

THE WHITE MAN'S BURDEN

*A look back at my 1993 “Does the Bible Teach Sola Scriptura?”
debate with Protestant apologist James White*

By Patrick Madrid

JAMES WHITE LOVES TO ARGUE. He’s a Fundamentalist who runs an anti-Catholic ministry, so you’d expect him to be no stranger to controversy, but his appetite for in-your-face confrontation goes beyond typical anti-Catholic zealotry. Alpha & Omega Ministries, the organization White runs, has carved a modest niche for itself in the Fundamentalist counter-cult marketplace, producing tracts and tapes attacking Oneness Pentecostals, Mormons, Jehovah’s Witnesses, and, of course, Catholics. He and his followers pride themselves on their adversarial methods of witnessing to “cultists.”

AT LEAST ONCE YEARLY WHITE and his friends descend on Salt Lake City during the Mormon Church’s biannual General Conference. Armed with anti-Mormon tracts, they station themselves at each entrance to Temple Square and hand out literature telling Mormons why they are going to hell. But leafleting is one of the tamer methods White employs in preaching his gospel.

A man barely out of his twenties, he has already garnered a reputation as a debate junkie. I don’t mean that he’s been in lots of debates — that’s fine, of course; I’ve been in plenty myself — I mean he *craves* debates. He chases after Catholic apologists, issuing challenges to debate, appearing almost frantic to goad someone, anyone, into a fight. [Well, perhaps not *anyone*. In May 1991 White traveled to Toledo, Ohio and was beaten in a debate on justification by lay-Catholic apologist Dr.

Art Sippo — a debate which I moderated. (Regrettably, the audio tapes of the debate were defective and so are not available.) Since then White has repeatedly declined Sippo’s invitations to engage in further debates, complaining that Sippo was “not a gentleman.”

At the conclusion of the debate, White refused to shake hands with Sippo and snarled, “Do you realize that you are under the wrath of God?” He accused Sippo of misrepresenting him — a curious complaint, given that White had ample opportunity to rectify any misconceptions, that being, after all, the purpose of a debate. He claimed Sippo “didn’t understand” the Protestant position. This is a common response from Evangelical apologists when their arguments are refuted and they have nothing else to say]. Most telling is his penchant for crowing that so-and-so is “afraid” to debate him. He does this in letters and on computer bulletin boards, and he implies it in the pages of his sporadically-published newsletter,

Pros Apologian. [A Greek phrase meaning “toward a defense.”]

WHITE TAKES PAINS TO SHOW off his knowledge of Greek, as this pedantic title illustrates. His books are sprinkled with self-congratulatory references to his facility with languages]. He has sent debate challenges via registered mail so his prey cannot claim not to have received them. I know: I received such a letter.

After ignoring his taunts for quite a while, I decided to debate him. I had two reasons. First, I wanted to demonstrate that his arguments for *sola scriptura* can’t withstand biblical and logical scrutiny. Second, he needed to be refuted because he preaches a false gospel and leads people away from Christ’s truth.

For the sake of the souls he harms with his errors and for his own sake, his claims needed to be demolished. Unfortunately, debating White affords him, an otherwise obscure anti-Catholic, the very things he wants: notoriety and legitimacy. What’s an apologist to do?

This article originally appeared in [This Rock Magazine](#) in October of 1993. This edition copyright 1993-2009, Patrick Madrid, all rights reserved.

EVER SINCE I FIRST MET him three years ago (at a debate, of course), White has harangued me for a debate, in letters, faxes, and phone calls. He even showed up at my seminars to reiterate this demand publicly. I guess he figured that, if nothing else, he might embarrass me in front of my audiences. Well, he never managed this, but his antics did pay off, though the outcome was not quite what he hoped for.

I accepted his challenge to debate the Protestant claim of *sola scriptura*, and on September 28 we had it out. The venue was a diminutive Orthodox Presbyterian Church in Chula Vista, south of downtown San Diego.

Sola scriptura, the theory that Scripture is formally sufficient for deciding all matters of Christian doctrine and practice, is the most important issue for a Catholic to raise when speaking with Protestants. It's the foundation of all Reformation errors and, ironically, is the simplest theory to disprove from the Bible. When you demonstrate that the Bible does not teach *sola scriptura*, Protestantism collapses in a heap.

I arrived fifteen minutes before the debate was scheduled to begin. The evening was windless and hot. As I stepped into the building I grimaced as I felt the temperature rise an additional ten degrees: The church had no air conditioning.

A three-hour debate with a cocky Fundamentalist in a stiflingly hot room suddenly became the last thing I wanted to attend, much less participate in. There being no alternative but to endure the heat, I took comfort in the large fans that pushed the baking air from one end of the room to the other.

The pastor, a congenial middle-aged man, welcomed me, and I greeted several friends and co-workers in the audience. I walked over to the book tables where White was chatting with someone. I stood a few feet away, waiting to say hello. He saw me, but when the conversation ended he turned his back on me and walked away. "Just as well," I thought. "I'm not here to be chummy with him. Let's

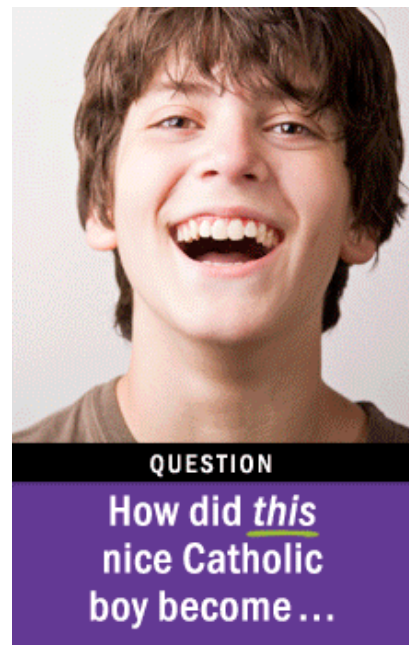
get on with the debate."

I made my way to the debate table and arranged my Bible and notebook in front of me. White sat to my left, fidgeting, saying nothing as he rummaged through his materials. After a few minutes we exchanged terse remarks, but it was clear the only things either of us wanted to say would be said in the debate. I drank a tall glass of water. The pastor introduced us, gave an opening prayer, and turned the microphone over to White.

There is an advantage in letting your opponent speak first, since you have the ability to respond to his statements in your opening remarks, but there's a corresponding drawback in that your opponent is able, to some degree, to set the course of the debate. That's what White tried to do. Straightaway he tried to shift the burden of proof away from himself, claiming that I had to prove the Catholic position on Sacred Tradition. But, as I pointed out in my opening remarks, the debate was on the question "Does the Bible teach *sola scriptura*?" Since White had agreed to take the affirmative, it was up to *him* to show where the Bible taught the doctrine.

THIS WAS TO BE NO ordinary Catholic/Protestant bickerfest. Unlike Bill Jackson, Robert Morey, and other anti-Catholics, White is a formidable debate opponent, at least by Fundamentalist standards. A glib orator, he doesn't usually rely on the standard array of anti-Catholic polemics. He has developed his own anti-Romanist arguments — they're creative, but not necessarily effective. Most of White's arguments, instead of trapping me, only backfired on him. My favorite example was his "pen analogy." But first some background so you'll see why it flopped.

During his opening remarks, in one of his many attempts to shift the burden of proof, White assured the audience that a debate on *sola scriptura* should not be framed in such a way that the Protestant would have to prove that there is no other binding, infallible, divine revelation except that



which is contained in the Bible. Such a statement, known in logic as a "universal negative," would be unfair to him since he would have the "impossible task" of demonstrating that no other binding revelation existed apart from Scripture.

This not-too-subtle sleight of hand was White's attempt to shirk his obligation to defend *sola scriptura* and to maneuver me into defending Sacred Tradition. [A subject Catholic apologetists are quite able to defend from Scripture, Church history, and common sense. The doctrine of Sacred Tradition is taught explicitly in passages such as 1 Corinthians 11:2, 2 Thessalonians 2:15, and 2 Timothy 2:2 and implicitly in many others]. He sought to draw attention away from his flimsy scriptural case by trying to portray me as having put an unreasonable and impossible burden of proof on him.

But he was not being called upon to defend a universal negative statement. His task was to show where the *Bible* says that it is formally sufficient in matters of doctrine and Christian living. I admit the task of proving that the Bible teaches *sola scriptura* is impossible, but not for the reason White tried to palm off on the audience. It's impossible because the Bible doesn't



Follow Patrick on Twitter



Follow Patrick on Twitter

teach that theory.

With a flourish White produced a pen, holding it high for all to see. He told the audience that trying to prove that no other infallible, divine revelation exists outside of Scripture would be like trying to prove there is no other pen in the universe like the one he held up. He said that, for him to prove that no other such pen exists, he would have to search everyone's pockets, ransack every office supply store, and scour the entire earth. He complained that he would have to visit the moon and all the planets in the solar system; indeed, he would be forced to search every corner of the universe to make sure no other pen like this pen exists. Only then would he have proven the uniqueness of his pen.

WHEN IT WAS MY TURN to speak I dealt with White's analogy. I invited him to remain right where he was on earth, reassuring him that in order to win the debate he need not visit any other planet. The *Bible* was the only "universe" he would need to search, I reminded the audience. He did not need to prove anything except that the Bible teaches *sola scriptura*. Just one

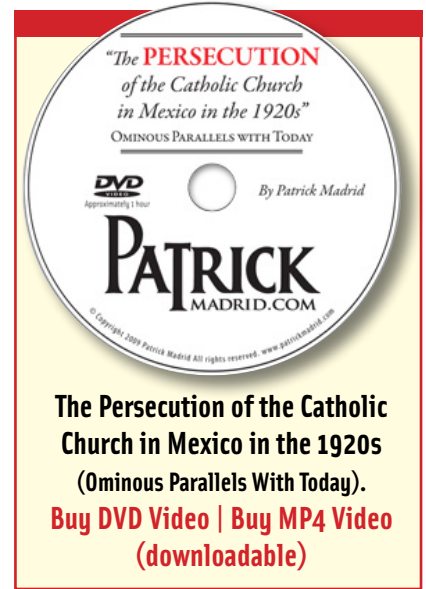
verse would do.

During the cross-examination he asked me to furnish an example of infallible, binding, divine revelation outside of Scripture. I picked up my Bible and dropped it on the table between us. "Here it is, Mr. White — the canon of the New Testament." I reminded him that there is no inspired table of contents in Scripture to tell us which books belong to the Bible and which don't. That information comes to us from outside Scripture.

The canon of the New Testament must be decided infallibly; otherwise there'd be no way to know for sure if the books in it really are inspired. The canon must be binding, or else folks would be free to have their own customized canons containing those books they take a fancy to and lacking the ones they don't. And the canon must be part of divine revelation; if it's not, it's merely a tradition of men, and White would be left in the intolerable position of championing a canon of purely human origin.

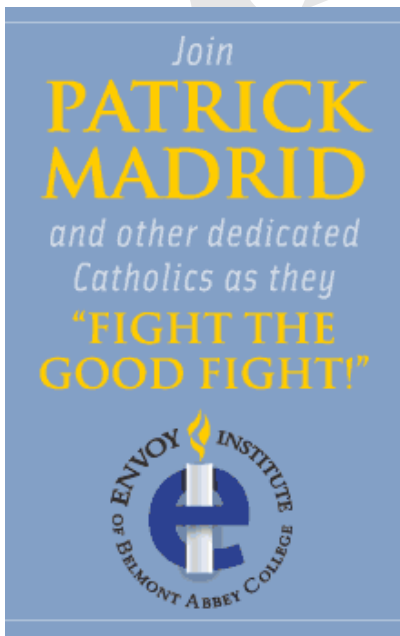
White had no coherent response to this argument. He danced around the issue the entire evening, never once giving a straight answer. [There isn't room in this article for an in-depth discussion of the New Testament canon and an explanation of why it is so problematic for Protestants. An excellent introduction to this issue is found in Henry G. Graham, *Where We Got the Bible: Our Debt to the Catholic Church* (Rockford: TAN Books), available from Catholic Answers for \$6.95 post-paid.].

Throughout the debate, White's clickety-clack recitation of his arguments worked against him, often losing the audience's attention. [The most common observation I've heard from those who witnessed the debate was that White spoke too quickly. I hasten to add that I am acutely aware of my own deficiencies as a debater. Reviewing tapes of my debates is always an unpleasant affair for me. As much as anyone else, I recognize (and cringe at) the lost opportunities, missteps, and imperfections in my remarks]. He spoke so rapidly at times, as though trying to overpower



the audience with the velocity of his verbiage, that any power his arguments may have had was swallowed up in a torrent of words. This is a danger all debaters face, and it's an easy one to succumb to. There's always far more material than can be funneled into a few minutes of argumentation. That's what makes debates so challenging. You must know what to stress, what to mention in passing, and what to leave out.

TO DEBATE EFFECTIVELY ONE NEEDS a plan of attack. For me it was simple. I had to keep White focused on the issue I knew he would seek to evade: what the Bible says about its own authority. I knew that my opening and closing statements, rebuttals, cross-examination questions, and spur-of-the-moment comments had to be aimed at that one target. It's easy to be lured into a discussion of side issues, especially when your opponent doesn't have much of a case and seeks to hide that fact behind the fig leaf of irrelevancies. [Throughout the debate I queried White on key issues directly relating to *sola scriptura*, such as how he knows which books belong in the canon of the New Testament. He avoided giving answers to these questions, complaining they were "off the topic," yet he raised all sorts of irrelevant issues including "the chair of Moses" (Matt 23:1-3), praying to Michael the Archangel,



YES. These are
STRANGE and
DIFFICULT times.



the Immaculate Conception and Assumption of Mary, papal infallibility, and Sacred Tradition.

I FOCUSED MY OPENING REMARKS ON the common errors made by defenders of *sola scriptura*, most of which White would manage to commit that evening: (1) Confusing formal and material sufficiency; (2) assuming that the phrase “Word of God” always means “the Bible”; (3) employing a hermeneutic of anachronism (reading back into Scripture novelties such as *sola scriptura*); (4) attempting to shift the burden of proof; (5) confusing testimony with authority; and (6) claiming there can’t be more than one ultimate authority.].

White also attempted to press the Church Fathers into service by offering selective quotations that gave the misimpression that the Fathers taught *sola scriptura*. [Some of the more fantastic examples of White’s patristic piracy come from St. Athanasius. In his *39th Festal Letter* Athanasius says, “These [canonical] books are the fountains of salvation, so that he who thirsts may be satisfied with the oracles contained in them. In these alone the school of piety preaches the gospel; let no man add to or take away from them.” What White neglects to tell people is that the context of Athanasius’s festal letters was

not his alleged views on the formal sufficiency of Scripture, but his instructions to the clergy and faithful in liturgical matters. He was instructing them about which books could and could not be read at Mass. (What a difference a context makes!). I responded by reminding the audience that what the Fathers may or may not have said on this issue was irrelevant. What mattered was what the *Bible* said.

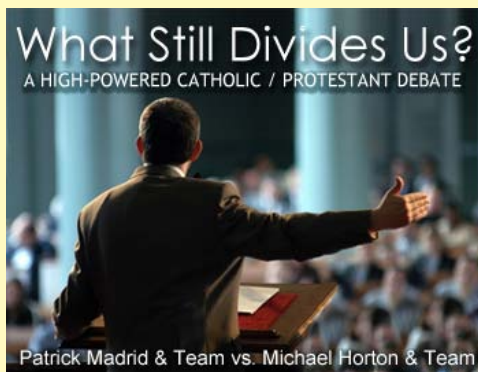
I knew White would try this dodge, so I came prepared with 52 pages of quotations from the Fathers (including scads from the ones White likes to cite) to show that they definitely did not teach *sola scriptura*. That seemed to give him pause; he didn’t bring up the issue again. [In correspondence with me White has bragged about the “broad and deep witness” to *sola scriptura* in the early Church. Although his cut-and-paste style of quoting the Fathers might impress those who never have *read* the writings of the Church Fathers, anyone who has studied patristic literature can only laugh at such a grotesquely inaccurate statement. White’s misuse of the Fathers mimics that of the Jehovah’s Witnesses, who misquote the Fathers to give the appearance that the early Church did not believe in the divinity of Christ or in the Trinity. Catholics familiar with early Church history will not be buffaloeed by such obfuscation.

In our correspondence prior to the debate White made it clear that he wanted to use quotations from the Fathers to bolster his defense of *sola*

scriptura. I reminded him of the irony of this tactic of leaning on the Church Fathers like a crutch in his attempt to prove that *sola scriptura* is biblical. “What’s the matter?” I asked him. “Don’t you think you can make your case from Scripture *alone*? After all, that’s the nature of the theory, isn’t it?”].

Since there is no other verse in the Old or New Testament which even remotely suggests the formal sufficiency of Scripture, White was forced to make do with 2 Timothy 3:16-17: “All scripture is inspired [Greek: *theopneustos* God breathed] by God and is useful for teaching, for refutation, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work.” His entire argument rested on this one passage. He claimed 2 Timothy 3:16-17 teaches the notion that the Bible is sufficient in all matters of Christian doctrine and practice. In his book *Answers to Catholic Claims*, White claims that this “passage literally *screams* sufficiency!” [James White, *Answers to Catholic Claims* (Southbridge: Crowne Publications, 1990), 42, emphasis in original.]. As I informed the debate audience, this passage is indeed screaming, but only because of the way White twisted it in his futile attempt to squeeze *sola scriptura* out of it.

Continued on page 5



Eight CDs—worth of high-powered, edge-of-your-seat Catholic/Protestant debate. Don't miss this one!

Patrick Madrid leads a team of three Catholic apologists against a three-man team of Protestant apologists

[Order the CDs](#)

[Download the Debates](#)

Make Someone You Know REALLY Happy!

Give a gift subscription to Envoy Magazine.

Call 800-55-ENVOY
www.envoymagazine.com



IN THE DEBATE WHITE USED the analogy of a bike shop that contains everything necessary to equip a bike enthusiast for riding.

Comparing the bike shop to the Bible, the shop could be called “sufficient” for a bike ride. He seemed fairly giddy with confidence until I pointed out that although the shop might provide all the equipment, it presupposed the customer knew how to *ride* a bike, this being analogous to knowing how to use Scripture correctly. Bike shops can equip customers with all the necessary paraphernalia, but they can’t teach them how to ride.

White responded that since 2 Timothy 3:17 specifies that the *man of God* is made fully equipped, this implies the man of God will know how to use Scripture correctly. White’s equanimity disappeared when I asked how he decides who is a “man of God” and who isn’t. I used the controversy within Protestantism over infant baptism to provide a graphic illustration of how White’s argument that “the man of God knows how to use Scripture correctly” begs the question.

The pastor of the Presbyterian church in which we were debating believes, based on Scripture alone, that infants should be baptized. Lutherans, Anglicans, and other Protestants share this view, basing their position on what the Bible says. As a Baptist, White rejects infant

baptism as unbiblical, holding to baptism for adult believers only. He believes that those who practice infant baptism are misusing Scripture.

“Well, who is the ‘man of God’ in this instance?” I asked White. “After all, we’re told to ‘rightly divide the Word of Truth’ (2 Tim. 2:15). If the Presbyterian pastor who was our host was wrong in baptizing infants, he must be wrong because he was misusing Scripture. By White’s definition, the pastor would not be a “man of God.” The audience got my point, but White failed to interact with my rebuttal of his attempt to hijack 2 Timothy 3:16-17.

White complained about my mention of infant baptism as being an “irrelevant issue.” He failed to understand that infant baptism itself was not the subject of my point; it was used as an example of the failure of *sola scriptura* to function as a sure guide to the truth and to demonstrate how vacuous his “man of God” argument was.

BUT JAMES WHITE IS A resourceful fellow. He dug deeper into his bag of tricks, coming up with what he hoped would be the show-stopping argument. He told the audience that since the passage says Scripture will make the man of God “competent” (*artios*) and “thoroughly furnished” (*exartizo*), it implies the sufficiency of Scripture. But this argument also fails.

Since White knew that 2 Timothy 3:16-17 does not explicitly say that Scripture is sufficient — it says Scripture is *ophelimos*, which means “useful” or “profitable” — he was forced to argue that the passage *implies* it. In asserting this he unwittingly refuted his own position and showed precisely why *sola scriptura* won’t work.

For *sola scriptura* to be true, Scripture must be sufficient to settle all doctrinal disputes and quandaries. But it’s not sufficient to settle *this* dispute or the others which cause the fragmentation and confusion within Protestantism. White failed (or refused) to grasp the implications of this fact.

White committed a lexical fallacy by insisting that since Scripture makes the man of God “thoroughly equipped for every good work,” it must be formally sufficient, basing this on two Greek words: *artios* (“suitable” or “correct”) and *exartizo* (“furnished”).

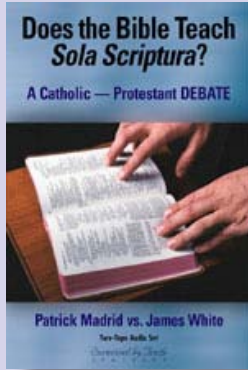
White was able to find a single Greek lexicon that listed “sufficient” as a possible translation of *artios* and another lexicon that listed “sufficient” as a possible translation of *exartizo*. But, as I pointed out, the lexicons he cited listed “sufficient” as a third or fourth translation of *artios* and *exartizo*. None listed “sufficient” as the primary or even secondary meaning. This is an important point. Lexicons list meanings beginning with the most common and ending with the least common.

What is more, each of these terms is a *hapax legomena*, a word that appears in Scripture only once, so there are no parallel examples with which to compare them and see their meaning in other contexts. Since there are no other places in Scripture where these words mean “sufficient,” it is natural to fall back upon their most common meanings, not their least common. The first readers of 2 Timothy would have taken the words in the common, not an uncommon, sense.

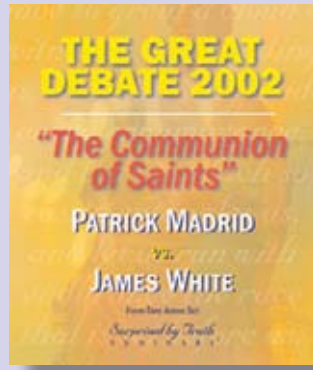


Follow Patrick on Twitter

Order the debates between Patrick Madrid and James White



Order the CD or rD Download



Order the VHS tape

WHITE'S ATTEMPT TO FORCE SUFFICIENCY into this passage is contradicted by every major Bible translation, Catholic and Protestant. None, not even those produced by the most ardent supporters of *sola scriptura*, render the passage as “that the man of God may be ‘sufficient,’ ‘sufficient’ for every good work.” Although *artios* and *exartizo* could mean “sufficient” in some instances, they don’t have that meaning in the context of 2 Timothy 3:16-17.

It’s possible, but not certain, that Paul was engaging in mild hyperbole here. Hyperbole, exaggeration used to stress a point, is common in Paul’s letters. For example, he says, “God was pleased to reconcile *all* things to himself through Christ” (Col. 1:20), but Paul could not have meant *absolutely* all things or he would have found himself in the absurd position of meaning that God reconciled the damned (and even Satan) to himself through Christ. That Paul may have been engaging in hyperbole in 2 Timothy 3:16-17 is plausible in light of the next point.

White argued that since Scripture will make the man of God competent (*artios*), equipped (*exartizo*) for every good work, it’s safe to conclude that Scripture is all we need. But such a conclusion is hardly warranted by the context of this passage. White’s hermeneutic fails when applied to similar passages.

James 1:4 says, “And let [your]

perseverance be perfect [*teleion*], so that you may be perfect [*teleioi*] and complete [*holoklepoi*], lacking in nothing [*en medeni leipomenoi*].” This passage uses stronger language than does 2 Timothy 3:16-17 and goes far beyond the mere implication of sufficiency that White wants to see by the explicit statement that perseverance will make you “perfect and complete, lacking in *nothing*.” (If any verse in the Bible could be used to argue for “sufficiency,” James 1:4 would be it.)

IF WHITE WERE CONSISTENT AND applied his hermeneutic here, James would be saying that all one needs is perseverance (the context is perseverance in suffering and good works). This would mean that *perseverance* is sufficient — that Christians don’t need prayer, faith, grace, or even Scripture, just perseverance. White had no meaningful response to this point. The best comeback he could muster was this: “It’s not the same thing!”

He claimed that since *teleios*, not *artios*, is used in James 1, the two passages cannot be compared. Either White did not understand or was too embarrassed to admit to the audience that the primary meaning of *teleios* is “complete” or “perfect.” It’s a more forceful word for indicating perfection or completion than is *artios*. White made an even more elementary blunder by assuming that the same Greek word would need to be used in both passages to represent the same

concept. It does not, which is why both *artios* and *teleios* are translated in English as “complete” (2 Tim. 3:17 and James 1:4).

If White’s *artios/exartizo* argument proves anything, it proves too much. Even a cursory examination of 2 Timothy 3:16-17 shows that *artios* and *exartizo* modify “the man of God” (*ho tou theou anthropos*), not “Scripture” (*graphē*). Scripture does not claim sufficiency for *itself* here. Rather, it says it completes and makes fit the man of God. If White’s argument proves something about Scripture, it proves that Scripture makes *the man of God* sufficient — a position White is unlikely to embrace.

IN MOST DEBATES, AFTER THE closing remarks and the final prayer, the participants shake hands. Not so in this case. White was visibly upset with the outcome of the debate and did not offer his hand. For the next half hour he and I, separated by a few feet, conversed one-on-one with members of the audience. We were surrounded by persistent folks who wanted to comment or ask questions, and we had little chance to speak to each other before we left.

Maybe just as well. He’s so hardened in his hatred of the Catholic Church that I knew there was nothing I could say or do to convince him of his errors. The best I can do is pray that God will illuminate his mind with the truth.

If nothing else, the debate demonstrated one thing clearly: *Sola scriptura* is not taught in the Bible. It’s a little tragic that James White and those in his camp see in the Bible a doctrine that just isn’t there.

— Patrick Madrid, 1993

The Audio CDs and downloadable MP3 files for this debate are available at: www.patrickmadrid.com.

Additional debates by Patrick Madrid are also available here.

Copyright: Patrick Madrid, all rights reserved.



Follow Patrick on Twitter