

INNER EXPERIENCE IS AMBIGUOUS

A young farmer out in his field saw a cloud formation shaped like the letters “PC” –which he read as a sign from heaven – “Preach Christ.”

Off to seminary he went and became a pastor. He was a sincere Christian, but as a pastor he was inept and ruined the congregations he served.

His older brother just shook his head and said, “I told him the ‘PC’ mean ‘Plant Corn’ – he should have stayed where he was.”

How does a call to the ministry happen? An Anglican bishop describes her “inner call” as a direct, personal revelation:

“When I was about 15 . . . I heard a voice. I don’t think anyone else would have heard it, but it was as clear as anything. I heard a voice that said: ‘You are my beloved, and you will be my priest. And I will never leave or forsake you.’ I knew it was Jesus.”

Is a “call” to the ministry a vision in the clouds? A voice in the night?

Deceptive angels

A survey reports that 40% of the population claims to have seen an angel – and every angel was reported to be a good angel!

But angels and visions are tricky. As Paul writes to the Corinthians: “Even the devil disguises himself as an angel of light” (2 Cor 11:14).

Visions and voices can be a kind of dream-like working out of inner desires and ambitions. Psychologists say that persons in transition or under heavy stress are prone to visions and voices.

Luther’s “No” to visions

Everyone knows the story of Luther throwing an inkwell at the devil. What is less well known is

that he had the same reaction to visions of Christ. Luther from his *Table Talk* (WATR I:287, 8-27):

“Christ once appeared visible here on earth . . . and according to the divine purpose of God finished the work of redemption. . . . I do not desire that he should come again in the same manner, nor that he would send an angel to me. No, even if an angel would appear before my eyes, it would not add to my belief; for I have my Savior, bond and seal; I have my Word, Spirit, and sacrament; on these I depend, and desire no new revelations. And the more steadfastly to confirm me in this resolution to hold solely by God’s Word and not to give credit to any visions or revelations, I tell you what happened to me: On Good Friday last, I was in my room in fervent prayer when suddenly appeared upon the wall a bright vision of our Savior Christ, with the five wounds, steadfastly looking upon me, as if it had been Christ himself corporally. At first sight, I thought it was some celestial revelation, but I reflected that **it must be an illusion and juggling of the devil, for Christ appeared to us in his Word, and in a meaner more humble form;** therefore I spoke to the vision: Away with you, confounded devil: I know no other Christ than he who was crucified, and who in his Word is pictured and presented to me. Whereupon the image vanished, clearly showing of whom it came.”

For Luther personal experiences and private miracles may be the devil in disguise.

Moreover, for Luther seeking visions and private miracles is a sign of sin. He called it “enthusiasm” – believing in the god-within.

God, however, is not inside of us. Rather, he is outside of us and comes to us in his Word and sacrament, as Luther writes:

“In short: enthusiasm clings to Adam and his children from the beginning to the end of the world – fed and spread among them as poison by the old dragon. It is the source, power, and might of all heresies Therefore we should and must insist that **God does not want to deal with us human beings except by means of his external Word and sacrament.** Everything that boasts of being from the Spirit apart from such a Word and sacrament is of the devil” (*Smalcald Articles III/VIII/9-10; BC 323 [Kolb/Wengert]*).

Therefore pastors are free from having to have “an inner call” because all experiences and visions are ambiguous. Christ comes to us in his external Word and sacrament – as Luther says, a “meaner, more humble form.”

Congregations are free to reject clergy who use an “inner call” as a basis for their authority. The call to ministry is an external call; there is no certainty in inner voices.

The call to public ministry

The call to public ministry is a matter of matching the need for preachers with the skills of those who are trained for ordained ministry.

(Of course, physical limitations, such as being blind or deaf, are not insurmountable barriers to ordained ministry.)

But in our day, as in Luther’s, there are individuals who **claim an inner call** but who can’t think or preach, or who are mentally unstable, or morally unsuitable for public leadership.

Christian leaders need to be strong and wise enough to say “No” to such people in order to protect congregations.