

1 CORINTHIANS: MOVING FROM THE CARNAL TO THE SPIRITUAL STATE

Part XXXVIII: Understanding Paul's Reference To Baptism For The Dead

(1 Corinthians 15:29-34)

I. Introduction

- A. Nearly "200 explanations have been given" for Paul's reference to baptism for the dead in 1 Corinthians 15:29, most of which are absurd as people have tried to conform it to Christian doctrine, B. K. C., N. T., p. 544.
- B. The Mormons use this verse to support their doctrine of proxy baptism, the belief that one can be baptized for the salvation of another person who has died, so we need to understand what Paul meant for our edification:

II. Understanding Paul's Reference To Baptism For The Dead, 1 Corinthians 15:29-34.

- A. First, for several Biblical reasons, Paul could **not** have taught that a living believer can be baptized for a deceased party to provide the dead person salvation (as follows):
 - 1. Salvation is a gift of God that occurs for one when he believes in Christ apart from any works, Ephesians 2:8-9. Water baptism is a work, so it cannot qualify to save anyone, whether he is alive or dead!
 - 2. Hebrews 9:27 claims that it is appointed unto men once to die, but after this the judgment, not a second opportunity to be saved by *any* means! One must be saved **before** he dies or he goes into condemnation.
 - 3. Paul stated in 1 Corinthians 1:17 that Christ had not sent him to baptize, but to preach the gospel. If baptism could save, Paul would have reported that the Lord commissioned him to baptize, not just to preach the Gospel without also baptizing!
 - 4. Also, nowhere else in Scripture is there a reference to salvation by proxy baptism. If such a doctrine on such an important topic were true, we should expect to see it taught in several passages, but only here does there seem to be a phrase that one might possibly conclude promotes salvation by proxy baptism!
- B. Second, Paul revealed that the baptism for the dead practice he mentioned was not necessarily practiced by Christians, or at least doctrinally sound Christians, for he refers to "they" as performing this practice, v. 29.
- C. Third, Paul could not have referred to a Greek idea, for the Greeks "believed in the immortality of the soul, but not in the resurrection of the body. To them, the body was the source of man's weakness and sin; death, therefore was the welcome means by which the soul was liberated from the body. Resurrection, in their thinking, would only enslave the soul again," Ryrie Study Bible, KJV, 1978, ftn. to 1 Cor. 15:12.
- D. Fourth, the setting shows Paul tried to shame his readers by noting how those with obvious pagan error regarding their belief on baptism at least still held to belief in the resurrection opposite some of Paul's readers:
 - 1. North of Corinth lay Eleusis, the center of an ancient popular pagan mystery religion, *Ibid*. "Part of the rites of initiation into this pagan religion were washings of purification in the sea without which no one could hope to experience bliss in the hereafter (cf. Pindar *Fragment* 212; Sophocles *Fragment* 753). A vicarious participation in the mysteries was not unknown either (cf. Orphica *Fragment* 245)," *Ibid*.
 - 2. In view of this, Paul might have been trying to shame his readers for doubting the resurrection when pagans who held to obvious theological error on the belief of baptism in their false religion still hoped for a resurrection, and that to the shame of Paul's Christian readers who denied the resurrection!
- E. Fifth, the context that follows 1 Corinthians 15:29 shows Paul in line with the interpretation of verse 29 we just gave continued to critique and shame his readers for denying belief in the resurrection, 1 Cor. 15:30-34:
 - 1. Paul critiqued and shamed his readers for doubting the resurrection in 1 Corinthians 15:30-31 by stating that not believing it would be foolish since he and others stood in constant danger of death for their faith.
 - 2. Paul added that if he had fought with beasts in the arena at Ephesus, what he apparently came close to doing, and there was no resurrection, he would have been foolish as one whose life was so greatly at risk, and he states as much to critique his readers who denied the resurrection, 1 Corinthians 15:32.
 - 3. Thus, Paul admonished his readers not to be deceived, that keeping bad company corrupted good character. They needed to avoid those who denied the resurrection, 1 Cor. 15:34 NIV. They were to come to their right mind to have the knowledge of God, and Paul spoke this to their shame, 1 Cor. 15:35.

Lesson: Paul did not teach salvation by proxy baptism in 1 Corinthians 15:29, but mentioned pagans who taught an obvious error on baptism while at least still holding to belief in a resurrection to the shame of Paul's Christian readers who denied the resurrection. In 1 Corinthians 15:30-34, Paul kept rebuking and shaming his readers for denying the resurrection when he and others risked their lives for the faith and belief in the resurrection.

Application: Salvation is not by works, so it is not by water baptism, and we must hold to salvation by faith alone!