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Because Context Matters

Reclaiming our Identity in Christ *The High Calling of Being a Slave of Christ*

*Paul and Timothy, **bondslaves** by nature, the property of Jesus Christ, to all the consecrated and separated ones in Jesus Christ who are in Philippi, together with overseers and deacons. (Sanctifying) grace be to you and (tranquilizing) peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.*

Philippians 1:1&2 Wuest¹ **boldness added**

***Slaves**, obey your human masters with fear and trembling, in the sincerity of your heart as to Christ, not like those who do their work only when someone is watching – as people pleasers – but as **slaves of Christ** doing the will of the Father from the heart. Obey with enthusiasm, as though serving the Lord and not people, because you know that each person, whether **slave** or free, if he does something good, this will be rewarded by the Lord.*

Ephesians 6:5-8 NET² **boldness added**

*I, therefore, the prisoner for the Lord, urge you to live (**walk**) **worthily of the calling with which you have been called**, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing one another in love, making every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. Ephesians 4:1-3 NET **boldness added***

Words Matter I am old enough to remember Dinah Washington getting a Grammy Award in 1959 for the blues song, “*What a Difference a Day Makes*.” Those of us who labor in the biblical vineyard of contextual restoration could easily adopt as our theme song, *What a Difference a Word Makes* (good book title too!). Case in point – rediscovering that the word *kataluma* in Luke 2:7 means *guestroom*, not *inn*, which significantly reshapes our understanding of how Mary and Joseph were viewed by the Davidic clan that glorious Bethlehem birth night.³ Likewise, realizing that the Greek word *airo* in John 15:2 contextually means *lifts up*, not *cuts off*, totally changes what Jesus is saying⁴ about the Father’s approach to discipling.

Having recently returned from our inaugural “*Paul’s Roman World*” contextual immersion trip to Italy (we’re about to leave on a second trip in October 2014 and have a third one scheduled for May 2015), we discovered yet another word to add to this *What-a-Difference-a-Word-Makes* list. It is the Greek word *dulos* (*slave*) which has been mistranslated for centuries as *servant*. And where *dulos* has been translated correctly, the original context for *slave* continues to be missed. This Reflection reclaims Paul’s original Roman context for *dulos* with implications for our “life together” as the body of Christ.

Post Pentecost After Pentecost, the New Testament unfolds in two directions. Peter stays in Jerusalem and establishes the Kingdom in Israel while Paul takes the “Good News” to the Gentile world. I suspect that Peter had the easier task. Basically “all” he had to do was bring the message that “*Yeshua is Messiah*” to the Jews. Peter did not have to change the Jewish culture, their observance of the feasts and festivals, their dietetic preferences, etc.

Paul's Challenge On the other hand, Paul's task in bringing the Gospel to the pagan Roman world was more challenging. He brings a message of monotheism to a polytheistic culture of major, minor, household and cultic gods. He enters a status conscious, benefactor/ patronage driven⁵ culture of aristocrats, soldiers, slaves, freedmen, and declares we are all one in Christ – a non-status Kingdom in a socially stratified culture. He engages a world accustomed to (some might argue addicted to) constant entertainment, spectacle and sensual pleasures, to bring a message extolling modesty and personal piety. Paul brings to this culture steeped in ancestor worship a message that if your ancestors did not believe in Jesus Christ, they will not be in Eternity.

Furthermore, Paul makes the life of a new Roman believer more complicated because embracing Jesus will be seen as rejecting the State (worshiping the gods and patriotism were co-mingled). And if that is not enough, he has to also deal with the Judaizers who are nipping at his heels trying to convince these new believers to sign up for the Jewish package of sacrifices, kosher foods, circumcision and ritual purification. Appreciating the cultural complexities of the Roman World deepens admiration for Paul's task as well as for the profound work that the Holy Spirit did to bring the Kingdom to all peoples (Abrahamic Covenant).

A Common Identity In the midst of all this cultural diversity, Paul considers how best to unify these new Gentile followers of Jesus meeting in the atriums, the public space, of Roman villas. He considers what the best way is to unify people from diverse backgrounds and levels of society into a common identity in Christ. He can't exhort them to be a disciple of Jesus since these new Gentile believers have no context for the world of rabbis and disciples. One day the Holy Spirit gives him the solution: these new believers need to see themselves as *dulos* (slaves) of Christ. Unpacking the weightiness of that high calling necessitates our understanding of what a *dulos* was in the first-century Roman (city) world. This is what's been missing for hundreds of years.

The Great Cover Up In his book *Slaves*, John MacArthur points out that the Greek word for *slave* (*dulos*) has been mistranslated as *servant* in almost every English Bible since the Geneva Bible (1560) and King James Bible (1611) were printed.⁶ He suggests that even though the meaning of the Greek word *dulos* is clear, early Western translators flinched in using *slave* because of the stigma attached to that word as it was contextually defined by the slave trade of the British Empire.⁷ In its place, Western translators chose to substitute the word *servant*. And thus began what MacArthur calls the great "cover up,"⁸ a translational error that significantly hid for hundreds of years what Paul intended our identity in Christ to be.

By the mid-1900's, more and more Bibles corrected this *slave/servant* translational error. Now, for the most part, we have the right word, *dulos*, in the text; although, some translations like the New King James Bible made only a slight adjustment, replacing *servant* with *bondservant* which did little to illuminate Paul's intent. However, since these *servant-to-slave* changes took place during the rise of the American Civil Rights movement, an implicit Southern Antebellum plantation understanding of *slave* kept future generations from discovering Paul's vision for being a *dulos of Christ*. It didn't help that the pulpit avoided this Ephesians 6:5-8 passage. Thus the great "cover up" was prolonged and we continued to miss Paul's intended epicenter of our identity in Christ.

One outcome of this "cover up" was that thousands of American college students became soured by a perception of a Gospel that seemed to sanction American slavery and South African apartheid. How many hundreds of Christian college professors heard their students say, "I can't believe in a God/Jesus who condones slavery" and lacked the context and understanding to correct that misperception? As a result, something beautifully conceived by the Holy Spirit was misperceived as something oppressive by the culture. How sad! As we entered the 21st Century, most Bibles have replaced *servant* with *slave*, but people continue to bring the wrong context to *dulos*. So let's reconstruct some of Paul's original Roman context for this word.

Slave Markets in Paul's Roman World Slaves were an ever-present part of Paul's Roman world. Around the time of Christ, Emperor Augustus levied a 2% tax on slave sales which generated \$5,000,000 of annual income. That equates to roughly 250,000 slave transactions per year!⁹ Because slaves were a lucrative business, slave traders closely followed the Roman Legions into battle. And when yet another people group was conquered, most of the "choice" human specimens were quickly sold to slave traders who transported them to

slave markets throughout the Empire. The two largest slave markets were in Rome, just a short distance from the Forum, and Ephesus (the reason why Paul makes use of the *slave* metaphor in Ephesians).

In Ephesians 4:1 Paul exhorts the Ephesians to “*walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which you have been called.*” With that language, he is evoking the image of the slave market in Ephesus.¹⁰ Roman law required slave traders to fully disclose to buyers the abilities and attributes of the slaves being sold. Consequently, each slave for sale had a sign/placard hanging around his/her neck detailing the origin, ethnicity, skills, abilities, traits, health, character, intelligence, strengths and weaknesses of the slave. By this disclosure, the slave trader was guaranteeing that this was an accurate portrayal of what the buyer would be getting.

In using that *walk* language and evoking the *slave* imagery, Paul reminds the Ephesians that they were bought by Jesus with an enormous price and need to live up to the character traits, attributes, values of the new Christian “sign” hanging around their “spiritual neck.” That imagery is also a reminder that exhorts each believer (*dulos*) to provide the value described on their placard commensurate with the price (and therefore value) ascribed to him/her by their new Master. If you had to go through each day with your personalized Christian placard around your neck, what would you write on it to forthrightly disclose to a watching world the essence/distinctives of what you are all about as a *dulos* of Jesus Christ?

The Slave Economy in Paul’s Roman World Depending on the historical source, slaves made up 20-40% of the entire population of the Roman Empire in Italy. In addition to being cooks and household staff, slaves were also bookkeepers, merchants, tradesmen, engineers, teachers, and physicians. Since the Roman aristocracy despised administration, slaves were the “professional” civil servants who ran the Empire.¹¹

Part of the genius of Rome was that a *slave* could aspire to become a *freedman*. He could earn and save money, and, if he pleased his master, eventually buy his freedom and become a Roman citizen. Thus, slaves in the Roman world had aspirational hope – a pathway to freedom. (The public act of declaring a slave a *freedman* is called *manumission*.) In the city context where the vast majority of Paul’s house churches resided, most “slaves” were not oppressed. In fact it was just the opposite. They were treated like highly valued, long-term members of a family (exceptions were the agrarian slaves in the hinterlands and the mining slaves - the Spartacus’ of that world).

Many of the city slaves were encouraged to become entrepreneurs by their owner/master. In visiting Herculaneum (Bay of Naples) on our “*Paul’s Roman World*” contextual immersion experience, we entered first-century Roman villas frozen in place by Mt. Vesuvius that had two rooms facing the street on either side of the entrance hallway of the villa. These were store fronts where the villa owner encouraged his slaves to do business and keep part of the money so they could eventually buy their freedom. While there is much more that could be said about the Roman *slave/owner* relationship in the first century, it suffices to say this is not at all the context of the early American cotton plantation world that gets so easily projected onto the Pauline text.

The Appeal of Roman Slavery I don’t want to be accused of romanticizing first-century Roman slavery. Obviously the environment (and destiny) of a slave was totally shaped by the nature and character of the master. There were good and not so good masters. The following observations may be helpful to point out how being a *slave* was viewed by those in the “system”:

- When Rome conquered your part of the world, you became a Roman subject without rights. Thus if you were a bookkeeper, a physician or a teacher in a conquered territory, you knew that becoming a Roman *slave* was the only pathway for you to eventually buy your freedom and become a freedman with Roman citizen rights. Thus it is not surprising that many professionals in conquered lands willingly sold themselves into Roman slavery as the only pathway to Roman citizenship and freedom. So unlike our American antebellum slavery culture.
- There were slaves, living under wonderful masters, who accumulated enough money to buy their own freedom (*manumission*) with their master’s consent, but chose not to pursue *manumission*. Why?

Because they desired staying in the master's household where they were often treated as an adopted child and loved and cared for by a family.

Don't Forget the Master!

While we have been focusing on the *slave* in the first-century Roman master/*slave* context, we can't forget the master. Paul's call is to be a *slave of Christ*. To underscore his thesis, Paul implicitly moves from the lesser to the greater. In using the phrase *slave of Christ*, Paul is encouraging the Ephesians to envision the best possible human master/*slave* relationship and extrapolate that to a much higher Master/*slave* dynamic.

He wants these new believers in Christ to visualize a Heavenly Master who knows them perfectly, wants His best for them, and possesses perfect wisdom and all power. A Master whose every thought for them is focused on moving them forward toward wholeness and maturity. A Master who sees them as his Bride and is preparing a room for them where He will reside with them in Eternity (John 14: 2-3). Implicit in Paul's identity example is his expectation that these new believers in Christ would respond, "***Of course that is what we desire and that's why we prepare ourselves each day to live out that reality in our master's household.***"

Slaves are not Servants

Since Paul's contention is that our common identity in Christ is found by each believer viewing him- or herself as a *slave* of Jesus, it behooves us to get this word right if we are ever going to understand other crucial words/texts correctly; e.g., *making disciples*, our body life together. Thus, it is crucial that we know the difference between being a *servant* of Christ and a *slave* of Christ as Paul uses the word *dulos*.

Being a *servant* is at best a shadow of what Paul envisions a *slave* of Christ to be. Might a major part of the body life and discipling malaise we are experiencing in the West be traced to focusing on the wrong target/outcome/objective of being a *servant* when the real call is to see ourselves as being a *slave of Christ*? Might the converse also be true? If we are ever going to revitalize what it means to be a *slave of Christ*, not just a *servant*, it's necessary to understand the significant differences between the two.

- A *slave* is exclusively owned by the master. A *servant* can hire himself or herself out to different masters (think Downton Abbey).
- A *slave* does what the master tells him to do. It's not optional. A *servant* can exercise some choice and if he or she finds the master's demands too onerous or expectations too high, he or she can leave and find employment elsewhere. A *slave* exercises complete, unquestioned submission to his or her master. A *servant* can choose what he or she will submit to.
- A *slave* is totally dependent and sustained by the master. A *servant* is partially dependent on his current employer as well as on his or her own devices.
- A household city *slave* can easily become viewed as "family" while the *servant* will always be seen as part of the "hired help."
- A *slave* wakes up in the morning with a proactive, intentional posture that asks 1) what does my master (who has the capacity to set me free) want from me today?, 2) how can I best serve him today? What will give my master pleasure today? So different from the more passive, reactive way a *servant* often thinks when taking a posture of only (and sometimes begrudgingly) doing what the master/employer tells him or her to do.

This brief compare and contrast scenario shows you how (unintentionally) harmful the great "cover up" has been? How replacing *slave* with *servant* clouds our vision (and understanding) of what Paul intended to portray when he exhorted those early Christian converts to see him- or herself as a *slave of Christ*?

Slaves and Jesus

Rediscovering this original context of Paul's intentional use of the word *dulos* helps us to also understand the teachings of Jesus in new ways. On more than one occasion, Jesus draws upon the Roman world's understanding of *dulos* in His discourses, e.g., Luke 17:7-10 and Luke 19:11-27. Jesus uses the latter parable to tell the story of a nobleman who, as he prepares to leave to obtain a kingdom for himself, calls his slaves and instructs them to do business for him while he is gone. That is straight Roman world master/*slave* talk. Revisiting this parable (among others) with a contextually corrected understanding of *dulos* will allow us

to (re)capture the original meaning Jesus intended. While that is beyond the scope of this Reflection, we've added those parables to the list of upcoming passages to contextually revisit and restore in 2015. Stay tuned!

Reflect Upon

- Have you seen yourself as a *servant* of Christ rather than a *slave* of Christ? Do you need to make adjustments in this regard?
- If the notion of being a *servant* of Jesus is but a shadow of what Paul intended with *slave*, what price do you think the church has paid (and may still be paying) for that dilution?
- Were you surprised at how the church could have missed the true meaning of *dulos* for so long? Does it make you wonder what else we might be missing that could further explain some of the anemia found in the American church today?
- How would you describe yourself as a follower of Jesus Christ if a “Christian” placard were placed around your neck for public display listing
 - What spiritual disciplines you are particularly faithful in exercising.
 - What Spiritual Gifts you've been given.
 - What fruits of the Spirit are most commonly seen in you?
 - Which of the Beatitudes you most frequently exhibit.
 - What character traits best describe you.
- If someone approached you (because of the disciple-of-Jesus “placard” around your neck) and asked: *Why in the world would you willingly make yourself a slave of Christ?* How would you respond? How would you describe your Master to the one asking the question?
- Since context and original meaning always matters, what are the implications for the reading, preaching, and teaching of Scripture in your church?

Shalom Doug Greenwold PBT Teaching Fellow Reflection # 914 © Doug Greenwold 2014

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Notes and Sources

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- ² *The New English Translation Bible*, First Edition, (Dallas, TX: Biblical Studies Press, 1996-2005).
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- ⁵ David deSilva, *Honor, Patronage, Kinship & Purity: Unlocking New Testament Culture* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Press, 2000) 95-104.
- ⁶ John MacArthur, *Slave: The Hidden Truth About Your Identity in Christ* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2010) 15.
- ⁷ *Ibid*, 17.
- ⁸ *Ibid*, 3.
- ⁹ W. V. Harris, “Trade” in the *Cambridge Ancient History: The High Empire A.D. 70-192* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 2000) Vol. 11, 721.
- ¹⁰ Randall Smith, “*An Italian Adventure: Paul’s Response to the Roman World*” (Sebring, FL: Christian Travel Study Program, 2014) 65.
- ¹¹ Lionel Casson, “*Everyday Life in Ancient Rome*” (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998) 58.