

O Praise the Gracious Power

Thomas H. Troeger

Christ "has broken down the dividing wall of hostility...that he might...reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross" (Ephesians 2: 14b-16a, RSV). A "wall" is one of those metaphors that I call a "primal image," by which I mean an elemental reality so central to our experience as creatures that its use as a figure of speech has a material resonance in our spirits. "Water," "darkness and light," "bread," "fire," and "wind" are other common primal images. They are popular with hymnwriters not only because the Bible uses them again and again, but because the theological poetic sensibility is attuned to how a sense of the numinous spills from these images, how they express without exhausting the ineffable depths of existence.

In reading the words from Ephesians which inspired this hymn, I was struck by how the primal image of the wall gave a sharper sense to the meaning of the cross. Language about the cross often becomes the jargon of a piety disconnected from the day-to-day experience of people. But such disconnection does not happen in the passage from Ephesians because the primal image of the wall makes plain what the cross means: "the dividing wall of hostility" has come down.

The hymn text recapitulates the scriptural dialectic between primal images and language about the cross as it moves between the stanzas and the refrain, which is a more traditionally phrased proclamation of the gospel: "We praise you Christ!/Your cross has made us one." There is a constant oscillation between the central religious symbol of the cross and the primal images of fist, circle, rock, and tide, although the image is sometimes welded into an adjective: "fisted minds" and "encircling every race."

In order for the cross to be transformative it needs to penetrate to the level of primal images, to the rudimentary essence of how we organize and respond to the world, those caverns of the heart where we put up our walls of fear and clench our fists and draw our circles of exclusion. The hymn tells how Christ reverses the human processes of alienation. The hymn is a dynamic verbal icon that celebrates the reconciliation that Christ has brought about: every stanza begins "O praise." The images of the first five stanzas are piled on top of each other in stanza six, and their cumulative force finally impels us to share the good news of what the cross means: "Announce the gospel to the world." The poetic flow of the hymn is an expression of how the experience of reconciliation through Christ leads to an irrepressible desire to declare the wonder of a fragmented world reassembled by grace.

Thomas H. Troeger is Professor of Preaching and Communications at Iliff School of Theology, Denver, Colorado. He is also a widely published hymnwriter.

January 1997 • Vol. 48, No. 1

O praise the gracious power
that tumbles walls of fear
and gathers in one house of faith
all strangers far and near:

Refrain

*We praise you Christ!
Your cross has made us one!*

O praise persistent truth
that opens fisted minds
and eases from their anxious clutch
the prejudice that binds:

Refrain

O praise inclusive love
encircling every race,
oblivious to gender, wealth,
to social rank or place:

Refrain

O praise the word of faith
that claims us as God's own,
a living temple built on Christ,
our rock and corner stone:

Refrain

O praise the tide of grace
that laps at every shore
with visions of a world at peace
no longer bled by war:

Refrain

O praise the power, the truth,
the love, the word, the tide.
yet more than these, O praise their
source,
praise Christ the crucified:

Refrain

O praise the living Christ
with faith's bright songful voice!
Announce the gospel to the world
and with these words rejoice:

Refrain

©1994, Oxford University Press. Used by permission.

Hymn Interpretation