

Lecture 1: Why Church History, and the Church's First Two Years

Dr. Nathan Busenitz · The Master's Seminary · 65 minutes

Dr. Busenitz opens the course by dismantling the caricature that the church fell off a cliff after the apostle John and was only rescued by Martin Luther. He gives ten reasons to study the first fifteen hundred years, explains the convictions he brings to the telling, connects church history to preaching, and then opens the book of Acts to the church's first two years. Listen for his claim that this history belongs to Bible believing Christians, not to Rome.

STUDY SHEET: THE LECTURE, SECTION BY SECTION

01

The caricature, and why most Christians are clueless

Most evangelicals, especially in North America, have almost no concept of the first fifteen hundred years of church history, the first three quarters of it. The popular version runs: John died on Patmos, the church instantly became Roman Catholic, nothing happened but Augustine, Aquinas, and Constantine, and then Luther nailed his theses to a door and saved everything. Busenitz promises a line of faithful men in every generation before the Reformation, and a heritage that belongs to Bible believing evangelical Protestants more than to any other branch of the Christian world.

02

God is at work in history

Past the first century we are outside biblical history, yet the Lord has kept working in his church: convicting sinners, conforming believers to Christ, carrying the gospel toward the ends of the earth. Church history is not a pile of dates and dead people but a testimony to God's sovereign providence, his gospel promises being kept generation after generation.

03

Christ said he would build his church

In Matthew 16:18, a text Busenitz says Rome badly misreads, the rock is the content of Peter's confession, not Peter himself. To study church history is to watch the promise unfold: the gospel challenged, oppressed, its people persecuted and killed, and the church never overrun by the gates of Hades. The grass withers and the flower fades, but the word of God stands forever.

04

It is our history

The church's history is the history of the bride of Christ, and we are part of that bride. Church history runs from the day of Pentecost to the return of Christ, and we are inside it, not observers after it. Men training to serve local churches should understand the history of the thing they are attempting to do.

05

The truth was preserved and passed down

The Lord authorized the apostles to give the New Testament through the Spirit, and the apostles entrusted their teaching to faithful men who would teach others also, the pattern of 2 Timothy 2:2. The course will name some of those faithful men in the first centuries. This is providential preservation, not miraculous preservation, and it is illustrated especially in how the canon was collected and defended.

06

Warned by the history of error

Nearly every ancient heresy has been regurgitated as a modern cult. Gnosticism, the exaltation of human wisdom over God's revelation, resurfaces in New Age thought, Word of Faith teaching, Mormonism, and Christian Science. The legalism of the Judaizers reappears in groups like early Seventh day Adventism. The Arian denial of Christ's deity returns in the Jehovah's Witnesses. Knowing where the errors came from equips you when the doorbell rings.

07

Learning from the faithful

The first three hundred years inside the Roman Empire were marked by persecution, detailed famously in Foxe's Book of Martyrs, and every generation shows believers eagerly awaiting Christ's return and staying faithful under pressure. Athanasius, whom Busenitz calls the saint of stubbornness, never once gave in to Arianism through a lifetime of harassment.

08

Learning from those who failed

Paul treated Israel's wilderness generation as recorded examples, including negative examples, for believers who came later. Church history works the same way: men who knew better defected to heresy or gave in to practices they knew were unbiblical, and the wreckage that followed stands as a warning for future ministries.

09

A faithful apologist is a good historian

Elders are charged to hold fast the faithful word, to exhort in sound doctrine and refute those who contradict, and every Christian is called to give a defense for the hope within. A little church history lets you stand your ground with Greek Orthodoxy, Roman Catholicism, Islam, and the American cults. Busenitz refuses the common notion that church history belongs to the Catholics: the Bible is ours, and so is the history.

10

A right perspective on our own moment

We are not the first generation to get it right, and earlier generations lived far closer to the apostles. Every generation is shaped by its culture in ways it cannot see: the fathers by Platonism, some reformers by violence, and, Busenitz argues, the modern church by evolutionary science, which he calls the same old move of bending Scripture to Greek philosophy, only now the philosophy is materialist and renamed science.

Selection, objectivity, and humility

No one semester can cover everything, so the course selects the recognized turning points, while granting that God may measure significance by faithfulness rather than impact. Pure objectivity is impossible, so Busenitz states his grid up front: Scripture as the ultimate authority, and the gospel as faith alone in Christ alone through his work on the cross alone, principles the Reformation recovered from Scripture rather than invented. He also commends a lifetime habit of reading biography, the way Piper reads Edwards.

Church history in the pulpit

Four uses for the preacher. Illustrations: inferior to biblical ones but both timeless and fresh, since almost no one has heard of Athanasius fleeing into the Egyptian wilderness. Old commentaries: Chrysostom preached verse by verse through much of the New Testament, and his conclusions almost always match careful modern exegesis. The history of doctrine: the Trinity, the canon, baptism, and eschatology all involve history, and Busenitz claims every church father known to us was premillennial until about AD 250, when Clement of Alexandria, father of the allegorical hermeneutic, became the first amillennialist. And apologetics: he argues Islam works like a Christian cult, appealing to prior true revelation, Moses, David, the prophets, and the gospel of Jesus, to lend credibility to falsehood, so that Mormonism is in a sense the American Islam of the nineteenth century.

Pentecost, AD 30

The church begins in Acts 2, ten days after the ascension and fifty days after Passover, when the Spirit came on the hundred and twenty. Busenitz dates it to AD 30: Herod the Great died about 4 BC, Jesus was about thirty when his ministry began around AD 26 (Luke 3:23), and three and a half years of ministry put the crucifixion and resurrection in AD 30. The date also works backward: the Jerusalem Council of Acts 15 sits around AD 49, and Paul's own arithmetic in Galatians 1, three years plus fourteen, places his conversion near AD 32, which only fits if the church began in 30. The tongues of Acts 2 were authentic foreign languages, listed in the text itself, not gibberish; Augustine took the many languages as a sign the gospel was for all nations.

The first two years of the church

Acts 1:8 outlines the whole book: Jerusalem and Judea, then Samaria, then the ends of the earth. Peter preaches, the church grows through arrests and threats, and Ananias and Sapphira fall as a deceitful contrast to Barnabas's genuine gift. Gamaliel counsels leaving the Christians alone lest the council be found fighting against God, advice his own student Saul refused until the Damascus road. In Acts 6 the apostles devote themselves to prayer and the word while deacons take up the daily administration, a pattern Busenitz presses on future pastors. Stephen's martyrdom scatters believers as far as Antioch, the empire's third largest city, where Gentiles begin to believe. All of this, through Acts 8, happens within roughly the church's first two years.

SCRIPTURE IN THIS LECTURE

Matthew 16 · Isaiah 40 · Luke 3 · Acts 1 · Acts 2 · Acts 5 · Acts 6 · Acts 7 · Acts 15 · Acts 22 · Galatians 1 · 2 Timothy 2 · 1 Peter 1 · 1 Peter 3

KEYTERMS

Church history

In this course, the story of Christ's church from the day of Pentecost to his return; we are part of it, not spectators after it.

The early church fathers

The Christian leaders who came after the apostles; Busenitz argues they belong to the evangelical heritage, not to Rome.

Providential preservation

God keeping the truth alive through ordinary means, faithful men entrusting it to others, rather than by ongoing miracle.

Gnosticism

The ancient exaltation of human wisdom above God's revelation, resurfacing in New Age thought, Word of Faith teaching, Mormonism, and Christian Science.

Arianism

The ancient denial of the deity of Christ, echoed today most closely by the Jehovah's Witnesses.

The allegorical hermeneutic

Reading Scripture as allegory to fit an outside philosophy; Busenitz names Clement of Alexandria its father.

Sola Scriptura and faith alone

The two convictions Busenitz states as his grid for the course: Scripture the ultimate authority, salvation by faith alone in Christ alone.

The day of Pentecost

The Jewish feast fifty days after Passover on which the Spirit came and the church began, dated in this course to AD 30.

COMPREHENSIONCHECK:FOURTEENQUESTIONS

1. In the popular caricature Busenitz describes, what supposedly happened to the church after the apostle John died?

- A. It flourished for a thousand years
- B. It fell off a cliff and became Roman Catholic almost instantly
- C. It moved entirely to Rome
- D. It disappeared until Augustine

2. How does the lecture say we should think of church history, rather than as dates and dead people?

- A. As background for sermons only
- B. As a purely academic discipline
- C. As a testimony of God's sovereign providence fulfilling his gospel promises
- D. As the history of Western civilization

3. In Matthew 16:18, what does Busenitz say the rock refers to?

- A. Peter himself
- B. The apostles as a group
- C. The city of Jerusalem
- D. The content of Peter's confession

4. The pattern of 2 Timothy 2:2 is that Paul's teaching goes to Timothy and then to whom?
 - A. Angels who guard it
 - B. Faithful men able to teach others also
 - C. The church at Rome
 - D. Written archives only
5. How does the lecture describe God's preservation of the truth through history?
 - A. Miraculous preservation
 - B. Preservation by the papacy
 - C. Providential preservation
 - D. Preservation by councils
6. Which modern group does the lecture tie most closely to ancient Arianism?
 - A. The Jehovah's Witnesses
 - B. Christian Science
 - C. Seventh day Adventism
 - D. The Word of Faith movement
7. Why does Busenitz call Athanasius the saint of stubbornness?
 - A. He refused to leave Rome
 - B. He never gave in to Arianism despite lifelong harassment
 - C. He rejected every church council
 - D. He would not learn Greek
8. What does Busenitz refuse to concede to Roman Catholicism?
 - A. The Old Testament
 - B. The creeds
 - C. Church history itself
 - D. The mission field
9. What modern habit does the lecture compare to the fathers bending Scripture to Platonism?
 - A. Reinterpreting Genesis through Darwinism
 - B. Using contemporary sermon illustrations
 - C. Reading the Puritans
 - D. Singing modern hymns
10. What two convictions does Busenitz state up front as the grid for this course?
 - A. Tradition and reason
 - B. Scripture as ultimate authority, and salvation by faith alone in Christ alone
 - C. Objectivity and neutrality
 - D. Creeds and councils
11. What eschatology claim does the lecture make about the church fathers before about AD 250?
 - A. Every known father was premillennial
 - B. They were all amillennial
 - C. They avoided eschatology entirely
 - D. They followed Augustine's view

12. What year does the lecture argue best fits the day of Pentecost, working from both Herod's death and Paul's timeline in Galatians 1?

- A. AD 26
- B. AD 30
- C. AD 33
- D. AD 49

13. What were the tongues of Acts 2, according to the lecture?

- A. Ecstatic speech no one understood
- B. A private prayer language
- C. Authentic foreign languages the crowds recognized
- D. Angelic languages

14. In the Acts 6 pattern the lecture draws out, the apostles devote themselves to what?

- A. Administration and hospitality
- B. Prayer and the ministry of the word
- C. Travel and letter writing
- D. Temple sacrifices

Answer key (fold under before you begin): 1 B · 2 C · 3 D · 4 B · 5 C · 6 A · 7 B · 8 C · 9 A · 10 B · 11 A · 12 B · 13 C · 14 B

TALKITOVER

1. Busenitz says every generation is shaped by its culture in ways it cannot see. What pressures of our own moment might future believers look back on and ask how the church ever gave in to them?
2. He argues church history belongs to Bible believing Christians rather than to Rome. How would knowing that heritage change the way you answer a Catholic friend, or a visitor from a cult at your door?
3. The apostles gave themselves to prayer and the word while deacons carried the administration. Where does our own congregation's service load sit against that pattern, and where do you fit in it?

ONEVERSETOCARRY

Christ's promise in Matthew 16:18: I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overpower it. Twenty centuries of history are that promise unfolding.

GOFURTHER

The lecture's own commendations: Foxe's Book of Martyrs on the persecuted church, John Piper's The Swans Are Not Silent on Athanasius, the Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture series for hearing the fathers on the passage you are studying, and the lifelong habit of reading Christian biography.

Lecture by Dr. Nathan Busenitz, from The Master's Seminary's public channel. Study notes written from the lectures themselves and reviewed by Medina Community Church. medinacommunitychurch.org/historical-theology-1-1