THE QUESTION

What did early Christians mean by calling Christ the head of the church?

Asked by a THF member on April 19, 2026 · published November 9, 2026, updated November 11, 2026 · 12 numbered quotations · the 30 early Christian passages and 174 Bible verses we kept are listed at the back, each with a link.

Read it online: thehistoricfaith.com/early-church-questions/what-did-early-christians-mean-by-calling-christ-the-head-of-the-church

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

Early Christians taught that Christ is the Head of the Church, meaning He rules and saves it and gives it life. The Church is His own body, joined to Him like a bride to her husband, and it grows only while it holds to Him. Writers drew from this a call to unity and holy living.

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 plainly named the Church's Head

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

Irenaeus names Christ the Head of the Church as part of his teaching on the Trinity: the Father is above all, the Word is Head of the Church, and the Spirit dwells in believers. Dionysius of Alexandria repeats Paul's words outright and draws a lesson: since Christ is the way, the wise keep the eyes of their minds fixed on Him.

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 2, 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 17, page 7** Read it in the library ›
THF's updated English

POINT 2 OF 6

His headship means royal rule as Savior

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

Clement of Alexandria reads the high priest's gold headpiece as a picture of the Lord's royal power, because the Head of the Church is the Savior. Tertullian, explaining Paul's words that Christ is the head of every man, says that "head" here means authority, and that authority belongs only to the author, the one who made man.

3 “Also, the broad gold mitre shows the royal power of the Lord, since the Head of the Church is the Savior, as Ephesians 5:23 says. The mitre that is on it, that is, on the head, is a sign of most royal rule.”

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Clement of Alexandria,** *Stromata* 5.6 (c. 190–215 AD) **Source 8, page 6** Read it in the library ›
THF's updated English

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

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Tertullian,** *Against Marcion* 8 (c. 196–220 AD) **Source 10, page 6** Read it in the library ›
THF's updated English

POINT 3 OF 6

The Church is His one body

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

An early sermon long linked to Clement of Rome says the living Church is the body of Christ. John Chrysostom, a later fourth-century preacher, adds that one head means one body. Its members differ in honor, but the greater must not look down on the lesser, and the lesser must not envy the greater.

5 “I do not think you are unaware that the living church is the body of Christ.”

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Clement of Rome,** *Second Epistle* 14 (c. 88–99 AD) **Source 1, page 6** Read it in the library ›
THF's updated English

6 “If there is one head, then there is one body. The body is made up of members that are both honorable and less honorable. But the greater member must not rise up even against the least, nor should the lesser envy the greater.”

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **John Chrysostom,** *Homilies on Ephesians* 10 (c. 386–407 AD) **Source 27, page 7** Read it in the library ›
THF's updated English

POINT 4 OF 6

The Head gave Himself for His bride

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

Origen pictures Christ as the Church's husband: for her sake the Lord left the Father, became flesh, and was joined to her so that the two became one flesh. Tertullian calls Christ the Head of the man and the Husband of the Church, and points to the crown of thorns He wore for us, a picture of the sins the cross took away.

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7 “And for the sake of the church, the Lord, the husband, left the Father, whom He saw when He was in the form of God, as in Philippians 2:6. He also left His mother, since He was truly the son of the Jerusalem above, and was joined to His wife who had fallen down here. And these two here became one flesh. For because of her, He Himself also became flesh, when "the Word became flesh and dwelt among us," as in”

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Origen,** *Commentary on Matthew* 14 (c. 215–254 AD) **Source 16, page 7** Read it in the library ›
THF's updated English

8 “What sort of garland, however, I pray you, did He who is the Head of the man and the glory of the woman, Christ Jesus, the Husband of the church, submit to in behalf of both sexes? Of thorns, I think, and thistles, a figure of the sins which the soil of the flesh brought forth for us, but which the power of the cross removed, blunting, in its endurance by the head of our Lord, death's every sting.”

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Tertullian,** *De Corona* 14 (c. 196–220 AD) **Source 12, page 7** Read it in the library ›
THF's updated English

POINT 5 OF 6

Life and growth come from holding the Head

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

Irenaeus quotes Paul: the whole body of the Church grows by holding the Head. He ties this to acknowledging that the Son of God truly came in the flesh and is God. Chrysostom, writing much later, says the whole body draws its being and well-being from the Head, and the Church keeps growing as long as it holds on to Him.

9 “Remember, my dear friend, that you have been redeemed by the flesh of our Lord and renewed by His blood; and by "holding the Head, from which the whole body of the Church, being joined together, grows"—that is, acknowledging the coming in the flesh of the Son of God and His divinity, and steadfastly looking to His human nature, while also using these proofs from Scripture—you easily refute, as I have shown, all those heretical ideas that were devised later.”

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Irenaeus,** *Against Heresies: Book V* (c. 175–202 AD) **Source 4, page 6** Read it in the library ›
THF's updated English

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10 “All the body has from there its being and its well-being. Why, letting go the Head, do you cling to the members? If you have fallen off from it, you are lost.”

later in the same passage

“All the Church, so long as she holds the Head, increases, because here there is no more passion of pride and vainglory, nor invention of human fancy.”

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **John Chrysostom,** *Homilies on Colossians* (c. 386–407 AD) **Source 28, page 7** Read it in the library ›

THF's updated English

POINT 6 OF 6

Belonging to the Head calls for holy living

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

Clement of Alexandria says the Church is a holy body, and those who are Christians in name only, not living by the word, are like its fleshly parts. Chrysostom later adds that having Christ as our Head is a far greater honor than wearing a gold crown, so we should take far more care to be worthy of it.

11 “The Church of the Lord, the spiritual and holy choir, is represented as a body. From this it follows that those who are only called Christians, but do not live in agreement with the word, are the fleshy parts. Now this spiritual body, the holy Church, is not for fornication.”

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Clement of Alexandria,** *Stromata* 7.14 (c. 190–215 AD) **Source 7, page 6** Read it in the library ›

THF's updated English

12 “If someone placed a royal crown, a crown of gold, on our head, would we not do everything we could to seem worthy even of those lifeless jewels? But now it is not a crown that is on our head. What is far greater is this: Christ Himself has become our very Head, and yet we pay no attention to it.”

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **John Chrysostom,** *Homilies on Ephesians* 3 (c. 386–407 AD) **Source 29, page 7** Read it in the library ›

THF's updated English

THE LIMITS

What these passages don’t tell us

- These passages do not explain how Christ's headship relates to bishops or other church offices.
- Most of these writers mention Christ as Head briefly while arguing about something else, such as false teaching, marriage or crowns.

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- 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 30 early Christian passages and 174 Bible verses we kept for this question (repeats and weak or off-topic search hits were left out): early Christian passages first (sources 1–30, grouped by writer, earliest first), then Bible verses in The Faith Once Delivered Bible (sources 31–61, in Bible order), then 143 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 *30 passages from 11 writers*

Clement of Rome, *c. 88–99 AD · source 1*

1 *Second Epistle* 14 **Quote 5, page 3** "then, brothers, if we do the will of God our Father, we will be members of the first church, the spiritual church, the one that was created before the sun… [continues online] **read ›**

Irenaeus, *c. 175–202 AD · sources 2–4*

2 *Against Heresies: Book V* (1885 English) **Quote 1, page 2** "thus one God the Father is declared, who is above all, and through all, and in all… [continues online] **read ›**

3 *Against Heresies: Book V* (1885 English; on point 3) as the blessed Paul declares in his Epistle to the Ephesians, that "we are members of His body, of His flesh, and of His bones… [continues online] **read ›**

4 *Against Heresies: Book V* (1885 English) **Quote 9, page 4** "holding the Head, from which the whole body of the Church, having been fitted together, takes increase"—that is, acknowledging the advent in the flesh of the Son of God… [continues online] **read ›**

Clement of Alexandria, *c. 190–215 AD · sources 5–8*

5 *Stromata* 4.8 (on point 2) "ruling power, therefore, is the head. And if the Lord is head of the man, and the man is head of the woman, then the man, being the image and… [continues online] **read ›**

6 *Stromata* 4.8 (1885 English; on point 2) 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 ›**

7 *Stromata* 7.14 (1885 English) **Quote 11, page 5** "those, who are merely called, but do not live in accordance with the word, are the fleshy parts… [continues online] **read ›**

8 *Stromata* 5.6 (1885 English) **Quote 3, page 2** head] is, then, a sign of most princely rule; and otherwise we have heard it said, The Head of Christ is the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ… [continues online] **read ›**

Tertullian, *c. 196–220 AD · sources 9–12*

9 *Against Marcion* 8 (1885 English; on point 3) "however, he says elsewhere, Ephesians 1:23 that the Church is the body of Christ, so here also (the apostle) declares that he fills up that which is behind of… [continues online] **read ›**

10 *Against Marcion* 8 **Quote 4, page 3** "head of every man is Christ." 1 Corinthians 11:3 What Christ, if He is not the author of man? Here he has used "head" to mean authority. Now authority… [continues online] **read ›**

11 *Against Marcion* 8 (on point 1) "he says, "even as Christ is the head of the Church… [continues online] **read ›**

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12 *De Corona* 14 **Quote 8, page 4** less may the Christian put the service of idolatry on his own head. No, I might have said, upon Christ, since Christ is the Head of the Christian man. For… [continues online] **read ›**

Origen, *c. 215–254 AD · sources 13–16*

13 *Commentary on John* 10 (on point 3) interpretation, both of these, the temple and the body of Jesus, seem to me to be types of the Church. They mean that it is built of living stones, 1… [continues online] **read ›**

14 *Against Celsus* 79 (on point 3) “since Christ is the Head of the Church, so that Christ and the Church form one body, the… [continues online] **read ›**

15 *Commentary on Matthew* 13 (on point 3) say to the hand, "I have no need of you," in 1 Corinthians 12:21. But if anyone in the whole body of the congregations of the church, who because… [continues online] **read ›**

16 *Commentary on Matthew* 14 **Quote 7, page 4** “Corinthians 12:27. For the body of Christ is not something… [continues online] **read ›**

Dionysius of Alexandria, *c. 232–265 AD · source 17*

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

Gregory Thaumaturgus, *c. 240–270 AD · source 18*

18 *A Sectional Confession of Faith* 1 (on point 3) “also is Christ. For by one Spirit are we all baptized into one body… [continues online] **read ›**

Cyprian, *c. 248–258 AD · sources 19–21*

19 *Treatises* (on point 2) “since Christ is the head of the man, and God is the head of Christ, he who tore the head in the martyr was persecuting God and Christ in that… [continues online] **read ›**

20 *Epistles* (on point 3) You also wrote that, because of me, the Church now has one part of herself scattered abroad, even though the whole people of the Church are gathered, united, and joined… [continues online] **read ›**

21 *Epistles* (on point 3) “in Christ, who is the heavenly bread, we may know that there is one body, with which our number is joined and united… [continues online] **read ›**

Apostolic Constitutions, *c. 250–380 AD · sources 22–26*

22 *Apostolic Constitutions* (1885 English; on point 3) “to diminish the Church by withdrawing themselves, and causing the body of Christ to be without its member… [continues online] **read ›**

23 *Apostolic Constitutions* (1885 English) royal priesthood, and an holy nation, the Church of God, the pillar and ground of the marriage-chamber… [continues online] **read ›**

24 *Apostolic Constitutions* (on point 2) “the head of Christ is God, even His Father… [continues online] **read ›**

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

26 *Apostolic Constitutions* (1885 English) “3:16 For the principal part of the woman is the man, as being her head… [continues online] **read ›**

John Chrysostom, *c. 386–407 AD · sources 27–29*

27 *Homilies on Ephesians* 10 **Quote 6, page 3** “If there is one head, then there is one body. The body is made up of members that are both honorable and less honorable. But the greater member must not rise up even against the least, nor should the lesser envy the greater.” **read ›**

28 *Homilies on Colossians* **Quote 10, page 5** “All the body has from there its being and its well-being. Why, letting go the Head, do you cling to the members? If you have fallen off from it, you are lost.” **read ›**

29 *Homilies on Ephesians* 3 **Quote 12, page 5** “If someone placed a royal crown, a crown of gold, on our head, would we not do everything we could to seem worthy even of those lifeless jewels? But now it is not a crown that is on our head. What is far greater is this: Christ Himself has become our very Head, and yet we pay no attention to it.” **read ›**

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Clement of Rome · *source 30*

30 *First Epistle to the Corinthians* (1885 English; on point 3) 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 *31 verses, The Faith Once Delivered Bible (Old Testament from the Septuagint), in Bible order*

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

32 **Matthew 19:5** and said, ‘For this reason a man shall leave his father and his mother and shall be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh’? **read ›**

33 **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 ›**

34 **Acts 2:2** Suddenly a sound came from heaven like a rushing, mighty wind, and it filled the whole house where they were sitting. **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 7:9** The patriarchs, moved with jealousy against Joseph, sold him into Egypt. God was with him **read ›**

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

38 **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 ›**

39 **Romans 12:4** For even as we have many members in one body, and all the members do not have the same function, **read ›**

40 **Romans 12:5** so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually members of one another. **read ›**

41 **1 Corinthians 3:23** and you are Christ’s, and Christ is God’s. **read ›**

42 **1 Corinthians 10:17** Because there is one loaf of bread, we, who are many, are one body; for we all partake of the one loaf of bread. **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 12:20** But as it is, there are many members, yet one body. **read ›**

46 **1 Corinthians 12:27** Now you are the body of Christ, and members individually. **read ›**

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

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

49 **Ephesians 4:4** There is one body and one Spirit, even as you also were called in one hope of your calling, **read ›**

50 **Ephesians 4:6** one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in us all. **read ›**

51 **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 ›**

52 **Ephesians 5:30** because we are members of his body, of his flesh and bones. **read ›**

53 **Ephesians 5:32** This mystery is great, but I speak concerning Christ and the church. **read ›**

54 **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 ›**

55 **Colossians 2:19** and not holding firmly to the head, from whom the whole body, supplied and knit together through its joints and ligaments, grows with the growth that comes from God. **read ›**

56 **1 Timothy 2:12** But I do not permit a woman to teach, nor to exercise authority over a man, but to be in quietness. **read ›**

57 **1 Timothy 3:4** one who rules his own house well, having children in subjection with all reverence; **read ›**

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58 **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 ›**

59 **Hebrews 3:6** but Christ is faithful as a Son over his house. We are his house, if we hold fast our confidence and the glorying of our hope firm to the end. **read ›**

60 **Hebrews 10:21** and having a great priest over God's house, **read ›**

61 **1 Peter 5:3** not as lording it over those entrusted to you, but making yourselves examples to the flock. **read ›**

ALSO LINKED BY THF TO THESE PASSAGES *143 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 22:14 · 45:3

Isaiah 8:4

Matthew 1:1 · 1:18 · 5:14 · 6:10 · 11:27 · 12:30 · 12:31 · 12:36 · 18:8 · 18:9 · 18:12 · 20:5 · 22:1 · 26:24 · 26:39

Luke 2:49 · 4:18 · 7:35 · 7:43 · 10:16 · 10:22 · 10:27 · 16:9 · 16:16 · 22:15 · 22:19 · 24:39

John 1:1 · 1:3 · 1:10 · 1:14 · 1:18 · 2:18 · 2:19 · 4:1 · 4:14 · 7:39 · 10:34 · 12:34 · 13:8 · 13:23 · 14:2 · 15:25 · 20:22

Acts 2:17 · 8:20

Romans 5:19 · 6:4 · 6:12 · 6:23 · 11:16 · 11:32

1 Corinthians 1:19 · 1:27 · 2:6 · 2:15 · 4:15 · 5:13 · 6:12 · 7:29 · 10:4 · 10:16 · 11:5 · 11:7 · 11:9 · 11:10 · 11:18 · 11:23 · 12:1 · 12:3 · 12:4 · 12:8 · 12:31 · 13:1 · 14:21 · 14:25 · 14:26 · 14:34 · 15:8 · 15:36 · 15:53

2 Corinthians 2:17 · 4:4 · 5:17 · 6:17 · 11:31 · 12:3 · 12:9

Galatians 1:1 · 1:8 · 4:4 · 4:19 · 5:16 · 5:22 · 6:14

Ephesians 1:10 · 1:23 · 3:8 · 3:10 · 4:8 · 4:16 · 4:25 · 4:26 · 5:11 · 5:18 · 5:19 · 5:21 · 5:22 · 5:25 · 5:28 · 5:29 · 5:31 · 6:2 · 6:4 · 6:11 · 6:12 · 6:19

Philippians 4:17

Colossians 1:5 · 1:6 · 1:15 · 1:19 · 1:20 · 1:21 · 1:22 · 1:24 · 2:8 · 2:13 · 2:16 · 2:18 · 2:22 · 3:3 · 3:11 · 3:18 · 4:1

1 Peter 2:5 · 2:9

1 John 4:1

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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