

Gospel Gleanings, "...especially the parchments"

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Baptized for Whom?

Else what shall they do which are baptized for the dead, if the dead rise not at all? why are they then baptized for the dead? (1 Corinthians 15:29, KJV 1900)

For whom are we baptized? Who is the centerpiece of this entire chapter? What does baptism intend to depict? Whether we accept the opening verses of Romans 6 as referring to water baptism or something else, the analogy of baptism prevails. And what does Paul associate baptism with in this lesson? To Jesus' death, burial, and resurrection? In water baptism, necessarily full bodily immersion in water¹, we depict our personal belief in Jesus' death, burial, and resurrection from the dead, and we profess our faith in Him and in His work as the complete and exclusive remedy for our sins. So in a very real sense, Paul teaches that water baptism relates specifically to Jesus' death, burial, and resurrection. Thus, if someone in a New Testament church does not believe in the resurrection, he has lost all reason for his being baptized. If you do not believe in the resurrection, you do not believe in Jesus' resurrection. And if you do not believe in His resurrection, you have no basis whatever for allowing anyone to baptize you in water. Your unbelief in the resurrection leaves you with no logical reason to submit yourself to water baptism. It is this point that Paul is making in the context of the verse and in the flow of the greater lesson of First Corinthians 15.

Some commentaries suggest that the idea of surrogate baptism was believed and practiced by a few people in the Corinthian Church. Nothing in the verse in any way suggests this idea. Paul refers to "they" who are baptized for the dead. Other commentaries refer to a small pagan religion in the Greek peninsula who did practice surrogate baptism and hold that Paul was refuting their practice. I suggest that neither interpretation holds strong support in this verse. Paul would hardly bother to raise or refute every pagan idea that existed in his day. He wrote the Corinthian letter with a pastor's heart (Or, more correctly, an apostle's heart). Every error that Paul raises and refutes or rebukes throughout the letter was a practice that was being entertained by at least some people in the Corinthian Church. I suggest that Paul's reference to "they" has to do with a

broad practice that, if believed and practiced, must rely on Jesus' death, burial and resurrection, or it has no Biblical support at all for its observance. Presumably everyone in the Corinthian Church had been baptized. If some of them now rejected the resurrection, they had no factual or truth basis for that baptism. Why did they submit to a rite that built its very existence on something that they did not believe? They reduced themselves to hypocrites who did something that they did not personally believe in. They could not answer Paul's "Why?" question at all.

Two aberrant ideas need brief mention. One group of professing Christians claims that the verse teaches surrogate baptism, meaning that they believe you, a living believer, can actually be baptized as a surrogate for dead relatives who died not baptized, and your baptism imputes the merits of your baptism to them, as if they had been baptized. When we examine this verse in its broad context of Paul's fifty-plus verses on the resurrection, we find no support and no reference to surrogate baptism at all. To isolate this verse from its context and impose this meaning onto it ignores and in fact contradicts its contextual setting and meaning. Would Paul devote over fifty verses focused on the centrality of Jesus' resurrection as the exclusive basis for our resurrection to glory and then devote a single verse to believer's surrogate baptism? The idea has no logical or contextual support. It must ignore context and view this one verse as if it stands alone and not in a broad contextual flow.

The second errant idea is more indirect, but I mention it only because it suggests that what you or I do can be imputed to another person as merit for their eternal salvation. I refer to the Roman Catholic idea of purgatory. According to this teaching, you may do something, typically write a check to the church for a tidy sum of money, and thereby effectively "Buy" your dead loved one out of an imaginary intermediate state of punishment. The idea of purgatory didn't exist, even within Roman Catholic doctrine, prior to Augustine, roughly four centuries too late to be a New Testament doctrine.

Further, both ideas patently rely on the doctrine of human works for eternal salvation. In fact, both ideas rely on the idea that one human being is capable of acting as a personal mediator and

¹ The most reliable New Testament Greek dictionaries, even those compiled by men who practiced sprinkling, consistently define the Greek word translated "Baptize" in the New Testament as immersion.

substitute for another person's sins. In effect, both ideas promote a mortal human to the role of Savior that Jesus alone holds in Scripture. In effect, a human is elevated to the same level as Jesus and is credited with substitute work on behalf of another that puts away that other person's sins. Paul emphatically writes words that refute and contradict both ideas at their foundation.

For there is one God, and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus. (1 Timothy 2:5)

How many gods does Paul acknowledge? One? Yes, only one. How many mediators does Paul acknowledge? One? Yes, one and only one. No mortal, regardless of time or place born, regardless of ancestry, and regardless of personal conduct, can supplant, replace, or even assist "the man Christ Jesus" as the one and only one mediator between God and men. No, Mary fails that test. In fact, in her song of praise to God before Jesus' birth, she stated her joy in "...God my Saviour." Mary was not a savior. She needed a Savior, and she knew who her Savior was. (Luke 1:47) Take note. Mary did not think of herself as an intermediary between God and men. She thought of herself as a mortal sinner who had been supremely blessed with a Savior whom she praised for her present blessing. Both ideas utterly lack Biblical support and must therefore be rejected. Further, both ideas contradict Paul's teaching that Jesus alone is the one mediator between God and men. He quite sufficiently fills that role so that there is no need whatever for any other.

...if the dead rise not at all. Rather than thinking of these words as an exclusive look into the future and doing something to ensure the resurrection of others, Paul points backward to the one and only historical resurrection that had already occurred. If the dead rise not at all, then Jesus did not rise. Forget about anyone's future resurrection. The idea is false and hopeless if Jesus didn't already rise from the dead. Paul's emphasis throughout this chapter builds on Jesus and His personal resurrection. Review Paul's eight consequences that the Corinthians must face if Jesus didn't arise from the dead. What is the state of your faith and our preaching if Jesus didn't arise? To ignore this foundation and impose the novel idea of using the term to refer to people who are now dead and to a believer being baptized as a surrogate on behalf of that person utterly ignores and contradicts Paul's teaching in the whole chapter. If we reject that Jesus arose, everything about our faith is a farce and leaves us "...of all men most miserable." And, following Paul's reasoning, if Jesus didn't arise from the dead, why does any believer accept the idea of water baptism as a public statement of their faith in Jesus and His resurrection?

This verse imposes a powerful example onto our thinking. We've examined the negative and errant

idea. Think about the implications of Paul's words in this verse on your life. Do you believe in Jesus and in His resurrection? Do you believe that He alone is the one true mediator with God for you? Have you been baptized? If not, why? On what logical basis do you believe in Jesus and the resurrection, but decline to show by your personal act that you so believe? If you believe that His ultimate sacrifice was for you and that His ultimate victory was equally for you, should you not manifest that belief by a personal act that shows your belief in Him and in His resurrection? The casual attitude of believers in our day contradicts the example of first century believers. "Here is water. What doth hinder...?" The danger of persecution did not dampen their faith, but pride and the alluring notion of living with one foot in the kingdom of God and one foot in the world effectively hinders contemporary believers. Admittedly, the confusing array of contradictory teachings, all claiming to teach the truth of Scripture, plays a sad role in this neglect. First century believers had one Christian truth that stood in vivid contrast with a wide array of pagan ideas that taught the mirror opposite worldview to Jesus. Our culture contains an almost endless array of diverse groups and ideas that claim the Bible and Jesus, leaving the inquiring believer confused and bewildered about which set of ideas and Biblical interpretations to believe. In our culture, the lines of demarcation have been confusingly blurred. One day the popular politician of the day will openly speak words of rejection and criticism against any form of conservative, Bible-based Christian faith, and the next day, faced with the latest crisis or catastrophe, that same politician will sing "God bless America" and ask his constituents to pray for our country. While this hypocritical rhetoric seems to play well with superficial citizens, I have to wonder. What does God think of such empty faith?

We need constantly to return to Scripture to keep the Biblical view of faith and of our obedience, including our baptism, fresh in our minds and clear in our purpose. Obedience that focuses on anyone or anything other than our Lord fails the Biblical test of the righteousness of faith.

***William Gadsby's Hymnal*, 1.709**
(Published 1838)

The Lord that made both heaven and earth,
And was himself made man,
Lay in the womb, before his birth,
Contracted to a span.

Behold, from what beginnings small
Our great salvation rose;
The strength of God is owned by all;
But who his weakness knows?

Let not the strong the weak despise;
Their faith, though small, is true;

Though low they seem in others' eyes,
Their Saviour seemed so too.

Nor meanly of the tempted think;
For O what tongue can tell
How low the Lord of life must sink,
Before he vanquished hell?

As in the days of flesh he grew
In wisdom, stature, grace,
So in the soul that born anew,
He keeps a gradual pace.

No less almighty at his birth,
Than on his throne supreme;
His shoulders held up heaven and earth,
When Mary held up him.
Thomas Hart

Little Zion Primitive Baptist Church
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Worship service each Sunday
Joseph R. Holder

10:30 A. M.
Pastor