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Montanism and Pentecostalism

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by

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Some people have drawn parallels between Montanism and modern Pentecostalism. Some have even called Pentecostalism as ‘neo-Montanism’. Although there are teachings and practices to do with the Holy Spirit and the ‘gifts’ that are similar, Pentecostalism is now a broader movement (‘neo’ or Charismatic/Pentecostalism) which has adopted some of the philosophies of the post modern world. However, the similarities between the old Montanism and the new Charismatic/Pentecostal movement serve as a timely warning to the modern church.

The Beginnings:

Montanism was an early second century movement. It began in the region of Phrygia and spread throughout the Roman Empire. Montanism drew large numbers partly because the orthodox church had become lax and many were dissatisfied with its increasing formalism and worldliness.

In about AD156 a pagan phrygian priest, Montanist, claimed to be converted to Christianity. The Phrygians had previously worshipped Cybele, the mother of the gods, with wild music, the shedding of blood and other pagan rites. Montanus was eventually accompanied by two women, Mazimilla and Priscilla, who left their husbands and joined the Montanist movement.

Montanism was given a boost when Tertullian, the foremost Latin church writer of his time, joined the movement in North Africa in about AD207.

The modern *Pentecostal movement* can be traced to an experience in 1901 with Charles Parham and a Bible school at Topeka, Kansas, USA. He encouraged his students to repeat the experience of the apostles at Acts 2. It was on new years eve that the unknown tongues movement began with a lady called Agnes Ozman. It was furthered some years later by one of the students, William Seymour, at ‘Azusa St.’, Los-Angeles This is despite Charles Parham admitting that what had happened was a counterfeit. He was seeking the gift of *known* languages at Topeka; but what occurred was ecstatic utterances as proved by linguistic experts. Yet, the experience from Topeka was spread from a handful of students to thousands at Azusa St. and then in 1912 to the founding of the Assemblies of God church in the US. (1)

Montanus eventually hung himself. A few years later Maximilla committed suicide in the same way. The sect persisted for centuries but disappeared between 500-550AD.

The Pentecostal movement is young by comparison, being little more than 100 years old. Like the Montanist movement in early years, it is in a stage of rapid growth. In the middle of the 20th Century it infiltrated many of the major denominations and the ‘Charismatic movement’ was born. Although the movement has broadened to include many doctrines, the most prevalent features are the emphasis on the Holy Spirit, the gifts, unknown tongues and extra revelation from God apart from the Bible.

Religious movements come and go. So too have Pentecostal/Charismatic ‘winds’ come and gone and often with false prophecies. We would do well to learn from history. Today’s ‘new’ teachings often have their seeds in yesterday’s heresies.

- (1) See ‘*Diakrisis*’ article Jan/Feb/2004 ‘*The Foundation and History of the Pentecostal Movement*’; Also the book ‘*Fields White Unto Harvest*’ by James Goff for an unbiased historical account of Charles Parham, the Topeka events, the unknown tongues history and the Azusa St. events.
- (2) ‘*Ecclesiastical History*’ by Eusebius, V,16
- (3) See lists in ‘*Diakrisis*’ articles May/June/2002 and July/99.
- (4) Some Pentecostals use a handful of doubtful references or misquote early church fathers to attempt to show the ‘gifts’ never ceased. This is exposed and refuted historically in the ‘*Diakrisis*’ article ‘*The Sign Gifts In History - The Facts*’ (Sept/Oct/2003).
- (5) Eusebius, Church History V.16.19
- (6) Ecclesiastical History 5.16-17 -
- (7) Eusebius 5.16.5.
- (8) ‘*Holy Laughter to Holy Fire*’ by Michael L. Brown, P.197&198
- (9) Ibid. For a history of Charles Parham see the book ‘*Fields White Unto Harvest*’ by James Goff.
- (10) ‘*Holy Laughter to Holy Fire*’ by Michael L. Brown, P.197&198
- (11) Ibid
- (12) Ibid

Clarence Larkin stated: *'But the conduct of those possessed, in which they fall to the ground and writhe in contortions, causing disarrangements of the clothing and disgraceful scenes, is more a characteristic of demon possession, than a work of the Holy Spirit. From what has been said we see that we are living in 'perilous times', and that all about us are 'seducing spirits' and that they will become more active as the dispensation draws to its close, and that we must exert the greatest care lest we be led astray'.* (12)

Today the Pentecostal movement is considered Christian along with many other main stream denominations. This is despite the teaching on the Holy Spirit being radically new to historic Bible teaching. Like the Montanists, many Pentecostal leaders claim allegiance to the written word of God, yet continue to accept new words from God in the form of messages in tongues and prophetic utterances, as well as in dreams and visions.

Historians cite one of the infectious errors of Montanism was the spirit of pride. At times it surely pervaded the content of the prophecies and their view of their own authority in the church. The Montanists were accused of showing little outward love for the rest of the church and were at times considered pharisaical in fasting and celibacy.

An early document 'The Shepherd of Hermas', written in the second century, is believed by many to refer to the flourishing Montanists movement of the day: *'First the man who seems to have the Spirit exalts himself, and wishes to have the first seat, and is bold and impudent and talkative, and lives in the midst of many luxuries and many other delusions, and takes rewards for his prophecy; and if he does not receive rewards he does not prophesy. Can, then, the Divine Spirit take rewards and then prophesy? It is not possible that the prophet of God should do this, but prophets of this character are possessed by an earthly spirit...And it associates with doubters and the vain, and prophesies to them in a corner, and deceives them, speaking to them according to their desires, mere empty words'.*

In his own lifetime Montanus was eventually condemned or excommunicated by churches in Asia Minor, in Syria and in Egypt. Rome and the rest of Europe also wrote against him. The reaction continued for several centuries.

The 'seedbed' for this new Pentecostal movement and its doctrine was the Holiness movement in the late 1800's. It is clear that various Holiness sectors of the Methodist movement left the traditional view of Sanctification *as a process* ('progressive sanctification') and began to develop over time doctrines of *states* or *stages* of sanctification. This appears to be the result of individuals being genuinely dissatisfied with their sinfulness and yearning for a greater holiness. This climate set the stage for the 1901 experience when the foundational doctrine of the Pentecostal movement was birthed - the 'Baptism with the Spirit' as a 'subsequent' experience to salvation. Later was added the doctrine of 'the evidence of tongues'.

The similarities between the beginnings of the Montanist movement and the Pentecostal movement are evident in the considerable dissatisfaction with the state of the church at the times. Historians cite the fact that in the social climate of the day the Pentecostal experience found a release from the problems faced by individuals in difficult times. The importance of this cannot be underestimated and many historians admit the sociological climate to be a vital link in the acceptance of this new teaching. The Montanist movement, like the later Pentecostal, appeared to have 'life' rather than the dead orthodoxy of the times. The Montanist movement also strongly taught a separation from the world.

The Teachings and Practices:

Montanist arguably expressed his newfound Christianity in a manner similar to his old religion - with ecstatic utterances, visions and prophecies. Historians wrote of Montanism as 'Christian mysticism' that was adopted from the 'Phrygian fanaticism'. Montanist claimed to have received direct revelations from the Holy Spirit and that when he was in an ecstatic condition the Godhead gave voice through him. Because the 'prophets' in Montanism spoke in the first person for God, many early church fathers such as Cyril of Jerusalem, accused the Montanists of claiming to be God or the Holy Spirit. But as in the Pentecostal movement today, the practice of prophesying is not necessarily claiming to be God but rather his messenger in delivering God's word.

The women with Montanist also claimed the inspiration of the Holy Spirit when they spoke in prophesying. (In Montanism women could

hold prominent positions in church). Montanist prophecies were described by the early church father and historian, Eusebius, as being: *'...carried away in the spirit and wrought up into a certain kind of frenzy and irregular ecstasy, raving and speaking, and uttering strange things, and proclaiming what was contrary to the institutions that had prevailed in the church...'* (2)

Like Pentecostalism today, the Montanists believed that their prophecies were additional words from God and additions to the apostles writings they already had. However, it soon became apparent that the Montanist prophecies were not the same as the apostolic, since many failed to come to pass. Maximilla at one time falsely prophesied wars and anarchy when there was actually a period of peace for many years. Similarly, today the list of false prophecies each year of many modern day Charismatic/Pentecostal prophets and healers are too numerous to mention here. (3)

Montanism taught a return of the sign 'gifts' which had historically ceased before that time as attested to unanimously by the early church fathers. (4)

Montanus and the two women proclaimed the near approach of the age of the Holy Spirit and the millennial reign in Pepuza, a village in Phrygia, upon which the New Jerusalem was to descend. Maximilla said: *'After me there is no more prophecies; but only the end of the world'*. (5)

The early church historian, Eusebius, in describing the Phrygian heresy, wrote: *'Montanus became beside himself, and being suddenly in a sort of frenzy and ecstasy, he raved, and began to babble and utter strange things, prophesying in a manner contrary to the constant custom of the Church handed down by tradition from the beginning. Some of those who heard his spurious utterances at that time were indignant, and they rebuked him as one that was possessed, and that was under the control of a demon, and was led by a deceitful spirit, and was distracting the multitude; and they forbade him to talk, remembering the distinction drawn by the Lord and his warning to guard watchfully against the coming of false prophets. But others imagining themselves possessed of the Holy Spirit and of a prophetic gift, were elated and not a little puffed up; and forgetting the distinction of the Lord, they challenged the mad and insidious and seducing spirit, and were cheated and deceived by him. In consequence of this, he could no longer be held in check, so as*

to keep silence. Thus by artifice, or rather by such a system of wicked craft, the devil, devising destruction for the disobedient, and being unworthily honored by them, secretly excited and inflamed their understandings which had already become estranged from the true faith'.(6)

Eusebius goes on to mention that the leaders of the church after studying the 'babbling spirit' and seeing that many prophecies did not come to pass, they judged it the work of a 'false and seducing spirit' and separated themselves from those involved and withheld communion from them.

Montanist and his two women colleagues continued to speak in ecstatic prophecies and visions and urged their followers to fast and pray, so that they also could receive Spirit revelations. The movement spread from Phrygia across the known Christian world and to Africa. Bishop Apollinarius wrote of the Montanist deception and those who thought they were 'possessed of the Holy Spirit'.

The movement was well intentioned in seeking revival of an increasingly secular church, but it produced discord and splits. The movement destroyed and divided some churches. Apollinarius found the church at Ancyra torn in two, and he opposed the 'false prophesy'. (7)

The church initially considered the Montanist movement as we would today consider a cult. But it took some years before the church actually pronounced it heretical.

Similarly, initial eyewitnesses to the early Pentecostal movement at the turn of the 20th Century considered it in no uncertain terms. Many of these men were respected Bible teachers at the time and witnessed some of the early Pentecostal meetings, including the Azusa St. mission. G. Campbell Morgan described the Azusa Street activities as *'the last vomit of Satan'* (8); R.A.Torrey declared that this new Pentecostal movement was *'emphatically not of God, and founded by a Sodomite'* (Charles Parham was eventually charged with homosexuality) (9); H.A.Ironside in 1912 described the holiness Pentecostal movement as *'disgusting... delusions and insanities'...* *'Pandemoniums where exhibitions worthy of a madhouse or a collection of howling dervishes'...* *'were causing a heavy toll of lunacy and infidelity'* (10); W.B.Godbey said the Azusa St. movement was the result of spiritualism: *'Satan's preachers, jugglers, necromancers, enchanters, magicians, and all sorts or mendicants'* (11);