THE QUESTION

# Could a single man serve as an elder or deacon in the early church?

*Asked by a THF member on June 28, 2026 · published November 9, 2026 · 10 numbered quotations · the 11 early Christian passages and 115 Bible verses we kept are listed at the back, each with a link.*

Read it online: thehistoricfaith.com/early-church-questions/could-a-single-man-serve-as-an-elder-or-deacon-in-the-early-church

## The short answer *From the text: says what the passages say*

Yes. The early writers did not bar single men from serving. One church order says a bishop, presbyter or deacon who was unmarried at ordination must not marry afterward. They read Paul's words about one wife mainly as a rule against a second marriage, and they judged leaders by their character and life.

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POINT 1 OF 8

## Unmarried men could be ordained

***Our note · compiled by machine learning · From the text: says what the passages say***

The Apostolic Constitutions plainly expects that some bishops, presbyters and deacons will be single when they are ordained. It does not turn them away. It only says they must not marry after ordination.

**1** “If he is unmarried when he is ordained, it is not lawful for him to marry afterward.”

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Apostolic Constitutions** **Source 10, page 6** **Read it in the library ›**
(c. 250–380 AD)
*THF's updated English*

POINT 2 OF 8

## Married leaders were kept to one wife

***Our note · compiled by machine learning · From the text: says what the passages say***

The same rule covers men who were already married. A married bishop, presbyter or deacon was to stay with the wife he had and never marry a second time, even if she died.

**2** “If he is already married at that time, he must not marry a second time, but must be content with the wife he had when he came to ordination.”

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Apostolic Constitutions** **Source 10, page 6** **Read it in the library ›**
(c. 250–380 AD)
*THF's updated English*

POINT 3 OF 8

## Husband of one wife meant no remarriage

***Our note · compiled by machine learning · From the text: says what the passages say***

Origen reads Paul's rules for bishops, deacons and elders as keeping men who had married twice out of church office. He wonders why Paul is so strict, since some twice-married men seem better than others. He treats the phrase as a limit on marriages, not a demand to be married.

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**3** “Paul does not want anyone in the church who has risen above the many, as happens in the administration of the sacraments, to enter a second marriage.”

*later in the same passage*

“Now when we saw that some who have been married twice may be much better than those who have been married once, we were puzzled why Paul does not allow those who have been married twice to be appointed to church offices at all.”

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Origen,** *Commentary on Matthew* 14 (c. 215–254 AD) **Source 7, page 6** Read it in the library ›
*THF's updated English*

POINT 4 OF 8

## Tertullian says clergy married only once

***Our note · compiled by machine learning · From the text: says what the passages say***

Tertullian says the church held its leaders to one marriage so strictly that he remembered men being removed from office for marrying a second time. He includes deacons with bishops and presbyters under the same promise.

**4** “Therefore, among us the rule is laid down more fully and more carefully: those who are chosen into the priestly order must be men of one marriage. This rule is observed so strictly that I remember some being removed from office for digamy.”

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Tertullian,** *On Exhortation to Chastity* 7 (c. 196–220 AD) **Source 5, page 6** Read it in the library ›
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**5** “You ask it of a monogamist bishop, of presbyters and deacons bound by the same solemn engagement, and of widows whose Order you have yourself refused.”

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Tertullian,** *On Monogamy* 11 (c. 196–220 AD) **Source 4, page 6** Read it in the library ›
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POINT 5 OF 8

## Leaders were chosen from ordinary believers

***Our note · compiled by machine learning · From the text: says what the passages say***

Tertullian argues that church leaders come from among all the believers. So the strict marriage rule for leaders shows the kind of life the whole church was meant to honor.

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**6** “For where do bishops and clergy come from? Do they not come from all? If all are not bound to monogamy, where are monogamists to be found for the clerical rank?”

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Tertullian,** *On Monogamy* 12 (c. 196–220 AD) **Source 6, page 6** Read it in the library ›
*THF's updated English*

POINT 6 OF 8

## Lower ministers could marry after entering

***Our note · compiled by machine learning · From the text: says what the passages say***

The Apostolic Constitutions makes a different rule for readers, singers and doorkeepers. If they joined the clergy while single, they were allowed to marry later. The ban on marrying after ordination applied to bishops, presbyters and deacons.

**7** “But if they entered the clergy before they were married, we permit them to marry, if they are inclined to do so, lest they sin and incur punishment.”

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Apostolic Constitutions** (c. 250–380 AD) **Source 10, page 6** Read it in the library ›
*THF's updated English*

POINT 7 OF 8

## Character was the main test

***Our note · compiled by machine learning · Interpretation: our reading of the passages, not their words***

When the Didache and the Apostolic Constitutions describe choosing leaders, they ask about gentleness, honesty, a well-run life and a good name. Neither passage lists being married as a requirement.

**8** “Therefore, appoint for yourselves bishops and deacons who are worthy of the Lord: men who are gentle, not lovers of money, truthful, and proven.”

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Didache,** *Teaching of the Twelve Apostles* 15 (c. 50–120 AD) **Source 1, page 6** Read it in the library ›
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**9** “If they agree, let him ask further whether he has a good testimony from all men concerning his fitness for so great and glorious an authority; whether everything relating to his piety toward God is right; whether he has practiced justice toward men; whether he has managed the affairs of his household well; and whether he has been blameless in the course of his life.”

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Source 11, page 6** Read it in the library ›

**Apostolic Constitutions** (c. 250–380 AD)
*THF's updated English*

POINT 8 OF 8

## Staying unmarried was held in honor

***Our note · compiled by machine learning · Interpretation: our reading of the passages, not their words***

Hermas is speaking about widows and widowers, not leaders. Still, he shows the wider view: marrying is no sin, but remaining unmarried brings greater honor with the Lord.

**10** “There is no sin in marrying again. But if they remain unmarried, they gain greater honor and glory with the Lord.”

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Hermas,** *Shepherd* **Source 2, page 6** Read it in the library ›
(c. 90–150 AD)
*THF's updated English*

THE LIMITS

## What these passages don’t tell us

- These passages do not name any single elders or deacons or say how common they were.
- They do not explain why a man ordained single could not marry later.
- They do not show whether every church followed these rules the same way.
- A word-for-word match shows that a quotation really is in our text. It does not show that our reading of it is right, or who wrote each work.

WHERE EVERY QUOTE CAME FROM

## The Sources

The 11 early Christian passages and 115 Bible verses we kept for this question (repeats and weak or off-topic search hits were left out): early Christian passages first (sources 1–11, grouped by writer, earliest first), then Bible verses in The Faith Once Delivered Bible (sources 12–96, in Bible order), then 30 more verses THF links to these passages, by reference. **Quote 1, page 2** beside a source shows where the study quotes it. Passages are

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in THF's updated English unless marked "1885 English" (the Roberts–Donaldson translation, public domain). "… [continues online]" marks a passage the library gave only in part. **On paper?** At **thehistoricfaith.com**, Bible verses are in the **Audio Bible** and early Christian writings in the **Library** (search for the title).

## EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITERS *11 passages from 7 writers*

### **Didache**, *c. 50–120 AD · source 1*

**1** *Teaching of the Twelve Apostles* 15 (1885 English) **Quote 8, page 4** "appoint for yourselves bishops and deacons worthy of the Lord, men meek, and not lovers of money, 1 Timothy 3:4 and truthful and proven… [continues online] **read ›**

### **Hermas**, *c. 90–150 AD · source 2*

**2** *Shepherd* (1885 English) **Quote 10, page 5** "is no sin in marrying again, said he… [continues online] **read ›**

### **Athenagoras**, *c. 170–190 AD · source 3*

**3** *A Plea for the Christians* 33 (on point 8) a person should either remain as he was born, or be content with one marriage. For a second marriage is only a specious adultery… [continues online] **read ›**

### **Tertullian**, *c. 196–220 AD · sources 4–6*

**4** *On Monogamy* 11 **Quote 5, page 3** "it is for a man not to touch a woman; but, on account of fornications, let each one have his own wife." He shows that there were some who, having… [continues online] **read ›**

**5** *On Exhortation to Chastity* 7 (1885 English) **Quote 4, page 3** "therefore, among us the prescript is more fully and more carefully laid down, that they who are chosen into the sacerdotal order must be men of one marriage… [continues online] **read ›**

**6** *On Monogamy* 12 (1885 English) **Quote 6, page 4** "some separate order of monogamists have to be instituted, from which to make selection for the clerical body… [continues online] **read ›**

### **Origen**, *c. 215–254 AD · sources 7–8*

**7** *Commentary on Matthew* 14 (1885 English) **Quote 3, page 3** "any one is blameless, the husband of one wife, having children, that believe Titus 1:5-6 — of course — and so on… [continues online] **read ›**

**8** *Commentary on Matthew* 14 (on point 8) But because of fornications, let each man have his own wife, and let each woman have her own husband," 1 Corinthians 7:2; and this, "Let the husband render to… [continues online] **read ›**

### **Cyprian**, *c. 248–258 AD · source 9*

**9** *Treatises* (on point 8) propriety, and in modesty of dress and adornment, so that, according to the apostle, she who is unmarried may be holy both in body and in spirit. Paul instructs and… [continues online] **read ›**

### **Apostolic Constitutions**, *c. 250–380 AD · sources 10–11*

**10** *Apostolic Constitutions* (1885 English) **Quotes 1, 2, 7, pages 2, 4** have already said, that a bishop, a presbyter, and a deacon, when they are constituted, must be but once married, whether their wives be alive or whether they be dead… [continues online] **read ›**

**11** *Apostolic Constitutions* **Quote 9, page 5** named and approved, let the people gather on the Lord's Day, together with the presbytery and the bishops who are present, and let them give their consent. And let… [continues online] **read ›**

## THE BIBLE *85 verses, The Faith Once Delivered Bible (Old Testament from the Septuagint), in Bible order*

**12** **Genesis 2:24** For this reason a man shall leave his father and his mother and shall be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh. **read ›**

**13** **Exodus 1:21** And because the midwives feared God, they made households for themselves. **read ›**

**14** **Exodus 20:13** Open the verse to read it. **read ›**

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15 **Leviticus 16:32** The priest whom they anoint, and whose hands they consecrate to serve as priest after his father, shall make atonement; he shall put on the linen garment, the holy garment. **read ›**

16 **Leviticus 18:18** You shall not take a woman in addition to her sister as a rival, to uncover her nakedness beside her, while her sister is still living. **read ›**

17 **Leviticus 20:21** If anyone takes his brother's wife, it is uncleanness; he has uncovered his brother's nakedness. They shall die childless. **read ›**

18 **Leviticus 21:3** and for a virgin sister who is near to him and has not been given to a husband; for these he may defile himself. **read ›**

19 **Leviticus 21:7** They shall not take a woman who is a prostitute and profaned, nor a woman cast out by her husband, for he is holy to the Lord his God. **read ›**

20 **Leviticus 21:14** A widow, a woman cast out, a profaned woman, or a prostitute, these he shall not take; but he shall take as his wife a virgin of his own people. **read ›**

21 **Leviticus 22:13** But if the daughter of a priest becomes a widow or is cast out, and has no seed, she shall return to her father's house as in her youth; she shall eat of her father's bread. But no stranger shall eat of it. **read ›**

22 **Numbers 4:23** From twenty-five years old and upward to fifty years old you shall number them, everyone who goes in to minister, to do his works in the tabernacle of witness. **read ›**

23 **Deuteronomy 5:18** Open the verse to read it. **read ›**

24 **Deuteronomy 17:17** He shall not multiply wives for himself, so that his heart does not turn away; and he shall not greatly multiply silver and gold for himself. **read ›**

25 **Deuteronomy 20:7** And what man is there who has become engaged to a woman and has not taken her? Let him go and return to his house, lest he die in the war and another man take her." **read ›**

26 **Deuteronomy 24:5** If a man has newly taken a wife, he shall not go out to war, and no duty shall be laid on him; he shall be free at home for one year and shall cheer the wife whom he has taken. **read ›**

27 **Judges 18:19** They said to him, "Be quiet; put your hand over your mouth, and come with us, and be a father and a priest to us. Is it better for you to be priest to the house of one man, or to be priest to a tribe and a house, to a clan in Israel?" **read ›**

28 **Judges 21:7** What shall we do for wives for those who are left, since we have sworn by the Lord not to give them any of our daughters as wives?" **read ›**

29 **Judges 21:16** Then the elders of the congregation said, "What shall we do for wives for those who are left, since the women have been destroyed out of Benjamin?" **read ›**

30 **1 Samuel 21:5** Open the verse to read it. **read ›**

31 **1 Chronicles 9:13** and their brothers, heads of the houses of their families, one thousand seven hundred and sixty, mighty men of valor for the work of the service of the house of God. **read ›**

32 **2 Chronicles 31:16** besides the offspring of the males from three years old and upward, to every one who entered the house of the Lord, by a daily account, for ministry in the daily courses of their arrangement. **read ›**

33 **Ezra 1:2** "Thus says Cyrus king of the Persians: The Lord God of heaven has given me all the kingdoms of the earth, and he himself has charged me to build him a house in Jerusalem, which is in Judea. **read ›**

34 **Ezra 4:20** And mighty kings have been in Jerusalem, ruling over all the land beyond the River, and full tribute and a share were given to them. **read ›**

35 **Ezra 9:4** Then everyone who followed the word of the God of Israel gathered to me because of the faithlessness of the exiles; and I sat still in silence until the evening sacrifice. **read ›**

36 **Ezra 9:12** Now therefore do not give your daughters to their sons, and do not take their daughters for your sons; and you shall never seek their peace or their good, so that you may be strong and eat the good things of the land and leave it as an inheritance to your sons forever.' **read ›**

37 **Nehemiah 10:14** The rulers of the people: Parosh, Pahath-moab, Elam, Zattu; (Septuagint 2 Esdras 20:15 (Nehemiah 10:14 in most Bibles)) **read ›**

38 **Psalms 1:6** For the Lord knows the way of the righteous, but the way of the ungodly shall perish. **read ›**

39 **Ecclesiastes 3:15** What has been already is, and what is to be has already been; and God will seek the one who is pursued. **read ›**

40 **Ecclesiastes 4:14** For he will come out of the house of the prisoners to reign, for even in his kingdom he became poor. **read ›**

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41 **Ecclesiastes 12:2** before the sun and the light are darkened, and the moon and the stars, and the clouds return after the rain; **read ›**

42 **Isaiah 7:6** “We will go up to Judea, and having talked with them we will turn them to our side, and we will make the son of Tabeel king of it,” **read ›**

43 **Daniel 5:18** O king. God Most High gave the kingdom and the majesty and the honor and the glory to Nebuchadnezzar your father; **read ›**

44 **1 Esdras 1:2** having set the priests in their robes by their daily courses in the temple of the Lord. **read ›**

45 **1 Esdras 4:20** A man leaves his own father who brought him up, and his own country, and clings to his own wife, **read ›**

46 **1 Esdras 5:39** When the record of the descent of these men was sought in the register and was not found, they were excluded from serving as priests. **read ›**

47 **1 Esdras 5:40** And Nehemiah and Attharias told them not to share in the holy things until a high priest should arise clothed with the Manifestation and the Truth. **read ›**

48 **1 Esdras 9:4** and that whoever did not come within two or three days, according to the judgment of the ruling elders, should have his cattle given over to the temple, and he himself should be cut off from the multitude of the captivity. **read ›**

49 **1 Esdras 9:12** Let the leaders of the multitude stay, and let all those of our settlements who have foreign wives come at an appointed time, **read ›**

50 **1 Esdras 9:18** Of the priests who had come together, there were found those who had foreign wives: **read ›**

51 **Tobit 1:6** But I alone went often to Jerusalem at the feasts, as it is written for all Israel by an everlasting statute, having the firstfruits and the tithes of the produce and the first shearings; and I gave them, from all the produce, to the priests, the sons of Aaron, for the altar. **read ›**

52 **Wisdom of Sirach 10:20** Among brothers their leader is honored, and those who fear the Lord in his eyes. **read ›**

53 **Wisdom of Sirach 25:8** blessed is he who lives with a wife of understanding, and he who has not slipped with his tongue, and he who has not served one unworthy of him; **read ›**

54 **Wisdom of Sirach 26:1** Blessed is the husband of a good wife; the number of his days will be doubled. **read ›**

55 **Wisdom of Sirach 26:3** A good wife is a good portion; she will be given among the portion of those who fear the Lord. **read ›**

56 **Wisdom of Sirach 36:29** He who acquires a wife begins a possession, a helper suited to him and a pillar of rest. **read ›**

57 **Wisdom of Sirach 36:30** Where there is no fence, a property will be plundered, and where there is no wife, a man will groan as he wanders. **read ›**

58 **Wisdom of Sirach 42:10** in her virginity, lest she be defiled and become pregnant in her father’s house; when with a husband, lest she transgress, and when married, lest she be barren. **read ›**

59 **Letter of Jeremiah 1:31** And in their houses the priests sit with their tunics torn, and their heads and beards shaved, and their heads uncovered. **read ›**

60 **Letter of Jeremiah 1:33** The priests take some of their gods’ clothing and clothe their wives and children. **read ›**

61 **Susanna 1:34** Open the verse to read it. **read ›**

62 **Susanna 1:50** Open the verse to read it. **read ›**

63 **1 Maccabees 4:42** He chose unblemished priests, devoted to the law; **read ›**

64 **1 Maccabees 14:38** And King Demetrius confirmed him in the high priesthood accordingly, **read ›**

65 **2 Maccabees 3:15** The priests, throwing themselves down before the altar in their priestly robes, called toward heaven upon him who had given the law about deposits, that he would keep them safe for those who had deposited them. **read ›**

66 **2 Maccabees 4:14** that the priests were no longer eager for the services of the altar; but despising the temple and neglecting the sacrifices, they hurried to take part in the lawless exhibitions in the wrestling arena after the signal for the discus-throwing. **read ›**

67 **2 Maccabees 8:28** After the Sabbath they gave some of the spoils to those who had been tortured and to the widows and orphans, and the rest they divided among themselves and the children. **read ›**

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68 **2 Maccabees 12:2** But among the local governors, Timothy and Apollonius the son of Gennaeus, and also Hieronymus and Demophon, and besides these Nicanor the Cypriarch, would not let them settle down and live in quiet. **read ›**

69 **2 Maccabees 14:25** Nicanor urged Judas to marry and have children; Judas married, settled down, and shared in the common life. **read ›**

70 **2 Maccabees 15:18** For their anxiety for wives and children, and also for brothers and relatives, weighed less with them; but the greatest and first fear was for the consecrated temple. **read ›**

71 **3 Maccabees 2:30** Open the verse to read it. **read ›**

72 **4 Maccabees 7:6** Open the verse to read it. **read ›**

73 **1 Enoch 15:7** Open the verse to read it. **read ›**

74 **Luke 12:13** One of the multitude said to him, “Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me.” **read ›**

75 **Luke 12:14** But he said to him, “Man, who made me a judge or an arbitrator over you?” **read ›**

76 **Acts 14:23** They appointed elders for them in every church and, after prayer with fasting, commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed. **read ›**

77 **Romans 16:1** I commend to you Phoebe our sister, who is a deaconess of the church at Cenchreae, **read ›**

78 **1 Corinthians 7:2** But because of sexual immorality, let each man have his own wife, and each woman her own husband. **read ›**

79 **1 Corinthians 7:8** But I say to the unmarried and to widows: it is good for them if they remain as I am. **read ›**

80 **1 Corinthians 7:32** But I want you to be free from care. The unmarried man cares for the things of the Lord, how he may please the Lord; **read ›**

81 **1 Timothy 3:1** The saying is trustworthy: if anyone aspires to the office of bishop, he desires a good work. **read ›**

82 **1 Timothy 3:2** The bishop therefore must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, temperate, self-controlled, orderly, hospitable, able to teach; **read ›**

83 **1 Timothy 3:4** one who rules his own house well, having children in subjection with all reverence; **read ›**

84 **1 Timothy 3:8** Deacons likewise must be dignified, not double-tongued, not given to much wine, not greedy for shameful gain, **read ›**

85 **1 Timothy 3:10** Let them also first be tested; then let them serve if they are blameless. **read ›**

86 **1 Timothy 3:11** Women likewise must be dignified, not slanderers, temperate, faithful in all things. **read ›**

87 **1 Timothy 3:12** Let deacons be husbands of one wife, ruling their children and their own houses well. **read ›**

88 **1 Timothy 3:13** For those who have served well gain for themselves a good standing and great boldness in faithfulness in Christ Jesus. **read ›**

89 **1 Timothy 4:3** forbidding marriage and requiring abstinence from foods which God created to be received with thanksgiving by the faithful who know the truth. **read ›**

90 **1 Timothy 5:7** Also command these things, that they may be without reproach. **read ›**

91 **1 Timothy 5:9** Let no one be enrolled as a widow under sixty years old, having been the wife of one man, **read ›**

92 **1 Timothy 5:11** But refuse younger widows; for when their desires turn them against Christ, they want to marry, **read ›**

93 **1 Timothy 5:14** Therefore I desire that the younger women marry, bear children, manage the household, and give the adversary no occasion for reviling. **read ›**

94 **1 Timothy 5:17** Let the elders who rule well be counted worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in the word and in teaching. **read ›**

95 **Titus 1:6** provided a man is blameless, the husband of one wife, with faithful children who are not accused of reckless living and are not insubordinate. **read ›**

96 **Titus 1:7** For a bishop must be blameless as God’s steward, not self-willed, not quick-tempered, not given to wine, not violent, not greedy for dishonest gain, **read ›**

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## ALSO LINKED BY THF TO THESE PASSAGES *30 verses, by reference*

*Partly machine-linked: related to the passages, not always quoted in them. Each reference links to the verse in our audio Bible.*

**Matthew** 5:17 · 5:31 · 5:42 · 19:3 · 19:5 · 19:9 · 19:12

**Mark** 10:11

**Luke** 6:30 · 16:18

**Romans** 1:17 · 2:13 · 7:3

**1 Corinthians** 3:2 · 7:1 · 7:10 · 7:39 · 7:40 · 12:31 · 15:22

**Galatians** 3:11 · 6:1

**Ephesians** 4:5 · 6:9

**Colossians** 3:25

**Titus** 1:5

**Hebrews** 5:11 · 10:38

**1 Peter** 1:17

**Revelation** 1:6

*Searched: Ante-Nicene Fathers volumes 1–9 and the Bible, including the Septuagint.*

### ABOUT THIS STUDY

A THF member asked “Could a single man serve as an elder or deacon in the early church?” on June 28, 2026. The Historic Faith answered it as a public study on November 9, 2026.

**Library only.** This study was written only from The Historic Faith’s library of early-Christian writings and the Bible, never from the web. Every passage we kept from what the library gave is listed above, with a link to read it.

**How it was made.** Compiled by machine learning from The Historic Faith’s library of early-Christian writings and the Bible only. Every quotation was matched word for word against our stored text. Not yet reviewed by The Historic Faith.

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THE END OF THIS STUDY