

# “Lay Hands on No Man Suddenly”: What does it really mean?

What does it mean to "lay hands on no man suddenly"<sup>1</sup>? We read this in Paul's letter to Timothy. It's there in the NT, it's advice, so we need to know what it means. We've been told by people like Chuck Swindle that we are to take the Bible at face value. Therefore, "lay hands on no man suddenly" means what it says – or does it?

Does it mean that I don't touch anyone quickly so I scare them? That's what it seems to say. If we understand the spiritual principle of 'laying hands' on people, it might have a different meaning. However, if we don't know about the 'laying on of hands', then we won't be able to apply that kind of understanding to the verse.

So we can't really take the verse at face value because it depends on your understanding. For example we could say it means, "don't suddenly touch people". We could say that, but what was in Paul's mind when he was writing to Timothy? That's the issue, that's the important thing. What was the writer wanting to convey to the reader? This was in a personal letter, not a letter to the churches. Paul was writing to a young apostolic man and advising him how to fulfil his duties.

So, if Paul was referring to the 'laying on of hands', does it mean you shouldn't allow people to lay hands on you just because they say so, or because they want to? That could be what Paul meant. Or, does it mean, don't go around laying hands and praying for people suddenly, quickly – you need to think about it. In other words, don't go around willy nilly laying hands on every man, woman and child you see because you're excited about the laying on of hands. Certainly that appears to be the mindset in the charismatic and Pentecostal system – you have to lay hands on everyone because everyone has got to be set free.

But I go back to what I said earlier: What was Paul wanting to convey to Timothy? For a start, we don't know – we're not Paul. Secondly, because it's been translated into English, we have only got the Anglicised understanding of what Paul wrote in his letter. And, thirdly, what did Timothy understand by what Paul said, because that's the important thing for us. We have to understand what Paul intended, and so we have to have the mind of Timothy so we can understand it. Timothy was a Gentile of Jewish-Greek parentage, so he didn't think like we do.

It should be obvious now that we can't take the statement “lay hands on no man suddenly” and just say, “Well, the Bible says it, therefore I know what it means”.

All communication needs deciphering. That's the rule, that's a law of communication. Communication is a code that needs to be deciphered, and if you can't decipher it properly, you won't get the full meaning. It's simple logic. With that in mind, looking at some of the English Bible translations, we can see how they interpret the expression. After all, Bible translators should have more skill than us in translating the Greek into English. Before we do that, it's wise to remember that every translator, like every Bible reader, reads through the lens of their understanding, their biases and their worldviews.

## **Ordination Meaning**

Some English versions note that the 'laying on of hands' was a process used for setting aside deacons<sup>2</sup>, elders and apostles<sup>3</sup> so they have taken that practice as the intent of what Paul was actually writing about. For example:

*AMP – "Do not hurry to lay hands on anyone [ordaining and approving someone for ministry or an office in the church, or in reinstating expelled offenders], and thereby share in the sins of others; keep yourself free from sin."*

*CSB – "Don't be too quick to appoint anyone as an elder"*

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1 – 1 Timothy 5:22

2 – Acts 6:1-6

3 – Acts 13:2-3

CEB – *"Don't rush to commission anyone to leadership"*

CEV – *"Don't be too quick to accept people into the service of the Lord by placing your hands on them"*

ERV – *"Think carefully before you lay your hands on anyone to make him an elder"*

EXB – *"Think carefully before you [Do not quickly/hastily] appoint someone to leadership [lay your hands on anyone; 4:14; a way of dedicating someone to Christian service]"*

This interpretation may be the case, but like the others I've offer at the beginning, it's unprovable.

## **Partaking of a Person's Sins**

Some English versions have linked the 'lay hands on' section and the 'sins of others' section of the verse together as a single thought. This is an entirely different approach, and one that doesn't go contrary to the Greek from the translator's understanding. For example:

PHILLIPS<sup>4</sup> – *"Never be in a hurry to ordain a man, or you may be making yourself responsible for his sins. Be careful that your own life is pure."*

TLB – *"Never be in a hurry about choosing a pastor; you may overlook his sins, and it will look as if you approve of them."*

MSG – *"Don't appoint people to church leadership positions too hastily. If a person is involved in some serious sins, you don't want to become an unwitting accomplice."*

NASB – *"Do not lay hands upon anyone too hastily and thereby share responsibility for the sins of others."*

NET – *"Do not lay hands on anyone hastily and so identify with the sins of others."*

Again, this interpretation may be the case, but all like the others, it's unprovable.

**Conclusion:** It is foolish to say: "The Bible says it, I believe it, and that settles it". **Without a proper understanding of the intention of the writer and the reader, a correct understanding of what the Spirit may want to say from the scriptures is curtailed by our misunderstanding and preconceived ideas.** That should be quite obvious from this study.

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