



Baptism for the Dead?

The Kingdom Citizen White Paper | KCWP-002

By Michael K. Lake, Th.D., D.R.E.

Scriptures in Question:

²⁹ Otherwise, what will they do who are baptized for the dead, if the dead do not rise at all? Why then are they baptized for the dead?

1 Corinthians 15:29 (NKJV)

Is the concept of baptizing others serving as proxies for those already dead a biblical practice? Here is what one Mormon site presents concerning what they call proxy baptism.

The Prophet Joseph Smith first taught about the ordinance of baptism for the dead during a funeral sermon in August 1840. As part of that sermon, he read much of 1 Corinthians 15, including verse 29, and announced to those in attendance that the Lord would permit Church members to be baptized in behalf of their friends and relatives who had departed this life. He said, “The plan of salvation was calculated to save all who were willing to obey the requirements of the law of God” (Journal History of the Church, 15 Aug. 1840).

There have been many people who lived on the earth who never heard of, or were never taught the Gospel of Jesus Christ and who were not baptized. Others lived without fully understanding the importance of the ordinance of baptism. While others were baptized, but without proper authority. Because our Heavenly Father is a loving, just, and merciful God, He has prepared a way for everyone to receive the blessings of baptism – especially those who through no fault of their own, never had the opportunity for baptism. He has therefore authorized baptisms to be performed by proxy for them.

Members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints are taught and believe that baptism is essential for salvation in the Kingdom of God, and thus the sacred ordinance of baptisms for their kindred dead are performed in sacred Mormon Temples throughout the world to give those who have died without ever having had the opportunity to receive baptism, or who were baptized but without proper authority, the opportunity to receive it by proxy if that is their desire.

Some people have the misconception that when Mormon baptisms for the dead are performed, deceased persons are baptized into The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints against their will. This; however, is not the case. Members are taught that each individual has his or her free agency, or the right to choose. Some people have also wondered if the mortal remains of the deceased are somehow disturbed in this process; they are not. The person acting as a proxy uses only the name of the deceased. The validity of a vicarious baptism depends on the deceased person for whom the ordinance is performed, accepting it and choosing to accept and follow the Savior while residing in the spirit world.ⁱ

Let's compare their belief (and revelation) to what the Word of God says.

1. My Background and Approach

Such topics are usually handled by those members of the Body of Christ who have the calling and gift of an apologist. I am not an apologist; my background is in Christian education and theology. (Although I have trained those gifted in apologetics over the years.) Therefore, my approach to this subject, while not that of an apologist, is rooted in the expertise and anointings God has given me. For a more detailed handling of this topic from an apologetical point of view, I recommend seeking gifted Evangelical apologists who have already written extensively on this subject.

2. Hermeneutical Factors

As we approach this topic, some basic hermeneutical principles must be utilized to ensure that we are skillfully dividing the Word of Truth (2 Tim: 3:16). The five areas that we need to examine are:

- Context

- Culture
- History
- Geography
- Language

With the topic at hand, geography will not play an essential role in interpreting the subject of baptism for the dead. The other four areas are crucial to ensure we remain biblical.

a. Context

Hermeneutical Principle: Any scripture taken out of context becomes a pretext.

Using Scripture within context is a principle on which the modern Church has wholly lost its mooring. It is common practice in our day to lift a verse out of context to produce a teaching that is not in accordance with the whole of the Holy Scriptures. But with the current state of the Church, if it sounds good and excites the flesh, it must be right!

Taking scriptures out of context is not a modern phenomenon. Cults, false prophets, and false teachers have been doing so for over two thousand years. In the days of the apostles, Hebraic and Christian themes were blended with concepts from the Mystery Religions to create new, unbiblical doctrines perpetrated on fledgling Gentile Churches. The progenitors of Gnosticism were a constant thorn in the flesh for the early apostles. In our modern times, many teachers within the charismatic movement will claim a “rhema word” from the Holy Spirit, then separate a verse, or segment of a verse of Scripture, to create a new doctrine that does not exist within the context of the verse they are using.

A Mormon axiom states, “*A living prophet is better than a dead one.*” How does this hypothesis line up with the written Word of God?

¹⁹ And so we have the prophetic word confirmed, which you do well to heed as a light that shines in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts; ²⁰ knowing this first, that no prophecy of Scripture is of any private interpretation, ²¹ for prophecy never came by the will of man, but holy men of God spoke *as they were* moved by the Holy Spirit. ^{2:1} But there were also false prophets among the people, even as

there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Lord who bought them, *and* bring on themselves swift destruction. ²And many will follow their destructive ways, because of whom the way of truth will be blasphemed. ³ By covetousness they will exploit you with deceptive words; for a long time their judgment has not been idle, and their destruction does not slumber.

2 Peter 1:19–2:3 (NKJV)

The apostle Peter was in a unique position to oppose the unscriptural teachings of the false teachers and prophets of his day. Peter had walked with Jesus for the entirety of His earthly ministry. As far as revelation is concerned, this apostle of the faith was at the transfiguration of Christ. If anyone could have claimed special revelation privileges, it would have been Peter! In verse 19 of the KJV, we read, “a more sure word of prophecy.” The apostle Peter placed the words of dead apostles and prophets over those of so-called living ones! (Hebraically, Abraham was the first prophet, and Moses was the first apostle). The New Testament is always perfectly aligned with the First (or Old) Testament, when correctly interpreted. The Word of God, from Genesis to Revelation, is one fluid revelation from God. The Bible begins with creation and ends with the finality of God’s redemptive plan. While it can take a lifetime of prayerful and diligent study to unearth the wonderful treasures in the Word of God, no additional books of the Bible are needed to achieve God’s divine purpose. Extrabiblical books, such as those contained within the Pseudepigrapha and Apocrypha, are informative in biblical studies but should never be elevated to Scripture. Because of our subject matter, the later must be said for the Book of Mormon.

Now, let’s return to our examination of 1 Corinthians Chapter 15.

When we examine 1 Corinthians 15:29, we cannot lift that verse out of context and ignore all surrounding verses. To do so would be like overhearing about 60 seconds of a twenty-minute conversation and coming to the wrong conclusion. What is the topic of Paul’s rabbinical argument? Was this gifted apostle introducing a new practice into the Christian faith that had no hint of expression in the Jewish community or with the other apostolic witnesses?

²⁰ But now Christ is risen from the dead, *and* has become the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. ²¹ For since by man *came* death, by Man also *came* the resurrection of the dead. ²² For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ all shall be made alive.

1 Corinthians 15:20-22 (NKJV)

The topic is not baptism at all; it is the resurrection of the dead. In New Testament times, two primary groups taught in the Jewish communities were the Pharisees and the Sadducees. The Pharisees believed in the resurrection. It should also be noted that, theologically, Jesus would have fallen in the category of the Pharisees (although He was never afraid to call them out on many of the places they were in error). The Sadducees were mainly the descendants of the Maccabees and the Hasmonaean empire and did not believe in the resurrection. The Sadducees were more concerned with political power than theological accuracy. Yet, from Paul's addressing the subject of the resurrection of the dead, it seems that some of the doctrines of the Sadducees were creeping into the Gentile Church. In this line of thought, then Jesus would have never been raised from the dead. (Later in Gnostic thought, Jesus' resurrection was reduced to a spiritual resurrection, not a physical one.) The thought of baptism in the Early Church was identifying with Christ's death, burial, and resurrection. Messiah is the one Who conquered death, hell, and the grave. If His resurrection was merely spiritual, they were baptized into faith for someone still dead, hence the phrase: baptized for the dead.

Paul then continues his rabbinical argument regarding the resurrection of the dead and not baptism. In other words, baptism was never the topic!

³⁵ But someone will say, "How are the dead raised up? And with what body do they come?" ³⁶ Foolish one, what you sow is not made alive unless it dies. ³⁷ And what you sow, you do not sow that body that shall be, but mere grain—perhaps wheat or some other *grain*. ³⁸ But God gives it a body as He pleases, and to each seed its own body. ³⁹ All flesh *is* not the same flesh, but *there is one kind of* flesh of men, another flesh of animals, another of fish, *and* another of birds. ⁴⁰ *There are* also celestial bodies and terrestrial bodies; but the glory of the celestial *is* one, and the *glory* of the terrestrial *is* another. ⁴¹ *There is* one glory of the sun, another glory of the moon, and another glory of the stars; for *one* star differs from *another* star in glory. ⁴² So also *is* the resurrection of the dead. *The body* is sown in corruption, it is raised in incorruption. ⁴³ It is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness, it is raised in power. ⁴⁴ It is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body. There is a natural body, and there is a spiritual body. ⁴⁵ And so it is written, "*The first man Adam became a living being.*" The last Adam *became* a life-giving spirit. ⁴⁶ However, the spiritual is not first, but the natural, and afterward the spiritual. ⁴⁷ The first man *was* of the earth, *made* of dust; the second Man *is* the Lord from heaven. ⁴⁸ As

was the man of dust, so also are those who are made of dust; and as is the heavenly Man, so also are those who are heavenly. ⁴⁹ And as we have borne the Image of the *man* of dust, we shall also bear the image of the heavenly *Man*.

1 Corinthians 15:35-49 (NKJV)

Before we leave the subject of context, it is essential to address a topic that even much of Christianity has overlooked historically. If Paul had addressed some new revelations and practices, his writings would have contained an extensive thesis. We find interwoven in his writings the defense for Gentiles coming to faith without the necessity of first becoming physically Jewish through circumcision (the entire subject of the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15). Yet, the concept of baptism for the dead would be considered even more radical to the Jewish community in the First Century, yet it is never addressed.

With that said, it can also be pointed out that the moving of the Sabbath from Saturday to Sunday, the concepts of Gentiles not needing to follow the commandments of God (even though the Council in Acts 15 instructed the newly converted Gentiles to “learn Moses” each Sabbath), and other practices that have their origin in the Roman Catholic Church would have also required significant doctrinal statements and justifications for those changes. Yet, they are absent from the apostolic writings. Most ministers either misconstrued the rabbinical style of theological argument or were ignorant of Jewish colloquialism and misinterpreted Paul’s writing.

b. & c. Cultural and Historical

There is no record culturally within First Century Judaism or historically in Judaism or Christianity for someone serving as a proxy to be baptized for someone who has already died. The genesis of this practice is solely found historically in the Mormon Church and cannot be found even in remote splinter groups of Christianity.

²⁷ And as it is appointed for men to die once, but after this the judgment,

²⁸ so Christ was offered once to bear the sins of many. To those who eagerly wait for Him He will appear a second time, apart from sin, for salvation.

Hebrews 9:27-28 (NKJV)

Other Historical Evidence (or Lack Thereof)

One of the reasons for the Reformation was the practice of the Roman Catholic Church selling indulgences. For those unfamiliar with this practice, a wealthy Catholic who was planning on, let's say, having an affair could purchase ahead of time forgiveness from the affair from the Catholic Church. He could then enter into that affair (or multiple affairs) without any fear of judgment from God. How profitable was this practice? Indulgences paid for many of the cathedrals built in Europe by the Catholic Church. ⁱⁱ

The Catholic Church also founded a concept called “baptism regeneration.” In other words, the baptism ceremony is the saving agent that produces the New Birth, not the individual’s faith in Christ. This same belief system is represented in some old-line denominations that are just one step theologically away from Catholicism, such as Anglican, Methodist, Lutheran, and even the Church of Christ (at least regarding baptism). If, for a moment, the Catholic Church had found an ancient practice within the Ante Nicene Period or in the apostle Paul's writings, they would have instituted baptizing for the dead. There is no such Catholic doctrine. It should be noted that in a similar vein, they did invent the practice of hiring a priest to pray for loved ones who had died to get them out of Purgatory. ⁱⁱⁱ A practice that may be lucrative but not found in the Scriptures.

We are now going into language in a biblical examination of what baptism is supposed to represent.

3. A Biblical Examination of Baptism

I remember growing up Baptist and studying to become a Baptist minister as a teenager. The particular Baptist denomination that I was in loved to attempt to trace its origins to the ministry of John the Baptist. To this day, I distinctly remember one minister declaring that Jesus joined the Church that John was establishing at the Jordan River! Even at the ripe old age of fourteen, I thought that his statement flew in the face of Jesus’ words: “Upon this rock, I will build My church, and the gates of Hell will not reveal against it.” (Matt. 16:18) I remember thinking that maybe the brother was new to ministry and had not read the book of Matthew yet. But alas, it was a standard statement within that Baptist group.

The truth is that the practice of baptism did not start with John the Baptist. Baptism began with Moses.

¹⁰ Then the LORD said to Moses, "Go to the people and consecrate them today and tomorrow, and let them wash their clothes. ¹¹ And let them be ready for the third day. For on the third day the LORD will come down upon Mount Sinai in the sight of all the people. ¹² You shall set bounds for the people all around, saying, 'Take heed to yourselves *that* you do *not* go up to the mountain or touch its base. Whoever touches the mountain shall surely be put to death. ¹³ Not a hand shall touch him, but he shall surely be stoned or shot *with an arrow*; whether man or beast, he shall not live.' When the trumpet sounds long, they shall come near the mountain."
Exodus 19:10-13 (NKJV)

This storyline is not only the origin story of baptism (or *mikvah* in Hebrew) but paints a powerful picture of the redemptive story of Christ. In the Old Testament, Moses and his ministry served as a prototype for the Messiah.

¹⁵ "The LORD your God will raise up for you a Prophet like me from your midst, from your brethren. Him you shall hear, ¹⁶ according to all you desired of the LORD your God in Horeb in the day of the assembly, saying, 'Let me not hear again the voice of the LORD my God, nor let me see this great fire anymore, lest I die.' ¹⁷ And the LORD said to me: 'What they have spoken is good. ¹⁸ I will raise up for them a Prophet like you from among their brethren, and will put My words in His mouth, and He shall speak to them all that I command Him.
Deuteronomy 18:15-18 (NKJV)

Moses and Jesus are never contrasted in Scripture. They are in perfect harmony with one another. There is one mistranslation regarding this in the book of John:

¹⁷ For the law was given by Moses, *but* grace and truth came by Jesus Christ.
John 1:17 (KJV)

Notice that the word "but" is in italics. The use of italics in the KJV Bible means this word (nor its concept) was not in the text's original language. John was not contrasting Moses and Jesus; he connected Jesus to Moses! Which, of course, in his Jewish mind, was connecting Jesus to Moses's promise in Deut. 18:15-18.

Therefore, the life and ministry of Moses was a shadow of Messiah.

- God sent a redeemer to deliver His people from Egypt (in biblical typology, Egypt represents the world and its system).
- The people had to believe the promise of the redeemer and trust that he was sent from God.
- The people had to come under the blood of the Passover Lamb (again, referring to Christ's completed work as the Lamb of God).
- Now, people (who have been redeemed, come under the lamb's blood as an act of faith, and have been delivered from the power of Egypt) are preparing to meet with and learn to walk with God.

The gathering at Mount Sinai is the genesis story of the practice of baptism, which also became known as ceremonial washing within Hebraic thought.

¹ Therefore leaving the principles of the doctrine of Christ, let us go on unto perfection; not laying again the foundation of repentance from dead works, and of faith toward God, ² Of the doctrine of baptisms, and of laying on of hands, and of resurrection of the dead, and of eternal judgment.

Hebrews 6:1-2 (KJV)

Compare the KJV translation with a more modern translation, such as the New American Standard Version.

¹ Therefore leaving the elementary teaching about the Christ, let us press on to maturity, not laying again a foundation of repentance from dead works and of faith toward God, ² of instruction about washings and laying on of hands, and the resurrection of the dead and eternal judgment.

Hebrews 6:1-2 (NASB)

John the Baptist did not have to teach the Jewish people about a new practice that he was instituting. Every Jew in the crowd had been baptized many times! Jerusalem was scattered with baptismal pools for those coming to Jerusalem to worship. These baptismal pools were used to prepare themselves before entering the Temple. As with Moses, the people washed even the world's dust from them before meeting with God.

John was announcing the arrival of Messiah (i.e., Almighty God and the Creator in the flesh) and the coming of the Kingdom of God. This required preparation from the people. Preparation for the LORD's arrival included repentance and the ceremonial washing in the River Jordan.

¹ In those days John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea,
² and saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!" ³ For this is
he who was spoken of by the prophet Isaiah, saying: "*The voice of one
crying in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the LORD; Make His paths
straight.'*"

Matthew 3:1-3 (NKJV)

After Christ's death, burial, and resurrection, these acts of Messiah provided an interpretation of this ancient ceremonial washing that originated with Moses.

- One must believe that Jesus is the Kinsman Redeemer sent from God.
- One must trust in His words and His completed work.
- One must come under His blood (as the Lamb of God) that was shed on the Cross on their behalf to redeem them.
- One must believe that Messiah had risen victorious over death, hell, and the grave (which takes us back to Paul's argument in 1 Cor. 15).

Therefore, baptism is a ceremonial washing that identifies with Christ's death, burial, and resurrection. Like the children of Israel who were freed from the power of Egypt, it is a declaration of that faith, a washing away of the old man who was a slave to sin, and a new life of walking in covenant with Almighty God.

This is why a believer's baptism is the most biblical position regarding baptism. An unrepented sinner can enter the water and become a wet sinner, regardless of age. Infant baptism is not biblical either. An infant or small child cannot understand the dynamics of what Christ has done for them nor the consequences of sin. They are still in the age of learning. It is not until they reach the age of accountability, illustrated in the Jewish community with Bar Mitzvah at the age of thirteen, that salvation can be achieved.

If personal faith and comprehension of the completed work of Messiah are required for the living, how can they be applied to the dead? In a word, they cannot. As the book of Hebrews declares:

²⁷ And as it is appointed for men to die once, but after this the judgment,
Hebrews 9:27 (NKJV) This is why the apostle Paul declared:

¹ We then, *as workers together with Him* also plead with *you* not to receive the grace of God in vain. ² For He says: "*In an acceptable time I have heard you, And in the day of salvation I have helped you.*" Behold, now is the

accepted time; behold, now *is* the day of salvation.

2 Corinthians 6:1-2 (NKJV)

Apologetical Article Regarding Baptizing for the Dead

What is baptism for the dead mentioned in 1 Corinthians 15:29? by [Matt Slick](#) | Dec 10, 2008: <https://carm.org/mormonism/what-is-baptism-for-the-dead-mentioned-in-1-corinthians-1529/>

The Purpose of the Kingdom Citizen Whitepapers

The purpose of the Kingdom Citizen Whitepapers is to provide biblical clarity on a variety of subjects for the Remnant in the Last Days. KCWs primarily focus on practical theology and application rather than detailed academic-level examination.

About the Author



Dr. Michael K. Lake holds doctorates in Theology and Religious Education. He is the founder and chancellor of Biblical Life College and Seminary, the Scholar-in-Residence at the Strategic Remnant Learning Center—Biblical Life Assembly, a best-selling author, host of Biblical Life TV, and co-host with his wife Mary Lou of the podcast, The Kingdom Intelligence Briefing.

Endnotes

ⁱ Article: Mormon Belief of Baptism for the Dead: <https://mormonbeliefs.org/temples-and-prophets/mormon-temples/mormon-baptism-for-the-dead/>

ⁱⁱ Article: The Sinister History of Catholic Indulgences. <https://www.historyskills.com/classroom/year-8/church-indulgences/>

ⁱⁱⁱ Note: The word “Purgatory” is not found in the Bible but only in the Apocrypha. This unbiblical practice of paying a priest to pray a loved one out of Purgatory is practiced to this day in the Roman Catholic Church.