

# **Gyula Homoki**

## **Montanists: Enthusiasts or Reformers?**

*A Theological Evaluation of Montanist Prophecy  
and Its Significance for the Life of the Church*

### **Theses of the dissertation**

1. Based on the findings of historical theological research, Montanism cannot be regarded as heresy.
2. Within the framework of the dynamic and personalistic dialogue between God and God's Church, Montanist prophecy can be seen as a legitimate form and occasion of divine revelation.
3. The primary agents of Montanist prophecy, Montanus, Maximilla, and Priscilla, participated in the articulation of prophecy as persons. From a contextual and personalistic theological point of view, the specific elements of their personal life and their socioreligious environment played a constitutive role in the process of divine revelation.
4. The prophecy of Montanus, Maximilla, and Priscilla primarily entailed ethical messages to the contemporary Church. These messages were closely related to the ecclesiological and eschatological conviction of the movement. While the Montanist message can be perceived as legitimate within its own context and time, the temptation of the movement consisted in its aspiration to

claim universal validity to the particular prophetic messages, thus ignoring the nature of Christian ethics based on the perfect law of freedom and the personal characteristics of the believer.

5. Montanist prophecy as a reoccurring phenomenon in the life of the Church with its ecstatic and nonconformist message opposes a static understanding of revelation and an affirmative ecclesiology in order to remind the community of believers of its “not of this world” self-understanding.

### **The theme and aim of the dissertation**

The dissertation deals with the second-century prophetic movement called “Montanism”. Since the movement, in time and space, proved to be a widespread phenomenon in the early Christian Church, this dissertation examines the prophecy of Montanism, especially the source, the prophetic agents, and the messages it mediated to the contemporaries. Besides historical presentation, the dissertation intends to situate the movement within the life of the Church from a systematic theological point of view.

### **Applicability of the dissertation and its relation to the history of research**

In the history of research, scholars have usually tended to approach Montanism from various perspectives (history of religion, history of antiquity, archaeology, patristics, historical theology). Theological evaluations

often resulted in simplified schematization or confessionalism. The dissertation places Montanism within broader theological concepts, thus contributing to international (historical and theological) research by highlighting new ways to appreciate the prophetic movement within the life of the early Church. The literature on the subject available to Hungarian readers is somewhat scarce; thus, the thesis also proves to be the first comprehensive presentation of Montanism in Hungarian.

## **Methodology of the dissertation**

Any theological evaluation of Montanism must start with a thorough examination of historical data, written records, and epigraphic evidence that deals with the prophetic movement. The dissertation constructs the historical, social, and cultural profile of the Montanist prophecy by presenting a careful analysis of primary sources and using the interpretations of relevant secondary scholarly literature. It then explores the specific theological questions (theology of revelation, pneumatology, ecclesiology) stemming from the prophetic phenomenon. In dealing with the theological inquiry, the dissertation fundamentally takes an ecumenical approach, incorporating both Protestant and Roman Catholic theologians into the discourse.

## **Structure of the dissertation**

After a detailed presentation of the history of research, the dissertation explores the theological

significance and characteristics of Montanist prophecy in three main chapters.

Chapter 2 deals with and explores the source of Montanist prophecy. The historical and textual analysis proves that the movement regarded itself as a fulfilment of the eschatological promise given to the people of God both in the Old (Joel 2:28-32) and New Testaments (Acts 2) while also identifying the source of its prophetic activity in the Johannine Paraclete (John 14-16). Montanist prophecy can be defined as a Christian prophetic activity in line with biblical and early Christian prophetic trajectories. The dissertation argues that divine revelation is best understood as a personalistic dialogue between God and God's people within the historical existence in contrast to a set of propositions or doctrines. Montanist – or any given post-biblical or post-apostolic – prophetic claim and activity must be evaluated within this dialogical interaction between God and the Church.

Chapter 3 focuses on the Montanist prophets themselves and asks the question of to what extent they participated in the prophetic proclamation. Historical reconstruction reveals that the form of prophecy and the moral obligations within the “original” Phrygian Montanism owed much to the divination techniques and moral mentality of some of the native Phrygian cults. Montanus himself had probably been one of the functionaries of these cults before his conversion to Christianity. Thus, some of the characteristics of the movement can be traced to the religious, cultural, and

sociological climate of its native land. From a systematic theological point of view, it must be stressed that no prophecy or any form of revelation would be totally free from any external influences since God always reveals Godself within specific and material/worldly contexts. The primary context is the prophets themselves, who participate in the encounter with God as a person. Consequently, they cannot leave their “this-worldly” contextual embodiment behind. In the process of prophetic activity, the prophets themselves become part of the personalistic revelatory act. The elements of their personality become constitutive factors in the proclamation. The concepts of “theonom reciprocity” (Bohren), divine accommodation (Calvin), and divine pathos (Heschel) all help us to understand more fully this divine-human cooperation.

Chapter 4 centres on the prophetic messages as they were formulated by the Montanist prophets. The movement primally addressed ethical issues connected to how Christians ought to live in their everyday lives. The imperatives of the Montanists about sexual ethics, marriage, fasting, radical martyrdom, and penitence can all be seen as resulting from specific ecclesiological and eschatological convictions. All of the examined ethical implications of Montanist prophecy can be seen as legitimate Christian responses to second- and early-third-century issues that caused controversy in the Church. However, the systematic theological inquiry has revealed that the “completion claim” of the movement cannot be

maintained. Montanist prophecy as “radical consistency” (Ervin Vályi Nagy) was tempted with a kind of prophetic hubris that threatened the personal responsibility of the believer and tended to raise its own moral standards to the level of universal, eternal truth.

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