

Church History I

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Session Six

“The Early Danger of Holy Deception”

Introduction

As the church continued to grow and expand, the enemy often looked for new ways to stall and upend the Christian movement. Persecution caused great physical harm and fear, but ironically it led to greater strength and growth. False teaching from the Gnostics caused great confusion and separation, but it was quickly exposed for its inconsistency with Scripture and its own claims, which led to greater doctrinal affirmations and solidarity among believers. However, if persecution and false teaching from the outside couldn't derail the church, then perhaps a distortion of Scripture from within would lead to the demise of God's people – and this is precisely what took place through a movement known as “Montanism.” What we see through this movement is deception through the misuse of Scripture – what could be called “*holy deception*” – and such deception proved to be a source of false teaching throughout church history, even today. The enemy is wise enough to know that many Christians will not fall for false teaching that comes from the outside, but if the teaching can appear to be based on Scripture, with personal claims that God commanded certain beliefs or activities, then it holds much more weight with followers of Christ – and this is dangerous.

1. Montanism

- a. **Background:** In AD 155, a young pagan priest named Montanus converted to Christianity. By AD 170, he was living in a region of Asia Minor known as Phrygia and began prophesying alongside two “prophetesses” named Priscilla and Maximillia. Each claimed that the Holy Spirit, or the “*Paraclete*,” as they preferred, was speaking through them in a *new way* to the church. They substantiated this new revelation as a fulfillment of two promises that Christ made.
 - **John 14:16** – “*And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Helper to be with you forever.*” [Gk. “Paracletos,” παράκλητος – “Helper”]
 - **John 16:12-13** – “*I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth, for he will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak, and he will declare to you the things that are to come.*”

Therefore, according to Montanus, the *Paraclete*, the *Spirit of Truth*, had finally arrived as Christ predicted, and Montanus, Priscilla, and Maximillia were the prophets that God called upon to make these modern revelations known. Thus began the “Montanist” movement, which members called, “*the New Prophecy*.”

- b. **Beliefs:** Montanus taught that believers had entered a new age of Christianity. Just as Jesus introduced a new age in the early first century, now the Holy Spirit had introduced an even newer age in the second century. This new age wasn't characterized by new doctrine, but a more rigorous moral life. Just as Jesus expanded the meaning and demands of the Law through the Sermon on the Mount, the Holy Spirit had even further expanded what Jesus taught and demanded throughout his ministry. However, this "*New Prophecy*" would be the final revelation of God before the second coming of Christ. Maximillia prophesied, "*After me, there will be no more prophecy, but the End.*" As believer prepared for Christ's return, this new moral code was expected.
- **New Morals:** (1) Second marriages were banned with no exceptions; (2) Fasting was expected on a more frequent basis, which included "xerophagies," eating only dried food; (3) All virgin women must be veiled; (4) Serious sins committed after baptism could no longer be forgiven; (5) Believers must never seek to escape persecution and martyrdom, but must embrace such death with eagerness.
 - **Quote:** "*Righteousness was at first in a primitive state, with only a natural fear of God. From that stage, it progressed through the Law and the Prophets to its infancy. Then it passed through the Gospel to the enthusiasm of youth. Now, through the Paraclete, it is settling into maturity.*" – Tertullian, a North African theologian
 - **Other Expressions:** Montanists placed a big emphasis on visions, revelatory dreams, speaking in tongues, prophetic utterances, and other religious experiences. They renamed their Phrygian community of Pepuza, "Jerusalem." Some believe they thought that Christ would return to Pepuza, hence the renaming. Others feel like it was to make the point that Pepuza had become a holy community, the dwelling place of the Holy Spirit, like a "spiritual" Jerusalem.
- c. **Results:** Montanism quickly spread throughout Asia Minor and the Mediterranean, reaching Italy, France, and North Africa. However, the Catholic Church (churches that were united on the apostles teaching, i.e., true churches) rejected the movement decisively. Apologists and theologians, such as Clement of Alexandria, opposed Montanism. Churches and leaders that embraced the movement were excommunicated (removed). Finally, by the fifth and sixth centuries, Montanism had disappeared.

2. Signs and Warnings of Holy Deception

- a. **Sensationalism** – One of the signs of holy deception throughout church history has been a high emphasis placed on sensationalism – these spectacular and supernatural experiences that aim to give creditability and generate attraction. Some have observed that the Montanist's emphasis on the "works" of the Holy Spirit – speaking in tongues, prophetic utterances, revelatory dreams, healings, etc. – resurfaced in the early twentieth century through modern Pentecostal and charismatic movements. Like Montanism, these movements gained popularity through what appeared to be signs of the Holy Spirit's work – outward manifestations of the Spirit that generated excitement and passion. However, historical evidence has shown that such sensational signs were rarely, if ever, experienced by the true churches of Christ after the first century.

Rather, such miraculous and supernatural work had decreased significantly since the time of Jesus and the apostles.

- **Quote:** *“There were signs of the Holy Spirit at the beginning of Christ’s teaching. Immediately after He ascended into heaven, He showed forth more of these signs; but afterwards there were not so many. Still, even now there are traces of them among a few who have had their souls purified by the Gospel”* – Origen of Alexandria (AD 184-253), theologian and scholar
 - **Quote:** *“Even at that late date [early second century], many miraculous powers of the divine Spirit worked through the evangelists of the Church, so that – the first time they heard the Gospel – entire communities embraced with wholehearted enthusiasm the worship of the Creator of the universe.”* – Eusebius of Caesarea (AD 260-340), church historian. He gives the impression that by his generation, such signs were no longer witnessed.
 - **Quote:** *“We hear of many brothers and sisters who have gifts of prophecy, speak by the Spirit in all kinds of tongues, bring people’s secret thoughts to light for their own good, and declare the mysteries of God.”* – Irenaeus, Bishop of Lyons, late second century. While Irenaeus reports of “hearing” such acts, he gives the impression that he hasn’t experienced or witnessed such gifts personally – either in Lyons, or in his travels.
 - **Problem:** If the Montanists reported that God was doing a *new work* through the Holy Spirit, and this new work represents a more advanced way of knowing God and experiencing salvation, then it only reasons that unless one experiences this new work, as evidenced through supernatural manifestations of the Spirit, they are not among the true people of God. However, this would mean that theologians and church leaders such as Irenaeus, Origen, and many others were outside of God’s kingdom.
 - **Quote:** *“Broadly speaking, ordinary Christians were highly suspicious of the Montanists’ prophecies, visions, speaking in tongues, cult of martyrdom, and general state of religious intensity and enthusiasm. To Catholics, Montanists seemed like spiritual drunkards”* – Nick Needham, 117.
 - **Truth:** Such a false standard is held today by some Pentecostal and charismatic denominations. While the New Testament does give evidence that Christ and the apostles had supernatural abilities, we are also reminded that such abilities were enabled to give credibility to the gospel. Once the church began to grow through the preaching and teaching of the Word, these supernatural gifts appeared to cease (1 Cor. 13:8?). If such gifts were a litmus test for true Christianity, why were they not experienced in all the churches? We must ask the same questions today. However, a sign of holy deception is the unique practice of sensational wonders.
- b. **New Revelation** – Another sign of holy deception is the claim that God has revealed new information to a select group of people. The Montanists claimed that God had given them new revelation through the Holy Spirit, which was actually a fulfillment of Christ’s promise (John 14:16; 16:12-13). However, such an interpretation was proven to be false and self-serving. Christ

and the apostles never taught about a “golden-age” of the church, where new rules and standards would be given just before Christ’s return. Rather, the promises Christ made about the arrival and work of the Holy Spirit were fulfilled at Pentecost (Acts 2), which is what the apostles affirmed. Thus, if the Montanist claims were true, then each Gospel and New Testament letter would no longer have authority.

- **Problem:** The Montanist model was one that could have destroyed the church had leaders not defended the truth and rejected the movement. For religious people throughout history could always claim to have the latest word from God and lead their followers in dangerous directions. We have seen such tactics used by many religious groups (Mormonism/LDS; Jehovah’s Witnesses; prosperity gospel preachers; end-times enthusiasts, etc.)
 - **2 Timothy 3:16–17** – *“All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.”*
 - **Jude 3** – *“Beloved, although I was very eager to write to you about our common salvation, I found it necessary to write appealing to you to contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints.”*
 - **Hebrews 13:7–9** – *“Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God. Consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith. Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever. Do not be led away by diverse and strange teachings.”*
 - **Galatians 1:6–9** – *“I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel—not that there is another one, but there are some who trouble you and want to distort the gospel of Christ. But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed. As we have said before, so now I say again: If anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to the one you received, let him be accursed.”*
- c. **Prophetic Predictions and Date-Setting** – It’s been well-documented that most of the Montanists predictions didn’t come true. Maximillia suggested that Jesus would return by the end of her life. *“After me, there will be no more prophecy, but the End.”* However, she died in AD 179. Such things weakened the credibility of all Montanists and their prophets.
- **Matthew 24:36** – *“But concerning that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only.”*
 - **Matthew 7:15** – *“Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves.”*
 - **Deuteronomy 18:20** – *“But the prophet who presumes to speak a word in my name that I have not commanded him to speak, or who speaks in the name of other gods, that same prophet shall die.”*

- **Problem:** A sure sign of a false teacher today is failed predictions and date-setting.
- d. **Moral Extremism** – Another aspect of the Montanist movement is the insistence of a more rigorous moral code. In other words, God expects ever more holy and sacrificial way of life than ever before. For example, the Montanists taught that there were certain sins that couldn't be forgiven after one had been baptized. Such ideas were always connected to the false teachings that the apostles encountered in the first century, especially Paul.
- **Colossians 2:20–23** – *“If with Christ you died to the elemental spirits of the world, why, as if you were still alive in the world, do you submit to regulations—“Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch” (referring to things that all perish as they are used)—according to human precepts and teachings? These have indeed an appearance of wisdom in promoting self-made religion and asceticism and severity to the body, but they are of no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh.”*
 - **Problem:** Such moral extremism isn't just false, but it gives the impression that one has to meet a specific moral standard to find God's approval – and that's against the true gospel. God expects holy living as a result of being made new in Christ, but he doesn't demand extreme forms of holiness or obedience to be accepted or to remain in the kingdom.