the 17th Century has a detailed section about this controversy and some of the attempts to heal the divisions within and between particular congregations over this matter, and a useful discussion of some of the issues involved. 3

It is to be remembered that John Smyth had referred to this act in association with ordination of church officers. The laying on of hands was intended to identify the officer, in a time of prayer, designating that person as a leader, but it was also done to assure that person that God gives to them the power to serve in this ministry. 4 The act was both identifying and empowering.

General Baptists became particularly interested in the implications of Hebrews 6.1-8, which they saw as indicating six principles of the Christian’s life. These words follow on from chapter 5, where we read of the concern that the Christians receive a good foundation in faith. The writer regrets that they still need milk rather than solid food, but urges them in Chapter 6 to hold onto the sure foundation, because (it suggests) once this is lost it is impossible to restore. Here then are the six principles: repentance from dead works, faith towards God, the doctrine of baptisms, the laying on of hands, the resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment.

The General Baptists differed from the Particular Baptists only in the fourth, the laying on of hands. Some Particular Baptists did this, while almost all General Baptists did. Laying hands on the baptised is specified in the ‘Orthodox Creed’ of the General Baptists of 1679. In 1674, Thomas Grantham wrote about this principle, arguing that in not laying on hands in this way the churches were neglecting “the Sealing Spirit of Promise”. 7 As Barrie White observes, General Baptists saw the imposition of hands as an act which confirmed both the believer and the church’s commitment to obedience to Christ and the pattern for the church which they saw laid down in Hebrews 6. To commit themselves fully to this way was also to draw upon the Spirit’s presence, so they argued that not to lay hands in this way was to deny themselves some measure of the Spirit’s presence and

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power. This explanation is supported by William Rider’s tract, ‘Laying on of hands asserted’ (1656).  

While I cannot here pursue the course of this controversy, in which incidentally the Particular position (opposing the laying on of hands on all the baptised) seems to have won out, I think it is worth asking what really was at stake. It is not clear to me that it is simply about a second element in the process of becoming a church member, as H. Leon McBeth suggests, though it is something like that.  

The laying on of hands, at the time of baptism, was seen to invoke the Spirit and thus to express the seal of the new covenant upon the new believer. It did not mean that those whose hands touched the person in some literal sense mediated the Spirit. Only God gives the Spirit: the Spirit moves where it wills, not where we say it will. But at least one of the issues here was whether the seal of the Spirit was for all those called to faith in Christ, as witnessed in Baptism. On this both Particular and General Baptists were agreed. While the Particular Baptists reserved the laying on of hands for the ordination of ministers, this did not imply that only these people received the Spirit.

So what did this sign mean? Here I run the risk of over-interpreting events and movements of the distant past and attributing theological meanings which may not have been there. Nonetheless, I think we can infer some things from the significance given to this practice. To say that the Spirit is given to the newly baptised is to say that they now live in God and are gifted and called for this life. It is also to say that each member of the community can look to this person as an expression of God’s presence amongst us. It is to say that this person has some gift from God, for us – which we must receive, value and use. And it is to say that this person also has a responsibility to contribute their gift to the life of our community. In short, what is signified here is a notion of how the Spirit gives life to the whole church. Each person is gifted, in some way, and they are invited and given scope to speak in the meetings because they have been baptised into Christ and have, as Hebrews 6 puts it, received a sure foundation and a taste of the goodness of the Word of God and the powers of the age to come.

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Much earlier, General Baptists had been ridiculed because their preachers were not educated types: in 1645 a tract had criticised Baptist preachers such as “an honest glover ... a reverend Taylor (tailor?) ... a learned seholler ... a renowned cobbler ... a button-maker, and divers others.”[^10] In 1647, Edmund Chillenden issued a paper, “Preaching without Ordination; or a Treatise proving the lawfulness of all Persons to preach and set forth the Gospell, though no minister, nor any other Officer in the Church of God.”[^11]

What these things signify, I suggest, is that General Baptists saw the gifts of God’s word coming to them through many lives and many people, and it was for this reason that their meetings invited more than one speaker and left open the opportunity for others to respond. The laying on of hands signified this radical openness to God’s gift in and through each other and a continuing expectation that the gifts of the Word and the “powers of the age to come” really were with them.

An interesting historical and theological question is why the Particular Baptists opposed this practice (remembering that initially not all rejected it, but by and large it was strongly opposed). The Particularist position seems to have been focused on the office of the Messenger or Teaching Elder, who was to be called by the local congregation to this ministry and ordained by the laying on of hands. Though some groups denied this, most held that this ordination and laying on of hands was, as the Particular Baptists of 1704 said, “an ordinance of Jesus Christ still in force.”[^12] So, whereas the Particular position did not deny the right of all to speak in the meetings, nor the gift of the Spirit to all, they reserved the laying on of hands for the recognition and edification of those specifically called to the ministry of teaching and preaching. By 1693 the Western Association, meeting in Bristol, affirmed that the Lord’s Supper and Baptism should be administered by an ordained elder, but they allowed (recognising that they must not limit the Holy One) that this might be done by one who was called by the congregation but had not yet been ordained by the laying on of hands.

[^10]: This section is quoted by Underwood, from Louise F. Brown, The Political Activities of the Baptists and the Fifth Monarchy Men in England During the Interregnum (Washington, 1912), p. 5, n7.
[^11]: Underwood, op cit, p. 86.
[^12]: Underwood, op cit, p. 75.
Critical Issues Arising

So what do we make of all this? In many places, until recent times, Baptists have not laid hands on the newly baptised. It is interesting to note, however, that the practice has been re-introduced in a wide variety of contexts, perhaps as the influence of Pentecostal movements has come into Baptist churches. In my own local church, hands are laid upon people leaving the church to go to another place, usually as a sign of commissioning and blessing. I think a case can be made for the re-introduction of the practice at baptism. I am not sure that we would continue to exegesis Hebrews 6 as offering us six principles of Christian faith, in the way the early Baptists did; nor perhaps would we see this as an issue of sufficient worth to cause dividing from our fellow-Baptists. But there is surely something of great importance in this historic practice. We are baptised into the missionary life of God in the real world, here and now. We are invited to have a part in the mission of the Spirit, and this part is mediated to, and through, each believer. We are each given a gift, for the whole mission of the Church. And we are, each of us, a gift to and for the whole mission of the Church. This is “laid upon us” and for this we are accountable.

In passing, it is worth noting an interesting personal anecdote concerning the laying on of hands, which illustrates the unhappy separation of baptism and the reception of the Spirit from the corporate life of the Church. In April 1890, as a young man of 19 years, the celebrated F. W. Boreham was baptised at the ‘Old Baptist Union Church’ in Stockwell. This took place without him being a participant in the life of that church, or at that stage any Baptist church. The pastor urged him to receive the Holy Spirit as hands were laid upon him. Boreham records in his autobiography: “it really did seem to me that a gracious tide of spiritual power poured itself into my soul, and, for weeks afterwards, I lived in such ecstasy that I could scarcely believe that the earth on which I was walking was the dusty old earth to which I had always been accustomed.” (By the time Boreham went to Spurgeon’s College the following year, he was a member of the Kenyon Baptist Church.)

There are some critical issues here, though, for Baptist identity and witness today. One of these is the question of why this discussion of all the

13 Anthony Cross makes this observation also, in Baptism and the Baptists: Theology and practice in twentieth century Britain, (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2000), p. 405. Cross observes that the laying on of hands in one situation was explained as “the recognition of the seal of the Spirit and commissioning for work in the priesthood of all believers”.

baptised as equipped for ministry in and with the Spirit was so quickly limited to the question of teaching and preaching in the context of the gathered church. This is the question of the equipment of all the saints for the work of ministry not only in the gathered life of the community but in all the expressions of Christian life, in citizenship, in home and family, in working life and in neighbourhood. Today, we see our lives as expressed in many different areas. We even call them different lives: we say, ‘my work life’ or ‘my home life’, and (sadly) ‘my spiritual life’, as if each of these is a life apart from the others.

The theology of baptism and the early idea of laying on of hands, suggested above, call for an understanding of our life and identity as Christians to be worked out in all aspects: in work and home, in citizenship and sporting clubs, and in the gathered life of the church. All these should be one, integrated and holistic expression of our baptism – our immersion in the life of God, the creator and living Lord of all the world.

Another critical issue here concerns whose hands might be laid upon the newly baptised. In the context of ordinations, in other traditions, the idea of apostolic succession fairly clearly defines whose hands are laid. Those who ordain are those already ordained. In the early Baptist ordination of deacons and pastors, the hands were those of the elders and, commonly, pastors visiting from neighbouring congregations. There seem to be some vestiges here of the older ideas of office and apostolic succession. If today we wished to restore the practice of laying hands on all the baptised, to express the inclusion, gifting and responsibility of all in the mission of God, it is a vital question whose hands would represent the whole community in this act.

One interesting question is whether today we have any other expressions, in our worship, of these theological dimensions of our identity and mission. It might be suggested that the practice called ‘the right hand of fellowship’, extended to new members when they are ‘received’ into membership, is the successor to the laying on of hands. This would continue the view that the laying on of hands was part of the process of becoming a member, in which perhaps the members of the church affirm (by a second act) what has been done by God in the first act. I suspect in fact that this has been the trend, implying that being baptised involves a person’s relationship with God, while joining the church involves their relationship with other Christians. All too easily, this has made joining the church optional. To say this, however, implies that the church is not involved in the act of baptism. Furthermore, it ignores the clear association of the act of laying on of hands with the invocation and mediation of the
Spirit. On the positive side, the right hand of fellowship expresses trust and encouragement to new members, recognizing them as gifts to the local church and assuring them of the continuing support and prayer of their fellow members. It is worth noting that many churches now also pass the peace, an act in which people shake hands to express that collective fellowship in Christ. So this act can be seen as a continuous affirmation of the symbolic meaning of the right hand of fellowship first extended upon baptism and entry into membership.

It seems to me that the most important question to consider here is how the gathered life of the church, including and most importantly the worship service, acts of baptism and the laying on of hands, gives expression to the priesthood of all believers. This idea is perhaps the most misunderstood of all in our heritage, especially where it is taken to mean, as one commentator put it a generation ago, “getting the laity to help the clergy with their work”.

Beginning with an outright refusal of the distinction between clergy and lay, I would suggest that we need to re-think the idea of the priesthood of all believers in such a way as to recognize, with the earliest Baptists, that all Christians are called into ministry, each of us and all of us, as one life together in and with God. This is not a priesthood of each Christian, but of all. There is one, collective priesthood in which we each have a contribution.15

Secondly, I think it vital to say that the priesthood of all believers does not mean that anyone can do anything, in the ministry of the church, totally, nor specifically in the gathered activities such as worship. The priesthood of all believers does not mean that everyone is gifted for everything; nor that some are gifted for everything (despite their messianic pretensions). Rather, it means that all are gifted, and that together there is a ministry which is offered to God as an expression of our life in Christ, our one great high priest. We are together called to be “a royal priesthood, a holy nation” (1 Peter 2. 9).

Thirdly, in explaining what this means for Baptist life, I find it helpful to distinguish the gathered life and the dispersed life of the local congregation. The gathered life of the church includes all its organisational expressions, the groups and meetings and missions and machinations, while

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the dispersed life includes all that the people do and are, at home and work, at leisure and in the wider community.

I want also to argue very firmly for the importance of the dispersed life as the primary context for ministry and worship. The priesthood of all believers is about offering the whole of our lives, and our whole life as a people of God, as worship.

In terms of the worship of the gathered community, however, the priesthood of all believers, understood in this way, is quite crucial. It is not about who can do what. Rather, it is about whose life is mentioned and challenged and prayed for and offered in worship.

Just as we asked the critical question, "Whose hands?", in the laying on of hands, or the right hand of fellowship, so too it is a critical question whether the worship service is in fact the gathering of the whole lives of all the people. If we see our whole lives as immersed in the mission and life of God, then the worship service must be a gathering and naming of that whole life, individually and collectively, in prayers of thanksgiving and of supplication. Our preaching and praying will be acts of discernment and expectation: seeking where God is and what God is doing, and pleading God's blessing for those we know who are in need, in prison, in suffering and confusion, or praising God with those who are enjoying health and success in their endeavours. In such worship there must be prophetic challenge and positive inspiration, and a sending of all in the assurance that we do not take Christ into the world, rather we meet him, we go with him, alive in the Spirit. In short, if our lives are shaped by our baptism, if we are immersed continually in the life of God, then the worship service will be the gathering and the focusing of who we are, in all aspects: it will be the offering of all that we are, to the glory of God.

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