

# BAPTISM AND RESURRECTION

## (1 Cor 15:29)

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Otherwise, what will those people do who receive baptism on behalf of the dead? If the dead are not raised at all, why are people baptized on their behalf?<sup>1</sup>

If there is a consensus view of this much disputed verse it is that the Corinthians were indeed practising vicarious baptism on behalf of people who had died (the identity of these people is a further area of dispute), and that Paul is referring to this practice, without either approving or disapproving of it, as an *ad hominem* argument against those who deny the possibility of resurrection.<sup>2</sup> Those who put this forward do so with the air of someone making the best of a bad job.<sup>3</sup> Even allowing for the fact that, at least within the scholarly community, NT practices are no longer expected to provide ecclesiastical precedents, so that there is less need than previously to squeeze Paul into the mould of our way of thinking, one detects little actual enthusiasm for this solution even among those who propose it, and in fact many scholars remain unsatisfied with it. The proof of this is that articles continue to appear in the journals proposing alternative solutions. To my knowledge, at least three such articles have appeared in the last three years, and I shall begin by briefly summarizing

<sup>1</sup>NRSV.

<sup>2</sup>This is the view of the principal commentators on 1 Corinthians, and also of writers on baptism in the New Testament. C. K. Barrett, *A Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians* (London: A & C Black, 1968) 362-4, H. Conzelmann, *I Corinthians* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975) 275, G. D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987) 763-7, G. R. Beasley-Murray, *Baptism in the New Testament* (London: Macmillan, 1962) 185-192, A. J. M. Wedderburn, *Baptism and Resurrection* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1987) 288-9, L. Hartman, "Into the Name of the Lord Jesus" (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1997) 91, M. J. Harris, "Prepositions and Theology in the Greek NT", *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, 3.1208.

<sup>3</sup>It is frequently linked with 1 Cor 10:1-13 as evidence that some at Corinth had a magical view of sacraments as, most recently, in J. D. G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1998) 449.

and responding to these contributions before myself seeking to rehabilitate an older solution.

In 1995 J. D. Reaume published an article<sup>4</sup> in which after reviewing many different options he concluded that: i. the verse refers to the rite of Christian baptism (not, for example, martyrdom); ii. those being baptized are probably a particular group (not all the Corinthians); iii. the dead are dead believers, so that ... ; iv. it is likely that they had been baptized before they died, since Christian baptism appears to have been universal and to have closely followed on conversion. This means that the verse does not refer to vicarious baptism, the living being baptized on behalf of others who had not been baptized. He then considered three other solutions: that Paul thinks of new believers in their baptism as stepping into the place of Christians who have died; that he was referring to the hope of those being baptized that they would thereby be reunited with their loved ones at the resurrection;<sup>5</sup> or thirdly that people were ascribing their conversion and baptism to the influence of those who had preceded them in the faith.<sup>6</sup> On these Reaume preferred the third. While I agree that we have here to do with normal Christian baptism, and that it is not vicarious, I cannot see how referring to Christians' sense of debt to those who had gone before them would serve Paul's purpose in this passage. The fact that people owe their conversion and baptism to the influence of deceased Christians says nothing one way or the other about the future resurrection of such Christians. Moreover, despite Reaume's attempt to distinguish between the anarthrous νεκροί, meaning the dead in general, and the articular οἱ νεκροί, meaning Christians who have died (p. 470), I find it hard to believe that Paul would have referred to the Christian dead in this way. I shall return to this point.

In his article of the same year, R. DeMaris began by accepting the consensus view that the verse refers to vicarious baptism undergone by living Christians on behalf of dead believers and, by drawing on his extensive knowledge of Graeco-Roman burial customs, especially as brought to light by archaeology in Corinth itself, sought to show how the Corinthian context makes sense of the practice itself and of Paul's attitude to it.<sup>7</sup> He shows that both the Greeks and the Romans saw the event of death as the beginning of a long and troubled journey for the deceased,

<sup>4</sup>J. D. Reaume, "Another Look at 1 Corinthians 15:29, 'Baptised for the Dead'", *BSac* 152 (1995) 457-75.

<sup>5</sup>The view put forward by Jeremias, "'Flesh and Blood Cannot Inherit the Kingdom of God'", *NTS* 2 (1955-6) 155-6.

<sup>6</sup>This was also suggested by A. Robertson & A. Plummer, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the First Epistle of St. Paul to the Corinthians* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1911) 395.

<sup>7</sup>R. DeMaris, "Corinthian Religion and Baptism for the Dead (1 Cor. 15:29): Insights from Archaeology and Anthropology", *JBL* 114 (1995) 661-82.

and that the living had a duty to help the dead to find peace through their prayers and offerings to underworld deities. Against this background baptism for the dead makes sense as a Corinthian innovation designed to help those who became Christians deal with their inherited preoccupation with the fate of the dead, and Paul apparently tolerated or even approved the practice, since otherwise he would have objected to it. This contribution is very successful in illuminating the social and religious context of the Corinthian church. This would explain why the Corinthians were doing it (if they were), but we are left wondering how Paul could possibly have approved of it. Paul's attitude to pagan religion is very plain. He expected his converts to sever all connection with idolatry (1 Cor 10:14-22). Moreover he had his own understanding of personal and general eschatology which he was not diffident in teaching his churches, in the light of which he would simply have rejected the long, troublesome journey ideas of the surrounding culture (1 Thess 4:13-8, 2 Cor 5:1-10, Phil 1:21-3). In Paul's view dead Christians were asleep, waiting the trumpet call, not painfully journeying in search of rest and integration into the world of the dead. But even if the Corinthian Christians shared their neighbours' views of the after-life, to the point of adapting baptism to conform to them, this would never have persuaded them of the truth of resurrection. Such a baptism might have confirmed them in their belief in post-mortem survival, but would have nothing whatever to say to the question of resurrection, except to make it even less likely.

Very different is the view of Joel R. White, put forward in an article in 1997.<sup>8</sup> Rejecting as unlikely the idea that the verse refers to vicarious baptism in the usual sense, he suggests that, while the "baptism" is to be taken as literal, "the dead" are not. "The dead" refers not to departed Christians but to Paul and his fellow apostles on account of whom their followers had been baptized. Paul several times in the Corinthian letters refers to his apostolic sufferings in terms of death,<sup>9</sup> and in this very passage he goes on to talk about his sufferings and even to claim that he "dies" every day (1 Cor 15:30-2). Just as there is no point in Paul's undergoing all this if there is no resurrection, so it is suggested there is no point in the Corinthians attaching themselves to such deluded teachers. This is a very attractive solution, especially for the way in which it relates to the immediately following context, but would the Corinthians have picked up the reference? It involves taking νεκροί in two different senses in as many lines. White suggests that ὅλως νεκροί means "those who are literally dead", but surely that would require the definite article before ὅλως?

<sup>8</sup>J. R. White, "1 Corinthians 15:29, Baptised on account of the Dead", *JBL* 116 (1997) 487-99.

<sup>9</sup>See 1 Cor 4:9, 2 Cor 2:14, 4:10-14, 6:1-10 (esp. v. 9).

An old exegetical crux of this kind may be likened to an unclimbed mountain peak. Many attempts have been made on it but none have conquered it to general satisfaction. There are only so many possible routes that can be taken, and in the course of time these come to be quite well-known. There is the Southern Glacier route, or the Eastern Ridge, and of course the dreaded North Face, and from time to time a fresh attempt is made to conquer the peak by one or other of these routes, each climber perhaps finding a new hand-hold here or there. So with this verse.<sup>10</sup> At this time of day it is not likely that anyone is going to come up with an entirely new approach, but it may yet be possible to make a more convincing case for one of the routes tried before and then perhaps forgotten in favour of more fashionable approaches. Accordingly, the interpretation I am offering here is not new, it is in fact at least as old as Chrysostom in the fourth century,<sup>11</sup> but I believe it has been too quickly passed over by recent interpreters and that it can be proposed with greater cogency than has been the case up to now.<sup>12</sup>

It will be helpful to state the interpretation I am proposing, so that the reader will be in no doubt where the discussion is going, and then to try to provide adequate arguments for it. The baptism referred to in 1 Cor 15:29 is, I believe, normal Christian baptism undertaken by Christian believers on profession of repentance toward God and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. The people Paul has in mind in this verse are not a group in the Corinthian church who practise a distinctive baptism but the group (τινες) who say there is no resurrection of the dead (15:12) whose claim is at odds with their being baptized.<sup>13</sup> In their baptism they came as children of Adam, as those destined for death, like all other Christians, and they underwent baptism in the hope of sharing in the resurrection. In this sense they were baptized for (their own) dead bodies, so that receiving the Spirit now they could be confident of a resurrection like that of

<sup>10</sup>Fee, *1 Corinthians*, 765-6, categorizes the various attempts under four heads.

<sup>11</sup>Chrysostom, *Hom. I Cor. XL*. For the interpretation of the Greek Fathers generally see, K. Staab, "I Kor. 15,29 im Licht der Exegese der griechischen Kirche", *Studiorum Paulinorum Congressus*, I.443-50. It was also briefly suggested by G. W. H. Lampe, *The Seal of the Spirit* (London: Longmans Green, 1951) 94 and R. P. Martin, *The Spirit and the Congregation: Studies in 1 Cor. 12-15* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984) 120-1, but Martin thinks that the Corinthians were denying not resurrection but death and that Paul is pointing out that they were baptized in water as those who were as good as dead. See also J. C. O'Neill, "1 Cor. 15:29", *ExpTim* 91, 1980, 310-1.

<sup>12</sup>Beasley-Murray for example says, "In the judgment of most, the artificiality of this view is too apparent to require comment." *Baptism*, 186.

<sup>13</sup>This meets Fee's objection that Paul is referring to the practice of a particular group and so cannot be talking about normal baptism. See Fee, *Corinthians*, 766, n. 28.

Jesus at his return. If however there were to be no resurrection, then their baptism would have been an empty promise.

The attraction of this view is that it would bring the verse into line with the main stream of Christian experience and eliminate the need to hypothesize an otherwise unknown group with a bizarre baptismal practice. Can it be sustained?

In the first place, it coheres well with the passage as a whole, especially with the argument that begins at v. 12. In verses 12-19 Paul engages those who deny the resurrection in direct argument designed to show the futility of their position. We may paraphrase it as follows. If there is no resurrection then Christ was not raised (v. 13). If Christ was not raised, then there is no gospel to preach (v. 14). If the gospel is null and void, then your faith is equally empty (v. 17). You have no reason to hope for the forgiveness of sins or for eternal life, either for yourselves or for those who have died (v. 18). In fact what were you baptized for at all? It was always likely to mean nothing but trouble in this life, but in the gospel we preached to you there was hope of a final deliverance from the power of sin and death. But if there is no resurrection, then all the sufferings attendant on becoming a Christian and serving Christ, yours no less than ours, have been quite pointless (v. 19 with v. 29 f.).

As it stands, v. 29 seems like an abrupt change of subject, but we should probably see vv. 20-28 as an insertion by Paul into his own argument, a pre-formed piece of theology designed to open a window onto the great plan of God to reverse the effects of Adam's sin in the resurrection of Jesus, which will ultimately lead to the destruction of death itself and the final reconciliation of all things to God and in God.<sup>14</sup> It is designed to show that resurrection is no optional appendage to the gospel, but the very heart of it, without which there is no gospel at all, but it achieves its effect at some cost to the flow of the argument, which is resumed in v. 29. That v. 29 belongs with vv. 12-19 more than with v. 20-28 can be seen when we compare the similar structure of the argument in both passages.

The main premise is found in v. 12:

A. Εἰ δὲ Χριστὸς κηρύσσεται ὅτι ἐκ νεκρῶν ἐγήγερται,

Now if Christ is proclaimed as raised from the dead,

This is then followed by the logical conclusion, expressed as a question:

<sup>14</sup>For the idea that 1 Corinthians contains such material, see E. E. Ellis, "Traditions in 1 Corinthians", *NTS* 32, 1986, 481-502. He suggests 1 Cor 2:6-16 and 11:3-16 as such pre-formed insertions. I am not suggesting that these verses are a creed or a hymn or a pre-Pauline fragment of tradition. Paul will have written it himself, but its elevated style and the way that it goes well beyond the needs of the present argument suggest that it was not first conceived in the course of dictating the argument that surrounds it.

B. πῶς λέγουσιν ἐν ὑμῖν τινες ὅτι ἀνάστασις νεκρῶν οὐκ ἔστιν;

how can some of you say there is no resurrection of the dead?

and by a further protasis and apodosis restating the point:

C. εἰ δὲ ἀνάστασις νεκρῶν οὐκ ἔστιν, οὐδὲ Χριστὸς ἐγήγερται·

If there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised;

We find the same thing in v. 29.

The main premise is recalled in the single word,<sup>15</sup>

A. Ἐπεὶ

Otherwise

Then we have a conclusion expressed as a question:

B. τί ποιήσουσιν οἱ βαπτιζόμενοι ὑπὲρ τῶν νεκρῶν;

what will those people do who receive baptism on behalf of the dead?

and by a further statement of the point using a protasis and apodosis:

C. εἰ ὅλως νεκροὶ οὐκ ἐγείρονται, τί καὶ βαπτίζονται ὑπὲρ αὐτῶν;

If the dead are not raised at all, why are people baptized on their behalf?

The striking similarity of the second and third members in each case shows that v. 29 intends to round off a pattern of argument begun at v. 12, and tends to confirm that οἱ βαπτιζόμενοι (v. 29) are the same people as τινες (v. 12).

Secondly, it seems to me very unlikely that Paul would use the words οἱ νεκροὶ to refer to the Christian dead.<sup>16</sup> In most of its forty-three occurrences in the Pauline letters νεκρός refers to the dead as those subject to mortality. In thirty-two cases Paul is talking about the eschatological event of resurrection as a matter of hope or of debate, or to the resurrection of Jesus as an instance or inauguration of this event. Normally the dead are dead bodies, hopelessly beyond resuscitation, and only by an act of God can anyone envisage their being raised alive. The debate with the Corinthians is certainly about such a physical occurrence happening to dead bodies. Paul's preferred word for Christians who have died is some

<sup>15</sup>This elliptical use of ἐπεὶ is discussed in A. T. Robertson, *A Grammar of the Greek New Testament* (Nashville: Broadman, 1934) 965.

<sup>16</sup>In this I agree with K. C. Thompson, "1 Corinthians 15:29 and Baptism for the Dead", *Studia Evangelica II*, (ed. F. L. Cross; Berlin, 1964) 647-59, against Jeremias, who suggests that Paul distinguished between νεκροὶ as the dead in general and οἱ νεκροὶ as deceased Christians.

part of κοιμάομαι, meaning literally “to fall asleep”.<sup>17</sup> Paul presumably uses it precisely to convey the thought that they are to be raised and are therefore not “dead” in the usual sense, as can be seen especially from v. 18 of the present chapter. This makes it unlikely that he would refer to the dead relatives of Corinthian Christians as οἱ νεκροί.

On the other hand, νεκρός is occasionally used by Paul and his disciples to refer to people as subject to death apart from Christ, and even to the continuing power of death in the Christian’s experience during this present “now and not yet” time between the two Ages. Thus he can refer to the body as “dead because of sin” (Rom 8:10), which presumably refers to the continuing fact of Christian mortality, seen as the outworking of the sin that came into the world through Adam and from which those who are in Christ are delivered only “in hope” (Rom 8:24). They have the Spirit as the guarantee of future resurrection, but meanwhile they are in their bodies subject to death. Arguably, Rom 7:24 belongs here. The “body of death” is the same as the “mortal body” of Rom 8:11, which is the state of affairs referred to by 8:10, “the body is dead”. The later Pauline tradition can say that before conversion we were “dead in or because of sins” (Col 2:13, Eph 2:1), which should not in my view be seen as a matter of being “spiritually dead” (whatever that may mean), but of being subject to the sentence of God upon sinful humanity, subject to death as penalty, “children of wrath” as Eph 2:3 goes on to say. It is therefore plausible that by “the dead” in 1 Cor 15:29 Paul is referring not to dead Christians or to the dead relatives of Christians but to the Christians themselves, who in their baptism came to the water “dead”, subject to death because of their sin, and who were baptized with a view to being raised to life with Christ.

In line with this it is interesting to read the following reference to baptism in the second century *Shepherd of Hermas*.

Before a man bears the name of the Son of God he is dead (νεκρός). But when he receives the seal he puts away mortality (νέκρωσιν) and receives life. The seal then is the water. They go down into the water dead (νεκροί) and come up alive (ζῶντες). (Sim. 9.16, 93.3-4)<sup>18</sup>

<sup>17</sup>The only real exception is 1 Thess 4:16, οἱ νεκροὶ ἐν Χριστῷ, which is perhaps used as variation for the sake of style, since Paul has already just used κοιμάομαι twice in vv. 13-18.

<sup>18</sup>There is some discussion as to whether the seal refers to baptism, since elsewhere the seal appears to be the message of Christian preaching. Probably it is both and Hermas is not being very consistent, but whatever may be the case with the seal there seems to be no doubt that the general picture of going down into the water dead and coming up alive intends to evoke the image of baptism. See further Hartman, “*In the Name*”, 183-5.

It is surely much more likely that Paul's converts had a similar understanding of baptism than that they thought they could or should get baptized on behalf of the dead. That they *could* have thought like this is proved by the use of νεκρός in Paul's letters, and if they *did* do so, it would not be strange if they spoke about their own baptism as a matter of being baptized ὑπὲρ τῶν νεκρῶν. It may in fact have been almost a technical term in regular use, as Godet suggested.<sup>19</sup>

Advocates of the consensus view urge that ὑπὲρ must have a vicarious sense, as it often does of course when followed by a person or persons. But it can have simply a final sense when followed by other kinds of noun,<sup>20</sup> and, as Jeremias pointed out,<sup>21</sup> Paul has used the phrase ὑπὲρ τῶν ἁμαρτιῶν in a final sense earlier in this same chapter (15:3). Beasley-Murray objects that Paul normally uses ὑπὲρ followed by a personal reference and that when he does the meaning is always "on behalf of". The two occasions when he uses ὑπὲρ τῶν ἁμαρτιῶν (15:3 and Gal 1:4) are both probably citations of traditional credal material. Two points may be made in reply. In the first place, we have seen that the present phrase, ὑπὲρ τῶν νεκρῶν, may well also be traditional rather than Paul's own expression, and secondly, as I have argued, οἱ νεκροί should not be thought of as people, but as inanimate corpses, so the final sense is perfectly appropriate here. The words translated "for our sins" (15:3) are actually short for "for the forgiveness of our sins" (ὑπὲρ τῆς ἀφέσεως τῶν ἁμαρτιῶν), and a similarly condensed expression could well be employed in 15:29, but there is no need on my theory to read so much into the text as Jeremias requires. He thinks they were baptized "with a view to being united with their dead in the resurrection", which seems to require an impossible amount to be supplied by the reader. In contrast I suggest that all that needs to be supplied is τῆς ἀναστάσεως to give an exactly equivalent phrase, ὑπὲρ τῆς ἀναστάσεως τῶν νεκρῶν.

Finally it needs to be reiterated that this understanding was that of Chrysostom in the fourth century, which while not an infallible guide to Paul's meaning at least shows that he found the proposed solution comprehensible as Greek.<sup>22</sup> He makes two references to this verse in his *Homilies on 1 Corinthians*. The first comes as a parenthetical remark in

<sup>19</sup>F. Godet, *1 Corinthians* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1887) 383.

<sup>20</sup>BDF 231.2 instances 2 Cor 1:6, ὑπὲρ τῆς ὑμῶν παρακλήσεως.

<sup>21</sup>Jeremias, "Flesh", 156.

<sup>22</sup>So Thompson, "Baptism", 655. It was not, however, Tertullian's view (contra Reaume, 464). Tertullian in fact is the ancestor of the present consensus view. While he admits he does not know what the practice was, he says, "[Paul's] only aim in alluding to it was that he might all the more firmly insist upon the resurrection of the body, in proportion as they who were vainly baptized for the dead resorted to such a practice from their belief in such a resurrection." *Adv. Marc.* 5.10.



an exposition of 1 Cor 10, where Chrysostom is explaining what Paul means by saying that the Israelites were baptized into Moses (*Hom. XXIII.3*). He says:

Like as we, on our belief in Christ and his resurrection, are baptized, as being in our own persons destined to partake in the same mysteries; for “we are baptized” says he “for the dead”, that is, for our own bodies; even so they, putting their confidence in Moses, having first seen him cross, ventured also themselves into the waters.

Later, dealing with this very verse, he first rejects with scorn the type of vicarious baptism practised by the Marcionites, and then goes on (*Hom. XL.2*):

This therefore Paul recalling to their minds said, “If there be no resurrection, why art thou then baptized for the dead?” i.e. the dead bodies (σωματῶν). For in fact with a view to this art thou baptized, the resurrection of thy dead body, believing that it no longer remains dead.

We notice particularly that Chrysostom himself understands οἱ νεκροί as “bodies”, not as people or departed saints, and that he has no difficulty in reading ὑπέρ as final, “with a view to” the resurrection of thy dead body.

I conclude that the verse refers to normal Christian baptism as undergone by ordinary Corinthian Christians. Besides the obvious advantage that it relieves us of the necessity of supposing that Paul could refer in this way to a practice so obviously at variance with everything we otherwise know he believed about baptism, this interpretation is commended by three things. First, it coheres well with the immediate co-text and the argument of the chapter, once it is recognized that vv. 20-28 are a “purple passage” inserted by Paul into the flow of his own argument. Second, it agrees well with Paul’s use of the term νεκρός to denote the state of mortality from which the Christian longs to be delivered, as opposed to the number of those who have died and await their resurrection. Third, it has the support of one of the earliest and ablest expositors of the NT who lived very much nearer to Paul’s thought-world than we do ourselves. If this is so, then the verse presents us not with an oddity requiring an explanation, but with a witness to the meaning of baptism for the early Christians needing to be listened to. Baptism we learn is both with a view to the forgiveness of sins and to the resurrection of the body. Not of course that Paul thought or taught that baptism conveyed either of these automatically, apart from faith in the Lord Jesus, but baptism is into

Christ, and in Christ and through his death and resurrection sins are forgiven, the Spirit is poured out, and eternal life is promised to all who belong to him. As Beasley-Murray says, “Baptism means hope!”<sup>23</sup>—the same hope that is expressed in the Nicene Creed:

I acknowledge one baptism for the remission of sins;  
and I look for the resurrection of the dead,  
and the life of the world to come.

<sup>23</sup>Beasley-Murray, *Baptism*, 296.