

The Messiah's mission: Romans 13:8-14

Christ as weapon, Paul?

by [Thomas R. Yoder Neufeld](#) in the [August 26, 2008](#) issue

In January 1990, as Operation Desert Storm was lighting up the skies over Iraq, I was asked to preach on Romans 13. When people refer to Romans 13, they are usually thinking of the first seven verses, which suggest that submission to the authorities, who have been placed there by God and given the “sword,” is the duty of every Christian.

My Mennonite tradition has always had an uneasy relationship to Romans 13. Rather than try again to search for a way of reading it that would not subvert Jesus’ call to love the enemy, or Paul’s to pursue the stranger with love, I decided to preach on the second half of the chapter.

Scholars have long wondered whether someone slipped the first half of Romans 13 into Paul’s letter after his death, perhaps when other texts asking Christians to be subordinate to governing authorities (state, husband, father, boss) became part of the New Testament. I suspect that this is not the case, but 13:8 does seem to pick up the energy and the spirit evident at the end of chapter 12: “Owe no one anything, except to love one another.” In this second half of Romans 13 we see Paul, a radical Jew, excited about the dawning of the day of liberation, and calling on his readers to live as those who have already tasted of that freedom—and to do so in how they love not only each other, but strangers and enemies.

Yes, “radical Jew.” We know of Paul’s radically hospitable stance toward non-Jewish believers in Jesus when it came to circumcision. Here he lets everyone know that he is not an enemy of the Torah, even if the conclusions he draws from the Jewish conviction that love is both core and apex of Torah observance place him in tension with many Jews, including those who follow Jesus.

Paul’s views about what God is up to with the cosmos are just as radical. Along with many Jews, Paul looks forward with great anticipation to the arrival of God’s cosmos-transforming reign. But Paul believes not only that the great day of liberation is

about to dawn (he evidently underestimates the time it will take), but also that believers are not to be bystanders in that dawning. In a way reminiscent of his first letter to the Thessalonians (5:8), he summons believers to “put on the armor of light.” The militants down at the Dead Sea, one of whose documents was titled “The War of the Sons of Light Against the Sons of Darkness,” would have understood its radical implications with regard to the Roman imperial machine. Lest his militancy be misunderstood, Paul parses this summons with the parallel phrase: “Put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh.”

Paul is surely recalling for the Romans their baptism and how, after being immersed in the watery grave (Rom. 6:4), they put on new garments signifying their identification with the risen Messiah Jesus. For this radical Jew that could only mean being implicated in the dawning of the great day, and in the mission of the Messiah to reconcile the world with God.

But Christ as weapon? Paul envisions the life of believers, individually and corporately, as a grace-full “war” against an age marked by darkness—exploitation, subjugation, enslavement—a struggle in which the “Christ weapons” are made of light: zealous love of strangers and enemies, wily grace, inventive nonretaliation. That is what it means to put on Christ. Now perhaps we can more fully understand the importance that Romans 12 places on pursuit and victory.

If the first seven verses of Romans 13 did not exist, we might not have noticed their absence. Even so, they are part of our canon. Our considerations of the last halves of both chapters 12 and 13 should caution us, however, never to read the first half of Romans 13 apart from its envelope, namely, the crystal clear call not to be conformed, not to participate in the conflict and violence that Paul terms “the works of darkness,” but rather to be transformed, to love above all else, and thereby to put on the “armor of light,” that is, the Lord Jesus Christ.

The various Christian traditions do not agree on whether Christians should participate in war. What if, in our ongoing discernment, we made the starting point our shared experience of God’s love of enemy in Christ and the worship in life and thought to which it summons us? What if we recalled over and over again that at our baptism we “put on the Lord Jesus Christ,” and with that his way of pursuing threats and enemies with love and the offer of reconciliation? What if we subordinated the first half of Romans 13 to the second half, at least until we could stop the first half from subverting our faithfulness when it is most needed? How differently might the past few years have turned out if we had done so? How much might the next few yet

be transformed?