A More Positive View of Slavery: Establishing Servile Identity in the Christian Assemblies

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Recent scholarship calls attention to violence, sexual exploitation, and other indignities experienced by slaves. For most slaves in the Christian assemblies, however, the abuses associated with slavery were not an issue, and so slavery functioned as the place where countless servile believers demonstrated their faith in Christ by serving the neighbor. Three subpoints support the basic position: (1) Paul called himself a slave repeatedly to form an identity with epistolary audiences, large portions of which were servile; (2) directives to slaves to endure suffering for doing good (1 Pet 2:18–21) were paradigmatic for all Christians, not just slaves; and (3) Jesus’ death by crucifixion (servile supplicium = "the slaves’ punishment") was presented as the common experience of every Christian, not just slaves. Since slaves were the ones for whom much parenesis was intended originally, the argument can be made that biblical slavery remains pertinent for its applicability to Christian vocation.

Key Words: slavery, identity, servile identity, Christian identity, Paul, Paul’s self-understanding, suffering, 1 Pet 2:18–21, the cross, servile religion, Christian vocation

Slavery does not fare well in the estimation of many who have written on the topic lately.¹ Usually emphasized are certain undeniably negative

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aspects of slavery to which slaves were subject, such as violence and sexual exploitation. Although one may not dispute these findings, I find problematic the idea that gratuitous violence, disgrace, and degradation were endemic to ancient slavery as such. That opinion cannot abide the possibility that slavery—at other times and amid other peoples—may have existed far differently than it did among Americans in the antebellum South, for example. The first Christians offer a case in point: for them, slavery was arguably a morally ambiguous institution. One might say that slavery for them was neither completely good nor uniformly bad but simply the place where untold numbers of Christians demonstrated their faith in Christ by engaging in service to the neighbor. If this is approximately the role that slavery played among the first Christians, then one could reasonably argue that biblical slavery remains pertinent for Christians still today and so should be studied for its applicability to actually being a Christian in concrete situations.

Three concrete situations I shall consider are (1) Paul's self-designation as a slave, (2) servile suffering for doing good, and (3) the cross as the common experience of all Christians. In the conclusion I shall argue that there remains an affinity between slavery in its NT guise and what some call the doctrine of Christian vocation. In the title, the word “identity” signifies group awareness or a set of values by which one group (such as slaves) may be distinguished from other groups.


3. This is the position of A. D. Callahan, R. A. Horsley, and A. Smith (“Introduction: The Slavery of New Testament Studies,” Semeia 83/84 [1998]: 3), for example, who argue, “ancient Greek and Roman slavery, like modern slavery in the United States, applied the sanction of law and custom to kidnapping, rape, torture, and murder. The slave-holding elite agreed with all master classes in all slave regimes that the use of the ruthless physical violence of torture, along with the psychological violence of terror, was more than a prerogative of dominical power.”


5. It is impossible to know what proportion of an ancient congregation was servile, freed, or free. Cf. W. A. Meeks, The First Urban Christians: The Social World of the Apostle Paul (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1983), 64.

6. An old dictionary defines identity as “the distinctive character and appearance belonging to an individual or a class, by which it may be known” (I. K. Funk et al., eds., A Standard Dictionary of the English Language [2 vols.; New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1894–95], 1:891). A more recent dictionary defines identity as “the condition of being the same with something described or asserted” (Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary [10th ed.; Springfield, MA: Merriam-Webster, 1994], 575).
Paul’s Self-Designation as a Slave

Paul on more than one occasion referred to himself as a ὅδωλος ("slave"), though most translations into English obscure this fact by substituting the word “servant” for “slave”:

- “Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ [ὁδωλὸς Χριστοῦ Ἰησοῦ]” (Rom 1:1, KJV, NKJV, RSV, NRSV, NIV, TNIV)
- “If I were still pleasing men, I should not be a servant of Christ [Χριστοῦ ὅδωλος οὐκ ἂν ἦμὴν]” (Gal 1:10, RSV)
- “Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus [ὁδωλοὶ Χριστοῦ Ἰησοῦ]” (Phil 1:1, RSV)
- “Paul, a servant of God [ὁδωλὸς θεοῦ] and an apostle of Jesus Christ” (Titus 1:1, RSV)

Might these passages indicate that Paul actually was a slave, or at least had servile roots? A tradition establishes that Paul came to Tarsus with his parents as prisoners of war from Gischala in Galilee, where his father, liberated, became a Roman citizen.9 The tradition could indicate that Paul did indeed have servile roots since prisoners of war were commonly enslaved after battle, not butchered.10

However, the possibility that Paul was in any way connected to slavery should be balanced by an incident that suggests something quite different about Paul’s status in contemporary society: when the apostle was arrested at the temple in Acts 21, Paul pointed out to the military tribune on duty that he was a Jew from Tarsus in Cilicia, “a citizen [πολίτης] of no ordinary city” (Acts 21:39, NIV). And when the tribune directed that Paul be flogged and questioned in a manner “usual for non-Romans and slaves,”11 Paul asserted both that he was “a Roman citizen” (αὐτὸς ὁ Ῥωμαῖος, Acts 22:25) and that he had been “born a citizen” (ἐγεννήθη γεγέννημα, Acts 22:28)—whereas the commander, unlike Paul, had had to pay a big price for his citizenship. Apparently, then, Paul was—from a legal perspective—free, even though it is conceivable that Paul’s father (or

7. The second half of this sentence consists of a present contrary-to-fact condition (cf. E. Burton, Syntax of the Moods and Tenses in New Testament Greek [Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1955], 248), indicating—in the internal logic of the sentence—that Paul was indeed a ὅδωλος.
8. Two other passages germane to this discussion are 1 Cor 9:19 (Paul made himself “a slave to all [τῶν ἕματον ἔδωλον],” RSV) and 2 Cor 4:5 (“for what we preach is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants [ὁδωλοί ὁμός] for Jesus’s sake,” RSV).
an earlier ancestor) had been manumitted and so acquired Roman citizenship.\textsuperscript{12} We are left with the likelihood that Paul was not a slave in the common meaning of the word but that in the passages cited Paul used the word \textit{doulos} figuratively:

The term \textit{doulos} expresses the total belongingness, total allegiance, correlative to the absolute ownership and authority denoted by \textit{kurios} used of Christ. But when \textit{doulos Christou \Iota sigma} (or \textit{Iota sigma Christou}) is used, as here [Rom 1:1], as a self-designation (cf. Gal. 1:10; Phil. 1:1; cf. also Jas. 1:1; 2 Pet. 1:1), it probably carries, in addition to the personal confession of commitment, a reference to the writer’s special office, in the fulfillment of which he is in a special sense Christ’s slave.\textsuperscript{13}

In addition to Paul’s commitment to his office as a (quasi-) slave and apostle of Christ,\textsuperscript{14} we should consider the possibility that Paul used \textit{doulos} to establish an identity between himself and those slaves who—together with other Christians—comprised the original epistolary audience. Consider Rom 1:1, the first of the several passages cited above. Here Paul refers to himself as not only a \textit{doulos Christou \Iota sigma} (“slave of Christ Jesus”) but also \textit{klytos apostolos} (“called apostle”) and \textit{elagabalos theou} (“set apart for God’s gospel”).\textsuperscript{15} A rationale for Paul’s use of the term \textit{doulos} in Rom 1:1 may lie in the relationship between the Roman correspondence and that to the Philippians, in which Paul refers to both himself and Timothy in Phil 1:1 as \textit{doulos Christou \Iota sigma} (“slaves of Christ Jesus”). In Phil 4:22, Paul conveys the greetings of “all the saints, especially those who belong to Caesar’s household [μαύλωσα δὲ οί ἐκ τῆς Καίσαρος οἰκίας].” Brown has argued recently that, just as there was some substantive connection between the Philippian congregation and the \textit{familia Caesars} in Rome, so the phrase \textit{doulos Christou \Iota sigma} in Rom 1:1 functions as a technical term, creating a literary persona that would have resonated with original letter recipients:

\textsuperscript{12} “Paul was technically \textit{ingenuus}, ‘native citizen’ or ‘freeborn,’ i.e., born of a free or freed father. He was a birthright citizen, because his family had undoubtedly been long settled in Tarsus” (J. A. Fitzmyer, \textit{The Acts of the Apostles} [AB 31; New York: Doubleday, 1998], 712.

\textsuperscript{13} C. E. B. Cranfield, \textit{Romans 1–8} (ICC; London: T. & T. Clark, 1975), 50-51. Others, e.g., W. Sanday and A. C. Headlam (\textit{A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans} [5th ed.; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1902], 3); E. Käsemann (\textit{Commentary on Romans} [ed. and trans. G. W. Bromiley; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988], 5), and R. Jewett (\textit{Romans: A Commentary} [Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007], 100) have suggested that Paul alludes here to the notion of the “servant of the Lord” (\textit{עבד יהוה}; cf. Josh 1:1-2, 14:7; 24:29; Judg 2:8; 2 Kgs 17:23; Psa 78:70; 89:4, 21; Jer 7:25; Dan 9:6; Ezra 9:11; Amos 3:7; etc.).

\textsuperscript{14} “The self-designation \textit{doulos \Iota sigma Christou} as used by Paul expands the parallel \textit{apostolos \Iota sigma \Iota sigma Christou}. If the latter describes Paul’s office according to its significance and operation towards those without, the former describes it according to the relationship to Christ and therefore its final basis, which consists in the fact that Christ has won Paul from the world and made him His possession” (K. H. Rengstorf, \textit{“doulos,” TDNT} 2:277).

\textsuperscript{15} According to the translation in Jewett, \textit{Romans}, 95.
The composition of the Roman congregation must have been such that [the phrase] δοῦλος Χριστοῦ Ιησοῦ would have been meaningful to them as a way of analogically elucidating Paul’s self-understanding as an apostle. In short, given the statement in Phil. 4:22 and the greetings found at the end of Romans, it appears reasonable to deduce that members of the imperial household formed part of the Roman congregation.  

What type of slaves constituted the familia Caesaris to whom Paul directed his Roman correspondence, then? Brown argues that Paul’s letter to the Romans features a small group of upwardly mobile slaves who found themselves in a bind. Though lacking citizen status, the slaves were in a sense all equal to one another and could, remarkably, amass “a great deal of wealth and power.” On the other hand, they were “despised” in that they were “not accepted by the established aristocracy.” Indeed, the higher an imperial slave climbed in the administrative hierarchy, “the more he was held in contempt by aristocrats.” Brown suggests that Christianity offered to servile members of the imperial familia in Rome a means of compensating for the problem of lack of status in contemporary society. For example, an imperial slave could not speak in his own right but only on behalf of his master; however, given that his master—the Roman emperor—was considered to be the son of a god and his word was backed by the full power of the Roman military establishment, “the slave’s word would be a powerful medium indeed.”

By referring to himself as a slave in Rom 1:1, then, Paul created a literary persona that would have been readily comprehensible to many enslaved Christians in Rome, the evidence of which is perceptible still in the following passages:

- “that we should no longer be slaves to sin [τοῦ μηκέτι δουλεύειν ἡμῶς τῇ ἀμαρτίᾳ]” (Rom 6:6, NIV)
- “don’t you know that when you offer yourselves to someone to obey him as slaves [δοῦλου], you are slaves [δοῦλοι ἐστί] to the one whom you obey—whether you are slaves to sin [ἀμαρτίας], which leads to death, or to obedience [ὑπακοής], which leads to righteousness?” (Rom 6:16, NIV)
- “but thanks be to God that, though you used to be slaves to sin [ἡτε δοῦλοι τῆς ἀμαρτίας], you wholeheartedly obeyed the form of teaching to which you were entrusted” (Rom 6:17, NIV)

17. Ibid., 731–32.
18. Ibid., 732.
19. Ibid. Orlando Patterson (Slavery and Social Death [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982], 307) surmised that the power of the imperial slave was one “accumulated at the expense of his own legal standing.”
• “you have been set free from sin and have become slaves to righteousness [εἰδούλωθητε τῇ δικαιοσύνῃ]” (Rom 6:18, NIV)
• “but now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves to God [δουληθεντες δι του θεου], the benefit you reap leads to holiness, and the result is eternal life” (Rom 6:22, NIV)

The same identity-building device could be at work in several of the other passages listed at the beginning of this subsection, where Paul refers to himself as a slave. Paul’s self-designation as a slave must indicate at least that Paul cared about the slaves as Christians and possibly conceived of Christianity itself as something uniquely intended for slaves. We should expect, then, that Paul would present in his letters the sort of issues that would have had an immediate appeal to slaves and to others—those recently manumitted (freedmen and freedwomen), those of lower social status, etc.—who were descended from slaves. Quite a number of upper-class Italians in ancient times were descendants of slaves, so Paul’s efforts to form a relationship with a large proportion of his readership seem entirely justified. In general, the progression assumed in Roman society was (in order of occurrence) slavery, manumission, “freed” status, and then the enjoyment of increasingly significant levels of wealth, familial pedigree, and influence (auctoritas):

Virtually no one “had it all”—wealth, pedigree, freedom—and any such rare birds as did were called nobiles by the fawning multitude. Nevertheless, it would be a great mistake to suppose that only the very few “haves” had a life, whereas everyone else merely subsisted in abject misery—as is the incorrect impression sometimes given. For even complete slaves, carrying out servitudes that must have seemed disgraceful in the eyes of the world, could potentially be sued for committing damages within their own spheres of responsibility, and it could be expected by a hostile plaintiff that such slaves would have the resources to pay damages on their own, if convicted, quite apart from the responsibility of a master.

There also was a mid-range group—drawn primarily from the lower orders—that consisted of craftsmen, bar keeps, petty hucksters, clerks, members of the collegia (trade associations), a clothier from Pompeii, a slipper-cobbler in Rome, and others. Most of these latter people—scions of slaves, foreigners, and the great “bulk of the

21. For still more evidence of this type in Romans, see 6:20, 7:6, 12:11, 14:18, and 16:18.
23. “Among the decurions and municipal officials of Italy whose names are known to us from the inscriptions, about 33% may be suspected of servile descent at Ostia, Puteoli and Capua, 25% at Beneventum. In the rest of Latium the proportion is 20%, in the rest of Campania, 17%, in Etruria, 16%. . . . These figures are merely approximate, and no doubt in some cases the apparent evidence for descent from freedmen is misleading; but it is practically certain that in at least as many cases, probably far more, the descendants of slaves show no trace of their origin” (M. L. Gordon, “The Freedman’s Son in Municipal Life,” JRS 21 [1931]: 70).
people” (plebs, multitudo)—were insignificant in themselves, but “hundreds” of them acting in concert did apparently influence the rich and famous by sponsoring parades, lobbying for preferred political candidates, sponsoring hugely publicized funerary banquets, and so on. What they wanted from the elite they mostly got: patronage, monetary gifts, meeting halls, and honors of diverse kinds.24

**SERVILE SUFFERING FOR DOING GOOD**

Brown’s study features “elite members of the slave caste.”25 However, I would like next to consider another text in the NT where clearly the appeal is made not to slave elites but rather to a type of slave at the opposite end of the spectrum—namely, to slaves suffering bodily harm for doing good.26 Consider 1 Pet 2:18–21, wherein Peter writes:

> House slaves [ὁι οἰκεταί], submit yourselves [ὑποτασσόμενοι] with all fear to your masters [τοῖς δεσπόταις], not only to those who are good and considerate [τοῖς ἄγαθοις καὶ ἐπικιέσιν], but also to those who are crooked [τοῖς σκολιοῖς]. For it is commendable if, because of the consciousness of God, a man bears up under pains, suffering unjustly [ὑπομένεις τις πάσχον τὰς ἀδίκιας]. For how is it to your credit if you, sinning and being beaten [κολάφιζομενοι], endure? But if you, doing good and suffering [εἰ ἁγαθοποιοῦντες καὶ πάσχοντες], endure, this is commendable before God. For to this you were called [εἰς τοῦτο γὰρ ἐκλήθητε], because even Christ suffered for you [ὁ τὸν Χριστὸν ἐκτάθην υπὲρ ὑμῶν], leaving behind an example for you [ὑμῖν ὑπομείναν υπογραμμον], that you should follow in his footsteps [华丽 ἐπικολουθήσητε τοῖς ἔχοντι αὐτοῖ].27

Here Peter seems to have envisioned a number of “worst case scenarios” for the slaves.28 The passage reveals, for example, that the slaves’ masters


25. So Brown (“Paul’s Use,” 733) on the slaves in Romans.


27. My translation.

were “crooked” (τοῖς σκολοῖς, 2:18), which must mean—at the very least—that they were “unjust” and dishonest with respect to the slaves’ “pay, working conditions, expectations,” and so on.29 Another clue to the original situation is that physical beatings (κολαφίζομενοι, 2:20) were common in the experience of these slaves, even if the immediate context of that term—“sinning and being beaten” (άμαρτοντες καὶ κολαφίζομενοι, 2:20)—assumes that their blows could be “a just desert.”30 For improper conduct on the part of the slaves. Further, the words translated “under pains” (λύπας, 2:19), “suffering unjustly” (πάσαν ὀλίγος, 2:19), and “doing good and suffering” (ἀγαθοποιοῦντες καὶ πάσχοντες, 2:20) must indicate that the lot of these particular slaves was rough indeed. Some interpret the statement “doing good” (ἀγαθοποιοῦντες) in only a general sense; probably, however, Peter had in mind not only the slaves’ suffering while doing good (the pres. act. ptc. ἀγαθοποιοῖντες in 2:20 denotes ongoing activity) but also suffering for doing good.31 In other words, even though these particular Christian slaves were serving faithfully, their “crooked” masters regarded them as disobedient and so deserving of physical punishment on account of their devotion to Christ. In “such a predicament,” then, it was inevitable for Christian slaves that “punishments [should] then ensue.”32

Thus, the slaves suffered. What seems significant about the suffering of these particular domestics is that their lot is supposed by several scholars to have had a “paradigmatic” significance for every Christian in the original situation.33 First, all the Christians in Peter’s epistolary audience—including, presumably, the completely free members (ελεύθεροι) of that community—are referred to in 1 Pet 2:16 as “God’s slaves” (εἰς κοινοῖς). 29. The literal meaning of σκολοί -ά -άν is “bent, curved, or crooked as opposed to straight, crooked.” Here the adj. holds the metaphorical significance: “morally bent or twisted, crooked, unscrupulous, dishonest . . . harsh, unjust” (BDAG, 930). “Harsh” is the word several translations (NIV, NKJV, NRSV, TEV) use to render τοῖς σκολοῖς in 1 Pet 2:18. Other translations include “froward” (KJV) and “overbearing” (RSV). “Unjust”: so, Selwyn, The First Epistle of St. Peter, 176; Brox, Der Erste Petrusbrief, 132; Achtemeier, 1 Peter, 195; and Elliott, 1 Peter, 517. “Pay, working conditions, expectations”: Grudem, The First Epistle of Peter, 126. Although there is no indication whether these masters/owners were Christian or not, Elliott is of the opinion (see 1 Peter, 516) that here “pagan masters are assumed.”

30. The verb κολαφίζω means “to strike sharply, esp[ecially] with the hand, strike with the fist, beat, cuff” (BDAG, 555). “My whole head’s swollen with blows [κολαφίζω]” means an unsavory character in Terence (Ad. 245 [trans. J. Barsby; LCL]). The word is used to describe the abuse meted out to Jesus: “they struck him [κολαφίζων αὐτὸν]” (Matt 26:67), and “some began . . . to strike him [δραματὸς τινὸς . . . κολαφίζων αὐτὸν]” (Mark 14:65). It is also used of Paul’s wretched circumstances in Ephesus—“we are brutally treated [κολαφίζομεν]” (1 Cor 4:11)—and of Satan, who used Paul’s thorn in the flesh to “torment [κολαφίζω]” him (2 Cor 12:7). “A just desert”: Glancy, Slavery in Early Christianity, 149.


32. Achtemeier, 1 Peter, 197 n. 111.

Second, several of the phrases used in 1 Pet 2:18–20 for the slaves (or for the servile Christ in 1 Pet 2:21–25) are applied to Christians of other estates elsewhere in the letter, thus linking the latter closely to the former. Third, the seemingly insignificant adverb δυμοίος (“in just the same way”) in 3:1 (also 3:7 and 5:5) connects all the activities of submission (denoted by ὑποστήσασθαι) and suffering (denoted by νάσημαι) to one common referent. Thus, if letter recipients were to ask, “We are to submit and suffer ‘in the same way’ [δυμοίος] as whom?” the implied answer would be “In the same way as do the slaves”—or better, “In the same way as does Christ”—since most of the submissive suffering in 1 Peter comes to a head in that of the slaves (2:18–20) and supremely so in that of the servile Christ (2:21–25):

Peter bases his instructions for all Christian members of society on the example of Christ’s lowly position in human society, but he first addresses the lowliest—the slave, who by definition is being treated unjustly. The role of the slave in Roman society images the role of Jesus Christ, who was a suffering slave obedient to God but treated unjustly in the world.37

It is for reasons such as these that Peter Brox refers to 1 Pet 2:18–25 as “ein Schlüsseltext des Briefes” (“a key text of the letter”). The passage could have been a song (“ein Lied”) of the congregational assembly, or a catechetical set-piece (“katechetisches Lehrstück”) familiar to all the Christians who received the letter.39 At any rate, the passage features Christ’s

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34. The particle ὡς, in the expressions ὡς ἐκλειθηταῖν (2:16) and ὡς θεοὶ δοῦλοι (2:16) must indicate that it was the metaphorical significance of the Christians’ freedom and slavery that Peter wished to emphasize, not their actual legal standing in Roman society.

35. Cf. the following pairs, for example:

Slaves: “For to this [ἑκτὶ τοῦτο] you were called [ἐκλειθητη]” (2:21).

All: “Because to this [ὥς τοῦτο] you were called [ἐκλειθητη]” (3:9).

Servile Christ: “No deceit [οὐκ ἔσωθοι] was found in his mouth [ἐν τῷ στόματι αὐτοῦ]” (2:22).

All: “Whoever loves life . . . must keep his lips [χεῖλα] from deceitful speech [τῷ μὴ λαλήσαι δοῦλον]” (3:10).

Servile Christ: “Who, when he was reviled [ὁς λοιδοφόρος ἦν], did not revile in return [ὁς ἀντελοθέτησι]” (2:23).

All: “Do not repay evil with evil or insult with insult [λοιδορῖν ἀντι λοιδορίας]” (3:9).

The scheme is based on the one featured in Achtemeier, 1 Peter, 192 n. 50. A similar pattern occurs in 2:21–24 (slaves/servile Christ) and 3:13–18 (all Christians).

36. The particle θεοὶ links wives (3:1), husbands (3:7), and “the younger” (5:5). The verb ὑποστήσασθαι links the entire epistolary audience (2:13), slaves (2:18), wives (3:1, 5), the angels, authorities, and powers (3:22), and “the younger” (5:5). The verb πάσχω links slaves (2:19–20), the servile Christ (2:21, 23; 3:18; 4:1), and the whole community (3:14; 4:15–16, 19; 5:10).


38. Brox, Der Erste Petrusbrief, 129.

39. So ibid., 129 n. 420. Cf. “einem geformten christologischen Text” (ibid., 134) and “das Christuslied” (ibid., 135).
submissive suffering and death as a kind of epitome of the suffering of the slaves—which, like Christ’s suffering, was undeserved. In this section, then, Peter paints Christ as the Slave par excellence, as the innocent Sufferer on whom even the most wretched slave in the original situation might well have depended. Christ at his passion and death was someone for the slaves to imitate, though not necessarily ethically. Consider the phrases “leaving behind an example for you” (ὑποδηλούθησε τοῖς Ἰχνευσιν αὐτῶν) and “that you should follow in his footsteps” (γίνα ἐκ παρακολούθησε τοῖς Ἰχνευσιν αὐτῶν), both of which occur in 1 Pet 2:21. There is, to be sure, a tendency among commentators to understand the phrases in an ethical sense; closer examination suggests a far different meaning, however: the slaves were conformed to Christ’s “example” (ὑπογραμμός) and “followed in his footsteps” (γίνα ἐκ παρακολούθησε τοῖς Ἰχνευσιν αὐτῶν) when, in faith, they perceived the place at which their present sufferings were connected to Christ’s, and Christ’s to theirs.41 Since “footprint” (ἔχος) need not mean strict mimesis (but more a trace or even an “impression”), Stumpff suggests that walking “in his [Christ’s] footsteps” (1 Pet 2:21) means not a “detailed imitation of individual traits” between Christ and the slaves but rather an impression made from the One to the others—or, indeed, a going the same way as the One who has gone before.42

We have established, then, that slavery among the Christians was possessed of a highly paradigmatic significance. Peter’s encouragement was intended not for “an elite group of slaves” at Rome, but for what one supposes were more typical domestics who—slapped about for doing good—were encouraged by Peter to “bear up” under difficult circumstances.43 We may suspect—from several indications we have seen here—that a large

40. This was connected to the Passion accounts, especially to the trial (1 Pet 2:22–23) and crucifixion (1 Pet 2:24). See the detailed treatment in Jobes, 1 Peter, 194.
41. For the ethical sense of the phrases, see especially Selwyn, The First Epistle of St. Peter, 20–21, 92, 97–100, 161, 169, 178, 195. The word ὑπογραμμός means, literally, a “pattern” that children used to master the letters of the Greek alphabet. Cf. G. Schrenk, ὑπογραμμός (ὑπογράφω), TDNT 1:773; Achtemeier, 1 Peter, 199; Elliott, 1 Peter, 526; and Jobes, 1 Peter, 195. See also Plato, Leg. 711b: κάνε ὑπογραφάνει τῷ πράττων, “he should first trace out the right lines” (trans. R. G. Bury; LCL); and Clement of Alexandria, Strom. 5.8.49: ὑπογραμμόμενοι παιδικοί, “copy-heads for children” (quoted by LSJ, s.v. ὑπογραμμός). The verb ὑποκολοθήκας means “to follow, attend” (see BDAG, 358). It occurs in reference to the signs that would attend the gospel (Mark 16:20). It is used of the godly widow: that she must be well-attested in good works (1 Tim 5:10). Finally, it is used of the sins that appear, i.e., follow (1 Tim 5:24). The verb could have been a technical term for being a follower of Jesus (Achtemeier, 1 Peter, 199 n. 147; Elliott, 1 Peter, 527; and Jobes, 1 Peter, 195). In the NT, the noun ἔχος (“footprint”) has only a figurative meaning (BDAG, 485). Cf. the word’s two other occurrences in Rom 4:12 and 2 Cor 12:18. For the connection between the people’s suffering and Christ’s, see A. Stumpff, “ἔχος,” TDNT 3:404.
42. Examples of ἔχος meaning “impression” appear in ibid., 3:402–3. See also ibid., 3:404 for following the One who has gone before. Cf. also Brox’s point (Der Erste Petrusbrief, 135) that Christiansleiden (“Christian suffering”) arises out of Christus-Leiden (“Christ’s suffering”).
segment of those Christians who received the letter from Peter were either actual slaves or were at least in a position to understand the many complexities associated with slavery in ancient life—complexities, alas, that often are lost on moderns who ascribe to the conviction that all men (and by this one means also women, boys, girls, etc.) are created equal. But the myth of a monolithic equality for everyone in broad society was completely unknown in ancient times, when large disparities between categories of persons were simply accepted as a matter of course. One context in which the inequalities were especially evident was in the assignment of penalties for crimes committed. In ancient society, punishments did not fit the crime, as we moderns all too blithely assume; instead, one’s standing in society had everything to do with the type of punishment one could expect to receive.

THE CROSS AS THE COMMON EXPERIENCE
OF ALL CHRISTIANS

Not everyone who died on a cross was a slave in the ancient world, yet anyone who did perish by crucifixion experienced the so-called “slaves’ punishment” (servile supplicium). Army deserters could die on crosses, as well as freedmen and still other despised members of lower-class society who were not slaves. Ordinarily, punishment for capital offenses depended on one’s standing in society: persons known as humiliores, defined by the Roman law codes as “persons of the humbler sort,” could be subject to crucifixion, torture, bodily punishment, and exposure to beasts in the arena, whereas for the same offenses honestiores (“gentlemen”) were merely “sent into exile.”

Crucifixion (called “condemnation to the gallow” in Justinian’s Digest) was not the only extreme penalty, of course. Nevertheless, it is listed first in a grouping of extreme penalties presented in a decreasing order of severity: crucifixion, burning alive, and beheading, followed closely by

44. The phrase servile supplicium (“slaves’ punishment”) occurs in Valerius Maximus 2.7.12 to describe the crucifixion the elder Scipio Africanus meted out to Roman deserters who had run away from their country at the time of the Carthaginian War: hos [Romanos] . . . tamquam patriae fugitivos crucibus adfixit.

45. For example, Scriptores Historiae Augustae 6.4.6; 15.12.2; Tacitus, Hist. 4.11 (cf. 2.72); Horace, Sat. 1.8.32; Livy 29.9.10; 29.18.4. The examples come from M. Hengel, Crucifixion in the Ancient World and the Folly of the Message of the Cross (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977), 51–52 n. 1.


47. Ad furcam damnatio (Dig. 48.19.28 pref.). Also, in furcam dannabitur (Dig. 49.16.3). Cf. also the related phrases in furca suspendisse (Dig. 48.13.7 pref.); furcae subici (Dig. 48.19.9.11); furca figendos (Dig. 48.19.28.15); furcae suspenduntur (Dig. 48.19.38.1); and in furcam tolluntur (Dig. 48.19.38.2).
work in the mines and deportation to an island. Moreover, the OT attests to early forms of crucifixion, or at least to the suspension or impalement of condemned persons on trees or beams of wood. Still more evidence attests to the antiquity, ubiquity, and spectacularity of crucifixion. Finally, there was the sense that virtually any person of "the meaner sort" could end up on the gibbet himself one day: "I know the cross will be my tomb," jokes a rascally slave in Plautus, "[for] there's where my ancestors rest—father, grandfather, great-grandfather, and great-great-grandfather!" By Roman times, even freedmen could "suffer the penalty" (supplicia penderent) if they had conspired with slaves to do their patron in. A spectacular epitaph from Amyzon in Caria of Asia Minor records the punishment of a slave who had dared to murder his master sometime in the second century B.C.:

Demetrios, mourned by all, whom sweet sleep held and the nectarous drink of Bromios; slain (ὁφαγον οἰκείων) by the hands of a slave and in a great conflagration burnt together with the house, I came to Hades, whilst my father, siblings and elderly mother received to their bosoms bones and ashes; but the one who did such things to me my fellow-citizens

49. For example, Gen 40:19, 22; Deut 21:22–23; Josh 8:29; 10:26; 2 Sam 4:12; 21:6, 9, 12; Esth 7:9–10; 9:13–14, 25; Ezra 6:11.
50. The evidence from Plautus (our earliest Roman source, ca. 250–184 B.C.) is considerable. For only "a few references" from Plautus, see the many contained in Hengel, *Crucifixion*, 52–53 n. 3. In *Verr.* II.5.12, Cicero states that slaves suspected of rebellion in Sicily were handed over for crucifixion "in the manner of our ancestors" (more maiorum), referring apparently to the Sicilian slave uprisings of 137–133 and 104–101 B.C. Regarding the ubiquity of crucifixion, Hengel surveys (*Crucifixion*, 22–23 nn. 1–10) the evidence from Persia, India, Assyria, Scythia, the Taurians, Celts, Germans, Britanni, and Carthaginians. He surmises (*Crucifixion*, 23) that the Romans learned crucifixion from Persia by way of Greece and Carthage. Regarding its being a spectacle, "the practice approved by most authorities has been to hang notorious brigands on a gallows [famosos latrones... furca figendos] in the place which they used to haunt, so that by the spectacle [conspectu] others may be deterred from the same crimes" (*Dig.* 48.19.28.15 [Callistratus, A.D. 193–200]).
52. "There was passed also a senatorial decree... that, if a master had been assassinated by his own slaves [si quis a suis servis interfectus esset], even those manumitted under his will, but remaining under the same roof, should suffer the penalty among the rest [inter servos supplicia penderent]" (Tacitus, *Ann.* 13.32 [trans. J. Jackson; LCL]).
crucified alive (ζωῶν ἀνεκρέψασαν) for the wild beasts and birds.⁵³

Preceding examples suggest that crucifixion was very much part of the cultural landscape inhabited by the first Christians—and this quite apart from Jesus' own well-known death on a cross:

So the soldiers took charge of Jesus. Carrying his own cross (βαστάζων ἐκατέρω τὸν σταυρόν), he went out to the place of the Skull (which in Aramaic is called Golgotha). Here they crucified him (ἀυτὸν ἐκτίθησαν), and with him two others—one on each side and Jesus in the middle. (John 19:16b–18, NIV)

Obviously, the passion narratives, which feature the death of Jesus on a cross, provide some of the best evidence for crucifixion to emerge from antiquity.⁵⁴

Hengel points out that people in ancient society would have been "all too aware of what it meant to bear the cross through the city and then be nailed to it."⁵⁵ He suggests that Paul's preaching of "Christ crucified" could well have been a considerable deterrent to the advancement of Christianity in the original situation. Any alleged "son of god" who could not help himself (cf. Mark 15:31) but rather required that followers should take up their respective crosses and follow him would "hardly [have been] an attraction to the lower classes of Roman and Greek society."⁵⁶

Hengel resolved the dilemma by suggesting that early Christianity "was not particularly a religion of slaves."⁵⁷ That position is consonant with what has been argued by quite a number of scholars to the effect

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⁵³. The Greek text and translation are in New Docs 8:2. S. R. Llewelyn suggests (ibid.) that the slave, "apparently availing himself of the deep sleep which had overtaken his master after a banquet, killed him and then tried to conceal the crime by setting the whole house alight. As such, the document stands as a counter-balance to the numerous (and no doubt biased) epitaphs commemorating a good relationship between master and slave."


⁵⁵. Hengel, Crucifixion, 62, citing Plautus, Carbonaria frg. 2: patibulum ferat per urbem, deinde offigitur cruici.

⁵⁶. "We preach Christ crucified (ὁμιλεῖς δὲ κριστὸν ἐκτίθησαν)," 1 Cor 1:23. Cf. also 1 Cor 1:13 (ironic), 17, 18; 2:2.


⁵⁸. Ibid., 62.

that early Christianity was not primarily a movement of the poor and socially disenfranchised. The itinerant Paul relied often on Christians who obviously were quite wealthy and well-positioned in ancient society to give both him and the expanding mission much-needed assistance. Lydia, the hospitable “seller of purple goods” (πορφυρόπωλις, Acts 16:14–15; cf. 16:40), springs immediately to mind, as do many other Christians who must have possessed wealth and relatively high social status, for example, Jason (Acts 17:5–9); Aquila and Priscilla (Acts 18:2–3); Titius Justus (Acts 18:7); Philip, surnamed “evangelist,” who had a house (Acts 21:8); Mnason, who likewise had a house (Acts 21:16); and Philemon (Phlm 22), to name several.60 Also, it is astonishing to see how often Paul apparently rubbed shoulders with the power elites of his day: proconsuls, synagogue rulers, the Roman procurator of Judea, Asiarchs in Ephesus, the “chief man” at Malta, a city treasurer in Corinth, and at least a deputy of Caesar, if not the emperor himself, at Rome.61

I shall argue here, however, that emerging Christianity never lost its servile character, even as it bubbled upward to engage the elites of ancient society. Consider that some Christians at Corinth, for example, were clearly of servile, or of at least freed, status. Paul writes in 1 Cor 7:21–24:

Were you called while a slave [δουλὸς ἐκλήθη]? Do not let it concern you, but if you are able to be made free [δώναι ἐλευθέρος γεννηθῶν], rather make use of [it]. For he in the Lord who is called while a slave [δουλὸς] is a freedman of the Lord [ἀπελευθέρων κυρίου ἐστὶν]. Likewise, he who is called while free [ἐλευθέρος] is a slave of Christ [δουλὸς ἐστὶν Χριστοῦ]. You were bought for a price [τιμὴν ἠγοράσθης]; do not become slaves [δοῦλοι] of men. But let each person, as beholden to God [παρὰ θεῷ] remain in the state in which he was called.62

Wayne Meeks points out that this passage “would be a strange example” were there “no slaves among the addressees.”

Likewise, “Chloe’s people” (ὑπὸ τῶν Χλόης, 1 Cor 1:11) were either “slaves or former slaves” of Chloe, according to Meeks. Indeed, it was the existence of “Chloe’s people” in particular that caused Meeks to consider how many slaves and freedmen with apostolic endorsement traveled between the congregations “as agents of their masters or mistresses.” When still other names are pressed, it seems Paul often memorialized persons who were of servile—or at least freed—status: Achaicus (1 Cor 16:19), Fortunatus (1 Cor 16:17), Hermas and Hermes (Rom 16:14), Luke, called “the beloved physician” (Λουκᾶς ὁ ἱατρὸς ὁ ἀγαπητός, Col 4:14), “those . . . who belong to the family of Narcissus” (τοὺς ἐκ τῶν Ναρκίσσου, Rom 16:11), Onesimus (Phlm 16), and probably others. Four times Paul conveys greetings to named Christians and their anonymous households, which undoubtably included servile persons, for example, “to Philemon . . . and to Apphia . . . and to Archippus . . . and to the church-throughout-your-house” (Phlm 1–2, added emphasis). Here “house” (οἰκός) signifies not so much a building as the all-embracing, extended household that would have included the master’s immediate family, relatives, temporary workers, tenants, business partners, clients, and (especially) dependent freedpersons and slaves.

63. Meeks, Urban Christians, 64.
64. Ibid., 63 (cf. ibid., 59). Glancy (Slavery in Early Christianity, 49) concurs: they were “probably her slaves.”
65. Meeks, Urban Christians, 57. According to Meeks (ibid.), others who possibly fit this category are Amphilatus (Rom 16:8), Andronicus and Junia(s) (Rom 16:7), and Epaenetus (Rom 16:5).
66. Possibly, Achaicus was a slave of the household of Stephanas (according to E. B. Redlich, S. Paul and His Companions [London: Macmillan, 1913], 235) or a freedman colonist from Italy (according to Meeks, Urban Christians, 56). Fortunatus too was of Stephanas’s household and probably a slave. So Redlich, Companions, 235. Both Hermas and Hermes were probably slaves (ibid., 238). The name Hermes was “common among slaves, but not so much so as Hermes” (Sandy and Headlam, Romans, 427). Apparently, the same Luke is mentioned in Phlm 24. Meeks points out that doctors were often slaves: “we might speculate that Luke had been a medicus in some Roman familia, receiving the name of his master (Lucius, of which Lukas is a hypocorism) on his manumission” (Urban Christians, 57). Narcissus may well have been a freedman of Claudius, whose death just after the accession of Nero is recorded in Tacitus (Ann. 13.1). If this possibility is true, Narcissus’ servile household (the so-called Narcissiani) received Paul’s greeting here (thus, Sandy and Headlam, Romans, 425–26; and Redlich, Companions, 255). About Onesimus, Paul writes “no longer as a slave [οὐκέπι τό ός δοῦλον] but as more than a slave [ἄλλος ὁ πρώτος δοῦλον]” (Phlm 16; cf. Col 4:9). But in spite of Paul’s rhetoric here, Onesimus probably was in fact a slave—and this quite in spite of the fact that his master Philemon was supposed to accept him in faith as “a beloved brother [δοῦλον ἄγαπητόν]” (Phlm 16). Another example is Urbanus (Rom 16:9), who possessed “a common Roman slave name” (Sandy and Headlam, Romans, 425). Redlich surmises, further, that Urbanus was “probably a slave” (Companions, 285). However, Meeks supposes that the name Urbanus lacks “any clear indicator of . . . social standing” (Urban Christians, 56). Likewise, it is unclear whether or not Rufus was a slave in Rom 16:13.
67. Cf. the similar phrases in Rom 16:5, 1 Cor 16:19, and Col 4:15.
68. V. P. Branick, The House Church in the Writings of Paul (Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier, 1989), 37.
Finally, Paul used particular tags to designate not only the telltale presence of slaves and other social undesirables among the Christians at Corinth, for example, but also to convey a clear sense of Greco-Roman society’s contemptuous estimation of them. Paul writes in 1 Cor 1:26–29:

For look at your calling, brethren, for not many are wise according to the flesh, not many are powerful, not many are noble-born. But God selected the foolish things of the world [τὰ μωρὰ τοῦ κόσμου] to shame the wise, and the weak things of the world [τὰ ἄσθενη τοῦ κόσμου] God chose out to shame the strong, and the low-born/ignoble things of the world [τὰ ἄγνωστα τοῦ κόσμου] God chose out, and the despised things [τὰ ἐξουσιοδοτημένα]—indeed, the things that are not [τὰ μὴ ὄντα]—in order to set at not the things that are, so that no flesh may boast before God.69

The servile taint is revealed by the neuter plural phrases that Paul uses to adorn the preceding passage: “the foolish things” (τὰ μωρὰ); “the weak things” (τὰ ἄσθενη); “the low-born things” (τὰ ἄγνωστα); “the despised things” (τὰ ἐξουσιοδοτημένα); and “the things that are not” (τὰ μὴ ὄντα). We may deduce that Paul does not write merely about “things” here but that the phrases must represent tags for slaves in the epistolary audience at Corinth who, as nonbeings, were conceived of by Paul and elements of his readership as complete nonpersons.70 Nonbeings such as these apparently comprised a large part of the epistolary audience at Corinth, however, for why else would Paul have kept repeating the phrase, “not many of you . . . not many of you . . . not many of you” (οὐ πολλοὶ . . . οὐ πολλοὶ . . . οὐ πολλοί, v. 26)?71 Later pagans would opine that educated persons could not possibly be Christians, for that religion appealed only to “foolish, dishonorable and stupid” people—indeed, to “slaves [ἀδράποδα], women, and little children.”72

In short, Hengel’s suggestion that early Christianity “was not particularly a religion of slaves”73 cannot be substantiated. We should say rather

69. My translation.
71. “In saying ‘not many,’ of course, Paul is well aware that some of their number were in fact well off by human standards (e.g., Crispus, Gaius, Erastus, Stephanas). Some of them indeed had their own houses and, according to 11:17–22, were abusing the ‘have-nots’ at the Lord’s Table. But primarily the community was composed of people who were not ‘upper class,’ although from this statement one cannot determine how many would have belonged to the truly ‘poor’—slaves and poor freedmen—and how many would have been artisans and craftsmen, such as Paul was himself” (G. D. Fee, The First Epistle to the Corinthians [NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987] 82).
72. The view of Celsus, as quoted by Origen, Cels. 3.44.
73. Hengel, Crucifixion, 62.
that the vigorous Christianity revealed in the texts of the NT was quint-
essential a slaves' religion in that so much of it—epitomized by the death
of Jesus on a cross—could not help but strike a responsive chord in the ex-
perience of countless slaves, who themselves could have served under con-
stant threat of crucifixion in the early centuries A.D.\textsuperscript{74} Hengel himself
admits as much toward the end of his study, where he comments on the sig-
ificance of the death of Jesus and how, in his opinion, the "passion story"
formed a "solidarity" between the love of God and anyone who has
ever experienced "unspeakable suffering."\textsuperscript{75} Hengel envisioned in particu-
lar servile experiences in the early centuries A.D.:

In the person and the fate of the one man Jesus of Nazareth this sav-
ing 'solidarity' of God with us is given its historical and physical
form. In him, the 'Son of God,' God himself took up the 'existence
of a slave' and died the 'slaves' death' on the tree of martyrdom (Phil-
ippians 2.8), given up to public shame (Hebrews 12.2) and the 'curse
of the law' (Gal. 3.13), so that in the 'death of God' life might win vic-
tory over death. In other words, in the death of Jesus of Nazareth God
identified himself with the extreme of human wretchedness, which
Jesus endured as a representative of us all, in order to bring us to the
freedom of the children of God:

He who did not spare his own Son,
but gave him up for us all,
will he not also give us all things with him? (Romans 8.32).\textsuperscript{76}

At the same time, the gospel was presented to the world in those days as
a bold invitation to anyone and to everyone (regardless of social status) to
become a slave of God in Christ by faith and baptism, taking up one's
"cross" and following Jesus into a new life and destiny as a disciple of the
Crucified One. Consider only the "take-up-your-cross-and-follow-Me"
statements in the Synoptic Gospels, for example;\textsuperscript{77} the historical origins of
this language may derive from the carrying of a cross to public execution
by condemned malefactors, opined Johannes Schneider (who wrote the ar-
ticle on crucifixion in the \textit{TDNT}).\textsuperscript{78} That horrific act may possibly have sug-
gested to onlookers "a beginning of [Christian] discipleship," which would
then become "a lasting state" for anyone who had been baptized into the
death and resurrection of Jesus: "The disciple of Jesus is a cross-bearer, and
[this] he remains . . . his whole life."\textsuperscript{79} Thinking of this type must have
penetrated to the depths of society during the first centuries A.D.

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\textsuperscript{74} The slaves' punishment (\textit{servile supplicium}) hovered like a pall over ancient society in
general. See, for example, ibid., 86–89.
\textsuperscript{75} The quoted portions are taken from ibid., 88.
\textsuperscript{76} Ibid., 88–89.
\textsuperscript{77} "Let him take up his cross [\textit{diástref tòv sunghôv}] and follow me" (Matt 16:24, Mark
8:34). In Luke 9:23, the evangelist appends "daily" (\textit{kai òpēra}) to the saying.
\textsuperscript{78} J. Schneider, \textit{TDNT} 7:572–84, esp. p. 578.
\textsuperscript{79} Ibid., 7:578.
Conclusion

I suggested at the beginning that biblical slavery remains pertinent for Christians still today. By far, the greatest pertinence concerns the work-related vocations of the first Christians whose jobs apparently resembled what slaves carried out in the household or on the farm. After surveying the “virtually limitless” number of slave jobs in antiquity, Bradley declared that “no occupation in Roman society was closed to slaves”; Treggiari, moreover, counted some 78 different jobs that slaves performed in the household of Livia at Rome. While no comparable lists of occupations exist in the Bible, the NT writers seem to presume that the first Christians also were comprised of persons who possessed a close proximity to slavery. Take Paul, for example: his life as a workman was spent in large degree with slaves or persons of low social status. The other apostles also engaged in professions that seem redolent of slavery, or at least of low status. Finally, Jesus sanctified common toil as a “carpenter” (τέκτων, Mark 6:3; cf. ὁ τοῦ τεκτόνος υἱός, Matt 13:55), a word that can be linked to slaves. One may conclude that the NT was intended for the ancient equivalent of

81. S. Treggiari, “Domestic Staff at Rome in the Julio-Claudian Period, 27 B.C. to A.D. 68” Histoire Sociale/Social History 6 (1973): 241–55. Treggiari breaks down the slave jobs according to the following headings:

| Administrative staff (e.g., dispensator ["slave steward"], servile cashiers, accountants, secretaries) |
| Slaves in charge of particular rooms (e.g., atrienis ["major domo"], porters, "triclinarchs" [in charge of the triclinium]; cubiculare ["bedroom staff"]) |
| Personal servants (hair dressers, clothiers, masseurs, pedisqui ["smartly dressed courtiers"]) |
| Craftsmen (lanipedi [weighed out the wool for each day’s work for servile spinners, weavers, menders, etc.], goldsmiths and silversmiths, pearl setters) |
| “Professionals” (doctors, surgeons, professors and “child-minders,” architects, musicians, actors) |
| Outdoor workers (gardeners, groomsmen, litter-bearers) |

82. “And because he [Paul] was of the same trade he stayed with them, and they worked [ὑγραῖονος], for by trade they were tentmakers [οἰκηστοιοι]” (Acts 18:3 RSV). “[Paul’s] life was very much that of the workshop . . . of leather, knives, and awls; of wearying toil; of being bent over a workbench like a slave and of working side by side with slaves; of thereby being perceived by others and by himself as slavish and humiliated” (R. F. Hock, The Social Context of Paul’s Ministry: Tentmaking and Apostleship [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980], 67; emphasis added).
83. Luke was the “beloved physician [ὁ ἱερέως δάγκατης]” (Col 4:14). Simon and Andrew were “fishermen [ἀλιεῖς]” (Matt 4:18, Mark 1:16). James and John were business “partners [κοινοῖοι]” with Simon (Luke 5:10). Matthew was a “tax collector [ὁ τελῶνης]” (Matt 10:3; cf. ἠρτὸς τοῦ τέλανον, Matt 9:9, Mark 2:14, Luke 5:27). Moreover, Judas apparently served Jesus and the band of disciples as a kind of “treasurer” (cf. τὸ γλασσόφοικον εἶχεν ὁ λοίδης, John 13:29).
84. LSJ provides as a general definition of τέκτων, a “worker in wood, carpenter, joiner” (e.g., Homer, Il. 6.315). The τέκτων produced items such as ships and spears (Homer, Od. 9.126,
everyman, who, as a contemporary of the events described, possessed a keen understanding of how slavery functioned in ordinary life:

Slavery was everywhere; it was as much a part of the fabric of life in ancient times as those technological gadgets we take so much for granted. Only the Essenes at Qumran and the Egyptian Therapeutae appear to have rejected slavery in principle; Jesus and His immediate disciples did not keep slaves according to the available evidence, nor did Paul, Barnabas, or Timothy. Yet very soon, especially as Christianity expanded into the Gentile communities, there were believers who owned, had close dealings with, or were themselves, slaves.85

There is, furthermore, a correlation between the virtual servility of the first Christians and what many continue to call the doctrine of Christian vocation.86 While Luther valued the forgiveness of sins above all other doctrines, and his theological writings return constantly to that center “like rays of the sun from one glowing core,”87 the reformer was no less taken by how God’s lively forgiveness of sins grants abundant life to Christians of widely varying vocations in life and how Christ lives in and through common Christians through the humble means of grace (Word of God, baptism, Lord’s Supper). This is true even if one’s vocation consists merely of hauling manure around in a field, cleaning children, milking cows, hoeing the garden, planting, digging, and farming, or wielding the sword (cf. Rom 13:4) as either a soldier or grim executioner: “An executioner . . . is better than a prior or an abbot, for this function has been entrusted by God.”88


86. For an introduction to the subject of Christian vocation, see the “Table of Duties,” or “Certain Passages of Scripture for Various Holy Orders and Estates Whereby These Are Severally to Be Admonished as to Their Office and Duty,” in the Small Catechism of Martin Luther (A Short Explanation of Dr. Martin Luther’s Small Catechism: A Handbook of Christian Doctrine [St. Louis: Concordia, 1943], 25–30). This section of the Small Catechism has scriptural admonitions of the following types: to bishops, pastors, and preachers; what the hearers owe to their pastors; of civil government; of subjects; to husbands; to wives; to parents; to children; to servants, hired men, and employees; to employers; to the young in general; to widows; to all in common. Finally, Luther writes: “Let each his lesson learn with care, / And all the household well shall fare” (ibid., 30).


Luther’s general understanding of the Christian life is this: “God gives you an office that you may serve.” Thus, the rare Christian prince is, at the same time, a “servant of all” since he genuinely puts the affairs of his subjects ahead of his own (as Duke Frederick the Wise did, for example, when he harbored Luther at great personal risk). Indeed, those very opportunities in life that seem at first to be so attractive to a Christian (love for one’s spouse; the pursuit of money, power, prestige; the enjoyment of one’s job, etc.) end up placing even greater burdens on a believer than if such aspirations had not been realized in the first place. Nevertheless, in this backhanded way, God assigns the tasks of creation to everyone on earth, including Christians.

For this reason, many Christians are tempted to abandon their vocations when confronted with their burdens and duties, flee their particular crosses, and seek something that has greater meaning and recognition in the eyes of the world. At these times, supposed Luther, the Christian is alone with Christ on the cross and shares his agony (cf. Matt 27:46, Mark 15:34). Only then, when every possibility has been closed and the Christian is about to give up, does God teach one how rightly to pray:

Being in need means that all creation’s possibilities have been tried and found incapable of helping. At that point God descends and com-


92. Wingren, Luther on Vocation, 171.
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implements his creation. The door by which God enters to effect the new is often the prayer of a person in need.93

I propose that, in the main, the relationship between masters and slaves in the NT and between Christians of greater or lesser station (as Luther articulated this in his doctrine of vocation) is essentially the same. Thus, the most recent criticisms of slavery cannot obscure the fact that, in so many respects, Christians continue to find themselves in quasi-servile relationships yet today. Let one simple, yet telling, example suffice: substitute “employees” and “bosses” for δοῦλοι (“slaves”) and κυρίοι (“masters”), respectively, and there remains still today—long after the legal abolishment of slavery in modern democratic societies—essentially the same relationship as obtained long ago in the assemblies of the NT:

Slaves [οἱ δοῦλοι], be obedient to those who are your earthly masters [ὑπακούετε τοῖς κατὰ σάρκα κυρίοις], with fear and trembling, in singleness of heart, as to Christ [ὡς τῷ Χριστῷ]; not in the way of eyeservice, as men-pleasers, but as servants of Christ [ὡς δοῦλοι Χριστῷ], doing [ποιοῦντες] the will of God from the heart, rendering service with a good will as to the Lord [δουλεύοντες ὡς τῷ κυρίῳ] and not to men. (Eph 6:5–7 rsv; cf. Col 3:22–25)

Let modern Christians see themselves in this picture, then, and not simply dismiss what the NT reveals about slavery as an outmoded relic of a bygone age. A proper doctrine of vocation holds that God hides himself behind those persons to whom Christians are beholden in this world, beginning with one’s parents, of course, but then also one’s employer, husband, pastor, teacher, representatives of the government (to whom one owes taxes and allegiance), and all others under whose authority God has set each and every Christian to be faithful.94 Just as true, however, is the idea that God works and speaks through the common Christian to others over whom God has set one to be the divine representative: one’s children, wife, employees, congregation (if one is a pastor), students (if one is a teacher), the people who elected the Christian to office (if one is a magistrate), and so on.95

God continues the work of creation through humanity’s diverse vocations on earth, and these range “from the princely to the meanest labor.”96

93. Ibid., 135–36.
94. Luther’s understanding of vocation derives especially from the fourth commandment of the Decalogue (“Honour your father and your mother,” Exod 20:12; cf. Deut 5:16): “What does God require of us in the Fourth Commandment? God requires us—A. To honor our parents and other superiors, that is, to regard them as God’s representatives; . . . B. To serve our parents and other superiors by gladly doing for them what we can; . . . C. To obey our parents and other superiors in all things in which God has placed them over us; . . . D. To love and esteem our parents and superiors as precious gifts of God” (Small Catechism, 65–66; emphasis in original). Wingren, Luther on Vocation, 68–69, 87.
95. Ibid., 87–88.
96. Ibid., 48.
The church continues to teach these remarkable truths to the world in Luther’s explanation of the fourth commandment in the Small Catechism:

Thou shalt honor thy father and thy mother, that it may be well with thee and thou mayest live long on the earth. What does this mean? We should fear and love God that we may not despise our parents and masters, nor provoke them to anger, but give them honor, serve and obey them, and hold them in love and esteem. 97

97. Small Catechism, 6 (emphasis in original). Cf. also the admonition to “Servants, Hired Men, and Employees,” in the “Table of Duties” (ibid., 29).