

Blacks bristle at notion of `slave of Christ'

by [Adelle M. Banks](#)

March 1, 2011

(RNS) For evangelical author John MacArthur, the best way to explain a Christian's relationship to Jesus is what appears to be a simple metaphor -- one often used by the Apostle Paul himself.

"To be a Christian is to be a slave of Christ," writes MacArthur, the pastor of a nondenominational church in Sun Valley, Calif.

His new book, "Slave: The Hidden Truth About Your Identity in Christ," explores the varied practices of Bible translators regarding the controversial term. It's also drawing mixed reactions among African-American Christians whose ancestors were slaves in 19th-century America.

MacArthur views the issue in almost conspiratorial terms: While biblical texts use the word "slave" to describe actual slave-master relationships in biblical times, English translators often opt for the word "servant" when describing a believer's relationship to God.

"The stigma was just too great with that word to use it to refer to believers, even though they knew that was what `doulos' meant," the white pastor said, referring to the Greek word for "slave."

In most translations, the Apostle Paul describes himself as "a servant of Jesus Christ" in Romans 1:1, but the Southern Baptists' Holman Christian Standard Bible has him using the term "slave of Jesus Christ."

It's the same in Luke's famous Nativity account, where the Virgin Mary calls herself "the Lord's servant" or "the handmaid of the Lord" in most versions, while the Holman Bible calls her "the Lord's slave."

Ray Clendenen, who was the associate editor for the 2004 Holman Bible, said he suggested the use of "slave" in such passages. "We weren't trying to produce a traditional Bible," he said. "We were trying to produce an accurate one."

The New International Version, a top-selling Bible whose latest edition will be released Tuesday (March 1), continues its translations of Paul as "a servant of Christ Jesus," and Mary as "the Lord's servant."

Some African-American leaders have long stayed away from the slave language, and differ with MacArthur's view that it's the best way to relate to God.

"Your will is broken in slavery, and I don't think God wants to break our will," said the Rev. Joseph Lowery, a retired United Methodist pastor and icon of the civil rights movement. "I'm a little slow to accept the word slave because it has such a nasty history in my tradition."

MacArthur argues that using the word "slave" is just one of many concepts in the Bible that might be unappealing -- hell's not a crowd-pleaser, either -- but are nevertheless key to reading and understanding the sacred text.

"You can't let the Bible usage of the concept of slavery be informed by the abuses of the African slave trade," said MacArthur, who devotes pages in his book to describing first-century Roman slavery. "That's not the context in which it was written."

But MacArthur said there's an important theological meaning to the term "slave," however politically incorrect the word may be: "You give obedience to the one who has saved you from everlasting judgment," he said.

When the more inclusive New Revised Standard Version of the Bible was being developed in the 1980s, its translation committee sought advice from African-American scholars about whether to use "slave" or "servant."

Cain Hope Felder, a New Testament professor at Howard University School of Divinity, recommended "slave" when describing the institution of slavery, which was a part of the Greco-Roman world known by biblical writers. But he said descriptions of church leaders are "a totally different matter" and "servant" is more fitting.

"A slave's self-esteem is almost negligible," said Felder. "Not having self-esteem, not having rights, that certainly runs counter to the whole thought in the New Testament."

Mitzi Smith, an associate professor of New Testament at Detroit's Ashland Theological Seminary, said it is inappropriate to "sanitize" the word by changing it to "servant," but she disagrees with the idea that the master-slave relationship is the ideal image for God and Christian believers.

"We have so many more examples to show how to be in relationship with God," she said. "A slave-master relationship is not one of willing obedience and what God seeks is willing obedience and a relationship of love with us."

Other African-American leaders, however, embrace both the use of "slave" throughout the Bible -- and MacArthur's interpretation of it.

The Rev. Dallas H. Wilson Jr., vicar of St. John's (Episcopal) Chapel in Charleston, S.C., hosted a three-day workshop in early February to promote MacArthur's book. Once, the black pastor thought it "ludicrous" to embrace slave terminology, but MacArthur convinced him that it is "a biblical command."

"I think what we have done is we have translated slavery `servant' and watered it down," said Wilson, who leads a predominantly black congregation of about 70 people. "Instead of condemning the system, we should condemn the abuses."

The Rev. Darrell Coulter, a black Southern Baptist pastor in Charleston who attended the workshop, agrees.

"The slave has always been a piece of property with no relationship," he said. "But with Christ, it's different."