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# BIBLE TALK

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This week the question is: **Should we baptize men for the dead?**

In other words, suppose a man, or woman had never been baptized before they died, is it possible that someone now living could be baptized on their behalf?

Notice several things about baptism first:

John 3:5 -- baptism in water is part of the new birth and unless one is born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of heaven.

Matthew 28:19 -- baptism is the only thing in the entire Bible that is to be done in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. The importance and necessity of baptism can be seen in this one fact alone.

Acts 2:38 -- baptism in water is for the remission of sins.

Acts 22:16 -- baptism in water is for the "washing away" of sins.

Romans 6:3-4 -- baptism in water is puts a sinner into Christ and makes him a member of the body of Christ.

1 Peter 3:20-21 -- the apostle Peter came right out and said "baptism saves us now." It's as though he knew that some people would one day deny the necessity of water baptism and so he wrote that baptism "saves us" to prevent anyone from thinking that sinners could be saved without it.

## **PREREQUISITES TO BAPTISM**

However, as important as baptism is, the Bible clearly teaches that there are some prerequisites to baptism. Not just anyone can be baptized and have their sins washed away; there are certain requirements that must be met first.

### **Mark 16:16**

16 "He who believes and is baptized will be saved; ...

Notice that belief in Jesus is necessary before a man can be baptized. If a man does not believe in Jesus first, baptism will do no good.

### **Acts 8:36-38**

36 Now as they went down the road, they came to some water. And the eunuch said, "See, here is water. What hinders me from being baptized?"

37 Then Philip said, "If you believe with all your heart, you may." And he answered and said, "I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God."

38 So he commanded the chariot to stand still. And both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water, and he baptized him.

According to this passage something was hindering the eunuch from being baptized. Something stood in the way and Philip would not baptize the eunuch unless he met a certain condition first. What was that condition? Philip said, "*If you believe with all your heart, you may.*" In other words, Philip refused to baptize anyone who did not first believe in Jesus Christ. This is very significant. Just as James 2:24 teaches that faith only cannot save a sinner, this passage is teaching that baptism only cannot save a sinner either. It takes both belief in Christ and baptism in water together to save the sinner. That's why Jesus said in Mark 16:16, "He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved."

Again, what prerequisites are necessary before a person can be saved?

### **Acts 2:37-38**

37 Now when they heard this, they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, "Men and brethren, what shall we do?"

38 Then Peter said to them, "Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; ...

Notice there are two things specifically mentioned in this passage that are necessary for the remission of sins: repentance and baptism. Repentance was placed before baptism. Unless a man repents first, baptism will do no good.

**Q:** Since belief and repentance are prerequisites to baptism, how can a living person be baptized in behalf of a dead person?

Philip refused to baptize anyone living who did not first believe in Christ (Acts 8:37), how then can we baptize anyone in behalf of a dead person who never believed?

Again, Peter refused to baptize anyone living who did not first repent of their sins (Acts 2:38), so how can we baptize anyone in behalf of a dead person who never repented?

The Bible clearly teaches:

**2 Corinthians 5:10**

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.

Every man shall give account of the things he did while in his own body. No one can believe for another person, no one can repent for another person and no one can be baptized for another person. Each person is responsible for his own actions and no one can obey God for another person.

**A DIFFICULT PASSAGE**

There is, however, a passage in 1 Corinthians 15 which some people use to justify the practice of baptizing living people in behalf of dead people:

**1 Corinthians 15:29**

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?

In spite of the fact that the Scriptures clearly teach men must believe and repent before they can be baptized and in spite of the fact that the Bible clearly teaches men shall give account for the things done in their own bodies, some people interpret this passage in such a way so as to say:

Living people can be baptized as representatives of dead people who never believed, or repented!

Is this what 1 Corinthians 15:29 is teaching? Not at all. Notice carefully the following facts:

- (1) The Greek word βαπτίζω, translated "*baptized*" in this passage, is in the middle voice. According to the textbook, Essentials of New Testament Greek, by Ray Summers, "*in the middle voice the subject is acting so as to participate in some way in the results of the action*" (p. 38). In other words, because the Greek word βαπτίζω is in the middle voice, the ones being baptized are going to participate in some way in the results of the action. The ones being baptized are the ones receiving the benefits of the baptism.

- (2) It is assumed that the pronoun "*they*" in verse 29 is referring to men that are living and it is assumed that the living are being baptized for the dead. But what if this assumption is wrong? What if the pronoun "*they*" referred, not to the living, but to the dead themselves? In fact, it is very likely the pronoun "*they*" does indeed refer, not to the living, but to the dead themselves!

verse 18 -- "they which are fallen asleep"

verse 23 -- "they [the dead] that are Christ's at his coming."

verse 35 -- "with what body do they [the dead] come"

Since the pronoun "*they*" is being consistently used in this passage to refer to the dead themselves, it seems very logical to conclude that the word "*they*" in verse 29 is also referring to the dead.

Now let's put this information all together. First, the word "*they*" refers to the dead, not to the living. And second, the middle voice of the verb βαπτίζω indicates that ones being baptized are themselves receiving the benefits of the baptism. This information would make the passage to teach this:

### **1 Corinthians 15:29**

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?

Contextually, Paul is trying to prove the resurrection. Some at Corinth were denying the resurrection (verse 12). His argument is this: "If there is no resurrection from the dead, then why did these godly saints who have already died get baptized in preparation for death? They were baptized for the remission of their sins expecting to be raised up with Christ to eternal life, but if there is no resurrection from the dead, what is the benefit of their having been baptized?"

1 Corinthians 15:29, then, is not a command, nor an example of living people being baptized in behalf of dead people, but rather it is an argument concerning the resurrection of the dead.

## **SUMMARY**

In summary, should we baptize men in behalf of those who are already dead? The answer is no! 1 Corinthians 15:29 does not teach proxy baptism, but just the opposite. It teaches that baptism in water will do a man no good if after he dies there is no resurrection of the dead.

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