

A Brief Summary and Review of the Concept of “Baptism for the Dead”

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Baptism for the dead is a practice over which there would be little debate, if it were not for the Mormon Church's practice of it today. The online database Wikipedia defines "baptism for the dead" as "a religious practice of baptizing a living person on behalf of an individual who is dead; the living person is acting as the deceased person's proxy."¹

The term is only referred to one time in the Bible:

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? (I Cor. 15:29TNIV)

Exactly what Paul was referring to is very difficult, if not impossible to know. There is no other reference to baptism for the dead in either the New or Old Testaments. Through the years, there have been dozens of explanations offered. Prominent among them have been:

1. That a living man or woman is baptized in honor of a dead person who had a spiritual influence on them ("I am baptized today because of the influence of my aunt Marilyn. I wish she could be here today to witness this event.") This may have been connected with the divisions over apostles that had led various ones to Christ earlier in I Corinthians.

Baptism in the Corinthian church was an expression of allegiance to honor not only Christ but also the 'patron' apostle in whose testimony the convert had believed (1 Cor 1.12–17). Some apostles known to the Corinthians had died (cf. 15.6), yet their testimony lived on and bore fruit in Corinth, resulting in baptism for the honouring of the dead apostles.²

¹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Baptism_for_the_dead

² "Living Rewards for Dead Apostles: 'Baptised for the Dead' in 1 Corinthians 15.29" *New Testament Studies* (2006), 52: 71-85 Cambridge University Press

2. Baptism for those believing Christians who had died before being immersed [although the early church did not know believers who had not been immersed]
3. The Baptism referred to is persecution—baptism of fire that leads to death. i.e. “Why are people willing to go through persecution even leading to death if there is no resurrection?” This interpretation fits with following verses but seems forced & unnatural to the rest of the text.
4. That Paul is referring to a pagan rite, not one associated with Christian practices. It is a rite that he acknowledges exists (without stating either approval or disapproval) in the multi-religious environment of Corinth. In later verses, he quotes pagan writers. (the end of v. 32 is from Isaiah 22:13, although it was common among pagans; v. 33 is a quote from the pagan philosopher Menander, etc.) To further bolster this argument, it is pointed out that Paul uses the third person here instead of the second person. (It is not “Why are YOU baptized for the dead?” But why are ‘*those* baptized for the dead.’³) as a way of contrasting Christian doctrine from pagan practices.
5. The Biblical scholar F.W. Farrar goes on to list some of the explanations which he discredits as totally fanciful:
Such are the notions that “for the dead” can mean “for our mortal bodies” (Chrysostom); or “for those about to die” (Estius. Calvin, etc.); or “over (the sepulchers of) the dead” (Luther); or “to supply the vacancies left by the dead” (Le Clerc, etc.).⁴

However it is understood, it *is* certain that Paul is not advocating the practice here. He is simply acknowledging that it occurs and uses it in his bigger argument. His argument is: “If there is no resurrection of the dead (as some in Corinth have argued) then why would anyone even *do* this practice?” Paul does

³ Richard Oster, I Corinthians (The College Press NIV Commentary) Joplin, MO: College Press, 1995.

⁴ *Ibid.*

not say the practice is a good thing or a bad thing...he simply acknowledges its existence in the religious world in Corinth.

The idea that people could do something in this life to benefit those who are dead after they are raised from the dead is found in the Apocryphal book of II Maccabees. (This book, while accepted as part of the Old Testament canon by Roman Catholics has never been accepted by Jews or Protestants).

He [Judas Maccabbeus] also took up a collection, man by man, to the amount of two thousand drachmas of silver, and sent it to Jerusalem to provide for a sin offering. In doing this he acted very well and honorably, taking account of the resurrection. For if he were not expecting that those who had fallen would rise again, it would have been superfluous and foolish to pray for the dead. But if he was looking to the splendid reward that is laid up for those who fall asleep in godliness, it was a holy and pious thought. Therefore he made atonement for the dead, so that they might be delivered from their sin. (II Macabees 12:43-45-RSV).

Among the Jews at this time there was the practice that if someone were dying under ceremonial impurity, someone could be cleansed as a proxy for them.⁵ It is possible that a belief regarding benefiting the dead may have spread to Corinth from some Jewish faction.

Outside of Christianity, proxy baptisms are practiced by the Mandaeans of Iraq and Iran, by some of the Neo-Apostolic congregations of Europe, and by some Native American religions.”⁶

Throughout history, the doctrine of baptism for the dead has only been practiced outside of mainstream Christianity. It was found in two groups that were considered heretical at the time of their existence (and ever since): the Cerentians and the Marcionites.

The Cerentians were a cult who followed the teachings of Cerenthus who said the man Jesus was taken over by the Christ-spirit at His Baptism in the

⁵ *The Pulpit Commentary: 1 Corinthians*. 2004 (H. D. M. Spence-Jones, Ed.) (488).

⁶ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Baptism_for_the_dead

Jordan River, who then possessed Him for three years, and abandoned Him on the cross, leaving the man Jesus a very confused individual with no memory of the past three years or why He was on a cross.⁷

The Marcionites believed the God of the OT (who, in their view, created this world but was a bungler) was in fact evil while the God of the NT was a superior god who was only good and truth and was in fact unknown before Jesus came. Christianity, therefore, stands in opposition to Judaism and the God of the OT is an inferior demiurge. The Marcionites are best known for their rejection of anything in the New Testament that spoke favorably of Jews, the Old Testament Law, or the god of the Old Testament.

The Marcionites were Gnostic in their outlook. Gnosticism has been in the news since the publication of the novel, “The DaVinci Code”. It is a subject for a completely different study and is much, much bigger than the subject of baptism for the dead, but in a nut-shell they believed that the physical body was evil. The spirit was trapped inside the body and was asleep. It could only be awakened by knowledge. (The Greek word for knowledge is *gnosis*). There are, in addition, several spheres or levels (typically seven) separating us from God. One could ascend through these levels only with additional hidden knowledge and formulas, revealed only to those initiated in Gnostic practices. Besides its non-Christian teachings, Gnosticism also was disruptive because it was elitist...those with the “special knowledge” would look down on those who did not have that knowledge. Those without the knowledge were considered as still operating in the fleshly, evil part of life.

Baptism for the dead was practiced by the Gnostics as a way of imparting knowledge to dead souls and liberating them to begin the process of gaining the secret knowledge necessary to ascend toward God.

The doctrines of Gnosticism have always been rejected by the orthodox church. While Gnosticism probably did not exist during the time of the writing of the New Testament, there are hints that “incipient Gnosticism” was creeping into

⁷ For what it is worth, this is also the view of Islam about the person of Jesus

the churches. Paul spoke in several passages against doctrines that seemed later to develop into Gnosticism.

The orthodox church has always stood in opposition to baptism of the dead. In fact, at the Synod of Hippo (in northern Africa) in A.D.393 the act of baptizing for the dead was specifically condemned: "The Eucharist shall not be given to dead bodies, nor baptism conferred upon them." (Fourth canon of the Synod of Hippo)⁸

The Mormon Church teaches that the practice of baptism for the dead answers the theological problem of what happens to the righteous dead...those who lived good lives but die without knowing of Christ.

One Mormon source puts it this way:

...The doctrine of "baptism for the dead" is one of the most wonderful issues in the restored Church of Jesus Christ for...it resolves one of the thorniest of theological issues in a wonderful way that shows the power of God's grace and love.... The thorny issue: if salvation is only through Christ, what happens to all the billions of people who lived and died without ever even hearing of Christ? And if we must be baptized to enter into a covenant with Christ (as Christ plainly teaches in John 3:3-5...), what of those that never had a chance?⁹

While that might be a seemingly delightful answer to that problem, it still remains a doctrine that is outside the biblical teaching and outside the teaching of the orthodox church for almost two thousand years. The Mormon church teaches that the dead are brought into a saving relationship with God by the baptism of someone who is living. But how would this make the point, that Paul is making, of the reality of the resurrection? They are saved and go to be with God, (according to Mormon theory) but there is no resurrection necessarily involved in that.

⁸ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Baptism_for_the_dead#Early_History

⁹ (http://www.jefflindsay.com/LDSFAQ/FQ_BaptDead.shtml#why)

The Mormon Church claims that there is one favorable reference to baptism of the dead in the early church: in the early Christian writing “The Shepherd [or Pastor] of Hermas.” This passage (ch. 16) refers to the dead being brought to life by the act of baptism, although even the Mormon church does not claim that baptism for the dead brings the dead back to life. The passage in the Shepherd of Hermas seems to be a parallel to Romans 6 in speaking of the fact that we are dead in our sins before baptism and we are given new and eternal life by our obedient baptism. I have chosen to replicate chapter 16 from the Shepherd of Hermas in a footnote so that the reader can decide for him/herself whether or not there is a clear reference in it to the baptism of the dead.¹⁰

As for the Mormon Church’s teaching of this practice, the practice of baptism for the dead is not even found in the Book of Mormon, but is a later teaching of that church. In fact, the Book of Mormon itself declares that one cannot repent and change one’s spiritual state after death:

33 And now, as I said unto you before, as ye have had so many witnesses, therefore, I beseech of you that ye do not procrastinate the day

¹⁰ “Explain to me a little further, sir,” I said. “What is it that you desire?” he asked. “Why, sir,” I said, “did these stones ascend out of the pit, and be applied to the building of the tower, after having borne these spirits?” “They were obliged,” he answered, “to ascend through water in order that they might be made alive; for, unless they laid aside the deadness of their life, they could not in any other way enter into the kingdom of God. Accordingly, those also who fell asleep received the seal of the Son of God. For,” he continued, “before a man bears the name of the Son of God³⁷¹³⁷¹ *The name of the Son of God. The name of God.—Lips. [1 John v. 11, 12.]* he is dead; but when he receives the seal he lays aside his deadness, and obtains life. The seal, then, is the water: they descend into the water dead, and they arise alive. And to them, accordingly, was this seal preached, and they made use of it that they might enter into the kingdom of God.” “Why, sir,” I asked, “did the forty stones also ascend with them out of the pit, having already received the seal?” “Because,” he said, “these apostles and teachers who preached the name of the Son of God, after falling asleep in the power and faith of the Son of God, preached it not only to those who were asleep, but themselves also gave them the seal of the preaching. Accordingly they descended with them into the water, and again ascended. [But these descended alive and rose up again alive; whereas they who had previously fallen asleep descended dead, but rose up again alive.³⁷²³⁷² All the translations and Clemens Alexandrinus (*Strom.*, vi. 6, 46) have this passage. It is omitted in Lips.] By these, then, were they quickened and made to know the name of the Son of God. For this reason also did they ascend with them, and were fitted along with them into the building of the tower, and, untouched by the chisel, were built in along with them. For they slept in righteousness and in great purity, but only they had not this seal. You have accordingly the explanation of these also.” (found at: <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/anf02.ii.iv.ix.html>)

of your repentance until the end; for after this day of life, which is given us to prepare for eternity, behold, if we do not improve our time while in this life, then cometh the night of darkness wherein there can be no labor performed.

34 Ye cannot say, when ye are brought to that awful crisis, that I will repent, that I will return to my God. Nay, ye cannot say this; for that same spirit which doth possess your bodies at the time that ye go out of this life, that same spirit will have power to possess your body in that eternal world. 35 For behold, if ye have procrastinated the day of your repentance even until death, behold, ye have become subjected to the spirit of the devil, and he doth seal you his; therefore, the Spirit of the Lord hath withdrawn from you, and hath no place in you, and the devil hath all power over you; and this is the final state of the wicked. (Alma 34:33-35)

CONCLUSION

Even if the doctrine of baptism for the dead were a Christian doctrine, it is certainly not a central doctrine to the Christian faith. If it were important for us to understand, God would surely have given it more space than one obscure reference in one verse in the Bible.

But the theory behind the Mormon interpretation of this doctrine runs counter two basic teachings of the New Testament:

- a. Baptism must be accompanied by faith, repentance and confession. (Acts 2:38, etc.) Baptism without accompanying faith, repentance and confession is an empty act for a living person OR a dead person. Faith, repentance and confession are not acts that dead people can do.
- b. The Bible is clear that there is one chance for us to be with God eternally and that is based on the decision we all make regarding the place of Jesus Christ in our lives. Heb. 9:27 clearly teaches: *people are destined to die once, and after that to face judgment.*

While we may never absolutely understand the practice to which Paul was referring, the way that we must go to receive Christ and be forever with him after death IS clearly stated in the Bible. May we follow and be obedient to that teaching.
