

## Early Church Heresies – 4. Montanists

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Over the past few weeks, we have been looking at some of the early church's history. It has not focused on the heroes, but on those who've tried to destroy God's church. And as we have done that, we've also been looking to Jesus, to see how the early church looked to him, and persevered through the hard times.

But today, as I talk about the Montanists who began around 170AD but were a spent force after 150 years, I admit that the early church's response was not as good as it should have been; for they goofed.

There had been many prophets in the early church. In some churches, major disputes erupted between the elders and the roaming prophets, usu over teaching and divided loyalty in congregations. Over time, the number of prophets had dwindled.

And as false teaching affected the churches, people looked to 2 places: to the bishops and to the scriptures (the written words of the apostles) looking to find out what God wanted them to know. This diminished the role of the prophets.

One man, Montanus, claimed to be a prophet in Phrygia, which is an area in the middle of what is now Turkey. Like every convert to Christianity, Montanus rejected many of his former ideas, beliefs and practices. Yet people still argue as to how much he brought with him into Christianity.

He loved the writings of the apostle John. In John 14:16 Jesus promised that he would send another Counsellor (or Paraclete who is the Holy Spirit) to be with us. John's gospel does not have the account of Pentecost, but before Jesus ascended, he breathed on them & said *Receive the Holy Spirit*.

At his baptism, Montanus was filled with the Holy Spirit and said "As the dispensation of the Father had given way to the dispensation of the Son, so the dispensation of the Son had now given place to the dispensation of the Holy Spirit, for Christ's promise of the Paraclete had now been fulfilled."

In other words, God the Father was most active in the Old Testament. In the New Testament Jesus took over the active role within the Godhead, virtually replacing the Father. But now that Montanus was baptized, that era has ceased. Now the Holy Spirit replaced Jesus in the active role of the Godhead. It was a huge claim. The Age of the Holy Spirit began with the baptism of Montanus.

Apart from the boldness of the claim, which some others have said began at Pentecost, not at Montanus' baptism, it is perilously close to the heresy of Modalism, which says that while there is but one God, that one God had a mask of the Father in the Old Testament, the Son in the Gospels & the Holy Spirit in the epistles. Like an actor, God changed his manner of dealing with his people according to which mask or mode he had. The one God was Father, then became Son, then became the Holy Spirit. Some of the followers of Montanus were accused of having this heresy, instead of believing that there is one God in 3 persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, who has always been there as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, & always will be.

However, one of the greatest proponents of helping to explain the Trinity, whose name was Tertullian, was also a Montanist. If Montanus had taught the heresy, Tertullian would never have been a Montanist.

So what did Montanus do? He, with 2 other prophets (Prisca or Priscilla, & Maximilla), would writhe on the ground in trances & prophesy. They spoke in human tongues as well as unknown languages.

Montanus described this way of prophesying (which was different to that described in the New Testament, but similar to some of the prophetic schools in 1 Samuel 10 and 19) as letting God talk through him like God playing a musical instrument, without any human input. One of his prophecies explains this "The man is like a lyre, & I dart like a plectrum. The man sleeps & I am awake."

This directly confronted Paul's teaching in 1 Cor 14:29-33 where Paul said: *2 or 3 prophets should speak and others should weigh carefully what is said. & if a revelation comes to someone who is sitting down, the 1st speaker should stop. For you can all prophesy in turn so that everyone may be instructed and encouraged. The spirits of the prophets are subject to the control of the prophets. For God is not a God of disorder but of peace.*

Often their prophecies were given in the first person, eg Montanus prophesied "I am neither angel nor ambassador, but I, the Lord and Father, am come."

Many misunderstood this to be a claim to be God.

But he became very popular. His initial teachings were to strengthen the weaknesses he saw in the

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church. He declared compulsory fasts, and banned remarriage for any widowed person. Virginity and chastity were highly prized. Prisca prophesied: “The holy (meaning chaste) minister knows how to minister holiness. For those who purify their hearts both see visions, and placing their heads downwards also hear manifest voices, as saving as they are secret.”

Martyrdom became important. Be a martyr, do not die in bed. And if you were declared an outlaw for your faith, that was tremendous, for Montanus claimed that God outlawed anyone not outlawed by unsaved mankind.

Then Prisca claimed that Jesus came to her in the form of a woman and lay beside her. In her vision, Jesus told her that the city of Pepuza was where the new Jerusalem would come down from heaven.

All 3 prophets stated that Jesus was about to return, to reign for 1000 years. Then, as Maximilla outlived the other 2, she claimed that Jesus would return when she died. She died in 179AD, but Jesus did not come.

However, the followers re-interpreted her prophecy to mean that there would be no more prophets until Jesus returned.

The early church reacted to Montanism, and the reaction led many Christians to believe that we could no longer expect the spiritual gifts to occur.

What did they do?

1st, after hearing the claims, the 3 prophets were declared heretical. They even sent some people to exorcise them, but they never got close enough.

2nd, church leaders, especially in the eastern half of the Empire, questioned all non-Biblical prophecy. Some claim this was a power grab over the prophets. More generous critics say that especially following Marcion’s heresy, that the Bishops were emphasizing the Scriptures from other writings, and that as Christians wanted more clarity in who to believe, they looked to their bishops for greater guidance. The bishops were convinced that no new prophecy should be added to the apostolic writings.

3rd, instead of testing the spirits to see if the prophecies were in line with the revealed truth of the Bible, a major part of the church squashed all prophecy as being dangerous. Only certain expressions of Christianity were now acceptable.

Ordinary Christians were seen to be lacking any gifts. Teaching on the spiritual gifts declined. Church leaders became the ones who ministered.

Bishops were cast into the role of keepers of the faith, rather than preachers and pray-ers.

The church suffered tremendously as it was deprived of much of the vitality and life that God was giving to each member to minister for Him.

Over the past 100 years, modern Christianity has revisited the role of the Holy Spirit in the lives of ordinary Christians. There have been many problems that have arisen due to the apparent freedoms felt by those experiencing spiritual renewal. Some have reacted by squashing it like they did in the past. Others have tested the spirits, keeping parts but rejecting other bits.

Montanus certainly went too far, loosening himself from the guidelines God has given us. The more we understand and apply the Bible, the better we should be living in the way Jesus desires for us, filled with his Spirit, bearing fruit and ministering with the gifts he so freely supplies.