

“Baptism For The Dead”

Introduction. This study will ponder one of the most difficult verses in the New Testament. It lies in the middle of Paul’s discussion of the resurrection in 1 Corinthians 15. A careful examination of the context can help us to see the apostle’s intent.

I. ***Possible Interpretations***

- A. The following are several different ways that 1 Corinthians 15:29 is worded in various versions:
 1. The KJV -- “Else what shall they do which are baptized for the dead, if the dead rise not at all? why are they then baptized for the dead?”
 2. The NKJV -- “Otherwise, what will they do who are baptized for the dead, if the dead do not rise at all? Why then are they baptized for the dead?”
 3. The ASV -- “Else what shall they do that are baptized for the dead? If the dead are not raised at all, why then are they baptized for them?”
 4. The NASV -- “Otherwise, what will those do who are baptized for the dead? If the dead are not raised at all, why then are they baptized for them?”
- B. This verse has over forty different positions. Most of them can be broken down into the following categories:
 1. Those that treat “baptism” as being used metaphorically.
 2. Those that understand baptism literally, but apply it to something other than immersion for remission of sins.
 3. Those that understand baptism to refer to vicarious baptism.
 4. Those that understand the word to refer to immersion in water in order to obtain forgiveness of sins.
- C. While it is impossible to consider all the various interpretations, we will look at some of the more pertinent ones to our discussion.
 1. Mormons have claimed that this verse supports their view of baptism for the dead.
 - a. In their practice, individuals go to their local Mormon temple, dress appropriately for a baptism, representatively adopt the name of a person who has died, and then the Mormon is baptized for that deceased person. This way, the dead person has fulfilled the requirements of salvation in the afterworld and can enjoy further spiritual benefits in the spiritual realm.
 - b. Of course, Mormons say that this is not derived from 1

Corinthians 15:29, but from modern revelation which restored that practice and the understanding and authority necessary for it to be done. No first-century Christian reading Paul's epistle could possibly have misinterpreted the expression *hyper ton nekron* ("for the sake of the dead") to mean that the faith of a living Christian could possibly be reckoned to the benefit of a dead Christian, whether he was genealogically related to him or not. Furthermore, this interpretation wrests the verse out of context, as we will observe shortly.

2. Another position states that Paul was using an example from the pagans in vs. 29. This is significant because it is contended that Christians were not practicing baptism for the dead, but the pagans were. Just north of Corinth was a city named Eleusis. This was the location of a pagan religion where baptism in the sea was practiced to guarantee a good afterlife. The Corinthians were known to be heavily influenced by other pagan customs. It may be that the Corinthians were being influenced by the Eleusis religious practices where baptism for the dead was practiced. The point is that even the pagans believe in the resurrection, otherwise, why would they baptize for the dead? So, the resurrection is a reality and is going to happen. This interpretation is based upon the use of the third person plural (they) which the verb "baptizo" is in. But it is problematic that Paul would bring up this heathen practice as if somehow it should teach a lesson to the Corinthians without any refutation.
3. Some take the position that the verse is a series of rhetorical questions which make the point that if the dead are not raised, one's baptism is absolutely nonsensical. If there is no resurrection from the dead, what difference does it make whether or not one has his sins washed away? In other words, is one baptized in order to forever be in the realm of the dead?
4. Another position says that the Corinthians were inconsistent. Their practice: death, burial, and resurrection. Their doctrine: death, burial, no resurrection. They must change either their preaching or their practice. This would mean that every time they immerse, they needed to drown them. This would make their baptism agree with their doctrine. But if they continue to baptize as they have been, they need to recognize that this is an eloquent proclamation of the resurrection. In other words, the way they baptize reveals their view of dead people – they

are raised, which contradicts their doctrine.

5. Some take the position that people submitted to baptism "for the sake of the dead" (the preposition *hyper* is intended to mean "for the sake of" rather than "on behalf of" in this particular context), even though their primary motivation would be to get right with God, as sinners in need of a Savior. The "dead" in this interpretation may either be loved ones dear to the one baptized or influential Christians who have passed on or who were martyred for the cause of Christ. The one who has been deeply impressed by the example of a dying Christian may have been moved to join him or her in obedience to the Lord -- in the joyous expectation of meeting that one in his glorified resurrection body.

II. **A Consideration Of The Context**

- A. This chapter is one long treatise on the subject of the resurrection of the dead. It is obvious that the Corinthians accepted Christ's resurrection but denied the resurrection of Christians.
- B. Current philosophical opinion in intellectual Greek circles as well as among the Jewish Sadducees was that such a reconstitution of bodily form was impossible once physical death had occurred. The appearance of resurrected Old Testament saints in bodily form to many observers in Jerusalem after the death of Jesus on the cross was apparently dismissed as hallucinations (Matthew 27:52). But throughout this chapter, the apostle shows that the bodily resurrection of Christians in the end of time is guaranteed by the bodily resurrection of Christ Himself.
- C. The chapter can be divided into six paragraphs:
 1. Vss. 1-11 -- The evidence of the resurrection.
 - a. The resurrection of Christ is a historic fact proven by the message of the gospel, the testimony of witnesses, and the conversion of Paul himself.
 - b. Paul and the rest of the apostles always preached the resurrection as part of the gospel. The bodily resurrection is a part of the gospel whether it was preached by Paul or any other apostle.
 2. Vss. 12-19 -- The importance of the resurrection.
 - a. Paul had preached the gospel to them, they had believed, and their lives had been transformed.
 - b. But if the dead rise not, then Christ is dead and that gospel is a lie. Faith is only good if a person lives; there is no hope after death.
 3. Vss. 20-28 -- The plan of the resurrection.

- a. It was through the first Adam's sin that death came into the world; but through the last Adam, death has been conquered.
 - b. Christ cannot hand over the kingdom over to the Father until every enemy is defeated. This reign began at Pentecost and will continue in His spiritual kingdom until every enemy is destroyed.
4. Vss. 29-34 -- The incentives of the resurrection.
- a. Paul mentions several practices in daily life that prove the resurrection of the body, including our practice which is discussed in this lesson.
 - b. Paul warns them to avoid the false teachers who were trying to persuade them to believe that there was no resurrection of the dead.
5. Vss. 35-49 -- The bodies of the resurrection.
- a. Paul uses illustrations from nature to show that there is no life apart from death.
 - b. Every man who has a natural, physical body is earthy. When the resurrection of the dead occurs, we will be given a heavenly body like Jesus.
6. Vss. 50-58 -- The victory of the resurrection.
- a. There can be no sting in death when a person is a Christian, for Christ has removed that sting.
 - b. Inscriptions on tombs in ancient Greece and Rome indicate that death was their greatest enemy; they saw no hope beyond the grave. In Christ, we have life and hope.
- D. So if the hope of the bodily resurrection of believers is a delusion, then Christ Himself could not have risen bodily from the grave. And if He never rose from the grave, the entire gospel proclamation is a fraud; and there is no deliverance from sin and spiritual death (vs. 17). Therefore, the doctrine of bodily resurrection is not a matter of option for the Christian; it is the very essence of salvation. But that salvation is available only to those who respond with obedience to the Master's call.

Conclusion. There are many interpretations, and it is difficult to find a satisfactory one because there is no position without some problems. Considering that more than forty positions have been advanced to explain this passage, it is best to approach it with very little dogmatism. It is much easier to explain what it does not mean (i.e., the Mormon position) than what it does mean. There is no conversion by proxy. Such a teaching cannot be found in any part of scripture, and it is completely at variance with what God's word teaches about salvation.