

Pleasant Valley
Church of Christ

3317 Amidon
Wichita KS 67204
(316) 838-4195
www.letjesusleadus.org

Schedule of Services

Sunday

Classes 9:30 am
Worship 10:30 am
Evening 6:00 pm

Wednesday

Classes 7:30 pm

The Pleasant Valley Church of Christ is a non-denominational group of believers who are committed to following Jesus in our attitudes, our relationships, and our worship. If you want the same thing in your life, please contact us. We'd like to help.

Unless otherwise noted, all scripture quotations are from the New King James Version Bible, Thomas Nelson Publishers.

Wings



*"But those who wait on the Lord shall renew their strength;
they shall mount up with wings like eagles" (Isaiah 40:31)*

December 20, 2009

Baptism for the dead

by David King

"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 Cor. 15:29).

This is the only passage in the New Testament that mentions baptism for the dead. Paul appears to describe it as an actual practice but provides no other information, so we are left to wonder what he was referred to. For centuries commentators have struggled to explain it. According to one review of the subject I read recently, there are over two hundred different interpretations.

The most natural interpretation is some kind of proxy baptism, in which a person is baptized in behalf of a dead relative or friend. This is the view taken by the Mormons, in particular. While grammatically appropriate, this approach suffers from a complete lack of corroborating evidence in the New Testament, as well as contradicting everything we know about baptism as a personal decision tightly linked to one's own faith and repentance (Ac. 2:38).

Others adopt unusual definitions of the phrase "for the dead" to find the meaning. For example, some suggest Paul is referring to those who are baptized "in view of their own impending death," or those who are baptized "to take the place of the fallen martyrs," or those who are baptized "in response to the death of Christ." All these interpretations get credit for cleverness, but they are obviously stretched too thin to be credible.

The key to unlocking this puzzle is to notice the pronouns: "what will **they** do . . .

why are **they** baptized?" Paul is not describing something that he or the Corinthians practiced. Rather, it is some other group that performs this kind of baptism. Throughout this chapter, Paul consistently uses the pronouns "we" or "you" (v. 17, 19). But suddenly here he switches to "they." Why?

Corinth was located just a few miles from the town of Eleusia, which was the home of an ancient religion known as the Eleusinian Mysteries. The Mysteries were probably the dominant religious movement of the day, certainly in Greece. One of the rituals practiced by the followers of this religion was baptism in the nearby Aegean Sea, performed at the autumnal equinox. There is some evidence that these worshippers practiced a form of baptism for the dead (Orphic Fragment 245).

Remember that Paul's objective in this chapter is to defend the Christian doctrine of the resurrection. Paul is making an argument based on the Corinthians' existing knowledge of a pagan religion. He is not legitimizing the pagan religion or ritual. Rather, he is using it as a means of reinforcing the reasonableness of a belief in the resurrection. Even the pagans recognize a future life; their practice of proxy baptism proves it. So why should his teaching of a future resurrection be so hard to believe?

In conclusion, baptism for the dead was indeed a form of proxy baptism, known to the audience for whom Paul was writing. But it was a practice of the pagans of that day, not the Christians. There is no Biblical basis for God's people today to practice it.