

# Baptism for the Dead

1 Corinthians 15:29; D&C 128:1–18

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## The Prophet Joseph Smith said:

“Every man that has been baptized and belongs to the kingdom has a right to be baptized for those who have gone before; and as soon as the law of the Gospel is obeyed here by their friends who act as proxy for them, the Lord has administrators there to set them free. A man may act as proxy for his own relatives; the ordinances of the Gospel which were laid out before the foundations of the world have thus been fulfilled by them, and we may be baptized for those whom we have much friendship for; but it must first be revealed to the man of God, lest we should run too far.”

—*Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, 367



Joseph Smith explained this important doctrine in an epistle to the Church written in 1842: **D&C 128:1–18** (especially v.16–18).

## Baptism Is Essential for Everyone

It is essential to discuss the ordinance of baptism itself when talking about the bold doctrine of baptism for the dead. If baptism by immersion is mandatory for the living for entrance into the kingdom of God, as Jesus and his apostles plainly taught, it should also be a requirement for those who have passed on, who had no opportunity to receive baptism during mortality.

There is evidence outside the Bible that the ordinance of baptism for the dead was taught and practiced by early Christians. Even the Roman Catholic Jerome Biblical Commentary admits that it seems as though Christians at Corinth “would undergo baptism in the name of their deceased non-Christian relatives and friends, hoping that this vicarious baptism might assure them a share in the redemption of Christ.” (*Brown, Jerome Biblical Commentary*, 2:273). Nevertheless, many scholars find no satisfactory explanation for such a practice (“*Baptism for the Dead*” in Ludlow, *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, 1:95–97).

The following is a reconstruction of an interview between Dr. Edgar J. Goodspeed, a renowned Bible translator and scholar, and the late Dr. Paul R. Cheesman, professor of ancient scripture at Brigham Young University. The interview took place on the campus of UCLA in the summer of 1945 (*Anderson, Understanding Paul*, 413):

Cheesman: Is the scripture found in 1 Cor. 15:29 translated properly as found in the King James Translation?

Goodspeed: Basically, yes.

Cheesman: Do you believe that baptism for the dead was practiced in Paul's time?

Goodspeed: Definitely, yes.

Cheesman: Does the Church to which you belong practice it today?

Goodspeed: No.

Cheesman: Do you think it should be practiced today?

Goodspeed: This is the reason why we do not practice it today. We do not know enough about it. If we did, we would practice it.

Cheesman: May I quote you as a result of this interview?

Goodspeed: Yes.

# Paul's Teachings on Baptism for the Dead

Richard Lloyd Anderson and Sidney B. Sperry<sup>11</sup>  
1 Corinthians 15:29; D&C 128:1–18



The reference of Paul in 1 Cor. 15:29 to baptism for the dead is to scholars one of the most vexing problems in the New Testament.

Through modern revelation Latter-day Saints understand it thoroughly that in the Temples of God men and women may enter and by proper authority delegated from God be baptized for and in behalf of their dead ancestors who had never heard of or had never had the opportunity to accept the Gospel and its ordinances in the flesh. (D&C 127:5–10; 128:1–25) Latter-day Saints believe that the ordinances of the Gospel are just as binding upon the dead as upon the living (John 3:3–5), and that inasmuch as baptism is an earthly ordinance which the dead cannot perform for themselves, it must be done for and in their behalf by their descendants in mortality. If the dead accept the Gospel in the spirit world, the ordinances performed in the Temples of God will become binding in their behalf.

Paul the Apostle understood this fact and taught the doctrine to the Corinthians. He was therefore perplexed when some of them who were being baptized for their dead questioned the doctrine of the

resurrection from the dead. He says to them in effect, "Why are you being baptized for your dead, if they do not rise from death?" He assumes that baptism for the dead is useless if there is no resurrection, and in this he is correct. (2 Nephi 9:7–9).

C.J. Callan, a reputable Catholic scholar, makes this commentary on 1 Cor. 15:29:4

*"In the supposition that there is no resurrection of the dead, why, asks St. Paul, do some of the Corinthians receive Baptism for their friends and relatives who died without it? The Apostle is assuming that such a practice had in view the future resurrection of the body.*

*"What was this Baptism for the dead? Many widely different explanations have been given, but by far the most reasonable and the most common is the following: In the time of St. Paul, when a catechumen died without Baptism, it was customary for a friend or relative to have the ceremony performed upon himself on behalf of the dead person, thus publicly affirming, by a symbolic action, that his departed friend or relative had died in union with the Church and was awaiting a glorious resurrection. This is the explanation of Tertullian (Adv. Marc. v. 10; De Resurr. xxviii) and is adopted by the majority of modern exegetes, such as Bisping, Van Steenkiste, Le Camus, Cornely, MacRory, Rickaby, etc. The Apostle simply refers to this practice, which must have been well known to the Corinthians, without approving or condemning it. Although erroneous, it was perhaps tolerated in the early Church until heretics began to attribute to it the efficacy of real Baptism." (Cf. Vacant, Bapteme des morts, in Dic. de la Bible; Cornely, h. 1).*

A conservative Protestant scholar gives this note on the various interpretations of the passage in question:

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<sup>11</sup> Adapted from Richard Lloyd Anderson, *Understanding Paul*, 92–97 and Sidney B. Sperry, *Paul's Life and Letters*, vii to 303.

*"A much vexed passage. A mere enumeration of all the various interpretations would require, says Bengel, a dissertation occupying four folio pages. The clue to the Apostle's meaning lies in ver. 18: the hope of reunion in Heaven with their beloved dead who had 'gone to their rest in Christ,' had induced some, hitherto unbelieving, to profess faith and be baptised . . . Vicariurn baptisma, "Vicarious Baptism" (Ambrstr., Grot). [meant that] believers submitted themselves to the Sacrament in name of their unbaptised dead, that these might rank as Christians and share in the felicity of the Resurrection. The practice certainly prevailed in the time of Tertullian (cf. De Resurr. Cam. 48; Adv. Marc. v.10)*