

# Christ the Firstborn

IN THE LIGHT OF

“The Glory as of the Only Begotten  
from the Father”

(John 1. 14)

BY

W. E. VINE, M.A.

Author of “The Roman Empire in Prophecy,” “The Divine  
Inspiration of the Bible,” “The Twelve Mysteries  
of Scripture,” etc.



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# Christ the Firstborn.

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THE title "Firstborn," as used in Scripture with reference to the Son of God, has a certain association with the other title of His Divine relationship to the Father, "the only begotten." It will be well, therefore, in the first place to consider the teaching of Scripture regarding the latter. That title is found only in the Gospel of John and in his first Epistle. The passages are as follows:

(1) "And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, (and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the Only Begotten from the Father), full of grace and truth" (John 1. 14, R.V.).

(2) "No man hath seen God at any time; the only begotten Son, which is in the bosom of the Father, He hath declared Him" (John 1. 18).

(3) "For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth on Him should not perish, but have eternal life" (John 3. 16).

(4) "He that believeth on Him is not judged; he that believeth not hath been judged already, because he hath not believed on the Name of the only begotten Son of God" (John 3. 18).

(5) "Herein was the love of God manifested in us, that God hath sent His only begotten Son into the world, that we might live through Him" (1 John 4. 9).

## **The Glory of His Relationship.**

In speaking of "the glory as of the Only Begotten from the Father" the apostle intimates that the Son of God was the sole representative of the being and character of the One who sent Him. In the original the definite article is omitted both before "only begotten" and before

"Father," and its absence in each case serves to lay stress upon the characteristics referred to in the terms used. The apostle's object is to demonstrate what sort of glory it was that he and his fellow apostles had seen. Yet he is not merely making a comparison with earthly relationships. This is at once indicated by the word "from," which rightly translates the original *para*.

The glory to which John refers was that of a unique relationship. It was a Father's Only Begotten who came, the only One who could truly represent such a Father in being, in nature, and love. In this relationship He came down from Heaven to earth on His Father's mission. With this agrees His statement to the disciples, "Ye... have believed that I came forth from the Father. I came out from the Father, and am come into the world: again, I leave the world and go unto the Father" (chap. 16. 27, 28). Here he plainly declares His pre-existent relationship as the Son, prior to His Incarnation. Obviously He means that He came forth from the presence of One who was already His Father prior to His coming. The mode of His coming forth is suggested by His statement, "Again, I leave the world and go unto the Father." For this expresses the reversal of His procedure mentioned in the first part of the verse. His going unto the Father is the antithesis of His coming out from the Father.

### **Eternal Sonship.**

Again, the same writer, in the introduction to his Epistle, says, "The Life was manifested, and we have seen and bear witness, and declare unto you the Life, the eternal Life which was with the Father, and was manifested unto us" (1 John 1. 2). John does not say that He who was the Life was "with God," but that He was "with the Father." The terms "father" and "son" are correlative. That of "father" implies the existence of

a son. There is no hint in the Scriptures as to any time at which God began to be a Father, yet the Scriptures make clear that His fatherhood in relation to Christ was pre-existent to the Incarnation. Was the fatherhood of the One eternal? Then the sonship of the Other must likewise have been eternal.

So again in the same Epistle, where the apostle says, "The Father hath sent the Son to be the Saviour of the world" (chap. 4. 14). It was a Father who sent, and a Son who came. Accordingly, we can only rightly understand the term "the only-begotten" when used of the Son, in the sense of unoriginated relationship. "The begetting is not an event of time, however remote, but a fact irrespective of time. The Christ did not *become*, but necessarily and eternally *is* the Son. He, a Person, possesses every attribute of pure Godhood. This necessitates eternity, absolute being; in this respect He is 'not after' the Father" (Moule).

### A Distinction.

Though the word "begotten" is used of the Son's relationship to the Father, it does not imply any beginning of His Sonship. It suggests relationship indeed, but must be distinguished from generation as applied to man. To endeavour to establish our ideas of Divine relationship in accordance with our knowledge of human relationships is simply to betray our ignorance. The finite mind cannot conceive of that which is infinite. Our limitations of time and sense preclude our full apprehension of the eternal. God has conveyed the facts relating to Himself in language the phraseology of which we are able to understand, though the facts themselves lie outside the range of human conception. The word "Son," when used of the Son of God, speaks of Him as the perfect archetype of all that the word connotes, whether in human

relations, or Divine. It signifies all that goes to make up the true idea of the word "Son," *viz.*, the same essence (Heb. 1. 3; John 5. 18; 10. 33-36), dignity (Heb. 1. 2), likeness (Heb. 1. 3; Matt. 5. 54, R.V.), love (John 1. 18; Psa. 22. 20, *margin*), and obedience (Heb. 5. 8), as distinguished from the mere idea of "child." The expression "only begotten" tells of the uniqueness of that relation in His case. The expression also suggests the thought of the deepest affection, as in the case of the Old Testament word variously rendered, "only one" (Gen. 22. 2, 12), "only son" (Jer. 6. 26; Amos 8. 10; Zech. 12. 10), "only beloved" (Prov. 4. 3), and "darling" (Psa. 22. 20; 35. 17). These are evidently the thoughts conveyed to us by the apostle's statement that "the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us (and we beheld His glory, glory as of an Only Begotten from a Father) full of grace and truth." He emphasises the lowliness of Christ in deigning, with all the majesty of His eternal Godhood, to become flesh and dwell among us, and it is consistent with His glory and His lowliness that He tabernacled among us "full of grace and truth."

### **The Son's Eternal Dwelling-Place.**

(2) The second statement is, "The Only Begotten Son, which is in the bosom of the Father, He hath declared Him" (John 1. 18). This expresses both His eternal union with the Father in the Godhead and the ineffable intimacy and love between them, the Son sharing all the Father's counsels and enjoying all His affections. The form of expression used in the original, and rendered "which is," is the present continuous participle. Expressed literally in English it would be "the One being" (in the bosom). We are to understand, therefore, that the bosom of the Father ever was, and never ceased to be, the dwelling place of the Son.

### **The Measure of God's Love.**

(3) Thirdly, the statement that "God so loved the world that He gave His Only Begotten Son" (John 3. 16), cannot be taken to mean that Christ became the Only Begotten Son by Incarnation. That would rob the verse of its meaning and force. The value and greatness of the gift lay in the sonship of Him who was given. His sonship was not the effect of His being given. We must distinguish from this the declaration uttered predictively and recorded in Psalm 2. 7: "Thou art My Son; this day have I begotten Thee," and quoted in Acts 13. 33, Heb. 1. 5 and 5. 5. These utterances point to a distinct occasion, whereas the title Only Begotten indicates, as we have seen, the unoriginated relationship of the Son to the Father.

A moment's consideration as to the character of the gift will show us how essentially the Son was one with the Father in the Godhead. It was not one whom God had created that He gave. Had He given a Son who was one of His creatures, His love would have been less than that of a man who lays down his own life for his fellows. For had Christ been created, God could have replaced His gift by another Son. Creation is no difficulty with God. He could have replaced such a gift without a drain on His resources.

No! The Father and the Son are One in the Godhead. Whatever distinction there is between them does not affect their unity. "God was in Christ reconciling the world unto Himself" (2 Cor. 5. 19). "God commendeth His own love toward us in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us" (Rom. 5. 12). In the Person of Christ God came to save us. But more than this, He gave "His only begotten Son" (with all that lies in that unique relationship). "He spared not His Son" (Rom. 8. 32;

1 John 4. 9). Such a gift was an "unspeakable gift" and the love was "His own," something peculiar to Himself, having no affinity with human love, which depends upon something in another to call it forth. His love was displayed toward those who were sinners.

### **The Sin of Unbelief.**

(4) Fourthly, the importance of that eternal relationship is emphasised by the apostle in the statement, "He that believeth on Him is not judged: he that believeth not hath been judged already, because he hath not believed on the Name of the Only Begotten Son of God" (chap. 3. 18). He might have said simply, "because he hath not believed on the Son of God." Instead he lays stress upon the full revelation of God's character and will, His love and grace, as conveyed in the Name of One who, being in such a unique relationship to Him, was provided by Him as the object of faith. The sin of unbelief is seen to be the greater in proportion to the greatness of the One who came in order that men might be saved from the judgment they deserved.

### **Not Sonship by Incarnation.**

(5) Fifthly, in his first Epistle the apostle similarly stresses the greatness of the Person as measuring the greatness of the love that sent Him: "Herein was the love of God manifested in us, that God hath sent His Only Begotten Son into the world, that we might live through Him" (1 John 4. 9). In sending His Son He sent His all. He could give no greater gift. The infinite value of the Person indicates the transcendent way in which such love was manifested. The words "in us" disclose the sphere in which God's love was exhibited. We are by nature dead through trespasses and sins.

This passage again shows the sending to have been by



way of His Incarnation and not subsequent to it. The statement does not mean that God sent out into the world one who at His birth in Bethlehem had become His Son. By means of the Incarnation He sent into the world One who was already His Son. The Apostle Paul, writing to the Galatians, says, "When the fullness of the time came, God sent forth His Son, born of woman, born under the Law" (Gal. 4. 4). The reference plainly is to His being sent forth from Heaven to earth by Incarnation, and not to any subsequent mission in the days of His flesh. We may not read the words as if they meant that God sent forth One who at His birth became His Son, any more than the parallel statement in verse 6, "God sent forth the Spirit of His Son," could be taken to mean that God sent forth One who became His Spirit when He sent Him. The Holy Spirit had ever been the Spirit of God prior to Pentecost. So in regard to the statement in verse 4, He whom God sent forth to be born of a woman had ever been His Son. This is made clear, too, by the statement in 1 John 1. 2, "The Life was manifested, and we have seen, and bear witness, and declare unto you the Life, the eternal Life, which was with the Father, and was manifested unto us." The writer does not say that He who was the Life was "with God," but that He was "with the Father." Since He was with the Father, and was at the same time the eternal Life, His Sonship must have been eternal.

### **The Title "Firstborn."**

With this truth before us, of the eternal relationship involved in the term "Only Begotten," we now turn to consider the other title, "Firstborn," which is to be distinguished from it, though it is associated with it. Here again, there are five passages in the New Testament, and, in addition, one in the Old Testament, where this

title is used of Christ. It will be useful to set these out as we did in the other case, in detail, but now in chronological order, the successive periods or points of time being indicated in the context. The passages are as follows:

(1) "Who is the image of the invisible God, the Firstborn of all creation" (Col. 1. 15).

(2) "And He is the Head of the body, the Church; who is the beginning, the Firstborn from the dead; that in all things He might have the pre-eminence" (Col. 1. 18).

(3) "Jesus Christ, who is the faithful witness, the Firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth" (Rev. 1. 5).

(4) "For whom He foreknew, He also foreordained to be conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the Firstborn among many brethren" (Rom. 8. 29).

(5) "And when He again bringeth in the Firstborn into the world He saith, And let all the angels of God worship Him" (Heb. 1. 6).

(6) "I also will make Him My Firstborn, the highest of the kings of the earth" (Psa. 89. 27).

### **A Comparison and a Contrast.**

It will be seen from the above passages that the title "Firstborn," while used with reference to created beings, distinguishes Him, firstly, from all creatures absolutely as such, and then relatively from them as those who are subordinate to Him. Yet it is this reference to created beings which distinguishes the title from that of "Only begotten." The two have this in common, that neither of them classes Him with created beings. While "Only Begotten" speaks of His absolute and unique relationship to the Father, the title "Firstborn" brings other beings into view, not implying a beginning of His being, nor

classing Him with His creatures, but denoting His pre-eminence over them in time and dignity.

The six passages above quoted have reference to the following subjects respectively, which are given in chronological order: (1) His work in Creation; (2) His Resurrection (first aspect); (3) His Resurrection (second aspect); (4) His position among His glorified saints; (5) His manifested glory; (6) His Millennial reign.

## I. CHRIST THE FIRSTBORN, With Reference to Creation.

In the first passage Christ is described as "The image of the invisible God, the Firstborn of all creation," and the explanation of the latter clause is that "In Him were all things created, in the heavens and upon the earth, things visible and things invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or powers; all things have been created through Him, and unto Him" (Col. 1. 16, 17).

### "The Image of God."

The apostle first speaks of Him here in relation to His Godhood. He is "the Image of the invisible God." Similarly in 2 Corinthians 4. 4 he describes Him as "the image of God." On the word *eikōn*, rendered "image," Bishop Lightfoot remarks, "Beyond the very obvious notion of likeness, the word involves two other ideas; (1) representation. In this . . . it implies an archetype of which it is a copy; (2) manifestation . . . the underlying idea being the manifestation of the hidden." It is to be distinguished therefore from our word "likeness," which merely denotes a resemblance.

What the Apostle John says of the Son of God as the Word is likewise applicable to this term "image." "No man hath seen God at any time; the only-begotten Son, which is in the bosom of the Father, He hath declared

Him" (John 1. 18). Here in the Colossian passage Paul similarly predicates the invisibility of God, and virtually states that the Son, in being both the representation and manifestation of God, has declared Him. As Liddon says, "The expression 'image of God,' supplements the title of 'the Son.' As 'the Son,' Christ is derived eternally from the Father, and He is of one substance with the Father. As 'the Image' Christ is, in that one substance, the exact likeness of the Father, in all things except being the Father. The Son is the image of the Father, not as the Father, but as God: the Son is the Image of God . . . God's unbegun, unending reflection of Himself in Himself, but also the organ whereby God, in His essence invisible, reveals Himself to His creatures. Thus the *eikōn* is, so to speak, naturally the Creator, since creation is the first revelation which God has made of Himself. Man is the highest point in the visible universe: in man, God's attributes are most luminously exhibited; man is the image and glory of God. But Christ is the adequate Image of God, God's self-reflection in His own thought, eternally present with Himself."\*

### Christ the Creator.

The Son, then, in His very Person and nature, makes God known. He is the full revelation both of the being and character of God. As the apostle says in the next chapter, "In Him dwelleth all the fullness of the Godhead bodily" (Col. 2. 9). This would in itself be sufficient to show that the expression "the Firstborn of all creation," does not imply that He is ranked among created beings. The apostle definitely refutes this implication in his succeeding explanation, "For in Him were all things created . . . all things have been created through Him...

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\*Liddon. "The Divinity of our Lord," pp. 321, 322.

and in Him all things consist." Since the Son of God is Himself the Creator, whatever the title "Firstborn" signifies, it is evident that it does not mean that He, the Creator, is at the same time to be classed with His creatures.

Further, the form of expression exemplified in the phrase "Firstborn of all creation," was not infrequently used to distinguish a person from others, in declaring his priority to them in time and his superiority over them in position. The literal rendering, for instance, of the statement of John the Baptist, "He was before me" (John 1. 15-30) is, "He was first of me." The margin of the Revised Version has "first in regard of me." It was far from the Baptist's thought to class the Lord Jesus with the order of beings to which he himself belonged. With this idiomatic use of the preposition "of" we may compare Milton's line, "Adam, the goodliest man of men since born," and the words of the historian Thucydides, who speaks of a war as "the most notable of wars previously waged." In these cases "of" obviously implies distinction, not association.

#### A Fourfold Position.

The apostle's statement, then, does not mean that Christ is ranked as the first among created beings. He existed before them, not only as their Creator, but in eternal relationship to the Father as His Firstborn. That He is "the Image of God" defines His relation in the Godhead; that He is "the Firstborn of every creature" defines His position with regard to creatures. They owe their origin and condition to Him. The position is fourfold. All things were created (a) firstly, in Him; (b) secondly, by Him; (c) thirdly, unto Him; and (d) fourthly, by His power all things consist (vv. 16, 17).

## (a) "In Him."

With regard to the first of these, namely, that all things were created *in* Him, the preposition expresses that the Son of God was the Centre from whom, in the Divine counsels, creative power should proceed. As Liddon says, "There was no creative process external to and independent of Him, since the archetypal forms after which the creatures are modelled, and the sources of their strength and consistency of being, eternally reside in Him" (page 323). He was the Divine Designer.

## (b) "By Him."

Secondly, they were created *by* Him. He was the Divine Instrument (Rev. 4. 11, R.v.). "Without Him was not any thing made that hath been made" (John 1. 3). In this sense we are to understand the description the Lord gives of Himself in the letter to the church at Laodicea, where He calls Himself "The beginning of the creation of God." This expression, in the original, does not signify that He was Himself created, it means He is the source of all that has been created.

In the same sense he speaks of Himself as "the Alpha and Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end" (chap. 22. 13; cp. 1. 8, 17). The same expressions are used by God the Father of Himself in chapter 21. 6, as also He had done through the prophet Isaiah: "Who hath wrought and done it, calling the generations from the beginning? I the Lord, the First and with the Last, I am He" (Isa. 41. 4; cp. 44. 6). Again, "I am the First, I also am the Last. Yea, Mine hand hath laid the foundation of the earth, and My right hand hath spread out the heavens" (chap. 48. 12, 13). Thus the very expressions which declare the Deity of God are applied by Christ to Himself.

These expressions unfold the great Name "Jehovah," and especially in two respects: "The First" or "the Alpha," as the One by whose power all things had their beginning, and "the Last," "the Omega," as indicating that He will see to it that all the Divine counsels will at length be completely fulfilled. In the Apocalypse the Lord Jesus declares that His are all the prerogatives of Godhood. There is no hint in any part of the Scriptures that Christ was the first of created beings. The testimony is clear and explicit throughout that He was the Creator, Himself being uncreated.

(c) "Unto Him."

Thirdly, "All things were created *unto* Him." He is the Divine Object. "He is not, as Arianism propounded, merely an inferior workman, creating for the glory of a higher Master, for a God superior to Himself. He creates for Himself: He is the End of created things, as well as their immediate Source."\* In the Epistle to the Romans the apostle predicates these things of God. He says, "Oh, the depth of the riches, both of the wisdom and the knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments, and His ways past tracing out! For who hath known the mind of the Lord, or who hath been His counsellor? Or who hath first given to Him, and it shall be recompensed unto him again? For *of* Him, and *through* Him, and *unto* Him, are all things. To Him be the glory for ever. Amen" (Rom. 11. 33-36). What is there said of the Father is here in Colossians said of the Son, a testimony therefore to His Deity and His oneness with the Father in the Godhead. The Son is not only a Divine Agent in creation, He is its final Object. The Father has determined "to sum up all things in Christ, the things in the heavens, and the things upon the earth"

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\*Liddon. Page 323.

(Eph. 1. 10). All things are to be subjected to Him (1 Cor. 15. 27). The Son is "able even to subdue all things unto Himself "(Phil. 3. 21).

(d) "In Him All Things Consist."

This fourth the apostle introduces by the statement, "He is before all things." Herein he declares not only Christ's pre-existence, but likewise His absolute existence. He and He only *is*. All else is created. Further, He is "before all things," including time itself. This the Lord Himself stated when He said, "Before Abraham was, I am." He did not say "Before Abraham was, I was," as He would have done had He merely intended to state His pre-existence. He says instead, "I am," taking up the language of Jehovah to Moses, when He commanded him to say to the children of Israel, "I Am hath sent me unto you."

The second statement that, "in Him all things consist," signifies that every creature finds in Him "the explanation and law of its being." As Lightfoot says, "He is the principle of cohesion in the universe. He impresses upon creation that unity and solidity which makes it a cosmos instead of a chaos. Thus, to take one instance, the action of gravitation, which keeps in their places things fixed, and regulates the motion of things moving, is an expression of His mind." Similarly in the Hebrews Epistle Christ is described as "upholding all things by the word of His power." Plainly these Scriptures teach that, apart from Christ, creation could neither have come into being, nor could its order be maintained. The Son of God, "the effulgence of the Father's glory and the very image of His substance," maintains all things by His word of power (Heb. 1. 2, 3). The Scriptures make clear, then, that not only does the world of nature owe its existence to a direct act of creation on the part of the Son



of God, but that He Himself, by whose decree, indeed, the natural laws which regulate the universe were established, sustains the universe by His might. That there are increasing evidences of this is admitted to-day in the scientific world. Here is what a recent writer has to say on the subject: "The Bible . . . comes in to show the rational *via media* between Deism and Pantheism, avoiding the absurdity of both extremes. There is a place where God abides in a sense in which He is not to be found in any other place. Yet His powers and perfections are such that, by His Spirit and by His Word, He is present everywhere throughout His universe. His Word is as effective at the remotest distances as near at hand, for the simple reason that matter has no "properties" which He has not imparted to it, and therefore it can have no innate inertia or reluctance to act which God's Word would need to overcome in order to induce it to act, even when this Word operates across the boundless fields of space. He has created free personalities, and He leaves the mind of each of His creatures free to serve Him or not to serve Him, these free intelligent beings becoming thus true second causes. More than this, provision for almost innumerable second causes seems to have been made even among other departments of nature, without, however, interfering with the direct action of the Word of the Infinite One in guiding and controlling them all."

### **His Pre-eminence in Dominion.**

When, therefore, the apostle says that Christ is "The Firstborn of all creation," he is using a term which is perfectly consistent with the facts of His pre-existence before all created beings, His superiority to them, as being the source of their existence, and His pre-eminence over them as the One to whose power they owe their very

condition and maintenance. All this lies in the meaning of the word *prōtotokos*, "firstborn," as applied to the Son of God. It is likewise connected with the principles of primogeniture with reference to dominion. The idea of dominion had a tendency, owing to the sense of priority, to outweigh the initial meaning of simple priority of birth. Indeed the thought of priority of birth was not infrequently lost in the idea of pre-eminence. Thus, in His argument with Job, Bildad speaks of the "firstborn of death" (Job 18. 31), signifying thereby the one who has pre-eminent power over death. So again, Isaiah, speaking of days of Millennial peace and glory, says, "The firstborn of the poor (that is to say, the one who is pre-eminently poor) shall feed, and the needy shall lie down in plenty" (Isa. 14. 30). Under the Mosaic economy it was possible for a man to make any one of His sons his "firstborn" other than the one who was actually so (Deut. 21. 16, 17). This idea of pre-eminence in authority and dominion is then the predominant thought in the use of the word as applied to the Son of God. In coming into creation in Manhood and thus taking part with that which He had Himself created, allying Himself the Infinite with the finite, it could only be as "the Firstborn of all creation." This now comes before us in the remaining passages.

## II. CHRIST THE FIRSTBORN,

### **With Reference to His Resurrection** (*first aspect*).

Following the description of Christ's creative power and glory as the Firstborn in regard to the natural creation, the apostle makes a similar statement with reference to the spiritual creation: "And He is the Head of the Body, the Church; who is the Beginning, the Firstborn from the dead; that in all things He might have the pre-eminence" (Col. 1. 18). The fourfold teaching of the title,

as intimated in the previous sections, is again before us here, namely (a) Divine relationship; (b) priority to others in time; (c) source of their existence; (d) pre-eminence over them.

### **Resurrection His Presumptive Right.**

(a) Here He is described as the "Firstborn from the dead," lit., "out from among the dead." Stress is laid upon the fact of His resurrection. To Christ, as the Son of God, resurrection was not only a fact of foreordained fulfilment, it was a presumptive right; it was His Father's vindication of His Sonship, the vindication at the same time of Christ's claim to be the Son of God. He had announced it beforehand to His critics and opponents, the Scribes and Pharisees, as the one sign which would be given to them. His reply to their request for some token of the validity of His claims, was that no sign would be given them but the sign of Jonah the prophet; "For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the whale, so," He said, "shall the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth" (Matt. 12. 38-40). His resurrection was the crowning evidence of His Deity as the Son of God, and of the Divine character of His Mission. In His resurrection was fulfilled the Messianic prophecy uttered by Isaiah, "He is near that justified Me" (Isa. 50. 8). That the statement was directly predictive of the Lord Jesus Christ, is clear from the context: "The Lord God hath opened Mine ear, and I was not rebellious, neither turned away backward. I gave My back to the smiters, and My cheeks to them that plucked off the hair: I hid not My face from shame and spitting. For the Lord God will help Me; therefore have I not been confounded: therefore have I set My face like a flint, and I know that I shall not be ashamed. He is near that justifieth Me" (Isa. 50. 5-8).

For all others resurrection is a matter of pure grace. The Resurrection of Christ was His due. His sinlessness, a fact which even His bitterest enemies admitted, demanded it. The very terms of God's Law decreed it. Perfect obedience to its commands guaranteed the assurance of life: "He that doeth them shall live in them" (Lev. 18. 5, quoted in Gal. 3. 12). He was the only One who ever fulfilled absolutely the conditions laid down in the Law. "Tempted in all points like as we are," He was yet without sin. Tested in every way, He alone of all men since the Fall "was so born that He needed not to be born again." Yet, be it always remembered, the nature which He took in His Incarnation was that of true humanity, possessing all the essential properties of manhood. He identified Himself with humanity in everything but sin.

It is, therefore, of Christ that the Psalmist says, "Thou wilt not leave My soul in Sheol, neither wilt Thou suffer Thine Holy One to see corruption. Thou wilt show Me the path of life," *i. e.*, resurrection life (Psa. 16. 9-11).

(b) His was

#### **Priority in Resurrection.**

Others had been translated, or had been raised with bodies not entirely delivered from the power of death. He, first, was raised to die no more. "If we died with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with Him; knowing that Christ being raised from the dead dieth no more; death no more hath dominion over Him" (Rom. 6. 8, 9). He Himself says, "I am . . . the Living One; and I was dead, and behold, I am alive for evermore" (Rev. 1. 17, 18). He has been shewn to be pre-eminent over creation (Col. 1. 15), and in providence (v. 17), and now He is seen to be pre-eminent over the new creation as the first to rise from the dead. Here, again, the expression has reference to others, who would follow, and enter through Him the vast sphere of reconciliation.

### **The Founder of the Church.**

(c) What we have remarked above, with reference to the description of Christ in Revelation 3. 14, as "the Beginning of the Creation of God" applies here. As "the beginning," He is the Originator of the Church. It owes its very existence to Him; firstly, by reason of the predetermining and eternal counsels of God in Him; secondly, by reason of His death and resurrection; thirdly, by the mission of the Holy Spirit, sent forth by the Father and the Son at Pentecost. Thereupon began the fulfilment of His Word to Peter, that on the ground of the truth of his confession concerning Himself as "the Christ, the Son of the Living God," He would build His Church (Matt. 16. 16-18).

### **(d) His Pre-eminence Over the Church.**

Because He is "the beginning, the Firstborn from the dead, He is related to the Church as the Head of the Body. All that is naturally set forth in this relationship is true of the spiritual union suggested. The Church is under His control and government, and derives its sustenance from Him. As He sustains the natural creation, so He does the spiritual. From Him "all the body fitly framed and knit together through that which every joint supplieth, according to the working in due measure of each several part, maketh the increase of the body unto the building up of itself in love" (Eph. 4. 16), and again, "all the body, being supplied and knit together through the joints and bands, increaseth with the increase of God" (Col. 2. 19). This constant care and nourishment relates to the present circumstances of believers on the earth; for it is here that Christ, as Head of the Church, gives gifts, "for the perfecting of the saints unto the work of ministering, unto the building up of the body of Christ"

(Eph. 4. 11-13). He will, however, always be the Head, —the Source of all life and energy in His members throughout eternity.

The Divine purpose in view is that "in all things (or, as the margin, 'among all') He might have the pre-eminence." Either rendering is possible. If we read "in all things," then the reference is both to the universe and the Church. If the rendering "among all" is adopted, then the reference is especially to the Church. The context indicates the rendering "in all things." For the apostle goes on to say that it was the Divine good pleasure "through Him to reconcile all things unto Himself . . . whether things upon the earth, or things in the heavens."

### III. CHRIST THE FIRSTBORN,

**With Reference to His Resurrection** (*second aspect*).

There is another passage which speaks of Christ's position as the Firstborn in resurrection. In Revelation 1. 5 He is called "The Firstborn of the dead." Now while in Colossians 1. 18, as we have seen, He is spoken of as "The Firstborn *from* (*ek*, out from among) the dead," in Revelation 1. 5 the Greek has no preposition, according to the best manuscripts. Each passage refers to His resurrection. The distinction is that Revelation 1. 5 indicates more specially the fact that Christ had been dead, whereas Colossians 1. 18 lays stress upon the fact that He arose "from the midst of the dead." In accordance with what is more particularly in view in Revelation 1. 5, is the Lord's own statement in verse 18, "I was dead, and behold, I am alive for evermore." Here Christ calls attention to the fact that, while He is essentially the Living One, and is alive for evermore, He was dead.

It is as Son of Man that He is seen in this chapter. The opening chapters of Genesis present to us the first

man forfeiting everything God had placed in his hands, even life itself. But here in the closing book we have the second Man presented in all His victory over death and Hades and ready to take the Kingdom. God's purpose in man is fulfilled through Him who is the second Man and in whom all things in Heaven and on earth are yet to be headed up in the ultimate triumph of God over evil. Only through death could Christ "bring to naught him that had the power of death." So that what before was the evidence of the enemy's power comes now, to the believer, the portal into unending bliss, the key of which is held by One who is Himself the Firstfruits of His own victory as "the last Adam," "the Firstborn of the dead."

#### IV. CHRIST THE FIRSTBORN

##### Among His Glorified Saints.

Passing now chronologically from the above two passages, which refer to His resurrection, we are next directed to the consummation of the purposes of God in Christ for the Church at His Second Coming. In the 8th chapter of Romans the apostle refers again and again to this event. Indeed that chapter is divided by these references into five distinct sections. The first ends at verse 11, which speaks, not of the present reinvigoration of the bodies of believers, but of their transformation by the Lord at His Second Coming, the assurance of which is based upon the fact that His Spirit dwells in them. The second ends at verse 17, which speaks of their being glorified together with Christ as being joint-heirs with Him, and as those who have known what suffering with Him is. The third ends at verse 23, which speaks of "the adoption, to wit, the redemption of our body." The fourth is marked off at verse 30, where the apostle says, "For whom He foreknew, He also foreordained to be conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be

the Firstborn among many brethren: and whom He fore-ordained, them He also called: and whom He called, them He also justified: and whom He justified, them He also glorified." Here Paul is confirming his statement that "to them that love God all things work together (or 'He worketh all things together') for good, even to them that are called according to His purpose" (v. 28). The confirmation consists of an unfolding of the Divine purposes of grace in the complete salvation of believers. The whole scheme rests upon the foreknowledge of God: "Whom He foreknew He also foreordained." God in His foreknowledge foresaw certain persons in whom He would fulfil His counsels of grace, with the grand purpose in view that they should be "conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the Firstborn among many brethren;" the Firstborn being the Son by nature, His many brethren sons by adoption, yet conformed as kindred beings to the image—a moral and spiritual likeness now, and corporeal also hereafter—of God's Son.

### **The Future Glory of the Son.**

The Divine determination that the Son of God should be glorified carries with it the full salvation of believers. Their assurance of coming glory is due to the certainty that God will fulfil His purposes towards His Son, and that their conformity to Him will enhance His glory in the highest possible manner. In being glorified with Him they will show forth His glory to a degree impossible by any other means. Conformity to the image of Christ is indeed a process now determined by God in the spiritual life of His children, but when the Church is complete, and the Lord comes with His shout to raise the saints that have fallen asleep and change the living, then will He Himself be seen in the midst as "the Firstborn among many brethren." Then will He have brought



the "many sons" unto glory (Heb. 2. 10). Then "He that sanctifieth and they that are sanctified" will be all together, all being "of one" (*i.e.*, of one Father). It is for this cause that "He is not ashamed to call them brethren." Then will He say, "Behold, I and the children which God hath given Me." They will be an unbroken family, an undivided company, and His prayer will have been fulfilled, "Father, those whom Thou hast given Me, I will that where I am they also may be with Me, that they may behold My glory." Subsequently, at their revelation with Him in manifested glory, the world will see their perfect unity and will know 'that the Father sent Him, and loved them as He loved the Son' (John 17. 22-24).

### **The Church of the Firstborn (Ones).**

The Church is associated with Christ in this title of the Firstborn in Hebrews 12. 23, where the apostle calls them "the Church of the firstborn (ones) who are enrolled in Heaven." Israel is similarly described as "Israel, My son, My firstborn (Exod. 4. 22; cp. Jer. 31. 9). In each case the thought is that of pre-eminence in relationship to God. In regard to Israel, other nations are to be brought into Divine favour hereafter because of the relationship which God established between Himself and His chosen people. In this sense they are His first-born. So also with the Church. Those who constitute it are brought into the closest possible relationship with God through the operation of the Holy Spirit. The privileges too of spiritual primogeniture are theirs. Theirs is the kingdom and the priesthood. First dying in their Substitute they live to serve (cp. Exod. 13. 13).

### **Firstfruits.**

We may compare the term "firstfruits," which signifies

a special position as the outcome of the favour of God and His dealings of grace. "Two Hebrew words are thus translated, one meaning the chief or principal part (Num. 18. 12; Prov. 3. 9, etc.); the other the earliest ripe, of the crop or of the tree (Exod. 23. 16; Neh. 10. 35, etc.); they are found together in Exodus 23. 19, etc., 'the first of the firstfruits.' The term is applied in things spiritual:

(a) To the presence of the Holy Spirit with the believer as the firstfruits of the full harvest of the Cross; 'And not only so, but ourselves also, which have the firstfruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, waiting for our adoption, to wit, the redemption of our body' (Rom. 8. 23).

(b) To Christ Himself in resurrection in relation to all who have fallen asleep believing in Him; 'But now hath Christ been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of them that are asleep. . . . But each in His own order: Christ the Firstfruits; then they that are Christ's at His coming' (1 Cor. 15. 20-23).

(c) To the earliest believers in a country in relation to those of their countrymen who believe later: 'Salute Epænetus my beloved, who is the firstfruits of Asia unto Christ' (Rom. 16. 5). 'Ye know the house of Stephanas, that it is the firstfruits of Achaia, and that they have set themselves to minister unto the saints' (1 Cor. 16. 15).

(d) To the believers of this age in relation to the whole of the redeemed here, and James 1. 18: 'Of His own will He brought us forth by the Word of truth, that we should be a kind of firstfruits of His creatures.' '\*

Both Hebrew words occur in Leviticus 2. Verse 12 points to Him as the Leader of those who will be like Him. Verse 14 points to Him as the Captain made perfect through suffering, and pre-eminent as Firstborn from

\* "An Exposition of the Epistles to the Thessalonians." By Hogg and Vine. p. 271.

the dead. All others who are brought into Divine favour are viewed in this term. Just as Christ as "the firstfruits," is the earnest and pledge of the future resurrection of saints, so believers, "a kind of firstfruits," are the earnest and pledge of the eventual restoration of creation.

Just as the whole land of Canaan was consecrated to God by the consecration of the firstfruits, so the whole nation of Israel was acknowledged as belonging to God by the setting apart of the firstborn (Exod. 13. 12-16). Subsequently, the tribe of Levi was substituted for the firstborn of the families, to minister to the Lord (Num. 3. 12, 45-50). Since, however, there were 273 more firstborn in Israel than there were male Levites, the 273 were redeemed at five shekels each. Notwithstanding, in order to mark the whole nation as consecrated to the Lord, the redemption money had to be paid for every firstborn (Num. 18. 15).

Just so the Church is the peculiar possession of God. It is not His only possession, but as it is "the Church of the firstborn ones," they are, in their special relationship, a token that all else belongs to Him. Their union with Christ in His resurrection life, obtains for them this distinction over other members of the human race. The title identifies them immediately with Christ Himself.

The occasion when the Lord Jesus will be seen to be "the Firstborn among many brethren" is further indicated in the verse which follows in Romans 8. "Whom He justified, them He glorified." The past tense here is prophetic. Distinctions of time are not in view, the apostle's object being to present the work of Divine grace in its finality.

## V. CHRIST THE FIRSTBORN, With Reference to His Manifested Glory.

In point of time the last event in reference to which

Christ is spoken of as the Firstborn, is His Second Advent, His return in glory to the earth to set up His Kingdom. There are two passages in which the title occurs which speak of this, one in the Epistle to the Hebrews and the other in the Psalms. The former is as follows: "And when He again bringeth in the Firstborn into the world, He saith, And let all the angels of God worship Him" (Heb. 1. 6, R. V.).

It is important to notice the position and meaning of the word "again," here; it does not in this case serve simply to link a further statement to one preceding; it is to be taken with the word "bringeth." The time of which the apostle is speaking is not that of the Incarnation, as we shall see from the passage in the Old Testament from which the quotation is taken. Besides this, there is nothing in Scripture to shew that what is here said of the angels took place at the birth of Christ. Upon that occasion there was "a multitude of the heavenly host praising God" (Luke 2. 13). The whole company of the glorious angels was not present. When He returns to earth in the Day of His manifested glory, for the purpose of overthrowing the foes of God and establishing His Kingdom, He will be accompanied by all His holy angels. As He Himself said, "For the Son of Man shall come in the glory of His Father with His angels" (Matt. 16. 27). Again, "But when the Son of Man shall come in His glory, and all the angels with Him, then shall He sit on the Throne of His glory: and before Him shall be gathered all the nations" (chap. 25. 31, 32). The Lord Jesus will be revealed from Heaven "with the angels of His power in flaming fire, rendering vengeance to them that know not God, and to them that obey not the Gospel of our Lord Jesus: who shall suffer punishment, even eternal destruction from the face of the Lord and from the glory of His might, when He shall come to be

glorified in His saints, and to be marvelled at in all them that believed" (2 Thess. 1. 8-10). It will be as the Firstborn in relation to all creation, including the angels, that He will be brought into the world to receive the inheritance awaiting Him.

### **The Song of Moses.**

The words in Hebrews 1. 6, "And let all the angels of God worship Him," are quoted from the Septuagint Version of Deuteronomy 32. 35-43, at the close of the Song of Moses, which consists of the history of the nation of Israel from its inception to the time yet future, when they shall be delivered from their enemies and become the praise of the Lord and the leading nation in the world. The end of the Song speaks of the Divine judgment upon the foes of Israel, the final deliverance of that nation, and the blessing of the Gentiles which will follow upon the restoration of God's earthly people at the beginning of the Millennium.

In order to get the connection it will be well to quote the passage in full as from the Septuagint Version: "For I will lift up My hand to Heaven, and swear by My right hand, and I will say, I live for ever, for I will sharpen My sword like lightning, and My hand shall take hold of Judgment; and I will render judgment to Mine enemies, and will recompense them that hate Me. I will make My weapons drunk with blood, and My sword shall devour flesh, from the blood of the wounded, and from captivity, from the head of the rulers of the enemies. Rejoice, ye heavens, with Him, and let all the angels of God worship Him. Rejoice, ye Gentiles, with His people, and let all the sons of God strengthen themselves in Him; for He will avenge the blood of His sons, and He will render vengeance, and recompense justice to His enemies, and will reward them that hate Him; and the Lord shall thoroughly purge His people's land."

The poetic narrative regarding Israel's history begins at the eighth verse, which describes how the Lord, in primarily allotting the Gentile nations their inheritance, set their geographical limits in relationship to the future population of Israel, Palestine thus being predetermined ethnologically as the centre of the world. The Song proceeds to declare the care bestowed by God upon His people, and then the apostasy and rebellion of the nation, in provoking Him to anger with their idolatry. Consequent judgment upon them is next predicted (v. 35). The cruel treatment meted out to them, however, at the hands of their Gentile enemies, to whom they would be delivered, would in turn call for Divine vengeance upon these nations. Their enemies must come under the wrath of God through their disregard of His claims and their hatred of His people.

### **The Doom of Antichrist.**

The close of the Song thus brings into view the end of the present age, the time elsewhere called "the Day of the Lord," and falls into line with 2 Thessalonians 1. 7-10, noticed above, and with many other Scriptures relating to the same period; such as Isaiah 63. 3-6, for instance, which foretells the day of vengeance, and the year of God's redeemed. See also Joel 3. 1-6, 12-17; Rev. 19. 11-21, etc. All these speak of the climax of the warfare of Armageddon, the termination of the Great Tribulation. There is a very close connection between the latter passage and the one under consideration in Deuteronomy 32. The nineteenth chapter of Revelation describes the Beast and the kings of the earth under him, and their armies, gathered together to make war against Christ. The Beast is the same being as is spoken of in Revelation 13, who, by that time, will have received world-wide worship, the political and social affairs of

the world likewise being under his control. So also in chapter 17, which foretells that the rulers of the Ten-Kingdomed League will hand over their power and authority to him, and, with him will "war against the Lamb. And the Lamb shall overcome them, for He is Lord of lords and King of kings" (chap. 17. 14).

### **The Consummation.**

Deuteronomy 32. 42 gives perhaps the earliest intimation in Scripture of the overthrow of this great Antichrist and the kings of the earth and the consequent deliverance of Israel from their tyranny. The sword of the Lord is to begin its work with "the head of the rulers of the enemy," *i. e.*, the Antichrist, the Beast of Revelation 19, who is to be taken and destroyed, and with him the False Prophet, while "the rest," that is the rulers of the earth and their armies, are to be killed "with the sword of Him that sat on the horse" (Rev. 19. 20, 21). Immediately upon their overthrow the heavens are called to rejoice and "all the angels of God" are summoned to worship Christ. Thereupon, the tyrant oppressor of the Jews having been removed, the Gentiles are called to rejoice with His people. The land, now freed from its anti-Christian despots, will be thoroughly purged. For a more extended view of this see Ezekiel 39. 12 to the end of the chapter.

### **"The King of Kings."**

This is the time, then, to which Hebrews 1. 6 refers. In this way God will bring His Firstborn into the world. Then will be fulfilled the prophecy of Psalm 89. 27, "I also will make Him My Firstborn, the highest of the kings of the earth," a direct antithesis to the position held by the Beast under Satan, who, as the above passages show, will for a short time have ruled over the kings

of the earth. But Christ is the "King of kings." The brief despotism of the Antichrist will yield place to the permanent dominion of the Christ of God.

Though the Psalm immediately speaks of David, it refers prophetically to David's "greater Son," and to His enthronement as God's King "upon His holy hill of Zion." Then will the nations be given to Him "for His inheritance, and the uttermost parts of the earth for His possession" (Psa. 2. 6-8).

### **The Doxology.**

This completes our brief and inadequate review of the glories of the Lord Jesus Christ as "the Only begotten" in relation to the Father, and as "the Firstborn" in relation to the old and new creations. Under these titles we see Him, in the one, in His eternal and unique relationship, and, in the other in His present exaltation and in the rapidly approaching consummation of this age, when, having received His Church to Himself in resurrection life and power, He will return to set up the Kingdom which shall never be destroyed. May our contemplation of His glorious Person ever lead us to worship and adore Him, the Son of the Father, "the faithful Witness, the Firstborn of the dead, and the Ruler of the kings of the earth." "Unto Him that loveth us, and loosed us from our sins by His blood: and He made us to be a Kingdom, to be priests unto His God and Father: to Him be the glory and the dominion for ever and ever. Amen."