

THE UNDER-ROWER

The Man God Made

“Thou art worthy, O Lord, to receive glory and honour and power: for thou hast created all things, and for thy pleasure they are and were created.” Rev. 4:11

For though ye have ten thousand instructors in Christ, yet have ye not many fathers: for in Christ Jesus I have begotten you through the gospel.” 1Cor. 4:15

By Pastor Del Wray

The real meaning of being a servant of Christ, the man that God made, called, chosen and ordained of God. The Apostle Paul warned that many preaching in our day would not be called, but would be self-made ambassadors for the Evil-One. When Paul wrote of himself as a servant, as a slave, he conveyed a startling truth. Are you an under-rower for Christ? In our day of so called famous clergymen, evangelists, and television teachers, it's easy to lose sight of the real meaning of being a minister in God's Commonwealth, in His Kingdom and in His local Baptist church. Paul's testimony to the Baptist Church at Corinth was that he and his companions wanted to be regarded as "servants" 1 Cor. 4:1. Yes, Paul was a Baptist preacher while the tag "Baptist" had not been recognized as such as time went by our enemies began to use the name. You see it was our enemies that made our God given name prominent. The name Baptist means "Anti-Religion" and "Anti-Catholic." Paul and his co-laborers wanted to be recognized as servants. The word communicated a vision of humility and absolute servility. The word was, literally "under-rowers." That hardly means anything to us. But for the Corinthians of the first century, it was a loathsome term. Corinth sat astride the Isthmus that joined the Southern Peninsula to mainland Greece. Corinth was where the war galleys of the Roman Empire crossed the Isthmus that separated the Ionian Sea from the Aegean Sea. In Paul's time, it was the wealthiest and most prominent of all Greek cities. One of the most common sights to the people of Corinth was the ship tramway that moved vessels overland to the opposite shore. Like the Panama Canal today, that overland transport system was in constant use and saved days of travel time for all who used it. The most numerous boats were the triremes or galley slave ships, each with three banks of oars in three levels, one above another. The slaves who sat chained to the bottom oars were called, the "under-rowers".

The word for servant is the Greek word "*huperetes*," which literally means "an under-rower." This is the description that Paul gives in Luke 1 of the position of a pastor or in fact any minister. He, Paul wanted to be known as an "under-rower." Before you pastors who read this treaty get excited or let your pride smother your sinful heart, stop take a deep breath and let the Spirit of God show you one of the great truths in the Word of God. Most will refuse to read on I'm sure but let me assure you those who do will understand the difference between surrendering their servitude to Jesus Christ, the Word of God and not to their own congregations. If you're offended take it up with God! Here we go one more time:

Now everyone in Corinth understood what that word “servant” “*huperetes*” meant. Corinth was where the war galleys of the Roman Empire crossed through the Isthmus that separated the Ionian Sea from the Aegean Sea, and the Corinthians knew that the lowest deck of a war galley was made of single rows of benches on both sides of the ship where the rowers sat. Then on a little deck raised up above them all, so that each rower could see him, was the captain of the ship. It was the rowers' task to row according to what he said. If he wanted the ship to move then they were to row; if he wanted them to stop they had to stop instantly. Their whole business was to obey his orders. Now, that is the word that Paul chooses to describe those who are teachers, preachers and ministers of the Word of God within the congregation of the Church. They are "under-rowers" of Christ.

This is a word that is used in other places in Scripture also. When our Lord stood before Pontius Pilate and Pilate asked him if he were a king, Jesus said, "My kingship is not of this world; if my kingship were of this world, my servants “*huperetes*” would fight," John 18:36. That is, "If my kingdom was an earthly kingdom and I told my servants to fight that is what they would do. They would obey what I said." This word is used again in the account of Paul and Barnabas as they go out on the first missionary journey. Luke tells us that they took with them a young man named John Mark to be their "minister" *huperetes*. Did that mean that he was to be in charge of the devotions every morning? No, it meant that he was the one who got the airline tickets, checked their baggage, and made hotel reservations, ran the errands, and did what they told him.

Paul says, "That is what we want you to think about us. We are not big shots we are not as some super-saints we are not among you as domineering leaders with the last word to utter. We are servants of Christ, under-rowers with our eyes fixed on Him." What He tells us to say that is what we are to say, and what He tells us not to do that is where our limits are. That is what we want you to think about us as you see us ministering among you. That's the core of Paul's message here.

From this flows what I think is a biblical independence of ministers of Christ, using that term in its widest sense. They are not to be servants of the Board, for the members of the Board themselves, the elders, are joint ministers of Christ with him. Ministers are not to be servants of the congregation, and least of all not to their denomination. They are servants of Christ. Paul says in Galatians, Chapter 1, "If I were still pleasing men, I should not be a servant of Christ," Galatians 1:10. There he draws a sharp contrast. They are not to be paying heed to what the congregation, or any one group within the congregation wants to hear, but they are to say what the Lord tells them to say. That is what the servant of Christ, the under-rower of Christ, must do. I tell you I have never valued anything more in my whole life than the fact that I belong with that crowd. I see myself as and *huperetes*, an under-rower, of Christ, and it is my responsibility to say and do what He says and tells me to do, nothing more and nothing less. We need to learn that great truth. For it is right here that the church has failed.

LIFE AT THE BOTTOM OF THE SHIP

The “under-rowers” life at the bottom of the ship was tough and always busy and it was permanent. Most died in service, the chains about their ankles grim reminders of their bondage. And there were five aspects of their work that Paul and his companions could identify with in

calling themselves “servants” of Christ.

First, the galley slave had to row to the captain’s beat. To keep as many as 150 oars together, the captain beat a rhythmic tempo on a drum. Each slave had to row with the beat.

Second, the slaves had to row together. Often their thirty-foot-long oars were moved by two or three rowers. They quickly learned that one could not lean on the oar, another push, and another pull! They had to work as a team.

Third, they had to trust the captain. In the gloomy depths of the boat, a slave had no idea where he was, where he was going, or when he would arrive. His was a labor of total faith and obedience. As the captain’s beat grew more and more rapid it could signal an enemy attack or a storm to be avoided or a hurried schedule but the slave could not question which. He could only obey.

Fourth, the galley slave was committed for life. His was always a one-way trip. The damp, hard benches were no relief to his weary bones after a day’s labor. The lack of sunshine and fresh air, combined with the leg chains, meant repeated illness during service, binding every slave to the ship with deadly certainty. And if the ship went down in a storm or in conflict, the slaves had no way of escape.

Finally, the slave received no honor. Only the captain was visible to the outer world. Although there were dozens of men who gave their lives and their very breathe to keep the ship unrewarded by the world. If an under-rower were seen, it was because he was not doing his job

GALLEY SLAVES FOR CHRIST

With a few strokes of a pen on parchment, Paul painted a portrait that was horridly vivid for his first readers. And he said it was a portrait of himself and his companions in ministry. Paul wanted to be known for five things: that he rowed to the Captain’s beat and so was submissive that he worked in harmony with those about him and so was sensitive, that he didn’t care where he labored for the Captain, and so was trusting that he would die at his post, and so was dedicated, and that he wanted none of the glory to go to himself, but all to the Captain, and so was humble. Our motivation for serving Christ differs, of course, even if our situation is similar. Like galley slaves, we need to obey our Master, cooperate with our fellow servants, and trust Jesus to take us where we need to go, remain in service for a lifetime, and give Christ all the glory. But while galley slaves did these things out of fear, we can do them in confident trust in a loving Captain whose plans for us are good. For I know the plans I have for you, declare the LORD, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future, Jer. 29:11. Like galley slaves, we belong to someone else. “You are not your own,” wrote Paul “you were bought with a price” 1 Cor. 6:19, 1 Cor. 6:20. But while they were held by iron chains, we are held in Christ’s service by a different kind of chain: “For Christ’s love compels us . . .” 2 Cor. 5:14.

Are you truly submissive, rowing to the beat of your Captain? Are you pulling together with your fellow servants in Christ? Are you willing to go wherever He leads? Are you committed to Him for life? And do you make sure to take none of the glory but to pass it all on to Him?

ARE YOU REALLY GOD'S UNDER ROWER?