

PATRICK MADRID

A Catholic/Protestant Debate on *Sola Scriptura* Between Patrick Madrid and Douglas Jones

This written debate on *sola Scriptura* between Patrick Madrid, editor of *Envoy Magazine* and Douglas Jones, editor of *Credenda/Agenda Magazine*, a Reformed evangelical Protestant journal, appeared recently in *Credenda/Agenda* (1996). It was agreed that Doug would select and frame the debate theme, he would have the first *and* last comment in the exchange, and each response would be limited to no more than 115 words.

DEBATE THEME (selected and framed by Doug Jones)

What is the relationship between Scripture and the Church? Is Scripture or the Church the supreme and infallible judge of truth?

DJ: Many modern evangelicals and Roman Catholics haggle over the Anabaptistic notion of *sola* rather than *sola Scriptura*. The classical Protestant notion of that doctrine was never intended as a condemnation of tradition or a denigration of the authority of the Church. Both Scripture and the Church are genuinely authoritative norms, not mere advisory boards. Protestants maintain that Scripture is the ultimate authority, with the Church serving as a subordinate, though real, authority. In practice, conservative Roman Catholicism reverses this hierarchy, necessitating an infallible Church. The debate with Rome over *sola Scriptura* really turns on the question of Rome's claim to infallibility. If it can't justify that claim, then *sola Scriptura* takes the day rather easily.

PM: Since you concede that the Church is "genuinely authoritative," not a mere advisory board, I have this debate already half won. The other half will be to demonstrate that this means Scripture is not sufficient in se for all matters of doctrine. For if, to be correctly interpreted, Scripture needs a magisterial Church (as I believe Christ intended), then *sola Scriptura*, as promulgated by the *Westminster Confession*, is an erroneous concept. "Geneva" asserts: "The only infallible rule of interpretation of Scripture is the Scripture itself (WCF I,9)." Rome responds:

“Tradition, Sacred Scripture and the teaching authority of the Church . . . are so linked and joined together that one cannot stand without the others” (*Dei Verbum* 10).

DJ: Notice, though, what you do here. You have to treat the classical Protestant teaching on the genuine authority of the Church (*potestas ordinis*) as though it were a modern “concession.” But classical Protestants never held to such Anabaptistic views as you suppose. Connected to this, your third sentence assumes that genuine spiritual authority requires infallibility. This is clearly false, though. We would agree that parents have genuine spiritual authority without being infallible. Isn’t it a non sequitur, then, for Rome to insist the Church must be infallible to be authoritative? If you want to undermine the classical view, you need to criticize, not sole sufficiency, but the claim that Scripture alone is the ultimate and infallible norm.

PM: Stop flailing at the poor Anabaptists. It remains for you to make good the *WCF*’s claim that “the only infallible rule of interpretation of Scripture is the Scripture itself.” Where does Scripture teach that? Which pre-Reformation Church council or creed taught that? Scripture doesn’t and the Church never did. (Historically, the “classical” view is Rome’s, not Geneva’s.) The “parent/child” analogy doesn’t obtain. One needn’t assume the need for an infallible Church. I recognize this as Christ’s intention (vis. the historical and scriptural evidence). And you’ve just demonstrated why Scripture requires an infallible Church, by claiming the Anabaptist view is “incorrect.” The Anabaptists sure think it’s what Scripture teaches. Who decides? Aren’t they just being consistent with the *WCF* claim?

DJ: Flailing Anabaptists must remain an important hobby, especially since Rome tries to force everyone into an individualistic mold. For example, you read your cite of the *WCF* as claiming that only individuals can infallibly interpret Scripture, a position rejected by the Westminster divines and the Reformers. The Church has genuine interpretive authority like a supreme court, but Rome’s novelty is to insist that this authority must be infallible. That runs contrary to Scriptural descriptions of an authoritative Church which in abnormal times may teach falsehood (Jer. 6:13; 14:14; Is. 29:10; Ez. 22:25; 2 Pet. 2:2; Acts 20:29; 1 Tim. 4:1). You ask “who decides?” The answer does require authority, but how does it require infallibility?

PM: I’m simply trying to force you to defend the *WCF* claim, but you seem unwilling to do so. You haven’t explained how Scripture can be its own “infallible interpreter,” where Scripture claims this, and when Scripture ever actually functioned as such. These elements must be proven if you’re to vindicate the *WCF* version of *sola Scriptura*. I contend that you can’t prove them since your position is epistemologically untenable. The “who decides?” dilemma pivots on the a priori question: “which ‘church’ is the Church?” Under the *WCF* rubric, you can’t even determine that with certitude; just as you can’t be completely certain the Anabaptist or any view (Rome’s, for example) is incorrect. That certainty requires infallibility, otherwise, you’re simply guessing.

DJ: Actually, I've defended that *WCF* claim in each of my previous paragraphs; it's just another aspect of the teaching that Scripture is the "supreme judge" (I, X). If Scripture alone is ultimate and infallible, then it certainly doesn't contradict itself (I, IX). So, for our discussion, anything showing the infallibility of Scripture and the fallibility of the Church is an argument for *sola Scriptura*. I've supplied passages pointing to the Church's fallibility. I now argue by challenge that Rome's exegetical arguments for infallibility are simple non sequiturs. Moreover, your epistemological argument for infallibility starts an infinite regress: if we need infallibility to interpret Scripture, then we'll need it to interpret the Church, and so on. What help is that?

PM: Please furnish even one example of Scripture interpreting itself. I reject your interpretation of the verses you cited and your premise that "Scripture alone is . . . infallible." On the contrary, Christ's Church is infallible (cf. Matt. 10:40, 16:18, 18:18, 28:20; Luke 10:16; John 14:25-26, 16:13; 1 Thess. 2:13; Tim. 3:15). Your argument entails the conclusion that the dogmas promulgated by Nicaea I, Ephesus, and Chalcedon were merely fallible, as was the Church's determination of the NT canon. (If this is true, we're all in big trouble!) Your syllogism is flawed, and it's *non sequitur* to claim that Scripture requires an infallible Church (cf. 2 Pet. 1:20-21; 3:15-16). And this debate is your perfect opportunity to prove otherwise: Please demonstrate how Scripture can "infallibly interpret itself" so as to solve this particular standoff.

DJ: Your ongoing concern about self-interpretation is really not particularly relevant to *sola Scriptura*. "Interpreting itself" is just another way of saying that clearer passages shed light upon the less clear. Every ultimate norm, including yours, does that (John 10:35). More to the point are your proofs for Church infallibility. First, regarding councils, you again assume that fallibility entails falsehood. Must parents and courts always judge falsely? Second, the passages cited prove too much or too little. Those speaking of leading the Church into "all truth" clearly go beyond Rome's very narrow subset of infallible truths. Why preclude science and economics? Others cited speak of preserving the Church, but something can be preserved without being infallible. Infallibility simply doesn't follow.

PM: Actually, the claim that "the only infallible rule of interpretation of Scripture is the Scripture itself" lies at the very heart of this disputation. Can Scripture "decide" which passages are clear and which are unclear? (Matthew 16:18-19 seems quite clear to me.) Of course not, but the Church can, and before the Reformation the Church consistently taught the Catholic model of authority, not *sola Scriptura*. Since you've admitted the Church has real authority, why don't you adhere to its historic teaching? Or is this authority merely a convenient prop? Finally, fallibility entails the possibility not the necessity of error. Under your "fallible Church" rubric, you can never be certain which scriptural interpretations are erroneous and which aren't.

DJ: Careful. Your challenge "can Scripture `decide`"? again works only against solo not *sola Scriptura*. We both agree, along with classical Protestants and the *WCF*, that the Church alone should decide authoritatively. She weighs passages for clarity,

allowing one passage to clarify another. This model is far more historic than Rome's late novelties, and I gladly adhere to it. And if an infallible Church provides the certainty you demand, why is Rome still debating the meaning of Trent? Subjectivism can't just stop with Scripture. You have yet to show how my arguments against Roman infallibility fail. But can we at least agree that if the Church is fallible, then only Scripture can be ultimate and infallible?

PM: We agree that the Church weighs passages, but notice that it has always done considerably more than that. The aforementioned councils show that since apostolic times the magisterium saw itself as teaching infallibly, imposing its interpretation of Scripture as dogmatic (Acts 15:28, 1 Thess. 2:13). St. Athanasius explained in *De Decretis* that First Nicaea's definition of Christ as *homoousios* with the Father was not a merely fallible interpretation. This is hardly a "Roman novelty," as you allege. (The nascent Catholic model is visible in Acts 15:15-35, 16:4.) And remember, Orthodoxy also rejects *sola Scriptura*. Like the Catholic Church, they have preserved the ancient Christian teaching that the Church, at least in its ecumenical councils, teaches infallibly. Historically, *sola Scriptura* is the novelty.

DJ: There is simply no such thing as the historic view on these matters. Several competing views always existed side by side (though not the solo view). Even by the late medieval period, the Church still struggled to clarify notions of tradition and Scripture. And Athanasius's *De Decretis* is a particularly weak buttress for Rome, since Athanasius appeals to countless Scriptures to justify Nicaea's language. Why not just cite the council and cease all disputing, as Rome's notion entails? And Eastern Orthodoxy openly rejects Rome's sweeping claims about definitive conciliar infallibility. But quite apart from these concerns, you still haven't provided any rebuttal to the arguments against Roman infallibility. If that fails, then *sola Scriptura* follows easily.

PM: Your dismissal of *De Decretis* as "weak" evidence boggles the mind. Athanasius composed it precisely to refute the Arian claim that the Church teaches fallibly and erroneously. He did appeal "just to the council" to quell the dispute (as Orthodoxy does): "The Confession arrived at Nicaea was, we should say, more sufficient and enough by itself for the subversion of all religious heresies and for the security and furtherance of the doctrine of the Church" (*Ad Afros*). Earlier, you mentioned "Rome's very narrow subset of infallible truths." Now you decry "Rome's sweeping claims about . . . infallibility." You're dodging here. Ultimately, to vindicate *sola Scriptura*, you must explain how Scripture infallibly interprets itself. So far you haven't.

DJ: You'll find the explanation of self-interpretation in my fourth through sixth paragraphs. My "Sweeping" and "narrow" describe different features. Interestingly, you don't cite *De Decretis* itself. There's nothing in it or *Ad Afros* contrary to a classical Protestant view. Sufficiency is far from Roman infallibility. I suspect you're still pursuing Anabaptist ghosts. Elsewhere Athanasius actually understates conciliar authority more than I would, claiming, "Vainly do they run about with the

pretext that they have demanded councils for the faith's sake; for divine Scripture is sufficient above all things" (C. of Arm. & Sel.). I'm sincerely curious why you haven't rebutted my criticism that your case proves too much and too little. Without a response, doesn't my syllogism stand uncontested?

PM: Remember, fallibility entails the possibility, not the inevitability, of teaching error. This possibility creates your dilemma. Under *sola Scriptura*, you can't know with certitude if Scripture is being interpreted correctly. Agreeing with an interpretation is vastly different from knowing it's true. This is why your criticisms and syllogism fail. The passages cited here cannot, in 115 words, be adequately analyzed, but I have indeed rebutted your understanding of them repeatedly, showing that epistemologically, historically, and practically, *sola Scriptura* is a paper tiger. It's not taught in Scripture (you've provided no direct evidence), it's alien to historic Christian teaching and praxis, and it simply doesn't work. If it did, why doesn't Scripture infallibly resolve this standoff?

DJ: Why doesn't Roman infallibility resolve this standoff? In the end, all your epistemological and practical objections apply equally against your own position. Similarly, if fallibility always precluded "certitude," then unless we had infallible civil courts, we could never have justice with certitude. But that's absurd (Ezek. 45:9). Throughout, my argument has been: (P1) Either Scripture or the Church alone is infallible and ultimate; (P2) It's not the case that the Church alone is infallible and ultimate (my paragraphs three and five); (C) Scripture alone is infallible and ultimate. With this, the Church is a genuinely authoritative, sufficient (as with Athanasius), anti-individualistic, and reformable Court. Both Rome and modern evangelicalism join arms in rejecting these ancient truths.

Well, Patrick, we have to stop somewhere. We both have more to say. I've wanted to have this little chat for some time. And you have been, as always, a gentleman and an honorable opponent. I wish we could be on the same side. You have my sincere thanks.

— Douglas Jones, *Credenda/Agenda*

If you found this written debate interesting, we think you might also find the following resource of interest as well:

