**BAPTISM FOR THE DEAD**

In 1Corinthians 15:29-32, we read this: “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!’”

The meaning of v.29 has been the subject of much speculation. It has been greatly abused by Mormons and others who teach “vicarious baptism” – the idea that one can be baptized in behalf of some deceased person in order to save their soul. Literally, the phrase in question says, ***“baptized (immersed) for (on behalf of) the dead (ones, plural).”*** While I understand that this SOUNDS like vicarious baptism; I seriously doubt that this is the meaning. At the same time, I also know that this passage is “hard to understand” (cf. 2Pt.3:16). Because of this difficulty, I want to consider what this passage means, without being too dogmatic. The truth is that there are almost as many interpretations of this passage as there are expositors – which is a testament to the difficulty involved.

The first thing I would like to get out of the way is to point out that whatever this passage means, it ***cannot*** be referring to the Mormon doctrine of “vicarious baptism.” I can say this with all confidence because the Bible teaches that we are ***individually responsible*** for our lives: “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” (2Cor.5:10). “It is appointed for men to die once, but after this the judgment” (Hb.9:27). Further, the story of the rich man and Lazarus makes it very clear that there is no “second chance” after death (Lk.16:19-31). ***Finally, I would simply observe that if one can believe and obey the gospel for me after I’m dead, then what is to stop another from disbelieving or disobeying for me?***My salvation would depend, not upon myself, but upon others – who may act either for or against me.

Now let us look at the contextof 1 Corinthians 15:29. In context, Paul reveals some consequences of denying the resurrection. He asks three things: 1) Why be baptized for the dead? (whatever this is, v.29); 2) Why do we stand in jeopardy every hour? (why suffer persecution, v.30); and 3) What advantage is it? (to suffer for Christ, v.31-32).

Notice also that Paul said, “What will ***they*** do who are baptized for the dead” (v.29). He did NOT say, “What will ***you*** do,” but “What will ***they*** do.” This tells me that whatever this baptism is, it was not performed on all the Corinthians! In context, ***“they”*** are those who denied the resurrection. The same individuals are referred to as ***“some among you”*** (v.12), ***“they”*** (v.29), and ***“someone”*** (v.35). That is significant, as we try to ascertain Paul’s meaning.

Finally, Paul said, “What will they do who are ***baptized for the dead, IF the dead do not rise*** at all?”That little word “if,” is a conditional word. ***It seems clear that Paul is saying baptism is only “for the dead, IF the dead do not rise.”*** In other words, ***IF*** the dead do not rise, ***THEN*** our baptism is for the dead. Allow me to elaborate…

Water baptism is a symbolic reenactment of the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ (Rm.6:1-4; Col.2:11-12). ***But if Christ is not raised, then He is still among the dead; and that completely destroys what baptism was designed to symbolize!*** In such a case, one is not being baptized for a living Lord; rather s/he is merely being baptized for the dead! Stated another way, if the dead do not rise: 1) Why be baptized? 2) Why do we stand in jeopardy? And 3) what advantage is there in suffering for Christ? (cf. v.29-32)

This is but one explanation of many that are offered for this difficult passage. I am of the opinion that the simplest explanation of a difficult passage is usually the best. I am always skeptical when one must write volumes of material to explain something the Lord said. The Lord’s will is fairly simple; so, if one must write that extensively to explain it, it is very likely that the “explanation” is wrong. Either that, or else you need to hone your teaching skills!

--Lanny Smith