

BAPTIZED FOR THE DEAD

Today my wife, Barbara and I are at Shiloh Hills Baptist Church in Kennesaw, Georgia, just north of Atlanta. Last week I received a phone call from the pastor asking if I would consider coming to preach for him. But this invitation entailed much more than just an invitation to preach; the pastor asked if I would like to baptize our grandson Aidan. This is an answer to prayer that has been fourteen years in the making. Ill John 4 reveals our hearts, "I have no greater joy than to hear that my children walk in truth." I am sure every parent and grandparent understands why we are away today.

In this next paragraph, you might wonder, why have I digressed? If you read on, you will discover a beautiful parallel that makes for one great singular truth. I had a difficult choice to make, because our great friend and mentor, Dr. John Moore has passed into glory. I place Dr. Moore in the category of his fellow Scotsman, Peter Marshall or his English counterpart and friend, Martin Lloyd-Jones. The impact Dr. Moore had on my life began in February, 1976 when he preached a message at Moody's Founder's Week in Chicago. It was from Psalm 90 on "The Beauty of the Lord." It was a wake up call to me as a young preacher. Psalm 90:16, 17 says, "Let thy work appear unto thy servants, and thy glory unto their children. And let the beauty of the LORD our God be upon us: and establish thou the work of our hands upon us; yea, the work of our hands establish thou it." He pointed out it was God's work, not ours and all that we do is for God's glory. And then he hammered home in loving earnest that this was the only way our work for Christ will be established. I loved and admired Dr. Moore from afar, until a few years ago we finally preached together in Florida. It was, as world would say, "perfect chemistry." I could not wait for him to come out to Houston. He came and our people at Christchurch fell in love with him. He is the author of over 160 songs and choruses, perhaps the most famous being the two songs that our choir recently sang in a medley, Burdens Are Lifted at Calvary and Why.

The decision I had to make was: Shall my wife and I go to Georgia where I would have the priceless privilege to preach and baptize our grandson, or shall we fly to Canada to pay my respects and to say a tribute to one of the last of my influential mentors. Always, I still try to follow the guideline, "what would Jesus do?" and often I ask myself what would someone like my dad or, in this case specifically, what would John Moore do? In the process of making the decision and shortly afterwards, an unusual Scripture verse came to me. It is found in the famous resurrection chapter of the Bible, I Corinthians 15. In glorious language, the apostle was making the point that "...if Christ be not raised, your faith is vain; ye are yet in your sins" (I Corinthians 15:17). Then Paul goes on to assure us that Christ is risen

from the dead! Then the chapter continues with Paul moving into the language of what sounds like military order, "But every man in his own order: Christ the firstfruits; afterward they that are Christ's at his coming" (I Corinthians 15:23). So, Christ, the Captain of our Salvation is raised from the dead first, then His believers follow Him at His return. Then the apostle launches into the explanation of the spiritual war that we experience now in our daily lives that finally culminates with the end time battles (specifically Gog and Magog and Armageddon). Allow me to share with you the exact inspired words found in I Corinthians 15:24 through 28: "Then cometh the end, when He shall have delivered up the kingdom to God, even the Father; when He shall have put down all rule and all authority and power. For He must reign, till He hath put all enemies under His feet. The last enemy that shall be destroyed is death. For He hath put all things under His feet. But when He saith all things are put under Him, it is manifest that He is excepted, which did put all things under Him. And when all things shall be subdued unto Him, then shall the Son also Himself be subject unto Him that put all things under him, that God may be all in all." If you read this passage in its context, we observe Christ, our Commander will be fighting evil in and through us in the present church age until He presents us to the Father at the end of time. The unusual Bible verse that I want to bring to your attention now is the verse that follows the above passage, I Corinthians 15:29: "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?" This is one of the most misunderstood verses in the Bible. Rather than explain the false interpretations of this verse, allow me to give you the contextual understanding of this verse. In this battle, our fellow soldiers pass away. But thanks be to God, we shall see them again at our Lord's return! But in the interim, we must continue to battle on for God, as our Lord commanded us, "...Occupy till I come" (Luke 19:13b). We are God's occupying force in this world and when one brother or sister in Christ passes, we "fill in the ranks." In other words, we obey the Great Commission and preach the Gospel and baptize the converts in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit as commended us in Matthew 28:19. So the command to "baptize for the dead" is not talking about baptism by proxy. The simple preposition "for" has a synonym in the word "because." In other words, if we read this verse correctly we see God is saying, "What now happens to those who have witnessed the death of many of their martyred (for in this era many were martyred for their faith) brothers and sisters in Christ? We should continue to win more to Christ and enlist them into the church through baptism to fight this good fight of faith (I Timothy 6:12; II Timothy 4:7) because we, like they, who fill in the ranks, shall rise from the dead also. This conflict is not in vain. We shall win in the end!

And now we come to this great truth in a most personal way. Today, I celebrate the life of an old soldier who fought the good fight and finished his course, by baptizing another to take his place in this conflict on earth that promises a heavenly reward. What better way to honor the ministry of John Moore than to baptize another convert? Every week I would talk with Dr. Moore. At the end of every conversation we would pray together. He always prayed for the work of God

to be blessed, continue and excel for God's glory. So today, in some small but significant way, Dr. Moore's prayer is being answered in the very weekend that his life on earth is celebrated.

Why then do we "baptize for the dead"? Because the new recruits shall be raptured with the soldiers that have gone on before. And the new recruits are commissioned to make more disciples as well. Praise God, the cycle continues! Then in the conclusion of this great resurrection chapter we are given this final admonition: "Therefore, my beloved brethren, be ye stedfast, unmoveable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, forasmuch as ye know that your labour is not in vain in the Lord" (I Corinthians 15:58).

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Johnny Pope". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.