

## Church History Lecture XV Later Medieval Doctrinal Controversies.

*A lecture delivered by Rev Ronald Mackenzie in the Free Church Seminary.*

### *The Predestinarian Controversy*

As a result of the writings and influence of Augustine (5th century) the church had originally supported the doctrine of predestination against the heretical Pelagius. But soon there commenced a gradual drift away from this accepted truth. The new prevailing sentiment cautiously moved between Augustinianism and Semi-Pelagianism and then towards Semi-Pelagianism itself — giving some weight to the preceding and enabling grace of God yet claiming merit for man's consenting and co-operating will. There were, however, supporters of the Augustinian position. Isidore of Seville (560-636AD) still held to a twofold or double predestination (i.e. predestination of both the elect and the non-elect). Earlier, Fulgentius of Ruspe (468-533AD) had held to a weaker kind of double predestination. Augustinians of even milder form were Bede and Alcuin. But for two centuries after Isidore the doctrines of Augustine were largely ignored with a consequent increase in Semi-Pelagianism. Then in the 9th century a controversy developed around this doctrine through the writings of Gottschalk, a Saxon monk.

Gottschalk (c.805-c.868 AD) was involuntarily brought to the monastery of Fulda in childhood as an "oblatus" — a pious offering by his parents. When of age, he desired to leave but was prevented by his abbot, Rabanus Maurus who held that parental consecration of a child to monastic life was binding upon the child. However, Gottschalk managed to get himself transferred to Orbais where he devoted himself to the study of Augustine and Fulgentius. He became convinced of Augustine's doctrine of predestination and through reading his writings to his fellow monks he won many to this doctrine.

Unlike the popular view of the time which applied predestination only to the elect, and only foreknowledge (*presciti*) to the non-elect, Gottschalk clearly propounded double predestination. To Gottschalk the thought seemed revolting that any sinful creature could ever be able to produce a change in the divine counsels. His views were opposed by his former abbot, Rabanus Maurus who wrote against the doctrine of double predestination, misrepresenting Gottschalk as teaching that divine foreordination placed every man under constraint, so

that although he may want to be saved, and may strive after it with faith and good works, he still labours in vain if he has not been predestined to salvation. Called before a Synod at Mainz in 848AD, Gottschalk courageously maintained his views but was condemned by the Synod. A year later he was summoned before the Synod of Chiersy where he refused to recant and was condemned a heretic. The Synod deposed him from the priesthood. He was publicly scourged, compelled to burn his books and imprisoned for the rest of his life — some 19 years — despite appeals to Pope Nicholas! From prison, Gottschalk delivered his courageous testimony:

"I believe and confess that God foreknew and foreordained the holy angels and elect men to eternal life, but that he almost equally foreordained the devil ...with all reprobate men, on account of their foreseen future evil deeds, by a just judgment to merited eternal death ".

Having been refused communion and Christian burial unless he recanted which he refused to do, Gottschalk died a martyr unshaken in his faith, his conviction of the unchangeableness of God reflecting itself in his inflexible conduct. Although he majored on one issue, he correctly perceived the importance and ramifications of the doctrine of God's sovereignty.

Gottschalk's imprisonment encouraged sympathisers such as Ratramnus, Magister Florus and Remigius to openly support his views. Ratramnus defended Gottschalk's view that, although God was the author as well as ruler of good thoughts and deeds, He was only the ruler and not the author of evil deeds. Magister Florus emphasised that although God predestinated the elect both to salvation and good works, He did not predestinate the reprobate to sin, but only to punishment. It is interesting that in 855AD the Synod of Valence, endorsed a somewhat modified Augustinian system as held by Gottschalk's friend, Remegius. Following Gottschalk's death the controversy seems to have been abandoned until revived in the 14th century by the famous Augustinians, Bradwardine and Wycliffe.

Nevertheless it seems that a small, generally Augustinian, faction survived in the church but not sufficiently influential to contain the widespread theological drift towards Semi-Pelagianism — a drift away from the sovereignty of God. Undoubtedly one reason for this was that the concept of man's free will as qualifying man's guilt and inability, and consequently implying merit, was

helpful in strengthening the Roman church's idea of sacramental mediation in salvation. Semi-Pelagianism having become deeply embedded in Roman Catholic faith, became an additional reason for that Church's hostility to the Reformation.

### *The Eucharistic Controversies*

Before the Roman church finally adopted the dogma of transubstantiation in the 11th century, there were two periods of controversy. The first took place in the middle of the 9th century between Radbertus and Ratramnus. The second occurred in the 11th century between Berengar and Lanfranc.

The controversy was whether the bread and wine of the Lord's Supper literally and actually became the body and blood of Christ (the mystical view), or whether these elements were only a representation of His body and blood (the spiritual view). Church fathers had held both views but Augustine unmistakably held the spiritual view. But the mystical view (i.e. transubstantiation) spread in an age of excessive superstition such as the Middle Ages. Gradually the spiritual view as held by Augustine gave way to transubstantiation.

*Paschasius Radbertus* (800-865 AD) was the first to clearly and unequivocally expound transubstantiation in his book *On the Body and Blood of the Lord* where he clearly taught that "the substance of bread and wine is effectually changed into the flesh and blood of Christ " while "the figure of bread and wine remain ". Radbertus supported his doctrine by the word of institution interpreted in a literal sense and appealed to marvellous instances of the supposed appearances of the body and blood of Christ. The book caused a sensation, but many were not prepared to accept the miraculous proofs.

*Ratramnus* (d.868) strongly and ably opposed the views of Radbertus, and, in a tract which he wrote, concluded that the elements remain in reality what they were before consecration and that *only in a spiritual sense* to the faith of believers are they the body and blood of Christ. " Bread and wine, produce, after consecration, an effect on the souls of believers which they cannot produce by their natural qualities". Unbelievers, on the other hand, cannot receive Christ as they lack the spiritually renewed heart to do so. Hence Ratramnus regarded the Mass only as a commemorative celebration of Christ's sacrifice whereby Christians are assured of their redemption. "How then", asks

Ratramnus, " shall that be called Christ's body and blood in which no change is recognised to have taken place? But since they confess that they are Christ's body and blood....and this change did not take place in a corporeal sense but in a spiritual, it must now be said that this was done figuratively ". Radbertus then quotes Augustine and continues, "...we see then that the doctor says that the mysteries of Christ's body and blood are celebrated in a figurative sense by the faithful ".

Alcuin, Rabanus Maurus, John Scotus Erigene and Florus Magister supported this view. Pope Sylvester II, however, defended the miraculous transformation of the elements by priestly consecration — possibly since it greatly strengthened the power of the priesthood who were thereby confirmed as miracle workers. The pope's view prevailed. No council was called to decide the matter. Transubstantiation won — Radbertus was canonised in 1073 and the tract of Ratramnus was twice condemned (1050 and 1059) and included in the Tridentine Index of prohibited books.

Ratramnus' writings on the subject, however, were preserved and were of benefit to the Reformers more than 600 years later. At his trial in Oxford in 1555, Bishop Ridley expressed his indebtedness to Ratramnus; " This man was the first that pulled me by the ear and forced me from the common error of the Roman church to a more diligent search of Scripture and ecclesiastical writers on this matter".

*Berengar* (1000-1088) was an able dialectician and popular teacher in Tours where he was a canon and head of the cathedral school. During his studies of the Bible between 1040-45, he concluded that Radbertus' doctrine was in error. He disseminated his views through his pupils and thereby caused a sensation. In a letter to his colleague Lanfranc he disclosed that he held Ratramnus' doctrine of the spiritual presence of Christ in the Mass. He admitted a change in the elements to that of a consecrated state but did not admit a change of substance.

As a result of this letter Berengar was tried before the Synod of Tours in 1054 under Leo IX. He only escaped condemnation by the intervention of Hildebrand who invited him to Rome to address the Lateran Council in 1059, but this assembly would not receive his doctrine of a spiritual communion and forced

him to recant and to burn his books. Returning to France, he also returned to his former convictions and wrote strongly against Lanfranc and Nicholas II for their views of transubstantiation, arousing intense hatred against himself. In 1079 a Lateran Council required Berengar to sign a statement which unequivocally maintained the conversion of substance in terms that allowed no other interpretation. Again he recanted and with papal help returned unmolested to France where he died in 1088. While rejecting transubstantiation, Berengar held to a spiritual real presence and participation of Christ in the Eucharist. However, his repeated recantations injured his own cause and indirectly promoted the victory of transubstantiation. Finally, in 1215 the Fourth Lateran Council exalted transubstantiation to the position of a fixed dogma in these words.:

' The body and blood are truly contained in the sacrament of the altar under the forms of bread and wine; the bread substantiated into the body and the wine into the blood by divine power...And this sacrament no-one can in any case administer except a priest who has been properly ordained.'

### *The Images Controversy*

Insofar as this controversy was a factor contributing to the split between the Eastern and the Western churches it had greater historical than doctrinal importance. Its origins go back to the 3rd and 4th centuries when increasing veneration was being shown to the remains of those who had been martyred for the Faith. A tendency to worship departed saints then developed, assisted by the influx of nominal converts from polytheistic idolatry following the cessation of persecution and the establishment of Christianity as the state religion under Constantine. This tendency to saint-worship led to visual representations being made of them. At first, these consisted of paintings but in due course statues were made of their supposed likeness.

Muslims overrunning Christian countries discovered these images and rightly charged Christianity with the sin of idolatry. The resultant reaction led to the *Iconoclastic Controversy* in the East. The emperor Leo the Isaurian (714-41 AD) declared war on the cult of icons. His supporters were called *Iconoclasts* (icon-breakers), his opponents, *Iconodules* (icon-venerators). Popular riots against the iconoclastic emperor broke out in Constantinople and Venice (which threw off its allegiance to the Byzantine empire and became an independent Italian republic). The Emperor Leo's position was not helped by

Pope Gregory II(715-31) who supported the Italian iconodule rebels for two reasons:—

- (1) The papacy accepted the iconodule position as theologically correct (though the actual veneration of icons had not developed so fully in the Western church as in the East).
- (2) Popes objected to the iconoclast emperors' subjection of the Eastern church to state control, making the emperor supreme judge in doctrinal and spiritual matters.

Leo's son and successor, Constantine V (741-75), continued the iconoclast campaign by summoning an ecumenical Church Council in Constantinople in 754 (packed with 338 iconoclast bishops) which condemned idols and required that all images be destroyed and removed from places of worship. However it said nothing about saint-worship, the root cause of images, nor of the use of the cross (the crucifix being banned as having an image on it). But the reform attempt failed.. A *Second* Council of Nicea in 787 pronounced in favour of icons. This has remained, ever since, the Eastern Orthodox Church's position. ( The Council distinguished between *latreia* (=latria, Latin) or divine worship, and *proskunesis* (=dulia, Latin) veneration given to icons). The Church of Rome went further, however, and allowed "graven" as well as painted images, despite a minority opposition from such men as Agobard (d.841), archbishop of Lyons who not only condemned image worship but also saint-worship (which he regarded as a cunning device of Satan to smuggle heathen idolatry into the church), and Claudius, bishop of Turin(814-839

### *Conclusion*

The Trinitarian and Christological controversies were resolved consistently with Scripture. The three later controversies (9th-12th centuries) were all resolved on the side of error — evidence of the growing apostasy of the church, increased willingness to tolerate error and a reluctance to subject church dogma to the light and scrutiny of Scripture. Nevertheless, the truths for which pious men such as Gottschalk suffered were to have a glorious resurrection at the Reformation. These controversies lent weight to the Reformers' claim that there had been opposition to the false doctrines adopted by the Roman church and a continuity of true doctrine in the visible church despite the errors of the official church.