THE QUESTION

What did the early church teach about submission, humility and unity among believers?

Asked by a THF member on June 25, 2026 · published November 9, 2026 · 10 numbered quotations · the 24 early Christian passages and 200 Bible verses we kept are listed at the back, each with a link.

Read it online: thehistoricfaith.com/early-church-questions/what-did-the-early-church-teach-about-submission-humility-and-unity-among

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

Early writers taught believers to be subject to one another, respect their leaders, refuse pride, and keep unity as one body in Christ. Clement compares the church to a body where every part is needed. Polycarp and Ignatius urge mutual submission and love, and obedience to rulers reaches only as far as pleases God.

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.
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POINT 1 OF 7

Believers should be subject to one another

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

Polycarp tells the church to love the brotherhood, stay united in the truth, and be gentle with each other. He then says plainly to be subject to one another, so that outsiders see good works and the Lord's name is not shamed.

1

> “Stand firm, therefore, in these things, and follow the example of the Lord, being steadfast and unchanging in the faith, loving the brotherhood, and being attached to one another, united in the truth, showing the meekness of the Lord in your interactions with one another, and despising no one.”
>
> *later in the same passage*
>
> “Be subject to one another, “having your conduct blameless among the Gentiles,” that you may both receive praise for your good works, and the Lord may not be blasphemed through you.”

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Polycarp,** *Epistle to the Philippians* (c. 100–155 AD) **Source 7, page 6** Read it in the library ›
THF's updated English

POINT 2 OF 7

Every member of the body is needed

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

Clement uses an army and a human body as pictures of the church. Not everyone has the same rank, but each does his own part. The great need the small, and even the smallest parts serve the whole body.

2

> “The great cannot exist without the small, nor the small without the great.”
>
> *later in the same passage*
>
> “The head is nothing without the feet, and the feet are nothing without the head; indeed, the very smallest members of our body are necessary and useful to the whole body.”

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Clement of Rome,** *First Epistle to the Corinthians* **Source 23, page 7** Read it in the library ›
THF's updated English

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POINT 3 OF 7

Division tears apart the body of Christ

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

Clement asks why a church with one God, one Christ and one Spirit would split into parties. He calls strife a kind of madness that forgets believers are members of one another, and he warns that the split had shaken the faith of many.

3 “Have we not all one God and one Christ? Is there not one Spirit of grace poured out upon us? And have we not one calling in Christ?”

later in the same passage

“Why do we divide and tear to pieces the members of Christ, and raise up strife against our own body, and have reached such a height of madness as to forget that “we are members one of another?””

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Clement of Rome,** *First Epistle to the Corinthians* **Source 20, page 7** **Read it in the library ›**
THF's updated English

POINT 4 OF 7

Honor Christ, respect leaders, and honor elders

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

Clement lists the order of a healthy church: honor the Lord Jesus first, then respect those who lead and honor the elders. Ignatius likewise tells believers to be subject to the bishop, presbyters and deacons, and to love one another.

4 “Let us honor the Lord Jesus Christ, whose blood was given for us; let us respect those who lead us; let us honor the elders among us; let us train the young men in the fear of God; let us guide our wives to what is good.”

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Clement of Rome,** *First Epistle to the Corinthians* **Source 21, page 7** **Read it in the library ›**
THF's updated English

5 “Be subject to the bishop, the presbyters, and the deacons. Love one another in the Lord, as you are the images of God.”

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Ignatius of Antioch,** *Epistles of Ignatius* (c. 98–117 AD) **Source 4, page 6** **Read it in the library ›**
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POINT 5 OF 7

Do not exalt yourself above others

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

Irenaeus warns believers not to grow proud over good works or special gifts, but to be humble in all things. A later church order repeats Jesus' warning that whoever exalts himself will be humbled.

6 “He taught by His commandment that we who have been set free should, when hungry, take the food given by God; and that when placed in the exalted position of every grace that can be received, we should not be lifted up with pride either by trusting in works of righteousness or by being adorned with super-eminent gifts of service, nor should we test God, but should feel humility in all things, and remember the saying, "You shall not test your God."”

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Irenaeus,** *Against Heresies: Book V* (c. 175–202 AD) **Source 9, page 6** Read it in the library ›
THF's updated English

7 “You shall not exalt yourself, as the Pharisee did, for everyone who exalts himself shall be humbled.”

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Apostolic Constitutions** (c. 250–380 AD) **Source 18, page 7** Read it in the library ›
THF's updated English

POINT 6 OF 7

Care for one another and share

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

In Hermas, a heavenly speaker addresses believers as her sons. She tells them to live at peace, carry each other's burdens and share what they have with those in need. She also warns church leaders who love the chief seats to cleanse their hearts.

8 “Be at peace with one another. Care for one another. Bear each other's burdens. And do not enjoy God's gifts by yourselves alone, but share them generously with those in need.”

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Hermas,** *Shepherd* (c. 90–150 AD) **Source 1, page 6** Read it in the library ›
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POINT 7 OF 7

Obey rulers in what pleases God

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

A church order tells believers to honor rulers and pay what is owed, but only in matters that please God. Polycarp adds that Christians should pray for rulers and even for those who persecute them.

9 “Be subject to all royal authority and rule in matters that are pleasing to God, as to ministers of God and punishers of the ungodly.”

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Apostolic Constitutions** (c. 250–380 AD) **Source 17, page 7** Read it in the library ›
THF's updated English

10 “Pray also for kings, and rulers, and princes, and for those that persecute and hate you, and for the enemies of the cross, that your fruit may be manifest to all, and that you may be perfect in Him.”

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Polycarp,** *Epistle to the Philippians* (c. 100–155 AD) **Source 8, page 6** Read it in the library ›
THF's updated English

THE LIMITS

What these passages don’t tell us

- These passages give general rules for church life; they do not settle every question about how much authority a leader has.
- They do not describe what a believer should do when a leader teaches or acts wrongly.
- 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 24 early Christian passages and 200 Bible verses we kept for this question (repeats and weak or off-topic search hits were left out): early Christian passages first (sources 1–24, grouped by writer, earliest first), then Bible verses in The Faith Once Delivered Bible (sources 25–71, in Bible order), then 153 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).

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"… [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 *24 passages from 10 writers*

Hermas, *c. 90–150 AD · sources 1–2*

1 *Shepherd* (1885 English) **Quote 8, page 4** also, standing joyful before your Father, may give an account of you all to your Lord… [continues online] **read ›**

2 *Shepherd* (1885 English; on point 6) the aged, practising righteousness, watching the brotherhood, bearing insolence, being long-suffering… [continues online] **read ›**

Ignatius of Antioch, *c. 98–117 AD · sources 3–6*

3 *Epistle of Ignatius to the Ephesians* (on point 4) The more someone sees the bishop keeping silent, the more they should respect him. For we should receive anyone whom the Master of the house sends to be over His… [continues online] **read ›**

4 *Epistles of Ignatius* **Quote 5, page 3** These things, brothers, out of the affection I have for you, I have felt compelled to write, urging you for the glory of God, not as if I were a… [continues online] **read ›**

5 *Epistles of Ignatius* (1885 English; on point 4) presbyters, "feed the flock which is among you," till God shall show who is to hold the rule over you… [continues online] **read ›**

6 *Epistles of Ignatius* (on point 3) Mindful of your love and zeal in Christ, which you have shown towards us, we thought it appropriate to write to you, who display such a godly and spiritual love… [continues online] **read ›**

Polycarp, *c. 100–155 AD · sources 7–8*

7 *Epistle to the Philippians* (1885 English) **Quote 1, page 2** fast, therefore, in these things, and follow the example of the Lord, being firm and unchangeable in the faith, loving the brotherhood… [continues online] **read ›**

8 *Epistle to the Philippians* **Quote 10, page 5** you up in faith and truth, and in all meekness, gentleness, patience, long-suffering, forbearance, and purity… [continues online] **read ›**

Irenaeus, *c. 175–202 AD · source 9*

9 *Against Heresies: Book V* (1885 English) **Quote 6, page 4** also the apostle taught, saying, "Minding not high things, but consenting to things of low estate… [continues online] **read ›**

Clement of Alexandria, *c. 190–215 AD · source 10*

10 *Stromata* 5.6 (1885 English) the Head of the Church is the Savour… [continues online] **read ›**

Tertullian, *c. 196–220 AD · source 11*

11 *Against Marcion* 8 (on point 1) again: "Be kindly affectioned one to another with brotherly love… [continues online] **read ›**

Origen, *c. 215–254 AD · sources 12–14*

12 *Commentary on John* 10 (1885 English; on point 2) that body of Christ which the Church is said to be, as we are said by the Apostle… [continues online] **read ›**

13 *Against Celsus* 63 (1885 English; on point 5) this, not understanding how it has been said that every one who exalted himself shall be abased… [continues online] **read ›**

14 *Commentary on Matthew* 12 (on point 5) themselves under the mighty hand of God… [continues online] **read ›**

Apostolic Constitutions, *c. 250–380 AD · sources 15–18*

15 *Apostolic Constitutions* (on point 7) us pray for kings and those in authority, that they may be… [continues online] **read ›**

16 *Apostolic Constitutions* (1885 English; on point 3) one consent teach those that are under you to be of the same sentiments and to be of the same opinions about the same matters, that there may be no… [continues online] **read ›**

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17 *Apostolic Constitutions* **Quote 9, page 5** Be subject to all royal authority and rule in matters that are pleasing to God, as to ministers of God and punishers of the ungodly. Give them all the fear… [continues online] **read ›**

18 *Apostolic Constitutions* **Quote 7, page 4** Be slow to anger, for such a person is very wise, since one who is quick-tempered is a great fool. Be merciful, for blessed are the merciful, for they shall… [continues online] **read ›**

Anonymous · *source 19*

19 *Treatise Against the Heretic Novatian* 1 (on point 5) 13. I beg you, have you not read, “Do not boast, and do not speak proudly, and do not let arrogance come out of your mouth; for the Lord lifts… [continues online] **read ›**

Clement of Rome · *sources 20–24*

20 *First Epistle to the Corinthians* **Quote 3, page 3** do we divide and tear to pieces the members of Christ, and raise up strife against our own… [continues online] **read ›**

21 *First Epistle to the Corinthians* (1885 English) **Quote 4, page 3** blood was given for us; let us esteem those who have the rule over us… [continues online] **read ›**

22 *First Epistle to the Corinthians* (1885 English; on point 1) ye were all distinguished by humility, and were in no respect puffed up with pride, but yielded obedience rather than extorted it… [continues online] **read ›**

23 *First Epistle to the Corinthians* (1885 English) **Quote 2, page 2** 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 ›**

24 *First Epistle to the Corinthians* (1885 English; on point 3) up the epistle of the blessed Apostle Paul. What did he write… [continues online] **read ›**

THE BIBLE *47 verses, The Faith Once Delivered Bible (Old Testament from the Septuagint), in Bible order*

25 **Matthew 23:12** Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted. **read ›**

26 **Luke 14:10** But when you are invited, go and sit in the lowest place, so that when he who invited you comes, he may tell you, ‘Friend, move up higher.’ Then you will have glory in the presence of all who sit at the table with you. **read ›**

27 **Luke 14:11** For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted.” **read ›**

28 **Luke 18:14** I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but he who humbles himself will be exalted.” **read ›**

29 **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 ›**

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

31 **Acts 24:2** When Paul was called, Tertullus began his accusation, saying, “Since through you we enjoy much peace, and through your foresight good things are being accomplished for this nation, **read ›**

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

33 **Romans 12:10** In love of the brothers be tenderly affectionate to one another; in honor prefer one another, **read ›**

34 **Romans 12:16** Be of the same mind one toward another. Do not set your mind on high things, but associate with the humble. Do not be wise in your own eyes. **read ›**

35 **1 Corinthians 1:10** Now I urge you, brothers, through the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all speak the same thing and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be joined together in the same mind and the same judgment. **read ›**

36 **1 Corinthians 1:16** I also baptized the household of Stephanas; beyond that, I do not know whether I baptized anyone else. **read ›**

37 **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 ›**

38 **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 ›**

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39 **1 Corinthians 12:13** For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free, and we were all given drink to share in one Spirit. **read ›**

40 **1 Corinthians 12:20** But as it is, there are many members, yet one body. **read ›**

41 **1 Corinthians 12:27** Now you are the body of Christ, and members individually. **read ›**

42 **1 Corinthians 16:16** that you also submit to such people, and to everyone who works with us and labors. **read ›**

43 **Ephesians 4:2** with all humility and meekness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, **read ›**

44 **Ephesians 4:3** being eager to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. **read ›**

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

46 **Ephesians 4:5** one Lord, one faith, one baptism, **read ›**

47 **Ephesians 4:13** until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, **read ›**

48 **Ephesians 5:21** subjecting yourselves to one another in the fear of Christ. **read ›**

49 **Ephesians 5:22** Wives, be subject to your own husbands, as to the Lord. **read ›**

50 **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 ›**

51 **Ephesians 5:24** But as the church is subject to Christ, so let the wives also be to their own husbands in everything. **read ›**

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

53 **Ephesians 5:33** Nevertheless each of you must also love his own wife even as himself; and let the wife see that she respects her husband. **read ›**

54 **Philippians 2:3** Do nothing out of selfish ambition or empty pride, but in humility count others better than yourselves. **read ›**

55 **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 ›**

56 **Colossians 3:18** Wives, submit to your own husbands, as is fitting in the Lord. **read ›**

57 **1 Thessalonians 5:12** Now we ask you, brothers, to recognize those who labor among you and lead you in the Lord and admonish you, **read ›**

58 **1 Timothy 2:2** for kings and all who are in high places, that we may lead a tranquil and quiet life in all godliness and reverence. **read ›**

59 **1 Timothy 3:4** one who rules his own house well, having children in subjection with all reverence; **read ›**

60 **1 Timothy 5:1** Do not rebuke an older man, but exhort him as a father; the younger men as brothers; **read ›**

61 **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 ›**

62 **Hebrews 13:7** Remember your leaders, who spoke the word of God to you. Considering the outcome of their way of life, imitate their faithfulness. **read ›**

63 **Hebrews 13:17** Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they watch on behalf of your souls, as those who will give account, that they may do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be unprofitable for you. **read ›**

64 **James 4:7** Be subject therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. **read ›**

65 **1 Peter 2:13** Therefore subject yourselves to every ordinance of man for the Lord’s sake: whether to the king, as supreme, **read ›**

66 **1 Peter 2:17** Honor all men. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the king. **read ›**

67 **1 Peter 4:9** Be hospitable to one another without grumbling. **read ›**

68 **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 ›**

69 **1 Peter 5:2** shepherd the flock of God which is among you, exercising the oversight, not under compulsion, but voluntarily; not for dishonest gain, but willingly; **read ›**

70 **1 Peter 5:5** Likewise, you younger ones, be subject to the elders. And all of you, submitting to one another, clothe yourselves with humility, for God resists the proud, but he gives grace to the humble. **read ›**

71 **1 Peter 5:6** Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, that he may exalt you in due time, **read ›**

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ALSO LINKED BY THF TO THESE PASSAGES *153 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.

Psalms 4:4 · 107:20 · 116:15

Proverbs 11:25 · 19:17 · 31:8

Isaiah 66:2

Daniel 3:18

Matthew 2:20 · 3:15 · 4:10 · 5:4 · 5:7 · 5:16 · 5:17 · 5:44 · 7:2 · 10:19 · 10:29 · 11:27 · 13:27 · 17:6 · 17:8 · 18:6 · 18:17 · 18:23 · 21:9 · 21:15 · 22:32 · 22:39 · 23:6 · 23:26 · 24:5 · 24:25 · 25:35 · 26:24 · 27:52

Mark 8:38 · 9:42 · 12:39

Luke 1:71 · 2:14 · 4:6 · 6:29 · 6:36 · 10:30 · 11:23 · 11:43 · 12:21 · 16:1 · 16:15 · 16:28 · 17:2 · 19:40 · 20:46 · 21:14 · 22:32

John 2:11 · 3:5 · 5:14 · 7:37 · 8:44 · 15:1 · 15:12 · 19:19 · 21:17

Acts 4:32 · 10:28 · 10:47 · 20:29 · 20:35 · 23:4 · 23:5

Romans 1:32 · 2:21 · 2:24 · 7:23 · 8:3 · 8:5 · 8:10 · 8:11 · 10:2 · 10:17 · 11:33 · 11:34 · 12:9 · 12:12 · 12:13 · 12:17 · 12:18 · 12:19 · 13:1 · 13:8 · 13:9 · 14:12

1 Corinthians 1:2 · 1:12 · 3:11 · 3:13 · 3:16 · 5:11 · 7:25 · 11:3 · 11:27 · 12:3 · 12:26 · 13:4 · 14:30 · 15:25 · 15:50 · 15:58

2 Corinthians 7:1 · 8:18 · 11:2 · 11:29 · 11:31

Galatians 1:1 · 1:10 · 6:2 · 6:10

Ephesians 4:1 · 4:26 · 4:27 · 5:6 · 5:31

Philippians 1:21 · 3:14

Colossians 1:10

1 Thessalonians 5:13

2 Thessalonians 2:11 · 3:6

1 Timothy 1:13 · 2:1 · 2:4 · 3:15 · 5:10 · 5:21

2 Timothy 4:6

Titus 3:1

Hebrews 6:2 · 13:2 · 13:12 · 13:20

James 1:27 · 2:14 · 4:1 · 5:4 · 5:19

1 Peter 2:5 · 2:12

1 John 2:11

Revelation 2:5 · 2:10

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

ABOUT THIS STUDY

A THF member asked “What did the early church teach about submission, humility and unity among believers?” on June 25, 2026. The Historic Faith answered it as a public study on November 9, 2026.

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How to cite this study. The Historic Faith, “What did the early church teach about submission, humility and unity among believers?” Early Church Questions, published November 9, 2026, https://thehistoricfaith.com/early-church-questions/what-did-the-early-church-teach-about-submission-humility-and-unity-among. To cite one quotation, add its number and source, for example “quote 1, source 7.”

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THE END OF THIS STUDY