THE QUESTION

Is apostolic succession a myth, or did the early church teach it?

Asked by a THF member on April 9, 2026 · published November 9, 2026 · 11 numbered quotations · the 22 early Christian passages and 80 Bible verses we kept are listed at the back, each with a link.

Read it online: thehistoricfaith.com/early-church-questions/is-apostolic-succession-a-myth-or-did-the-early-church-teach-it

The short answer *From the text: says what the passages say*

These early writers did not treat apostolic succession as a myth. They describe it as a known fact: apostles placed bishops in the churches, and those bishops had named successors down to their own day. They saw this line as a guard for the apostles' teaching, while insisting the teaching itself must still match the apostles.

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.

IN THIS STUDY

1	The apostles appointed the first bishops	**2**	**6**	A bishop with no predecessor was rejected	**4**
2	Irenaeus said the line could be traced	**2**	**7**	Believers were told to follow the succession	**5**
3	Churches named who placed their bishops	**3**	**8**	A list alone was not enough	**5**
4	Succession carried the apostles' teaching forward	**3**		What these passages don't tell us	**6**
5	Cyprian saw church order continuing through successions	**4**		The Sources: 22 early Christian passages and 80 Bible verses, with links	**6**

© 2026 The Historic Faith · Library only, never the web · For personal study; please don't republish.

POINT 1 OF 8

The apostles appointed the first bishops

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

Clement of Rome says God sent Christ and Christ sent the apostles. As the apostles preached, they tested their first converts and made them bishops and deacons for the believers who would come later.

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."

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Clement of Rome,** *First Epistle to the Corinthians* **Source 22, page 8** Read it in the library ›

THF's updated English

POINT 2 OF 8

Irenaeus said the line could be traced

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

Irenaeus speaks of succession as something anyone could check. He says the church can name the bishops the apostles appointed and show who followed them up to his own time.

2

"It is within the power of all, therefore, in every Church, who wish to see the truth, to clearly contemplate the tradition of the apostles shown throughout the whole world; and we are able to identify those who were appointed as bishops in the Churches by the apostles, and to demonstrate the succession of these men to our own times, those who neither taught nor knew of anything like what these heretics rave about."

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Irenaeus,** *Against Heresies: Book III* (c. 175–202 AD) **Source 6, page 6** Read it in the library ›

THF's updated English

© 2026 The Historic Faith · Library only, never the web · For personal study; please don't republish.

POINT 3 OF 8

Churches named who placed their bishops

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

Tertullian gives concrete examples rather than a vague idea. The church at Smyrna pointed to John, and the church at Rome pointed to Peter, as the apostles who set their bishops in place.

3 “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 11, page 7** Read it in the library ›
THF's updated English

POINT 4 OF 8

Succession carried the apostles' teaching forward

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

Origen and Irenaeus both link succession to teaching. The church's teaching, they say, came down in order from the apostles and was still kept in the churches, so it was the measure for testing new ideas.

4 “In the same way, since there are many who think they hold the opinions of Christ, and yet some of them think differently from those before them, the teaching of the Church, handed down in orderly succession from the apostles and remaining in the Churches to the present day, is still preserved.”

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Origen,** *De Principiis (On First Principles)* (c. 215–254 AD) **Source 15, page 7** Read it in the library ›
THF's updated English

5 “But, again, when we refer them to the tradition that originates from the apostles and is preserved through the succession of presbyters in the Churches, they object to tradition, claiming they are wiser not only than the presbyters but even than the apostles, because they have discovered the unadulterated truth.”

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Irenaeus,** *Against Heresies: Book III* (c. 175–202 AD) **Source 7, page 6** Read it in the library ›
THF's updated English

© 2026 The Historic Faith · Library only, never the web · For personal study; please don’t republish.

POINT 5 OF 8

Cyprian saw church order continuing through successions

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

Cyprian reads Christ's words to Peter as the start of the church's order. From there, he says, the line of bishops continues through the generations, and the church's life is guided by them.

6 “From there, through the changes of times and successions, the ordering of bishops and the arrangement of the Church continues on.”

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Cyprian,** *Epistles* (c. 248–258 AD) **Source 17, page 7** Read it in the library ›

THF's updated English

POINT 6 OF 8

A bishop with no predecessor was rejected

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

Cyprian refuses to count a man as bishop who followed no one and simply set himself up. For him, a real bishop takes the place of another through lawful ordination in the church.

7 “Nor can he be counted as a bishop who succeeded no one and, despising the evangelical and apostolic tradition, arose from himself.”

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Cyprian,** *Epistles* (c. 248–258 AD) **Source 18, page 7** Read it in the library ›

THF's updated English

8 “Or how can he be considered a pastor when the true Shepherd remains and presides over the Church of God through successive ordination, yet he succeeds no one and begins from himself?”

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Cyprian,** *Epistles* (c. 248–258 AD) **Source 19, page 7** Read it in the library ›

THF's updated English

© 2026 The Historic Faith · Library only, never the web · For personal study; please don’t republish.

POINT 7 OF 8

Believers were told to follow the succession

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

Irenaeus urges obedience to the presbyters who hold the succession from the apostles. He links that succession with receiving the gift of truth.

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

POINT 8 OF 8

A list alone was not enough

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

Tertullian says that even if a group invented a list of bishops, its teaching would still give it away. Clement of Alexandria likewise stresses that the apostles had one teaching and one tradition. Succession and true doctrine went together.

10 “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) **Source 11, page 7** **Read it in the library ›**
THF's updated English

11 “For just as the apostles' teaching was one, so also their tradition was one.”

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Clement of Alexandria,** *Stromata* 7.17 (c. 190–215 AD) **Source 9, page 7** **Read it in the library ›**
THF's updated English

© 2026 The Historic Faith · Library only, never the web · For personal study; please don’t republish.

THE LIMITS

What these passages don't tell us

- These passages show what early writers believed and practiced; they do not trace every church's line of bishops.
- They do not settle later disputes over which churches today keep this succession.
- 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 80 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 23–67, in Bible order), then 35 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 9 writers*

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

1 *Epistle to the Smyrnaeans* "deacons to the presbyters; the presbyters to the bishop… [continues online] **read ›**

2 *Epistle to the Smyrnaeans* (1885 English) "that ye all follow the bishop, even as Christ Jesus does the Father, and the presbytery as ye would the apostles… [continues online] **read ›**

3 *Epistle to the Trallians* (1885 English) "like manner, let all reverence the deacons as an appointment of Jesus Christ, and the bishop as Jesus Christ, who is the Son of the Father, and the presbyters as… [continues online] **read ›**

Irenaeus, *c. 175–202 AD · sources 4–8*

4 *Against Heresies: Book III* (1885 English; on point 2) "it is a matter of necessity that every Church should agree with this Church, on account of its pre-eminent authority, that is, the faithful everywhere, inasmuch as the apostolical… [continues online] **read ›**

5 *Against Heresies: Book IV* (1885 English; on point 4) "True knowledge is [that which consists in] the doctrine of the apostles, and the ancient constitution of the Church throughout all the world, and the distinctive manifestation of the body… [continues online] **read ›**

6 *Against Heresies: Book III* (1885 English) **Quote 2, page 2** "we are in a position to reckon up those who were by the apostles instituted bishops in the Churches, and [to demonstrate] the succession of these men to our own… [continues online] **read ›**

7 *Against Heresies: Book III* (1885 English) **Quote 5, page 3** "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 ›**

© 2026 The Historic Faith · Library only, never the web · For personal study; please don't republish.

8 *Against Heresies: Book IV* **Quote 9, page 5** "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 · sources 9–10*

9 *Stromata* 7.17 (1885 English) **Quote 11, page 5** "as the teaching, so also the tradition of the apostles was one… [continues online] **read ›**

10 *Stromata* 1.1 (1885 English; on point 4) "they preserving the tradition of the blessed doctrine derived directly from the holy apostles, Peter, James, John, and Paul, the sons receiving it from the father (but few were like… [continues online] **read ›**

Tertullian, *c. 196–220 AD · sources 11–13*

11 *On Prescription Against Heretics* 32 **Quotes 3, 10, pages 3, 5** "in the time of the apostles, we can say this: Let them bring out the original records of their churches. Let them unfold the list of their bishops, coming down… [continues online] **read ›**

12 *Against Marcion* 21 (1885 English; on point 4) "that no other teaching will have the right of being received as apostolic than that which is at the present day proclaimed in the churches of apostolic foundation… [continues online] **read ›**

13 *On Prescription Against Heretics* 20 (1885 English; on point 4) "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 ›**

Hippolytus, *c. 200–236 AD · source 14*

14 *Refutation of All Heresies* 1 (1885 English) "we, as being their successors, and as participators in this grace, high-priesthood, and office of teaching, as well as being reputed guardians of the Church, must not be found… [continues online] **read ›**

Origen, *c. 215–254 AD · source 15*

15 *De Principiis (On First Principles)* (1885 English) **Quote 4, page 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 16–19*

16 *Epistles* (on point 6) 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 ›**

17 *Epistles* **Quote 6, page 4** "through the changes of times and successions, the… [continues online] **read ›**

18 *Epistles* (1885 English) **Quote 7, page 4** "can he be reckoned as a bishop, who, succeeding to no one, and despising the evangelical and apostolic tradition, sprang from himself… [continues online] **read ›**

19 *Epistles* (1885 English) **Quote 8, page 4** "how can he be esteemed a pastor, who — while the true shepherd remains and presides over the Church of God by successive ordination — succeeding to no one, and beginning from… [continues online] **read ›**

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

20 *Apostolic Constitutions* (on point 1) "among us, you 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… [continues online] **read ›**

21 *Apostolic Constitutions* (1885 English; on point 1) "this we did in every city, everywhere through the whole world, and have left to you the bishops and to the rest of the priests this very Catholic doctrine worthily… [continues online] **read ›**

© 2026 The Historic Faith · Library only, never the web · For personal study; please don't republish.

Clement of Rome · *source 22*

22 *First Epistle to the Corinthians* **Quote 1, page 2** 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. Nor was this a… [continues online] **read ›**

THE BIBLE *45 verses, The Faith Once Delivered Bible (Old Testament from the Septuagint), in Bible order*

23 **Exodus 29:30** The priest from among his sons who succeeds him, who goes into the tabernacle of witness to minister in the holy place, shall put them on for seven days. **read ›**

24 **Numbers 10:13** They set out first by the voice of the Lord, by the hand of Moses. **read ›**

25 **Numbers 15:23** just as the Lord commanded you by the hand of Moses, from the day the Lord gave the command to you and onward throughout your generations, **read ›**

26 **Numbers 27:17** who shall go out before them and who shall come in before them, who shall lead them out and who shall bring them in, so that the congregation of the Lord may not be like sheep that have no shepherd." **read ›**

27 **Job 8:18** If it swallows him up, his place will deny him. Have you not seen such things, **read ›**

28 **Proverbs 14:19** The evil will fall before the good, and the ungodly will wait at the doors of the righteous. **read ›**

29 **Song of Solomon 2:11** For behold, the winter is past, the rain is over, it has gone its way. **read ›**

30 **Isaiah 15:3** Wrap yourselves in sackcloth in her squares, and lament on her rooftops and in her lanes; all of you, wail with weeping. **read ›**

31 **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 ›**

32 **1 Esdras 5:40** And Nehemiah and Attharias told them not to share in the holy things until a high priest should arise clothed with the Manifestation and the Truth. **read ›**

33 **1 Esdras 8:89** O Lord of Israel, you are true; for we are left a root this day. **read ›**

34 **Judith 8:18** For there has not arisen in our generations, nor is there this day, any tribe or family or clan or city of ours that worships gods made with hands, as it was in former days; **read ›**

35 **Wisdom of Sirach 45:15** Moses filled his hands and anointed him with holy oil; it became for him an everlasting covenant, and for his seed for the days of heaven, to minister to the Lord and to serve as priest together, and to bless his people in his name. **read ›**

36 **Baruch 3:19** have vanished and gone down to Hades, and others have risen up in their place. **read ›**

37 **Letter of Jeremiah 1:44** All that is done among them is false. How then is anyone to think or to say that they are gods? **read ›**

38 **1 Maccabees 14:19** And these were read before the assembly in Jerusalem. **read ›**

39 **1 Maccabees 14:38** And King Demetrius confirmed him in the high priesthood accordingly, **read ›**

40 **1 Maccabees 14:41** and that the Jews and the priests were well pleased that Simon should be their leader and high priest forever, until a faithful prophet should arise; **read ›**

41 **2 Maccabees 9:23** But I observed that my father, at the times when he marched into the upper country, appointed the one who would succeed him, **read ›**

42 **3 Maccabees 2:11** Open the verse to read it. **read ›**

43 **4 Maccabees 12:17** Open the verse to read it. **read ›**

44 **4 Maccabees 15:3** Open the verse to read it. **read ›**

45 **4 Maccabees 18:10** Open the verse to read it. **read ›**

46 **1 Enoch 69:10** Open the verse to read it. **read ›**

47 **1 Enoch 93:9** Open the verse to read it. **read ›**

48 **Matthew 16:18** And I also say to you that you are Peter, and on this rock I shall build my church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it. **read ›**

49 **Luke 1:5** In the days of Herod, king of Judea, there was a priest named Zacharias, of the division of Abijah. His wife was of the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. **read ›**

© 2026 The Historic Faith · Library only, never the web · For personal study; please don't republish.

50 **Acts 2:42** They continued steadfastly in the apostles' teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers. **read ›**

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

52 **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 ›**

53 **Acts 26:3** especially because you are expert in all customs and questions which are among the Jews. Therefore I beg you to hear me patiently. **read ›**

54 **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 ›**

55 **1 Corinthians 12:29** Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Are all miracle workers? **read ›**

56 **2 Corinthians 11:13** For such men are false apostles, deceitful workers, masquerading as Christ's apostles. **read ›**

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

58 **1 Timothy 1:4** nor to pay attention to myths and endless genealogies, which produce disputes rather than God's stewardship, which is exercised in faithfulness. **read ›**

59 **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 ›**

60 **1 Timothy 3:1** The saying is trustworthy: if anyone aspires to the office of bishop, he desires a good work. **read ›**

61 **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 ›**

62 **1 Timothy 3:15** but if I am delayed, I write so that you may know how one ought to conduct oneself in God's house, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and support of the truth. **read ›**

63 **2 Timothy 2:2** And the things which you have heard from me among many witnesses, entrust to faithful men who will be able to teach others also. **read ›**

64 **2 Timothy 4:4** and they will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to fables. **read ›**

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

66 **2 Peter 1:16** For we did not follow cunningly devised fables when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty. **read ›**

67 **2 Peter 3:4** and saying, "Where is the promise of his coming? For, from the day that the fathers fell asleep, all things continue as they were from the beginning of the creation." **read ›**

ALSO LINKED BY THF TO THESE PASSAGES *35 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.

Proverbs 29:3

Isaiah 63:3

Matthew 5:6 · 5:15 · 10:5 · 11:27 · 12:32 · 24:12 · 24:24 · 28:19

Mark 4:21 · 4:34 · 7:9 · 16:15

Luke 10:16 · 11:23 · 12:47 · 12:50 · 18:8

John 1:3 · 1:8 · 5:17 · 20:22

Acts 1:1 · 1:8 · 1:15 · 9:5

Romans 16:21

1 Corinthians 6:10 · 9:25 · 14:33

Galatians 3:27

Ephesians 4:2

Philippians 1:18

1 John 2:27

© 2026 The Historic Faith · Library only, never the web · For personal study; please don't republish.

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

ABOUT THIS STUDY

A THF member asked “Is apostolic succession a myth, or did the early church teach it?” on April 9, 2026. The Historic Faith answered it as a public study on November 9, 2026.

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 above, 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.

How to cite this study. The Historic Faith, “Is apostolic succession a myth, or did the early church teach it?” Early Church Questions, published November 9, 2026, https://thehistoricfaith.com/early-church-questions/is-apostolic-succession-a-myth-or-did-the-early-church-teach-it. To cite one quotation, add its number and source, for example “quote 1, source 22.”

© 2026 The Historic Faith. Selection, arrangement and editing by THF; machine-compiled text and public-domain quotations are not claimed. For personal study; please don’t republish.

THEHISTORICFAITH.COM

THE END OF THIS STUDY