Baptism for the Dead
Scripture: 1 Corinthians 15
Code: BQ032012

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? (15:29)

This verse is one of the most difficult in all of Scripture, and has many legitimate possible interpretations; it has also, however, been used to support many strange and heretical ideas. The careful and honest interpreter may survey the several dozen interpretations offered and still not be dogmatic about what it means. But we can be dogmatic, from the clear teaching of other parts of Scripture, about some of the things it does not mean. As to what this verse does mean, we can only guess, since history has locked it into obscurity.

We can be sure, for example, that it does not teach vicarious, or proxy, baptism for the dead, as claimed by ancient gnostic heretics such as Marcion and by the Mormon church today. Paul did not teach that a person who has died can be saved, or helped in any way, by another person's being baptized in his behalf. Baptismal regeneration, the idea that one is saved by being baptized, or that baptism is in some way necessary for salvation, is unscriptural. The idea of vicarious baptismal regeneration is still further removed from biblical truth. If a person cannot save himself by being baptized, he certainly cannot save anyone else through that act. Salvation is by personal faith in Jesus Christ alone. "For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God" (Eph. 2:8; cf. Rom. 3:28; etc.). That is the repeated and consistent teaching of both the Old and New Testaments. Quoting from Genesis 15:6, Paul says, "For what does the Scripture say? 'And Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness' " (Rom. 4:3). The only way any person has ever come to God is by personal faith.

If one person's faith cannot save another, then certainly one person's baptism cannot save another. Baptism is simply an act of obedient faith that proclaims identity with Christ (Rom. 6:3–4). No one is saved by baptism—not even living persons, much less dead ones. "It is appointed for men to die once and after this comes judgment" (Heb. 9:27). Death ends all opportunity for salvation and for spiritual help of any sort.

In the New Testament baptism is closely associated with salvation, of which it is an outward testimony. Although a person does not have to be baptized to be a Christian, he has to be baptized to

be an obedient Christian—with the obvious exception of a believer who has no opportunity to be baptized before death. Baptism is an integral part of Christ's Great Commission (Matt. 28:19). In the early church a person who was saved was assumed to have been baptized; and a person was not baptized unless the church was satisfied he was saved. To ask, then, if a person was baptized, was equivalent to asking if he was saved.

If we assume that Paul was using the term baptized in that sense, then **those … who are baptized** could refer to those who were giving testimony that they were Christians. In other words, he was simply referring to believers under the title of **those who are baptized**, not to some special act of baptism. **The dead** could also refer to Christians, to deceased believers whose lives were a persuasive testimony leading to the salvation of the **baptized**. This seems to be a reasonable view that does no injustice to the text or context.

The Greek *huper*, translated for in verse 29, has a dozen or more meanings, and shades of meaning—including "for," "above," "about," "across," "beyond," "on behalf of," "instead of," "because of," and "in reference to"—depending on grammatical structure and context. Although for is a perfectly legitimate translation here, in light of the context and of Paul's clear teaching elsewhere, "because of" could also be a proper rendering.

In light of that reasoning and interpretation, we could guess that Paul may have simply been saying that people were being saved (baptism being the sign) because of the exemplary lives and witness of faithful believers who had died. Whether this is the right interpretation of this verse we cannot be certain, but we can be certain that people often come to salvation because of the testimony of those whom they desire to emulate.

Some years ago a young man in our church was told by his doctors that he had only a short time to live. His response was not one of regret or bitterness but of joy at the prospect of soon being with his Savior. Because of his confident faith and contentment in face of death, one person I know of, and perhaps more, came to a saving knowledge of Christ.

During the Finnish–Russian war seven captured Russian soldiers were sentenced to death by the Finnish army. The evening before they were to be shot, one of the soldiers began singing "Safe in the Arms of Jesus." Asked why he was singing such a song, he answered tearfully that he had heard it sung by a group of Salvation Army "soldiers" just three weeks earlier. As a boy he had heard his mother talk and sing of Jesus many times, but would not accept her Savior. The previous night, as he

lay contemplating his execution, he had a vision of his mother's face, which reminded him of the hymn he had recently heard. The words of the song and verses from the Bible that he had heard long ago came to his mind. He testified before his fellow prisoners and his captors that he had prayed for Christ to forgive his sins and cleanse his soul and make him ready to stand before God. All the men, prisoners and guards alike, were deeply moved, and most spent the night praying, weeping, talking about spiritual things, and singing hymns. In the morning, just before the seven were shot, they asked to be able to sing once more "Safe in the Arms of Jesus," which they were allowed to do.

At least one other of the Russian soldiers had confessed Christ during the night. In addition, the Finnish officer in charge said, "`What happened in the hearts of the others I don't know, but … I was a new man from that hour. I had met Christ in one of His loveliest and youngest disciples, and I had seen enough to realize that I too could be His."

It may be that the first seeds of faith were planted in Paul's own heart by the testimony of Stephen, whose death the young Paul (then Saul) witnessed and whose confident and loving dying testimony he heard (Acts 7:59—8:1).

In 1 Corinthians 15:29 Paul may be affirming the truth that Christians who face death with joy and hope are a powerful testimony. The prospect of eternal life, of resurrection life, of reunion with loved ones, is a strong motive for people to listen to and accept the gospel. Resurrection is one of the greatest assurances that God gives to those who trust in His Son. For those who believe in Jesus Christ, the grave is not the end. At death our spirits are not absorbed back into some cosmic divine mind. When we die we will go immediately to be with the Lord—as an individual, personal being. Not only that, but one day our glorified bodies will rejoin our spirits, and we will live as whole, completed human beings throughout all of eternity with all who have loved and worshiped God.

Another way in which the believing **dead** are used as a means of salvation is through the hope of reunion. Many believers have been drawn to the Savior because of a strong desire to be united with a loved one who has gone to be with the Lord. I have never led a funeral service in which I did not make such an appeal. I have seen a husband who would not come to Christ until his wife died. Because he could not bear the thought of not seeing her again, committing his own life and eternity into the hands of the One he knew was her Lord was made more attractive. I have seen children come to Christ after their mother's death, motivated in part by the desire one day to be united with her. What her pleading and praying could not do, her death accomplished.

It is also true, of course, that the resurrection holds out great reunion hope for those who already are believers. The hope that sustained David after the death of his infant son was that, though “he will not return to me,” “I shall go to him” (2 Sam. 12:23). David knew that one day he and his son would be reunited.

Perhaps confused by some of the same pagan philosophy that plagued the Corinthian church, the Thessalonian believers were concerned because they thought their believing loved ones and friends who had died somehow had no prospect of a future life. “But we do not want you to be uninformed, brethren, about those who are asleep,” Paul wrote them, “that you may not grieve, as do the rest who have no hope. For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep in Jesus” (1 Thess. 4:13–14). “Like you,” He was assuring them, “they will be resurrected, and you will all be reunited by the Lord when He returns.”

If there is no resurrection, no hope of a future life, Paul asked, why are people coming to Christ because of the testimony of believers who have died? **If the dead are not raised at all, why then are they** [many present Christians] **baptized for** [become believers because of the testimony of] **them** [deceased faithful believers]?

Available online at: http://www.gty.org
COPYRIGHT (C) 2013 Grace to You
You may reproduce this Grace to You content for non-commercial purposes in accordance with Grace to You's Copyright Policy (http://www.gty.org/connect/copyright).