

Some African-Americans bristle at “slave of Christ” language

April 21, 2011

WASHINGTON (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, pastor of a nondenominational church in Sun Valley, Calif.

An 1861 image by Theodore R. Davis depicts a slave auction in the South. Christian author John MacArthur argues in a new book that Bibles should use the term “slave of Christ” instead of “servant of Christ,” even though some black theologians find that language objectionable. (RNS PHOTO/Courtesy Library of Congress)

His new book, [*Slave: The Hidden Truth About Your Identity in Christ*](#), explores 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.

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, MacArthur explained.

“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,” MacArthur 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.”

The New International Version, a top-selling Bible whose latest edition was released 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 they 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 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 generally 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.

[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.

Dallas H. Wilson Jr., vicar of St. John's (Episcopal) Chapel in Charleston, S.C., hosted a three-day work-shop in early February to promote MacArthur's book.

"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.”