

The Only Begotten Son and His Brothers

With this short essay we begin a series of reflections on the Gospel of John. As used here, the word *reflection* denotes the expression of carefully considered thoughts and, in this case, thoughts focused on various profound and mysterious matters revealed in this Gospel. The sole intention is not to provoke theological debate or dispute but to encourage concentrated consideration of certain characteristic Johannine themes, many of which either have been misunderstood or have received insufficient attention. Our first subject is, I believe, intriguing—the only begotten Son and His brothers.

The Only Begotten Son

John 1:14, referring to the incarnated Word, who is God Himself, says, “We beheld His glory, glory as of the only Begotten from the Father.” Although the Gospel of John, in contrast to the synoptic Gospels, does not present a narrative of the Lord’s transfiguration, this verse is clearly an allusion to it. A second reference to the only begotten Son is in verse 18: “No one has ever seen God; the only begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, He has declared Him.” The Son is the embodiment and expression of the Father, and thus He declares the Father. The only begotten Son was, is, and always will be in the bosom of the Father. As every believer knows, 3:16 testifies that “God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son,” a giving that, according to the immediate context, included the Son of Man being lifted up on the cross as the fulfillment of the type of the bronze serpent in Numbers 21:4-9. Believing into name of the only begotten Son is mandatory and nonnegotiable: “He who believes into Him [the Son] is not condemned; but he who does not believe has been condemned already, because he has not believed into the name of the only begotten Son of God” (John 3:18). In 1 John 4:9 we see that the manifestation of the love of God is intrinsically related to His sending of His Son: “In this the love of God was manifested among us, that God sent His only begotten Son into the world that we might have life and live through Him.” God has given to us eternal life, “and this life is in His Son. He who has the Son has the life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have the life” (5:11-12).

The Son’s being the only begotten Son refers to His deity,

to His identity in the Divine Trinity and to His eternal existence in the immutable Godhead. In the Godhead He alone—the only begotten Son—expresses God. This unique standing in His deity is unchanging; there never was a time when He was not the only begotten Son, and there never will be a time when He will cease to be the only begotten Son. For there to be a change in His status as the only begotten Son would entail a change in the eternal Godhead, but since God is immutable by nature, change in nature of any sort is impossible, and any teaching to the contrary is heretical. Furthermore, this Son is the *only* begotten Son, and as such, He cannot have brothers, and God the Father cannot have other sons.

His Brothers

According to John 20:17, the resurrected Jesus, the Son of God, said to Mary, “Go to My brothers and say to them, I ascend to My Father and your Father, and My God and your God.” The same Gospel that emphatically emphasizes the fact that Jesus Christ, the incarnate Word, is the only begotten Son of God presents this Son as referring to the disciples as His brothers and then testifying that His Father has become their Father. The only begotten Son—the unique Son who cannot have brothers—here reveals that He has brothers and that He and they have the same Father. The only begotten Son and His brothers—what are we to make of this? How are we to understand this?

The Gospel of John gives us at least three clues. The first clue is seen in 1:12-13: “As many as received Him [the Son of God as the true light], to them He gave the authority to become children of God, to those who believe into His name, who were begotten...of God.” These children of God begotten of God are surely the brothers of the Son. The second clue is in 12:24, where the Son of God says, “Unless the grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it abides alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.” Clearly, the grain of wheat refers to the Son of God who, through incarnation, put on humanity as a shell encasing His divinity. Instead of loving His human life and preserving it, He died a life-releasing death (19:34) in which the shell of His humanity was broken for the release of the divine life from within Him for the producing of many grains. The thought here is of the

multiplication of the one grain into many grains for the Lord's increase mentioned in 3:30. The many grains in 12:24 correspond to the brothers in 20:17. The remaining clue, like the first, involves birth: "A woman, when she gives birth, has sorrow because her hour has come; but when she brings forth the little child, she no longer remembers the affliction because of the joy that a man has been born into the world" (16:21). This birth of a man was the bringing forth in the resurrection of Christ of the one new man created by the Lord on the cross (Eph. 2:15). This corporate man (4:24) is composed of the resurrected Christ as the firstborn Son of God and the regenerated believers as His brothers, who are simultaneously the many sons of God (Heb. 2:10).

The Firstborn Son

Now we need to see how the designation *firstborn Son* is developed by Paul. Christ's resurrection was His birth as God's firstborn Son. Acts 13:33 reveals that resurrection was a birth for the man Jesus. He was begotten by God in His resurrection to be the firstborn Son of God among many brothers, who had been predestinated to be conformed to His image for the corporate expression of God (Rom. 8:29). As we have pointed out, He was the only begotten Son of God from eternity in the Godhead and retains this unique status for eternity. Nevertheless, after His incarnation and through His resurrection He was begotten by God in His humanity (not in His divinity) to be God's firstborn Son. This was prophesied in Psalm 2:7: "You are My Son; / Today I have begotten You." Acts 13:33, which is Paul's quotation of Psalm 2:7, indicates that Christ was begotten as the Son of God on the day of His resurrection. This develops the Lord's word in John 16:21. The child in that verse refers to Christ as the firstborn Son of God, who was born, begotten, in His resurrection (20:17; Rom. 8:29; Heb. 1:6). The bringing forth in John 16:21 is the begetting in Acts 13:33, which reveals that the Lord Jesus was born, begotten, in resurrection to be the Son of God with respect to His humanity. Although Christ was already the only begotten Son of God in eternity, it was still necessary for Him to be born in resurrection as the firstborn Son of God (Rom. 8:29).

Christ needed to be begotten as the Son of God in resurrection because He had put on humanity.

As to His divinity there was no need for Him to be begotten as the Son of God in this way, but as to His humanity there was the need for this. On the day of His resurrection, the Lord Jesus was designated as the Son of God with respect to His humanity (1:3-4). Through incarnation God's only begotten Son put on humanity and became the God-man. In resurrection this God-man, with His humanity, was born of God to be the firstborn Son of God. Prior to His incarnation, God's only begotten Son did not have the human nature but only the divine nature. However, in resurrection the firstborn Son has both the human nature and the divine nature.

Whereas the only begotten Son in the Godhead cannot have brothers, the firstborn Son in God's economy does have brothers—the brothers mentioned by the Lord in John 20:17. In fact, the word *Firstborn* in Romans 8:29 indicates that in addition to the firstborn Son of God there will be other sons, the many brothers of the firstborn Son. Hebrews 2:10 speaks of many sons, and Romans 8:29, of many brothers. As believers in Christ, we all are sons of God and brothers of the firstborn Son. In resurrection, when the Firstborn was born, His brothers were born, regenerated, as unveiled in 1 Peter 1:3. We were all born at the same time—He as the firstborn Son and we as the many sons of God and the many brothers of the Firstborn.

Christ is the Son of God in two ways or senses. On the one hand, in the Godhead He is the unique, unchanging, eternal only begotten Son of God, and as such, He does not have brothers. On the other hand, in the outworking of the economy of God to have many sons for the corporate expression of God, Christ is the firstborn Son, and as such, He has many brothers, and God has many sons. Now His Father is our Father, and His God is our God. Praise Him!

by Ron Kangas

Being Conformed to the Image of the Firstborn as the Gospel

Christ is the model, the pattern, of the gospel. He was born in the flesh; yet He was made the Son of God by resurrection in the Spirit of holiness. The first three chapters of Romans reveal our sinfulness; chapter four reveals our justification; chapter six, our death and burial; and chapter seven, our problem with the flesh and the natural life. But chapter eight reveals that we are conformed to the image of Christ, the Firstborn among many brothers. Christ was designated the Son of God, and we also are designated the many sons of God. This is the main point of the gospel.

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