Baptism for the Dead
Scripture: 1 Corinthians 15
Code: BQ53111

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? (1 Corinthians 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.

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