

**Endorsements for *In Christ Alone*  
by Sinclair B. Ferguson**

“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 International Disability Center

“*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  
Bible Teacher and Author  
of *The Pursuit of Holiness* and other titles

“Sinclair Ferguson is one of my favorite authors, and he’s done all of us a great favor by pulling together these writings penned over a long, faithful, and fruitful ministry (may it continue for many years!). This book is a feast that will satisfy both mind and heart, sharpening your thinking and deepening your devotion to *Christ Alone*.”

—C. J. MAHANEY  
President, Sovereign Grace Ministries



i n C h r i s t a l o n e



i n C h r i s t a l o n e

LIVING

*the*

GOSPEL

CENTERED

LIFE

SINCLAIR B. FERGUSON



Reformation Trust

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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

**I**n *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](http://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 ([www.ligonier.org](http://www.ligonier.org)) and its Reformation Trust Publishing division ([www.reformationtrust.com](http://www.reformationtrust.com))

## Preface

for the encouragement and help they have given me to complete this project. 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.<sup>1</sup>*

—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

**T**he 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.”<sup>2</sup>

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.”<sup>3</sup>

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

## The Word Became Flesh

amazement and joy—that we also have come to know our Creator! Then we say, “We have seen His glory.”

The lesson? Read and re-read John’s Gospel until you discover that it is bigger on the inside than it appeared to be from the outside. That is true of the Gospel of John because it is first true of the gospel of Jesus Christ!



## SANTA CHRIST?

I took the hand of my toddler son (it was several decades ago now) as we made our way into the local shop on the small and remote Scottish island where earlier that year I had been installed as minister. It was Christmas week. The store was brightly decorated and a general air of excitement was abroad.

Without warning, the conversations of the customers were brought to a halt by a questioning voice from beside me. My son's upraised index finger pointed at a large cardboard Santa Claus. "Daddy, *who* is that *funny-looking* man?" he asked.

Amazement spread across the faces of the jostling shoppers; accusing glances were directed at me. Such shame—the minister's son did not even recognize Santa Claus! What likelihood, then, of hearing good news in his preaching at the festive season?

Such experiences can make us bewail how the Western world gives itself over annually to its Claus-mass or commerce-mass. We celebrate a reworked pagan Saturnalia of epic proportions, one in which the only connection with the incarnation is semantic. Santa is worshiped, not the Savior; pilgrims go to the stores with credit cards, not to the manger with gifts. It is the feast of indulgence, not of the incarnation.

It is always easier to lament and critique the new paganism of secularism's blatant idolatry than to see how easily the church—and we ourselves—twist or dilute the message of the incarnation in order to suit our own tastes. But, sadly, we have various ways of turning the Savior into a kind of Santa Claus.

### ***Santa Claus Christianity***

For one thing, in our worship at Christmas we may varnish the staggering truth of the incarnation with what is visually, audibly, and aesthetically pleasing. We confuse emotional pleasure—or worse, sentiment—with true adoration.

For another thing, we may denigrate our Lord with a Santa Claus Christology. How sadly common it is for the church to manufacture a Jesus who is a mirror reflection of Santa Claus. He becomes Santa Christ.

Santa Christ is sometimes a Pelagian Jesus. Like Santa, he simply asks us whether we have been good. More exactly, since the assumption is that we are all naturally good, Santa Christ asks us whether we have been “good enough.” So just as Christmas dinner is simply the better dinner we really deserve, Jesus becomes a kind of added bonus who makes a good life even better. He is not seen as the Savior of helpless sinners.

Or Santa Christ may be a Semi-Pelagian Jesus—a slightly more sophisticated Jesus who, Santa-like, gives gifts to those who have already done the best they could! Thus, Jesus’ hand, like Santa’s sack, opens only when we can give an upper-percentile answer to the none-too-weighty probe, “Have you done your best this year?” The only difference from medieval theology here is that we do not use its Latin phraseology: *facere quod in se est* (to do what one is capable of doing on one’s own, or, in common parlance, “Heaven helps those who help themselves”).

Then again, Santa Christ may be a mystical Jesus, who, like Santa Claus, is important because of the good experiences we have when we think about him, irrespective of his historical reality. It doesn’t really matter whether the story is true or not; the important thing is the spirit of Santa Christ. For that matter, while it would spoil things to tell the children this, everyone can make up his or her own Santa Christ. As long as we have the right spirit of Santa Christ, all is well.

But Jesus is not to be identified with Santa Claus; worldly thinking—however much it employs Jesus-language—is not to be confused with biblical truth.

### ***The Christ of Christmas***

The Scriptures systematically strip away the veneer that covers the real truth of the Christmas story. Jesus did not come to add to our comforts. He did not come to help those who were already helping themselves or to fill life with more pleasant experiences. He came on a deliverance mission, to save sinners, and to do so He had to destroy the works of the Devil (Matt. 1:21; 1 John 3:8b).

Those whose lives were bound up with the events of the first Christmas did not find His coming an easy and pleasurable experience.

Mary and Joseph's lives were turned upside down.

The shepherds' night was frighteningly interrupted, and their futures potentially radically changed.

The magi faced all kinds of inconvenience and family separation.

Our Lord Himself, conceived before wedlock, born probably in a cave, would spend His early days as a refugee from the bloodthirsty and vindictive Herod (Matt. 2:13–21).

There is, therefore, an element in the Gospel narratives that stresses that the coming of Jesus is a disturbing event of the deepest proportions. It had to be thus, for He did not come merely to add something extra to life, but to deal with our spiritual insolvency and the debt of our sin. He was not conceived in the womb of Mary for those who have done their best, but for those who know that their best is “like filthy rags” (Isa. 64:6)<sup>4</sup>—far from good enough—and that in their flesh there dwells no good thing (Rom. 7:18). He was not sent to be the source of good experiences, but to suffer the pangs of hell in order to be our Savior.

### ***A Christian Christmas***

The Christians who first began to celebrate the birth of the Savior saw this. Christmas for them was not (contrary to what is sometimes mistakenly said) simply adding a Christian veneer to a pagan festival—the Roman Saturnalia. They may have been doing what many Christians have done in

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marking Reformation Day (which happens to fall on Halloween), namely, committing themselves to a radical alternative to the world's Saturnalia, refusing to be squeezed into its mold. They were determined to fix mind, heart, will, and strength exclusively on the Lord Jesus Christ. There was no confusion in their thinking between the world and the gospel, Saturnalia and Christmas, Santa Jesus and Christ Jesus. They were citizens of another empire altogether.

In fact, such was the malice evoked by their other-worldly devotion to Christ that during the persecutions under the Emperor Diocletian, some believers were murdered as they gathered to celebrate Christmas. What was their gross offense? Worship of the true Christ—incarnate, crucified, risen, glorified, and returning. They celebrated Him that day for giving His all for them, and as they did so, they gave their all for Him.

One Christmas Eve in my teenage years, I opened a book a friend had given to me as a present. I found myself so overwhelmed by its teaching on my recently found Savior that I began to shake with emotion at what had dawned on me: the world had not celebrated His coming, but rather had crucified Him.

Doubtless I was an impressionable teenager. But should it not cause us to tremble that “they crucified my Lord”? Or is that true only in song, not in reality? Are we not there when the world still crucifies Him in its own, often-subtle ways?

The truth is that unless the significance of what Christ did at the first Christmas shakes us, we can scarcely be said to have understood much of what it means, or of who He really is.

*Who is He in yonder stall  
At Whose feet the shepherds fall?  
'Tis the Lord! O wondrous story!  
'Tis the Lord! the King of glory!  
At His feet we humbly fall,  
Crown Him! Crown Him, Lord of all!*<sup>5</sup>

SANTA CHRIST?

And we might add:

*Who is He on yonder cross  
Suffers for this dark world's loss?  
'Tis the Lord! O wondrous story!  
'Tis the Lord! the King of glory!  
At His feet we humbly fall,  
Crown Him! Crown Him, Lord of all!*

Let us not confuse Jesus Christ with Santa Claus.