

The Early Church Fathers on Apostolic Succession

The Early Fathers believed that authentic teaching and authority came through apostolic succession. Christ conferred authority on the apostles who in turn conferred it upon their successors. We see examples of this in Scripture. The Apostle Paul tells us how this was done in a letter to Timothy. He writes: "Do not neglect the gift you have, which was given you by prophetic utterance when the elders laid their hands upon you" (1Timothy 4:14). There are also examples of men other than the twelve being called apostles. For instance, in Acts 14:14 we see that Barnabas along with Paul is referred to as an apostle. All of this makes sense as the Church of Christ would have to function as designed until the Second Coming.

Clement of Rome

Our Apostles knew through our Lord Jesus Christ that there would be strife for the office of bishop. For this reason, therefore, having received perfect foreknowledge, they appointed those who have already been mentioned, and afterwards added the further provision that, if they should die, other approved men should succeed to their ministry (*Letter to the Corinthians* 44:1 [A.D. 95]).

Ignatius of Antioch

You must all follow the bishop as Jesus Christ follows the Father, and the presbytery as you would the Apostles. Reverence the deacons as you would the command of God. Let no one do anything of concern to the Church without the bishop. Let that be considered a valid Eucharist which is celebrated by the bishop, or by one whom he appoints. Wherever the bishop appears, let the people be there; just as wherever Jesus Christ is, there is the Catholic Church (*Letter to the Smyrnaens* 8:1 [A.D. 110]).

Irenaeus

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 times; . . . For if the apostles had known hidden mysteries, which they were in the habit of imparting to the perfect apart and privily from the rest, they would have delivered them especially to those to whom they were also committing the Churches themselves. For they were desirous that these men should be very perfect and blameless in all things, whom also they were leaving behind as their successors, delivering up their own place of government to these men (*Against Heresies* 3:3:1 [A.D. 189]).

Tertullian

If there be any [heresies] bold enough to plant themselves in the midst of the apostolic age, so that they might seem to have been handed down by the Apostles because they were from the time of the Apostles, we can say to them: let them show the origin of their Churches, let them unroll the order of their bishops, running down in succession from the beginning, so that their first bishop shall have for author and predecessor some one of the Apostles or of the apostolic men who continued steadfast with the Apostles (*The Prescription Against Heretics* 32:1 [A.D. 200]).

Clement of Alexandria

After the death of the tyrant, the [Apostle John] came back again to Ephesus from the Island of Patmos; and, upon being invited, he went even to the neighboring cities of the pagans, here to appoint bishops, there to set in order whole Churches, and there to ordain to the clerical estate such as were designated by the Spirit (*Who is the Rich Man that is Saved?* 42:2 [A.D. 200]).

Origen

through His only-begotten Son Jesus Christ, what appears to us, who observe things by a right way of understanding, to be the standard and discipline delivered to the apostles by Jesus Christ, and which they handed down in succession to their posterity, the teachers of the holy Church (*On First Principles* 4:8 [A.D. 225]).

Cyprian of Carthage

Christ, who says to the apostles, and thereby to all chief rulers, who by vicarious ordination succeed to the apostles: "He that heareth you, heareth me; and he that heareth me, heareth Him that sent me; and he that despiseth you, despiseth me, and Him that sent me" (*Luke 10:16*, Letter 68:4 [circa A.D. 250]).

Firmilion of Caesarea

But what is his error, and how great his blindness, who says that the remission of sins can be given in the synagogues of the heretics, and who does not remain on the foundation of the one Church which was founded upon the rock by Christ can be learned from this, which Christ said to Peter alone: "Whatever things you shall bind on earth shall be bound also in heaven; and whatever you loose on earth, they shall be loosed in heaven;" and by this, again in the gospel, when Christ breathed upon the Apostles alone, saying to them; "Receive the Holy Spirit: if you forgive any man his sins, they shall be forgiven; and if you retain any man's sins, they shall be retained." Therefore, the power of forgiving sins was given to the Apostles and to the Churches which these men, sent by Christ, established; and to the bishops who succeeded them (*Letter to Cyprian 75:16* [A.D. 255-256]).

Peter of Alexandria

A cycle of two hundred and eighty-five years from the incarnation of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ had rolled round, when the venerable Theonas, the bishop of this city, by an ethereal flight, mounted upwards to the celestial kingdoms. To him Peter, succeeding at the helm of the Church, was by all the clergy and the whole Christian community appointed bishop, the sixteenth in order from Mark the Evangelist, who was also archbishop of the city (*Genuine Acts of Peter* [A.D. 300-311]).

Eusebius

Zambdas received the episcopate of the church of Jerusalem after the bishop Hymenaeus, whom we mentioned a little above. He died in a short time, and Hermon, the last before the persecution in our day, succeeded to the apostolic chair, which has been preserved there until the present time (*Church History 7:32:29* [A.D. 325]).

Gregory of Nyssa

The tradition has come down to us from our fathers, handed on, like some inheritance by succession from the apostles and the saints who came after them (*Against Eunomius 4:5* [A.D. 382]).

Jerome

Far be it from me to speak adversely of any of these clergy who, in succession from the apostles, confect by their sacred word the Body of Christ (Letter 14:8 [A.D. 374-376]).

Augustine

[T]here are many other things which most properly can keep me in [the Catholic Church's] bosom. The unanimity of peoples and nations keeps me here. Her authority, inaugurated in miracles, nourished by hope, augmented by love, and confirmed by her age, keeps me here. The succession of priests, from the very see of the apostle Peter, to whom the Lord, after his resurrection, gave the charge of feeding his sheep [John 21:15-17], up to the present episcopate, keeps me here. And last, the very name Catholic, which, not without reason, belongs to this Church alone (*Against the Letter of Manichaeus called Fundamental 4:5* [A.D. 397]).

Apostolic Constitutions

[Invocation in the Ordination of Bishops] Grant to him, almighty master, through your Christ, possession of the Holy Spirit, so that he may have, according to your mandate, the power to remit sins, to confer orders according to your precept, and to dissolve every bond, according to the power which you gave to your apostles (8:5:7 [A.D. 400]).