

Transcript 83-2 Catholicism

Shea Houdmann

So welcome to the Got Question podcast. This is part two of our series of me asking Doctor Gregg Allison some of the most common questions we receive about Roman Catholicism. So Gregg and welcome back.

Gregg Allison

Thank you, enjoyed the first part, thank you.

Shea Houdmann

So please tune into part one if you've not, but some of the things that will we talk about now we'll be impacted by some of the things we discussed in part one, so this is a little background. In case you haven't seen part one, Greg Allison is the professor of Christian theology at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. He teaches annually on Roman Catholicism for the Rome scholars and Leaders network, and regularly teaches seminary courses in church seminars on Catholic theology in practice.

Shea Houdmann

So Gregg, for the first question in Part 2, I'd like to ask you based on the official teachings of the Roman Catholic Church as to how a person is saved, would you say that most Roman Catholics truly know the Lord or not? And then, as we discussed in part one, many Catholics don't exactly practice exactly according to the official teachings of the Catholic Church and your experience and your ministry too and with Catholics, do you find that most Catholics are genuine believers in Lord Jesus Christ. Or are they actually in need of the gospel?

Gregg Allison

According to the official doctrine of the Roman Catholic Church, and let's just focus on one aspect that would be justification. The Roman Catholic doctrine is justification is not only the forgiveness of sins, but also the sanctification and the renewal of the inner person. So the Roman Catholic official position on justification combines forgiveness, regeneration, being born again, and sanctification. Thus making justification a lifelong process. We don't believe that's the biblical way of viewing salvation.

Gregg Allison

So for a Catholic Roman Catholic to adhere to that notion of justification and that notion not being squared with Scripture, then I wonder how can they be saved right? And also this notion of the sacraments being instruments for the infusion of grace enabling Roman Catholic faithful, to cooperate with that grace, engage in good works and merit eternal life.

Gregg Allison

Again, that's very foreign to us Protestants, and we think it contradicts Scripture, so officially, officially we'd say no. This the Roman Catholic Church, in its doctrine of salvation and way people are saved, is wrong headed. Does that mean that there can be no Roman Catholics who are saved? No.

Gregg Allison

Absolutely, they can be saved just like Jews can be saved and Buddhists can be saved and Taoists and Muslims and agnostics and atheists and you and me and Protestants right. Through the Gospel of Jesus Christ. So if a Roman Catholic has come into contact with the good news and that could be through your efforts to evangelize them, my efforts, or they may be going to a Bible study in their neighborhood. Maybe they have an evangelical who hosts them at their house and they have regular conversations about the gospel.

Gregg Allison

If they embrace the good news of Jesus Christ. Of course they can be saved despite what we would say would be the official teachings of the Catholic Church. God can justify them a by his grace, through faith in Christ alone, even though they don't understand rightly the doctrine of justification.

Shea Houdmann

Yes, it's always difficult when you're we're speaking in generalities so they're approximately 1 billion Catholics in the world. So it's asking our Catholic saved is kind of like asking are Baptists saved and I would speculate that the vast majority of Baptists genuinely know the Lord, but 100% no. I would absolutely not believe that, but I've met Baptists who are trusting in their own good works to save them rather than Christ. So there's not a universal statement we can make about any denomination or division of Christianity, but when, let's say I'm running across a Roman Catholic for the first time, like generally speaking, should I be seeking to evangelize the Roman Catholic, or to help them just to understand what God's word teaches about salvation more clearly?

Gregg Allison

I my approach is always I want to be able to share the good news of Jesus Christ, the gospel with Meredith and with Mike, whoever they are right so engaging in conversation, right? I'm maybe asking them about their religious experience, where they are in church and all like that, but my orientation is always I want to be able to connect with Meredith and with Mike over the gospel. Because even if they do know the Lord, it's always good for us to center on the gospel and make sure that we're clarifying what we believe and how we're living and all like that. So that's my basic orientation towards anyone I meet, not just Roman Catholic, Meredith or Roman Catholic Mike, but anyone for that matter.

Shea Houdmann

So when I went through 40 questions about Roman Catholicism, which again highly recommended, we'll include links to where Doctor Allison's book can be purchased on are in the show notes on podcast.gotquestions.org and also the description on YouTube is excellent book if you want to really understand what Catholics believe and why they believe in these things, but in one of the things that I struggle with is this. Knowing how to best minister to Roman Catholics?

Shea Houdmann

I have several family members whom I love dearly who are dedicated Roman Catholics and I struggle with what exactly? What do I do? What do I say? So in your experience, what are some of the things that

we can do to minister to Roman Catholics to point them more towards the truth of God's word, a clearer understanding of the gospel.

Gregg Allison

First we need to be the right kind of people, right? We need to be people who love Roman Catholics, right? Whether they're family members or friends, neighbors, colleagues at work, wherever we're called to love all people, and we're focusing on Roman Catholics. So we are called to love Roman Catholics. And we're called to pray for them as well. Well, right, so that we need to be the right kind of people.

Gregg Allison

And I say this because some maybe many evangelicals who or former Roman Catholics and left the Roman Catholic Church. They become rabidly anti Catholic and that stance to me is both wrong headed and it never worked. So hardly ever works. So I'm calling upon us. Whatever our background is to love and pray for our Roman Catholic neighbors and friends and family members and then talk to them honestly about the gospel. Invite them to be part of a Bible study.

Gregg Allison

When we were in Rome, Italy, we engaged in what we call reading groups of the gospel. So we would be meeting on a Tuesday evening. 3, 4, 5 couples. We would look ahead to the liturgical calendar for the Sunday Mass to come to. Coming Sunday and there would be an indication in the calendar what the reading from one of the four Gospels would be. That became our biblical text for our Bible study. Let's say it's Luke 19, one to 10. The story of Zacchaeus. And so what we would do Tuesday night, we'd look ahead in the calendar, the gospel reading for the Mass on Sunday is Luke 19, one to 10 that would become our Bible study. We would read the text. We would reread the text and then we would lead just a very simple Bible study. Observation interpretation, application, prayer. Observation. Who are the people in this story? Zacchaeus. What he? Small little guy, climbs up in a Sycamore tree. He's a tax collector. What's a tax collector? In Rome they would answer kind of like a mafioso, right, right, OK, we're getting there, right? So we're looking at the text. Who's the characters right? Zacchaeus, what does he say? What does he do? Who's another character? Jesus. Who is he? What is he done? What does he do? Anybody else, no, Oh yeah, there's the crowd. What do they do? Why are they grumbling?

Gregg Allison

We get into the interpretation of this. Who is Jesus? Why is he coming to? Why does he say I must go to your house today when he talks about He's coming to seek and save that which is lost? What is that about?

Gregg Allison

And then our application is. So what are we going to do in light of this text. Right, so and then prayer and often our Catholic friends in our Bible study, they would. They would not want to pray. So I would just say Jesus, thank you for coming to seek and save that which is lost. End of the Bible study. See you next week.

Gregg Allison

The whole idea here. Is study the Bible focus on the Bible? Focus on one of the four Gospels. Some are reading from them so that they are. Roman Catholic friends would understand who Jesus is and what he's done, because that's what they need. They need that more than anything else before we invite them to repent and believe, which is always an important step. But they have to know who Jesus is and what he's done before they can take that, that major step of appropriating the good news.

Shea Houdmann

Exactly, I mean, I told you before the show about my experience when at an uncle who died away, who was a nominal Catholic at best, and attending his funeral and so here's a room filled with all of my extended family with aunts, uncles, cousins and the priest gets up and says Josh, my uncle will experience eternity in the presence of the Lord because he was baptized in the Roman Catholic Church as an infant, and I was just like. That's not even what the Catholic Church actually teaches, and yet here you are. So something like that for a while turned me into one of the rabid anti Catholics that you mentioned and so.

Shea Houdmann

But God has brought me through the process to getting back to loving Catholics, to strongly disagreeing with some of their teachings and especially some of the aberrant forms of what the church actually teaches, but to actually love Roman Catholics and to try to point them more to the truth by showing them a better way by showing them what Scripture actually teaches and living that out to make the gospel more, the true gospel, more attractive, but that's difficult, especially when you see loved ones who are trapped in are believing things that are really hindering them spiritually.

Gregg Allison

Yeah, it's a often a slow process, right? And this is why, like the reading groups of the gospel were effective, fruitful, because we would meet with our Catholic neighbors week in week out, month in, month out and it would take months upon months before they grasped the good news and so you have to be patient, put them in a in a in a holding pattern where there's constant exposure to the word of God, the grace of the Lord Jesus through the good news. And that's the way as we love them and pray for them. But I think we're going to see the most fruit.

Shea Houdmann

It's a good plan. It's a powerful reminder to me as well. One question we haven't delved into the history very much, but I know this is something you're an expert on as well. Why is there so much animosity between Catholics and Protestants? Just a little bit of historical background and why even some of that continues even today.

Gregg Allison

Well, prior to the Reformation we had, we need a desperate long period in the history of the Roman Catholic Church where you had the Papacy, and Rome was basically captured and moved to Avignon, France, and the papacy at that time was spiritually corrupt. It was morally corrupt. The popes were little more than puppets of the French government, and then that situation was resolved. Kind of to the point where there was a Pope in Rome there was a Pope in Avignon, France, and there was a council called by the Roman Catholic Church that then established another Pope and then there were three popes at one

time, and so there's this desperate situation prior to the Reformation, and that's fostering an environment for Luther and Zwingli and Calvin to come along and say the Roman Catholic Church is become so encrusted with scandal and spiritual bankruptcy and moral compromise, and the selling of indulgences rather than the preaching of the good news and the veneration of Mary, which looks more like the worship of Mary, let's the worship of Jesus Christ. And so there's this environment fostered in Protestants, then are protesting against the Roman Catholic Church. So that's part in part of our history, right?

Gregg Allison

And then we get into the wars of religion where Catholics are killing Protestants and Protestants are killing Catholics. That's embedded right in our and our reality.

Gregg Allison

And even fast forwarding to our times back in the 1960s, right when John F Kennedy was running for the presidency of the United States, people were against him because he was Catholic. He became the first Catholic president, but he was Catholic and people thought that the Pope in Rome would be pulling the strings and telling him what to do to govern, rule the United States.

Gregg Allison

So there's been a lot of misunderstanding. Thankfully, we're past the wars of religion, but there's still a lot of animosity, particularly people evangelicals coming out of Roman Catholicism. They tend to be pretty much anti Catholic, and it takes a while to overcome that.

Shea Houdmann

For sure, so when you look at the current history, I mean current is in for the last 50-100 years. What is the official Roman Catholic viewpoint about Protestants about evangelical believers? Do they consider us to be saved so to speak? Or do they consider us to be still rebellious against Christ Church to the point that we are unsaved.

Gregg Allison

Up to Vatican council two which took place 1962 to 1965, the Roman Catholic Church largely looked at Protestants right as unbelievers, right? They had to come to the Catholic Church in order to be saved. They weren't saved, but their turning point comes with Vatican 2 and the view of Protestants as separated brothers and sisters. So we still have many aspects of salvation, like prayer and the Bible, the Holy Spirit of the gospel, but we're separated because we don't join ourselves fully to the Catholic Church. Therefore we can't experience the fullness of salvation and but even since Vatican 2, there's still this view. There's only one true Church of Jesus Christ and it is the Roman Catholic Church, right? Because the Roman Catholic Church is the whole price. It's the deity, humanity and body of Christ. And there's only one. And so the church that you attend the church that I attend, it's we don't actually go to churches. We are members of a ecclesial community. This is a Pope Benedict XVI term for us. We participate where members of ecclesial communities but not churches, because there can only be one true church and that's the Roman Catholic Church. So while there's been a lot of ecumenical dialogue and a lot of coming closer together there, there's still a world of difference that separates us.

Shea Houdmann

Yeah, so Gregg. So final questions. I mean, we've covered a lot of issues and like we said in part one, I mean some of these issues we can do entire podcast episode just on the Eucharist, for example, but what are the key differences between Protestants and Catholics? Again, I know this is a very broad question and what are some of the things that us as evangelical believers can do to bridge the gap, or at least what are some key points that we could in the conversation with the Catholic key things we could point them to that maybe help them to at least consider, huh? I've never really thought of it that way. Maybe I need to examine these things further.

Gregg Allison

Key areas of divergence.

Shea Houdmann

Huh, huh?

Gregg Allison

First, what is our authority? And so Protestants would say, scripture is our ultimate authority. The Roman Catholic response would be scripture, tradition and the magisterium, so that's a major dividing point. Second, the nature of salvation. Is it a lifelong process that involves infusion of grace, engagement, and good works meriting eternal life, forgiveness, regeneration, sanctification all mixed together, or justification is God's declaration we're not guilty but righteous instead, so we're standing before God, fully clothed in the righteousness of Jesus Christ. That's another very huge area of difference. The doctrine of the church is there only one true Church of Jesus Christ, the Roman Catholic Church. Or do Protestants have churches or we simply ecclesial communities and the only way for us to experience the fullness of salvation is come home to Rome? Those are three major divergences.

Gregg Allison

I think key to us is just is loving our Catholic family members and friends and neighbors and colleagues and just having open and honest dialogue with them. And pointing out these differences while also pointing out the commonalities we all agree about God who is triune and that Jesus Christ is fully God fully man and died on the cross for our sins. There's a lot of commonality's that we share, but then just being open and honest with one another about our differences and ultimately I think it's going back, reading and studying and meditating on talking about what the Bible says about these matters. That's where it really comes down to it, I think.

Shea Houdmann

Gregg, thank you again for being on the show. I mean, I, I love your spirit. I love I love your knowledge of Catholicism and how you understand Catholic beliefs and practices from a theological perspective, but you also have an in depth knowledge of why we as evangelicals disagree, and but especially like I said I, I love your spirit. I love your passion for reaching Roman Catholics, and that's really what I wanted to talk about. Yes, there are very important differences between Protestant Catholics and trust me, there are some areas of Catholic doctrine practice where I could not disagree more strongly with what they believe, and I know the same is true for you, but that should not impact our ability to love Roman

Catholics and to show the difference that Christ has made in our lives and hopefully point them to a better understanding of the gospel.

Shea Houdmann

So Gregg thank you again for being on the show.

Gregg Allison

Thanks, Shea. You're a tremendous host. You have a lot of good knowledge and experience with Roman Catholicism and your follow up questions to write. I just show you have a depth and breadth of knowledge which is highly unusual for most evangelicals.

Shea Houdmann

Yes, no don't thank you.

Gregg Allison

Thank you.

Shea Houdmann

And I mean most of that is from either my experience. I've got questions of being asked these questions. And then rewriting and editing articles over and over again. So no matter how strongly we disagree, we want to at least present their viewpoint fairly, and that process is ongoing. Trust me, so again, Doctor Allison book, 40 questions about Roman Catholicism. Highly recommended. We'll include some links where you can purchase those, so this has been the Got Questions podcast on the top questions about Roman Catholicism, got questions? The Bible has answers. Well, if you find them