



Conducted by
James Gardiner

"I shall be glad to read your comments on Acts 13:48, which reads, "And as many as were ordained to eternal life believed."

The questioner is alluding of course to the doctrine of predestination over which so much controversy has raged over many centuries. The verse as it stands appears to support the predestinarian idea — that God has predetermined who will be saved and who will be condemned — thus, as "many as were ordained to eternal life believed." Does the verse support the doctrine of predestination?

What is meant by Predestination?

First of all perhaps a little introduction about the doctrine might be in order. It is a common misconception that John Calvin was the originator of the doctrine and predestination is almost always referred to as Calvinistic. It is certainly true that Calvin wrote more about predestination than perhaps anyone else did. It is also probably correct to say that Calvin was the man who offered to the world the most complete and exhaustive body of doctrine on the subject. However, long prior to Calvin's birth in 1509 others had given expression to the same ideas, not least of whom was a monk called Gottschalk who in the year 830 wrote much on the subject and had various debates on the issue. Gottschalk had been influenced by the writings of St. Augustine (354-430) who himself was a strong advocate of extreme predestination. There were others before St. Augustine. Thus we see that the idea of divine predestination (or pre-election, or foreordination) is almost as old as the New Testament, and is not some new or novel departure from established teaching.

It is true to say that no subject has caused more controversy down the centuries than has predestination, and each exponent on the matter has been confronted with equally able opposition. Indeed it was because of *the opposition* to Calvin's extreme views on predestination that he spent so many years writing in defence of his subject and why he wrote so much upon it. Critics have said that Calvin had a kind of one-track mind on predestination, but this is quite unjustified in view of his voluminous writings on other Bible themes. The truth is that he wrote more about predestination because it was most hotly opposed. In like manner *we* are often accused of saying too much about baptism — the reason being, of course, that other preachers are saying too little about it.

Most of us reject the extreme form of the doctrine of predestination, and perhaps believe that it borders on being blasphemous, or worse; but I feel that we should all try to learn as much about it as we can. It is too much to say that we should *respect* it, but we should try to *understand* it. Most of the Reformers were men who accepted and taught predestination. Calvin was a humble and scrupulously honest man and his writings on foreordination were not motivated by a desire to bolster the "tradition of his church", but an honest expression of his own findings after years of studying God's word. It should also be mentioned that there were, and are, different brands

of predestinarianism, some severe, some not so severe. Calvin was in the severe class; Luther in the mild class. It goes without saying that *opposition to the doctrine* also takes severe and not so severe forms. It should be appreciated that the issue is a very difficult one and not in any way clear-cut. Great minds have applied themselves to both sides of the question and strongly disagreed — which illustrates that the matter is not easily resolved. (I haven't forgotten that I am supposed to be dealing with Acts 13:48 but I feel that we can't plunge into an answer on this verse without a few background germane remarks. After all, there are many other verses in the New Testament more predestinarian than this one.)

The Bible and Predestination

I suppose most of us could go a long way with the teachings of Calvin and the others on predestination. Surely the Bible is a book about the predestination of God. Most of the important things in world history have happened at the behest of God. God has foreordained all the important things. In the Old Testament God is represented as completely sovereign. His name is "I am" and beside Him "there is none other". His sovereign will, and only His will ordains what is and what shall be. He created the earth to its last detail and maintains it. He ordains the rising of the sun each day and maintains all nature (see Psalm 104). Man lives in the hollow of God's hand, and if God takes no part in the events of men's lives each day why does God advocate prayers to be made to Him?

Israel and its chequered history was ordained by God. Was Christ's lineage through David by mere chance? nay; but by the hand of God. The destiny and sacrifice of Jesus "was foreordained before the foundation of the world, but was manifest in these last times for you" (1st Peter 1:20). As the Lord's destiny was foreordained so was the disciples': "I have manifested Thy name", said Jesus, "to the men thou gavest me out of the world. Thine they were, and thou gavest them to me... Thou hast given Thy Son power over all flesh, that He should give eternal life to as many as Thou hast given Him." These last words come from John 17, where John Knox, the reformer, says he "cast his first anchor" of predestination. And finally the end to which all the processes of nature and grace are moving — the final consummation — is hidden in the determinate foreknowledge of God and predestined by God. The means of salvation is foreordained by God — the gospel. The gospel was not some last-minute measure of desperation to save man, or an afterthought of the Almighty, but, as with Christ, was conceived before the world began. Readers will doubtless think of many other instances of God's foreordination but these main ones may suffice to show that the Bible is a book all about predestination.

However, when Calvin and the others, say that not only was *the means* of salvation (Christ and the gospel) foreordained by God but that *the individuals* to be saved by God had been predestined as well, then we must take issue with them on the matter. It was Calvin's understanding of the scriptures that at the outset of time God decided which men would be saved and which would be condemned — not a question of *foreknowledge* of who would be saved, but a definite decision of *whom He would save*. Calvin realised of course the consequences of such an assertion and the many difficulties one would incur with other passages of scripture. It is to his credit, as an honest man, that he did not try to do violence to other scripture to fit his teaching on predestination, but rather attributed the difficulties to the mysterious side of the nature of God. His greatest difficulty of course was to reconcile predestination with the free will and the free agency of man. He apparently found no difficulty here and quoted Christ as an example of one who did what God had ordained Him to do and yet all the time exercised complete freedom of will and agency. Christ was *obedient to God* even to the cross (He could have refused) and yet Christ did what God not only *foreknew* but had actually *predestined* it. So Calvin had no trouble with predestination versus free will. He had no trouble, either, in transferring the principle that mankind has free will respecting the gospel and yet obeys it because God by pre-election had decided he should.

“Ordained to Eternal Life”

Obviously much more requires to be said on this subject but reference must now be made to Acts 13:48. Does this verse support the idea that God has ordained some to eternal life and condemned others?

Paul was in Antioch in Pisidia, preaching in the synagogue. Some Gentiles had asked him to preach again the following sabbath, which he did. Almost the whole city came to listen, and when the Jews saw the huge crowds they became so jealous that they refuted Paul's preaching and blasphemed. Paul rebuked them and said "It was necessary that the word of God should first have been spoken to you; but seeing ye put it from you, and judge yourselves unworthy of eternal life, lo, we turn to the Gentiles". Verse 48 goes on to say, "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". This verse, like the whole question of predestination, has been the subject of much controversy. The dispute has impinged upon the 'phrase "were ordained". Apparently this phrase is capable of more than one translation. I am no Greek scholar, but my Young's Analytical Concordance certainly bears out the fact that the English word "ordain" in the New Testament can be derived from various words. This is quite unlike the word predestinate which occurs only four times in the New Testament and is always translated from the same Greek word. The translators of the King James Version translated "ordained" from no fewer than twenty different Greek words, and so we can see that there is room for investigation into the propriety of the use of "ordain" in some cases. Acts 13:48 is apparently one such case, and it is suggested that "*disposed to*" is preferable to "*ordained to*" in this verse (see McGarvey's Commentary on Acts). This would render the verse thus: "And as many as *were disposed to eternal life believed*".

Alford says, "'As many as were disposed to eternal life'. The meaning of the word disposed must be determined by the context. The Jews had judged themselves unworthy of eternal life: the Gentiles, 'as many as were disposed to eternal life, believed'".

Plumptre says of this verse that a better translation would be "as many as were disposed for..."

Jacobson in the *Speaker's Commentary* says, "Rather, were set in order to for, i.e. were disposed for eternal life".

Dean Farrar renders it, "All who, by the grace of God, desired to range themselves in the ranks of those who desired eternal life accepted the faith". (*Life of Paul*)

The Interpreter's Bible says of 'ordain': "The word might mean little more than *disposed* with reference merely to human choice. But it is more likely that God's predestination is in view and it seems indeed that this actual phrase is not uncommon in Rabbinical literature."

It would appear therefore that there are strong grounds for saying that the verse could be translated in a way which would describe the Gentiles' *disposition to be saved* rather than their *foreordination*. This certainly would be more in accord with rest of the scriptures concerning God's grace and salvation. The Jews not God judged themselves unworthy of eternal life.

I do not want the questioner to think that I have conveniently swept the difficulties of predestination and foreordination under the carpet, together with Acts 13:48, for I know that other verses still confront us on the matter. I, therefore propose, God willing, to refer to some of those in the next "Question Box".

(Questions please to James R. Gardiner, 88 Davidson Terrace, Haddington, East Lothian, Scotland).