

Question: In 1 Corinthians 15:29, Paul refers to people being baptized on behalf of the dead. Who are these people? Is the practice of baptizing others for the dead biblical and correct? I want to understand this better.

Answer: To understand this properly, we need to look at the passage in context. Paul was addressing the church in Corinth, where some doubted the resurrection of the dead. Let's read 1 Corinthians 15:12-14

“If Christ is preached as raised from the dead, how can some of you say there is no resurrection of the dead? If there is no resurrection, then Christ has not been raised. And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching and your faith are useless.”

This shows Paul confronting those who rejected the resurrection, which is the foundation of Christian hope.

At the same time, some people in Corinth practiced baptisms on behalf of those who had died without believing or being baptized.

According to early church historian St. John Chrysostom (4th century), there was a custom where a living person would be baptized “for” a deceased person to secure their salvation. This involved the living person lying over the dead body, and a priest asking the dead if they wanted to be baptized. Since the dead could not respond, the living person answered for them and then was baptized, believing this would save the deceased from eternal punishment.

Paul mentions this practice in 1 Corinthians 15:29

“Now if there is no resurrection, what will those do who are baptized for the dead? If the dead are not raised at all, why are people baptized for them?”

Paul’s point is to expose the inconsistency of those who deny resurrection yet practice baptism for the dead. Baptizing for the dead implies a belief in life after death and resurrection. This highlights that the resurrection is a critical doctrine in Christianity (cf. 1 Corinthians 15:20-22).

However, Paul does not approve or practice this baptism on behalf of the dead himself, nor does he teach that true believers should do so. The phrase “those who are baptized for the dead” likely refers to a group outside orthodox Christian teaching.

This false practice was part of a broader problem in those churches, which included other erroneous teachings such as the claim that “the Day of the Lord has already come” (2 Timothy 2:18; 2 Thessalonians 2:2).

Today, similar misunderstandings exist in some churches, including the Roman Catholic teaching of purgatory. Purgatory is described as a temporary place of purification for Christians who die with unconfessed sins or incomplete sanctification. It is believed that prayers or masses by the living can help shorten this purification period, eventually allowing entry into heaven.

However, this doctrine is not supported by Scripture. The Bible states clearly in Hebrews 9:27

“Just as people are destined to die once, and after that to face judgment.”

This verse teaches that after death comes judgment, not a second chance for purification or salvation through the actions of the living.

Praying or baptizing for the dead as a means to alter their eternal fate is a false teaching. It offers a false hope that people can be saved after death, encouraging sin and reliance on works instead of the finished work of Christ on the cross.

The Bible warns of such deception:

“The Spirit clearly says that in later times some will abandon the faith and follow deceiving spirits and things taught by demons.”

(1 Timothy 4:1)

In summary:

- Baptism is a personal act of faith and repentance, symbolizing union with Christ (Romans 6:3-4). It cannot be done on behalf of the dead.
- The resurrection of the dead is foundational to Christian faith (1 Corinthians 15:17-22).

- After death, each person faces judgment (Hebrews 9:27).
- False teachings like purgatory and baptism for the dead distort the gospel and should be rejected.

Amen.

May God bless you.

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