



**GOTTSCHALK**  
SERVANT OF GOD



# OTTSCHALK SERVANT OF GOD

*A Story of Courage, Faith, and Love for the Truth*

written and illustrated by  
**CONNIE L. MEYER**



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to my children,  
grandchildren,  
and children in the Lord



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## PREFACE

Why a story about Gottschalk? Mysteries still surround the life of the medieval monk named Gottschalk. Letters concerning his teaching have been found just in the past century. Drawings included in the book to illustrate the story are only an artist's conception. Perhaps more facts pertaining to this preacher of predestination will yet come to light. Nevertheless, the story of this man, this important man—this often forgotten and misunderstood man—must be told. The links in the chain of church history are not complete without him.

From the time the truth of the gospel was made clear to the New Testament saints in Jerusalem and beyond, and the Nicene Council fought for the truth of the divinity of Jesus Christ in 325, and Augustine battled to maintain the truths of sovereign grace in the fifth century against Pelagius, little development happened in defense of the truth until the time of Luther and Calvin in the sixteenth century. Little, that is, except for Gottschalk. Even Luther and Calvin were not aware of Gottschalk and his stand for the truth of sovereign grace and predestination. Had they known of him, they would have rejoiced.

One might wonder, had God forgotten his church in all those centuries between? Was the truth anywhere to be found or to be preached? The Roman Catholic Church had already begun to decline. The seeds of man's ability to save himself, the seeds sown by Augustine's archenemy, Pelagius, steadily sprang up as poisonous weeds even while Augustine lived. And weeds grow.

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But the truth was still in the hearts and minds of God's people. God was putting it there. Gottschalk is evidence of that.

God was protecting his church, preserving her, leading her, guiding her. No, she was not forgotten. God was leading her throughout all of history, sometimes at a crawl, sometimes at a trot, and sometimes at a grueling gallop—but he was with her all along. Such is the comfort we receive from the story of Gottschalk. God preserves his church. As Gottschalk would say in his characteristic way, “It is obviously seen brighter than the sun and is more clearly apparent than daylight.”<sup>1</sup>

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

**B**ecause of the unique character of Gottschalk's story, a note about the bibliography and references in this book is in order. This story could not have been told without the important work of previous authors and historians. This is especially true because not a great amount of material is available about Gottschalk, particularly in English. This makes what sources are available to be very important indeed.

Ronald Hanko has translated some of Gottschalk's writings from Latin, and with his gracious permission, his translation of Gottschalk's *Shorter Confession* is included at the end of this book, while his translations of Gottschalk's *Longer* and *Shorter Confessions* and *Extant Fragments* are available electronically as bonus material at [www.rfpa.org](http://www.rfpa.org). Victor Genke and Francis X. Gumerlock have also written about and translated some of Gottschalk's writings. Their book, entitled *Gottschalk and a Medieval Predestination Controversy*, was an important source for this story. So were the chapter on Gotteschalk in Herman Hanko's *Portraits of Faithful Saints* and the chapter on Rabanus Maurus in Hanko's *Contending for the Faith*. The bibliography at the end of this book gives a complete list of sources used, although more could be especially acknowledged here.

Kirsten De Vries very ably gave of her time and expertise in various languages to assist in translating some of the sources that could only be found in German, as well as helped to determine how to reference pronunciations of foreign words included in the story.

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The English language, however, does not contain all sounds as they are authentically spoken in foreign lands, so some pronunciations are only approximate.

Along with the translated material already mentioned, two poems written by Gottschalk are included at the end of this book. Working from classical Latin to translate medieval poetry is no easy task. I am greatly indebted to Jason Holstege, Jonathan Langerak, Jr., and Justin Smidstra for their time, effort, and expertise given in this important endeavor.

Marvin Kamps, now in glory, read the manuscript and provided very helpful suggestions and encouragement. Several junior high readers also read the manuscript and jotted down questions or comments along the way. The work of these readers, younger and older, proved to be invaluable and surely has contributed to a much improved book.

Nor can I underestimate the great encouragement and sound, godly advice of a beloved friend, Dena Engelsma, who is also now in glory. Her knowledge and love of literature and poetry were irreplaceable. Her comments always instructive; her wit always delightful—she was helpful even to the very last days of her life. She is appreciated more than words can say.

One's family as well is never left untouched in such a project. I am much indebted to my husband and children. They too were not left out of the evaluation process, and their opinions and suggestions were also very helpful, as well as their modeling for illustrations. I could mention many others besides, such as friends and family, who gave an encouraging word, and librarians who helped find sources.

A work such as this is not brought to publication alone. With many thanks and much credit to all these and more, the following story is submitted to the reader.

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## INTRODUCTION

Those were the days of knights, of kings and queens, and of dynasties. Those were the days of lords and serfs, of monks and nuns, and of Vikings, when monasteries were many and the church and governors of the land shared rule.

Some people call those days the Dark Ages. The days were dark in a way, dark to us. It was so long ago, the details of the history are hard to know. The days were spiritually dark as well. True doctrine was hard to come by, if not nearly lost.

But there was a light. A clear beam of understanding and truth reflected from one monastery, from one courtroom, from one dungeon—from one man. This is a story of courage, of faith, and of love for the truth. This is the story of Gottschalk, the monk from Orbais (Or-BAY).



A knight from the ninth century, ready for battle.

*And I will walk at liberty  
Because Thy truth I seek;  
Thy truth before the kings of earth  
With boldness I will speak.*

—Psalter 326:3 (versification of Psalm 119:45–46)

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## CHAPTER 1



**C**harlemagne (Shar-la-MANE) was a mighty king and ruler who stood almost seven feet tall. He looked as mighty as he was. He spent most of his reign, which was from 768 to 814, going forth to conquer neighboring lands. He won almost every battle. By the time of his death he ruled all of western Europe.

Charlemagne did other important things as well. He belonged to the Christian church of that day, so he was concerned about Christian things. He did not want the people he conquered to be completely destroyed or to be slaves. He wanted all those people to be Christians, and he wanted to rule over them that way. When

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each heathen, idol-worshipping tribe was conquered, he forced the people to convert to Christianity and to be baptized. If they refused, they could be killed. Later Charlemagne sent missionaries to each of those lands to teach the people there what it meant to be a Christian.

How genuine these kinds of conversions were is highly questionable from our viewpoint in history. However, many of the people he conquered did in time come to believe as Christians, at least in part. Charlemagne allowed them to “Christianize” many of their pagan practices, so their change to Christianity was not always a complete change of heart. Yet their change of religion did help to make Charlemagne’s rule more peaceful and secure. His subjects could better understand his laws.

But this tall and mighty ruler was not content to conquer only heathens and lands. He wanted to conquer more. He wanted to conquer ignorance. Although he could read Latin, he could not even write his name. Many in those days could not read or write. That was of great concern to Charlemagne. He wanted the people in his realm to be educated.

He gathered the most famous and best teachers in all the land to come to his palace in Aachen (AH-ken) to start a royal school there. Men who were taught in this school would be educated enough to be able to help govern the land and to be bishops and abbots in the church. In 789 Charlemagne decreed that every monastery in his domain must maintain schools for the children, whether they lived in the monastery or not. Education must be for all.

Toward the end of Charlemagne’s reign a remarkable thing happened. Charlemagne came to Rome to visit the pope of the church and to worship with him. It was Christmas day in the year 800, and Pope Leo III had something special planned for that day. During the Christmas service the pope crowned Charlemagne to be the Holy Roman emperor. Charlemagne may not have been aware that this was going to happen, but it happened all the same.



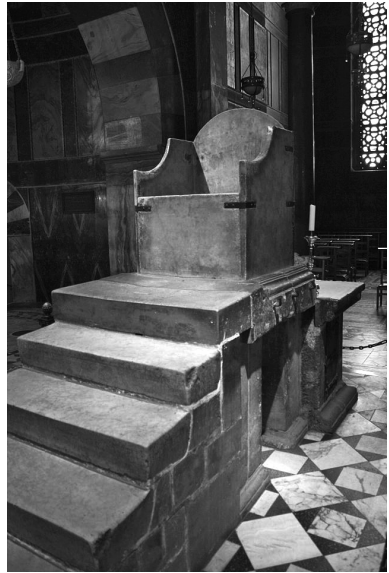
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The pope took the authority not only to say who would be king, but also to say who would be the godlike emperor over the whole realm. And the king, then called an emperor, took the authority to accept the honor of that title and to protect the pope. Each man depended on the other, but at the same time each man wanted to rule over the other. Such rivalries would continue in Europe for centuries.

Those were the early Middle Ages, when there was little separation between the state government and the church, when fierce Vikings

from the north raided and attacked any town at any time, when plagues came and went and left hundreds of graves in their wake, when monasteries dotted the land like leopard spots, and when only one church existed in all of western Europe—the Roman Catholic Church. Those were interesting times in which to live. Those were difficult times in which to live. Those were dangerous times in which to live.

Into those times in 806 an infant boy named Gottschalk (GOTT-chalk) was born.<sup>1</sup>



Charlemagne's throne at Aachen.

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## CHAPTER 2

Count Bernus and his wife received their newborn son from the Lord. They named him Gottschalk, meaning servant of God. Although they were Saxons who descended from a line of pagan, idol-worshiping tribes in what is today Germany, they lived in Charlemagne's Frankish territory then. Charlemagne had conquered that area and brought the Christian religion into it. Count Bernus, probably of noble Saxon heritage, was appointed to the stately, regal position of count after Charlemagne took over. Bernus was loyal to Charlemagne and to the new faith that this new king brought to his conquered land. By their choosing the name Gottschalk, we know that God was in the mind of those parents as they welcomed their precious baby boy into the world.



Count Bernus and his wife received their son from the Lord.

A count in those days was a high-ranking official who ruled an area of land on behalf of the king. Counts had charge over a county, an area surrounding a city or fortress, or a number of towns or villages. Bernus owned a large manor or castle, land, horses, and servants. If he lived in a castle, it most likely was constructed of wood rather than stone, because most of the buildings at that time were wooden. Many castles would be built in the next century,

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and most of them would be built of stone. However the count's dwelling was built, it was a fine home. He was a nobleman who was rich in this world's goods as well as rich in political power.

A count usually had much for his children to inherit. Gottschalk's father did too. Gottschalk could have been brought up in all the luxuries that the early Middle Ages had to offer: soft fur blankets, fine linen clothes, carved wooden furniture, roasted meats, pastries, and more. Many people were very poor in the Middle Ages, but some were very rich. Gottschalk was born into one of the richest of homes.

All this could mean that Gottschalk might be wealthy all his life and that he might receive some sort of official position and lands when he grew up. He could raise a family of his own to carry on the family name; he could own property and have political power. Or he could become a knight to serve and protect his king.

But he also might not do any of those things or have any of those things. Many children of noble birth did not. Many would live in anything but luxury and comfort, with barely a blanket to stay warm in winter and no earthly possessions to their name but the cloaks on their backs. Gottschalk would be one of those.

How could this be? We know a large inheritance belonged to Gottschalk—large enough to be part of a serious dispute later on. So what would account for his birth into a rich and powerful family but living in extreme poverty and discomfort, even as a child?

Gottschalk's parents believed they were doing great service to God by donating their son along with his inheritance to the church.



Charlemagne is known as the first ruling Frank, establishing the Frankish dynasty, the ruling family tree of the Franks. This is a coin from that time, depicting this mighty ruler.

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That was their plan with Gottschalk. Perhaps that was the reason they named him servant of God. They knew where he would go.

Many noblemen did that. Monasteries and convents were not filled with many beggars, poor, and outcast; they were filled with men and women of noble and mighty birth. Joining a monastery usually involved paying a fee, a sum of money the poor could not afford. Besides, joining a monastery was seen as a holy thing to do. The rich had more to lose to prove such holiness. One who went to live in a monastery must give up all earthly possessions and focus on God alone, joining to pray and worship at least seven times each day. A life of self-sacrifice it certainly was, and many wanted to live that way.

Perhaps they made vows to live in such a manner out of sincere love and devotion to God. Perhaps they made such vows to try to earn their salvation from God.

*"Indoors I suffer the icy cold,  
the sight of my frozen bed  
gives no pleasure,  
warm neither when I get up  
nor where I sleep,  
I snatch what rest I can."<sup>1</sup>*

Perhaps an older brother was going to receive all the family's inheritance and the best option left was to join a monastery and try to gain a high position in the church. Whatever their thoughts were about the matter, many chose to live and pray

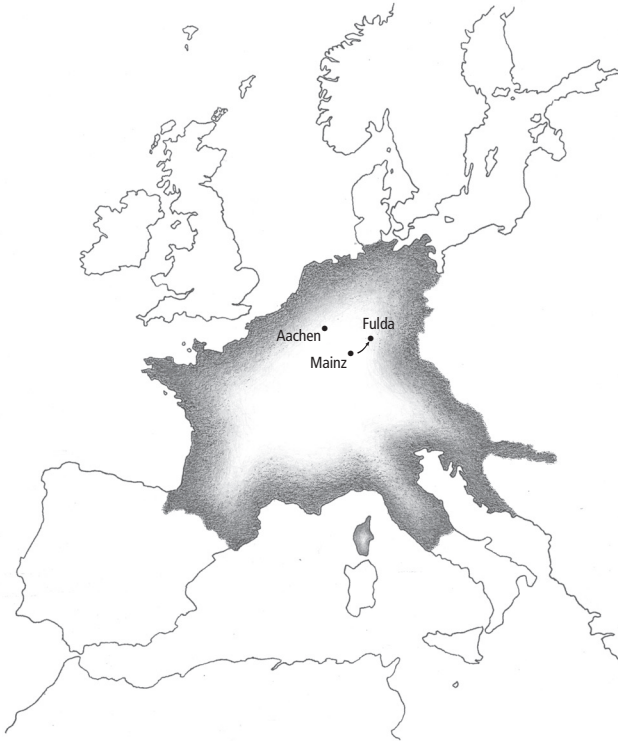
and work in these quiet, solemn buildings and chapels set apart from the world for such purposes.

But some did not choose this life for themselves. Some were brought as young children to live within the quiet, cold walls. Gottschalk would be one of those.

Gottschalk. Servant of God. His parents could not have known how fitting his name would be. The abbot of his monastery would never understand. But God knew his name. God knew his name from all eternity. God would make his name true.

---

## CHAPTER 3



**C**harlemagne, the tall and mighty ruler of the Holy Roman Empire, was going to die. God had given him a long life and reign. A grand funeral procession would mark the burial of this important man in history, while the rule of the empire would pass peacefully to his son, Louis the Pious. The year was 814. Times in western Europe were going to change.

Changes were going to gradually be seen in the whole empire, but changes—drastic changes—were already happening about that time for one boy who lived in the Saxon part of Charlemagne’s



Gottschalk must come along,  
but Gottschalk would not return home again.

kingdom. Gottschalk could have been as young as seven years old when his parents prepared to travel with him from their home in Mainz (Mine-ts) to the monastery in Fulda. Gottschalk must come along, but Gottschalk would not return home with them again.

Children of noblemen were often sent away to be educated, sometimes to another nobleman's home to be tutored there, or more often to a monastery school—to not only learn there, but also to be a member there. That is how the children of the rich were educated in the Middle Ages.

But we can only guess at the thoughts of parents who brought their children away at such a time and the emotions of the children so young who must leave their families.

How does one explain to a little boy that he will never again live at home in his large and beautiful house and never again be in close company with his parents and brothers and sisters? He must go to live with strangers, in service to God, and his life must be strictly ordered as the church says it must be. All his inheritance will be given to the monastery where he will live out his days, never to marry, never to own one object of beauty or worth, much less own one inch of land or property. The church will own him and all his possessions. He will be raised to obey the church in all things. Prayer will be central to every day, and utter silence will be required at every meal, with studying, working, and copying manuscripts in between. This is how monks lived. Gottschalk must learn to be a monk.

Young boys who were brought to live in monasteries were



The monastery and cathedral complex that exists in Fulda today was rebuilt and remodeled in 1712. Two huge towers dominate the architecture of the present cathedral, and those towers replaced two that existed on the same spot and belonged to the original eighth-century building.

called oblates. The practice was not unusual. Other oblates were already living in the Fulda monastery. In fact, Fulda was known for its education. Gottschalk's father might have felt proud to bring his son to such a famous and prestigious place of religious instruction. Fulda was one of the best. Later Gottschalk would appreciate that part of his life, but at this time, all he knew were changes.

A monastery still stands in Fulda, the place where Gottschalk was ceremonially handed over to the church by his parents.

In 744, about seventy years before Gottschalk arrived, St. Boniface, the famous missionary to the German Saxons, had founded the abbey. Boniface wanted Fulda, which was located on the border of wild Saxon country, to be an especially important abbey in the whole of Charlemagne's empire. Boniface made sure the

*Abbey is another word for a monastery, where monks (men and boys) live under the direction of an abbot (a word meaning father). The monks take vows to maintain a secluded and holy life.*

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monastery was built with extra care, to be strong, large, and handsome. In 754 robbers murdered Boniface while he was bringing the gospel to the Frisians, a tribe of pagans living to the north. A special crypt in the monastery still holds Boniface's bones today.

Besides the crypt that holds Boniface's bones, the basilica, a large church with a long sanctuary, was another important part of the abbey. It had two round, high towers pointing to the sky. Inside this sanctuary for worship the pillars and walls were decorated in a fine manner. Monks in the monastery in Fulda were specially trained in artistic accomplishments and other studies. The whole complex was an impressive sight to the travelers as they broke through the dense forests of Germany and saw the buildings ahead towering even higher than the trees.



The whole complex was an impressive sight to the travelers.

“Is that where I will live?” Gottschalk might have asked his father as they neared the monastery. “Yes, son, that is where you will live and learn and grow,” he might have replied.

For Gottschalk it was a new and strange place to live. New and strange things happened here. During the oblation ceremony Gottschalk was led with his parents to the front of the sanctuary,





The music sung in the monasteries was called Gregorian chant, named after Pope Gregory the Great and developed during Charlemagne's lifetime. The songs were the monks' prayers sung all together, reverently, in a kind of wandering melody. Separate measures of rhythm in music had not been invented yet.

to the altar where the bread and wine were and where the priest stood when he performed the mass.<sup>1</sup> Gottschalk's parents then took his right hand and wrapped it in the altar cloth. They kissed his wrapped hand and gave it to the priest, symbolizing their offering of their son to God and to the church. Chanted prayers sung by a choir of monks in low, simple melody echoed between the high stone walls while the abbot, the head of the monastery, poured holy water onto the boy's head. Then the abbot shaved Gottschalk's head, leaving only a ring of hair around his bald scalp. That special haircut, called a tonsure, was a mark of being a monk.

Before the ceremony was even finished Gottschalk's parents were required to leave. Every reminder of Gottschalk's former life with them was taken away as well. The ceremony continued. The clothes he had on, probably an embroidered tunic and a pair of high stockings, were taken off him, and a loose black garment that hung down to his knees was put on him instead. Besides a few extra items, such as a handkerchief, belt, stockings, shoes, and a blanket and pillow for his bed, that was all Gottschalk was left with in the world.

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The deed was done. Gottschalk was a monk. Vows to be a monk had been said, whether by Gottschalk's father or by Gottschalk himself as he was instructed to repeat the words. Final vows would come later when he was older. But for then Gottschalk was a member of the monastery in Fulda, with all its privileges and duties. Many, many duties.



Young Gottschalk became a monk.