

# PAUL DID NOT TEACH “STAY IN SLAVERY”: THE MISTRANSLATION OF κλήσις IN 1 CORINTHIANS

A Paper presented to the Combined Session of the African-American Hermeneutics and Paul and Politics Sections of the Society of Biblical Literature, 22 November 2008, in Boston, MA

by

S. SCOTT BARTCHY

Department of History, UCLA

[© 2008: reproduction in any form only by written permission of the author]

## - I -

1. The translators of the New Revised Standard Version of 1 Corinthians 7:20 render the key term κλήσις with the word “condition” – “Let each of you remain in the condition in which you were called.” The translators reflect here a view that has become common wisdom about Paul, which Leander Keck states succinctly in his widely used handbook, *Paul and His Letters* (1979:94-95): “Paul’s ethic appears to be so thoroughly influenced by his expectation of the imminent parousia that it produces a ‘conservative’ stance, for he actually urges his readers not to change their roles in society (1 Cor 7:17-24)”. Perhaps the best known defender of this radically conservative position was Albert Schweitzer, who derived from 1 Cor. 7:17-24 Paul’s “theory of the status quo,” according to which the natural condition of the Christian’s existence has “become of no importance, not in the general sense that it does not matter what is done to it, but in the special sense that henceforth nothing must be done to it. If therefore, a slave became a believer he should not, on this theory, if he were afterwards offered freedom, accept it.” [*Mysticism of Paul the Apostle* (New York: Black, 1968 - first Eng. ed. 1931), 194-95].

2. But this common view of Paul is based on an egregious mistranslation of the key term κλήσις, using a fictional secondary meaning of this word. This translation error is encouraged by Frederick Danker’s echoing [again in the 3<sup>rd</sup> edition of Bauer-Danker-Arnt-Gingrich *Greek-English Lexicon* - BDAG] Walter Bauer’s original rendering of this word by the German *Stand*, “social position,” or *Beruf*, “occupation.” To be sure, in English we can use the word “calling” to refer to a person’s occupation, but the term κλήσις never carried that extended meaning in ancient Greek. Within the entire New Testament and in every Pauline and post-Pauline usage of this term and the cognate verb καλέω, the calling in question is God’s invitation and call to belong to Christ, except in Romans 11:29 when God’s earlier calling of Israel is Paul’s subject.

3. Nevertheless, the erroneous translation of κλήσις in 7:20 led the NRSV committee to have Paul in the famous following verse 21 advise enslaved Christ-followers: “Even if you can gain your freedom, make use of your present condition - slavery - more than ever!” While the ellipsis at the end of 7:21 - *mallon chresai* - is indeed grammatically ambiguous, the rhetorical and social context is not. A solid grasp of the social-legal context of Greco-Roman slavery alone

makes this “stay in slavery” completion of *mallon chresai* practically nonsensical as I sought to prove 35 years ago in my recently re-published *First-Century Slavery and the Interpretation of 1 Corinthians 7:21*. (Wipf & Stock, 2003)

4. Yet my experiences in classrooms in both Germany and the United States prove that it is often pointless to present my evidence and conclusions regarding Paul’s words in 1 Cor 7:21 without first dealing with his admonition in the previous sentence “to remain in the calling.” The historically contested completion of the ellipsis in 7:21 continues to be colored strongly by Luther’s original mistranslation of κλη̄σις. It is high time to revisit the evidence and revise our opinions of Paul’s putative social conservatism.

## - II -

5. How then did the Greek verbal noun meaning “calling” or “invitation” or “summons,” -- and translated correctly with “vocatione” in the Latin Vulgate, with “calling” in the King James Version and the American Standard Version -- come to be translated into English as “condition” in the New RSV, the New American Standard Bible, and others, or “state” in the Revised Standard Version and New American Bible, or “station” in Goodspeed’s translation, or “situation” in the NIV and Today’s NIV -- or “position that one holds” by Frederick Danker in the Bauer-Danker Greek-English Lexicon?

6. Whatever motives have kept alive this tradition of serious English mistranslation – and I have some suspicions, the consequence has been that Paul of Tarsus is wrongly regarded as one who has firmly shut the door on all possible changes in the status quo, indeed giving the status quo a divine sanction. As such he is widely regarded as the arch social conservative at the foundation of the movement that became Christianity. In short, the translation of κλη̄σις is not simply a philological nicety. It has had enormous social and theological consequences. So how and why did this fateful mistranslation become plausible and so widely imitated?

## - III -

7. The story begins not in the first or second century but in the sixteenth, for prior to that time *vocatio* in this context was understood specifically as the call from God into a covenant relationship with God, even when some medieval writers sought to limit the call to becoming a monk. But when Martin Luther translated the New Testament from Greek into German, he boldly decided to change radically Paul’s intended meaning by substituting the term *Beruf* (“occupation/ status”) for the correct German word *Ruf* (“call/shout/name”) : Luther wrote: “Ein jeglicher bleibe in dem Beruf darin er berufen ist” (1545). Luther’s apparent first motivation was

to assure his readers that they need not torture themselves with such existential doubts as he had suffered about his ability to make himself pleasing to God. These anxieties had motivated him to seek his God's favor by changing himself from a raucous student of the law to becoming an Augustinian monk and then on to entering the celibate priesthood. As part of his emphasis on the importance of the laity in the Church, Luther hoped to encourage each person to believe that there was no need to change one's status from lay to clergy, or priest to monk, to please God.

8. Likewise, a German peasant should not seek a higher social position, for God had called him to be a good Christian precisely as a peasant. Not only monks had a vocation from God; every Christian in non-ecclesiastical employment had such a vocation as well – to love their neighbors where they were. Thus to seek to change one's status, however lowly, would go against God's will. Luther's princely supporters must have applauded this translation.

9. Despite Luther's intent to comfort and empower the laity by translating κλήσις with the word *Beruf*, it was a daring move fraught with disastrous potential – and a radical domestication and distortion of the historical Paul's apparent intent. Indeed, along the way there have been significant protests against this mistranslation. The philologists Hermann Cremer and Julius Koegel, on whose shoulders Gerhard Kittel stood, rejected this rendering as “eine reine Erfindung” - a total invention. Even Karl Holl, the early twentieth-century pro-Lutheran critic of culture, in his famous essay “Die Geschichte des Worts Beruf,” admitted that in 1 Cor 7:20 Luther undertook a “bold re-stamping of the Greek word's meaning.”

10. Max Weber then weighed in with his judgment expressed in his even more famous essay “Die protestantische Ethik und der Geist des Kapitalismus.” As he notes, “there is no Greek word at all that bears the ethical coloring of the German word “Beruf.” [“Im Griechischen fehlt eine dem deutschen Wort [sic. ‘Beruf’] in der ethischen Färbung entsprechende Bezeichnung überhaupt.”]

11. Karl Ludwig Schmidt, in his article on κλήσις in the *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, continued Cremer-Koegel's and Weber's elimination of the German word *Beruf* as a legitimate translation of κλήσις. Schmidt then rejects the idea that Paul's use of κλήσις in 1 Cor 7:20 provides any support for the Lutheran view of *Beruf*, even as advocated by the great Hans Lietzmann. To be sure, Lietzmann admitted that he could not find any parallels to translating κλήσις with *Beruf*. And as a TLG search can now verify, Lietzmann could not find any parallels because there simply are none. Indeed, none are needed, since 1 Cor 7:20 makes perfectly good sense when read with the ordinary, primary meaning of κλήσις, as we shall see in

a few minutes.

12. Nevertheless, Bauer decided to perpetuate this long-refuted secondary meaning for κλήσις in 1 Cor 7:20, and Danker has agreed with Bauer in BDAG 3rd ed., that both Philo and Libanius provide supporting evidence for translating κλήσις with “condition, position, etc.”

- IV -

13. Earlier in my research I had dismissed from consideration the relevance of the ancient witnesses that Danker cites under the second BDAG meaning for κλήσις, namely, Libanius and Philo. Bauer/Danker reference Philo *Legatio ad Gaium* 163 to support translating θεοῦ κλήσις with “the position of a god,” a view Danker continues to advocate to this day. This reference was easy for me to ignore, even though roughly contemporary with Paul, because no published translation of this Philo passage agrees. Compare C.D. Yonge’s translation of this passage: “And the name of God is held in so little veneration among them that they have given it to i-bises and to poisonous asps.” In the Loeb edition of Philo, F.H. Colson translates this passage: “the title of God,” which is a reasonable variant of “name.” But clearly, it is an imaginative stretch to conclude that “position” or “condition” could be possible. The unambiguously correct translation is “the name of God.” [In private correspondence, Wayne Meek commented: “Failure to understand Philo’s sarcasm here is almost ludicrous.”]

14. There is indeed a documented secondary meaning of κλήσις, but not the one claimed by Bauer-Danker. The word is occasionally used by some ancient Greek writers to indicate a person’s “name”—that is, a word to identify personally the one being called or invited. This is the second meaning of κλήσις that is verified by both Lampe’s *Patristic Greek Lexicon* and by Liddell-Scott-MacKenzie-Jones.

- V -

15. On the other hand, the quotations from Libanius as translated by Bauer did seem potentially relevant but not readily convincing to me since they were written more than three-hundred years after Paul wrote. Furthermore, Bauer-Danker’s presenting Libanius as the first witness for the putative second meaning after Philo implied to me that there was no intervening usage of κλήσις that could be found meaning “position, condition” as Bauer claimed was Libanius’s meaning. Bauer then provided a translation for Libanius’s phrase: κλήσιν ἔλαβε: *er ergriff den Beruf*, which in BDAG English is rendered “he took up the occupation” [of cutlery- or sword-maker.]

16. This citation from Libanius appears in Libanius's introduction to his summaries of the orations of Demosthenes. And my research reveals that Bauer/Danker ignore completely the sentences before and after the one in question. Libanius is commenting on Demosthenes's father, also named Demosthenes, whose political opponents had given him a slanderous nickname related to a workshop that he owned in which the slaves were skilled sword-makers. See my translation of this passage and Ernst Badian's translation of Libanius's probable source, Plutarch, on the handout.

“The father of Demosthenes [the rhetor] was Demosthenes of Paianieus, born a free man - for it is necessary not to lie about this. He acquired/possessed a workshop with slaves who were sword-makers, which is the reason he was called ‘the sword-maker’”  
{έντεϋθεν τήν τοῦ μαχαιροποιοῦ κλήσιν ἔλαβε}.

17. Libanius continues immediately to describe the rhetor's mother, noting that her background was rather questionable {οὐκ ἦν, ὡς φασι, καθαρῶς}. Apparently to stop some rumors, Libanius was taking pains to assert that in contrast to the rhetor's mother, his father was a well respected free man, despite his father's enslaved-sounding nickname. In short, when Bauer translated Libanius's phrase κλήσιν ἔλαβε with the German equivalent of “took up the occupation [of sword-maker]” he continued to invent a meaning for κλήσις that Libanius never heard of. Likewise, in BDAG's second citation from Libanius [*Progyrn.* 9,2,1], κλήσις is used for the name of the Phrygians, not to designate a characteristic of them, as claimed in BDAG, which is an unjustifiable and unnecessary “massaging” of the meaning to make it give putative support to Bauer's reading of 1 Cor. 7:20.

18. I am convinced that these sentences found [first by Bauer?] in Libanius would never have been read in a way to support the unique “position, condition, situation” rendering of κλήσις in 1 Cor 7:20 if it had not been decided before anyone had read Libanius in this connection that Paul had radically and yet appropriately changed the accepted meaning of that word and invented a unique meaning. I also have to conclude that neither Bauer nor Danker ever read closely in context the sentences from Libanius that they cite, which is indeed surprising in light of the highly controversial nature of their claim for a special meaning of κλήσις in 1 Cor. 7:20

- VI -

19. So let's take a closer look at 1 Cor 7. Not only the meaning of κλήσις in vs. 20 but Paul's use of the term in the immediate context should have alerted post-Luther translators of Paul's letters to Martin Luther's intentional and fateful mistranslation of this key word. For two

sentences earlier, vs. 18, Paul wrote: “Was anyone at the time of his call (κλήσις) circumcised?” As Neil Elliott in his excellent book *Liberating Paul: the Justice of God and the Politics of the Apostle* (1994:34) puts it, “Surely no one would argue that the ‘calling’ here was a matter of God calling a man *to be circumcised*. Why, then, should anyone suppose that in 7:21 Paul speaks of God calling a person *to be a slave*?”

20. And in sharp contrast to the conventional wisdom expressed by Leander Keck about Paul’s general opposition to social change in view of the impending end, throughout chapter 7 of 1 Corinthians, Paul repeatedly suggests that under the appropriate circumstances his new converts to Christ might very well change their social status – or have it changed by others – without sinning or rejecting God’s “call to peace” which he regards as basic to all relationships (7:15). Indeed, as Elliott correctly stresses (following my argument of two decades earlier), the structure of this chapter is based on Paul’s offering alternatives to his personal preferences for his converts’ conduct or for their marital status.

21. Rather than writing as a social conservative who reinforced the status quo with divine sanctions, in 1 Corinthians 7 Paul of Tarsus redefined sexual politics in marriage as a partnership of equals – the man’s body belongs to his wife in the very same way (ὁμοίως) as everyone in Paul’s world took for granted that the woman’s body belonged to her husband (7:4-5). Further, a woman did not have to be married or become pregnant to be regarded as a full person “in Christ” among her new sisters and brothers in Paul’s communities. Nor did a man have to prove his virility or gain honor for his blood-family by siring children, preferably boys. There is substantial evidence that Paul of Tarsus lived and taught a radical critique of the status quo in the Roman Empire, thoroughly rejecting a social conservatism that was reinforced by traditional cultural values and social codes.

#### - VII -

22. Now back to erroneous and fateful translations. The putative second meaning of κλήσις stated in BDAG has had serious theological and moral repercussions far beyond disagreements among philologists. For example, many times during the past few years, I’ve been in SBL and AAR sessions when some colleague has sought to reinforce his or her opinion by stating: “after all, Paul urged the Corinthians to remain in the social situation they were in when they responded to Paul’s preaching,” citing 1 Cor 7:20. And, as you are aware, the NRSV, the RSV, NASB, NEB, REB, NAB, and NIV/ TNIV all render κλήσις in 1 Cor 7:20 with terms such as “condition, state, and situation,” with the translation committees presumably being inclined to do so by the great authority of BDAG. At the least, the translators have found no challenge there to the tradition of mistranslation that began with Martin Luther.

23. After apparently basing their translation κλη̃σις in 1 Cor 7:20 on the second meaning given in BDAG, the NRSV committee then went so far in the next verse as to ignore the solid legal and rhetorical contextual exegesis published most recently by Bert Harrill and decades earlier by me. Our exegesis shows how completely unlikely it would have been in the context of Greco-Roman slavery for Paul in 7:21 to have urged his converts who were in slavery to remain in that slavery if their owners decided to manumit them. For, as I have emphasized, an enslaved person in Greco-Roman society rarely had any control over being set free or not – owners manumitted slaves for their own advantages. This ignoring of the social-legal context in which Paul and his converts lived has resulted in the NRSV closing the door in many readers' minds on any Paul-approved changes in the social situation of a Christ-follower. Even though 1 Cor 7 is laced with Paul-approved observations of social changes, the erroneous translations of both vs. 20-21 make Paul sound like a quintessential, divinely-sanctioned endorser of the first-century Mediterranean social order.

- VIII -

24. To be sure, Paul along with almost all of his contemporaries apparently did not imagine that slavery as such could be eliminated from his world. Nevertheless, Paul did not want any enslaved persons who had become Christ-followers to think that their legal-social status could influence negatively their relationship to God or their warm welcome into the “body of Christ.” The key question was: who did they think they were? It is a question of their primary identity. For Paul, being “in Christ” trumps all other definers.

25. It was this new status and identity that they were forsaking, in which they were not remaining, whenever they went back to identifying themselves by their social, religious, or legal situations – identities that their families, their spouses, their peers – and owners – no doubt continued to stress as being the real truth about who they were. How could their participation in this new kind of “in Christ” surrogate-sibling group, not based on blood-relationships, social status, gender, or religious heritage ever turn out well? The pressures not to remain in their calling in and by Christ must have been quite powerful. Therefore, Paul exhorted them: “Each of you should remain in the calling in Christ by which you were called.”

26. Finally, it is critical to observe that Paul did not seek to justify slavery in any way, nor did any pre-Constantinian writer understand him to have done so – this was Augustine's doing (*De Civitate Dei* 19,15). Augustine explained that God instituted slavery as punishment for the offense of Adam's original sin. In sharp contrast, Paul never connected this institution either with the will of God as punishment for sin (contra W.L. Westerman, *The Slave Systems of Greek and*

*Roman Antiquity* 1955: 157, 161) or with the orders of creation. This left the theological “door” open for later Christian abolition movements to call on Paul’s authority as well as for scholars such as Amos Jones, Jr. (*Paul’s Message of Freedom: What Does It Mean to the Black Church* [1984]) and Orlando Patterson (*Freedom in the Making of Western Culture* [1991]) to regard Paul of Tarsus as a major advocate of freedom.

27. To be sure, from the perspective of history, and in light of Paul’s later influence, we can only be profoundly disappointed that Paul did not do more than leave the door open to challenge the institution of slavery as such in the Roman Empire and later in the New World. Even if his letter to the slave-owner Philemon included an appeal to manumit Onesimus, his new “brother in Christ,” as I firmly judge to be the case, that letter has been too easily and too often read out of historical context. What is certain is that Paul did not teach enslaved Christ-followers to “stay in slavery.”

28. Indeed, when evaluated in the context of the cultural values and social codes that prevailed across the Roman Empire, it is abundantly clear that Paul appeared to almost everyone who met him or heard of him as a teacher who was challenging a wide range of social conventions and relationships that limited the exercise of one’s faith in Jesus as the Christ of God. Paul paid for his perceived radicality with his life.

\* \* \* \*