Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ,

One of the most loved hymns of recent times is ‘In Christ Alone.’ It is a beautiful hymn that has become a real favourite or many. But what are we actually saying when we say, *In Christ Alone*?

* Positively, who is Christ? Why must it be Him and Him *alone*? And Christ alone for what; what do we need Him for?
* And negatively, what things or people might we be tempted to add to Christ? And why is this bad?
* And if it is all about Christ alone, do we need the law? Do we even need the OT?
* And what other areas of faith and life are affected by *In Christ Alone*?

Well, the doctrine of *In Christ Alone* was an issue that was troubling the church in Colossae. It is why Paul wrote this letter to them and we are going to explore their situation and the specific application of this doctrine that Paul provided.

And I trust you noticed how the language of our text is borrowed by our confession article? Our text says, “*These are a* ***shadow*** *of the things to come, but the* ***substance*** *belongs to* ***Christ***,” and our confession article says, “With the coming of **Christ** … all **shadows** have been fulfilled … yet their truth and **substance** remain for us in Jesus **Christ**.” And what we are going to see is that the *same* doctrine that Paul taught in our text had similar and different applications *for the church in the time of the Reformation*. And having seen how the doctrine of *In Christ Alone* spoke to the Colossian situation and the Reformation situation, we will be perfectly placed to see **how this doctrine speaks to our situation today**. So they will be our three main headings – Christ Alone and the **Colossian** situation, Christ Alone and the **Reformation** Situation, and Christ Alone and **Our** Situation.

1. So we begin with In Christ Alone and the **Colossian** Situation.
   1. The **theme** **of** **Colossians** is Jesus Christ, the best and All-sufficient Saviour. In ch. 1 we have a declaration of Christ as the superior, most glorious, premiere, first, supreme, highest, best, most excellent, Royal Saviour of mankind and the One *in* whom and *by* whom creation will be restored. It is possibly the most beautiful and comprehensive statement about who Jesus is in the whole Bible. So it is Christ who is to be the object of the believer’s faith and nothing or no-one else.
   2. So having held Christ before the Colossians **positively**, in ch. 2 Paul begins the **negative** side of his argument by addressing the false teaching that was circulating in Colossae.
      1. And if you look at v8 you will see that he starts off in a **general** way by talking about “*philosophy*” and “*human tradition*.” And this sort of teaching was dangerous because it could “*take you captive,*” he said. And it would ‘take you captive’ by taking you away from trusting in Christ alone like a kidnapper takes a child away from his/her parents.
      2. But from v11 Paul gets specific. One of the key parts of the false teaching in Colossae was the error known as **Judaism**. Judaism was the idea that in addition to believing in Jesus you also had to keep the ceremonial laws of Moses. 
         1. The first five books of the Bible are known as the Law of Moses. They contain the God’s **moral** law, i.e. The Ten Commandments, which are for all people and for all time, and they contain the **civil** law of Israel – those society laws that were specific to Israel as a nation but which contain principles that can still be helpfully applied today, and they contain the **ceremonial** law – all of the rules about ceremonies, offerings, festivals, temple furniture, what the priests had to wear, and unclean foods, etc. And the problem in Colossae had to do with the ceremonial law.
         2. And what was being taught was that to be saved you still had to be circumcised, which is what vv11-15 are about, and you had to avoid certain foods and drinks, and you had to observe the Jewish festivals, which is what the list in v16 is about.
            1. And very quickly, because it is not our main consideration today, I want to point out here that the Greek word translated as “**Sabbath**” at the end of v16 is in the plural in Greek. It literally is “Sabbath*s*.” And I really wish the ESV translators had kept it plural in English, as some other English versions have done. You see, v16 is not talking about God’s moral law or the Ten Commandments. This is not God saying that there are now just 9 commandments that we need to keep. The Sabbath Day of the Fourth Commandment has its origins in creation; it is not something limited to just Israel and her ceremonies. The Sabbaths in view here are the *ceremonial* Sabbaths *that were just for the Israelites*. In **Hosea 2:11** God spoke of a coming time when He would “*put an end to all [Israel’s] mirth, her feasts, her new moons, her Sabbaths, and all her appointed feasts*.” And this is consistent with how the Book of Hebrews speaks about Christ as the fulfillment of the *ceremonial* law of the OT. So Colossians 2:16 is not a proof text against observing the Lord’s Day!
   3. But having identified the idea that you had to believe in Jesus and observe the Jewish ceremonial law as the false teaching that undermined the doctrine of In Christ Alone, Paul said, “*These are a shadow of things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ*.” So what is that all about?
      1. Well, let’s start with the words ‘**shadow’** and ‘**substance**.’ We have had some lovely weather in recent days with bright sunshine. And when there is sunshine there are shadows. So boys and girls, imagine that you are sitting outside and waiting for your friend to arrive. And they arrive and around the corner of the house this shadow starts to appear. And you first see curly hair, just like your friends, and a nose and ears, just like your friends, and arms and legs and a body shape, just like your friends, and the shadow moves just like your friend does. So that shadow has helped you. It has given you lots of information. You know that your friend has arrived and you know that they are upright and ready to play. But do you go and hug the shadow and play with the shadow? Of course not! You go and hug and play with the person – the substance – the real thing!
      2. That’s what Paul was saying here. God’s plan was always to send Jesus to earth at a definite moment in history, but there would be generations of God’s people who lived before Jesus came to earth. And they needed to know about Him so that they could believe in Him. So God gave them ceremonies and festivals that would function like shadows. All of these ceremonies revealed something about who Jesus would be and what He would do.
         1. That is why we read about the **Passover** earlier. A lamb had to be killed and its blood had to be put on the doorposts so that the angel of the Lord would pass over those houses and not kill the firstborn. But then Jesus, the Lamb of God, came “*to take away the sins of the world*.” And **1 Corinthians 5:7** says, “*For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed*.” So the Passover was a shadow and Jesus is the substance.
         2. And we could look at every other ceremony and offering and piece of temple furniture and food law and clothing regulation and see how they were all *shadows* of Christ. Vern Poythress has a book called ‘*The Shadow of Christ in the Law of Moses’* where he does exactly that. I borrowed the title for my sermon title.
         3. But the point is those ceremonial laws were only *shadows*. They were given to instruct Israel. They were given to lead the people to faith in Messiah. But now Christ had come! Now the substance had come so they had to ‘stop playing with the shadows’!
      3. Now, let’s just try and put ourselves in the sandals of these Jewish believers for a moment. They had been brought up from day dot with all of the Jewish ceremonies and festivals and laws. Every meal, the clothes they wore, what buildings they entered, who they associated with, their holidays, all these things were governed by these laws! This was a massive adjustment! Imagine believing your whole life that eating bacon was unclean and evil and now it was fine! Imagine not going to Jerusalem for Passover when it had been one of the highlights of the year for centuries! Imagine not having to circumcise baby boys when for centuries that was what defined you as a nation. So the NT makes it clear that allowance was made for a short time of transition where Jews could observe some of these customs *just as customs*, but they had to understand that salvation was *In Christ Alone*.
2. So that’s *In Christ Alone* and the **Colossian situation**. Because Christ had come and because Christ was better the Jews had to learn that continuing to ‘play with the shadows’ was spiritually dangerous for themselves and that it was completely wrong for them to require non-Jews to observe the ceremonial law. And that brings us in the second place to *In Christ Alone* and the **Reformation Situation**.
   1. And for those of you who do not know, the Reformation is the time in the 16th century when God raised up ministers, like Martin Luther and John Calvin, who worked to reform the Roman Catholic Church because too many wonderful gospel realities had become hidden or ignored or were mixed with error. And of course, as a Reformed Church, that is where our name comes from – the Reformation. And our confession of faith was written to declare the truth of the gospel and to criticize false teaching and practice in the time of the Reformation.
      1. So the doctrine of *In Christ Alone* that we have seen in Colossians 2 has been the unifying theme of articles 16-24 – our election, our regeneration, our justification, our sanctification – all these have at their heart *In Christ Alone*. Even our efforts to obey God’s law are not to *earn* our salvation but because we *have been* saved. It is all *In Christ Alone*. And *In Christ Alone* is also the core of this article. And it is expressed in Colossians 2:17 language because the same error that Paul addressed in Colossae was present in the official teaching of the **Roman Catholic Church** of that time. And sadly, that official teaching has not changed to this day.
         1. In terms of **salvation**, we would have been in perfect agreement with the Judaizers in Colossae that salvation was in Christ. Where they went wrong was Christ *plus* instead of Christ *alone*. And it is the same with Rome: We are in perfect agreement with Rome about salvation in Christ. Where they go wrong is Christ *plus* Mary’s work and prayer to Mary, and plus prayer to the saints, and plus allegiance to the Pope, and plus going to the confessional and participating in the Sacraments and not eating meat on the Fridays of Lent. The only thing that should come after salvation in Christ is a fullstop! It must be In Christ *Alone*.
         2. But **Rome’s** **problem was and is not just its doctrine of salvation**. Our article says that the use of the ceremonies and symbols of the law “ought to be abolished among Christians.” And if you have ever seen a RC service, you would think you were right back in the Temple – up the front is a priest in elaborate robes, there is incense and candles and golden bowls, the building will be ornately decorated and there will be images and statues all over the place, and in the most prominent and central place in the building you will find not a pulpit but an altar. And on that altar the re-sacrificing of Jesus takes place in the Mass.
         3. And just as the ceremonies of the OT so often became empty rituals that Jews performed while their hearts were in love with Baal, so too the ceremonialism of Rome leads people to think that they can keep God happy by doing the rituals but that they don’t need offer Him their hearts.
            1. An extreme version of what I talking about is those Mafia movies where you see a hitman kill someone and then go to the confessional and then ‘get back to work.’
            2. But we all know, even with our simple worship, how easy it is to go through the motions of worship while our minds are distracted; to recite a creed or sing a song without engaging with our hearts and minds.
            3. But ceremonial and ritualistic worship lends itself to a going through the motions. And I will say more about this in our third and last point.
      2. But before then there was one other group in the time of the Reformation that this article had in view. And they were the **Anabaptists** or the Radical Reformers. They looked at Rome and her doctrine of salvation and her worship and decided that the problem was the OT. In their view, because Christ had come and because we have the NT, we can ignore the OT. And that is why the article continues, “In the meantime, we still use the testimonies taken from the law and prophets.”
         1. You will remember that when Jesus met the two people on the road to Emmaus, “*beginning with Moses and all the Prophets (meaning the OT!), He interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself*.” The OT is about Jesus!
         2. When you read the OT looking for Christ, it comes alive! And when you read the NT in the light of what the OT says about prophets, priests, kings, the temple, sacrifices, festivals, the Promised Land, Jerusalem, ceremonial washings, lambs, firstfruits, incense, candles, etc, wow! The glory and majesty of Christ and His church and eternal life become clearer and more wonderful!
            1. And we saw an example of this with the Passover and Jesus as the Lamb of God.
         3. And seeing things like this will make us eager to *believe* and to *love* and to *obey* Christ!
3. So the doctrine of *In Christ Alone* that we have in Colossians 2 spoke powerfully also to errors in the time of the **Reformation**. There should be no ceremonies and symbols of the law among Christians but the OT enriches our faith and obedience as believers. So we can end now with a few thoughts about *In Christ Alone* and **Our** Situation.
   1. And the first is that in terms of salvation it is *In Christ Alone*. Must we read the Bible? Yes. We are commanded to in the Bible. Must we be baptized? Yes. We are commanded to in the Bible. Must we be members of a church and attend worship? Yes. We are commanded to in the Bible. Must we tithe – give 10% of our income to the Lord? Yes. We are commanded to in the Bible. So how is a person saved? Is it by doing these things? No. It is by repenting of your sin and trusting in Christ alone. None of these things can earn salvation or contribute to salvation; they are works of thankfulness *for* our salvation. Our salvation is *In Christ Alone*.
   2. But from what we have seen about Christ as the substance of the OT shadows, I hope you can see why the fixation of so many professing Christians today with the **nation of Israel** and the hope of a rebuilt temple in Jerusalem is a denial of *In Christ Alone*. Israel and Jerusalem and the temple and the sacrifices were shadows for God’s OT people. But Christ, the substance, has come! We look to Him and the church and heaven now, not to a patch of dirt in the Middle East!
   3. And that brings us to our final point of application, which is **how we worship**. As you can see, I am not wearing ceremonial robes. There are no candles. There is no incense. Our building is plain and unadorned and we could just as easily worship in the carpark or on a beach because it is not about the building. And we have a table that we use for Lord’s Supper but it is not an altar and in the centre here we have the pulpit because it is the word of Christ that is central in NT worship. And our ceremonies are baptism and the Lord’s Supper. They are simple ceremonies and there is no blood because the blood of Jesus has washed away our sins on the cross.
      1. Someone has described the Bible in this way: The OT is a book with many pictures and little text, the NT is lots of text with very few pictures!
      2. And this is reflected in our worship – OT worship had lots of ceremonies and symbols and feasts and decorations, which taught the *eyes* about Jesus, but NT worship is all about words, which teach the heart and mind about Jesus, and just baptism and Lord’s Supper for the heart and mind and eyes.
      3. Sadly though, even in Protestant or Non-RC churches today there are those seeking more decoration and more ceremony and ministerial robes and candles and symbolic embroideries. And people lap this up; they love it because it appeals to the flesh. But Christ would have us worship Him in Spirit and truth – He wants our spirit, the core of our being, to enter into His presence by the power of the Holy Spirit, through the word of truth – the preaching of Christ.
      4. And that does not mean that we cannot have a comfortable building and update the décor, but our decoration will be about tidiness and comfort and good stewardship, not about symbolism!

May the Lord cause us to always be content and satisfied with *Christ Alone*! And may He do this through the preaching and teaching of the word of Christ, from the Old and New Testaments. Amen.