
BAPTISM FOR THE DEAD

Problem Texts (9)

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‘Otherwise, what do people mean by being baptized on behalf of the dead? If the dead are not raised at all, why are people baptized on their behalf?’ (1 Cor. 15:29)

In the study of Paul, as of the other biblical writers, it is wise to assume that he means what he says. When his words have a natural meaning, it is better to accept that meaning than to put an unnatural construction on them.

This is a problem text for many modern readers because Paul seems to be countenancing, or at least not condemning, the practice of baptism by proxy. Such a practice is strange and unacceptable to us, and we tend to suppose that it must have been strange and unacceptable to him. He must therefore have meant something different from what he appears to mean.

The Context

First, however, let us remind ourselves of the context. Paul has learned that some members of the church of Corinth are denying the resurrection hope. They accepted that Christ, having died and received burial, was raised again the third day, but they did not accept that his people would share in his resurrection by being raised from death themselves. Paul shows that the resurrection of Christ, the foundation fact of the gospel, logically involves the resurrection of his people; those who deny his people’s resurrection call his own resurrection into question, and thus undermine the faith of the gospel. Having argued that Christ’s resurrection carries with it the sure hope of resurrection for his people, Paul goes on to state the place occupied by his resurrection and theirs in the divine programme. This programme reaches its consummation with Christ’s handing back his mediatorial kingship to God, by whom he was entrusted with it. But this consummation is dependent on Christ’s resurrection and that of his people.

Subsidiary arguments

Having thus completed his main theological argument, Paul adduces some subsidiary ones of a practical nature, based on his readers’ exper-

ience and his own. The argument from baptism for the dead appears to refer to a practice familiar to his readers. If indeed some of them were being baptized by proxy for friends (believing friends, it may be) who had died before receiving baptism, Paul’s argument is: what use would there be in that, if your friends are not going to rise from the dead?

If there was such a practice, then this is our only first-century reference to it. But what other sense can be derived from Paul’s words?

An improbable suggestion

One suggestion is that Paul’s question ended with the word ‘baptized’—‘what do people mean by being baptized?’ Then comes the answer, in effect: ‘If there is no resurrection, their baptism is for the dead’—i.e. for people who are going to stay dead—‘and what is the use of being baptized for them?’ But this construction seems to overlook the fact that ‘the dead’ on whose behalf baptism is said to be received are different from those who are being baptized; it is not on their own behalf that the latter are here viewed as receiving baptism.

A more probable suggestion

‘There is no need of departing from the ordinary meaning of “baptized”, “for”, or “dead”.’ So says William Kelly in his commentary on this epistle (1878), and the interpretation he offers is in line with that observation. The preposition ‘for’ (Gk. *hyper*), as he points out, means not only ‘on behalf of’ but, where appropriate, ‘in place of’. The dead are dead believers, those ‘who have fallen asleep in Christ’, as they are called in *verse 18*. By their death the ranks of the church militant here in earth have been depleted, but new converts come forward to replace them:

Each stepping where his comrade stood,

The instant that he fell.

As these new converts fill up the ranks of the followers of Christ, they are baptized in place of those who have gone before. There would be no point in this procedure if death ends all, but since Christ has been raised as the firstfruits of those who have

fallen asleep, both those who have gone before and those who take their place share the resurrection hope.

This interpretation, which does no violence to the wording of the text, was revived in 1955 by a German theologian, Maria Raeder. She thought there was the further implication that the pagan relatives of those who had fallen asleep in Christ became believers and were baptized in order to be reunited with their Christian friends after death.

Of the various interpretations which I have come across, this one (especially as formulated by Kelly) is the only one which commends itself as a valid alternative to that which envisages the practice of baptism by proxy.

Final reflections

Those who think that Paul could never have employed an argument from a ‘horrible heathen superstition’, as Calvin calls proxy baptism, should reflect that, if the incident of *Acts 21:23–26* were not recorded in the New Testament, it might be judged equally out of the question to suppose that Paul could have participated in such an outmoded Jewish rite. (Indeed, some students of his letters find it impossible to accept *Acts 21:23–26* as historical.) We must not overestimate our competence to decide what Paul could or could not have done, where the principles of the gospel were not imperilled. He might have put baptism by proxy on a par with placing flowers on the graves of departed friends. But if Kelly’s interpretation be thought acceptable, Paul’s possible reaction to proxy baptism can remain an academic question.

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