

The label has come off the bottle

Once upon a time (during the second century, to be precise) a man called Montanus mixed a pleasant-tasting poison and put it in a large unbreakable bottle. The poison had the power to reproduce itself so, as long as a few drops remained, it didn't matter how much of it was used. Given time, the bottle would eventually fill up again.

Ingredients

Many of the ingredients used by Montanus were actually quite wholesome and it was these that gave his poison its attractive flavour. For example, he was tired of the worldliness of the church of his day and taught that Christians should be red hot, unashamed, sternly self-disciplined, filled with self-denial, and radically different from the unconverted. It was this ingredient which persuaded Tertullian (approx. AD 160-230) to drink the poison for a while. The same ingredient also made the Montanists heroes in times of persecution.

Another tasty ingredient was Montanus' insistence that believers should understand who the Holy Spirit was and what was his work in their lives. They were not to think that ministers had a monopoly of spiritual experiences. The Holy Spirit had been given to all Christians and had gifted each one of them to make some useful contribution to the building up of Christ's church.

But mixed with these beneficial ingredients were additives, which were to prove ruinous to the church's health. Montanus taught that God had new revelations to give to his people. These could come directly to the Christian without the Scriptures being involved. Yes, God could have dealings with you even when your bible was shut and absent from your thoughts. Indeed, you could have exalted spiritual experiences without your mind being active at all!

Montanus taught that he himself was a mouthpiece for direct revelations from the Holy Spirit. He refused to believe that prophecies had disappeared from the church, although he accepted that not every Christian had such messages to transmit. He encouraged women to take to the platform, and two of them — Prisca and Maximilla — became second only to himself in declaring that they had the Word of the Lord for his people.

Once the poison was mixed, Montanus put a label on his bottle. He called it 'Authentic Christianity' and it proved to be very popular. Who will ever be able to count the multitude that drank from it during the second century, not only in his native Asia Minor, but later in Europe? During the fourth century the vast majority of Christians in North Africa were completely intoxicated by it.

Effects

The effects of the poison were quickly seen. It did not necessarily prove fatal, but was always health-destroying. Its effects were similar to those of modern mind-bending drugs. Without exception, people who drank the poison suffered from self-delusion. They sincerely believed that they were speaking in tongues when they weren't. They thought they were having real experiences of God even when their minds were inactive or unstimulated. Worst of all, they considered that they were eating a healthy diet in meetings where there was little or no exposition of the Bible. Christian after Christian was found to be suffering from spiritual malnutrition.

The effects of the poison on preachers were equally obvious. They lost their power. Compelling preaching flows from a heart that believes that God speaks in the Bible, everywhere in the Bible, only in the Bible, and nowhere outside of the Bible. Once a preacher nurses the thought that God may perhaps have dealings with his hearers without the biblical text being directly involved, a whole dimension of conviction and directness inevitably disappears from his preaching.

Action

Besides the awful effects we have mentioned, Montanism was splitting churches everywhere. What could be done about it? Groups of churches began to act. They forcefully stressed that there were no new revelations after the apostolic era and that prophecy in all its forms had disappeared from the church. They could not destroy Montanus' bottle or stop his poison reproducing itself. So they tore off his label and replaced it with one carrying the single word HERESY.

On the whole this action worked very well. Some of those who had been drinking from the bottle gave it up, and eventually lost all taste for it. Most other Christians, when they saw the label, kept their distance. There were, of course, always a few who closed their eyes, gulped the poison down, and suffered the inevitable effects. Happily, some of these were rescued by the Reformers and Puritans, who had discovered the perfect antidote to Montanism. It was called the doctrine of the sufficiency of Scripture.

However, unless you regularly renew the glue, no label will stick for ever. The last three centuries have seen Montanus' bottle fill up again, while its label has become increasingly loose. It has slipped further and further down the bottle. The warning it gives has become very much harder to see. It is not surprising that more and more people have consumed Montanus' tasty poison. In fact there has been so much use of the bottle recently that the label has come off altogether.

But is it right that the health of Christ's church should be ruined by an ancient toxin? Is it right that Christians throughout the world should experience the self-delusion from which previous generations were so mercifully delivered? Must we again live through an era of powerless preaching and split churches?

Isn't it time to firmly stick the HERESY label back on the Montanist bottle? Isn't there anybody, anywhere, who will bring out the good old Reformed and Puritan antidote — that God speaks in the Bible, everywhere in the Bible, only in the Bible, and nowhere outside the Bible? Is there anything else that will rescue the modern church?

By Stuart Olyott and 1st published in the Evangelical Times, May 1998

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