

Question (shayla): What is the “baptism for the dead” mentioned in 1 Corinthians 15:29?

Answer (meforshim):

Otherwise what will they do who are being baptized for the dead? If the dead are not raised at all, then why are people baptized for them? - 1 Corinthians 15:29 HCSB

Numerous explanations have been offered for this verse ranging from the inane to the sophisticated. Mormonism, in particular, has claimed that this verse supports their view of baptism for the dead.

In their practice, individuals go to their local Mormon temple, dress appropriately for baptism, representatively adopt the name of a person who has died, and then the Mormon is baptized in water for the deceased person. This way, the dead person has fulfilled the requirements of salvation (according to Mormonism) in the afterworld and can enjoy further spiritual benefits in the spiritual realm.

But the Mormons are incorrect. They have usurped this verse and taken it out of context. So let's examine this verse briefly so we can see what Paul is talking about when he mentions baptism for the dead.

In verses 1-19, the fact of Christ's resurrection is detailed by Paul. Beginning in verse 20 and going through verse 23, Paul speaks about the order of the resurrection. Christ is the first one raised – in a glorified body – and then those who are His will be raised. Next, verses 24-29 mention Christ's reign and the abolition of death. This is when this controversial verse occurs.

Just north of Corinth was a city named Eleusis. This was the location of a pagan religion where baptism in the sea was practiced to guarantee a good afterlife. This religion was mentioned by Homer in the Hymn to Demeter (478-479). The Corinthians were known to be heavily influenced by other customs. After all, they were in a large economic area where a great many different people frequented. It is probable that the Corinthians were being influenced by the religious practices found at Eleusis where baptism for the dead was practiced.

Paul used this example from the pagans in 1 Corinthians 15:29, when he said, "...if the dead are not raised at all, then why are **people** baptized for the dead?" Paul did not say "we." This is significant because the Christian church was not practicing baptism for the dead; the pagans were.

Paul's point was simple: resurrection is a reality. It is going to happen when Jesus returns. Even the pagans believe in the resurrection, otherwise, why would they baptize for the dead?

However, some are not convinced by this argument and state that the language is not generalized in the Greek and, therefore, Paul is not speaking about the pagans. Let's take a look at it in the original, shall we?

ἐπεὶ τί ποιήσουσιν οἱ βαπτιζόμενοι ὑπὲρ τῶν νεκρῶν; εἰ ὅλως νεκροὶ οὐκ ἐγείρονται, τί καὶ βαπτίζονται ὑπὲρ αὐτῶν

Literally, the verse is translated as:

Else¹⁸⁹³ what⁵¹⁰¹ shall they do⁴¹⁶⁰ which are baptized⁹⁰⁷ for⁵²²⁸ the³⁵⁸⁸ dead,³⁴⁹⁸ if¹⁴⁸⁷ the
dead³⁴⁹⁸ rise¹⁴⁵³ not³⁷⁵⁶ at all?³⁶⁵⁴ why⁵¹⁰¹ are they then²⁵³² baptized⁹⁰⁷ for⁵²²⁸ the³⁵⁸⁸ dead?³⁴⁹⁸

The issue here is the fifth and sixteenth words, “baptizontai” – “they are baptized.” In both cases they are present, passive, indicative, third person, plural. In other words, in both cases the appropriate translation is generalized and in the third person. Paul does not refer to the recipients of the letter (the Christians) but to some unnamed third party.