

Bible Studies

What about Baptism for the dead?

Every time I ask for suggestions about Bible studies someone (who shall be nameless) says, "what about baptism for the dead?". So here we are. I must confess to a hidden agenda. This study is not really about baptism for the dead, it's about how to understand, and how not to understand, the scriptures.

Now if there is no resurrection, what will those do who are baptized for the dead? If the dead are not raised at all, why are people baptized for them? 1 Corinthians 15:29

What do you think this verse means?
Who today baptise people for the dead?
Why do they do it?

The Mormons baptise people on behalf of their dead relatives, they hope by doing so to give their dead relatives standing before God.

Why don't we baptise for the dead?

Baptism signifies belief. Each person must come to God for themselves. My personal faith cannot even save my own children. Ezekiel 14:20. (Although I trust my example and my prayers will). How then can baptising me, save my dead relative?

In the back of our minds a doubt arises and we start to question. Paul does talk about Baptism for the dead. We don't do it, the Mormons do, maybe they are right, maybe we are missing something by not practising what they practice.

The Mormons are wrong, not just because of the theological argument that says that each person must be born again for themselves, but because they have totally misinterpreted the above scripture.

Jesus replied, "You are in error because you do not know the Scriptures or the power of God. Mat 22:29
The Pharisees, to whom Jesus was talking, knew the scriptures like the back of their hands. But they misunderstood them, therefore they did not know the scriptures at all.

How should we understand this verse?

First we have got to look at the context.

Turn to 1 Corinthians 15
What is the topic of the Chapter?

Read the verse around v29

What is Paul saying in his reference to Baptism for the dead?
Is Paul teaching about Baptism for the dead?

It becomes very clear that this passage has nothing to do with a doctrine of baptism, it is to do with the resurrection. Paul is using the example of baptism and his own persecution for the Lord as evidence of the reality of a bodily resurrection. This kind of argument is called an *ad hominem* argument, one that appeals to a persons experience or feelings rather than to reason or logic.

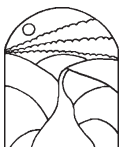
Does Paul's work & persecution, prove there will be a resurrection? v30
No, people have died for all manner of causes true and false. It does prove the sincerity of Paul's belief in the resurrection and his motivation in holding out for the Gospel against great opposition.

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Waiuku AG
Ray Moxham
www.wag.org.nz
WaiukuAG
@maxnet.co.nz

Does Paul endorse the practice of Baptism for the dead?

Does Paul say that we should practice it?

Is there any other verse in Scripture that can support or clarify this verse?

Does Baptising a live person save them?

The next thing we must look at is what practice was Paul referring to.

Paul is not presenting a hypothetical argument there really was such a practice.

Who was doing it?

Why were they doing it?

Who were they doing it to?

What effect did they hope it would have?

We do not even know for sure whether it was a Christian practice, a practice of a heretical group, or even something the pagans did in their religions.

If you cannot find the answers to these questions in the text itself, or in other passages of scripture, then how on earth can you base a practice on it?

Some possible solutions

Three possible explanations of this verse exist;

1 There is no record of baptism for the dead in any of the very early church writings, if there were it would give us a good idea of what Paul was on about. But there is a reference in the work of Chrysostom, Bishop of Constantinople (second part of the fourth century) referring to a well known group of heretics called the Marcionians. He says;
When a catechumen [new believer] among them [the Marcionites] dies, they hide a living man under the dead man's bed, approach the dead man, speak with him, and ask if he wishes to receive baptism; then when he makes no answer the man who is hidden underneath says instead of him that he wishes to be baptised, and so they baptise him instead of the departed.

If as we have noted, Paul does not endorse the practice, but neither does he condemn it. Had it been a totally heretical practice Paul, noted for calling a spade a spade, would surely have condemned it. Some think he did, taking the verse to mean, "*what on earth will they get up to next, if they find there is no resurrection?*" It is more likely it was a practice with which Paul could not agree, but which he saw no need to refute.

2 It has been proposed that either in a plague or an accident a large number of new, as yet unbaptised believers had died. (It is known that there were several plagues at this time in Corinth) It is possible that the corpses themselves, or friends on their behalf, were Baptised. This was to give the idea of closure, in their conversion experience and to help with the grieving process for the rest of the Church (who probably firmly believed they would be alive at the Lord's return). It may also have been done to affirm the church's belief in the resurrection of their dead brothers.

This may be misguided but it would be sincere, I can understand such a practice.

3 Finally it is possible to take the Greek for *Baptism of the Dead* to mean *Baptism because of the dead*. This would be a legitimate but unusual translation. If so, Baptism here would be seen as symbolic of salvation. The idea goes like this: Christian wife, sympathetic, but as yet unbelieving husband. Wife dies, Husband understands Christian teaching about the resurrection and want to ensure that he will be where his wife is. This motivates him to give his life to the Lord. Under such circumstances I would have no problem baptising him 'for the dead'.

All of the above is guess work. The bottom line is we really do not know what Paul was talking about. Each of these three ideas is more credible and more in line with the Bible and Church History, than the Mormon concept of Baptising people on behalf of their long dead unbelieving relatives.

More over it give us a very good illustration of how not to read the Bible.