

Book Review of *In Christ Alone: Living the Christ Centered Life* by Sinclair Ferguson (Orlando FL: Reformation Trust Publishing, 2007).

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The first thing one must know about *In Christ Alone* is that it is not a monograph. It is a collection of fifty short articles which Sinclair Ferguson, currently Senior Minister of First Presbyterian Church in Columbia, SC, penned over two decades for two publications, *Eternity* magazine and *Tabletalk*. Ferguson has arranged them topically into six different sections, and while the structure helps provide some framework, the fact is that these remain fifty distinct essays. In essence, *In Christ Alone* is a compilation of Ferguson's exegetical theology over a period of twenty years.

However, this is what makes the book so useful, especially for use in personal or family devotions. For Ferguson is the same throughout: always sound, and always, as the title signifies, Christ-centered. As Jerry Bridges puts it on the book cover, *In Christ Alone* serves as a small systematic theology in the form of a very readable book. If one were to commit fifty days to reading this book, one chapter per day, then one will indeed learn better how to live a Gospel-centered life. And that is simply because every chapter is chock full of Scripture, pointing the believer to the greatness and grace of his Savior.

But quoting lots of Scripture does not guarantee Christ-centered thinking. Another well known Christian book boasts almost one thousand Biblical quotes, and even begins with the promising statement, "It's not about you." But Rick Warren's best-selling *The Purpose Driven Life*, with its forty day program, turns out to be all about you and what you can make of your life, with God's help. Of course, this fits perfectly with Warren's Arminian theology, and so we are not too surprised that in the forty chapter summaries, Warren mentions Jesus Christ only three times, and in two of those cases, what you must do for Him. No resting in Christ there. It is not that Warren doesn't have good things for us to ponder and to do, but without that total, robust reliance on Christ alone, he offers little more than a moralism cloaked in evangelical-sounding language.

I only bring this up because of the complete contrast one will find with *In Christ Alone*. I will admit that I allowed my mind to fantasize what might have been had Ferguson and Reformation Trust published this work under the title, "The Christ-Driven Life: fifty days to discover life's true purpose."

Not that Ferguson would advocate explicitly such a simplistic fifty day program as if that could guarantee a closer intimacy with Christ. Indeed, he seems to recognize that such an approach would undermine the very premise of the collection. For instance, Ferguson bemoans the idea of gaining Christian contentment by programmed means, such as "five steps to contentment in a month." Rather, he writes, "Christians must discover contentment the old-fashioned way: we must learn it" (pp. 187-8). Likewise, regarding contemporary approaches to mortification of sin, he writes that keen young Christians can be vulnerable to quick fixes, "but that in our evangelical subculture quick fixes do not solve long term problems." Thus, the reason that Christians today

turn to Paul to tell them *what* to do, but then run to the local Christian bookstore to discover *how* to do it is that “we do not linger long enough over what Paul is saying” (pp. 218, 220). We are impatient and pragmatic and want *our* lives to have purpose *now*.

But Ferguson offers a different program, one that reflects the older, grittier and more patient devotion which used to mark reformed piety before it was annexed and homogenized by the larger neo-evangelical subculture which took form in the middle of the last century. In Ferguson, one finds no self-focused and self-empowered program which offers a quick path to greater godliness. Rather, when one reads these essays, one is caught up in the author’s own Christ-centered thought. One gets the sense that it would never occur to Ferguson to suggest such a fleshly approach to growing in grace as a fifty day program, since such a thing almost inevitably takes one’s eyes *off* the Savior and onto oneself as the one completing the preset formula.

Indeed, it is the hallmark of these essays that they are instead Christ-focused and thus the collection is aptly named. Perhaps this is best epitomized in the chapter introducing Hebrews, when Ferguson asks whether Hebrews “does anything for us?” He then explains how there is no letter in the New Testament that tells us more about Christ and His work: how it is Hebrews which reveals how Jesus is the key to understanding the Old Testament; how Hebrews displays the greatness of Jesus Christ while emphasizing the importance of His humanity; and how it emphasizes the nature of true faith, a faith which values the Lord Jesus Christ above all things. Ferguson then concludes, “If studying Hebrews had that effect on us, it would be time well spent, don’t you think? How do you feel about Hebrews ‘doing’ that for you?” (pp. 45-8).

This is Ferguson at his best, reminding us that the most practical thing we can do is to study and meditate upon the person and merits of our Lord Jesus. We see this also in his explication of the Sabbath when he states that the key is not so much to ask what is OK to do on a Sunday or not, but *internally to cease* “from all self-sufficiency in order to rest in God’s grace” (pp. 228-9). Likewise, this pure resting in Christ allows us to enjoy the “greatest of all Protestant heresies” – the grace of assurance, that we might know beyond doubt that our souls are saved eternally simply by looking to Jesus alone (pp. 149-152). And if we in the Reformed world seek revival and the power to witness, our first step is not to study and discuss much as we tend to do, but to “wait” on the Spirit’s anointing (p. 95). This is another way of saying that in order to be truly useful we must *first* rest in Christ.

Moreover, this resting in Christ is not just for the new believer but for all Christians their whole life long. If we wish to decrease our worldliness and grow in our affection for Christ, the way to do that is no different then when we first believed:

What was it that created that first love? Do you remember? It was our discovery of Christ’s grace in the realization of our own sin.... Forgiven much we loved much (Luke 7:47)... The way in which we maintain “the expulsive power of a new affection” (for Christ) is the same as the way we first discovered it. Only when grace is still “amazing” – when we return to Christ and the cross where God’s love for us was demonstrated to us (Rom. 5:8) – does it retain its power in us. Only as we retain a sense of our own profound sinfulness can we retain a sense of the graciousness of God (p. 225).

And so a major theme of *In Christ Alone* is indeed taking our eyes off ourselves and our own efforts by thinking less pragmatically and more theologically – of meditating upon the Gospel. And the very fact that this theme emerges from fifty distinct essays rather than an agenda driven monograph serves to make it all the more authentic. This Christ-centeredness emerges from Ferguson in every essay simply because he is Christ-centered as a pastor, a theologian and a Christian. These essays are simply his meditating upon Scripture with *his* need for Christ in view – and that naturally leads him to the Gospel, that we may rest in it.

Not that Ferguson is a quietist by any means. He stays firmly in the mainstream of Reformed thought by insisting that true faith issues forth in good works. Assurance of salvation leads to love and good works, attendance to the public and private means of grace, and faithfulness to Christ until the end (p. 152). In a chapter on personal holiness, Ferguson emphasizes secret piety and challenges us to embrace the word “duty” once again and see it as a delight (pp. 159-162).

Indeed, one of the most valuable aspects of *In Christ Alone* is Ferguson’s realistic assessment of the Christian life, that true Christian piety involves suffering and not just triumph. In this, once again, reading Ferguson takes one back into an older and deeper piety that the evangelicalism of our day has forgotten. For instance, in the chapter entitled, “Struggles,” Ferguson describes the apostle Peter’s growth in grace not in terms of triumph, but in Peter learning, bit by bit, what it means to take up the cross (in his case, literally). Ferguson writes, “Perhaps we are so used to thinking about the infallibility of what the apostles wrote that we fail to take seriously enough the failures in the way they lived” (p. 180). This is a sobering view of sanctification, but one that is ultimately encouraging, for if Peter could so struggle and fail, and yet remain justified and useful to God, so can we.

Likewise, Ferguson goes on in the next chapter to describe how real Christian character is shown not in one’s own recognition, but in the ability to “play the second fiddle well” (pp. 183-6). That the mark of a growing Christian is that he encourages others and serves the Church behind the scenes, not caring who gets the credit. In this way, we reflect the spirit of Barnabas, and more importantly, of Christ.

In these things, Ferguson seems to “get” what was once common among our forefathers and yet forgotten in our day: authentic Christian faith involves sacrifice, service and suffering. That enjoying the benefits of Christ requires sharing in His sufferings – not so much that we need to be persecuted outwardly on a daily basis, but that following in the way of Christ *means* dying to self, becoming a servant to those around you, and enduring hardship with the sobriety, hope and joy that only the Gospel can provide. This is clearest in the chapter entitled, “Growing Strong in the War Zone,” in which Ferguson suggests that suffering actually be considered a mark of the Church, along with the Word, sacraments and prayer. He speculates that the only reason it was not listed in the classic formulations is that our forefathers simply took it for granted! And so we should not long for the glory of the “golden days” of Calvin’s Geneva, or Knox’s Scotland, or Edwards’s Northampton, for all these men and the people of these ages knew that true glory belongs not only in the future hope of heaven, but is “part of the ‘here and now’ of suffering” (pp. 201-4).

Ferguson even has a “word for the Reformed” in this regard in a chapter on what it means to have true Pentecostal power. After asking why it is that we Reformed lack power in our evangelistic witness, and suggesting that we are too prone to study, discuss and run ahead without “waiting” for the Spirit’s anointing, Ferguson then makes a deeper point. He writes:

Those who received power in the apostolic days had to settle the related issue of the crucifixion. They grasped that the risen Lord was the One who had first become a crucified Savior. Following Him meant a mark across their shoulders, a piercing of their hands and feet, and yes, a gashing of their sides, too. *Waiting* without *emptying* will not lead to *going* with the fullness of the Spirit (pp. 95-6).

In other words, we will never have spiritual power to evangelize (or anything else) unless we first embrace the crucifixion for ourselves – to take up our crosses of sacrifice, suffering and service in the way of Christ. He then concludes:

So, how about the *empowered* Reformed church? How about the *Spirit-filled* Reformed church? Is the Reformed church these things by definition? Only if there is first the *crucified* Reformed church (p. 96).

A quote such as that needs no further elaboration.

I will admit that when I first began *In Christ Alone*, I was somewhat skeptical of its usefulness as a *book*, and even a little cynical. Why republish fifty different articles under one cover? But here is the usefulness: in this collection, we have an example of sound, consistent, Christ-centered thinking penned over a period of two decades, all without any resort to gimmick or fad. We are encouraged by getting a glimpse into the heart of a man captured by Christ alone. As Alistair Begg puts it in his foreword, the reason this simple Gospel focus is so needed today, is that “with the prevailing emphasis on ecology and poverty, many (evangelicals) 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’” (p. 2). Sinclair Ferguson needs no such convincing.

So if you want a welcome break from the shallow, pragmatic, self-focused devotional literature of our day, and want to read truly Christ-centered reflections, Ferguson and Reformation Trust have done us a favor to gather all of these articles under one cover. The next time someone suggests a forty day devotional program, consider giving them *In Christ Alone*, and suggest to them that therein lie fifty great chapters about the real purpose of life – knowing, loving and resting in Jesus Christ.