

HERESIES, ANCIENT and MODERN.

Lecture 7 – FANATICISM the Road to Error

Introduction

When I started this series and taught on the topic of a theological triage, I intimated that not all inaccurate theologies are heretical. There generally tends to be a sliding scale. Some may not be unorthodox but might be unwholesome. Today I introduce you to a movement that became a heresy but didn't start out that way. At best they were fanatics, to begin with. Fanatics tend to be single-minded and excessive.

The Miriam-Webster dictionary define *fanatics* as: "a person exhibiting excessive enthusiasm and intense uncritical devotion toward some controversial matter (as in religion or politics)." Notice a key word here: *uncritical*. That idea will run through this presentation.

Montanus

Montanus was a professing Christian, living about A.D. 170. Prior to his conversion he was a priest in an Asiatic cult called Cybele. He claimed that he had the gift of prophecy, prophesying in an ecstatic state. His following was called Montanism. He lived in Asia Minor.

Let's define *prophecy* in the way we are using it today. Prophecy is "a message that is claimed by a prophet to have been communicated to them by a deity. Such messages typically involve inspiration, interpretation, or revelation of divine will."¹

Two prophetesses, Prisca and Maximilla, joined him. They claimed to be mouthpieces of the *Paraclete*, the Greek title John the Apostle used in his Gospel of the Holy Spirit. "Eusebius, a church historian born around A.D. 260-270, wrote the following of Montanus: 'In his lust for leadership, he became obsessed and would suddenly fall into frenzy and convulsions. He began to be ecstatic and speak and talk strangely, and prophesied contrary to that which was the custom from the beginning of the church. Those who heard him were convinced that he was possessed. They rebuked him and forbade him to speak, remembering the warning of the Lord Jesus to be watchful because false prophets would come' (Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, 5.16.1)."²

Brown writes, "Montanus was a 'charismatic,' who maintained that he received direct revelation from the Holy Spirit. He considered himself the last great prophet, who would be immediately followed by

¹ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Prophecy>

² <https://www.gotquestions.org/montanism.html>

the establishment of the heavenly Jerusalem.”³ His belief that the end of the age was near constrained him to a sort of asceticism, calling his followers to abstain or dissolve their marriages and find an appropriate place to wait for the coming of the Lord.

The Closed Canon

If the error of Marcion (Lecture 6) was that the Scriptures were insufficient to answer the big questions in life; the error of Montanus was that God was adding revelation to the Scriptures. The idea of prophecy was not the big issue, the problem was that:

- a. This movement believed that they received these revelations, particularly when they were in an ecstatic, irrational, state; and
- b. These revelations were inspired, authoritative and directly from God.

The theological question that this movement gave rise to was, “Is the canon of Scripture, closed?” “Is there added revelation to the Bible, the 66 books recognized by the early Church?” The Scriptures are complete and divine. Unquestionable revelation has ceased. Outside of the Scriptures, no human being can ever say on their own authority, “*Thus says the LORD . . .*” (Exodus 7:17a, ESV). In fact, the ceasing of inspired, authoritative, infallible divine revelation is seen right in the texts of Scripture. Consider for example Jude 3 (ESV),

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.*

The following verse provides more important information concerning the completion of Scripture:

“So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone,” (Ephesians 2:19–20, ESV)

These verses in Ephesians tells us that the apostles are part of the foundation of the church. There is only one foundation that the church has. The Scripture in John 14:26 teach that the apostles were taught "all things."

In Hebrews 1:1–2 (ESV), we read:

¹ *Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, ² but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world.*

³ Brown, Harold O.J., *Heresies, Heresy and Orthodoxy in the History of the Church*, Hendrickson Publishers, Peabody, MA, 1988, Page 66

This passage in Hebrews makes it clear that Christ Jesus is the final and complete revelation of God. God in times past spoke through the prophets. Now, He speaks through Christ. God speaks to us in and through the Scriptures which Jesus said “testify of me” (John 5:39).

Modern Reaction

The main problem of the Montanists was that they believed that they could receive direct, unquestionable messages from God, for which they were to act on. During the Reformation the reformers re-emphasized the truth that the canon of Scripture is closed and that direct revelation of this sort ended with the Revelation of Jesus by the Apostle John. They emphasized this to guard against the Roman Catholic practice of elevating Church Tradition to the level of Scripture.

“A modern parallel appears to be offered by the Latter-Day-Saints, or Mormons.”⁴ “The rise of Pentecostalism and its emphasis on direct revelation” is another example.⁵ Most evangelicals do not place ideas like “the leading of the Holy Spirit”, impressions, etc. on a par with Old Testament prophetic functions and the New Testament apostolic roles. Sadly, many in the church give heed to dreams and visions shared from the pulpit or the pew and to those who unwisely and recklessly claim that “God spoke to me.” Most evangelical Christians recognize the exhortation of Paul in 1 Thessalonians 5:19–22 (ESV),

¹⁹ Do not quench the Spirit. ²⁰ Do not despise prophecies, ²¹ but test everything; hold fast what is good. ²² Abstain from every form of evil.

Dr. Wayne Grudem adds an important analysis: “If the Thessalonians had thought that prophecy equaled God’s Word in authority, he would never have had to tell the Thessalonians not to despise it—they “received” and “accepted” God’s Word “with joy from the Holy Spirit” (1 Thess. 1:6; 2:13; cf. 4:15). But when Paul tells them to “test everything” . . . He implies that prophecies contain some things that are good and some things that are not good when he encourages them to “hold fast *what is good.*” This is something that could never have been said of the words of an Old Testament prophet, or the authoritative teachings of a New Testament apostle.”⁶

I have provided a lengthy 9-part series of articles on this topic, entitled “Jesus I know. Paul I know. Who Are You?” on my Blog, starting with the first here: <http://jamesmaclellan.blogspot.com/2015/06/jesus-i-know-paul-i-know-who-are-you.html>

Application

⁴ Brown, Harold O.J., *Heresies, Heresy and Orthodoxy in the History of the Church*, Hendrickson Publishers, Peabody, MA, 1988, Page 68

⁵ *Ibid*, Page 67

cf. compare

⁶ Grudem, W. A. (2004). *Systematic theology: an introduction to biblical doctrine* (p. 1054). Leicester, England; Grand Rapids, MI: Inter-Varsity Press; Zondervan Pub. House.

“If someone really does think God is bringing something to mind which should be reported in the congregation, there is nothing wrong with saying, “*I think* the Lord is putting on my mind that ...” or “*It seems to me that* the Lord is showing us ...” or some similar expression.”⁷ And then these ideas or impressions need to be tested.

It should be readily obvious how this unchecked fanaticism can easily lead to heresy. What are the implications:

1. A closed canon implies that other religious books or document that supporters purport to be inspired by God should be rejected as spurious. The Book of Mormon, the Qu’ran, when the Pope speaks *Ex Cathedra*, etc.
2. A closed canon also implies that there are no apostles or prophets today who are receiving new messages from God. Anyone who claims a new revelation from God, proffers his or her message as divinely inspired, or assumes authority on par with the Bible is leading people astray.

John MacArthur is right, in my opinion:

*“Scripture never commands us to tune into any inner voice. We’re commanded to study and meditate on Scripture (Joshua 1:8; Ps. 1:1-2) ... Those willing to heed inner voices and mental impressions may be listening to the lies of a deceitful heart, the fantasies of an overactive imagination, or even the voice of a demon ... Those who follow subjective impressions are by definition undiscerning [people].”*⁸

⁷ Grudem, W. A. (2004). [*Systematic theology: an introduction to biblical doctrine*](#) (p. 1056). Leicester, England; Grand Rapids, MI: Inter-Varsity Press; Zondervan Pub. House.

⁸⁸ <https://www.ridgepointefellowship.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/013-What-About-Inner-Impressions.pdf>