

BIBLICAL INSIGHTS #35: BAPTISM FOR THE DEAD

By John Temples

One of the most mysterious passages in God's word is found in 1 Corinthians 15:29--"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?"

This text is found in a section of Scripture dealing with the reality of the resurrection of the dead--a doctrine which, apparently, some in the Corinthian church denied (see verse 12).

Did the early church baptize for (in behalf of or as a proxy for) their loved ones who had died? Is this something the church should be practicing today? Here are some notes and thoughts for those seeking truth on this mysterious subject.

Of course, when one contemplates baptism for the dead, he thinks of the Mormons, or the Latter-day Saints as they prefer to be called. They actively practice baptism for the dead in their temples. Joseph Smith, the founder of the LDS Church, announced the doctrine in 1840, apparently to alleviate concerns over relatives who had died without baptism. Here is a description of the practice from an LDS website: "Jesus Christ taught that baptism is essential to the salvation of all who have lived on earth (see John 3:5). Many people, however, have died without being baptized. Others were baptized without proper authority. Because God is merciful, He has prepared a way for all people to receive the blessings of baptism. By performing proxy baptisms in behalf of those who have died, Church members offer these blessings to deceased ancestors. Individuals can then choose to accept or reject what has been done in their behalf."

<https://www.lds.org/topics/baptisms-for-the-dead?lang=eng>

Because of the extraordinary importance Mormons place on it, and because Paul mentions it in a discussion of a future resurrection of believers, you and I ought to investigate baptism for the dead (hereafter abbreviated BFTD).

The only Biblical mention of BFTD is in the single passage quoted above (1 Corinthians 15:29). Jesus never taught or mentioned BFTD. The apostles never commanded it. There is no example of its being done in the first century in a church of Christ. There are no instructions in the New Testament on how to do it. For other crucial doctrines and practices, such as baptism, singing in worship, and the Lord's Supper, there are clear Biblical instructions and examples; but none for BFTD. And when other New Testament passages are considered, BFTD is seen to be opposed to gospel truth. Consider:

BFTD VIOLATES NUMEROUS PASSAGES WHICH TEACH THAT THERE IS NO SECOND CHANCE TO BE SAVED AFTER DEATH

Here are three examples:

- In Luke 16:26, Jesus recounts part of a conversation in the afterlife between a rich man in torment in Hades and Abraham in Paradise. Abraham says to the rich man, "...between us and you there is a great gulf fixed, so that those who want to pass from here CANNOT, nor can those from there pass to us."
- Hebrews 9:27--"It is appointed for men to die once, but after this the judgment."
- 2 Corinthians 6:2b--"Behold, now is the accepted time; behold, now is the day of salvation."

One interesting note here: The LDS Church considers BFTD to be one of their most important doctrines, but their Book of Mormon (said by them to contain "the fullness of the everlasting gospel") does not mention the doctrine! In fact, the Book of Mormon denies the possibility of anyone changing their eternal destiny after death. It says in Alma 34:32-35, "Behold, *this life is the time for men to prepare to meet God*; yea, behold the day of this life is the day for men to perform their labors. And now, as I said to you before, as ye have had so many witnesses, therefore, I beseech of you that ye do not procrastinate the day of your repentance until the end; for after this day of life, which is given us to prepare for eternity, behold, *if we do not improve our time while in this life, then cometh the night of darkness wherein there can be no labor performed*. Ye cannot say, when ye are brought to that awful crisis, that I will repent, that I will return to my God. Nay, ye cannot say this; for that same spirit which doth possess your bodies at that time

that ye go out of this life, that same spirit will have power to possess your body in that eternal world. For behold, *if ye have procrastinated the day of your repentance even until death, behold, ye have become subjected to the spirit of the devil, and he doth seal you his; therefore, the Spirit of the Lord hath withdrawn from you, and hath no place in you, and the devil hath all power over you; and this is the final state of the wicked.*" (Emphasis mine, JT)

BFTD IS NOT POSSIBLE BECAUSE ONE PERSON CANNOT BE SAVED FOR ANOTHER PERSON

We may share some burdens with others, but we cannot share salvation or impute our righteousness to another. Ezekiel 18:20 proclaims, "The soul who sins shall die. The son shall not bear the guilt of the father, nor the father bear the guilt of the son. *The righteousness of the righteous shall be upon himself, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be upon himself.*" Galatians 6:5 says, "For each shall bear his own load." Acts 2:38 reads, "Then Peter said to them, 'Repent, and let *each one of you* be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.'" And 2 Corinthians 5:10--"For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that *each one* may receive the things done in the body, according to what *he* has done, whether good or bad."

So why does Paul mention BFTD in 1 Corinthians 15:29? The most likely explanation, in my view, is that he is referring to some apostate group--not part of the legitimate and faithful church in Corinth--which was practicing proxy baptism.

The strongest evidence of this is Paul's use of pronouns in chapter 15. Observe:

- Paul uses "I" in verses 1, 3, 9 and others to mean himself.
- He uses "you" in verses 1, 2, 3, 11, 12, 17, and 31 referring to the Corinthian Christians.
- He uses "we" or "our" in verses 11, 14, and 15 to designate the apostles as a group. ("We" in verse 19 appears to be the "editorial we," meaning Christians in general.)

So for 28 verses in chapter 15, Paul refers to himself, the other apostles, and faithful Christians using the pronouns “I,” “we,” “you,” and “our.” But suddenly, in verse 29, he switches pronouns. He says, “What shall THEY¹ [the ones being baptized for the dead] do?”

After verse 29, he immediately reverts to the pronouns “I,” “you,” and “we.” This is strong evidence that whoever was baptizing for the dead were NOT among the apostles or the faithful element of the Corinthian church. This church had many troubles, one of which, it seems, was an element or group who refused to accept apostolic teaching, who did not believe there would be a resurrection of the dead, and who were advocating and practicing proxy or “substitute” baptism.

So we conclude that, since there are no instructions or examples in Scripture of BFTD being done by faithful Christians, and since it violates many Scriptures on salvation, and since the only Bible reference to it seems to point to an outside or apostate group, BFTD is no part of New Testament Christianity. --John Temples

POSTSCRIPT: Some might wonder about 1 Peter 4:6 in connection with this doctrine. It says the gospel was preached “to those who are dead.” Notice the tenses of the verbs: the gospel WAS preached to those who ARE dead. The preaching was done during the lifetimes of those under discussion. For an excellent explanation of this passage, read brother Wayne Jackson’s article at <https://www.christiancourier.com/articles/810-baptism-for-the-dead-revisited>.

¹ The translation “what shall they [or those] do” is without a doubt correct, and is so rendered in every major standard Bible version. According to https://biblehub.com/text/1_corinthians/15-29.htm, the Greek word is future active indicative, third person plural, hence requires the pronoun “they.”