THE QUESTION

Did the early church have a head elder over the other elders?

Asked by a THF member on April 19, 2026 · published November 9, 2026 · 12 numbered quotations · the 46 early Christian passages and 202 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-have-a-head-elder-over-the-other-elders

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

These passages never use the title head elder. They show each church led by a group of elders who served as a council around one bishop. The bishop presided, ordained the clergy and traced his office back to the apostles, while the elders taught, advised him and shared in decisions, all under Christ the King.

LIBRARY ONLY	This study was written only from The Historic Faith's library of early-Christian writings and the Bible, never from the web. Every passage we kept from what the library gave is listed at the back, with a link to read it.
HOW IT WAS MADE	Compiled by machine learning from The Historic Faith's library of early-Christian writings and the Bible only. Every quotation was matched word for word against our stored text. Not yet reviewed by The Historic Faith.
SHARING WITH AN AI?	Every quotation here comes from The Historic Faith's library. If you paste this study into an AI, anything it adds beyond these pages comes from that AI, not from us.

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POINT 1 OF 7

Elders led the churches as a group

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

Hermas speaks of the presbyters (elders) who preside over the Church, always in the plural. Clement of Alexandria describes the elders' work as helping believers grow, while deacons serve. Neither passage singles out one elder as chief.

1 “But you will read the words in this city, along with the presbyters who preside over the Church."”

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Hermas,** *Shepherd* (c. 90–150 AD) **Source 2, page 6** Read it in the library ›
THF's updated English

2 “In the same way also, in the Church, the elders attend to the part whose object is improvement, and the deacons to the work of ministry.”

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Clement of Alexandria,** *Stromata* 7.1 (c. 190–215 AD) **Source 15, page 7** Read it in the library ›
THF's updated English

POINT 2 OF 7

One bishop presided with the elders as council

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

Ignatius pictures each church gathered around one altar and one bishop, with the elders and deacons beside him. The Apostolic Constitutions call the elders the bishop's counselors and the senate of the Church. So the one who stood over the elders was the bishop, not a head elder.

3 “For there is one flesh of the Lord Jesus Christ, and His blood, which was shed for us, is one; one loaf is also broken for all, and one cup is shared among them all: there is only one altar for the whole Church, and one bishop, with the presbytery and deacons, my fellow-servants.”

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Ignatius of Antioch,** *Epistle to the Philadelphians* (c. 98–117 AD) **Source 3, page 6** Read it in the library ›
THF's updated English

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4 “Let a double portion also be set apart for the presbyters, since they labor continually in the word and teaching, because of the apostles of our Lord, whose place they hold, as the bishop's counselors and the crown of the Church. For they are the Sanhedrin and senate of the Church.”

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Apostolic Constitutions** (c. 250–380 AD) **Source 39, page 8** Read it in the library ›
THF's updated English

POINT 3 OF 7

Ignatius compares the elders to the apostles

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

Ignatius gives the bishop and the elders different pictures. The bishop stands for the Father, and the elders are like God's council and the gathered apostles. Without these leaders, he says, there is no true gathering of the church.

5 “And do you reverence them as Christ Jesus, of whose place they are the keepers, just as the bishop is the representative of the Father of all things, and the presbyters are the sanhedrim of God, and assembly of the apostles of Christ.”

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

POINT 4 OF 7

Only the bishop could ordain the clergy

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

The Apostolic Constitutions set clear limits. One bishop ordains an elder or a deacon, and elders are not allowed to ordain others. This is one of the clearest ways the bishop stood above the elders.

6 “A presbyter is ordained by one bishop, and so also are a deacon and the rest of the clergy.”

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Apostolic Constitutions** (c. 250–380 AD) **Source 40, page 8** Read it in the library ›
THF's updated English

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7 “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 **Source 41, page 8** Read it in the library ›
Apostolic Constitutions (c. 250–380 AD)
THF's updated English

POINT 5 OF 7

Church leaders traced succession from the apostles

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

Tertullian challenges false teachers to show a list of bishops going back to an apostle. Irenaeus urges obedience to the presbyters who hold this succession along with the office of bishop. His wording shows the words elder and bishop could still overlap.

8 “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 19, page 7** Read it in the library ›
THF's updated English

9 “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 10, page 6** Read it in the library ›
THF's updated English

POINT 6 OF 7

Big decisions were made together in council

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

Cyprian records an agreed plan for a hard case. Rather than one man deciding alone, the bishop was to meet with the elders, deacons, confessors and faithful lay people before acting.

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10 “You can know that I wrote this from their reply, for in their letter they wrote this: "However, what you yourself have also declared in so important a matter satisfies us: first, that the peace of the Church must be maintained; then, that after an assembly for counsel has been gathered, with bishop, presbyters, deacons, and confessors, as well as the laity who stand firm, we should deal with the case of the lapsed."”

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Cyprian,** *Epistles* (c. 248–258 AD) **Source 32, page 8** Read it in the library ›
THF's updated English

POINT 7 OF 7

Good leaders rule under Christ the King

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

Origen says Christians chose humble, blameless people to lead churches and turned away those hungry for power. Those who lead well do so under Christ, the great King. Clement adds that a true elder is known by a righteous life, not by rank alone.

11 “And those who rule over us well are under the compelling influence of the great King, whom we believe to be the Son of God, God the Word.”

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Origen,** *Against Celsus* 75 (c. 215–254 AD) **Source 24, page 7** Read it in the library ›
THF's updated English

12 “He is not such because men ordained him, nor is he considered righteous because he is a presbyter. Rather, he is counted among the presbyters because he is righteous.”

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Clement of Alexandria,** *Stromata* 6.13 (c. 190–215 AD) **Source 16, page 7** Read it in the library ›
THF's updated English

THE LIMITS

What these passages don’t tell us

- These passages do not describe one elder chosen to lead the other elders apart from the bishop.
- They do not explain how the single bishop over the elders first came about in each church.
- 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 46 early Christian passages and 202 Bible verses we kept for this question (repeats and weak or off-topic search hits were left out): early Christian passages first (sources 1–46, grouped by writer, earliest first), then Bible verses in The Faith Once Delivered Bible (sources 47–64, in Bible order), then 184 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 *46 passages from 15 writers*

Didache, *c. 50–120 AD · source 1*

1 *Teaching of the Twelve Apostles* 4 (1885 English) that speaks to you the word of God remember night and day; and you shall honour him as the Lord… [continues online] **read ›**

Hermas, *c. 90–150 AD · source 2*

2 *Shepherd* **Quote 1, page 2** "you will read the words in this city, along with the presbyters who preside over the Church… [continues online] **read ›**

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

3 *Epistle to the Philadelphians* (1885 English) **Quote 3, page 2** "presbyters, and deacons, and the rest of the clergy, together with all the people, and the soldiers, and the governors, and Cæsar [himself], to the bishop… [continues online] **read ›**

4 *Epistle to the Smyrnaeans* (on point 2) "deacons to the presbyters; the presbyters to the bishop… [continues online] **read ›**

5 *Epistle to the Trallians* (1885 English) **Quote 5, page 3** "do ye reverence them as Christ Jesus, of whose place they are the keepers, even as the bishop is the representative of the Father of all things, and the presbyters… [continues online] **read ›**

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

Irenaeus, *c. 175–202 AD · sources 8–13*

8 *Against Heresies: Book IV* (1885 English; on point 5) "Such presbyters does the Church nourish, of whom also the prophet says: "I will give thy rulers in peace, and thy bishops in righteousness." Of whom also did the Lord… [continues online] **read ›**

9 *Against Heresies: Book V* (1885 English; on point 7) "the Word is through all things, and is Himself the Head of the Church… [continues online] **read ›**

10 *Against Heresies: Book IV* (1885 English) **Quote 9, page 4** "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 ›**

11 *Fragments from the Lost Writings of Irenæus* (on point 5) "together. Thus, the difference in observing the fast fosters the harmony of our shared faith. The presbyters before Soter who led the Church you now govern—namely, Anicetus, Pius, Hyginus… [continues online] **read ›**

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12 *Against Heresies: Book III* (on point 5) was also appointed by apostles in Asia to be the bishop of the Church in Smyrna. I saw him in my early youth, for he lived a very long time… [continues online] **read ›**

13 *Against Heresies: Book III* (1885 English; on point 5) “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 ›**

Clement of Alexandria, *c. 190–215 AD · sources 14–17*

14 *Stromata* 3 (1885 English) “proinde episcopos, inquit, oportet constitui, qui ex domo propria toti quoque Ecclesiæ præ esse sint meditati… [continues online] **read ›**

15 *Stromata* 7.1 (1885 English) **Quote 2, page 2** “also, in the Church, the elders attend to the department which has improvement for its object… [continues online] **read ›**

16 *Stromata* 6.13 (1885 English) **Quote 12, page 5** 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 ›**

17 *Stromata* 6.13 “according to my opinion, the grades here in the Church, of bishops… [continues online] **read ›**

Tertullian, *c. 196–220 AD · sources 18–21*

18 *De Corona* 14 (on point 7) less may the Christian put the service of idolatry on his own head. No, I might have said, upon Christ, since Christ is the Head of the Christian man. For… [continues online] **read ›**

19 *On Prescription Against Heretics* 32 (1885 English) **Quote 8, page 4** “after their blasphemy, what is there that is unlawful for them (to attempt… [continues online] **read ›**

20 *Apology* 39 (1885 English; on point 1) “tried men of our elders preside over us, obtaining that honour not by purchase, but by established character… [continues online] **read ›**

21 *Against Marcion* 8 (on point 7) “he says, "even as Christ is the head of the Church… [continues online] **read ›**

Early Liturgies, *c. 200–400 AD · source 22*

22 *Divine Liturgy of St. Mark* 1 (on point 2) “all the orthodox bishops, elders, deacons, sub-deacons, readers, singers, and laity… [continues online] **read ›**

Hippolytus, *c. 200–236 AD · source 23*

23 *Against the Heresy of Noetus* 1 (on point 1) “He claimed that he himself was Moses, and that Aaron was his brother. When the blessed presbyters heard this, they called him before the Church and questioned him. But at… [continues online] **read ›**

Origen, *c. 215–254 AD · sources 24–26*

24 *Against Celsus* 75 (1885 English) **Quote 11, page 5** “who are ambitious of ruling we reject… [continues online] **read ›**

25 *De Principiis (On First Principles)* 4.1 (on point 1) by some. There Hermas is commanded to write two little books, and afterward to announce to the presbyters of the Church what he learned from the Spirit. For these are… [continues online] **read ›**

26 *De Principiis (On First Principles)* 4.1 (on point 1) respect of the command given to Hermas to write two books, and after doing so, to announce to the presbyters of the Church what he had learned from the Spirit… [continues online] **read ›**

Dionysius of Alexandria, *c. 232–265 AD · source 27*

27 *Exegetical Fragments* 2 (on point 7) “Christ is the head of the Church… [continues online] **read ›**

Novatian, *c. 240–258 AD · source 28*

28 *Treatise Concerning the Trinity* 29 and healings, does wonderful works, often gives discrimination of spirits, provides powers of government, suggests counsels, and orders and arranges whatever other gifts of charismata there are. And so He… [continues online] **read ›**

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Cyprian, *c. 248–258 AD · sources 29–34*

29 *Epistles* (on point 4) 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 ›**

30 *Epistles* sin be made, let the bishops be despised and trampled underfoot, let peace be proclaimed by the presbyters with deceitful words, and so that the fallen may not rise up… [continues online] **read ›**

31 *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 ›**

32 *Epistles* (1885 English) **Quote 10, page 5** “that an assembly for counsel being gathered together, with bishop, presbyters, deacons, and confessors, as well as with the laity who stand fast, we should deal with the case of… [continues online] **read ›**

33 *Epistles* (1885 English) “warning, indeed, our presbyters and deacons ought to have given you, that they might cherish the sheep committed to their care, and by the divine authority might instruct them in… [continues online] **read ›**

34 *Epistles* (1885 English) “what danger ought we not to fear from the Lord's displeasure, when some of the presbyters, remembering neither the Gospel nor their own place, and, moreover, considering neither the… [continues online] **read ›**

Apostolic Constitutions, *c. 250–380 AD · sources 35–41*

35 *Apostolic Constitutions* (on point 2) “the bishops and the presbyters are the priests… [continues online] **read ›**

36 *Apostolic Constitutions* (on point 4) 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 the laying on… [continues online] **read ›**

37 *Apostolic Constitutions* (on point 6) 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 ›**

38 *Apostolic Constitutions* (on point 2) with James the Lord's brother, what should be done. And it seemed good to him and to the elders to speak words of teaching to the people. For some… [continues online] **read ›**

39 *Apostolic Constitutions* **Quote 4, page 3** “they are the Sanhedrin and senate of the Church… [continues online] **read ›**

40 *Apostolic Constitutions* (1885 English) **Quote 6, page 3** “A presbyter by one bishop, as also a deacon, and the rest of the clergy” **read ›**

41 *Apostolic Constitutions* **Quote 7, page 4** 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 who dare to… [continues online] **read ›**

Malchion, *c. 260–280 AD · source 42*

42 *Epistle Against Paul of Samosata* 1 Dionysius and Maximus, and to all our fellow ministers throughout the world—both bishops and presbyters and deacons—and to the whole Catholic Church under heaven: Helenus, Hymenaeus, Theophilus, Theotecnus… [continues online] **read ›**

Clement of Rome · *sources 43–46*

43 *First Epistle to the Corinthians* (1885 English) blood was given for us; let us esteem those who have the rule over us… [continues online] **read ›**

44 *First Epistle to the Corinthians* (1885 English; on point 6) “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 ›**

45 *First Epistle to the Corinthians* (on point 5) “Thus, preaching through countries and cities, they appointed the first-fruits of… [continues online] **read ›**

46 *First Epistle to the Corinthians* (1885 English) “ye did all things without respect of persons, and walked in the commandments of God, being obedient to those who had the rule over you, and giving all fitting honour… [continues online] **read ›**

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THE BIBLE *18 verses, The Faith Once Delivered Bible (Old Testament from the Septuagint), in Bible order*

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

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

49 **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 ›**

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

51 **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 ›**

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

53 **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 ›**

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

55 **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 ›**

56 **1 Timothy 3:1** The saying is trustworthy: if anyone aspires to the office of bishop, he desires a good work. **read ›**

57 **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 ›**

58 **1 Timothy 5:1** Do not rebuke an older man, but exhort him as a father; the younger men as brothers; **read ›**

59 **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 ›**

60 **1 Timothy 5:19** Do not receive an accusation against an elder except at the word of two or three witnesses. **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 **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 ›**

63 **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 ›**

64 **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 *184 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.

Genesis 4:25

Exodus 23:14 · 32:32

Leviticus 15:18 · 19:15

Deuteronomy 8:18 · 20:5 · 20:19 · 29:29

Psalms 45:3

Proverbs 8:27 · 9:17 · 22:6 · 31:20

Isaiah 1:15 · 1:17 · 8:4 · 50:9 · 60:17 · 63:3 · 66:2

Jeremiah 23:24

Matthew 5:6 · 5:9 · 5:14 · 6:19 · 6:24 · 7:21 · 9:13 · 10:5 · 10:19 · 11:5 · 13:27 · 18:20 · 19:6 · 20:5 · 21:32 · 22:1 · 22:39 · 23:9 · 24:5

Mark 7:9 · 8:38 · 12:39 · 16:17

Luke 2:49 · 4:18 · 6:46 · 7:35 · 10:16 · 10:20 · 11:23 · 12:47 · 12:50 · 14:13 · 16:15 · 20:25 · 20:27 · 20:34 · 20:46 · 21:14

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John 1:1 · 1:3 · 1:10 · 1:14 · 3:6 · 4:14 · 6:27 · 7:37 · 7:39 · 13:23 · 14:6 · 14:16 · 14:18 · 15:1 · 15:12 · 15:20 · 16:13 · 17:6 · 17:11 · 20:22 · 21:17

Acts 1:8 · 1:20 · 2:17 · 4:32 · 9:5 · 10:13 · 10:34 · 11:15 · 15:1 · 15:7 · 15:9 · 15:13 · 15:23 · 20:29

Romans 7:4 · 7:12 · 8:7 · 8:9 · 11:4 · 14:19 · 14:21 · 15:27

1 Corinthians 2:12 · 5:13 · 6:10 · 6:12 · 6:18 · 7:5 · 7:8 · 7:9 · 7:14 · 7:32 · 7:39 · 7:40 · 9:25 · 10:20 · 10:33 · 12:3 · 12:8 · 14:21 · 14:33 · 15:41

2 Corinthians 4:13 · 6:17 · 11:3

Galatians 1:8 · 1:10 · 3:27 · 5:13 · 5:17

Ephesians 3:8 · 3:10 · 4:2 · 4:6 · 4:8 · 4:13 · 4:25 · 4:26 · 4:27 · 5:11 · 5:18 · 5:19 · 5:22 · 5:23 · 5:25 · 5:29 · 5:31 · 5:32 · 6:2 · 6:4 · 6:5 · 6:9 · 6:11 · 6:12 · 6:19

Philippians 1:18 · 4:3

Colossians 2:20 · 3:3 · 3:22 · 4:1

1 Thessalonians 4:17

2 Thessalonians 2:10 · 3:6

1 Timothy 2:4 · 4:1 · 4:3 · 5:14 · 5:21

2 Timothy 3:5 · 3:8

Titus 2:14

Hebrews 10:1 · 13:5 · 13:7 · 13:17

James 5:16

1 John 2:27

Revelation 2:5 · 4:4 · 11:16 · 22:18

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

ABOUT THIS STUDY

A THF member asked “Did the early church have a head elder over the other elders?” on April 19, 2026. The Historic Faith answered it as a public study on November 9, 2026.

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THE END OF THIS STUDY