### **Steward and Slave** (By Dr. Kent R. Wilson)

### **An elevated view of the slave-servant**

Significant research and exegesis have been conducted on the concept of the slave in the New Testament[[1]](#footnote-1)—more so than can be reviewed in the limited scope of this thesis. However, the Pauline and General Epistles address slaves directly enough times to make this a theme that cannot be ignored, particularly in view of the steward as slave.[[2]](#footnote-2) In the New Testament, Jesus and the apostles never outwardly denounce the practice of slavery, nor are Christian slave owners ever told to manumit their slaves.[[3]](#footnote-3) It is a social condition that is assumed and addressed primarily from practical and theological perspectives. The metaphor of a slave or servant is used by Jesus Christ 3 times[[4]](#footnote-4) and by the apostle Paul over 25 times[[5]](#footnote-5) in both negative and positive applications representing spiritual bondage to sin or to God. Paul often called himself a “servant of Jesus Christ.” Modern opinion concerning the meritorious value of the slave metaphor in the New Testament varies from commendation for the “spiritual emancipation” given 1st century slaves (Finley 1968, 189) to denigration for the dehumanizing “psychological domination” of slaves in the name of religion (Bradley 1994, 150-53).

Given the opposing ways the slave metaphor is used in the biblical record, and the silence of Christ and the apostles with regard to the appalling nature of slavery in society, the modern reader needs to keep an open perspective with regard to the personal views of the biblical writers on slavery. They likely believed that “slavery was a matter of the spiritual or moral domain and that physical, earthly bondage was immaterial to spiritual progress. […] The slave who pursued truth and virtue was not really a slave at all” (Bradley 1994, 150). The biblical writers called slaves to act with virtue, respect, other-worldly mindedness, and with a heart of service because their true master was the God who rewards. The New Testament writers equally elevated the position of the steward to encompass all Christians who served one another as they served the eternal Master. This stewardship of all believers was holistic of all of life, and driven by a relationship between the steward and the divine master that was virtuous and intimate.

### **The serving steward**

Even though the core identity of biblical stewards was that of a slave,[[6]](#footnote-6) most Christian expositors overlook this foundational identity or give it only cursory affirmation.[[7]](#footnote-7) Jesus, considered by some as the Bible’s preeminent steward, affirms repeatedly that he came primarily to serve: “I am among you as one who serves” (Luke 22:27).[[8]](#footnote-8) Paul equally acknowledges that his stewardship also came in the form of service: “Men ought to regard us as servants of Christ and those entrusted with [“stewards of”] the secret things of God” (1 Cor. 4:1).[[9]](#footnote-9) Thus, the work of a steward is the work of a servant:[[10]](#footnote-10) “We are stewards here only as we participate *in* Christ in his work as the faithful servant of God. This participation is the work of the steward” (Rodin 2000, 116). Even though Block (1993) wrote a non-religious business book on stewardship, he affirms this biblical premise when he relates how service is central to stewardship:

To hold something of value in trust calls for placing service ahead of control, to no longer expect leaders to be in charge and out in front. There is pride in leadership, it evokes images of direction. There is humility in stewardship, it evokes images of service. Service is central to the idea of stewardship. (41)

1. See Harrill (2006); Barnes (1969); and Bartchy (1985). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. 1 Cor. 7:21-22; Eph. 6:5-8; Col. 3:22-25; 1 Tim. 6:1-2; Tit. 2:9-10; and 1 Pet. 2:18-21. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Slave owners are primarily told to treat their slaves with kindness (Eph. 6:9; Col. 4:1) and a runaway slave is even encouraged to return to his master (Philem. 10-16). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Matt. 20:27; Mark 10:44; and John 8:34. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Such as Rom. 7:14, 25; Rom. 8:15; 1 Cor. 9:19, 27; and Gal. 4:7. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. The only biblical exception being governmental or military stewards who may or may not have been slaves (e.g., Erastus as *oikonomos tēs poleōs*, “treasurer of the city” in Rom. 16:23). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. It is surprising that the three primary exegetical works on the biblical steward (Brattgard 1963; Hall 2000; Rodin 2000) all fail to develop the relationship of the steward with regard to his core identity as a slave or servant, only acknowledging its historical roots. It isn’t until Block’s 1993 non-religious treatment of stewardship in the workplace that service and servanthood are developed with any detail with regard to stewards. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. See also Matt. 20:28; Luke 12:37; John 13:12-16; and Phil. 2:7. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. See also 1 Cor. 3:5; 9:19; 2 Cor. 4:5; and Col. 1:25. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. It is important to point out that the reverse of this statement is not necessarily true (“the work of a servant is the work of a steward”). It would be a mistake to apply all characteristics of slavery to stewarding, or to say that biblical passages which concern the slave therefore concern the steward. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)