

As the Church of Christ grew into the second century, her doctrine progressively developed against several threats from without and within. Having first distinguished Christian doctrine and practice from the Judaism which so harshly persecuted Christ's disciples in the first century, the Church responded to threats from the gnostic heresies, especially the teachings of Marcion. These gnostic movements attempted in different degrees to marry the gospel of Christ with classical Greek philosophy. All of the gnostics taught a dualistic struggle between good and evil¹ and, following Socratic philosophy, the antithesis between material matter and the Spirit. Also during this period the established Greco-Roman paganism began to take notice of this growing religion called Christianity, and so the saints were beginning to defend the apostolic faith against the accusations of the heathen majority. The Church during this period was locked in the midst of a vigorous contention for the Christian faith. Defending orthodox Christian doctrine was the supreme concern of the day. As has so often been the case in the history of the Church, there was a tendency for the pendulum to swing against the tide of the prevailing environment--to pursue the opposite extreme. In reaction to this great emphasis the Church was placing on orthodox doctrine, another movement sprang up which emphasized the experiential life of the Spirit and holy living.

Montanus rose to prominence as a teacher in the city of Adaba² near Phrygia during the reign of Antoninus Pius (138-161)³. Montanus was a self-proclaimed reformer who believed that the Church had lost something of the spiritual life of the apostolic age and was reverting to a state of dead orthodoxy. It may seem strange to the reader that one

¹O. J. Brown, *Heresies*, (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2003), 60.

²Asterius Urbanus, "Letter to Miltiades", *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Philip Schaff, (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans), vol 7, 335.

³Brown, 66.

such as Montanus concluded that the Church needed reforming at a time when not even one century had passed since the death of the apostles. The movement he began became known as the Montanist or sometimes the “Phrygian”⁴ heresy. The Montanists taught a higher level of asceticism than that which was common in the Christian Church at the time. Claiming to have prophets, they sought to revive the same gifts and direct revelation that the apostles had in their day. Montanus put forth two disciples in particular, Prisca and Maximilla, as prophetesses. These self-proclaimed prophetesses together with Montanus claimed to be the mouthpieces of the Spirit of God. They applied to themselves Christ's promise to send the Comforter, "And I will pray the Father, and he shall give you another Comforter, that he may abide with you for ever⁵", teaching that this promise had its fulfillment in them⁶. The Montanists claimed that their doctrine was in complete harmony with the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments as they had been received from the earliest days, but that they had a “new prophesy” of the Holy Spirit in addition to these⁷. They expected the return of Christ to bring the Church age to an end and usher in the earthly reign of New Jerusalem immediately following the prophecy of Montanus⁸. They entered into prophetic ecstasies, claiming to speak in other tongues as in the days of the apostles⁹. The Montanists exhorted adherents to dissolve marriages (or abstain from marriage) and to gather in the Phrygian cities of Pepuza and Tymium to await Christ's imminent return¹⁰.

⁴Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, trans. C. F. Cruse, (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1998), 141.

⁵*The Holy Bible*, Authorized Version, John 14.16.

⁶Eusebius, 169.

⁷Brown, 67; Serapion in Eusebius, 177.

⁸Brown, 66.

⁹Urbanus, 335.

¹⁰Brown, 67.; Appolonius in Eusebius, 175.

Montanist teachings proved to be a formidable opponent to the orthodox in the churches, especially in Asia¹¹. This was perhaps due in part because the Church had not yet fully resolved the question of the canon of Scripture. Although there had been a great deal of consensus from the beginning as to which books belonged in Scripture, the Church had not yet offered a declarative definition. Montanism played on the uncertainty regarding the closing of the canon among some believers and a desire for a new word from God. In response to the Montanist influence, orthodox presbyters began to write letters and visit the churches in Asia to oppose it, exhorting the churches there to hold to the faith once delivered in the gospel. Prominent among these presbyters were Apollinaris of Hieropolis, Miltiades, Apollonius, Serapion of Antioch and Asterius Urbanus¹². Alluding to Scripture, Asterius countered the Montanist teaching by reminding the flock that Christians were forbidden either to add to or take away from the gospel given to the apostles, describing the Montanists as one of the false prophets of whom Jesus had warned his disciples, and accusing them of following a spirit of delusion¹³. He and Apollonius alike criticized the Montanist leadership for not living up to Christ's example of humility and servant-leadership. Asterius and Apollonius described Montanus as a recent convert who fell victim to his own lust for prominence¹⁴. Apollonius questioned the moral character of the two “prophetesses”, Prisca and Maximilla, noting that at least one had been married before claiming to be a virgin, and that their taking of gifts in exchange for prophetic utterances, as well as their costly attire,

¹¹Eusebius, 169.

¹²Ibid., 170, 174, 175, 177.; Urbanus, 335.

¹³Ibid., 335, 336.

¹⁴Ibid., 335.; Apollonius in Eusebius, 175.

was unbecoming true prophetesses¹⁵. Asterius pointed out the schismatic spirit of the Montanists, who condemned all Christians who did not heed their prophet, calling them “slayers of the prophets”¹⁶. He contrasted the characteristic Montanist behavior while prophesying with the behavior of the true prophets and apostles in Bible times and pointed out instances where the Montanist prophecies had not come to pass as predicted¹⁷.

The orthodox efforts to quell the Phrygian fire proved effective. Asterius testifies that as a result of these visits and letters, the churches in Asia had rejected and excommunicated the Montanists as heretics¹⁸. Serapion of Antioch declares in a private epistle that “the influence of this lying party of a new prophecy, as it is called, is abominated by all the brethren in the world...”¹⁹. The valiant efforts of the orthodox presbyters in Asia to protect the Church from Montanism had borne fruit. One of the greatest losses to Montanism, and by far the most famous of the Montanists, was Tertullian. Tertullian had made a name for himself as an orthodox theologian. He had contributed significantly to the orthodox formulation of the doctrine of the trinity. But Tertullian defected to Montanism during its early years of growth. Some time later, after the catholic Church's vigorous counterattack had put a damper on the movement, Tertullian spoke of persecution at the hands of the Christian imperial government²⁰. He bemoaned the irony of being persecuted in the name of Christ, but recognized God's hand in it, teaching fellow Montanists that the law of God permitted them to flee persecution²¹. The so-called prophetess Maximilla likewise spoke of persecution, “I am chased like a

¹⁵Ibid.

¹⁶Urbanus, 336.

¹⁷Ibid., 337;

¹⁸Ibid, 336, 337.

¹⁹Serapion in Eusebius, 177.

²⁰Tertullian, *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol 4, 116.

²¹Ibid.

wolf from the sheep; I am no wolf. I am word, and spirit, and power²².” The Church of Christ had withstood the test of yet another false teaching. This one was more subtle than those which had come before because it claimed that it was not denying but simply adding to the apostolic faith. It was in response to this and other heresies that the Church took greater measures to define the canon of Scripture and put a larger emphasis on teaching the final completeness of Christ's revelation previously given through his prophets and apostles for all mankind until his return. Where the Marcionites had sought to take away from Scripture, the Montanists had sought to add new revelation. The Church from this time on increasingly found the answer to both in a firm resoluteness and reliance upon the foundation of the finished writings of the prophets and apostles as they had been handed down for her rule of faith and practice. The issue of the closing of the canon and the sufficiency of accepted Scripture would again play a critical role in the middle ages as the Roman See rose to power. The bishop of Rome eventually claimed to be God's spokesman on earth, the vicar of Christ. These papal claims bear striking similarity to Montanus' self-identification as the *Paraclete* whom Jesus promised to send. This “Comforter” would guide and comfort the Church in Jesus' absence, causing her to remember all things that he had commanded²³. Of course this Comforter is the Holy Spirit, the true vicar of Christ on earth, who teaches and guides all of God's elect in the truth unto salvation. When groups such as the Waldenses and the Lollards protested against the pope by proclaiming that the Scriptures alone are the rule for Christian faith and practice and the only sure repository of apostolic teaching, they followed the example of the early church fathers who had opposed Montanism. Later reformers renewed and

²²Urbanus, 336.

²³*The Holy Bible*, Authorized Version, John 14.26.

strengthened this testimony for the finality and sufficiency of the Holy Scriptures.

Montanism had agitated the Church during its short rise, but in the end it helped to cement her firm reliance on the finished revelation of the Bible.

Bibliography

Primary Sources

Tertullian. *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*. ed. Philip Schaff. (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans). vol 4.

Urbanus, Asterius. *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*. _____. vol 7.

Apollonius and Serapion in Eusebius. *Ecclesiastical History*. trans. C. F. Cruse. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1998).

Secondary Sources

Brown, O. J. *Heresies*. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2003).

Eusebius. *Ecclesiastical History*. _____.

The Montanist controversy offers timely lessons for the Church today. Christians would do well to learn from the anti-Montanist writings of the church fathers during this period. First of all there is the immediate negative reaction of Apollonius, Serapion, and Apollinaris of Hieropolis to the emergence of “new teaching” or “new revelation.” We do not follow a faith which is ever-evolving. We adhere to the “faith once delivered to the saints²⁴.” The canon of Scripture is fixed, and nothing can ever be added or taken away. Thus Jesus told his disciples, “all that I have heard from the Father I have revealed to you²⁵” and Paul could declare “I have not shunned to declare unto you the whole counsel of God²⁶”. The apostle John, who certainly knew that his apocalypse post-dated all the other apostolic writings, pronounced an anathema against any who would add or subtract from “the words of the prophecy of this book.” Christ, the final and eternal High Priest, in whom all the priests of the Old Testament are fulfilled, is also the final Prophet who reveals unto God’s people his will for their salvation²⁷. The revelation that Christ the great Prophet once gave through his prophets and apostles is sufficient and final for all ages because his work of redemption (which they preached in the *gospel*) is final. The Church of Christ has no need of new, direct, prophetic revelation. There has been progress and development in our understanding of Scriptural revelation, but anyone who teaches “new” doctrines after the Church has studied the Scriptures for nearly 2000 years should provoke immediate suspicion. Legions of new doctrines or “restorationist” movements have kept emerging since the second Great Awakening right to the present day. The Charismatic movement continues to grow worldwide, claiming like the

²⁴*The Holy Bible*, Authorized Version, Jude 3.

²⁵*Ibid.*, John 15.15.

²⁶*Ibid.*, Acts 20.27.

²⁷*Ibid.*, Hebrews 1.1.

Montanists to have the gifts prophecy and of tongues. Most of the same criticisms that the orthodox made against the Montanist leadership may also be applied to popular Charismatic leaders today. The Church in taking on this movement today ought to heed Apollonius' admonition when he said, "The fruits of a prophet must be examined; for by its fruit the tree is known²⁸."

²⁸Apollonius, 176.