

Transcript- 82-1 Catholicism

Shea Houdmann

Welcome. To the Got Questions podcast. So many of you know that in our attempt to answer questions biblically, we occasionally get people from a different faith perspective as us who will ask us questions or people who maybe are evangelical Christians who asking questions about something else and. All of the questions are along these lines. The most frequent ones, are questions about Roman Catholicism, whether that's Catholics trying to help trying to understand maybe Protestantism better, or Protestants, Evangelicals want understand Catholicism better and we get a lot of questions about this.

Shea Houdmann

So today I have a special guest Doctor Gregg Allison. Gregg is. A professor of Christian theology at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, he teaches annually on Roman Catholicism for the Rome scholars and Leaders network, and regularly teaches seminary courses and church seminars on Catholic theology and practice. So Gregg, welcome to the show.

Dr. Gregg Allison

Thanks so much Shea for having me on.

Shea Houdmann

What I'm going to do today is I'm going to ask Greg some of the questions that we've found are most frequently asked of us about Catholicism. He has an excellent book out called 40 Questions about Roman Catholicism and will include links to where this book can be purchased on the show notes on the description field on YouTube when this video goes up and also at podcast.GotQuestions.org, so it's a great book. Highly recommended, gives a great breakdown. Covers more thoroughly what we're going to discuss in brief here today. So Gregg question number one most popular Catholic related question that we receive is do Roman Catholics believe in salvation by works?

Dr. Gregg Allison

Actually, I think that's a common misunderstanding on the part of many Protestants on the part of many evangelicals. They think Roman Catholics try to earn their salvation by doing good works and actually Roman Catholic a process of salvation is very much a grace oriented, grace saturated because that grace comes to the Catholic faithful through the sacraments. These sacraments then, through this grace, transformed the very being the essence the nature of the Catholic faithful. Which then enable them to collaborate with this grace. Engage in good works and thereby merit eternal life.

Dr. Gregg Allison

So we often focus on this last part. We see they're engaging in good works to merit eternal life, but again, all that is made possible according to the Roman Catholic Church, by this grace, which is infused into the Catholic faithful by the sacraments. So, for example, take the Eucharist and we'll come back to that later, right? So they're receiving the body and blood of Jesus Christ this grace is infused through the sacrament of the Eucharist that changes the Catholic faithful, rendering them able to engage in good

works, please God, and thereby merit eternal life. So it's not a salvation by works system, it's salvation by grace, then enabling the Catholic faithful to engage in good works. Or salvation.

Shea Houdmann

Excellent explanation I maybe they ask you this because I think this will touch on several different questions we get. It seems to me that there is an official teaching of the Roman Catholic Church, and then there's actually the beliefs and practices of most Roman Catholics. So on this issue, the salvation by works, I have found a lot of Roman Catholics who will actually say they believe they are saved by observing the teachings of the Roman Catholic Church. Or by doing good works or. So that's not the official teaching of the Roman Catholic Church, but that does seem to be what a lot of Catholics believe, so. What in your experience is the disconnect between the official teachings and the day in, day out practice of most Roman Catholics?

Dr. Gregg Allison

Yeah, that's an excellent point. There's often a very strong disconnect. Can we put it this way between doctrine and practice? So the Roman Catholic doctrine of salvation would include a grace infused into the Catholic faithful through the sacraments so that they can engage in good works. Often that is understood by Catholics to mean I have to engage in good works and earn my salvation. And they have very little emphasis on grace, so there is this disconnect.

Shea Houdmann

Question #2 maybe this will be a really good one to kind of illustrate what we're just talking about with the disconnect. Why do Catholics worship Mary? By even asking that question most Catholics would say we don't worship Mary we venerate her in the Catholic Church, so it's the official teaching. We don't advise anyone to worship Mary or to worship the Saints, but in observation, at least from an evangelical Protestant perspective, it sure seems like they're worshipping Mary, so how do you answer this question when it's asked of you?

Dr. Gregg Allison

I would begin just the way you began the Roman Catholic Church denies that Mary is to be worshipped, right worship adoration is reserved for the triune God alone, so by no means do Roman Catholics worship Mary. They worship God, who is father, son and Holy Spirit just like you and I do. Rather, they reserve veneration for Saints, and hyper veneration for Mary, this would be devotion that is not worship. It's not adoration, but it's a service into Mary. It's a reverence for Mary. It's veneration, but it by no means mounts up to the worship, which is reserved for God alone.

Shea Houdmann

So as an evangelical Protestant, which I know, you are as well, that's very difficult because we don't worship, adore or venerate anyone or anything other than the triune God. So how maybe a little bit more in depth. How would you explain it? The difference to a Protestant who really struggles with what they observe in the Catholic Church, it's like if I were doing that for me, that would be worship so. How do Catholics really draw the line and where does it cross the line between worship and veneration and adoration?

Dr. Gregg Allison

It's hard for us evangelicals to understand that difference, because what we see actual Catholics doing looks to us like worship. But I think we go back to the official position. The doctrine of the Catholic Church, and it very explicitly denies that's what Roman Catholics are doing. They're not worshipping God and we can relate to that. We can understand that worship is to be reserved for God alone. So whatever we see Catholics actually doing or whatever they may be explaining to us what they're doing, we must kind of translate and say but I know they're not worshipping, even though it appears that they're worshipping a God. They're asking Mary to intercede for them, they're viewing Mary as a stellar example of holiness, but that's not worship. It's not to that degree.

Shea Houdmann

Now I've had the privilege of going on several international trips with Compassion International to countries in South America, which are largely Roman Catholic in their population, and I have found and tell me if I'm right or wrong on this, that there's the difference between most Catholics in the United States and Catholics and other parts of the world. In terms of this, where Catholics here maybe a little bit less into the Mary, adoration, worship, veneration, whatever we call it. Other countries, even in like Italy, where the Catholicism is stronger, there tends to be more of that and definitely more abuses of that than we see here in the United States. Is that accurate?

Dr. Gregg Allison

That's very accurate and gives this idea. The Roman Catholic Church is a very broad tent, right? And the manifestations of the Roman Catholic faith differ like you've just said from country to country, right? There are certain countries which are much more oriented to Mary. With John Paul II, that of the former Pope. Right from Poland was obviously very engaged with his Maryology. Contrast that with many Catholics in the United States. I'm just even going to talk about my evangelical friends who have become members of the Roman Catholic Church. They've left their evangelical churches. They become associated with members of the Roman Catholic Church.

Dr. Gregg Allison

But when I ask them the question about Mary, they go, Oh yeah, you know. We don't find a biblical basis for all this Marian doctrine. We don't agree with veneration of Mary. We don't engage in that, and so they pick and choose if you will, and they decide this whole area of Marian devotion we're not going to follow it, but that contrasts again all across the world with different practices.

Shea Houdmann

So just the sheer number of statues you see to Mary and or Saints in Latin America, South America, in parts of Europe, and this astounding. But to Protestants that's anathema to have any sort of statue up front and stained glass that this one thing most Protestant churches or even you've gone away from that. But having a statue and bowing before a statue to us, it's like how could you do that?

Shea Houdmann

But understanding the difference in culture and understanding that they separate veneration from worship, I think it's important I would still question whether even that level of integration is right, but it is helpful to at least know from their perspective that they do see that as distinct.

Dr. Gregg Allison

And you point out it's disconcerting to us evangelicals. So my wife and I lived in Rome for 3 1/2 years. We go back to Rome every year. It's disconcerting to go into a Catholic Church. And see a area of it with a statue of Mary or statue of the Saints and see these de votive candles. You know hundreds of them and then in another section where you might have a statue of Jesus there maybe a couple. You know some score of few scores of candles and you go there's something imbalanced here but still on this, we evangelicals look at Mary's stance and I don't think that's right either, right? We may swing the pendulum from this. What appears to us to be worship, worshipping Mary, or venerating her, and we go the opposite way and about the last person we would ever talk about even though she's mentioned often in the Synoptic Gospels and John, we say no, we're not even going to talk about her, but she is a stellar example for us of the obedience of faith. She said to the Angel Gabriel's announcement that she would become the mother of the Incarnate Son. She said, let it be done to me according to your word.

Dr. Gregg Allison

I want that kind of the obedience of faith. She's a model of that, and we should honor her. Respect her as the one whom God, through whom God brought about the incarnation of his son, conceived by the Holy Spirit born of the Virgin Mary. And historically, we should agree with all Christians that Mary is theotokou. She's the mother of God, which originally was not a statement about her and her exaltation, but a statement about the one whom she bore in her womb, the one to whom she gave birth.

Dr. Gregg Allison

Jesus, the son of God, is fully God not partially God, but fully God, so there's ways that we evangelicals should engage with Mary while avoiding this idea of worship or even veneration.

Shea Houdmann

Some of the conversations I've had, it's been really helpful to hear some of these things from the Catholic perspective, even if I disagree or strongly disagree, I at least want to understand things from their perspective, and we as Protestants can take things too far the other way as you just described, and so similar to the worship of Mary. Do Roman Catholics pray to Mary and the saints.

Dr. Gregg Allison

And not in the way we might think of it. The Roman Catholic Church emphasizes the communion of Saints, the communion of all members of the Roman Catholic Church, which has three aspects to it. There's the earthly church, or what they call the militant church. The church on Earth that is sojourning and fighting against Sin and Satan and death and all like that. There's the purgatorial church consisting of the souls of the Catholic faithful who have died in the grace of God, and the friendship of God, but they're not fully purified, so their soul is undergoing a purging or purgation in purgatory.

Dr. Gregg Allison

You can hear that those words together. There so. So there's the earthly church. There's a purgatorial church. And then there's the Heavenly Church, the church triumphant. Consisting of the Saints in Heaven, Mary, and so there's, there's an interchange between these three aspects of the Catholic Church. There is a communion of fellowship that's not broken between these, but continues, and so.

Dr. Gregg Allison

For example, the Saints and Mary in the Heavenly Church can pray for the Catholic faithful on Earth and can pray for the souls of the Catholic faithful in Purgatory, asking God to release their souls right from purgatory. Asking for God to direct and empower and comfort us on Earth. So there's this interchange of spiritual goods, which includes interceding for one another. So it's not really praying to Mary or praying to the Saints but expecting them, anticipating them, welcoming them to pray for us and for the souls of the Catholic faithful in purgatory.

Shea Houdmann

So the way I had it explained to me by a Catholic friend was. It's no different than asking, so let me Shea asking you Gregg. Could you pray for me? It's no different doing that than asking a Saint in in heaven to pray for me and that was at least helpful. OK, I get it, but the Bible does talk about Christians asking other people on Earth to pray for them, those who are living and to me that's the key difference. And so if a Roman Catholic were to ask you what do you think about praying to Saints in heaven or asking them to pray for you, how would you respond with whether that's biblical, I mean I, I see where they're going, I see why they hold that, but how do you respond?

Dr. Gregg Allison

I'd respond the exact same way that you responded. Right, we have a biblical basis for praying for one another. It's all over scripture praying for one another. Paul's letters are saturated with his prayers, for the church and we model ourselves after that. So there there's a firm biblical basis, and we as Protestants believe in the priesthood of all believers that we can pray for one another. It's one of our responsibilities, but there's no biblical basis for the Saints in heaven praying for us. We don't, as Protestants believe in a purgatorial church either, but just in terms of the Heavenly Church interceding for the earthly church. There's no biblical basis, so right we can understand how they get there through this communion of Saints, but we don't find any biblical basis. And so we say we don't engage with those who have gone before us who are deceased, who are with the Lord. We're not asking them to pray for us.

Shea Houdmann

Yeah, another most common thing we'll hear about those who oppose this is that, like in Hebrews where it says we can approach the throne of grace boldly, so if we can if we can approach God, we know that he loves us. We know that he hears why in the world would we need Saints in heaven to pray for us like? Well, we're going to apply that principle in that way. The same thing would apply to asking other people on Earth to pray for us. So I've found that's not a great argument to use, but I'd like to point people back to Scripture and that we have a biblical basis for asking other believers to pray for us, there is no biblical basis to communicating with people in heaven and asking for them to also intercede for us.

Dr. Gregg Allison

Your good point here about the end of Hebrews 2 and the end of Hebrews 4, we do have a high priest who has been tempted and tried and suffered in every way, like us. The lone exception he never sinned. So we can approach his throne boldly and ask for mercy and grace. We know that the Son of God is interceding for us. We know the Holy Spirit is interceding for us. That's the heavenly reality that we cling to on the basis of scripture.

Shea Houdmann

So you mentioned briefly earlier about Purgatory. I have found there's a lot of misunderstanding among most evangelicals and Protestants about what exactly Catholics believe about purgatory. So give us the quick breakdown and. Just a humorous memory that I have. I remember attending a conference once about Catholicism and there was a little booklet in the back and on the cover it said everything the Bible says about purgatory and then you open it up and all the pages were blank. So if to me that was a very interesting thing, but as I've talked to Catholics over the years, there are some Scripture passages they point to which to them teach really something akin to purgatory. So explain for us, what is purgatory and why do Catholics believe in it?

Dr. Gregg Allison

Yeah, Purgatory is the state in place of the souls of Catholic faithful who have died in the friendship and the grace of God, but are not perfectly purified. They still bear the taint, the mark of forgiven mortal sins. And venial sins. And so they must render passive satisfaction to God by undergoing that suffering in purgatory. So their souls are purged once purged then, those souls go immediately into the presence of the Lord in heaven and, and that's where they will live eternally. For Catholics who commit mortal sin. So a heinous premeditated sin that they're fully aware of conscious of if they commit mortal sin and they do not avail themselves of the sacrament of penance if they die with mortal sin on their soul.

Dr. Gregg Allison

There's no chance for them to go to purgatory. They certainly don't go to heaven, but they go to hell. And so, so those who have committed mortal sin go to hell. The Saints and Mary, those who have died in the friendship and the fellowship and the Grace of God, and have done more than what they were responsible for doing their souls go immediately into heaven, but for the vast majority of the Catholic faithful, their souls will go to purgatory where there is this temporal punishment, this purgation, or cleansing of sin, so that they're undergoing this passive suffering and, and thus they will be cleansed and be able to go to heaven.

Dr. Gregg Allison

And importantly, then going back to our last question, Mary and the Saints in heaven can pray for the souls in Purgatory a you and I can pray for the souls in purgatory, right? Our Catholic family members can pay for masses that will be said for the dead to release those souls from purgatory, you can engage in and buy or earn indulgences for the souls of people in purgatory. So there's this whole system that most of us Protestants are pretty unfamiliar with.

Shea Houdmann

Yeah, how would you respond to someone who's like OK? That doesn't seem biblical to me, so why do you think what are the primary errors of believing in something like purgatory? Why do we as Protestants as evangelicals, reject the idea of purgatory?

Dr. Gregg Allison

Because one of the two key principles on which our Protestant faith is grounded is justification by God's grace alone accomplished by Christ alone and appropriated by faith alone. Justification is God's declaration. I am not guilty but righteous instead because God imputes to me the perfect righteousness of Jesus Christ. That's my standing before God so I have no need of purgatory for a final purgation of my sins because I stand forgiven and I stand clothed in the perfect righteousness of Jesus Christ.

Dr. Gregg Allison

The Protestant view of justification has no need of purgatory, and then there's no biblical basis really.

The key, the key basis for the Roman Catholic doctrine and practice of purgatory is an apocryphal book. It's an extra book in the Catholic Old Testament called Second Maccabees chapter 12 in particular, which becomes in their mind the biblical basis for purgatory.

Dr. Gregg Allison

But we Protestants don't consider second Maccabees to be part of inspired Scripture. Catholics may also point to 1st Corinthians Chapter 3, 10 through 15, this idea of God burning up the works, testing the works of believers by fires, and they will be saved. I think Catholics misinterpret that passage and apply it to the notion of purgatorial suffering and fire to cleanse one of these tainted sin. And so we don't agree that there is a biblical basis for it, and there's no need for purgatory within a system where justification is our standing before God.

Shea Houdmann

For sure, excellent explanation, next question, and we could probably spend a whole episode on this one just because it's such a key point. What do Catholics believe about the Lord's supper? Communion, also called Eucharist or the mass, and how is that different from what evangelicals typically believe?

Dr. Gregg Allison

Yeah, we could spend a whole long time on this one.

Shea Houdmann

Absolutely yeah.

Dr. Gregg Allison

Right, so the Catholics generally refer to what we would call the Lord Supper as the Eucharist. They could call it the Lord Supper communion. There's lots of different names, but it is a sacrament and what it's one of the seven sacraments of the Roman Catholic Church. It's the apex, the climax to which all the other six sacraments point because in it the body and blood of Jesus Christ is sacramentally really present. So that the once and for all sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross of Calvary 2000 years ago it

cannot be locked in space and time but is transported if you will and re presented at the mass today in every Catholic parish around the world.

Dr. Gregg Allison

It's not a re sacrifice. Jesus is not being re sacrificed for the four billion, 300 and 75th millionth etc time Christ died with sacrifices, atoning sacrifice once and for all. But that atoning sacrifice is re presented when the Catholic priest consecrates the bread and the wine. They are transubstantiated or changed into the very substance of the body and blood of Jesus Christ.

Dr. Gregg Allison

The bread still looks like smells like tastes like bread. The wine still looks like tastes like, feels like wine, smells like wine, but the substance, the very nature, the very essence of these two elements of nature are changed. So that they become the body and blood of Jesus Christ. There's nothing like that within Protestant circles.

Dr. Gregg Allison

Martin Luther, Zwingli, Calvin all denounced transubstantiation as being without a biblical basis, does not have a strong historical attestation it's philosophically grounded. Many reasons why they rejected it, but we Protestants have nothing close to transubstantiation.

Shea Houdmann

So Gregg, I really like how you explained the difference between Catholics believing in a re sacrifice of Christ versus a re presentation but for evangelicals, that's very difficult to understand the actual difference, so maybe clarify for us. And what exactly is the key difference between Jesus being re sacrificed versus his sacrifice being re presented?

Dr. Gregg Allison

Both Roman Catholics and Protestants reading the letter to the Hebrews see this repeated theme. Christ died once and for all. Christ was sacrificed once and for all and so you can't maintain that Jesus is re sacrificed a second time a 300 time a four billion time that would be against the Bible, right?

Dr. Gregg Allison

So Catholics agree, Protestants agree he's sacrificed only one time. Now, Roman Catholics believe that that atoning sacrifice of Christ, Christ dying on the cross participates in the atemporality or the eternity of God. Thus it cannot be locked in space and time because it's an odd temporal reality. It does. It did happen 2000 years ago, but it also happens today in every mass a Catholic mass worldwide, so that event 2000 years ago. Participating in the atemporality or eternity of God can become re presented today, and that's what happens in the Eucharistic celebration.

Shea Houdmann

So helpful to see. So several of the questions. We've talked about so far keep going back to whether something is taught in the Bible or not taught in the Bible, and for the one of the rallying cries of the Reformation was sola scriptura. Our scripture alone that the Bible alone should be our authority for Christian faith and practice so that would be the standard response from how Protestants view the

Bible. It's not universal, but sadly so many Protestant churches really don't even believe that anymore, but generally speaking, how do Catholics view the Bible and why are they so willing to embrace practices that aren't taught in the Bible?

Dr. Gregg Allison

Yeah, I like what you said about sola scriptura scripture alone, so in an earlier question we talked about one of the two key principles of Protestantism being justification. This now, as you've just said, is the second key principle of Protestantism. Sola scriptura scripture is our ultimate authority. So how does God speak to people today? It's through the Bible. It's through His word which is written scripture. That's God's revelation of himself and his ways to us. Roman Catholics agree that yes, God does reveal himself in his ways, to us through the Bible, but not through the Bible alone, because there's another aspect of divine revelation which is called tradition. Which contains other truths inspired truths about God and his ways.

Dr. Gregg Allison

So divine revelation for Roman Catholics consists of both the Bible and tradition. 2 examples of tradition. The Immaculate Conception of Mary, that is Mary, when she was conceived was conceived without sin. That's part of Roman Catholic tradition that was proclaimed by the Pope in 1854. A second example of tradition proclaimed by the Pope in 1950 is called the bodily assumption of Mary. That is, at the end of her days when she died her body was not placed in a tomb or a grave for decay, but was assumed or taken up into heaven so that she rose. She was assumed in heaven, body and soul, so she is there with her son, Jesus Christ, in terms of her in the integrity of her soul and her body.

Dr. Gregg Allison

So those are two examples of tradition, and so Catholics derive some of their doctrine and some of their practices, not from scripture, but from this tradition. This is where we come into conflict. I would add there's a third aspect to the authority of the Roman Catholic Church. In addition to scripture. And tradition.

Dr. Gregg Allison

There's also the magisterium or teaching office of the church, the Pope and the College of Bishops together with him. They are the ones who determine what books belong in the Bible. They are the ones who determine the official interpretation of the Bible. They are the ones who determine what elements consist in tradition and what's the proper understanding of tradition.

Dr. Gregg Allison

So we've got Scripture, the written word of God. We've got tradition. The teachings of Jesus that he orally communicated to the apostles who in turn orally communicated that teaching to their successors. The bishops in the Catholic Church that teaching continues to be nurtured and fostered in the magisterium of the church. You've got scripture, tradition, and the magisterium would be the authority structure in the Catholic Church, thereby giving rise to doctrines and practices which are foreign to us as Protestants.

Shea Houdmann

And that's been one of the bigger biggest struggles in attempting to have conversations about some of these issues with either Roman Catholic friends or family members for me is that I keep wanting to go back to well, the Bible doesn't teach that. That's not in scripture, but for the Roman Catholic scripture, it isn't their only source of authority that they can go to church tradition over 2000 years of history, or two proclamations from the Pope and so forth.

Shea Houdmann

So it's helpful for us to understand that they don't just get their doctrine and practice from scripture alone it helps us to understand where they get these ideas from. 'cause obviously many of these Catholic practices are foreign to scripture, so this is the Got Question podcast with Doctor Gregg Allison. I'm peppering him with all the most common questions about Roman Catholicism.

Shea Houdmann

This is the end of part one, so I encourage you to watch Part 2 as well. Part 2 will be a little bit more focused on how to have good conversations with Roman Catholics, so hope this conversation has been beneficial to you and please come back for Part 2. This has been the Got Questions podcast and Got Questions the Bible has answers and we'll help you find them.