

WHO HAS BEWITCHED YOU?

Endless stories can be told of people hearing sounds that don't really occur and seeing things that do not really exist. For example, in extremely hot weather, one can look down the middle of a road and it looks to be swimming in water.

Around the world, people claim to see God revealing Himself in clouds and in various other apparitions. Sometimes crowds gather when it is claimed someone has seen an apparition of Mary. There have been instances where it appears the outline of Mary has appeared on something. Does Mary reveal herself in this way? Does God reveal Himself in unusual ways? Or could this revelation be the *bewitching* work of the devil? Where in God's Word can we turn for help in understanding visions, apparitions, voices, and other possible ways of being *bewitched*? As we consider how to determine whether our religion is correct and God-pleasing, think of the word *bewitched*. This word occurs only once in the New Testament, when St. Paul writes to the Galatian Christians: "You foolish Galatians, who has bewitched you?" (Galatians 3:1). Although some Biblical scholars disagree, Luther sees "bewitching" as involving the devil. Why? Because whenever the Gospel is attacked, the devil is always involved. Jesus illustrates this, in Matthew 13:24-25, when He relates that as soon as the Gospel seed is sown the devil sows his tares, hoping to confuse and destroy people.

Blaming the devil for various types of bewitching, Luther explains that the devil often bewitches us by manipulating our sensory perceptions; he tricks our senses of smell, sight, taste, hearing, or feeling. Luther warns: "Satan has the uncommon ability to touch all the senses in such a way that you swear you see, hear, or feel something which you nevertheless do not see" (*Luther's Works*, vol. 26, p. 191).

Our senses are gifts from God, as Luther confesses in his *Small Catechism*: "God has given me my eyes, ears, and all my senses." God has given us senses to help us to enjoy the life He gives, to taste delicious food, hear great music, and smell fragrant flowers. Even though He wants us to enjoy these blessings, our heavenly Father does not want us to trust sensory perceptions as a way to confirm the authenticity of our faith. Our faith comes from, and can only be judged by, God's living and unchanging Word. This Word of God is what the devil can never manipulate or change. God's Word is like God Himself - changeless: "Every good thing bestowed and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation, or shifting shadow" (James 1:17). "For I, the Lord, do not change" (Malachi 3:6). Does this mean our Christian faith is not to stimulate our sensory perceptions? No! Is joy part of the true Christian faith? Absolutely! The pages of the Bible show many examples of great joy and emotion; but emotion pleasing to God is always a result, a fruit, of hearing His changeless, living Word. Appearing to the shepherds on the night of Jesus' birth, the angel said: "Behold, I bring you good news of a great JOY which shall be for all the people; for today in the city of David there has been born for you a Saviour, who is Christ the Lord" (Luke 2:10-11). The changeless Word brings and confirms the Gospel message from God. Though emotions and joy are often a product of God's Gospel message, God never speaks to us through our emotions. He speaks only through His Word.

Therefore, rejoice that God has given us confirmation of His forgiveness of all our sins in Christ's death and resurrection as recorded in His Word. Enjoy life! Use the senses God has blessed us with: seeing, smelling, hearing, touching, and tasting. If people ask us to confirm our faith by seeing God in the clouds, Mary in windows, or Jesus silhouetted in rock formations, turn away from these apparitions. Look only to the unchanging Word of God - through which the Holy Spirit gives us eyes of faith to see Jesus. "These things [God's inspired and unchanging written record

of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection] *have been written* so that you might believe... and that believing you may have life in His name" (John 20:31).