

# The Early Church Fathers on The Church

The early Church taught infallibly, gave us the New Testament, and was made up of three ranks of clergy – bishop, priest, and deacon. Nothing would have been more foreign to them than the idea that the Bible was the sole rule of faith. For one thing, the printing press would not be invented for more than a thousand years. Even if they would have had access to a Bible, the vast majority of people were illiterate. Additionally, the New Testament was not even codified until the fourth century. Realistically speaking, the type of Christianity proposed by our Protestant friends was not even possible for the first fifteen centuries after Christ's resurrection.

## Clement of Rome

Those, therefore, who present their offerings at the appointed times, are accepted and blessed; for inasmuch as they follow the laws of the Lord, they sin not. For his own peculiar services are assigned to the high priest, and their own proper place is prescribed to the priests, and their own special ministrations devolve on the Levites. The layman is bound by the laws that pertain to laymen (*Letter to the Corinthians* 40 [A.D. 95]).

## Ignatius of Antioch

In like manner let everyone respect the deacons as they would respect Jesus Christ, and just as they respect the bishop as a type of the Father, and the presbyters as the council of God and college of the apostles. Without these, it cannot be called a Church. I am confident that you accept this, for I have received the exemplar of your love and have it with me in the person of your bishop. His very demeanor is a great lesson and his meekness is his strength. I believe that even the godless do respect him (*Letter to the Trallians* 3:1-2 [A. D. 110]).

## Hermas

With regard to the stones which are in the building. Those square white stones which fitted exactly into each other, are apostles, bishops, teachers, and deacons, who have lived in godly purity, and have acted as bishops and teachers and deacons chastely and reverently to the elect of God (*The Shepherd* 3:56:1 [A.D. 140-155]).

## Irenaeus

Since therefore we have such proofs, it is not necessary to seek the truth among others which it is easy to obtain from the Church; since the apostles, like a rich man [depositing his money] in a bank, lodged in her hands most copiously all things pertaining to the truth: so that every man, whosoever will, can draw from her the water of life. For she is the entrance to life; all others are thieves and robbers. On this account we are bound to avoid them, but to make choice of the things pertaining to the Church with the utmost diligence, and to lay hold of the tradition of the truth. For how stands the case? Suppose there should arise a dispute relative to some important question among us. Should we not have recourse to the most ancient churches with which the apostles held constant intercourse, and learn from them what is certain and clear in regard to the present question? For how should it be if the apostles themselves had not left us writings? Would it not be necessary [in that case] to follow the course of the tradition which they handed down to those to whom they did commit the churches? (*Against Heresies* 3:4 [A.D. 189]).

Now all these [heretics] are of much later date than the bishops to whom the apostles committed the Churches; which fact I have in the third book taken all pains to demonstrate. It follows, then, as a matter of course, that these heretics aforementioned, since they are blind to the truth, and deviate from the [right] way, will walk in various roads; and therefore, the footsteps of their doctrine are scattered here and there without agreement or connection. But the path of those belonging to the Church circumscribes the whole world, as possessing the sure tradition from the apostles, and gives unto us to see that the faith of all is one and the same (*Against Heresies* 3:4 [A.D. 189]).

## Clement of Alexandria

The gradations of bishops, presbyters, and deacons happen to be imitations, in my opinion, of the angelic glory and of that arrangement which, the Scriptures say, awaits those who have followed in the footsteps of the apostles and who have lived in complete righteousness according to the gospel (*Stromata* 6:13:107:2 [A.D. 202]).

### **Hippolytus**

When a deacon is to be ordained, he is chosen after the fashion of those things said above, the bishop alone in like manner imposing his hands upon him as we have prescribed. In the ordaining of a deacon, this is the reason why the bishop alone is to impose his hands upon him: He is not ordained to the priesthood, but to serve the bishop and to fulfill the bishop's command. He has no part in the council of the clergy, but is to attend to his own duties and is to acquaint the bishop with such matters as are needful. . . . On a presbyter [priest], however, let the presbyters impose their hands because of the common and like Spirit of the clergy. Even so, the presbyter has only the power to receive [the Spirit], and not the power to give [the Spirit]. That is why a presbyter does not ordain the clergy; for at the ordaining of a presbyter, he but seals while the bishop ordains. (*Apostolic Tradition* 9 [ca. A.D. 215]).

### **Origen**

Not fornication only, but even marriages make us unfit for ecclesiastical honors; for neither a bishop, nor a presbyter, nor a deacon, nor a widow is able to be twice married (*Homilies on Luke*, 17 [ca. A.D. 235]).

### **Cyprian**

Peter speaks there, on whom the Church was to be built, teaching and showing in the name of the Church, that although a rebellious and arrogant multitude of those who will not hear or obey may depart, yet the Church does not depart from Christ; and they are the Church who are a people united to the priest, and the flock which adheres to its pastor. Whence you ought to know that the bishop is in the Church, and the Church in the bishop; and if anyone be not with the bishop, that he is not in the Church (*Letters* 66 [A.D. 253]).

### **Hilary of Poitiers**

This is a truth which the passionate zeal of rival heresies brings into the clearest prominence. The Church, ordained by the Lord and established by His Apostles, is one for all; but the frantic folly of discordant sects has severed them from her (*On the Trinity* 7:4 [A.D. 356-360]).

### **Jerome**

Since Hilary when he left the Church was only a deacon, and since the Church is to him, though to him alone, a mere worldly multitude, he can neither duly celebrate the Eucharist, for he has no bishops or priests (*Dialogue Against the Luciferians* 21 [A.D. 382]).

### **John Chrysostom**

[In the greeting of the epistle to the Philippians, Paul addresses himself:] "To the co-bishops and deacons." What does this mean? Were there plural bishops of one city? Certainly not! It is the presbyters that [Paul] calls by this title; for these titles were then interchangeable, and the bishop is even called a deacon. That is why, when writing to Timothy, he says, "Fulfill your diaconate" although Timothy was then a bishop. That he was in fact a bishop is clear when Paul says to him, "Lay hands on no man lightly," and again, "which was given you with the laying on of hands of the presbytery"; and presbyters would not have ordained a bishop (*Homilies on the Epistle to the Philippians* 1:1 [inter A.D. 398-404]).

### **Apostolic Constitutions**

A bishop is to be ordained by three bishops or two; and if anyone be ordained by one bishop, he and the one ordaining are to be deposed (8:27:2 [A.D. 400]).