

ORDAINED TO ETERNAL LIFE

by James W. Ward

Acts 13:48 says, "And when the Gentiles heard this, they were glad, and glorified the word of the Lord: and as many as were ordained to eternal life believed" (KJV). When I was a boy, a Baptist friend used this passage to prove to me that God foreordains some people to be saved. But is that an acceptable interpretation of "ordained to eternal life"?

Calvinists think so. Albert Barnes says that the Gentiles "were THEN disposed, and in good earnest determined, to embrace eternal life, by the operation of the Grace of God on their hearts" (*Notes on the New Testament, Acts*, p. 215). Earlier, he said that "ordained" is "never used to denote an internal **disposition** or **inclination** arising from one's own self. It does not mean that they **disposed themselves** to embrace eternal life" (pp. 214, 215).

F. F. Bruce gives the meaning as "enrolled for eternal life in the records of heaven," and then says in a footnote, "We cannot agree with those who attempt to tone down the predestinarian note of this phrase by rendering 'as many as were disposed to eternal life!...' (*The New International Commentary on the New Testament, The Book of Acts*, pp. 283, 284).

Here are the facts. "Ordained" is from *lasso*, which according to *Strong* (def#: 5021), means "to arrange in an orderly manner, i.e. assign or dispose (to a certain position or lot): — addict, appoint, determine, ordain, set." The latter five words are the translations given to it in the eight New Testament passages where it is found (Matt. 28:16; Lk. 7:8; Acts 13:48; 15:2; 22:10; 28:23; Rom. 13:1; 1 Cor. 16:15).

Barnes is wrong in saying that *lasso* is "**never** used to denote an internal **disposition** or **inclination** arising from one's own self." It is so used at least twice, in Acts 15:2 and 1 Corinthians 16:15. The latter reads, "I beseech you, brethren, (ye know the house of Stephanas, that it is the firstfruits of Achaia, and {that} they have addicted themselves to the ministry of the saints,)..." (KJV). Where the King James has "addicted," other translations have "set" (ASV) and "devoted" (NKJV, NIV).

Clearly, then, "disposed to eternal life" is a possible rendering of "ordained to eternal life." But how do we decide whether the Gentiles disposed **themselves** or whether **God** ordained them? The answer lies in applying two rules of interpretation, 1) consider the context, and 2) the law of antithesis. The first one we all know well and acknowledge. The second is more obscure. Even books on hermeneutics seldom mention it, except perhaps in discussions of Hebrew poetry and antithetical parallelisms. D. R. Dungan (*Hermeneutics*, pp. 346-349) treats it briefly, as does I. B. Grubbs (*Exegetical Analysis*, pp. 6, 7), who calls it the "Law of Opposition, or Negation."

Dungan explains it this way: "Hence, if at any time there shall be one member of the antithesis which we can understand, we can know what is intended by the other, by knowing that it is the opposite of the one we have described. If we know that one is on the right hand, we know just as certainly that the other is on the left hand; if one is North, the other is South — for such

opposites inhere in the figure" (p. 347).

This rule helps us understand Acts 13:48 because in its context Luke records a **contrast** between Jewish attitudes and action and Gentile attitudes and action. If we can understand one side of the contrast, "we can know," as Dungan said, "what is intended by the other."

Turning to the context, we notice that the Jews were full of envy or jealousy (v. 45), that they contradicted, blasphemed, spoke against, and thrust away the word of God (vv. 45, 46), and finally that they **judged themselves** unworthy of eternal life (v. 46). Now look at the **contrasting** response of the Gentiles, all stated in verse 48.

They were **glad**, not envious. They **glorified** the word of God, rather than speaking against it. And they were ordained to eternal life and believed, rather than judging themselves unworthy of salvation.

If **judging themselves** was something the Jews did for themselves, and it obviously was, then the law of antithesis requires that **ordaining and believing** be something the Gentiles did for themselves. It was not something that God did for them. "Ordained to eternal life" does not refer to "foreordination" in the Calvinistic sense. The Gentiles in question had hearts "disposed" toward eternal life, and when they heard the hope-filled message of Paul, they believed.

If only I had known all of this when it first came up in my boyhood days. I could have given my Baptist friend a better answer.