

M I L E S T O N E S

Lessons from Montanism

The Triune God is revealed in the New Testament primarily in terms of the believers' experience; there is no dogmatic or systematic presentation. As such the Triune God is revealed for our subjective participation. Given this focus, the church has not been without its share of overzealous proponents of the experience of the Spirit who have been unwilling to be balanced by the revelation contained in the written word of God, the Bible. The history of Montanism provides one such example, but more can be learned from it than from just its excesses. Equally valuable lessons can be learned when the church's reactions to the Montanist movement are also compared with the Word of God.

Originating in Phrygia in the latter half of the second century, Montanism placed particular emphasis on the work of the Holy Spirit. Although it had some admirable aspirations, Montanism also exhibited some unbalanced and dangerous tendencies with regard to the Spirit. Its lack of acceptance by the church at large doubtless led to the movement's eventual disappearance, but it also may have set the stage for reactionary imbalances as well, which have diminished the church's vitality and frustrated the building up of the Body of Christ. Most of the information on the history, beliefs, and practices of this group come from sources critical of Montanism. Eusebius of Caesarea, one of its most vocal critics, cites information about Montanism in general and about its founder Montanus in particular in his *History of the Church*:

It is said that a recent convert named Montanus, while Gratus was proconsul of Syria, in his unbridled ambition to reach the top laid himself open to the adversary, was filled with spiritual excitement and suddenly fell into a kind of trance and unnatural ecstasy. He raved, and began to chatter and talk nonsense, prophesying in a way that conflicted with the practice of the Church handed down generation by generation from the beginning....On those who were elated and exultant about him the spirit bestowed favours, swelling their heads with his extravagant promises. Sometimes it reproved them pointedly and convincingly to their faces, to avoid appearing uncritical—though few of the Phrygians were deceived. (161)

Despite these sources, little is known concerning Montanus, from whom the movement derived its name. He was originally pagan, possibly even an idol priest, living in Pepuza,

Phrygia. After his conversion, there is no evidence that he became a priest or bishop; but he did attract followers through bold pronouncements and certain manifestations of power. The most noteworthy of his disciples were two women, Priscilla and Maximilla, who became influential prophetesses in the movement (Wace 738). The time and circumstances of Montanus's death are not known, but the movement continued on for quite some time.

Although Montanists were seemingly orthodox in their teachings, at least in the early stages, their basic practices revolved around a particular view of the work or "administration" of the Paraclete, the Holy Spirit. Some adherents at the beginning even identified the Paraclete with Montanus himself. According to Tertullian, who became an adherent to Montanism in his latter years, the administration of the Paraclete involved "the direction of discipline, the revelation of the Scriptures, the re-formation of the intellect, the advancement toward the 'better things'" (*Veiling* 27). The Paraclete has continued to prophesy, Tertullian continues in the same passage, to the present time as promised, so current manifestations should not be regarded as something novel. Accordingly, those who have received the Paraclete as Christ's unique successor "set truth before custom" without hesitation (28).

In addition to their desire to wholeheartedly follow the leading of the Paraclete, the Montanists had some other admirable inclinations. First, their stance was a growing reaction against the looseness, worldliness, and increasing rationalism in the church as a whole. Second, the Montanists refused to accept the establishment of a select priesthood which had been developing in the church up to that time. They made no distinctions among the believers, at least in the matter of prophesying, and were very much inclined toward a more universal priesthood. Third, their daily living focused on the Lord's second coming and the appearing on earth of the New Jerusalem. Finally, the Montanists were ready to die for their faith; martyrdom was extolled, and it appears that a number of them did give their lives during times of trial.

In spite of these noble and spiritual inclinations, however, Montanists demonstrated certain dangerous tendencies from the very start. Even some of their admirable characteristics were carried to extremes. The first dangerous tendency was

a readiness to elevate mere humans to a divinely authoritative position. While Montanus may have never intended to equate himself with the Paraclete, thinking of himself as merely His inspired organ (Wace 738), he did believe that a real prophet was so possessed by the divine source that his words were those of God. A prophet was regarded as a musical instrument 'played' by God Himself. Hence, the prophecies of Montanus were given as from God, and the authoritative wording and tone he used may have caused less discerning listeners to ascribe too lofty a position to him. Nearly the same reverence was accorded to his two co-laborers, Priscilla and Maximilla. To Montanus and his followers prophecy was something given in an ecstasy; the prophet was possessed. For the sympathetic Tertullian, this ecstasy was somewhat akin to madness in that the soul stood out of itself; and the prophet lost his sensation, having been overshadowed by divine power (*Soul* 223-224, *Against Marcion* 383). His six books entitled *On Ecstasy* would shed further light on this matter, but they have not survived.

Although a study on New Testament prophesying is beyond the scope of this article, it should be pointed out that in Paul's view prophecy is not some ecstatic utterance issuing from a frenzied state of mind. In 1 Corinthians 14:1 he writes, "Pursue love, and desire earnestly spiritual gifts, but especially that you may prophesy." In verses 3 through 4 he continues, "But he who prophesies speaks building up and encouragement and consolation to men....but he who prophesies builds up the church." Having pointed to love as the "most excellent way" to experience the divine life as the believers' inner content in 1 Corinthians 13, Paul presents prophesying as the speaking out of this inner content for the corporate building up. This is quite different from the notion of prophecy held by the Montanists.

Closely related to the danger of elevating and blindly following an ecstatic prophet was the tendency of the Montanists toward imbalance between the Spirit and the written Word. In His wisdom God has given His redeemed both the Spirit and the Word for a proper and healthy Christian life. Both are needed for properly receiving God's speaking. If the Word is not properly cared for, there will be serious deviations from the truth. If the Spirit is neglected, there will be a lack of vitality, even deadness. All alleged spiritual revelation and prophecy should be based on and agree with the Scriptures, God's written revelation. This balance, however, was not kept by Montanus and his followers, and extra-biblical and contra-biblical teachings crept into their midst (cf. MacArthur 74-75, 83-84). In the atmosphere of the movement's early successes, Priscilla and Maximilla abandoned their husbands, with Montanus' apparent approval—an action that is clearly against the teaching of the Scriptures.

Another dangerous tendency seen among the Montanists

was the heavy emphasis upon, and strict imposition of, outward practices in the name of the Paraclete—all contrary to the New Testament's focus on the divine life in the believers. In addition to the powerful type of prophesying already discussed, the movement emphasized fasts, forbade second marriages, and demanded a strict lifestyle and severe self-denial (Wace 741), all beyond New Testament parameters. The legalistic imposition of such practices on members must have led, in cases of weak disposition, to failure, defeat, discouragement, and even desperation. The apostle Paul never endorsed a mix of powerful and miraculous things with outward demands and restrictions; rather, he encouraged his readers to have a normal, daily experience of Christ for their growth in life, with prophecy being an outflow of such a life and having the building up of the Body as the ultimate goal.

Another tendency that was observed among the Montanists was spiritual pride, which eventually led to divisiveness. Quoting from Apolinarius of Hierapolis, Eusebius characterizes Montanus and his early followers as being "filled with conceit," and notes how "this arrogant spirit taught them to denigrate the entire Catholic Church throughout the world" (161). This assessment seems to be confirmed by Tertullian himself in a number of his later writings. He makes a very pointed statement in *Against Praxeas*: "We indeed, on our part, subsequently withdrew from the carnally-minded [*psychiā*] on our acknowledgment and maintenance of the Paraclete" (598). In *On Modesty*, he distinguishes between "spiritual men" and the "psychic" (soulish) whom he is addressing, and between "the Church of the Spirit" composed of the spiritual men (the Montanists) and "the church which consists of a number of bishops" (99-101). In *On Monogamy*, he again makes a spiritual-soulish distinction, again placing the mainstream church in the soulish category. It is the Montanists—"us," the "Spiritual" (59)—that alone understand what the Paraclete says on "the discipline of monogamy" and follow His lead (59). Such distinctions lead to separation or serve as justification for division. On this point of separation and/or divisiveness, there is a graphic passage in Tertullian's treatise, *On the Soul*. In the course of discoursing on the soul's nature, he describes a sister "now amongst us" who has the gift of ecstatic vision and revelation—often received while the regular church service was going on. Tertullian notes, "After the people are dismissed at the conclusion of the sacred services, she is in the regular habit of reporting to us whatever things she may have seen in vision (for all her communications are examined with the most scrupulous care in order that their truth may be probed)" (188). In this example, a clear tendency is evidenced for the potential of divisions occurring between those who left at the end of the "sacred service" and those who "probed" the truth in this sister's communications, rather than probing the truth of them. It is evident from his argument that Tertullian himself regarded her visions as being from God, even drawing support for his understanding of the soul from them.

The reaction of the church to the Montanist movement must be considered in order to gauge its true impact. In many respects the reactions have borne both negative and positive consequences. Due to its heavy stress on the Paraclete's revelation and on prophesying in His name, Montanism engendered a significant distrust for anything related to the Spirit's presence, gifts, and function, causing Christians to be wary of any experience of the Spirit related to speaking forth the "words of this life" (Acts 5:20). According to the New Testament, to prophesy is to speak for the Lord, to speak forth the Lord, to minister Christ to others without any obligation for the miraculous or dramatic. This should be a principle distinctive of church meetings as Paul indicated in 1 Corinthians 14, stating, "He who prophesies speaks building up and encouragement and consolation," and, "He who prophesies builds up the church" (vv. 3-4). The dangerous tendencies of Montanism, however, produced a reaction in the church that no doubt moved church leaders to place more emphasis on objective aspects of the Christian faith. The codification of the canon of the Scripture was a positive step that was taken to limit unbounded license in regard to spiritual matters. John MacArthur notes, "Since the canon of Scripture was completed, no genuine revival or orthodox movement has ever been led by people whose authority is based in any way on private revelations from God" (73).

In addition to the needed safeguard of an established canon, however, there also was an increase in the power and scope of church administration. The establishment of a canon of Scripture occurred hand in hand with the establishment of fixed channels for its interpretation by church leaders at the expense of all members in the Body being encouraged to participate in its building up by speaking one to another through such simple means as psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs (Eph. 5:19). Stanley M. Burgess has observed that the tradition of prophecy which had continued up to and through the period of Montanism began to decrease as a fixed and rigid organization in the church increased. What had been free and spontaneous now gave way to an all-measuring "fixed rule of faith and a closed canon of divine oracles, governed by an order of bishops established by an external rule of succession. The prophet ruling by revelation was giving way to the bishop ruling with authority" (52). Cyprian, the bishop of Carthage during the mid-third century, also claimed to have had visions and revelations from the Lord; and he shared them in prophesying with his congregation. Yet in his mind, these gifts of the Spirit were only for priests and, especially, the bishop (*Epistles* 375). Cyprian's views were influential and lasting. As one outcome of the reaction to Montanism, a strengthened episcopal hierarchy alone was seen as being qualified to handle spiritual practices. At this critical juncture in church history, prophecy was "captured by the monarchical episcopate, used in its defense, and left to die an unnoticed death when true episcopate stability rendered it a superfluous tool" (86).

For the purpose of preserving organizational hierarchies and in the name of protecting against damaging, divisive elements, the pendulum often swings away from any subjective experience of the Triune God. The swing away from Montanism was deserving, but certainly a critical aspect of God's New Testament economy, that of the genuine New Testament prophesying by all the members of Christ's Body, was undeservedly discredited by the taint of the Montanist imbalances. As a consequence, the growth of the Body of Christ languishes, especially in the aspect spoken of in Ephesians 4. The growth of the Body unto the building up of itself in love is dependent upon the subjective operation of the Triune God in the measure of each one part. No member is insignificant and no genuine experience fails to contribute to the joining and knitting together of the Body, especially as the rich supply flows between the members of the Body as each speaks truth with his neighbor (vv. 16, 25).

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