

Do We Sometimes Prejudge Roman Catholic Responses?

Many times, I have purposely asked Roman Catholics the following question: “Pretend you died tonight and stood before God and He asked you why He should let you into heaven. What would you answer Him?” I ask this hoping to determine what they depend on for salvation. On occasion, one of them says, “Because Jesus took my punishment” or “Because Jesus died for my sins.” I think this type of answer is evidence that they might genuinely trust in Jesus’ work rather than their own works for salvation. But most often, Roman Catholics give a different answer such as, “I try to live a good life and treat others as I would like to be treated.” Years ago, I was taught to assume that such an answer indicates that the person is an unbeliever because he is trusting in his works instead of Jesus’ finished work on the cross.

While such an answer may indeed point to an unregenerate mindset, I am no longer sure that we should assume outright that the person is an unbeliever. I think we need to be careful about assuming anything on the basis of a person’s response to a single question. I think that question is a good question to ask because the answer forms the basis for a potentially good gospel dialog. I will continue asking it. All I am suggesting is that we try to avoid making significant assumptions without sufficient discussion.

In response to an answer that points to a works-based orientation, I have observed Protestants immediately begin calling them to repent and be saved under the assumption that they were unbelievers. While many, if not most, of them need to hear this call to repent and believe the gospel, what if the person actually has a relationship with Jesus as their Lord and Savior? Such a person will likely conclude that this Protestant is an arrogant know it all who has not taken the time to understand them yet.

As Protestants, I think we need to keep in mind that it is likely that the Roman Catholic we are talking with has most likely been taught to think of salvation differently. Also, we should not assume that we know exactly what this particular Roman Catholic has been taught or what he believes. The fact is that most Catholics are taught that Jesus died for our sins. While they have been taught this, I perceive that most of the ones I have met really do not trust in Jesus’ death in their behalf. In other words, I perceive that most of the ones I have met remain dead in their trespasses and sins.

But for the sake of discussion, let’s say we meet one who gives us a works-based answer to our question. Also, assume that he was taught and also believes that Jesus died for his sins in spite of his answer to our question. It is important to remember that most Roman Catholics have been taught over and over that Christians obey God and He is pleased with obedience and displeased with disobedience. (This is a biblical doctrine.) So, when we pose our question, perhaps the Roman Catholic, being put on the spot, might do the following. What if he immediately begins to examine his life to verify that it is characterized by Christian obedience? Yes, we are trying to guide him to the One and Only reason for our hope, Jesus’ substitutionary death on the cross. But what if, due to the heavy emphasis of the teaching on the importance of good works, his mind jumps over the real reason for hope and starts looking inwardly for reason to think he is truly a Christian (since all true Christians obey).

I am not at all suggesting that we should assume that a works-oriented answer to our question is a good answer! No! I am only suggesting that maybe the person is trying to give the answer he thinks is the one we expect to hear. Yes, it would be best if this person automatically answered something like, “Because Jesus took my punishment!” But, perhaps we should not automatically assume that just because his answer is not the one we want to hear, the person is definitely an unbeliever. If we make that assumption, our next response might take a direction that is unnecessarily offensive. He will likely perceive that we are typical Protestant’s with a certain script. But if we take the time to probe further, we might discover that the person just did not understand what our question was aimed at. After all, we are putting them on the spot with a pretty weighty question.

Just to clarify, I am not suggesting that we should be satisfied with their works-based answer! As much as possible, we want to help them understand that it is Jesus’ substitutionary death that is the only basis for salvation. I am just suggesting that our ability to communicate the gospel after their works-based answer might be hindered if they detect that we are assuming things about them that we really don’t know to be true for sure.

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Οὐαὶ μοί ἔστιν ἂν μὴ εὐαγγελίζωμαι (Προς Κορινθίους Α 9:16)