

## **Montanist Prophecy and Christian Revelation: A Theological Evaluation**

Homoki Gyula

In the second half of the second century CE a new religious movement appeared on the horizon of the Christian Church which named itself New Prophecy (later to be labelled Montanism). The vibrant prophetic movement by its ecstatic prophecy, strict and rigorous moral conduct and novel eschatological program caused sensation among the contemporary ecclesiastical leaders. Adherents of the New Prophecy legitimated their claims by appealing to the Paraclete which was promised by Jesus to the Johannine community. They believed that in their own circles they experienced a fresh awakening of the Spirit-Paraclete which lead them to the fullness of knowledge regarding the ambiguous moral questions of Christian discipline. After the “orthodox” Christian leaders rejected their claim and condemned the followers of the movement heretic, the New Prophecy got to be equated with the wild and ecstatic enthusiasm which threatened the stability and integrity of the Christian church lead by the episcopate.

In the history of the research on the subject, some scholars tended to keep the ancient label and thus regarded the movement as alien to the true nature of Christianity. The ecstatic mode of prophecy and the ascetical message it communicated together with some penitential liturgical rites from later centuries served as proofs for these scholars that the movement had more to do with pagan religious cults than with the “pure” Christian form of divine revelation and ecclesiastical practices. In my judgement these misinterpretations are the result of an ahistorical understanding of Christian revelation which regards the revelation of God in purely metaphysical terms that has nothing to do with human agency and historical, cultural, political (altogether: human) contexts.

In my presentation firstly I would like to draw attention to the prophetic self-consciousness of the founding prophets Montanus, Maximilla and Priscilla and demonstrate that they believed that they were called and appointed directly by God to fulfil their prophetic task within the Christian Church. In this act of calling, they are in line with the prophetic tradition of the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament church: by appealing to their biblical and well-known apostolic forerunners they saw themselves in line with this tradition. Nonetheless their opponents of the emerging “catholic” church, mostly bishops and presbyters, saw a threat in this prophetic phenomenon which could not be controlled effectively by the episcopate, thus they regarded the movement as of “non-Christian” origin and discredited their message and public characters.

Secondly, I intend to evaluate the prophecy of the movement from a theological point of view. I argue that according to Christian theology every form of revelation is a divine-human cooperation in which the author of the revelation (God) creates a connection to human agents (prophets) and mediates their message through the actual person. In this process which Rudolf Bohren called “theonom reciprocity” the initiative is made on the side of the transcendence, although in the actual communication (including the form, the style and other “outward” elements) the prophet participates fully and personally. In light of the controversy around the New Prophecy, I argue that the prophecy of Montanus and his fellow prophetesses was a

Christian phenomenon and the possible pagan influences in the prophetic mode of speech cannot disqualify such understanding.