THE QUESTION

What did apostolic succession look like in the early church?

Asked by a THF member on April 10, 2026 · published November 9, 2026 · 11 numbered quotations · the 34 early Christian passages and 79 Bible verses we kept are listed at the back, each with a link.

Read it online: thehistoricfaith.com/early-church-questions/what-did-apostolic-succession-look-like-in-the-early-church

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

In these writings, apostolic succession was a visible chain. The apostles appointed bishops in the churches, and each was followed by another, ordained by bishops with the people's consent. Churches could name their bishops back to the apostles, and this line was trusted to hand on the apostles' teaching unchanged.

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	Christ sent the apostles, who appointed bishops	**2**
2	Churches kept named lists of their bishops	**2**
3	Each church could trace its first bishop	**3**
4	The line guarded the apostles' teaching	**3**
5	Teaching passed from church to church	**4**
6	Bishops ordained new bishops with the people	**4**
7	Ordination came through the laying on of hands	**5**
8	One episcopate held the churches together	**5**
	What these passages don't tell us	**6**
	The Sources: 34 early Christian passages and 79 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

Christ sent the apostles, who appointed bishops

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 they preached, the apostles tested their first converts and made them bishops and deacons for those who would believe 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 33, page 8** **Read it in the library ›**
THF's updated English

POINT 2 OF 8

Churches kept named lists of their bishops

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

Irenaeus names the bishops of Rome one after another, starting with Linus, whom the apostles placed there. He counts Clement as third from the apostles, a man who had known them personally.

2

"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 5, 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

Each church could trace its first bishop

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

Tertullian says apostolic churches kept records showing who placed their first bishop. He gives Smyrna and Rome as examples, and says other churches could point to their own founders in the same way.

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

POINT 4 OF 8

The line guarded the apostles' teaching

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

Irenaeus points to the succession of bishops as public proof of what the apostles taught. If the apostles had secret teachings, he argues, they would have given them to the men they trusted with the churches.

4 “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 7, page 6** 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 8, 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 5 OF 8

Teaching passed from church to church

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

Tertullian describes the apostles founding churches in every city. Other churches then received the faith from these, so the same teaching spread outward from the apostles' own foundations.

6 “From these all the other churches, one after another, derived the tradition of the faith and the seeds of doctrine, and every day derive them, so that they may become churches.”

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Tertullian,** *On Prescription Against Heretics* 20 (c. 196–220 AD) **Source 13, page 7** **Read it in the library ›**
THF's updated English

POINT 6 OF 8

Bishops ordained new bishops with the people

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

Cyprian calls it an apostolic practice for nearby bishops to gather with the local people when a new bishop is ordained. Church rules in the Apostolic Constitutions likewise ask for a blameless man chosen by all the people.

7 “This is also maintained among us, and almost throughout all the provinces: for the proper celebration of ordinations, all the neighboring bishops of the same province should gather with the people for whom a prelate is being ordained.”

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

8 “He must be an excellent man, chosen by all the people.”

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Apostolic Constitutions** (c. 250–380 AD) **Source 22, 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

Ordination came through the laying on of hands

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

The Apostolic Constitutions tell the bishop to ordain a deacon by laying hands on him with prayer before the clergy. John Chrysostom adds that bishops, not presbyters, ordained a bishop.

9 “Concerning the ordination of deacons, I, Philip, make this constitution: O bishop, you shall ordain a deacon by laying your hands on him in the presence of the whole presbytery and the deacons, and you shall pray and say”

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Apostolic Constitutions** (c. 250–380 AD) **Source 23, page 7** Read it in the library ›
THF's updated English

10 “Here he is not speaking about Presbyters, but about Bishops. For Presbyters cannot be thought to have ordained a Bishop.”

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **John Chrysostom,** *Homilies on First Timothy* (c. 386–407 AD) **Source 32, page 8** Read it in the library ›
THF's updated English

POINT 8 OF 8

One episcopate held the churches together

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

Cyprian sees all the bishops as sharing one office across the whole world. He rejects a rival who sets himself up as bishop after a lawful one has been ordained, calling it an attempt to build a merely human church.

11 “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 15, 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 describe the pattern; they do not give a full list of bishops for every church.
- They do not settle every later dispute about how authority is shared among bishops.
- 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 34 early Christian passages and 79 Bible verses we kept for this question (repeats and weak or off-topic search hits were left out): early Christian passages first (sources 1–34, grouped by writer, earliest first), then Bible verses in The Faith Once Delivered Bible (sources 35–65, in Bible order), then 48 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 *34 passages from 11 writers*

Hermas, *c. 90–150 AD · source 1*

1 *Shepherd* (1885 English) square white stones which fitted exactly into each other, are apostles, bishops, teachers, and deacons… [continues online] **read ›**

Ignatius of Antioch, *c. 98–117 AD · sources 2–4*

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

4 *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 5–9*

5 *Against Heresies: Book III* **Quote 2, page 2** "He, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, was preached by the Churches and may also understand the apostolic tradition of the Church. This Epistle predates those who now spread… [continues online] **read ›**

6 *Against Heresies: Book III* (1885 English; on point 2) "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 ›**

7 *Against Heresies: Book III* (1885 English) **Quote 4, page 3** "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 ›**

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

8 *Against Heresies: Book III* **Quote 5, page 3** "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… [continues online] **read ›**

9 *Against Heresies: Book IV* (on point 4) "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 10–11*

10 *Stromata* 1.1 "few were like the fathers. By God's will, they also came to us to place in us those ancestral and apostolic seeds. And I know well that they will… [continues online] **read ›**

11 *Stromata* 6.13 (1885 English) an one is in reality a presbyter of the Church, and a true minister (deacon) of the will of God, if he do and teach what is the Lord's… [continues online] **read ›**

Tertullian, *c. 196–220 AD · sources 12–13*

12 *On Prescription Against Heretics* 32 **Quote 3, page 3** "records of their churches. Let them unfold the list of their bishops, coming down in proper succession from the beginning, in such a way that their first bishop can show… [continues online] **read ›**

13 *On Prescription Against Heretics* 20 **Quote 6, page 4** they may become churches. Indeed, it is for this reason alone that they can consider themselves apostolic, since they are the offspring of apostolic churches. Every sort of thing must… [continues online] **read ›**

Origen, *c. 215–254 AD · source 14*

14 *De Principiis (On First Principles)* (1885 English; on point 4) "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 15–19*

15 *Epistles* **Quote 11, page 5** 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 ›**

16 *Epistles* (on point 6) a priest be appointed in the presence of all the assembly. That is, He teaches and shows that the ordination of priests should not be carried out except with the… [continues online] **read ›**

17 *Epistles* **Quote 7, page 4** "also maintained among us, and almost throughout all the provinces: for the proper celebration of ordinations, all the neighboring bishops of the same province should gather with the people for… [continues online] **read ›**

18 *Epistles* (on point 8) as traitors and rebels against the Church, or who were promoted among the heretics by a profane ordination at the hands of false bishops and antichrists, contrary to Christ's… [continues online] **read ›**

19 *Epistles* (1885 English; on point 8) "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 ›**

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

20 *Apostolic Constitutions* (1885 English; on point 1) Matthias was chosen to be an apostle in the room of the betrayer, and took the lot of Judas; as it is said, His bishopric… [continues online] **read ›**

21 *Apostolic Constitutions* (on point 7) "that those named by us bishops, and presbyters, and deacons, were made so by prayer and by the laying on of hands, and that the difference in their names shows… [continues online] **read ›**

22 *Apostolic Constitutions* **Quote 8, page 4** 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. And let… [continues online] **read ›**

23 *Apostolic Constitutions* (1885 English) **Quote 9, page 5** "Concerning the ordination of deacons, I Philip make this constitution: You shall ordain a deacon, O bishop, by laying your hands upon him in the presence of the whole presbytery… [continues online] **read ›**

24 *Apostolic Constitutions* (1885 English; on point 7) "lays on hands, ordains, offers, receives the blessing from bishops, but by no means from presbyters… [continues online] **read ›**

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

25 *Apostolic Constitutions* (1885 English; on point 7) “5:4 For such sacred offices are conferred by the laying on of the hands of the bishop… [continues online] **read ›**

26 *Apostolic Constitutions* any bishop, presbyter, or deacon receives a second ordination from anyone, let him be removed from office, along with the person who ordained him, unless he can show that his… [continues online] **read ›**

27 *Apostolic Constitutions* (on point 6) Simon the Canaanite, also make a constitution to decide how many bishops should elect a bishop. Let a bishop be ordained by three or two bishops. But if anyone is… [continues online] **read ›**

Archelaus, *c. 270–300 AD · source 28*

28 *Disputation with Manes* 1 (on point 1) is, the foundation of the Church, and has put us in trust of the… [continues online] **read ›**

John Chrysostom, *c. 386–407 AD · sources 29–32*

29 *Homilies on Acts* (on point 7) “forth the hand, or ordination: the hand of the man is laid upon the person, but the whole work is of God, and it… [continues online] **read ›**

30 *Correspondence with Pope Innocent I* 1 (on point 8) was given authority to ordain another to take the place of one who was still living. For a false ordination cannot deprive the priest of his rank, since neither can… [continues online] **read ›**

31 *Homilies on Philippians* (on point 7) him, "Lay hands hastily on no man," in 1 Timothy 5:22. And again, "Which was given you with the laying on of the hands of the Presbytery," in 1… [continues online] **read ›**

32 *Homilies on First Timothy* **Quote 10, page 5** “the laying on of the hands of the presbytery… [continues online] **read ›**

Clement of Rome · *sources 33–34*

33 *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 ›**

34 *First Epistle to the Corinthians* (1885 English; on point 1) “this reason, therefore, inasmuch as they had obtained a perfect fore-knowledge of this, they appointed those [ministers] already mentioned, and afterwards gave instructions, that when these should fall asleep… [continues online] **read ›**

THE BIBLE *31 verses, The Faith Once Delivered Bible (Old Testament from the Septuagint), in Bible order*

35 **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 ›**

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

37 **Matthew 19:15** He laid his hands on them, and departed from there. **read ›**

38 **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 ›**

39 **Mark 10:16** He took them in his arms and blessed them, laying his hands on them. **read ›**

40 **Luke 1:2** even as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the word delivered them to us, **read ›**

41 **Acts 1:2** until the day he was taken up, after he had given instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles he had chosen. **read ›**

42 **Acts 1:20** “For it is written in the book of Psalms: Let his dwelling be made desolate, and let there be no one to dwell in it; and: Let another take his office of overseer. **read ›**

43 **Acts 1:22** beginning with the baptism of John until the day he was taken up from us, one of these must become a witness with us of his resurrection.” **read ›**

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

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

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

46 **Acts 8:1** Saul consented to his killing. That day a great persecution arose against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria. **read ›**

47 **Acts 8:14** Now when the apostles who were at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had received the word of God, they sent Peter and John to them, **read ›**

48 **Acts 8:17** Then they laid their hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit. **read ›**

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

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

51 **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 ›**

52 **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 ›**

53 **Acts 15:4** When they reached Jerusalem, the church, the apostles, and the elders welcomed them, and they reported all that God had done with them. **read ›**

54 **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 ›**

55 **Acts 15:23** They wrote this letter to be delivered by them: “The apostles, the elders, and the brothers, to the brothers among the Gentiles in Antioch, Syria, and Cilicia: Greetings. **read ›**

56 **1 Corinthians 11:2** Now I praise you, brothers, that you remember me in all things, and hold firm the traditions, even as I delivered them to you. **read ›**

57 **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 ›**

58 **1 Corinthians 15:5** and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. **read ›**

59 **1 Corinthians 15:7** Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, **read ›**

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

61 **2 Thessalonians 2:15** So then, brothers, stand firm and hold the traditions which you were taught by us, whether by word or by letter. **read ›**

62 **1 Timothy 3:1** The saying is trustworthy: if anyone aspires to the office of bishop, he desires a good work. **read ›**

63 **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 ›**

64 **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 ›**

65 **Hebrews 6:2** of the teaching of baptisms, of laying on of hands, of resurrection of the dead, and of eternal judgment. **read ›**

ALSO LINKED BY THF TO THESE PASSAGES *48 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

Mark 4:21 · 4:34 · 7:9 · 12:39 · 16:15

Luke 10:16 · 11:23 · 12:47 · 12:50 · 20:46

John 1:8 · 5:17 · 20:22

Acts 1:1 · 1:8 · 1:15 · 9:5 · 10:13 · 10:34 · 11:15 · 15:1 · 15:7 · 15:9 · 15:13

1 Corinthians 6:10 · 9:25 · 10:20 · 14:33 · 15:6

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

Galatians 3:27
Ephesians 2:20 · 4:2
Philippians 1:18 · 2:2 · 3:16
Titus 1:5
Hebrews 5:4 · 6:6
1 Peter 2:5
1 John 2:27
Revelation 4:4 · 11:16

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

ABOUT THIS STUDY

A THF member asked “What did apostolic succession look like in the early church?” on April 10, 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, “What did apostolic succession look like in the early church?” Early Church Questions, published November 9, 2026, https://thehistoricfaith.com/early-church-questions/what-did-apostolic-succession-look-like-in-the-early-church. To cite one quotation, add its number and source, for example “quote 1, source 33.”

© 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