

Lecture 8: Tertullian, Irenaeus, Origen, and Cyprian

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

Four towering Africans dominate this lecture, two from Alexandria and two from Carthage, and their disagreements still shape ours: philosophy or separation, literal or allegorical, purity or unity. Busenitz weighs each man honestly, the brilliance and the failures alike, and shows why two of them were never made saints.

STUDY SHEET: THE LECTURE, SECTION BY SECTION

01

Getting the map straight

The patristic period spans the church's first five hundred years, closing around the fall of the western empire in 476. The Council of Nicaea in 325 splits it: fathers before it are ante-Nicene (ante meaning before, not against), those during and after are Nicene and post-Nicene. Within the ante-Nicene period sit the apostolic fathers, the second century apologists, and the polemical fathers, the foundational generations this course lingers over.

02

Alexandria and Carthage

Four African leaders frame the church's first culture war: Clement and his student Origen in Alexandria, eager to harness Plato as a lesser light pointing to the gospel; Tertullian and his admirer Cyprian in Carthage, insisting with Paul in 1 Corinthians 1 and 2 that man's wisdom is foolishness with God. Busenitz sides nearer Tertullian on principle, while warning that both poles carry dangers the rest of the lecture will illustrate.

03

Tertullian, father of Latin theology

Probably trained in law, Tertullian was the first great father to write in Latin, the language of the western empire's people (nothing sacred about it, whatever later Rome made of it), and when Latin lacked a word he invented one, hundreds of them, including the one we cannot do without: Trinity, three persons, one God. He also pushed forward the recognition of the canon against Marcion's scissors. Yet Rome never sainted him, because at the end of his life, disgusted at worldliness in the mainstream church, he defected to the Montanists for their moral strictness. An explanation, Busenitz says, not an excuse.

04

Irenaeus of Lyon

A disciple of Polycarp, who was a disciple of John, Irenaeus carried the apostolic chain to Gaul as bishop of Lyon and became the great polemicist against Valentinian Gnosticism in his five volume *Against Heresies*, even turning the Gnostics' own word demiurge back on them. He testifies that the church received exactly four Gospels, his reasoning charmingly odd (four zones of the world, four winds) but his witness invaluable: while Gnostic gospels multiplied, the true church knew only four.

05

The pillar and ground of the faith

Irenaeus writes that the gospel the apostles preached was afterwards, by God's will, delivered to us in the Scriptures, to be the pillar and ground of our faith: an early confession of Scripture's final authority. And when he spells out the ancient tradition of the apostles, its content is simply the faith of the New Testament: one God the Creator; his Son Jesus Christ, born of a virgin, who suffered under Pontius Pilate, rose, ascended, and will come in glory as Savior and Judge. The oral tradition, in other words, is the written tradition; there is no secret second deposit, a point worth remembering when Rome appeals to one.

06

How Mary's elevation actually happened

A student's question draws a preview: the fathers' references to the virgin are about Christ's birth, not Mary's status. Her elevation begins centuries later, around the Council of Ephesus in 431, where calling Mary the bearer of God was meant to defend the incarnation, that the one born was fully God from conception, and only over time became a claim about her. Jerome pressed her perpetual virginity, though the Gospels name four brothers of Jesus and mention sisters. Busenitz, following Calvin's treatise on relics, traces the engine of it: when the empire forced pagans into the church, the devotion once paid to goddesses found a new object.

07

Origen: brilliantly right and brilliantly wrong

Origen of Alexandria, Clement's student and successor at the catechetical school, is perhaps the most brilliant of the fathers and something like the father of systematic theology; his *On First Principles* was among the first attempts to organize Christian doctrine, and his answer to the pagan Celsus a serious apologetic. He professed that the Bible alone is inspired and must ground all Christian thinking. But in practice, Needham observes, Platonism colored everything, and when Origen was wrong he was abysmally wrong.

08

The allegorical hermeneutic

Origen taught that Scripture has three levels, body, soul, and spirit: the literal, the moral, and the spiritual meaning, with the literal the least important. The method came down a long chain: Greek philosophers allegorizing Homer's immoral gods, Alexandrian Jews applying it to the Old Testament, the Epistle of Barnabas and Clement baptizing it for the church, Origen popularizing it. Its fatal flaw is subjectivity: a hidden meaning not in the text answers to the interpreter, not the author, so the Bible can be made to mean anything. Calvin condemned it as Satan's subtlety, though Busenitz notes Calvin kept a version of it for prophecy, which is where amillennial conclusions come from. Alexandria's allegorical school would collide for centuries with Antioch's literal school.

09

Where allegory took him

Origen's errors were not small: he taught a universalism in which all, eventually even Satan, would be saved, the very well Rob Bell drew from in *Love Wins*. Centuries later a council at Constantinople anathematized Origen by name alongside Arius and Nestorius, which is why Rome never sainted him either: Tertullian out for Montanism, Origen out as a condemned heretic. The fathers, Busenitz insists, must be read like any modern author: with patience, respect, and 1 Thessalonians 5's test, holding fast the good and rejecting the rest, never as inspired, whatever Eastern Orthodoxy says of its councils.

Cyprian and the unity of the church

Bishop of Carthage through the Decian persecution, Cyprian charted the mainstream course on the lapsed: restoration, but only upon demonstrated repentance, in some cases only at the point of death. Against Novatian's rival pure church he wrote on the church's unity, including the famous line that no one can have God for his Father who does not have the church for his mother, words aimed at schismatics abandoning the true church for a rival altar, not a charter for Rome. His stricter view that baptism outside the church was void the mainstream declined to follow. Cyprian himself died a martyr by the sword.

Purity first, then unity

Cyprian's legacy frames a tension every generation must hold: Scripture commands both unity and doctrinal purity. Busenitz's rule: purity is the foundation, for unity without truth is only superficial; but the command to unity is real, and dividing over matters that are not core doctrine sins against it. The Novatianist and fundamentalist temptations are the same temptation.

Foxe's roll call

The lecture closes in Foxe's Book of Martyrs, with the King James Bible and Pilgrim's Progress one of the three most influential English Christian books: Timothy, Ignatius, Polycarp, Justin, Irenaeus, and Cyprian in their deaths, and young Origen, whose mother hid his clothes to keep him from running to martyrdom beside his father, a roll call running down to Constantine, whose legalization of Christianity would end the age of persecution and begin a very different set of problems.

SCRIPTURE IN THIS LECTURE

1 Corinthians 1 · 1 Corinthians 2 · 2 Timothy 2 · 1 Thessalonians 5

KEY TERMS

Ante-Nicene

The church fathers before the Council of Nicaea in 325; ante meaning before, not against.

Trinity

Tertullian's coined Latin term expressing the biblical truth of three divine persons and one God.

The rule of faith

The fathers' summary of apostolic doctrine, whose content, as Irenaeus shows, is simply the faith written in the New Testament.

The allegorical hermeneutic

Origen's three level reading of Scripture, body, soul, and spirit, in which the hidden meaning outranks the literal and the interpreter replaces the author.

The school of Antioch

Alexandria's great rival, committed to the literal, historical sense of the text.

Universalism

Origen's teaching that all, eventually even Satan, will be saved; condemned by the church and revived in modern times.

Theotokos

Bearer of God, the title debated at Ephesus in 431 to defend Christ's full deity from conception, later bent into an elevation of Mary.

On the Unity of the Church

Cyprian's treatise against the Novatianist schism, the context for his church as mother language.

Anathema

A council's formal condemnation; Origen's name was placed under one at Constantinople, which is why Rome never counted him a saint.

COMPREHENSIONCHECK:FOURTEENQUESTIONS

1. What does ante-Nicene mean?
 - A. Against the Council of Nicaea
 - B. Before the Council of Nicaea
 - C. After the Council of Nicaea
 - D. About the Council of Nicaea
2. Which indispensable theological term did Tertullian coin?
 - A. Incarnation
 - B. Trinity
 - C. Justification
 - D. Canon
3. Why is Tertullian not counted a saint by Rome?
 - A. He was anathematized as a Gnostic
 - B. He joined the Montanist movement at the end of his life
 - C. He denied the resurrection
 - D. He refused baptism
4. What discipleship chain stands behind Irenaeus?
 - A. Peter to Clement to Irenaeus
 - B. John to Polycarp to Irenaeus
 - C. Paul to Timothy to Irenaeus
 - D. James to Jude to Irenaeus
5. What does Irenaeus say the apostles' preaching became, by God's will?
 - A. A secret oral deposit guarded by bishops
 - B. The Scriptures, the pillar and ground of our faith
 - C. The liturgy of the church
 - D. The creeds of the councils
6. When Irenaeus spells out the ancient tradition of the apostles, what is its content?
 - A. Practices found nowhere in Scripture
 - B. Exactly the faith written in the New Testament
 - C. The rulings of Roman bishops
 - D. Instructions for the calendar

7. What was the title bearer of God at the Council of Ephesus originally meant to defend?
- A. Mary's sinlessness
 - B. That the one born of Mary was fully God from conception
 - C. The perpetual virginity
 - D. The authority of Ephesus's bishop
8. What three levels of meaning did Origen assign to Scripture?
- A. Law, prophets, writings
 - B. Body, soul, and spirit: the literal, moral, and spiritual senses
 - C. Past, present, future
 - D. Hebrew, Greek, Latin
9. What is the fatal flaw of the allegorical method, as the lecture presents it?
- A. It requires knowing Greek
 - B. Its hidden meanings answer to the interpreter rather than the author, so the text can mean anything
 - C. It takes too long
 - D. It ignores the New Testament
10. Which of Origen's teachings did Rob Bell revive in Love Wins?
- A. The threefold sense
 - B. Universalism, that all will finally be saved
 - C. The preexistence of the canon
 - D. Strict literalism
11. Why is Origen not counted a saint by Rome?
- A. He was a Montanist
 - B. He was anathematized by name at a later council
 - C. He never wrote in Latin
 - D. He opposed the four Gospels
12. What was Cyprian's position on restoring the lapsed?
- A. Immediate restoration for all
 - B. No restoration ever
 - C. Restoration upon demonstrated repentance, sometimes only near death
 - D. Restoration only by rebaptism
13. Against whom was Cyprian's church as mother language aimed?
- A. The Roman emperor
 - B. Schismatics abandoning the true church for Novatian's rival altar
 - C. Protestant reformers
 - D. The Gnostics of Egypt
14. In the tension between purity and unity, which does Busenitz say must come first?
- A. Unity, at any doctrinal cost
 - B. Doctrinal purity, as the only foundation for true unity
 - C. Neither can be ranked
 - D. Whichever the culture prefers

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

1. Tertullian invented the vocabulary we still confess with, and then ended outside the church he served. What keeps zeal for purity from curdling into separatism in your own convictions?
2. Irenaeus insisted the apostles' tradition is fully written in Scripture. How would you use his testimony in a conversation with someone who appeals to an unwritten church tradition?
3. Origen made the Bible say beautiful things it does not say. Where are we tempted to prefer an edifying spiritual reading over what the author actually meant, and why is the trade a bad one?

ONEVERSETOCARRY

The test the lecture keeps applying, from 1 Thessalonians 5: examine everything carefully, hold fast to what is good.

GOFURTHER

The lecture's own commendations: Bryan Litfin's chapters on Tertullian and Origen read with the discernment Busenitz models, Nick Needham on the allegorical method, John Calvin's short treatise on relics, and Foxe's Book of Martyrs for the deaths of the men met in this lecture.

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-1-8