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### The Montanist Controversy And Ellen White

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# Memory, Meaning & Faith

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November 17, 2010

## The Montanist Controversy And Ellen White



Montanism was a second century Christian movement led by Montanus, who spoke as a prophet. The movement emphasized visions, ecstatic utterances, and ascetic requirements. Commenting on the eventual expulsion of Montanists from the early church, von Campenhausen concludes that

From this time dates the 'ecclesiastical', and later also official mistrust of all the cruder forms of religious enthusiasm and ecstasy. If Montanism (in this respect going beyond primitive Christianity) saw in this the surest criterion of divine inspiration, the tendency within the Church was now fixed firmly in the opposite direction, namely to condemn it as a mark of demonic possession. Enthusiastic promptings, raptures, and visions are in general forced out on to the periphery of the Church and into heresy, until monasticism creates a new home for them and new, organised opportunities for development. Moreover, increasing hellenisation of the Church, with its emphasis on the spirituality and rationality of the faith, restricts understanding of the very different nature of earlier 'prophecy.' In vain did Irenaeus warn his contemporaries against driving the true prophecy out of the Church from anxiety over the false. (Hans von Campenhausen, *Ecclesiastical Authority and Spiritual Power in the Church of the First Three Centuries*, 191)

In his critical history of Ellen White, *Prophetess of Health*, Ronald Numbers recounts a period where she was excluded from ministry.

A crisis over Ellen's visions also developed in 1851. In July she wrote to her friends, the Dodges: "The visions trouble many. They [know] not what to make of them." ... Nonbelievers frequently charged that the visions were being elevated above the Bible. This criticism particularly galled James [White]. In an effort to keep the visions as inconspicuous as possible, he decided in the summer of 1851 not to print his wife's testimonies in the widely distributed Review and Herald. In the future her prophetic writings were to be confined to an "Extra," for limited circulation among "those who believe that God can fulfill his word and give visions 'in the last days.'" The "Extras" were scheduled for every two weeks,

but only one issue ever appeared. For the next four years Ellen White lived in virtual exile among her own people, being allowed to publish only seven Review and Herald articles, none relating a vision. ...

Her visions unappreciated, Ellen White again grew discouraged. The divine revelations came less and less frequently, until she feared her gift was gone. (72-23)


## Questions

- What parallels are there between the reaction of the early church to Montanus and early Adventists to Ellen White? What differences?
- What challenges does having a living prophet pose to a Christian movement?
- Why are those with "official" authority often motivated to exclude or expel those who have prophetic authority?

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