THE QUESTION

Did the early church warn about mission drift?

Asked by a THF member on April 18, 2026 · published November 9, 2026 · 9 numbered quotations · the 22 early Christian passages and 137 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-warn-about-mission-drift

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

They do not use the phrase, but they warn about the same danger. Christ sent the apostles to teach all nations, and the churches kept that same faith. Early writers warn that busy business lives, looking back to the world, and taking up pagan ways can pull believers away from that calling.

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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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IN THIS STUDY

1	Christ gave the church a clear mission	2	6	Taking up pagan ways turns from the Gospel	4
2	The same faith was handed to every church	2	7	Faithfulness must last to the end	4
3	The mission now reaches all nations	3		What these passages don't tell us	5
4	Busy business lives can cause drift	3		The Sources: 22 early Christian passages and 137 Bible verses, with links	5
5	Looking back to the world is turning aside	3			

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POINT 1 OF 7

Christ gave the church a clear mission

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

Tertullian says Christ sent the eleven to teach all nations and baptize them, and that the apostles did this at once. Justin adds that twelve plain men went out from Jerusalem to teach God's word to every nation. The starting mission was clear: to preach Christ and make disciples.

1 "Accordingly, after one of these had been struck off, on His departure to the Father, He commanded the other eleven to go and teach all nations, who were to be baptized into the Father, and into the Son, and into the Holy Ghost"

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Tertullian,** *On Prescription Against Heretics* 20 (c. 196–220 AD) **Source 12, page 6** **Read it in the library ›**
THF's updated English

2 "From Jerusalem, twelve men went out into the world. These men were uneducated and not skilled in speaking, but by the power of God, they proclaimed to every nation that they were sent by Christ to teach the word of God to all."

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Justin Martyr,** *First Apology* (c. 130–165 AD) **Source 5, page 6** **Read it in the library ›**
THF's updated English

POINT 2 OF 7

The same faith was handed to every church

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

Tertullian stresses that the apostles preached the same doctrine everywhere, and every later church took its faith from those first churches. For him, staying on course means keeping the faith that was first handed down, not changing it.

3 "After first bearing witness to the faith in Jesus Christ throughout Judea, and founding churches there, they next went out into the world and preached the same doctrine of the same faith to the nations."

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Tertullian,** *On Prescription Against Heretics* 20 (c. 196–220 AD) **Source 12, page 6** **Read it in the library ›**
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POINT 3 OF 7

The mission now reaches all nations

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

Tertullian explains that some of Christ's first orders fit the apostles' own time, such as going first to Israel. But he says the church's task now is to preach in every land. He treats the mission as something the church must keep doing.

4 “And no city has been excepted. So we preach throughout all the world.”

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Tertullian,** *De Fuga in Persecutione* 6 (c. 196–220 AD) **Source 11, page 6** **Read it in the library ›**
THF's updated English

POINT 4 OF 7

Busy business lives can cause drift

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

Hermas pictures believers tangled in business like thorns. He says they drift away from God's servants because their dealings choke them. He still says repentance is open to them if they turn quickly and do good.

5 “Those who are tangled up in many different kinds of business do not stay close to the servants of God, but drift away, being choked by their business dealings.”

later in the same passage

“But repentance is open to all these people, if it is speedy, so that what they did not do in earlier times they may make up for in these days and do some good, and they shall live to God.”

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Hermas,** *Shepherd* (c. 90–150 AD) **Source 1, page 5** **Read it in the library ›**
THF's updated English

POINT 5 OF 7

Looking back to the world is turning aside

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

Cyprian compares Christians to Israel wanting to go back to Egypt. He uses Christ's words about the plough to warn believers not to return to the world they left behind.

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6 “The Lord also warns us of this in His Gospel, teaching that we should not return again to the devil and to the world, which we have renounced and escaped from.”

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Cyprian,** *Treatises* (c. 248–258 AD) **Source 16, page 6** **Read it in the library ›**
THF's updated English

POINT 6 OF 7

Taking up pagan ways turns from the Gospel

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

Clement of Alexandria warns that the church should not adopt the ways of pagan life. He says some are called Christians but do not live by the word. Elsewhere he calls leaving the church's true knowledge for false ideas a kind of adultery.

7 “From this it follows that those who are only called Christians, but do not live in agreement with the word, are the fleshy parts.”

later in the same passage

“Nor should the things that belong to heathen life be adopted by turning away from the Gospel.”

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Clement of Alexandria,** *Stromata* 7.14 (c. 190–215 AD) **Source 9, page 6** **Read it in the library ›**
THF's updated English

8 “Now it is adultery if someone abandons the church's true knowledge and the conviction about God, and accepts a false and unfitting opinion.”

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Clement of Alexandria,** *Stromata* 6.16 (c. 190–215 AD) **Source 10, page 6** **Read it in the library ›**
THF's updated English

POINT 7 OF 7

Faithfulness must last to the end

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

Cyprian says even a confessor who stood firm under persecution has only begun. Quoting Christ, he says the one who endures to the end will be saved. A strong start does not guarantee staying faithful later.

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9 “Confession is the beginning of glory, not the full earning of the crown. It does not complete our praise, but begins our honor.”

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Cyprian,** *Treatises* (c. 248–258 AD)
THF's updated English
Source 18, page 6 **Read it in the library ›**

THE LIMITS

What these passages don’t tell us

- The phrase "mission drift" is modern; these passages speak of drifting from the faith and calling, not of how a church plans its work.
- They speak mostly about believers and teaching, not about how to fix a ministry that has lost its focus.
- 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 22 early Christian passages and 137 Bible verses we kept for this question (repeats and weak or off-topic search hits were left out): early Christian passages first (sources 1–22, grouped by writer, earliest first), then Bible verses in The Faith Once Delivered Bible (sources 23–81, in Bible order), then 78 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 *22 passages from 10 writers*

Hermas, *c. 90–150 AD · sources 1–3*

1 *Shepherd* **Quote 5, page 3** “are tangled up in many different kinds of business do not stay close to the servants of God, but drift away, being choked by their business dealings. And the rich… [continues online] **read ›**

2 *Shepherd* fit into the building of the tower. Also, I saw other stones thrown far away from the tower and falling into the public road. Yet they did not remain on… [continues online] **read ›**

3 *Shepherd* (1885 English) those which fell into the fire and were burned are those who have departed for ever from the living God… [continues online] **read ›**

Justin Martyr, *c. 130–165 AD · sources 4–6*

4 *First Apology* (on point 1) “the Gentiles, who had never heard anything about Christ until the apostles set out from Jerusalem and preached… [continues online] **read ›**

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5 *First Apology* (1885 English) **Quote 2, page 2** "from Jerusalem there went out into the world, men, twelve in number, and these illiterate, of no ability in speaking: but by the power of God they proclaimed to every… [continues online] **read ›**

6 *First Apology* (1885 English; on point 1) "find it also predicted that certain persons should be sent by Him into every nation to publish these things, and that rather among the Gentiles [than among the Jews] men… [continues online] **read ›**

Irenaeus, *c. 175–202 AD · sources 7–8*

7 *Against Heresies: Book V* (1885 English) "therefore, who cast away by apostasy these forementioned things, being in fact destitute of all good, do experience every kind of punishment… [continues online] **read ›**

8 *Against Heresies: Book III* (1885 English; on point 2) "no persons of any kind would act properly, if they should advise blind men, just about to fall over a precipice, to continue their most dangerous path, as if it… [continues online] **read ›**

Clement of Alexandria, *c. 190–215 AD · sources 9–10*

9 *Stromata* 7.14 (1885 English) **Quote 7, page 4** "are those things which belong to heathen life to be adopted by apostasy from the Gospel… [continues online] **read ›**

10 *Stromata* 6.16 (1885 English) **Quote 8, page 4** "it is adultery, if one, abandoning the ecclesiastical and true knowledge, and the persuasion respecting God, accedes to false and incongruous opinion, either by deifying any created object, or by… [continues online] **read ›**

Tertullian, *c. 196–220 AD · sources 11–12*

11 *De Fuga in Persecutione* 6 (1885 English) **Quote 4, page 3** "then, the circumstances of the apostles even required the injunction to flee, their mission being to preach first to the lost sheep of the house of Israel… [continues online] **read ›**

12 *On Prescription Against Heretics* 20 (1885 English) **Quotes 1, 3, page 2** "it is on this account only that they will be able to deem themselves apostolic, as being the offspring of apostolic churches… [continues online] **read ›**

Origen, *c. 215–254 AD · sources 13–14*

13 *Commentary on Matthew* 10 (1885 English; on point 3) "the Apostles on this account left Israel and did that which had been enjoined on them by the Saviour, Make disciples of all the nations, Matthew 28:19 and, You… [continues online] **read ›**

14 *Against Celsus* 26 (1885 English; on point 1) "it have come to pass without divine assistance, that Jesus, desiring during these years to spread abroad His words and teaching, should have been so successful, that everywhere throughout the… [continues online] **read ›**

Novatian, *c. 240–258 AD · source 15*

15 *Treatise Concerning the Trinity* 29 (1885 English) "Him also he tells: Now the Spirit speaks plainly, that in the last times some shall depart from the faith, giving heed to seducing spirits, doctrines of demons, who speak… [continues online] **read ›**

Cyprian, *c. 248–258 AD · sources 16–19*

16 *Treatises* (1885 English) **Quote 6, page 4** "14:11-14 The Lord, admonishing us of this in His Gospel, and teaching that we should not return again to the devil and to the world, which we have… [continues online] **read ›**

17 *Epistles* (1885 English; on point 3) "when first He sent His disciples on the ministry of salvation, He bade them, saying, Go not into the way of the Gentiles, and into any city of the Samaritans… [continues online] **read ›**

18 *Treatises* (1885 English) **Quote 9, page 5** "finally, forsaking the Church in which he has become a confessor, and severing the concord of unity, he shall have exchanged his first faith for a subsequent unbelief, he may… [continues online] **read ›**

19 *Treatises* (1885 English; on point 1) "the disciples, scattered over the world, at the bidding of their Master and God gave forth His precepts for salvation, guided men from their wandering in darkness to the way… [continues online] **read ›**

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Apostolic Constitutions, *c. 250–380 AD · sources 20–21*

20 *Apostolic Constitutions* (1885 English) when some said one thing, and some another, I Peter stood up… [continues online] **read ›**

21 *Apostolic Constitutions* (on point 6) of care in judging will be overcome with sorrow and left without comfort. Then he will either drift over to the heathen or become entangled in heresies, and so be… [continues online] **read ›**

Archelaus, *c. 270–300 AD · source 22*

22 *Disputation with Manes* 1 (on point 2) us the very image of Paul himself, you would still remain accursed. For we were taught beforehand about you. The Holy Scriptures have both warned us and armed us against… [continues online] **read ›**

THE BIBLE *59 verses, The Faith Once Delivered Bible (Old Testament from the Septuagint), in Bible order*

23 **Matthew 9:36** But when he saw the multitudes, he was moved with compassion for them because they were harassed and scattered, like sheep without a shepherd. **read ›**

24 **Matthew 10:6** Rather, go to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. **read ›**

25 **Matthew 14:22** Immediately Jesus made the disciples get into the boat and go ahead of him to the other side, while he sent the crowds away. **read ›**

26 **Matthew 14:24** But the boat was already in the middle of the sea, battered by the waves, for the wind was against them. **read ›**

27 **Matthew 17:27** But, lest we cause them to stumble, go to the sea, cast a hook, and take up the first fish that comes up. When you have opened its mouth, you will find a stater coin. Take that, and give it to them for me and you." **read ›**

28 **Matthew 25:14** "For it is like a man going into another country, who called his own slaves and entrusted his goods to them. **read ›**

29 **Matthew 28:19** Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, **read ›**

30 **Mark 6:34** Jesus came out, saw a great multitude, and he had compassion on them because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things. **read ›**

31 **Luke 9:60** But Jesus said to him, "Leave the dead to bury their own dead, but you go and announce God's kingdom." **read ›**

32 **Luke 9:62** But Jesus said to him, "No one, having put his hand to the plow and looking back, is fit for God's kingdom." **read ›**

33 **Luke 11:42** But woe to you Pharisees! For you tithe mint and rue and every herb, but neglect justice and the love of God. These you ought to have done, without leaving the others undone. **read ›**

34 **Luke 12:58** For when you are going with your adversary before the magistrate, try diligently on the way to be released from him, lest perhaps he drag you to the judge, and the judge deliver you to the officer, and the officer throw you into prison. **read ›**

35 **John 6:66** At this, many of his disciples went back and walked no more with him. **read ›**

36 **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 ›**

37 **Acts 6:1** In those days, as the disciples multiplied, grumbling arose among the Hellenists against the Hebrews, because their widows were being neglected in the daily service. **read ›**

38 **Acts 8:4** Therefore those who were scattered went about preaching the word as the gospel. **read ›**

39 **Acts 11:19** So those scattered by the distress that arose over Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch, speaking the word only to Jews. **read ›**

40 **Acts 11:20** But some of them, men from Cyprus and Cyrene, came to Antioch and spoke to the Hellenists, preaching the gospel of the Lord Jesus. **read ›**

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

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42 **Acts 11:26** When he found him, he brought him to Antioch. For a whole year they gathered with the church and taught a considerable multitude. The disciples were first called Christians in Antioch. **read ›**

43 **Acts 13:4** So, being sent out by the Holy Spirit, they went down to Seleucia. From there they sailed to Cyprus. **read ›**

44 **Acts 13:13** Now Paul and his company set sail from Paphos and came to Perga in Pamphylia. John departed from them and returned to Jerusalem. **read ›**

45 **Acts 13:43** When the synagogue gathering broke up, many of the Jews and devout converts followed Paul and Barnabas, who spoke to them and urged them to continue in the grace of God. **read ›**

46 **Acts 13:46** Paul and Barnabas spoke out boldly, and said, “It was necessary that God’s word should be spoken to you first. Since indeed you thrust it from yourselves, and judge yourselves unworthy of eternal life, behold, we turn to the Gentiles. **read ›**

47 **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 ›**

48 **Acts 15:3** So, sent on their way by the church, they passed through Phoenicia and Samaria, describing the conversion of the Gentiles and bringing great joy to all the brothers. **read ›**

49 **Acts 15:7** After much debate, Peter stood up and said to them, “Brothers, you know that long ago God chose among us that through my mouth the Gentiles should hear the word of the gospel and believe. **read ›**

50 **Acts 17:33** Thus Paul went out from among them. **read ›**

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

52 **Romans 2:19** and are confident that you yourself are a guide of the blind, a light to those who are in darkness, **read ›**

53 **Romans 15:20** and so making it my ambition to preach the gospel where Christ had not been named, so that I might not build on another’s foundation, **read ›**

54 **1 Corinthians 9:7** What soldier ever serves at his own expense? Who plants a vineyard and does not eat its fruit? Or who tends a flock and does not partake of the flock’s milk? **read ›**

55 **1 Corinthians 14:36** Or did the word of God go out from you? Or did it come to you alone? **read ›**

56 **Galatians 1:6** I marvel that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ for a different gospel, **read ›**

57 **Galatians 3:1** Foolish Galatians, who has bewitched you not to obey the truth—you before whose eyes Jesus Christ was openly portrayed among you as crucified? **read ›**

58 **Galatians 5:4** You are alienated from Christ, you who desire to be justified by the law. You have fallen away from grace. **read ›**

59 **Colossians 1:23** if indeed you continue in faithfulness, grounded and steadfast, and not moved away from the hope of the gospel which you heard, which was proclaimed in all creation under heaven, and of which I, Paul, became a minister. **read ›**

60 **2 Thessalonians 2:3** Let no one deceive you in any way. For it will not be unless the rebellion comes first, and the man of sin is revealed, the son of destruction. **read ›**

61 **1 Timothy 1:6** from which some have strayed and turned aside to empty talk, **read ›**

62 **1 Timothy 1:19** holding faithfulness and a good conscience, which some have thrust away and so made shipwreck concerning the faith, **read ›**

63 **1 Timothy 4:1** But the Spirit expressly says that in later times some will depart from the faith, paying attention to deceiving spirits and doctrines of demons, **read ›**

64 **1 Timothy 5:12** having condemnation, because they have abandoned their former faithfulness. **read ›**

65 **1 Timothy 5:15** For already some have turned away after Satan. **read ›**

66 **1 Timothy 6:21** which some profess, and thus have wandered from the faith. Grace be with you. Amen. **read ›**

67 **2 Timothy 2:18** who have strayed from the truth, saying that the resurrection has already taken place, and overthrow the faith of some. **read ›**

68 **2 Timothy 3:5** holding a form of godliness but having denied its power. Turn away from these people also. **read ›**

69 **2 Timothy 4:4** and they will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to fables. **read ›**

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70 **Titus 1:14** not paying attention to Jewish fables and commandments of men who turn away from the truth. **read ›**

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

72 **Titus 3:14** Let our people also learn to maintain good works to meet necessary needs, that they may not be unfruitful. **read ›**

73 **Hebrews 2:1** Therefore we ought to pay greater attention to the things that were heard, lest perhaps we drift away. **read ›**

74 **Hebrews 2:3** how shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation? It was first spoken through the Lord and confirmed to us by those who heard, **read ›**

75 **Hebrews 3:12** Beware, brothers, lest perhaps there might be in any one of you an evil heart of unfaithfulness, in falling away from the living God; **read ›**

76 **Hebrews 6:1** Therefore leaving the teaching of the first principles of Christ, let us press on to perfection—not laying again a foundation of repentance from dead works, of faith toward God, **read ›**

77 **Hebrews 6:6** and fell away, to be renewed again to repentance, since they crucify the Son of God again for themselves and expose him to public shame. **read ›**

78 **2 Peter 2:20** For if, after they have escaped the defilement of the world through the knowledge of the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, they are again entangled in it and overcome, the last state has become worse for them than the first. **read ›**

79 **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 ›**

80 **Revelation 2:4** But I have this against you, that you left your first love. **read ›**

81 **Revelation 2:5** Remember therefore from where you have fallen, and repent and do the first works; or else I am coming to you quickly, and will move your lampstand out of its place, unless you repent. **read ›**

ALSO LINKED BY THF TO THESE PASSAGES *78 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 2:3

Jeremiah 2:27 · 20:8

Micah 4:1

Matthew 6:12 · 10:5 · 10:17 · 10:23 · 13:5 · 13:19 · 13:57 · 19:23 · 21:32 · 22:40 · 23:35 · 24:24 · 24:27

Mark 4:7 · 4:34 · 10:23 · 16:15 · 16:17

Luke 6:23 · 6:37

John 1:1 · 1:8 · 3:18 · 5:46 · 8:44 · 14:16 · 14:18 · 15:20 · 16:13 · 16:24 · 20:22

Acts 1:1 · 1:8 · 1:15 · 1:20 · 2:6 · 2:17 · 7:52 · 10:13 · 10:34 · 11:15 · 11:25 · 15:1 · 15:9 · 15:13 · 15:14 · 15:23 · 21:11 · 21:13

Romans 3:15 · 8:7 · 8:9

1 Corinthians 2:12 · 3:13 · 6:12 · 7:40 · 10:20 · 12:3 · 12:8

2 Corinthians 4:13

Galatians 5:17 · 5:20

Colossians 3:5

1 Thessalonians 2:14

2 Timothy 3:8 · 3:12

Hebrews 6:8 · 11:3 · 11:30 · 11:37

1 Peter 2:4 · 4:3

Revelation 11:1 · 21:16

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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