



in **C**hrist alone

LIVING

the

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CENTERED

LIFE

SINCLAIR B. FERGUSON

FOREWORD *by* ALISTAIR BEGG

“The title *In Christ Alone* is enough to make hearts brave and souls stand at attention. And Sinclair Ferguson, the consummate teacher, takes great pains to explain the supreme sufficiency of Jesus Christ and why He is ‘enough.’”

—JONI EARECKSON TADA

Founder, Joni and Friends

“*In Christ Alone* is a basic systematic theology in the form of a very readable book. Whether you are a new Christian looking for basic Christian doctrine or a more mature one wanting a refresher, this book will both instruct you and delight you. I warmly commend it to all Christians who want to grow in their faith.”

—JERRY BRIDGES (1929–2016)

Late Bible teacher and author
of *The Pursuit of Holiness* and other titles

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LIGONIER MINISTRIES

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To Libbie,
Alasdair, Rebeckah,
Éowyn, and Alden.
In loving gratitude for Al.

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FOREWORD

It is hard to conceal the sense of pleasure and privilege that accompanies the opportunity to write this foreword. Along with so many, I have found Sinclair Ferguson's writing to be profoundly helpful. It is hard to believe that twenty-seven years have elapsed since I first read *The Christian Life*. I remember as a young pastor being sorely tempted to preach my way through that introduction to Christian doctrine because not only was it comprehensive, it was so wonderfully clear. As I read this manuscript, I found myself employing Ronald Reagan's memorable line in debating Jimmy Carter in 1980: "There you go again!" Sinclair has done it again!

Here is rich theological content distilled with pastoral care and attention so as to make it accessible to every reader. How else could we explain a chapter on Christian liberty that bears the title "Eating Black Pudding"? As you benefit from each of these fifty short chapters, you may feel as if you have enjoyed the privilege of looking over the professor's shoulder at a thumbnail sketch of his lecture notes. Or, better still, that you have sat with your pastor as he has encouraged you to see that, in the words quoted from John Calvin, "salvation whole, its every single part is found in Christ" (p. 7).

It is this emphasis that makes the book so timely. One of the signs of aging is the temptation to view all our yesterdays as the good old days and to find in the present more causes for alarm and disappointment than are justified. As Christians, we are not exempt, and some might argue that we are more prone than others to this perspective. In light of that, I now proceed with caution. Is it wrong to suggest that earlier generations were more thoroughly grounded in the gospel, better versed in the Scriptures, and more convinced that a new life in Christ is lived on the pathway of joyful obedience? How can we possibly tell?

First of all, listen to the present generation talk. I thoroughly enjoy the privilege of addressing students at Christian colleges throughout the country. Their enthusiasm and creativity spur me on, but an accompanying uncertainty and lack of definition in basic Christian doctrine are causes for genuine

Foreword

concern. Some cannot, for example, explain why Mormonism is not Christian because they are unsure of the doctrine of the Trinity. Many appear to be uncertain about the exclusive claims of Jesus, and with the prevailing emphasis on ecology and poverty, many would be hard-pressed to agree with George Smeaton that “to convert one sinner from his way, is an event of greater importance, than the deliverance of a whole kingdom from temporal evil.”

Second, consider what is being read by this generation. If the best sellers tell the story, we are preoccupied with imaginative descriptions of end-time phenomena while searching for ways to live up to our human potential. Books on self-improvement and “how-to” texts on all matters earthly sell in abundance. We are reading about our bodies to the neglect of our souls as we measure success by achievement in the “here and now,” having lost sight of the “then and there.”

Third, hear our loss of focus on the gospel in our songs. This is no comment on musical styles and tastes, but simply an observation about the lyrical content of much that is being sung in churches today. In many cases, congregations unwittingly have begun to sing about themselves and how they are feeling rather than about God and His glory.

What, then, is the antidote to theological vagueness in our students, our books, and our songs? We need to learn to preach the gospel to ourselves because it is the A to Z of Christianity. We need, as chapter 28 makes clear, to be reminded of the three tenses of salvation. All this and more is accomplished by Dr. Ferguson as he consistently turns our gaze to Christ, the author and finisher of our faith.

We are helped in the process by the work of gospel-saturated hymn writers. Over the centuries, Isaac Watts, John Newton, William Cowper, and many others provided the church with biblical theology in memorable melodic form. Today, men such as Keith Getty and Stuart Townend are doing the same with compositions such as their contemporary hymn that shares its title with this book: “In Christ Alone.” We should be encouraged by the fact that “In Christ Alone” has become something of an anthem for the church in the first decade of this century. As Alec Motyer has rightly observed,

FOREWORD

“When truth gets into a hymnbook, it becomes the confident possession of the whole church.” Perhaps all that is necessary to expose the shallowness of our songs and to cause us to praise God as we ought is for pastors and poets and musicians to drink from the same fountain. Then biblical exposition will issue in song and our hymns will be full of the gospel.

It is a double joy to count the author of this book and the writers of this song as my friends, and I can commend both the book and the hymn with gratitude and enthusiasm.

—*Alistair Begg*
Parkside Church
Cleveland, Ohio
September 2007

P R E F A C E

In *Christ Alone*, while small in size, has been long in the writing. Indeed, it has taken two decades to produce. That is not so much because its author is a slow writer but because almost the entire book is a tapestry of articles written over the years for two periodicals, *Eternity Magazine* and *Tabletalk*. Only through a variety of circumstances did it become clear that when sewn together these various pieces would present a picture of the blessings of life in Christ.

As for the various chapters, they began life in the early 1980s when two Christian leaders and mutual friends, the late James Montgomery Boice and R.C. Sproul, befriended me, then a young seminary professor from another land. Over the years, both Jim and R.C. extended to me unfailing kindness and friendship, and the privilege of sharing in their ministries in Philadelphia, Orlando, and other parts of the United States. In addition, both men afforded opportunities to write for the magazines with which they were involved, *Eternity Magazine* in the case of Jim Boice and *Tabletalk* in the case of R.C.

In Christ Alone is a small down payment on the debt I owe to these two friends.

I am grateful to the leaders of the Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals for their graciousness in granting permission for the use of several articles from *Eternity Magazine*. These articles, forming several chapters in this volume, are maintained on the Alliance Web site, www.alliancenet.org, as part of its mission of calling the twenty-first-century church to a new reformation and proclaiming the great evangelical truths of the gospel. The Alliance, originally spearheaded by Jim Boice, continues to carry out its mission by broadcasting solid biblical teaching on radio and by sponsoring events such as the Philadelphia Conference on Reformed Theology. I count it a privilege to serve as an Alliance Council member.

I am also grateful to my friends at Ligonier Ministries (Ligonier.org) for the encouragement and help they have given me to complete this project.

Preface

Greg Bailey in particular has gone far beyond the call of duty in perfectly balancing personal encouragements to me with his editorial skills in bringing this project to completion, and I am both grateful and indebted to him. Ligonier disseminates R.C.'s teaching in audio and video forms; produces his daily *Renewing Your Mind* radio program; sponsors conferences; and publishes God-honoring books and music as part of its mission of proclaiming the holiness of God. Its daily devotional magazine, *Tabletalk*, is now in its 31st year. The editors were most gracious in granting permission for the use of numerous articles for this volume.

As the conclusion of *In Christ Alone* indicates, these pages came together in my mind just as my longtime friend and colleague Al Groves had gone to be with Christ. It is to his memory that *In Christ Alone* is dedicated. The conclusion not only refers to Al but contains material by him. I am indebted to Libbie Groves and to her family for permission to include that material here. Please read the conclusion last.

It remains only to express my gratitude to Eve Huffman, my secretary at First Presbyterian, Columbia, for her characteristically cheerful efficiency in helping me prepare these pages for publication, and to my longtime friend Alistair Begg for his foreword.

Nothing of much significance happens in my life apart from the devotion, prayerfulness, love, and friendship of my wife, Dorothy. To her and to our family I owe more than words can express or time can repay.

—*Sinclair B. Ferguson*
First Presbyterian Church
Columbia, S.C.
August 2007

In Christ Alone

*When we see salvation whole,
its every single part
is found in Christ,*

*And so we must beware
lest we derive the smallest drop
from somewhere else.*

*For if we seek salvation, the very name of Jesus
teaches us
that he possesses it.*

*If other Spirit-given gifts are sought—
in his anointing they are found;
strength—in his reign;
and purity—in his conception;
and tenderness—expressed in his nativity,
in which in all respects like us he was,
that he might learn to feel our pain:*

*Redemption when we seek it, is in his passion found;
acquittal—in his condemnation lies;
and freedom from the curse—in his own cross is given.*

*If satisfaction for our sins we seek—we'll find it in his
sacrifice;
and cleansing in his blood.*

*If reconciliation now we need, for this he entered Hades.
To overcome our sins we need to know
that in his tomb they're laid.*

*Then newness of our life—his resurrection brings
and immortality as well comes also with that gift.*

In Christ Alone

*And if we also long to find
inheritance in heaven's reign,
his entry there secures it now
with our protection, safety, too, and blessings that abound
—all flowing from his royal throne.*

*The sum of all is this:
For those who seek
this treasure-trove of blessings of all kinds,
in no one else can they be found
than him,
for all are given
in Christ alone.¹*

—John Calvin

PART I

The Word Became Flesh



The Creator took on creatureliness. Thinking about this can be tough going at first, even for Christians. We should not be surprised that this truth staggers our minds. If need be, then, read this section and return to its chapters after reading the rest of the book.





PROLOGUE TO CHRIST

The Gospel of John has always been regarded as the most theological of the four Gospels. As John Calvin said, with some insight, “The first three exhibit [Christ’s] body, if I may be permitted to put it like that, . . . but John shows his soul.”²

Each of the Gospels has a different starting point. Matthew begins with Abraham, Mark with John the Baptist, and Luke with Zechariah and Elizabeth. But John’s Gospel begins at the beginning—in eternity.

The opening verses are usually described as the Prologue. Like the overture to a great symphony, it introduces the motifs the composer (John) will weave into his testimony to his Lord. What are these motifs?

The Identity of Jesus

He is the Word made flesh (1:14). With a thrilling use of suspense—read the Prologue slowly and out loud to feel it—John delays before naming the majestic Logos in 1:17–18. Finally, we learn that He is Jesus! He comes to us from the deep recesses of eternity.

Our Savior is the God-man, and we should think of Him as both. In the first verse, He is described as the companion of God (He “was with God”) who, simultaneously, is Himself God (“the Word was God”). He “became flesh” (1:14). Fully God, fully man; truly God, truly man.

This view of Jesus—what came to be known in Christian theology as

the hypostatic, or “personal,” union (our Lord has two natures united in one person)—is the basic key to John’s Gospel. The One who strides through its pages is God the Son made flesh.

Revelation in Jesus

Our Lord is the Light of the World (John 1:4–5, 9; cf. 8:12). John’s Gospel records Jesus’ self-revelation. Its two main sections are sometimes called the “Book of Signs” (chapters 1–12), in which He points to His own identity, and the “Book of Glory” (chapters 13–21), in which He reveals His fellowship with the Father and the Spirit, and then is glorified through His death, resurrection, and ascension. Throughout both sections, the Lord is light shining into the world’s darkness.

In the Book of Signs, Jesus is seen to illumine and expose the darkness that forms the atmosphere in which humanity lives. Thus, Nicodemus, despite his many good qualities, comes to Jesus “by night” (John 3:2). Jesus’ conversation with him makes clear that, scholar though he may be, he is spiritually in the dark.

In the Book of Glory, Christ’s light continues to shine despite the efforts of the powers of darkness to extinguish it. Again, significantly, when Judas leaves the gathering in the upper room to betray Jesus, “it was night” (13:30).

Into this world in which “men loved darkness rather than light” (3:19), the Light of the World comes to unmask and to judge sin (9:39), and to reveal God. Whoever has seen Him has seen the Father (14:9; cf. 1:18).

Fulfillment in Jesus

John’s Christology is set within the context of God’s progressive purposes in history. “The law was given through Moses, but grace and truth came through Jesus Christ” (1:17). The Old Testament points forward to the New. God revealed Himself in pictures and ceremonies through Moses; Jesus is the reality to which they pointed. In Him, fullness arrives (1:16).

Like John the Baptist (1:15), the Law and the Prophets were only wit-

nesses to the Light; Jesus is the Light itself. That is why, for John, the events, imagery, and language of the Old Testament are like a shadow cast backward into history by Christ, the Light of the World. The dwelling of God in the wilderness tabernacle foreshadowed the presence of the Word incarnate as the final temple. It is in Him alone that we finally see God's glory (1:14).

The Work of Jesus

The Creator is also Re-Creator. From the beginning of his book, John makes clear his answer to the famous question that formed the title of Anselm of Canterbury's great work: *Cur Deus Homo?*—Why the God-man?

What makes this two-nature Christology essential to the gospel? John's answer is twofold:

1. Only God—the One through whom “all things were made” (1:3, cf. v. 10), in whom “was life” and “light” (v. 4)—can reverse creation's death and dissipate the darkness caused by sin.

2. But since that death and darkness are within creation, within man, the Word must become flesh in order to restore it from within. The Creator must enter His own creation, groaning as it is under the burden of alienation from Him.

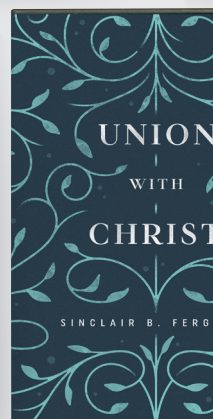
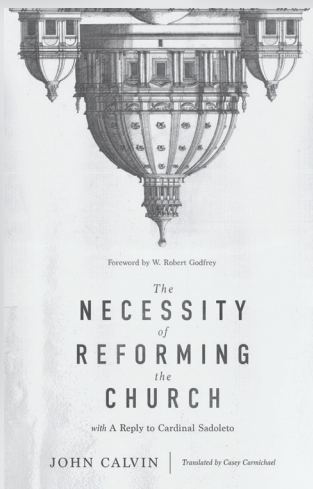
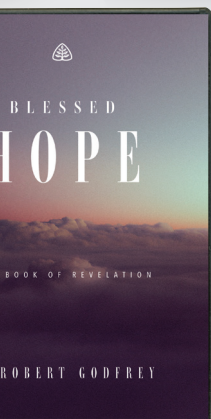
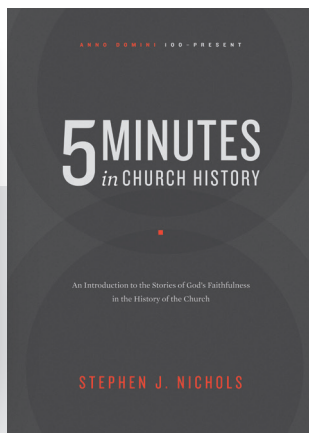
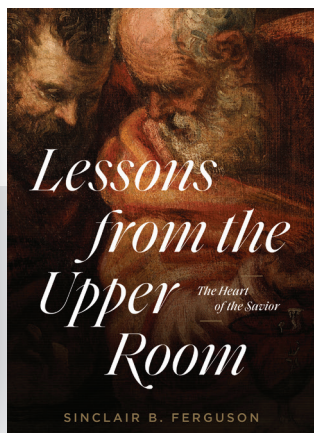
John's Christology is a Christology from above and from below. Christ comes from the Father, but He is also born of the Virgin Mary. But it is more than that. It is a Christology from without and from within: “How great is the difference between the spiritual glory of the Word of God and the stinking filth of our flesh!” writes Calvin again. “Yet the Son of God stooped so low as to take to himself that flesh addicted to so many wretchednesses.”³

Thus, John bids us take three steps to understand the Lord Jesus Christ:

1. The Word became flesh.
2. The Word made His dwelling among us.
3. The Word revealed His glory.

When we come to know Christ as our Redeemer, we discover—to our

We want to see men and women around the world connect the deep truths of the Christian faith to everyday life.



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