

PAUL DID NOT TEACH
“JEDER SOLL IN SEINEM STAND BLEIBEN”
LUTHER’S MISTRANSLATION OF “κλήσις” IN 1 CORINTHIANS

A Guest Lecture by Professor Dr. S. SCOTT BARTCHY,
Director, Center for the Study of Religion at UCLA, 2009
for
Augustana Theologische Hochschule
Neuendettelsau, Germany
9 June 2009

Introduction

1. Good evening – distinguished guests, colleagues, and students. I am both deeply honored and thoroughly delighted to have been invited by Frau Professor Doctor Renate Jost to speak to you this evening. I also express my sincere gratitude to Professor Doctor Wolfgang Stegemann, who heard me present an earlier version of this argument at the Society of Biblical Literature’s Annual Meeting held in Boston, Massachusetts last November. He has strongly encouraged me to continue my research on the subject of this lecture. And I have been glad to follow his advice, especially in anticipation of speaking to you this evening and discussing with you a significant paradigm-shift in our understanding of Paul of Tarsus.

- I -

2. As most of you are aware, Paul’s words in First Corinthians 7:20-21 have played a decisive role in the critical argument about whether or not Paul was a thoroughgoing social conservative. Did he urge the Christ-followers in Corinth to believe that God had called them all to remain in their social situation, state, or condition – in their “Stand” or “Beruf” – even to stay in slavery if their owners offered to free them? Or did Paul exhort them to believe that it was God’s calling in Christ that gave each of them a new identity and that they therefore should resist all temptations or pressures from family and friends to go back to thinking about themselves and acting as they did before they responded to God’s call, God’s invitation?

3. This evening, I invite you to think with me about what Paul of Tarsus meant when he urged the Christ-followers in Corinth: ἕκαστος ἐν τῇ κλήσει ἣ ἐκλήθη, ἐν ταύτῃ μείνω (1 Cor 7:20) The strictly literal translation of these words is: “Each one in the calling in/by/with which he was called, in this (calling) he should remain.” Auf Deutsch: “Jeder in dem Ruf, worin/wobei er gerufen wurde, in diesem (Ruf) soll er bleiben.“ Yet in all German translations known to me, except one, “κλήσις” has been interpreted to mean “Beruf, Stand, Berufung, Platz” or even “Ort” in a recent version. The translation problem began with Martin Luther’s decision to substitute the word “Beruf” for the correct word “Ruf.” He thereby made Paul speak for Luther’s own theological and social agenda.

4. As a result of Luther’s mistranslation of “κλήσις”, and the continuation of this mistranslation in almost all German versions and in many English versions, Paul is frequently and wrongly regarded as an ultraconservative thinker who firmly shut the door on all possible changes in the status quo, indeed as one who gave the status quo a divine sanction. Consequently Paul is often said to be the arch social conservative at the foundation of the movement that became Christianity. In short, how “κλήσις” should be translated is not simply a philological nicety. It has had enormous social and theological consequences.

5. Permit me then to remind you about the way many German translations have continued Luther’s practice of distorting Paul’s original meaning by substituting other words for the correct translation “Ruf.”

5.1. In the *Unrevidierte Elberfelder Bibel*, 1905: “Ein jeder bleibe in dem Beruf, in welchem er berufen worden ist. Bist du als Sklave berufen worden, so lasse dich nicht kümmern; wenn du aber frei werden kannst, so benütze es vielmehr.”

5.2. In the *Luther Bibel*, 1912: “Ein jeglicher bleibe in dem Beruf, da er berufen ist. Bist du als Knecht berufen, Sorge dich nicht; doch kannst du frei werden, so brauche es viel lieber.”

5.3. In the *Schlachter Version* 1951 published by the Genfer Bibelgesellschaft: “Jeder bleibe in dem Stand, darin er berufen ist. Bist du als Sklave berufen worden, so sei deshalb ohne Sorge! Kannst du aber frei werden, so benütze es lieber.“

5.4. In the *Einheitsübersetzung der Heiligen Schrift* von 1979: “Jeder soll in dem Stand bleiben, in dem ihn der Ruf Gottes getroffen hat.“ Then consistent with their rendering of the Greek “κλήσις” with the German word “Stand“, their translation of the famous *crux interpretum* in the next sentence, verse 21, reads: „Wenn du als Sklave berufen wurdest, soll dich das nicht bedrücken; auch wenn du frei werden kannst, lebe lieber als Sklave weiter.“ Notice how the translation of these two verses with “Stand” and “lebe lieber als Sklave” strongly and reciprocally influence each other.

5.5. See also the International Bible Society’s German translation, *Hoffnung für Alle*: “Jeder soll an dem Platz dienen, an dem ihn Gottes Ruf erreichte” as well as in the *Gute Nachricht* translation (1982): “Alle sollen Gott an den Platz dienen . . .”

5.6. Notice the important change that was made in the text of the *Luther-Revision* of 1984: “Jeder bleibe in der Berufung, in der er berufen wurde. Bist du als Knecht berufen, so Sorge dich nicht; doch kannst du frei werden, so nutze es um so lieber.”

5.7. This use of “Berufung” in the Luther-Bibel was ignored, however, in the 1993 revision of the *Elberfelder Bibel*, and the translators even rejected the word “Beruf” that had been used in the 1905 version of *Elberfelder* and instead substituted the word for social class: “Stand”. They wrote: “Jeder bleibe in dem Stand in dem er berufen worden ist.”

5.8. The change to “Berufung” in the Luther-Bibel was also ignored in the most recent German translation known to me, the *Zürcher Bibel* 2007, which reads: “Jeder aber bleibe an seinem Ort, an den er berufen worden ist.” Thus the concept of “Stand” is taken even further away from the literal meaning of “κλήσις” with the substitution of the word “Ort”.

5.9. On the other hand, following the 1984 version of the *Luther Bibel* the *Münchener Neues Testament* of 1998, reads: “Jeder in der Berufung, in der er gerufen wurde, in dieser soll er bleiben.”

6. But is the change to “Berufung” in the Luther-Bibel a clear advance over the use of “Beruf” or “Stand”? Professorin Luise Schottroff is quite skeptical. She writes: “Die Lutherübersetzung in der revidierten Fassung von 1984 lautet: ‘Jeder bleibe in der Berufung, in der er berufen wurde’. Damit wird zwar nicht mehr gesagt, bleibe in dem ‘Beruf’ (= ‘Stand’), den du hattest als du Christ oder Christin wurdest, aber durch den Relativsatz wird das Wort Berufung zu Beschreibung des gesellschaftlichen Status-quo, zur Zeit des Gläubigwerdens.” (*Lydias ungeduldige Schwestern. Feministische Sozialgeschichte des frühen Christentums*, 1994, 204)

7. While it is well known that every translation may to some extent also express the translator’s interpretation, Martin Luther is the first translator known to me who decided to create his own, innovative meaning for the Greek word “κλήσις”. Luther intentionally mistranslated the Greek word “κλήσις” in verse 20 using the German word “Beruf,” and he thereby set in motion a false and fateful misunderstanding of Paul’s view of the relation between life “in Christ” and the realities of the social world of the first century. This verse and Luther’s intentional mistranslation became a major influence on most of the later German and English translators of this verse and on the scholars who have written commentaries on First Corinthians.

- II -

8. These translators support and reflect here a view that has become common wisdom about Paul, which Professor Udo Schnelle states succinctly in his widely used de Gruyter Lehrbuch, *Paulus: Denken and Leben*, dass “das Schwergewicht der Paränese [in 1. Korintherbrief 7,20] auf dem ‘Bleiben’ in der jeweiligen Berufung liegt” (2003, 228). “Für Paulus sollen die Sklaven in ihrem Stand verbleiben” (S. 621). “Im vergehenden Kosmos rät Paulus zu einer *inneren Freiheit* gegenüber den Dingen der Welt und zu einem Verbleiben in der jeweiligen Berufung” (S. 230). Here Schnelle clearly uses the word “Berufung” to designate the Christian’s social status. From another perspective, earlier in the United States, Professor Leander Keck of Yale University had written in his widely-used handbook on *Paul and His Letters*: “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)” (1979, 94-95).

9. But this common view of Paul is based on a serious mistranslation of the key term “κλήσις”, using a fictional secondary meaning of this word. This translation error in German is defended by Walter Bauer in his very influential *Griechisch-deutsches Wörterbuch zu den Schriften des Neuen Testaments und der frühchristlichen Literatur*. And those who turn to the English translation of this authoritative lexicon discover that the distinguished American editor, Professor Frederick Danker echoes [again in the 3rd edition of the Bauer-Danker-Arnt-Gingrich *Greek-English Lexicon* = BDAG] Bauer’s rendering of this word by the German word “*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. In every Pauline and post-Pauline usage of this term, the calling in question is God’s invitation and call to belong to Christ.

10. Nevertheless, the erroneous translation of “κλήσις” in 7:20 led the New Revised Standard Version 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 the phrase *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). In short, an enslaved person had little or no control over his legal status which was a matter resting solely in the owner’s hands.

11. Among the German scholars who have accepted this critical observation of mine as the basis for their exegesis of First Corinthians are Samuel Vollenweider in his *Freiheit als neue Schöpfung* (1989:235), Hans Josef Klauck in his commentary on the *Einheitsübersetzung* (1984:54), and Helmut Merklein in his *Ökumenischer Taschenbuchkommentar* (2000, 133). In Klauck's words: Der Sklave "konnte seine Freilassung nicht erzwingen, er konnte sie aber, wenn einmal verfügt wurde, auch nicht verhindern, selbst wenn er das wider Erfahrung gewollte hätte" (54).

12. The Greek word *dunasai* in verse 21 has unfortunately led most modern interpreters astray. But as Vollenweider carefully observes, in this case the word describes a "recht regulaeres Ereignis, das dem Sklaven 'widerfährt'" (235). Paul used *dunasai* here in the same way it functions in the Mattheus-Evangelium 26:9 ("dieses Wasser hätte können teuer verkauft und den Armen gegeben werden" – Luther 1956 [*Edunato touto pratheenai*]) and Apostelgeschichte 26:32 ("Dieser Mensch [der Paulus] könnte losgegeben werden, wenn er sich nicht auf den Kaiser berufen hätte" – Luther 1956 [*apoleluthai edunato*]).

13. Yet my experiences in classrooms and lecture halls in both Germany and the United States have shown that it is often pointless for me 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 "κλήσις" in 7:20. "Stand" in verse 20 is often followed by "stay in slavery" in verse 21, while "stay in slavery" in verse 21 seems to reinforce the translation "Stand" or "Beruf" in verse 20.

- III -

14. The translation of "κλήσις" has had enormous social and theological consequences. So how and why did this fateful mistranslation become plausible and so widely imitated? As I have asserted earlier in this lecture, the story begins not in the first or second century but in the sixteenth. 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 that 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* for the correct German word *Ruf*. As Karl Ludwig Schmidt wrote: "Luther hat nachdrücklicher als alle anderen vor ihm das Wort 'Beruf' (vocatio) anstatt im Sinne von 'Berufung' als gleichbedeutend mit 'Stand' or 'Amt' verwendet. In Abweichung von der September Bibel hat er dann in dem genannten Sinne "κλήσις" im Ersten Korintherbrief 7,20

mit ‘Beruf’ übersetzt.” So in his translation of 1545, Luther wrote: “Ein jeglicher bleibe in dem Beruf darin er berufen ist.” Apparently, Luther’s primary agenda was to assure his readers that they need not torture themselves with such existential doubts as he had suffered about his own ability to make himself pleasing to God. As part of Luther’s emphasis on the importance of the laity in the Church, he 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.

15. 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. Luther strongly emphasized that “nicht das Mönchtum einen Beruf habe, sondern jeder Christenmensch innerhalb der Welt und ihrer Arbeit” (Schmidt 493). Every Christian in non-ecclesiastical employment had such a vocation – specifically to love their neighbors where they were. Thus to seek to change one’s status, however lowly, would go against God’s will that one love one’s neighbor. Luther’s princely supporters must have applauded this translation.

16. Despite Luther’s intent to comfort and empower the laity by translating “κλήσις” with the word *Beruf*, it was a daring move fraught with far-reaching 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. For example, in the *Biblisches-theologisches Wörterbuch des neutestamentlichen Griechisch*, (1923) Hermann Cremer and Julius Kögel, rejected the use of “Beruf” as “eine reine Erfindung” - a total invention. They wrote: “Für 1. Korintherbrief 7,20 hat man unnötigerweise . . . die Bedeutung ‘Beruf’, *externa conditio*, erfunden.” Even Karl Holl, the early twentieth-century pro-Lutheran critic of culture, in his famous essay “Die Geschichte des Wortes Beruf”, (1924) admitted that in 1 Cor 7:20 Luther dared to make a “bold re-stamping of the Greek word’s meaning” – in Holl’s words: “eine kühne Wortumprägung”.

17. Max Weber then entered the conversation with his judgment expressed in his even more famous essay “Die protestantische Ethik und der Geist des Kapitalismus”. As Weber 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.”

18. Karl Ludwig Schmidt, in his important article on “κλήσις” in the *Theologische Wörterbuch zum Neuen Testament* continued Cremer-Kögel’s and Weber’s rejection of the German word *Beruf* as a legitimate translation of “κλήσις”. Schmidt then categorically denies the claim that

Paul's use of "κλήσις" in 1 Corinthians 7:20 can provide support for the Lutheran view of *Beruf*. Earlier the great Hans Lietzmann had claimed in his commentary on First Corinthians [*Handbuch zum Neuen Testament*] that in verse 20, Paul used the word "κλήσις" to mean "Stand, wie unser Wort 'Beruf'". Yet Lietzmann was quick to note that he could not find any parallel to this use of "κλήσις", either in the New Testament or in any other ancient Greek literature. He wrote: "Parallelen zu diesem Sprachgebrauch fehlen." Then Lietzmann asked: "Ist er von Paulus geschaffen?" Schmidt answered with a firm "nein". And as a search in the *Thesaurus Linguae Graecae* 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.

19. Nevertheless, Bauer decided to perpetuate this long-refuted secondary meaning for "κλήσις" in 1 Cor 7:20, and Danker has agreed with Bauer in the 3rd English edition that both Philo and Libanius provide supporting evidence for translating "κλήσις" with "condition, position, situation, and 'Stand'". Note that neither Lampe's *Patristic Greek Lexicon* nor Liddell-Scott-MacKenzie-Jones *Greek-English Lexicon* in any way suggests that "κλήσις" could mean or ever did mean "position that one holds" or "condition". Note also that Frederick Preisigke, in his *Wörterbuch der griechischen Papyrusurkunden*, (1925-31) presents only two meanings for "κλήσις": "Vorladung" and "Namensnennung".

- IV -

20. Earlier in my research I had dismissed from consideration the relevance of the ancient witnesses that Bauer and Danker cite under the their second meaning for "κλήσις", namely, Libanius and Philo. Bauer/Danker reference Philo's *Legatio ad Gaium* 163 to support translating θεοῦ κλήσις with the words "the position of a god", a translation that Prof. Danker has continued to advocate in private correspondence with me, despite my protests. This reference to Philo's writing was relatively easy for me to ignore, even though Philo was roughly contemporary with Paul, because no published translation of this Philo passage in any language known to me agrees with this rendering. Compare C.D. Yonge's English translation of this passage: "And the name of God is held in so little veneration among them [the Egyptians] that they have given it to ibises and to poisonous asps." And in Leopold Cohn's authoritative German translation of this phrase in the de Gruyter edition of 1964 we read: "Der Name Gottes ist bei ihnen so geheiligt."

21. So clearly, it requires a baseless leap of the imagination to conclude that "position" or "condition" or "Stand" or "Beruf" could be a possible translation of "κλήσις" in this passage. The unambiguously correct translation is "the name of God". [In private correspondence Prof.

Wayne Meeks of Yale University wrote to me; “Failure to understand Philo’s sarcasm here is almost ludicrous.”] In my judgment, if Philo (or Paul) had wanted to express the idea of “position”, he had available the Greek semantic realm at the center of which is the word στάσις (see, so for example, *epistasis, peristasis*).

22. To be sure, there is indeed a documented secondary meaning of “κλήσις”, but not the one claimed by Bauer-Danker and assumed by so many translators of 1 Corinthians. As is the case in Philo, 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. But this is the only second meaning of “κλήσις” that is verified by both Lampe’s *Patristic Greek Lexicon* and by Liddell-Scott-MacKenzie-Jones *Greek-English Lexicon*.

23. On the other hand, the quotations from Libanius as translated by Bauer did seem to me to be potentially relevant but very problematic because they were written more than three-hundred years after Paul wrote his letters. Furthermore, the fact that Bauer and Danker present Libanius as the first witness after Philo to support their second meaning strongly suggested to me that neither Bauer nor Danker had found any writer before or after Philo or in the three hundred years period Libanius who used the word “κλήσις” to mean “position, condition, or Beruf or Stand” as Bauer claimed was Libanius’s meaning. Bauer then provided a German translation for Libanius’s phrase: κλήσιν ἔλαβεν, namely *er ergriff den Beruf*, which in Danker’s English edition is rendered “he took up the occupation” [of cutlery-maker or sword maker.] This translation is also “eine reine Erfindung”!

24. The citation from Libanius appears in Libanius’s introduction to his summaries of the orations of Demosthenes. There are no German or English translations of this book. So I was immediately challenged to consult the Greek text itself – research that other scholars had not done, perhaps because of Bauer’s authority. And my research reveals that both Bauer and Danker have ignored completely the sentences both before and after the sentence in question. Libanius is commenting on Demosthenes’s father, also named Demosthenes, whose political opponents had given him a slanderous nickname, einen Spitznamen, related to a workshop that he owned in which the slaves were skilled sword-makers. My translation of this passage reads: “The father of Demosthenes [the rhetor] was Demosthenes of Paianieus, born a free man He owned a workshop with slaves who were sword-makers, which is the reason he was called [received the name] ‘the sword-maker’” {τὴν τοῦ μαχαιροποιοῦ κλήσιν ἔλαβεν} (In *Argumenta Orationum Demosthenicarum* 2 [R. Foerster VIII, 601]).

25. Libanius continues immediately to describe the rhetor's mother, noting that her background was rather questionable. 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. The younger Demosthenes himself had sought to stop this slandering of his father by stating in his speech *Against Aphobus* [1.9] that his father owned a factory in which thirty-one slaves were expert "sword-makers".

26. In short, when Bauer translated Libanius's phrase κλησιν ἔλαβεν with "*er ergriff den Beruf*", which Danker then rendered in English: "took up the occupation [of sword-maker]" Bauer continued to invent a meaning for "κλησις" that Libanius never heard of. Likewise, in Bauer's and Danker's second citation from Libanius [*Progymnasmata* 9,2,1, VIII 290,14], "κλησις" is used for the name of the Phrygians, not for designating a characteristic of them, as claimed by Bauer and Danker, both of whom give the meaning of "κλησις" an unjustifiable and unnecessary "Massieren" to make this Greek word seem to support Bauer's reading of 1 Cor. 7:20.

27. I am convinced that these sentences found in Libanius [first by Bauer? or an assistant?] would never have been read in a way to support the unique "Beruf, Stand, position, condition, situation" translation of "κλησις" 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 somehow appropriately changed the usual and clear meaning of "κλησις" and invented a new and unique meaning – "eine kühne Wortumprägung". And I also have to conclude that neither Bauer nor Danker ever read closely in the Greek the sentences from Libanius that they cite. This conclusion is indeed surprising in light of the highly controversial nature of their claim for a special meaning of "κλησις" in 1 Cor. 7:20.

- V -

28. So let's take a closer look at 1 Cor 7. Not only the meaning of "κλησις" 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 (κλησις) 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*?" (Elliott's emphasis.) Similarly, in light of Paul's insistence

that "circumcision is nothing and the foreskin is nothing" the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben incisively asks, why would Paul have exhorted the Christ-followers to "remain in this nothing"? (*The Time that Remains*, 2000, Eng. 2005, p. 23).

29. It is especially relevant to observe that in the other ten uses of "κλήσις" in the New Testament writings, including Romans 11:29, Philippians 3:14, and 1 Cor 1:26, this word unequivocally means "calling, invitation". And in these passages "κλήσις" has been correctly and consistently translated as such in all the English and German versions known to me. I have been persuaded for almost 40 years that "κλήσις" has the same meaning in 1 Cor 7:20 as it does in these three uncontested Pauline passages, as well as in the continuation of the Pauline tradition in Ephesians 1:18, 4:1, 4:4, 2 Thessalonians 1:11, and 2 Timothy 1:9.

(For later Christian writers, see, e.g., the unambiguously clear "calling, invitation" meaning of "κλήσις" in the Epistle of Barnabas 16:9, 1 Clement 46:6, and Shepherd of Hermas 31:6 [Mandates IV 3] and 77:1 [Similitudes VIII 11].)

I must conclude that in 1 Cor 7:20 Paul used the term "κλήσις" as he always does in his letters, namely, as "calling, invitation".

- VI -

30. Now back to erroneous and fateful mistranslations. The supposed second meaning of "κλήσις" stated Bauer/Danker has had serious theological and moral repercussions far beyond disagreements among philologists. Many times during the past few years, I have been in sessions of the Society of Biblical Literature and the American Academy of Religion in the USA when one or more of our colleagues have sought to reinforce his or her negative opinion of Paul by forcefully claiming: "After all, Paul urged the Corinthians to remain in the social situation they were in when they responded to Paul's preaching." Unfortunately, most English translations also render "κλήσις" in 1 Cor 7:20 with terms such as "condition, state, and situation", with the respective translation committees presumably being inclined to do so by the great authority of Bauer and Danker, if not entirely basing that rendering on the second meaning given by Bauer-Danker. At the least, neither German nor English language translators have found any challenge in Bauer-Danker to the tradition of mistranslation that began with Martin Luther.

31. Note carefully, then, that in sharp contrast to the conventional wisdom expressed by Udo Schnelle, Leander Keck, and many other Neutestamentler 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. And such changes neither result in sinning or in rejecting God's "call to peace" which he regards as basic to all

relationships (7:15). Indeed, as Neill 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.

32. For example, in 7:2-6 Paul strongly encourages sexual relations in marriage, although his preferred missionary ideal is celibacy (7:7) – but celibacy is only for those who are comfortable in their single state (7:9); he recommends unmarried and widowed persons to marry, although it is not his first choice (7:8, 39); he encourages a woman who has left her husband to stay unmarried (7:11), although Paul not only prefers that Christ-followers not divorce – he even quotes a command from Jesus against divorce (7:10). Yet, followers of Christ who are married to pagans are not enslaved to that relationship and to the status quo if their husband or wife wants to dissolve it. Indeed, it is truly astonishing that Paul regards a female follow of Christ as the locus of spiritual authority in her home even when she is married to a non-believing husband (7:13-14). Thus Paul can encourage this “sister in Christ” to remain in that relationship, if her husband is willing. She neither has to serve his gods nor will sex with him pollute her. Yet, she is free to separate from him if he is not willing to continue the marriage.

33. The fundamental principle, says Paul, is that “God has called the Christ-follower to Peace” (7:15). Paul then anticipates another change in the status quo when he advises a betrothed couple that they will not be sinning if they marry (7:28, 36), but they will do well if they decide not to marry. And at the end of this chapter Paul states that a widowed woman may indeed re-marry, another change in the status quo; his only condition is that she marry “in the Lord”, that is, another Christ-follower, even though Paul states that he thinks that she would be happier if she remained single (7:39-40).

34. 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 the ancient 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”, that is, by 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 begetting children, preferably boys. There is substantial evidence in Paul’s letters that he 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 -

35. After apparently basing their translation of “κλήσις” in 1 Cor 7:20 on the second meaning given in Bauer-Danker, the translators of both the New Revised Standard Version and the *Einheitsübersetzung* then went so far in the next verse as to ignore the solid legal and rhetorical contextual exegesis published most recently by J. Albert Harrill, *The Manumission of Slaves in Early Christianity* (1995) 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 routinely manumitted slaves for their own advantages. This ignoring of the social-legal context in which Paul and his converts lived has resulted in the New Revised Standard Version and the *Einheitsübersetzung* 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 punctuated with Paul-approved observations of social changes, the erroneous translations of both vss. 20-21 make Paul sound like a quintessential, divinely-sanctioned endorser of the first-century Mediterranean social order. He was not!

- VIII -

36. 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. As Helmut Merklein correctly observes: “Christus ist es, der die Identität der Christen bestimmt, und nicht irgendein vorgegebener Status” (*Ökumenischer Taschenbuchkommentar 7/2, Der erste Brief an die Korinther*, Kapitel 5.1-11.1, S. 135). Luise Schottroff is even more specific: “Berufung geht vor, sie hat Vorrang von den Zwängen des Sklavinseins, den Geschlechterrollen im Patriarchat oder der Herkunftsreligion. Um diesen Vorrang der Berufung leben zu können, brauchen Menschen Selbstbewusstsein” (*Lydias ungeduldige Schwestern. Feministische Sozialgeschichte des frühen Christentums*, 1994, 188)

37. 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. For example: “Du bist mein Sohn, und ich bin sehr dagegen, dass Du mit einer Lehre zu tun hast, die die Autorität des Vaters,

meine *potestas*, in Frage stellt". Oder, "Du bist meine Frau und Du solltest meine Götter ehren. Aber dagegen hast Du die Ehre unserer Familie schwer verletzt, als Du eine Person, die gekreuzigt wurde, wie einen Gott verehrtest." How could anyone's participation in this new kind of "in Christ" surrogate-sibling group, not based on blood-relationships and loyalty, nor on social status, nor on gender, nor on religious heritage ever turn out well? The pressures brought by family, friends, and peers 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." Thus I disagree strongly with Professor Gordon Fee's comment that such an exhortation as this would have been "too obtuse for the Corinthians to have grasped it" (*The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 1987, 316).

38. 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. In *De Civitate Dei 19,15*, Augustine explained that slavery resulted from the decision of God to use it 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 (in this book, Patterson devotes two entire chapters to Paul of Tarsus).

39. 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 release Onesimus from slavery because he had become 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 the 'Stand' of slavery".

40. 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 to be a radical teacher who was challenging a wide range of social conventions and relationships that he had come to believe were opposed to the will of God, that hindered the exercise of one's faith in Jesus as the Christ of God and that limited the full participation in the alternate communities created by his Spirit. Let it be remembered that Paul

paid for his perceived radicality with his life.

- IX -

41. How then is the best way to translate the meaning of 1 Corinthians 7 into English and into German? K. L. Schmidt gave this sound advice: “Im Neuen Testament ist die Bedeutung ‘Beruf’ ausgeschlossen. Daraus dürfte gefolgert werden müssen, dass man nicht eine andere Bedeutung annehmen sollte, so lange die sonst übliche neutestamentliche Bedeutung immerhin auch hier möglich ist.” With Schmidt’s strong admonition in mind, I have proposed: “Neither circumcision nor uncircumcision makes any difference. But keeping the commands of God is what really counts. Each person should continue in that calling into which he was called. Were you a slave when you were called? Don’t worry about it. But if, indeed, you become manumitted, by all means [as a freedman] live according to [God’s calling].”

42. The most contextually-sensitive German translation that have found reads: “Alle sollen ihr Leben als von Gott Gerufene führen, da Gott sie gerufen hat. Hat Gott dich als Sklavin oder Sklave gerufen, lass es dich nicht bekümmern. Doch wenn ihr freigelassen werden könnt, macht umso mehr Gebrauch von Gottes Ruf.” This is the translation made by Luise Schottroff in *Die Bibel in gerechter Sprache*, and I fully agree that she has expressed in German the meaning that Paul intended.

Jawohl – bleibe in dem Ruf Gottes, egal was Dir passiert!

* * * * *