

HANS DENCK  
AND THE DEBATE OF THE  
FREEDOM OF THE WILL

By  
HANS JUERGEN RATH, B.A.

A Thesis  
Submitted to the Faculty of the Divinity College  
in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements  
for the Degree  
Bachelor of Divinity

McMaster University

April, 1966

BACHELOR OF DIVINITY (1966)

McMASTER UNIVERSITY  
Hamilton, Ontario

TITLE: Hans Denck and the Debate of the Freedom of  
the Will

AUTHOR: Hans Juergen Rath, B.A. (McMaster University, 1962)

SUPERVISORS: Dr. Walter Klaassen  
Conrad Grebel College  
University of Waterloo  
Waterloo, Ontario

Dr. Russell F. Aldwinckle  
McMaster Divinity College

NUMBER OF PAGES: v, 76

#### SCOPE AND CONTENTS

This work is particularly concerned with Hans Denck as one of the first leaders of South German Anabaptism, in his relation to the debate on free will between 1524 and 1526. In addition to the examination of Erasmus' and Luther's treatises and of the positions of Carlstadt and the Peasant of Woehrd (Diepold Peringer), Denck's tract, Was geredt sey, is studied in detail against the background of his biblical, mystical, and humanistic-philosophical orientation.

## PREFACE

Until very recent years, the study of Reformation history has in the main been confined to the activity of Luther, Zwingli, and Calvin, and their followers. Gradually, however, scholarship is taking cognizance of the fact that the Reformation embraces another major religious current, namely, that of Anabaptism.

I shall not attempt a careful definition of Anabaptism; this would demand a scholarly work in its own right, a task which is premature at the present stage of research. Suffice it to say, that the affirmation of genuine freedom of the will (soul liberty) and of religious liberty, and the individual's responsible exercise of his God-given freedom, were basic principles of Anabaptism. These convictions sprang from the unconditional, biblical faith of the Anabaptists, and they have been of more penetrating influence since the Reformation than the doctrine of justification by faith as held by Luther.

The subject of this thesis was conceived in the light of the apparent relevance of Anabaptist theology for today. The increasing interest among Anglican theologians in believers' baptism, for example, speaks for a growing awareness in our churches, that each individual enjoys a freedom

of the will and a personal responsibility towards God, which only he himself can discharge. The Anabaptists died for their convictions, because they believed them to be true both to the Scriptures and to their own religious experience. Many Free Churches of non-Calvinist persuasion, including the Baptist churches, stand in their tradition. It is to be hoped that as the truth of certain Anabaptist principles is being discovered, Christians will hail the present opportunity and exonerate the Anabaptists, and thus, will complete, at long last, the story of the Reformation. In so doing, we will find ourselves proclaiming the Gospel.

I should like to thank all those who have helped me in the preparation of this thesis. I owe a special debt to Dr. Walter Klaassen of Conrad Grebel College, University of Waterloo, for supervising the writing of this work, though not a member of the faculty of McMaster Divinity College; and to Dr. R. F. Aldwinckle for being second reader. I have greatly appreciated their counsel and patience.

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## INTRODUCTION

Dr. Johnson once said, "We know our will is free, and there's an end on't."<sup>1</sup> Unfortunately, the question is not settled that easily, but in all fairness to Dr. Johnson, it must be pointed out that he did not have, in fact, a simple answer to the problem of free will either. He remarked on a later occasion: "All theory is against the freedom of the will, all experience for it."<sup>2</sup>

The question of individual freedom has occupied the minds of men since the days of prehistory. No final answer has as yet been found, nor is it likely that the mystery will ever be solved in the realm of man's present existence; that is, at least philosophically speaking. On the other hand, is it perhaps possible that a final conviction concerning man's freedom, or the lack of it, will be achieved among those who belong to the community of Christian faith? Again, the answer must be that it is doubtful. Though Christianity lays claim to revealed truth, men are disagreed on the content and interpretation of that truth which is the Gospel.

How will a man find eternal salvation? There is no

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<sup>1</sup> G. B. Hill, ed., Boswell's Life of Johnson, rev. and enl. L. F. Powell (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1934), II, 82.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., III, 291.

doubt that the Gospel offers it, but how is it imparted to the individual person? Early in the fifth century A. D., this question issued in the great controversy between Pelagius and Augustine of Hippo (354-430) over the freedom of the will. Though the Council of Ephesus, in 431, condemned the Pelagian doctrine, which made salvation solely dependent on man's (supposed) will power, the Church did not adopt full-fledged Augustinian predestinationism. On the contrary, she more and more developed sacramentalism and the idea that the priesthood was empowered to mediate grace through the sacraments to men who performed cooperating works of contrition.

Luther (1483-1546) and, later on, Calvin (1509-1564) were the true successors of Augustine. When Luther revived the predestinarian teaching of the Bishop of Hippo, the scene was set for a new controversy over the question of free will.

The subsequent pages are devoted to an analysis of the polemical writings of the debate, as it developed between the years of 1524 and 1526. Special attention will be paid to the role of Hans Denck (c.1500-1527), because of his relation to that much neglected side of the Reformation, Anabaptism. It will be seen that much of what Denck contributed to the discussion of the freedom of the will, is not only consonant with the Scriptures, but also congenial to life and religious experience.

# I

## DEBATE BEFORE HANS DENCK

The protagonists of the debate of the freedom of the will were Erasmus (c.1466-1536) and Luther. If it had not been for the thorough-going persecution of the Anabaptist cause in Germany and Switzerland, the voices of men like Balthasar Hubmaier (?-1528), Hans Denck and Pilgram Marbeck (c.1495-1556) would perhaps have been heard in the world. As it was, the Anabaptist leaders were driven from place to place and died (in truly scriptural manner) as "aliens and exiles"<sup>1</sup> in a hostile world. The movement lacked coherence and certainty of action and, therefore, lacked the strength to turn the world upside down.<sup>2</sup>

It is the purpose of this chapter to prepare the ground for the analysis of Denck's defence of the free will. This requires of us that we examine the pronouncements of Erasmus and Luther, and also of Carlstadt (c.1480-1541) and the "Peasant of Woehrd."

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<sup>1</sup>

I Peter 2:11.

<sup>2</sup>

S. Cramer, "Die geschichtliche und religioese Bedeutung Hans Denck's und der Taeufer", Protestantische Kirchenzeitung fuer das evangelische Deutschland, XXX (1883), 1158.

### Erasmus

During the early years of the Reformation, Erasmus had kept himself out of any direct involvement in Luther's controversy with the Catholic Church; but pressure mounted. Disturbed by the increasing social unrest among the peasants; provoked by the personal attacks, upon him, of the misguided patriot Ulrich von Hutten (1488-1523) and of Luther himself;<sup>3</sup> and urged by King Henry VIII of England and the papacy; Erasmus finally declared open war against Luther and broke with the Reformation. His central point of attack was Luther's doctrine of the total depravity of man. He first formally stated his case in the classic treatise, Diatribes seu collatio de libero arbitrio (On the Freedom of the Will), which appeared on September 1, 1524, in Basel.

Erasmus' pursuits were mainly those of a humanist scholar of his age. His interests were, therefore, literary, philosophical, and ethical. No one could have been more concerned about the moral life of the Church than Erasmus. There was much in the Catholic Church he was dissatisfied with, but he found reason not so much for quarrelling with her theology as to question the moral conduct and the practical wisdom of her leaders. As a cultured man of peace, it went against his nature to speak out against stupidity and vice bluntly and

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Preserved Smith, Erasmus: A Study of His Life, Ideals and Place in History (New York: Dover Publications, 1962), p. 340.

directly. Erasmus thought that men would reform their lives, if they could only see what they were doing. With supreme skill, then, he satirized human faults and foibles, as for example in the Colloquies (1518). His works were written in Latin, for he addressed himself to the educated man, with whom rested all hope and responsibility for reforming the Church and society.

In the light of Holy Scripture and of the tradition of the Church Fathers, and, no doubt, also in view of the ancient classical writers, Erasmus could not believe, that man was no more than a lump of clay in the hands of a divine potter. Man was a fallen creature; to this he agreed, but man was not depraved to the point, where he no longer could desire good. Erasmus' estimate of man was too high in order for him to hold the view that he had no capacities whatever of determining his eternal destiny. Indeed, the debate between Erasmus and Luther was restricted to this aspect of human freedom where it touched matters of eternal salvation. Luther did not quarrel with him about man's freedom of choice in the lower, that is, other than spiritual, sphere of life.<sup>4</sup> Luther held that "man has a twofold nature, a spiritual and a bodily one," but that "no external thing," no work of the body, "has any influence in producing Christian righteousness and freedom, or in producing unrighteousness or servitude."<sup>5</sup>

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Ibid., p. 339.

5

The Freedom of a Christian, in Donald Weinstein, ed., The Renaissance and the Reformation: 1300-1600 (New York: Free Press, 1965), pp. 173 and 174.

Erasmus, the humanist scholar, realized that this dichotomy of man's nature created all kinds of philosophical problems, which would ultimately lead to making God the author of both good and evil. In fact, he laid this very charge against Luther;<sup>6</sup> and similarly did Hans Denck against the Lutheran preachers.<sup>7</sup> True to biblical anthropology, Erasmus saw man as a unified entity and a social creature over against God his creator, whose power sustains him with life. For the purposes of the discussion, Erasmus described this man in terms of free will and God in terms of grace.

Early in his Diatribes, Erasmus defines the freedom of the will as "the power of the human will whereby man can apply to or turn away from that which leads unto eternal salvation."<sup>8</sup> He heartily agrees with Luther that man needs God's freely given gift of grace to lead him effectively to eternal life: "We owe our entire life work to God, without whom we could accomplish nothing."<sup>9</sup> He is not guilty of Luther's charge of Pelagianism,<sup>10</sup> which teaches that man is not intrinsically

<sup>6</sup> A Diatribe or Sermon Concerning Free Will, in Ernst F. Winter, tr. and ed., Erasmus-Luther: Discourse on Free Will (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1961), p. 88. (Hereafter, referred to as De libero arbitrio).

<sup>7</sup> Infra, p. 50.

<sup>8</sup> De libero arbitrio, p. 20.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 85.

<sup>10</sup> The Bondage of the Will, in Winter, op. cit., p. 121. (Hereafter, referred to as De servo arbitrio).

dependent upon God for the determination of his destiny.<sup>11</sup>

But Luther could see the issue only in the crass shades of black and white. Anything which might limit the absolute sovereignty of God smacked, to him, of Pelagianism.

Erasmus does not have much to say about the atoning work of Christ, that is, in the objective sense; instead, he emphasizes the grace by which God wants to save everyone: "The mercy of God offers everyone favorable opportunities for repentance."<sup>12</sup> As we should expect, he bases his claims on the word of Scripture. Furthermore, Erasmus argues, God plainly calls for repentance and obedience on the part of everyone. This presupposes the ability to choose between God and Satan, between good and evil.

Erasmus describes the mechanics of the interplay between grace and free will in the following manner: God's mercy "invites" or "excites" man to repentance. If he (freely) responds, the "Spirit of Christ"<sup>13</sup> (or grace) in continual "cooperation" with his "striving" after good will "lead" him to the final goal of salvation. "The two causes meet in this same work, the grace of God and the human will, grace being the principal cause and will a secondary, since it is impotent without the principal cause, while the latter has sufficient

<sup>11</sup>

M. John Farrelly, Predestination, Grace, and Free Will (London: Burns & Oates, 1964), p. 80.

<sup>12</sup>

De libero arbitrio, p. 29.

<sup>13</sup>

Ibid., p. 42.

strength by itself."<sup>14</sup> The soteriology of Erasmus is, therefore, clearly synergistic.<sup>15</sup>

God is for Erasmus by definition omnipotent and omniscient, and this is, indeed, also the biblical conception. But to what degree God's foreknowledge of every human act is or is not contingent, he refuses to say: "Some things God wishes to remain totally unknown to us."<sup>16</sup> He agrees with Lorenzo Valla (1405-1457),<sup>17</sup> that "foreknowledge does not cause what is to take place," but he adds that somehow God "must wish the foreknown, seeing that He does not prevent it though He could do so."<sup>18</sup> However, the will of God does not compel a choice or action, but in His omniscience God knows beforehand what will take place.

Erasmus is well aware that contradictory statements are to be found in the Bible concerning the freedom of the will. On the other hand, since all Scripture is inspired by the same Spirit and hence cannot contradict itself,<sup>19</sup> they must be seen

<sup>14</sup>  
<sup>15</sup> Ibid., pp. 85-6.

<sup>15</sup> "God's mercy precedes our will, accompanies it, and gives it fruitfulness. Nevertheless it remains that we wish, run and attain, except that all this we must ascribe to God, to whom we belong with everything we are" (De libero arbitrio, p. 49).

<sup>16</sup>  
<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p. 9.

<sup>17</sup> Italian humanist, who exposed the Donation of Constantine as a forgery. He, too, wrote a dialogue on free will.

<sup>18</sup> De libero arbitrio, p. 49.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. 20.

to stand in creative tension, to the end that "no sinner should be overconfident, none again should despair."<sup>20</sup>

Erasmus, then, defends freedom as an indispensable condition of moral responsibility. In this assertion he is both biblically and philosophically sound. God's ethical demands upon us would be "ridiculous,"<sup>21</sup> if we were incapable of making a choice. His position is best summed up in his words: "I like the sentiments of those who attribute a little to the freedom of the will, the most, however, to grace."<sup>22</sup>

### Luther

As early as 1516, Luther disparaged the theological abilities of Erasmus. He criticized the editor of the Greek Testament for misunderstanding the Pauline conception of the nature of sin and for undervaluing grace.<sup>23</sup> At the meeting of the general chapter of the Augustinians of Germany in April 1518 at Heidelberg, Luther maintained the thesis that "'Free Will' after the fall is nothing but a word, and as long as it is doing what is within it, it is committing deadly sin."<sup>24</sup> When the papal bull, Exsurge Domine (June 15, 1520), condemned

<sup>20</sup>

Ibid., p. 30.

<sup>21</sup>

Ibid., p. 32.

<sup>22</sup>

Ibid., pp. 92-3.

<sup>23</sup>

In a letter to Spalatin, Oct. 19, 1516, cf. Smith, op. cit., pp. 214-5.

<sup>24</sup>

Martin Luther, Selections from His Writings, ed. John Dillenberger (Garden City: Doubleday & Co., 1961), p. 502.

this proposition together with 40 others as heretical, Luther replied: "I should have said straightforwardly that the free will is really a fiction and a label without reality, because it is in no man's power to plan any evil or good. As the article of Wycliffe, condemned at Constance, correctly teaches: everything takes place by absolute necessity."<sup>25</sup> He sustained this position throughout his life.<sup>26</sup>

Luther let many months pass after Erasmus challenged him on his doctrine of the total depravity of man. It was not until December 1525 that his answer was ready, entitled De servo arbitrio (On the Bondage of the Will). This treatise, which exceeds that of Erasmus four times in length, is an elaborate biblical exposition of Luther's basic conviction, that the whole work of man's salvation, first to last, is God's.

Like Augustine of Hippo, Luther was experientially predisposed to adopt the monergistic view of salvation, that God's grace is all-sufficient. Both men were subject to intense spiritual struggles, and they only found peace when they stopped striving for it. While both men, in the course of their lives, were driven, under the press of circumstances, to assume more extreme theological positions than they had first contemplated, on this point, Luther had been firm since the study of the Book of Romans in the Greek text. Augustine,

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Quoted by Erasmus, De libero arbitrio, pp. 44-5.

26

Philip Schaff, History of the Christian Church: Modern Christianity: The German Reformation (2nd rev. ed.; New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1895), VI, 372.

too, had come to see before the Pelagian controversy, "that even the beginning of faith is God's gift."<sup>27</sup>

At the time of their fall, both Satan and man were abandoned by God, so that they cannot will good, that is, things which please God or which God wills.<sup>28</sup> The whole human race is fallen in Adam, and since man did not choose to live in obedience to God, he deserves damnation without distinction. If God will remit the sin of any individual person, He is granting him a gift which is undeserved. Both justification and the faith that justifies are, according to Luther, free gifts, which God will bestow at His pleasure.

Though Luther denies man the capacity of free will, he still speaks in terms of the human will. Now, this will is either a slave to Christ or to the devil. It can only act according to the wishes of its master:

The human will is like a beast of burden. If God rides it, it wills and goes whence God wills; as the Psalm says, 'I was as a beast of burden before thee' (Ps. 72,22). If Satan rides, it wills and goes where Satan wills. Nor may it choose to which rider it will run, nor which it will seek. But the riders themselves contend who shall have and hold it.<sup>29</sup>

Man seems to be caught up in a cosmic struggle between God and Satan. Satan, though abandoned by God, still possesses "angelic"

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<sup>27</sup>

Farrelly, op. cit., p. 83.

<sup>28</sup>

De servo arbitrio, p. 129.

<sup>29</sup>

Ibid., p. 112.

power, which he can muster against God. Miltonic descriptions come to mind.<sup>30</sup>

E. F. Winter suggests that Augustine of Hippo taught the freedom of the will against the Manichaeans, but the necessity of grace against the Pelagians.<sup>31</sup> Does Luther leave himself open to the charge that by teaching infralapsarian predestinationism he has revived the ancient heresy of Manichaeism? <sup>32</sup> Luther himself would not think so, for he insists that he ascribes everything to God. It is precisely because nothing can escape the sway and motion of His omnipotence, that he denies man the power of free will. Everything that happens is the result of God's working: good and evil.

Consequently, God must be the author of evil works, charge Erasmus<sup>33</sup> and Denck. No, says Luther. It is true,

since God moves and works all in all, He necessarily moves and works even in Satan and wicked man. But he works according to what they are and what He finds them to be, i.e., since they are perverted and evil, being carried along by that motion of Divine Omnipotence, they cannot but do what is per-

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Said Satan: "Peace is despaired,  
For who can think submission! War then, war  
Open or understood, must be resolved."  
Paradise Lost, I, 660-2.

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Winter, op. cit., p. 3, n. 1.

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De servo arbitrio "is one of his most vigorous and profound books, full of grand ideas and shocking exaggerations that border on Manichaeism and fatalism" (Schaff, op. cit., p. 430).

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De libero arbitrio, p. 88.

verse and evil . . . . Yet God cannot do evil Himself, for he is good.<sup>34</sup>

On the other hand, Luther argues, "when God works in us, the [evil human] will is changed under the sweet influence of the Spirit of God," so that it will do good, "not from compulsion, but responsively of its own desire and inclination."<sup>35</sup> According to Luther, then, God works in his creation both with and without grace. Without it, evil will result at the hand of unregenerate man; the work of grace, by necessity, results in good works and eternal salvation. Man can neither resist evil, nor good, and while he alone is responsible for the evil, God is to be praised as the sole author of good.

Luther insists that "the Word of God [that is, Scripture] must be taken in its plain meaning, as the words stand,"<sup>36</sup> and he accuses Erasmus of interpreting passages figuratively that are to be understood literally. However, Luther maintains that one must clearly distinguish between the Word of God and God Himself, between God preached and God hidden: "Thus, He does not will the death of a sinner -- that is, in His Word; but He wills it by His inscrutable will . . . . What, why, and within what limits It wills, it is wholly un-

<sup>34</sup>

De servo arbitrio, p. 130. The editor is inconsistent about capitalizing personal pronouns that refer to God.

<sup>35</sup>

Ibid., p. 111.

<sup>36</sup>

Ibid., p. 129.

lawful to inquire."<sup>37</sup> Furthermore, Luther argues that the Old Testament proper consists of "laws and threats," whose whole function is to convict man of sin. The New Testament proper consists of "promises and exhortations," and

they are intended to animate those who are already justified and have obtained mercy to be diligent in the fruits of the Spirit and of the righteousness given them, to exercise themselves in love and good works, and to bear courageously the cross and all the other tribulations of this world.<sup>38</sup>

Luther, in trying to come to terms with biblical contradictions, had to posit a secret will of God over against His revealed will in Holy Scripture. He was so convinced that man could contribute nothing to his own salvation, that he denied him even the freedom to respond to God's love and to surrender to Him. God "foresees, purposes and does all things according to His immutable, eternal and infallible will. This thunderbolt throws free will flat and utterly dashes it to pieces."<sup>39</sup>

Erasmus follows the Greek Fathers<sup>40</sup> in their desire to defend the justice of God and the freedom of the will, for Scripture clearly teaches both ideas. He upholds, therefore, the conditional character of predestination and grace as well as the universality of God's salvific will. This enables

<sup>37</sup> Luther, Selections, p. 191.

<sup>38</sup> De servo arbitrio, pp. 126-7.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., p. 106.

<sup>40</sup> Farrelly, op. cit., p. 79.

Erasmus to defend the harmonious quality of all Scripture and the claim that the Bible reveals the true character and purposes of God.

### Carlstadt

Andreas Bodenstein von Carlstadt contributed to the debate on free will at least in the form of two tracts, which appeared in 1523 and 1524;<sup>41</sup> however, he is better known for his part in the Leipzig disputation (1519) and in the Eucharistic controversy (1523-26). Between these two events, Carlstadt had turned from an enthusiastic supporter of Luther into a disillusioned opponent. By 1523, he had adopted spiritualist views. He applied the principle of the priesthood of all believers to the point that he put aside his priestly vestments and his university insignia, and now signed himself as a "new<sup>42</sup> layman."

Erasmus refers to Carlstadt's views on the relation of the human will and divine grace in his Diatrobe,<sup>43</sup> but he cannot have been familiar with his tracts of 1523/24, for the position which he ascribes to him and rejects is no other than that

<sup>41</sup> Von Manigfeltigkeit des einfeltigen einigen Willens Gottes. Was Sundt sei (On the Diversity of the Plain and Only Will of God. What Sin Is), and Ap Got ein Ursach sei des teuffelischen Falhs (Whether God Is a Cause of the Fall of Satan), C. F. Jaeger, Andreas Bodenstein von Carlstadt (Stuttgart: Verlag von Rudolf Besser, 1856), pp. 300 and 341.

<sup>42</sup> Jaeger, op. cit., p. 300.

<sup>43</sup> De libero arbitrio, p. 30.

which Luther defends in his reply to Erasmus. Carlstadt had argued for the depravity of man in debate with the Catholic theologian Johann Maier von Eck (1486-1543) at the Leipzig disputation,<sup>44</sup> so that it is likely that Erasmus' observations are based on that discussion.

Carlstadt reflects a strong influence of the fourteenth century German mysticism upon him. It was Luther who had made the anonymous Theologia Germanica<sup>45</sup> newly available with the editions of 1516 and 1518. This little book may have been the devotional guide of the "Friends of God," who first associated themselves with one another in Southern Germany at the beginning of the fourteenth century, and who were distinguished for their earnest piety and their practical belief in the presence of the Spirit of God with all Christians, laity as well as clergy.<sup>46</sup> The Theologie Deutsch was received with such enthusiasm by Luther's fellow countrymen, that no fewer than seventeen editions of the work appeared during his lifetime. Its main impact was, however, felt among the more radical reformers of the day, of whom Carlstadt was one.

Carlstadt came to believe that God has endowed man with the powers of reason and free will, in order that he desire to

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<sup>44</sup> Roland H. Bainton, Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther (New York: New American Library of World Literature, 1950), p. 88.

<sup>45</sup> Infra, pp. 35-41.

<sup>46</sup> Theologia Germanica, ed. Dr. Pfeiffer, translated, and a historical introduction, by Susanna Winkworth, with a preface by Charles Kingsley (London: Macmillan, 1901), p. xxv.

live in humble submission (Gelassenheit) under God.<sup>47</sup> The more a man surrenders his will to God, the greater will be the work of the Spirit in him: "There a true and whole heart will be turned to God and be united with him and will be divinized [vergottet]." <sup>48</sup>

Carlstadt defines sin as a will -- "Widerwill, ander Will oder Beiwill" -- which wills contrary to or other than God's will: "Whoever does not sink his will in the will of God and does not lose his own will therein, should not think he can be God's friend." But he who is "of one will with God . . . is born of God and cannot sin."<sup>49</sup> That is true Gelassenheit. While this is perfectly good logic, we should want to question whether any man is capable of total surrender and complete transformation of his sinful nature. At least in his present existence, no man can transcend his earthly, human ties, for he was born of blood, of the will of the flesh, and of the will of man.<sup>50</sup> At best we can say by way of explanation, that Carlstadt owes the notions of absorption in God, or divinization, and of sinlessness to the teaching of the German mystics.

Carlstadt did not subscribe to any form of predestinationism, neither supralapsarian, nor infralapsarian. C. F.

<sup>47</sup>

Jaeger, op. cit., pp. 344-5.

<sup>48</sup>

Ibid., p. 313n.

<sup>49</sup>

Ibid., p. 311.

<sup>50</sup>

John 1:13.

Jaeger reports that Carlstadt's tract, Whether God Is a Cause of the Fall of Satan, is based on the arguments which Carlstadt brought against this thesis at a disputation held at Wittenberg.<sup>51</sup> Both the devil and man are responsible for their own sins; no one may hold God responsible for his eternal destiny:

For this very reason did [God] send Christ, His Son, into the world, to enlighten all men and bring them to Himself, who would only accept Him [Christ]. Christ has suffered and given satisfaction for the sin of the whole world, and he has shown that God does not come to all creatures with wrath, but first of all with the revelation of His love and mercy.<sup>52</sup>

Men sin, because God has granted them freedom of choice. God, then, in a sense, "does ordain sin," and His "permissive will is an effective force."<sup>53</sup> Carlstadt draws a distinction between the eternal will and the permissive will of God. The permissive will is only for a time, and its function is to bring sinners to repentance. This verhaengliche Will after allowing a man to become a sinner, does nothing other than to harden him in his self-will, in order to bring him to his right senses, like the Prodigal Son.<sup>54</sup> Now, it is quite possible in Carlstadt's view, that a sinner will persist

<sup>51</sup> Jaeger, op. cit., p. 341.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., p. 346.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., pp. 317-8.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., p. 319.

in his self-will. Such a person will ultimately be judged and condemned by God when the time of the permissive will is passed, for in the end only the eternal will of God, which wills and works good, will prevail. Before that day, the gospel will have been preached even to the dead, so that every man will have had an opportunity to surrender his will to God's eternal will.<sup>55</sup>

### Diepold Peringer

Not much is known about the so-called Peasant of Woehrd, apart from some references to him by Luther's friend Georg Spalatin and by a certain Anton Kreuzer in his chronicle.<sup>56</sup> Theodor Kolde, a church historian about the turn of the present century, drawing on these sources, reports that the Peasant probably was the banished Swabian pastor, Diepold Schuster, from Aichenbrunnen near Ulm, and that he appeared in Nuremberg under the assumed name of Peringer.<sup>57</sup> He preached there when the imperial diet was convened towards the end of January, 1524. Apparently he created considerable commotion among the people, for he identified himself with the cause of

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<sup>55</sup>

Ibid., pp. 325-6.

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Theodor Kolde, "Hans Denck und die gottlosen Maler von Nuernberg", Beitraege zur bayerischen Kirchengeschichte, VIII (1902), 2-3. I did not search the official records of the City of Nuremberg for any additional information about the "Peasant".

<sup>57</sup>

Modern historians refer to him by the name of Diepold Peringer.

the common people by claiming to be illiterate and by displaying boorish manners.<sup>58</sup>

One sermon (or perhaps two<sup>59</sup>) has survived to this day in several editions. It is at once evident that we are not dealing here with an "illiterate revivalist,"<sup>60</sup> but with a preacher who knew both his Old and New Testaments well. He accurately quoted Scripture at great length. While his New Testament passages conform closely to Luther's translation (1522), he leaves us to wonder about his source for the Old Testament quotations, because Luther's translation of the whole Bible was not published until 1534.

Diepold Peringer categorically denies the freedom of the will,<sup>61</sup> and he does so exclusively on biblical evidence. In fact, his sermon<sup>62</sup> consists of a string of scriptural quotations. Peringer's own comments are confined to three

<sup>58</sup>

Paul Joachimsen, Die Reformation als Epoche der deutschen Geschichte, ed. Otto Schottenloher (Muenchen: Chr. Kaiser Verlag and Verlag von R. Oldenbourg, 1951), pp. 123-4.

<sup>59</sup>

Eyn Sermon geprediget vom Pawren zu Werdt, Bey Nuernberg, am Sontag vor Fasznacht, vñ dem freyen willen des Mennschen. Im Jar. M.D.XXiiij. Each of the two editions in the Nuremberg Civic Library contains what may be considered two sermons.

<sup>60</sup>

George H. Williams, The Radical Reformation (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1962), p. 151.

<sup>61</sup>

Georg Baring ("Hans Denck und Thomas Muentzer in Nuernberg 1524", Archiv fuer Reformationsgeschichte, L (1959), 151) and George H. Williams (Radical Reformation, p. 151) grossly err in their judgment, when they state that Peringer defended the free will of man.

<sup>62</sup>

Or that part of the sermon dealing with the question of the freedom of the will.

sentences, of which one stands at the beginning, one at the end, and one within the list of "proof texts." Peringer attributes everything that happens to the providence, doing and grace of God. Apart from God's grace man can neither know, choose or do the good that leads to salvation, nor is it in his power, then, to do evil, for "God . . . also effects the evil in a godless man."<sup>63</sup>

This teaching is clearly derivative of Luther's own. The extant works of Peringer are too few for us to determine whether he understood Luther's position or whether he crudely made God the author of evil.

The preaching of the Peasant of Woehrd is of interest to us mainly for two reasons. His sermon is evidence of the fact that Luther's denial of the free will was probably widely proclaimed by his followers. We can be sure that sermons on divine providence were often prone to misunderstanding. A denial of freedom might be taken as an invitation to licence, alike by the careless preacher and the irresponsible listener. It is at this point that the sermon of Peringer is significant for the discussion of Denck's contribution to the debate on free will. Denck was in Nuremberg during the preaching activity of Peringer, and he was probably exposed to his sermons and eccentricities. Denck also witnessed the mounting immorality and anarchy among the populace, which culminated in the bloody

Peasant Revolt of 1524/25. He blamed the theology of the Reformer for the disastrous turn of events. Finally, after being expelled from Nuremberg in January 1525, he took up his pen in defence of the responsible freedom of man.

## II

### LIFE OF HANS DENCK

The life of Hans Denck was very short. He was snatched away by the plague, before he had reached his thirtieth year. Nevertheless, by the time of his death in November 1527, his name was widely known among the leading figures of the Lutheran and Zwinglian reform. He was not always praised; indeed, this is an understatement, but neither was he outrightly condemned. Denck was rather a much misunderstood man.

It is hardly fair to attribute to Denck "a simple, undogmatic faith in the universal love of God which dwells in the hearts of all men."<sup>1</sup> He had a very firm conception of the meaning of Christian discipleship. He insisted that the "Means [of repentance and salvation] is Christ, whom none may truly know unless he follow after him with his life."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Frederick L. Weis, The Life, Teachings and Works of Johannes Denck, 1495-1527 (Pawtucket, R. I.: Commercial Printing Co., 1925), p. 68.

<sup>2</sup> Hans Denck, Whether God Is the Cause of Evil, or the full German title, Was geredt sey das die Schrifft sagt Gott thue vnd mache guts vnd boeses. Ob es auch billich das sich yemandt entschuldige der Suenden vnd sy Gott vberbinde. 1526, in George H. Williams and A. M. Mergal, eds., Spiritual and Anabaptist Writers (London: SCM Press, 1957), p. 108. (Hereafter, referred to as Whether God, or ET, for English translation).

According to Walter Fellmann, the modern editor of the first complete critical edition of Denck's writings, this sentence represents the motto of Hans Denck, which has been greatly valued, to the present day, among those who stand in the Anabaptist tradition.<sup>3</sup>

### Contemporary Estimate of Denck

In June 1525, Denck visited St. Gall, Switzerland, which by that time had become a stronghold of the Swiss Anabaptists. Two leaders of the Zwinglian Reformation have left us with significant accounts of Denck's stay in that city. Johannes Kessler (1502-1574) wrote in his contemporary chronicle, Sabbata:<sup>4</sup>

Hans Denck, a Bavarian, was a learned, eloquent and humble man. . . . He was tall, very friendly, and of modest conduct. He was to be praised very much, had he not defiled himself and his teaching with terrible errors. . . . He was exceedingly trained in the word of the Scriptures and educated in the three main languages.<sup>5</sup>

Denck seems to have given the impression that he believed in a general atonement. This is well brought out by the other contemporary witness, Joachim von Watt

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<sup>3</sup>  
Hans Denck, Religioese Schriften, ed. Walter Fellmann, vol. VI, pt. 2, of Quellen zur Geschichte der Täufer (Guetersloh: Bertelsmann Verlag, 1956), p. 45n.

<sup>4</sup>  
E. Egli and R. Schoch, eds. (St. Gallen, 1902), pp. 151f.

<sup>5</sup>  
J. J. Kiwiet, "The Life of Hans Denck", Mennonite Quarterly Review (hereafter MQR) XXXI (1957), 242.

(Vadianus; 1484-1551), in a letter he wrote in 1540:

He could cite Scripture passages sharply and above understanding. The bountiful love of our God was praised so much -- as he did for instance in a certain meeting -- that he seemed to give hope even to the most wicked and most hopeless people that they would obtain salvation, which would be granted to them someday however distant it might be.<sup>6</sup>

If Denck actually held this view in mid-1525 (which is unlikely), he had changed his position by 1526, when he published his treatise on the free will, Was geredt sey, as we may gather from his rhetorical question: "Should it therefore be not true that he died for all, just because all are not saved? . . . Many deny the Lord."<sup>7</sup>

Denck was well respected among his Anabaptist brethren; indeed, it appears he was one of their leaders in Southern Germany during 1526 and 1527. J. J. Kiwiet argues that he became the originator of the South German Anabaptists, as distinct from the Swiss Brethren,<sup>8</sup> and that his leadership passed via Hans Hut (?-1527) to Pilgram Marbeck.<sup>9</sup> During 1526, Denck gave quiet leadership to the Anabaptists in Augsburg, and when the Lutheran pastor of that city, Urbanus Rhegius (1489-1546),

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<sup>6</sup> Joachimi Vadiani ad D. Joan Zuiccium Epistola, in Kiwiet, op. cit., p. 242. The meaning (or translation?) of the phrase "above understanding" is uncertain.

<sup>7</sup> Whether God, p. 102.

<sup>8</sup> Kiwiet, op. cit., p. 245.

<sup>9</sup> J. J. Kiwiet, Pilgram Marbeck (Kassel: J. G. Oncken Verlag, 1958), pp. 40-46.

discovered his activities, he denounced him as "the abbot of the Anabaptists,"<sup>10</sup> and he exerted such pressure upon him that Denck decided to abandon the city overnight.

When he came to Strassburg the same month, in November 1526, his influence was felt at once. In fact, his leadership was so influential, that the Reformed Church party under the leadership of Martin Bucer (1491-1551) had him expelled within less than two months. On the day after his departure, Wolfgang Capito (1478-1541) wrote to Zwingli: "He has disturbed our church terribly. His seemingly unselfish life, the dexterity of his mind, his decent way of acting, have astonishingly captivated the people."<sup>11</sup>

It is difficult to imagine, what influence Denck would have commanded in his day, had he not met with untimely death in 1527. He found his lot as a homeless wanderer almost unbearable. His letter to Johannes Oecolampadius (1482-1531), the reformer of Basel, is a pathetic outcry over his exile and ill success.<sup>12</sup> Separated from his wife and brethren, he turned to his friend of earlier years for help and shelter. It was granted to him, but only long enough to prepare for death. However, Hans Denck outlived himself through his

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<sup>10</sup>

Williams, Radical Reformation, p. 156.

<sup>11</sup>

Kiwiet, "Life of Denck", p. 249.

<sup>12</sup>

Ibid., p. 257.

numerous writings, which soon found receptive hearts among the spiritual heirs to the Anabaptists of the sixteenth century.

We have seen that Denck's opponents all speak about his intellectual prowess, his biblical understanding and his religious fervour. These estimates are clearly confirmed by his writings. He argues his points intellectually, scripturally and with a deep devotion to Christ.

### Formative Influences

What influences shaped the heart and mind of Hans Denck? Unfortunately, we do not know much about his early years. His first public Confession,<sup>13</sup> which he had to tender to the city council of Nuremberg in 1525, contains, in passing, a brief reference to his youth. Here we learn, that Denck was probably raised in a devout Christian home and that he was already concerned about his spiritual well-being before he left for the university:

From my childhood I learned the faith through my parents and I spoke regularly about it; later on I also read books of men and furthermore I was proud of my faith, but, in truth, I never really considered the opposite, / the fact of sin /,<sup>14</sup> which is born in me by nature, though it was pointed out to me many times.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Bekennntnis fuer den Rat zu Nuernberg. 1525, in Denck, Religioese Schriften, pp. 20-26.

<sup>14</sup> muttwillen, lit. "wantonness", ibid., p. 20.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

## Native Sensitivity

We may assume that Denck was a very sensitive and in many ways self-conscious person from his childhood on. He went on to say in his Bekenntnis, that he did not yet fully possess life-giving faith, for he was convinced that true faith expresses itself in godly living.<sup>16</sup> A year later, when he spoke out for the responsible freedom of man, he testified that he opened his mouth against his will, but that "God has drawn me out of the corner."<sup>17</sup>

Denck believed that it was God's purpose to establish "light and peace"<sup>18</sup> in his creation, according to His own character. Therefore, he championed the causes of truth and love, which he demanded from all who wanted to bear the name Christian, and he demanded them first of all from himself. When he failed in his mission, he was deeply troubled in his heart. Instead of promoting harmony, he found himself to be the cause of disunity: "Where I began to love, I fell into disfavour among many men. . . . And as much as I have striven after the Lord, men have striven against me."<sup>19</sup> He searched his soul, confessed his own lack of understanding God, and

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<sup>16</sup>Ibid., p. 21.<sup>17</sup>Hans Denck, Was geredt sey. . ., in Religioese Schriften, p. 28. (Hereafter referred to as Was geredt sey).<sup>18</sup>Ibid., p. 30.<sup>19</sup>Hans Denck, Widerruf, in Religioese Schriften, p. 105.

expressed his willingness to repent, could he only see that he alone was at fault.<sup>20</sup>

#### Humanism and Erasmus

Denck's registration in the University of Ingolstadt, in 1517, is the earliest traceable date in his life. The records also show that he was born at Heybach in Upper Bavaria, but no year is given. Since students at that time entered university at about age 15, modern historians have tentatively fixed Denck's birth date at ca. 1500.

Denck's education probably followed the humanistic tradition of the University. He became an excellent linguist, not only in Greek and Latin, but also in Hebrew, which speaks for the fact that he participated in the renewed interest in the study of the Bible in its original sources. Only a little while before, Erasmus had published an edition of the Greek New Testament. Whether Denck attended any of Johann Reuchlin's (1455-1522) lectures, we cannot be certain, but we may be quite sure that Reuchlin's De Rudimentis Hebraicis (1506), which consisted of a Hebrew grammar and lexicon, aided Denck and Ludwig Haetzer (c.1500-1529) in their German translation of the Old Testament prophets (1527).

Denck continued to seek out the friendship of German

humanists until the end of his stay in Nuremberg, in January 1525. In Augsburg (1519), a very learned monk, Veit Bild (1481-1529) introduced him to classical poetry.<sup>21</sup> Bild was a student of Oecolampadius, a fact which probably won Denck entrance into the humanist circles of Basel, early in 1523. Meanwhile, Denck taught in Stotzingen near Ulm, Donauwoerdt and Regensburg.<sup>22</sup> His residence at Regensburg is of note, because the preacher at the cathedral there, Augustinus Marius, reports (in 1530) that Denck "soon after left for Basel, baptized with the Lutheran spirit, to [visit] Oecolampadius."<sup>23</sup> J. J. Kiwiet links Denck's sudden conversion with Balthasar Hubmaier's stay in this city (December 1522 to March 1523); however, we have no record that he won Denck for the cause of the Reformation at that time.<sup>24</sup>

We have not as much information about Denck's activity in Basel as we should wish. We know of his contact with Oecolampadius, whose famous lectures on Isaiah he attended, and who soon recommended him to the reform party at Nuremberg, so that Denck received the appointment of headmaster at the St. Sebald's School, in September 1523. While in Basel, Denck's

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<sup>21</sup> Kiwiet, "Life of Denck", p. 232.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., pp. 232-33.

<sup>23</sup> Denck, Religioese Schriften, p. 9.

<sup>24</sup> Kiwiet, "Life of Denck", p. 233.

interests still seem to have been mainly literary. He lived there for seven months, and was engaged as a writer of Greek and Latin verse, and as a corrector and an editor in the printing establishments of Cratander and Curio.

There is lively interest, today, in the relation of Humanism and Anabaptism<sup>25</sup> and in the question of the influence of Erasmian theology upon Hans Denck.<sup>26</sup> Whether there was any personal contact between these two men, is uncertain, though not unlikely. Erasmus resided in Basel permanently after 1521,<sup>27</sup> and he once referred to Denck's death in a letter, early in 1528.<sup>28</sup>

There is a growing consensus of opinion among scholars<sup>29</sup> that South German Anabaptism, and specifically Hans Denck, was more or less directly influenced by the great Christian humanist and theologian.<sup>30</sup> Thor Hall contends in his paper<sup>31</sup>

<sup>25</sup>Robert Kreider, "Anabaptism and Humanism", MQR, XXVI (1952), 123-141.

<sup>26</sup>Thor Hall, "Possibilities of Erasmian Influence on Denck and Hubmaier in Their Views on the Freedom of the Will", MQR, XXXV (1961), 149-170.

<sup>27</sup>Albrecht Hege, Hans Denk: 1495-1527 (Tuebingen: Eberhard Karls Universitaet, n.d.), p. 11. (Unpublished doctoral dissertation).

<sup>28</sup>Kiwiet, "Life of Denck", p. 234, n. 56.

<sup>29</sup>Kiwiet, op. cit., p. 234; W. Fellmann, "Der Theologische Gehalt der Schriften Dencks", in O. Michel and U. Mann, eds., Die Leibhaftigkeit des Wortes (Hamburg: Furche-Verlag, 1958), p. 161, (tr. by W. Klaassen in Mennonite Life, XVIII (1963), 44); Hall, op. cit., p. 150; H. S. B. Neff, "Erasmus", Mennonite Encyclopedia, II, 239f.

<sup>30</sup>"It is not from a humanistic point of view that Erasmus argues against Luther; his concern is theological and Biblical, and he speaks as a theologian and not as a literary genius only" (Hall, op. cit., p. 153).

that both Denck and Hubmaier are indebted to Erasmus in their views of the freedom of the will and related subjects. While he has been careful to lay bare the main points of their treatises on free will, Hall seems to have been too quick at seeing interdependence where Erasmus and Denck, for example, may have only shared a common concern for a genuinely Christian life. Luther's teaching seemed to encourage freedom from moral restraints and social disorder. It so happened that as diligent humanist students of the Bible they agreed on the diagnosis of the prevalent spirit of licence: Luther's unbiblical, or at least one-sidedly biblical, doctrine of salvation. Each argued in his own way -- and this ought to be stressed -- appealing to both Scripture and reason, that man is a being utterly dependent on God, but responsible for his actions and, therefore, free in his will.

One should not want to deny that there is a certain spiritual kinship between Denck and Erasmus, but one must be careful not to jump to conclusions about the dependence of the one upon the other. It is not obvious, as Hall would have us believe, that when Denck spoke of the Word of God being near to all men he was "in substantial and basic agreement" with the main point of Erasmus' doctrine of grace, and that Denck

"Is it difficult to imagine that Denck knew of Luther's book against Erasmus; that his own pamphlet Was Geredt sey. . . is his own contribution to the discussion; and that in his arguments he referred back to Erasmus' book for support?" (Hall, op. cit., p. 155; cf. also p. 153).

simply rejected the scholasticism of Erasmian terminology.<sup>32</sup>

Denck's theology and language betray not so much Erasmian discipleship,<sup>33</sup> as the strong influence of mediaeval German mysticism. Albrecht Hege's estimate would appear to be nearer the truth:

The basic theological and religious principles of Denck have their origin largely in mysticism, but humanism is responsible for their outward expression. Denck owes to the mystical theologians the thoroughgoing spiritualization and intensification of the theological statements, but their realization as spiritualism, yes, sometimes even as rationalism, is inconceivable without the influence of German humanism.<sup>34</sup>

#### German Mysticism

We cannot trace the beginnings of mystical influence upon Hans Denck. There was a revival of interests in the writings of the German mystics at that time. The sermons of Johann Tauler (c.1300-1361) and the anonymous Theologia Deutsch were printed frequently during the formative period of Denck's thought, expressly at Basel at the time of his stay there.<sup>35</sup> Denck's spiritual temperament was receptive to

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Ibid., pp. 167-68.

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"The first three writings of the Augsburg period show. . . how he remained a disciple of Erasmus" W. Fellmann, "Theological Views of Hans Denck", Mennonite Life, XVIII (1963), 44.

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Hege, op. cit., p. 10.

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Tauler's sermons were published in Basel in 1521, 1522, 1523; Theologia Germanica in 1523, Kiwiet, "Life of Denck", p. 235, n. 70.

the mystical interpretation of life. It is more than likely, then, that he occupied himself with the mystical authors no later than during his Basel period.<sup>36</sup>

When Denck moved on to Nuremberg in September 1523, he entered a circle of humanists which had been deeply influenced by German mysticism. They were very anxious for religious reform, and by the time Denck arrived they had already become disillusioned with the effects of the Lutheran Reformation. In July, the shoemaker and humanist, Hans Sachs (1494-1576), had raised his song of protest against the "Wittenbergisch Nachtigall." In the next following year (1524), Sachs wrote two dialogues in which he asserted that no Christianity was possible without an imitation of Christ, and that no real reformation could be achieved by merely changing external forms. First of all, a complete submission to the will of God must take place.<sup>37</sup> These were also the emphases of the Theologia Deutsch and of Hans Denck, which leads us to conclude that the "evangelical"<sup>38</sup> spirit of the Nuremberg humanists exerted a decisive influence on Denck, and therefore, by implication, the teaching of the German Theology.

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"The German mystics exercised upon him, without a doubt, the strongest and most lasting effect, at that time [at Basel]" (Hege, op. cit., p. 10).

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Kiwiet, op. cit., p. 237.

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Hans Sachs drew a clear distinction between an evangelical and a Lutheran Christian in his pamphlet, Ein Gespraech eines evangelischen Christen mit einem Lutherischen (1524).

"Theologia Germanica"

It is well for us, at this point of the spiritual history of Hans Denck, to consider some of the basic emphases of mediaeval German mysticism, for we shall meet them again in our discussion of his treatise of the freedom of the will, Was geredt sey. What follows is based, in the main, on Pfeiffer's edition of the Theologia Germanica.<sup>39</sup>

The German mystics, like the Neoplatonists of an earlier day, had an almost pantheistic conception of the world.<sup>40</sup> They taught that everything owes its existence to God and is nothing apart from God. God is "the highest Good," "the Perfect," "Eternal Goodness." A thing or a creature "hath its source in, or springeth from the Perfect; just as a brightness or a visible appearance floweth out from the sun or a candle, and appeareth to be somewhat, this or that."<sup>41</sup> As long as a creature remains this or that, something "beside" or "without" the Perfect, it has no real existence, because all things have their "substance" in God. For some thing to be, it cannot have an isolated existence apart from God; it must participate in God, an idea somewhat analogous to Tillich's Ground of all Being.<sup>42</sup>

<sup>39</sup>

Cf. Chap. I, n. 46.

<sup>40</sup>

Plotinus stresses the transcendence of the One.

<sup>41</sup>

Theologia Germanica, p. 2.

<sup>42</sup>

Tillich has consciously taken some of his language from the mystical writings of Jacob Boehme (1575-1624). (I am indebted for this information to Dr. R. F. Aldwinckle).

Something that is not related to God is, therefore, nothing.<sup>43</sup>

Similarly is to be understood the mystical notion that sin and evil are nothing.<sup>44</sup> God, in whom alone is true Being, is true Good. He wills in his "Eternal Will" that "nothing be willed or loved but the Eternal Goodness."<sup>45</sup> Now, every creature is good, insofar as it has its being in God. When it wills something that is contrary to the will of God, it sins and does evil. Since, however, evil has no real being, the creature, when it sins, does in effect do nothing: "The willing or desiring which is contrary to God is not in God. . . . It is evil or not good, and is merely nought."<sup>46</sup>

"Praise and honour and glory belong to none but to God only,"<sup>47</sup> because God alone is truly good and perfect. When God seeks this tribute for Himself and, indeed, wills it that men glorify Him,<sup>48</sup> He does not assume anything for Himself but what in fact belongs to Him on account of His very nature and property.<sup>49</sup> In Christ, therefore, and in godly men everywhere, nothing but the truth of God is made manifest, as indeed it must be made manifest according to the Eternal Will of God.<sup>50</sup>

The German mystics defined sin in terms of self-will,

<sup>43</sup>

Theologia Germanica, pp. 5-6.

<sup>44</sup>

Ibid., p. 188.

<sup>45</sup>

Ibid., p. 177.

<sup>46</sup>

Ibid., p. 188.

<sup>47</sup>

Ibid., p. 11.

<sup>48</sup>

Ibid., p. 122.

<sup>49</sup>

Ibid., p. 96.

<sup>50</sup>

Ibid., p. 95.

which wills contrary to the will of God:<sup>51</sup> "Disobedience and sin are the same thing, for there is no sin but disobedience, and what is done of disobedience is all sin."<sup>52</sup> The great concern of the mystics is the overcoming of this sin, in order that good may abound, as God has willed it in His Eternal Will.

The noted mystic, Meister Eckhart (c.1260-1327), also pointed out the beneficial effects of sin. To be sure, he insisted that a man should not want to commit sin; on the other hand, sin can result in bringing a man humbly before God:

Indeed, if a man were completely turned to the will of God he would not want the sin into which he had fallen not to have happened. Certainly, not in view of its being directed against God, but because through it you have been compelled to greater love and thus you have been abased and humbled.<sup>53</sup>

The nature of man consists of body and soul, of "outward man" and "inner man." The outward man is timebound and earthbound, but the soul has "the power of seeing into eternity."<sup>54</sup> In addition to the gift of reason, that is, of perceiving "the One true Good,"<sup>55</sup> every man has also been given

<sup>51</sup>  
Ibid., p. 193.

<sup>52</sup>  
Ibid., p. 59.

<sup>53</sup>  
Jeanne Ancelet-Hustache, Master Eckhart and the Rhineland Mystics (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1957), pp. 134-35.

<sup>54</sup>  
Theologia Germanica, p. 22.

<sup>55</sup>  
Ibid., p. 63.

the gift of will.<sup>56</sup> This "created will is as truly God's as the Eternal Will, and is not of the creature."<sup>57</sup> Therefore, the goodness or blessing of God exists already in the life of every man; it only needs to be recognized and acknowledged.<sup>58</sup>

Though man can perceive the good and can will to do it with his God-given powers, he has the freedom to disobey God; indeed, this is what he does most of the time: "[God] doth not constrain any by force to do or not to do anything, but He alloweth every man to do and to leave undone according to his will, whether it be good or bad, and resisteth none."<sup>59</sup>

If anyone asked why God has created a creature which can go against the Eternal Will of God,<sup>60</sup> the mystics answered that it was necessary for God to receive genuine praise for His goodness. For this purpose, then, God has created man, that he might carry out God's Eternal Will and bring to Him the glory due unto His name:

If there were no reason or will in the creatures, God were, and must remain for ever, unknown, unloved, unpraised, and unhonoured, and all the creatures would be worth nothing, and were of no avail to God.<sup>61</sup>

<sup>56</sup> Theologia Germanica, p. 196.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., p. 198.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., p. 30.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., pp. 119-120.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., p. 194.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., p. 202.

Man is not to assert his God-given will for himself or for the promotion of his own private ends. If he does so, he usurps the will which is really not his own, but is God's will in him, and he enslaves it, so that it becomes self-will:

Whoso robbeth the will of its noble freedom and maketh it his own, must of necessity as his reward, be laden with cares and troubles, with discontent, disquiet, unrest, and all manner of wretchedness, and this will remain and endure in time and in eternity. But he who leaveth the will in its freedom, hath content, peace, rest, and blessedness in time and in eternity.<sup>62</sup>

There is a distinction, then, between the freedom of choice and the freedom of the will. The created will in man is God's and is only free, according to the teaching of the German mystics, as long as men let God have free reign in their lives. On the other hand, they may freely choose, whether they want to let the will of God be free or make it their own.<sup>63</sup>

Since perfection, or true goodness, is one and of God, and since man is to participate in God's purposes, man must strive to become "a partaker of the divine nature."<sup>64</sup> He

<sup>62</sup>

Ibid., p. 203.

<sup>63</sup>

"Now, in this present time, man is set between heaven and hell, and may turn himself towards which he will. For the more he hath of ownership, the more he hath of hell and misery; and the less of self-will, the less of hell, and the nearer he is to the Kingdom of Heaven" (Theologia Germanica, p. 206).

<sup>64</sup>

Ibid., p. 155.

achieves this end, when he loses his created will in the Eternal Will of God.<sup>65</sup> He will be "made divine"<sup>66</sup> on two conditions; namely, that he has Erkenntnis<sup>67</sup> and Gelassenheit.<sup>68</sup> The first, recognition or perceiving, lies within man's power of reason to see the "True Light" and the "seed" of "the One true Good" in himself. Gelassenheit on man's part, that is, total submission or yielding of his will to the Eternal Will of God, will allow the seed to bring forth the "fruits of God" in his life:<sup>69</sup> "He who is imbued with or illuminated by the Eternal or divine Light, and inflamed or consumed with Eternal or divine love, he is a Godlike man and a partaker of the divine nature."<sup>70</sup>

The mystics also taught that the death of Christ is the sufficient atonement for the sins of all men:<sup>71</sup> "God took human nature or manhood upon Himself and was made man, and man

<sup>65</sup>

Ibid., p. 98.

<sup>66</sup>

Ibid., p. 10.

<sup>67</sup>

"Erkenntnis, the property of which is to give light and shine, and take knowledge" (Theologia Germanica, p. 113).

<sup>68</sup>

"[About my salvation], I can, or may, or shall do nothing of myself, but just simply yield to God, so that He alone may do all things in me and work, and I may suffer Him and all His work and His divine will" (Theologia Germanica, p. 10).

<sup>69</sup>

Ibid., p. 154.

<sup>70</sup>

Ibid., p. 156.

<sup>71</sup>

Ibid., p. 48.

was made divine. Thus the healing was brought to pass."<sup>72</sup>

The salvation which Christ obtained for us does not relieve us from the true obedience, for which we are created.<sup>73</sup> Christ is the new man in whom we must live with self-denying humility and obedience. He who does is a brother of Christ and a child of God.<sup>74</sup> Whoever perceives the perfection of Christ, must imitate his life, until the death of the body.<sup>75</sup> This life will not be free from suffering; indeed, he who wants to be his disciple, must take up his cross and follow him, "and the cross is nothing else than Christ's life."<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>72</sup>

Ibid., p. 9.

<sup>73</sup>

Ibid., p. 49.

<sup>74</sup>

Ibid., p. 53.

<sup>75</sup>

Ibid., p. 64.

<sup>76</sup>

Ibid., p. 207.

### III

#### RESPONSIBLE FREEDOM OF THE WILL

The period in Nuremberg marked a decisive turning point in the life of Hans Denck. He came to share the disillusionment of the humanist circle with the Lutheran reform, because of the licentious attitude to life it had produced. Denck looked for improved lives as a result of Luther's teachings, but did so in vain. The reforming preachers presumed to declare the truth of God; however, the lives of the people remained untransformed. Denck suspected, therefore, a fallacy in their doctrine. Before he was banished from the city, he was committed to the belief that salvation was for any man the result of a personal covenant with God. Saving faith was not a grace imparted by the application of the Seven Sacraments of the Church, nor a divine favour bestowed by virtue of predestination; salvation involved the exercise of personal responsibility towards God.

#### Question of Muentzer's Influence

The eventful year was 1524. Early in January, the imperial diet met in Nuremberg trying to resolve the controversy over Luther; however, no agreement was reached. At the same time, the Peasant of Woehrd preached to the common

people on the predestinarian principle of salvation. The month of June witnessed the outbreak of the Peasants' War near Schaffhausen. At the end of September, both Thomas Muentzer (1488/89-1525) and his follower Heinrich Pfeiffer were expelled from Muehlhausen (Thuringia) for their revolutionary eschatological expectations. They went to Nuremberg, mainly, in order to find a printer for their protests against Luther.

Muentzer remained in the city for only four weeks. He did not stir up any commotion among the people; neither, he wrote later, had such been his intention.<sup>1</sup> There is no reason for assuming that Muentzer stayed "presumably with Denck" and that "the rector of St. Sebald's school was among those who urged him to preach."<sup>2</sup> One of the first modern historians of the life and work of Hans Denck, Heberle, started this idea that Muentzer exercised formative influence on Denck,<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> "I could have played a pretty game with the people of Nuremberg had I cared to stir up sedition, an accusation brought against me by a lying world. Many people urged me to preach, but I replied that I was not there for that purpose, but rather to answer my enemies through the press" (Williams, Radical Reformation, p. 151).

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Heberle, "Johann Denk und sein Buechlein vom Gesetz", Theologische Studien und Kritiken, XXIV (1851), 129.

and ever since it has been perpetuated.<sup>4</sup> If there is any connection between Muentzer and Denck, it rather rests on the fact that both men are indebted to the heritage of the German mystics, particularly with respect to the doctrine of the immanence of God in the soul and the understanding of Scripture.<sup>5</sup> But Denck did not share the guiding principles of Muentzer's teaching, as delineated by Otto Brandt: "(1) the teaching of the inner revelation by visions, dreams, and ecstasies; (2) the eschatological chiliastic teaching; and (3) the realization of the kingdom by force."<sup>6</sup>

Denck was the last person to believe that the Kingdom of God must be realized by force; he was not a zealot, but a man of peace. Denck did not share any immediate eschatological expectations of Christ's Second Coming. We know that in August 1527 Denck and Hans Hut contended this point of belief at the so-called "Martyr's Synod" at Augsburg, where they reached the agreement that they would preach on the nature of Christian discipleship, rather than on eschatological subjects.<sup>7</sup> Lastly, Denck was no visionary.

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<sup>4</sup> Adolf M. Schwindt, Hans Denck: Ein Vorkaempfer undogmatischen Christentums, 1495-1527 (Schluechtern, Habertshof: Neuwerkverlag, n.d. [1524]), pp. 6-7; Georg Baring, "Hans Denck und Thomas Muentzer in Nuernberg 1524", Archiv fuer Reformationsgeschichte, I (1959), 145-181.

<sup>5</sup> Infra, pp. 57-59.

<sup>6</sup> Kiwiet, "Life of Denck", p. 238.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 256.

In a recent essay, Robert Friedmann wrote on "Thomas Muentzer's Relation to Anabaptism." His observations on Muentzer and Hut are equally valid concerning Denck:

If Hut was a 'spiritualist', he was a Biblical one, as were Michael Sattler and all the early Anabaptists, but he really was not a spiritualist at all. Muentzer, on the other hand, was an inspirationist (like David Joris a decade or so later), and understood the idea of the 'spirit' much more subjectively than any Anabaptist. To him the 'inward scripture' outbade the 'Holy Scripture' . . . . Anabaptists at no time minimized the unconditional Biblical faith.<sup>8</sup>

### Denck's Disillusionment

As the year of 1524 drew on, Denck became implicated in the case of the "three godless painters."<sup>9</sup> The painters belonged to the humanist circle, which had fallen under the influence of Carlstadt's views on the Lord's Supper, doubting whether the bread and wine were really the body and blood of Christ. When one of the artists confessed that he had discussed his doubts with Denck, the latter was immediately summoned before the city council. He was asked to supply a detailed written statement, covering his views on the Scriptures, sin, righteousness of God, law, Gospel, baptism and the Lord's Supper. The Lutheran preachers, under the leadership of Andreas Osiander (1498-1552), found Denck's Confession "deceptive and unchristian towards his neighbour,"<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Robert Friedmann, "Thomas Muentzer's Relation to Anabaptism", MQR, XXXI (1957), 82.

<sup>9</sup> Kolde, op. cit., pp. 1-31, 49-72.

<sup>10</sup> Denck, Religioese Schriften, p. 11.

so that Denck was expelled from Nuremberg on January 21, 1525.

According to Oecolampadius, Denck went to Muehlhausen after his banishment from Nuremberg.<sup>11</sup> In June, we find him in St. Gall, Switzerland, and he probably settled in Augsburg in the early autumn of 1525. When Denck decided to leave the city in November 1526, perhaps, in order to avoid imprisonment or martyrdom, he was condemned to a homeless existence until his death a year later.

Denck's second stay in Augsburg was significant for several reasons. He formally became an Anabaptist when he received believers' baptism from Balthasar Hubmaier, who visited the city on his way from Zurich to Moravia. Denck, in turn, baptized Hans Hut, through whose subsequent missionary activity many were won to the Anabaptist community, in Franconia, Austria, and Moravia.<sup>12</sup>

In Augsburg, Denck published his first writings; among them, Von dem Gsatz Gottes<sup>13</sup> will be of passing interest to us, and Was geredt sey<sup>14</sup> will occupy our attention for the remainder of this chapter. We do not know how much time

<sup>11</sup> Kiwiet, op. cit., p. 241.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 245.

<sup>13</sup> On the Law of God; full German title, Von dem Gsatz Gottes wie das auffgehaben sei vnd doch erfuehlt werden muoss, Georg Baring, Hans Denck: Schriften: Bibliographie, vol. VI, pt. 1, of Quellen zur Geschichte der Taeufer (Guetersloh: Bertelsmann Verlag, 1955), p. 23. Critical edition in Religioese Schriften, pp. 48-66.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. II, n. 2. Critical edition of the original German text (hereafter CE) in Religioese Schriften, pp. 27-47.

elapsed between the actual writing and the printing of his pamphlets. George H. Williams, who edited an English translation of Was geredt sey, thinks that Denck wrote his defence of the responsible freedom of man "early," or "shortly after being expelled from Nuremberg."<sup>15</sup> Denck may have had the completed manuscript with him at St. Gall, in June 1525, for Kessler wrote, in 1527, that he saw one of Denck's books.<sup>16</sup> We may be quite certain that Denck was greatly concerned with the question of saving faith, ever since he had become disillusioned with the Lutheran teaching. Then, in December 1525, when Luther published his De servo arbitrio, it is conceivable, that Denck made some quick revisions of his manuscript and handed it to the printer, Silvan Ottmar.<sup>17</sup> It is also possible that Denck wrote his tract early in 1526<sup>18</sup> under the pressure of extreme provocation at Luther's belligerent pronouncement. While his polemicism is generally restrained, he was challenged to the point of calling his opponent "a subtle rogue"<sup>19</sup> and "a poisonous snake."<sup>20</sup>

It is evident from the introductions to the two tracts

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<sup>15</sup> Williams, Anabaptist Writers, p. 89n.

<sup>16</sup> Kessler, Sabbata, p. 273, in Kiwiet, op. cit., p. 243.

<sup>17</sup> Baring, op. cit., pp. 22-23.

<sup>18</sup> Denck, Religioese Schriften, p. 27.

<sup>19</sup> Was geredt sey, p. 41, (ET, p. 104).

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 34, (ET, 96).

of Denck, which were mentioned above, that Denck was dismayed at the presumptuous pride of the religious parties of his day. Men claimed to know the truth, and yet they were at one and the same time self-righteously intolerant of others. Denck addressed all religious factions when he said: "There are a few brethren, who imagine that they have utterly explored the gospel, and whoever does not everywhere say yes to their talk must be a heretic of heretics."<sup>21</sup>

According to Denck, there is really only one great evil, namely, pride. Jesus cared for the despised and helpless people of the world; therefore, "whoever thinks, he belongs to Christ, must take the way which Christ walked; thus, one enters the eternal dwelling-place of God. He who does not walk in that way shall err eternally."<sup>22</sup>

"Was geredt sey"

Following a short preface or introduction, Denck's treatise on the will, Was geredt sey, though it is written in continuous prose, may be divided into four parts and a brief conclusion. Denck develops his thesis by means of an exchange of arguments with an imagined opponent. This opponent is not necessarily Luther; he is rather a representative Lutheran preacher, against whose objections he defends himself at length.

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<sup>21</sup>

Whether God, pp. 88-89, (CE, 28).

<sup>22</sup>

Von dem Gsatz Gottes, pp. 50-51.

In the first part<sup>23</sup> of the treatise, Denck relates sin and human freedom to the nature and will of God. God made His creation, so that He might receive genuine praise. Therefore, man was created free, even free to sin; however, God had already overcome sin. The second part<sup>24</sup> describes the operation of salvation. A man who is submissive to God's will shall find salvation. In the third part,<sup>25</sup> Denck expounds Christ as the means, by which God unites men with Himself and by which He has conquered sin and death. In the last section,<sup>26</sup> Denck stresses the responsibility which rests upon every man, of availing himself of God's salvation. God draws all men to Himself who let themselves be drawn.

#### Sin and Freedom

Denck opens his treatise by considering one of the thorniest problems of theology, namely, the fact of evil. Who is responsible for the evil that men do? Is God the author of sin, or man? Luther held man and Satan responsible for their sin, though denying man, now, any freedom of action with regard to salvation. According to Luther, humanity once became sinful through the disobedience of one man, Adam, and it again was made righteous, that is, those from among the whole human race whom God predestines unto salvation, through

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<sup>23</sup> Was geredt sey, p. 28, l. 15 to p. 31, l. 25, (ET, 89-93).

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 31, 26-36, 7, (ET, 93-98).

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 36, 8-40, 10, (ET, 98-102).

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 40, 11-47, 13, (ET, 102-110).

the obedience of one heavenly man, Jesus Christ. The question is, has God treated men as puppets ever since the Fall? To Erasmus and Denck, this is unthinkable. Erasmus, therefore, asserted that "those who deny any freedom of the will and affirm absolute necessity, admit that God works in man not only the good works, but also the evil ones."<sup>27</sup>

Denck takes up the argument at the very bottom. Some "scribes" of his day maintained that "since God is in all creatures, he works in them good and evil, that is, . . . virtue and sin."<sup>28</sup> Denck concurs that if God had never created anything at all, sin would never have arisen; however, neither would God have received enough praise for His goodness. Here we recognize again the doctrine of the German mystics, that God must by His very nature be praised. Of course, biblical exhortations to praise are also very common. Hans Denck is saying, then, that in a certain sense God created by necessity.

Denck sustains this thought further when he argues that God could not have prevented the occurrence of sin "without disadvantage to his eternally abiding truth."<sup>29</sup> God would have had to force and drive men "like a stone or a block," in order to avoid sin. Their praise of God would not

<sup>27</sup>

De libero arbitrio, p. 88.

<sup>28</sup>

Whether God, p. 89, (CE, 28).

<sup>29</sup>

Ibid., p. 90, (CE, 29).

have been sincere; besides, being aware of no sin, they would have regarded themselves equally righteous with God and worthy of their own glory.

Now, it is a fact, that God did create. It is also agreed to by all apologists that God is both good and the author of good. Denck adds that God cannot work evil at the same time, for "he would be against himself, and his Kingdom would be destroyed and man would be wronged by the punishment which he had not deserved."<sup>30</sup> Since sin is a fact and God did not prevent its occurrence, God must have allowed sin to happen, that is, He must have ordained it. This is just another way of saying that God has created man free and responsible. Man may either act in accordance with the will of God as it is revealed to him, or he may assert himself against God, and sin. The choice is man's, but so is the responsibility for his actions. Men who are respected as responsible persons will exercise their freedom as responsible men. Therefore, says Denck, men will freely acknowledge the love of God and will, on their own account, bring honour and glory to their author.

Again, we hear an echo of the Theologia Germanica in Denck's reassuring words, that "sin is over against God to be reckoned as nothing; and however great it might be, God can, will, and indeed already has, overcome it for him-

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<sup>30</sup>

Ibid., p. 89, (CE, 28).

self to his own eternal praise, without harm for any creatures [that is, men]."<sup>31</sup> Care must be taken, not to regard this isolated statement as a blanket endorsement of the doctrine of universalism. Denck simply wishes to say within the context of his treatise, that God has provided a means for overcoming man's apostasy, and that evil is the absence of good. God is omnipotent; no enemy of His is as powerful as He. It is doubtful whether Denck conceived of the nothingness of sin as not-being in the philosophical sense, to which the Neoplatonists subscribed.

Denck places two kinds of values upon sin, where we should prefer to distinguish clearly between sin proper and the consequences of sin. Sin which is wilful self-assertion against God, is always evil, but the punishment which sin inevitably incurs is good and beneficial, because it is designed by God to lead a sinner to repentance and submission to God:

Whoever recognizes sin as a punishment in [the light of] truth, for him it is no longer a sin, neither does it hurt him any more, but it is for him [rather] a wonderful encouragement to acknowledge and to love the real good.<sup>32</sup>

It was Gerhard Haake who first pointed out, that Denck, with regard to the nature of man, spoke of "sin as a means of education to the good in opposition to the doctrine

<sup>31</sup>

Ibid., p. 90, (CE, 29).

<sup>32</sup>

Was geredt sey, p. 30, (ET, 91).

of original sin."<sup>33</sup> Denck accepts as a fact that every man sins, but he rejects Luther's insistence on the total depravity of man. As will be shown below, Denck believes that God has given sufficient signs of His goodness and mercy to enable man to recognize that the "darkness" and "discord" and "misery" of sin are the divine chastisement of a "patient" and "merciful Father,"<sup>34</sup> who seeks to bring all creatures to His "light and peace."<sup>35</sup>

At the end of the first part of his treatise, Denck strongly repudiates the excuses people "fabricate" for their sinful lives. Those Christians are false who

say that they can do nothing but what God works in them, for the mouth speaks otherwise than it is in the heart. The mouth speaks of its resignation / gelassenheit / while the heart makes use of all its own liberty. / Such a person / steals from God the will which he has created good and free and / thus / makes it his own against God's will.<sup>36</sup>

These words distinctly echo phrases of the Theologia Deutsch; they also convey the spirit of II Timothy 3:2-5: "Men will be lovers of self . . . rather than lovers of God, holding the form of religion but denying the power of it." False Christians persist in their sin, because they "will not find sufficiency in God."<sup>37</sup> Men alone are responsible for their

<sup>33</sup>

Gerhard Haake, Hans Denck, ein Vorlaeufer der neueren Theologie, 1495-1527 (Norden: Diedr. Soltau, 1897), p. 26.

<sup>34</sup>

Whether God, p. 109, (CE, 46).

<sup>35</sup>

Ibid., p. 92, (CE, 30).

<sup>36</sup>

Ibid., p. 92, (CE, 31).

<sup>37</sup>

Ibid.

sin.

### Salvation and Self-Surrender

Denck agrees with his imagined opponent that he "can never do anything good."<sup>38</sup> God is the sole author and doer of good. This is why man's attitude and relationship to God is all-important. Denck emphasizes in the opening paragraphs of the second section of Was geredt sey, that if one wants to be saved, one must humbly believe that all God wills and does is good. Therefore, even punishment is God's way of bringing men to salvation. Man must be willing to suffer God's works in him and through him. As long as man trusts in himself, in his own strength and ability to obey God's commands, he arrogates to himself the glory which belongs to God alone, and he cannot receive salvation:

Salvation is in us but not of us, just as God is in all creatures but not for that reason from them, but rather they from him. For if God is in me, then in fact everything is in me that belongs to God -- omnipotence, righteousness, mercy. If I do not believe this, I am a liar.<sup>39</sup>

God demands a childlike humility and trust from man. Man must be surrendered to God as a child is surrendered to his father. You must stop being afraid of God, afraid

that he will crush you where you are holding still over against him. For so it appears to

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid., p. 93, (CE, 31).

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., pp. 93-94, (CE, 32).

flesh and blood before man has yielded himself.  
 . . . If man held himself still, that would be  
 the time and place for the Spirit of the Lamb  
 to give testimony and say that this is the  
 only way to salvation, namely, to lose oneself.<sup>40</sup>

Man cannot and will not conquer sin; therefore, neither fear and trembling, nor self-righteous works, will avail anything. The New Testament teaches by the Holy Spirit, that God has overcome sin and man must entrust his whole life to God in that assurance. The fact that salvation is in us does not mean that every man, or certain chosen ones, are already saved: "It is not enough that God be in you; you must also be in God."<sup>41</sup> You must honour Him as God and conduct yourself as His child. Unless a man has faith and is obedient to his Father, God will disinherit him.

This trusting self-surrender, or Gelassenheit,-- as Denck calls it, with the German mystics, time and time again -- is the faith which God requires of a man. Gelassenheit is by no means total passivity (lassen)<sup>42</sup> on the part of man. Denck's bone of contention with the Lutheran party was precisely on this point. Luther taught that God in His wisdom freely gave the gift of faith to some, but not to others. Those whom God predestined to salvation should be saved willy-nilly. This assurance was quickly seized upon

<sup>40</sup>

Ibid., pp. 94-95, (CE, 33).

<sup>41</sup>

Ibid., p. 94, (CE, 32).

<sup>42</sup>

Was geredt sey, p. 33, (ET, 95).

by cruder minds, who took it to mean that a man could do as he pleased, since no justified man would forfeit his salvation. It is only fair to point out that Luther intended no such interpretation of his doctrine of justification by faith. He believed that those who possessed the grace of faith would also, in ever increasing measure, show forth in their lives the fruits of the Spirit.<sup>43</sup> Now, it was just because Luther's teaching lent itself to such demoralizing misinterpretation, that Denck contested its truth and wrote his treatise.

While, on the one hand, Gelassenheit is not to be identified with the abdication of conscience and of moral responsibility, on the other hand, saving faith does not constitute any form of activity (thun)<sup>44</sup> by which a person can secure his eternal salvation. Salvation is of God, and a man will be saved when he lets God take full control of his life. Personal righteousness will ensue, and the fruits of the Spirit will appear when a man trustingly surrenders his will to God, for "where I . . . run in the truth, there not I but the Word of God runs in me, that is, I run in a suffering manner, in such a way that my running will not be in vain, as also Paul says of himself."<sup>45</sup> Where man's will is one

<sup>43</sup>

Gal. 5:22-23.

<sup>44</sup>

Was geredt sey, p. 33, (ET, 95).

<sup>45</sup>

Whether God, p. 94, (CE, 32); cf. Gal. 2:21.

with God's, there God's will is being done.

Denck's doctrine of salvation is firmly based on his belief in the immanence or nearness of God: "God is in and works in all creatures truly."<sup>46</sup> No one should be able to find God or even so much as seek Him, had God not first drawn near and, indeed, were He not present in man: "Whoever seeks God truly has him also truly, for without God one can neither seek nor find God."<sup>47</sup> Or in another passage, Denck puts his conviction this way: "The Word of God is already with you before you seek it; gives to you before you ask; opens up for you before you knock."<sup>48</sup> God has left in the human race a testimony to Himself, that is, to His goodness and to His truth; to His righteousness, love and mercy. This testimony is given by the "Spirit of the Lamb," or the "Word of Truth," which "is in all people and it preaches to every single one in particular, according to how one listens to him."<sup>49</sup>

The teaching of Denck on this point is by no means radical. The presence and activity of the Spirit of God in man was primary for Abraham and his sons in faith as it was for Denck. The Christian apologist Justin Martyr (?-c.165) taught that each man possessed a logos spermatikos, a seed

<sup>46</sup>  
Ibid., p. 90, (CE, 29).

<sup>47</sup>  
Ibid., p. 96, (CE, 34).

<sup>48</sup>  
Ibid., p. 107, (CE, 44).

<sup>49</sup>  
Ibid., p. 95, (CE, 33).

of the divine logos or Reason, which enabled him to arrive at fragmentary facets of truth.<sup>50</sup> The mediaeval Church developed the idea of God's prevenient grace, which Erasmus called extraordinary grace,<sup>51</sup> and which prepared man for the work of salvation. It was seen earlier, that the Theologia Deutsch affirmed the power of the soul of seeing into eternity.<sup>52</sup> It would appear, then, that Denck was, first and foremost, influenced by the teaching of the German mystics on the doctrine of the immanence of the Spirit. Just because he set the testimony of the Spirit above Scripture, does not mean that Denck was a spiritualist. He regarded the Bible very highly; in fact, he wrote in his Widerruf a month before he died: "I prize Holy Scripture above all human treasures."<sup>53</sup> Albrecht Hege observes therefore quite appropriately, that the Spirit was for Denck practically nothing else than "the interpreter of Scripture."<sup>54</sup> Moreover, his doctrine of Christ, as will be shown below, is evidence of sound, biblical faith.

The presence of God in man is of a very personal kind. God works through the activity of the Lamb, or the Person of

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<sup>50</sup> J. N. D. Kelly, Early Christian Doctrines (2nd ed; New York, Evanston and London: Harper and Row, 1960), p. 96.

<sup>51</sup> De libero arbitrio, p. 29.

<sup>52</sup> Supra, p. 37.

<sup>53</sup> Denck, Religioese Schriften, p. 106.

<sup>54</sup> Hege, op. cit., p. 93.

the Word of God, to bring men to conversion and commitment to God's will. Proof of the saving work of God is to be found in the good results of "preaching and punishment:"<sup>55</sup>

But that the Lamb Itself preaches, can be recognized in the fact that where a person has long been preached to from without he should never hear, unless he had previously received testimony from the Spirit of God in his heart, even though covered over.<sup>56</sup>

### Jesus Christ, the Means of Salvation

At the beginning of the third part of Was geredt sey (according to this writer's division of the treatise), Denck once more clearly distinguishes between "the Word which is in the heart" of every man and the "external testimony" of the truth.<sup>57</sup> The former, he now identifies with Christ in his spiritual presence; the latter refers to the Scriptures. Denck accuses the Lutherans of taking the words of the Bible, which are mere testimony to the truth, for the very truth itself, "which is an abomination in the sight of God."<sup>58</sup> Thus, they deny that the preaching of Christ in the hearts of men

is a work powerful in proving to every single one in particular the glory of the Father in the inward killing and resurrection. . . .

<sup>55</sup>

Whether God, p. 96, (CE, 34).

<sup>56</sup>

Was geredt sey, p. 34, (ET, 95-96).

<sup>57</sup>

Whether God, p. 99, (CE, 36-37).

<sup>58</sup>

Ibid., p. 98, (CE, 36).

They seek Christ only in the historical flesh, in the expectation that it is enough that the work of God be manifested in him, and that it is unnecessary that it be manifested in all.<sup>59</sup>

According to Denck, we should listen to both the voice of Christ within us and the biblical witnesses and

test and compare everything in the fear of the Spirit, . . . until we would hear God in uttermost forthrightness speak with us and we become certain of His will, which is to forsake all self-concern an sich and to surrender oneself to that freedom which belongs to God die Gott ist.<sup>60</sup>

While it is true to say that Christ offered himself up to the Father for all men -- for they shall always lack the perfection of his self-denial; yet they must follow in his footsteps.

Men shall die and rise with Christ to newness of life by means of their Gelassenheit.<sup>61</sup>

J. J. Kiwiet has pointed out<sup>62</sup> that Christ is not the

<sup>59</sup>

Was geredt sey, p. 36, (ET, 98-99).

<sup>60</sup>

Ibid., p. 37, (ET, 99). Williams translates die Gott ist as "which is God." This translation is doubtful, for it renders the statement obscure, if not meaningless. It makes better sense to regard the case of Gott to be dative and to translate the phrase, "which belongs to God," or "which is characteristic of God." Cf. CE, p. 29, l. 16, dann im ist; also CE, 32, 19, das Gott gehoert. If Gott were a nominative case, it should normally follow the verb; cf. CE, 35, 30; 37, 20; 38, 12; 39, 21.

<sup>61</sup>

"Scripture speaks of a Gelassenheit, (which is the means of coming to God, namely, Christ himself) which is not to be regarded physically but spiritually, as he indeed proclaimed himself before he came in the flesh," Was geredt sey, p. 35, (ET, 97).

<sup>62</sup>

J. J. Kiwiet, "The Theology of Hans Denck", MQR, XXXII (1958), 6.

most perfect man to Denck, but "the most perfect reflection of his Father."<sup>63</sup> This distinction is important, for upon it hinges Denck's doctrine of atonement. Just as the Theologia Germanica makes salvation dependent both on man's Erkenntnis, that is, his profound spiritual understanding, of the love of God, and on his Gelassenheit, so does Hans Denck. Though Christ has been preaching in the hearts of men since the beginning of time, "the Word . . . had to become man in Jesus for this reason that people both in spirit and in the flesh, from within and without, behind and before, and in all places might have testimony."<sup>64</sup>

Denck does not look upon the ministry and death of Jesus of Nazareth as constituting a one-time, objective, atoning sacrifice for the sins of the human race. There was never a time when God had not already overcome the sin of the world, for God by His Word has always had a witness to Himself in the hearts of men. Finally, He openly exposed to the view and understanding of all men the atoning love which He has held out to man "from eternity." This love reflects the true nature of God, and manifests itself to the end, that men will come to the light, be reconciled to God and receive the fruits of the Spirit through the surrender of themselves to the will of God. While no objective atonement needs to be made, in

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<sup>63</sup>

Was geredt sey, p. 37, (ET, 100).

<sup>64</sup>

Whether God, p. 101, (CE, 39).

Denck's view, a man is again fully restored to fellowship with God when he accepts Christ as his true "Lord" and "Saviour."<sup>65</sup>

Servants of the "Master" are those who have welcomed and consciously received the Holy Spirit, and who have acknowledged the presence of the Spirit in Christlike self-surrender to the Father: "Christians . . . are in God one with Christ and like gleich Christ, in such a way that what refers to the one refers also to the other. As Christ does, so do they also, and thus they have Christ as their Lord and Master." The extent to which anyone "has, on his own, offered up his life without complaint, . . . he has merely taken that perfection from him, namely, righteousness through grace. But he has received it from no one but the Father, namely, grace through righteousness."<sup>66</sup>

One extended passage of Denck's treatise brings together his teachings on Jesus Christ and the atonement. Because of their central importance, it will be quoted here in its full length:

God created all men in His own image im selbs gleich but none has so remained except for one, and that man is Jesus. He loved all others so much, that he offered up to the Father his life for their death which they deserved. This self-denial he must certainly have learned from the Father, since he was completely like the Father dem vatter ganntz gleich

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid., p. 100, (CE, 37).

<sup>66</sup> Was geredt sey, p. 37, (ET, 100). Cf. n. 67.

and obeyed Him in all things. Therefore has God also had that love which Jesus demonstrated before Pilate, from eternity. Indeed, He loves His Son as much as the apple of His own eye; nevertheless, He found heart-felt satisfaction in his death, though He should rather have suffered it Himself, had it not been against the eternal order, and had men been able to perceive the spiritual, for He is a Spirit whom no physical eyes and ears can see or hear.<sup>67</sup>

In the light of these words, it is not surprising that Denck insists on the absolute sufficiency of Christ's sacrifice "for the guilt of all." He argues philosophically, that if Christ "had excluded anyone, then his love would have been squint-eyed and a respecter of persons."<sup>68</sup> Denck, however, never bases his convictions on his spiritual insight alone. He is always true to his own teaching, that intuitive knowledge must be validated by the external testimony of the Scriptures, and conversely, that the biblical message must be authenticated by the religious experience of the individual believer. Therefore, concerning the nature of Christ's sacrifice, Denck turns to the Bible for confirmation of what he considers to be true. He finds there recorded two notions, namely, that Christ died for many<sup>69</sup> and yet also that he died for all.<sup>70</sup> He concludes that they are "not contradictory,

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid., p. 39, (ET, 102). ET is uncertain, where the German text has been inserted in the quotation. Williams translates the phrases "equal to himself" and "completely equal to the Father," respectively.

<sup>68</sup> Whether God, p. 102, (CE, 39).

<sup>69</sup> Mt. 20:28; Mk. 10:45.

<sup>70</sup> I John 2:2.

but expressly written to indicate that not all have received the light, though it has enlightened all,<sup>71</sup> and [that] perhaps [etwa] many deny the Lord, who has, none the less, ransomed them all."<sup>72</sup>

### Freedom and Responsibility

Albrecht Hege traces the development of Denck's argument for the freedom of the will along three lines: on the grounds of the nature of God, of the nature of man, and for a pastoral reason.<sup>73</sup> At the present juncture in the analysis of Was geredt sey the first two points have been covered. The last one is the subject matter of the fourth and last section of the treatise, which now awaits examination. Here Denck is concerned that no one shall be able "to entrench himself for his ungodly conduct behind his incapacity."<sup>74</sup>

The universality of God's love and the freedom of man to accept or reject it, do not affect the certainty of God's foreknowledge and providence. Denck argues that God has indeed known from the start what relationship between Himself and men would ensue. God foresaw man's sin and death, but He also has turned both sin and death to His own glory. Sin's punishment brings man to repentance, and death has become the

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<sup>71</sup>

John 1:9.

<sup>72</sup>

Was geredt sey, p. 40, (ET, 102).

<sup>73</sup>

Hege, op. cit., p. 73.

<sup>74</sup>

Ibid.

means of salvation by the sacrifice and resurrection of Jesus Christ. In the words of Denck, the unwilled, "uncreated death" of Adam and his sons is being swallowed up in the "created death" of Jesus and his followers.<sup>75</sup>

God is not to be blamed for evil, simply because He allowed it and ordained that it should occur. Without this provision, man would not have been free and God would not have enjoyed sincere praise and honour. It is man who is guilty of sin, for "the Father in heaven has warned His child Israel from its youth up by means of the law, not to steal, that is not to mis- appropriate anything creaturely for himself kaeine creaturen im selbs zu aignen." <sup>76</sup>

Since men know they are guilty, it does not help a man, and indeed it is vain and presumptuous on his part, to enquire after God's providence. If he is so concerned about his right relationship with God -- and Denck is thinking perhaps of Luther --,

why does he not heed His commands, which He has given for the purpose that they be obeyed, rather than the providence fuersehung about which nothing has been ordered or revealed in the community davon in der

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<sup>75</sup>

Whether God, p. 103, (CE, 40).

<sup>76</sup>

Was geredt sey, p. 40, (ET, 103). Williams translates the inserted original text incorrectly, "to take possession of the creaturely instead of himself."

gemain nichts gebotten noch geoffenbart ist<sup>77</sup>

It is certain, suggests Denck, that God's providence accords with His will, and since God's will is known in part even to the perverse, it is His will which delimits the realm of man's responsibility.

Luther's doctrine of justification by faith is based on the idea of particular atonement. A man will be saved solely at the good pleasure of God, regardless of works, and Denck adds, "regardless also of faith,"<sup>78</sup> for Luther's concept of faith is that of an outright gift of God. For Denck, faith signifies a free response of man to the love of God, which is manifested in Jesus Christ. This faith issues in cross-bearing discipleship after the example of the Lord. Salvation, therefore, is not something which cannot be lost again once it has been received: "Whom God has received in faith, he can and wills to reject again in case the person does not remain in faith."<sup>79</sup> Faith involves faithfulness, so that no one can take comfort in any kind of providential, divine election. Denck champions the freedom of man, but not without reminding his reader of the attending responsibility.

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<sup>77</sup>

Ibid., p. 41, (ET, 104). Williams consistently translates fuersehung as "foreknowledge," for which Denck has however the word fuerwissen (CE, 40, 12). Perhaps, Denck uses the two terms interchangeably. For in der gemain, Williams gives the unusual translation of "absolutely."

<sup>78</sup>

Whether God, p. 105, (CE, 42).

<sup>79</sup>

Ibid.

Denck rises to new heights of passion and eloquence as he elaborates on his uncompromising statement: "Clearly, all who truly fear God must renounce the world. And in the measure that they have to use the world out of necessity, they ought always to be prepared for struggle and ready for adversity as sojourners upon the earth."<sup>80</sup> Denck does not advocate otherworldliness to the exclusion of present realities, but he is expressing the conviction that there is a definite priority about man's faith-relationship with God. Only in this way will the fruits of the Spirit appear.

In another paragraph, Denck exalts the constancy of God's mercy over against the fickleness of man. Men vacillate like Israel, which God has repeatedly redeemed and punished, but God still wants to save the whole of Israel, "for he wills not the death of the sinner but that the sinner may be converted and live."<sup>81</sup> God shows His forbearance in the postponement of punishment, because He is prepared to take everyone back on repentance, regardless of his past conduct. The promises of the Gospel are not only held out for the edification and encouragement of those predestined few who are arbitrarily being justified, but they are sincerely extended for all to hear and to accept.

Denck calls upon his readers to acknowledge their

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<sup>80</sup>

Ibid., p. 106, (CE, 42).

<sup>81</sup>

Ibid., p. 109, (CE, 46).

God-given freedom of the will and to act responsibly towards God, lest the judgment of God come upon them:

I beseech /bezeuege/ and beg you, in expectation of /bey/ the Advent of Jesus Christ, our Lord, all /of you/ who hear, see or otherwise perceive the truth of God,<sup>82</sup> that you will also accept it in the truth of Christ, that is, according to the manner, way and form, which Christ has taught and himself demonstrated, namely, by self-denial and self-surrender. . . . If you do not return while the Lord gives you opportunity, you will have part with him who first conceived and brought forth lies according to his own nature. This inheritance is the gnawing worm that none can kill, and the eternal fire that none can quench.<sup>83</sup>

Whoever takes these words to heart, will enjoy peace and fellowship and will be a light among the pagans, until the Lord comes.

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82

Was geredt sey, p. 47, (ET, 110). Williams translates "who in the foregoing manner behold, or otherwise perceive the truth of God /so die warhait Gottes hoeren, sehen oder sonnst vernemen/."

83

Ibid.

## CONCLUSION

All participants in the debate on the freedom of the will, at the time of the Reformation, affirmed the necessity of special revelation. From beginning to end, salvation is the result of God's gracious activity.

Luther rightly maintains that man has forfeited all privileges of fellowship with God. He prejudges, however, the extent of God's power and God's love when he insists, that God will save only a limited number of men and that the individual has no freedom of choice in the matter. In so doing, Luther renders the promises of the Gospel vain and empty. If the Gospel is not good news to all, there is no Gospel. Either Christ died for the sins of all, or God is not love.<sup>1</sup> The New Testament announces God's love unambiguously and unequivocally to all mankind and demands of Christ's followers that they declare this love in word and deed to all nations. Where God offers bread, is He, in fact, only holding out a stone,<sup>2</sup> since He may deny the gift of faith to anyone, by which alone man can participate in the atoning work of Christ?

It is difficult to believe that "the viewpoint which Luther expounds in opposition to Erasmus is, in the light of

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<sup>1</sup>  
I John 4:8.

<sup>2</sup>  
Mt. 7:9.

the biblical evidence, indisputable."<sup>3</sup> Such an estimate can only be sustained, if one supposes that truth is ultimately not absolute and unitary, but relative. Indeed, if Luther is right, a wedge has been driven between the Scriptures and the religious history which they record. The charge has frequently been raised against the Reformation, that while it has freed men from the bondage of the papacy, it has enslaved them to the Bible; that it has set up one idol for another. Once the Scriptures are divorced from the primacy of all religious experience, be it that of the prophets and apostles or that of the reader and listener, they will be misinterpreted and wrongly understood. Luther cannot be cleared of the charge that he ascribes to the words of the Bible the authority of the Word of God.

If Luther may be said to deny free will as a bibli-  
cist, Erasmus defends man's freedom on humanist philosophical grounds, while Denck argues as a mystic. Erasmus makes his appeal, time and again, to reason. Scripture means for him what it says, when it enjoins repentance and obedience and holds man responsible for his attitudes and actions. These demands correspond to life as it is experienced and are, at once, inseparable from the reality of freedom of choice. An individual person is only responsible for his life when he is truly free to choose between good and evil.

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<sup>3</sup>

Fellmann, "Der Theologische Gehalt", p. 160.

Denck was not a mystic in the sense that he lived a withdrawn life of contemplation; on the contrary, as most Anabaptists, he was very much involved in the human scene. He firmly believed that faith implied faithfulness: "[God] looks for faith and good works; he takes pleasure in them and rewards them. [It is] not that they have their origin in us, but we must not acknowledge in vain the grace which He has offered us or even refuse [it]."<sup>4</sup>

As far as Denck was concerned, nothing stands in the way of doing the will of God, apart from man's unwillingness. God continually testifies to Himself in the heart of each individual, in the Scriptures, and in every life situation. God reveals Himself as the God of love who wants all men to become instruments of His love, to the extent to which they will surrender their lives to Christ. Denck conceives of the responsible freedom of man, not on biblical evidence alone or along philosophical considerations, but through the direct activity of the living Word of God.

It was Denck's signal contribution to Reformation thought, that he sought the fount of religion in personal experience. He did not disdain historical Christianity, but he believed that God let His Word become flesh, in order to provide a means of salvation for all men. Faith is nothing that can be learned or passed on from one person to another;

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<sup>4</sup> Widerruf, in Denck, Religioese Schriften, pp. 107-108.

faith can only be experienced in response to the work of the living Christ in one's heart.

Denck rediscovered the fundamental reality and truth of religious experience. The Scriptures and all formal expressions of religious life are the result of the dynamic encounter between God and man. Denck's emphasis is also truly biblical and apostolic. The God and Father of the Lord Jesus Christ, and, indeed, the God of the Bible, calls upon all men freely to respond to His love with faith and to come to Him. Men are summoned to exercise their God-given free will with responsibility, for they will be accountable for their actions.

It is encouraging to note that there has been, since the Second World War, a gradual awakening among Christians generally to the need of personal faith in Jesus Christ. The perception of this religious truth does not belong to the heritage of the Protestant Reformation as traditionally defined. Men have heard anew the Word of God, which preaches in the human heart; which is revealed in the Scriptures; and which was proclaimed, at a crucial time in history, by Hans Denck and his spiritual heirs.

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