Should only ordained ministers of the Church of God baptize, or is it sufficient to get baptized through unordained members?

In our booklet, "Baptism--A Requirement for Salvation," we address and answer this question, as follows, beginning on page 27, under "Who Should Baptize?"

"Once a person is truly ready for baptism, a true minister of Christ should perform the baptism, though it may sometimes require a waiting period by virtue of the fact that a minister of Christ is not immediately available. We need to understand, though, that God is in charge and that when He calls someone and leads them to baptism, He will also work out the necessary details to send one of His ministers to perform the baptism. For instance, God sent Peter to Cornelius, and He sent Philip to the eunuch so that they could be baptized.

"The biblical record indicates that only ordained ministers of God should perform baptisms. The reason is that the baptism is done for the purpose of receiving the Holy Spirit. We need to remember that following baptism by immersing under water, the minister is to pray over the person and to lay his hands on their head so that the person can receive the Holy Spirit. The Bible shows that without the laying on of hands, a person normally does not receive the Holy Spirit.

"Notice this in Acts 8:12-17: 'But when they believed Philip [one of the original seven deacons, Acts 6:5] as he preached the things concerning the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, both men and women were baptized... Now when the apostles who were at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had received the word of God, they sent Peter and John to them, who, when they had come down, prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit. For as yet He [better translated: it - the Holy Spirit] had fallen upon none of them. They had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. Then they laid hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit. And when Simon [Magus] saw that through the laying on of the apostles' hands the Holy Spirit was given...' (Compare, too, Acts 19:5-6).

"We read later in the same chapter that Philip was sent, through an angel, to the eunuch, and that Philip baptized him. If this baptism led to the gift of the Holy Spirit, then Philip, who by that time would have been a minister, would have prayed over the eunuch and laid his hands on him. We note that Philip is called an 'evangelist' in Acts 21:8.

"We cannot reach a different conclusion by virtue of the fact that Christ's apostles baptized others before they received the Holy Spirit themselves. The twelve apostles were in quite a different position than the rest of us are today, having been specifically chosen by Christ for a very unique and particular purpose. They were sent out by Christ to heal the sick, cast out demons and preach the gospel, prior to their conversion (Luke 22:32, AV; compare regarding conversion, 1 Samuel 10:6, 9). These activities, especially healing the sick and casting out demons, are reserved today for God's ordained ministers. You may want to read the stirring account in Acts 19:13-16, reporting about the futile and unsuccessful attempt of unordained people to cast out a demon.

"The fact that Christ allowed His apostles to baptize does not mean that unordained people have the authority to do so today. This would also include ministers from churches that do not teach and practice the law of God, including the observance of the Sabbath and the Holy Days. (Note that in unusual circumstances, God might grant His Holy Spirit to someone who is baptized by a minister outside the Church of God, or by an unordained person within the Church, if the baptized person fulfills all the requirements for proper baptism, as discussed earlier in this booklet. There is no promise, however, that God would grant the Holy Spirit under those circumstances,

especially when the person to be baptized understands the role and function of God's true ministers in His Church.)

"Every example pertaining to the New Testament Church identifies Christ's chosen ministers as those who would baptize people, pray over them and lay their hands upon them, so that the Holy Spirit could be given to them. We find, for instance, that only God's ministers were given special authority from God to pray for the sick and to lay their hands upon them (while anointing them with oil). Notice it in James 5:14-15: 'Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise him up.'(This is not to say that God might not give power to heal to some other people, but how sure can we be of that? We can be sure, however, that the elders of God's Church have the authority and power to pray for healing of the sick.)."

Some have questioned this teaching, claiming that repentant Saul, whose name was changed to Paul, was baptized by Ananias. They state that Ananias was not an elder, and that it is therefore acceptable that unordained Church members baptize.

However, we must understand that the Bible interprets the Bible, and that God's Word cannot be broken (compare John 10:35). This means, the Bible does not contradict itself. Each passage on a given subject must be read together with all the other passages, and they must be understood as complementing each other in harmony, rather than creating disharmony and confusion.

We already saw that baptized people did NOT receive the Holy Spirit, UNTIL the ministry laid hands on them. A letter from the Letter Answering Department of the Worldwide Church of God sets forth the long-understood teaching of the Church in this regard:

"The laying on of hands is a symbolical act which sets individuals apart and signifies the imparting of spiritual blessings, authority, and power... In the New Testament, a newly baptized person had laid hands on him for the receiving of the Holy Spirit. Notice in Acts 8:16-17 that after God's ministers had baptized repentant converts, then [they] 'laid... hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit. And... through laying on of the apostles' hands the Holy Spirit was given.'... The laying on of hands also accompanies an ELDER's prayer for the afflicted. We read in Acts 9:17: 'And Ananias... putting his hands on him said, [Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus... has sent me that you may receive your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit].'"

We then read, in verse 18, that "Immediately there fell from his eyes something like scales, and he received his sight at once; and he arose and was baptized."

The Bible describes Ananias as "a certain disciple in Damascus" (Acts 9:10), a "devout man according to the law, having a good testimony with all the Jews who dwelt there" (Acts 22:12).

Some commentaries claim that Ananias was a lay person. But even if that were the case, then this episode could still not be used for a carte-blanche authority, given to unordained members to baptize. Please note that Ananias received a direct order from Christ Himself, in a vision (Acts 9:10-12), so that Paul "may receive [his] sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit" (Acts 9:17). However, based on other Scriptures, as discussed above, the conclusion in the above-quoted letter of the Letter Answering Department seems to be correct that this disciple Ananias was an ELDER, when he laid his hands on Paul to heal him, and when he baptized Paul (The Bible does not specifically say that it was Ananias who baptized Saul, but this seems to be highly probable).

As our previous comments have shown, only ELDERS of God's Church are charged to anoint the sick with oil, lay their hands on them, and ask for God's healing. Since Ananias did just that, it appears that he was an elder.

The above-cited letter of the Letter Answering Department concluded: "The laying on of hands, then, serves to show that God works through His MINISTERS. This ceremony is mentioned as one

of the basic doctrines of His church in Hebrews 6:2."

Unordained members who decide to baptize others and "lay hands on them" (Acts 8:17-18; 19:5-6) should realize that they would not have a Biblical basis to justify their action. This would be true, even if their particular Church organization, or a particular minister, may "authorize" such behavior, as it would not be supported by God's written Word, and we must obey God rather than man (Acts 5:29; 4:19).