THE QUESTION

Did the early church accept elders appointed outside the bishops' line of succession?

Asked by a THF member on April 10, 2026 · published November 9, 2026 · 10 numbered quotations · the 31 early Christian passages and 96 Bible verses we kept are listed at the back, each with a link.

Read it online: thehistoricfaith.com/early-church-questions/did-the-early-church-accept-elders-appointed-outside-the-bishops-line-of

The short answer *Interpretation: our reading of the passages, not their words*

Not as a rule. These writers taught that the apostles set up a line of approved successors, that bishops alone ordained, and that men set up outside the Church's unity were false ministers. The passages do not name any later group, and they still judge teaching by whether it agrees with the apostles.

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POINT 1 OF 7

The apostles provided for approved successors

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

Clement of Rome says the apostles foresaw conflict over church office. So they appointed ministers and arranged for other approved men to follow them. He adds that later leaders were appointed by respected men with the agreement of the whole church.

1

"For this reason, considering that they had obtained perfect foreknowledge of this, they appointed the ministers previously mentioned, and subsequently instructed that when these ministers passed away, other approved men should succeed them in their ministry."

later in the same passage

"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 30, page 8** Read it in the library ›
THF's updated English

POINT 2 OF 7

Only bishops were to ordain

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

The Apostolic Constitutions reserves ordination to bishops and calls this the Church's proper order. It says a presbyter may lay on hands in blessing, but he does not ordain.

2

"We do not permit presbyters to ordain deacons, deaconesses, readers, ministers, singers, or doorkeepers, but only bishops, for this is the ecclesiastical order and harmony."

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Apostolic Constitutions** **Source 25, page 7** Read it in the library ›
(c. 250–380 AD)
THF's updated English

3

"In the same way, he gives it to a fellow presbyter. He lays on hands, but does not ordain."

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Apostolic Constitutions** **Source 23, page 7** Read it in the library ›
(c. 250–380 AD)
THF's updated English

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POINT 3 OF 7

Taking an office not given was condemned

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

The same work warns against those who mix up the church orders and claim honors no one gave them. It compares them to Korah and King Uzziah, who took the priesthood without God's commission.

4 “But because many think this is a small matter, and dare to confuse the orders, and to remove the ordination that belongs to each one, taking for themselves dignities that were never given to them, and allowing themselves in a tyrannical way to bestow that authority which they do not themselves have, they provoke God to anger, as did the followers of Corah and King Uzziah.”

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Apostolic Constitutions** **Source 21, page 7** Read it in the library ›
(c. 250–380 AD)
THF's updated English

POINT 4 OF 7

Bishops set up outside unity were false

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

Cyprian speaks of one worldwide episcopate held together in unity. He calls a bishop made by a few breakaway men false, and notes that this man was a presbyter who had deserted the Church.

5 “And although there is one Church, which Christ has spread throughout the whole world into many members, and also one episcopate spread abroad through the united number of many bishops, he still tries, in spite of God's tradition and in spite of the joined and firmly connected unity of the Catholic Church everywhere, to make a merely human church.”

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Cyprian,** *Epistles* **Source 16, page 7** Read it in the library ›
(c. 248–258 AD)
THF's updated English

6 “But the reason I did not write to you at once, dearest brother, about Fortunatus, that false bishop appointed by a few men, and those long-standing heretics, was that the matter was not something that should be brought to your attention immediately and hastily, as if it were important or something to be feared.”

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Cyprian,** *Epistles* **Source 18, page 7** Read it in the library ›
(c. 248–258 AD)
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POINT 5 OF 7

Acting apart from the bishop was condemned

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

Ignatius warns that a person who acts apart from the bishop, presbyters and deacons has a defiled conscience. He says doing anything without the bishop breaks the Church's unity and throws its order into confusion.

7 “But he who is outside does anything apart from the bishop, the presbyters, and the deacons, such a person is defiled in his conscience and is worse than an infidel.”

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Ignatius of Antioch,** *Epistle to the Trallians* (c. 98–117 AD) **Source 4, page 6** Read it in the library ›

THF's updated English

8 “For if one who rises up against kings is justly deemed worthy of punishment, as they disrupt public order, how much more severe a punishment, do you suppose, shall he be thought worthy of, who presumes to do anything without the bishop, thus both destroying the Church’s unity and causing its order to fall into confusion?”

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Ignatius of Antioch,** *Epistle to the Smyrnaeans* (c. 98–117 AD) **Source 5, page 6** Read it in the library ›

THF's updated English

POINT 6 OF 7

Elder and bishop were once shared titles

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

Chrysostom explains that in the apostles' day presbyters were also called bishops. Even so, he says presbyters would not have ordained a bishop, so the titles overlapped but the roles still differed.

9 “So then, as I said, in earlier times both the Presbyters were called Bishops and Deacons of Christ, and the Bishops were called Presbyters.”

later in the same passage

“Yet Presbyters would not have laid hands on a Bishop.”

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **John Chrysostom,** *Homilies on Philippians* (c. 386–407 AD) **Source 27, page 7** Read it in the library ›

THF's updated English

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POINT 7 OF 7

Right teaching must match the apostolic churches

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

Tertullian says only those Christ sent should be accepted as preachers. He tests all teaching by whether it agrees with the churches the apostles founded.

10

"Since the Lord Jesus Christ sent the apostles to preach, our rule is that no others should be accepted as preachers except those whom Christ appointed."

later in the same passage

"We are in communion with the apostolic churches because our teaching is in no way different from theirs."

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Tertullian,** *On Prescription Against Heretics* 21 (c. 196–220 AD)
THF's updated English

Source 14, page 6 **Read it in the library ›**

THE LIMITS

What these passages don't tell us

- These passages do not speak about any church group that began after the early centuries.
- They do not say whether God works through believers who gather outside this order.
- One passage from Tertullian stresses the Spirit over bishops, so not every early voice put it 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 31 early Christian passages and 96 Bible verses we kept for this question (repeats and weak or off-topic search hits were left out): early Christian passages first (sources 1–31, grouped by writer, earliest first), then Bible verses in The Faith Once Delivered Bible (sources 32–86, in Bible order), then 41 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).

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EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITERS *31 passages from 13 writers*

Didache, *c. 50–120 AD · source 1*

1 *Teaching of the Twelve Apostles* 11 “Only the one who has the ways of the Lord is a prophet. Therefore, the false prophet and the true prophet will be known by their ways. And every prophet… [continues online] **read ›**

Clement of Rome, *c. 88–99 AD · source 2*

2 *Second Epistle* 14 then, brothers, if we do the will of God our Father, we will be members of the first church, the spiritual church, the one that was created before the sun… [continues online] **read ›**

Ignatius of Antioch, *c. 98–117 AD · sources 3–7*

3 *Epistle to the Philadelphians* (on point 5) free.” Let governors be obedient to Caesar; soldiers to those that command them; deacons to the presbyters, as to high priests; the presbyters, deacons, and the rest of the clergy… [continues online] **read ›**

4 *Epistle to the Trallians* **Quote 7, page 4** blessed apostles. He who is within the altar is pure; therefore, he is obedient to the bishop and presbyters. But he who is outside does anything apart from the bishop… [continues online] **read ›**

5 *Epistle to the Smyrnaeans* **Quote 8, page 4** “deacons to the presbyters; the presbyters to the bishop… [continues online] **read ›**

6 *Epistle to the Philadelphians* (1885 English; on point 1) “also the nearest Churches have sent, in some cases bishops, and in others presbyters and deacons… [continues online] **read ›**

7 *Epistle to the Philadelphians* (1885 English; on point 1) “also the nearest Churches have sent, in some cases bishops, and in others presbyters and deacons… [continues online] **read ›**

Justin Martyr, *c. 130–165 AD · source 8*

8 *Dialogue with Trypho* (1885 English) he said, ‘Many shall come in My name, clothed outwardly in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ravening wolves.’ ” And, ‘There shall be schisms and heresies.’ And, ‘Beware of… [continues online] **read ›**

Irenaeus, *c. 175–202 AD · sources 9–11*

9 *Against Heresies: Book IV* (1885 English; on point 4) “it is also incumbent] to hold in suspicion others who depart from the primitive succession, and assemble themselves together in any place whatsoever, [looking upon them] either as heretics of… [continues online] **read ›**

10 *Against Heresies: Book III* (1885 English; on point 7) “But, again, when we refer them to that tradition which originates from the apostles, [and] which is preserved by means of the succession of presbyters in the Churches, they object… [continues online] **read ›**

11 *Against Heresies: Book III* (on point 7) defeated by their own arguments. On the other hand, it has been shown that the preaching of the Church remains consistent everywhere, stays steady, and is supported by the prophets… [continues online] **read ›**

Clement of Alexandria, *c. 190–215 AD · sources 12–13*

12 *Stromata* 6.13 (on point 6) equally from Jews and Greeks. Since, according to my opinion, the grades here in the Church, of bishops, presbyters, and deacons, are imitations of the angelic glory, and of that… [continues online] **read ›**

13 *Stromata* 6.13 (1885 English; on point 7) an one is in reality a presbyter of the Church, and a true minister (deacon) of the will of God, if he do and teach what is the Lord's… [continues online] **read ›**

Tertullian, *c. 196–220 AD · sources 14–15*

14 *On Prescription Against Heretics* 21 (1885 English) **Quote 10, page 5** “all doctrine must be prejudged as false which savours of contrariety to the truth of the churches and apostles of Christ and God… [continues online] **read ›**

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15 *On Prescription Against Heretics* 42 (1885 English; on point 4) “very unity, however, is schism. I am greatly in error if they do not among themselves swerve even from their own regulations, forasmuch as every man, just as it suits… [continues online] **read ›**

Cyprian, *c. 248–258 AD · sources 16–20*

16 *Epistles* (1885 English) **Quote 5, page 3** “although there have already been ordained in each city, and through all the provinces, bishops old in years, sound in faith, proved in trial, proscribed in persecution, (this one) dares… [continues online] **read ›**

17 *Epistles* (on point 4) deacons ought to remember that the Lord chose apostles, that is, bishops and overseers, while the apostles, after the Lord's ascension into heaven, appointed deacons for themselves as servants… [continues online] **read ›**

18 *Epistles* **Quote 6, page 3** brother, about Fortunatus, that false bishop appointed by a few men, and those long-standing heretics, was that the matter was not something that should be brought to your attention… [continues online] **read ›**

19 *Epistles* (1885 English; on point 4) “if they are not in the Church, nay more, if they act against the Church, how can they baptize with the Church's baptism… [continues online] **read ›**

20 *Treatises* (1885 English; on point 3) “plunge into heresies and schisms when priests are disparaged, when bishops are envied, when a man complains that he himself was not rather ordained, or disdains to suffer that another… [continues online] **read ›**

Apostolic Constitutions, *c. 250–380 AD · sources 21–25*

21 *Apostolic Constitutions* **Quote 4, page 3** among us, you yourselves are not ignorant of them. For you certainly know that those named by us bishops, and presbyters, and deacons, were made so by prayer and by… [continues online] **read ›**

22 *Apostolic Constitutions* (on point 1) 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 ›**

23 *Apostolic Constitutions* **Quote 3, page 2** does not receive the blessing. He lays on hands, ordains, offers, and receives the blessing from bishops, but never from presbyters. A bishop removes from office any clergyman who deserves… [continues online] **read ›**

24 *Apostolic Constitutions* (1885 English; on point 4) “If a bishop or presbyter rebaptizes him who has had true baptism, or does not baptize him who is polluted by the ungodly, let him be deprived, as ridiculing the… [continues online] **read ›**

25 *Apostolic Constitutions* **Quote 2, page 2** of the clergy to baptize. For example, not readers, singers, doorkeepers, or ministers, but only bishops and presbyters. Even then, the deacons are to assist them in it. But those… [continues online] **read ›**

Lactantius, *c. 290–320 AD · source 26*

26 *Divine Institutes* 30 (1885 English) “it is the Catholic Church alone which retains true worship… [continues online] **read ›**

John Chrysostom, *c. 386–407 AD · sources 27–28*

27 *Homilies on Philippians* **Quote 9, page 4** Jesus." For these alone are holy, and those who are not are from now on profane. "To the fellow-Bishops and Deacons." What does this mean? Were there several Bishops… [continues online] **read ›**

28 *On the Priesthood* 3 everyone joins together in his favor. He must keep only one goal in view: the building up of the Church. In nothing should he be moved by either hostility or… [continues online] **read ›**

Anonymous · *source 29*

29 *Treatise on Re-Baptism* 1 “faith also cannot exist, not only among heretics, but even among those who are established in schism. And for that reason, those who repent and are amended by the teaching… [continues online] **read ›**

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Clement of Rome · *sources 30–31*

30 *First Epistle to the Corinthians* **Quote 1, page 2** "apostles also knew, through our Lord Jesus Christ, that there would be conflict regarding the office of the episcopate. For this reason, considering that they had obtained perfect foreknowledge of… [continues online] **read ›**

31 *First Epistle to the Corinthians* (on point 1) they appointed the first-fruits of their labors, having first proved them by the Spirit, to be bishops and deacons of those who would later believe. Nor was this a… [continues online] **read ›**

THE BIBLE *55 verses, The Faith Once Delivered Bible (Old Testament from the Septuagint), in Bible order*

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

33 **Susanna 1:36** Open the verse to read it. **read ›**

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

35 **Matthew 3:4** Now John himself wore clothing made of camel's hair with a leather belt around his waist. His food was locusts and wild honey. **read ›**

36 **Matthew 7:15** Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly are ravenous wolves. **read ›**

37 **Matthew 11:27** All things have been delivered to me by my Father. No one knows the Son, except the Father; neither does anyone know the Father, except the Son and he to whom the Son desires to reveal him. **read ›**

38 **Matthew 21:26** But if we say, 'From men,' we fear the crowd, for all hold John as a prophet." **read ›**

39 **Matthew 23:8** But you are not to be called 'Rabbi', for one is your teacher, the Christ, and all of you are brothers. **read ›**

40 **Matthew 23:30** and say, 'If we had lived in the days of our fathers, we would not have shared with them in the blood of the prophets.' **read ›**

41 **Mark 3:15** and to have authority to heal sicknesses and to cast out demons: **read ›**

42 **Mark 11:30** The baptism of John—was it from heaven, or from men? Answer me." **read ›**

43 **Mark 13:22** For false christs and false prophets will arise and will show signs and wonders, that they may lead astray, if possible, even the chosen ones. **read ›**

44 **Luke 13:5** I tell you, no, but, unless you repent, you will all perish in the same way." **read ›**

45 **Luke 20:4** the baptism of John, was it from heaven, or from men?" **read ›**

46 **Luke 20:6** But if we say, 'From men,' all the people will stone us, for they are persuaded that John was a prophet." **read ›**

47 **John 17:16** They are not of the world, even as I am not of the world. **read ›**

48 **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 ›**

49 **Acts 6:2** The twelve summoned the multitude of the disciples and said, "It is not appropriate for us to forsake the word of God and serve tables. **read ›**

50 **Acts 6:3** Therefore, brothers, select from among you seven men of good reputation, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom, whom we may appoint over this work. **read ›**

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

52 **Acts 13:8** But Elymas the sorcerer—for that is how his name is translated—opposed them, seeking to turn the proconsul away from the faith. **read ›**

53 **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 ›**

54 **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 ›**

55 **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 ›**

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

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57 **Acts 20:30** Men will arise from among your own selves, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them. **read ›**

58 **Romans 6:13** Also, do not present your members to sin as instruments of unrighteousness, but present yourselves to God as alive from the dead, and your members as instruments of righteousness to God. **read ›**

59 **Romans 16:17** Now I beg you, brothers, look out for those who are causing the divisions and occasions of stumbling, contrary to the doctrine which you learned, and turn away from them. **read ›**

60 **1 Corinthians 9:2** If to others I am not an apostle, yet at least I am to you; for you are the seal of my apostleship in the Lord. **read ›**

61 **1 Corinthians 11:16** But if anyone wishes to be contentious, we have no such custom, nor do the churches of God. **read ›**

62 **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 ›**

63 **1 Corinthians 11:19** For there also must be factions among you, that those who are approved may be revealed among you. **read ›**

64 **1 Corinthians 12:5** There are various kinds of service, and the same Lord. **read ›**

65 **1 Corinthians 12:28** God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then miracles, then gifts of healings, helps, administrations, and kinds of tongues. **read ›**

66 **2 Corinthians 11:13** For such men are false apostles, deceitful workers, masquerading as Christ's apostles. **read ›**

67 **Galatians 5:20** idolatry, sorcery, hatred, strife, jealousies, outbursts of anger, rivalries, divisions, heresies, **read ›**

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

69 **2 Thessalonians 3:6** Now we command you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, to withdraw from every brother who walks in a disorderly way and not according to the tradition which they received from us. **read ›**

70 **1 Timothy 2:7** for which I was appointed a preacher and an apostle—I speak the truth in Christ, I do not lie—a teacher of the Gentiles in faithfulness and truth. **read ›**

71 **1 Timothy 3:1** The saying is trustworthy: if anyone aspires to the office of bishop, he desires a good work. **read ›**

72 **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 ›**

73 **1 Timothy 3:7** He must also have a good testimony from outsiders, so that he does not fall into reproach and the devil's trap. **read ›**

74 **1 Timothy 3:10** Let them also first be tested; then let them serve if they are blameless. **read ›**

75 **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 ›**

76 **1 Timothy 5:1** Do not rebuke an older man, but exhort him as a father; the younger men as brothers; **read ›**

77 **1 Timothy 5:19** Do not receive an accusation against an elder except at the word of two or three witnesses. **read ›**

78 **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 ›**

79 **Titus 3:10** Reject a divisive man after a first and second warning, **read ›**

80 **Hebrews 6:2** of the teaching of baptisms, of laying on of hands, of resurrection of the dead, and of eternal judgment. **read ›**

81 **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 ›**

82 **2 Peter 2:1** But false prophets also arose among the people, as false teachers will also be among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, denying even the Master who bought them, bringing on themselves swift destruction. **read ›**

83 **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 ›**

84 **1 John 4:1** Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits, whether they are of God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world. **read ›**

85 **2 John 1:1** The elder, to the chosen lady and her children, whom I love in truth—and not I alone, but also all who know the truth— **read ›**

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86 **3 John 1:9** I wrote to the church, but Diotrephes, who loves to be first among them, does not receive us. **read ›**

ALSO LINKED BY THF TO THESE PASSAGES *41 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.

Isaiah 60:17 · 63:3
Jeremiah 23:21
Matthew 5:6 · 10:5 · 10:40 · 12:31 · 24:11
Mark 3:29 · 7:9 · 12:39
Luke 10:16 · 11:23 · 12:47 · 12:50 · 20:46
John 20:22
Acts 1:8 · 9:5 · 14:4 · 16:4
Romans 16:7
1 Corinthians 6:10 · 9:25 · 12:3 · 14:2 · 14:33 · 15:5 · 15:41
Galatians 1:19 · 3:27
Ephesians 4:2 · 4:13
Philippians 1:18
1 Thessalonians 2:6 · 4:17
Titus 1:5 · 2:14
1 John 2:27
Revelation 4:4 · 11:16

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

ABOUT THIS STUDY

A THF member asked “Did the early church accept elders appointed outside the bishops' line of succession?” 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