

Concise church biographies

Gottschalk [c. 804-869]

Gottschalk ('servant of God', also Gotteschalk) was born in Bern and his parents entered him into a Benedictine monastery. When he was about 23 he rebelled against monastic life and asked to quit the monastery; the Synod of Mainz in 829 granted his request. The abbot of the monastery, Rabanus Maurus, contradicted this and appealed to the emperor, succeeding in keeping Gottschalk in the monastery and making him a lifelong enemy.

Gottschalk later studied theology under Ratramnus and then transferred to Orbais in Rheims (France) and was ordained to the priesthood. Here he read Augustine, developed his understanding of double predestination from both Augustine's writings and the Bible and led an early medieval Neo-Augustinian movement, including many fellow monks. Between 837 and 847 he travelled widely in Italy, Caesarea, Constantinople and Alexandria preaching predestination; he corresponded with scholars, preached and debated theologians. Although the Catholic Church hailed Augustine as a saint and formally upheld his theology, in reality Rome had adopted Semi-Pelagianism over time and hated the doctrine of predestination.

Gottschalk taught in Italy in 846 and in the Balkans but his predestination doctrine incited opposition from his old abbot Rabanus, now archbishop, who forced him to face his critics in Germany in 848 at the Synod of Mainz in front of the emperor. Gottschalk presented his doctrine and showed that it was in accordance with church teaching. However, he was condemned and sent to a monastery in Hautviller run by the Archbishop Hincmar of Rheims. The order said, '*We send to you this vagabond monk, in order that you may shut him up in his convent, and prevent him from propagating his false, heretical, and scandalous doctrine*'. Hincmar, a scholar of church law, wanted to get a retraction from Gottschalk.

In 849 Hincmar called a synod at Chiersy where Gottschalk refused to recant, despite threats. The synod condemned him and affirmed multiple heresies, such as conditional reprobation, universal atonement, and God's desire to save all men. The Synod deposed Gottschalk from the priesthood, burned his books, ordered him to be imprisoned in a monastery, and had him publicly whipped. Inside the monastery Gottschalk was flogged in secret and nearly died, but he refused to recant. Some leading clerics protested this.

Gottschalk continued to study and composed his first confession. Hincmar replied to this by warning his parishioners in his tract, 'To the Rural and Simple'. Gottschalk responded with his 'Longer Confession'. The church became split between Hincmar and Gottschalk; different synods supported both. Then Hincmar wrote 'Concerning the Predestination of God and Free Will', arguing that if God reprobates then he is the author of sin, but his work was mainly Patristic quotations and not a match for Gottschalk's theological arguments. Archbishop Ussher reprinted Gottschalk's Longer Confession in 1631 and Gottschalk also inspired the later Jansenists.

Gottschalk died aged about 62 after 20 years of imprisonment. Hincmar stopped his body being buried in consecrated ground.

Gottschalk is important in establishing the fact that double predestination was not an invention of the Reformers in the 16th century but flowed from Augustine's anti-Pelagian writings and has been affirmed throughout history. Indeed, Gregory of Rimini and others formed a strong Neo-Augustinian emphasis in the Middle Ages.

It is not only our right but also our obligation to regard this German Calvin as one of the first heroes of the history of our faith. Hans von Schubert.