

Occasion.¹

Paul had frequently expressed an interest in visiting the church(s) at Rome.¹ It is not at all likely that either Paul or Peter founded the churches. Rather, as Christians came to Rome for various reasons, churches were founded in Rome. See ([Acts 19:21](#); [Romans 1:13](#); [Romans 15:22-29](#)). Shepard points out that Paul's desire to go to Rome was not only to see believers and to spread the Gospel as he did wherever he went on his missionary journeys but he realized the strategic importance of Rome.² It was from Rome that the Gospel could be taken throughout the Roman empire. He was well aware of the expansionistic nature of the empire and how it would suit his mandate to fulfill Christ's command that he be the instrument through which he would preach the Gospel to the nations [class to look up the Lord's missionary command]. Paul had been in the eastern half of the empire – now it was his desire to go to the western half. This would have been greatly facilitated by his presence in Rome.

Purpose.

Paul had many friends in Rome (read [Romans 16](#) ff).² This passage reveals the heart of Paul, I think. Note the very personal nature of this passage – especially note the recognition that Paul gives to women who are fellow servants of Christ (vs' 1, 6, 15). It was the nature of Paul to accept everyone into the sphere of service to Christ – perhaps with the notable exception of Mark on a subsequent missionary journey – we just do not know the reason for Paul's rejection of Mark at that point. At any rate, a lesson to be learned by all of us is to be inclusive and to accept all believers as beloved of the Lord just as Paul had been received by the Christians of Damascus and later Jerusalem. He never forgot that inclusiveness and it made an indelible mark on his life and a believer.

Opening Comments on Paul's Use of "Slave of Christ."³

¹ Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, separated unto the gospel of God, Romans 1:1 (KJV).

See [AMP](#), [NASB](#), [NKJV](#) and [WEY](#)³ where bond-servant is used as translation of *doulos*. It is not necessary to include the term "bond" in the status of servant but it is certainly appropriate. The original *doulos* is rich in meaning as applied to the ancient world. We certainly cannot apply our American experience to this word but it would be good to look briefly into the Bible times.

The Christian application of "Slave."

²² **For he who was called in the Lord while a slave, is the Lord's**

¹ For these outline points use Ungar endnote.

² The Life and Letters of St. Paul, J. W. Shepard, page 365.

³ **Paul, a bondservant of Jesus Christ, called to be an Apostle, set apart to proclaim God's Good News,** Romans 1:1 (WEY).

freedman; likewise he who was called while free, is Christ's slave. ²³
You were bought with a price; do not become slaves of men.
 1 Corinthians 7:22-23 (NASB95).

We can draw from the Hebrew law and the Roman law to gain insight into the use of *doulos*. First and foremost the word is probably best couched with the idea of being either a freedman or a bond-servant. A good translation of *doulos* is bond-servant but even this might be a bit misleading. See OT on the idea bond-servant.

¹⁶ **And it shall be, if he say unto thee, I will not go away from thee; because he loveth thee and thine house, because he is well with thee;** ¹⁷ **Then thou shalt take an awl, and thrust it through his ear unto the door, and he shall be thy servant for ever. And also unto thy maidservant thou shalt do likewise.** Deuteronomy 15:16-17 (KJV)

It is from this passage we get the idea of a “bond-servant” but that is not the entirety of this passage – the main thrust of this passage was to *free* slaves after 6 years. Where we get the idea of bond-servant is where after a slave is freed according to Hebrew law he desires to stay with his master. More on this later.

More on the idea of freedmen. But Peter might shed some additional light on the term *doulos*. The idea of a “freedman” was prevalent in Peter and Paul’s day. These were people who were freed by their masters for benevolent reasons or for notable service. The slave of Roman times could buy themselves out of servitude. Certainly Hebrew law set the standard with the year of Jubilee. Read [Deuteronomy 15:12-18](#). Every seventh year Hebrew slaves were not only to be set free but they were to be given the means to “make it” in life in the form of flocks etc, it is implied that the freed slave might even have been given land on which to make a living. It is in this passage that the concept of a bond-servant is presented where the slave is free to go but wishes to stay with his beloved master and so a ceremony is practiced where the man’s ear is pierced by an awl and is forever associated and protected by his master.

The Romans had similar ceremonies where a special occasion is made of freeing a slave. However, there was always a special association between the master and the freedman forever.

With that in mind we can read and perhaps understand Peter’s comments below:

¹⁶ **[Live] as free people, [yet] without employing your freedom as a pretext for wickedness; but [live at all times] as servants of God.** 1 Peter 2:16 (AMP).

Let’s take a closer look at *doulos* from the Roman times when Paul wrote this epistle. The practice of manumission (freeing of slaves) was common in the Roman empire. In fact the practice had become so prevalent that Emperor Augustus passed a law proclaiming that no Roman slave could be freed before age 30.⁴ Even when slaves became freedmen they still had obligation to their former masters by way of service, due reverence.

⁴ See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Slavery_in_ancient_Rome

Slavery was a common experience of Paul's day. I miss the "remarkable" assertion below. It seems to me if we were to apply the prevalent practice of manumission of the day, it is easy to see that Christians could see themselves as at once freedmen and at the same time slaves of Christ. The practice was that common. It would have been an easy image to paint especially to Christian freedmen of Paul and Peter's day.

New Testament Use Of The Word Slave In Relation To Christ

In view of the way slaves were so often treated in the first century, it is remarkable that the Apostles again and again called themselves the slaves of Christ. Paul refers to himself thus (Rom. 1:1 and Phil. 1:1, Williams). James, Peter, and Jude do the same thing (Jas. 1:1; 2Pet. 1:1; Jude 1, Williams). To be the slave of Christ is to be God's freeman (1Cor. 7:22). Of course, some of those first century slaves were treated as friends to be trusted, and they really loved their masters and served them faithfully. This is the picture of all true believers in relation to Christ. Christ is our Owner, and we are His willing and loving slaves. —Manners and Customs of Bible Lands

Although there was much cruelty in the Roman world when it came to slavery there was much to be gained in understanding our relationship to the Lord *and to each other* by understanding the good from this status in life. First of all, a slave was not necessarily at the bottom of social strata in the Roman world.

"A slave of someone in high position had more status, authority and freedom than a free commoner; the emperor's slaves were some of the highest-ranking people in the empire, as the Roman Christians would know. In the Old Testament, prophets from Moses on were generally called "servants" or "slaves" of God.—Bible Background Commentary.

If I may pick up on this commentary, Paul more closely identifies himself with the Romans, many of which were perhaps slaves or former slaves. Rather than using his Roman citizenship when writing to the Roman church, chooses to identify himself as a slave of Christ. It certainly expresses his devotion to Christ and probably expresses common teaching among Christianity of the day for a humble attitude of the Christian aristocrats and an elevating attitude among the Christian slaves. This idea is wonderfully expressed in Philemon:

Here the general principle is stated clearly that in Christ we are all at once free in Him and also willing servants of Him.

¹⁰ I entreat you on behalf of my own child whose father I have become while in my chains—I mean Onesimus. ¹¹ Formerly he was useless to you, but now—true to his name—he is of great use to you and to me. ¹² I am sending him back to you, though in so doing I send part of myself. ¹³ It was my wish to keep him at my side for him to attend to my wants, as your representative, during my

imprisonment for the Good News. ¹⁴ Only I wished to do nothing without your consent, so that his kind action of yours might not be done under pressure, but might be a voluntary one. ¹⁵ For perhaps it was for this reason he was parted from you for a time, that you might receive him back wholly and for ever yours; ¹⁶ no longer as a slave, but as something better than a slave—a brother peculiarly dear to me, and even dearer to you, both as a servant and as a fellow Christian. ¹⁷ If therefore you regard me as a comrade, receive him as if he were I myself. Philemon 1:10-17 (WEY).

Paul puts it succinctly in Galatians:

²⁷ For as many of you as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ. ²⁸ There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus. Galatians 3:27-28 (KJV).

Here the general principle is stated clearly that in Christ we are all at once free in Him and also willing servants of Him. So if we were to understand the true nature of slavery in it's best terms, it afforded opportunities of service to benevolent masters as well as advancement in the Romans world. True, Roman slavery had a dark side but this is not the example God's word chooses to draw upon when depicting a person being a servant of the Lord or a servant to each other (indeed we are commanded to observe the latter).

Finally let's review the following passages:

"No longer do I call you slaves, for the slave does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all things that I have heard from My Father I have made known to you. John 15:15 (NASB95)

Let a man regard us in this manner, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. 1 Corinthians 4:1 (NASB95)

For you were called to freedom, brethren; only do not turn your freedom into an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another.

Galatians 5:13 (NASB95).

ENDNOTES

1. **ROMANS, EPISTLE TO.** *The greatest of Paul's epistles and considered by many as the greatest book in the NT. Galatians has been called the "Magna Charta" of Christian liberty and the Roman epistle has been called the "constitution" of Christianity. Its subject material, its logical reasoning, its vigor of style, and its relevance to human need give it a foremost place in biblical revelation. It is a book, in one sense, simple and clear, but in another sense so magnificent that it baffles complete comprehension.*

Occasion. *The epistle appears to have been occasioned by the apostle's interest in the church at Rome. He tells us that he intended to pay a visit in the near future (Acts 19:21; Romans 1:13; Romans 15:22-29). The fact that Phoebe, a deaconess of the church at Cenchræa, was going to Rome presented an opportunity to send the epistle to the Christians in that city (Romans 16:1-2). Paul was all the more compelled to write to this church since it had come into existence apparently without authoritative leadership and needed thorough instruction in the fundamentals of salvation.*

Date. *The letter was written in Corinth during Paul's three-month visit in Greece (Acts 20:2-3). This fact is made evident by reference to the apostle's journey to Jerusalem with a collection for the poor at the time of writing (Romans 15:25-27). Since this collection was emphasized in the earlier letters to Corinth (1 Cor. 16:1-4; 2 Cor. 8-9), it is quite evident that these letters were written about the same time. It clearly appears from these considerations that Romans is later than 2 Corinthians because the apostle is about to leave for Jerusalem (Romans 15:25). The second Corinthian epistle was written from Macedonia, and from Macedonia Paul went to Greece. Numerous instances in the Corinthian epistles point to the fact that the epistle to the Romans was written from Corinth not long after Paul penned 2 Corinthians, that is, a.d. 56.*

—New Unger's Bible Dictionary

Background. *The origin of Christianity in Rome must be traced to converts scattered throughout the empire who came to visit or live in the imperial city. That Peter was the founder of the church is indefensible since it would be unthinkable that Paul would omit his name if he had been bishop in the city. It is possible that the sojourners at Jerusalem on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2:10) may also have been instrumental in the founding of the Roman church. Some critics have denied the authenticity of Romans 15-16, but there is no valid internal evidence supporting this, neither is there support for it in the ancient manuscripts. Moreover, his greeting of many persons by name was a studied effort to establish rapport with a church he had never met. Such greetings of individuals would have been unnecessary and unwise in writing Philippians, Corinthians, Ephesians, and others. Furthermore, any omission of members of the church would have incurred the risk of offending someone in the churches with which Paul was familiar. In this case, however, omissions would have hurt no one because he could not possibly have known all the members of the church.*

—New Unger's Bible Dictionary

2. Begin quote from —Life Application Concise New Testament Commentary.
Paul had friends in Rome, as Romans 16 shows, but he had not personally visited that

church. So he begins his letter by formally presenting his credentials. He first calls himself Christ's slave, meaning one who is subject to the will and wholly at the disposal of his master. Paul, in using the term, expresses his absolute devotion and subjection to Christ Jesus. For a Roman citizen to identify himself as a servant was unthinkable. Paul could have introduced himself to these Romans as a Roman citizen, but instead he chose to speak of himself only as completely dependent on and obedient to his beloved Master.—Life Application Concise New Testament Commentary.

3. Begin —Lenski New Testament Commentary

Paul's first apposition to his own name is *δολος ησο Χριστο*, "a slave of Jesus Christ," which is certainly an Old Testament religious Semitism but not as L. supposes completely non-pagan, for B.-P. 320 cites several pagan examples of its religious use. Yet this designation is so typical that by means of it Paul at once strikes the full Christian note. It is debated whether "slave," when here and elsewhere it is applied to an apostle and at times includes assistants, refers to office, "apostle" specifying only the particular office, or whether "slave" is to be taken in the broad sense in which all believers belong to their Lord and serve him in complete obedience. In the Old Testament the word is used in both senses, which leaves the question undecided. In the New Testament John, as for instance in Rev. 1:1, often employs *δολοι* with reference to all Christians, with which passage Eph. 6:6; I Pet. 2:16 agree and we may add Rom. 6:16-20; 14:4, 7, 8; I Cor. 7:22, together with the statements that we all belong to Christ, are bought by him, and are bound to serve him (*δουλε ειν*). The fact that Paul, too, was such a slave no one would deny. We ask ourselves why he should want to stress only his official status by the use of this term when that status is made fully plain in the second apposition, "a called apostle." Why lose the added meaning found in the broad sense of "slave"? True, "official slave" and "apostle" are not tautological, but Paul would certainly be using two terms in this opening sentence in which the wording is most brief and compact.

We accept the enhanced meaning. Not only in his office as an apostle but already in his status as a Christian Paul is one of the many slaves of Jesus Christ who is owned by this blessed Lord (attributive genitive, R. 496), purchased and won by him, as a slave is wholly subject to him and has no will except this Lord's will. With this first word Paul does not introduce himself as an apostle but puts himself at the side of all the Romans as being one of them. Although he holds the highest office in the gift of Christ, they are not to feel that he exalts himself above them but is first of all a brother and one of their fellow slaves. John writes in the same spirit, Rev. 1:9. The correct reading is "Jesus Christ," the personal and the official name in one. "Christ" is no longer appellative: "Jesus the Christ," but already as Peter used it in Acts 2:38, and as the two names have ever since been used also in the confessional form "our Lord Jesus Christ" (v. 7). Yet even then "Christ" (really the verbal adjective *χριστς* from the liturgical verb *χρω*, "to anoint") retains its original appellative force and names Jesus as God's Anointed, our Prophet, High Priest, and King in one. This is Paul's blessed Master under whom, like Paul, all the Romans, too, are *δολοι*. —Lenski New Testament Commentary