

# Baptism for the Dead

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We talk much about the subject of water baptism. As such, we are very familiar with passages that speak of its method, necessity, and purpose. However, how many of us understand, or could give explanation of, the baptism for the dead? Believe it or not, we are more familiar with this strange sounding baptism than we might initially think.

It was the apostle Paul who wrote of the baptism for the dead. He did so in his first letter to the church at Corinth. Here is what the inspired apostle wrote:

*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

So, what exactly is the baptism for the dead? Before we discuss what it is, let's talk about what it is not.

What it is not, is what the Mormon church practices in their doctrine of baptism for the dead. In Mormonism, baptism for the dead is a living Mormon, being baptized in water for a deceased family member, who may not have had the opportunity to become a Mormon.

In the New Testament, water baptism requires the personal faith of the one being baptized, and is thusly administered to only the living who believe, confess, and repent (cf. Mk. 16:16; Acts 2:41; 8:37; 16:31ff; 18:8). One cannot be baptized for someone else, whether living or dead. This is not what Paul had in mind when he wrote of the baptism for the dead.

Some have thought the baptism for the dead was a reference to some ancient cultic practice. However, as you read Paul's words, it is clear he approved of this baptism. He is using the baptism of the dead to establish for the Corinthians, the important truth, that there will be a resurrection of the dead.

There were some in Corinth, who were denying that the dead would ever rise (1 Cor. 15:12). Paul responds boldly to such false reasoning, demonstrating the consequences of such a denial:

*But if there is no resurrection of the dead, not even Christ has been raised; and if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is vain, your faith also is vain. Moreover we are even found to be false witnesses of God, because we testified against God that He raised Christ, whom He did not raise, if in fact the dead are not raised. For if the dead are not raised, not even Christ has been raised; and if Christ has not been raised, your faith is worthless; you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. If we have hoped in Christ in this life only, we are of all men most to be pitied.*

1 Corinthians 15:13-19

So what does the resurrection of the dead have to do with the baptism for the dead? Everything!

Consider this: Whatever the baptism for the dead was, the Corinthians knew about it and had been engaged in the practice of it. Paul is using something they were familiar with to

make his point. Thus, whatever baptism for the dead was, it had to have the resurrection of the dead in view. Remember, this is the truth Paul is trying to establish..

What form of baptism were the Corinthians familiar with and practicing? Water baptism into Christ (Acts 8:36; 10:47; 18:8; 1 Cor. 1:13-17). Does water baptism have the resurrection in view? Of course! Does water baptism have something to do with death? Absolutely! (cf. Rom. 6:3-4).

These points contextually considered, we can see that baptism for the dead was nothing more than water baptism into Christ.

Paul asks the Corinthians, "What will those do who are baptized for dead?" Some have suggested that "the dead" is a reference to Christ. The thought being that one is baptized on account of Christ (who had died and was raised). While baptism is itself a picture of His death, burial, and resurrection (Rom. 6:3-4), I do not believe this is Paul's thought. The problem with this interpretation is that "dead" in the Greek is plural, not singular, as would be the case if the thought was Christ.

Looking closer at the text, we see that it reads: "What will those do who are baptized on behalf of (or for the sake of) the dead?" We must now consider, who are the "those" and who are the "dead"? Since we that know baptism on behalf of another is a non-biblical practice, then the "those" and the "dead" would have to be the same people. In other words, with water baptism, and the importance of the resurrection in mind, Paul asks, "What is the point of being baptized on behalf of your own dead bodies, if there is no resurrection of the dead?" Paul challenges the Corinthians' denial of the resurrection, asking, "Why be baptized in hope of a resurrection to eternal life if the dead do not rise?" His argumentation is brilliant! To be baptized in hope of being raised to live eternally would be an exercise in futility, if the dead are not raised.

Because Christ has risen from the dead, we have a victory over death (Heb. 2:14; 1 Cor. 15:57). That victory is obtained through faithful obedience to the gospel, which requires our being baptized into Christ for the remission of our sins (Acts 2:38; 22:16). In Christ, our dead bodies will be raised incorruptible and immortal. This is what the "baptism for the dead" is all about. With such a wonderful truth established for the Corinthians, Paul concludes the fifteenth chapter with these powerful words of encouragement:

*Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your toil is not in vain in the Lord.*

1 Corinthians 15:58

Though it is seldom, if ever, used as such, Paul's teaching regarding the baptism for the dead is a wonderful proof text for the essential nature of water baptism.

In the same way that Paul's teaching in I Corinthians 15 disproves the practices of the Mormon church regarding the baptism for the dead, He also shows that water baptism is just as essential to our salvation as the hope of the resurrection of the dead. This thoroughly discredits those who teach that baptism is just a sign of one's faith. Both of those arguments are false, since the New Testament affirms no such practices.

Why not let Scripture interpret Scripture? In this way, the clearest and most contextually consistent interpretation is discovered: Baptism for the dead is another way of describing water baptism into Christ.