

Table: “Five Solas” of Reformed Faith versus PC(USA)

Introduction: The “Five Solas” emerged during the Protestant Reformation as Latin phrases meant to summarize the Reformers’ fundamental theological beliefs, as distinct from those of the Roman Catholic church. The Latin word “sola” means “alone” or “only.” The “Five Solas,” taken together, articulated the basic pillars of faith the Protestant Reformers believed were essential to Christian belief and practice. Deriving from the Reformed Tradition, the Presbyterian denomination is grounded in these “Five Solas”, which find their expression in the Presbyterian Church (USA)’s *Book of Confessions*. Sadly, as we shall demonstrate here, the PC(USA) now embraces a culture of theological pluralism that abandons its “Five Solas” heritage. Listed below are the “Five Solas” of Reformed faith, along with evidence of how the PC(USA) has departed from these tenets in its policy and practice.

1. The Person and Work of Jesus Christ: “Solus Christus” – by Christ Alone

“Solus Christus” is the Reformed teaching that Jesus Christ is one with God, that by His death and bodily resurrection He is the unique and only mediator between God and humans, and that there is salvation in no other.

The Word of God:

John 14: 4-6

“You know the way to the place where I am going.”
Thomas said to him, “Lord, we don’t know where you are going, so how can we know the way?”
Jesus answered, “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.”

Colossians 1:15-23

¹⁵He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation.
¹⁶For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him. ¹⁷He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. ¹⁸And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy. ¹⁹For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, ²⁰and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.

²¹Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behavior.
²²But now he has reconciled you by Christ’s physical body through death

PC(USA) beliefs, policies, and practices:

a.) The deity and singular, saving lordship of Christ

-In 1981, the highest church court, the Permanent Judicial Commission, upheld National Capital Union Presbytery’s decision to ordain Mansfield Kaseman. In answer to the question, “Was Jesus God?” Kaseman replied, “No, God is God.” Later, in an attempt to explain his position, he said, “Saying Jesus is one with God is a better way of saying it ... but I, too, am one with God.

-In 1993, a conference entitled “Re-Imagining God” was funded by the PC(USA) mission budget (\$60,000) and planned largely by PC(USA) personnel at denominational expense. Participants received tens of thousands of dollars worth of travel and registration expense reimbursements from the PC(USA) mission budget. At the conference, “worship” leaders denied the existence of a transcendent God, worshipped “the god within ourselves,” and exchanged the goddess “Sophia” for Jesus Christ, declaring that Jesus “was first born only in the sense that he was first to show us that it is possible to live in oneness with the divine source while we are here on this planet.”

-In 1994, The PC(USA) co-sponsored “Celebrate! Gathering at the Crossroads,” an ecumenical student conference in St. Louis. The Bible Study leaders’ book for that occasion was *Journeys by Heart: A Christology of Erotic Power*. Here is a quote from that book: “Christ is a major problem for feminist theology. That problem has been born of an unholy trinity, father-son-holy ghost, that has cradled Christ in its patriarchal arms ... I will be developing a Christology not centered in Jesus, but in relationship and community and the whole-making, healing center of Christianity. In that sense, Christ is what I am calling Christa/Community.”

-In 2000, The Rev. Dirk Ficca (a member of Chicago Presbytery) was the featured speaker at the PC(USA) sponsored and funded “Peacemaking Conference.” He stated that world peace is threatened by religions that make exclusive claims, and he asked rhetorically, “If God is at work in our lives, whether we’re Christian or not, what’s the big deal about Jesus?” In 2001, the Executive Committee of the General Assembly Council, the PC(USA) agency responsible for the conference, declined to discipline Ficca or even to distance itself from his “Jesus” statement. Rather, it affirmed that PC(USA) conference speakers had the freedom to express their convictions.

-At the 2001 General Assembly, a motion was made to declare “the singular, saving lordship of Jesus Christ.” That motion was defeated when the assembly was persuaded that such a statement was disrespectful to “other religions.” “Religions are like a basket of fruit,” said a speaker representing the prevailing opinion. “Apples and oranges are different, but they are all fruit. Religions are different varieties of the same thing, so they’re all equal.” Largely as a reaction to this 2001 vote, the 2002 General Assembly affirmed the document “Hope in the Lord Jesus Christ,” which did recognize that “Jesus Christ is the only Savior and Lord, and all people everywhere are called to place their faith, hope, and love in him.” But in an effort to please all sides, the document also added language that “we do not

to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation—²³if you continue in your faith, established and firm, not moved from the hope held out in the gospel. This is the gospel that you heard and that has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven, and of which I, Paul, have become a servant.”

Acts 4: 8-12

“Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them: “Rulers and elders of the people! If we are being called to account today for an act of kindness shown to a cripple and are asked how he was healed, then know this, you and all the people of Israel: It is by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified but whom God raised from the dead, that this man stands before you healed. He is

“the stone you builders rejected, which has become the capstone.

Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved.”

presume to limit the sovereign freedom of ‘God our Savior, who desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth’... Grace, love, and communion belong to God, and are not ours to determine.” The added language introduced confusion and ambiguity on the question of whether Jesus alone is truly Savior and Lord.

b.) The atonement of Christ

-In 1993, Delores Williams, speaker at the PC(USA)-sponsored “Re-Imagining God” conference, declared: “I don’t think we need folks hanging on crosses and blood dripping and weird stuff ... we just need to listen to the God within.” Williams’ articles, including one that rejects “the theory of the atonement,” have been published by the PC(USA)’s official publication, Presbyterian Survey, and she was featured as the leader of a week-long seminar leader at Ghost Ranch, a PC(USA) national conference center.

-In 2002, at a conference sponsored by the Covenant Network of Presbyterians, Anna Case-Winters, associate professor of theology at the PC(USA)’s McCormick Theological Seminary, declared that the atoning death of Jesus Christ is an outdated doctrine. Not the cross, but “the incarnation itself may be redemptive,” said Winters, in a paper that she prepared for the conference. “He became as we are that we may become as he is – the incarnation that accomplishes our salvation.” Winters has often declared that the atonement is an evil doctrine, because it is child abuse for a father to sacrifice his son, and the doctrine encourages such child abuse in today’s world. Winters has played a prominent role among PC(USA) policy makers. She was appointed by Jack Rogers, moderator of the 2001 General Assembly, to the General Assembly Committee on Confessions and Theology. She has also served as the PC(USA)’s delegate to the World Alliance of Reformed Churches.

-In 2010, Margaret Miles was chosen to give the prestigious annual Sprunt Lecture at the PC(USA)’s Union Theological Seminary in Richmond, Va. Miles rejected the orthodox view of the cross, declaring it an inappropriate symbol for 21st century Christians. She suggested that the cross be replaced with a lactating breast: “The cross is inappropriate as a symbol of God’s love because it presents a violent act as salvific. The equation of love with heroic violence and suffering is typically a male-centered perspective ... the value of the nursing breast as a symbol of God’s provision might need to be reconsidered in our own time.”

c.) The bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ

-In 1997, Rosemary Radford Ruether delivered the prestigious Sprunt Lecture at the PC(USA)’s Union Theological Seminary. In her book, *Sexism and God-Talk*, Ruether calls the resurrection of Jesus Christ “a myth created by males to assuage their own fear of death.” Her theology makes room for multiple deities that are encompassed into “the great womb within which all things--Gods and humans, sky and earth, humans and non-humans--are generated.”

-In recent years, several PC(USA) ministers have publicly declared their inability to believe that Jesus rose from the dead. Among them are John Shuck in Elizabethton, TN, Rob Martin in Palo Alto, CA, Helen Dekker, in the Presbytery of West Jersey, and James Rigby, of Austin, TX. Says Rigby: “The resurrection took place when the community was born. What rose was the body of Christ. Maybe a body got up; I don’t care. That’s not the point ... It’s a symbol of something deeper ... What these symbols are talking about are not things that happened; they are things that are always true. The Resurrection is happening now. ... Heaven is not another world someplace else. It’s a profound understanding of this world, of that which is not born and that which does not die.”

While the statements in the paragraph above have been made by individual ministers and are not official declarations of the PC(USA) itself, the denomination’s failure to discipline such ministers leads them to believe that they can make such statements with impunity.

They rightly perceive that a culture of theological pluralism is firmly entrenched in the PC(USA), a denomination which by forfeiting any theological boundaries has therefore welcomed a multiplicity of divergent and often contradictory faiths.

II. The Authority of Scripture: “Sola Scriptura” – by Scripture Alone

“Sola Scriptura” is the Reformed teaching that the Bible is the only inspired, perfect, sufficient and authoritative word of God and the only source for Christian doctrine.

The Word of God:

2 Timothy 3:16-17

“All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness,¹⁷ so that the servant of God^[a] may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.”

1 Thessalonians 2:13

“And we also thank God continually because, when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men, but as it actually is, the word of God, which is at work in you who believe.”

2 Peter 1: 16-20

“We did not follow cleverly invented stories when we told you about the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty.¹⁷ For he received honor and glory from God the Father when the voice came to him from the Majestic Glory, saying, “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.”¹⁸ We ourselves heard this voice that came from heaven when we were with him on the sacred mountain. And we have the word of the prophets made more certain, and you will do well to pay attention to it, as to a light shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts.²⁰ Above all, you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet's own interpretation.²¹ For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.”

John 17:17

“Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth.”

PC(USA) policies and practices:

Throughout the PC(USA), there is a general pattern of prioritizing one’s perceptions of faith above the propositional truths of Scripture. Scripture then is only “authoritative” if it melds with the preconceptions one brings to it. This breaks from the Reformed tradition, which not only declares that Scripture is our authority, but stipulates how Scripture is to be properly interpreted—via the principle that *Scripture interprets Scripture*. In other words, one is to read a particular passage in the light of the whole counsel of Scripture.

This hermeneutic is often disregarded by General Assemblies and their agencies. Instead, they typically lift up a principle (e.g., “justice” or “equality” or “liberation”), each with its own predetermined (i.e. extra-biblical) definition, and then interpret a passage of Scripture through the lens of that predetermined principle. In this manner, the words of Scripture are recast into meanings that defy what Scripture actually says. This hermeneutic is often employed during General Assembly deliberations. Thus the General Assembly disregards *what Scripture says* in favor of what its theologians *say that Scripture means*. One often hears the statement, “We all agree that Scripture is authoritative, but we have different ways of interpreting it.” This has led to the plight described in Judges 21:25: “There was no king [authority] in Israel, and everyone did what is right in his own eyes.”

-As an example, witness the proceedings of the Boston Presbytery, which put forth the concept of three tiers of authority: First is Jesus Christ, second is the Scriptures who witness to Christ, and third is the confessions of faith. The scheme definitely implies that there is a way or are ways of knowing Christ that could take precedence over the testimony of the Scriptures. The Boston Presbytery went so far as to claim that the Scriptures are to be obeyed only “to the extent that they accurately bear witness to Christ's will.”(1) Of course, Colossians 3:16 clearly states that Scripture is “the word of Christ,” so it is unclear how any portion of Scripture could be anything other than what Christ wills.

-In 1991, the Presbyterian Women Horizons Bible study issued a statement which elevated human authority above Scripture. Quote: “In obedience to the Bible, we sometimes must disobey a given biblical imperative.” This theme was later reiterated in the report of the Special Committee on Human Sexuality (1991): “...Whatever in Biblical tradition, church practice and teaching, human experience, and human reason violates God’s commandment to do love and justice, that must be rejected as ethical authority.” The human lens of “love and justice” thus determines the applicability of Scripture. (“Horizons” is the official publication of Presbyterian Women and is funded by the PC(USA) mission budget.)

-Minutes of the 217th General Assembly (2006) show the following statement: “We derive our understanding of human life from Scripture and the Reformed Tradition in light of science, human experience, and reason guided by the Holy Spirit.” This statement inverts the orthodox approach to Scripture interpretation, which more correctly would state, “We derive our understanding of all things in science, human experience, and reason in light of Scripture.” The statement as quoted in the minutes represents a clear subjugation of Scriptural authority to human interpretation, and implies the Holy Spirit could guide the reader in a manner other than what is stated in Scripture.

-In 2010, the Rev. Landon Whitsitt, vice-moderator of PUCSA, declared, “Sola Scriptura is dead in most places and rapidly dying in others.” The accuracy of his comment regarding the PC(USA) is not challenged here; however, he meant it as something to celebrate, while we see it as something to lament.

III. Salvation: “Sola Gratia” – by Grace Alone and

IV. “Sola Fide” – by Faith Alone

“Sola Gratia” is the Reformed teaching that salvation comes by divine grace only, and apart from any human merit or achievement. “Sola Fide” implies that our justification (i.e. being declared just by God) is received by faith only, without reliance on “good works.” Taken together, these two doctrines recognize that our salvation from death to life is entirely dependent on the grace of God, who imputes to the believer the righteousness of Christ. This then is a “free” gift received by the believer simply through faith, and not merited by any work on the part of the believer. Implied in these two concepts is the need for redemption from the universality of sin, which is understood as the fundamental and universal human affliction which separates us from God. It is this affliction which necessitates our justification, for apart from forgiveness in Christ, our sinful condition necessarily leads to our destruction. Salvation by faith in God’s wondrous grace is thus understood to bring redemption from this fate and to eternal life with God.

The Word of God:

Romans 3:21-26 But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it— ²²the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction: ²³for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, ²⁵whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God’s righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. ²⁶It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.

PC(USA) policies and practices:

In 2006, Jim Rigby, minister of St. Andrews Presbyterian Church in Austin, TX welcomed into the congregation’s membership Robert Jensen. When receiving Jensen, Rigby made it clear that Jensen’s “faith” was “not exactly orthodox.” In an article published in Counterpunch magazine, Jensen had said, “I don’t believe in God. I don’t believe Jesus Christ was the son of a God that I don’t believe in, nor do I believe Jesus rose from the dead to ascend to a heaven that I don’t believe exists.” Jensen said he joined the church because he approved of its social service and political stands. Rigby defended the decision to admit to the membership of a Christian church a person who does not believe what the church believes, saying that it was important to “build bridges” with non-believers and that policies of inclusiveness and diversity would widen Christian fellowship.

V. Everything for God’s Glory: “Soli Deo Gloria” – Glory to God Alone

This final “Sola” represents the culmination of our faith—that everything is done for God’s glory alone. God is understood as represented by the Trinity—a manifestation of God in three distinct persons: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. We are created by the Father through the Son through whom we have been redeemed. We are then drawn into a holy, Trinitarian communion by the Holy Spirit, empowering us to be fruitful as we experience abundant and eternal life. Reformed faith tells us not only that Jesus Christ is our Savior, but that he is our present Lord, our future Judge, and our coming King. Thus, our life in Christ is a disciplined life in which our wills and sinful inclinations must be conformed to His example and teaching as we witness it in Scripture, so that everything we think and do is done in reverent submission and honor to the glory of God.

The Word of God:

1 Corinthians 10:31: “So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God.”

Matthew 3: 16-17 “As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. ¹⁷ And a voice from heaven said, “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.”

Matthew 28: 19-20: “Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”

Ephesians 4: 14-16: “Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of people in their deceitful scheming. ¹⁵ Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ. ¹⁶ From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.”

PC(USA) policies and practices:

The aforementioned quotations represent a sampling of the theological drift in the PC(USA) over the past thirty years. An overarching theme in all these examples is this: When truth is disregarded in any area of Scripture, there is no boundary to how far one will stray. Attempts to incorporate supposedly minor deviations from God’s explicit instruction as revealed in Scripture invariably result in further and further decay, eventually yielding situations that are nothing less than shocking in their irreverence.