THE QUESTION

Did early church elders govern the church or mainly shepherd the flock?

Asked by a THF member on May 1, 2026 · published November 9, 2026 · 12 numbered quotations · the 23 early Christian passages and 80 Bible verses we kept are listed at the back, each with a link.

Read it online: thehistoricfaith.com/early-church-questions/did-early-church-elders-govern-the-church-or-mainly-shepherd-the-flock

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

They did both. Early writers say elders and bishops ruled the church and were to be obeyed. But they describe that rule as shepherding: caring for the weak and sick, bringing back those who wander, correcting gently, and guarding the flock from false teachers, knowing they would answer to God.

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.

IN THIS STUDY

1	Believers were told to obey the elders	2
2	Pastors were expected to rule and govern	2
3	Their rule meant caring for every sheep	3
4	Correction was to heal, not crush	3
5	Overseers guarded the flock from false teachers	4
6	Leaders were chosen with the church's consent	4
7	The church avoided men hungry for power	5
	What these passages don't tell us	5
	The Sources: 23 early Christian passages and 80 Bible verses, with links	6

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POINT 1 OF 7

Believers were told to obey the elders

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

Irenaeus says Christians must obey the presbyters who stand in the line handed down from the apostles and keep the truth. Ignatius tells the people to be subject to the presbyters and deacons, while he tells the presbyters to feed the flock.

1 “Therefore, 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 episcopate, have received the certain gift of truth, according to the good pleasure of the Father.”

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Irenaeus,** *Against Heresies: Book IV* (c. 175–202 AD) **Source 4, page 6** Read it in the library ›
THF's updated English

2 “You presbyters, "feed the flock which is among you," until God reveals who is to lead you.”

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Ignatius of Antioch,** *Epistles of Ignatius* (c. 98–117 AD) **Source 1, page 6** Read it in the library ›
THF's updated English

POINT 2 OF 7

Pastors were expected to rule and govern

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

Cyprian says each pastor is given a part of the flock to rule and govern. He pictures a returning bishop as a shepherd feeding his flock, a pilot guiding a ship, and a ruler governing the people, all at once.

3 “A portion of the flock has been assigned to each pastor, and he must rule and govern it, since he will have to give an account of his actions to the Lord.”

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Cyprian,** *Epistles* (c. 248–258 AD) **Source 10, page 7** Read it in the library ›
THF's updated English

4 “In this way, the shepherd has been restored to feed his flock, the pilot to guide the ship, and the ruler to govern the people.”

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Cyprian,** *Epistles* (c. 248–258 AD) **Source 14, page 7** Read it in the library ›
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POINT 3 OF 7

Their rule meant caring for every sheep

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

Polycarp tells presbyters to be merciful, bring back those who wander, visit the sick, and care for widows, orphans and the poor. The Apostolic Constitutions describe the bishop keeping the strong firm and strengthening the weak by encouragement.

5 “And let the presbyters be compassionate and merciful to everyone, bringing back those who wander, visiting all the sick, and not neglecting the widow, the orphan, or the poor, but always "providing for that which is becoming in the sight of God and man;" abstaining from all wrath, favoritism, and unjust judgment; keeping far from all covetousness, not quickly believing an evil report against anyone, not severe in judgment, as knowing that we are all under a debt of sin.”

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Polycarp,** *Epistle to the Philippians* (c. 100–155 AD) **Source 2, page 6** **Read it in the library ›**
THF's updated English

6 “He must watch over the strong, that is, keep firm in the faith the one who is already strong. He must feed the people peaceably. He must strengthen the weak, that is, confirm by exhortation the one who is being tempted.”

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Apostolic Constitutions** (c. 250–380 AD) **Source 17, page 7** **Read it in the library ›**
THF's updated English

POINT 4 OF 7

Correction was to heal, not crush

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

The Apostolic Constitutions say a bishop must reprove without striking and warn people so they turn back. Cyprian warns that leaders who allow what leads to ruin stop being shepherds and become butchers of the sheep.

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7 “He must reprove, but not strike; bring them low so that they may be ashamed, but not ruin them; warn them so that they may be converted; and rebuke them so that they may be reformed and live better lives.”

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Source 17, page 7** Read it in the library ›
Apostolic Constitutions (c. 250–380 AD)
THF's updated English

8 “But it is the duty of those placed over them to keep the rule, and to instruct those who are either rushing ahead or ignorant, so that those who ought to be shepherds of the sheep may not become their butchers.”

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Cyprian,** *Epistles* **Source 13, page 7** Read it in the library ›
(c. 248–258 AD)
THF's updated English

POINT 5 OF 7

Overseers guarded the flock from false teachers

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

Irenaeus recalls Paul telling the bishops and presbyters of Ephesus to watch over the flock the Holy Spirit gave them, because savage wolves would come. Guarding sound teaching was part of their leading.

9 “Be careful, then, both about yourselves and all the flock over which the Holy Spirit has made you bishops, to lead the Church of the Lord, which He has acquired for Himself through His own blood.””

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Irenaeus,** *Against Heresies: Book III* **Source 3, page 6** Read it in the library ›
(c. 175–202 AD)
THF's updated English

POINT 6 OF 7

Leaders were chosen with the church's consent

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

Clement of Rome says leaders were appointed with the consent of the whole church and should not be removed if they served humbly. The Apostolic Constitutions say a bishop must be chosen by all the people. Decisions about leaders involved the congregation.

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10 “We believe, therefore, that those appointed by them, or later by other distinguished men with the consent of the whole Church, who have served the flock of Christ blamelessly in a humble, peaceful, and selfless spirit, and have long enjoyed a good reputation with everyone, cannot be justly removed from the ministry.”

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Clement of Rome,** *First Epistle to the Corinthians* **Source 22, page 7** Read it in the library ›
THF's updated English

11 “He must be an excellent man, chosen by all the people.”

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Apostolic Constitutions** (c. 250–380 AD) **Source 19, page 7** Read it in the library ›
THF's updated English

POINT 7 OF 7

The church avoided men hungry for power

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

Origen says Christians reject those who are ambitious to rule and instead urge modest men to take charge. He says good church rulers follow God's commands, not worldly policy, and serve for the salvation of people.

12 “We reject those who are ambitious to rule. But we urge those to take a public charge in the Church of God who, because of too much modesty, are not easily persuaded to do so.”

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Origen,** *Against Celsus* 75 (c. 215–254 AD) **Source 9, page 7** Read it in the library ›
THF's updated English

THE LIMITS

What these passages don’t tell us

- These passages do not give a full list of which decisions belonged to elders, bishops or the whole congregation.
- Most of them speak of bishops and presbyters together and do not always separate the two roles.
- 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 23 early Christian passages and 80 Bible verses we kept for this question (repeats and weak or off-topic search hits were left out): early Christian passages first (sources 1–23, grouped by writer, earliest first), then Bible verses in The Faith Once Delivered Bible (sources 24–71, in Bible order), then 32 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 *23 passages from 10 writers*

Ignatius of Antioch, *c. 98–117 AD · source 1*

1 *Epistles of Ignatius* **Quote 2, page 2** "presbyters, "feed the flock which is among you," until God reveals who is to lead you. For "I am now ready to be offered," that I "may win Christ." Let… [continues online] **read ›**

Polycarp, *c. 100–155 AD · source 2*

2 *Epistle to the Philippians* (1885 English) **Quote 5, page 3** "let the presbyters be compassionate and merciful to all, bringing back those that wander, visiting all the sick, and not neglecting the widow, the orphan, or the poor, but always… [continues online] **read ›**

Irenaeus, *c. 175–202 AD · sources 3–4*

3 *Against Heresies: Book III* (1885 English) **Quote 9, page 4** "heed, therefore, both to yourselves, and to all the flock over which the Holy Ghost has placed you as bishops, to rule the Church of the Lord, which He has… [continues online] **read ›**

4 *Against Heresies: Book IV* (1885 English) **Quote 1, page 2** "Wherefore it is incumbent to obey the presbyters who are in the Church,—those who, as I have shown, possess the succession from the apostles… [continues online] **read ›**

Clement of Alexandria, *c. 190–215 AD · source 5*

5 *Instructor* 1.6 (1885 English; on point 3) "if we who preside over the Churches are shepherds after the image of the good Shepherd, and you the sheep, are we not to regard the Lord as preserving consistency… [continues online] **read ›**

Tertullian, *c. 196–220 AD · sources 6–8*

6 *De Fuga in Persecutione* 11 (on point 3) "speak out against them with similar threats, not only because they wickedly eat the sheep—they feed themselves rather than those committed to their care—but also because they scatter… [continues online] **read ›**

7 *De Fuga in Persecutione* 13 (1885 English) "the apostles, with so much foresight, make the office of overseer of this type, that the occupants might be able to enjoy their rule free from anxiety, under color of… [continues online] **read ›**

8 *Apology* 39 (1885 English; on point 7) "tried men of our elders preside over us, obtaining that honour not by purchase, but by established character… [continues online] **read ›**

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Origen, *c. 215–254 AD · source 9*

9 *Against Celsus* 75 (1885 English) **Quote 12, page 5** "who are ambitious of ruling we reject… [continues online] **read ›**

Cyprian, *c. 248–258 AD · sources 10–16*

10 *Epistles* (1885 English) **Quote 3, page 2** "a portion of the flock has been assigned to each individual pastor, which he is to rule and govern, having to give account of his doing to the Lord… [continues online] **read ›**

11 *Epistles* (on point 3) the day of judgment, because, though we are pastors, we have neither been willing to care for the sheep entrusted and committed to us in time of peace, nor to… [continues online] **read ›**

12 *Epistles* (on point 3) I am against the shepherds, and I will require my flock at their hands, and cause them to stop feeding the flock; neither shall they feed them anymore. For I… [continues online] **read ›**

13 *Epistles* **Quote 8, page 4** "it is the duty of those placed over them to keep the… [continues online] **read ›**

14 *Epistles* (1885 English) **Quote 4, page 2** "so the shepherd might be restored to feed his flock, and the pilot to manage the ship, and the ruler to govern the people… [continues online] **read ›**

15 *Epistles* (on point 6) to you to be a bishop who, after a bishop had been appointed in the Church by sixteen fellow bishops, strives through bribery to be made a corrupt and outsider… [continues online] **read ›**

16 *Epistles* (on point 2) be loosed in heaven." From there, through the changes of times and successions, the ordering of bishops and the arrangement of the Church continues on. So the Church is founded… [continues online] **read ›**

Apostolic Constitutions, *c. 250–380 AD · sources 17–20*

17 *Apostolic Constitutions* **Quotes 6, 7, pages 3, 4** "them sound to the Church. Feed the flock, not with insolence and contempt, as lording it over them, Ezekiel 34:4 but as a gentle shepherd, gathering the lambs into… [continues online] **read ›**

18 *Apostolic Constitutions* (on point 3) Woe to the shepherds of Israel, for they have fed themselves; the shepherds do not feed the sheep, but themselves. You eat the milk and are clothed with the wool… [continues online] **read ›**

19 *Apostolic Constitutions* **Quote 11, page 5** the Lord, who are now together, give you these divine constitutions concerning every form of the church. Paul, the chosen vessel, our fellow apostle, is present with us, and James… [continues online] **read ›**

20 *Apostolic Constitutions* (on point 2) among the laity, to the destruction of another, but to God alone. For it is your privilege to govern those under you, but not to be governed by them. For… [continues online] **read ›**

Anonymous · *source 21*

21 *Treatise Against the Heretic Novatian* 1 (on point 3) "I will feed my sheep with judgment." Ezekiel 34… [continues online] **read ›**

Clement of Rome · *sources 22–23*

22 *First Epistle to the Corinthians* (1885 English) **Quote 10, page 5** "are of opinion, therefore, that those appointed by them, or afterwards by other eminent men, with the consent of the whole Church, and who have blamelessly served the flock of… [continues online] **read ›**

23 *First Epistle to the Corinthians* (1885 English; on point 1) "let the flock of Christ live on terms of peace with the presbyters set over it." He that acts thus shall procure to himself great glory in the Lord… [continues online] **read ›**

THE BIBLE *48 verses, The Faith Once Delivered Bible (Old Testament from the Septuagint), in Bible order*

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

25 **Matthew 24:28** For wherever the carcass is, there the eagles will gather. **read ›**

26 **Matthew 24:45** "Who then is the faithful and wise slave, whom his lord has set over his household, to give them their food in due season? **read ›**

27 **Mark 14:53** They led Jesus away to the high priest. All the chief priests, the elders, and the scribes gathered with the high priest. **read ›**

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28 **Luke 11:4** And forgive us our sins, for we ourselves also forgive everyone who is indebted to us. And do not bring us into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one.’” **read ›**

29 **Luke 12:24** Consider the ravens: they do not sow, they do not reap, they have no warehouse or barn, and God feeds them. How much more valuable are you than birds! **read ›**

30 **Luke 12:42** The Lord said, “Who then is the faithful steward with sound judgment, whom his lord will set over his household to give them their portion of food at the proper time? **read ›**

31 **Luke 22:66** When day came, the assembly of the elders of the people gathered, both chief priests and scribes, and they led him into their council, saying, **read ›**

32 **John 10:2** But one who enters in by the door is the shepherd of the sheep. **read ›**

33 **Acts 3:2** A man lame from his mother’s womb was being carried. They laid him daily at the temple gate called Beautiful to ask alms from those entering the temple. **read ›**

34 **Acts 9:14** Here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who call on your name.” **read ›**

35 **Acts 11:22** The report about them reached the ears of the church in Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to go as far as Antioch. **read ›**

36 **Acts 11:30** which they also did, sending it to the elders by the hands of Barnabas and Saul. **read ›**

37 **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 ›**

38 **Acts 15:2** After considerable dissension and debate between Paul and Barnabas and these men, Paul and Barnabas and some others from among them were appointed to go up to the apostles and elders in Jerusalem about this question. **read ›**

39 **Acts 15:6** The apostles and the elders were gathered together to see about this matter. **read ›**

40 **Acts 15:22** Then the apostles and elders, with the whole church, decided to choose men from among them and send them to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas: Judas called Barsabbas and Silas, leading men among the brothers. **read ›**

41 **Acts 16:4** As they passed through the cities, they delivered the decrees decided by the apostles and elders in Jerusalem for them to observe. **read ›**

42 **Acts 20:17** From Miletus he sent to Ephesus and summoned the elders of the church. **read ›**

43 **Acts 20:28** Therefore pay attention to yourselves and to all the flock among whom the Holy Spirit has made you bishops, to shepherd the church of the Lord and God, which he purchased with his own blood. **read ›**

44 **Romans 3:15** their feet are swift to shed blood; **read ›**

45 **Romans 6:18** And having been freed from sin, you were made slaves of righteousness. **read ›**

46 **Romans 14:12** So then each one of us will give account of himself to God. **read ›**

47 **1 Corinthians 9:7** What soldier ever serves at his own expense? Who plants a vineyard and does not eat its fruit? Or who tends a flock and does not partake of the flock’s milk? **read ›**

48 **2 Corinthians 5:10** For we must all be made manifest before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each may receive what is due for the things done through the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad. **read ›**

49 **Ephesians 4:11** He gave some to be apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, shepherds and teachers; **read ›**

50 **1 Thessalonians 5:12** Now we ask you, brothers, to recognize those who labor among you and lead you in the Lord and admonish you, **read ›**

51 **1 Timothy 3:1** The saying is trustworthy: if anyone aspires to the office of bishop, he desires a good work. **read ›**

52 **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 ›**

53 **1 Timothy 3:4** one who rules his own house well, having children in subjection with all reverence; **read ›**

54 **1 Timothy 3:12** Let deacons be husbands of one wife, ruling their children and their own houses well. **read ›**

55 **1 Timothy 4:14** Do not neglect the gift that is in you, which was given to you by prophecy with the laying on of the hands of the elders. **read ›**

56 **1 Timothy 5:1** Do not rebuke an older man, but exhort him as a father; the younger men as brothers; **read ›**

57 **1 Timothy 5:2** the older women as mothers, the younger women as sisters, in all purity. **read ›**

58 **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 ›**

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59 **1 Timothy 5:19** Do not receive an accusation against an elder except at the word of two or three witnesses. **read ›**

60 **Titus 1:5** I left you in Crete for this reason, that you would set in order the things that were lacking and appoint elders in every city, as I directed you— **read ›**

61 **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 ›**

62 **Titus 2:2** that older men be temperate, dignified, sober-minded, sound in faithfulness, love, and perseverance; **read ›**

63 **Titus 2:15** Speak these things, exhort, and rebuke with all authority. Let no one despise you. **read ›**

64 **Hebrews 10:21** and having a great priest over God's house, **read ›**

65 **Hebrews 13:7** Remember your leaders, who spoke the word of God to you. Considering the outcome of their way of life, imitate their faithfulness. **read ›**

66 **Hebrews 13:17** Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they watch on behalf of your souls, as those who will give account, that they may do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be unprofitable for you. **read ›**

67 **James 5:14** Is any among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord; **read ›**

68 **1 Peter 2:25** For you were going astray like sheep, but now you have returned to the Shepherd and Bishop of your souls. **read ›**

69 **1 Peter 5:1** I exhort the elders among you, as a fellow elder, a witness of Christ's sufferings, and a partaker of the glory to be revealed: **read ›**

70 **1 Peter 5:2** shepherd the flock of God which is among you, exercising the oversight, not under compulsion, but voluntarily; not for dishonest gain, but willingly; **read ›**

71 **1 Peter 5:3** not as lording it over those entrusted to you, but making yourselves examples to the flock. **read ›**

ALSO LINKED BY THF TO THESE PASSAGES *32 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 4:10 · 5:42 · 6:12 · 9:2 · 9:12 · 9:13 · 18:10 · 18:12 · 20:25 · 24:11

Mark 5:34

Luke 5:20 · 8:18 · 10:16 · 12:48 · 15:4 · 16:9 · 19:10

John 6:34 · 10:11 · 10:12 · 10:16

Romans 12:17 · 14:10

1 Corinthians 1:9 · 1:31 · 10:26

2 Corinthians 8:21 · 10:17

2 Timothy 2:20 · 4:6

James 2:13

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

ABOUT THIS STUDY

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THE END OF THIS STUDY