Christ the Firstborn

by Kerry S. Robichaux

In a sense, it is no profound matter to speak of the centrality and universality of Christ, especially as we view Him as God. Certainly all the created realm finds its focus in God and is absolutely pervaded by Him as the Creator. All things exist because of God, not merely as the product of His initial creative action but more importantly as the issue of His constant divine maintenance. To declare the initial and constant dependence of creation on Christ the Son of God is almost to declare the obvious. But to discover that Christ is the centrality and universality of all God's action in creation and new creation because He is the Son of Man is to come upon a profound truth that not only unveils His all-inclusiveness but also unlocks the mystery of God's economy with man.

There are certainly clear and unequivocal affirmations of Christ's divinity in the New Testament, and because of these we can never doubt that it is God who became man and dwelt among us, that it is God who lends eternal and universal value to the redemption He accomplished, and that it is by being God that Christ ultimately uplifts mankind to the eternal plane. But the apostles testified more forcefully to the *man* Christ Jesus, who fully identified with the human condition and fully encountered human problems. Their stronger message was not simply that God had come to solve our problems but more amazingly that as a man He had passed through the full spectrum of human existence and had fully been approved by God on the basis of His humanity. The good news to humankind is that a human being has overcome temptation, sin, death, and the devil; that a human being has redeemed humankind and reconciled it to God; and that a human being is now exalted as Lord of all. There is a man in glory with God now, and because of that, we bow the knee and worship a man.

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To the ears of many fundamental Christians, this all may sound strange and may even send up an alarm. If so, it only underscores a strong imbalance in fundamentalism that overemphasizes the divinity of Christ at the expense of His humanity. Barth was probably correct in this regard when he flatly declared that fundamentalism is docetic (53). Too often we believers today are overly impressed with Christ's miraculous accomplishments, which, to our mind, put Him in another league from us, and we discount, if not completely ignore, what He accomplished by being human. While His divinity holds us in awe and elicits due praise and worship, His humanity relates Him to us, makes His accomplishments our own possessions, and incorporates us into Him and thus into all that God is. Apart from a thorough appreciation of who Christ is as a man, we have no base upon which to enjoy Him as God, and the great chasm between God as Creator and humanity as creature remains unbridged.

The comprehensiveness of Christ's humanity can hardly be discounted if careful attention is paid to Paul's appreciation of it. In this article I wish to focus on Paul's particular use of the term *firstborn* (Gk. πρωτότοκος) as he applies it to Christ's humanity. There are three key verses where

Paul terms Christ the Firstborn. In employing this term he shows that Christ has the first place in all things (Col. 1:18). This appears to be a major key to Paul's understanding of who Christ is. Paul could tie his own existence on a number of levels to Christ's preeminence on each of these levels. As a creature, Paul knew Christ as "the Firstborn of all creation" (Col. 1:15); as one who had been transferred from the old creation to the new (cf. 2 Cor. 5:17), Paul knew Christ as "the Firstborn from the dead" (Col. 1:18); and as a child of God and member of His household, Paul knew Christ as "the Firstborn among many brothers" (Rom. 8:29). Paul expressed Christ's preeminence on each level by referring to Him as the Firstborn. The points I hope to make in this article are first that in using the term *firstborn* in each of these contexts, Paul was referring particularly to Christ's humanity, and second that God accomplishes all His economy, both in old creation and in new, through Christ the Firstborn.

The Significance of the Term *Firstborn*

There is some controversy concerning what Paul means when he speaks of Christ as the Firstborn. Taken independently, each use of the term can be made to mean a number of things, and studies that present the many possibilities abound. Those familiar with the scholarly dialogue regarding this term will immediately recognize that I am departing from the majority view at least with regard to Christ as the Firstborn of all creation, which modern opinion generally understands as a reference to Christ's divinity. The other two terms, *the Firstborn from the dead* and *the Firstborn among many brothers,* have been more easily understood as referring to Christ's humanity. Hence, modern consensus takes *firstborn* in one place as a reference to Christ's divinity and in the other places as references to His humanity. The obvious problem in this is that a unity of concept is sacrificed. There is not much impetus among expositors to treat the three instances of the term as a single notion applied in three contexts. This is probably the result of examining each instance as it best fits into the particular book being expounded, and not stepping back to consider whether Paul has something unitary in mind. I believe that there is good reason to consider that Paul is applying a single concept in these various contexts. In this article the unity of concept behind Paul's use of the term *firstborn* will hopefully be justified.

On the simplest level, perhaps the best argument for a unitary concept is the simplest and most common-sense one: Paul has in mind not a mythical or even theological Christ but a Christ of whom he had definite personal experience, and this perspective governed his descriptions of Him. His realization of the one Christ he encountered in his daily Christian living led him to see Christ as preeminent not only in the church and in his own Christian experience but even in general human existence and in creation itself. Always in mind was the Christ of his experience and living faith, and this was a singular Christ, who, though both human and divine, was not segmented in Paul's mind. It appears that Paul applied his appreciation of the whole and historical Christ to the ever-expanding contexts of church, humanity, and creation. F. F. Bruce helps us in this way:

> As with all the other direct or indirect OT adumbrations of our Lord (including the messianic concept itself), this one [*Firstborn of all creation*] is interpreted by the NT writers in terms of the historic and personal fact of Christ, and not *vice versa."* (60)

In calling Christ the Firstborn from the dead, Paul is certainly thinking of the historical and personal Christ; likewise, when he speaks of Him as the Firstborn among many brothers. Bruce's point, and my own, is that Paul is similarly thinking of that same historical and personal Christ when he tells us of the Firstborn of all creation. The preeminence that Paul recognized in Christ should have been of a singular nature since it derived from the singular relationship that Paul had with Christ. In calling Christ the Firstborn in various contexts, Paul is employing this singular type of preeminence to describe Christ's status in relation to God's original creation, in relation to God's new creation, and in relation to the transfer of redeemed humanity from the former to the latter.

Paul first used the term *firstborn* to describe Christ in his Epistle to the Romans, written sometime around AD 58 from Corinth. There he speaks of Christ as "the Firstborn among many brothers" (8:29), a designation that relates to Christ's status in relation to the redeemed believers. Some years later, perhaps as many as four, the term *firstborn* is employed to describe Christ again, this time in the Epistle to the Colossians, and this time in its two other ways: "the Firstborn of all creation" (1:15) and "the Firstborn from the dead" (1:18). In looking at his uses of the term *firstborn* in this chronological order, we could perhaps trace a development in Paul's understanding of Christ, from the more narrow notion of Christ's preeminence in the church to the grandly inclusive notion of His preeminence in all the created realm. This would be an interesting study in itself, but such an approach to the matter does not best provide us an insight into the reality of Christ that Paul finally arrived at and that becomes the heritage of the church today. For this we would do better to consider the concept of firstborn as it is applied to Christ first in His relationship to the created realm, then in His experience of resurrection, and then finally in His relationship to His redeemed and regenerated believers.

The Firstborn of All Creation

Paul's startling designation of Christ as the Firstborn of all creation is easily the most controversial of his three uses of

the term *firstborn*. If we are to understand a unitary concept of Christ as the Firstborn, applied variously in the three contexts in Paul's writing, we must first understand *the Firstborn of all creation* as a reference to Christ's humanity. The context of the term (Col. 1:12-20) is problematic.

> Giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you for a share of the allotted portion of the saints in the light; who delivered us out of the authority of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of the Son of His love, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins; who is the image of the invisible God, the Firstborn of all creation, because in Him all things were created, in the heavens and on the earth, the visible and the invisible, whether thrones or lordships or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through Him and unto Him. and He is before all things, and all things cohere in Him; and He is the Head of the Body, the church; He is the beginning, the Firstborn from the dead, that He Himself might have the first place in all things; for in Him all the fullness was pleased to dwell and through Him to reconcile all things to Himself, having made peace through the blood of His cross—through Him, whether the things on the earth or the things in the heavens.

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In these verses it appears to call for a reference to Christ's divinity, but the term itself has all the implications of His humanity. In referring to Christ as the image of the invisible God, Paul seems to be alluding to His identity as the second of the Trinity, who expresses the Father eternally. Such a designation would seem to refer to Christ in His status in the eternal Godhead, apart from the created realm.[1] Yet fast upon this epithet, Paul adds a reference to Christ in relation to creation, and not simply a reference to Him as the active instrument of creation or even as the Creator Himself but as the Firstborn of all creation. Is the reference to Christ in His humanity, and thus to His status as a man of creation, or to His divinity, and thus to Him as God in His relation to creation? Because the interpretational problem has been with us for at least 1,600 years, it is perhaps worthwhile to first consider the history of the interpretation of this term.

The History of the Term's Interpretation

J. B. Lightfoot is normally credited with the best presentation of how this term was viewed by the early church through the fourth century, and hence his synopsis is followed here (148-150). The earliest of patristic interpreters, those of the second and third centuries, uniformly understood the term as a reference to the Logos of God, the second of the eternal Trinity, and not to the incarnate Christ. Among these writers, Lightfoot lists Justin Martyr (*Apol.* I.23; I.33; I.46), Theophilus (*Ad Autol.* II.22), Clement of Alexandria (*Exc. Theod.* 7, 8, 19), Tertullian (*ad Prax*. 7; *ad Marc.* V.19), and Origen (*contra Cels.* VI.47, 63, 64). Generally, these writers understood Christ to be the Firstborn because relative to the Father He is the only begotten and is in this sense "born," and relative to creation He is the Logos through whom creation came into being and is in this sense the first principle or agent of the created realm. It was apparently their view that the words *of all creation* did not imply that Christ was a member of creation, as might first occur to a reader.

At the beginning of the fourth century, however, a new twist in interpretation was introduced by Arius of Alexandria. He too understood *firstborn* as a reference to Christ prior to the incarnation, but used it to bolster his claim that the Son of God was a creature, albeit the most preeminent among creatures. In saying so, Arius hoped to preserve a unique Godhead for the Father and to relegate to the Son the status of a lesser God. His teaching, of course, motivated the great theological debate that stirred the church during the fourth century. The Council of Nicaea in AD 325 condemned Arianism, but the issue was not fully solved until a half century later.

Arius's handling of Colossians 1:15, a chief verse in his scriptural arsenal, was not, however, met head on by the proponents of orthodox teaching. It was instead challenged by now a third interpretation of the term *firstborn*. Surprisingly, this new interpretation was advanced by the greatest teachers of the fourth and fifth centuries. These teachers took a view similar to Arius's that the phrase *of all creation* implied that Christ was being viewed as a part of creation, and they referred the title to the incarnate Christ. Where they differed from Arius was in their understanding of what the creation referred to. For them, creation here was the new creation, not the original creation. Lightfoot is highly critical of this view, perhaps rightly, because it is difficult to justify a reference to the new creation when the following verses seem so solidly to refer to the physical, original creation.

On the other hand, the assessments of these great teachers

of the fourth and fifth centuries cannot so easily be swept aside. This was the view of teachers of great reputation, like Athanasius (*c. Arianos* II:62-64), Gregory of Nyssa (*ad Eunom.* II:8; III:3; *de Perf.*), and Cyril of Alexandria (*Thes.* 25; *de Trin. Dial.* 4; 6), men well-known for developing, defending, and establishing the orthodox notions of Trinity and Christology. In their defense (should such men need defense at all), we must expect that they were aware of the views of their predecessors and yet chose to differ even when the views of their predecessors would have easily served to refute Arius, as Lightfoot contends.[2] Yet a description of their understanding of this term, and particularly Athanasius's, is not as simple as it is made out to be. Even Lightfoot notices a deeper texture in Athanasius's concept but does not delve fully into a description of it or an analysis of its significance. John Henry Newman, whose translation and notes are offered in the *Nicene and Post-Nicene* volume on Athanasius, points out that "there are two senses in which our Lord is *Firstborn to the creation* [according to Athanasius]; viz., in its first origin, and in its restoration after man's fall" (383). Lightfoot focuses on the latter sense and understands Athanasius to equate the creation in Colossian 1:15 with the new creation implied by the *many brothers* in Romans 8:29. But Newman rightly recognizes in Athanasius the understanding of a dual preeminence in the term *Firstborn of all creation.* Newman continues in a subsequent note:

> Thus [Athanasius] considers that *Firstborn* is mainly a title, connected with the incarnation, and also connected with our Lord's office at the creation. In each economy it has the same meaning; it belongs to Him as the type, idea, or rule on which the creature was made or remade, and the life by which it is sustained. (383)

This is a far deeper notion than the simple and normally polarized views on the term. It is not simply Christ in His deity as the active agent of creation or Christ in His humanity as a member and participant in creation. Rather, it relates Christ's original creative action to His eventual incarnation, by which He came to be a creature Himself. From this perspective, the term draws from the one person of Christ the dual relationship that He has with creation. Since "in Him all things were created" (Col. 1:16) and since "all things came into being through Him, and apart from Him not one thing came into being which has come into being" (John 1:3), Christ is certainly the origin in creation. But His status as such looks not merely back at His eternal deity, by which He could out of nothing create everything, but also forward to His own becoming a creature through incarnation and to His own initiation of and entry into the new creation through resurrection.

Modern scholarship has more or less dismissed the views of the fourth and fifth centuries concerning Christ as the Firstborn of all creation, perceiving these views to be motivated only by the threat of Arianism. Yet in all fairness to these ancient and greater teachers, we should at least hear them out on their own terms. If we do, we will find that in point of fact they were not simply remolding scriptural interpretations to answer heterodoxy. Instead, they were developing what had been established in the second and third centuries to better fit what they perceived to be a fuller view of Christ, a view which could alone overthrow the aberrant teachings that had been introduced. Athanasius did not abandon the notion that as Firstborn of all creation Christ was, first of all, the origin of creation as to His deity. Rather, he augmented the notion as previously held, so that now *Firstborn of all creation* could be viewed in a way that was consonant with His status as the Firstborn in the new creation as to His humanity. This view not only deepens our understanding of Christ but also appeals to a more natural way of understanding the language of Paul's expression. At any rate, it may be that

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only Gregory of Nyssa and Cyril of Alexandria understood more deeply what Athanasius was saying. It certainly appears that few afterward did, for Lightfoot continues his narrative concerning the exegetical history of the term by saying that "at a later date, when the immediate controversy has passed away, the Greek writers generally concur in the earlier and truer interpretation of the expression" (150).

Lightfoot's Exegetical Arguments

Lightfoot presents his history of the term's interpretation only after he has made his case for the "true" interpretation. We should examine, if only briefly, his exegetical arguments since he is again credited with providing the argumentative base for the modern exegetical stance on this passage. From the outset, it should be noted that Lightfoot is concerned with arguments against the Arians, whose position was that as to His divinity Christ was a creature. Further, Lightfoot argues that in the passage

there is a clean segmentation into two parts: praise for Christ the divine and praise for Christ the human. Against the background of these two starting points, his arguments are certainly persuasive. However, he is frequently having to argue more circumstantially and less textually. He maintains that the genitive postmodifier ("of all creation") does not necessarily imply that the Firstborn Himself belonged to the creation (147). In this, of course, the converse is easily detected: Nor does it necessarily imply that the Firstborn Himself *did not* belong to the creation; in fact, if anything, Lightfoot has alerted us to this more natural way of understanding the phrase. In point of fact, the postmodifier as it stands is contested. Nigel Turner discusses the possibilities of meaning and concludes that the objective genitive ("over all creation," "to all creation") and genitive of comparison ("before all creation") are not the only alternatives, for the genitive could be construed as being neither objective nor comparative. Turner wishes to return it to its natural reading,

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a partitive genitive: "among all creation." This leads him to interpret the phrase "as closely identifying Christ with the family of which He is the head, i.e. the whole of creation which looks eagerly for redemption" (124). As such, Christ would be viewed as a part of creation with His humanity brought into focus.

The text being less than persuasive on this, Lightfoot moves on to contextual arguments. If Christ the Firstborn belonged to creation, it would be inconsistent with His universal agency in creation as expressed by the words following "in Him all things were created" (v. 16). However, Lightfoot assumes that universal agency is all that is to be found in the words following. But agency, while certainly a component of its meaning, cannot be taken to be the full import of the preposition ἐν ('in'). Nor does Lightfoot take into account the additional modifiers: "All things have been created through Him and unto Him." I do not deny that Paul is ascribing universal agency in creation to Christ, but more than this is being said, and this invites us to understand more than a reference to His divinity. At best, the context also does not necessarily imply that the Firstborn did not belong to the creation.

Lightfoot's next arguments appeal to both other apostolic writings and "the fundamental idea of the Christian consciousness." Little issue can be taken with these, for indeed nowhere do the apostles speak of the deity of Christ as a created thing, nor could such a view hold itself consonant with the most basic Christian belief. Again, however, his argument is against the Arians and is based upon the supposition that *Firstborn of all creation* is a reference to Christ in His divinity. It does not admit the possibility that the reference is to Christ in His humanity. For those who will allow such a reference—for example, Athanasius—an argument like this will simply bounce. Many of Lightfoot's other arguments have the same quality. While they are quite persuasive as protections of Christ's divinity, they are not germane if we do not understand Paul to be referring exclusively to Christ's divinity.

Christ the Firstborn of All Creation in His Redemptive Role

Any interpretation of the phrase *Firstborn of all creation* must respect the entire context, and this is where Lightfoot and his followers pass on quietly. On the significance of the preceding context, scholarship diverges greatly. Most modern commentators, following Lightfoot, view Colossians 1:15-20 as an imported ancient hymn and thus treat the passage as a whole in itself. Dangling apart from the preceding context, Colossians 1:15-20 can be easily sectioned into two parts, and the two statuses of Christ, as God (vv. 15-17) and as man (vv. 18-20), can be easily perceived. The truth of Christ's two statuses, and thus of His two natures, cannot be assailed, as the rest of the New Testament confirms it. But do we do justice to this passage by lifting it from its context and examining it as an independent unit? As part of the context that precedes it, Colossians 1:15-20 begins to look less like a statement on the two natures and statuses of Christ and more like a statement on the qualifications of Christ to be the Redeemer of mankind and the Initiator of the new creation. At the fore in the passage is not an expression of the doctrine of the two natures of Christ, more clearly articulated in the fifth century, but an elucidation of the one historical person of Christ the God-man in His one role in both the old and new creations and the relationship of that role to our redemption. Paul here is not so much speaking of the preexistent Christ in His role in creation, and thus segmenting the God-man first into the divine and then into the human, as he is identifying the historical, personal, and incarnate Christ with the very preexistent Christ whose creation eventually stood in need of Him as its Redeemer. It is a view of Christ that does not segment Him into human and divine components and does not

apportion His work into separate actions which each rely on only one of His distinct natures. Rather, it treats Him as He is and as Paul knew Him, an entire person whose work is bound to His entire being as both complete God and perfect man. In this regard, Bruce again provides some insight:

> But Paul speaks not only of a preexistent Christ, but of a cosmic Christ: that is to say, he finds in Christ "the key to creation, declaring that it is all there with Christ in view."[3] Whatever figures in Jewish literature, canonical or otherwise, may have preexistence predicated of them, to none of them are such cosmic activity and significance ascribed as are here to the preexistent Christ. Nor is this the only place where Paul makes this ascription: he has already stated in 1 Cor. 8:6 that Christians have "one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things, and we through Him," while in Rom. 8:19-21 he shows how the redemption secured by Christ works not only to the advantage of its immediate beneficiaries, "the sons of God," but through them to the whole creation. (61)

In creation He is not simply the Logos, as eternal deity uninvolved with humanity, effecting creation, but the Logos, as deity to be incarnated in time, bringing creation into being with reference to His subsequent creatureliness. Thus, His being the Firstborn of all creation is not merely in reference to His deity, nor does it at the same time fully ignore His deity; rather, it refers to His being God become man, Creator become creature, and as such the preeminent One among all creatures, who by virtue of His deity authors creation and by virtue of His humanity serves as the aim of all creation. This, I feel, best encompasses what Paul predicates of Christ in relation to creation, that in Him and through Him and unto Him were all things created (v. 16).

What I am suggesting is an amelioration of the tension between the two extremes in the interpretation of the term *Firstborn of all creation*. Such an amelioration respects the wholeness of Christ as both God and man, and thereby respects the context of the term in Colossians 1. What precedes verse 15 is Paul's thanks to the Father for His actions in Christ to qualify the believers to share in the portion allotted to them (v. 12). These actions include our being delivered out of darkness, our being transferred into the Son's kingdom, and our being redeemed (vv. 13-14). Of these, redemption serves as base, and Christ alone was able to accomplish this redemption. The enunciation of Christ's qualifications as Redeemer is, I believe, the import of verses 15-20. To redeem humankind Christ must be human Himself. This is the basic tenet of our faith, and I believe that Paul is calling upon this tenet here. If we are to understand *Firstborn of all creation* as merely an allusion to Christ's eternal Godhead, we are left without any clear reference to that which Christ must be in order to be our Redeemer, that is, to His being human. The second part of this imported hymn from the ancient church, beginning in verse 18, alludes to His status in resurrection in the new creation and bypasses the reference to His incarnation and human living, which are prerequisite to the accomplishment of redemption. If we are to find a Redeemer in this context at all, we must look for Him in verses 15-17. And yet, verses 15-17 certainly suggest Christ's role as the active agent of creation. Hence, there are two notions at play here: Christ as Creator and Christ as creature. As Creator, He alone is qualified to redeem humankind because He is the source of it. As creature, He is qualified because He is part of humankind and can serve as ransom for it. However, the redemption He accomplished could not have been effected on the basis of either of His statuses alone. He could not have redeemed humankind merely as a single instance of creation, for His death would have lacked the universal application that was needed to apply to all humankind; this derives from His divinity. On the other hand, He could not have redeemed humankind merely as the Creator, for He would have lacked the necessary humanity for a redemptive death; this derives from His humanity.

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In Colossians 1:15-17 Paul is speaking foremost not of Christ in creation but of Christ in redemption, and to do so, he must speak of Christ as both Creator and creature. But he does not divide Christ into His two roles as we with theological training would wish. He is making less of a Christological statement than a soteriological one. Instead, his presentation implies a notion of Christ which, I feel, our theological tendencies may be obfuscating. The Redeemer that Paul is speaking of is the Christ who authored creation with a view to His own eventual participation in it. As such, He is the Firstborn of all creation both from the perspective of His being the eternal expression of God and thereby the active instrument of creation, and from the perspective of His

being the prototype of all the created realm and thereby the singular representation of creation in the redemptive process. In the beginning, when He acted to create, He did so with a view to His own eventual incarnation and could in this sense be the image in which humankind was made. Then in time, when He appeared on the earth as a man, He did so as the fulfillment of creation and not merely as an instance of it. For this reason, Paul elsewhere calls Him the last Adam (1 Cor. 15:45), that is, the Adam that sums up and consummates the Adam originally created. Just as the original Adam could, by his one act, affect the entire human race and cast it into corruption, so Christ as the last Adam could, by His one act, affect the entire human race and lead it through the termination of His own death and through the germination of His own resurrection. In this sense, Christ did not come to merely repair the created realm, but more precisely He came to fulfill the divine economy for the created realm. In this sense, He was the Adam that was meant to be, the last Adam according to which the first Adam had been made.

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As the Firstborn of all creation, Christ redeems the human race not merely as a representative instance of humanity but as its incorporate Head. This is the significance of His title *the Son of Man*. In incarnation Christ came not merely as a lone perfect man but as the Son of Man, who incorporates in Himself all humankind. This title points to His relationship to and involvement with humanity on the level of species, and indicates that Christ's actions as a man were not simply those of a marvelous individual but also those of One who includes all humanity in Himself. On the one hand, He underwent the experiences of human living that were unique to Him. He was born in Bethlehem; He grew up in Nazareth; He walked in Galilee; He died in Jerusalem. But on the other hand, He underwent experiences that are salient to humanity as a whole. By living a perfect human life, He paved the way for humanity to enter into glory. By dying an all-inclusive death, He terminated the old created race. By rising from the dead, He brought forth humanity in new creation and introduced it into glory. As the Son of Man, He incorporates us into Himself and ushers us into the same condition that He enjoys in His glorified humanity. For this reason, Paul speaks of our dying together with Christ, being raised together with Him, and being seated with Him in the heavenlies (Rom. 6:8; Eph. 2:5-6).

Christ the Firstborn

Typically, the three instances of the term *firstborn* have been understood as applying to Christ in three aspects and for the most part metaphorically. In creation Christ as the Logos of God was the active agent, and because of His creative participation He may be called the Firstborn of all creation. For the most part, the term has been taken as a metaphor signifying either sovereignty or priority. Then, because He was the first to be raised from the dead, He can be called the Firstborn from the dead. Here the term is seen to signal mainly priority and again has been taken as metaphorical because apparently no birth occurred. Finally, understanding the sonship of the believers to be an adoption, many have taken the term *Firstborn among many brothers* as yet another metaphor in yet another context, here indicating Christ's superiority over the believers. But in all these applications of the term *firstborn* as applied to Christ, two great components of meaning are sacrificed. First, a certain wholeness of person is lost by segmenting Christ into these three aspects. Rather, I suggest that we view Christ as one Firstborn undergoing one process and yielding one result. In His activity in creation, He is the Firstborn of all creation both because He authors it and because He contemplates His eventual incarnation as the prototype of it; in incarnation He fulfills His station as Firstborn of all creation and lives and moves as the first and perfect instance of all creation; in dying on the cross, He as the Firstborn of all creation brings all creation to the cross and terminates it; in resurrection He comes forth as the Firstborn from the dead; and in His regenerating the believers with His resurrection life, He becomes the Firstborn among many brothers. The whole process in God's economy is accomplished first by Christ being the Firstborn Himself—of all creation, then from the dead, and finally among many brothers—and then by the incorporation of all His elect in Himself.

A second component of meaning that has been lost in the traditional handling of this term is the notion of birth. For the most part, this has been completely ignored or made metaphorical. In this regard, the term *firstborn* is taken as a whole concept that signifies only sovereignty, priority, or superiority. Basically, *first* is attended to and *born* is ignored. No doubt, this is a reflex of understanding *Firstborn of all creation* as a reference to Christ's divinity

alone. If He is the Firstborn of all creation by virtue of His divine status alone, then there can be no birth, for He is eternally divine. Arianism errs precisely on this point, maintaining that in His divine status He was born at some point in time. Nicaea roundly condemned this notion: "And those who say that 'There was a time when He was not' and 'Before He was begotten He was not,' and that 'He came into being from what is not,' …these the catholic and apostolic church anathematizes." But if the epithet is allowed to apply to Christ in His entire person, that is, to Him as both God and man, then we can easily recover the sense of *born* and preserve the sense of *first.* As mentioned above, He was the active agent of creation by virtue of His divinity and as the prototype and telos of creation by virtue of His eventual but contemplated humanity. The divine perspective is being taken here, not one that is limited to the constraints of linear time. As Firstborn of all creation, He was genuinely born through incarnation, while His firstness derives both from His status as the God of creation and from His role as prototype and telos of creation.

In the terms *Firstborn from the dead* and *Firstborn among many brothers,* the notion of birth is not lost either. However, the birth referred to is not that which resulted in His incarnation. Rather, we must look to His resurrection as His birth in new creation. In Acts 13:33 Paul speaks of Christ's resurrection as God's begetting Him: "God has fully fulfilled this promise to us their children in raising up Jesus, as it is also written in the second Psalm, 'You are My Son; this day have I begotten You.'" Paul here is not referring to Christ in His eternal status as the Son of God but to Christ in His status as a resurrected man. In His humanity Christ had died; thus, resurrection was a birth into the new creation. Formerly, He was the Son of God only by virtue of His divinity, and the attribution of Son of God could be assigned to His humanity only because there was a communication of properties (*communicatio idiomatum*) that existed in His one person. In resurrection, however, His humanity was also brought into sonship, not merely through a communication of properties but more intrinsically through the germination of the divine life within Him, which is the essence of resurrection. This process of germination in His resurrection, analogous to but not completely identical with the process of germination in natural birth, was a birthing of His humanity into new creation and divine sonship. Now, not only was He the Son of God by virtue of His eternal existence in the Godhead, but He was the Son of God also in His humanity through His resurrection from the dead by the germination of His human being.

From this perspective, He is the Firstborn, not just the only begotten. When we speak of Him as the only begotten Son of God (John 1:14, 18; 3:16, 18; 1 John 4:9), we are referring to His eternal sonship in the Godhead, which is unique to Him eternally and cannot be shared with anyone. The only begotten has no brothers, as the term emphatically implies. Even when considering the person of Christ, we can assign to His humanity the designation *only begotten Son,* again only because of a communication of properties, not because His humanity is eternal and thus a basis for His eternal sonship. But the apostles also spoke of Christ as the Firstborn and declared that as such He had many brothers (Rom. 8:29; John 20:17). He is the Firstborn among many brothers because He as a man was the first to be born in resurrection; thus, the sense of priority obtains in the term. And He is also the Firstborn because there are many brothers who follow in His birth; thus, the sense of membership is included in the term. The many brothers, to which He is the first member, were brought forth in His resurrection. Again, the divine perspective, which takes no notice of time, is being taken here as it was with the term *Firstborn of all creation.* While in time the many believers of Christ are regenerated and become sons of God and brothers of Christ, in fact their birth occurred in the resurrection of Christ. Peter tells us that we were regenerated through Christ's resurrection (1 Pet. 1:3). This need not be understood as merely a potentiating of our eventual regeneration, for Paul says that we were made alive together with Christ (Eph. 2:5; Col. 2:13). Though our experience of this resurrection as birth is appropriated by faith, the spiritual reality and basis of it lies in Christ's own resurrection from the dead. Christ is the Firstborn among many brothers because in His resurrection all His elect were included. *The Firstborn from the dead* and *the Firstborn among many brothers* imply therefore the same thing, the resurrection of Christ as both the birth of His own humanity into the new creation and the birth of His many brothers into the new creation. By the former, He takes the lead to be intrinsically related in humanity to God as a Son; by the latter, He leads His many believers to His same station that they may also be intrinsically related to God as sons.

> The whole and grand economy of God is accomplished not as a series of episodic events populated by a full stage of characters but as a single operation of God on the one person of Christ, in whom both the old creation and the new creation find their source and subsistence.

At operation in the history of Christ, then, are two births, one at incarnation and one at resurrection. The first qualifies Him to be the Firstborn of all creation; the second, the Firstborn from the dead and among many brothers. Both are charged with His divinity, which gives to each a timeless quality and assures Him the first place in all things; and yet both are based on His humanity, which gives to Him a membership in both created realms, first the old, then the new. In creation, He as the divine Creator acted in contemplation of His eventual incarnation, and by doing so, established His sovereignty as the source of all creation and His priority as the prototype of all creation. In resurrection, He as the divine and human person rose from the dead, and by doing so, established His sovereignty as the Progenitor of the new creation and His priority as the first among the many brothers in the new creation. Because of this, Paul could say of Him that He has the first place in all things (Col. 1:18).

God's Economy in and through Christ the Firstborn

We generally view God's actions in His economy as a series of episodic events in time, somewhat like a universal drama unfolding across the æons. A scene opens in a certain setting; a Character or characters appear; actions take place; problems arise, crest, and resolve. The goal is mankind's redemption, and the ending is known and expected. First, God creates; man falls in a garden; God calls a race of chosen people; after some interval God comes to redeem and reconcile; finally, the effects of the fall are nullified, and there is a glorious city in which God and man dwell as one. The saga is not wrong, for the events are all true and the characters are all real. But there is a deeper sense to what is going on in the episodes, a sense that unifies all God's work in the person of Christ. There is one God who acts in and through one Christ to produce one result. All God's actions are confined to His one operation in and through the one Christ, and the one Christ is best viewed as the Firstborn. God creates in and through Christ the Firstborn, and the creation springs into being with Christ the Firstborn as both its beginning and its goal. All the created realm exists in Him because He incorporates in Himself all creation, especially all the human race. When He appears in time as an individual man, He does not lose His identity as the unique God-man, but He nevertheless includes all our race in Himself as He dies for our redemption and rises for our justification and regeneration. While His death is the unique sacrifice for sins, He undergoes the process of death and resurrection as the Firstborn of all creation, thereby terminating the old creation and germinating the new creation. In raising Him from the dead, God operates in and through the one Firstborn not only to beget Him in His humanity but also to beget His believers into the new creation. Through this one operation Christ the Firstborn of all creation becomes the Firstborn from the dead and the Firstborn among many brothers, and God's elect, the believers of Christ, become the many brothers of the Firstborn. In this way, the whole and grand economy of God is accomplished not as a series of episodic events populated by a full stage of characters but as a single operation of God on the one person of Christ, in whom both the old creation and the new creation find their source and subsistence. In whatever way we as creatures, as human beings and as regenerated believers, relate to God, we do so by virtue of our incorporation into this central and universal Christ, who is to the Father as well as to us the Beloved (Eph. 1:6). A&C

Notes

[1]For the sake of simplicity and to avoid digression into the controversy, here I am assuming the modern consensus that *image of the invisible God* is a reference to Christ as God. However, there are ample and convincing arguments in favor of the view that the term refers to Christ in His humanity.

[2]It may be the case that since Athanasius first refuted Arius's views in the way that he did, others later simply repeated his interpretation, with only minimal modifications. He was, in fact, held in very great esteem by the later writers of the fourth and fifth centuries, so such would not be inconceivable.

[3]Quoting from A. M. Hunter, *Interpreting Paul's Gospel.* (London, 1954), p. 60.

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