

PATRICK MADRID

The Madrid/Jones Dialogue on Scripture and the Church

Douglas Jones and Patrick Madrid

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Catholic writer Patrick Madrid and Reformed writer Douglas Jones were invited to ask each other a question for this dialogue on Scripture and the Church and then given the opportunity to reply to the original essays.
—eds.

Patrick Madrid's Question:

The Westminster Confession of Faith asserts, "The only infallible rule of interpretation of Scripture is the Scripture itself." I contend that this proposition is unworkable. Given the substantive doctrinal divisions among Protestant denominations that adhere to *sola Scriptura*, can you explain how Scripture infallibly interprets itself and show post-Reformation examples of this?

Doug Jones Response:

We should always find ourselves with some sorrow when entering into these sorts of discussions. Many things beautiful in medieval Christendom have been lost, and both Rome and Protestantism share the blame. But the issues surrounding the authority of Scripture and the church are not light or dismissible, for they are stained with martyrs' blood and marked out by ancient covenantal threats.

Most of the differences between classical Protestantism on one side and Rome and Constantinople on the other stem from a background clash between Hebraism and Hellenism. The Reformation was one of the fruits of the late medieval period's attempt to throw off the shackles of Hellenism and revive Hebraic, covenantal thinking. When classical Protestants, especially those of us in the Reformed tradition, gaze at the issues that separate these groups (redemption, authority, worship), many

of us cannot help but see that Rome and the East have not yet extricated themselves from the dark labyrinths of Plato and Aristotle.

Thematically, Protestants carried forth Athanasius's praise of the demise of Greek philosophy—"not only does the wisdom of the Greeks no longer make any progress, but that which used to be is disappearing." But the battle has been longer than he expected.

My friend Patrick Madrid, whom I greatly respect, asks a question above about *sola Scriptura* which shows some of this Hellenistic/Hebraic conflict. One of the biggest contemporary confusions about the Protestant doctrine is that between *sola* and what can be called *solo Scriptura*. These two notions are really worlds apart. The former (*sola*) is the classical Protestant view with deep medieval and patristic roots, namely the teaching that Scripture is the only infallible and supreme *criterion of* truth. Whereas the latter view (*solo*) is the more anabaptistic, individualistic, evangelical view that Scripture is the only *location* of truth and authority. The difference between the two views is akin to the difference between a constitution as the *highest* law of the land over an authoritative court, on one side, and a constitution as the *only* law of the land without any courts. Tragically, the anabaptistic view has clearly taken the field in modern evangelicalism.

Richard Muller has noted that the Reformation arguments "against the idea of a co-equal authority of Scripture, tradition, and church, typically summarized by the phrase *sola Scriptura*, must never be taken as a condemnation of tradition or a denigration of the authority of the church. . . . The Reformation took as its point of departure the late medieval debate over the relation of Scripture to tradition and assumed that tradition stood as a subordinate norm under the authority of Scripture and derived its authority from Scripture."

Patrick's question misses the heart of the debate, since all sides invoke self-interpretation. All "self-interpretation" means is that there is no higher epistemological appeal; the highest norm must be consistent with itself. I suspect Patrick is personifying "self-interpretation" and reading it as making the constitution also the court itself, but that is the anabaptistic position. Elsewhere the WCF teaches that the church holds the power of interpretation. Chrysostom expresses self-interpretation well: "Sacred Scripture whenever it wants to teach us something like this, gives its own interpretation, and doesn't let the reader go astray. . . . So, I beg you, block your ears against all distractions of that kind, and let us follow the norm of Sacred Scripture." Historical examples of this can be found at just about every ecclesiastical council, pre- and post-Reformation.

Since we share a commitment to the infallibility of Scripture, the heart of the debate with Rome over *sola Scriptura* really turns on the question of the church's infallibility. If Rome can't justify that claim, then *sola Scriptura* prevails rather easily. *Sola Scriptura* maintains that the church has genuine interpretive authority like a supreme court, but Rome's novelty is to insist that this authority must be infallible. That,

however, runs contrary to Scriptural descriptions of an authoritative church that in abnormal times may teach falsehood (Jeremiah 6:13; Isaiah 29:10; Ezekiel 22:25; 2 Peter 2:2; Acts 20:29; 1 Timothy 4:1). Moreover, Rome's positive exegetical arguments for infallibility are simple *non sequiturs*. None of the appeals to the church's perseverance or "leading into all truth" entail infallibility. And the stated need for an infallible Church creates a vicious infinite regress: if we need infallibility to interpret Scripture with "certitude," then we'll need it to interpret the church with "certitude," and so on. What help is that?

Now when critics deny that the early church held to *sola Scriptura*, they have to have the anabaptistic notion in mind. You certainly won't find the anabaptistic notion in the early church or Scripture, but that's no great victory since you won't find the *solo* doctrine among the classical Protestants either. Among the Fathers, though, we can often hear early forms of the *sola* notion, as in Basil's *Moralia*: "the hearers who are instructed in the Scripture should examine what is said by the teachers, receiving what is in conformity with Scripture and rejecting what is opposed to them." Now this is a bit too individualistic for classical Protestants, but it's a start. Yet the common reply to this claim is to take us immediately to Basil's famous statements about unwritten traditions. But notice how that reply misfires. It works only against the anabaptistic notion concerned with location of truth; unwritten tradition doesn't count at all against Scripture as the ultimate criterion of truth. If we aren't confusing *so/o* for *sola*, then we can easily find the classical Protestant teaching throughout the Fathers.

But then the howls start, since admittedly and shamefully, modern evangelicalism's fragmentation bears little resemblance to the unity of the church in the Fathers' time. One answer to that is that modern evangelicalism has abandoned *sola* for *solo Scriptura*. [n addition, "Protestant fragmentation" is only an objection against *sola Scriptura* if we have a very un-Hebraic view of the church. From Abraham's time on, the church has faced both institutional unity and fragmentation, yet the church persevered even during apostasy and exile. The Jewish Sanhedrin in the first century had much more institutional unity than the early Christians, but it was apostate. In the Hebraic mindset, institutional unity is no guarantee of covenantal faithfulness. The Apostle Paul raised covenantal threats similar to those of Moses: "if God did not spare the natural branches, he may not spare you either" (Romans 11:21).

Many of the Fathers had a far more Hebraic understanding of the church than does Rome. Jerome tells us that, "The church does not consist in walls, but in the truth of her doctrines. The church is there, where true faith is. But fifteen or twenty years ago heretics possessed all walls here, for twenty years ago heretics possessed all the churches here; the church however was where true faith was."

Similarly, Hilary teaches us, "I warn you of one thing: beware of Antichrist, for the love of walls has taken you badly; you venerate the church of God badly in houses and buildings. ... Is it doubtful that Antichrist will have his seat in these?" Unity is sometimes a veneer for apostasy and fragmentation the scar of faithfulness.

Contemporary Protestant fragmentation won't stay with us forever. The Enlightenment joke is growing more stale by the minute. By the Spirit's work in fulfillment of divine promises, the Protestant Church will one day be both faithful and institutionally united. Until then, we have to imitate Elijah's patience. But we ought not reject the ancient doctrine of *sola Scriptura* for dangerous Roman novelties.

Doug Jones's Question: The debate over *sola Scriptura* is at base a debate over the nature of the church. We both agree that the church has real authority, but why do you think the church must be infallible?

Patrick Madrid's Response:

Which "church" do you mean? The Orthodox Church? The Catholic Church? What about the Lutherans, Anglicans, Orthodox Presbyterians, Church of Christ, Calvary Chapel, or the Reformed Baptists? Is it the Presbyterian Church in America or the independent, "Bible-believing" fellowship down the street? The twin fallacies of ambiguity and of begging the question lurk at the heart of your question. Before you can deny the infallibility of the "church," you must first define which church you mean.

You accord "real authority" to the Church, but what does this mean? Where exactly is this authority located? Who exercises it? When and how is it used? What are its limits? The Catholic Church has concrete answers to these questions and can furnish sixteen centuries of pre-Reformation evidence that its model of authority (Scripture, Tradition, and Magisterium) worked. For *sola Scriptura* to be more than a mere slogan, it must be demonstrable in practice. Can you show us where *sola Scriptura* has actually worked?

This debate is not about the Church, but about the nature of the Scriptures the Church recognizes as canonical. *Sola Scriptura* entails formal sufficiency—that all revelation necessary for the Church to possess is presented formally in Scripture. Catholics and Orthodox reject this. Vatican II said, "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).

St. Athanasius wrote: "The very tradition, teaching, and faith of the Catholic Church from the beginning was preached by the apostles and preserved by the Fathers. On this the Church was founded; and if anyone departs from this, he neither is nor any longer ought to be called a Christian" (*Ad Serapion* 1:28).

A major disproof of *sola Scriptura* is the New Testament canon. There's no "inspired table of contents" in Scripture listing the canonical books. This divinely revealed information comes to us from outside Scripture, through the Church. If Christ's Church is not infallible, then you can have no certainty that the books in your Bible belong there.

But Christ's Church indeed teaches with his infallible authority: "He who listens to you, listens to me; and he who rejects you rejects me" (Luke 10:16; cf. Matthew 10:40, 16:18, 18:18, 28:20, John 14:25-26, 16:13, I Thessalonians 2:13; I Timothy 3:15). Christian orthodoxy has always been measured by adherence to the Church's doctrinal interpretations of Scripture.

In contrast, the *Westminster Confession of Faith* declares: "the only infallible rule of interpretation of Scripture is the Scripture itself." But where does Scripture teach this? The *Westminster Catechism* says: "The whole counsel of God, concerning all things necessary for his own glory, man's salvation, faith, and life is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture" (6). For this to be true, *sola Scriptura* itself must be "expressly set down in Scripture, or ... deduced from Scripture."

But where does Scripture teach *sola Scriptura*? What pre-Reformation creed or counsel taught it? If *sola Scriptura* were part of "the faith once for all handed on to the saints" (Jude 3), we'd expect to find it everywhere in the early Church. But we don't. The patristic testimony alone leaves *sola Scriptura* squashed flat.

For example, the early Church taught the doctrine of baptismal regeneration, a doctrine you reject. Conversely, it did not teach *sola Scriptura*, a doctrine you embrace. So if we can at least agree that "the Church: equates with the Church Saints Athanasius and Augustine wrote about, isn't it safe to say that you are doctrinally at odds with that Church, at least on baptismal regeneration? And if so, why do you claim that the Church has "real authority," if you are not bound by it? Or is this authority merely just a convenient prop?

St. Cyril of Jerusalem wrote that the Church "is called Catholic, then, because it extends over the whole world, from end to end of the earth, and because it teaches universally and infallibly each and every doctrine which must come to the knowledge of men, concerning things visible and invisible, heavenly and earthly and because it brings every race of men into subjection to godliness" (*Catechetical Lectures* 18:23 [A.D. 350]).

The *Catechetical Lectures* are packed with Catholic doctrines: the Mass, the efficacy of prayers for the dead for the dead, the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist, the intercession of the saints, holy orders, baptismal regeneration, and many other doctrines Protestants reject as "unscriptural."

The First Council of Constantinople proclaimed the Church's belief in "baptism for the remission of sins" and warned it would "anathematize every heresy which is not of the same mind and the holy, Catholic, and apostolic Church of God" (Canon 7 [A.D. 381]).

As a Reformed Christian, you don't believe in baptism for the remission of sins, basing your position on Scripture. *Sola Scriptura* has put you at odds with the Church you admit has authority over you.

St. Augustine defined orthodoxy as the assent to all the doctrines taught by the Church: "It is in fact that the Church is called 'Catholic' because it truly embraces the whole of that truth, some particles of which may be found even in various heresies" (*Letter 93* 7:23 [A.D. 408]).

This "whole truth" didn't include *sola Scriptura*, nor was it transmitted according to the *sola Scriptura* model. St. Basil of Caesarea expressly denied *sola Scriptura*: "Of the beliefs and practices whether generally accepted or enjoined which are preserved in the Church, some we possess derived from written teaching; others we have delivered to us in a mystery by the apostles by the tradition of the apostles; and both of these in relation to true religion have the same force" (*On the Holy Spirit* 27).

St. Vincent of Lerins said:

"I have often then inquired earnestly and attentively of very many men eminent for sanctity and learning, how and by what sure and so to speak universal rule I may be able to distinguish the truth of Catholic Faith from the falsehood of heretical depravity; and I have always, and in almost every instance, received an answer to this effect: that whether I or anyone else should wish to detect the frauds and avoid the snares of heretics as they rise, and to continue sound and complete in the Catholic Faith, we must, the Lord helping, fortify our own belief in two ways: first, by the authority of the Divine Law [Scripture], and then by the Tradition of the Catholic Church. But here some one perhaps will ask, 'Since the canon of Scripture is complete, and sufficient of itself for everything, and more than sufficient, what need is there to join with it the authority of the Church's interpretation?' For this reason: Because, owing to the depth of Holy Scripture, all do not accept it in one and the same sense, but one understands its words in one way, another in another, so that it seems to be capable of as many interpretations as there are men. . . Therefore, it is very necessary, on account of so great intricacies of such various error, that the rule for the right understanding of the prophets and apostles should be framed in accordance with the standard of ecclesiastical and Catholic interpretation" (*Commonotioria* 2:1-2 [A.D. 434]).

That standard never included *sola Scriptura*.

Sola Scriptura is a paper tiger. It's not taught in Scripture, it's alien to historic Christian teaching and practice, and it simply doesn't work.

Doug Jones's Follow-up:

I sincerely wish my always-honorable friend Patrick and I could be on the same side of these issues, but alas, we'll just have to keep talking and hoping for now.

The sum of Patrick's answer to my initial question is that without an infallible church, Christians can have no certainty. He didn't elaborate on this, but as it stands it's rather problematic. Consider how this conflicts with our views of other authorities, such as civil courts and parents.

Both of these are intimately involved in applying standards of justice, and yet both are fallible authorities. But on Patrick's view, we could never be sure about any questions of justice. In fact, we could never know what justice is.

Even more problematic is the infinite regress produced by Patrick's infallibility claim. If an infallible Scripture is so cursed by subjectivity that we need an infallible interpreter, then we can't stop there. We will also need an unending row of infallible interpreters at each subsequent stage. We end up in an almost postmodern subjectivism.

As to Patrick's Scriptural proofs, notice that they prove too much or too little. They prove too much because they are so general as to include everything the church would say, but Rome severely narrows what it will count as infallible. They prove too little because they are wonderful exhortations to faithfulness and perseverance, but neither of these entails infallibility. And remember that the rub about the claim to church infallibility is that if it's false, then *sola Scriptura* follows rather quickly, since Scripture would be the only infallible authority left.

Patrick's other criticisms apply only against the *solo* location view. Note that even that favorite "major disproof" regarding the canon assumes the *solo* view—that is, no table of contents "in Scripture." An even if that criticism could be transformed apply against the classical Protestant view would also prove that the Old Covenant Church never had authoritative revelation.

Patrick's other challenges about the definition of the church, patristic testimony, and pre-Reformation councils were already discussed in my opening essay. And as much as all sides of this issue long for the wonderful truths expressed by Vincent of Lerins, none of us can legitimately hold it up while the East and West remain divided. In the end, the most interesting part of this discussion for me is that continuing background conflict between Hellenistic and Hebraic assumptions.

Patrick Madrid's Follow-up:

The Catholic position doesn't entail *non sequiturs* or an infinite regress. Scripture is infallible, yes, but it cannot box our ears, rap our knuckles, or cry out, "Hold on! You've misunderstood!" But the Church can.

The infallibility of the Church derives from the fact that she is a living organism, the bride of Christ, teaching and sanctifying with his authority and guidance (cf. Luke 10:16 again). She explains, clarifies, and answers questions in her councils, for example. When an Arius or a Pelagius pops up with heterodox interpretations of Scripture, the Church can point out where they went wrong. Scripture can't.

There is no regress of infallible interpreters. It's understandable that Doug would wish to shift the focus away from the nature of Scripture to the nature of the Church; doing so will avoid having to deal with thorny issues like the canon and defining what exactly he means by the "church." His response didn't really answer the question "how does Scripture infallibly interpret itself?" We were told it "missed the heart of the debate." Not so.

The WCF's expression of *sola Scriptura* (certainly a "classical" Protestant statement) pivots on this assertion. I don't see where Doug has made a case for this.

His appeal to the Fathers actually worsens matters for him. The quote he cites from Chrysostom, for example, makes my point *a fortiori* regarding the serious doctrinal divisions among Protestants who adhere to *sola Scriptura*. Chrysostom's writings brim with doctrines such as baptismal regeneration, the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist, and the sacrificial character of the Catholic priesthood—doctrines Doug vehemently disagrees with.

Was Chrysostom a bad exegete? Or is it possible that Doug's understanding of Scripture is incorrect on these matters? And if it is, what good does *sola Scriptura* do him? And then there was the claim that the infallibility of the Church is a "dangerous Roman novelty." How does he account for the teaching of Cyril of Jerusalem in A.D.350 (among others) that the Catholic Church "teaches universally and infallibly"?

Doug Jones is a man of good will, and I admire the vigor with which he presents his position. But in spite of his considerable talent, the position he defends [*sola Scriptura*) remains untenable, as all errors are. Patristic testimony, logic, and, ironically, Scripture itself, demonstrate this. I invite our readers to study the evidence carefully, prayerfully, and without prejudice.

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