

COMMENTARIES COMPARED: EXPOSITION ANCIENT & MODERN: BAPTISM FOR THE DEAD

By David Lee Burris

ARE LIVING CHRISTIANS TO be baptized for the dead? One passage of Scripture which has long puzzled Bible scholars is 1st Corinthians 15:29: “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?”

Baptism for the dead is not mentioned elsewhere in the Bible or in other early Christian documents, with two exceptions. Yet, barring one reference by Clement of Alexandria in Excerpt 122 of *Excerpta ex Theodoto* and one by Tertullian in *Against Marcion*, 1st Corinthians 15:29 stands alone in the age of Saint Paul and for centuries afterwards,

Clement of Alexandria lived from about AD 153 to 217. A native of Greece, he traveled and studied widely before settling in Egypt, where in the AD 190s he was the principal or dean of Christianity’s foremost theological school, and one of the most prominent Christian teachers of his age. He was well versed in the science of the day, in philosophy and in religion, including Christian sects. Among his writings against deviations from Christianity he mentioned baptism for the dead as a tenet of a particular Gnostic sect.

“Gnostic” meant a person who claimed to possess a secret religious knowledge. The Gnostics were a strange species of believer. They believed that only the spirit is good and pleasing to God and that all matter is evil and death. The very origin of matter was evil and not from God.

The Gnostic group encountered in the *Excerpta ex Theodoto* was that of one Theodotus, who taught that there were an original divine mother and father who gave birth to other spirit beings. Rebellious and envious, their youngest great-granddaughter attempted to imitate their action by producing spirit children. She did such a bad job that in addition to (good) soul and spirit she gave birth to (evil).

In some instances, matter and spirit were mixed in such a way that particles of soul and spirit were trapped in material human bodies. Other particles of spirit escaped and continued in the purely spiritual form of angels. In order to liberate themselves from their bodily prisons of flesh and death to be reunited with the first parents (be saved), members of Theodotus's sect relied on a body of secret knowledge about angels, gods, and other spirit beings, including what was referred to as "baptism for the dead."

Clement's *Excerpta ex Theodoto* relates that Theodotus's Gnostics believed that the ones who are baptized in 1st Corinthians 15 are angels, spirit creatures who had escaped imprisonment in matter. Only pure spirit beings are truly alive, and the redemption process can begin only with them. The ones for whom they are baptized are human beings, whom Theodotus's group considered to be dead due to being trapped in bodies of flesh. An angel must first be baptized in heaven on behalf of a "dead" human, followed by the human's own baptism on earth. Being prisoners of the flesh and the material world and dead to the spiritual, humans cannot start the process. According to Clement, 1st Corinthians 15:29 refers to this Gnostic concept. Neither Paul, Clement, nor the Gnostics taught that humans still in material bodies were baptized for deceased humans. To Theodotus's Gnostics, "resurrection" meant that the soul is freed from the material body and raised up to equality with the angels in a purely spiritual world, a world of true life with the original divine spirit parents.

One of the main themes in 1st Corinthians 15 is the resurrection and incorrect views about it. It is not a discussion about baptism. It does touch on baptism for the dead, but only secondarily to the resurrection of our material bodies; Paul mentions baptism for the dead only as part of an argument against the Gnostics' eccentric notions about the resurrection, in order to turn their theories against them.

The strange dogmas described in *Excerpta ex Theodoto* were based on the secret knowledge Gnostics claimed they alone possessed. Paul's warning in 1st Timothy 6:20 against "what is falsely called knowledge" (RSV) indicates that the Apostle both knew about and opposed Gnosticism, including the idea of angelic baptism for the spiritually dead and other Gnostic tenets described by Clement a hundred and fifty years later. Paul's counsel in 1st Timothy 1:4 and Titus 3:9 to avoid "endless genealogies" remind us of the Gnostics' lines of descent from the original spirit parents to their great-granddaughter, humans and angels, and also recall to our memories the unstinting genealogical research of modern-day practitioners of baptism for the dead.

Briefly, what 1ST Corinthians 15:29 refers to is this Gnostic concept. Neither Paul nor the Gnostics taught that humans still in material bodies were baptized for deceased humans. Note that 1st Corinthians 15:29 does not ask “what shall we do which are baptized for the dead” but rather “what shall *they* do.” The *Excerpta ex Theodoto* indicates that “they” are the angels, not Christians on earth. Such “baptism for the dead” was not a standard or apostolic Christian doctrine but a Gnostic one, which Paul and Clement used against these heretics.

We now turn to the evidence of Tertullian’s *Against Marcion* in connection with another aberrant Christian sect. This book was written sometime between AD 207 and 212 by a prominent lawyer who had converted to Christianity and became a Christian clergyman. Tertullian wrote against many heresies, including that of the Marcionites. Their founder, Marcion, and his followers shared many beliefs with the Gnostics, including that matter was evil and only the spirit was good, but they did not believe in the great number and genealogies of gods propounded by the Gnostics. Nevertheless, Marcionites did believe in more than one deity. Like the Gnostics and Mormons, Marcion’s interpretations of the Christian faith were regarded as fanciful and perverted by mainstream Christians. He even sought to abolish the Bible of the church and introduce his own in its place. Marcion’s ideas were so close to the Gnostics that the church father Irenaeus in the AD 180s regarded him as one of them. Irenaeus had known the first disciples of the apostles in western Anatolia, and became a prominent pastor in France, and was thus very knowledgeable about the apostolic faith. Because we know so little about the rites and sacramental practices of the Marcionites and the Gnostics, and given the similarities between them, we must conclude that they shared the doctrine of baptism for the dead, for similar reasons. Because Marcion was not active until the middle of the second century, born much too late to have been at Corinth in the time of the Apostle Paul, we must conclude that Marcion adopted the concept of baptism for the dead from Gnostics, who (as we have seen) were there in Paul’s time.

Tertullian expressed puzzlement as to what such baptism consisted of, which as a prominent Christian churchman and scholar he would have known about if it had been as great a feature of Christian life as it is to one of our latter-day denominations. His comment at *Against Marcion* 5.10 was:

"What," asks he, "shall they do who are baptized for the dead, if the dead rise not?" Now, never mind that practice, (whatever it may have been.) The *Februarian* lustrations will perhaps answer him (quite as well), by praying for the dead. Do not then suppose that the apostle here indicates some new *god as the* author and advocate of this (baptism for the dead. His only aim in alluding to it was) he might all the more firmly insist upon the resurrection of the body, in proportion as they who were vainly baptized for the dead resorted to the practice from their belief of *such* resurrection. We have the apostle in another passage defining "but one baptism." To be "baptized for the dead" therefore means, in fact, to be baptized for the body; for, as we have shown, it is the body which becomes *dead*. What, then, shall they do who are baptized for the body, if the body rises not again? We stand, then, on firm ground (when we say) that the next question which the apostle has discussed equally relates to the body.

In any event, the testimonies of the Apostle Paul and of the church fathers Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, and Tertullian are unanimous that, in its original historical and biblical context, and in the sense of the phrase as understood by the earliest Christians, baptism for the dead meant something radically different from Mormon theology and practice. In early Christianity it was distinctive of fringe cults opposed by mainline Christians and, even so, was probably never practiced by or on human beings. As the first heirs of the Apostle Paul, Clement and the other orthodox authors shared the Apostle's culture and language to an extent that they knew the background of his writings and how he meant them to be understood. An interpreter loses these advantages, and thereby the meaning of Paul's statements, if s/he works only in the milieus of the nineteenth or twenty-first centuries.

4. Clement of Alexandria, *Excerpta ex Theodoto*; Clement of Alexandria, *Extraits de Théodote*.

5. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 1.27.1–2, 4 (ANF 1:352–53).

6. Tertullian, *Against Marcion* 5.10 (ANF 3:449–50).¹

¹ Brattston, D. W. T., & Ward, K. (2020). [Bible problems solved by early christians](#). Eugene, Oregon: Resource Publications.

Early Christian Commentators on the Baptism of the Dead

John Chrysostom (AD 347-407) is the most thorough commentator on the verse. He published *Homilies on the Epistles of Paul to the Corinthians*, and he did not dodge [1 Cor. 15:29](#). He even suggests that he has more to say on the subject, but cannot:

I desire now expressly to utter it, but I dare not because of the uninitiated. These add a difficulty to our exposition, compelling us either not to speak clearly or to declare to them the unutterable mysteries. Nevertheless, as I am able, I will speak as through a veil. ([Homily XL](#))

Summation of the Baptism of the Dead

We have only two people to work with, but both say that "the dead" refers to our bodies. Our bodies are buried with Christ in baptism & we are raised to new life in Christ. We also hope in the resurrection, when our dead bodies will either rise from the grave or, if we are still alive at his coming, be transformed instantly ("in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye") from corruptibility to incorruptibility.

I can't say I find that interpretation very satisfying. Paul seems to referencing a specific practice in that passage. I suspect he is talking about a rite that he disagrees with, performed by the gnostic teachers that he is refuting in that chapter.

Thus, I would paraphrase Paul's argument as: "If those gnostics don't believe in a resurrection of the body, why do they baptize on behalf of dead people? It doesn't make any sense."

I can't say I'm right. I'm just speculating. However, with just two early Christians, one writing 150 years after Paul and the other more than 300 years after, I think we are free to guess as well as they are.

Quotes on the Baptism of the Dead in 1 Cor. 15:29

Let's quote Tertullian in full, as his is much shorter.

"What" asks he, "shall they do who are baptized for the dead, if the dead rise not?" Now never mind that practice. The Februrarian Illustrations will perhaps answer him by praying for the dead. Don't suppose that the apostle here indicates some new god as the author and advocate of this. Instead, he said this that he might more firmly insist upon the resurrection of the body, in proportion as they who were vainly baptized for the dead resorted to the practice from their belief in such a resurrection. We have the apostle in another passage defining "but one baptism." To be "baptized for the dead" therefore means, in fact, to be baptized for the body; for, as we have shown, it is the body which becomes dead. What then shall they do who are baptized for the body if the body does not rise again?

We stand, then, on firm ground because of the fact that the next question which the apostle discusses equally relates to the body. "But some men will say, 'How are the dead raised? With what body do they come?" ([Against Marcion V:10](#))

The homily (sermon) from John Chrysostom is [several paragraphs long](#), so I will just give you excerpts.

Chrysostom's homily begins with a description of what followers of Marcion do. Marcion was the founder of a heretical sect that accepted only Luke's Gospel and a few of Paul's letters and only accepted those with edits. He rejected the God of Israel as different from the Father of Jesus.

Chrysostom scoffs at Marcion's practice, so that "none of the more exceedingly simple folk" be led astray, then turns to explaining the passage.

I first wish to remind you who are initiated of the response, which on the evening they who introduce you to the mysteries bid you make. ... After the enunciation of those mystical and fearful words and the awe-inspiring rules of doctrine which have come down from heaven, this we also add at the end when we are about to baptize, bidding them to say, "I believe in the resurrection of the dead," and upon this faith we are baptized.

The mysteries are the bread and wine of [the Eucharist](#) which were given to converts immediately after baptism. The "response" is the [rule of faith](#) or "creed" that those who are being baptized confess to at their baptism. The [Apostles Creed](#) and [Nicene Creed](#) that many churches still repeat each week are products of baptismal confession of early churches. These are the "awe-inspiring rules of doctrine" to which Chrysostom refers.

In the fourth century, "I believe in the resurrection of the dead" would have been a part of almost every church's rule of faith (creed). Tertullian points out in a much earlier writing that the original rule of faith, given by Jesus, was "in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit" ([De Corona 3](#)).

After we have confessed this together with the rest [of the rule of faith], then at last we are let down into the fountain of those sacred streams. This, therefore, Paul recalls to their minds and says, "If there be no resurrection, why are you then baptized for the dead?" i.e., the dead bodies. For, in fact, it is with a view to this that you are baptized, the resurrection of the dead body, believing that it no longer remains dead. (*ibid.*)

Finally we need to add the comment by the editors of *The Nicene & Post-Nicene Fathers* on a baptismal comment by Gregory of Nyssa (AD 335-395) from about the same time as John Chrysostom's.

Why are they baptized into Christ if he has no power or goodness of his own? ([Against Eunomius I:22](#))

The editors' note says:

This throws some light on the much discussed passage, 'Why are these baptized for the dead?' Gregory at all events seems here to take it to mean, 'Why are they baptized in the name of a dead Christ?' as he is adopting partially St. Paul's words, 1 Cor. xv. 29.

Summary

Only two early writers, Tertullian and John Chrysostom, talk definitively about the baptism of the dead mentioned in [1 Corinthians 15:29](#). Both say that the reference is to our bodies, which are buried with King Jesus in baptism. Both say that we should understand this to mean that we live in expectation of the resurrection of our bodies.

Pulpit Commentary

Verses 29-34 - **Arguments from the practices & lives of Christians.** The three arguments used in these verses are: If there be no resurrection:

1. Why do some of you get yourselves baptized on behalf of your dead friends?
 2. Why do we face lives of daily peril?
 3. How would it be otherwise possible to resist Epicurean views of life? Verse 29.
- **Else what shall they do which are baptized for the dead**, etc.? This clause can have but one meaning, and that its obvious one, namely, that, among the many strange opinions and practices which then prevailed, was one which was entirely un-warranted-but which St. Paul does not here stop to examine - of persons getting themselves baptized as it were by **proxy** for others who had died. **Doubtless some of the deaths alluded to in [1 Corinthians 11:30](#) had happened to persons who had been cut off before they were actually baptized; and their friends had as it were gone through the rite in their stead, in the hope of extending to them some of its benefits.** It is argued that St. Paul could not possibly mention such a practice without reprobation; but that is an *a priori assumption* not warranted by Paul's methods (see [1 Cor. 10:8](#); [1 Cor. 11:6](#)). He always confines his attention to the question immediately before him, and his present object is merely to urge a passing *argumentum ad hominem*. There is nothing at all surprising in the existence of such an abuse in the medley of wild opinions and wild practices observable in this disorganized Church. **It accords with the known tendency of later times to postpone baptism, as a rite which was supposed to work as a charm.** We also find that the actual practice of baptism on behalf of the dead lingered on among Corinthians (Epiph., 'Haer.,' 28:7) and Marcionites (Tertullian, 'De Resurrect.,' 48; 'Adv. Marc.,' 5:10). Tertullian accepts the words in their obvious sense in his 'De Praeser. Haer.,' 48, but accepts the absurdity of "the dead" meaning "the body" ("pro mortuis tingui est pro corporibus tingui") in his book against Marcion (5:10). **St. Chrysostom tells us further that the proxy who was to be baptized used to be concealed under the bier of the dead man, who was supposed to answer in his name that he desired to be baptized.** How perfectly natural the custom was may be seen from the fact that among the Jews also a man dying under ceremonial pollution was cleansed by proxy. Such are the notions that "for the dead" can mean "**for our mortal bodies**" (Chrysostom); or "**for those about to die**" (Estius, Calvin, etc.); or "**over (the sepulchres of) the dead**" (Luther); or "**to supply the vacancies left by the dead**" (Le Clerc). Equally unwarrantable are the "explanations" (?) which make those who are being "baptized" mean those who are "passing through a baptism of suffering" (!). The disuse of this vicarious baptism among orthodox Christians may have been due to the discouragement of it by St. Paul when he went to Corinth, and "set in order" various erroneous customs ([1 Corinthians 11:34](#)).

Gill's Exposition of the Entire Bible

Else what shall they do which are baptized for the dead, The apostle here returns to his subject, and makes use of new arguments to prove the doctrine of the resurrection of the dead, and reasons for it from the baptism of some persons; but what is his sense, is not easy to be understood, or what rite and custom, or thing, or action he refers to; which must, be either Jewish baptism, or Christian baptism literally taken, or baptism in a figurative and metaphorical sense. Some think that he refers to some one or other of the divers baptisms of the Jews; see [Hebrews 9:10](#) and **particularly to the purification of such who had touched a dead body**, which was done both by the ashes of the red heifer burnt, and by bathing himself in water; and which, the Jews say (l), intimated, "the resurrection of the dead": wherefore such a rite was needless, if there is no resurrection; to strengthen this sense, a passage in Ecclesiasticus 34:25 is produced, , "he that washeth himself after the touching of a dead body, if he touch it again, what availeth his washing?" but the phrase there used is different; it is not said, he that baptizeth or washeth himself for the dead, but from the dead, to cleanse himself from pollution received by the touch of a dead body: it is also observed, that the Jews, as well as other nations, have used various rites and ceremonies about their dead, and among the rest, **the washing of dead bodies before interment**; see [Acts 9:37](#) and this by some is thought to be what is here referred to; and the reasoning is, if there is no resurrection of the dead, why all this care of a dead body? why this washing of it? it may as well be put into the earth as it is, since it will rise no more; but how this can be called a baptism for the dead, I see not: rather therefore Christian baptism, or the ordinance of water baptism is here respected; and with regard to this, interpreters go different ways: some think **the apostle has in view a custom of some, who when their friends died without baptism, used to be baptized in their room**; this is said to be practised by the Marcionites in Tertullian's time, and by the Corinthians in the times of the Apostle John; but it does not appear to have been in use in the times of the Apostle Paul; and besides, if it had been, as it was a vain and superstitious one, he would never have mentioned it without a censure, and much less have argued from it; nor would his argument be of any weight, since it might be retorted, that whereas such persons were mistaken in using such a practice, they might be also in the doctrine of the resurrection of the dead: others are of opinion that such persons are intended, called **Clinics, who deferred their baptism till they came upon their death beds, and then had it administered to them**; but as this practice was not in being in the apostle's time, and was far from being laudable; and though the persons to whom it was administered were upon the point of death, and nearer the dead than the living, and were as good as dead, and might be intended by them, for their advantage, when dead and not living; yet it must be a great force and strain on words and things, to reckon this a being baptized for the dead: others would have the words rendered, "*over the dead*"; and suppose that **reference is had to the Christians that had their "baptisteries" in their places of burial, and by being baptized here, testified their faith & hope of the resurrection of the dead**; but this was rather a being baptized *among the dead*, than over them, or for them; and moreover it's not certain, they did make use of such places to baptize in; to which be added, primitive Christians had not so early burying grounds of their own:

Others would have the meaning to be, that they were **baptized for their dead works**, their sins, to wash them away; but this baptism does not of itself, and no otherwise than by leading the faith of persons to the blood of Christ, which alone cleanses from sin, original & actual; nor is this appropriate to the apostle's argument. Others imagine, that he intends such as were baptized, and added to the church, and so filled up the places of them that were dead; but the reason from hence proving the resurrection of the dead is not very obvious: those seem to be nearer the truth of the matter, who suppose that the apostle has respect to the original practice of making a confession of faith before baptism, and among the rest of the articles of it, the doctrine of the resurrection of the dead, upon the belief of which being baptized, they might be said to be baptized for the dead; that is, for, or upon, or **in the faith and profession of the resurrection of the dead**, and therefore must either hold this doctrine, or renounce their baptism administered upon it; to which may be added another sense of the words, which is, that **baptism performed by immersion**, as it was universally in those early times, was a lively emblem and representation of the resurrection of Christ from the dead, and also both of the spiritual and corporeal resurrection of the saints. Now if there is no resurrection, why is such a symbol used? it is useless and insignificant; I see nothing of moment to be objected to these two last senses, which may be easily put together, but this; that the apostle seems to point out something that was done or endured by some Christians only; whereas baptism, upon a profession of faith in Christ, and the resurrection from the dead, and performed by immersion, as an emblem of it, was common to all; and therefore he would rather have said, what shall we do, or we all do, who are baptized for the dead? I am therefore rather inclined to think baptism is used here in a figurative metaphorical sense, for afflictions, sufferings & **martyrdom**, as in [Matthew 20:22](#) and it was for the belief, profession, and preaching of the doctrine of the resurrection of the dead, both of Christ and of the saints, that the apostles and followers of Christ endured so much as they did; the first instance of persecution after our Lord's ascension was on this account. The Apostles Peter and John, were laid hold on and put in prison for preaching this doctrine; the reproach and insult the Apostle Paul met with at Athens were by reason of it; and it was for this that he was called in question and accused of the Jews; nor was there anyone doctrine of Christianity more hateful and contemptible among the Heathens than this was.

Now the apostle's argument stands thus, what is, or will become of those persons who have been as it were baptized or overwhelmed in afflictions and sufferings, who have endured so many and such great injuries and indignities, and have even lost their lives for asserting this doctrine,

if the dead rise not at all? how sadly mistaken must such have been!

why are they then baptized for the dead? how imprudently have they acted! and what a weak and foolish part do they also act, who continue to follow them! in what a silly manner do they expose themselves to danger, and throw away their lives, if this doctrine is not true! which sense is confirmed by what follows: the Alexandrian copy, and some others, read, "for them", and so the Vulgate Latin version; and the Ethiopic in both clauses reads, "why do they baptize?"

Baptism for the Dead?

by [Dave Miller, Ph.D.](#)

“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?”

The most notorious interpretation of 1 Corinthians 15:29 is the one advocated by Mormonism—that people who are alive on the Earth can be baptized, and the efficacy of that baptism then is offered to those who already have died and are in the spirit realm. But this verse cannot be teaching proxy baptism as practiced by the Mormons. Many other passages eliminate that possibility by stressing the singular necessity of responding obediently to God in this life (Proverbs 11:7; John 8:24; Luke 16:26; 2 Corinthians 5:10; Hebrews 9:27). The Mormon view is in direct contradiction to what the Bible teaches from beginning to end. We have only this life in which to make our decisions, and when we leave this life, we have no further opportunities to repent (Luke 16:25-31; Hebrews 9:27).

At least four adequate explanations exist that avoid contradicting the rest of the Bible. First, “dead” refers to the “old man of sin” (Romans 6:6). We are baptized for the dead in the sense that we are baptized in water to eliminate the dead man of sin. Hence Paul was asking why one would be baptized to eliminate the old man of sin in anticipation of eternal acceptance if the resurrection will not be forthcoming.

Second, “dead” refers to the world of lost souls—those who are spiritually dead. “They” refers to the apostles and “baptism” refers to the baptism of suffering that the apostles endured in order to make known the Gospel to the world (alluded to in passages like Mark 10:38-39, Luke 12:50, Acts 9:16, and 1 Corinthians 4:9). Thus, Paul was asking why the apostles would subject themselves to the baptism of suffering, in behalf of the spiritually dead people of the world if, in fact, no one has hope of the resurrection.

Third, “they” refers to those who are baptized in water on the basis of the preaching and teaching done by those who had since died. In other words, why would a person obey the command to be baptized, and thereby have hope of life beyond the grave, if the one who taught the person to be baptized has since died and will not be raised from the dead?

Fourth, Paul was using logical argument known as *argumentum ad hominem*—an argument based upon what men were doing at that time and with which the readers would be familiar. The Corinthians were familiar with people who practiced an immersion for benefit of the dead. He used the third person pronoun “they” as opposed to “you” or “we.” New Testament baptism would have been referred to in the first or second person. This tactic referring to what outsiders were doing (without implying endorsement) to make a valid spiritual point was used by Paul on other occasions (e.g., Acts 17:28; Titus 1:12).

These four possible interpretations each have contextual evidence to support them. None of the four contradicts any other Bible doctrine. What is critically important is that we not miss Paul’s point in 1st Corinthians 15. He brought up the subject of baptism for the dead for one reason: to reaffirm the reality of the resurrection. Christians were being drawn into the destructive heresy that the general resurrection is but fictitious. In a setting where he ardently defended the actuality and centrality of the resurrection, he advanced two questions. If the resurrection and end-time events are not to occur, then “why are they baptized for the dead?” & “why do the apostles stand in jeopardy every hour?” (vss. 29-30). He wanted the Corinthians to face the fact that many things Christians do have meaning only if the resurrection is an anticipated and ultimate objective. If when we die, that’s it— with no future conscious existence—why take risks living the Christian life as the apostles frequently did? If this life is all there is, forget Christianity and live it up (vs. 32)! But resurrection is coming! So do not live this life indulging the flesh and mingling with those who will influence you to do so (vs. 33). Live righteously, and get your mind straight in view of your knowledge of the coming resurrection (vs. 34).



Explain 1 Corinthians 15:29. What is meant by the phrase, “baptism for the dead?”

Explanations it cannot be

This text has been considered by many scholars and commentators as one of the hardest passages to interpret without violating other passages of scripture. Mike Willis stated in his commentary that he has read more than 40 different positions with regard to this text. So, we must understand that we cannot go into this text lightly as we try to come to an understanding. One of the easier things to do with the text is define what it could not be referring to. By doing this we can narrow our focus and begin to look at plausible explanations for this text.

Mormon teaching

Mormonism teaches that the living are to be baptized for those who are dead, so they can accept the vicarious baptism in the spirit world. This is the biggest religious group that you will come across that will teach this view point. This is why they spend much time in genealogies so that they can look back and try to save those in their families who have already died that may not be saved. It is interesting that the Book of Mormon itself does not teach the baptism for the dead. In fact, the book of Mormon teaches the opposite that only the time in this life is given to repent and prepare to meet God. But in the book *Doctrine and Covenants* Joseph Smith, the founder of the Mormon religion claimed to receive a revelation that they should be baptized for the dead. This comes from his idea that “it is an unthinkable and immoral doctrine to admit that all those men who died or who will die without baptism are damned forever.” But the ability to baptize for those who have already died violates many biblical passages and biblical principles.

Reasons against baptism for the dead:

Luke 16: Rich man and Lazarus. Abraham clearly told the rich man that there is a great gulf fixed between the two of them and no one can pass between the two. Abraham did not say that there would be a possibility that he could be with Abraham if one of his brothers performed baptism for him. We also see from the story here that there are no second chances once we die. Both the rich man and Lazarus destinations were sealed based upon how they had lived.

Matthew 28:19-20 & Mark 16:16: The great commission. In considering the possibility of baptism for the dead, we must initially look at the great commission given by Jesus and what he instructed toward baptism. Jesus, in the Matthew account, said, **“Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”** Here we see disciples were made not only by baptizing, but teaching them to obey everything.

The dead cannot obey and therefore cannot become disciples. Consider also the account of Mark, **“Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned.”** Belief is a necessary part of salvation. Those who do not believe will be condemned. Those who did not become Christians did not believe and are condemned. Peter in Acts 2:38 said repentance is necessary. We are not saved today by baptism alone, nor can the dead be saved by baptism alone. Confession, belief, repentance, and faithful living are all required for God to grant us salvation. The dead cannot do these things and therefore cannot be saved once they are dead.

2 Corinthians 5:10: Judged by our own deeds. Notice what Paul said to the same people the Corinthians in his second letter. **“For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive the things done in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad.”** By what will we receive our judgment? According to the things done in the body, according to what each person has done. It is not by the things that occur once we are dead. It is not according to what others have done for us. We are judged only by our own works that we did while we were alive on the earth.

Logic: can the reverse occur? If it is possible for people to be baptized for those who have died, then can the reverse also occur? Can you do something to reject Christ for someone else? If I die saved, can someone in the future do something to reject Christ for me? Another thought: why must we wait for them to die? Why can we not start baptizing for people who are alive if salvation is something that can be transferred? I believe the problems can be seen. Our works determine our own spiritual eternity, not someone else's works. Where is the incentive to be obedient to the Lord now? Why not do what you want and leave in your will for someone to get baptized for you? We have no example of this occurring. We see that simply taking the phrase at face value and suggest that baptism for the dead occurs and that is viable. So we must look for another alternative for what Paul is describing here.

Understanding the Passage

Determine the context

The first critical thing that we must do when studying any passage of scripture, but especially when we are dealing with a difficult passage to interpret. Let us look at the context of Paul's teaching & this will help us *weed out what the text cannot be talking about and clue us in as to what the text is about*. Notice that this chapter is about proving the resurrection of Christ. Some in Corinth seem to have thought that there was no resurrection of the dead and possibly went so far as to think that Christ did not raise from the dead. Paul in 1st Corinthians 15 is going to make arguments to prove that Christ did in fact raise from the dead.

Eyewitness accounts. The first proof that Paul gives is in the first 11 verses of chapter 15. Here Paul says that we have eyewitness accounts of the resurrection of Christ. Christ appeared to Peter, then to the twelve apostles, to more than 500 brethren, James, then to all of the apostles, and to Paul himself. This is proof number one that Christ did raise from the dead.

No reason for faith. Paul's second argument for the resurrection is in verses 12-19 that if there is no resurrection, then Christ did not raise, our faith is vain, they are all false witnesses, and we are still in our sins. So from the fact that we have hope in Christ is an argument that Christ did raise from the dead and thus we will as well.

Resurrection when all things in subjection. Paul then goes on to explain to the Corinthians when the resurrection will be. The resurrection of the dead came through Christ and will occur when all enemies are abolished, the last enemy being death. Now verse 29, however we understand this verse, must be in connection with this section of text. The verse is in an extension of the argument and further proof of when the resurrection will be and that there is a resurrection of the dead. With this in mind, let us consider a few possible interpretation of this text. Important also to note, especially for those who know some Greek, that the word "for" in the Greek in verse is the word *huper* and not *eis*. This word can mean "over, above, for the sake of, on behalf of, with a view toward, with reference to." It is not like the word *eis* which is for as in Acts 2:38 for the forgiveness of sins.

Possible understandings

Baptism frees us from the fear of death: This position goes like this: one of the reasons man is baptized is because of his fear of death and the retribution that awaits him beyond the grave. The person who is obedient to the gospel responds because of his fear of the judgment to come (Acts 17:30-31). This has possibilities to it but not one that I accept.

Baptism over the sepulchers of martyrs: This theory supposes the early church was forced to baptize their converts in the burial tombs of intense persecution. This takes that word for (*huper*) literally, that they were baptized above the tombs. Scholars note that there is no historical foundation for this theory. We do not read of this occurring in history, nor do we read of a persecution in Corinth yet at this time.

Baptism received on account of the dead: This theory states that a plague of some sort had broken out in Corinth that was killing many. Supposedly, some who were had previously delayed being baptized decided to be baptized for fear of death. But the problem is again that this is supposition and there is no historical reason to believe that a plague was in progress in Corinth.

Why be baptized if there is no resurrection?

The argument could thus be summarized. “If the dead do not rise at all, why then are new converts, who one day will die, baptized?” Why be baptized if there is no resurrection? Paul in Romans 6:3-9 explains the symbolism and the reason behind baptism. When we are baptized, we are baptized into Christ’s death. But this is a view toward being raised from the dead to walk in newness of life. If there is no raising of the dead, there is no newness of life, and then there is no reason for baptism. Baptism portrays the very thing that the Corinthians were denying. Baptism is, in part, our declaration that we believe in the resurrection of all the dead, of Christ first and through him all others. If Christ did not rise from the dead, burial with him in baptism is meaningless. This same point is argued by Paul in verse 30. If the dead are not raised, why were the Corinthians being baptized, and why were Paul and others jeopardizing their lives by preaching Christ? Why were they preaching baptism if the dead are not raised and why then would they put their lives on the line.

Grammar change

There is some debate as to how to punctuate this verse. Mike Willis does something interesting to this text like I would like to show you for consideration. Remember the punctuation that appears in our text was added later by men. You can see the differences in punctuation by looking at the King James versus looking at the American Standard.

From this, our brother argues the text should be punctuated like this: “Otherwise what shall they do who are baptized? For the dead? Indeed, if the dead do not rise again at all, why are people baptized? For them?” With this, the point that we have just made could be further strengthened. Are they baptized to be numbered among the dead who are never to rise again? He goes on in his commentary to show that this verse can be grammatically broken this way and still sustain the Greek of the text without violation.

I do not think that the grammar change is necessary to the understanding of the text. The word *huper* can do the same thing as breaking the sentences up. Paul’s arguing that there is no point to baptism if all that happens is death and we do not rise again. The other answers, and there are many of them, seem to run into problems when trying to reconcile to the theme of the text & arguments that Paul is making.

For example, notice verse 32. Paul is still continuing the argument. Why be baptized? Why go through the perils of living a Christian life? Why not simply eat and drink for tomorrow we die? That is the conclusion. That is how we ought to live life if there is no resurrection. Following Christ is voided. Baptism is voided. Salvation is nullified. Instead, Paul is teaching that there is a resurrection and therefore we must be baptized to be part of that resurrection with Christ.

Rays of Living Light

BY PRESIDENT CHARLES W. PENROSE

BAPTISM FOR THE DEAD

II

A NEW TESTAMENT DOCTRINE

"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?" (I Cor. xv:29.) This was an argument used by the Apostle Paul with the Corinthians, who doubted the doctrine of the resurrection of the body. It is evident that they were familiar with baptism for the dead. For, the apostle was reasoning with them from what they knew. The influence of Greek philosophy affected the minds of the Saints at Corinth, and the apostle found it necessary to write to them his splendid treatise, to convince them that as Christ was actually raised from the dead, so all mankind should be brought forth from their graves, as the Savior himself declared. And appealing to their good sense, he asked the question why they were baptized for the dead, if, as some among them maintained, there was to be no resurrection of the dead.

NOT UNDERSTOOD IN MODERN TIMES

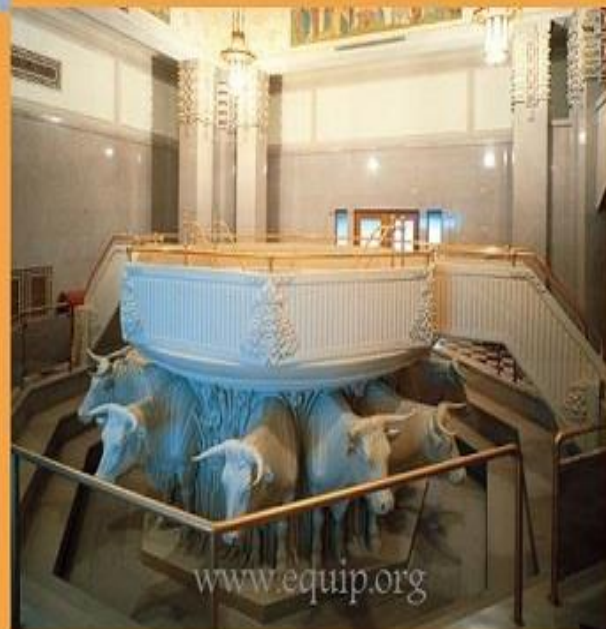
This doctrine, that the living could be baptized in behalf of the dead, has not been understood in the so-called Christian world for many hundreds of years. It was known to the early fathers, but became obsolete when the authority held by the apostles and their associates was taken from the earth and spiritual darkness settled upon the world. Yet, if that was part of the doctrine of Christ in the Apostolic age, it is part of it now. But who among all the sects of the age teaches it? Who has authority to administer it? Who knows anything of the manner in which the ordinance



Baptism for the Dead: Discerning Historical Precedent from Mere Prose

Steve Bright

“A group is on shaky ground...when it bases a doctrine or practice on an obscure or isolated statement or an incidental historical detail that is mentioned in a biblical passage.”



Mormon Doctrine: Baptism for the Dead

By **Wayne Jackson**

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The fifteenth chapter of Paul's first Corinthian epistle deals with the subject of the bodily resurrection from the dead. This great treatise easily divides into four sections:

1. **the resurrection of Jesus Christ as documented by the testimony of many eye-witnesses (vv. 1-11);**
2. **the Lord's resurrection from the dead—a divine guarantee of the future resurrection of the body (vv. 12-34);**
3. **the spiritual nature of the resurrection body (vv. 35-49); and**
4. **the ultimate victory to be associated with the resurrection (vv. 50-58).**

In the midst of this chapter, the apostle writes:

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? (v. 29, ASV).

It is rather well-known that the "Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints" (Mormons) appeals to this passage in order to support their doctrine of **vicarious baptism**, i.e., the baptism of a living person, with the benefits of the rite (i.e., remission of sins) being transferred to another person, already deceased. According to B.H. Roberts, the major historian of the Mormon Church, Joseph Smith, Jr., founder of the LDS movement, wrote:

A man may act as proxy for his own relatives . . . we may be baptized for those whom we have much friendship for (1950, 366).

In 1959, Stephen L. Richards, first counselor in the first presidency of the Salt Lake Church wrote:

All men are equal before the law and all are to have the opportunity, even the dead, to accept the Gospel and receive the promised blessings, but all must know and understand, and the dead who have gone on into the spirit world without knowledge of the Gospel are to be hereafter given the election to embrace it through vicarious works done for them by their descendants and friends in the brotherhood of the Church. This work is done within the Temples provided for that purpose (1959, 11).

The doctrine of **proxy obedience**, including the notion that one may be immersed for another person, is wrong. It violates numerous principles of Scripture. Consider the following.

Ezekiel, an Old Testament prophet, argued that neither obedience nor disobedience is transferable from one generation to another.

The person who sins will die. The son will not bear the punishment for the father's iniquity, nor will the father bear the punishment for the son's iniquity; the righteousness of the righteous will be upon himself, and the wickedness of the wicked will be upon himself (Ezekiel 18:20, NASB).

Note that what is said referencing "righteousness" is equally applicable to "wickedness." If it were possible for a living person to submit to an act of righteousness (e.g., baptism), and have the attendant blessing transferred to someone else in the realm of the dead, why could not a living person commit an act of evil, and have the resulting condemnation transferred to another in the domain of the dead?

The fact is, the Bible teaches that judgment will be of "each one" according "to what **he** has done, **whether it be good or bad**" (2 Corinthians 5:10). Again, "each one of us shall give account of himself to God" (Romans 14:12). No one will be judged upon the basis of another's deeds.

In the Lord's parable of the ten virgins (Matthew 25:1ff), the foolish virgins who failed to secure sufficient oil, i.e., they had not made adequate personal preparation, and who subsequently "slept," i.e., they died (Daniel 12:2; 1st Thessalonians 4:13), met the bridegroom (Christ) in that same unprepared condition. Moreover, when the foolish attempted to "borrow" preparation from the wise, they were refused. Among other things, this narrative unquestionably teaches that obedience cannot be transferred; it must be individual.

If remission of sins could be supplied to wicked persons in Hades (cf. Luke 16:23), they could depart their place of torment, and enter the realm of the comforted. Yet Jesus plainly taught that “there is a great gulf fixed” between the two states, so that “none may cross over” (Luke 16:26).

Significantly, the verb rendered “is fixed” in the Greek New Testament, is a perfect tense, passive voice form. The perfect tense suggests that the boundary is permanent, and the passive voice indicates the barrier was “fixed” by an extraneous force, namely God.

Heaven has decreed that once a person dies, his station in eternity is permanent. It is appointed unto men once to die, and after this there is nothing but judgment (Hebrews 9:27). If one could leave the realm of the condemned and enter the domain of the saved, might not the reverse theoretically be true as well?

The Controversial Passage

And so, in connection with his discussion concerning the resurrection of the dead, Paul writes:

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? (1 Corinthians 15:29, NASB).

Admittedly, due to the limited amount of information in the immediate context, this is a difficult passage. More than thirty different views have been expressed by commentators as to its possible meaning. In approaching the passage, however, two factors must be kept in mind.

First, no interpretation may be thrust on this passage which creates a conflict with other Bible verses of clear import. A fundamental principle of biblical exegesis is this: obscure passages always must yield to the light of more lucid passages which speak to the same general theme; never is the reverse the case.

Second, the correct view of this verse must relate to the doctrine of the resurrection of the body, since that is the primary thrust of the context. The mention of baptism obviously is incidental to the apostle’s main argument.

Let us now consider several factors in this enigmatic passage.

One must look carefully at the pronouns. Paul does not say: “What will **we** do who are baptized for the dead?” That surely would have been the construction if he had been alluding to a dogma which he and other faithful Christians were practicing. Rather, he says: “What will **those** do.” The pronoun is a third person form.

Some expositors suppose that Paul refers to an ancient heretical sect who, though practicing baptism on behalf of deceased believing friends, denied the body’s ultimate resurrection (perhaps influenced by Greek philosophy which held that the fleshly body is intrinsically evil). According to this view, Paul, by use of an *ad hominem* argument (i.e., reasoning from an opponent’s position), exposes their theological inconsistency. In other words, if there is to be no resurrection of the body, immersion for the dead is a useless procedure.

The chief problem with this, in the minds of many, is the fact there is no first-century historical evidence of any such sect. It is true that Tertullian (ca. 160-220 A.D.), a church scholar in Carthage, believed this practice did exist in Corinth. He wrote:

Now it is certain that they [some of the Corinthians] adopted this (practice) which such a presumption as made them suppose that the vicarious baptism (in question) would be beneficial to the flesh of another in anticipation of the resurrection (*On The Resurrection Of The Flesh* 48).

In another treatise, Tertullian refers to the practice of those who “were vainly baptized for the dead” (*Against Marcion* 5.10). But observe that even he characterizes the practice as **vain**.

A second problem with this view is this: why would Paul mention, even in an *ad hominem* fashion, this practice of proxy baptism, without any censure, when such a practice is so patently foreign to New Testament teaching regarding the nature of baptism? Does it make sense that the apostle would rebuke one error (no resurrection), and yet pass over in silence an equally false view (proxy baptism)?

Some interpret the phrase “for the dead” as reflecting an expression which emphasizes the **motive** for the baptism, being baptized, in some sense, **on account of** the dead.

Hermann Cremer noted that in this passage the baptism was not said to be “for the advantage of the dead,” but that the dead saints, inasmuch as they will rise again to a glorious resurrection, provide the living **with an occasion** to be immersed (1962, 128; cf. Lenski 1963, 690).

According to this view, Paul would be saying: “If there is no resurrection, as some of you allege (v. 12), why do you continue to practice baptism, thus following the example of those saints (now dead), who were baptized in order to become Christians?” In other words, there is no virtue in the ongoing practice of baptism, which depicts a burial/resurrection, if, in fact, there is to be no resurrection from the dead.

Some scholars suggest that the preposition *huper*—“**for** the dead”—can signify the sense of “in the place of,” or “in the stead of” (cf. Arndt and Gingrich 1967, 846).

This might reflect the meaning that those being baptized were doing so in order to take “the place of” the dead. James MacKnight refers to an ancient Greek writer who describes the replacement of soldiers who died in battle: “They decreed to enlist other soldiers **in the place of** [*huper*] those who had died in the war” (1954, 203).

The meaning of the passage might thus be: “If, as some of you argue, there will be no resurrection, why do you continue to baptize folks to take the place of your comrades who have died in defense of their faith? If there is to be no resurrection, why replenish the church?”

Conclusion

While there are several possible meanings of this difficult passage, which, in general, are consistent with the immediate context and overall teaching of the Scriptures, any view of the passage which clearly contradicts plain Bible teaching must be forthrightly rejected. The Mormon view of proxy baptism certainly falls into this category. It has no validity.

Mormonism 2030

With the canonization of human evolution as doctrine, the Mormons keep temples open around the clock to baptize billions of their dead and distant relatives.

Brother Bubbles, having been commissioned of Jesus Christ, I baptize you for and in behalf of Bonzo, who is dead, in the name of the Father and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, Amen.

