THE QUESTION

Did early Christians believe the true church could use force to defend the faith?

Asked by a THF member on April 10, 2026 · published November 9, 2026 · 12 numbered quotations · the 36 early Christian passages and 71 Bible verses we kept are listed at the back, each with a link.

Read it online: thehistoricfaith.com/early-church-questions/did-early-christians-believe-the-true-church-could-use-force-to-defend-the

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

No. The early writers here say religion must be defended by dying, not by killing, because faith depends on free will. Christians endured persecution, prayed for their enemies and loved those who hated them. They tested the true church by apostolic teaching and succession, not by force or by suffering alone.

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 at the back, 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.
SHARING WITH AN AI?	Every quotation here comes from The Historic Faith's library. If you paste this study into an AI, anything it adds beyond these pages comes from that AI, not from us.

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POINT 1 OF 8

Religion is defended by dying, not killing

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

Lactantius grants that religion should be defended with all our power, but says the right way is patient endurance. Using bloodshed and torture does not protect religion; it defiles it.

1

"Religion must be defended not by killing, but by dying; not by cruelty, but by patient endurance; not by guilt, but by good faith."

later in the same passage

"For if you want to defend religion by bloodshed, tortures, and guilt, it will no longer be defended, but polluted and profaned."

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Lactantius,** *Divine Institutes* 20 (c. 290–320 AD) **Source 28, page 8** **Read it in the library ›**

THF's updated English

POINT 2 OF 8

Faith cannot be forced on anyone

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

Lactantius gives the reason: worship has to be willing. If a person's mind is forced, there is no real religion left, so force defeats its own purpose.

2

"For nothing depends so much on free will as religion. If the mind of the worshiper is unwilling, religion is immediately taken away and ceases to exist."

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Lactantius,** *Divine Institutes* 20 (c. 290–320 AD) **Source 28, page 8** **Read it in the library ›**

THF's updated English

POINT 3 OF 8

Christians endured persecution and prayed for persecutors

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

Aristides tells the emperor that Christians bear mistreatment patiently and pray for those who wrong them. Justin says Christians choose to die rather than deny Christ, trusting God to reward them.

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3 “For their part, they offer prayers that these people may repent of their error.”

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Aristides,** *Apology* 17 (c. 125–140 AD) **Source 4, page 6** Read it in the library ›
THF's updated English

4 “While neither they nor you are persuaded by us, but strive earnestly to cause us to deny the name of Christ, we choose instead to submit to death, fully assured that God will reward us with all the good He has promised through Christ.”

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Justin Martyr,** *Dialogue with Trypho* (c. 130–165 AD) **Source 7, page 6** Read it in the library ›
THF's updated English

POINT 4 OF 8

Christians love even those who hate them

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

The Epistle to Diognetus compares Christians to a soul that loves the body that fights it. The Apostolic Constitutions teach the same way of life: love enemies and hate no one.

5 “The soul loves the flesh that hates it, and loves the members; Christians likewise love those that hate them.”

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Mathetes,** *Epistle to Diognetus* (c. 80–200 AD) **Source 1, page 6** Read it in the library ›
THF's updated English

6 “But love those who hate you, and you will have no enemy.”

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Apostolic Constitutions** (c. 250–380 AD) **Source 26, page 7** Read it in the library ›
THF's updated English

POINT 5 OF 8

Apostolic succession was a test of a church

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

Tertullian challenges groups claiming apostolic roots to show their list of bishops reaching back to an apostle or an apostle's companion, as the churches of Smyrna and Rome could.

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7 “Let them unfold the list of their bishops, coming down in proper succession from the beginning, in such a way that their first bishop can show that his ordainer and predecessor was one of the apostles or one of the apostolic men, and moreover, a man who remained faithful with the apostles.”

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Tertullian,** *On Prescription Against Heretics* 32 (c. 196–220 AD) **Source 17, page 7** **Read it in the library ›**
THF's updated English

POINT 6 OF 8

Teaching must match what the apostles taught

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

For Tertullian, even an invented list of bishops would fail if the doctrine differs from the apostles. Origen likewise accepts as truth only what agrees with the tradition handed down from the apostles.

8 “For when their doctrine is compared with the doctrine of the apostles, its very difference and opposition will show by itself that its author was neither an apostle nor an apostolic man.”

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Tertullian,** *On Prescription Against Heretics* 32 (c. 196–220 AD) **Source 17, page 7** **Read it in the library ›**
THF's updated English

9 “Therefore, that alone is to be accepted as truth which differs in no way from ecclesiastical and apostolic tradition.”

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Origen,** *De Principiis (On First Principles)* (c. 215–254 AD) **Source 19, page 7** **Read it in the library ›**
THF's updated English

POINT 7 OF 8

The true church heals sinners through repentance

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

Lactantius notes that many groups call themselves the Catholic Church. He says the true one is where sins are confessed and repented of, and where the weak are treated in a healing way.

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10 “However, because all the separate assemblies of heretics prefer to call themselves Christians, and think that theirs is the Catholic Church, it must be understood that the true Catholic Church is the one in which there is confession and repentance, and which deals in a healing way with the sins and wounds to which the weakness of the flesh is subject.”

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Lactantius,** *Divine Institutes* 30 (c. 290–320 AD) **Source 29, page 8** Read it in the library ›
THF's updated English

POINT 8 OF 8

Suffering alone does not prove a group true

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

Cyprian and the anonymous treatise both warn that dying for the name of Christ does not by itself make a person right. Someone who thinks wrongly about God or splits from the church is not saved by being killed.

11 “It is clear that if people of this kind are put to death outside the Church, it is not the crown of faith, but rather the punishment of treachery.”

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Cyprian,** *Epistles* (c. 248–258 AD) **Source 23, page 7** Read it in the library ›
THF's updated English

12 “On this same principle, a heretic who is put to death for confessing Christ's name cannot afterward correct anything, if he has thought wrongly about God or about Christ, even though he has deceived himself by believing in another God or another Christ.”

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Anonymous,** *Treatise on Re-Baptism* 1 **Source 35, page 8** Read it in the library ›
THF's updated English

THE LIMITS

What these passages don’t tell us

- These passages do not discuss any later case of a church body persecuting others.
- They do not say that being persecuted, by itself, proves which group is the true church.
- They treat apostolic teaching and succession as tests, but do not settle how to apply those tests to churches today.
- 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.

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WHERE EVERY QUOTE CAME FROM

The Sources

The 36 early Christian passages and 71 Bible verses we kept for this question (repeats and weak or off-topic search hits were left out): early Christian passages first (sources 1–36, grouped by writer, earliest first), then Bible verses in The Faith Once Delivered Bible (sources 37–67, in Bible order), then 40 more verses THF links to these passages, by reference. **Quote 1, page 2** beside a source shows where the study quotes it. Passages are 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 *36 passages from 13 writers*

Mathetes, *c. 80–200 AD · source 1*

1 *Epistle to Diognetus* **Quote 5, page 3** "what the soul is in the body, that Christians are in the world. The soul is spread throughout all the members of the body, and Christians are scattered through all… [continues online] **read ›**

Ignatius of Antioch, *c. 98–117 AD · sources 2–3*

2 *Epistle to the Trallians* (1885 English; on point 5) "from these, there is no Church. Concerning all this, I am persuaded that ye are of the same opinion… [continues online] **read ›**

3 *Epistles of Ignatius* Mindful of your love and zeal in Christ, which you have shown towards us, we thought it appropriate to write to you, who display such a godly and spiritual love… [continues online] **read ›**

Aristides, *c. 125–140 AD · source 4*

4 *Apology* 17 **Quote 3, page 3** shameful acts with males, and with a mother and a sister and a daughter, in turn accuse the Christians of their monstrous impurity. But the Christians are righteous and good… [continues online] **read ›**

Justin Martyr, *c. 130–165 AD · sources 5–7*

5 *Dialogue with Trypho* (1885 English; on point 6) I replied, "The fact that there are such men confessing themselves to be Christians, and admitting the crucified Jesus to be both Lord and Christ, yet not teaching His doctrines… [continues online] **read ›**

6 *First Apology* (on point 3) "We do not fear death, since it is… [continues online] **read ›**

7 *Dialogue with Trypho* (1885 English) **Quote 4, page 3** "all of whom we say, You are our brethren… [continues online] **read ›**

Irenaeus, *c. 175–202 AD · sources 8–14*

8 *Against Heresies: Book IV* (on point 8) bearing witness in this way is unnecessary. They argue that their doctrines alone serve as the true testimony for Christ. Occasionally, one or two individuals among them, since the Lord… [continues online] **read ›**

9 *Against Heresies: Book III* (on point 5) He, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, was preached by the Churches and may also understand the apostolic tradition of the Church. This Epistle predates those who now spread… [continues online] **read ›**

10 *Against Heresies: Book III* (1885 English; on point 5) "Since, however, it would be very tedious, in such a volume as this, to reckon up the successions of all the Churches, we do put to confusion all those who… [continues online] **read ›**

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11 *Against Heresies: Book III* himself, after the Lord spoke to him from heaven and showed him that by persecuting His disciples he was persecuting his own Lord, and after Ananias was sent to him… [continues online] **read ›**

12 *Fragments from the Lost Writings of Irenæus* (1885 English; on point 3) "indicates the persecution against the Church set on foot by the nations who still continue in unbelief… [continues online] **read ›**

13 *Against Heresies: Book IV* (on point 5) "it is necessary to obey the presbyters in the Church—those who, as I have shown, possess the succession from the apostles; those who, along with the succession of the… [continues online] **read ›**

14 *Against Heresies: Book IV* (1885 English; on point 5) "where there is a regular succession, there is also fixedness… [continues online] **read ›**

Clement of Alexandria, *c. 190–215 AD · source 15*

15 *Stromata* 7.15 (1885 English; on point 6) it is said that it is on account of those that are approved that heresies exist… [continues online] **read ›**

Tertullian, *c. 196–220 AD · sources 16–18*

16 *De Fuga in Persecutione* 2 (on point 3) devil, and persecution consists of injustice—for what is more unjust than that the bishops of the true God, and all the followers of the truth, should be treated in… [continues online] **read ›**

17 *On Prescription Against Heretics* 32 **Quotes 7, 8, page 4** "if there are any heresies bold enough to place themselves in the middle of the apostolic age, so that they may seem to have been handed down by the apostles… [continues online] **read ›**

18 *De Fuga in Persecutione* 1 (on point 3) belongs to God alone. This is that fan which even now cleanses the Lord's threshing floor, the Church, I mean, winnowing the mixed heap of believers and separating the… [continues online] **read ›**

Origen, *c. 215–254 AD · source 19*

19 *De Principiis (On First Principles)* (1885 English) **Quote 9, page 4** "seeing there are many who think they hold the opinions of Christ, and yet some of these think differently from their predecessors, yet as the teaching of the Church, transmitted… [continues online] **read ›**

Cyprian, *c. 248–258 AD · sources 20–25*

20 *Epistles* (1885 English; on point 8) "apostates and deserters, or adversaries and enemies, and those who lay waste the Church of Christ, cannot, even if outside the Church they have been slain for His name, according… [continues online] **read ›**

21 *Epistles* (on point 5) from the faith? Shall their unbelief make the faith of God of no effect? God forbid; for God is true, but every man a liar." Romans 3:3-4. And… [continues online] **read ›**

22 *Epistles* (on point 5) commands and warnings we ought to keep, describes the honor of a bishop and the order of His Church in the Gospel. He says to Peter: "I say to you… [continues online] **read ›**

23 *Epistles* (1885 English) **Quote 11, page 5** "it is manifest that, if people of this sort should be put to death outside the Church, it is no crown of faith, but is rather a punishment of treachery… [continues online] **read ›**

24 *Seventh Council of Carthage* 1 "they are Christians, why are they not in the Church of God… [continues online] **read ›**

25 *Epistles* (on point 6) his bishopric, and argues that he holds the succession from Peter, on whom the foundations of the Church were laid. Yet he introduces many other rocks and sets up new… [continues online] **read ›**

Apostolic Constitutions, *c. 250–380 AD · sources 26–27*

26 *Apostolic Constitutions* **Quote 6, page 3** "is, you shall not destroy a man like yourself, for you destroy what was well made. Not as if all killing were wicked, but only the killing of the innocent… [continues online] **read ›**

27 *Apostolic Constitutions* (1885 English; on point 3) "10:22 For he that is persecuted for the sake of the faith, and bears witness in regard to Him, Christ, and endures, is truly a man of God… [continues online] **read ›**

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Lactantius, *c. 290–320 AD · sources 28–32*

28 *Divine Institutes* 20 **Quotes 1, 2, page 2** that nothing among men is more excellent than religion, and that it ought to be defended with all our power. But just as they are deceived about religion itself, so… [continues online] **read ›**

29 *Divine Institutes* 30 (1885 English) **Quote 10, page 5** "however, because all the separate assemblies of heretics call themselves Christians in preference to others, and think that theirs is the Catholic Church, it must be known that the true… [continues online] **read ›**

30 *Of the Manner in Which the Persecutors Died* 15 (1885 English; on point 3) "and other officers of the Church were seized, without evidence by witnesses or confession, condemned, and together with their families led to execution… [continues online] **read ›**

31 *Epitome of the Divine Institutes* 63 (on point 1) about the thing itself rather than its origin. What is so terrible, what is so filthy, as the killing of a human being? That is why our life is protected… [continues online] **read ›**

32 *Of the Manner in Which the Persecutors Died* 48 (on point 2) met at Milan and discussed the good and safety of the state, it seemed to us that, among the things that benefit mankind in general, reverence for the Divinity deserved… [continues online] **read ›**

John Chrysostom, *c. 386–407 AD · source 33*

33 *Homilies on Acts* (on point 3) may be in vain. That is, let not their threatenings come to fulfillment. They did not say this because they wanted to escape hardship themselves, but for the sake of… [continues online] **read ›**

Anonymous · *sources 34–36*

34 *Treatise on Re-Baptism* 1 (1885 English; on point 8) "outside the Church there is no Holy Spirit, sound faith moreover cannot exist, not alone among heretics, but even among those who are established in schism… [continues online] **read ›**

35 *Treatise on Re-Baptism* 1 (1885 English) **Quote 12, page 5** "which principle also, that heretic who, by confessing Christ's name, is put to death, can subsequently correct nothing, if he should have thought anything erroneously of God or of… [continues online] **read ›**

36 *Treatise on Re-Baptism* 1 (1885 English; on point 8) "all those, by denying the true Christ, and by introducing or following another — although there is no other at all — leave themselves no hope or salvation… [continues online] **read ›**

THE BIBLE *31 verses, The Faith Once Delivered Bible (Old Testament from the Septuagint), in Bible order*

37 **Matthew 5:45** that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven. For he makes his sun rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. **read ›**

38 **Matthew 26:59** Now the chief priests, the elders, and the whole council sought false testimony against Jesus, that they might put him to death, **read ›**

39 **Mark 13:9** But watch yourselves, for they will deliver you up to councils. You will be beaten in synagogues. You will stand before rulers and kings for my sake, for a testimony to them. **read ›**

40 **Luke 6:32** If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. **read ›**

41 **Luke 21:12** But before all these things, they will lay their hands on you and will persecute you, delivering you up to synagogues and prisons, bringing you before kings and governors for my name's sake. **read ›**

42 **John 8:40** But now you seek to kill me, a man who has told you the truth which I heard from God. Abraham did not do this. **read ›**

43 **John 16:2** They shall put you out of the synagogues. Indeed, the hour is coming when whoever kills you will think he is offering service to God. **read ›**

44 **Acts 2:42** They continued steadfastly in the apostles' teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers. **read ›**

45 **Acts 8:1** Saul consented to his killing. That day a great persecution arose against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria. **read ›**

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46 **Acts 8:3** But Saul ravaged the church, entering house after house, dragging off men and women and handing them over to prison. **read ›**

47 **Acts 9:1** But Saul, still breathing threats and slaughter against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest **read ›**

48 **Acts 12:1** About that time King Herod laid hands on some of the church to mistreat them. **read ›**

49 **Acts 22:4** I persecuted this Way to the death, binding and delivering into prisons both men and women, **read ›**

50 **Acts 26:10** I also did this in Jerusalem. I both shut up many of the saints in prisons, having received authority from the chief priests; and when they were put to death I gave my vote against them. **read ›**

51 **Acts 26:11** Punishing them often in all the synagogues, I tried to make them blaspheme. Being exceedingly enraged against them, I persecuted them even to foreign cities. **read ›**

52 **Romans 7:9** I was alive apart from the law once, but when the commandment came, sin revived and I died. **read ›**

53 **1 Corinthians 1:16** I also baptized the household of Stephanas; beyond that, I do not know whether I baptized anyone else. **read ›**

54 **1 Corinthians 3:21** Therefore let no one boast in men, for all things are yours, **read ›**

55 **1 Corinthians 11:16** But if anyone wishes to be contentious, we have no such custom, nor do the churches of God. **read ›**

56 **1 Corinthians 11:18** For first of all, when you come together as a church, I hear that there are divisions among you, and I partly believe it. **read ›**

57 **1 Corinthians 11:19** For there also must be factions among you, that those who are approved may be revealed among you. **read ›**

58 **1 Corinthians 13:3** And if I give away all my possessions to feed others, and if I give my body to be burned, but do not have love, it profits me nothing. **read ›**

59 **2 Corinthians 5:5** Now he who prepared us for this very thing is God, who also gave us the pledge of the Spirit. **read ›**

60 **Galatians 1:7** which is not another gospel; but there are some who trouble you and want to pervert the gospel of Christ. **read ›**

61 **Ephesians 4:5** one Lord, one faith, one baptism, **read ›**

62 **1 Thessalonians 2:15** who killed both the Lord Jesus and their own prophets, and drove us out, and do not please God, and are contrary to all men, **read ›**

63 **2 Thessalonians 1:4** so that we ourselves boast about you in the churches of God for your perseverance and faithfulness in all your persecutions and the troubles you endure, **read ›**

64 **2 Timothy 3:11** persecutions, and sufferings—the things that happened to me at Antioch, Iconium, and Lystra. What persecutions I endured! And the Lord delivered me out of them all. **read ›**

65 **2 Timothy 3:12** And all who desire to live godly lives in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution. **read ›**

66 **Titus 1:14** not paying attention to Jewish fables and commandments of men who turn away from the truth. **read ›**

67 **1 John 2:19** They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have remained with us. But they went out so that it might be made manifest that none of them belong to us. **read ›**

ALSO LINKED BY THF TO THESE PASSAGES *40 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 3:12 · 5:11 · 5:39 · 5:40 · 5:42 · 5:46 · 6:13 · 7:15 · 10:23 · 12:30 · 22:37 · 24:4 · 24:11 · 24:23 · 27:5

Mark 5:11 · 12:32

Luke 6:29 · 6:35 · 22:31 · 22:32

John 3:16 · 4:7 · 12:6 · 15:20 · 16:33 · 17:11

Acts 1:18 · 15:13

1 Corinthians 1:27 · 5:11

2 Corinthians 5:1 · 6:10 · 12:7 · 12:9

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Philippians 2:12

1 Timothy 1:20

2 Timothy 1:15

1 Peter 1:17 · 2:11

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

ABOUT THIS STUDY

A THF member asked “Did early Christians believe the true church could use force to defend the faith?” on April 10, 2026. The Historic Faith answered it as a public study on November 9, 2026.

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THE END OF THIS STUDY