right ear of him who is to be cleansed and on the thumb of his right hand and on the big toe of his right foot" (Lev. 14:14). Later, oil is applied to all the same anatomical locations.

Hear the rhyme? The healing ritual is a consecration, a commissioning, an alternate ordination. To be healed of disease and restored to integrity is, in effect, a summons into service. A healed person becomes inherently priestly.

When Jesus heals his first leper, he stretches out his hand and touches him. Although he sternly charges the man to "say nothing to anyone" but only to follow the appropriate rite of restoration with a priest, the healed man cannot keep silent (Mark 1:44). He talks freely, spreads the news, and declares the mercy of God in priestly fashion to the point that Jesus can no longer move about openly—and this already in the first chapter of the Gospel.

Soon after, though, following another remarkable healing, the Gerasene demoniac receives the exact opposite instructions. Jesus commands him, "Go home to your friends and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and how he has had mercy on you" (Mark 5:19). Evidently the rules are different for a non-Israelite living

on the far side of the lake. At any rate, this healed and restored gentile is commissioned to go forth and labor as a preacher, evangelist, and apostle—well in advance of the Twelve, and despite any supposed messianic secret in Mark.

Jesus continues to heal by laying his hand on sufferers throughout Mark's Gospel (1:33, 5:41, 6:5, 7:32, 8:23, 9:27), thereby setting the precedent for the healing ministry of his apostles: "And they cast out many demons and anointed with oil many who were sick and healed them" (6:13). Much later, an about-to-ascend Jesus promises that his disciples "will lay their hands on the sick, and they will recover" (16:18). Jesus also applies his hands to bless children, anticipatorily healing them of the wounds life holds in store for them, while also commending to them their own ministry of sharing the Good News of one who values children in his kingdom (10:16).

Twice the hands that reach for healing and blessing move not from Jesus but toward him, and both times by women.

A woman who has bled for 12 years reaches out her fingers to touch Jesus' garment (Mark 5:21-34). It is a touch of such electric charge that Jesus distinguishes it from the press of the crowd all around him. Jesus approves her faith and confirms her healing.

The other woman to reach for Jesus turns up in the home of Simon the leper. She breaks "an alabaster flask of ointment of pure nard, very costly" (Mark 14:3). For those who don't keep nard in their medicine chests, it's a fragrant oil. Certain shortsighted and moralistic dinner guests object to the waste. What they fail to notice is that, up to this point in time, the one acclaimed as Christ, the Anointed One, has not yet been anointed.

In fact, there is nothing in any of the Gospels that qualifies recognizably as an anointing in any of its traditional formats. Metaphorically, yes—Peter declares to Cornelius that "God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power" (Acts 10:38), and the epistles speak of believers being anointed in the same way.

But this episode at Simon the leper's house is the closest we get to the literal, physical action. The nard-bearing woman assumes the prophetic role of anointing God's chosen priest and king, little realizing that she is also preparing him to die. Jesus approves the presumption, declaring that "wherever the gospel is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in memory of her" (Mark 14:9).

If anything, literal anointing in the New Testament is more aligned with healing than with qualifying as the Christ. Recall that Jesus sent out his disciples to anoint for healing. James, the brother of the Lord, exhorts the same care for the ailing: “Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer of faith will save the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up. And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven” (James 5:14-15).

Unsurprisingly in a midrashic meditation principally concerned with integrity—just like Leviticus, in fact—James sees no contradiction in asking for both physical healing and forgiveness of sins, but he also doesn’t assume the one is causally related to the other. Healing is holistic, and an all-hands-on-deck ecclesial emergency.

Hands for consecrating, hands for healing, hands for blessing, hands for anointing: an up close and personal ministry to counteract the practical gnosticism of ages past and present.

Like much of the world church, in 2020 my congregation found ourselves impounded for Lent, Holy Week, and Easter. No ashes traced on the forehead by a sooty pastoral finger; no communion placed in cross-shaped hands. We reverted to the tiniest of house churches for our days of penitence and festival alike.

But as so often happens, new connections come to light in extremis. We had no palm branches to serve as our wave offering before the Lord on his way into Jerusalem. But we had our own palms. We lifted them up in praise. The image has stayed with me ever since.