THE QUESTION

How did the apostles and early Christians appoint leaders in the churches?

Asked by a THF member on April 9, 2026 · published November 9, 2026, updated November 11, 2026 · 10 numbered quotations · the 28 early Christian passages and 62 Bible verses we kept are listed at the back, each with a link.

Read it online: thehistoricfaith.com/early-church-questions/how-did-the-apostles-and-early-christians-appoint-leaders-in-the-churches

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

The apostles, sent by Christ, appointed tested early converts as bishops and deacons and arranged for approved men to succeed them. Churches appointed worthy, proven men with the whole church's consent and kept lists of bishops back to the apostles. A later rulebook adds that bishops ordained leaders by laying on hands.

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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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POINT 1 OF 7

Christ sent the apostles, who appointed tested converts

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

Clement of Rome describes an orderly chain: God sent Christ, and Christ sent the apostles. As the apostles preached from city to city, they tested some of their first converts by the Spirit and made them bishops and deacons. He sees this order as foretold in Scripture.

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."

later in the same passage

"Thus, preaching through countries and cities, they appointed the first-fruits of their labors, having first proved them by the Spirit, to be bishops and deacons of those who would later believe."

later in the same passage

"For thus says the Scripture in a certain place, "I will appoint their bishops in righteousness, and their deacons in faith.""

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Clement of Rome,** *First Epistle to the Corinthians* **Source 26, page 8** **Read it in the library ›**
THF's updated English

POINT 2 OF 7

The apostles planned for leaders to be succeeded

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

Clement says the apostles knew there would be fights over leadership, so they gave instructions that approved men should take over when leaders died. Later leaders were appointed by respected men with the consent of the whole church, and faithful leaders were not to be pushed out.

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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."

later in the same passage

"We believe, therefore, that those appointed by them, or later by other distinguished men with the consent of the whole Church, who have served the flock of Christ blamelessly in a humble, peaceful, and selfless spirit, and have long enjoyed a good reputation with everyone, cannot be justly removed from the ministry."

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Clement of Rome,** *First Epistle to the Corinthians*
THF's updated English

Source 27, page 8 Read it in the library ›

POINT 3 OF 7

Churches were told to choose worthy, proven men

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

The Didache tells believers to appoint their own bishops and deacons and lists the character to look for. It adds that these leaders also do the work of prophets and teachers, so they should be honored. Polycarp gives a similar list for deacons, warning against slander and love of money.

3

"Therefore, appoint for yourselves bishops and deacons who are worthy of the Lord: men who are gentle, not lovers of money, truthful, and proven."

later in the same passage

"For they also carry out for you the service of prophets and teachers. So do not despise them, because they are your honored ones, along with the prophets and teachers."

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Didache,** *Teaching of the Twelve Apostles* 15 (c. 50–120 AD)
THF's updated English

Source 1, page 6 Read it in the library ›

4

"They must not be slanderers, double-tongued, or lovers of money, but must be temperate in all things, compassionate, industrious, and live according to the truth of the Lord, who was the servant of all."

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Polycarp,** *Epistle to the Philippians* (c. 100–155 AD)
THF's updated English

Source 8, page 7 Read it in the library ›

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POINT 4 OF 7

Churches traced their bishops back to apostles

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

Tertullian says the apostolic churches could show a list of bishops going back to one placed by an apostle, and he reports Rome's claim that Peter ordained Clement. Irenaeus tells Rome's list differently: the apostles gave the office to Linus, then came Anacletus, and Clement was third. Both use these lists to tie churches to the apostles.

5 "The church of Smyrna records that Polycarp was placed there by John. In the same way, the church of Rome says that Clement was ordained by Peter."

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Tertullian,** *On Prescription Against Heretics* 32 (c. 196–220 AD) **Source 12, page 7** Read it in the library ›
THF's updated English

6 "The blessed apostles, having established and built up the Church, entrusted the role of the episcopate to Linus."

later in the same passage

"Anacletus succeeded him, and after him, Clement became the bishop, third in line from the apostles."

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Irenaeus,** *Against Heresies: Book III* (c. 175–202 AD) **Source 9, page 7** Read it in the library ›
THF's updated English

POINT 5 OF 7

A later rulebook ties ordination to the bishop

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

The Apostolic Constitutions, a later work (4th century) than Clement and the Didache, say no one may take a church office for himself; sacred duties come through the bishop's laying on of hands. Another rule in the same work says the bishop ordains, while a presbyter lays on hands but does not ordain.

7 "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** (c. 250–380 AD) **Source 24, page 8** Read it in the library ›
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8 “He lays on hands, ordains, offers, and receives the blessing from bishops, but never from presbyters.”

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

POINT 6 OF 7

God's clear choice was meant to prevent quarrels

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

Clement compares the apostles' care to Moses, who settled a fight over the priesthood with the tribes' rods. Aaron's rod blossomed and bore fruit. Clement says Moses did it this way so there would be no rebellion and God would be honored.

9 “The rod of Aaron was found not only to have blossomed but also to bear fruit.”

later in the same passage

“Undoubtedly he knew; but he acted this way so that there might be no sedition in Israel, and that the name of the true and only God might be glorified; to whom be glory forever and ever.”

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Clement of Rome,** *First Epistle to the Corinthians* **Source 28, page 8** Read it in the library ›
THF's updated English

POINT 7 OF 7

Ignatius describes one bishop with presbyters and deacons

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

Ignatius describes the church as gathered around one bishop, together with the presbyters and deacons. This is the shape of leadership in the churches Ignatius wrote to. The quote is from the longer version of the letter.

10 “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 2, page 6** Read it in the library ›
THF's updated English

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THE LIMITS

What these passages don’t tell us

- These passages do not describe a full step-by-step service for ordaining a leader, or explain exactly how a church gave its consent.
- Tertullian and Irenaeus tell Rome's early list differently: one says Peter ordained Clement, the other puts Linus and Anacletus before Clement.
- The rule that bishops ordain by laying on hands comes from the Apostolic Constitutions, a work written later than Clement and the Didache.
- 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 28 early Christian passages and 62 Bible verses we kept for this question (repeats and weak or off-topic search hits were left out): early Christian passages first (sources 1–28, grouped by writer, earliest first), then Bible verses in The Faith Once Delivered Bible (sources 29–45, in Bible order), then 45 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 *28 passages from 10 writers*

Didache, *c. 50–120 AD · source 1*

1 *Teaching of the Twelve Apostles* 15 (1885 English) **Quote 3, page 3** “appoint for yourselves bishops and deacons worthy of the Lord, men meek, and not lovers of money, 1 Timothy 3:4 and truthful and proven… [continues online] **read ›**

Ignatius of Antioch, *c. 98–117 AD · sources 2–7*

2 *Epistle to the Philadelphians* **Quote 10, page 5** “to those that command them; deacons to the presbyters, as to high priests… [continues online] **read ›**

3 *Epistle to the Smyrnaeans* (on point 7) “deacons to the presbyters; the presbyters to the bishop… [continues online] **read ›**

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

5 *Epistles of Ignatius* (on point 7) “But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to fulfill its lusts." Presbyters, be subject to the bishop; deacons, to the presbyters; and you… [continues online] **read ›**

6 *Epistles of Ignatius* (1885 English; on point 7) “ye subject to the bishop, to the presbyters, and to the deacons… [continues online] **read ›**

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7 *Epistles of Ignatius* (on point 7) “the people be subject to the presbyters and the deacons… [continues online] **read ›**

Polycarp, *c. 100–155 AD · source 8*

8 *Epistle to the Philippians* (1885 English) **Quote 4, page 3** “it is needful to abstain from all these things, being subject to the presbyters and deacons, as unto God and Christ… [continues online] **read ›**

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

9 *Against Heresies: Book III* **Quote 6, page 4** “blessed apostles, having established and built up the Church, entrusted the role of the episcopate to Linus. Paul mentions Linus in the Epistles to Timothy. Anacletus succeeded him, and after… [continues online] **read ›**

10 *Against Heresies: Book III* (on point 4) was not only taught by the apostles and spoke with many who had seen Christ, but he was also appointed by apostles in Asia to be the bishop of the… [continues online] **read ›**

11 *Against Heresies: Book III* (1885 English; on point 4) “do this, I say,] by indicating that tradition derived from the apostles, of the very great, the very ancient, and universally known Church founded and organized at Rome by the… [continues online] **read ›**

Tertullian, *c. 196–220 AD · sources 12–14*

12 *On Prescription Against Heretics* 32 (1885 English) **Quote 5, page 4** “after their blasphemy, what is there that is unlawful for them (to attempt… [continues online] **read ›**

13 *De Fuga in Persecutione* 13 (1885 English; on point 2) “the apostles, with so much foresight, make the office of overseer of this type, that the occupants might be able to enjoy their rule free from anxiety, under color of… [continues online] **read ›**

14 *On Monogamy* 12 (on point 3) persons, he does not prescribe to all." Does it then also follow that he does not prescribe to bishops alone what he does enjoin upon all, if what he does… [continues online] **read ›**

Origen, *c. 215–254 AD · source 15*

15 *Commentary on Matthew* 14 (on point 3) of the sacraments, to enter a second marriage. For when he lays down the rule about bishops in the First Epistle to Timothy, he says, "If a man seeks the… [continues online] **read ›**

Cyprian, *c. 248–258 AD · sources 16–17*

16 *Epistles* (on point 1) “But deacons ought to remember that the Lord chose apostles, that is, bishops and overseers… [continues online] **read ›**

17 *Epistles* 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 ›**

Apostolic Constitutions, *c. 250–380 AD · sources 18–24*

18 *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 ›**

19 *Apostolic Constitutions* (1885 English; on point 5) “constitutions concerning this mystical worship, we, the apostles, do ordain for you, the bishops, presbyters, and deacons… [continues online] **read ›**

20 *Apostolic Constitutions* (1885 English; on point 3) “Do you first ordain bishops worthy of the Lord, and presbyters and deacons, pious men, righteous, meek, free from the love of money, lovers of truth, approved, holy, not accepters… [continues online] **read ›**

21 *Apostolic Constitutions* (1885 English; on point 5) “that imposition of hands shall be to him instead of baptism: for by the laying on of our hands the Holy Ghost was given to believers… [continues online] **read ›**

22 *Apostolic Constitutions* **Quote 8, page 5** constitution. A bishop gives the blessing, but does not receive the blessing. He lays on hands, ordains, offers, and receives the blessing from bishops, but never from presbyters. A bishop… [continues online] **read ›**

23 *Apostolic Constitutions* (on point 5) undergo the punishment of the companions of Korah. Numbers 16. We do not permit presbyters to ordain deacons, deaconesses, readers, ministers, singers, or doorkeepers, but only bishops, for this is… [continues online] **read ›**

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24 *Apostolic Constitutions* (1885 English) **Quote 7, page 4** "5:4 For such sacred offices are conferred by the laying on of the hands of the bishop… [continues online] **read ›**

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

25 *Disputation with Manes* 1 (on point 1) laid our foundation, that is, the foundation of the Church, and has put us in trust of the law, appointing ministers and presbyters and bishops in it. He also describes… [continues online] **read ›**

Clement of Rome · *sources 26–28*

26 *First Epistle to the Corinthians* **Quote 1, page 2** "Thus, preaching through countries and cities, they appointed the first-fruits of… [continues online] **read ›**

27 *First Epistle to the Corinthians* **Quote 2, page 3** "instructed that when these ministers passed away, other approved men should succeed them in their ministry. We believe, therefore, that those appointed by them, or later by other distinguished men… [continues online] **read ›**

28 *First Epistle to the Corinthians* **Quote 9, page 5** themselves over which of them should be honored with that glorious title, he commanded the twelve leaders of the tribes to bring him their rods, each one inscribed with the… [continues online] **read ›**

THE BIBLE *17 verses, The Faith Once Delivered Bible (Old Testament from the Septuagint), in Bible order*

29 **Numbers 17:2** "Speak to the children of Israel, and take from them a rod, a rod for each house of their families, from all their leaders by the houses of their families, twelve rods; and write each man's name on his rod. (Septuagint Numbers 17:17 (Numbers 17:2 in most Bibles)) **read ›**

30 **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 ›**

31 **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 ›**

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

33 **Acts 8:19** saying, "Give me this authority too, so that anyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit." **read ›**

34 **Acts 13:3** Then, when they had fasted and prayed and laid their hands on them, they sent them away. **read ›**

35 **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 ›**

36 **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 ›**

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

38 **1 Timothy 3:1** The saying is trustworthy: if anyone aspires to the office of bishop, he desires a good work. **read ›**

39 **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 ›**

40 **1 Timothy 3:8** Deacons likewise must be dignified, not double-tongued, not given to much wine, not greedy for shameful gain, **read ›**

41 **1 Timothy 3:12** Let deacons be husbands of one wife, ruling their children and their own houses well. **read ›**

42 **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 ›**

43 **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 ›**

44 **Hebrews 3:5** Moses indeed was faithful in all his house as a servant, for a testimony of those things which were afterward to be spoken, **read ›**

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

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ALSO LINKED BY THF TO THESE PASSAGES *45 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 63:3

Matthew 5:6 · 5:42 · 10:5 · 20:28

Mark 7:9 · 10:43 · 13:35

Luke 10:16 · 11:23 · 12:35 · 12:47 · 12:50 · 15:21 · 16:9 · 22:32

John 20:22

Acts 1:8 · 9:5

Romans 8:16 · 13:14

1 Corinthians 6:9 · 6:10 · 9:25 · 14:33

Galatians 1:10 · 3:27 · 5:16 · 6:1 · 6:7

Ephesians 4:2 · 5:22

Philippians 1:18 · 1:27 · 4:8

1 Timothy 3:4 · 5:9 · 6:16

2 Timothy 2:12 · 2:15 · 4:6

Hebrews 13:17

1 Peter 2:11 · 5:2

1 John 2:27

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

ABOUT THIS STUDY

A THF member asked “How did the apostles and early Christians appoint leaders in the churches?” on April 9, 2026. The Historic Faith answered it as a public study on November 9, 2026.

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THE END OF THIS STUDY