

Paul's military language

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I find more than a dozen military references in the Pauline corpus. In Philemon, Paul includes in his greetings “Archippus our fellow soldier.” In this week's second reading, Paul advises his readers to stand firm and strive side by side. The former Roman soldiers living in Philippi would have heard a reference to a Roman military formation.

Paul sees in himself “another war with the law of my mind, making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members” (Romans 7:23). According to Paul our persons are the battlefields over which the old and new eras contend.

For the congregation in Corinth, Paul compares speaking in tongues without interpretation to a bugle giving “an indistinct sound.” The full verse reads, “And if the bugle gives an indistinct sound, who will get ready for battle?”

Some take Paul's military references literally. The slogan “For God and Country” all too often identifies God with a specific national cause. A man I know studied in a German city not long after World War II. One Sunday he attended church in one of the villages outside of the city. This church, like many other Lutheran churches, had a painting over the altar of Christ rising from the tomb. In this painting, the risen Christ was the Aryan youth of Nazi propaganda. The good news of Jesus' resurrection became the resurrection of the Aryan nation.

I would never equate the American flag and what it stands for with Hitler's insignia. But is it any less a misreading of Paul when any country's flag is paraded into church and the national interest conflated with the Christian mission?

On the other side are those who are embarrassed by Paul's military references and avoid them. By denying or glossing over the military reference we miss the opportunity to explore how Paul subverts the language and structures of the old order.

2 Corinthians 2:14-16 is a good example. The conquering army followed the standard bearer carrying the Roman eagle. They paraded into the city to receive the accolades of the adoring citizenry. They sacrificed to the gods. The aroma of incense filled the air.

On his missionary journeys, Paul entered the cities with his companions. He says they followed Christ in triumphal procession. They are the "aroma of Christ to God." It is an ironic, even comical comparison. Still today the church processes behind a crucifer. The standard bearer carries the cross of Christ.

Paul's use of military language subverts the trappings of empire. He does this to proclaim the good news of God's mercy in Christ Jesus.