

BAPTISM FOR THE DEAD

I Corinthian 15:29

I. WHAT DOES THE PASSAGE DESCRIBE?

This is the only place in the New Testament where this practice is mentioned. The most natural meaning of the passage suggests a *vicarious baptism*, that is, a living person being baptized, *by proxy*, for someone who had already died.

This was practiced by a second century heretical sect, the Marcionites. When a candidate died before being able to be baptized, they concealed a living person under the couch where the dead person lay. Then when they asked the dead person if he wanted to be baptized, the living person under the couch would reply “yes” and then would be baptized for the dead person. (Baker Ency. Of the Bible, Vol. 1, p. 260).

In modern times the Mormons practice “baptism for the dead.” They maintain very extensive genealogical records, listing the names of ancestors into the distant past, including non-Mormons. Then a living Mormon is immersed by proxy on behalf of the dead person.

It is possible that the Corinthians were practicing a proxy baptism. But, of course, the only ones Scripturally eligible for baptism are living, believing, repentant persons.

II. WHAT COULD PAUL HAVE MEANT IF HE WERE REFERRING TO SUCH A PRACTICE?

In I Corinthians 15 Paul was replying to the contention of some there who denied that there was a resurrection (see 15:12). If he were referring to a proxy baptism being practiced there in Corinth, then his argument was “why are you baptizing people on behalf of those who have already died if you don’t believe they will someday be resurrected?” It should be stressed that Paul’s mention of the practice by no means implies that he **endorsed** it. It is possible that he simply used a practice of theirs, which attributed some magical powers to baptism, to point out its inconsistency with a “no resurrection” position.

III. WHAT ARE SOME OTHER POSSIBLE MEANINGS OF THE PASSAGE?

The difficult part of the verse is the phrase “for the dead.” The word “for” in Greek is literally “on behalf of.” There have been as many as 30 different interpretations of this passage apart from a literal “proxy baptism.” Here are some of the most popular ones.

- [1] Immersed in view of having died to sin.
- [2] Immersed in anticipation of being raised from the dead.
- [3] Immersed in view of someday joining their dead loved ones.
- [4] Immersed in view of expecting to die for the faith.

If the most likely meaning (a proxy baptism not endorsed by Paul) is not meant here, then perhaps [1] above would best describe the practice Paul refers to, for a person must die to sin before being baptized. (See Col. 2:12-13; Rom. 6:2-8, 11). In any event the passage does *not* authorize a living person being baptized in place of someone who has already died.