

Lecture 7: The Lapsed, the Pure Church, and the Second Century Apologists

Dr. Nathan Busenitz · The Master's Seminary · 68 minutes

Two questions drive this lecture. What should the church do with believers who denied Christ under torture and later repented? And how should Christians answer a hostile culture's slanders? Watch for Justin Martyr's description of a church service from around AD 150; Busenitz argues its six elements are exactly the elements of a faithful service today.

STUDY SHEET: THE LECTURE, SECTION BY SECTION

01

Heresy means division

The Greek word behind heresy means to divide, the very word Paul uses in Titus 3:10 for the divisive man to be rejected after two warnings. Most heresies divide by false doctrine; the last two in this survey, Novatianism and Donatism, divided the church over a question of discipline while holding orthodox doctrine, and were condemned for the schism itself.

02

The lapsed

For most of its first 250 years the church's persecution was regional, but under Decius in the mid third century it became empire wide. A Christian hauled in could save his life with a pinch of incense and the words Caesar is Lord. Those who did became known as the lapsed, and when peace returned, many sought readmission to the church, forcing an agonizing question that persecuted churches under the Soviets and in China have faced again: can those who denied Christ be restored?

03

The mainstream answer, and the Novatianist schism

The mainstream church answered yes: as Peter denied Christ and was restored, and as John Mark deserted and was later useful, so the genuinely repentant could over time be readmitted, after serious demonstration that the repentance was real. The followers of Novatian refused, styled themselves the pure church, elected Novatian as a rival bishop of Rome, and planted rival congregations, for which the church excommunicated them. The warning passages of Hebrews, the mainstream held, describe a final, willful rejection, not the terror driven failure of a believer who returns in grief.

04

Repentance before it became penance

The church demanded fruits of repentance from the lapsed, but Busenitz warns against reading later Roman Catholic penance back into this period. Repentance is an internal change of mind and heart that bears external fruit; centuries later, the Latin rendering of the Greek word, do penance rather than repent, helped shift the focus from the changed heart to the performed act, a confusion that would flower in medieval Catholicism.

The Donatists

The same drama replayed in the early fourth century under Diocletian's persecution. This time the deniers were called traditores, those who handed over, the root of our word traitor. The Donatists refused their restoration, formed separate churches, and rebaptized their members, which is why the Reformation's Anabaptists would later be smeared as Donatists. Augustine became their great opponent, and Cyprian's famous stress on the church's unity, which can sound Roman to modern ears, was forged against exactly this kind of schism.

Four slanders against the church

Though Christians were peaceful, morally upright, tax paying, and prayed for their rulers, the empire's rumor mill charged them with four crimes. Atheism, for denying the visible pantheon in favor of an invisible God. Sexual immorality, bred by the secrecy of their meetings and the name of the agape feast, a vicious circle since persecution forced the secrecy that fed the rumors. Cannibalism, from garbled reports of the Lord's Supper. And insurrection, the deadliest charge, because Christians would confess Jesus as Lord and not Caesar, the confession behind Romans 10:9.

The apologists

Against these slanders rose the second century apologists, Justin Martyr, Tatian, Athenagoras, Theophilus, Melito, and Hegesippus, whose apologies were not regrets but defenses, some addressed directly, if optimistically, to the emperor and Senate. Their task was double: answer false philosophy, and make a legal and moral case that Christians were no threat to Rome.

Justin Martyr

A trained philosopher who found in Christ the true philosophy, Justin wrote two apologies and a long, cordial Dialogue with Trypho, a Jewish interlocutor, in which he argues from the Old Testament that Jesus is the Messiah. He was martyred at Rome around 165 under Marcus Aurelius, answering the demand to recant: no rightly minded person turns from true belief to false.

A church service in AD 150

Justin's first apology preserves the oldest description of Christian worship outside the New Testament. On Sunday all in a city gather; the memoirs of the apostles or the writings of the prophets are read as long as time permits; the presider exhorts the congregation to imitate these good things; all rise for prayer; bread and the cup are given thanks over, distributed to each, and carried by deacons to the absent; a freewill offering is collected for orphans, widows, the sick, prisoners, and strangers; and they meet on Sunday because creation began and Christ rose on that day. Six elements: Scripture reading, a sermon, congregational prayer, the Lord's table, congregational worship, and an offering for the needy, the same six of a faithful church today. Whoever wants ancient practices, Busenitz says, should want these.

Justin on the Son, before Nicaea

Long before the Nicene vocabulary existed, Justin argued to Trypho from the Old Testament that the one who appeared to Abraham, Jacob, and Moses, the angel of the LORD who is called God, is numerically distinct from the Father yet never distinct in will, doing only what the Maker of all wills. Such passages answer modern groups who comb the fathers hoping to find the Son demoted.

Tatian and Athenagoras

Justin's student Tatian swung to the opposite pole, rejecting Greek philosophy and culture wholesale, and after Justin's death drifted into his own ascetic, semi-Gnostic sect that condemned marriage, meat, and even wine at the supper. Yet he left the church a gift: the Diatessaron, the first harmony of the Gospels, weaving exactly our four into one narrative, the standard Gospel text of Syrian churches into the fifth century and an early witness that four Gospels, and only four, carried authority. Athenagoras of Athens, meanwhile, picked up the Scriptures to refute them and was converted by what he read.

Athens and Jerusalem

At the century's turn the church's culture question crystallized in two men. Clement of Alexandria embraced Greek philosophy as complementary light, even fashioning a Christian Platonism, confident that meeting the culture on its terms would win it. Tertullian of Carthage answered with his famous demand: what has Athens to do with Jerusalem, the church with the academy? Busenitz maps the debate onto today's contextualization arguments, liberal accommodation on one side, separatist legalism on the other, and notes the irony that Tertullian, fleeing worldliness, overcorrected into Montanist strictness. The biblical balance stands between: in the world, not of it, never purchasing influence at the price of the message.

SCRIPTUREINTHISLECTURE

Titus 3 · Romans 10 · Acts 13 · Acts 15 · John 1

KEYTERMS

The lapsed

Christians who denied Christ under persecution, usually by a token act of Caesar worship, and later sought restoration.

Traditores

The fourth century name, root of our word traitor, for those who handed over the faith or the Scriptures under Diocletian.

Novatianism

The third century schism that refused all restoration of the lapsed and set up rival pure churches under Novatian.

Donatism

The fourth century recycling of the same schism after Diocletian, marked by rebaptism and opposed above all by Augustine.

Apologist

A defender of the faith; in the second century, one who answered both false teaching and Rome's legal slanders.

The agape feast

The church's love feast, whose secrecy fed pagan rumors of immorality.

The Diatessaron

Tatian's harmony weaving the four Gospels into one account, used by Syrian churches for centuries.

Ante-Nicene

Before the Council of Nicaea in 325, the dividing line of the patristic age.

Christian Platonism

Clement of Alexandria's project of integrating Greek philosophy into Christianity, answered by Tertullian's Athens and Jerusalem.

COMPREHENSIONCHECK:FOURTEENQUESTIONS

1. What does the word behind heresy literally mean?
 - A. Falsehood
 - B. To divide
 - C. Secret knowledge
 - D. Rebellion against Rome
2. Under which emperor did persecution first become empire wide?
 - A. Nero
 - B. Domitian
 - C. Decius
 - D. Constantine
3. Who were the lapsed?
 - A. Christians who fell asleep in services
 - B. Christians who denied Christ under persecution and later sought restoration
 - C. Pagans who attended church secretly
 - D. Clergy who retired early
4. On what biblical precedent did the mainstream church allow restoration of the truly repentant?
 - A. The rich young ruler
 - B. Peter's denial and restoration
 - C. The parable of the talents
 - D. Ananias and Sapphira
5. What did the Novatianists call themselves?
 - A. The remnant
 - B. The pure church
 - C. The confessors
 - D. The elect of Rome
6. How does Busenitz say the mainstream church read the warning passages of Hebrews?
 - A. As proof no denier could return
 - B. As describing a final, willful rejection rather than a terror driven failure later repented of
 - C. As applying only to Jews
 - D. As later additions to the text

7. What later confusion grew from the Latin rendering of the word for repentance?
- A. Repentance became a public festival
 - B. The internal change of heart was displaced by the performed act of penance
 - C. Repentance was restricted to clergy
 - D. The word disappeared from the Bible
8. Why were the Reformation's Anabaptists smeared as Donatists?
- A. They lived in North Africa
 - B. Like the Donatists, they rebaptized
 - C. They denied the Trinity
 - D. They followed Novatian's writings
9. Which of the four accusations against Christians was the most politically dangerous?
- A. Atheism
 - B. Immorality
 - C. Cannibalism
 - D. Insurrection: confessing Jesus as Lord rather than Caesar
10. What was Justin Martyr's Dialogue with Trypho?
- A. A courtroom transcript
 - B. A cordial debate arguing from the Old Testament that Jesus is the Messiah
 - C. A treatise against Rome
 - D. A commentary on Revelation
11. Which six elements make up the AD 150 service Justin describes?
- A. Incense, icons, processions, chants, relics, and vigils
 - B. Scripture reading, a sermon, congregational prayer, the Lord's table, congregational worship, and an offering for the needy
 - C. Baptisms, exorcisms, fasting, footwashing, tithing, and pilgrimage
 - D. Drama, dance, feasting, debate, song, and silence
12. Why did the church meet on Sunday, according to Justin?
- A. Roman law required it
 - B. It was the day creation began and the day Christ rose
 - C. It avoided the Jewish authorities
 - D. The emperor's birthday fell on it
13. What is the Diatessaron?
- A. Tatian's harmony of the four Gospels in one account
 - B. A Gnostic gospel
 - C. Justin's lost apology
 - D. A list of Roman accusations
14. What was Tertullian's famous question to the integrators of philosophy?
- A. Where is the wise man of this age?
 - B. What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?
 - C. Who has believed our report?
 - D. What is truth?

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

TALKITOVER

1. If a believer denied Christ under real threat and later returned in grief, how should a church weigh Peter's restoration against the fear of cheapening faithfulness? What would genuine fruits of repentance look like?
2. The four ancient slanders were all false, yet they justified real persecution. What caricatures of Christianity circulate today, and how do the apologists teach us to answer them?
3. Justin's six elements of worship match a faithful service now. Which of the six is weakest in our own habits of gathering, and what would strengthening it require of you?

ONEVERSETOCARRY

The confession that cost the early church everything, from Romans 10: if you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord and believe God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.

GOFURTHER

The lecture points to Justin Martyr's First Apology and Dialogue with Trypho, both readable in an evening's sitting, and to Phil Johnson's Shepherds' Conference seminar The History of Heresy, which traces these same ancient errors into their modern forms.

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-1-7