

Research Article

Evaluation of Sola Scriptura in the Perspective of Christian Religious Education and Its Challenges

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Abstract: The doctrine of Sola Scriptura, which positions Scripture as the supreme authority in matters of faith and practice, has been a foundational pillar for Protestant Christianity. However, its application within the dynamic context of modern Christian Religious Education (CRE) faces significant challenges that necessitate a critical evaluation. This study employs a qualitative research method with a descriptive-analytical approach to comprehensively investigate the interplay between this theological principle and contemporary educational praxis. The research is conducted by systematically gathering and analyzing a wide range of textual sources, including seminal theological works on Sola Scriptura, current CRE curricula, relevant scholarly articles, and educational policy documents. The analysis describes the core tenets of the principle as historically understood, followed by an examination of its practical implementation in educational settings. The study identifies and elucidates key challenges, such as the rise of historical-critical biblical interpretation, increasing religious pluralism, the pervasive influence of secularism, and the pedagogical shift towards student-centered learning models that prioritize personal experience. The findings reveal a critical tension between the exclusive truth claims inherent in Sola Scriptura and the inclusive, relativistic environment of the modern world. The study concludes that for CRE to remain relevant and effective, it must develop thoughtful pedagogical strategies that faithfully uphold the authority of Scripture while simultaneously engaging with these contemporary challenges. This necessitates a move beyond a mere transmission of doctrine towards fostering a critical and reflective faith among learners, enabling them to navigate the complexities of the modern age.

Keywords: Biblical Authority; Christian Religious Education; Qualitative Analysis; Sola Scriptura; Theological Challenges

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1. Introduction

The landscape of global Christianity is in a state of profound flux. In the West, established churches confront declining attendance and the rising tide of secularism, while in the Global South, particularly in Africa and Asia, vibrant growth is accompanied by its own complex challenges, such as the integration with local cultures and the proliferation of diverse theological streams. (Sumpter, 2019) At the heart of this transformation lies a critical, yet often unexamined, tension: the relationship between foundational theological doctrines and the practical realities of transmitting faith to new generations. Among these doctrines, few are as central to Protestant identity as Sola Scriptura (Scripture Alone), the Reformation principle that posits the Bible as the ultimate and infallible authority for Christian faith and practice. (Canale, 2012) For centuries, this tenet has served as a bedrock, a definitive answer to questions of authority and truth. (Furedi, 2013) However, its application within the dynamic

and often contentious arena of modern Christian Religious Education (CRE) is facing unprecedented challenges, necessitating a thorough and critical evaluation.

The general phenomena of the 21st century have created an environment radically different from the context in which *Sola Scriptura* was crystallized. (Cole, 1990) The digital revolution, characterized by the internet and social media, has democratized information, placing scholarly criticism, alternative interpretations, and diverse religious views just a click away for any curious student. This phenomenon erodes the notion of a single, authoritative narrative. Concurrently, pervasive religious pluralism means that Christian youth regularly interact with peers of different faiths or no faith at all, compelling CRE to move beyond simply asserting biblical authority towards explaining its coherence and relevance in a multi-faith society. (Tuegeh & Majesty, 2025) Furthermore, the dominant cultural ethos of postmodernism, with its emphasis on subjective truth and skepticism towards meta-narratives, directly challenges the objective truth claims inherent in *Sola Scriptura*. These broad societal shifts are not abstract concepts; they manifest concretely in the classroom, where educators report students questioning the Bible's relevance, its historical accuracy, and its perceived exclusivity.

The specific, current need arising from these phenomena is a pressing demand for pedagogical clarity and theological robustness within CRE. (Kia & Majesty, 2025a) The traditional model of education, which often involved the straightforward transmission of biblical content assuming its self-evident authority, is proving inadequate. Data from studies on religious deconstruction, particularly among young adults, indicate that a significant factor in faith attrition is an inability to reconcile traditional beliefs, including the doctrine of biblical inerrancy often associated with *Sola Scriptura*, with scientific discoveries, ethical questions, and historical criticism. (Hardy & Taylor, 2024) This indicates a critical gap: CRE must equip students not only with what to believe but also with how to hold those beliefs thoughtfully and resiliently in the modern world. The current need, therefore, is for an evaluation of *Sola Scriptura* that does not seek to discard it but to reframe its pedagogical application for a context where its authority cannot be assumed but must be thoughtfully articulated and defended.

A review of previous research reveals significant scholarly engagement with various facets of this topic. Numerous theological studies have extensively documented the historical development and doctrinal nuances of *Sola Scriptura*, defending or critiquing it from systematic and historical theological perspectives. (Peckham, 2016) Similarly, the field of Christian education has produced abundant literature on effective pedagogical methods for teaching the Bible, focusing on curriculum development and instructional strategies. (Kia & Majesty, 2025b) However, a clear research gap exists at the intersection of these two domains. Many theological treatments of *Sola Scriptura* remain abstract, disconnected from the practical challenges of the educational setting. Conversely, many pedagogical studies in CRE take the doctrinal foundation for granted, focusing on "how to teach" without sufficiently addressing the prior and more fundamental question of "what is being taught" in terms of the concept of scriptural authority itself and its contemporary critiques. There is a scarcity of research that systematically brings the doctrine of *Sola Scriptura* into direct dialogue with the specific, modern challenges faced by Christian educators in the classroom.

It is precisely this gap that the present study aims to fill. The novelty of this research lies in its deliberate and systematic application of a descriptive-analytical qualitative approach to evaluate *Sola Scriptura* explicitly through the lens of CRE praxis. Rather than conducting a purely theological debate or a generic pedagogical study, this research will analyze how this foundational doctrine is understood, implemented, and challenged within the concrete realities of contemporary religious education. It seeks to bridge the theoretical and the practical, exploring the friction between a historic doctrine and a postmodern context. (Tholfsen, 1999)

Therefore, the primary objectives of this research are threefold. First, to describe the principle of *Sola Scriptura* and its traditional role in shaping Protestant Christian education. Second, to identify and analyze the specific contemporary challenges including epistemological, philosophical, and pedagogical challenges that impact the application of *Sola Scriptura* in modern CRE. Third, based on this analysis, to propose a constructive framework for a nuanced understanding and application of biblical authority that can inform CRE curriculum and teaching methodologies, aiming to foster a robust, critically engaged, and sustainable faith for the 21st century. By achieving these objectives, this study hopes to contribute meaningfully to both theological discourse and educational practice, serving

educators, curriculum developers, and church leaders who are navigating the complex task of faith formation today.

2. Proposed Method

This study adopts a qualitative methodology with a descriptive-analytical approach. The research is designed to provide a systematic description and a critical analysis of the principle of Sola Scriptura and its associated challenges within the context of Christian Religious Education (CRE). (Long, 2018) Data collection is conducted through documentary analysis, focusing on a purposively selected range of textual sources. (Morgan, 2022) These include primary documents such as foundational theological works on Sola Scriptura and official CRE curricula, alongside secondary sources like scholarly journals and books relevant to the topic. The analytical process involves a two-stage procedure. First, a descriptive phase summarizes the historical understanding and traditional application of the doctrine. Subsequently, an analytical phase identifies, categorizes, and interprets the contemporary challenges epistemological, cultural, and pedagogical that impact its relevance in modern educational settings. This method allows for a thorough examination of the complex interplay between doctrine and educational practice. (Martin & Dismuke, 2018)

3. Results and Discussion

The Epistemological Challenge: The Shift from Certainty to Interpretation in the Classroom.

The principle of Sola Scriptura, which asserts the Bible as the supreme and final authority in matters of faith and conduct, has historically provided an epistemological foundation of certainty for Protestant Christianity (Kojonen, 2024). This certainty formed the bedrock of traditional Christian Religious Education (CRE), where pedagogical practices were largely designed to transmit the propositional truths of Scripture as unassailable facts. (Majesty et al., 2025) However, the contemporary educational landscape is characterised by a profound epistemological shift that fundamentally challenges this model. The central challenge for CRE today is no longer merely the dissemination of biblical content but the need to navigate the complex transition from presenting Scripture as a source of absolute certainty to fostering a nuanced understanding of it as a text that requires interpretation. (Kia & Majesty, 2025c) This epistemological dilemma sits at the heart of the modern crisis of authority within CRE.

The rise of historical-critical methodologies has been a primary catalyst for this shift. In contrast to pre-modern approaches that often treated the biblical text a-historically, these methods situate the Scriptures within their specific cultural, historical, and literary contexts. (Gordon, 2016) For the educator, this introduces a critical tension. Teaching about the documentary hypothesis for the Pentateuch or the synoptic problem in the Gospels, while academically rigorous, can inadvertently undermine the simple, unified view of scriptural authority that Sola Scriptura was intended to uphold. Students are consequently confronted with a text that appears human, complex, and layered, rather than a monolithic divine dictate. The classroom ceases to be a place where a single, authoritative meaning is delivered and becomes an arena where multiple legitimate interpretations must be acknowledged and weighed. This transition from a hermeneutic of reception to a hermeneutic of interrogation is disorienting for a pedagogical model built on the assurance of doctrinal certainty.

Furthermore, this epistemological challenge is exacerbated by the pervasive influence of postmodern thought, which questions the very possibility of objective, universal truth. The contemporary student is often immersed in a culture that privileges personal experience and subjective meaning-making over external, imposed authorities. When CRE insists on the Bible's unique authority without adequately addressing the philosophical underpinnings of that claim, it risks appearing dogmatic and irrelevant. The educator is thus tasked with a delicate balancing act: honouring the truth claims of the Christian tradition while simultaneously equipping students to understand and critically engage with a worldview that is inherently sceptical of such claims. (Sihotang et al., 2025) The goal shifts from creating assent to fostering a robust, personally owned faith that can withstand scrutiny.

The epistemological challenge necessitates a significant re-imagining of CRE pedagogy. It is no longer sufficient to present the Bible as a self-authenticating repository of facts. Instead, educators must intentionally integrate hermeneutics into the curriculum, teaching students how to interpret Scripture responsibly. This involves exposing them to different interpretive traditions, equipping them with tools for exegesis, and creating a classroom environment where questioning and dialogue are encouraged. The authority of Scripture,

therefore, is not diminished but is reconceived as being realised through a faithful and communal process of interpretation.(Nel, 2015) By embracing this shift, CRE can transform the challenge of interpretation into an opportunity for developing a deeper, more resilient, and intellectually honest faith.

The Pedagogical Challenge: Moving Beyond Content Transmission to Formational Engagement.

The pedagogical legacy of *Sola Scriptura* within Christian Religious Education (CRE) is deeply intertwined with a transmission model of learning. This approach, which logically flows from a doctrine positing a definitive textual authority, has historically emphasized the accurate and efficient transfer of biblical information from teacher to student. The educator's primary role was that of a conduit, ensuring the faithful delivery of doctrinal content, key narratives, and ethical precepts derived from Scripture.(Jacob, 2025) Success was often measured by the student's ability to recall and assent to these propositions. However, the profound societal and educational shifts of the twenty-first century have rendered this model increasingly inadequate. The central pedagogical challenge for CRE today is the critical need to evolve from a paradigm of mere content transmission to one of formational engagement, a shift that demands a fundamental rethinking of teaching practices, learning objectives, and the very understanding of what it means to know Scripture.

The limitations of the transmission model are starkly revealed in the context of modern youth ministry and educational psychology. A curriculum focused predominantly on "what the Bible says" often fails to address the more pressing questions of "what it means" and "why it matters" in the lived experience of the learner.(Marsaulina & Majesty, 2025) Students may exit a CRE program with a head full of facts yet possess a faith that is fragile, compartmentalized, and disconnected from the complexities of their daily lives. This disconnect is a significant factor in the well-documented trend of religious disaffiliation among young adults. When faith is presented as a series of propositions to be believed rather than a dynamic relationship to be embodied, it lacks the resilience to withstand intellectual doubts, cultural pressures, or personal crises. The pedagogical challenge, therefore, is not simply about improving the delivery of content but about transforming the entire educational encounter to facilitate the integration of belief, identity, and practice.(Bakar, 2021)

Addressing this challenge necessitates the adoption of pedagogical frameworks that prioritize formation over information. Such approaches are inherently more holistic and constructivist, viewing the learner not as a passive receptacle but as an active participant in the meaning-making process. Pedagogies like transformative learning theory, which seeks to facilitate profound shifts in perspective, or experiential learning models, which emphasize reflection on concrete experience, offer valuable pathways.(Taylor, 2018) For instance, rather than only lecturing on the parable of the Good Samaritan, a formational approach would engage students in a service-learning project followed by a guided theological reflection that connects their experience back to the biblical text and its demands for compassionate action. This process moves knowledge from the cognitive domain into the affective and behavioural domains, fostering what educational theorist Parker Palmer termed "a heart that can hold the complexities of truth."(Aylor, 2008)

Furthermore, this shift has profound implications for the role of the educator. The teacher transitions from being the sole authoritative expert to a facilitator of a communal learning journey. This requires creating a classroom environment characterized by psychological safety, where doubts can be voiced, questions can be explored, and diverse interpretations can be discussed respectfully. The authority of the educator is redefined; it resides less in their exclusive possession of knowledge and more in their ability to guide, model, and nurture a discerning community of interpretation. In this model, *Sola Scriptura* is not abandoned but is recontextualized. The Bible's authority is encountered not through passive reception but through an active, communal, and Spirit-led engagement where its transformative power is tested and realized in the lives of individuals and the community.(Thompson, 2020) Ultimately, overcoming the pedagogical challenge is essential for CRE to fulfil its mandate of making disciples, forming not merely informed believers but committed followers whose faith is deeply rooted, critically examined, and faithfully lived.

The Contextual Challenge: Navigating Religious Pluralism and Secularism.

The contemporary landscape in which Christian Religious Education (CRE) operates is fundamentally defined by two dominant sociological realities: pervasive religious pluralism and assertive secularism. These conditions present a profound contextual challenge to the pedagogical application of *Sola Scriptura*, a doctrine formulated in a context of Christendom where the Bible's normative status was largely culturally assumed. The principle itself, which posits Scripture as the ultimate authority for faith and practice, inherently contains a claim of exclusivity and finality. However, when taught within a social milieu where the Bible is but one voice in a marketplace of competing truth claims, its assertion can no longer be presupposed but must be thoughtfully and persuasively articulated. The central task for CRE, therefore, is to navigate this complex terrain without either retreating into a defensive ghetto mentality or diluting the distinctive claims of the Christian faith, a balancing act that requires significant pedagogical and theological nuance. (Hwang, 2024)

Religious pluralism fundamentally alters the dynamics of faith formation. Students of CRE are no longer isolated from alternative worldviews; they interact daily with peers who adhere to Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, or secular humanism, all of which offer coherent, and often compelling, accounts of reality, ethics, and the divine. (Gamaleal, 2024) A pedagogical approach that simply asserts the Bible's authority without engaging these alternative frameworks risks appearing parochial and intellectually insecure. The challenge is to equip students with a robust understanding of their own tradition that enables them to appreciate the genuine insights of other faiths while being able to articulate a reasoned defense of Christian particularity. This moves CRE beyond a comparative religion model that merely catalogues differences towards a dialogical model that fosters theological discernment. Students must learn to affirm the uniqueness of Christ and the normative authority of Scripture in a way that is firm yet respectful, confident yet not triumphalistic, acknowledging common grace while upholding definitive revelation.

Simultaneously, the rise of secularism, particularly in its "hard" form that relegates religion to the private sphere, poses a distinct challenge. Secular rationality often dismisses the Bible's claims as scientifically untenable or ethically outdated, creating a powerful cultural headwind against which CRE must operate. (Crain, 2022) In this environment, a pedagogy grounded in *Sola Scriptura* must intentionally address the perceived conflict between faith and reason. This involves consciously integrating topics such as the relationship between science and theology, the philosophical basis for belief in God, and the Bible's relevance to public ethical discourse. The goal is to demonstrate that Christian faith, anchored in Scripture, is not an irrational leap but a coherent worldview capable of engaging with the deepest questions of human existence. The educator's role expands to include that of an apologist, helping students deconstruct the implicit assumptions of secularism and reconstruct a faith that is intellectually viable and publicly engaged.

The contextual challenges of pluralism and secularism necessitate a reorientation of CRE from a model of indoctrination to one of critical formation. Success is no longer measured solely by the retention of doctrinal content but by the development of a faith that is both resilient and relational. This requires a pedagogy that is unapologetically rooted in the authority of Scripture while being intellectually agile, culturally literate, and empathetically engaged. By embracing this challenge, CRE can fulfill its mission of preparing students not to escape the world, but to faithfully inhabit it as thoughtful, articulate, and gracious witnesses to the truth claims of the Christian gospel.

The Doctrinal-Institutional Challenge: The Role of Tradition and Community in Interpretation.

The principle of *Sola Scriptura*, as championed by the Protestant Reformation, was fundamentally a corrective against ecclesial authorities that placed tradition on equal footing with the Biblical text. (Isaac & Schnabel, 2018) Its intent was to return Scripture to its position as the *norma normans* (the norm that norms) over against any *norma normata* (a norm that is normed). (Williams, 2016) However, a persistent and often unaddressed challenge in applying this doctrine within Christian Religious Education (CRE) is the practical inevitability of interpretation. The slogan "Scripture alone" can misleadingly suggest an unmediated, individualistic encounter with the text, obscuring the essential role that tradition and interpretive communities play in shaping how Scripture is understood and taught. This creates a significant doctrinal-institutional tension: how can CRE honestly acknowledge the

formative influence of tradition while maintaining a genuine commitment to the unique and supreme authority of Scripture?

The reality is that no reader, and no educator, approaches the Bible from a neutral standpoint. Every act of interpretation is filtered through a particular hermeneutical lens, which is invariably shaped by a specific theological tradition be it Reformed, Wesleyan, Lutheran, or Pentecostal.(Majesty et al., 2025) These traditions provide the confessional frameworks, doctrinal priorities, and even the canonical emphases that guide how Scripture is read. A CRE curriculum in a Reformed setting, for instance, will naturally emphasize covenants and God's sovereignty, while a Wesleyan approach might foreground sanctification and God's prevenient grace. The challenge for CRE is to move beyond a naive presentation of Sola Scriptura that ignores these underpinnings. Instead, it must adopt a reflexive pedagogy that makes these interpretive frameworks explicit to students, teaching them that while Scripture is the final authority, it is always accessed through a tradition of interpretation.(Dinkler, 2017) This transparency is crucial for intellectual honesty and for equipping students to understand the diversity within Protestantism itself.

Furthermore, the doctrine's potential for fostering interpretive individualism poses a significant pedagogical problem. An over-emphasis on the individual's right to interpret can lead to a fragmentation of understanding, where personal opinion is elevated to the level of authoritative doctrine. CRE, therefore, bears the responsibility of balancing the priesthood of all believers with the need for disciplined, communal interpretation. The classroom must be reconceived not as a place where a single authoritative interpretation is dispensed, but as a microcosm of the wider interpretive community where students learn to read Scripture together. This involves teaching them to use creeds, confessions, and the wisdom of the historical church as valuable guides and conversation partners, while always subjecting them to the critical light of Scripture itself. The goal is to form students who are neither independent mavericks nor passive recipients of dogma, but responsible members of a confessional community engaged in a continuous, collective pursuit of biblical truth.(Gorman, 2015)

Navigating this doctrinal-institutional challenge requires a mature articulation of Sola Scriptura that can be described as Prima Scriptura Scripture first.(Williams Jr, 2024) This approach acknowledges the Bible as the ultimate authority while affirming the vital, ministerial role of tradition and community as the context in which its authority is rightly discerned. For CRE, this translates into a pedagogy that is both confessionally grounded and critically engaged. By explicitly teaching students about the history of interpretation and the value of theological frameworks, educators can foster a faith that is both deeply personal and robustly communal, capable of respecting tradition while continually reforming itself according to the living Word of God.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, this evaluation demonstrates that the doctrine of Sola Scriptura faces significant challenges in the contemporary landscape of Christian Religious Education (CRE), necessitating a thoughtful reconceptualization of its application. The epistemological challenge reveals that the shift from assumed certainty to acknowledged interpretation requires CRE to integrate hermeneutical education, equipping students to engage critically with the Bible. The pedagogical challenge underscores the insufficiency of content transmission, calling for formational approaches that connect scriptural authority to personal identity and lived experience. Furthermore, the contextual challenge of pluralism and secularism demands a CRE that fosters a faith capable of respectful dialogue and public engagement. Finally, the doctrinal-institutional challenge highlights the need to balance Scripture's primacy with an honest acknowledgment of the interpretive role played by tradition and community. Addressing these challenges collectively is imperative for developing a CRE that is intellectually robust, pedagogically effective, and contextually relevant, thereby enabling a sustainable and resilient faith for the twenty-first century.

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