

# To What Does “Baptism for the Dead” Refer?

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The words in **1 Corinthians 15:29**, as presented in almost all translations of the Scriptures, are rather obscure and have always given Christian scholars great difficulty. Because this statement is in the context of the major subject of the resurrection it is vitally important for us to attempt to grasp the meaning of what the Apostle Paul was teaching in its full context. The text as usually presented is:

- ❖ “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 Cor. 15:29 NKJV*).
- “Otherwise, what do people mean by being **baptized on behalf of the dead**? If the dead are not raised at all, why are people baptized on their behalf?” (*1 Cor. 15:29 ESV*).

Because these renderings seem to contradict the New Testament teaching that believers only should get baptized it would seem most likely that we have a translation issue in this passage. So the following study will hopefully show several possibilities of how the text may be rendered in harmony with the rest of the Bible as well as looking at various interpretations of it.

## Context and Background

In this chapter of 1 Corinthians Paul is not trying to convince his readers that Jesus was resurrected. They believed that for sure. However, they failed to see the connection of Jesus’ resurrection with “the resurrection of the dead” for Christians. So he begins his argument with what his listeners already know:

- ❖ “But **now Christ is risen from the dead**, and has become the *firstfruits* of those who have fallen asleep. For since by man *came* death, by Man also *came* the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ all shall be made alive. But each one in his own order: **Christ the firstfruits, afterward those who are Christ’s at His coming**. Then *comes* the end, when He delivers the kingdom to God the Father, when He puts an end to all rule and all authority and power. For He must reign till He has put all enemies under His feet. The last enemy *that* will be destroyed *is* death. For “*He has put all things under His feet.*” But when He says “all things are put under *Him*,” *it is* evident that He who put all things under Him is excepted. Now when all things are made subject to Him, then the Son Himself will also be subject to Him who put all things under Him, that God may be all in all. 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? And why do we stand in jeopardy every hour? I affirm, by the boasting in you which I have in Christ Jesus our Lord, I die daily. If, in the manner of men, I have fought with beasts at Ephesus, what advantage *is it* to me? If *the* dead do not rise, “*Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die!*” (*1 Cor. 15:20-32*).

So Paul attempts to convince the Corinthians that Jesus is only the first of the resurrection (he is not here concerned about the resurrection of the unrighteous) and that the Christians who die before the return of Christ must all experience a resurrection. But what is meant by “**baptized for the dead**”? Forty different solutions have been suggested—most of them have involved retranslating the phrase. For example the New World Translation renders this as: “*being baptized for the purpose of [being] dead ones?*” This, therefore, carries a meaning that concerns living believers who get baptized into Christ’s death. Nevertheless, this rendering does not fit with other contextual factors in 1 Corinthians 15.

## The Interpretation of 1 Corinthians 15:29 as Vicarious Baptism

Some have applied this text to being baptized in place of anyone who has died, whether they are a believer or not. They make no attempt to understand this text in line with the Christian doctrine of salvation. Such an explanation goes fully against the Christian teaching that one must be a believer before getting baptized (Acts 8:12; 16:30-33). Furthermore, the false teaching that at death ‘the spirit’ departs from the body is basic for the interpretation that Paul means Christians to get baptized for the dead. Please see Volume 2, STUDY 4:

## No Definitive Interpretation

Sadly it must be admitted that there is no interpretive understanding of the phrase up to now which is definitive. Proposals have been:

- Because of the word “they” it has been taken to refer to a practice of the pagans in Corinth. However, no know practice has been discovered.
- Christians “being baptized into the ranks of the dead.”
- “Being baptized for the dead [Christ].”

Yet out of about ten interpretations which are reasonable we present three which still mean by proxy:

1. Being baptized for a member of one’s household who had died before becoming a believer.
2. Being baptized for someone who was on his way to becoming a believer, but died before they could get baptized.
3. Being baptized for someone who already believes, but dies before getting the opportunity to be baptized.

Even so, the first two of these proposals fail because, again it must be noted that **one must be a believer before getting baptized** (Acts 8:12; 16:30-33), unless this was an aberrant practice of a few Christians operating contrary to the principles established as the basis for baptism.

#### *FOR SOMEONE WHO BELIEVES BUT DIES BEFORE THEY CAN GET BAPTISED*

However, similar to #2, but providing fuller compliance with Christian doctrine concerning salvation, is the third possibility which may help our understanding. This is illustrated by considering the criminal dying next to Jesus, when Jesus promised him life in the kingdom. The criminal clearly believed and was repentant but was not in a position to demonstrate that faith by getting baptized. So for a believer to later get “baptized on behalf of” the criminal would mean that the now dead criminal could be viewed as one who died as a baptized Christian. This may have been what Christians **in Corinth** were doing **for other now dead believers**. The motive may be the belief that baptism is necessary for entering the Kingdom. Paul did not condemn this practice, but does his silence actually condoned such a practice?

## Toward a Better Understanding

#### *CONTEXTUALLY - LIVING CHRISTIANS AS “THE LIVING DEAD”*

In his commentary on 1 Corinthians Robert Gundry explains:

To take 15:29 apart from what immediately follows is to make 15:29 seem as though Paul is talking about living people getting baptized for others who are already dead and gone. But he goes right on to describe himself, a baptized Christian (Acts 9:18), as “dying day by day” in the sense that the enemy death is already at work in his body and in the afflictions he faces as a Christian. So Paul presents himself as an example of people who in the grip of death are getting baptized for themselves. To portray them as in the grip of death he speaks of them as *though* they’re dead already and therefore as *though* they’re different from themselves when in fact they’re themselves *as* the living dead. “What will [they]...do?” asks out of utter perplexity what reason for baptism there can possibly be if the baptizees, already in death’s grip as they are, won’t be raised.

This interpretation also seems to be a bit of a stretch as an explanation, but it may be valid because it works on a contextual basis. The following two approaches concern translation issues:

#### *DIFFERENT RENDERINGS*

a. *The Encyclopedia of Bible Difficulties* (p. 401-2) offers the following translation and explanation:

- ❖ “For what shall they do who are baptized **for the sake of** (Gk. *huper*) the dead? If dead people are really not raised up, why are people baptized **for their sake**?”

The phrase “**for the sake of**” is lexically just as correct as the usual phrases “on behalf of” or “for.” Also Kenneth Wuest’s translation renders *huper* as “for the sake of.”

The explanation given is that of an unbeliever being at the bedside of a dying Christian who witnesses to them so that they become a believer and later get “baptized **for the sake of** the dead” person. This rendering approaches the causal sense (“because of”). So for this explanation to work, a better rendering would be “because of” i.e. because of the witnessing of the now dead Christian. So this approach has some merit.

b. Because the earliest Greek manuscripts had no punctuation marks, it was first proposed by Johann Salomon Semler in 1770 that the punctuating of this passage in the standard translations is incorrect. His proposed punctuation gives the following word-for-word sentence structure:

“Otherwise what will they do the ones being baptized? On behalf of the dead ones if actually dead persons are not raised! Why indeed are they baptized on behalf of them?”

Then by introducing the earlier detail from *The Encyclopedia of Bible Difficulties* and Kenneth Wuest’s translation of *huper* as “**for the sake of**” we have a dynamically equivalent modern English rendering:

❖ “Otherwise what will those who are getting baptized achieve? It’s for the sake of [being] the dead if dead people aren’t actually raised! So why are they baptized for their sake?”<sup>30</sup> And why are we in danger every hour? <sup>31</sup>Every day I’m in danger of death!”

This rendering has the advantage of answering the question concerning why Paul did not condemn the statement but rather seemed, by his silence, to have condoned the view. With this re-punctuating of the passage there is nothing for him to condemn. Furthermore, it fits the context of Paul’s continuation of his argument from the passage in verses 12-19 against those who denied the resurrection. This re-punctuating of the passage is supported throughout history since it was first proposed by Semler by such scholars as: B. W. Newton (1859), E. W. Bullinger (1898), Paul Durselen (1903), Father Bernard Foschini (1950-51), and K. C. Thomson (1964). Nevertheless, no current translation that we are aware of gives this rendering, although the GOD’S WORD Translation is similar to Semlar’s proposal and gives a similar meaning:

❖ “However, people are baptized because the dead will come back to life. What will they do? If the dead can’t come back to life, why do people get baptized as if they can come back to life?”

### The Problems with Application of 1 Corinthians 15:29 as Vicarious Baptism

- There are no other biblical statements which demonstrate this interpretation as a baptism by proxy.
- There is no historical precedent for this practice among the early Christians other than among the heretical Marcionites.
- Because of the word “they” it appears to have been a practice of a minority group of Christians in Corinth only. However, neither Paul nor the rest of the Corinthians show any disapproval of it.
- Anyone getting baptized must do so in personal response and in faith to the divine favour shown them i.e. they must have already become a Christian. It would be wrong to get baptized vicariously for someone else.

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