

Word, Spirit, and Power: Women and Prophetic Authority in the Early Church

Mitchell Locklear



Mitchell Locklear graduated from Coastal Carolina University in May 2012 with a bachelor's degree. His major was history and his minor was religious studies. While at CCU, he became a member of Phi Alpha Theta (History Honor Society) and was an active officer in the History and Anthropology Club. He is currently pursuing an Master of Arts in History at the College of Charleston, Charleston, SC.

ABSTRACT

In the second century, a prophetic movement emerged out of Asia Minor that sent shockwaves through the Christian Church. Montanism, as the movement became known, emphasized both prophetic and female authority. These aspects of the movement were a threat to the male hierarchy of bishops, and in their efforts to combat threats to both episcopacy and patriarchy, Church leaders tied prophetic excesses to the usurpation of authority by women. Both Montanists and their opponents used New Testament literature and their own understandings of Church tradition to legitimize their claims. Church leaders were largely successful in neutralizing prophecy as a threat to episcopal authority, but they were not as successful in their attacks on women's authority. Women continued to pursue other avenues to exert spiritual influence on the Church.

In the latter part of the second century, the prophetess Maximilla, one of the three founders of the Montanist sect of Christianity, stated, "I am pursued like a wolf from the sheep. I am not a wolf. I am word, and spirit, and power" (Heine, 1989, 5.16-17). Maximilla's prophetic words echoed the earlier words of Paul, the early Christian missionary and apostle, who wrote that he did not come to the Corinthians with words of wisdom but in weakness, fear, and trembling in the demonstration of the Holy Spirit and power (1 Corinthians 2:4, English Standard Version). Maximilla and Paul were both speaking the language of weakness and of power. In early Christianity, female prophets, like Paul himself, embodied this contradiction. They were seen as mouthpieces of the divine will, but they were also weak and frail, always possessing the potential to cause harm to the Christian community. This article will use Montanism as a point of departure to discuss how early Christians lived with the contradiction that female prophets embodied. Anti-Montanist writers helped shape the position of orthodox Christianity, the form of Christianity that came to dominate the Roman Empire by the end of the fourth century, on both women and prophecy. Relying on early Christian leaders' interpretations of scripture, particularly those concerning the veil and teaching authority, this article argues that many viewed women's ability to prophesy as the cause of chaos and confusion, as well as a gateway for challenging male authority in the Church and a path toward the clericalization of women. In so doing, I will situate female prophets within

the larger context of the authoritative realm of asceticism, strict religious practices which were typically enacted by men. Ultimately, I will suggest that the marginalization of prophecy and the condemnation of strong female leadership within the Church were not separate historical developments. Prophecy was intentionally marginalized by Church authorities to suppress rival female-led factions.

Montanism or the New Prophecy, as it was known by adherents, was a Christian group of antiquity that gave a prominent role to prophecy. The movement began around 165 C.E. when a man named Montanus began a prophetic ministry in Phrygia, a Roman territory in modern-day Turkey. Later, he gained two female partners, Maximilla and Priscilla. A literal interpretation of the apocalyptic Book of Revelation fed a belief in the imminent return of Christ and led the New Prophets to designate the Phrygian town of Pepuza as the New Jerusalem and headquarters of their movement. Most of the extant documentation on the movement was produced by contemporary men who were hostile to Montanism, but the amount of attention it received from Christian writers in late antiquity testified to its importance (Tabbernee, 2007). Early in its history, local synods in Asia Minor examined the new prophecies and judged them to be profane and heretical (Eusebius, 1865). This was followed by condemnation from the Bishop of Rome in the latter half of the second century (Le Saint, 2003). Originally, the bishop had intended to approve the New Prophecy, but he was ultimately persuaded not to recognize the movement and recalled a letter of peace (Klawiter, 1980). In 364 C.E., the Council of Laodicea ruled that the baptisms of Montanists were not valid and required that Montanist converts to the orthodox faith be re-baptized. By the fifth and sixth centuries, the movement virtually ceased to exist under the pressure of imperial laws enacted against heresy (Le Saint, 2003).

In matters of doctrine, Montanism was almost identical to orthodox Christianity. In the *Refutation of all heresies*, Saint Hippolytus of Rome wrote, “they, like the Church, confess that God is the Father of the universe and the creator of all things, and they accept all that the gospel testifies about Christ. But,” wrote Hippolytus, “they devise new fasts, feasts, and the eating of dry food and cabbage, declaring that these things have been taught by those females [Maximilla and Priscilla]” (Heine, 1989, 8.19). Thus, Montanists and orthodox Christians shared much in common, but they diverged over certain practices and the level of authority granted to female prophets (Trevett, 1996). These differences resulted from Montanist pneumatology—the belief that final revelation was imparted by the Holy Spirit through the New Prophets. It was this aspect of Montanist teachings that was perceived as heretical (Tabbernee, 2007).

Yet the practical differences between Montanists and other Christians centered not around heresy but on the tendency of Montanists to make obligatory what others held to be voluntary (Tabbernee, 2007). Saint Jerome, living in the late fourth and early fifth centuries, wrote that while the orthodox fasted once a year at Lent, Montanists were required to fast three times throughout the year (Heine, 1989). Celibacy was held in high regard by both parties, but while orthodoxy allowed second marriages, Montanist prophecies forbade them (Tabbernee, 2007). There was also greater rigor on the part of the New Prophecy when it came to sin, forgiveness, and discipline (Trevett, 1996). Tertullian, a third-century theologian and Montanist, cited a New Prophet as saying on behalf of the Holy Spirit, “The Church can pardon sin, but I will not do it, lest they also commit other offenses” (Heine, 1989, 21.7).

Like their ideas on forgiveness and sin, Montanist beliefs about martyrdom were also considered radical, even suicidal, by other Christians. Montanists were encouraged to look for opportunities to become martyrs, and they condemned Christians who fled their homes in times of persecution. Opponents of Montanism found many problems with this approach, especially the possibility that a voluntary martyr could in a moment of weakness commit apostasy (Klawiter, 1980). These deviations in and of themselves

were not heretical, but they originated from Montanist beliefs about the role and purpose of prophecy in perfecting the discipline of the Church.

Prophecy was a common cause of tension in early Christianity. Paul's statements indicated that very early on in Christian communities, prophets and prophesying became an area of conflict (1 Thessalonians 5:19-22; 1 Cor. 14). This was no less true of Montanism, and it may explain why Montanists were keen on emphasizing their adherence to local prophetic traditions. There was in Asia Minor a tradition of prophetic succession that centered on prophets briefly mentioned in the Book of Acts, including Agabus, Judas Barsabbas, and Silas. It also included women, specifically the four virgin daughters of Philip the Evangelist (Acts 11:28; 15:22-32; 21:9). Acts 16:6 recorded that Silas traveled with the Apostle Paul through Phrygia, and Acts 21:9-10 connected Agabus with Philip's daughters, who in later tradition became associated with the city of Hierapolis in Phrygia (Eusebius, 1865). Later links in the prophetic chain were the prophet Quadratus, who may have been the same Quadratus who wrote an apology to the Emperor Hadrian, and the prophetess Ammia of Philadelphia, of whom little is known. These individuals were acknowledged even by non-Montanists as genuine prophets, and it was from these prophets that Montanism's New Prophets claimed descent (Trevett, 1996). Maximilla and Priscilla were associating themselves with a tradition that not only stretched back to apostolic times, but that also included women.

Despite their appeal to prophetic tradition, however, the manner of Montanist prophecy proved controversial. None of the Montanist oracles have survived intact; however, a few fragments were preserved in anti-Montanist writings and by Tertullian. Based on analysis of these fragments, it appears that Montanist oracles were examples of charismatic exegesis, the purpose of which was to remind Christians of the current activity of God in the world and God's promises, and to interpret that activity and those promises for contemporary Christian communities (Trevett, 1996). Expositing passages from the Gospel of John, Tertullian in *On the veiling of virgins* stated that while the law of faith endured, the role of the Paraclete (or Holy Spirit) was to progressively direct teaching, reveal Scripture, and perfect the Church's discipline (Dunn, 2004). This definition of the Paraclete's role mirrored that given to Maximilla, who said that through her the Holy Spirit revealed and interpreted God's covenant and promise (Epiphanius, 1994). To opponents of Montanism, this doctrine of progressive revelation was blasphemy and nullified the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. To Montanists, it was essential to the argument that Montanism was neither heretical nor novel. In their view, it was not heretical to obey the Holy Spirit, as the Spirit brought clarity and not novelty (Tabbernee, 2007).

Much of the concern and confusion surrounding Montanist prophecy was rooted in unresolved tension about women's prophetic role in the Church. In early Judaism, the Holy Spirit (*Ru'ah ha-Kodesh*) was "virtually synonymous with prophecy" (Aune, 1983). When translating *ruach* into Greek, Hellenistic Jews used the word *pneuma*. Both words carried the meanings of breath or wind, and from this the two words developed to mean life itself (Isaacs, 1976). This connection between spirit and breath/wind can be found throughout the biblical tradition, such as in John 3:8, "The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit." In Greco-Roman thought, *pneuma* was an all pervasive form of purified air, and first-century medicine viewed the body itself as pneumatic. Mixed with blood, the life-giving *pneuma* was spread throughout the body by way of veins and arteries, enabling thought and perception. In the New Testament, *pneumata* were viewed as "cosmic, personal agents" that could be clean or unclean. Unclean *pneuma* was the cause of disease and had to be expelled by exorcism (Martin, 1995). In early Christianity, *pneuma* became the primary means for explaining divine inspiration (Aune, 1983). Paul's metaphor of the Church as the body of Christ was a useful model for explaining the relationship between the Church and the Spirit (1 Cor. 12:12-27). As in the physical body, the divine *pneuma* was the life force of the Church. It was the vital stuff that came from God and was spread throughout the members of Christ's body. In the

same way that *pneuma* was the essence of perception in the physical body, the *pneuma* of God functioned as the source of divine knowledge and revelation for Christ's body, the Church (Martin, 1995). For Christians, it was the presence of *pneuma* that made prophetic revelation possible:

For who knows a person's thoughts except the spirit of that person, which is in him? So also no one comprehends the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might understand the things freely given us by God. (1 Cor. 2:11-12)

Just as the physical body could be harmed by unclean *pneuma*, however, so could the body of Christ. As in the physical body, the body of Christ was subject to invasion by harmful forces. The weakest points of entry through the boundaries of Christ's body were women because their bodies were believed to be more penetrable and porous than men's. In Greco-Roman society, prophecy was understood in much the same terms as sexual intercourse. During prophecy, the body was penetrated by the divine and was extremely vulnerable (Martin, 1995). Therefore, the Apostle Paul instructed women in Corinth to veil themselves when they prayed or prophesied not only out of a sense of piety but because of "the angels" (1 Cor. 11:2-16). During prophecy, women were not only conduits of divine power, but they could potentially be a breach in the boundary of Christ's body allowing diabolical *pneumata* to invade the Church. The veil was not simply worn to protect women from the penetrating gaze of men but also to protect the Church from women (Martin, 1995). Paradoxically, the female prophet was extremely powerful and extremely vulnerable. Even while infused with the divine *pneuma* and speaking on behalf of God, women were still weak, porous, and a danger to the entire Church as its most vulnerable entry point for sin.

One of the faults found with Montanist female prophets was that their prophecies were collected into books and circulated throughout various churches. According to opponents, this violated a prohibition on women writing religious books. In the fourth-century document *Debate of a Montanist and an Orthodox Christian*, the orthodox speaker argued that Paul's admonishment that women be veiled while prophesying was allegorical (Heine, 1989). Paul's letter, the orthodox speaker explained, went beyond discussion of a physical veil and dealt with the symbolic veil of authority. Veiled women were women who prophesied under the auspices and the authority of men. Mary, the mother of Jesus, was cited as the prototype of the veiled prophetess. Her pronouncement that "all generations will call me blessed" (Luke 1:48) was recognized by the orthodox speaker as prophetic. Yet Mary did not bring shame upon her head by writing books in her own name. "She has the evangelist as her veil," said the orthodox speaker (Heine, 1989).

For the orthodox, the danger of women prophesying without proper spiritual covering was manifested in the Montanists' lack of self-control. The New Prophets prophesied in ecstatic, trancelike states (Trevett, 1996). An oracle delivered by Montanus provides a description of such a state from the Paraclete's viewpoint, "Lo, the man is as a lyre, and I fly over him as a pick. The man sleepeth, while I watch" (Epiphanius, 1994, 48.4). During such moments of ecstasy, the New Prophets were not merely hearing and relaying a divine message; rather, Montanists believed that God was actively speaking through the passive prophet. Early on, it was this feature of the New Prophecy—not its content—that elicited the strongest criticism (Trevett, 1996). Eusebius (1865) quoted an anonymous writer who attributed the New Prophecy to "the adversary" and described it as a "kind of frenzy and irregular ecstasy, raving, and speaking, and uttering strange things" (5.16.6-7) that contradicted the Church's apostolic tradition.

The tradition that Eusebius' anonymous writer referred to was one that viewed self-control as an essential mark of authentic prophecy. As it related to prophecy, much of this language of control derived from Paul's instructions to the Corinthian prophets. Paul taught that "the spirits of prophets are subject to

prophets” and that they exercised some control over when to speak or not (1 Cor. 14:26-33). Anti-Montanist writers embraced Paul’s words and used them to attack ecstatic prophecy. Jerome described the biblical prophet as understanding everything he said and acting with complete control of his senses. The contempt for ecstatic prophecy was not universally held, however. There was Christian literature in which authentic prophecy was characterized as beyond the control of the prophet. In the *Shepherd of Hermas* written in the second century, several guidelines were given by which to judge a true prophet from a false one (Ehrman, 2003). One criterion was that a false prophet prophesied when consulted, while the true prophet could only prophesy when the “angel of the prophetic spirit” filled him. Montanists appealed to the book of Acts, which stated that the Apostle Peter “fell into a trance and saw the heavens opened” (Acts 10:10-11). In response, Didymus of Alexandria in his *Exposition on the acts of the Apostles* distinguished between different kinds of ecstasies (Heine, 1989). The ecstasy that Montanists experienced was one of madness and derangement, while the ecstasy that the apostles and biblical prophets experienced was divine ecstasy. Divine ecstasy for Didymus did “not involve madness, but sobriety” (Heine, 1989, 5.12).

The anti-Montanist writers consistently referred to the madness that the New Prophecy induced. Even though Montanus himself was not exempt from accusations of madness, the sources commonly referred to Montanism’s three founders in ways that highlighted the insanity of Maximilla and Priscilla, for example “Montanus, along with his mad women” (Heine, 1989, 240). Some opponents of Montanism even alleged that in their madness the three prophets hung themselves in a fit of ecstasy (Eusebius, 1865). This concern of Christian leaders with self-control during prophecy paralleled the larger discourse then occurring over self-control and exerting dominion over the desires of the flesh. Primarily growing out of traditional Greco-Roman conceptions of manhood as the ability to control one’s own body, Christian ideas of self-control elevated the renunciation of sex, as well as other marks of human weakness, to the level of an ultimate sign of manhood (Kuefler, 2001). In this context, the fervent opposition to ecstatic prophecy took on gendered connotations. Ecstatic prophecy represented loss of control of one’s body, which was a sign of weakness rather than strength. Anti-Montanist writers could not imagine the heroes of their faith—the prophets of the Old Testament and the apostles of the New—losing command of their faculties when receiving divine inspiration. The fact that Montanist prophets lacked self-control only confirmed that the New Prophecy was a counterfeit. Instead of being spiritually powerful, the New Prophets were weak and led by their passions. Ultimately, the New Prophets were prophesying in an unmanly fashion. Even Montanus’ own masculinity was called into question by Jerome, who mocked the Phrygian prophet as a “castrated half-man” (Heine, 1989, 41.4).

The result of this feminized form of prophecy, from the vantage point of Isidore of Pelusium, was a long-lasting heresy that “caused much corruption and disgrace and outrage” (Heine, 1989, 1.242). For Epiphanius, fourth-century bishop of Salamis, the problems were obvious: “Men are totally absurd when they . . . turn to illogicality and the disagreements which stem from enthusiastic inspiration and secret rites” (Heine, 1989, 49.3). By following after pseudo-prophets, men became “subject to Bacchic frenzy” and foolish enough to appoint women as bishops and priests in clear contradiction to the received tradition of the Church. Furthermore, he described Montanist assemblies in which prophetesses acting in an ecstatic manner “produced deception in people present, and ma[de] them weep” (Heine, 1989, 49.2). It was this ability to exert spiritual influence over individuals and ignite an internal, emotional reaction within people that concerned Montanism’s opponents. Through ecstatic prophecy, women in Montanism could inspire religious fervor and devotion, becoming a threat to the ecclesiastical establishment. The root of the problem was unveiled women and feminized men engaging in illicit prophecy and teaching without the guidance of spiritual fathers (i.e., orthodox bishops). The result was that weak men were seduced by the madness of the New Prophecy and in turn became irrational themselves, throwing off the wisdom of God for the foolishness of deluded women.

This feminizing prophecy was not just a risk to those *within* the body of Christ. The New Prophecy had direct implications for the very gender *of* Christ's body. In his *Panarion*, Epiphanius (1994) described a revelation given to either Priscilla or a later prophet named Quintilla that Pepuza would be the site of the New Jerusalem. According to Epiphanius' report, the prophetess claimed that "[h]aving assumed the form of a woman . . . Christ came to me in a bright robe and put wisdom in me" (49.1). While startling to Epiphanius, this vision was not highly original. It was clearly drawn from the Judeo-Christian wisdom tradition, which personified wisdom as an aspect of the deity (Trevett, 1996). In sapiential literature, this divine wisdom was described as female. She was "brought forth" (Proverbs 8:24) by God in the beginning, took part in creation, dwelled among men, and bestowed benefits on them. Hebrew literature would eventually identify this wisdom with the Law or Torah, and the Church Fathers considered her to be identical to the *logos*, the divine word (Murphy, 2003). Paul told the Corinthians that Christ was "the wisdom of God" (1 Cor. 1:24), and the Gospel of John utilized the wisdom tradition to describe the incarnation as "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (John 1:1). Therefore, Christ, the precreated "Word [that] became flesh and dwelt among us" (John 1:14), was identified with the precreated Wisdom, which was conceived of as feminine. Within this context, the provocative nature of the Montanist vision can be fully understood. It was not so much that Christ was appearing to people in the form of a woman or that he was imparting the wisdom (or word) of God to people. It was *who* he was appearing to and *who* he was imparting his wisdom/word to that caused concern. This vision of a feminine Christ entrusting a woman with his wisdom and word directly undercut the anti-Montanist argument against female authority in the Church.

The vision of a feminine body of Christ—female prophets exercising authority through feminine prophecy over feminized men—was a vision of disaster for leaders of the Church steeped in the patriarchal world of late-antique masculinity. The notion of a feminine body of Christ represented a weak body of Christ. Orthodox leaders blamed this weakness on the New Prophecy and the women who led it. Nevertheless, the success of the New Prophecy ultimately reflected the fragility of those who claimed to be the spiritual fathers in the Church. They were tasked with exercising authority over women for the purpose of protecting those women and the wider Church from penetration by unclean *pneumata*. Yet they were able to neither prevent the spread of Montanism nor prevent Montanist prophetesses from usurping the authority of men in the Church. In essence, the very existence of Montanism highlighted the impotency of the Church's male authorities. These male authorities saw prophecy as the root cause of their disgrace.

Didymus of Alexandria echoed this sense of insult to male authority in the fourth-century *On the Trinity* when discussing the three errors of the Montanists, writing, "[I]t is not permitted a woman to shamelessly compose books on her own authority and . . . to teach" (Heine, 1989, 3.41.3). When a woman taught men, she insulted her "head," i.e., her husband, who represented male authority to her. Therefore, women's authority was an affront to male authority. Through prophecy, some Montanist women were teaching within their local communities. To the anti-Montanists, this was in itself a violation of apostolic tradition expressed in the letters of Paul (1 Cor. 14: 34-35; 1 Timothy 2:12). When their prophecies were compiled into books and circulated beyond their local communities, however, the violation of tradition and the insult to male authority was multiplied many times over. It was as if woman were teaching in every community where her words were read.

Didymus and the author of the *Debate of a Montanist and an Orthodox Christian* (Heine, 1989) summed up the contradiction the Church wrestled with concerning female prophets. The orthodox did not condemn women who exhibited prophetic gifts. However, they did not give women authority to speak or teach in the Church. For Didymus, the reason women were silenced was obvious and stretched all the way

back to the Garden of Eden when “the teaching of the woman in the beginning mislead the common race” (Heine, 1989, 3.41.3). Women could not be trusted to teach the truth; that was the responsibility of bishops and presbyters. If a woman were to prophesy, like Mary, she had to put on the veil of male authority and covering. The male leaders of the Church could judge that she, in fact, had received true revelation, but they would have to be the ones to interpret it and teach it. Both sides, therefore, affirmed that women could prophesy, yet through an abstract interpretation of Paul, orthodoxy allowed women no agency regarding their prophetic gifts.

Tertullian described a model of prophetic ministry that could exist without threatening male authority. While Tertullian believed in the legitimacy and the authority of the New Prophecy, he was living in Carthage, geographically removed from the movement’s heart in Phrygia, and his views on female authority were more compatible with orthodox Christians than his more radical Montanist counterparts in Asia Minor (Klawiter, 1980). Despite his views on women, he recorded several accounts where they played prophetic roles within the church at Carthage. In the treatise *On the soul*, he described a woman noted for receiving revelations in ecstatic visions (Coxe, Roberts, & Donaldson, 1885). This woman talked to angels and Christ, and she proved to be a valuable source of knowledge for the Carthaginian church. In one case, she described the appearance and form of the human soul, which Tertullian used to support his own arguments on the subject. This woman’s visions, however, were not simply accepted by the larger community as the word of God. Tertullian explained that when this woman received a vision, it was reported to the leaders of the local church who then probed and analyzed its meanings in order to confirm or reject it. It appears from Tertullian’s account that the Carthaginian church represented a less radical model for women’s prophetic ministry in which female prophets were seen as real but were tightly controlled so that they did not threaten the established authority structure.

The potential for prophecy to unleash unclean forces within the Church explains why prophecy had long been placed within the context of asceticism. The Apostle Paul discussed both prayer and prophecy together, giving the same set of instructions for each (1 Cor. 11:4-6). Positions that necessitated much prayer also came with an expectation of a prophetic role, which is evident in the description of the enrolled widows given in the *Apostolic canons* (Eisen, 2000). In this fourth-century collection of canons, widows were tasked with praying for all who were tempted and to receive revelations when necessary (Tatum, 1848). A connection also existed between chastity and prophecy. Women leaders of Montanism left their husbands and undertook lives of celibacy (Eusebius, 1865, 5.18.13). The prophetess Priscilla, for example, was specifically accorded the title of virgin, possibly after entering into a nonsexual partnership with her former husband (Trevett, 1998). In his treatise on chastity, Tertullian (1951) recorded her words, saying the sexually pure saw visions and heard voices. Virgins would come to play a prominent role in later Montanist liturgies. Epiphanius (1994) said of Montanist liturgies, “[F]requently in their assembly seven virgins dressed in white and carrying torches enter, coming, of course, to prophesy to the people” (49.2). Such a description reveals both the prophetic and liturgical roles that virgins could fill in Montanism (Trevett, 1996). Maintaining discipline over the desires of the flesh was necessary to receive divine inspiration.

The prophetic life was just one of many ascetic lifestyles available to Christian women. Whereas canonical virgins and widows sought to express their religious calling within and under the authority of male dominated social structures, the ascetic prophetess stepped outside of and rejected the limits in which society and the Church desired to place her (Trevett, 1998). Armed with words of inspiration and revelation, she was listened to and taken seriously either as a mouthpiece for the divine by followers or as a dangerous threat by opponents. Virgins and widows occupied a respected place in society because their positions were based in acceptable roles for women in society—virginity and widowhood—but the ascetic prophetess left the domestic sphere and assumed the trappings of authority (Elm, 1996).

Those women who did step outside of society's limitations made themselves vulnerable to attack. Because the environment in which pneumatic and prophetic power flourished was an ascetic and holy lifestyle, one way to discourage any disruptive behavior was to attack the credibility of the prophet or prophetess. This was certainly the case for Montanist prophetesses who were described by their detractors not as rigid ascetics but as gluttonous lovers of revelry (Trevett, 1996). Apollonius accused Montanists of being deceptive about Priscilla's status as a virgin because she allegedly left her husband when she began to prophesy. The prophetesses were also accused of receiving money and expensive clothes from both the rich and the poor in violation of scripture. Other alleged offenses included dyeing their hair, painting their eyelids, playing at dice-boards, usury, and love of "ornaments" (Eusebius, 1865, 5.18). The ascetic prophetess's portrayal as deranged and demonized, however, was far worse because that attempt to discredit carried with it the threat of exorcism (Elm, 1996).

Writing in the third century, Bishop Firmilian of Caesarea in Cappadocia told of an "ecstatic" woman, possibly a Montanist, who claimed to be a prophetess and to be filled with the Holy Spirit. Firmilian reported how she:

Frequently dared to pretend that by an invocation not to be despised she sanctified the bread and celebrated the eucharist, and so dared to offer the sacrifice of the Lord [not] without the sacrament of the usual eucharistic prayer. She also dared to baptize many, employing the customary and lawful words of interrogation so that she appeared to differ in no way from the rule of the Church (Heine, 1989, 75.10).

Based on her status as a prophet, this woman assumed the privileges of a presbyter and performed sacramental rites in the exact manner the Church mandated. She was modeling to the people of Caesarea what the Church said was impossible—a female priest. Firmilian did not accept the validity of these acts, but he writes, with concern, that others accepted them as valid.

No doubt that was one reason Firmilian's ecstatic woman was subjected to an exorcism. Since the spirit inspiring them was thought to be demonic, Priscilla and Maximilla were both targets of exorcisms as well (Eusebius, 1865). Exorcism was a demonstration of power. On an individual level, exorcism functioned as a cure for bodily disease, and when it came to the body of Christ, it expelled demonic infection. But exorcism did not only demonstrate power by expulsion. It was also used to integrate problematic persons and concepts into a particular worldview. Through exorcism, expressions that did not fit within the dominant context were neutralized and rationalized. The prophetess who threatened the Church hierarchy would be revealed as a deranged woman possessed by an evil spirit, and the evil spirit would be defeated by the power of God working through holy male exorcists. The prophetess was to have an important part in this process. She had to cooperate with the exorcists. There needed to be a conversation where the nature of the spirit within the prophetess could be examined and finally subdued and defeated (Tabbernee, 2007). It was the Church's prerogative and responsibility to test all things, and a concern for determining the origin of spiritual phenomenon was evident in Christian literature. Several New Testament passages warned against false prophets (Matthew 7:15-20; 24:11) and instructed that spirits be tested (1 John 4:1-6). The second-century *Didache* and the *Shepherd of Hermas* devoted considerable attention to ways of distinguishing true prophets inspired by God from false prophets motivated by other spirits (Ehrman, 2003).

The exorcists who interrogated Maximilla and Priscilla failed to discredit the two women. The reason for this failure may be explained by the nature of Montanist prophecy. There is evidence that at least some of the Montanist prophecies were examples of esoteric or glossolalic speech that required interpretation to be

understood. In these two cases, it appears that Maximilla's and Priscilla's interpreters refused to explain the prophetic utterances to the exorcists (Tabbernee, 2007). To the orthodox, this was clear evidence that the spirit could not be genuinely divine, because if it were it would not have hindered the Church's authority. Clearly, the prophets refused to go along with this process because they did not recognize the authority of the exorcists. As such, the female prophets rejected integration within a social order and worldview. They blatantly disregarded the authority of bishops and, in so doing, were claiming greater authority. In each case, the exorcist was a man and the person intended to undergo exorcism was a woman. In addition, there were no recorded exorcisms performed on male Montanists (Trevett, 1998). These two facts indicate that the conflict was not simply between bishop and prophet. The conflict was between man and woman. Maximilla and Priscilla were not just prophets claiming greater authority; they were women claiming greater authority.

Such claims revealed conflicting visions over who would lead the Church (Trevett, 1998). The bishops reasoned that as successors to the apostles, they had the authority for such a task. Montanism represented a different approach. The Holy Spirit would lead the Church into all truth, and the Church was, in Tertullian's words, "the Church of the Spirit . . . not the Church which consists of a number of bishops" (Heine, 1989, 21.17). The anti-Montanist writers noted this challenge to authority and perceived degradation of the office of bishop, and Hippolytus of Rome noted his concern that people "magnif[ie]d these weak females above the apostles" (Heine, 1989, 8.19). "These weak females" presented an especially troublesome problem to the orthodox Church because they could potentially contradict the approved narrative that women could not be bishops or presbyters (Epiphanius, 1994, 79.3.4).

Considering the foundational roles that such women such as Maximilla and Priscilla fulfilled in early Montanism, it should not come as a surprise that women were also clergy of various ranks in the movement. According to Epiphanius (1994), Montanists ordained women as bishops, presbyters, and other officers in their communities based on Galatians 3:28. Besides a theology of androgyny, he also attributed women's clerical status to the importance of prophecy in the movement. The order of prophesying virgins that played a prominent role in later Montanism not only demonstrated the importance of virginity for prophetic status, but it also illustrated the intimate connection between prophecy and women's ecclesiastical authority, since it was through prophecy that they became the central actors in the service.

This relationship between prophecy and other kinds of authority that was exhibited in Montanism may also help explain the meaning of the tomb inscription of a Phrygian prophetess named Nanas. The inscription records, as part of Nanas' prophetic persona, that she was the recipient of "angelic visitations" (Tabbernee, 2007,). It is possible that in the original Greek this phrase was meant to contain a double meaning that not only referred to Nanas' communications with angels but also referred to her angel-like episcopal authority. If that was the case, the career of Nanas could offer yet another example of the crucial role prophecy had in allowing women to exercise power among early Christians in a variety of ways. The Montanist practice of women's ordination was in many ways made possible by the high view of prophecy the movement possessed. To be a prophet was to possess the Spirit of God, the voice of God, and the power of God. If Maximilla or Priscilla could have possessed such power, then the thought of other women possessing priestly power would not have been all that remarkable.

Perhaps this partly explained the condemnation of Montanist ministerial practices. The Montanist elevation of the New Prophets to positions of ecclesiastical authority necessarily meant a loss of power for bishops, who thought of themselves as successors to the apostles and guardians of the faith. In Epistle to the Ephesians, apostles and prophets, respectively, were listed as the chief officers Christ gave to the Church. In Montanism, however, it was the (female) New Prophets who held preeminence. Montanism's

own clerical hierarchy of patriarchs, associates (*koinonoi*), bishops, presbyters, and deacons relegated bishops to a mid-level position, prompting Jerome to write, “[w]ith us the bishops hold the place of apostles; with them the bishop is third” (Tabbernee, 2007). Taken together, orthodox Christians viewed in Montanism a usurpation of apostolic authority by the prophetic office with the result being the empowerment and ordination of women, a situation they felt went against the tradition of the Church.

The heightened awareness of the threat posed by female prophets was part of a larger trend in subordinating women that accelerated in the fourth century. Various church councils, from the First Council of Nicaea in 325 to the First Council of Orange in 441, emphasized that deaconesses were not members of the clergy and were not to be ordained as such (Rossi & Otranto, 1991). In the second half of the fourth century, the canons of the Council of Laodicea forbade the appointment of *presbytides* (female priests) “to preside in the church” and denied women access to the altars (Trevett, 1996).

Because of its role as a pathway toward clericalization, prophecy was a site of conflict within the larger struggle for power within the Church. Bishops not only wished to control prophecy, but they also attempted to confine it to the office of bishop. In effect, the two chief offices of Ephesians 4:11 were combined into the single office of the bishop. The process by which the prophetic gift was monopolized by the bishopric, or episcopal, office was illustrated in Ignatius of Antioch’s early second-century letter to the Philadelphians. In the letter, Ignatius recalled a previous visit to the Philadelphian church while it was experiencing leadership conflicts. While there, he told the Philadelphians, “Do nothing apart from the bishop.” It was not himself speaking, he claimed. Instead, it was the “voice of God” and the Spirit’s “preaching” (Ehrman, 2003, 7). Thus, prophecy was reclaimed in order to emphasize the authority of bishops (Ash, 1976). Nevertheless, this appropriation of prophecy by bishops would not settle the question of female authority entirely. While an important gateway to authority, prophecy was only one path available to women. There were other avenues, especially for wealthy, pious women (Elm, 1996). However, the isolation of prophecy within the confines of the episcopal ministry removed prophetic gifting as a justification for women’s higher status within the Church. Likewise, the simultaneous assertion that the episcopal office was reserved to men made it impossible for women to claim any real prophetic authority. Through this circular argument, the speech of both prophets and women was restricted in the Church.

Absorption of the prophetic gift by the bishop’s office was just one way the influence of prophecy was countered. Scripture was also reinterpreted to prohibit or cast suspicion on prophetesses. The Pauline-derived allegorical veil envisioned by Didymus of Alexandria and others was an example of this tool of control. Another example of this control was Epiphanius’ interesting interpretation of Revelation 2:18-29. “Do you not see,” asked Epiphanius (1994), “that he is speaking of women who deceive themselves with the concept of prophecy, and deceive many others? Now I mean Priscilla, Maximilla, and Quintilla” (51.33). Instead of reading the passage as a record of past events, Epiphanius argued that it was a prophetic warning to the church at Thyatira in Asia Minor for a future time when it would be overrun with the Montanist heresy. This strong condemnation admits very little room for women to pursue any valid prophetic ministry. Another method, developed long after Ignatius’ death, was to condemn all contemporary prophecy as false prophecy. In a sermon against all heresies, Athanasius was believed to have asked, “How can a prophet have appeared again after the appearance of the Savior?” (Heine, 1989, 10). His answer was that it was not possible since now that the savior had already come there was no need for him to send further messengers.

Despite the attempt to deny contemporary prophecy altogether or to confine it to the office of bishop, the defenders of orthodoxy against the prophetic movements were ultimately not successful in silencing women completely. The reality of prophecy in the Church was still recognized, even though the

prevalence of prophecy and the identification of specific individuals as prophets were in decline by the third century. While Montanism may have been a movement that sought to preserve the prophetic element of the Christian religion, its demise should not be understood as the defeat of that goal. The third century was not the beginning of the death of prophecy. It was instead a time when charismatic activity within Christianity was redirected toward new models. The heirs of “the old pneumatic Christianity” were the martyrs and later ascetics among whom women continued to make their presence felt (Eisen, 2000). This development might be explained as a response to the continued hyper-masculinization of the Church. In an environment where prophetic activity perceived as feminine was too dangerous to maintain, women attempted to live pneumatic lives in ways that emphasized the masculine characteristics of self-control and sobriety.

Both the Montanist and the anti-Montanist positions on female prophets represented different approaches to resolving the contradictions in Christian thought surrounding women, authority, and prophecy. The Apostle Paul affirmed the prophetic ministry of women when he wrote on the relationship between the veil and prophecy in 1 Corinthians; nevertheless, his commands that women should be silent in the Church and not have authority over men were the strongest support that orthodoxy had in challenging the authority of women (1 Cor. 14:34; 1 Tim. 2:12). Both sides were aware of the precarious situation prophetic women occupied. Montanism attempted to mitigate the danger of prophecy by placing it firmly within ascetical standards of behavior. For the orthodox Church, however, that was not enough. The risk “weak women” posed was so great that they could never be permitted to proclaim and interpret the words of God on their own. Orthodoxy interpreted Paul’s language on veiling and prophecy as a prohibition on female prophets proclaiming or interpreting revelation independently of male clerics. In doing so, they restricted female speech in the Church. When God chose a woman to be his mouthpiece, she was expected to allegorically hide herself under the veil of male authority. The role of the female prophet was to meekly receive revelation. The roles of Church leaders were to listen, discern, interpret, and approve or disapprove. Church leaders feared that wherever this pattern was not followed the result would be weakness, feminization, and a loss of control in the body of Christ. In their minds, this fear was confirmed when the power of male bishops was displaced by the authority of women prophets and clerics.

To stamp out the heretical claims of Montanism, particularly the powerful voices of its female prophets, leaders of the Church chose to deny women the prophetic gift and assert their own authority at the expense of both women and Montanism. However, they could never extinguish female authority from the Church entirely. Though it appeared in different forms depending on time and place, it continued to embody the contradiction of weakness and strength that surrounded the issue of Montanism, women, and prophecy. Montanism’s New Prophetesses lived out this contradiction to the fullest. Rejecting the limitations traditional authorities wished to place on them, these women were pursued like wolves among sheep and labeled possessed. Nonetheless, they led a Christian movement that shook the foundations of the Church and struck fear into the hearts of the religious establishment. These women were anything but weak. They possessed the word, the spirit, and the power.

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Faculty Adviser

Dr. Aneilya Barnes's research focuses on the Christianization of ancient Rome and the roles of women in the early Church, especially through the lens of Rome's sacred spaces and shifting landscape. She has authored several peer-reviewed articles on late-antique Roman architectural history, including her essay "Female Patronage and Episcopal Authority in Late Antiquity," which is forthcoming in the edited volume *Envisioning the Medieval Bishop* (Brepols). She also has a textbook, *Comparative Cultures: World Civilization to 1500*, that is scheduled to be in print in the coming year. Additionally, she continues to work on her manuscript, *Gender and Domestic Space in the First Christian Basilicas*. Her upper-level courses include the history of early Christianity, imperial Rome, and the early Islamic world. She earned her Ph.D. from the University of Arkansas in August of 2007 just prior to her arrival at Coastal Carolina University the same month.

