This is lecture 14, and it deals once again with the continuation of the previous lecture on the mystical radicals.

We have already alluded to the context between the leading personalities among the Saxon radicals and the more unified movement emanating from Zurich. The very fact that we can speak of a more unified movement coming out of the city of Zurich and are forced to speak of individuals when we come to the Saxon radicals already points us to a major distinction between the two camps.

Mysticism, being essentially individualistic, does not easily allow itself to be channeled into a coherent entity. The Swiss Brethren, in contrast, from the outset went about forming congregations based on believer’s baptism and what they held to be the apostolic church model. The one was individualistic, and the other sought to build a new church. The one was anti-institutional, the other was out to create a new institution.

The Brethren in the Schleitheim Confession sought to prepare a unified confessional statement. The mystics never seem to have done so. Aside from these contacts, however, there are individuals who move from one group to the other; but, unless I am mistaken, the movement was all from the mystical camp to the camp of the Swiss and South German Anabaptists. What does this tell us about the relationship between the two sides? This lecture shall deal with three such individuals who, in varying degrees, were important for the Anabaptist movement.

As the first of these, let us look at Martin Cellarius, whom we mentioned earlier as the fellow student of Melanchthon at the University of Tübingen, who had come to Wittenberg during Luther’s absence at the Wartburg.
Cellarius's own conversion experience predisposed him to the ideas of the Zwickau prophets. In his brief autobiography, which is in the archives of the Basel Library, Cellarius writes that after having discussed the stirring events of the day at length with Melanchthon and his friends, he was on a walk one day reading Luther’s *On the Liberty of a Christian Man*. Suddenly, he says, the Holy Spirit illumined his mind, and from that moment onwards, a new love for Luther and for his doctrine began to fill his heart.

As the historian Paul Wappler already argued many years ago, of all the people in Wittenberg, Cellarius was most taken in by the teachings of the Zwickau prophets. Especially their doctrine of the Holy Spirit, which seemed to confirm his own experience, impressed him deeply; but their ideas on baptism and the kingdom of God influenced him as well.

When Luther returned from the Wartburg, Cellarius attended a meeting between Luther and the prophets and reacted violently when Luther condemned them. On April 12, 1522, he left the city as a consequence, returning to Stuttgart, the city of his birth, where turning away from the academic life, he eked out an existence as a glassblower.

Cellarius may still have been in contact with Karlstadt and Gerhard Westerburg, for in October of 1524, he also headed south, spending a number of months in Zurich, where he joined the Swiss Brethren in those critical months before January 21, 1525, when twelve of them baptized one another on their confessions of faith.

From Cellarius’s letter to Oecolampadius of August 1527, it is quite apparent that he had extensive contacts with the Swiss Brethren, especially with Felix Manz. He seems to have been close to their views on baptism, and he was supposed to attend the last meeting between Zwingli and the Brethren on the subject of baptism, which was to be held in Zurich on January 15, 1525; but for some reason he left the city just before the disputation took place. Nobody appears to know the reason why. By June 11, 1525, he was in Konigsberg, where he was detained and forced to submit a statement of faith. According to . . . , Luther’s coworker in Brandenburg, that statement dealt with the Holy Spirit, with infant baptism, and with the glorious future kingdom of God on earth.

Following so hard upon the suppression of the peasants, Cellarius appeared to the authorities a dangerous and unrepentant
revolutionary. He was placed under arrest and once more ordered to prepare an extensive account of his beliefs. He did so in a document that has come to be known as *De Operibus Dei (Concerning the Work of God)*, later published in Strasbourg, the first systematic Protestant statement on predestination. From this already it can be seen that Cellarius does not fit easily into the mystical camp.

Released from prison, he returned to Wittenberg but stayed only briefly and then went on to Strasbourg. For one reason or another Cellarius had earlier avoided the ultimate showdown between Zwingli and his former followers, which took place at a discussion on January 15, 1525; nor was he ever to be rebaptized. But now in Strasbourg, he encountered a variety of Anabaptists, even Anabaptists like Hans Denck, who had been powerfully influenced by German mysticism. However, at Capito's house the two men—that is, Denck and Cellarius—became aware of rather deep differences between them.

Denck was a thoroughgoing advocate of the freedom of the will. Cellarius was a predestinarian. Ludwig Haetzer, who was also present, also condemned Cellarius's views. Felix Manz's execution on January 5, 1527, brought out further differences between the two. Cellarius, along with Bucer and Capito, defended Zwingli's role in the affair. Denck and Haetzer condemned it. Whereas Cellarius always retained an ambivalent attitude toward infant versus adult baptism, his adherence to the doctrine of predestination put him clearly on the side of the Reformers, though none of the Reformers were ever quite comfortable with him.

A second person to have extensive contact with the South German Anabaptists was Hans Hut. We hear of Hans Hut for the first time as a follower of Heinrich Pfeiffer in Mühlhausen, Thuringia. Heinrich Pfeiffer, a runaway monk who began to reform the city of Mühlhausen well before Thomas Müntzer arrived there in August of 1524, appears to have attempted to introduce the gospel into that city, quite apparently under authority of the Nuremberg Edict of 1523, but in a manner that aroused fear in the local authorities. In any case, when Müntzer joined Pfeiffer in the city and began to create Christian leagues—leagues based on the example of King Josiah in the Old Testament, which were intended to defend the gospel—Hans Hut's name appears on one of the lists of such a league.
Hans Hut was a book peddler who traveled between Nuremberg and Wittenberg, and he may also have met Karlstadt in Allmende and Müntzer in Auerstedt earlier. He apparently traveled to Nuremberg in the fall of 1524, together with Heinrich Pfeiffer, where he attempted to have Müntzer’s *Aussgetruckte Emplössung* published, his express expose, a tract that was a virulent attack on Luther. In Nuremberg, he appears to have contacted Hans Denck, the rector of Saint Sebald’s School, who would eventually baptize him. Shortly afterwards, Hut was expelled from his home town of Bibra because he refused to have his third son baptized. Whether this action stemmed from his contacts with Heinrich Pfeiffer, with Karlstadt, or with Thomas Müntzer is unknown.

Hut was also present at the famous May 15, 1525, Battle of Frankenhausen, where the Thuringian peasants were defeated and slaughtered en masse. It was his description of that event that detailed Müntzer’s role in it; and God’s avenging angel, which Müntzer had himself invoked in that battle, was to continue to play a powerful role in Hut’s thinking.

Where Hut made contacts with the Anabaptists is not quite certain, but since Denck baptized him on Pentecost day 1526, an appropriate day for one who emphasized the role of the Holy Spirit, it may well have been Hans Denck who introduced him to Anabaptism. Though Hut had been rebaptized, like the early church fathers who organized Christianity in their inherited neo-Platonic categories, Hut saw Anabaptism through Müntzer’s theology—especially through his eschatology. Like Thomas Müntzer, Hut remained convinced that God had destroyed the peasants because they had fought for selfish materialistic ends rather than championing God’s honor. After the battle, Müntzer and Pfeiffer had been executed and had had their heads put on pikes outside the gates of Mühlhausen; and so Hut came to identify them as the two witnesses of Revelation 11:3.

Since Müntzer had been mistaken about the time of harvest—that is, about the end of the age—Hut now placed it at Pentecost 1528, three years after the Battle of Frankenhausen. Buttressed by the Old Testament prophetic passages, Hut argued that the Turks, supported by the godly, would serve as God’s instrument of punishment. But who were the godly? Hut discovered these in the Anabaptists, a group being formed since the time of the Peasants’ War. So he was himself baptized and began a frenzy of activity to win and baptize others in order that the 144,000 could be gathered quickly. According to Revelation 7:2, he understood
the baptism he had himself received from Denck as the sign of the sealed who were to be spared in the coming judgment.

He began his missionary activity in the regions most affected by peasant unrest in Thuringia and Franconia. From there, he moved south, coming to Nikolsburg in Moravia, where Hubmaier held sway, in the spring of 1527. Here, as we shall see later, a very important debate took place between a slightly modified Swiss Anabaptist position in Hubmaier and the modified position of Thomas Müntzer in Hans Hut.

So strong were the feelings against Hut in Nikolsburg that he was imprisoned there, but he escaped, traveling through lower and upper Austria, where he established conventicles in Vienna, in Steyr, in Linz, in Freistadt, in Salzburg, and in Passau. The authorities, who had begun to persecute his followers in Franconia, now also began to persecute those in Austria, destroying his disciples with fire and sword.

In the summer of 1527, Hut and his most important disciples gathered in Augsburg to discuss matters. At this meeting Hut forthrightly rejected the Sermon on the Mount as the ethic of the church—an ethic that the Swiss Anabaptists had promoted. Yet he would divulge his end-time predictions only to a select few who were initiated into his apocalyptic secrets. Before he could leave Augsburg, however, he was arrested and condemned to death. In an attempt to escape, he was burned in his own prison cell.

Hut did not live to experience the failure of his predictions for 1528. Like most speculators of the end of the world, he probably would merely have recalculated on his prophetic slide rule had he still been alive. His followers, however, with Hut gone and 1528 passed without incident, faded into the woodwork or joined the pacifist Anabaptists. Of more lasting consequence may be the fact that Hut is thought by some to have introduced Müntzer's communal ideal into the Anabaptist groups in Moravia. This is speculative, however.

Unlike Cellarius and Hans Hut, who encountered Swiss-South German Anabaptism only after their exposure to radical ideas in Saxony, Hans Denck, coming from Bavaria, encountered Anabaptism after his exposure to humanism and mysticism. Born around 1500 in upper Bavaria, Denck attended the University of Ingolstadt from 1517 to 1520. It is not known, however, whether he heard John Eck while at the University of Ingolstadt or whether
he met Cellarius, who may have been a student at the same university during this time. By 1522 he was in Basel and began to associate himself with Oeolampadius, the city’s chief reformer.

In the meantime, he had acquired excellent philological skills in Latin, Greek, and Hebrew—an acquisition which probably points to an excellent humanistic education. In Basel he became a proofreader in the publishing house of Cratander, where he read both humanistic and mystical texts.

We have already pointed to some of the similarities between humanism and mysticism, many of which can be traced to their common neo-Platonic view of the human soul and of the divine spark within man. They also shared commonalities in their disregard for the externalities of the Christian faith. Erasmus, as we have seen, called the visible ritual of the church “superstition” if considered to be an end in itself. The only use of the visible ritual, he said, was as the human point of departure for the pursuit of the invisible, for the pursuit of the spiritual meaning or true reality.

They also both emphasized the moral life, though they may have come at it from different vantage points. Sometime in 1523, Denck came to Saint Sebald’s School in Nuremberg as rector, on the recommendation of Oeolampadius. While there, he encountered Karlstadt’s and Müntzer’s ideas, possibly through Hans Hut and Heinrich Pfeiffer. Because of his mystical-humanist background, he appears to have been receptive to at least some aspects of these ideas. One thing he never accepted, however, were the eschatological or revolutionary overtones of these ideas emanating from Thuringia; nor should his use of mystical theological terminology mislead us into asserting an influence of Müntzer over him, as has often enough been the case. Indeed, it is very possible that Denck came into contact with mystical ideas well before he ever met Hut and Pfeiffer and encountered Müntzer or his followers in the late summer/early fall of 1524.

Perhaps it was after this meeting between Denck and Hut that Andreas Osiander, the chief reformer in Augsburg, became suspicious of him, although there may also have been other reasons for this increasing suspicion of the church and political authorities. Whatever the case, Denck later observed that he now got into a quarrel with Osiander over the interpretation of the Eucharist, whereupon he was reported to the authorities. These called him sometime in December of 1524 to participate in a
discussion on theological issues with Osiander in their presence, but Denck would not allow himself to be pinned down at the discussion. In typical mystical-humanistic fashion, he could move around and play the field a little bit, and so the city magistrates requested a written confession of faith from him. This he finally presented in January of 1525.

In this confession, Denck laid out the following positions. First, he wrote that intellectual assent to inherited theological truths, or any theological truths for that matter, were incapable of saving him.

Second, he said true faith is obedience toward God and the assurance of God’s promises through Jesus Christ. It is, he said in another place, obedience to the Word of God, whether for life or death, with the assurance that it is for the best. This was not exactly Luther’s doctrine and certainly did not endear him with the ecclesiastical authorities in Nuremberg.

Third, he asserted that he too held the Bible in high regard and believed that it contained the truth, if only one could interpret it correctly; but how could one know that these books written with human hands, spoken with human mouths, and heard with human ears were the expression of God’s will and Spirit? Denck seems to be saying here what most mystics said of the Bible, that the Bible was a witness to God’s truth, to His action in history, and to His actions in persons—not, however, the power of God itself—and it was not enough for salvation.

Fourth, what was needed for salvation, said Denck, was one’s own experience of God, something that Tauler had called “the baptism of the Holy Spirit.” This is a very interesting point. What is normative for the Christian? The Word of God, as Luther claimed, or one’s experience of the Word of God? And are all religious experiences alike? If not, can they be normative at all? Luther called such mystics . . . fanatics. Of Thomas Müntzer he said that he had “swallowed the Holy Spirit, feathers and all.”

Fifth, Denck’s experience was based on the soul—indeed, on the presence of God in the abyss of the soul—and the soul’s encounter with the Holy Spirit.

Sixth, he said that he would place his trust in this inner voice, this divine spark within, rather than in some dead letter written with the hand of man. He would await the handwriting of the living God.
within his very soul; and the Bible, correctly understood, simply echoed what he heard and experienced deep within himself.

Seventh, within this context, Denck stressed the essential freedom of the will but also the essential corruption of the human flesh. Deep within, however, man possessed the living Word, and Denck possessed the living Word, which encouraged him to do good. So life became a struggle through which one, hopefully, gradually moved to ever higher levels of perfection.

Eighth, from other places, it nearly appears that Denck was also a Universalist. What is certain is that many contemporaries accused him of holding to Origen’s ancient heresy, according to which even the devil will eventually be saved.

Last, what is also certain is that Denck’s emphasis on the will and the various stages of mystical perfection made him a strong advocate of Christian discipleship. No one, he said, can know Christ unless he follows Him in life. Given this theological perspective, it was not surprising that the Nuremberg magistrates expelled Denck on January 21, 1525. From Nuremberg, Denck made his way to Augsburg, which was shortly to become a thriving center of Anabaptism. Here, in the summer of 1526, he was baptized on his confession of faith by Balthasar Hubmaier. It would be intriguing to know exactly what kind of theological discussion took place between Denck and Hubmaier before the baptism. Did Hubmaier know of Denck’s mystical views? Did Denck really understand Anabaptism, or was he attracted to them because of their moral earnestness?

There can be little doubt that Denck played an important role in the Augsburg Anabaptist congregation. He is even supposed to have presided over the so-called Martyrs’ Synod in 1527, so called because virtually all of the participants were martyred shortly after the conclusion of that event. As a consequence, Denck left Augsburg to go to Strasbourg, where he befriended Ludwig Haetzer, with whom he later translated the prophetic books of the Old Testament—a translation, it has been argued, later used by Luther for his own translation of the Old Testament.

Denck and Haetzer began the work of translation in Strasbourg but completed it in the city of Worms in early 1527. By mid-1527, Denck was forced to leave this city as well, and so he made his way to Switzerland, where he sought sanctuary in Basel with his old patron Oecolampadius. He had already become ill before he came
to Basel, and he died shortly after his arrival; but before he did, he
is supposed to have issued a retraction in Basel—a retraction in
which he regretted having been baptized because of the division
which believer’s baptism had created in Christendom. In the final
analysis, believer’s baptism was not that terribly important to
Denck the mystic either.

These various encounters of mystics with Anabaptists raise
intriguing questions about the communication of the faith during
the early years of the Reformation. How much did the two groups
really understand about each other? In a later lecture, we will
seek to demonstrate that they came to know each other's views
intimately only on occasion, but then the remaining historical
evidence from the period does not tell us everything that we
would like to know about it either.