

## 1 Corinthians 15:29 – “Baptism on Behalf of the Dead”

Paul’s citation of the practice of being baptized for the dead is one of the more obscure and enigmatic references in Scripture (Exodus 23:19b being another example). The straightforward meaning of the phrase indicates that some in the church were practicing a proxy baptism on behalf of those who had died. His use of the third person plural for the subject (“people,” ESV; “those being baptized,” Greek text) points away from it as an Apostolic sanctioned custom, however. Furthermore, church history knows nothing of a proxy baptism on behalf of others.

Many have speculated about the nature of this practice. Although some have suggested as many as forty interpretations of this verse, Anthony Thiselton, professor of Christian theology at the University of Nottingham, England lists thirteen views that have gained significant support. He finds ten of these completely unconvincing, two that have limited credibility, and one that is the most probable.<sup>1</sup> He favors the interpretation that “baptism on behalf of the dead” refers to some Christians who, out of a desire and belief that they would be reunited at the resurrection of the dead at the consummation with their deceased believing relatives, underwent baptism on their behalf.

Interpreters have balked at the plain understanding of the Greek text because of the difficulties they present, both historical and theological. There is no historical or Biblical foundation for such a baptism. Even more problematic, Paul would seem to be appealing, without a disapproval, to a practice diametrically opposed to his teaching about justification by faith alone, a view that requires the response on the part of the believer in his life. Proxy baptism strikes one as a magical charm, a sacramentalism gone wild with inherent *ex opere operato* regenerating efficacy.

To alleviate the apparent difficulties, a multitude of alternative solutions have been offered. Some view “baptism” metaphorically as either signifying death, or perhaps as being poured out unto death by labors on behalf of those who are lost. Others assign special shades of meanings to the preposition “on behalf of.” A particularly interesting interpretation in this vein is Luther’s who surmised that some were baptized “over” the graves of the dead. Other interpretations view “the dead” not literally, but descriptive of undergoing or enduring a desperate condition, such as “those despairing of life, a possibility Calvin acknowledged, or as those who would soon be martyred. Others punctuate the verse in various ways that disconnect baptism with those who are dead. Most scholars, contrary to these approaches, take

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<sup>1</sup> See Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, The New International Greek New Testament Commentary, Eerdmans Publishing Co., Paternoster Press, 2000, pp. 1242-49.

Paul's words at face value and think that he refers to some type of vicarious, or proxy baptism. But they differ greatly speculating on what form this might take.

In the end, we must admit that we simply do not know exactly Paul means. We can, however, offer some parameters. First, Paul's use of the third personal plural in reference to the group in question in verse 29 strongly points away from the action as that of the entire community, though they likely knew it was taking place. Second, this practice does not seem to rise to the level of a serious breach of faith and protocol, otherwise we should expect Paul, as Calvin observed, to denounce it just as he does other heretical views. Finally, we should categorically rule out any notion that Paul approved of any kind of baptism for the sake of unbelievers in general.

The best option is to understand the baptism in question as an anomalous practice of those who were baptized in the place of those who trusted in the work Christ, who perhaps had even confessed their faith, but had died before they were able to be baptized. It is also possible that such were being baptized on behalf of their infants who had died before receiving the sign of the covenant, but this, too suffers from being overly speculative and would unduly narrow the general focus of Paul's wording in verse 29.

Paul used this practice in support of the belief in the resurrection of the dead. For Christians to imitate this practice today would betray an understanding of the personal nature of justification by faith for adults, the nature of the sacrament of baptism, and the context of 1 Corinthians 15:29 which is not about salvation, but the belief in the resurrection of the dead.

For further reading:

John Calvin, *Commentary on the Epistles of Paul to the Corinthians*, Calvin's Commentaries, Rev. John Pringle, translator, Volume 20, Baker Books, 2003, pp. 34-38.

Dan Doriani, "What Does Paul Mean by 'Baptism for the Dead'?", <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/what-does-paul-mean-by-baptism-for-the-dead/>.

Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians, Revised Edition*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament, Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2014, pp. 845-50.

Matt Slick, “What Is Baptism for the Dead Mentioned in 1 Corinthian 15:29?”, <https://www.carm.org/mormonism/what-is-baptism-for-the-dead-mentioned-in-1-corinthians-1529/>.

Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, The New International Greek New Testament Commentary, Eerdmans Publishing Co., Paternoster Press, 2000, pp. 1242-49.

