Alone Together: *Sola Scriptura* and the Other Solas of the Reformation

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1 Introduction

In this article, the relation between *sola scriptura* and the other solas of the Reformation, namely *sola fide*, *sola gratia*, and *solus Christus*, are explored. The central thesis of the present contribution is that *sola scriptura* should be understood as inherently related to the other solas, for if this perspective is lost, the spectre of the dilemma of biblicism or postmodern relativism looms large.

A problem in discussing *sola scriptura* is the lack of a broadly accepted definition, either explicit or implicit. This lack of conceptual clarity obviously coheres with the polemic nature of the term and with the complex history of the idea. Therefore, two preliminary steps are taken to properly contextualize the discussion of the relation between the solas, and to obtain a working definition for *sola scriptura*. First, two critiques of *sola scriptura* are sketched (§2). Secondly, the history of the idea *sola scriptura* is explored, particularly the “original” meaning of the idea in the time of the Reformation (§3), to find a working definition of *sola scriptura* (§4). Then, the relation between *sola scriptura* and *sola fide*, *sola gratia*, and *solus Christus* is discussed respectively (§§5–7). This contribution closes with a concluding §8.

2 Two Critiques of Sola Scriptura

Two recent critical approaches can serve to demonstrate the importance and substance of the present discussion.¹ First, Brad Gregory has recently

1 These obviously are not the only critical voices on *sola scriptura*, but they can serve as representative critiques of the core of *sola scriptura*. Other critiques include Roman-Catholic apologists, who have criticized the principle as self-referentially incoherent and unbiblical in itself, because the Bible nowhere explicitly teaches *sola scriptura*. 

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Given **sola scriptura** a pivotal role in his picture of the development of the Reformation and the Enlightenment. The shared insistence of the Reformers on scripture as the sole authority for Christian life and faith led to what Gregory calls “the unintended Reformation”: a secularization of both church and society.² For while adherents of **sola scriptura** stated that scripture interprets itself (**sacra scriptura sui ipsius interpres**), they were unable to decide what the Bible actually taught and what, therefore, were good Christian doctrines and practices.³ In the resulting conflict of incompatible interpretations, the magisterial Reformers had to resort to various other authorities than scripture to defend their adherence to practices such as infant baptism and doctrines such as the Trinity that could not literally be found in the Bible, as radical Reformers argued untiringly. Ultimately, the conflict of mutually exclusive interpretations of scripture was brought under the tutelage of competing political authorities, transposing the conflict from the ecclesial to the political and even military levels. So, **sola scriptura** led to an interpretative plurality, not to say hermeneutical anarchy. Furthermore, traditional authorities that had served at one time as normative referees for the various truth claims, could no longer do so. Now, although the magisterial reformers (unlike the radical reformers) acknowledged the relative authority of patristic writers and conciliar decrees, “they all rejected every putative ‘authority’ whenever the latter diverged from what each regarded as God’s truth, based on scripture as they respectively and contrarily understood it.”⁴ The net result was “an open-ended proliferation of irreconcilable truth claims,”⁵ which led to conflict, both in writing, politically, and militarily. This hermeneutical anarchy evoked the philosophical response that the solution to disunity, indeed, conflict could only be found without any appeal to supernatural, special revelation. **Sola ratio** promised to be the comprehensive, peaceful and solid foundation for truth that **sola scriptura** could not offer.⁶

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³ Gregory, *The Unintended Reformation*, 93.
⁵ Gregory, *The Unintended Reformation*, 110.