

WHAT DOES THE BIBLE TEACH ABOUT BAPTISM FOR THE DEAD?

Being "baptized for the dead" is mentioned in but one Bible verse (1 Corinthians 15:29). The Bible actually teaches nothing directly about the subject. Obviously, therefore, baptism for the dead is not a major doctrine of Biblical Christianity. Furthermore, Biblical instruction in related areas demonstrate that such a practice cannot be proxy baptism for the purpose of salvation in the presence God. (1) Baptism is not a means of salvation (1 Corinthians 1:17; Romans 1:16). (2) The dead are not permitted to pass from hell to heaven (Luke 16:22-26). (3) Religious genealogical work, usually associated with contemporary baptisms for the dead, is forbidden (Titus 3:9). (4) Salvation is a personal decision and not accomplished by proxy (John 3:16). (5) A temple, the supposed place for this vicarious work, is no longer the house of the Lord (Acts 7:47-49) nor does the Bible ever mention baptisms at a temple.

Significantly, baptism for the dead is not commanded in the Bible. It is not even commended. Its passing mention is obscure and may not refer to a Christian practice at all when considered in the context of 1 Corinthians 15. A study of the passage shows that the clearest references to genuine Christians are normally either in the first or second person ("I," "you," "ye," "our," "me," "your," etc.). However, the third person "they" is used in reference to the ones being baptized for the dead, identifying the participants as non-Christians. In this viewpoint Paul is arguing for the validity of resurrection, the main theme of 1 Corinthians 15, by noting that if non-Christians accept the doctrine of resurrection, how much more should true believers.

Should baptism for the dead indicate Christian involvement, the wording could reinforce one of two unquestionable facts. First, as the initial generation of Christians began to die, it was necessary for others to take their places in the churches. Thus, after becoming Christians through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ (Acts 16:31), the next generation was being baptized for the dead in the sense of filling the ranks. Second, no one would be baptized unless they first believed in the resurrection of Jesus Christ (see also Romans 10:9). A still dead Christ would not be worthy of trust or the resulting act of obedience, baptism. Several Bible scholars assure us that the original Greek language of 1 Corinthians 15:29 could be rendered in such a way as to make "the dead" (mentioned three times) actually mean "the dead ones," a reference which would include Christ. The emphasis on the risen Christ is thus presented, undergirding the glorious truth that He has totally conquered for us both physical and spiritual death. Eternal life is ours through simple acceptance of Him (1 John 5:11-13).

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