

Montanus: First Charismatic

by

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Introduction

Solomon told us in the book of Ecclesiastes that there is nothing new under the sun. How often has not modern history proved that to be true. It is so in the world; it is so in the church.

The charismatic movement is of recent origin, and is a phenomenon of the late twentieth century. And yet it is as old as the history of the New Testament church. Precisely the evils of modern-day Pentecostalism were found in the Montanist movement of the third century A.D.

There is a kind of a pendulum which swings in the church from one extreme to the other. It is often the pendulum between rationalism (which makes man's reason the final arbiter of truth) and mysticism (which makes feelings the final arbiter of truth). Both have in common that they abandon (or add to) the Scriptures as the authority of all faith and life. The one puts reason in Scripture's place; the other puts feelings there.

Reason and feelings are quite opposed to each other, and this opposition makes the pendulum swing. Weary of the coldness of rationalism, the pendulum swings in the direction of mysticism; and then, frightened at last by the quagmire of the shifting sands of mysticism, the pendulum swings back towards rationalism. Both are reactions; both are wrong.

The great lesson to be learned by it all is simply this: Sola Scriptura, the one great principle of the Reformation.

In Montanism we have the beginnings of mysticism, the charismatic movement, and all revivalism. Yes, even the latter, for revivalism is not far removed from mysticism, and both share many common features, as we shall see.

Montanus and his followers

Phrygia is found in central Asia Minor. It was in this general area that the people later known as the Galatians settled, which people were the objects of the mission work of the church on Paul's first missionary journey. They were

a volatile and excitable people, given to fanatical excesses, and some of these national traits carried over after their conversion. Many strange heresies found in the early church arose in Phrygia. One of them was Montanism.

Montanus, after whom the heresy is named, was born a heathen and may have been a mutilated priest of the heathen goddess Cybele, whom the Galatians worshiped. Around the middle of the second century, somewhere between 150 and 170, Montanus was converted.

It was not long before Montanus began to have some strange ideas of what Christianity was all about. He was of the opinion that most of the Old Testament was the time of God the Father; the first century in the new dispensation was the period of God the Son; and with his own birth and conversion, a new age dawned: the period of God the Holy Ghost.

His chief appeal to Scripture was to the lengthy discourse of Jesus to His disciples on the eve of His crucifixion, a discourse dealing chiefly with the "Paraclete," the Spirit of truth whom Christ promised to send to the church. Montanus became convinced that perhaps he himself was the Paraclete; or, if not the Paraclete Himself, then the inspired organ through whom the Paraclete spoke.

Usually the Paraclete, so Montanus claimed, spoke through him while he was in a trance or in a state of ecstasy; but what he spoke was infallible and had to be taken by men as from God Himself.

He very soon gained a following, and his influence spread rapidly. His views were adopted by many in the church, and, as especially Rome and North Africa were affected by his teachings, the whole church was thrown into commotion. His heresies became the occasion for the first synods to be held in the post-apostolic church.

I suppose even then his whole movement would not have attracted the attention that it did if it had not been for the fact that one of the greatest of all the church fathers, Tertullian himself, joined the movement. This is always very difficult for me to understand, for Tertullian's writings are some of the most notable of all the church fathers, and his teachings of the Trinity were the clearest and most biblical of any writer prior to the Council of Nicea. In fact, Tertullian's insights did more than any other single writer to shape that crucially important doctrine of God.

Yet he joined the Montanist movement. It is a powerful lesson to us that the greatest of men in the church of Christ are prone to error and susceptible to false doctrine.

The views of Montanism

Heresy never arises in a vacuum. It is almost always a reaction to some weakness in the church. It is almost always present because the church has unpaid debts. A weakness in the church, in life or doctrine, creates a vacuum which a heresy rushes to fill.

So it was with Montanism. At the time the sect arose, the church had, generally speaking, enjoyed a fairly long period of peace, of freedom from persecution, and of prosperity. The result was that the church had become, in some measure, very much attached to this world, possessor of more material goods than had been the case since her beginning, worldly-minded in her outlook, and without the spiritual characteristic of a church which looks for the return of Jesus Christ. She had accommodated herself to the world for "the long haul," so to speak. Montanism was a reaction against the rationalism of Gnosticism (see our last article, May 1, 1998) and the moral laxity of the Roman church.

In addition to these characteristics, the balance of power was shifting in the church from the people of God functioning in the office of believers to an ordained clergy, an ecclesiastical priesthood, which was to develop into the episcopal system of Roman Catholicism.

Against all these things Montanism reacted. It doesn't sound all that unfamiliar and does not strike one who knows the times in which we live as being excessively strange.

The chief characteristic of Montanism was its belief in continuous revelation. All the special gifts of the Holy Spirit were continued, claimed the Montanists; and the result was that miracles, too, were part of the proper exercises of those who possessed the Holy Spirit. But prophecy was the main gift which was continued.

All those who were truly spiritual were endowed with these special gifts. No distinction was to be observed between clergy and laity, for men, women, and children alike were and ought to be prophets and prophetesses. Indeed, shortly after Montanus began his teachings in Phrygia, two women, Priscilla

and Maximilla, left their husbands and homes to join Montanus and become prophetesses in his group.

The prophecies given to the truly spiritual were usually given in ecstasies and trances, and Montanus described one who was in such a trance as a "lyre" or harp on which the Holy Spirit plays the melodious songs of heaven — a figure often used to this very day to describe the prophecies of those who claim to possess the gifts of prophecy.

While Montanism was intended to do away with the horrible sin of setting clergy above laity, it had its own levels of holiness. Only those who possessed the Spirit and could show the special gifts of the Spirit were the truly holy; the rest were looked down upon as "carnal."

It was this idea that led the Montanists to the notion of a "pure church," another idea which has lingered through the centuries and which has had its own attractiveness. Only the truly spiritual could belong to the church, so that the church was composed only of true believers. How often has it not been true that this notion of true believers dominated the thinking and life of the church. In fact, this very idea lies at the bottom of the main tenet of Baptist thinking: the baptism only of believers. It is the "pure church" ideal. It is not surprising, therefore, that Montanism denied infant baptism and insisted on believers' baptism.

Such views of the church led, in turn, to a very rigid view of morality and discipline. The Montanists were, in their protest against worldliness and carnality, almost ascetic. They believed that in times of persecution believers ought actively to seek martyrdom. They had no sympathy for those who lapsed — i.e., for those who under the pressure of persecution denied their faith, but later repented and sought re-admittance to the church. No lapsed member could ever again belong to the church here upon earth.

Tertullian went so far as to say that anyone who became guilty of any one of the seven deadly sins had forfeited all right ever to be a member of the church on earth.

They viewed the institution of marriage with a great deal of suspicion. They were flatly opposed to remarriage, even when one's spouse died; and they generally considered marriage itself to be God's grudging consent to man's irresistible tendency to indulge in fleshly lusts.

In eating and drinking, in pleasures and dress, in demeanor and conduct, they were gloomy, sober, not given to anything which could be construed as the enjoyment of what belonged to this world. They were an unhappy lot.

While the early church during the time of the apostles tended to believe that the Lord was coming within the lifetime of the saints then living (see Paul's epistles to the Thessalonians, e.g.), these hopes of Christ's imminent return tended to fade away, and the church became increasingly aware of the fact that it was the will of God that the church be on the earth for a great number of years. The loss of the hope of an imminent return of Christ soon left a mark of worldliness on the church. As Montanism rejected the worldliness of the church it saw the church's salvation in a renewed emphasis on the immediate return of Christ. It became a sect which taught that Christ could come at any moment, and it attempted to persuade the church at large of the truth of this assertion.

When persecution once more broke out under Antonius Pius, this persecution was interpreted to mean that the final persecution had come and that the church was about to witness the return of Christ and the establishment of the millennium. It is strange that so often those two ideas seem to go hand in hand: special revelations from God and the imminent return of Christ, the date of which can be predicted.

The significance of Montanism

The ecstasies, trances, visions, and special revelations of Montanism were its chief characteristic. Nor were the Montanists able to keep this aspect of their teaching within reasonable bounds. Montanism was characterized by frenzied activities of those in trances, by extremely unusual and bizarre manifestations of the Spirit, by irrational behavior which was condoned on the basis of an appeal to the work of the Spirit, and by utterances in strange tongues and with strange noises that neither God nor man could understand. In a more modern period, the charismatic movement emphasizes the special gifts of the Spirit, and revivalism gives evidence of bizarre behavior as being manifestations of the Spirit's presence. They come together, however, and show beyond doubt that they have much in common. To open oneself to revivalism is to cave in to the great evil of Pentecostalism. The two came together in Montanism; today's movement is no different.

Thus it is that Montanism, with its emphasis on special gifts, and with its

trances and visions, was guilty of an excessive supernaturalism and puritanism which denies the true character of the work of the Holy Spirit. One scholar is right when he says:

"The religious earnestness which animated Montanism, and the fanatical extremes into which it ran, have frequently reappeared in the Church after the death of Montanism, under various names and forms, as in Novatianism, Donatism, Anabaptism, . . . Puritanism, Pietism, . . . by way of protests and wholesome reaction against various evils in the church. And what may appear perhaps more strange, several of those very doctrines of the Montanists which in their earliest rise were pronounced heretical gradually made their way into the Church of Rome . . ."

The antidote to all such error is the great Reformation principle *Sola Scriptura*. And that principle means not only that Scripture is the sole authority for faith and life, but also that Scripture is all that we need to know for our salvation. The doctrine of the sufficiency of Scripture leads one who holds to it to anchor his soul firmly in God's Word and to seek for nothing else.

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