THE QUESTION

How much authority did early church elders have, and what kept them from abusing it?

Asked by a THF member on September 9, 2026 · published November 9, 2026 · 12 numbered quotations · the 14 early Christian passages and 34 Bible verses we kept are listed at the back, each with a link.

Read it online: thehistoricfaith.com/early-church-questions/how-much-authority-did-early-church-elders-have-and-what-kept-them-from

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

Early church leaders had real authority to teach, guide and correct, but the church belonged to Christ, not to them. They were tested and approved by the people, held to high moral standards, told to correct gently, and warned that they would answer to God. Big decisions were often made together.

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 8

The flock belongs to the Lord

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

Irenaeus recalls Paul's farewell to the elders of Ephesus. Paul tells them to watch over themselves first, and then the flock. The Holy Spirit gave them their office, but the church is the Lord's, bought with His blood. Paul also warns that harmful men may rise from among the leaders themselves.

1

“Be careful, then, both about yourselves and all the flock over which the Holy Spirit has made you bishops, to lead the Church of the Lord, which He has acquired for Himself through His own blood.””

later in the same passage

“Even from among your own number, men will arise, speaking twisted things to draw followers after them.””

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Irenaeus,** *Against Heresies: Book III* (c. 175–202 AD) **Source 2, page 7** **Read it in the library ›**

THF's updated English

POINT 2 OF 8

Leaders receive their mission, not invent it

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

Clement of Rome traces a clear line. God sent Christ, Christ sent the apostles, and the apostles appointed bishops and deacons. The leaders served a message they had received. They were also tested by the Spirit before they were put in office.

2

“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.”

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Clement of Rome,** *First Epistle to the Corinthians* **Source 14, page 7** **Read it in the library ›**

THF's updated English

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POINT 3 OF 8

The people tested and approved their leaders

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

In the Apostolic Constitutions, a bishop is chosen with the whole people taking part. They are asked more than once whether he is fair to others, runs his home well and lives a blameless life. Only when they agree is he ordained. Character is checked before power is given.

3 “When he has been named and approved, let the people gather on the Lord's Day, together with the presbytery and the bishops who are present, and let them give their consent.”

later in the same passage

“If they agree, let him ask further whether he has a good testimony from all men concerning his fitness for so great and glorious an authority; whether everything relating to his piety toward God is right; whether he has practiced justice toward men; whether he has managed the affairs of his household well; and whether he has been blameless in the course of his life.”

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Apostolic Constitutions** **Source 12, page 7** **Read it in the library ›**
(c. 250–380 AD)
THF's updated English

POINT 4 OF 8

Leaders must not be violent or greedy

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

Tertullian mocks people who think Paul's rules for bishops apply only to bishops. He lists the opposite traits, like being violent, quarrelsome and money-loving, to show how absurd that would be. He says the standard set for leaders shows every believer the order all must keep.

4 “No, indeed, be given to wine, prompt with the hand to strike, combative, money-loving, not ruling your house, nor caring for your children's discipline.”

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Tertullian,** *On Monogamy* **Source 5, page 7** **Read it in the library ›**
12 (c. 196–220 AD)
THF's updated English

5 “In this way the laity might better know that they themselves must keep that order which was indispensable to their overseers.”

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Tertullian,** *On Monogamy* **Source 4, page 7** **Read it in the library ›**
12 (c. 196–220 AD)
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POINT 5 OF 8

Their authority was real and came from Christ

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

The early writers did not treat leaders as mere advisers. The Apostolic Constitutions tell believers to honor a good shepherd, since hearing him is hearing Christ. Cyprian goes further and tells a bishop he may remove or exclude a proud deacon who keeps defying him, though he hopes for repentance first.

6 “For the one who hears him hears Christ, and the one who rejects him rejects Christ.”

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Apostolic Constitutions** **Source 10, page 7** Read it in the library ›
(c. 250–380 AD)
THF's updated English

7 “But if he also troubles and provokes you with his insults, you must use the authority of your office against him, either by removing him or by excommunicating him.”

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Cyprian,** *Epistles* **Source 7, page 7** Read it in the library ›
(c. 248–258 AD)
THF's updated English

POINT 6 OF 8

A bishop must correct gently, like a parent

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

The same book tells the bishop to love the people as his own children. He is to rebuke and warn, but never to strike or crush anyone. The goal of correction is always to heal people and bring them back, not to punish them or push them out.

8 “In the same way, let the bishop love the laity as his children, caring for them and cherishing them with loving diligence: like eggs, so that young may hatch; or like young birds, taking them in his arms so that they may be raised into birds.”

later in the same passage

“He must reprove, but not strike; bring them low so that they may be ashamed, but not ruin them; warn them so that they may be converted; and rebuke them so that they may be reformed and live better lives.”

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Apostolic Constitutions** **Source 10, page 7** Read it in the library ›
(c. 250–380 AD)
THF's updated English

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POINT 7 OF 8

No one may seize power God withheld

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

The Apostolic Constitutions warn against taking honors that were never given, and against acting like a tyrant. Cyprian shows another check: hard questions were settled by many bishops meeting together and weighing their judgments, with both discipline and mercy. No single leader was meant to act alone.

9

> "But because many think this is a small matter, and dare to confuse the orders, and to remove the ordination that belongs to each one, taking for themselves dignities that were never given to them, and allowing themselves in a tyrannical way to bestow that authority which they do not themselves have, they provoke God to anger, as did the followers of Corah and King Uzziah."

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Apostolic Constitutions** (c. 250–380 AD) **Source 11, page 7** **Read it in the library ›**
THF's updated English

10

> "And although it had previously been decided by us, by the confessors, by the city clergy, and also by all the bishops appointed either in our province or across the sea, that no novelty should be introduced concerning the case of the lapsed unless we all gathered in one place and, after comparing our judgments, decided on a balanced sentence, tempered both with discipline and with mercy, they have rebelled against this decision, and all priestly authority and power are destroyed by their rebellious conspiracies."

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Cyprian,** *Epistles* (c. 248–258 AD) **Source 8, page 7** **Read it in the library ›**
THF's updated English

POINT 8 OF 8

Shepherds will answer to God for the flock

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

Tertullian says a good shepherd gives his life for the sheep, and leaders who run away leave others with no example to follow. Hermas warns that if sheep wander, the shepherds must give an account to the Lord. Leaders cannot blame the flock for their own failures.

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11 “And if the leaders themselves turn their backs, who among the common people will hope to persuade others to stand firm in the battle? Certainly, a good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep, according to the word of Moses, when the Lord Christ had not yet been revealed, but was already foreshadowed in Moses himself: "If You destroy this people," he says, "destroy me also along with it."”

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Tertullian,** *De Fuga in Persecutione* 11 (c. 196–220 AD) **Source 3, page 7** **Read it in the library ›**
THF's updated English

12 “But if He finds any of these sheep wandering away, woe to the shepherds! And if the shepherds themselves have wandered away, what answer will they give Him about their flock?”

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Hermas,** *Shepherd* (c. 90–150 AD) **Source 1, page 7** **Read it in the library ›**
THF's updated English

THE LIMITS

What these passages don’t tell us

- These passages do not give a full step-by-step process for removing a leader who abuses his office.
- The writers do not all describe church order the same way; some, like Cyprian, give bishops very strong power to discipline those who defy them.
- Nothing here compares church leadership to running a business, so the passages cannot settle which modern planning methods fit a 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.

WHERE EVERY QUOTE CAME FROM

The Sources

The 14 early Christian passages and 34 Bible verses we kept for this question (repeats and weak or off-topic search hits were left out): early Christian passages first (sources 1–14, grouped by writer, earliest first), then Bible verses in The Faith Once Delivered Bible (sources 15–17, in Bible order), then 31 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).

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EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITERS *14 passages from 6 writers*

Hermas, *c. 90–150 AD · source 1*

1 *Shepherd* (1885 English) **Quote 12, page 6** "the other round stones, which had not yet been adapted to the building of the tower, and had not yet received the seal, were for this reason put back into… [continues online] **read ›**

Irenaeus, *c. 175–202 AD · source 2*

2 *Against Heresies: Book III* (1885 English) **Quote 1, page 2** "But that Paul taught with simplicity what he knew, not only to those who were [employed] with him, but to those that heard him, he does himself make manifest. For… [continues online] **read ›**

Tertullian, *c. 196–220 AD · sources 3–5*

3 *De Fuga in Persecutione* 11 (1885 English) **Quote 11, page 6** "Thus ought every servant of God to feel and act, even one in an inferior place, that he may come to have a more important one, if he has made… [continues online] **read ›**

4 *On Monogamy* 12 (1885 English) **Quote 5, page 3** "withal, to the very subtle argumentation on the contrary side. So true is it, say (our opponents), that the apostle has permitted the iteration of marriage, that it is only… [continues online] **read ›**

5 *On Monogamy* 12 **Quote 4, page 3** "now, you who think that an exceptional law of monogamy is made… [continues online] **read ›**

Cyprian, *c. 248–258 AD · sources 6–9*

6 *Epistles* (1885 English; on point 7) "We add, however, and connect with what we have said, dearest brother, with common consent and authority, that if, again, any presbyters or deacons, who either have been before ordained… [continues online] **read ›**

7 *Epistles* **Quote 7, page 4** "But deacons ought to remember that the Lord chose apostles, that is… [continues online] **read ›**

8 *Epistles* (1885 English) **Quote 10, page 5** "But I pray you, brethren, watch against the snares of the devil, and, taking care for your own salvation, be diligently on your guard against this death-bearing fallacy. This… [continues online] **read ›**

9 *Epistles* (1885 English; on point 7) "And, moreover, that it may be better understood what is the divine judgment against audacity of the like kind, we find that in such wickedness, not only the leaders and… [continues online] **read ›**

Apostolic Constitutions, *c. 250–380 AD · sources 10–13*

10 *Apostolic Constitutions* (1885 English) **Quotes 6, 8, page 4** "As to a good shepherd, let the lay person honour him, love him, reverence him as his lord, as his master, as the high priest of God, as a teacher… [continues online] **read ›**

11 *Apostolic Constitutions* (1885 English) **Quote 9, page 5** "Now this we all in common do charge you, that every one remain in that rank which is appointed him, and do not transgress his proper bounds; for they are… [continues online] **read ›**

12 *Apostolic Constitutions* (1885 English) **Quote 3, page 3** "Wherefore we, the twelve apostles of the Lord, who are now together, give you in charge those divine constitutions concerning every ecclesiastical form, there being present with us Paul the… [continues online] **read ›**

13 *Apostolic Constitutions* (1885 English; on point 3) "And I Simon the Canaanite make a constitution to determine by how many a bishop ought to be elected. Let a bishop be ordained by three or two bishops; but… [continues online] **read ›**

Clement of Rome · *source 14*

14 *First Epistle to the Corinthians* **Quote 2, page 2** "apostles have preached the Gospel to us from the Lord Jesus Christ; Jesus Christ has done so from… [continues online] **read ›**

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THE BIBLE *3 verses, The Faith Once Delivered Bible (Old Testament from the Septuagint), in Bible order*

15 **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 ›**

16 **Luke 10:16** Whoever listens to you listens to me, and whoever rejects you rejects me. Whoever rejects me rejects him who sent me.” **read ›**

17 **John 10:11** I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. **read ›**

ALSO LINKED BY THF TO THESE PASSAGES *31 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 · 9:2 · 9:12 · 10:5 · 18:3 · 18:12 · 19:14 · 20:25

Mark 5:34 · 7:9

Luke 5:20 · 8:18 · 11:23 · 12:47 · 12:50 · 15:4 · 19:10

John 10:12 · 20:22

Acts 1:8 · 9:5

1 Corinthians 6:10 · 9:25 · 14:33

Galatians 3:27

Ephesians 4:2

Philippians 1:18

1 Timothy 3:1

Titus 1:6

1 John 2:27

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

ABOUT THIS STUDY

A THF member asked “How much authority did early church elders have, and what kept them from abusing it?” on September 9, 2026. The Historic Faith answered it as a public study on November 9, 2026.

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THE END OF THIS STUDY