

# *Christ and the Church in Hebrews — the Son of God, the Firstborn, and the Church of the Firstborn*

*by James Fite*

The introduction of the Epistle to the Hebrews asserts that God has “spoken to us in the Son” (1:2). Most Bible readers simply identify “the Son” here as “the only begotten Son” (John 1:18). Indeed, Hebrews unambiguously refers to “Jesus, the Son of God” (4:14; cf. 6:6). However, this Epistle also speaks of “the Firstborn” and of “the church of the firstborn” (1:6; 12:23). These varied references to the person of Christ are significant. Hebrews presents a broad scope of Christ in His work and especially in His person. Simultaneously, this Epistle provides a multifaceted description of the church in both her essence and practicality. In this contextual presentation of Christ and the church, New Testament readers should go further to see the process by which the only begotten Son became the Firstborn in God’s economy to produce the church of the firstborn.

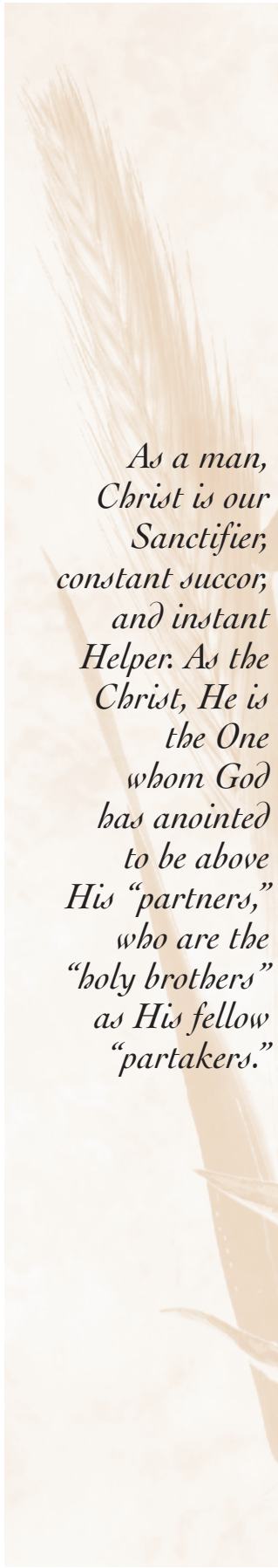
## **The Person and Work of Christ Revealed in Hebrews**

The writer of Hebrews—most likely Paul, given the intimate mention of Timothy in 13:23—deliberately avoids mentioning his name or the names of other writers of Scripture. He purposely remains unidentified lest the recipients be distracted from the central theme of this Epistle—the superiority of Christ and His new covenant to Judaism and its old covenant.<sup>1</sup> Commenting on Hebrews 12:24, Kenneth S. Wuest’s *Word Studies from the Greek New Testament for the English Reader* identifies this theme of superiority in the comparison of the blood of Jesus to the blood of the Levitical sacrifices.

The historical background and the analysis of the book show that the purpose of the writer is to prove that Jesus’ blood of the New Testament is better than and takes the place of the animal blood shed under the First Testament. Our exegesis of this verse [Heb. 12:24], therefore, is in line with the analysis of the letter. Again, the writer confronts his readers with the superiority of Jesus’ blood as over against that of the Levitical sacrifices. (228-229)

The Epistle’s repeated use of *better* (1:4; 6:9; 7:19, 22; 8:6; 9:23; 10:34; 11:16, 35, 40; 12:24) emphasizes that the author is comparing alternatives. Witness Lee in his outline of Hebrews in the *Recovery Version of the Bible* extends this central thought of superiority to the entire scope of choices available to the Hebrew believers as they hesitated between leaving the old covenant behind and coming forward to the new testament way of Christ and the church. The Judaic religion comprises five notable and seemingly unassailable foundations: the real and true God, genuine angels, the faithful and God-serving Moses, the compassionate Aaronic priesthood, and the God-derived model of jurisprudence. The writer of Hebrews systematically compares these pillars of Judaism to Christ and His new covenant and demonstrates that the new testament is far better (cf. 1:4; 8:6; 9:23; 11:40; 12:24).

Hebrews identifies at least thirty outstanding and superior aspects of Christ.<sup>2</sup> The Son is none other than God Himself, the Creator of the universe (1:1, 10). As the Son, He



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“holy brothers”  
as His fellow  
“partakers.”*

is the instrumental means through whom the universe was made in the past and the Upholder as the power source that bears all things in the present (vv. 2-3). Furthermore, He is the future appointed “Heir of all things” (v. 2). These descriptions echo Paul in Colossians 1:16-17: “In Him all things were created...; all things have been created through Him and unto Him;...All things cohere in Him.”

As the effulgence, radiance, and brightness of God’s glory and as the impress, image, imprint, likeness, and expression of God’s substance, essence, and nature in the Godhead (Heb. 1:3), the Son declares and explains God (cf. John 1:18). Furthermore, the Son is the Redeemer who, “having made purification of sins,” is now seated “on the right hand of the Majesty on high” (Heb. 1:3).

Because Jesus is God (v. 8), He is undoubtedly “much better than,” hence, superior to, the angels (v. 4). Although the angels are notable in their position, function, and characteristics, they are nevertheless creatures made by God (v. 7), whereas Christ as the Son of God is the Creator worthy of worship by the angels (vv. 5-6). The writer of Hebrews goes further to argue the perhaps less obvious fact that even as a man Christ is also superior to the angels. As a son of man, Jesus “was made a little inferior to the angels because of the suffering of death” (2:9). However, King David, echoing Genesis 1:26 and 28, declares that it is “mortal man,...the son of man,” whom God has caused to “rule over the works” of His hand and under whose feet He has “put all things” (Psa. 8:6). Today we may “not yet see all things subjected to Him,” but that does not negate the fact that God has indeed done so, since “we see Jesus,...crowned with glory and honor” (Heb. 2:8-9).

Furthermore, it is as the Son of Man (v. 6), a mortal man, a partaker of blood and flesh (v. 14), that Jesus destroyed the devil on the cross and made propitiation for the sins of the people (v. 17). Positively, as a man, He is our Sanctifier, constant succor, and instant Helper (vv. 11, 16; 4:16). As the Christ, He is the One whom God has anointed to be above His “partners,” who are the “holy brothers” as His fellow “partakers” (1:9; 3:14; cf. v. 1; 6:4; 12:8).

Christ Jesus is also the Apostle (3:1) sent from and with God to faithfully serve over God’s house (v. 6) as Moses faithfully served in His house, that is, as a part of His house (vv. 2, 5). In verse 6 *His house* refers to God’s people. Jesus is God, the Builder of the house (vv. 1, 4); hence, He is superior to Moses, who was simply part of the house (vv. 2-3). Jesus is the real Joshua, the fulfillment of the Old Testament figure, who brings God’s people into the Sabbath rest (4:8-10).

**T**he writer goes to great length to persuade the recipients of this Epistle that the priesthood of Christ is superior to the Aaronic priesthood (4:14—7:28). This is because Christ is the High Priest according to the eternal order of Melchizedek (5:5-6). Since the Aaronic priests shared the fallen human nature with those under their care, they could sympathize with the weaknesses of those under their ministry. However, the dead law of commandments under which they served was devoid of any power and thus unprofitable and incapable of helping the serving priests themselves or the people to whom they ministered. However, as the heavenly High Priest, Christ is “able to save to the uttermost” (7:25), because He is “according to the likeness of Melchizedek” (v. 15), “appointed not according to the law of a fleshy commandment but according to the power of an indestructible life” (v. 16). Lee notes that

all the other aspects of Christ in the foregoing chapters, such as His being the Son of God, the Son of Man, the Author of salvation, the Apostle, and the real Joshua, are the necessary qualifications for Him to be such a Priest, a Priest who can minister to us whatever we need and save us to the uttermost. (*Recovery Version*, v. 11, note 1)

Jesus is the Forerunner, the Pioneer who has entered within the veil, thereby cutting the way to glory, having Himself already entered (cf. 2:10). Christ is also the heavenly Minister of the true tabernacle (8:2) and the surety and Mediator of a new and better covenant

with a more excellent ministry (7:22; 8:6; 9:15; 12:24). Since Christ died, the covenant has become an enacted will and testament. Furthermore, as the Executor of the new testament (9:16-17), He makes all the bequeathed promises presently available to the heirs of salvation (cf. 1:14).

Christ is the Redeemer, who offered Himself through the eternal Spirit (9:14). Furthermore, He is the One in whom God speaks to bring us into the Holy of Holies for us to enjoy the law, the hidden manna, and the budding rod (vv. 3-4, 8), having offered Himself as the fulfillment, termination, and replacement of all the Old Testament offerings in order to obtain an eternal redemption (v. 12).<sup>3</sup> Christ not only speaks for God; He also replaces the Old Testament offerings, thereby opening the way for His believers to enter the Holy of Holies and enjoy Him in His heavenly ministry (10:18, 20-22).

In addition to being the Author of our salvation (2:10), Christ is the Perfecter of our faith (12:2), which faith is needed to substantiate and apprehend all the new testament promises and blessings bequeathed and dispensed to us by Him as the Mediator of the new covenant (v. 24). Hebrews concludes with the encouragement to follow the rejected Jesus outside the religious camp, bearing His reproach (13:13). We can do so confidently, because He is the great Shepherd of the sheep (v. 20).

### The Aspects of the Church Revealed in Hebrews

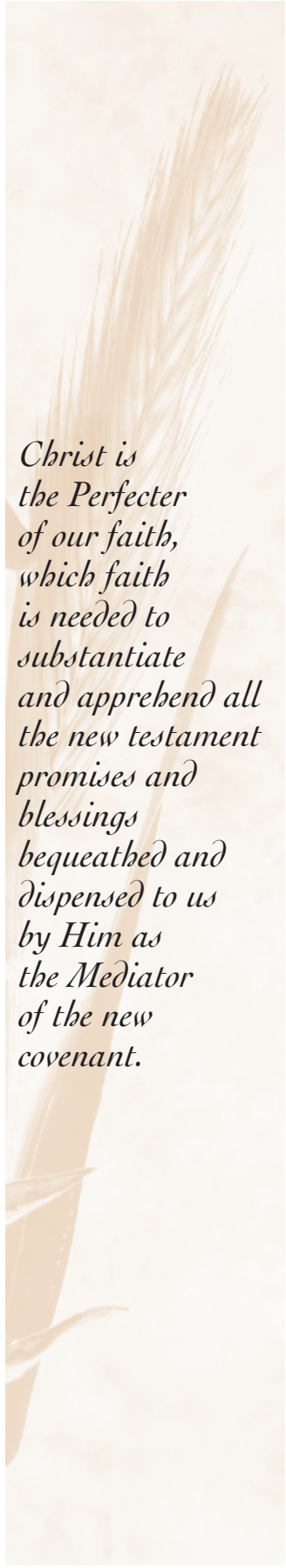
While most Bible readers recognize many of the above designations of Christ in Hebrews, fewer are apt to identify, much less explicate, the multifaceted and less obvious designations of the church in this Epistle. In a message entitled “The Church as Revealed in Hebrews,” Ron Kangas asserts that “there are seven facets of the church in its intrinsic significance in this book” (25). The first facet comprises the only two explicit mentions of the church in Hebrews—in 2:12 and 12:23. The remaining six references in Hebrews are allusions to the church.

First, Hebrews 1 alludes to the church being a corporate partnership. Verse 9 speaks of God having anointed the Son with the oil of exultant joy above His partners. In the ancient times the anointing oil was poured “upon the head”; it then “ran down upon the hem of the garments” (cf. Ps. 133:2). Hence, Hebrews 1:9 implies that the enjoyment and experience of the anointing oil by the Head is likewise enjoyed and experienced by His partners, that is, by the members of the Body. Later, the writer of Hebrews, in the context of warning the brothers—“lest perhaps there be in any one of you an evil heart of unbelief in falling away from the living God”—charges them to “exhort one another each day,” for they “have become partners of Christ” (3:12-14).

Second, Hebrews 3 alludes to the church being the house of God (v. 6). First Timothy 3:15 states unambiguously that “the house of God...is the church of the living God.” The Greek word *oikos* for *house* in these verses also implies the household, as in “the household of the faith” and “members of the household of God” (Gal. 6:10; Eph. 2:19).

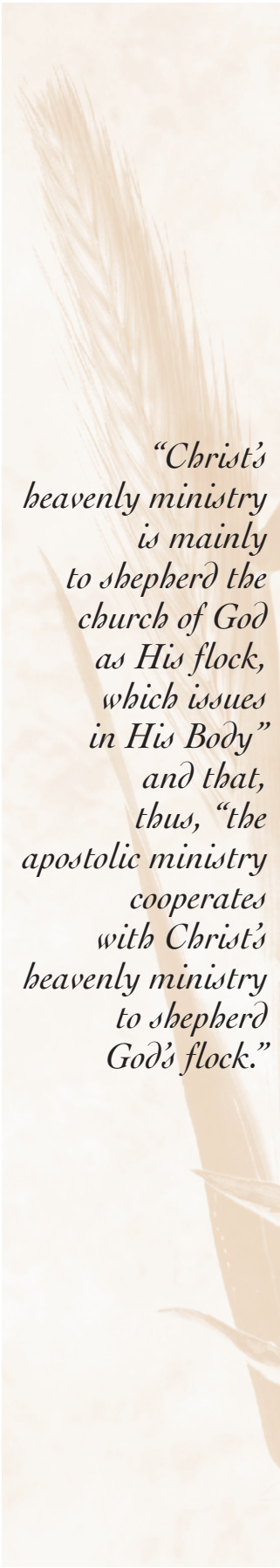
Third, Hebrews alludes to the church being the Sabbath rest in this age (3:6-7; 4:7-9). This seemingly simple statement is a great biblical discovery.<sup>4</sup> The writer of Hebrews first asserts in 3:6 that “we” (referring to the church, comprising the New Testament believers) are the house of God and then continues in verses 7 and 8 with a quotation of Psalm 95:7-8, which says, “Today, if you hear His voice, / Do not harden your heart.” Hebrews refers to this psalm repeatedly (Heb. 3:7-8, 15; 4:7). The word *therefore* at the beginning of 3:7, which connects the house of God in 3:6 with the Sabbath rest in 4:9, renders strong support for asserting that the church life is today’s Sabbath rest.

Fourth, Hebrews alludes to the church being the New Jerusalem in this age. Hebrews 12:22-24 states in the past tense, as an accomplished fact, that we “have come forward... to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem...and to the church of the firstborn...



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by Him as  
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of the new  
covenant.*





*“Christ’s  
heavenly ministry  
is mainly  
to shepherd the  
church of God  
as His flock,  
which issues  
in His Body”  
and that,  
thus, “the  
apostolic ministry  
cooperates  
with Christ’s  
heavenly ministry  
to shepherd  
God’s flock.”*

and to Jesus, the Mediator of a new covenant.” These verses describe a parallel unity of the heavenly Jerusalem, the church, and the new covenant. In Galatians 4 Paul similarly associates the covenant of grace, as allegorized by the promise to Abraham, with the Jerusalem above, which is the mother of the believers (vv. 24, 26).

Fifth, Hebrews alludes to the church being the unshakable kingdom of God (12:28). Bible readers may relegate this mention of the kingdom of God to a future time. However, the New Testament repeatedly refers to the kingdom as a present reality. We preach the gospel of the kingdom in the present age (Matt. 24:14). Those who receive this gospel are regenerated into the kingdom and transferred into the kingdom (John 3:5; Col. 1:13), thereby becoming the present partakers in the kingdom (Rev. 1:9). Romans 14:17 refers to the reality of the kingdom in the context of the proper church life in this age. Nevertheless, there is also the expectation of a coming manifestation of the kingdom that will be a reward at the Lord’s coming back for those who overcome in this age (cf. Matt. 16:27; Rev. 20:4, 6).

Sixth, Hebrews alludes to the church being the flock of God (13:20; cf. Acts 20:28; 1 Pet. 2:25; 5:2). Hebrews 13:20 speaks of “the blood of an eternal covenant,” the resurrection of Christ, and “the great Shepherd of the sheep.” Kangas points out that “Christ’s heavenly ministry is mainly to shepherd the church of God as His flock, which issues in His Body” and that, thus, “the apostolic ministry cooperates with Christ’s heavenly ministry to shepherd God’s flock (John 21:15-17)” (33).

#### **The Son of God as the Only Begotten, as Typified by Isaac, the Son of Abraham**

Bible readers, while especially familiar with John’s reference to the “only begotten” in John 3:16, may be less able to identify Paul’s only explicit reference to the “only begotten,” which is found in Hebrews: “By faith Abraham, being tested, offered up Isaac; indeed he who gladly received the promises was offering up his only begotten” (11:17). The context of *only begotten* here supports an allegorical interpretation that likens Isaac to Christ, who resurrected from the dead: “Of whom it was said, ‘In Isaac shall your seed be called’; counting that God was able to raise men even from the dead, from which he also received him back in figure” (vv. 18-19).

**G**enesis 22:2 records God’s precise instructions to Abraham concerning Isaac: “Take now your son, your only son, whom you love, Isaac, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I will tell you.” Note the explicit denotation here of the beloved Isaac as “your son, your only son.” After the Angel of Jehovah stopped Abraham from physically slaying Isaac and, instead, provided a replacement lamb, He said to Abraham, “You have not withheld your son, your only son, from Me” (v. 12). Lee identifies the significant and profound parallels between the only son Isaac and the only Son Christ:

Abraham’s offering of his beloved and only son, Isaac, on the altar is a vivid picture of God the Father’s offering of His beloved and only Son, Jesus Christ, on the cross. In this picture Isaac typifies Christ in a detailed way. Isaac, as Abraham’s only son (Gen. 22:2, 12, 16), typifies Christ as God’s only begotten Son (John 3:16). Isaac was Abraham’s beloved son (Gen. 22:2), and Christ was the Father’s beloved Son, in whom He delighted (Matt. 3:17). Isaac took his father’s will (Gen. 22:6), and Christ also chose the will of His Father (Matt. 26:39). Isaac was obedient unto death (Gen. 22:9-10); likewise, Christ was obedient unto death (Phil. 2:8). Isaac carried the wood for the burnt offering and walked to the top of Mount Moriah (Gen. 22:6); in the same way, Christ bore His cross and walked to Golgotha (John 19:17). Isaac was offered to God as a burnt offering on Mount Moriah; Christ also was offered to God on the same mountain...to fulfill the type of the burnt offering.<sup>5</sup> Isaac was “killed” on the altar and was returned to Abraham on the third day, that is, in resurrection (Gen. 22:4, 10-13; Heb. 11:19); similarly, Christ was crucified on the cross and was resurrected on the third day (1 Cor. 15:4). Isaac was multiplied in resurrection (Gen. 22:17), and

Christ also was multiplied in His resurrection (John 12:24; 1 Pet. 1:3). Isaac was the seed of Abraham for the blessing of all the nations (Gen. 22:18); likewise, Christ is the unique seed of Abraham in whom the blessing of Abraham has come to the nations (Gal. 3:8, 14, 16). (*Recovery Version*, Gen. 22:2, note 1)

To Abraham, the ram offering was the replacement, the substitute, for the offering of his promised only son. Likewise, to God, Christ as the only begotten Son is the reality, fulfillment, and replacement of all the old testament offerings. Hence, the seemingly simple reference to *only begotten* in Hebrews gives ground for applying the many types and figures in the Old Testament to a detailed appreciation of Christ's profound person, living, and work as described in the New Testament.

### **The Son of God as God in Eternity, and the Son of God as Man in Time**

As the Creator, the Son of God is the effulgence of God's glory and the impress of God's substance (Heb. 1:2-3). In chapter 7 the writer returns to the eternal aspect of the Son of God as God by indicating that He is like the priest Melchizedek, who is "without father, without mother, without genealogy" (v. 3). Lee notes the correspondence of Melchizedek in this passage with the eternal Word in John 1:

For all the important persons in Genesis, except Melchizedek, there is a genealogy. In the divine writing, the Holy Spirit sovereignly gave no account of the beginning of Melchizedek's days or of the end of his life, that he might be a proper type of Christ as the eternal One, as our perpetual High Priest. This corresponds with the presentation of the Son of God in the Gospel of John. Being eternal, the Son of God has no genealogy (John 1:1). But as the Son of Man, Christ does have a genealogy (Matt. 1:1-17; Luke 3:23-38). (*Recovery Version*, Heb. 7:3, note 1)

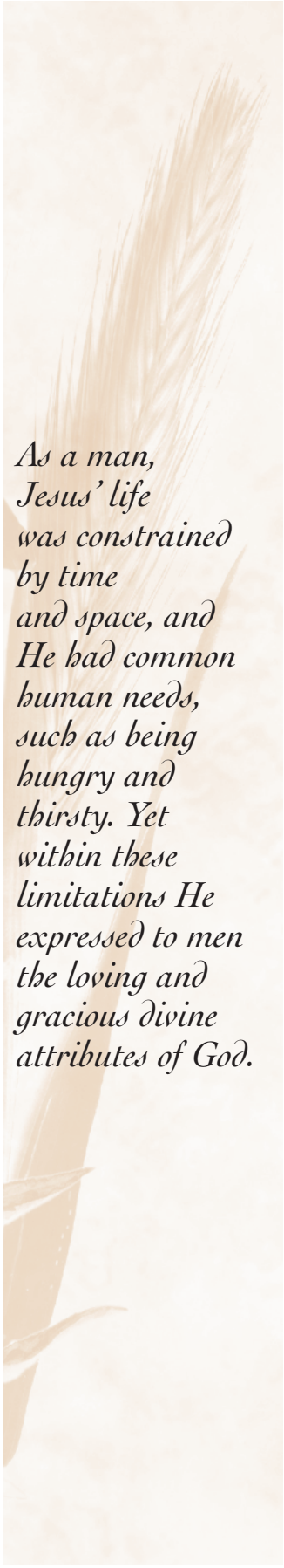
According to John 1, the Word is God and is with God; hence, He is the complete Triune God (cf. Rom. 9:5; Heb. 1:8). Furthermore, 1 John 5:20 indicates that the Son of God, Jesus Christ, is the true God.

**T**he Son of God is also the Son of Man (Matt. 16:13, 16). John 1:14, speaking of the incarnation, asserts that "the Word became flesh and tabernacled among us." According to Hebrews, the Son of God as a man with a genealogy passed through a perfecting process (2:10; 5:9; 7:28), which qualified Him to be God's anointed Christ and our Savior. As a man, His life was constrained by time and space (John 7:6, 8; cf. 11:6), and He had common human needs, such as being hungry and thirsty (Matt. 4:2; Mark 11:12; John 19:28). Yet within these limitations He expressed to men the loving and gracious divine attributes of God. Furthermore, He was "tempted in all respects like us, yet without sin" (Heb. 4:15). Through His death He consummated an eternal redemption, and through His life-giving resurrection He produced many sons of God as His duplication.

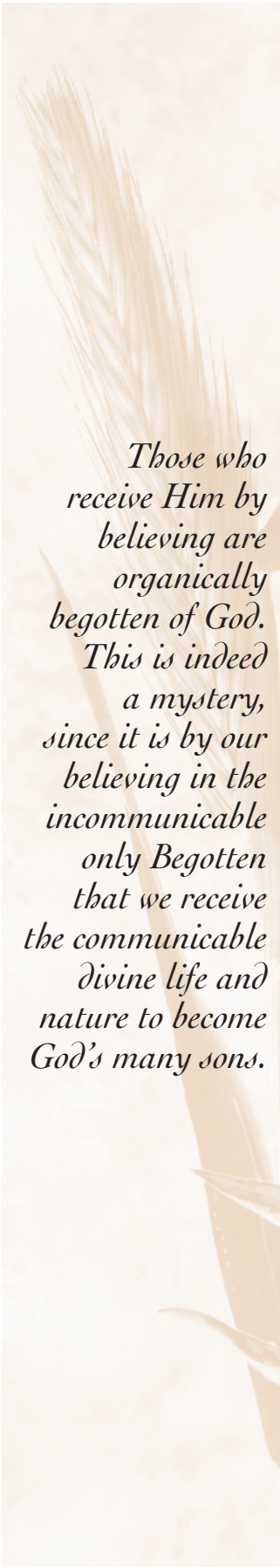
### **The Only Begotten Son of God Coming to Express the Glorious God, to Impart the Divine Life into His Believers, and to Reconstitute Them as God's House**

John's writings emphasize that Jesus Christ is "the only Begotten from the Father," that is, "the only begotten Son," who declared the Father and through whom "grace and reality came" (John 1:14, 17-18). In the Gospel of John, Jesus referred repeatedly to His Father's house (2:16; 14:2). In chapter 2 the Jews thought that He was speaking of the physical temple, but He was, instead, referring to His physical body, which He would raise up in three days (vv. 19, 21). In chapter 14 Jesus stated that the Father's house has many abodes (v. 2), implying that the Father's house would (after His resurrection) include His believers (vv. 20, 23).

As the tabernacle of God, Jesus lived as a man and dwelt with man (1:14). John's Gospel also describes the economical steps by which the eternal, uncreated Word, who was with God, who was God, and who was the sphere and instrument through which all things



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gracious divine  
attributes of God.*



*Those who  
receive Him by  
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organically  
begotten of God.  
This is indeed  
a mystery,  
since it is by our  
believing in the  
incommunicable  
only Begotten  
that we receive  
the communicable  
divine life and  
nature to become  
God's many sons.*

came into being, became flesh (1:1-3), that is, was incarnated to express and declare the glorious God in His human living (vv. 14, 18). Jesus would then go to the cross as the Lamb of God (vv. 29, 36) to redeem man with the intention to reproduce Himself in His transformed believers, the living stones (v. 42) as constituents to be built into the church as a spiritual house (cf. Matt. 16:18; 1 Cor. 3:12; 1 Pet. 2:5), the house of God (cf. John 1:51; Gen. 28:12, 17-19).

The church as the house of God is an accomplished fact, which our Lord carried out through His death, resurrection, ascension, and outpouring (Acts 20:28; Eph. 5:25; 1:20-23; 2:6). Nevertheless, there is an ongoing process of Christ continuing to personally “make His home” in our hearts through faith (3:17) and of us collectively as “all the building” being “fitted together” and “growing into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom” the believers in a locality “also are being built together into a dwelling place of God in spirit” (2:21-22). Through this process we are also sanctified (5:25-26) and ultimately transformed and conformed into His image in life, nature, and expression (2 Cor. 3:18).

Although God’s love is the motivating source for God’s giving of His only begotten Son (cf. 1 John 4:9), the impartation and expression of His divine life are the purpose and objective. God desires that everyone who believes into Him will have eternal life, that is, will have life and live through Him (John 3:16; 1 John 4:9).

Lee draws particular attention to the process by which God gave His Son. Lee asks why John 3:16 does “not say that He *sent*” but instead “says that He *gave* His only begotten Son to us. How did God give His Son?” (*Intrinsic View* 15, emphasis added). In one sense, God did give His Son as the fulfillment of all the offerings. However, He gives the Son more intrinsically by imparting Himself into us and transmitting “all that He is into us in His Divine Trinity—in the Father, in the Son, and in the Spirit” (15). According to 1:12-13, those who receive Him by believing are organically begotten of God. This is indeed a mystery, since it is by our believing in the incommunicable only Begotten that we receive the communicable divine life and nature to become God’s many sons. This seeming conundrum has spawned many heretical attempts to reconcile and explain the aspects of the person of Christ. These heresies, which began to appear even in the time of the early church, are refuted in the New Testament, especially in the writings of John.<sup>6</sup>

### **The Son of God as the Firstborn**

While Hebrews 7:3 likens the priest Melchizedek to the eternal Son of God who abides perpetually, 1:5-6 refers to the Son of God as “the Firstborn.” This title implies position, time, order, and multiplication. Colossians 1 ascribes two significant titles to the Son of God’s love: “the Firstborn of all creation” and “the Firstborn from the dead” (vv. 13, 15, 18). These titles indicate the centrality of Christ in the two universally most significant historical events—the incarnation of Christ and His resurrection from the dead. Lee points out that the context here is Christ’s preeminence (*Recovery Version*, v. 18, note 1)—“that He Himself might have the first place in all things” (v. 18).

Kerry S. Robichaux, in “Christ the Firstborn,” emphasizes how these two statuses of Christ simultaneously relate to Christ’s divinity and humanity:

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. (38)

Christ thus has the first place as both the source and prototype of all creation and the Progenitor of the new creation:



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). (38)

Concerning Christ being the Firstborn of all creation, Lee points out that Christ, as God, “is the Creator” but that “as man, sharing the created blood and flesh (Heb. 2:14a), He is part of the creation” (*Recovery Version*, Col. 1:15, note 2). Verse 18 juxtaposes Christ being the Head of the Body, referring to the church, and His being the Firstborn from the dead. Hence, Christ is the first, the preeminent One, by holding the top position in the inceptions of these two realities in time—in creation and in the church, which is God’s new creation (cf. Gal. 6:15).

### *The Firstborn Son Having Divinity and Humanity*

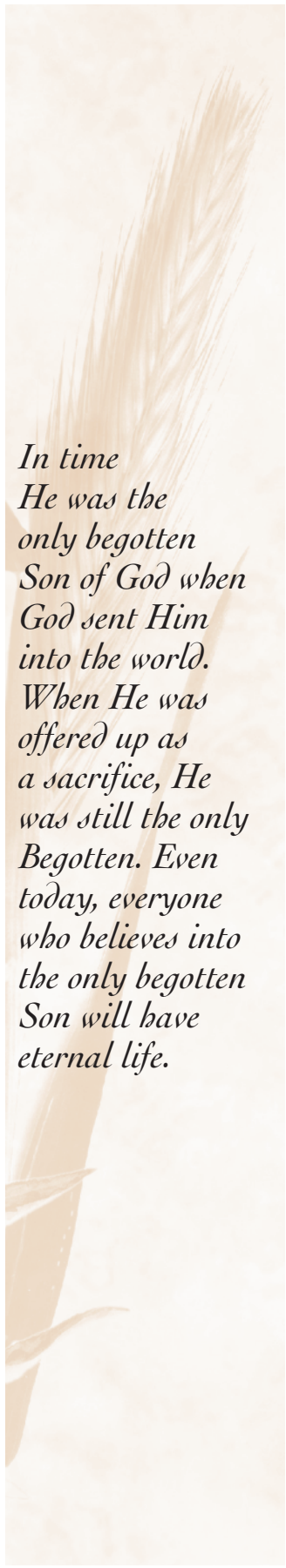
The term *firstborn* implies not only a birth but also that there are others who would in time be born sequentially after. Lee frames a difficult but crucial theological question in this way:

Christ was the only begotten Son of God [John 1:18], and then He became the firstborn Son of God with many brothers [Rom. 8:29]. Hence, as the Son of God, Christ has two statuses, one being the only begotten Son and the other, the firstborn Son. What is the difference between God’s only begotten Son and God’s firstborn Son? (*Organic Aspect* 69)

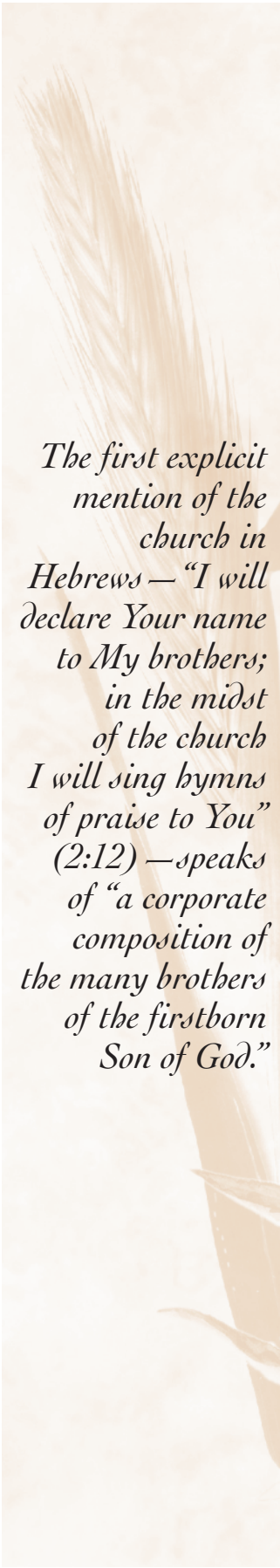
Lee notes that, “as the only begotten Son of God, Christ had divinity but not humanity; He was self-existing and ever-existing, as God is” (*Recovery Version*, Rom. 8:29, note 4). This was Christ’s status from eternity (John 1:18). In time He was the only begotten Son of God when God sent Him into the world (1 John 4:9; John 1:14; 3:16). When He was offered up as a sacrifice, He was still the only Begotten (v. 16; cf. Heb. 11:17). Furthermore, even today, everyone who believes into the only begotten Son will have eternal life (John 3:16).

However, to be offered up as a sacrifice, Christ had to have humanity and be mortal. Hebrews provides a roadmap of the Son’s process from the perspective of His humanity. Christ as a man came into the world (10:5), partaking of blood and flesh (2:14); as such, He had “a body...prepared” so that He could be offered to God for a sacrifice (10:5).<sup>7</sup> Through His human living, Christ learned obedience and suffered (5:8). Jesus then tasted death, passed through death, and resurrected from the dead (2:9, 14; 13:20; cf. 5:7; 11:19; 1 Pet. 1:3). He then ascended (Heb. 4:14; Eph. 4:9; John 3:13) and sat down on the right hand of the throne of God (Heb. 12:2). He is now crowned with glory and honor (2:7, 9). At the appointed time, He, the Coming One, will come to the inhabited earth that has been subjected to Him (10:37; 2:5-6).

While resurrection is certainly a mystery, 1 Peter 3:18 provides a clue as to the process by which Christ was made alive: “On the one hand being put to death in the flesh, but on the other, made alive in the Spirit.” Lee points out that after Christ died in the flesh, He was still alive and active in the Spirit: “When the Lord was buried in the tomb, His flesh, the humanity that was with Him, died. However, His divinity, the Spirit of holiness, had a great opportunity to work” (*Organic Aspect* 70). This is analogous to the process of a seed falling into the ground, dying, and bearing fruit—illustrated by the Lord’s word in John 12:24 concerning His being the grain of wheat that dies and then bears much fruit. Lee explains that “when a grain of wheat falls into the ground, its outer shell dies and decays, but its life within is active. The grain on the one hand dies and on the other, lives. When the grain dies, this death gives the life within an opportunity to operate to bring forth tender sprouts” (69-70). The working Spirit of holiness resurrected Jesus’ humanity and simultaneously uplifted the mortal humanity of Jesus into divinity and thereby designated



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*The first explicit mention of the church in Hebrews — “I will declare Your name to My brothers; in the midst of the church I will sing hymns of praise to You” (2:12) — speaks of “a corporate composition of the many brothers of the firstborn Son of God.”*

Him the Son of God in power (Rom. 1:4). As recorded in Acts 13:33, the day of His resurrection was a fulfillment of Psalm 2, in which God declared, “You are My Son; / Today I have begotten You.” Lee thereby asserts that “from that time on, He has been the firstborn Son of God” (70). Commenting on Romans 8:29, Lee points out that God’s only begotten Son “had divinity but not humanity,” whereas God’s firstborn Son has “both divinity and humanity”; thus, “His being the firstborn Son of God, having both divinity and humanity, began with His resurrection” (*Recovery Version*, v. 29, note 4).

### ***Christ as the Seed of David Becoming the Son of God***

Matthew’s Gospel describes how the Lord Jesus was tested by four groups of opposers: the ruling chief priests and elders concerning His authority, the rival but politically affiliated Pharisees and Herodians concerning giving tribute to Caesar, the unbelieving Sadducees concerning resurrection, and a scholarly lawyer concerning the greatest commandment (21:23—22:40). After muzzling all of them with His answers, He turned the tables by asking a seemingly simple question concerning the Christ: “Whose son is He?” (22:42). The Pharisees provided the seemingly obvious answer: “David’s.” Jesus then asked them, “If then David calls Him Lord, how is He his son?” (v. 45).

According to His humanity, Christ is a descendant of David (1:1). However, Hebrews 1:5 refers to the specific day when the Son was begotten by the Father to be the Firstborn: “To which of the angels has He ever said, ‘You are My Son; this day have I begotten You’? And again, ‘I will be a Father to Him, and He will be a Son to Me?’” Verse 5 first quotes Psalm 2:7 concerning “this day” and then quotes 2 Samuel 7:14 concerning God being the Father of Christ in His humanity. Lee relates this verse to the Lord’s question in Matthew 22:41-45:

The word concerning “your seed” in 2 Samuel 7:12 and “My son” in verse 14 implies that the seed of David would become the Son of God, i.e., that a human seed would become a divine Son. This word corresponds with Paul’s word in Rom. 1:3-4 concerning Christ as the seed of David being designated the Son of God in His humanity in resurrection...It also relates to the Lord’s question in Matt. 22:41-45 concerning how the Christ could be both the son of David and the Son of God as David’s Lord—a wonderful person, a God-man with two natures, divinity and humanity. These verses clearly unveil that a seed of man, i.e., a son of man, can become the Son of God. God Himself, the divine One, became a human seed, the seed of a man, David. This seed was Jesus, the God-man, Jehovah the Savior (Matt. 1:18-21; 2 Tim. 2:8), who was the Son of God by virtue of His divinity alone (Luke 1:35). Through His resurrection He as the human seed became the Son of God in His humanity as well. (*Recovery Version*, 2 Sam. 7:14, note 1)

### ***The Church of the Firstborn***

The first explicit mention of the church in Hebrews—“I will declare Your name to My brothers; in the midst of the church I will sing hymns of praise to You” (2:12)—speaks of “a corporate composition of the many brothers of the firstborn Son of God” (Lee, *Recovery Version*, v. 12, note 2). The second mention refers to “the church of the firstborn” (12:23). In this verse the Greek word for “firstborn,” *πρωτοτόκων*, is plural. Here the church is not only the assembly of called-out ones but also the assembly of firstborn ones, indicating that the church consists of firstborn ones.

J. N. Darby presents some context to the scene in which the church is described, stressing that the firstborn in 12:23 are the heirs and objects of grace:

There is however one peculiar object on which his eye rests in this marvellous and heavenly scene. It is the assembly of the firstborn whose names are inscribed in heaven. They were not born there, not indigenous like the angels...It is not merely that they reach heaven: they are the glorious heirs and firstborn of God, according to His eternal counsels, in accordance



with which they are registered in heaven. The assembly composed of the objects of grace, now called in Christ, belongs to heaven by grace. (342-343)

As the only Begotten, the Son is unique in the incommunicable aspects of His divine nature and in His unassailable position in the divine Triune Godhead. However, as the first-born ones, we, the brothers of the Firstborn, can participate in His communicable divine life and nature.

Other commentators on Hebrews 12:23 have related the church of the firstborn to the firstfruits of God's creatures in James 1:18. For example, F. W. Farrar's commentary on Hebrews says of Hebrews 12:23 that *the church of the firstborn* "refers to the Church of living Christians,...whose names, though they are still living on earth, have been enrolled in the heavenly registers (Luke x. 20; Rom. viii. 16, 29; Jas. i. 18) as 'a kind of firstfruits of His creatures' unto God and to the Lamb (Rev. xiv. 4)" (182). Lee concurs while explaining how this is "a relative way of speaking":

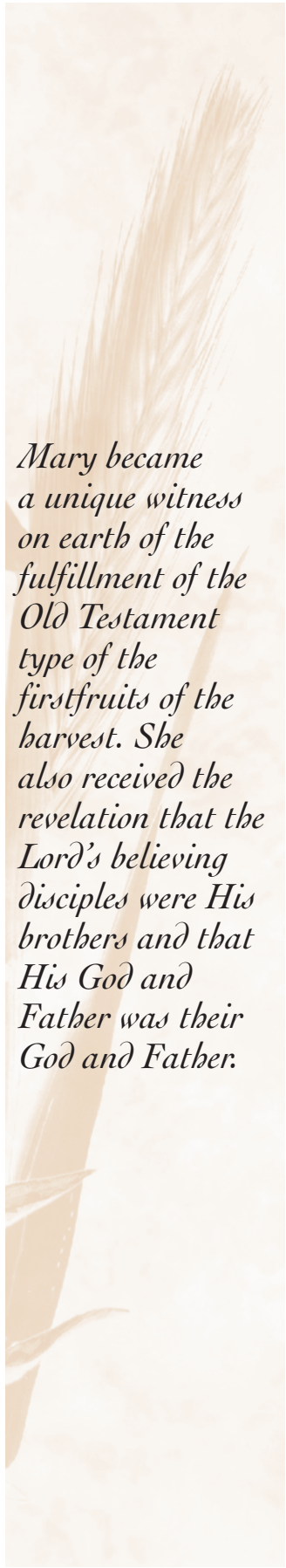
As the constituents of the church, we are the firstfruits of God's creatures. To say that the firstfruits refer to the firstborn sons is a relative way of speaking. The day will come when both the Gentiles and the Jews will turn to worship God. Although that situation is not here yet, today we believers take the lead to worship God. Hence, in this sense we are the firstborn sons, the firstfruits of God's creatures. (*Organic Aspect* 68)

The Lord resurrected on the first day of the week, which is the day after the Sabbath (John 20:1). Lee correlates this first day with the old testament offering of the firstfruits of the harvest; this previously God-ordained celebration was occurring on that specific day, the day Christ the firstborn Son of God was born:

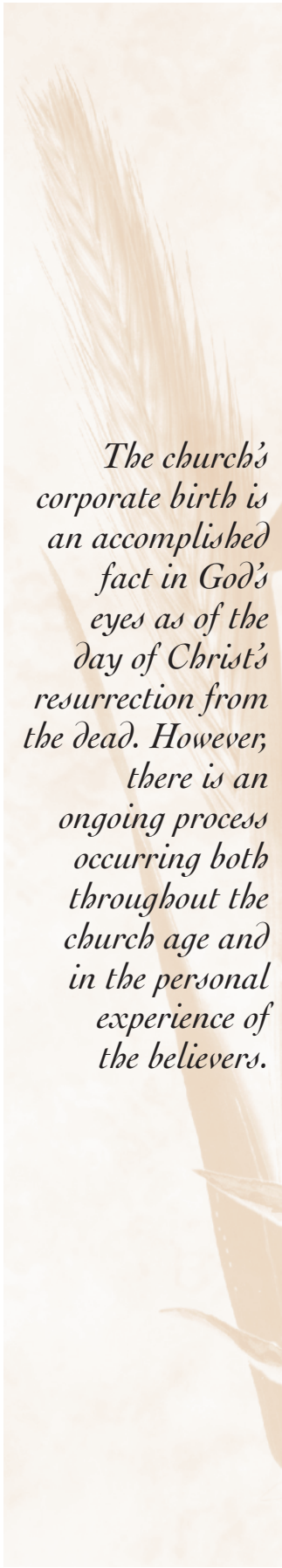
In Leviticus 23:10-11, 15, a sheaf of the firstfruits of the harvest was offered to the Lord as a wave offering on the day after the Sabbath. That sheaf of the firstfruits was a type of Christ as the firstfruits in resurrection (1 Cor. 15:20, 23). Christ resurrected on precisely the day after the Sabbath...In His resurrection He germinated the new creation with the divine life. Hence, the day of His resurrection was the beginning of a new week—a new age. This day of His resurrection was appointed by God (Psa. 118:24), was prophesied as "today" in Psa. 2:7, was predicted by Himself as the third day (Matt. 16:21; John 2:19, 22), and later was called by the early Christians "the Lord's Day" (Rev. 1:10). On this day Christ was born in resurrection as the firstborn Son of God (Acts 13:33; Heb. 1:5) and the Firstborn from the dead to be the Head of the Body, the church (Col. 1:18). (*Recovery Version*, John 20:1, note 1)

John 20 describes the sequence of events related to Mary finding the open tomb where the crucified Jesus had been laid. She reported this to Peter and John, who then ran to the tomb and found it well ordered but empty. The brothers logically concluded that the Lord had resurrected, and so they went home (v. 10). Mary, however, lingered at the tomb, weeping, not convinced and, thus, seeking to find out where the Lord had been taken. She was rewarded for her heartfelt seeking by seeing the Lord before His secret ascension to present Himself to the Father (vv. 17-18). Significantly, she became a unique witness on earth of the fulfillment of the Old Testament type of the firstfruits of the harvest. Furthermore, she also received the revelation that, from that day forward, the Lord's believing disciples were His brothers and that His God and Father was their God and Father. She thus became also the first witness of Christ not only as the sheaf of the firstfruits but also as the Firstborn among many brothers. Concerning His disciples now being the Lord's brothers, Lee notes,

Previously, the most intimate term the Lord had used in reference to His disciples was "friends" (John 15:14-15). But after His resurrection He began to call them "brothers," for through His resurrection His disciples were regenerated (1 Pet. 1:3) with the divine life, which had been released by His life-imparting death, as indicated in John 12:24...He was the Father's only Son, the Father's individual expression. Through His death and resurrection the Father's only Begotten became the Firstborn among many brothers (Rom. 8:29).



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*The church's corporate birth is an accomplished fact in God's eyes as of the day of Christ's resurrection from the dead. However, there is an ongoing process occurring both throughout the church age and in the personal experience of the believers.*

His many brothers are the many sons of God and are the church (Heb. 2:10-12), a corporate expression of God the Father in the Son. This is God's ultimate intention. The many brothers are the propagation of the Father's life and the multiplication of the Son in the divine life. (*Recovery Version*, John 20:17, note 2)

There is a corresponding process for His believers, who were begotten together with Him, to become the many brothers, the many sons of God. First Peter 1:3 indicates that all the believers were simultaneously regenerated "through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead"; thus, they have the same life and nature as the Firstborn. In their experience in time, these many sons are born of the Spirit (cf. John 3:3, 5) by their obedience to the word of the truth "through the living and abiding word of God" (1 Pet. 1:22-23). Hebrews 2:11 indicates that Christ as the sanctifying firstborn Son of God is not ashamed to call the sanctified ones "brothers," because they "are all of One," that is, of one source, having been born of the same Father in resurrection.

This corporate birth is an accomplished fact in God's eyes as of the day of Christ's resurrection from the dead. However, there is an ongoing process occurring both throughout the church age and in the personal experience of the believers. On the evening of the day of His resurrection, "Jesus came and stood in the midst" of the fearful disciples and "breathed into them and said to them, Receive the Holy Spirit" (John 20:19, 22). Furthermore, He sent them with authority to preach the gospel of redemption (cf. v. 23) and of the kingdom (Matt. 28:18-20). In resurrection the Lord became the receivable life-giving Spirit (John 20:22; 1 Cor. 15:45b). The believers, through their receiving of the gospel that is preached to the inhabited earth, are experientially born of God, regenerated by receiving Him. In his commentary on "the Firstborn among many brothers" in Romans 8:29, Lee notes the resulting mutual correspondence in their life and nature:

With His firstborn Son as the base, pattern, element, and means, God is producing many sons, and the many sons who are produced are the many believers who believe into God's firstborn Son and are joined to Him as one. They are exactly like Him in life and nature, and, like Him, they have both humanity and divinity. (*Recovery Version*, v. 29, note 4)

On one hand, the Firstborn passed through a process to become "life-givable"; on the other hand, the recipients of this life must undergo a transformational process to become the same as He is:

In and through resurrection Christ, the firstborn Son of God, became the life-giving Spirit (1 Cor. 15:45). As such a Spirit He enters into God's chosen people to dispense, to build, Himself as life into their being to be their inner constitution. In this way He makes them God-men, the many sons of God (Heb. 2:10), the mass reproduction of Himself as the firstborn Son of God (Rom. 8:29; 1 John 3:2). Thus, they, the human seeds, become the sons of God with divinity through the metabolic process of transformation... This metabolic process is the building up of the church as the Body of Christ and the house of God (Eph. 1:22-23; 2:20-22) by the building of God into man and man into God, i.e., by the constituting of the divine element into the human element and the human element into the divine element. This building will consummate in the New Jerusalem as a great, corporate God-man, the aggregate, the totality, of all the sons of God (Rev. 21:7). (Lee, *Recovery Version*, 2 Sam. 7:14, note 1)

Lee notes that God's expression is both for the church age and for eternity: the many brothers "are His increase and expression in order that they may express the eternal Triune God for eternity. The church today is a miniature of this expression (Eph. 1:23), and the New Jerusalem in eternity will be the ultimate manifestation of this expression (Rev. 21:11)" (*Recovery Version*, Rom. 8:29, note 4).

### **The Identification and Union of God's People with His Son**

The union of God and His people is organic, as illustrated by the grains being blended to

be fine flour and formed into one loaf, signifying the Body. The firstborn Son and the many sons are one in life, nature, appearance, and expression. We may consider that Christ and His people are “twins,” since all were born on the day of resurrection.

This can first be seen in the identification of Christ with the children of Israel. Matthew 2:13-15 describes how Joseph was instructed to take the child Jesus and His mother and flee to Egypt in order to escape Herod’s infanticide. They safely remained there until the death of Herod, who had sought to destroy the child. Verse 15 indicates that Jesus’ return back to the land of Israel was a fulfillment of Hosea 11:1: “Out of Egypt I called My Son.” Hosea, however, spoke this word in the context of the beloved Israel: “When Israel was a child, I loved him, / And out of Egypt I called My son.” Exodus 4:22 confirms this understanding; in this verse God instructs Moses to say to Pharaoh: “Thus says Jehovah, Israel is My son, My firstborn.” Note that here Israel is emphatically designated as Jehovah’s firstborn. Collectively, these verses indicate that God’s bringing Israel, the corporate son of God, out of Egypt became a prophecy of the Son of God, Christ, coming out of Egypt. Thus, the profound implication of these passages is that Christ is identified and united with His corporate people.

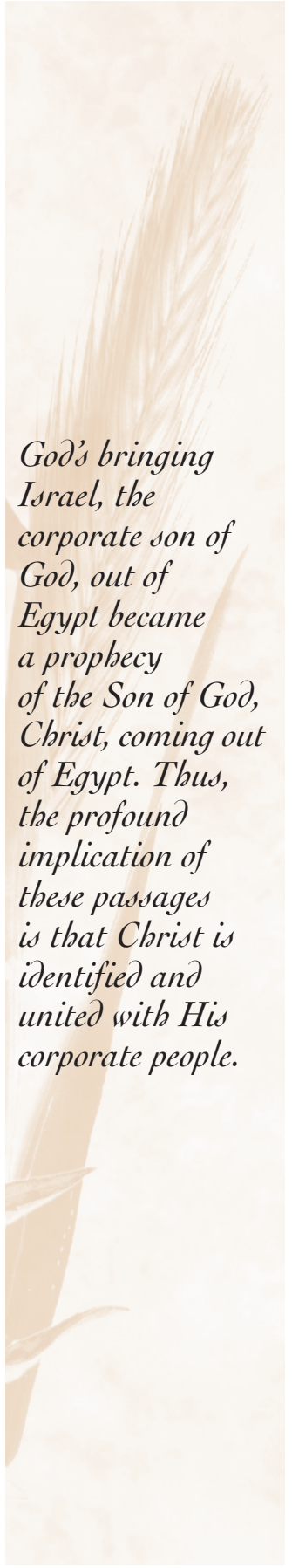
**T**he fulfillment of this identification is not merely positional; it is a life union. According to Lee, God’s call of His son, Israel, out of Egypt implies that Christ “became organically one with Israel through incarnation to be a real Israelite. Christ joined Himself to Israel in the matter of being a son of God” (*Recovery Version*, Hosea 11:1, note 2). Lee goes on to explain that this became possible through the steps that Christ took in His incarnation, death, and resurrection:

[Hosea 11:1] implies Christ as the Son of God. It also implies that all God’s chosen people become sons of God by virtue of their being organically united with Christ (cf. Rom. 11:17 and notes; Gal. 3:26 and note 2). This is possible because Christ is the Son of God in two aspects: the aspect of His being the only begotten Son of God and the aspect of His being the firstborn Son of God. In eternity Christ was God’s only begotten Son (John 3:16; 1 John 4:9), possessing only divinity without humanity. As such, He was unique. However, one day Christ was incarnated to be a man, taking on human nature and joining Himself with humanity (John 1:14). After dying an all-inclusive, vicarious death on the cross, He entered into resurrection. In resurrection and through resurrection He was begotten of God in His humanity to be the firstborn Son of God, possessing both divinity and humanity (Acts 13:33 and note; Rom. 1:3-4 and notes). Hence, in addition to His being the unique, only begotten Son of God from eternity, Christ, after His incarnation and through His resurrection, has become the Son of God in another sense, in the sense of being the firstborn Son of God (Heb. 1:5-6). Furthermore, in Christ’s resurrection all His believers were begotten of God, regenerated (1 Pet. 1:3), to be the many sons of God (Heb. 2:10), Christ’s many brothers (Rom. 8:29), to be His members for the constituting of His organic Body. All this is implied in this verse. (*Recovery Version*, Hosea 11:1, note 2)

### **Dispensational Transfers from Israel to the Church and from the Church to the Overcomers**

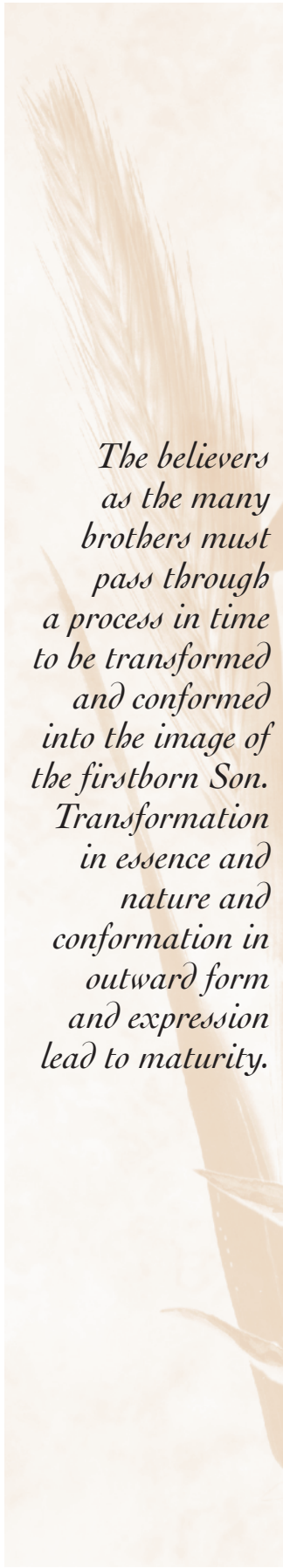
Farrar’s commentary on Hebrews 12:23 relates *the church of the firstborn* in Hebrews 12:23 to Jacob’s inheritance: “This refers to the Church of living Christians... These, like Jacob, have inherited the privileges of firstborn which the Jews, like Esau, have rejected” (182). Instead of Esau, who was Isaac’s firstborn, it was Jacob who received the birthright. Jacob then distributed it to certain of his descendants. Hebrews 12:14-16 warns the believers to positively pursue peace and sanctification and to beware of falling “away from the grace of God” in the same way that Esau gave up “his own birthright” for one meal. Lee notes that

Esau’s birthright as the firstborn son of Isaac was the double portion of land, the priesthood, and the kingship. Because of Esau’s profaneness in giving up his birthright, the double portion of land was given to Joseph (1 Chron. 5:1-2), the priesthood was passed to Levi (Deut.



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and expression  
lead to maturity.*

33:8-10), and the kingship was assigned to Judah (Gen. 49:10; 1 Chron. 5:2). (*Recovery Version*, Heb. 12:16, note 1)

A comparison of Luke 15 and Matthew 21 provides evidence of an analogous dispensational transfer of the birthright from the Jews to the church. The three famous parables in Luke 15 concerning the shepherd seeking a lost sheep, the woman seeking a lost coin, and the father receiving the lost son were the Lord's response to the Pharisees and the scribes who murmured against the Lord Jesus because He "welcomes sinners and eats with them" (v. 2). In the third parable the Lord likened these leaders of Judaism to the firstborn son who was "slaving" for the father and never neglected or transgressed any of the father's commandments (v. 29), and He likened the second son to the tax collectors and sinners, those who "devoured [the father's] living with harlots" (v. 30). In contrast, in Matthew 21:28-32 the Lord likened the first son, who said he did not want to "work in the vineyard" but "later...regretted and went" (vv. 28-29), to the "tax collectors and the harlots" (vv. 31-32). Hence, the second son, who said, "I will, sir" yet did not go (v. 30), was likened to the chief priests and the elders who did not believe John's gospel message of righteousness to repentant sinners (vv. 25, 32; cf. 3:1-2, 6). Lee points out that "the Jews were the firstborn of God (Exo. 4:22) and had the birthright. However, because of their unbelief the birthright was shifted to the church, which has become God's firstborn (Heb. 12:23)" (*Recovery Version*, Matt. 21:31, note 1).

Commenting on Hebrews 12:23, J. Barmby states that "the picture is, indeed, in some respects, ideal; for the actual Church on earth does not come up to the idea of the 'Church of the Firstborn,' but it is presented according to God's purpose for his people, and it rests with us to make it a present reality to ourselves" (362-363). For this reason the reference to Esau in verses 16 and 17 is applied as a warning to the New Testament believers to not go backward to the world or the old religion. Instead, they should continue running the race (v. 1) in light of the coming kingdom as a reward to the overcomers. Lee notes,

As the firstborn sons of God, we have the birthright. This includes the inheritance of the earth (2:5-6), the priesthood (Rev. 20:6), and the kingship (Rev. 20:4), which will be the main blessings in the coming kingdom and which the profane, world-loving-and-seeking Christians will lose at the Lord's coming back. Eventually, this birthright will be a reward given to the overcoming Christians in the millennial kingdom. Any worldly enjoyment, even one meal, could cause us to forfeit this birthright of ours. After such a serious warning, if the Hebrew believers had still preferred to indulge in "one meal" of their old religion, they would have missed the full enjoyment of Christ and would have lost the kingdom rest with all its blessings. (*Recovery Version*, Heb. 12:16, note 1)

### **The Firstborn Ones Being Conformed to the Image of the Firstborn**

In God's New Testament economy, Christ is the Firstborn (1:6), the "appointed Heir of all things" (v. 2). In the context of verse 5 (a quotation of Psalm 2:7), the Son in Hebrews 1:2 is the firstborn Son of God begotten by God in His humanity on the day of His resurrection (Acts 13:33). As the Firstborn, He receives the nations as His inheritance and the limits of the earth as His possession (Psa. 2:7-8). In His resurrection Christ was begotten by God to be the Firstborn among many brothers (Rom. 8:29); likewise, the believers were also resurrected with Him and regenerated with His life to be His many brothers (Eph. 2:6; 1 Pet. 1:3). Hence, in the Lord's resurrection the many brothers became one with the Firstborn.

In God's eyes, which see according to eternity, this is an accomplished fact. However, the believers as the many brothers must still pass through a process in time to be transformed and conformed into the image of the firstborn Son, as described in Romans 8:29; 12:2; and 2 Corinthians 3:18: Transformation in essence and nature and conformation in outward form and expression lead to maturity; maturity then results in glorification. Lee asks a practical question: "How can we be conformed to the image of God's Firstborn?" (*Organic Aspect* 71). The answer requires us to "understand how God's Firstborn lived on earth" (71).

After the fall of man, the only begotten Son of God came to become the Son of Man. The four Gospels describe how this man, who would become God's Firstborn in resurrection, lived the life of a man on earth. His was the pattern of the life that God desired the created man to live. Jesus did not live by Himself but was continually with the Father and looking to the Father (John 8:16; 11:41), not doing anything from Himself (5:30). He did what the Father was doing and worked the Father's works (vv. 17, 19; 10:25). He spoke what the Father was speaking (8:28, 38; 12:50) and went where the Father sent Him (6:57; 8:18; 14:24). To see Him was to see the Father (v. 9). In summary, He lived a crucified life, a life of "not I but the Father." Lee explains that "the crucified life which He lived on earth as the Son of Man became a mold"; therefore, we, the saved ones, "should be conformed to such a mold (Phil. 3:10b)" because we are "the same as He is" (72).

Through regeneration the believers received the divine life of God and thereby became God's children and His many sons; hence, we are the many brothers of Christ (Rom. 8:29). However, further steps are needed before we express Him in full. Lee asks, "Why is it that after we were regenerated to become the sons of God, we still have to be conformed to the image of God's firstborn Son?" (71). Conformation is needed because we do not yet live out the image of the firstborn Son of God. Lee illustrates with a familiar example: "Perhaps this morning some of you husbands and wives still had a quarrel, and after the quarreling you came to the meeting" (71). This kind of experience confirms that we are not yet like sons of God, even though we were *regenerated* to become sons of God. Lee says, "To be conformed to the image of God's firstborn Son equals to live out His image. When we all live out His image, the world will see Christ as the Firstborn of God because all His brothers will be manifested here" (71). For this reason we need to experience conformation in our daily living. Lee summarizes how conformation corresponds to both the inward transformation in life and the outward expression of Christ in our living:

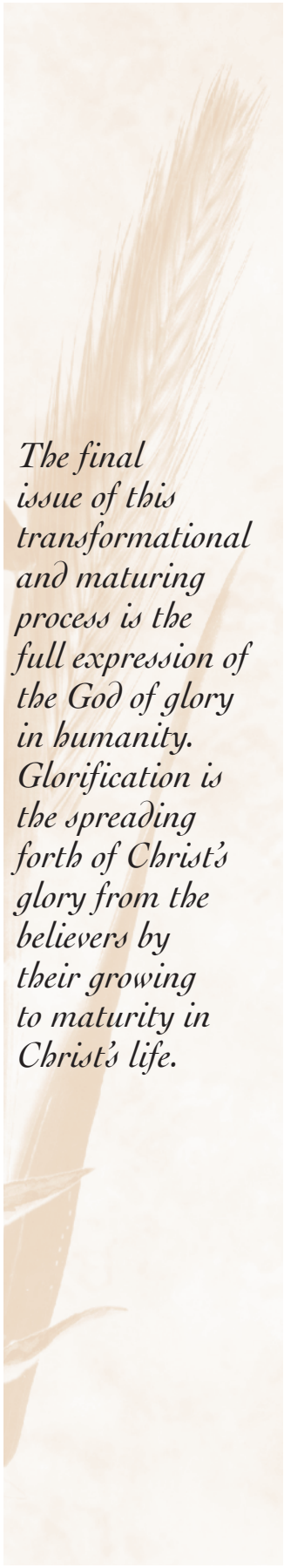
Conformation is the consummation of the believers' transformation in life, and it is also to be conformed to the image of the firstborn Son of God, who is Christ as the God-man. To be conformed to the image of God's firstborn Son is the believers' becoming full-grown in life as God-men. This is to be conformed to His death in all things through the resurrection power of Christ (Phil. 3:10) and to live Christ for magnifying Him through the bountiful supply of the Spirit of Jesus Christ, the God-man (Phil. 1:19-21a). This is to be the reprints of the God-man, Christ, that we may be exactly like Him, the firstborn Son of God. (73)

**T**he final issue of this transformational and maturing process is the full expression of the God of glory in humanity. Lee concludes that "glorification is the spreading forth of Christ's glory from the believers by their growing to maturity in Christ's life. We may say that glorification is the manifestation of the glory of the firstborn Son of God from within us" (73).

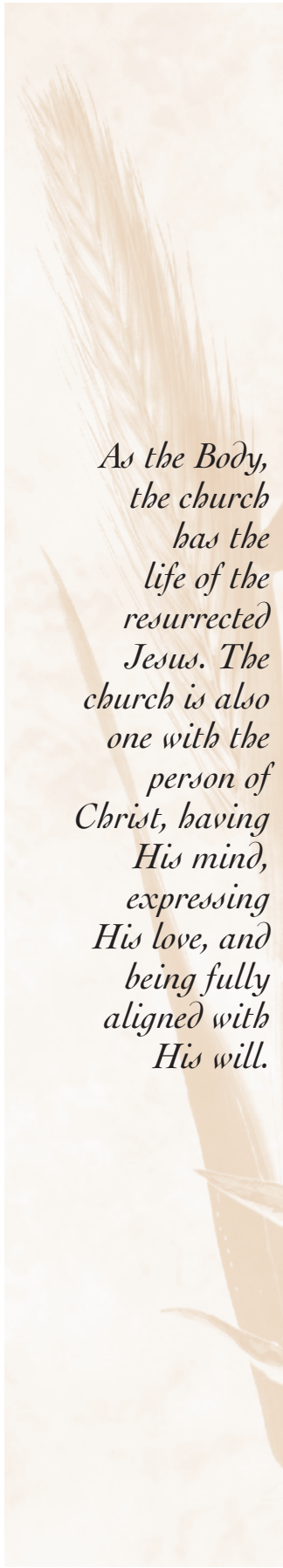
## Conclusion

In his *Word Studies in the New Testament*, M. R. Vincent provides a helpful summary comprising many of the above points in his commentary on the designation of the church in Hebrews 12:23—"And church of the first-born which are written in heaven (καὶ ἐκκλησίᾳ πρωτοτόκων ἀπογεγραμμένων ἐν οὐρανοῖς)" (553):

This forms a distinct clause; "and to the church," etc...The "myriads" embrace not only angels, but redeemed men, enrolled as citizens of the heavenly commonwealth, and entitled to the rights and privileges of first-born sons. Πρωτο-τοκος *first-born* is applied mostly to Christ in [the New Testament]. See Rom. viii. 29; Col. i. 15, 18; Heb. i. 6; Apoc. i. 5 [and compare to] Heb. xi. 28, and L. ii. 7. Properly applied to Christians by virtue of their union with Christ, "the first-born of all creation," "the first-born from the dead," as sharing his sonship and heirship. See Rom. viii. 14-17, 29. The word also points to Christians as the true *Israel* of God. The analogy is suggested with the first-born of Israel, to whom peculiar sanctity attached,



*The final issue of this transformational and maturing process is the full expression of the God of glory in humanity. Glorification is the spreading forth of Christ's glory from the believers by their growing to maturity in Christ's life.*



*As the Body,  
the church  
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life of the  
resurrected  
Jesus. The  
church is also  
one with the  
person of  
Christ, having  
His mind,  
expressing  
His love, and  
being fully  
aligned with  
His will.*

and whose consecration to himself God enjoined (Ex. xiii. 1, 11-16); and with the further application of the term *first-born* to Israel as a people, Ex. iv. 22. The way was thus prepared for its application to the Messiah. There seems, moreover, to be a clear reference to the case of Esau (ver. 16). Esau was the first-born of the twin sons of Isaac (Gen. xxv. 25). He sold his birthright (πρωτο-τοκια), and thus forfeited the privilege of the first-born. The assembly to which Christian believers are introduced is composed of those who have not thus parted with their birthright, but have retained the privileges of the first-born. The phrase “church of the first-born” includes all who have possessed and retained their heavenly birthright, living or dead, of both dispensations: the whole Israel of God, although it is quite likely that the Christian church may have been most prominent in the writer’s thought. (554)

**W**e have traced the economical process from Christ being the only Begotten to His being the Firstborn among many brothers—a process that comprises His incarnation, death, and resurrection—His becoming the life-giving Spirit, and His ultimate return to be the eternal reigning King. His many brothers become the full-grown many sons through regeneration, sanctification, transformation, and maturation to be built up as functioning members of the one Body of Christ and to be the constituents of the one new man. The day of resurrection is a crucial landmark of this process. This was the day of a great delivery—the birth of the church of the firstborn. In the divine and eternal view this is an accomplished fact. However, in time additional processes are needed—the gospel must be preached, and those who respond must pass through the process that includes regeneration, growth, transformation, building, and glorification to become like Him (1 John 3:2). The book of Revelation indicates that the man-child must grow and mature, and the bride must make herself ready (12:5; 19:7; 21:2).

In eternity future, the New Jerusalem will be the joint expression of the church of the firstborn, comprising the perfected descendants of Israel, represented by the gates with the names of the twelve tribes (v. 12), and the transformed New Testament believers, represented by the twelve foundations with the names of the apostles (v. 14). Ultimately, both Christ and those who are one with Him are taken up and corporately come down out of heaven to express Him in glory (1 Tim. 3:16; Rev. 21:11).

Although we look forward to this consummate future, in principle we need not wait for it. Rather, as His sons, we can have a foretaste even today. As the Body, the church has the life of the resurrected Jesus. The church is also one with the person of Christ, having His mind, expressing His love, and being fully aligned with His will. The church is not only one with the Firstborn in both life and expression but is also the same in status and position as the Firstborn. Hence, the church is the corporate firstborn participating in all the blessings and rights that are attributed to the Firstborn.

The church described in Hebrews points to a corporate union in life that should be our regular and present experience in this age as a foretaste (cf. 2:11-12).

As the consummate firstborn, the church can enjoy all the blessings and inheritances allotted to the Firstborn. This is a great mystery—Christ as the Firstborn and the church of the firstborn. **LC**

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>The *Recovery Version of the Bible* describes the subject of Hebrews as “Christ being superior to Judaism and everything related to it, and the new covenant which He consummated being better than the old covenant.”

<sup>2</sup>In note 5 on Hebrews 12:2 in the *Recovery Version of the Bible*, Lee provides an extensive list of the heavenly aspects of Christ after His ascension. In chapter 10 of *Elders' Training, Book 6: The Crucial Points of the Truth in Paul's Epistles*, Lee gives “thirteen crucial points in the book of



Hebrews" (124), corresponding respectively to each chapter; many of these points refer to specific aspects of Christ's person, work, and status (124-128).

<sup>3</sup>Concerning the symbolism and application of these items in the Holy of Holies, Witness Lee notes their superiority in comparison to the corresponding items found in the Holy Place:

The hidden manna in the golden pot signifies our experience of Christ as our life supply in the deepest way, an experience much deeper than that signified by the table of the bread of the Presence in the Holy Place. The budding rod signifies our experience of Christ in His resurrection as our acceptance by God for authority in the God-given ministry. This is deeper than the experience of Christ as the incense for our acceptance by God. The tablets of the covenant, which are the tablets of the Ten Commandments, signify our experience of Christ as the enlightening inner law, which regulates us according to God's divine nature." (*Recovery Version*, Heb. 9:4, note 3)

<sup>4</sup>New Testament readers have faced difficulties in how to interpret and apply the Sabbath rest. In his *Life-study of Hebrews*, Lee devotes seven consecutive messages (entitled "The Remaining Sabbath Rest" (msgs. 18—24)) to the Sabbath rest, for an in-depth study of this subject. Here we particularly focus on the connection of the Sabbath rest to the church life in this present age.

<sup>5</sup>According to Genesis 22:2, God commanded Abraham to "go to the land of Moriah" and offer Isaac "on one of the mountains of which I will tell you." According to 2 Chronicles 3:1, "Solomon began to build the house of Jehovah in Jerusalem on Mount Moriah," which became the place where the sacrifices were offered.

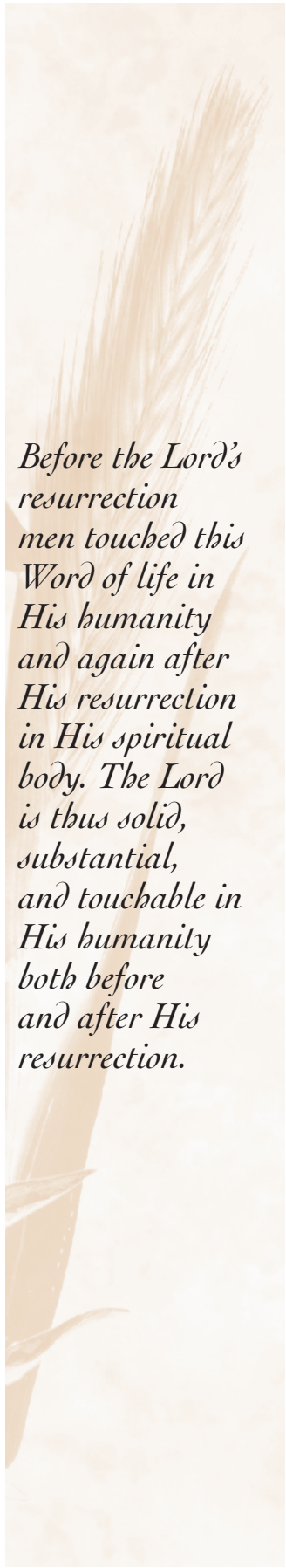
<sup>6</sup>One category of heresy acknowledges Christ's divinity but denies His humanity. The apostle John confronts directly those who would deny that Jesus came in the flesh. Concerning 1 John 1:1, Lee draws attention to the sequence of expressions used by John to describe the apostles' firsthand interaction with Jesus Christ, who is "the Word of Life": "First, *have heard*, then *have seen*; after having seen, *beheld*, gazed at with a purpose, and *handled*, touched with hands. These expressions indicate that the Word of life is not only mysterious but also tangible, because He was incarnated" (*Recovery Version*, v. 1, note 4). In this same note Lee points out that before the Lord's resurrection men touched this Word of life in His humanity and again after His resurrection in His spiritual body (Mark 3:10; 5:31; 1 Cor. 15:44; John 20:17, 27). The Lord is thus solid, substantial, and touchable in His humanity both before and after His resurrection. Hence, 1 John 1:1 is a direct counter-testimony against the heresy that denied the incarnation of the Son of God.

First John 1:7 continues to emphasize the Lord's humanity, referring to the "blood of Jesus"; however, the additional phrase *His Son* counters a second heretical category—one that insists on Christ's humanity but denies His divinity. This heresy particularly denies the divine conception of Jesus. The truth is that Jesus was conceived of the Spirit (Matt. 1:18). First John 4:2 says that "every spirit which confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is of God." Lee explains that "to confess that Jesus has come in the flesh is to confess that He was divinely conceived to be born as the Son of God (Luke 1:31-35). Since He was conceived of the Spirit to be born in the flesh, the Spirit would never deny that He has come in the flesh through divine conception" (*Recovery Version*, v. 2, note 2).

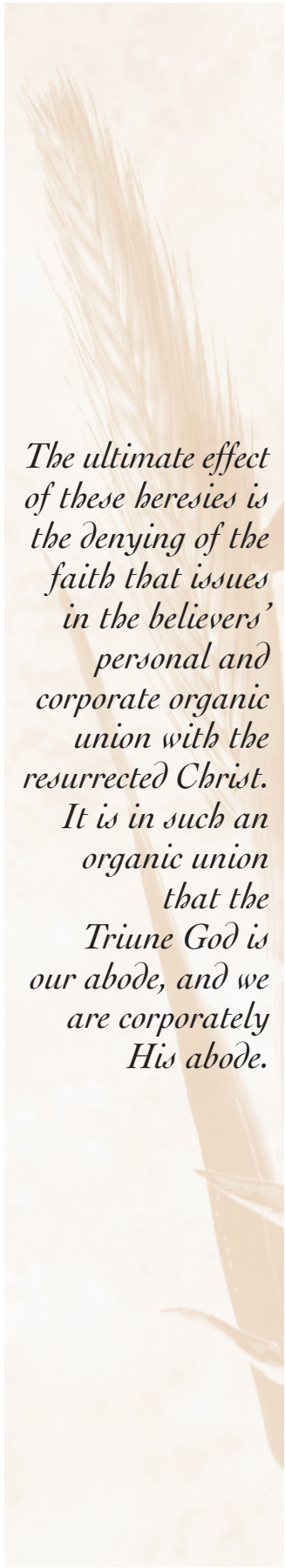
First John 1:7 simultaneously implies both the humanity and divinity of the Lord Jesus. Lee says that the title *Jesus* as the name of a man inoculates against the heresy that He was not a real and complete tripartite man and that the title *His Son* as a name of the Deity is an antidote to the heresy that insists on the Lord's divinity by denying His humanity (*Recovery Version*, v. 7, note 4). Earlier in the note, Lee explains that

the name Jesus denotes the Lord's humanity, which is needed for the shedding of the redeeming blood, and the title *His Son* denotes the Lord's divinity, which is needed for the eternal efficacy of the redeeming blood. Thus, *the blood of Jesus His Son* indicates that this blood is the proper blood of a genuine man shed for the redeeming of God's fallen creatures, with the divine surety as its eternal efficacy, an efficacy that is all-prevailing in space and everlasting in time. (*Recovery Version*, v. 7, note 4)

A third heretical category teaches erroneously concerning the time that Jesus Christ was God and the time that He was man. Adoptionism is one such example, which insists that the heavenly



*Before the Lord's resurrection men touched this Word of life in His humanity and again after His resurrection in His spiritual body. The Lord is thus solid, substantial, and touchable in His humanity both before and after His resurrection.*



*The ultimate effect of these heresies is the denying of the faith that issues in the believers' personal and corporate organic union with the resurrected Christ. It is in such an organic union that the Triune God is our abode, and we are corporately His abode.*

Christ is different from the earthly man Jesus. According to this heresy, the status of Christ was not Jesus' by birth—He was exalted to this status at a later time. This heresy claims that Christ as a dove descended upon Jesus at His baptism and then departed from Him before His death on the cross; it goes on to predict that the heavenly Christ “will rejoin the man Jesus at the coming of the Messianic kingdom of glory” (Lee, *Recovery Version*, 1 John 2:22, note 1). John designates the proponent of this kind of heresy a liar and antichrist.

A fourth category of heresy attempts to separate the Son from the Father or from the Spirit. Lee speaks against these heresies, applying the truth to the Christian experience:

Jesus, Christ, the Father, and the Son are all one. They all are the elements, the ingredients, of the all-inclusive compound indwelling Spirit, who is now anointing the believers all the time (vv. 20, 27). In this anointing, Jesus, Christ, the Father, and the Son are all anointed into our inner being. (*Recovery Version*, v. 22, note 2)

The ultimate effect of these kinds of heresies is the denying of the faith that issues in the believers' personal and corporate organic union with the resurrected Christ:

God the Father sent His Son as the Savior of the world (1 John 4:14) that men may believe in Him by confessing that Jesus is the Son of God, so that God may abide in them and they in God. But the heretical Cerinthians did not confess this; hence, they did not have God abiding in them, nor did they abide in God. Whoever confesses this, God abides in him and he in God. He becomes one with God in the divine life and nature. (Lee, *Recovery Version*, 1 John 4:15, note 1)

It is in such an organic union that the Triune God is our abode, and we are corporately His abode (cf. John 15:4-5).

<sup>7</sup>In Hebrews 10:5 the writer quotes Psalm 40:6, which literally says, “You have prepared ears for Me.” He thus correlates Christ's offering Himself to the obedience of a slave who is willing to serve his master for his entire life (Exo. 21:5) and, thus, submits to having his ear being bored through with an awl (v. 6). A further correlation is that an obedient slave is one who is able to “hear as an instructed one” (Isa. 50:4).

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