



The Epistle to the Romans

Romans 12-13: The Transformed Community

Having dealt with the issue of God's fidelity and the future of Israel, Paul turns to exhortation, encouraging his Roman audience to live in accordance with the principles to which they have committed themselves in Baptism (cf. chap. 6). As mentioned in the Introduction, some commentators on Romans find in these latter chapters Paul's primary concern, to address divisions within the Roman community occasioned by external persecution as well as internal differences. Other commentators find instead a set of generally conventional admonitions, echoing some of the themes that Paul had sounded in his earlier letters, especially to the Corinthians. Both factors seem to be at work. Some issues that Paul addresses seem very specific to the Roman situation, and Paul no doubt has been informed about those local concerns and he knows the history of the community. Yet the issues that he addresses lack the kind of urgency that would suggest a community seriously divided over them. Paul certainly tailors some of his common hortatory themes to the situation in Rome.

Romans 12:1-2: A Life of Moral Worship

How can we hope to live more faithfully? Romans has given us two metaphors already to understand our moral lives. Chapter six introduced us to life lived in slavery to God; chapter 8 presented the Spirit as the means by which God's law can be fulfilled in our lives. Now, in chapter twelve, Paul offers the prospect of transformation. The gift comes at a dear price, though: nothing short of handing one's body over to God. Paul uses cultic imagery to suggest that sacral character of the life of faith. Yet the "handing over" is not a physical blood sacrifice, but a yielding of a lived life to God. Faithful bodies are a "living sacrifice," a form of worship that is "in conformity with reason" (*logikên*). That somewhat more philosophical note characterizes the second general appeal, that the faithful should have their "mind" (*nous*) attuned to the will of God.

Our twenty-first-century western eyes might immediately imagine that Romans 12.1-2 describes an individual act, but the transformation Paul describes is more than that. It is communal, a truth that is indicated by the exhortations that follow – all aimed at life lived well and lovingly together.

Romans 12:3-8: The Body of Christ

For Paul, as for contemporary Stoic philosophers, the “mind” is not something distinct and separate from the body; neither is the “body” primarily the physical dimension of the single individual. As Paul had urged his followers in Corinth (1 Corinthians 12), he now urges his Roman audience to think of themselves as part of a social body (v. 4), in which the members have diversity of functions or “charisms” (v. 6), all gifts from God.

The list of gifts here differs slightly with the one in 1 Corinthians 12, indicating the obvious truth that these are representative lists. For the Romans there are prophets, ministers, teachers, exhorters, givers, leaders, and the compassionate (12:6- 7). We do not hear behind this paragraph Paul’s specific concern in Corinth that ecstatic gifts were being prized over more mundane and useful ones. Nonetheless, Paul exhorts toward humility and sober self-judgment. All are to lend their gifts to the community in humility, not for distinction but for the good of the whole.

Romans 12:9-21: Mutual Love

The image of the one body grounds a series of eloquently phrased admonitions to mutual love, hope, endurance, and hospitality (vv. 9-13). Belonging to the Body of Christ will show itself in many ways, in prayers for persecutors (v. 14), perhaps an allusion to the Roman situation, but also to true sympathy for other members of body, sharing in their joys and sorrows (v. 15), maintaining humility and not requiting evil with evil but pursuing peace with all (vv. 16-18). These admonitions recall some of the teachings of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7), and Paul may have been inspired by oral traditions about Jesus’ teachings. The conclusion reinforces the call to a non-violent response to persecution and grounds that call with an appeal to verses of Scripture that assert that vengeance is in the hands of God (v. 19: Deut 32:35, also cited in Heb 10:30), and that doing acts of kindness to an enemy is the proper way to repay him (v. 20: Prov 25:21-22). The concern not to repay evil in kind may have special relevance in a situation where the Roman community of believers has been subject to external pressure.

Romans 13:1-7: Obeying Authority

Paul now turns to what is clearly a local concern, the relationship to civil authority. He begins by reinforcing the legitimacy of civil authority, claiming that it is ultimately ordered by God (v. 1), so that resistance to it is ultimately resistance to God (v. 2). Paul then offers a functional explanation of what civil authority is supposed to do: to repress crime (v. 3), for the sake of which they bear the sword (v. 4). Hence obedience to such authority is not simply a matter of expediency, but also of moral principle, of “conscience” (v. 5). At this point Paul raises a specific topic that may have occasioned the whole admonition about civil authority, the requirement to

pay taxes of various sorts (vv. 6-7). If the general principle obtains that one must be subject to authority, then the particular case is also clear.

This brief passage on the authority of the political order has played various roles in the history of the relationship between Church and State. Kings and autocrats of various political persuasions have usually welcomed the notion that their authority has a divine foundation. In contemporary debates the affirmation that the state has the “power of the sword” offers support to those who favor capital punishment and who resist religious appeals to its abolition. Yet this chapter is no more a handbook of Christian political theory than is the first chapter of Romans a treatise on sexual ethics. Christians who have wrestled with the realities of oppressive political systems of the left or right have also heard other scriptural testimonies about political power, such as the prophetic witness of Ezekiel against an unjust king and the Book of Revelation about the demonic character of the state. Scripture as it often does speaks not with a univocal voice, but it challenges its readers to discernment.

Romans 13:8-10: The Heart of Paul’s Exhortation

Paul moves back from the specifics of paying taxes in deference to civil authority to the general principle that underlies all of his hortatory program, both in Romans and elsewhere: the requirement to love one another (v. 8). To reinforce the point, he again turns to scripture, claiming that the prohibitions of the Decalogue (Exodus 20:13-17; Deut 5:17-21), all are summarized in the positive injunction of the Holiness Code (Lev 19:18) that we should love our neighbors as ourselves.

In this little paragraph Paul neatly pulls together several themes of Romans generally. Within the immediate context of the exhortations, the appeal to the Holiness Code of Leviticus reinforces the introductory framing of the moral life in cultic terms (cf. 12:1). More importantly perhaps Paul reinforces one of his most dramatic claims in the early chapters of Romans, that his gospel does not abrogate the Torah, but it confirms it (cf. 3:31). The trope of finding the whole Law summarized in a single verse or two is a standard Jewish move, also found in the Gospels on the lips of Jesus (Matt 19:18-19; Mark 12:31; Luke 10:25-28, all also appealing to Lev 19:18). Both by his form and his content Paul shows himself to be a faithful heir of his Israelite heritage.

Romans 13:11-14: The Eschatological Framework

Balancing the appeal to scripture is Paul’s sense of the situation in which he and his addressees find themselves. Throughout Paul’s correspondence we find evidence of his acute sense of living in the last stage of salvation history, when the “shape of this world is passing away” (1 Cor 7:31), just before the return of Christ as glorious judge (1 Thess 4:15-18). His language here is more evocative and poetic: “night is far advanced, the day draws nigh” (v. 12), but the point of existence in this eschatological state is clear: we must “walk in the light,” not by engaging in self-indulgence of whatever sort, but by “putting on Christ” (v. 14).

It was this passage that St. Augustine read at Cassiciacum, when he heard what he thought was a child's voice saying "tolle, lege" – "take up and read." Even if neither Augustine nor many other readers of Romans shared Paul's sense that the world was coming to an imminent and cataclysmic end, they have heeded his call to "put on Christ" and follow the command to love.

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