

Baptism For The Dead

"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?" (1 Cor. 15:29).

There is likely no passage in the entire Bible that has more explanations for it than this verse. What does it mean? It is a verse which have had people "scratching their heads" for centuries. Space does not allow a reciting of all those we have seen given; certainly not the "explanation" and the "reasons" others reject that particular explanation.

It is to this verse that Mormons appeal to justify their "proxy" baptism. According to their doctrine, a Mormon adherent may be baptized for one who has died but in an unimmersed state. We agree that baptism is necessary; that it is for the remission of the sinner's sins for the scriptures say so in too many places (Mark 16:15-16; Acts 2:38; 22:16, 1 Peter 3:21), but to conclude that one may, by proxy, secure remission of sins for one who is deceased by being "baptized in his stead" is flawed for two very important reasons.

First, each man is accountable to God for himself. He cannot save another by acting by proxy for that person. Paul could have wished himself "anathema" from Christ if that would have saved his nation, Israel, but of course, he could not save them by separating himself from the Lord (Rom. 9:3). If he could have saved some of them by being baptized for them after their death, don't you know he would have done so? Ezekiel 18:20 tells us that the soul that sins shall die, the father shall not bear the iniquity of the son, neither shall the son bear the iniquity of the son. Neither father nor son can be punished for the sin of the other and conversely, neither father nor son can remove guilt from the other. Each soul will stand before God and give "account of the deeds done in the body."

Second, Jesus taught, in His account of Lazarus and the rich man (Luke 16) that after death no one can remove himself from where he goes at death. Abraham's words to the rich man are clear on this matter: "Son, remember that thou in thy lifetime receivest thy good things, and Lazarus in like manner evil things: but now here he is comforted, and thou art in anguish. And besides all this, between us and you there is a great gulf fixed, that they that would pass from here to you may not be able, and that none may cross over thence to us" (Lk. 16:25-26). That settles the matter. Proxy baptism is not what Paul had in mind when he spoke of "baptism for the dead".

Others regard "baptism for the dead" to refer to baptism for Christ. But in the ASV translation the word "dead" (for whom they are baptized) is plural — "why then are they baptized for them?" ruling out that the "dead" for whom some were "baptized" was Christ.

Still others view the "dead" as Christians who had passed on but whose faith in Christ, His word, and His promises of a future resurrection to be so certain and so sure that they were willing to suffer persecution, even martyrdom, rather than surrender their convictions. Their stalwart, unswerving faith made a tremendous impact upon others who were, by observing those faithful Christians, constrained to become Christians.

No explanation of 1 Corinthians 15:29 is without weakness. Some explanations (such as "proxy" baptism) may be shown not to be the explanation of the passage by virtue that it contradicts some other Bible passage or principle. For other explanations, we can see passages which seem to render the explanation doubtful. To me, the last explanation given above may not be what the apostle intended but it is something which has happened before and we are certain will happen again.

Remember, whatever Paul refers to was not something he necessarily endorsed. He simply calls attention to a practice that in that dangerous age might place them in a position of jeopardy. If there was no resurrection of the dead, why should any one hazard his life for the hope of a future life, if there was indeed no life in the future?

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