

# Reform before the Reformation?

## Comparing Martin Luther and Gottschalk of Orbais

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**By Rob Evans**

### Introduction

Five hundred years ago this October, the German monk, Martin Luther, (probably) nailed his famous 95 theses to Wittenberg's cathedral door. Even the most cautious historian would agree that his outspoken criticism of contemporary Christian practice and thought had an enormous impact on the religious, cultural, social, and political landscape of Europe. As this anniversary approaches, we have an opportunity to consider Luther's legacy and how it continues even in the twenty-first century.

It has often been noted that Luther (and those self-styled reformers who followed him) did not consider themselves innovative or revolutionary. Throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the emerging Protestant Churches emphasised their continuity with earlier Christian thought and practices. It is easy to be so caught up with what changed with Luther that we risk overlooking similar stories of protest and reform from earlier in Christian history. In this essay, I should like to compare the Protestant Reformation with one of these earlier and less well known theological protests.

In the 840s, another German-speaking monk, called Gottschalk of Orbais, had raised similar questions to those of Luther about human salvation. Gottschalk's questions had also aroused fierce controversy throughout the Carolingian Empire, which covered what is now France, Germany, and northern Italy from the early eighth to early tenth centuries (see map overleaf). Luther did not mention these debates (as far as I know), but they were used by later generations of Protestants. One of Gottschalk's sympathisers, Ratramnus of Corbie, was invoked by Nicholas Ridley, bishop of London, at his fatal trial for heresy in 1554. Gottschalk's work was edited by James Ussher, the Calvinist Archbishop of Armagh (*d.*1656). Although western Europe had undergone considerable cultural and political transformation between the ninth- and sixteenth-centuries, early modern Protestants observed a connection between themselves and this earlier generation. Research continues about the lines of transmission between the early medieval and early modern periods. I should like to raise a broader a series of questions arising from these connections.

How much did these two controversies really share? What might this reveal about how controversies are carried out? As the Church today continues to debate and argue, what possible lessons might there be in such a comparison? What is offered here are some initial thoughts, in the hope of sparking further discussion.

## Gottschalk and Luther: theological similarities

Let us begin with the theological similarities, since what aroused interest in Gottschalk among later Protestants was his outspoken claims about predestination and the nature of salvation. In 848, Gottschalk appeared before a synod at Mainz to answer accusations of heresy. He admitted before the delegates his belief that:

I, Gottschalk, believe and confess, profess, and testify...that predestination is twofold, either of the elect to rest or of the reprobate to death. For just as immutable God before the foundation of the world immutably predestined to eternal life all his elect through his gratuitous grace, the same immutable God through his just judgement likewise immutable predestined to deservedly eternal death absolutely all the reprobate, who at the judgement day will be condemned because of their evil merits.<sup>1</sup>

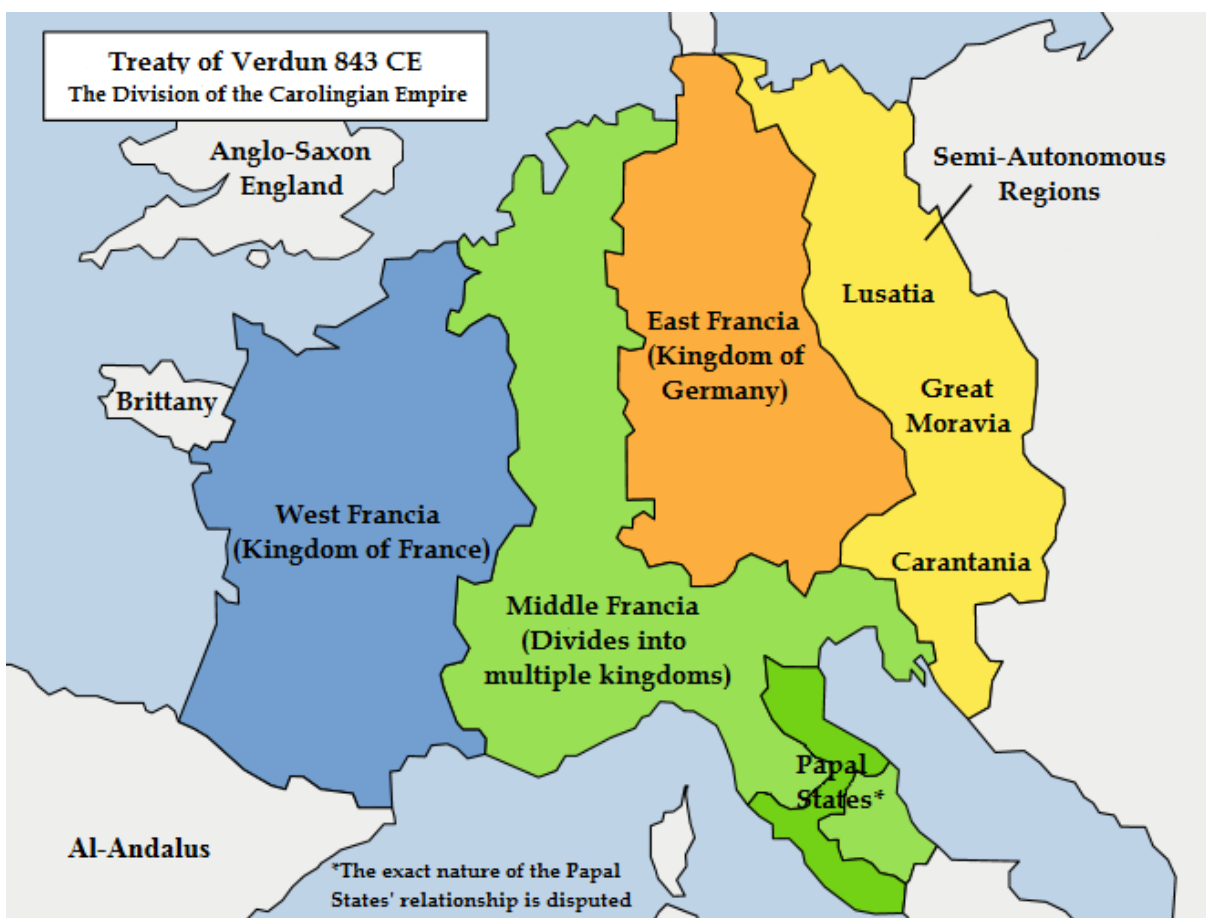


Figure 1: The Carolingian Empire in 843AD, roughly as it remained for the duration of the controversy.  
Image Credit: Christoph S., Wolpertinger CC-BY-SA-3.0

It was this 'twofold predestination' which defined Gottschalk's portrayal in ninth-century public opinion. A contemporary historian, writing near Mainz, noted that Gottschalk, 'held wicked opinions about divine predestination, namely that the good were predestined by God to life and the evil to eternal death' and so was condemned 'reasonably'.<sup>2</sup> Although questions of predestination have been

<sup>1</sup> Gottschalk, *Confession at Mainz*, trans. Genke, p. 68.

<sup>2</sup> *Annals of Fulda*, entry for 848AD.

associated more strongly with John Calvin, Luther debated similar questions with Erasmus of Rotterdam in *On the Bondage of the Will* (1525). Luther asserted that ‘God...foresees, purposes, and does all things according to His immutable, eternal, and infallible will’.<sup>3</sup> Concerning ‘the perdition of the wicked’, the ‘will of Majesty, from purpose, leaves and reprobates some, that they might perish’.<sup>4</sup> As a result of this common emphasis on God’s immutable will, both theologians emphasised the exclusive dependence on divine grace for salvation. Luther famously argued for ‘justification by faith alone’, while Gottschalk that the ‘elect’ had been predestined to life ‘through gratuitous benefit of [God’s] grace alone’.<sup>5</sup>

This similarity was not accidental, since both Gottschalk and Luther were heavily influenced by earlier debates, especially those between Augustine and the ‘Pelagian’ heresy in the early fifth-century. Luther cited Augustine’s arguments against the ‘Pelagian’ Julian of Eclanum,<sup>6</sup> while Gottschalk repeatedly used Augustine, Jerome, and Gregory the Great in his writings.<sup>7</sup> Gottschalk’s statement at Mainz that ‘predestination is twofold’ was in fact a quotation from Isidore of Seville, a seventh-century Spanish theologian.<sup>8</sup> Both debates can be seen as efforts to confront apparent contradictions within the doctrinal legacy of the early Church. The Protestant use of Gottschalk was simply another instance of this process.

Even more fundamentally, Gottschalk and Luther were both driven by the challenges of specific passages of Scripture. Gottschalk reminded his audience that Jesus had promised that ‘my sheep hear my voice...no one is able to snatch them out of the hand of my Father’ and then asked (following Augustine) ‘what can the wolf do [but] destroy only those predestined to destruction?’<sup>9</sup> Luther used the same verses to show that ‘since God has put my salvation out of the way of my will, and has taken it under His own’, salvation was certain, because ‘[God] is faithful, and will not lie, and moreover great and powerful’.<sup>10</sup> In addition to Jesus’ teaching in John 10, Paul’s teaching on predestination in Rom. 9-11 was also used. These and other passages were widely expounded by both theologians against their opponents, who then sought to provide alternative readings to resolve the perceived tensions with other parts of Scripture.

There were, of course, many differences in how Luther and Gottschalk articulated their positions. Gottschalk does not seem to have shared Luther’s specific emphasis on faith as the exclusive foundation for salvation. Luther himself did not seem to have known of Gottschalk. As we have seen, there were sufficient similarities for Gottschalk and his followers to be useful to later generations of Protestants. At the very least, this shows how pervasive certain questions within Christian theology have remained.

## Ninth- and sixteenth-century debates: historical similarities

Predestination was not, however, the only doctrinal question being debated in the ninth-century that would also prove controversial in the sixteenth. While Gottschalk made his case for double

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<sup>3</sup> Luther, *On the Bondage of the Will*, 9.

<sup>4</sup> Luther, *On the Bondage of the Will*, 61.

<sup>5</sup> Gottschalk, *Reply to Hrabanus*, 3, trans. Genke, p. 66.

<sup>6</sup> E.g. Luther, *On the Bondage of the Will*, 45.

<sup>7</sup> E.g. Gottschalk, *Longer Confession*, 7-10, trans. Genke, pp. 81-87.

<sup>8</sup> Isidore of Seville, *Sentences*, 2.6.1.

<sup>9</sup> *Shorter Confession*, citing Jn 10.27-9 and Augustine, *Homilies on John*, 48.6, trans. Genke, p. 72.

<sup>10</sup> Luther, *On the Bondage of the Will*, 164.

predestination, other theologians were debating the Eucharist and the cult of images. The former was debated between Ratramnus of Corbie, who wanted to distinguish between the physical and spiritual natures of the Eucharist, and Pascasius Radbertus who argued that the bread and wine were miraculously turned into Christ's body and blood, albeit perceived spiritually. When Ratramnus was re-discovered by John Fisher, bishop of Rochester in 1527 and published in Cologne by Johannes Prael in 1531, Protestants began to adopt Ratramnus as one of their own.<sup>11</sup>

In the 820s, Claudius, bishop of Turin, had stripped his churches of what he regarded as idols, provoking a furious debate about the cult of images. Again, there were significant parallels with much-studied iconoclasm of Protestant reformers, although in this case it is not clear if Claudius was known in the early modern period. Even the cult of saints itself was being questioned and discussed. While further research is need concerning the extent of textual transmission, it is intriguing that almost every major doctrinal topic on which Protestants and Catholics differed in the sixteenth century had also been discussed in the ninth.

When we take a broader view of their historical context, the debates which Gottschalk and Luther sparked also share certain historical similarities. Both men soon found themselves swept up in debates that eclipsed their own writings. The 1520s saw thinkers across Europe, such as Erasmus, intervening in the debate which Luther had begun. As Gottschalk was condemned at Mainz, theologians from across the Carolingian Empire rushed to condemn, support, or bring nuance to his arguments. Lupus, abbot of Ferrières (c.805-c.862), for example, argued that:

[God] has mercy on those whom he adopts by his grace, he hardens those whom he does not soften by this same grace, and abandons them by a judgement, which, though hidden from us, is nevertheless just.<sup>12</sup>

Lupus was a prominent scholar and theologian and here clearly supported Gottschalk's position (although without mentioning Gottschalk by name). The clergy of Lyons, similarly, produced a corporate response to the debate, probably authored by the deacon Florus (c.810-c.860), who was himself a noted scholar of Augustine. People also changed their minds: Prudentius, bishop of Troyes (d.861) and Florus both became more sympathetic to Gottschalk over the course of the debate.

Neither Gottschalk nor Luther's debates were confined to theologians. Lupus' letter was one of many tracts written to Charles the Bald (r.840-877), king of the west Frankish kingdom (roughly equivalent to modern France). The involvement of secular princes in the sixteenth-century Reformation was decisive. Frederick the Wise, Elector of Saxony, helped keep Luther alive in the dangerous days of the early 1520s. Much of the English reformation was not simply provoked by Henry VIII, but continued to be driven by acts of Parliament and the royal policy of his successors (and similarly halted by Mary I). The predestination debate of the ninth-century was likewise a matter of political concern. Gottschalk was imprisoned by Hincmar, archbishop of Rheims and Charles the Bald's leading adviser. Many of the theologians involved in the debate were associated with Charles' court, because the king asked different theologians to advise him. In 853, Charles himself presided over a synod at Quierzy, which broadly condemned the position of those sympathetic to Gottschalk.

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<sup>11</sup> For which see Matis, 'Ratramnus of Corbie'.

<sup>12</sup> Lupus, *Letters*, 78.

Charles and the west Frankish bishops were not, however, the only group making such decrees about the debate. In 855, a group of bishops met at Valence, in the kingdom of the Emperor Lothar I, to condemn Quierzy's position. As David Ganz notes, the Lotharingian bishops were partly making a statement of independence from their west Frankish colleagues. Although the Carolingian kingdoms shared more of a common culture than sixteenth-century Christendom, there were sufficient political divisions to affect how the debates played out. This was not nearly as strong as an English king wanting a divorce, but it nonetheless helped to shatter any illusions of a consensus against Gottschalk.

In the early modern period, princely support for Luther was matched by interest in his views among the laity. Much has been made of the rise of lay literacy in the early modern period as a result of the printing press and the significance of this for the Reformation. The laity of the ninth-century, however, cannot be dismissed as either illiterate or uneducated.<sup>13</sup> Gottschalk himself seems to have stayed in the mid-840s with Eberhard, count of Friuli in northern Italy. Eberhard seems to have been a learned man, judging from the library bequeathed in his will.<sup>14</sup> The count provided Gottschalk with protection and patronage. Hrabanus, the archbishop of Mainz, wrote with great anxiety to Eberhard that Gottschalk was a 'scandal to many in these regions'<sup>15</sup> Whether Hrabanus' claims that many were already being seduced was rhetorical posturing or factual report, it suggests a closer relationship between clergy and laity and a readier appetite for Christian teaching than we might assume.

### Ninth- and sixteenth-century debates: historical differences

There were, however, some striking differences between how the debates unfolded. The major difference between Gottschalk and Luther was a simple one of outcome. When Gottschalk died in c.867, the debate seems to have died with him. Prudentius and Lupus, who agreed vocally with his views, had died in 861 and 862 respectively. Florus of Lyons had died c.860. Hincmar, Gottschalk's fiercest opponent, lived to dominate the west Frankish Church until 882. No 'Gottschalkian' party survived to continue the debate.

As we saw, the debate about predestination was only one of several debates continuing through the ninth century: the cult of images, predestination, and the Eucharist. In the 1520s and 1530s, someone who agreed with Luther (or another reformer, such as Zwingli) about one of these positions would probably have agreed with Luther on all of them. As a result, 'Protestants' or 'evangelicals' could be defined by their shared views on a range of issues. In the 840s and 850s, no such ideological unity ever manifested itself. Let us take Pascasius Radbertus as an example. Pascasius vehemently defended the 'real presence' in the Eucharist against Ratramnus' 'memorialist' position. In this sense, had Pascasius been alive in the 1520s, he would have found himself arguing for Rome. Yet, as Gerda Heydemann has noted, his writings also exhibit some scepticism about aspects of the cult of saints, which just might have made him sympathetic to Luther. Lupus, by contrast, would have found some sympathy with Luther against Erasmus, and yet wrote not one, but two extant saints' lives, so that the saints would 'assist me greatly by [their] merciful intercession before God'.<sup>16</sup> Ratramnus of Corbie, fittingly the man responsible for Nicholas Ridley's conversion, was alone in combining what would become a Protestant position on the Eucharist with one on salvation. Otherwise, there seems to have been considerable fluidity between different debates.

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<sup>13</sup> See McKitterick, *Carolingians and the Written Word*.

<sup>14</sup> See Kershaw, 'Eberhard'.

<sup>15</sup> Hrabanus, *Letter to Eberhard*, trans. Genke, p. 166.

<sup>16</sup> Lupus, *Letters*, 13.

The Carolingian Church was, in principle, vehemently opposed to heresy and doctrinal deviance. For much of the ninth-century, however, a remarkable degree of debate seems to have occurred without the Church undergoing schism. Gottschalk was the only ‘heretic’ from within the Empire to be condemned and punished so publicly and decisively. This did nothing to stop the debate. As a point of comparison, the ecclesiastical debate of the ninth century which led to bishops being deposed and kings arguing with popes was not about doctrine. It was about Lothar II, king of the central Frankish kingdom, wanting a divorce in the 860s. Whereas Henry VIII used those sympathetic to Luther to achieve his, Lothar’s efforts seem to have remained firmly detached from the subsiding debate about predestination.

It might seem strange that the Pope has made little appearance in this account, given Rome’s importance in condemning Luther. Although the Pope was a significant authority in the early medieval Church, that authority was not exercised to nearly the same extent as it was in the later middle ages. Furthermore, Prudentius of Troyes alleged that in 859, Pope Nicholas I:

faithfully confirmed and catholicly decreed concerning the grace of God and free will, the truth of double predestination and the blood of Christ and how it was shed for all believers.<sup>17</sup>

No such decree survives nor does anything like this appear in Nicholas’ surviving letters. Nonetheless, in a worried letter, Hincmar sent one of his subordinates to Rome to check that Prudentius had been lying. Nicholas died before Hincmar’s subordinate reached Rome, so we shall never know what the Papal position on Gottschalk was. The very ambiguity of the situation, however, reflects the broader fluidity of debate in the ninth century compared with the rapidly hardening positions in the sixteenth.

## What does this tell us about Church debate?

The Carolingian Church cannot be considered beautifully harmonious. Gottschalk was publicly flogged and his books were burned. Hincmar noted with satisfaction that ‘Prudentius died scribbling away many things contrary to the faith’.<sup>18</sup> It would also be unfair to dismiss the sixteenth-century churches as purely intransigent. There were many Catholic reformers with divided loyalties in the 1530s and 1540s. The most famous was Peter Vermigli, who in 1542 abandoned attempts to reform the Catholic Church from within and fled to England. The different experiences of debate in the ninth and sixteenth centuries nonetheless raise interesting questions.

One major difference in approach between Luther and Gottschalk concerned their attitude to the authority of Church tradition. As we saw, Gottschalk’s tracts made considerable use of Augustine, Gregory, Jerome, and Isidore, alongside Scripture. Both sides of all Carolingian debates happily invoked a range of authorities in their favour without ever suggesting (to my knowledge) that these traditions might contradict one another. The tradition was entirely coherent and correct; it was only the contemporary interpretation of the tradition that could differ. Gottschalk and Hincmar agreed that Augustine was correct, but disagreed about what Augustine had meant.

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<sup>17</sup> *Annals of St-Bertin*, entry for 859AD.

<sup>18</sup> *Annals of St-Bertin*, entry for 861AD. What added insult to injury was that this was entered into Prudentius’ own annals!

Although Luther also used Augustine, the *Bondage of the Will* set Augustine against Jerome. Luther called Erasmus' interpretation of 'works of the law' in St Paul's letters 'a notable error and ignorance of Jerome which...has found its way throughout the world, although Augustine strenuously resisted it'.<sup>19</sup> Luther was highly unusual in suggesting that two doctors of the Church might contradict one another, which meant confining authority exclusively to the Bible. This was partly what made Luther so revolutionary.

Carolingian (and most medieval) theologians had argued from identical premises, even if they drew different conclusions. Over the course of the sixteenth century, by contrast, Protestants and Catholics soon found themselves speaking entirely different languages of interpretation. Was Christian theology to be based on Scripture alone, which allowed for earlier saintly theologians to be in error? Or did earlier theologians provide a coherent lens through which Scripture could be interpreted? This may provide some explanation, however crude, for how the Carolingian Church maintained a greater level of doctrinal dialogue. The disagreement over predestination, while very important, did not affect the foundations on which Christian theology rested.

At the same time, the early medieval and early modern churches shared many things with each other but not with modern churches. The most significant shift in the west has been the relationship between churches and political authority. Modern Christian debates only tangentially touch on public debates. The current debates about marriage and sexuality have been exceptional: it may be recent British governments' interest in the sexuality debate which has lent it such ferocity within the Church of England. While modern Christians may welcome the general absence of governmental intervention in doctrinal debates, Gottschalk and Luther's experience suggest that this does not necessarily alter the nature of Christian debate as much as we might think.

Far more decisive seems to be speed with which debates give rise to 'parties' or 'factions' committed to positions on multiple subjects. As we saw above, there was a significant difference between Luther's supporters gathering around a cluster of doctrinal positions and Carolingian theologians who kept several doctrinal debates distinct. It seems that in the former case, the differences between opposing sides expand to include almost every aspect of Christianity, rather than a narrow section of debate.

One might compare this to the question of whether voters in contemporary elections vote on the basis of policy or party. As observers of American politics have noted, the increasing distrust between Republicans and Democrats is partly because they reflect different worldviews in which the opposing party is 'the other'. Questions of abortion, taxation, and immigration simply become border posts along a political frontier rather than distinct policy areas which require separate scrutiny.

At the same time, the premises on which supporters of each party consider such policies also separate, so that mutual understanding becomes almost impossible. The division between Protestant and Catholics in the sixteenth-century was based on a division over the basic premises on which debate was to be conducted: was Scripture alone a sufficient authority or could Church tradition play a role as well? Similarly, left and right-wing parties differ, to take one example, on the basic role of government: for a Republican, government should be limited, for a Democrat, interventionist (to generalise). There remains, of course, a common premise about the need for government as opposed to anarchy, but this is often forgotten. To reverse a cliché, what divides becomes stronger than what

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<sup>19</sup> Luther, *On the Bondage of the Will*, 143.

unites. The shared premises of Carolingian theology did not, of course, prevent acrimonious debates emerging. We cannot know how much worse the debates might have been. It did, however, lend them a different character.

This is the point I think can be taken from this comparison: even where debates are about the same questions, they do not necessarily play out in the same way. The history of theological debate is more than simply the history of the theology involved. It is worth questioning, therefore, how arguments have been carried out and continue to be carried out today. Do we understand the premises from which we and our opponents are proceeding? How far does one topic of debate connect to another? Which topic is more important? Where can compromise be possible and where do we need to have the courage of our convictions? We may find that there are better or worse ways to argue.

I would like to close by acknowledging the courage and integrity of Gottschalk and Luther. As an Anglican minister, I remain deeply grateful to God for Martin Luther and for the Reformation. While their views continue to provoke disagreement, they had the courage of their convictions and spoke out against what they believed to be falsehoods propagated by the churches of their day. It would be a great mistake if we, out of fear of disagreement, remained silent in the face of similar errors. We should not worry *that* such arguments happen, but rather *how* they happen.

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## Further Reading

Gottschalk of Orbais's works were edited from the Latin by C. Lambot, *Oeuvres Théologiques et Grammaticales de Godescalc d'Orbais. Textes en majeure partie inédits* (Louvain, 1945).

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