

An Early "Baptist" View of Scripture.

"SALVATION does not depend upon acquaintance with the Holy Scriptures, however useful and good they may be for this purpose."

That will perhaps appear a strange or even startling declaration to many readers. On what grounds its author rested it, we will inquire presently. But first let us see who the author was. He was one who held believers' baptism. Now supposing we knew this, and nothing further, we might naturally conclude him to be a Baptist of the latest times, and even then, one of the "left wing." No such thing! He was an Anabaptist, i. e., a Baptist of early Reformation days; and what is more, by the testimony of foes as well as friends, he was one of the most gifted, trusted and influential of the leaders of the infant community. If, indeed, we have regard to consecrated abilities and purity and beauty of character, there is perhaps hardly a nobler figure to be found in the whole Reformation movement. Hans Denck is the man. Before detailing his views upon Holy Scripture, let us make a very brief survey of his life and work.

Of his early days scarcely anything is known. He appears to have been born in Bavaria about the close of the fifteenth century, and he graduated as Master of Arts in Basle. That he was a man of uncommonly good education is sufficiently proved by the fact that before the end of his short life he produced, in conjunction with another Anabaptist scholar, L. Hätzer, a translation of the Old Testament prophets from the Hebrew. Of this translation Martin Luther, while disparaging it in public on the ground that a heretic could not rightly interpret the scriptures, made, we are told, considerable use in his own version of that part of the Bible. At Basle, Denck heard the Lutheran Oecolampadius lecture on Isaiah. But the views which he advocated subsequently show him more indebted to a reading of Tauler and other of the German mystics of the later middle ages.

Fuller information about his doings begins with the autumn.

of 1523, when, on the recommendation of Oecolampadius, he was appointed rector of the school of St. Sebaldus at Nürnberg. The new order had already been introduced there, under the leadership of Osiander. But the moral results were sadly disappointing. Luther's insistence that a man is justified by faith in Christ alone, apart from any performance of the works of the law became a pretext for grave licentiousness. It was especially this antinomianism that made Denck seriously dissatisfied with the teachings of the Reformers. In 1524 he was already involved in a controversy with Osiander. Its immediate subject was the Eucharist. Unfortunately no details have come down to us. Perhaps Denck was scandalised by the admission of manifestly unfit persons to the Lord's table. Whether this were so or not, it is likely that he thought already of the presence of Christ as experienced only by a soul truly surrendered to His will, and accordingly stumbled at the materialistic association of that presence in the Lutheran doctrine, with the elements of the supper. In December there was a disputation before the magistrates, after which Denck was required to submit a confession of his faith. This he did. In January 1525 he was sentenced to banishment or imprisonment. He withdrew from the city, but was pursued by calumnies which increased the difficulty of finding permanent harbourage elsewhere. Among other charges, he was reported to make light of the scriptures, but especially to teach disobedience to the civil authorities—an accusation which, in his case, had not a shadow of foundation. For his part Denck besought forgiveness from his persecutors for any wrong he might unwittingly have done to them. Throughout his life he shows a pathetic longing to be at one with all his fellow-Christians. He acknowledges himself a man "who has erred, and may err again." He professes that he will never seek to retaliate for any injury he has experienced. In face of persecution he contends that "in matters of faith, all should take place freely, voluntarily, and without coercion."

Denck went first to St. Gall, where he found domicile with an Anabaptist. Here he published a little book, which is in effect an expansion of the principles announced in his confession. ("He who truly cares for the truth, may prove himself herein," etc.). It is the chief source for a knowledge of his views on scripture.

By the summer of 1525, the Anabaptists were in conflict with the magistrates of St. Gall, and Denck moved again, this time to Augsburg, where friends obtained for him liberty to teach. Here he was brought into full communion with the Anabaptists, apparently through the instrumentality of their

eminent leader, Balthazar Hubmeier. There followed a rapid growth of their community, and its extension to other cities of upper Germany; but also a keen attack upon them, which singled out Denck particularly as its object. He fled once more to Strassburg, where the reforming leaders were inclined to look with favour on the Anabaptist positions. There Denck published books against Luther's denial of freewill and of the obligation of Christians to perform the law. The cause made rapid headway. But Zwingli, the leader of the Swiss Reformation, was able to force a persecuting policy upon the heads of the Strassburg Church, with the result that Denck was soon driven from the city.

After some wanderings he was called to the help of the Anabaptists in Worms, and came thither early in 1527. Here he published his translation of the prophets, and also a beautiful book, *Of the true love*. Again the propaganda began to achieve wide success, and again it provoked persecution.

Denck now returned, perhaps by way of Switzerland, to Augsburg. He presided there over a conference of Anabaptists, and was sent by them on a mission to Switzerland. In the autumn of 1528 he came once more to Basle, worn and weak in body, and troubled in mind by the failure of his endeavours to promote unity among Christians and by the increasingly political complexion that some Anabaptists were now giving to their movement. He appealed to his old teacher, Oecolampadius, to procure him liberty to rest there awhile, admitting his fallibility and expressing regret for some harsh utterances into which he had been betrayed. Oecolampadius met him in a friendly spirit, apparently hoping to win him back from his errors. He induced Denck to write another confession, which might serve to remove misconceptions as to his views. This Oecolampadius presently published under the entirely misleading title of a *Recantation*. But before this Denck himself was dead, his undermined constitution having succumbed to the plague.

After this brief statement as to who Denck was and what he did, we will now return to the question of his views of scripture. It would indeed be an interesting study to outline his religious teaching in general; but as this would demand far more than the space at our disposal, we shall only refer to it so far as may be necessary to the explanation of our immediate subject.

There is, however, one belief of Denck which is fundamental, and which underlies all his teaching—his belief in the "inner light." He holds that man in his actual state is a sinful and miserable being. At the same time he has the consciousness of a sinless and blessed condition, and he

longs for it. This he owes to the presence within himself of a divine spark that gives witness to the holy will of God. It is indeed a spark of the eternal Word; it is thus essentially identical with the Christ, who became incarnate in Jesus. Jesus was perfectly obedient to the divine will. The natural man is disobedient: he pursues the will of the self, and herein lies his sin. He can, however, if he will, conform himself to the light within, though not without the aid of divine grace. The inward light is itself a gift of God. And if only man is *willing* to do the divine will (John vii. 17), straightway the grace that enables him to do it is forthcoming. If he seeks good, God works good in him. "He who truly seeks God," says Denck, "also truly has Him." It is such obedience to God's word, in reliance on God's grace, that constitutes saving faith.

Where, then, does the scripture come in? The answer is that it echoes the inward witness. Man's sinfulness has made it necessary. It serves the purpose of recalling to activity and corroborating that inward witness. But without the concurrence of the latter it could not convince and convert. In the act of complying with its requirements a man in effect accepts the scripture as of divine origin and authority. But how does he arrive at such a conclusion? Denck recognises in the frankest way what we call the human element in the Bible. It consists, he says, of words written with man's hands, spoken by man's mouth, and heard with man's ears. How then do we know that the message which it conveys to us is God's truth? Suppose, says Denck, you were to receive from an unknown person a document which promised you great good, you would not confide in his promises until you were certified as to the character of the sender. What is it, now, that certifies us that the utterances of Scripture are those of an all-wise, all-mighty and merciful God? It is the fact that the voice within us, the religious feeling of our own heart, says the same things. Our conviction of the divine origin of Scripture rests on the coincidence of its declaration with those of the highest instincts of our own nature.

By this time it will have become apparent in what sense Denck affirms the Scriptures to be indispensable to salvation. He means that there is implanted in every man a knowledge which, if he will but heed it—as he can do—will bring him to God. Were it not so, and if salvation depended on knowledge of the Scriptures, it would, he says, be out of the reach of millions of mankind. On the other hand, he is far indeed from making light of the Scriptures. The Scriptures have their value herein, that they testify of Christ. But they cannot give us eternal life. If we would have that, we must, as

they bid us, come to Christ Himself (John v. 39, 40). The true way to show our reverence for the Scriptures is to conform to their precepts. No man can esteem them more highly than he who keeps what they teach, namely, to love God alone with all the heart. People who, while neglecting to do this, extol the Scripture, merely make an idol of it. Denck himself claims to esteem it above all human treasures. And not without warrant. On all points he makes his appeal to the Scriptures; and his mind is so saturated in them that even the expressions and images of which he makes use are constantly those of Scripture.

This paper would remain incomplete without at least a brief indication of Denck's ideas respecting the interpretation of Scripture. He cannot subscribe to Luther's dictum that it is plain and open to the comprehension of the natural man. True, the word of God in itself is clear; but man's understanding is clouded by the darkness of earthly passions which spring from self-seeking. By nature we understand the secrets of God less than animals understand our speech. It is through the play of such selfish passions that divisions arise in the Church of Christ; and each party finds itself upon Scripture. For the Scripture contains passages that, so far as the words go, are opposed one to another. The opposition, however, is only on the surface. "Two counter-passages must both be true, but one is shut up in the other as the less in the greater, as time in eternity, as space in infinity." Here, by a depth and truth of insight at which one can never cease to marvel. Denck lights upon a principle of vast sweep and importance. In the Scriptures we have a heavenly treasure in earthen vessels. There is an eternal truth which in different passages finds a more or less complete expression. From this perception it is but a step to our present day conception of a progressive revelation in the Scriptures—Denck adds, "He who leaves a counter-passage standing and cannot reconcile it, is lacking in the ground of the truth." The business of the expositor is to collect all the divergent passages, and compare and reconcile them. But this task is beyond the natural man. Scripture is not of private exposition, but it belongs to the Holy Spirit, who also gave it, to expound it. Scripture is the utterance of the Spirit of Christ, and only he who has this Spirit can interpret it rightly. And he alone has the Spirit who conforms his life to the divine will. Humility and patience are the signs of His possession.

In his first book Denck collects and deals with some eighty counter-passages. He was especially exercised about the Lutheran doctrine of election to salvation or damnation. He

admits the Scripture passages on which the Lutherans rested their assertion of the condemnation of the wicked, e.g., "these shall go away into eternal punishment" (Matt. xxv. 46), but he sets counter-passages over against them, e.g., "God willeth that all men should be saved" (1 Tim. ii. 4), and he asks why his opponents should *prefer* to believe one set of passages rather than the other. His own heart tells him that God is just and merciful. This suggests the ultimate solution that God's eternal purpose is the salvation of all men, whereas the doom of punishment announced against the wicked is a measure having for its object their conversion from their evil way and recovery to the way of God.

It will be noticed that here Denck's final appeal is to the verdict of the inward voice. Similarly, when he is interpreting the divine declaration in Isaiah, "I create evil." This passage cannot mean that God is the ultimate author of sin: for again, our hearts tell us that God is just and good. Sin He only *permits*, and even out of sin He brings finally good. The evil that He *creates* is the misery that follows sin, and incites the sinner to return to God.

It is remarkable to what an extent Denck succeeded in anticipating views which have gained wide recognition only in comparatively recent times. To specify the details, however, would unduly lengthen this paper, and can hardly be necessary; the observant reader will have noted them for himself. The object of the paper will have been served if it has been made clear that those who accept such views, so far from abandoning the positions held by noble pioneers of our Baptist confession, who sacrificed all their worldly prospects to remain faithful to it, are rather returning to those positions.

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