

A Reformer's Dissent from Lutheranism: Reconsidering the Theology of Hans Denck (ca. 1500–1527)*

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I. INTRODUCTION

In the first thesis of his Heidelberg Disputation from 1518, Martin Luther remarked: “The law of God, the soundest doctrine of life, is not able to lead humanity to righteousness but rather stands in the way.”¹ According to Luther, God’s law not only reveals individual sins but also convicts and condemns human beings for their inability to love God.² This thesis became the basis for the famous notion of justification through grace by faith alone and for the Reformers’ separation from scholastic theology in its various late medieval forms. At the same time, theological dispute and dissent arose among the Reformers themselves, which has rendered it a worthwhile undertaking ever since to ponder the question of what it was that set the Reformers apart from one another. To this end, the following essay reexamines the theology of Hans Denck, who criticized the Lutheran understanding of justification for being inconsistent. So far, historians have focused mainly on Denck’s hermeneutics of the inner and outer word and then drawn conclusions in regard to his understanding of grace, faith, and Scripture, but nobody has analyzed in detail the theological issues at stake in Denck’s controversy with the Lutherans.

Steven Ozment has argued that Denck opposed the central Lutheran concept of justification through the incarnate Christ alone (*solus Christus incarnatus*), by faith through the hearing of the Word alone (*sola fide ex auditu ver-*

* Für Reinhard Schwarz zum 18.11.1999. – Abbreviations: Denck: *Schriften*: Georg Baring, Walter Fellmann (eds.), *Hans Denck: Schriften*, 3 vols., Gütersloh 1955–60 (references are to vol. 2 unless otherwise indicated); WA: *D. Martin Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, Weimar 1883–; WADB: *D. Martin Luthers Werke: Die Deutsche Bibel*, Weimar 1906–.

1. “Lex Dei, saluberrima vitae doctrinae, non potest hominem ad iusticiam promoveri, sed magis obest.” WA 1:353:5–16.

2. Cf. WADB 7:20:31–33: “wo das gesetz recht erkennet und auffs beste gefasset wird, da thuts nit mehr, denn ernnert uns unsere sunde, und todtet uns durch die selb, und macht uns schuldig des ewigen zorns.”

bi), and through Scripture alone (*sola scriptura*).³ I shall argue further that due to Denck's different perception of the person and work of Christ, he also opposed the idea of justification through grace alone (*sola gratia*) and that this is particularly visible in his understanding of God's law. Most interpreters have claimed that Denck's deviation from the magisterial Reformation found its roots in a divergent idea of human depravity and free will, while his understanding of grace was closer to Luther than to other radical Reformers.⁴ In what follows, I shall show that Denck's disagreement consisted precisely in an opposite understanding of God's grace and righteousness: whereas for Luther God initiates the justification of the sinner and transforms the latter's will, Denck holds that God does not raise up anybody against one's own will; those who do not fear and love God, God also does not love.

Most of Denck's interpreters, often expressing dislike for the concept of justification through grace by faith alone, have also argued that Denck's primary task of reform activity consisted "in refuting what he considered to be the errors of solafideism,"⁵ i.e., the accent on justification as forgiveness of sins over sanctification as conversion to God's will. This is correct as far as his "stress on the moral accountability of man and his pertinent critique of the Lutherans on this subject grew more out of mystical presuppositions than out of an existential disillusionment with Reformation morals" is concerned.⁶ Still, this interpretation does not identify the reason for the Lutheran "errors" and merely accepts Denck's critique without clarifying the underlying theological opposition. We contend that such a clarification is necessary to understand Denck's theological intentions.⁷

3. Steven Ozment, *Mysticism and Dissent: Religious Ideology and Social Protest in the Sixteenth Century*, New Haven, London 1973, pp. 125–133. Cf. the brief sketch in Hans-Jürgen Goertz, *The Anabaptists*, London, New York 1996, pp. 60–62.

4. Cf. Wayne A. Allen, *Hans Denck: A First Generation Radical Reformer*, Ph. D. dissertation, Rutgers University 1985; Clarence Bauman, *The Spiritual Legacy of Hans Denck: Interpretation and Translation of Key Texts*, Leiden 1991; Werner O. Packull, *Mysticism and the Early South German-Austrian Anabaptist Movement 1525–1531*, Scottdale, Pa. 1977; J. Denny Weaver, "Discipleship Redefined: Four Sixteenth-Century Anabaptists," in: *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 54 (1980), pp. 255–279; idem, "The Work of Christ: On the Difficulty of Identifying an Anabaptist Perspective," in: *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 59 (1985), pp. 107–129.

5. Allen, *Hans Denck*, p. 86.

6. Packull, *Mysticism*, p. 51

7. Cf. David C. Steinmetz, *Reformers in the Wings*, Philadelphia 1971, p. 213: "Denck's theology can be understood in part as the dialectical antithesis to Martin Luther's thesis."

Denck's œuvre in the German edition contains no more than 125 pages, and the theology in his writings is highly consistent. From the outset of his short career he was forced to be a wanderer without a home, which prevented him from becoming an influential magisterial Reformer. There can be little doubt that his continuous conflicts with various Lutheran theologians fostered a growing disillusionment on his part. In order to illustrate how he gave up his initial allegiance to the Lutheran cause, we begin with a brief sketch of his life during the decisive years 1524–1527. In the third part, Denck's mystical christology and soteriology is discussed. The fourth part considers his understanding of God's law and the idea of righteousness. Our final question will be, where exactly does Denck depart from Lutheranism and can he still be called a Protestant dissenter?

II. THREE YEARS OF DISSENT⁸

In 1523 Hans Denck, inspired by Luther's call for a reformation of the church,⁹ went to Basel in order to hear Johannes Oecolampadius, the main Reformer in the city. He earned his Master of Arts degree while working in his spare time as a corrector in several printeries. Among other things, he helped to edit and update Theodor Gaza's four-volume Greek grammar. He proved to be an able and promising young scholar. Therefore, in September of the same year, he was promoted by Oecolampadius and became the rector of the renowned St. Sebald school in imperial Nuremberg, one of the first German cities that showed sympathies for the Lutheran cause.

In June 1524 Denck was reprimanded by the Nuremberg City Council because he forbade his students to act as acolytes in the Roman mass, although he had no authority in such matters. In the fall of the same year several Nu-

8. For the biographical data in this section and for further details, cf. Ludwig Keller, *Ein Apostel der Wiedertäufer*, Leipzig 1882; Jan J. Kiwiet, "The Life of Hans Denck (ca. 1500–1527)," in: *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 31 (1957), pp. 227–259; Steinmetz, *Reformers in the Wings*, pp. 209–218; Werner O. Packull, "Hans Denck: Fugitive from Dogmatism," in: Hans-Jürgen Goertz (ed.), *Profiles of Radical Reformers: Biographical Sketches from Thomas Müntzer to Paracelsus*, Scottdale, Pa. 1982, pp. 62–71; Allen, *Hans Denck*; James M. Stayer, *The German Peasants' War and Anabaptist Community of Goods*, Montreal, Kingston 1991.

9. We do not know when Denck was born, but there is evidence that he grew up in Upper Bavaria and attended the University of Ingolstadt. According to his own testimony, he was raised in the Roman faith until he realized his inborn spiritual poverty and the vanity of all efforts to clean and preen himself. This led to his conversion to the true Evangelical religion. Denck: *Schriften*, 2, p. 20: 16–24.

remberg painters, students of Albrecht Dürer, caused disturbances because they publicly questioned Christ's bodily presence in the Lord's Supper. Three of them, who soon became famous as the "godless painters," were summoned to a trial,¹⁰ during which one of them mentioned the name of Hans Denck as their mentor. Initially, the case was dismissed until the involvement of the schoolmaster was clarified. When Denck was asked about the case, he proved to be too subtle for an indictment. On 10 January 1525, the City Council therefore demanded a written statement, in which he should explain his views on Scripture, sin, divine righteousness, law, Gospel, baptism, and the Lord's Supper. His "Confession" (*Bekentnis für den Rat zu Nürnberg*) was read by five Lutheran pastors under the leadership of Andreas Osiander. The group did not hesitate to request Denck's expulsion from the city - for "unchristian" and "poisonous" teachings. The city council granted the request and thereby impeded the scholarly career that Denck could have pursued as an Evangelical teacher. Instead, his public alliance with the three painters established his reputation as a dissenter from Lutheranism.

After a brief interlude in Mühlhausen from January until April 1525, when large parts of Germany and Switzerland were increasingly hit by the Peasants' War, Denck went to central Switzerland and broadened the scope of his activities as theological educator and religious teacher in Anabaptist congregations¹¹ that had dissented from the Zwinglian Reformation. In the fall of the

10. The minutes of the trial were published by Theodor Kolde, "Zum Prozess des Johann Denck und 'der drei gottlosen Maler von Nürnberg,'" in: idem, *Beiträge zur Reformationsgeschichte*, Leipzig 1890, pp. 228-250. The three painters (Jörg Pentz and Barthel and Sebald Beheim) believed in God but were indifferent towards Christ, Scripture, the sacraments, and the magistrates. Barthel Beheim maintained that statements about Christ meant no more to him than the sentence, "Duke Ernest has gone up the mountain." Gordon Rupp wonders whether one can regard the three painters as "pioneers of the 'Death of God Theology'" or as forerunners of logical positivism, who are engaged in the rational enquiry of "nonverifiable theological statements." Eventually, however, he concludes that they must have been "blind drunk." Cf. Rupp, "Protestant Spirituality in the First Age of the Reformation," in: G. J. Cuming, Derek Baker (eds.), *Popular Belief and Practice*, Cambridge 1972, pp. 155-171. Luther recommended that the painters be treated not as blasphemers but as misled Christians, although he saw their doubts about the authority of magistrates as a threat to the social order which was worthy to be severely punished; cf. WABr 3.432-433.

11. The term "Anabaptism" should be used with some caution. It was coined by opponents of the radical groups of the Reformation movement and systematically introduced in Heinrich Bullinger's book *Der Widertäufer Ursprung* (1561) in order to suggest heresy and violent sedition. The assertion that all Anabaptists were eager to rebaptize their followers is far from the truth. Moreover, although the question of infant

same year he settled in Augsburg, where many of the leading families were sympathetic to the Evangelical movement, in order to teach and tutor students in Latin and Greek.

In 1526 Denck published three major treatises. In "Whether God is a Cause of Evil" (*Was geredt sey, das die schrift sagt, Gott thue und mache guts und böses*), he interprets Jesus' commandments as the main purpose of the Gospel, while also pointing to the promise of divine grace through Jesus' exemplary atonement. In "Concerning the Law of God" (*Vom Gesetz Gottes*), he challenges Luther's interpretation of God's law as convicting humanity of its inability to love God's will and driving the sinner to despair in order that the Gospel can bring liberation. Against this view, he maintains that every Christian believer must walk the way Jesus walked. Finally, in "He who Truly Loves the Truth" (*Wer die Wahrheit wahrlich lieb hat*), he lists forty contradictory sayings of Scripture in order to show that the discovery of scriptural truth requires the reconciliation of paradoxes by means of spiritual illumination.

In Augsburg Denck became a leading figure of the local Anabaptist movement. Unfortunately, a fate similar to his experiences in Nuremberg awaited him. He was asked to discuss his theological views with the leading Reformer of the city, Urbanus Rhegius, but the debate did not lead to a satisfactory result. Rhegius then decided to look for a political solution, since the radical Reformers were becoming increasingly popular in South Germany, much to the dismay of the Lutherans. He set up a disputation before the city council, but Denck decided to flee the city immediately. This proved to be a wise decision, since soon afterwards Rhegius oversaw the first executions of Anabaptists. Denck turned to Strasbourg, a city known for its tolerance towards religious dissenters, where he arrived in October 1526. Yet the objections of Martin Bucer made it equally impossible for him to settle down, since here

baptism became the main reason for the religious dissent of the first Anabaptists in Zürich, they still shared many theological views with Zwingli and continued to emphasize the preaching of repentance and conversion as the center of piety. Cf. Fritz Blanke, "Zollikon 1525 - Die Entstehung der ältesten Täufergemeinden," in: *Theologische Zeitschrift* 8 (1952), pp. 252-269. - In general, baptism was not the foremost issue for people like Denck, who were attracted to Anabaptism due to the emphasis on Evangelical reform. Our interpretation today has to respect the particular fluidity of the situation in the Reformation scene between 1525 and 1530, when the religious and theological divergences within Protestantism became fully visible. Denck himself remarked in his last treatise that no one should baptize without being called and sent to teach. He therefore warned against tendencies that diminished the enlightening and uplifting goal of Evangelical teaching. Cf. Denck: *Schriften*, p. 109: 18-24.

too the teaching and preaching of the radical Reformers proved to be more and more attractive. Denck was evicted from Strasbourg on Christmas Eve 1526.

Instead of trying to find another occupation as Evangelical teacher, Denck then began to work on a translation and edition of the Old Testament prophets, which he undertook in cooperation with Ludwig Hätzer in Worms. The edition was published in April 1527 and well received by the philological experts. At the same time, Denck also worked on two further treatises: "On True Love" (*Von der wahren Lieb*), which contemplated the mystery of divine love, its consummation in Jesus, and its embodiment in those who follow in his way; and "The Order of God" (*Ordnung Gottes*), containing twelve chapters on such controversial dogmatic topics as predestination, divine foreknowledge, redemption, internal witness, and external authority.

In July 1527 Denck left Worms and went to Augsburg in order to participate in a secret synod of Anabaptist leaders, which later became known as the Martyrs' Synod. The group discussed chiliastic expectations and decided to organize visitations to fellow congregations in order to console them amidst the threat of persecution by Catholics and Lutherans. In October Denck entered Basel for what were to become his last days. Once more he had to defend himself, this time against his former teacher Oecolampadius, and thus wrote a "Protestation." He died of the plague in late November 1527. Soon after his death, Oecolampadius published Denck's last work under the title "Hans Denck's retraction," for its irenic preface mentioned the possibility of theological errors and expressed a desire for reconciliation among fellow Christian theologians.¹²

Despite the ongoing conflicts and disappointments overshadowing his theological career, Denck's theology did not entail an apocalyptic attitude toward the magisterial Reformation.¹³ Moreover, his elegant appearance, modest life-style, friendly tone in speech and writing, and scholarly talent, especially in the use of Scripture, were widely admired, even by opponents. A number of scholars have pointed out that in Denck's thinking the mystical tradition – particularly the *Theologia Deutsch*, which advocated the imitation

12. Denck: *Schriften*, p. 105:1–34.

13. Cf. Reinhard Schwarz, *Die apokalyptische Theologie Thomas Müntzers und der Taboriten*, Tübingen 1977. This does not exclude similarities between Müntzer's and Denck's spiritualist understanding of Scripture. Cf. Goertz, *The Anabaptists*, p. 52. For a possible influence of Müntzer on Denck, cf. Georg Baring, "Hans Denck und Thomas Müntzer in Nürnberg 1524," in: *Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte* 50 (1959), pp. 145–181; and the critical comments in Bauman, *Spiritual Legacy*, pp. 29–33.

of Christ through self-surrender to God's will, and the teachings of Meister Eckhart, who emphasized the equal importance of contemplation and action – played a major role.¹⁴ This influence can be seen in his understanding of the communication of God's word as an inward revelation and of Jesus as the perfect example of God's love for humankind. We begin our analysis with a closer look at these two features.

III. CHRIST AS MYSTICAL REDEEMER AND EXAMPLE OF TRUE LOVE

1. *Denck's Christology.* In order to approach Denck's christology, it is helpful to begin with the main aspect of his idea of God, i. e., the Johannine statement that God is love.¹⁵ On the one hand, Denck defines love as a spiritual power by which one is united or desires to become united with someone else, even to the point of self-abnegation. On the other hand, he emphasizes the universality of love's wantonness and claims that a pure and perfect love seeks to be united with everyone. In both cases, the lover desires to be beneficial towards others and not to himself or herself, because true love is never selfish.¹⁶

According to Denck, a spark of this true love is a quality of human beings, and since love is spiritual whereas humans are carnal, true love must have a divine source. It stems from the perfect love, which is God, the immutable, eternal creator and generator of all goodness. Human beings could never comprehend true love if God had not proven it in godly humans, or God's children, who as lovers of love "take after God as their spiritual father."¹⁷ The more love is proven, the more it is known; the more it is known, the more it is loved; and the more it is loved, the nearer a person comes to salvation.

14. On the various forms of medieval mysticism, cf. Heiko A. Oberman, *The Harvest of Medieval Theology: Gabriel Biel and Late Medieval Nominalism*, Cambridge 1963, pp.323–361; Steven Ozment, "Mysticism, Nominalism, and Dissent," in: Charles Trinkaus, Heiko A. Oberman (eds.), *The Pursuit of Holiness in Late Medieval and Renaissance Religion*, Leiden 1974, pp.67–92; Packull, *Mysticism*, pp.17–34. On the mystical influence on Denck, cf. Ozment, *Mysticism and Dissent*, and Bauman, *Spiritual Legacy*, pp.21–47. Cf. also Goertz, *The Anabaptists*, p.60: "The dualism of within and without, the spiritual and the natural, which was a key concept in medieval mysticism, determined Denck's argument."

15. Denck: *Schriften*, p.64:6–9.

16. *Ibid.*, p.76:5–29.

17. *Ibid.*, p.77:20.

Denck's christology focuses on the idea that Jesus of Nazareth was the one human being who expressed God's love at its highest and therefore "was called the Savior of His people."¹⁸ God united Himself with Jesus so that God's doing became Jesus' doing and Jesus' suffering became God's suffering. This union reveals the character of God's love as being merciful. God renounces all jurisdiction over human sin, under the condition that humans do not despise His mercy but respond to it through the enactment and proclamation of love. True human love always seeks to fulfill God's will. Since God is good, He will reward infinitely those who deny themselves and surrender to His love. This is proclaimed by Moses and Paul. Although the external form of their testimonies is different, their truth is the same. They assert that everybody who truly fears and loves God renounces and relinquishes the world of sinful disorder.¹⁹ Thus, it is not enough to hear the Gospel and to rely on the inward presence of God's kingdom, but one also has to enact it, because whoever does not fulfill God's law in one's life is not righteous before God.²⁰ On the whole, the Gospel proclaims God's mercy as well as God's justice.

True spiritual love is divine and can be recognized only in Jesus since he is the perfect example of union with God. Jesus lived in complete accordance with God and thereby displayed the model of true life. He is the ideal of spiritual *Gelassenheit*²¹ since he surrendered his own will entirely to the will of God.²² Unfailingly, Jesus taught and accomplished God's will so that humanity might follow his way.²³ Moreover, Jesus has atoned for the whole world in finding and pioneering the way to God so that we might walk therein and come to life.²⁴ According to Denck, the imitation of Jesus is the genuine expression of Christian faith, and it can be achieved through listening to Scripture and being led to Jesus as the new self.²⁵ Thereby, Scripture is understood as testimony to God's Word and righteousness, and not simply to the believer's inner feeling.²⁶ Humanity can receive the mystery of Christ through

18. *Ibid.*, p. 77:24.

19. *Ibid.*, p. 36:11-18.

20. *Ibid.*, p. 43:6-15.

21. This term implies "detachment" (Packull's translation) and tranquility, not merely "resignation" (Bauman's translation).

22. *Ibid.*, p. 40:2-4.

23. *Ibid.*, p. 78:3-23.

24. *Ibid.*, p. 53:5-7.

25. *Ibid.*, p. 21:16-21.

26. At this point, Denck's modification of the medieval mystical tradition is overlooked by most interpreters. Even Packull, who otherwise reads Denck with great care, does not see the relation between Denck's ideas of Christ and of Scripture:

renunciation.²⁷ In this process, God's Word is absorbed into the believer and becomes a human quality, like the spark of divine love that becomes a quality of the human soul.

Denck's christology is shaped by two further aspects: an emphasis on the believer's immediate spiritual relationship with God; and the idea of discipleship as self-surrender for the sake of true love, according to Jesus' command that "someone who does not lose himself or herself is not worthy of me."²⁸ In imitating the life of Jesus, humanity thus achieves conformity with God's will. Being in conformity with God's will, the believer is at once captivated and free – captivated by God's will and free to fulfill it in love.²⁹ Everyone who has received the Spirit is united with God and equal with Jesus.³⁰ Denck maintains that the original and primordial Word of God is the enabling grace in all humans, and when this Word is perceived, God is present in the believer.

2. *Denck's soteriology.* Denck characterizes salvation history as progress in spiritual freedom, which is a process of deification. The Word of God became human in Jesus so that it might divinize humanity.³¹ In regard to human sin, Denck emphasizes the "didactic nature of evil and the corrective and purifying quality of all punishment."³² While he asserts that God is actively present in and through the elect but not in or through the godless; the godless sin by themselves and God has no share in their evil deeds.³³ Humanity once rejected God's goodness and fell into darkness, without being able to rise up again.³⁴ This fall still happens through disobedience toward God's Word, when humanity seeks itself rather than God.³⁵ Nevertheless, God holds on to His gracious and benevolent will towards all creatures³⁶ and does not force humanity to fulfill His commandments. The use of coercion would interfere

"Denck argued that Scripture itself was only a testimony to the inner word" (Packull, *Mysticism*, p. 55). This is only partially correct, since for Denck the inner word is identical with Christ in the believer.

27. Denck: *Schriften*, p. 43:33–35.

28. *Ibid.*, p. 42:25–26; cf. Mt. 10:39.

29. *Ibid.*, p. 107:18–20.

30. *Ibid.*, p. 37:24–27.

31. *Ibid.*, p. 39:5–6.

32. Packull, *Mysticism*, pp. 43–44. Sin occurs "zu ainer straff." Denck: *Schriften*, p. 29:33.

33. *Ibid.*, p. 28:23–24.

34. *Ibid.*, p. 55:7–8.

35. *Ibid.*, p. 91:25–26.

36. *Ibid.*, p. 38:9–10; cf. 1 Tim. 2:4.

with God's righteousness, and it would render divine punishment unjust, since God Himself would be responsible for evil.³⁷ According to Denck, God compels no one to do the good or to stay in the truth, "so that His mercy might be recognized and not despised."³⁸

God sets forth the divine Word as a means of salvation. This Word existed from all eternity, and everything has been created in it. God uses it as a gracious means, in order to communicate divine righteousness to human unrighteousness. God's Word is near to all human beings so that they may attain it and thus return to God, which is the goal of their life.³⁹ It corresponds to the law of Mount Sinai, although it does not have the form of written letters but already dwells in the believers' hearts. Moses and Paul proclaimed the same truth, so that the true believers recognize the good they are longing for.⁴⁰ Human sin is lessened through honest contrition and confession in response to God's Word. Once this repentance happens in truth, a human being is reborn and sins no more.⁴¹

Although a reborn person is set free for holy and blessed living, nobody manages to maintain this high ethical conduct because the whole world still exists in mortal sin. Scripture tells us that God accepted many great sinners, but we read only of a few who sinned despite their knowledge of God's loving will and were received back again. Against religious boasting Denck maintains that "whoever does not love his brother, certainly does not love God, for he does not keep God's commandments."⁴² Therefore, whoever truly fears God remains safe from divine wrath, whereas to a transgressor God's mercy serves for condemnation.⁴³ Even a true believer can despise God's mercy by not following the divine commandment of love and thereby provoke God's punishment.

Denck asserts that Jesus proclaimed and freely offered God's grace, but also threatened God's wrath to all who do not obey His will so that they be converted.⁴⁴ Jesus showed a perfect love for his fellow-creatures by offering his life on their behalf and thus embodying God's gracious will.⁴⁵ At this

37. *Ibid.*, p. 38:21-24.

38. *Ibid.*, p. 35:24-25.

39. *Ibid.*, p. 38:17-18.

40. *Ibid.*, p. 36:1-7.

41. *Ibid.*, p. 55:8-11.

42. *Ibid.*, pp. 55:39-56:1.

43. *Ibid.*, p. 56:22-29.

44. *Ibid.*, p. 85:22-24.

45. *Ibid.*, p. 39:20-22.

point, Denck refers to the New Testament's lamb-christology and explains that the lamb that suffered in Jesus is the eternal lamb that suffered from the beginning of the world until its end.⁴⁶ This Lamb is the eternal mediator between God and humanity.⁴⁷

On the whole, for Denck the event of salvation "in Christ" is not linked to Jesus' salvific death on the cross, and thus the testimony of the "discarnate Christ"⁴⁸ in the believer's heart takes precedence over the presence of the crucified and risen Jesus Christ in the community of believers.⁴⁹ Denck avoids the idea of the incarnation of the divine Word in Jesus. Obviously, he is hesitant to bring God's spiritual being into immediate contact with any form of human bodily existence because God "is a Spirit whom no fleshly eyes and ears can see or hear."⁵⁰ Moreover, divine mercy is not thought of as a gracious gift. Denck states that the call to discipleship, and thus the way towards salvation, is conditioned by the requirement to fulfill the commandment to love God with all one's heart. Not surprisingly, he regards Moses and Jesus as prophets of eternal life, whereas Paul is accused of having twisted the teaching of the law that "who keeps the commandments shall live by them."⁵¹

Therefore, Denck assumes that it is possible to be acceptable before God by living in accordance with God's law, and he regards human obedience to God's law as a means of salvation because it leads to righteousness before God. Although, like the majority in the medieval tradition and Luther, he believes that the righteousness of faith surpasses all works of the law, he does not agree with Luther's idea that someone who without works has much faith in Christ, not someone who does many good works, is the righteous one.⁵² Instead, he stresses the reverse: as the work is, whether good or bad, so is the person and the person's faith. He regards faith as an inherently human endeavor and follows the scholastic idea of "doing what is in you" in describing the content of faith.⁵³ Clearly, he wants to refute the concept of justification

46. *Ibid.*, p. 95:3-5.

47. *Ibid.*, p. 33:28-29.

48. Ozment, *Mysticism and Dissent*, p. 126.

49. Bauman's claim "that the incarnation rather than the cross stands at the center of Denck's mysticism" (Bauman, *Spiritual Legacy*, p. 45) is correct only in so far as it refers to the believer's soul. In regard to the person of Christ, the incarnation is even less important for Denck than the cross.

50. Denck: *Schriften*, p. 39:28-29.

51. *Ibid.*, p. 32:6-13; cf. Lev. 18:5.

52. Cf. WA 1.354:16-17.

53. Cf. Denck: *Schriften*, p. 79:22-23: "die im glauben werden von Gott kinnder genennt, dieweil sie umb Gots willen sovil thund, alß inen müglich ist." It is noteworthy

through grace by faith alone. This becomes evident from a closer look at his understanding of God's law.

IV. THE LAW AS THE WORD OF GOD

The main text for Denck's understanding of the law are the words of Mt. 5, 17: "I am not come to abolish but to fulfill the law." For Denck, this verse summarizes the biblical idea of the law. It serves as the starting-point for his treatise, "Concerning the Law of God," which regards Christ as the embodiment of the law of divine love.

1. The Law's Structure: Letter and Spirit. Denck observes three kinds of law in the Bible: commandments, customs, and rights.⁵⁴ He claims that commandments are an expression of the love for God and the neighbor, as every rational person knows. Everything which is not done as an act out of love for God is sinful; whoever does not love God sins, and the ensuing transgression of the commandments makes the indictment only worse. According to Denck, all true disciples of Jesus have the word of love for God inscribed in their hearts and thus know how to act and live. Customs belong to the realm of external order. They are directed toward everyday life, including the relation to God as expressed in ceremonies. Finally, rights are agreed judgments between the members of a family or community; they protect the innocent and punish the unjust.⁵⁵

With this threefold distinction, Denck departs from the traditional division of the law into moral, ceremonial, and judicial parts, which was restricted to the law of the Old Testament. Denck emphasizes that one love is taught in both the Old and the New Testament. The only difference between the two Testaments is that through Jesus God's love has been most superbly explained and demonstrated, i. e., in the spirit of freedom instead of bondage. Still, Jesus' teaching never contradicted Moses' commandment of love for God, which comprehends the whole law.⁵⁶

that the phrase *facere quod in se est* was avoided by Luther's opponents Cajetan and Eck. Cf. Heiko A. Oberman, *The Dawn of the Reformation: Essays in Late Medieval and Early Reformation Thought*, Edinburgh 1986, p. 108; and WA 2:1-26 and 250-383.

54. Denck: *Schriften*, p. 62:26: "gebott, sitten und recht."

55. *Ibid.*, pp. 62:27-63:1.

56. *Ibid.*, p. 80:11-23.

In accordance with the Augustinian tradition, Denck distinguishes the spirit of bondage from the spirit of freedom.⁵⁷ Denck's interpretation of the New Testament is also in line with the idea that revelation occurs as a spiritual birth within: the children of the New Law receive God's Word in their hearts when they are born again in the soul's abyss by divine mercy.⁵⁸ Moses and Jesus were true prophets because they led their people not to alien gods but to the one God of Israel; they had one truth and one message: "everything that God spoke through Moses must be fulfilled in truth and in the way in which God spoke through Christ and the Apostles."⁵⁹ Jesus performed miraculous signs and deeds like Moses, but he explained the law in a higher way and liberated his people from bondage differently. Moses knew that after him another prophet would arise, but he did not reveal his knowledge to the people in order not to mislead their carnal wit.⁶⁰ Jesus did not mediate the divine law externally in a written form, but he speaks and writes it in the heart of every disciple, from the beginning of the world to its end.⁶¹

On the whole, the sum of the law and the sum of the Gospel is the same: it consists of the commandment to love God. The main difference between Moses and Jesus lies in the way of their mediation between God and humanity. When Denck speaks of the fulfillment of the law, he thinks of a superseding move from the letter to the spirit, or, from appropriating the law in a carnal manner, be it in Judaism or in Christianity, to understanding it in a spiritual way. Whereas the written law rules as a necessary substitute for the lack of spiritual knowledge in the carnal state, it is void in the spiritual state.⁶² This dialectic raises the question of the function of the law.

2. *The Law's Function: Divine and Human Righteousness.* Denck points out two functions of the law, one being practical, the other judicial. Firstly, the law is practical and pedagogical because God has given commandments in order that they be kept.⁶³ This does not only pertain to the written law but also to the law of love in the heart of Jesus' disciple. Therefore, everybody who re-

57. Augustine's seminal essay on the topic was *De spiritu et litera*, in which he interpreted 2 Cor. 3:6 soteriologically and no longer hermeneutically, as it was common before. John Burnaby (ed.), *Augustine: Later Works*, Philadelphia 1955, pp. 182–258.

58. Denck: *Schriften*, p. 80:29–35.

59. *Ibid.*, pp. 58:26–59:1.

60. *Ibid.*, p. 65:17–26; cf. Dtn. 18:15.

61. *Ibid.*, p. 53:18–20.

62. *Ibid.*, p. 66:9–14.

63. *Ibid.*, p. 58:5–7; cf. Dtn. 32:46.

duces the function of the law to the revelation of human sin makes God a liar because then God would command what is impossible, which places a contradiction in God. Scripture insists that God's commandments are light and not burdensome.⁶⁴ Likewise, Paul mentions that Scripture is for reproof, instruction, and consolation.⁶⁵ In general, Scripture and law in themselves are holy and good, but without the help of the Spirit no human being is able to use them correctly for God's and love's sake, and not incorrectly for the self's sake. The true believer listens to the whole testimony of Scripture and discerns everything according to the anointing of God's Spirit.⁶⁶

Denck acknowledges that no one is able to love God and live according to God's will with the help of the written law. God has to raise humanity from sin, not by external means but by Himself as the mediator⁶⁷ who sends "a burning and piercing word . . . , which points to the life of Jesus Christ that is so bitter to all human nature."⁶⁸ Denck blends this description of God's Word as the word of judgment with the idea of God's Word as the word of love. All particular laws are produced by God's love, but each law can also be withdrawn by love.⁶⁹ The clearest manifestation of this love is found in the union of God and humanity in the life of Jesus, though not in his death on the cross, as Luther claimed.⁷⁰ According to Denck, the union of God and humanity also happens in the believer, when God resigns His deity and a human being resigns his or her humanity. In this event of mutual resignation, a human being is free of the laws of the world and bound only by love for the neighbor.⁷¹

The second, judicial function of the law results from the commandment of love. Denck states that whoever does not know and love God is a sinner. This statement contains four aspects that indicate the similarities as well as the disagreements between him and Luther.

First, as long as a human being sins, he or she is by God's law convicted of unrighteousness and punished for the transgression of God's will. Even if the

64. Ibid., p. 58:15–16; cf. 1 John 5:3.

65. Ibid., p. 63:22–24; cf. Rom. 15:4.

66. Ibid., p. 63:13–14.

67. Ibid., p. 59:33–34.

68. Ibid., p. 63:30–32.

69. Ibid., p. 64:26–27.

70. Cf. Oberman, *Dawn of the Reformation*, pp. 119–120.

71. Denck: *Schriften*, pp. 64:33–65:2. This statement is reminiscent of Luther's description of Christian freedom, which implies that the believer is bound by no one except by Christ and, at the same time, he or she is subject to everyone; cf. WA 7:20–73.

written law can not lead anybody to the truth, it functions as a testimony that someone is not in the truth.⁷² The knowledge of not being in the truth is a precondition for redemption, because humanity can abandon sin only if it becomes weary of it through accusation by the law.⁷³ Thus, the law functions as a reminder of sin. According to Denck, the capital sin is disobedience and unbelief, and it is the result of human selfishness that looks upon its own righteousness instead of seeking God's righteousness.⁷⁴ He maintains that this sin can only be overcome by God's righteousness, which destroys human unbelief by means of the law so that the Gospel and the true faith can become effective.⁷⁵ God's righteousness is part of God's eternal Word, divided into law and Gospel, which kills the unbelievers while it makes alive the believers. Since all believers once were unbelievers, they all have to die in order that thereafter they no longer live for themselves as unbelievers but for God.⁷⁶

On the whole, Denck, like Luther, explains sin as human unbelief and rebellion against God's righteousness. At the same time, his concept of self-abnegation entails a strong emphasis on the human share in the struggle against sin, whereas for Luther such a struggle is possible only against the human will, since human unbelief in God is more fundamental than the wish to be converted or saved by God.⁷⁷

Second, after the event of being identified as a sinner, one has two possibilities: continuing to sin or repenting and humiliating oneself in suffering under the mighty hand of God. Although the law destroys human self-righteousness, it leaves room for a human response to God, since the human soul is the temple and throne of God's glory.⁷⁸ Denck perceives the exchange between God and the soul as an event of mutual activity, whereby the gift of righteousness and mercy stems solely from God. Moreover, the being of the human in God is a consequence of God's being in the human. This does not imply a fusion of the divine and the human because "that within me but not of me"⁷⁹ remains the driving power of Christian faith. Nevertheless, Denck does not mention that Jesus took human sin upon himself since he does not relate God's work in the believer to Jesus' death on the cross.

72. *Ibid.*, p. 60:2–5.

73. *Ibid.*, p. 59:26–28.

74. *Ibid.*, p. 91:25–26.

75. *Ibid.*, p. 22:29–32.

76. *Ibid.*, p. 23:3–10.

77. Cf. WADB 7:6:27–34.

78. Denck: *Schriften*, p. 101:29–30; cf. 2 Cor. 6:16.

79. *Ibid.*, p. 21:16.

Third, Denck argues for the possibility of universal salvation by affirming that everything has been created in God's goodness. Moreover, God's primordial word is present in the heart of every human being, where it can be accepted or rejected freely.⁸⁰ This does not imply, however, that everybody will be saved. Denck's idea of grace follows the classical tradition that applies God's mercy to the elect and God's justice to the condemned. He claims that God will reward everyone according to his or her works; eternal punishment to an evil person, according to divine righteousness, and eternal life to a good person, according to divine mercy.⁸¹ Thus Denck understands the salvific righteousness of faith not as a passive righteousness (*iustitia passiva*) freely bestowed on the human being, but as an active righteousness (*iustitia activa*) acquired and enacted through human works.⁸²

Denck's idea of the righteousness of faith thus gains a distributive quality, even if it is distinguished from the righteousness of the law. It is the believer's task to restore to God "everything that belongs to Him, that is, everything that we have and are capable of."⁸³ Denck points out that even according to Paul, not all works should be repudiated. Furthermore, the criterion of good works is not an expression of self-righteousness, but good works are a result of the believer's self-denial,⁸⁴ whereby the act of self-denial makes a human being more pleasing to God. This entails that the understanding of divine predestination as an expression of human inability and God's gracious freedom⁸⁵ can lead to self-righteousness and false humility; it separates God's mercy from God's justice and denies the salvific meaning of self-denial.⁸⁶

Lastly, although Denck asserts that being in God must be accompanied by a godly life, he strongly affirms that salvation does not stem from ourselves. God is present as creator in all creatures, but God is not created or controlled by them. If someone lives in the truth, he or she is conforming to God's will and commandment. In this way, God's Word remains the driving force of human obedience: as God does not seek or will Himself when He provides the creature with the occasion to repent, so the believer does not follow his or her

80. Ibid., p. 90:5–18.

81. Ibid., p. 107:29–31.

82. Ibid., p. 90:18–23.

83. "dise gerechtigkeit ist bereyt und begert grüntlich, Gott ... alles das widerzustellen, so im zugehörig ist, das ist alles, das wir haben und vermögen." Ibid., p. 79:16–18.

84. Ibid., p. 42:22–26; cf. 1 Cor. 6:9.

85. Cf. WA 18:685–686 and 722.

86. Denck: *Schriften*, pp. 96:32–97:4.

own will but God's will to love God and the neighbor.⁸⁷ When enmity toward God's law and unbelief are overcome through God's power, the law and the Gospel are heard and discerned with righteous ears.⁸⁸ In other words, the discernment of the law through the letter of the Old and New Testaments can never be achieved without God's Spirit. This Spirit points to Jesus as the perfect example of obedience to the law. Nevertheless, the believer's works are not meritorious in themselves because when one lives in the truth, one's reason, will, and power belong to God rather than to oneself.⁸⁹

In sum, although Denck stresses the spiritual character of God's law, he does not think of the law as a burden that accuses the human conscience and from which the justified is liberated through Christ. Whereas Luther insists that the law reveals sin but never leads to forgiveness, Denck says that through the law sin and unbelief are overcome because Jesus obeyed the law spiritually, in order to set an example for His followers to do the same. At the same time, Denck agrees with the Lutherans in speaking of an alien righteousness in the believer: "if God is in me, then everything is in me that belongs to God: omnipotence, righteousness, and mercy."⁹⁰ This idea clearly corresponds to Luther's thesis that God's righteousness is imputed to the believer, although Luther would limit the exchange to the communication of righteousness.⁹¹

The difference between Denck and Luther consists in Luther's understanding of the exchange between God and the soul as humanity's justification for the sake of Christ's person and work (*propter Christum*), which is rooted exclusively in the union of the Logos with the human being Jesus of Nazareth.⁹² For Denck, however, the exchange refers to the union of the believer's soul with the impersonal Logos, and it therefore remains unclear how far Jesus, by offering his life as a sacrifice for humanity's reconciliation with God,⁹³ acted as the mediator who took away human sin.⁹⁴ Thus, although Luther's understanding of righteousness appears in Denck's theology in a modified version, the fundamental Lutheran distinction between law and Gospel, which was responsible for Luther's new position "independent of the whole medieval scho-

87. *Ibid.*, pp. 32:33–33:7.

88. *Ibid.*, p. 60:26–30.

89. *Ibid.*, p. 53:32–33.

90. *Ibid.*, p. 32:18–20.

91. WA 2:146.

92. WA 7:25.

93. Denck: *Schriften*, p. 39:21–22.

94. *Ibid.*, p. 85:20–22.

lastic tradition,⁹⁵ is rejected. Moreover, Denck does not accept the idea that God's righteousness is revealed at the cross as Christ's righteousness⁹⁶ and is given to the faithful through faith and not through works. In short, he does not integrate the Augustinian dialectic of letter and spirit into the Lutheran dialectic of law and Gospel. For him the Gospel remains identical with the spirit, over against the letter, of the law.⁹⁷

V. CONCLUSION

The theology of Hans Denck focuses on God's spiritual presence in the believer and on God's revelation of true love in Jesus. On the one hand, Denck insists that God's initiative toward salvation always comes first, and whoever truly seeks God has already found Him. On the other hand, he maintains that God's Word appeared in Jesus, in order that humans become deified and walk in the way He pioneered. Jesus is the example of perfect union with God. Thus Denck interprets the unity of the Word of God as God's saving right-

95. Oberman, *Dawn of the Reformation*, p. 114.

96. Cf. *ibid.*, p. 120.

97. This point also explains Denck's view of Scripture. It is crucial to notice that this issue has a theological and not merely a hermeneutical impact, but unfortunately almost no interpreter has given due attention to this point, although it was already highlighted by Denck's theological opponents. When Bucer criticized Denck for refusing to ground every theological teaching on the Word of Scripture, the critical question was not the formal authority of the written Word, since both sides regarded the Bible as a means of God. What was at stake, was the sufficiency of Scripture for the believer's knowledge of God and of salvation. – Bucer claimed: "Dann die schrift weißmachtet zuor seligkeit, ... und leret alles guots, deshalb wer sein lere nicht wil lassen nach derselbigen gericht werden, de muoß auch keyn guote lere fueren." Robert Stupperich (ed.), *Martini Bucer Opera Omnia*, 9 vols., Gütersloh 1960–65, 2, p. 238. He pointed out that Denck regarded Scripture as an external testimony to an internal truth, but not as an instrument that God uses in order to create faith. Similarly, the Nuremberg clerics argued against Denck in 1525: "Gott gibt den glauben, er gibt in aber auch durch mittel des gehors ... Das gehor kombt aus predigen oder schreyben, also bleybt Gott der werckmeister und die schrift oder predigtambt der werckzeug, und als wenig ein werckmeister an werckzeug ettwas volenden kan, als wenig will Gott den glauben geben den, die sein schrift oder predig verachten." Denck: *Schriften*, 3, p. 138. – Both sides regarded the Bible as a testimony to God's grace, but the Lutheran point of departure from the medieval tradition is marked by the concept of Scripture's "external clarity," which is found not simply in the written letter but in the proclamation of the Word (WA 18:609.). This implies that God's Spirit reveals God publicly and not only in private, as Denck, in line with the mystical tradition, holds. In this context, the slogan "Scripture alone" expresses the belief in justification through grace by faith alone.

eousness in the Gospel and the law, whereas the Lutheran teaching ascribes this righteousness to Christ's presence in the Gospel but not in the law. Denck does not distinguish between law and Gospel in the way the Lutherans did, since for him the notion of the Gospel only plays a minor role; he understands the Gospel as the human proclamation of God's love in Christ's resurrection,⁹⁸ but not as the content of this proclamation, i.e., the person and work of Christ. God's Word is identified with the law and with God's will within the believer but not with Christ's presence in the proclamation of the church.

If the preceding analysis is accurate, it follows that the main reason for Denck's disagreement with the Lutherans is not rooted in a different idea of human depravity, as many interpreters have claimed. Resembling most Lutheran theologians, Denck acknowledges mortal sin as the fundamental condition of humanity and the reason for God's just punishment. The heart of the contention is the concept of justification. Therefore, the conflict is not rooted in Denck's alleged universalism. In this regard, Packull's argument that for Denck the "God of love could not punish the sinner vindictively and eternally"⁹⁹ is only half right, since it wrongly assumes that Denck took universal salvation for granted, which is not the case, as we have seen. Both sides presuppose that God does not seek the death of the sinner (Ez. 18:23). But whereas for Luther God justifies the sinner, Denck holds that God does not raise up anybody against one's own will; those who do not fear and love God through repentance, God also cannot love.¹⁰⁰ According to Denck, God does not command what is impossible, and God, by His very nature, does not justify the godless. This idea of grace dissents from Luther's theology, which entails that God's love does not find its objects but has to create anew what it loves. According to Luther, sinners are acceptable to God because God loves them, but God does not love them because they are acceptable.¹⁰¹ He therefore argued that sin is not merely a transitional stage but a fundamental opposition to God's will.¹⁰²

98. Denck: *Schriften*, p. 80:34.

99. Packull, "Fugitive from Dogmatism," p. 69.

100. "Wer in nit fürcht und liebet, den kan er auch nit lieben ..., ob er wol alle wunderberlich lieb hat ... Dann wa er dem lieb erzeyget, das ime widerstrebet, so thete er eben, daß er unnß verbeut, würffe den hunden das heilthumb für ...; das sei ferr von ime." Denck: *Schriften*, pp. 99:33-100:2.

101. WA 1:365.

102. Cf. Leif Grane, *Modus loquendi theologicus: Luthers Kampf um die Erneuerung der Theologie (1515-1518)*, Leiden 1975, p. 50.

Moreover, Denck holds that the Word of God is one and the same, with or without grace, whereas the Lutherans distinguish the two-fold character of God's Word as law and Gospel. He maintains that the law can be fulfilled and does not regard the law as an expression of God's wrath which condemns the sinner. This is particularly visible in his interpretation of Paul. Commenting on the thesis that Jesus Christ took upon himself the law's curse in order to redeem humanity from it (Gal 3:13), he maintains that the true believer is willing to suffer in self-denial from all the law's curses in order that God's will alone be fulfilled.¹⁰³ Denck's theology does not share Luther's emphasis on Christ's vicarious suffering "for us" as the center of salvation and the claim that human solidarity with Christ is a consequence but not a condition of Christ's solidarity with humanity.¹⁰⁴

Finally, the question arises whether Denck stands on common ground with Protestantism. If one distinguishes Protestantism theologically along the lines of the four *solae*, the answer is no. Denck's christology shows a strong mystical influence, and his understanding of the law stands in line with most medieval traditions. "Whether Old or New, both Testaments fall in the same category: *Lex*. With the medieval tradition [Denck] asserts that due to interiorization, origin, and effect, the two laws differ ... [Yet] though the quantitative difference between the laws is clearly acknowledged, both their dispensers fall in the category of *Legislator*."¹⁰⁵

Denck's thinking clearly resembles the evangelical spirit of Luther's critique of the Roman Church. At the same time, it is rooted in the idea of active self-denial¹⁰⁶ and does not accept the concept of justification through the incarnate Christ alone, through grace alone, through Scripture alone, and by faith alone. Denck thus dissents from Luther's fundamental thesis that "Christ is not a legislator, but the one who pays off¹⁰⁷ the law; every legislator is the

103. Denck: *Schriften*, p. 66:20-22. Cf. WA 40/I:434.

104. Weaver notices a distinction between *Gelassenheit* as the "real" Christ and the person of Jesus. He argues that "to see Christ spiritually requires solidarity with Christ, [thus] the solidarity principle ... makes Jesus more than a 'mere' example for Denck." Weaver, "Discipleship Redefined," p. 269. Still, this principle does not convey that Jesus' life was salvific and that it was really God who acted in Jesus.

105. Oberman, *The Harvest of Medieval Theology*, p. 119.

106. Cf. Meister Eckhart's admonition that "love cannot be lazy" and that "those who are given to the life of contemplation and avoid activities deceive themselves." Ray C. Petry (ed.), *Late Medieval Mysticism*, Philadelphia 1957, p. 207.

107. For this translation of "impletor," cf. Jan Frederik Niermeyer, C. van de Kieft (eds.), *A Medieval Latin-French/English Dictionary*, Leiden 1976, p. 515.

minister of sin since sin takes occasion by the commandment."¹⁰⁸ Instead, the person of Christ and the Words of Scripture are above all an ethical authority, whereby he refers to the teachings of Jesus and the biblical texts that point to God's judgment as the ultimate criterion of justice and salvation: "Whoever truly fears God indeed remains safe from His wrath, but towards an evildoer, even God's mercy serves for condemnation."¹⁰⁹ This claim also explains Denck's repeated warnings against the alleged spiritualist indifference of Lutheranism, notwithstanding the spiritualist emphases of his own theology.¹¹⁰

In conclusion, the case of Hans Denck provides a good example of the theological diversification of the Reformation. This process began in Wittenberg as early as 1522, over the question of Christ's presence in the Lord's Supper, and received wide public attention through Luther's controversy with Erasmus in 1525, over the question of the human will towards salvation. Against this background, Denck's attack on the Lutheran understanding of the law, set forth one year later in 1526, must have been regarded by many as an epilogue to a battle already fought. By then, the attention of the Lutheran reformers was fully directed toward rebutting radical groups of the Reformation, and theological controversies like the one with Hans Denck were submitted to that goal. It remains the task of contemporary historians to analyze and evaluate the underlying theological differences with more *Gelassenheit*. Denck's work should be understood neither as the completion of the magisterial Reformation nor as an unnecessary appendix to an already closed case but as a genuine theological alternative to Lutheranism.

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ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Im vorliegenden Aufsatz werden die theologischen Schriften Hans Dencks vor allem im Hinblick auf ihre Kritik an Luthers Rechtfertigungslehre analysiert. Im Gegensatz zu Luther sah Denck das Gesetz Gottes nicht nur als Mittel zur Verurteilung der

108. WA 2:494:9–11.

109. Denck: *Schriften*, p. 56:28–29.

110. Cf. *ibid.*, p. 56:22–23: "Wee dem, der Gott kennet und des flaisches knecht ist."

Menschen für ihren Unglauben. Vielmehr behauptete Denck, auch das Gesetz enthielte Gottes errettende Gnade, die nach Luthers Verständnis nur im Evangelium zu finden sei. Denck hatte also nicht nur ein anderes Menschenbild als Luther, sondern auch ein dem Luthertum entgegengesetztes Verständnis der Gnade Gottes. Obwohl er mit Luther hinsichtlich der Kritik an der römischen Kirche übereinstimmte, blieb Dencks Theologie der mittelalterlichen Tradition von Christus als Gesetzgeber verhaftet. Insgesamt sollte die Forschung deshalb die Theologie Dencks als eigenständige Alternative zur lutherischen Theologie begreifen.