

Dear Friends,

Is it possible for one believer to be baptized for another believer? For another person who is not a believer? The few groups that hold to this idea will typically quote our study passage for this week as their Bible proof. Does 1 Corinthians 15:29 actually teach surrogate baptism? In this study, I will argue that it does not. The idea of surrogate baptism must be imposed onto the verse. The verse, rightly interpreted in its contextual setting, does not at all teach surrogate baptism. It implies the right idea of "Surrogate" atonement, Jesus dying for our sins and thereby giving us the benefit of His death, so we should show our love to Him for His saving grace by being baptized for Him, for Him who died for us that we might live. The "Dead" for whom we should be baptized in the verse is Jesus, not anyone else. This lesson and all New Testament teaching on baptism reminds us that right New Testament baptism should be engaged as a selfless act of worship that honors Jesus for His saving life, death, and resurrection for us.

Lord bless,

Joe Holder

Ignored and Misunderstood Scriptures

(1 Corinthians 15:29)

Baptized for the Dead?

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)

Did Paul teach that one person can be baptized for another, even for someone who has died? What is a right interpretation and application of this verse? First, in every instance of baptism recorded in the New Testament, in one way or another the person being baptized was required to demonstrate faith in God and personal repentance. The idea of surrogate baptism for anyone, especially for someone already dead, contradicts this consistent New Testament teaching. Beginning with Pentecost (Acts 2), New Testament baptism also focuses on one's view of Jesus. We show in the symbolism of baptism our belief in His death, burial, and resurrection. Whatever the person engaged in surrogate baptism may think of Jesus, there is no link whatever to the dead person's regard—or lack thereof—for Jesus in this act. Thus, even before we begin to analyze this verse, the idea of surrogate baptism, one person being baptized for another, contradicts the pattern of New Testament baptism. If one believes, as I do, in the supernatural origin and preservation of Scripture, no contradiction can be regarded as acceptable. When we view what appears to be a contradiction in Scripture, we must rethink our ideas, our interpretations

that appear to contradict the pattern of New Testament teaching. Find a right interpretation that harmonizes with the whole.

The surrogate baptism, one person being baptized on behalf of another, interpretation of this verse serves as one of many examples of bad interpretation based on isolating a verse from its context and imposing one's personal ideas onto it rather than interpreting the verse in the flowing context in which it appears. In Biblical hermeneutics (Right interpretation of Scripture) studies, there is a quip that reflects wise thought. "A text without its context is a pretext." Simply stated, any passage examined in isolation rather than in its literary setting, its "Context," is easily misconstrued to mean whatever the person so misrepresenting it wishes. No literary work can—or should—be so interpreted. Shakespeare, the Bible, no literary work will communicate its author's true message unless we interpret it in its context.

How do we study a passage "Contextually"? Consider a visual representation of contextual study. On a blank sheet of paper, make a dot in the middle of the page with your pen or pencil. Now put your pen or pencil on that dot and draw an expanding spiral line around the dot, moving slowly outward with each circle. How do we apply this idea to our study? Start with your verse or sentence. Then carefully study the surrounding verses (Before and after) in an ever-expanding pattern. Go from the verse or sentence to the paragraph. (Many King James Bibles have a paragraph symbol in the margin) If not, go from the verse to the whole chapter in which it appears, then to the whole book. Next consider other New Testament books written by the same person. Then study similar topics as explained by other New Testament writers until you have covered the entire New Testament, and finally the Old Testament as well. Beginning to end, your objective is to find a consistent interpretation of the idea that flows and harmonizes with every verse in the Bible that teaches on the subject or idea of the verse which started your study. Right literary context is measured by proximity to the verse, not verses all over the Bible that contain a single word which appears in your study verse. You cannot discover right context with a concordance. You must study the actual text of Scripture, beginning with your verse and carefully moving outward through surrounding passages.

What is the immediate context of our study verse? It is 1 Corinthians 15, the most comprehensive teaching in one context in the New Testament on the literal resurrection of the body of God's people. Where does Paul begin his reasoning in this lesson? How does he reason through it with the Corinthians? If we follow this path, we shall discover his intent in our study passage.

For I delivered unto you first of all that which I also received, how that Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures; And that he was buried, and that he rose again the third day according to the scriptures: And that he was seen of Cephas, then of the twelve: After that, he was seen of above five hundred brethren at once; of whom the greater part remain unto this present, but some are fallen asleep. (1 Corinthians 15:3-6)

The bedrock foundation of the gospel which Paul taught the Corinthians—and us—must start with "Jesus and the resurrection." (Acts 17:18) Whether he preached to Greek philosophers on Mars Hill or an errant church in Corinth, Paul's gospel message was the same. If our goal is to be Biblical, to

respect and believe God, our gospel message must also be the same. We must follow Paul's teaching, not ignore it and other New Testament teaching in favor of our "private interpretations." (2 Peter 1:20)

How did Paul reason with the Corinthians from this "Jesus and the resurrection" foundation? His methods are simple, not at all complicated or obtuse. Whatever we think or do, if we fail to build our faith and our lives on this "Jesus and the resurrection" foundation, everything we think and do is "vain." In this chapter, Paul repeated this word, "Vain," six times. Five of those times he used the word to describe various major truths of the "Jesus and the resurrection" faith. If we deny Jesus' literal bodily resurrection, we must also deny His atoning death and every blessing we enjoy from the Lord that we receive because of His coming, death, and resurrection. However, Paul concludes the chapter with a mirror opposite conclusion. Given the facts of our faith, Jesus' coming (God in human flesh), death, resurrection, and present glory, every tenet of the gospel is true, and our labor "is not in vain in the Lord." (1 Corinthians 15:58)

If we follow this inspired reasoning consistently through the chapter, every thing we believe and do in the gospel must rest on this primary truth. What logical interpretation might this foundation direct us to reach if we apply this contextual premise to the verse? It compels us away from any notion of surrogate baptism to the basic truth of the passage. Some of the Corinthian Christians were questioning or outright denying the truth of the resurrection. Paul applies their own errant belief to their conduct. "If you do not believe in the resurrection, why were you baptized? Baptism symbolically states your belief in Jesus' death, burial, and resurrection. If you do not believe in the resurrection, you cannot believe in Jesus' resurrection. Why then were you baptized?" The "dead" for whom we are baptized—in that action of faith when we were baptized—was Jesus who died and arose for us. The passage thus follows the context in teaching the centrality of Jesus and His resurrection to the faith—and to the faithful conduct—of every believer, including that primary act of baptism. Paul is challenging the unbelievers in the Corinthian Church, "If Jesus didn't literally die '...for our sins according to the scriptures,' followed by His burial and resurrection (Verses 3-4), why were you baptized?"

Sadly, within the broad Christian community, we witness more deviations from Biblical teaching on faithful baptism than this aberrant and errant idea of surrogate baptism. If we accept Paul's inspired reasoning on baptism in this lesson, we will regard baptism as a selfless act of faith, engaged to honor Jesus, specifically His literal life as a man, His death for our sins, burial, and resurrection. Authentic New Testament baptism is not something we do to gain for our selves. We do it in faith to honor Jesus. So a believer thinking his baptism gains his salvation, his ultimate and eternal salvation from sin, contradicts this New Testament model. It degenerates Biblical baptism from an act of faith intended to manifest our faith in Jesus as our Savior to a selfish act motivated by hope of benefit or gain for self.

This idea of personal gain, the proverbial "What's in it for me?" permeates much of Christian conduct in contemporary Christian culture. Contemporary pastors need to invest much more teaching to their people on Jesus' words.

I have shewed you all things, how that so labouring ye ought to support the weak, and to remember the words of the Lord Jesus, how he said, It is more blessed to give than to receive. (Acts 20:35)

In every act of our Christian conduct this verse should dominate our thinking. Forget what “I want.” Forget “What’s in it for me?” This self-worship should wisely be replaced by “How can I serve others?” Only as we selflessly serve others do we truly serve Jesus.

I find it fascinating that Jesus included in His sheep-goat analogy of the final judgment (Matthew 25:31-46) a thought-provoking observation. Both the righteous (Sheep in His analogy) and the wicked (Goats in His analogy) were surprised at Jesus’ reminder of their actions. The wicked had many opportunities to be kind toward people in need, but they were too self-focused to notice. “When saw we thee....” And the righteous were so selfless in their outlook that they abundantly ministered to others in need, but never thought about self. They also respond with “When saw we thee....” And Jesus replied the same to both.

“Inasmuch as ye have done it (To the wicked He added “Not,” “not done it”) unto the least of one of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me.”

Jesus didn’t merely qualify conduct by what people did to some of His “brethren,” but specifically “unto the least of these my brethren.” If we could discover the least deserving of the Lord’s mercy-vessels elect people, we might well think of any number of reasons they don’t deserve our kindness. We might readily choose not to bother with a kindness to them. But Jesus thinks differently. Deserving or not (Do you truly deserve His kindness? Really!), they are “my brethren.” Baptism or any act of Christian service should be done in service to others and honor to Jesus. No other motive is acceptable with Him.

Elder Joe Holder