THE QUESTION

Did the early church allow calling spiritual leaders "father"?

Asked by a THF member on April 14, 2026 · published November 9, 2026 · 9 numbered quotations · the 14 early Christian passages and 69 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-allow-calling-spiritual-leaders-father

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

Partly yes: the early writers did not speak with one voice. Tertullian and Cyprian took Jesus' words strictly, saying believers have one Father in heaven. Yet Clement of Alexandria called his teachers fathers, and the Apostolic Constitutions call the bishop a father next after God. Archelaus explains that the word father has more than one sense.

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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 7

Jesus warned against titles that feed pride

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

In Tatian's gospel harmony, the command about calling no one father comes in a warning against scribes who love honor and greetings. Jesus ties it to humility: the greatest must serve, and whoever exalts himself will be humbled.

1

“But you, do not be called masters, for one is your master, and all of you are brothers. And call no one on earth your father, for one is your Father, who is in heaven.”

later in the same passage

“He who is great among you shall be your minister. Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted.””

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Tatian,** *Diatessaron* 40 (c. 150–180 AD) **Source 1, page 5** Read it in the library ›

THF's updated English

POINT 2 OF 7

Tertullian and Cyprian read the command strictly

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

Both writers explain the Lord's Prayer by pointing to this command. Praying "Our Father" is, for Tertullian, a way of obeying it, and Cyprian repeats that Christians have one Father in heaven.

2

“More than that, He even gave the command that we should call no one on earth father, except the Father whom we have in heaven”

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Tertullian,** *On Prayer* 2 (c. 196–220 AD) **Source 7, page 6** Read it in the library ›

THF's updated English

3

“Also, the Lord in His Gospel has commanded us to call no man our father on earth, because for us there is one Father, who is in heaven”

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Cyprian,** *Treatises* (c. 248–258 AD) **Source 9, page 6** Read it in the library ›

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POINT 3 OF 7

The command guards God's unique fatherhood

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

Irenaeus uses the same teaching against heretics who invented many gods and fathers. For him, the point is that only the one true God is Father in the full sense, not a rule about every human use of the word.

4

> "To whom is it not clear that if the Lord had known many fathers and gods, He would not have taught His disciples to know only one God and to call only Him Father?"

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Irenaeus,** *Against Heresies: Book IV* (c. 175–202 AD)
THF's updated English

Source 2, page 5 Read it in the library ›

POINT 4 OF 7

Clement of Alexandria called his teachers fathers

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

Clement compares teaching to having children. Words planted in a learner are like offspring of the soul, so Christians called the people who taught them fathers.

5

> "But words are the children of the soul. For this reason we call those who have taught us, fathers."

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Clement of Alexandria,** *Stromata* 1.1 (c. 190–215 AD)
THF's updated English

Source 4, page 6 Read it in the library ›

POINT 5 OF 7

A church order calls bishops spiritual fathers

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

The Apostolic Constitutions describe the bishop as a father next after God, because believers are born again through baptism under his care. A chapter heading speaks of bishops as spiritual parents.

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6 “Next after God, he is your father, who has begotten you again to the adoption of sons by water and the Spirit.”

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

7 “How bishops are to be honored and respected as our spiritual parents.”

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Apostolic Constitutions** **Source 11, page 6** Read it in the library ›
(c. 250–380 AD)
THF's updated English

POINT 6 OF 7

The word father has more than one sense

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

Archelaus explains that someone may be called father by birth, by raising a child, or by age and standing. Even Jesus had David and Joseph called his fathers, while God alone is his Father by nature. This suggests how both uses could stand together.

8 “For David was called His father, and Joseph was reckoned to be His father, although neither of these two was His father in the reality of nature.”

later in the same passage

“But God Himself is His only Father by nature, who was pleased to make all things plain to us in a short time by His word.”

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Archelaus,** *Disputation with Manes* 1 (c. 270–300 AD) **Source 13, page 6** Read it in the library ›
THF's updated English

POINT 7 OF 7

Tertullian still used father for family heads

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

Even Tertullian, who read Jesus' command strictly, says heads of families are rightly called fathers. He saw father as a gentler title than lord, and he refused only to give a man a name that belongs to God.

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9 "The name father is more welcome than the name of power. So the heads of families are called fathers rather than lords."

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Tertullian,** *Apology* 34 (c. 196–220 AD) **Source 6, page 6** **Read it in the library ›**
THF's updated English

THE LIMITS

What these passages don't tell us

- These passages give no church ruling on exactly when the title father is right or wrong.
- None of these writers argues directly with another about calling church leaders father.
- 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 14 early Christian passages and 69 Bible verses we kept for this question (repeats and weak or off-topic search hits were left out): early Christian passages first (sources 1–14, grouped by writer, earliest first), then Bible verses in The Faith Once Delivered Bible (sources 15–60, in Bible order), then 23 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 *14 passages from 8 writers*

Tatian, *c. 150–180 AD · source 1*

1 *Diatessaron* 40 (1885 English) **Quote 1, page 2** "23:10 And be not called directors: for your director is one, even the Messiah… [continues online] **read ›**

Irenaeus, *c. 175–202 AD · sources 2–3*

2 *Against Heresies: Book IV* (1885 English) **Quote 4, page 3** "if He did indeed teach us to call one Being Father and God, while He does from time to time Himself confess other fathers and gods in the same sense… [continues online] **read ›**

3 *Against Heresies: Book IV* (1885 English; on point 3) "what is much more important, [since it is true] that our Lord [acted likewise], who did also command us to confess no one as Father, except Him who is in… [continues online] **read ›**

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Clement of Alexandria, *c. 190–215 AD · sources 4–5*

4 *Stromata* 1.1 (1885 English) **Quote 5, page 3** “we call those who have instructed us, fathers… [continues online] **read ›**

5 *Who Is the Rich Man That Shall Be Saved?* 23 (1885 English) “no man your father on earth. Let the dead bury the dead… [continues online] **read ›**

Tertullian, *c. 196–220 AD · sources 6–7*

6 *Apology* 34 **Quote 9, page 5** “the heads of families are called fathers rather than lords… [continues online] **read ›**

7 *On Prayer* 2 (1885 English) **Quote 2, page 2** “even gave a precept that we call no one on earth father, but the Father whom we have in the heavens: Matthew 23:9 and so, in thus praying, we… [continues online] **read ›**

Cyprian, *c. 248–258 AD · sources 8–9*

8 *Treatises* (1885 English; on point 2) “one is your Father, which is in heaven. Matthew 23:9… [continues online] **read ›**

9 *Treatises* (1885 English) **Quote 3, page 2** “also to bear witness, among the very first words of his new birth, that he has renounced an earthly and carnal father, and that he has begun to know as… [continues online] **read ›**

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

10 *Apostolic Constitutions* (1885 English) **Quote 6, page 4** “is the teacher of piety; and, next after God, he is your father, who has begotten you again to the adoption of sons by water and the Spirit… [continues online] **read ›**

11 *Apostolic Constitutions* (1885 English) **Quote 7, page 4** “What Manner the Bishops are to Be Honoured, and to Be Reverenced as Our Spiritual Parents… [continues online] **read ›**

Archelaus, *c. 270–300 AD · sources 12–13*

12 *Disputation with Manes* 1 (on point 6) “said, "I say so..." And he added, "Everyone who is the founder or maker of anything may be called the father, or parent, of what he has made." Archelaus said… [continues online] **read ›**

13 *Disputation with Manes* 1 (1885 English) **Quote 8, page 4** “some, again, are called fathers in respect of the privileged standing accruing through time or age… [continues online] **read ›**

Peter of Alexandria, *c. 300–311 AD · source 14*

14 *Canonical Epistle* (1885 English) “let those apply their minds to what is in this place brought forward by this great father and holy martyr, who say that it is lawful for bishops to give… [continues online] **read ›**

THE BIBLE *46 verses, The Faith Once Delivered Bible (Old Testament from the Septuagint), in Bible order*

15 **Leviticus 18:8** You shall not uncover the nakedness of your father’s wife; it is your father’s nakedness. **read ›**

16 **Numbers 27:16** “Let the Lord God of the spirits and of all flesh select a man over this congregation, **read ›**

17 **Deuteronomy 23:1** Open the verse to read it. **read ›**

18 **Deuteronomy 33:9** He is the one who says to his father and mother, “I have not seen you,” and he did not recognize his brothers, and he disowned his sons; he kept your oracles, and guarded your covenant. **read ›**

19 **Ezra 1:11** All the vessels of gold and silver were five thousand four hundred; all these went up with Sheshbazzar from the exile out of Babylon to Jerusalem. **read ›**

20 **Proverbs 2:1** Son, if you receive the saying of my commandment and hide it with you, **read ›**

21 **Song of Solomon 5:7** The watchmen who go around the city found me; they struck me, they wounded me; the keepers of the walls took my veil from me. **read ›**

22 **Isaiah 7:5** And as for the son of Aram and the son of Remaliah, because they have counseled an evil counsel, **read ›**

23 **Isaiah 11:5** And he will have righteousness tied around his waist, and his sides wrapped with truth. **read ›**

24 **Isaiah 13:17** Behold, I am stirring up the Medes against you, who do not regard silver, nor have need of gold. **read ›**

25 **Isaiah 45:10** He who says to his father, “What will you father?” and to his mother, “What are you in labor with?” **read ›**

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26 **Jonah 1:9** He said to them, “I am a slave of the Lord, and I worship the Lord God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land.” **read ›**

27 **Malachi 1:6** A son honors his father, and a slave his master. If then I am a father, where is my glory? And if I am Lord, where is the fear of me? says the Lord Almighty. It is you priests who despise my name; yet you said, “In what way have we despised your name?” **read ›**

28 **1 Esdras 1:50** And the God of their fathers sent by his messenger to call them back, because he was sparing them and his dwelling. **read ›**

29 **Wisdom of Sirach 3:2** For the Lord has glorified the father over the children, and has established the judgment of the mother over the sons. **read ›**

30 **Wisdom of Sirach 3:8** Honor your father in deed and word, that a blessing may come upon you from him. **read ›**

31 **Wisdom of Sirach 3:10** Do not glorify yourself in your father’s dishonor, for your father’s dishonor is no glory to you. **read ›**

32 **Wisdom of Sirach 3:16** He who forsakes his father is like a blasphemer, and he who angers his mother is cursed by the Lord. **read ›**

33 **Wisdom of Sirach 4:10** Be like a father to orphans, and like a husband to their mother; and you will be like a son of the Most High, and he will love you more than your mother does. **read ›**

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

35 **Wisdom of Sirach 23:14** Remember your father and your mother, for you sit in the midst of nobles, lest you forget yourself before them, and by your habit become a fool, and wish that you had not been born, and curse the day of your birth. **read ›**

36 **Baruch 1:16** and to our kings and to our rulers and to our priests and to our prophets and to our fathers, **read ›**

37 **Letter of Jeremiah 1:40** How then is anyone to think or to say that they are gods, when even the Chaldeans themselves dishonor them? **read ›**

38 **1 Maccabees 2:65** And behold, Simeon your brother—I know that he is a man of counsel; listen to him always; he shall be a father to you. **read ›**

39 **1 Maccabees 15:34** Now that we have the opportunity, we are holding firmly to the inheritance of our fathers. **read ›**

40 **2 Maccabees 11:23** Now that our father has passed on to the gods, we wish the subjects of the kingdom to be free from disturbance and to attend to their own affairs. **read ›**

41 **3 Maccabees 5:7** Open the verse to read it. **read ›**

42 **4 Maccabees 7:5** Open the verse to read it. **read ›**

43 **4 Maccabees 11:5** Open the verse to read it. **read ›**

44 **4 Maccabees 13:17** Open the verse to read it. **read ›**

45 **1 Enoch 15:7** Open the verse to read it. **read ›**

46 **Matthew 3:9** Do not think to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham for our father,’ for I tell you that God is able to raise up children to Abraham from these stones. **read ›**

47 **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 ›**

48 **Matthew 23:9** Call no man on the earth your father, for one is your Father, he who is in heaven. **read ›**

49 **Mark 7:12** you no longer allow him to do anything for his father or mother, **read ›**

50 **Luke 1:5** In the days of Herod, king of Judea, there was a priest named Zacharias, of the division of Abijah. His wife was of the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. **read ›**

51 **John 1:6** There came a man sent from God, whose name was John. **read ›**

52 **John 1:12** But as many as received him, to them he gave the right to become children of God, to those who believe in his name, **read ›**

53 **John 2:10** and said to him, “Everyone serves the good wine first, and when the guests have drunk freely, then that which is worse. You have kept the good wine until now!” **read ›**

54 **John 8:41** You do the works of your father.” They said to him, “We were not born of sexual immorality. We have one Father, God.” **read ›**

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

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56 **Romans 3:4** May it never be! Let God be true, but every man a liar. As it is written: that you may be justified in your words, and prevail when you are judged. **read ›**

57 **1 Corinthians 1:16** I also baptized the household of Stephanas; beyond that, I do not know whether I baptized anyone else. **read ›**

58 **1 Corinthians 4:15** For though you have ten thousand tutors in Christ, you do not have many fathers. For in Christ Jesus I became your father through the gospel. **read ›**

59 **1 Timothy 5:1** Do not rebuke an older man, but exhort him as a father; the younger men as brothers; **read ›**

60 **Hebrews 12:9** Furthermore, we had the fathers of our flesh to discipline us, and we paid them respect. Shall we not much rather be in subjection to the Father of spirits and live? **read ›**

ALSO LINKED BY THF TO THESE PASSAGES *23 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.

Song of Solomon 2:16

Jeremiah 1:5

Matthew 28:19

Mark 9:50 · 16:9

John 8:44 · 10:30 · 13:27 · 14:15 · 16:14

Acts 9:15

Romans 9:1 · 15:18

1 Corinthians 2:9 · 15:3 · 15:9 · 15:11

2 Corinthians 7:10 · 11:3 · 12:8

Ephesians 3:8

1 Timothy 2:1

1 Peter 1:12

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

ABOUT THIS STUDY

A THF member asked “Did the early church allow calling spiritual leaders "father"?” on April 14, 2026. The Historic Faith answered it as a public study on November 9, 2026.

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How to cite this study. The Historic Faith, “Did the early church allow calling spiritual leaders "father"?” Early Church Questions, published November 9, 2026, https://thehistoricfaith.com/early-church-questions/did-the-early-church-allow-calling-spiritual-leaders-father. To cite one quotation, add its number and source, for example “quote 1, source 1.”

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THE END OF THIS STUDY