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II Timothy 1:6: Laying on of Hands by Paul for Ordination?

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Introduction

“For this reason I remind you to rekindle the gift of God that is within you through the laying on of my hands.” (II Tim 1:6, NRSV)

According to II Tim 1:6 ‘Paul’ laid his hands on ‘Timothy’, his beloved disciple (cf. II Tim 1:2).¹ This reference has been interpreted by most exegetes as an allusion to the appointment of Timothy as church leader, or ‘evangelist’ (II Tim 4:5; cf. 1:11), at their final parting.

This opinion shared by a majority is apparently persuasive because of its parallel with the laying on of hands by the church elders in I Tim 4:14. But, if this verse is understood as a reference to the appointment of Timothy to a church office, or to the entrusting to him of the ministry to be taken over from Paul (cf. I Tim 1:6), there remain some points that are open to further question:

¹ We start with the premise, without discussing in detail, that 2 Timothy, together with the other Pastoral Epistles, is pseudonymous and that all three letters were written by one author as a single ‘Corpus pastorale.’ For detail, cf. U. Schnelle, *Einleitung in das Neue Testament* (ÜTB 1830), Göttingen: V&R, 2011, 369-373; P. Trummer, ‘Corpus Paulinum – Corpus Pastorale. Zur Ortung der Paulustradition in den Pastoralbriefen’, in: K. Kertelge (ed.), *Paulus in den neutestamentlichen Spätschriften* (QD 89), Freiburg et al: Herder, 1981, 122-145: 125; G. Häfner, ‘Das Corpus Pastorale als literarisches Konstrukt’, *ThQ* 187 (2007) 258-273: 259-265.

- 1) How are the laying on of hands by the elders in I Tim 4:14 and that by Paul in II Tim 1:6 to be related to each other?
- 2) What does "for *this* reason" at the beginning of v. 6 refer to? The emphasis in the previous verse is put on Timothy's faith, which he inherited from his grandmother and mother. How can this fact be the reason for v. 6?
- 3) What does "rekindle" (*ἀναζωπύρειν*) the gift of God" mean, if this gift was supposed to be given to Timothy through the appointment ceremony by Paul?

These questions require examination of whether the laying on of hands in II Tim 1:6 really refers to the appointment of Timothy to a specific church office, or ministry. In early Christianity, laying on of hands was not necessarily situated in that kind of designation, but had a wider context. In the following pages we will consider another possible interpretation, after examining closely the difficulties above.

1. Difficulties of the *communis opinio*

1.1. Relation with the laying on of hands by the council of elders (I Tim 4:14)

"Do not neglect the gift that is in you, which was given to you through prophecy with the laying on of hands by the council of elders." (I Tim 4:14)

As mentioned above, the laying of hands on Timothy appears twice in the Pastoral Epistles (I Tim 4:14; II Tim 1:6), both of which report that through this act the 'gift' (*χάρισμα*) dwells in Timothy ('the gift of God' in II Tim 1:6).

These accounts raise two questions: (1) Do both accounts refer to one and the same incident or two separate acts? and (2) what is the laying on of hands in

each case for? These questions are in fact connected to each other.

It appears easy to answer the first question. Since there is no suggestion in either of the passages that the two descriptions go back to one and the same ritual act, it is preferable to regard them as references to two different events, whether historical or fictitious. Otherwise, we would have to imagine that both Paul and the council of elders were present at the scene and laid their hands on Timothy simultaneously, or consecutively: First Paul, then the elders did it as approval.² But this explanation is only possible if Paul and the elders both did it for the same purpose, and/or if Timothy experienced this ceremony only once in his life. However, neither of these assumptions can be demonstrated, as we see below.

Many exegetes suppose that I Tim 4:14 reflects an ordination to church office at the time of the Pastoral Epistles, while II Tim 1:6 is a fiction for the purpose of showing that Timothy was assigned to this office by Paul's authority.³ But this supposition does not take into consideration whether the readers of the Pastoral Epistles, who regard them as authentic Pauline, could understand such a distinction: It must have been impossible for them to recognize that the one reflects the convention of their time and the other was just a fiction.

2 P. Dornier, *Les Epîtres Pastorales* (SBI; Paris: J. Gabalda, 1969), 85. Cf. also I. H. Marshall, *The Pastoral Epistles* (ICC; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1999), 568; E. Lohse, Art. *χέρι κατλ.* *ThWNT IX* (1973), 413-428: 423,12-16; R. F. Collins, *I & II Timothy and Titus* (New Testament Library; Louisville/ London: Westminster John Knox, 2002), 131, 197.

3 E.g. A. T. Hanson, Art. Handauflegung I, *TRE 14* (1985), 415-422: 420; H. von Lips, *Glaube - Gemeinde - Amt. Zum Verständnis der Ordination in den Pastoralbriefen* (FRLANT 122; Göttingen: V&R, 1979), 241-243; L. Oberlinner, *Die Pastoralbriefe, erste Folge: Kommentar zum ersten Timotheusbrief* (HThK XI/2/1; Freiburg u.a.: Herder, 1994), 210; G. Kretschmar, *Die Ordination im frühen Christentum*, *FZPhTh 22* (1975) 35-69: 60-61; H. Merkel, *Die Pastoralbriefe* (NTD 9/1; Göttingen: V&R, 1991), 39. N. Brox, *Die Pastoralbriefe* (RNT; Regensburg: Pustet, 1989), 180-181, 228-229, sees this contradiction as resulting from the authors' carelessness.

Since these two accounts can thus hardly be led back to one historical fact, they must refer to different events. Timothy experienced, for whatever purpose, the laying on of hands twice; once by the council of elders, once by Paul.⁴ But then what do these two accounts refer to? We start with I Tim 4:14, because II Timothy should be read under the influence of I Timothy, which is expected to be read first in the Pastoral Epistles.⁵

The 'council of elders' (πρεσβυτέριον) in I Tim 4:14, a hapax legomenon in the New Testament, appears in the Letters of Ignatius of Antioch always as a subordinate group to an overseer (ἐπίσκοπος).⁶ So it appears true that this usage reflects the ecclesiastical institution at the time of the Pastoral Epistles (end of first, or early second, century A.D.) But it does not necessarily mean that its ritual act, laying on of the elders' hands, is also a reflection of the later practice of ordination, as some exegetes suppose. According to these exegetes, Timothy is a model of the later church leader, who was ordained through this rite.⁷ But this

interpretation is not persuasive, not only because Timothy is not described as one of the elders, but also because it is historically unlikely that the council of elders laid their hands on a bishop for his ordination.⁸

Laying on of hands was practiced not only for ordination, as in later church ceremony. The Acts of the Apostles reports that this rite was also performed when somebody in the church was entrusted with a specific duty, in order to pray for guidance by the Holy Spirit: In Acts 6:6 the hands of the whole community⁹ were laid on the Seven, who were supposed to be appointed to the task of food-distributing.¹⁰ This rite, performed with a prayer, seems to function as a plea for the guidance and help of the Holy Spirit, which already dwells in them (6:5). The same is the case in 13:1-3, where Barnabas and Paul were elected out of the group of 'prophets and teachers' (v. 1) for missionary work. Both of them were obviously elected for this task of limited duration, not for a specific church office.¹¹

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- 4 Some exegetes interpret τοῦ πρεσβυτερίου (I Tim 4:14) as objective genitive and render not "by the council of elders," but "to assume the post of elder"; so D. Daube, *The New Testament and Rabbinic Judaism* (JLCR 2; London: Athlone, 1956), 244-245; J. Jeremias, „ΠΡΕΣΒΥΤΕΡΙΟΝ außerchristlich bezeugt“, *ZNW* 48 (1957) 127-132; also G. Holtz, *Die Pastoralbriefe* (ThHK 13; Berlin: EVA, 1992), 111. But this contradicts I Tim 4:12 and II Tim 2:22, where Timothy is described as young man, and that he became 'elder.' And it is less probable to regard the modification τοῦ πρεσβυτερίου as objective genitive, because μου in II Tim 1:6 is obviously subjective genitive. Thus this interpretation finds little support today. Cf. J. Roloff, *Der erste Brief an Timotheus* (EKK XV; Zürich/Neukirchen-Vluyn: Benziger/ Neukirchener, 1988), 259 Anm. 193. Marshall, op.cit. (cf. n. 2), 568-569, supposes that this interpretation is not improbable.
- 5 In my view, the Pastoral Epistles are to be read in the order: I Tim, Tit, and II Tim. See M. Tsuji, „Persönliche Korrespondenz des Paulus: Zur Strategie der Pastoralbriefe als Pseudepigrapha,“ *NTS* 56 (2010) 253-272: 270-272.
- 6 Ign:Eph 2:2; 4:1; 20:2; Magn 2:1; 13:1; Trall 2:2; 7:2; 13:2; Philad 4:1; 5:1; 7:1; Smyr 8:2; 12:2.
- 7 E.g. E. Käsemann, "Amt und Gemeinde im Neuen Testament," in: idem, *Exegetische*

Versuche und Besinnungen I (Göttingen: V&R, 1964), 109-134: 129; and Roloff, op.cit. (cf. n. 4), 268, assume as background of the text a later situation that one of the elders was assigned to the duty of teaching and administration so that he took over the office of 'episcopos'.

- 8 According to the *Apostolic Tradition* attributed to Hippolytus of Rome, it is other bishops who lay their hands on the bishop being ordained, with the council of elders standing quietly by (*Traditio Apostolica* 2.1-3).
- 9 The subject of οἱ ἔστησαν ἐνώπιον τῶν ἀποστόλων ("they had them stand before the apostles") can only be the whole community in v. 5. Then the implicit subject of the following verb ἐπέθηκαν ('laid') should be the same rather than the apostles. So also C. K. Barrett, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles*, vol. 1 (ICC; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1994), 315; A. T. Hanson, op.cit. (cf. n. 3), 418. J. D. G. Dunn, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Narrative Commentaries; Valley Forge, PE: Trinity Press, 1996), 84, admits that the Greek text should be read so, but leaves the interpretation open.
- 10 In fact, these 'hellenists' must have concerned themselves not (only) with providing meals for widows, as 6:1-4 describes, but (also) with the mission. Cf. 8:5-13, 26-40.
- 11 Pace R. Pesch, *Die Apostelgeschichte*, 2. Teilband (Apg 13-28) (EKK V/2; Zürich:

The laying on of hands in this sense most probably holds true for I Tim 4:14. The task of Timothy, which he was given by Paul, is ‘public reading of scripture, exhorting and teaching’ during Paul’s absence (4:13; cf. also 1:3). For this special but temporary task the council of elders laid their hands on him, praying for guidance and support by the Holy Spirit. This must be the case also in I Tim 5:22, where the laying of Timothy’s hands on the elders is implied: Those elders “who labor in preaching and teaching” (5:17) were assigned to this task through the laying on of hands.¹² This passage tries to give authority to their ministry by dating it to the time of Paul.

If this interpretation of I Tim 4:14 is correct, the same might be the case for II Tim 1:6. It is by no means strange that Timothy repeatedly, each time he was assigned to a specific task, experienced this rite of laying on of hands. In II Tim 1:6, Paul might remind his ‘beloved child’ (1:2) of laying on of his hands, which he did before their final separation (cf. 1:4) in order to make Timothy his successor as preacher for the gospel (1:11, cf. 4:5 ‘evangelist’). The ‘gift of God’ (τὸ χάρισμα τοῦ θεοῦ), which was given to Timothy through this practice (1:6), appears to give support to this reading.¹³

But this reading is still open to doubt. First, if both passages, I Tim 4:14 and II Tim 1:6, refer to the same kind of ‘installation-rite,’ why does the author of

Benziger; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 1986), 18, who regards 13:1-2 as description of ordination.

12 Some try to relate 5:22 to the readmission of sinners and heretics; so e.g. Holtz, op.cit. (cf. n. 4), 129; M. Dibelius/ H. Conzelmann, *Die Pastoralbriefe* (HNT 13; Tübingen: Mohr, 1966), 62; H. -W. Bartsch, *Die Anfänge urchristlicher Rechtsbildungen* (ThF 34; Hamburg-Bergstedt: Reich, 1965), 101-102; see also Hanson, op.cit. (cf. n. 3), 420.

13 This is my former view; cf. M. Tsuji, “Laying on of Hands by the Elders (1 Tim 4:14) and by Paul (2 Tim 1:6),” *Shingaku-Kenkyu* (Theological Studies of Kwansei Gakuin University) 51 (2004) 61-73 (Japanese). For Paul, the ‘gift of the Holy Spirit’ means the various roles that it has given to each member of the church (Rom 12:6; I Cor 12:4. Cf. I Cor 7:7). It is not limited to the church offices as bishops and presbyters.

the Pastoral Epistles not mention their relationship? To be sure, I Tim and II Tim take the form of two independent letters, which were written with no relationship to each other.¹⁴ But, was the laying on of hands as rite of installation so common that the author of the Pastoral Epistles could refer to it repeatedly, disregarding the relationship to each other?

1.2. ‘For this reason’

The second question is how the phrase ‘for this reason’ (v.6) is to be understood. How can the fact that Timothy took his faith from his grandmother and mother give reason to remember the laying on of Paul’s hands (v. 5)?

This phrase is also used in II Tim 1:12 and Tit 1:13; in both passages the referent is clear. This is also the case in Heb 2:11, where the same phrase appears. Thus it is quite unlikely that the author used it here out of context.

What is ‘this reason’ then? I. H. Marshall says it is “the fact that Timothy is a genuine believer.”¹⁵ But this does not explain why it must be expressed through inheritance of faith from his grandmother and mother. How can this succession give Timothy reason to remind himself of the laying on of hands of Paul if it was for appointment to a specific duty? Even if “for this reason” was regarded as reference to all the contents of vv. 3-5,¹⁶ the question remains unsolved.

1.3. ‘Rekindle the gift of God’

The third question is: If Paul had laid his hands on Timothy in order to as-

14 Cf. Tsuji, op.cit. (cf. n. 5), 266.

15 Marshall, op.cit. (cf. n. 2), 696.

16 E.g. Collins, op.cit. (cf. n. 2), 195; L. Oberlinner, *Die Pastoralbriefe, zweite Folge: Kommentar zum zweiten Timotheusbrief* (HThK XI/2/2; Freiburg u.a.: Herder, 1995), 27; A. Weiser, *Der zweite Brief an Timotheus* (EKK XVI/1; Zürich: Benziger, Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 2003), 106: „Weil in ›Timotheus‹ das kostbare Erbe christlicher Glaubensstradition lebendig ist, ergeben sich für ihn daraus gegenwärtige und künftige Anforderungen und Aufgaben“.

sign him to a specific duty, what does it mean to 'rekindle' (*ἀναζωπυρεῖν*) the gift of God that is within him through that act? Does it imply that Timothy once neglected his task?

Although some exegetes try to overcome this difficulty by translating the verb differently,¹⁷ the instances in LXX (Gen 45:27; I Macc 13:7) and Josephus (Ant 8.234; 9.183; 11.240; 12.327; War 1.444) clearly support the meaning 'RE-kindle' (cf. also I Clem 27:3; IgnEph 1:1). It is thus difficult to understand why Timothy now has to rekindle the gift of God if he received it for the task which he took over as successor of Paul.

2. Laying on of Hands at Baptism

The problems mentioned above, i.e. unnoticed relationship with I Tim 4:14, vague connection with v. 5 and unclear meaning of 'rekindle the gift of God', lead us to consider the possibility that the laying on of hands in II Tim 1:6 has another 'Sitz im Leben' than ordination or installation. In fact, laying on of hands appears in the New Testament in connection with different situations:

- (a) healing (e.g. Mk 5:23; 6:5; Acts 9:12, 17; 28:8)
- (b) together with baptism (e.g. Acts 8:14-17; 19:1-7)
- (c) blessing (e.g. Mk 10:16. Cf. Gen 48:14-15)
- (d) appointment to a specific duty (e.g. Acts 6:6; 13:3; I Tim 5:22)

II Tim 1:6 has been regarded as an example of (d). But does the text allow no other possibilities? Highly unlikely are (a) and (c), not only because they do not match our context, but also there are no traditions telling that Paul healed or

17 E.g. Lips, op.cit. (cf. n. 3), 209, leaves it undecided, whether *ἀναζωπυρεῖν* means 'kindle intensively' or 'kindle again'. Oberlinner, *2 Tim* (cf. n. 15), 30-31, translates it 'kindle newly' ('neu zu entfachen'), explaining "daß es die Pflicht des Gemeindevorstehers ist, diese einmal übernommene Aufgabe immer wieder zu überdenken und ihr durch aktives Handeln gerecht zu werden" (31).

blessed Timothy.

On the other hand (b), i.e. baptism seems to be a good candidate for the situation behind our text. If this is the case, the above-mentioned questions can be solved without difficulties:

- 1) If II Tim 1:6 has baptism as its situation, the author of the Pastoral Epistles does not have to pay attention to the relation to I Tim 4:14, because Paul and the council of elders laid their hands on Timothy in totally different situations and for different purposes.
- 2) This hypothesis explains the connection between v. 5 and v. 6 without difficulty: Paul is assured that the faith which first lived in Timothy's grandmother and mother now lives in Timothy. Now it is important for him to strengthen this faith by recalling the baptism as its starting point, in order to join Paul in suffering for the gospel (v. 8) and take over his ministry (v. 14).
- 3) Also the expression 'rekindle the gift of God' can be understood better in connection with the baptism: Timothy should overcome the tears of separation (v. 4) and now, in absence of Paul, have courage to endure suffering in the work of an evangelist (1:8; 4:5). So Paul reminds him of his baptism, where Timothy confessed his faith and received the gift of God, which he should now rekindle in the face of coming difficulties.
- 4) Although there is no direct reference to Timothy's baptism by Paul in Acts, the expression 'my legitimate¹⁸ child in the faith' (*γνήσιον τέκνον ἐν πίστει*; I Tim 1:2; Tit 1:4) most probably implies that Paul himself baptized Timothy. This expression must be derived from Phil 4:3: 'legitimate Syzygus¹⁹ (*γνήσιε Σύζυγε*). Paul calls 'child' those he led to faith (for Timothy cf. I Cor 4:17; cf. especially Philm 10: 'Onesimus,

18 NRSV: 'loyal'.

19 On Syzygus as proper noun (cf. footnote of NRSV) see e.g. J. Gnllka, *Der Philipperbrief* (HThK X/3; Freiburg et al.: Herder, 1987), 166-167.

whose father I have become'). The author of the Pastoral Epistles probably learned from I Cor 4:17 that Timothy was baptized by Paul.²⁰

In addition to these advantages above, there are some more factors which speak in favor of this interpretation.

- 1) The 'gift of God', which was given to Timothy by the laying on of Paul's hands (v. 6), is actually the 'spirit' from God, as paraphrased in v. 7. Giving of the spirit is seen by Paul (and his followers) as essential for the baptism (cf. Rom 8:23; Gal 3:2-3; I Cor 6:11; II Cor 1:22; Tit 3:5; Heb 6:4).
- 2) The construction of v. 7 "is similar to Rom 8:15 and there is a certain parallel in the thought."²¹ The author of the Pastoral Epistles is obviously conscious of this intertextuality. If so, because it is highly probable that in Rom 8:15 the giving of the spirit at baptism is in the mind of Paul,²² this must be also the case in II Tim 1:7.
- 3) 'The gift of God' does not always mean the ability to perform ministry as a church leader. Paul himself uses this term not only for various church-ministries (cf. Rom 12:6-8; I Cor 12:4-31), but also in a broader sense (cf. Rom 1:11; 5:15-16; 6:23; 11:29; I Cor 1:7; II Cor 1:11). In our context, it is demanded to Timothy by Paul to 'join with Paul in suffer-

ing for the gospel' (II Tim 1:8) and to 'guard the good treasure entrusted to him' (II Tim 1:14). These are not special tasks exclusively for an ordained leader. In 4:5 Timothy is told to do the work of an 'evangelist' (εὐαγγελιστής). But this is not a designation of church-office, but rather that of function in a church: It means those who evangelize (cf. Acts 21:8, where Philip, one of the 'hellenists,' is called so; see also Eph 4:11: "Some would be apostles, some prophets, some *evangelists*, some pastors and teachers"). In our context it is thus important that Timothy, who was given the gift of 'not cowardice, but power and love and self-discipline' (II Tim 1:8) at his baptism, should rekindle this gift in order to take over the Pauline gospel and guard it as 'good treasure' (1:14).

- 4) The keywords of our paragraph are 'gospel' (v. 8, 10 and also 14 'the good treasure') and 'faith' (πίστις; v. 5, 12, 13). Timothy was told to guard the Pauline gospel based on his faith, which he inherited from his grandmother and mother, following Paul's trust and conviction as his model (v. 12). If so, the laying on of Paul's hands, which is related to this faith of Timothy, cannot be otherwise than for baptism. Timothy's appointment to a church office is, in spite of v. 11 (Paul's appointment as herald, apostle, and teacher), not the subject of our paragraph.

3. Conclusion

The laying on of hands in II Tim 1:6 should be regarded as the rite of baptism of Timothy, rather than as that for his appointment to a church-ministry as the majority of exegetes suppose. Not only can this alternative solve the problem of contradiction between I Tim 4:14 and our text, it can also go better with the whole context of vv. 3-14.

The author of the Pastoral Epistle probably obtained the information that Timothy was baptized by Paul from the interpretation of I Cor 4:17 and used it

20 In opposition to H. Conzelmann (*Der erste Brief an die Korinther* [KEK 5; Göttingen: V&R, 11(=1)1969], 111 Anm. 19) and many others, D. Zeller, *Der erste Brief an die Korinther* (KEK 5; Göttingen: V&R, 2010), 194, thinks that I Cor 4:17 does not imply the baptism of Timothy. But as Paul calls the Corinthian congregation 'my beloved children' (v. 14), it is very likely that v. 17 means Timothy's baptism. So also H. Merklein, *Der erste Brief an die Korinther, Kapitel 1-4* (ÖTBK 7/1; Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus Gerd Mohn; Würzburg: Echter, 1992), 329-330.

21 Marshall, *op.cit.* (cf. n. 2), 698.

22 So e.g. C. E. B. Cranfield, *The Epistle to the Romans*, vol. 1 (ICC; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1975), 396; H. Schlier, *Der Römerbrief* (HThK Sonderausgabe; Freiburg: Herder, 1975), 1977, 253.

here.²³

23 P. H. Towner, *The Letters to Timothy and Titus* (NICNT), Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006), 460, also reads our text in conjunction with baptism, but regards the laying on of hands as a 'commissioning' event: "the handing on of the mission from Paul to his coworker."