THE QUESTION

Was any bishop or elder called the head of the church, or only Jesus?

Asked by a THF member on April 19, 2026 · published November 9, 2026, updated November 11, 2026 · 10 numbered quotations · the 28 early Christian passages and 88 Bible verses we kept are listed at the back, each with a link.

Read it online: thehistoricfaith.com/early-church-questions/was-any-bishop-or-elder-called-the-head-of-the-church-or-only-jesus

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

In these writings only Christ is called the head of the Church. Bishops led each local church with real authority, but under God and Christ, with elders as their council. One later 4th-century church order tells each region's bishops to treat one chief bishop as their head. No passage names a head elder.

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 6

Christ is called the Head of the Church

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

Irenaeus, in the 2nd century, says the Father is above all and the Word, Christ, is Himself the Head of the Church. Dionysius of Alexandria repeats the title from Ephesians 5:23 and tells believers to keep the eyes of their mind fixed on Christ.

1 “The Father is truly above all and is the Head of Christ; the Word works through all things and is Himself the Head of the Church, while the Spirit dwells in us all.”

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

2 “Again, Christ is the head of the Church, Ephesians 5:23. Therefore, those who walk in His way are wise, for He Himself has said, "I am the way," John 14:6. For this reason, the wise person must always keep the eyes of his mind fixed on Christ Himself, so that he may do nothing excessively.”

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Dionysius of Alexandria,** *Exegetical Fragments* 2 (c. 232–265 AD) **Source 15, page 7** Read it in the library ›
THF's updated English

POINT 2 OF 6

Headship means authority that belongs to Christ

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

Discussing 1 Corinthians 11:3, "the head of every man is Christ," Tertullian says "head" here means authority, and that authority belongs to the one who made us. He adds that there is no room for another head. His target is a rival god, not church leaders.

3 “Here he has used "head" to mean authority. Now authority belongs to no one except the author.”

later in the same passage

“For if I am the image of the Creator, there is no room in me for another head.”

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Tertullian,** *Against Marcion* 8 (c. 196–220 AD) **Source 12, page 6** Read it in the library ›
THF's updated English

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POINT 3 OF 6

Bishops led local churches, but under God

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

Ignatius tells a congregation to follow its bishop, with the elders and deacons in their places, just as Jesus Christ follows the Father. In another letter he says elders who obey a young bishop are really submitting to the Father of Jesus Christ, whom he calls the bishop of us all.

4 “Ensure that you all follow the bishop, just as Jesus Christ follows the Father, and the presbytery as you would the apostles; and respect the deacons as being the institution of God. Let no one do anything related to the Church without the bishop.”

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Ignatius of Antioch,** *Epistle to the Smyrnaeans* (c. 98–117 AD) **Source 4, page 6** **Read it in the library ›**
THF's updated English

5 “It is important for you not to treat your bishop too casually because of his youth, but to show him full respect, honoring the authority of God the Father, as I have seen even holy elders do. They do not judge hastily based on their bishop's youthful appearance, but being wise in God, they submit to him—or rather, not to him, but to the Father of Jesus Christ, the bishop of us all.”

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

POINT 4 OF 6

Highest in his church, yet below Christ

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

The longer form of Ignatius's letters uses very strong words: no one in the Church is greater than the bishop. Yet he still puts God above all and calls Christ the only High Priest by nature. The elders are pictured as the bishop's council, not as a head elder.

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6 “For there is no one superior to God, or even like Him, among all beings that exist. Nor is there anyone in the Church greater than the bishop, who ministers as a priest to God for the salvation of the whole world.”

later in the same passage

“For the priesthood is the highest point of all good things among men, against which anyone mad enough to strive dishonors not man, but God, and Christ Jesus, the First-born, and the only High Priest by nature, of the Father.”

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

7 “And what is the presbytery but a sacred assembly, the counselors and advisers of the bishop?”

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 5 OF 6

A later rule names a regional chief bishop

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

The Apostolic Constitutions, a later 4th-century church order, says the bishops of each country should know who is chief among them and regard him as their head. This is headship among fellow bishops in one region, and he must still act with the consent of all.

8 “The bishops of every country ought to know who is chief among them and regard him as their head. They should not do any important thing without his consent. But each one should manage only the matters that belong to his own parish and the places under it. But let him also do nothing without the consent of all.”

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Apostolic Constitutions** (c. 250–380 AD) **Source 20, page 7** Read it in the library ›
THF's updated English

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POINT 6 OF 6

Many bishops shared one office together

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

Cyprian, in the 3rd century, speaks of one Church spread through the world and one office of bishop spread through many bishops. He calls the bishop of Rome "our colleague," chosen by God and confirmed by his fellow bishops. He stresses their unity rather than naming one human head over all.

9 “And although there is one Church, which Christ has spread throughout the whole world into many members, and also one episcopate spread abroad through the united number of many bishops, he still tries, in spite of God's tradition and in spite of the joined and firmly connected unity of the Catholic Church everywhere, to make a merely human church.”

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

10 “I now come, dearest brother, to the character of Cornelius our colleague, so that with us you may rightly know Cornelius, not from the lies of malicious people and slanderers, but from the judgment of the Lord God, who made him a bishop, and from the testimony of his fellow bishops, whose whole number has agreed with complete unity throughout the whole world.”

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Cyprian,** *Epistles* (c. 248–258 AD) **Source 16, page 7** Read it in the library ›
THF's updated English

THE LIMITS

What these passages don’t tell us

- None of these passages calls anyone a head elder.
- They do not settle how far a regional chief bishop's authority reached.
- The only passage that calls a bishop a head comes from the later Apostolic Constitutions, and the strongest Ignatius lines come from a longer form of his letters.
- 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 28 early Christian passages and 88 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 29–55, in Bible order), then 61 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 9 writers*

Ignatius of Antioch, *c. 98–117 AD · sources 1–6*

1. *Epistle to the Philadelphians* (on point 3) "one faith, and one type of preaching, and one Eucharist. For there is one flesh of the Lord Jesus Christ, and His blood, which was shed for us, is one… [continues online] **read ›**
2. *Epistle to the Smyrnaeans* (on point 3) that you all follow the bishop, just as Christ Jesus does the Father, and the presbytery as you would the apostles. Also, show reverence to the deacons, as those who… [continues online] **read ›**
3. *Epistle to the Smyrnaeans* **Quote 6, page 4** "deacons to the presbyters; the presbyters to the bishop… [continues online] **read ›**
4. *Epistle to the Smyrnaeans* **Quote 4, page 3** that you all follow the bishop, just as Jesus Christ follows the Father, and the presbytery as you would the apostles; and respect the deacons as being the institution of… [continues online] **read ›**
5. *Epistle to the Trallians* **Quote 7, page 4** him who is humble and quiet and trembles at my words?" Also, you should reverence your bishop as Christ Himself, according to the instructions of the blessed apostles. He who… [continues online] **read ›**
6. *Epistle to the Magnesians* **Quote 5, page 3** "It is important for you not to treat your bishop too casually because of his youth, but to show him full respect, honoring the authority of God the Father, as I have seen even holy elders do. They do not judge hastily based on their bishop's youthful appearance, but being wise in God, they submit to him—or rather, not to him, but to the Father of Jesus Christ, the bishop of us all." **read ›**

Irenaeus, *c. 175–202 AD · source 7*

7. *Against Heresies: Book V* (1885 English) **Quote 1, page 2** "the Word is through all things, and is Himself the Head of the Church… [continues online] **read ›**

Clement of Alexandria, *c. 190–215 AD · sources 8–9*

8. *Stromata* 5.6 (1885 English; on point 1) "the broad gold mitre indicates the regal power of the Lord, since the Head of the Church is the Savour… [continues online] **read ›**
9. *Stromata* 4.8 (1885 English; on point 1) I would have you know, says the apostle, that the head of every man is Christ; and the head of the woman is the man: for the man is not… [continues online] **read ›**

Tertullian, *c. 196–220 AD · sources 10–12*

10. *Against Marcion* 8 (on point 1) "he says, "even as Christ is the head of the Church… [continues online] **read ›**
11. *Against Praxeas* 14 (on point 2) "the head of Christ is God," 1 Corinthians 11:3… [continues online] **read ›**
12. *Against Marcion* 8 **Quote 3, page 2** "Here he has used "head" to mean authority. Now authority belongs to no one except the author." **read ›**

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

13 *Against Celsus* 79 (on point 1) “since Christ is the Head of the Church, so that Christ and the Church form one body, the… [continues online] **read ›**

14 *Commentary on Matthew* 12 (1885 English) “if the gates of Hades prevail against any one, such an one cannot be a rock upon which Christ builds the church, nor the church built by Jesus upon the… [continues online] **read ›**

Dionysius of Alexandria, *c. 232–265 AD · source 15*

15 *Exegetical Fragments* 2 **Quote 2, page 2** “Christ is the head of the Church… [continues online] **read ›**

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

16 *Epistles* **Quote 10, page 5** world. For this is something that, with worthy praise, commends our dearest Cornelius to God and Christ, to His Church, and also to all his fellow priests: he was not… [continues online] **read ›**

17 *Epistles* **Quote 9, page 5** And although there is one Church, which Christ has spread throughout the whole world into many members, and also one episcopate spread abroad through the united number of many bishops… [continues online] **read ›**

18 *Epistles* (on point 6) “you ought to know that the bishop is in the Church, and the Church in the bishop… [continues online] **read ›**

19 *Epistles* (on point 6) “Lord, whose commands and warnings we ought to keep, describes the honor of a bishop and the order of His Church in the Gospel. He says to Peter: “I say… [continues online] **read ›**

Apostolic Constitutions, *c. 250–380 AD · sources 20–27*

20 *Apostolic Constitutions* (1885 English) **Quote 8, page 4** “The bishops of every country ought to know who is the chief among them, and to esteem him as their head, and not to do any great thing without his… [continues online] **read ›**

21 *Apostolic Constitutions* the wife be obedient to her own proper husband, because the husband is the head of the wife… [continues online] **read ›**

22 *Apostolic Constitutions* (1885 English) if the head of the wife be the man… [continues online] **read ›**

23 *Apostolic Constitutions* (1885 English) if the man be the head of the woman… [continues online] **read ›**

24 *Apostolic Constitutions* (on point 6) “the canons, I also make this constitution. A bishop gives the blessing, but does not receive the blessing. He lays on hands, ordains, offers, and receives the blessing from bishops… [continues online] **read ›**

25 *Apostolic Constitutions* (1885 English; on point 4) “The bishop, he is the minister of the word, the keeper of knowledge, the mediator between God and you in the several parts of your divine worship… [continues online] **read ›**

26 *Apostolic Constitutions* (on point 4) now the deacon is to you what Aaron was, and the bishop what Moses was. If, therefore, Moses was called a god by the Lord, let the bishop be honored… [continues online] **read ›**

27 *Apostolic Constitutions* (1885 English; on point 3) “None But a Bishop and Presbyter, None Even of the Inferior Ranks of the Clergy, are Permitted to Do the Offices of the Priests… [continues online] **read ›**

Clement of Rome · *source 28*

28 *First Epistle to the Corinthians* (1885 English) us take our body for an example. The head is nothing without the feet, and the feet are nothing without the head; yea, the very smallest members of our body… [continues online] **read ›**

THE BIBLE *27 verses, The Faith Once Delivered Bible (Old Testament from the Septuagint), in Bible order*

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

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

31 **Matthew 23:8** But you are not to be called ‘Rabbi’, for one is your teacher, the Christ, and all of you are brothers. **read ›**

32 **Matthew 23:10** Neither be called teachers, for one is your teacher, the Christ. **read ›**

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33 **Luke 3:5** Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low; and the crooked places shall become straight, and the rough ways shall become smooth roads. **read ›**

34 **John 14:6** Jesus said to him, “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father, except through me. **read ›**

35 **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 ›**

36 **Acts 3:3** Seeing Peter and John about to enter the temple, he asked for alms. **read ›**

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

38 **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 ›**

39 **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 ›**

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

41 **Acts 20:28** Therefore pay attention to yourselves and to all the flock among whom the Holy Spirit has made you bishops, to shepherd the church of the Lord and God, which he purchased with his own blood. **read ›**

42 **1 Corinthians 3:23** and you are Christ’s, and Christ is God’s. **read ›**

43 **1 Corinthians 11:3** But I want you to know that the head of every man is Christ, the head of woman is man, and the head of Christ is God. **read ›**

44 **1 Corinthians 12:12** For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of that one body, though many, are one body, so also is Christ. **read ›**

45 **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 ›**

46 **Ephesians 1:22** And he subjected all things under his feet, and gave him to be head over all things for the church, **read ›**

47 **Ephesians 2:20** built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief cornerstone, **read ›**

48 **Ephesians 5:23** For the husband is the head of the wife, as Christ also is the head of the church, and he is the Savior of the body. **read ›**

49 **Colossians 1:18** He is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in all things he might have the preeminence. **read ›**

50 **1 Timothy 3:1** The saying is trustworthy: if anyone aspires to the office of bishop, he desires a good work. **read ›**

51 **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 ›**

52 **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 ›**

53 **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 ›**

54 **Hebrews 3:1** Therefore, holy brothers, partakers of a heavenly calling, consider the apostle and high priest of our confession, Jesus Christ, **read ›**

55 **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 ›**

ALSO LINKED BY THF TO THESE PASSAGES *61 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.

Deuteronomy 29:29

1 Chronicles 16:22

Psalms 45:3

Proverbs 30:19

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Isaiah 8:4

Matthew 5:14 · 7:24 · 12:36 · 16:18 · 16:19 · 17:3 · 20:5 · 22:1 · 28:19

Mark 9:4

Luke 2:49 · 4:18 · 7:35 · 10:16

John 1:1 · 1:3 · 1:10 · 1:14 · 4:12 · 4:14 · 7:39 · 13:23 · 14:28 · 20:22

1 Corinthians 1:30 · 5:13 · 10:4 · 13:12 · 14:34

2 Corinthians 3:18 · 6:17 · 11:31

Galatians 1:8 · 5:16 · 5:22

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

Colossians 3:3

1 John 4:12

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