

*Should Christians Be Baptized for Their Dead?*¹

“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?” (1 Corinthians 15:29, NKJV)

Some folks claim that 1 Corinthians 15:29 constitutes biblical authority for living Christians to be baptized as representatives of deceased unbaptized persons, in order that at the resurrection unbaptized dead people may then have the option of obtaining salvation procured for them by a proxy baptism. This claim, however, is refuted by historical, linguistic, and contextual considerations, and by arguments from Christian doctrine.

Historically, there is absolutely no evidence of any kind that living persons were baptized as representatives of dead people by either pagan or Christian people within Jewish, Greek, or Roman cultures during the first century of the Christian era. Only three of the ancient church fathers (Tertullian, Epiphanius, and Chrysostom) mention a practice of the living being baptized as representatives of those already dead. They recognize the practice in vogue during the third and fourth centuries, and perhaps the latter part of the second century, but that it was practiced only by the heretical Marcionites and Cerinthians, who, it is supposed, probably initiated the practice because of their misunderstanding of 1 Corinthians 15:29.

Linguistically, there are several assumptions of this claim that are not supported by the text of 1 Corinthians 15:29. If this passage were worded in accordance with the interpretation it is given, it would read as follows:

“Otherwise what are the living doing who are being baptized as representatives of the unbaptized dead if the dead rise not at all? Why are the living then being baptized as representatives of the unbaptized dead?”

Note, however, the following facts:

1. Paul does not say that they “are being baptized,” but rather that they “are baptized.” That is, they are in the state of having been baptized, just as houses that are in the state of having been decorated may be designated as houses that “are decorated.”
2. The phrase “they . . . who are baptized” does not refer to the living, but rather to the dead. The pronoun “they” occurs seven times within the fifteenth chapter of First Corinthians (15:18, 23, 29, 29, 35, 48, 48). “They” refers to the dead (15:35), to the dead in Christ (15:18, 23), but never refers to the living. Therefore, why should “they” in 15:29 refer to anything but “the dead?” Thus, “they . . . who are baptized” are the dead, who when alive were baptized but now are in the state of having been baptized.

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3. The Greek word *hyper*, translated “for” in this passage, does not mean “as representative of,” but rather “in behalf of” the dead. And since “they . . . who are baptized” means the baptized dead, then “they” are in the state of having been baptized **in behalf of themselves!** And finally,
4. Paul does not ask, “what are they doing . . . ?” but rather, “what shall they do . . . ?” He is not talking about the present, but rather the future, namely, the time of the resurrection.

Contextually, 1 Corinthians 15:29 must be seen as a part of Paul’s argument about the resurrection. Since some at Corinth were denying a resurrection of the dead (15:12), Paul’s questions (15:29) call attention to the fact that those now dead are in the state of having been baptized in expectation of the resurrection of the dead. They were baptized for their own benefit, believing that after their fleshly bodies had died, they, being in Christ by having been baptized (Galatians 3:27) would then be resurrected to eternal life. If they were wrong in their belief and there is no resurrection, as some were saying, then they would have had no need to have been baptized. If there is to be no resurrection, Paul is asking, what is the benefit of their having been baptized? The fact that those who are now dead were baptized when they were alive is an argument that they had believed there would be a resurrection.

Finally, because Christian doctrine cannot contradict itself, the teaching regarding vicarious baptism cannot be correct. Some significant doctrinal arguments regarding salvation are: First, that while each person should influence all others to be righteous, no one’s conduct, whether good or bad, is the basis for God’s judgment of the conduct of any other person. Each person is responsible for his own actions (Romans 14:12; Ezekiel 33:12). Second, that after this life is over there is no second opportunity to repent or to be made righteous before God. Each person is judged responsible for his life and conduct prior to his death (Psalms 115:17; Proverbs 11:7; Ecclesiastes 9:5,5; Isaiah 38:18; Matthew 25:31-46; Luke 16:19-31; John 5:28-29). To this the Book of Mormon agrees (Alma 34:32-36). And third, an individual who has already died cannot qualify for baptism because faith and repentance are required **before** baptism (Mark 16:16; Acts 2:38; 8:36-37). The false doctrine has belief coming **after** proxy baptism and makes no allowance for repentance. Moreover, one person can no more be baptized for another than he can believe and repent for another.

We conclude therefore that the claim that promotes vicarious baptism for deceased persons is not only lacking in historical support, but also perverts the message of 1 Corinthians 15:29 and contradicts plain Bible teachings regarding the Christian doctrine of salvation.