THE QUESTION

Did the early church count ordinations outside apostolic succession as valid?

Asked by a THF member on April 10, 2026 · published November 9, 2026 · 11 numbered quotations · the 33 early Christian passages and 70 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-count-ordinations-outside-apostolic-succession-as

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

No. These early writers treated real ministry as coming through the church's recognized line of bishops reaching back to the apostles. Self-appointed leaders, rival groups, and ordinations done outside church order were rejected or removed. Yet the same writers also tested a church by whether its teaching matched the apostles, not by a list of names 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.
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POINT 1 OF 8

The apostles planned for approved successors

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

Clement of Rome describes an orderly chain: God sent Christ, Christ sent the apostles. The apostles then appointed ministers and arranged for other approved men to follow them. Ministry was meant to pass along a known line, not be claimed by anyone.

1

"Christ was therefore sent forth by God, and the apostles by Christ. Both these appointments were made in an orderly way, according to the will of God."

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Clement of Rome,** *First Epistle to the Corinthians* **Source 33, page 8** **Read it in the library ›**
THF's updated English

2

"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."

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Clement of Rome,** *First Epistle to the Corinthians* **Source 32, page 8** **Read it in the library ›**
THF's updated English

POINT 2 OF 8

Churches had to show their line of bishops

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

Tertullian challenges groups claiming apostolic roots to produce their list of bishops, each ordained by the one before, back to an apostle or an apostolic man. He names Polycarp placed by John and Clement ordained by Peter as examples.

3

"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 6, page 6** **Read it in the library ›**
THF's updated English

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POINT 3 OF 8

Teaching had to match the apostles too

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

Tertullian adds that even an invented list would not help a group whose doctrine differs from the apostles. For him, a true line of bishops and true apostolic teaching belong together.

4 “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)
THF's updated English

Source 6, page 6 Read it in the library ›

POINT 4 OF 8

Those who leave the succession are warned against

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

Irenaeus tells believers to obey the presbyters who hold the succession from the apostles. He warns against those who break away from it and gather on their own, calling them heretics, schismatics, or hypocrites.

5 “But it is also necessary to be wary of others who depart from this original succession and gather themselves anywhere, viewing them as heretics with perverse minds, schismatics who are arrogant and self-serving, or as hypocrites acting for gain or vanity.”

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

Source 4, page 6 Read it in the library ›

POINT 5 OF 8

No one could appoint himself

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

The Apostolic Constitutions say sacred duties are given through the bishop's laying on of hands, and ordination belongs to the bishop alone. A person who seizes such an office for himself is warned that he will share the punishment of King Uzziah.

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6 “For no one takes this honor for himself, but only he who is called by God, as Hebrews 5:4 says. Such sacred duties are given through the laying on of the bishop's hands.”

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

7 “Ordination belongs entirely to the bishop, and to no one else.”

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

POINT 6 OF 8

Some ordinations were called invalid outright

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

These church rules say a bishop must be ordained by two or three bishops, and one alone would be invalid. They also say people ordained by heretics are not true clergy. Here the word invalid is used plainly.

8 “A bishop should be ordained by three bishops, or by two, but not by one; for that would be invalid.”

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Apostolic Constitutions** **Source 22, page 7** **Read it in the library ›**
(c. 250–380 AD)
THF's updated English

9 “For those who are either baptized or ordained by such people can be neither Christians nor clergymen.”

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Apostolic Constitutions** **Source 18, page 7** **Read it in the library ›**
(c. 250–380 AD)
THF's updated English

POINT 7 OF 8

Church acts depended on the bishop

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

Ignatius tells the church to do nothing without the bishop. A proper Eucharist is one led by the bishop or by someone he appoints, so that everything done is secure and valid.

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10 “Let no one do anything related to the Church without the bishop. Consider that to be a proper Eucharist which is administered by the bishop or by someone he has entrusted it to.”

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Ignatius of Antioch,** *Epistle to the Smyrnaeans* (c. 98–117 AD) **Source 2, page 6** Read it in the library ›
THF's updated English

POINT 8 OF 8

The whole church witnessed a lawful ordination

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

Cyprian adds that a priest should be chosen before the people, so that his life can be examined openly. He treats this public approval as part of what makes an ordination just and legitimate.

11 “That is, He teaches and shows that the ordination of priests should not be carried out except with the knowledge of the people standing nearby, so that in the presence of the people either the crimes of the wicked may be exposed, or the merits of the good may be made known, and the ordination, having been examined by the vote and judgment of all, may be just and legitimate.”

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Cyprian,** *Epistles* (c. 248–258 AD) **Source 9, page 6** Read it in the library ›
THF's updated English

THE LIMITS

What these passages don’t tell us

- These passages speak mainly about bishops and clergy; they do not say how God regards sincere believers outside this order.
- Clement of Alexandria also stresses that a true presbyter is known by a righteous life, not by ordination alone.
- 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 33 early Christian passages and 70 Bible verses we kept for this question (repeats and weak or off-topic search hits were left out): early Christian passages first (sources 1–33, grouped by writer, earliest first), then Bible verses in The Faith Once Delivered Bible (sources 34–66, in Bible order), then 37 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 *33 passages from 11 writers*

Ignatius of Antioch, *c. 98–117 AD · sources 1–3*

1. *Epistle to the Smyrnaeans* (on point 7) good to the bishop is also well-pleasing to God, so that everything you do may be secure and valid… [continues online] **read ›**
2. *Epistle to the Smyrnaeans* **Quote 10, page 5** but whatever he approves of is also pleasing to God, so that everything done may be secure and valid… [continues online] **read ›**
3. *Epistle of Ignatius to the Ephesians* (on point 7) it is fitting that you also should align yourselves with the will of the bishop who, by God's appointment, rules over you. This you indeed do of your own… [continues online] **read ›**

Irenaeus, *c. 175–202 AD · source 4*

4. *Against Heresies: Book IV* **Quote 5, page 3** 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 ›**

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

5. *Stromata* 6.13 (1885 English) "as being ordained by men, nor regarded righteous because a presbyter, but enrolled in the presbyterate because righteous… [continues online] **read ›**

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

6. *On Prescription Against Heretics* 32 **Quotes 3, 4, pages 2, 3** "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 ›**
7. *On Prescription Against Heretics* 41 (1885 English; on point 4) "another, persons who have apostatized from us, to bind them by vainglory, since they cannot by the truth… [continues online] **read ›**

Origen, *c. 215–254 AD · source 8*

8. *De Principiis (On First Principles)* (1885 English; on point 3) "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 9–15*

9. *Epistles* **Quote 11, page 5** "a priest be appointed in the presence of all the assembly. That is, He teaches and shows that the ordination of priests should not be carried out except with the… [continues online] **read ›**
10. *Epistles* (on point 4) "there are bishops made not by the will of God, but they… [continues online] **read ›**

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11 *Epistles* (1885 English; on point 8) “speak as grieving; I speak as constrained — when a bishop is appointed into the place of one deceased, when he is chosen in time of peace by the suffrage of… [continues online] **read ›**

12 *Treatises* (on point 4) the company of His clergy and people? He bears arms against the Church. He fights against God's appointment. He is an enemy of the altar, a rebel against Christ… [continues online] **read ›**

13 *Epistles* (on point 8) this reason, you must carefully observe and keep the practice handed down by divine tradition and apostolic observance. This is also maintained among us, and almost throughout all the provinces… [continues online] **read ›**

14 *Epistles* (on point 8) Cyprian explains why he did not immediately believe that the ordination of Cornelius was valid, until he received letters from his fellow bishops Caldonius and Fortunatus, which fully proved that… [continues online] **read ›**

15 *Epistles* (1885 English; on point 6) “to acknowledge and understand that when a bishop is once made and approved by the testimony and judgment of his colleagues and the people, another can by no means be… [continues online] **read ›**

Apostolic Constitutions, *c. 250–380 AD · sources 16–24*

16 *Apostolic Constitutions* (on point 5) “difference in their names shows the difference in their duties. For not everyone who wants to be ordained is ordained, as was the case in that spurious and counterfeit priesthood… [continues online] **read ›**

17 *Apostolic Constitutions* (on point 2) concerning those bishops who were ordained during our lifetime, we let you know that they are these: James, the bishop of Jerusalem, the brother of our Lord. After his death… [continues online] **read ›**

18 *Apostolic Constitutions* (1885 English) **Quote 9, page 4** “If any bishop, or presbyter, or deacon, receives a second ordination from any one, let him be deprived, and the person who ordained him, unless he can show that his… [continues online] **read ›**

19 *Apostolic Constitutions* (1885 English) **Quote 6, page 4** do we permit the laity to perform any of the offices belonging to the priesthood; as, for instance, neither the sacrifice, nor baptism, nor the laying on of hands, nor… [continues online] **read ›**

20 *Apostolic Constitutions* (1885 English; on point 6) “if he be convicted of having done so without the consent of such as governed those cities or countries, let him be deprived, both the bishop himself and those whom… [continues online] **read ›**

21 *Apostolic Constitutions* (1885 English) **Quote 7, page 4** “Ordination Belongs Wholly to the Bishop, and to Nobody Else… [continues online] **read ›**

22 *Apostolic Constitutions* (1885 English) **Quote 8, page 4** “a Bishop Ought to Be Ordained by Three or by Two Bishops, But Not by One; For that Would Be Invalid… [continues online] **read ›**

23 *Apostolic Constitutions* (on point 5) I, James the son of Alphaeus, make a rule about confessors: a confessor is not ordained, because he becomes one by choice and patience, and he is worthy of great… [continues online] **read ›**

24 *Apostolic Constitutions* (on point 6) also make a constitution to decide how many bishops should elect a bishop. Let a bishop be ordained by three or two bishops. But if anyone is ordained by one… [continues online] **read ›**

Archelaus, *c. 270–300 AD · source 25*

25 *Disputation with Manes* 1 (on point 1) is, the foundation of the Church, and has put us in trust of the… [continues online] **read ›**

John Chrysostom, *c. 386–407 AD · sources 26–30*

26 *Homilies on Acts* “he avoids everything superfluous. He does not tell in what way it was done, but that they were ordained with prayer. For this is the meaning of ordination, that is… [continues online] **read ›**

27 *Homilies on Acts* (on point 1) such occasions always give rise to great evils. Now, to show that someone certainly had to be appointed, he brings in the prophet as witness. But from among what persons… [continues online] **read ›**

28 *Homilies on First Thessalonians* (on point 7) “through them you were begotten by that eternal generation. Through them you have obtained the kingdom. Through their hands all things are done. Through them the gates of heaven are… [continues online] **read ›**

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29 *Homily on St. Ignatius* 1 (1885 English; on point 1) “who said these things ordained him, and they who suggest to others with so great strictness to make proof of those who are about to mount to the throne of… [continues online] **read ›**

30 *Homilies on Acts* (on point 1) they appointed two, it says. Why not many? So that the feeling of disappointment would not spread farther to many people. Again, he does not put Matthias last without reason… [continues online] **read ›**

Anonymous · *source 31*

31 *Treatise Against the Heretic Novatian* 1 (1885 English; on point 6) “them, shamelessly, and without any law of ordination, the episcopate is sought after… [continues online] **read ›**

Clement of Rome · *sources 32–33*

32 *First Epistle to the Corinthians* **Quote 2, page 2** “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… [continues online] **read ›**

33 *First Epistle to the Corinthians* (1885 English) **Quote 1, page 2** “these appointments, then, were made in an orderly way, according to the will of God… [continues online] **read ›**

THE BIBLE *33 verses, The Faith Once Delivered Bible (Old Testament from the Septuagint), in Bible order*

34 **Isaiah 60:17** And instead of bronze I will bring you gold, and instead of iron I will bring you silver, and instead of wood I will bring you bronze, and instead of stones, iron; and I will set your rulers in peace and your overseers in righteousness. **read ›**

35 **Susanna 1:5** Open the verse to read it. **read ›**

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

37 **Mark 3:14** He appointed twelve, that they might be with him, and that he might send them out to preach **read ›**

38 **Acts 1:17** For he was counted among us and received a share in this ministry.” **read ›**

39 **Acts 1:21** Therefore, of the men who accompanied us all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, **read ›**

40 **Acts 1:22** beginning with the baptism of John until the day he was taken up from us, one of these must become a witness with us of his resurrection.” **read ›**

41 **Acts 1:25** to take part in this ministry and apostleship from which Judas fell away, that he might go to his own place.” **read ›**

42 **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 ›**

43 **Acts 6:6** whom they set before the apostles. When they had prayed, they laid their hands on them. **read ›**

44 **Acts 7:7** ‘And the nation whom they serve I will judge,’ said God, ‘and after this they shall come out and serve me in this place.’ **read ›**

45 **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 ›**

46 **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 ›**

47 **Acts 15:25** it seemed good to us, having come to one accord, to choose out men and send them to you with our beloved Barnabas and Paul, **read ›**

48 **Romans 5:16** And the gift is not like what came through the one who sinned; for the judgment came from one trespass to condemnation, but the gracious gift came from many trespasses to justification. **read ›**

49 **1 Corinthians 3:5** Who then is Paul, and who is Apollos, but servants through whom you believed, and each serving as the Lord gave to him? **read ›**

50 **1 Corinthians 6:4** So if you have cases concerning the matters of this life, appoint those who are of least account in the church. **read ›**

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51 **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 ›**

52 **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 ›**

53 **Galatians 2:6** But as for those who were considered important—whatever they were makes no difference to me; God shows no partiality—for they added nothing to me. **read ›**

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

55 **Colossians 1:5** because of the hope which is laid up for you in the heavens, of which you heard before in the word of the truth of the gospel **read ›**

56 **2 Thessalonians 2:15** So then, brothers, stand firm and hold the traditions which you were taught by us, whether by word or by letter. **read ›**

57 **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 ›**

58 **1 Timothy 3:1** The saying is trustworthy: if anyone aspires to the office of bishop, he desires a good work. **read ›**

59 **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 ›**

60 **2 Timothy 1:11** For this I was appointed as a preacher, an apostle, and a teacher of the Gentiles. **read ›**

61 **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 ›**

62 **Hebrews 5:4** No one takes this honor upon himself, but is called by God, as Aaron was. **read ›**

63 **Hebrews 7:20** And insofar as this was not without an oath—for the others became priests without an oath, **read ›**

64 **Hebrews 8:2** a servant of the sanctuary and of the true tabernacle which the Lord pitched, not man. **read ›**

65 **Hebrews 9:16** For where there is a covenant, the death of the one who made it must be established. **read ›**

66 **Hebrews 9:17** For a covenant is in force upon death, since it is never in force while the one who made it lives. **read ›**

ALSO LINKED BY THF TO THESE PASSAGES *37 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 30:1 · 63:3

Matthew 5:6 · 7:6 · 10:5 · 10:34 · 16:16 · 28:19

Mark 7:9 · 12:39 · 13:23

Luke 10:16 · 11:23 · 12:47 · 12:50 · 20:46

John 10:1 · 10:8 · 20:22

Acts 1:8 · 9:5

Romans 8:5

1 Corinthians 6:10 · 9:25 · 14:33

Galatians 3:27

Ephesians 4:2

Philippians 1:18

Colossians 4:16

2 Timothy 1:5 · 4:10 · 4:21

Philemon 1:10

1 John 2:27

Revelation 3:17 · 4:4 · 11:16

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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