

CHURCH HISTORY LITERACY

Lesson 10

Heresies – Part 3

Montanism

BACKGROUND

In John 14–16, the Apostle recounts some of Jesus’ last words to his followers before the crucifixion. In the three chapters, Jesus makes multiple references to the Holy Spirit. Jesus says that the Holy Spirit will:

1. Come to dwell in the apostles as a “counselor”¹ (Jn 14:15-21);
2. Teach the apostles what they need to know while reminding them of the teachings and words of Jesus (Jn 14:25-26);
3. Testify about Jesus in conjunction with the apostles (Jn 15:26-27);
4. Convict the world in regard to sin, righteousness, and judgment (Jn 16:5-11); and
5. Guide the apostles into truth, telling them what is to come, and making known to them the things of Christ in ways that bring glory to Christ (Jn 16:12-15).

As we read through Acts, we see the Holy Spirit doing those very things. Starting with Pentecost in Acts 2, the Holy Spirit comes to indwell the believers, aiding, teaching, testifying, convicting and guiding them. The Holy Spirit did so in many diverse ways. More often not, the Holy Spirit used miracles and spoke in tongues, sometimes with outright instruction and other times through group discussion (Acts 15). Sometimes through dreams and visions; other times through personal inspiration. Sometimes the Holy Spirit indwelt spontaneously, and other times through the laying on of hands.

We can read of the Spirit’s work not only in Acts, but through the apostolic letters as well. Paul wrote about the gifts and fruit of the Holy Spirit in multiple letters. Some of the fruit seems miraculous; most does not. In his Corinthian correspondence, Paul goes into some detail about how those gifts were exercised, focusing on the proper usage as well as mistakes.

In Corinthians, Paul makes note of how some of the Corinthians were misunderstanding the work of the Spirit. The Spirit was never coming to make

¹ “Counselor is the word used in the New International Version. The Greek word John used is *parakletos* (παράκλητος). It is literally someone called along side in assistance. It is the term that was used of a lawyer giving help, along with others in an assisting position.

“super Christians” out of a select few. The Spirit’s work was always to be focusing on Christ and bringing glory to him. A close reading of First Corinthians indicates some particular problems with some ecstatic utterances that some thought were Spirit given. Paul noted these ecstatic utterances were not for the church meetings unless there was an interpreter who knew that ecstatic language!²

As the church transitioned from the New Testament into a post-scripture time period, what happened to the Holy Spirit and spiritual gifts? We get insight from the early church writings we have already covered. The earliest writings of the apostolic fathers indicate a spirituality not much different than that understood from the New Testament. As we move into the second century, however, events occur that start to change the church’s perception of the Spirit, as well as the church’s “usage” of the Holy Spirit.

Many of these major changes are seen through the “Montanist” movement³ and the church’s reactions to that movement.

MONTANISM

In the northern mountainous area of Phrygia (modern Turkey) during the middle of the second century after Jesus (around the 150’s), a pagan named Montanus converted to Christianity. We do not have any of his writings available today, but we know a good deal about him through the writings of others in the early church.

Montanus started the movement that bears his name. A number of others joined him, notably two women, Prisca (Priscilla) and Maximilla. These three built and lived in a “Christian” commune in the Phrygian town of Pwpuza⁴. While the movement started with Montanus in Asia Minor, we are remiss if we do not recognize the movement was different in different areas of the Mediterranean world. Within a few decades, the movement had a number of adherents in the big metropolitan area of Carthage, North Africa as well as in Rome itself.

² In other words, it shouldn’t be happening any time soon!

³ Modern scholars write of the “Montanist movement,” but that is a name assigned to this early church movement by outsiders. The name “Montanist” is first found in the writings of Cyril of Jerusalem (*Catechetical Lectures* 16.8) dating around 350. Tertullian, an early Montanist, called the movement “The New Prophecy.”

⁴ This seems to have been a rural backwater area of modern Turkey. While scholars do not know the precise place of Pwpuza, it was apparently around Hierapolis (modern Pamukkale). Some believe it the modern town of Uckuyu.

If we were to climb into a time machine, transport back, and visit with Montanists, I suspect in their better moments, they would claim to have been restoring the original church that we might read of in Acts.

Montanus considered the churches of his day to be spiritually dead. He issued very strict laws concerning the community and personal life of his followers. His teachings included stringent laws on fasting and other personal ascetic practices. He also taught that Christians should dissolve/annul their marriages and live celibate lives.

The church of Montanus' day (the one that he considered "spiritually dead") had erred in placing too much authority in the Bishops and in the apostolic writings. Montanus rejected the authority of each. Montanus believed that the authority for the church was the Holy Spirit, and it was the Holy Spirit who would teach and guide the church, not some Bishop or church letter from the apostles. In fact, Montanus believed that the spiritually dead church was limiting the Holy Spirit and closing God off by boxing him into the letters and books we now call scripture.⁵

The movement termed itself one of "spiritual" Christians, using the Greek term *pneumatikoi* ("spiritual"). The movement labeled the normative church as "soulish," using the Greek word *psuche*.

Montanus taught that Christ would come again soon. This time, the second coming was going to center on the commune town of Papuza along with its neighboring town, Tymion.

Obviously, Montanus did not get along well his local church. He condemned both the church and its leaders. The church did not get along well with Montanus either! Montanus was an independent who thought the Holy Spirit was teaching him on par with the apostles and exceeding the deception and limitations of the local church and its leaders.

The Montanus movement called itself the "New Revelation" or "New Prophecy." Its opponents changed that label and called it the "False Prophecy." The apostolic church considered Montanus boundless in his desire for preeminence. Montanus

⁵ We do not have any surviving writings of the Montanus or his first generation followers. Our best Montanist writings come from the Carthaginian Tertullian 50 years into the movement. Our side of that, most of our understandings of Montanist beliefs come from the opponents of Montanism. Much of what the opponents writes seems blatantly prejudicial and unreliable. Those statements are not included in this presentation. The statements included here are those that seem more fairly accurate by most scholars.

is portrayed in early writings as prideful and authoritarian. Those converts who came into his movement were puffed up as especially tuned in to the Holy Spirit but always subject to his occasional reproofs.⁶

Montanus considered himself the “mouthpiece” of the Holy Spirit. He sought signs and wonders in the church. He taught that the Holy Spirit was directly influencing him as he spoke prophetically. Montanists were famous for falling into trances and having spiritual frenzies. When the “Spirit” would seize Montanus and speak through him, the speeches would come out first person as if the Spirit himself were speaking. So, for example, one time the Spirit supposedly said, “Behold the man [Montanus] is like a lyre, and I strike the strings like a plectrum.”⁷ The man sleeps and I wake. Behold! It is I the Lord who moves the heart of the man.” In another speech, the Spirit supposedly said through Montanus, “I am the Lord God, born among men. I am neither an angel nor a priest. I am God the Father, come to you.”⁸

To get the full effect of what Montanus was saying, we must consider it within the context of its occurrence. Montanus sold himself to his followers as the voice of God. He would stand and speak claiming that God himself was taking possession of Montanus’s body and delivering a message straight from God. Anyone who truly believed this was bound to be impressed by Montanus’s “body” rising with such declarations as if God himself were speaking. It is no wonder that when Montanus taught something, his followers responded!

Montanus was not the only one to get such inspirations. Epiphanius wrote of a Montanist prophetess who explained, “In the form of a woman, adorned with a shining garment, Christ came to me and implanted wisdom within me and revealed to me that this place [Pepuza] is holy and that it is here that the heavenly Jerusalem will come down.”⁹

The New Prophecy spread quickly throughout the Mediterranean world as a prophetic movement. While Montanus and his two female prophesying companions had passed away by 180, the movement lived on. We have evidence of the movement lasting into the 6th century, although the movement was clearly diminished in size and influence much earlier.

⁶ Eusebius gives this insight in 5.16-18 of his Church History (315 A.D.).

⁷ In 21st century speak, read this as “Montanus is like a guitar and I strike the strings like a guitar pick.”

⁸ Eusebius also preserved these words.

⁹ Epiphanius, *Against Heresies*, 49.1.

Roger Olson, in *The Story of Christian Theology*, asserts that the Montanist movement may have been the first formal split in the Christian church. The movement did catch on in the Mediterranean world. By 160 A.D. when the formal split was manifested in most towns of Asia Minor¹⁰, there were frequently two distinct churches that could be found in many communities.

The effect on the apostolic church was deeper than merely a fellowship split. The church reacted in ways that history has shown to be both positive and negative. On the positive side, the heresy brought the church into clearer conviction over the need for faith and practice to accurately conform to scripture and the apostolic teachings.¹¹ Jesus and Pentecost were fresh enough history (as were the apostles) that orthodoxy could be maintained with certainty and accuracy. The orthodox church was still in the hands of those who could clearly point to an unbroken chain of apostolic succession. Interestingly, while the Montanists were officially considered heretical, with teaching adverse to the historical church, the Montanists did hold the same views about Christ and God as did the orthodox church. The heresy was seen in the other aspects of doctrine and practice.¹²

The writings of the apostolic church at this time are termed “scathing” by the scholar Christine Trevett.¹³ The New Prophecy was considered a rural movement of the intellectually inferior. The movement also started other non-mainstream innovations. For example, the movement is likely the first place in Christian history where the church had salaried officials¹⁴. This seemed to many in the

¹⁰ Care must be taken here because it seems in Carthage and other areas, the split of The New Prophecy was not so clear. The orthodox church in North Africa received a second phase of the movement which remained, to some extent within the church’s fold. Some scholars believe that the Prophecy movement was treated differently in Africa because it did not have the excesses of the movement in Asia Minor. The picture is certainly less clear.

¹¹ A large number of scholars see the movement as a major reason the orthodox church worked on an agreed canon of authoritative scriptures. A second generation Montanist is reported to have bribed his way out of prison, then writing a fake biblical epistle. The New Prophecy movement collected sayings of their prophets and had countless books considered authoritative. (Hippolytus, *Refut. Omn. Haer.* 8.19). Scholars note these actions as necessitating solidifying the canon.

¹² Hippolytus, *Refut. Omn. Haer.* 8.19.

¹³ *The Early Christian World*, Vol. 2, edited by Philip Esler.

¹⁴ The Montanists seem to have set up their ecclesiastical structure differently than the church at large. Jerome (writing around 400) wrote that the Montanists maintained a Patriarch followed by an office unheard of in the orthodox church termed *koinonos* (from the Greek for “fellowship”) putting the Bishops next in line in third place. These Montanist offices were open to women as

orthodox church as an inappropriate diversion of funds that the church should use for the poor or other ministry needs.¹⁵

On the negative side, the church was so repulsed by the movement and so feared its spreading, that orthodoxy seemed to distant itself from any charismatic work of the Spirit. The New Prophets claimed direct reception of the *paraklete* promised by Jesus in John's gospel¹⁶. They also used the Revelation of John as support for the visions they received as well as their end time theology.¹⁷ Any concept of signs and wonders was suspect as a manifestation of Montanism. The church failed to adequately distinguish the testing of prophetic words and deeds as scripture had earlier set out.

Early glances of the initial Montanist movement show a people that easily seem out of the mainstream of orthodoxy and valid Christian doctrine. It is not so clear, however, as the Montanist movement began to age a bit. As the third century dawned, the movement garnered one who would become its most famous adherent: a North African Christian theologian from the populous city of Carthage named Tertullian.

Tertullian, born around 150, we will consider in later classes for his contributions to theology (especially the Trinity) as well as his teachings on the proper way to interpret and understand scripture. He was, by all accounts, a major stalwart and defender of the orthodox church for most of his life. Most scholars would place Tertullian as one of the three finest early theologians produced in the church. Whether he was writing and explaining the Trinity some 100-150 years before most anyone else in the post-biblical church, or whether he was quoting or referencing apostolic writings as authority, Tertullian was without question a top thinker and writer.

well as men, to the chagrin of orthodoxy. (Jerome, *Epis. 41 ad Marcellam*). Some of the New Prophecy churches even had regularized formal prophecy in worship services given by "virgins dressed in white" carrying lamps. (Epiphanius, *Pan.* 49.2)

¹⁵ Eusebius, *Church History* 5.18.2.

¹⁶ Tertullian, *De Anima* 55.5; *De Virginibus Veandis* 1.8, 10; *De res. Carn.* 11.2.

¹⁷ One of the hallmarks of New Prophecy teaching was an emphasis on the second coming of Jesus as an any day event. They saw the famines and wars of their day as fulfilling the required signs of the end, and were big on teaching that the apocalypse was around the corner. Maximilla prophesied, "After me, there will no longer be a prophet, but the end." (Epiphanius, *Pan.* 48.2.4). Needless to say, this prophecy was clearly in error even by the Montanist movement. These types of erroneous prophecies fueled the anti-Montanists prompting the nickname for the movement as 'The False Prophecy' instead of "The New Prophecy" (Eusebius, *Church History*, 5.16.18).

Yet for some reason later in life, Tertullian became a Montanist¹⁸. His later life writings reference the effect of the Spirit moving within his own congregation in Montanist terms and understandings. One woman in Tertullian's church supposedly had the gift of prophecy. During Sunday services, she would enter "Spirit-induced" ecstasies. This woman would have conversations with angels and even God himself. As Bauer puts it, she "sees and hears mysteries, discerns what is in people's hearts, and leads the sick onto paths of healing."¹⁹

Tertullian understood skepticism on these matters. Accordingly, he recorded that his writings were as precise as possible, so that any who wished could double check the accuracy of his claims. Tertullian also went to great lengths to explain the scriptural basis for what he believed true. Citing First Corinthians, Tertullian referenced Paul as teaching that *charismata* ("charismatic gifts") would exist in the church through later times.

POINTS FOR HOME AND THE CHURCH

What do we make of this? Several things seem worthy of note. First, the historicity of Jesus and the apostolic witness is the bedrock of our faith. As John relates, the Holy Spirit comes to bear witness to the historical Jesus and his deeds. Further and most importantly, this same Spirit came to teach the Apostles the truth that served the church established by this same Spirit at Pentecost. So, whatever the Spirit might do within the church should certainly be consistent with these historical events and writings.

Did the Spirit disappear with the death of the apostles? Certainly not. The apostle Peter himself noted in his Pentecost sermon the historical reality of Joel's prophesy centuries earlier than the Spirit of God was being poured out on all people. That was not for that season only. That same Spirit is poured out today. In fact, Paul taught the Corinthians that without the Spirit, spiritual matters could not be understood. Such was true then, and it is true today. And so, we have an indwelling Spirit; a Spirit that comes into each believer. Where does that leave the church with prophetic words and signs and wonders?

The answer seems rooted in the promises of Jesus that commenced this lesson. In John, we have Jesus teaching that the Spirit would

1. Come to dwell in the apostles as a "counselor" (Jn 14:15-21);

¹⁸ This late in life conversion most likely cost Tertullian his sainthood in the Catholic Church.

¹⁹ Walter Bauer, *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity*, (SCM Press, 1972) at 178.

2. Teach the apostles what they need to know while reminding them of the teachings and words of Jesus (Jn 14:25-26);
3. Testify about Jesus in conjunction with the apostles (Jn 15:26-27);
4. Convict the world in regard to sin, righteousness, and judgment (Jn 16:5-11); and
5. Guide the apostles into truth, telling them what is to come, and making known to them the things of Christ in ways that bring glory to Christ (Jn 16:12-15).

And, so it does! Scripture does not limit the Spirit (God) on *how* the Spirit would do such, but we are provided what the Spirit will be doing. So, when we see or hear someone claiming Spirit-inspiration for their words or deeds, we can measure them against scripture with confidence that apostolic teaching is the ultimate standard.