

## ANOTHER LOOK AT 1 CORINTHIANS 15:29, "BAPTIZED FOR THE DEAD"

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First Corinthians 15:29 has puzzled many Bible students throughout church history. In this verse Paul wrote, "Otherwise, what will those do who are baptized for the dead? If the dead are not raised at all, why then are they baptized for them?" More than two hundred interpretive solutions have been proposed, but only a few remain as legitimate possibilities.<sup>1</sup>

A surface reading of the passage leads to the interpretation that believers were actually being baptized for the benefit of those who died without baptism. This practice is also known as vicarious baptism, that is, substitutionary baptism for the dead.<sup>2</sup> The interpretation of vicarious baptism is problematic for two reasons: first, there is no historical evidence of the practice of baptizing for the dead during New Testament times,<sup>3</sup> and second, it seems doubtful that Paul would have written of such a practice so contrary to his theology without condemning it.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Hans Conzelmann, *1 Corinthians*, Hermeneia (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975), 276, n. 120; and Bernard M. Foschini, "Those Who Are Baptized for the Dead: 1 Corinthians 15:29, An Exegetical Historical Dissertation," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 12 (1950): 260.

<sup>2</sup> Vicarious baptism was practiced by the Marcionites (Tertullian, *Anti Marcion* 10), the followers of Cerinthus (Epiphanius, *Adv. Haer.* 28, §6), and is presently practiced by the Mormon Church. The custom of the Marcionites involved an individual hiding under the body of the deceased who would answer for the corpse when the corpse was asked if he wanted to be baptized. This individual was then baptized for the dead catechumen.

<sup>3</sup> Gordon D. Fee, *1st Epistle to the Corinthians*, New International Commentary of the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 764; and F. F. Bruce, *1 Corinthians*, New Century Bible (London: Morgan & Scott, 1971), 148.

<sup>4</sup> Vicarious baptism implies a mystical view of baptism. For more on the mystical implications behind this view, see note 10.

Despite these problems, a majority of modern scholars have adopted this interpretation while at the same time rejecting other possible interpretations that may in fact be more legitimate. A re-examination of this text and possible interpretations will highlight the deficiency of this majority view and suggest other more plausible explanations. A survey of the most common positions will be followed by an examination of the verse and the various exegetical problems encountered in it. Then a summary of the most plausible explanations will be given.

#### POSSIBLE INTERPRETATIONS OF 1 CORINTHIANS 15:29

Of the scores of proposed interpretations for 1 Corinthians 15:29, only those views enjoying the widest acceptance and greatest support will be considered in this discussion. Three major categories encompass the views suggested by various commentators.<sup>5</sup> These categories are (a) vicarious baptism, that is, water baptism undertaken by a living individual for the benefit of a dead person who had died without being baptized; (b) metaphorical baptism, which refers to either martyrdom or Paul's sufferings; and (c) Christian baptism, water baptism of new believers.

#### VICARIOUS BAPTISM

Most commentators hold to some version of this interpretation, in which the beneficiaries of the baptism were catechumens or family members who had died without having been baptized.<sup>6</sup> Fee speculates that those involved in this practice felt that baptism was necessary for entrance into the eschatological kingdom, while Orr suggests that they felt that baptism was necessary for salvation.<sup>7</sup>

The strongest argument for this interpretation is that it is easily derived from the plain reading of the verse, since the words βαπτίζω, νεκρός, and ὑπὲρ are understood according to their most common usages.<sup>8</sup>

However, this view faces two significant problems. First, apart from this verse there is no historical or biblical evidence of such a practice in Corinth or elsewhere during the first century.

<sup>5</sup> The majority of suggested interpretations are based on these three general understandings, with subtle differences leading to the proliferation of interpretations.

<sup>6</sup> W. F. Orr and J. A. Walther, *1 Corinthians*, Anchor Bible (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1976), 337; and Fee, *1 Corinthians*, 764.

<sup>7</sup> Fee, *1 Corinthians*, 767; Orr, *1 Corinthians*, 337.

<sup>8</sup> Fee, *1 Corinthians*, 764; and G. R. Beasley-Murray, *Baptism in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 187.

Although there is reference to this practice in the late second century, the practice was apparently limited to heretical groups. Apparently these groups had instituted this practice because of a misinterpretation of the passage in question.<sup>9</sup> Second, it is doubtful that Paul could appeal to a practice so contrary to his theology without commenting on it.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Chrysostom, *Homily 40*; Tertullian, *Anti Marcion 10*; cf. Fee, *1 Corinthians*, 764.

<sup>10</sup> For most commentators, vicarious baptism for the dead implies that the Corinthians held a mystical view of baptism, although the exact nature of the benefit thought to be accrued for the dead varies. Some options would include its necessity for participation in the eschatological kingdom (Fee, *1 Corinthians*, 767); for participation in the resurrection (H. V. Martin, "Baptism for the Dead," *Expository Times* 54 [1942]: 193); or for salvation (Thomas Charles Edwards, *A Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians* [London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1885], 423; and Orr and Walther, *1 Corinthians*, 337).

A few have suggested that vicarious baptism does not necessarily imply any benefit for the dead, but if this were the case one wonders why such a rite would have taken place (C. K. Barrett, *A Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians*, Harper New Testament Commentary [New York: Harper and Row, 1968]; cf. Edwards, *A Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 424). Also the force of Paul's argument would be severely reduced if this practice had only sentimental value ("What will they do who are being baptized [as a sentimental gesture] for the dead?"). As a result, most commentators who espouse vicarious baptism hold that the practice involved a mystical view of baptism on the part of the Corinthians in which baptism was thought to have some measure of saving efficacy (e.g., Henry Leighton Goudge, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* [London: Methuen, 1903], 149; Heinrich A. W. Meyer, *Meyer's Commentary on the New Testament*, trans. William P. Dickson [reprint, Winona Lake, IN: Alpha, 1980], 365; Jean Hering, *The First Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians*, trans. A. W. Heathcote and P. J. Allcock [London: Epworth, 1962], 169; and David K. Lowery, "1 Corinthians," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, New Testament, ed. John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck [Wheaton, IL: Victor, 1983], 544).

The problem with this position is that neither Paul nor any other New Testament writer hinted of a practice in which one's baptism could be substituted for another's baptism. The clear teaching in the New Testament is that baptism has a personal character, with each individual being called to identify himself personally with Christ in obedience to His command (Matt. 28:18-20).

Pauline teaching makes it clear that baptism lacks saving efficacy. Paul taught with great vigor that personal faith alone is the sole condition for justification (Rom. 3:28, 10:8-9; Gal. 2:16, 3:6, 8; Eph. 2:8-9). Baptism is simply an act of faith symbolizing a believer's identification and union with Christ in His death and resurrection (Rom. 6:3; Col. 2:12; Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Theology* [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1981], 755; and George Eldon Ladd, *Theology of the New Testament* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967], 548). In addition Guthrie suggests that Paul corrected the Corinthians for holding a superstitious view of baptism when he declared in 1 Corinthians 1:17, "For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel" (Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Theology*, 755).

In light of Paul's teaching on baptism it is implausible that he would have referred to a practice so contrary to a fundamental aspect of his theology without commenting on it. This is especially true in 1 Corinthians, in which Paul sought to correct various errors in the church. The examples of believers taking each other to court and the issue of headcoverings seem insignificant in comparison to the error of vicarious baptism for the dead.

Some have argued that Paul elsewhere referred to practices with which he did

## METAPHORICAL BAPTISM

The commentators who understand baptism in a metaphorical way arrive at different conclusions regarding the interpretation of the passage. Two of the most recognized suggestions are the views that this baptism refers to martyrdom or to Paul's suffering for the gospel.

*Martyrdom.* Godet proposes that "baptized" means martyred and that "for the dead" means "for entering the place of the dead."<sup>11</sup> According to this view, Paul referred to those who had been "baptized by blood" (martyred) with the hope of the resurrection as evidence for his argument that the resurrection is sure. In support of this, Godet cites Jesus' use of βαπτίζω in Mark 10:38 and Luke 12:50, in which He spoke of the baptism He must endure, an apparent reference to His death. This view seems to suit the context well as Paul spoke in 1 Corinthians 15:30-32 of his suffering unto death for the gospel.

However, this view has some insurmountable weaknesses. First, there is no evidence of persecutions or martyrdoms in the church at Corinth at that time.<sup>12</sup> Second, while Jesus used βαπτίζω in the metaphorical sense of "suffering" or "martyrdom," Paul did not do so.<sup>13</sup> Third, Godet's rendering of ὑπὲρ as "for entering" is without parallel in Greek literature.<sup>14</sup>

Paul's sufferings. Murphy-O'Connor proposes that the phrase

not agree. Often cited is Paul's appeal to dining in the temple of an idol in 1 Corinthians 8:10 (Leon Morris, *1 Corinthians*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans], 215; Charles Hodge, *An Exposition of the First Epistle to the Corinthians* [NY: Nisbett, 1868], 337; and Murray J. Harris, "Prepositions and Theology in the Greek New Testament," in *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, 3:1208). In this case, however, Paul prevented any misunderstandings by specifically denouncing this practice in the course of his argument (1 Cor. 10:20). One would expect him to have done the same in 15:29 if he were referring to a practice of vicarious baptism.

<sup>11</sup> Fredrick Godet, *Commentary on First Corinthians* (1889; reprint, Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1977), 818.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 818. Godet counters this objection by listing examples of martyrs in the New Testament such as Stephen and James, concluding that there were many other cases of martyrdom that are not known. This argument from silence is doubtful in light of historical data suggesting that the church was experiencing a period of relative peace in Achaia at that time (Earle Cairns, *Christianity through the Centuries* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982], 90; and F. F. Bruce, *The Spreading Flame* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982], 21, 140).

<sup>13</sup> Jerome Murphy-O'Connor, "Baptized for the Dead; 1 Cor. 15:29: A Corinthian Slogan?" *Revue Biblique* 88 (October 1981): 534.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 534; Walter Bauer, William F. Arndt, and F. Wilbur Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 2d ed., rev. F. Wilbur Gingrich and Frederick W. Danker (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 838.

"baptism for the dead" was a slogan used by troublemakers in Corinth who were denying the resurrection in order to make light of Paul's efforts for the unenlightened or spiritually dead. Here the metaphorical understanding of βαπτίζω points to Paul's trials and suffering for the gospel while νεκρός refers to the "spiritually dead" or "spiritually unenlightened." The verse would then be rendered, "Why are they (Paul and other apostles) being destroyed while working for the sake of the lost? If dead believers are not raised, then why are they suffering for the lost?"<sup>15</sup>

In support of this view is the fact that it circumvents the theological problems of vicarious baptism. Also it fits the context well in that Paul referred to his sufferings in the following verses (15:30-31).<sup>16</sup>

However, this position faces some major difficulties as well. First, this view calls for differing nuances of νεκρός in the immediate context.<sup>17</sup> In its first occurrence νεκρός would be taken metaphorically as "the spiritually dead" but in its second occurrence it would have to be understood literally as "the physically dead." A writer would probably not utilize different nuances in the same sentence without indicating that intention.

Second, it is unclear how an appeal to this alleged slogan would strengthen Paul's case for the certainty of the resurrection. If the point of the alleged slogan was to demean Paul's efforts for the spiritually dead, as Murphy-O'Connor suggests, then why would the apostle include the slogan in a context where his struggles for the spiritually dead are given as evidence for the certainty of the resurrection?

Third, little evidence exists that the phrase "baptized for the dead" in verse 29 is a slogan, for it lacks some of the key characteristics of slogans, such as brevity, sustained qualification, and an unambiguous response.<sup>18</sup> Murphy-O'Connor's suggestion meets the first characteristic but falls short on the rest, as Paul is

<sup>15</sup> Murphy-O'Connor suggests that the group in Corinth that was denying the resurrection was influenced by the pre-Gnostic views of Philo ("Baptized for the Dead," 536).

<sup>16</sup> In addition the diatribe form of 1 Corinthians 15 is maintained. Verse 29 is a general statement referring to the troubles evangelists face, whereas verses 30-32 provide specific examples of these sufferings by referring to Paul's troubles in Ephesians and elsewhere (ibid., 533).

<sup>17</sup> Fee, *1 Corinthians*, 765.

<sup>18</sup> Carson lists three characteristics of a slogan: "They are short, they are usually followed by sustained qualification, and the Pauline response is unambiguous and does not require the addition of words or phrases to make sense of the text" (D. A. Carson, *Showing the Spirit* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987], 55). For example the slogans in 6:12-13; 7:1b; and 8:1b meet these three criteria.

seen as agreeing with the basic premise of the alleged slogan rather than qualifying it.<sup>19</sup> Also there is no adversative to distinguish the Corinthian's slogan and Paul's response to that slogan.<sup>20</sup> And, as Fee suggests, the assumption of Philo's influence on the Corinthians in order to prove that the Corinthians would have used νεκρός in the sense of "spiritually dead" is "questionable at best."<sup>21</sup>

### CHRISTIAN BAPTISM

Several commentators argue that 1 Corinthians 15:29 refers to Christian baptism in the normal sense of the initiation rite symbolizing the believer's identification with Christ. This category includes a variety of interpretations that can be grouped in six major subviews.

*Because of dead believers.* This view is one of the most widely supported alternatives to vicarious baptism. The phrase "baptism for the dead" is understood in the sense of unbelievers being baptized "because of believers who have died."<sup>22</sup> In this interpretation unbelievers decide to become Christians and be baptized because of the influence of a believer who had recently died.

Several arguments support this view. First, Paul used νεκρός with and without the definite article consistently in 1 Corinthians 15 to differentiate between "Christian dead" and "the dead in general."<sup>23</sup> Thus it is argued that τῶν νεκρῶν refers to dead Christians. Second, the preposition ὑπέρ with the genitive can have the causal sense of "because of."<sup>24</sup> Third, this interpretation fits the

<sup>19</sup> Paul would be saying in essence, "I agree that I am suffering for the spiritually dead (i.e., the unenlightened)," which would reinforce the Corinthians' gibe.

<sup>20</sup> Paul usually used an adversative to distinguish the slogan from his response to it (1 Cor. 6:12, 13; 7:1; Fee, *1 Corinthians*, 765).

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> A. T. Robertson and Alfred Plummer, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the First Epistle of St. Paul to the Corinthians*, International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: Clark, 1975), 359; G. G. Findlay, "St. Paul's First Epistle to the Corinthians," in *The Expositor's Greek Testament*, ed. W. Robertson Nicoll, 4 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 2:931; R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of I and II Corinthians* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1963), 690; John F. MacArthur, *I Corinthians* (Chicago: Moody, 1984), 425; and J. K. Howard, "Baptism for the Dead; A Study of 1 Corinthians 15:29," *Evangelical Quarterly* 37 (July–September 1965): 140.

<sup>23</sup> M. Raeder, "Vikariatstaufe in I Kor. 15:29?" *Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft* 46 (1956): 256-60; and J. Jeremias, "Flesh and Blood Cannot Inherit the Kingdom of God," *New Testament Studies* 2 (1955–1956): 155.

<sup>24</sup> F. Blass and A. Debrunner, *A Greek Grammar of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, trans. Robert W. Funk (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), 121; and Bauer, Arndt, and Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 839.

context with Paul returning to his former argument on the absurdity of denying the believers' resurrection, which he concluded with a specific discussion of the Christian dead.<sup>25</sup>

A few arguments have been presented against this view. Some have suggested that if Paul had meant "Christian dead" he would have clarified his intention when referring to "the dead" with more specific phrasing such as "dead friends" or "dead relatives."<sup>26</sup> Also Paul usually used ὑπὲρ with the sense of "on behalf of" when the object of the preposition is a person.<sup>27</sup>

*In order to be united with the dead at the resurrection.* With a slight modification of the former view, some have suggested that the preposition ὑπὲρ is functioning with the final sense of "for."<sup>28</sup> Jeremias, building on the work of Raeder, argues that verse 29 refers to "pagans who take baptism upon themselves ὑπὲρ τῶν νεκρῶν with the purpose of becoming united with their deceased Christian relatives at the resurrection."<sup>29</sup> Although this preposition may have a final sense, this usage seems uncommon in the New Testament.<sup>30</sup> In addition this interpretation requires filling a significant ellipsis in order to convey this sense, such as "baptized in order to be united with their deceased Christian relatives at the resurrection."<sup>31</sup>

*To take the place of dead believers.* Another suggestion is that the apostle was referring to individuals who were converted and baptized to take the place of deceased believers.<sup>32</sup> In addition to understanding "baptism" and "the dead" in accord with consis-

<sup>25</sup> Jeremias, "Flesh and Blood Cannot Inherit the Kingdom of God," 155.

<sup>26</sup> Findlay, *1 Corinthians*, 931.

<sup>27</sup> See the discussion below on ὑπὲρ; and Fee, *1 Corinthians*, 763, n. 11.

Jeremias, "Flesh and Blood Cannot Inherit the Kingdom of God," 156; Raeder, "Vikariatstaufe in I Kor. 15:29?" 258-60; Rudolf Schnackenburg, *Baptism in the Thought of St. Paul*, trans. G. R. Beasley-Murray (NY: Herder and Herder, 1964), 102.

<sup>29</sup> Jeremias, "Flesh and Blood Cannot Inherit the Kingdom of God," 155.

<sup>30</sup> This sense is evident in 2 Corinthians 1:6 and may be present in Philippians 2:13 and 1 Corinthians 15:3 (Blass and Debrunner, *A Greek Grammar of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 121; Conzelmann, *1 Corinthians*, 276; Beasley-Murray, *Baptism in the New Testament*, 186; cf. Bauer, Arndt, and Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 839; cf. H. E. Dana and Julius R. Mantey, *A Manual Grammar of the Greek New Testament* [New York: Macmillan, 1957], 111-12).

<sup>31</sup> Meyer, *Meyer's Commentary on the New Testament*, 367.

<sup>32</sup> That is, "What will they do who are being baptized to take the place of dead believers?" (A. G. Moseley, "Baptized for the Dead," *Review and Expositor* 49 [1952]: 57-61; and S. Lewis Johnson Jr., "1 Corinthians," in *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary* [Chicago: Moody, 1962], 1257).

tent Pauline usage, this position maintains the common substitutionary sense of ὑπέρ without implying that this action is vicarious or beneficial for the dead.<sup>33</sup>

The major difficulty with this interpretation is that the notion of new believers coming in to replace believers who had died is not immediately evident in this context.<sup>34</sup>

*With reference to the resurrection of the dead.* A fourth interpretation understands "baptism for the dead" to refer to the general baptism of all believers in which they are baptized "with reference to the resurrection of the dead."<sup>35</sup> This view normally holds to an implied ellipsis of "resurrection" in order to yield the meaning of "baptism with reference to the resurrection of the dead."

There is little support for this view other than the fact that it alleviates the theological problems of vicarious baptism and that Christian baptism has the symbolic sense of being united with Christ in His death and resurrection (Rom. 6:3-5). Additional support includes the fact that Paul elsewhere used the preposition ὑπέρ to mean "with reference to" (2 Cor. 1:7; 8:23).<sup>36</sup> The major argument against this view is that the implied ellipsis of "resurrection" in the phrase "baptized with reference to the resurrection of the dead" is too violent.<sup>37</sup> Paul probably would have included "resurrection" if this is what he meant.

*For their dying bodies.* A fifth suggestion argues that 1 Corinthians 15:29 makes reference to Christian baptism in which an individual is baptized for the benefit of his own "dying" body. Several early church fathers including Tertullian and Chrysostom ascribed to this position, which was later held by Erasmus.<sup>38</sup>

<sup>33</sup> See Philemon 13; cf. H. Riesenfeld, "ὑπέρ," in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 8:513.

<sup>34</sup> Edwards, *A Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 422. In addition this designation could rightly apply to all believers since all new believers are in a sense replacing the previous generation of believers. Paul, however, used the third person in this verse to indicate that he had a specific group of individuals in mind as opposed to all believers ("what will they do") (Meyer, *Meyer's Commentary on the New Testament*, 367).

<sup>35</sup> Evans, *I Corinthians*, 364; Moseley, "Baptized for the Dead," 57-58; and Albert Barnes, *Barnes' Notes on the New Testament* (reprint, Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1962), 793.

<sup>36</sup> Bauer, Arndt, and Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 839.

<sup>37</sup> Robertson and Plummer, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the First Epistle of St. Paul to the Corinthians*, 359; and Edwards, *A Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 432.

<sup>38</sup> Tertullian commented on this passage on two occasions and espoused the interpretation of Christian baptism for their dead or dying bodies (*Anti Marcion* 10;

Calvin suggested a more specific nuance of unbelievers repenting and being baptized on their death beds.<sup>39</sup> O'Neill has most recently espoused this position, citing additional evidence based on a tenuous deduction from textual evidence.<sup>40</sup>

This view has little support other than the fact that it avoids the theological difficulties of vicarious baptism and understands βαπτίζω and ὑπὲρ in accord with common Pauline usage. The major problem is that viewing νεκρός to mean "dying bodies" is without parallel in the New Testament.<sup>41</sup>

*Christian baptism based on alternative punctuation.* Some scholars have proposed that the solution to the interpretation of 1 Corinthians 15:29 is found in changing the punctuation of the verse.<sup>42</sup> Foschini argues that verse 29 consists of four rhetorical questions: (1) Ἐπεὶ τί ποιήσουσιν οἱ βαπτιζόμενοι, "If there is no resurrection, what is the point of being baptized?" (2) ὑπὲρ τῶν νεκρῶν, "Is it only to be united with the dead?" (3) εἰ ὅλως νεκροὶ οὐκ ἐγείρονται, τί καὶ βαπτίζονται, "If the dead do not rise again, why are they baptized?" (4) ὑπὲρ αὐτῶν, "Is it only to be united with them (i.e., with the dead who will never rise)?"<sup>43</sup> Thompson suggests that verse 29 consists of two questions: (1) Ἐπεὶ τί ποιήσουσιν οἱ βαπτιζόμενοι ὑπὲρ τῶν νεκρῶν εἰ ὅλως νεκροὶ οὐκ

cf. *De Resurrectione Carnis* 48; cf. K. C. Thompson, "1 Cor. 15:29 and Baptism for the Dead," *Studia Evangelica* 2 [1964]: 654). Chrysostom argued that Paul was referring here to Christian baptism for their own dying bodies (*Homily* 40). The other Greek fathers generally espoused a similar interpretation (Evans, *I Corinthians*, 373; Philip Schaff, ed., *Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers*, vol. 12: *St. Chrysostom—Homilies on I & II Corinthians* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956], 244, n. 3; 245.).

<sup>39</sup> John Calvin, *I and II Corinthians*, trans. John Pringle (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979), 38; John Albert Bengel, *Gnomon of the New Testament*, trans. James Bryce, 7th. ed., 3 vols. (Edinburgh: Clark, 1873), 3:329. There is some evidence of deathbed conversion in the early church (Calvin, *I and II Corinthians*, 37; Chrysostom, *Homily* 40).

<sup>40</sup> O'Neill proposes accepting the reading αὐτῶν τῶν νεκρῶν (codex 69) for τῶν νεκρῶν in order to support his suggestion that in verse 29 the meaning of νεκρός approaches that of the Hellenistic form τὰ νέκρᾱ, "corpses": "What do those hope to achieve who are baptized for their dying bodies?" (O'Neill, "1 Corinthians 15:29," 311). The major problem with this suggestion is that this reading occurs only in codex 69 and that O'Neill's deduction from this variant is tenuous (i.e., from "corpses" to "their own dead bodies"), which he himself admits. For further criticism of this view, see Fee, *I Corinthians*, 766.

<sup>41</sup> Bauer, Arndt, and Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 534-35.

<sup>42</sup> Thompson, "1 Cor. 15:29 and Baptism for the Dead," 647; Bernard M. Foschini, "Those Who Are Baptized for the Dead: 1 Corinthians 15:29. An Exegetical Historical Dissertation," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 13 (1951): 276-83; and F. J. Badcock, "Baptism for the Dead," *Expository Times* 54 (1942-43): 330.

<sup>43</sup> Foschini, "Those Who Are Baptized for the Dead," 278-79.

ἐγείρονται, "Else what will they achieve who are baptized merely for the benefit of their dead bodies, if dead bodies never rise again?" (2) τί καὶ βαπτίζονται ὑπὲρ αὐτῶν, "And why do people get baptized for them?"<sup>44</sup>

Since paleography reveals that accents, breathing marks, and punctuation were not used during New Testament times, these proposed punctuation changes may or may not be legitimate.<sup>45</sup> However, there is one insurmountable difficulty with these interpretations: they still hinge on Foschini's and Thompson's understanding of the preposition ὑπὲρ and the noun νεκρός.<sup>46</sup>

## EXEGESIS OF 1 CORINTHIANS 15:29

### THE CONTEXT

Paul had been addressing various problems in the Corinthian church, which had evidently been influenced by an overrealized eschatology and Hellenistic dualism.<sup>47</sup> Some in the church felt they were presently experiencing the kingdom in its fullness and were truly spiritual (1 Cor. 4:8-10). Also many in the church felt that the physical body was of little importance both in the present and in the future. This view led some to license (6:15-16) and others to asceticism (7:1-7). Some had evidently extended this view to deny the resurrection of believers (15:12). Having addressed these other problems, Paul then completed his letter by defending the doctrine of the resurrection.

Paul's argument in defense of the resurrection of believers includes three sections. First, he reaffirmed Christ's resurrection as a foundation for his argument that dead believers will be raised (15:1-11). Second, he demonstrated the absurdity of denying the resurrection of believers and he revealed the theological foundation that supports the resurrection of believers (vv. 12-34).

<sup>44</sup> Thompson, "1 Cor. 15:29 and Baptism for the Dead," 651.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 649; Foschini, "Those Who Are Baptized for the Dead," 278.

<sup>46</sup> For example Foschini suggests that his punctuation breaks the connection between baptism and the prepositional phrase "for the dead" (ibid.). However, his interpretation still hinges on the understanding of ὑπὲρ (i.e., the second question could still be, "Is it for the benefit of the dead?"). In addition Foschini's proposal that ὑπὲρ is equivalent to εἰς ("into") is doubtful; this nuance is evident only in classical Greek (Bauer, Arndt, and Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 838). Foschini strains to argue for this use by appealing to a few extrabiblical sources ("Those Who Are Baptized for the Dead," 281).

<sup>47</sup> Fee, *1 Corinthians*, 11.

Third, he affirmed that the resurrection is bodily, although he explained that the body will be transformed for an eternal existence (vv. 35-58).

Paul began the second major section of his argument (vv. 12-34) by demonstrating the absurdity of the position of those who deny the resurrection. Their position was contradictory, for they denied the resurrection of believers while affirming Christ's resurrection (vv. 11-12). His argument for the resurrection of believers then proceeded in three directions. First, he pointed out that their position implies that Christ was not raised from the dead, thereby destroying the foundation for their faith (vv. 12-19). Second, Paul reversed the proposition by arguing that the reality of Christ's resurrection guarantees the reality of believers' resurrection (vv. 20-28).

Third, Paul pointed out the incongruity of both their own behavior and the behavior of the apostles (vv. 29-34). By a series of rhetorical questions he pointed up the absurdity of various activities if there were no resurrection. The practice of baptism for the dead (v. 29) and the apostles' risk-taking behavior (vv. 30-32) were illogical if there is no resurrection of believers. In verse 31 he was probably emphasizing the truth of verse 30 that he daily faced the possibility of death. After giving a further concrete example of risk-taking in verse 32a, he quoted from Isaiah 22:13 to argue that it would make more sense to indulge in license than self-sacrificial behavior if there is no resurrection (1 Cor. 15:32). He concluded this section with some poignant words of advice, apparently designed to rebuke the Corinthians for associating with those who deny the resurrection (v. 34).

It is evident that verse 29 is only one small part of Paul's grand argument for the resurrection of believers. Verse 29 points out the incongruity of denying the resurrection of believers while at the same time participating in a certain religious practice.

#### CRITICAL EXEGESIS OF 1 CORINTHIANS 15:29

The wide variety of interpretations of 1 Corinthians 15:29 results from different suggested solutions to key exegetical problems. The meaning and referents of key terms such as οἱ βαπτιζόμενοι and τῶν νεκρῶν are the subject of some debate. However, the understanding of the preposition ὑπὲρ and the resulting theological implications are the decisive issues in this crux interpretation.

οἱ βαπτιζόμενοι. This verse begins with the statement, Ἐπεὶ τί ποιήσουσιν οἱ βαπτιζόμενοι ὑπὲρ τῶν νεκρῶν, "Otherwise,

what will those do who are baptized for the dead?"<sup>48</sup> As already stated, there are two basic suggestions for the meaning of βαπτίζω in this context. Some suggest that this word is being used metaphorically to describe martyrdom or Paul's sufferings for the gospel, while others hold that Christian baptism is in view. In favor of a metaphorical understanding is the fact that the figurative sense of "to perish" or "to suffer" is also evident in Greek literature,<sup>49</sup> including the New Testament (Mark 10:38-39).

However, this suggestion has a number of difficulties. First, apart from this verse there is no evidence that Paul used this term metaphorically to indicate suffering or martyrdom. Although Murphy-O'Connor's suggestion that the phrase "the ones being baptized for the dead" is a Corinthian slogan alleviates the problem of Pauline usage for the term βαπτίζω, his proposition seems doubtful, as previously discussed. Second, a figurative understanding of "baptism" would also require a figurative understanding of "the dead" (i.e., spiritually dead), in order to avoid a mystical view of suffering or of being killed for the benefit of the physically dead. A figurative view of "the dead" is improbable in this context, since Paul consistently referred to the physically dead throughout chapter 15 and even in the immediate context (v. 29b).<sup>50</sup> Third, there is no historical evidence of any believers being martyred in the Corinthian church at that time.<sup>51</sup>

Viewing βαπτίζω as referring to Christian baptism is most likely the correct understanding, since Paul consistently used

<sup>48</sup> The subordinating conjunction ἐπεὶ is probably functioning as an apodosis in an elliptical condition where the protasis is suppressed (A. T. Robertson, *A Grammar of the Greek New Testament in the Light of Historical Research*, 4th ed. [Nashville: Broadman, 1934], 1025). The probable ellipsis in this case would be the first-class conditional statement, "If all that I, Paul, have just said is not true, then what will they do" (Lenski, *The Interpretation of I and II Corinthians*, 688; and Fee, *I Corinthians*, 763).

<sup>49</sup> During the classical period the word βαπτίζω was used in the literal (active) sense of "to suffer shipwreck," "to perish," or "to drown." In the Septuagint the word occurs only four times and both the literal and figurative senses are present (cf. Lev. 6:28; Isa. 21:4). In the Koine Greek period the usage of the word βαπτίζω continued with both the literal (active) and figurative (passive) meanings, with the active sense of "to immerse" becoming especially prevalent. In a few cases the literal meaning was applied to the sacred washings of the mystery religions. However, the figurative sense continued as βαπτίζω is used to refer to "going under" with respect to sleep or intoxication and "perishing" (A. Oepke, "βάπτω, βαπτίζω," in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 1:536; and G. R. Beasley-Murray, "βαπτίζω," in *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, 1:144).

<sup>50</sup> This view requires a change in the meaning of νεκρῶν within the verse under question (see discussion on νεκρός on pages 469-71).

<sup>51</sup> Godet, *I Corinthians*, 818.

this term with the literal sense of the Christian initiatory rite.<sup>52</sup> Also Paul's argument in verses 29-32 is more coherent if Christian baptism is in view, since Paul would be citing two different examples of activities that demonstrate the absurdity of denying the resurrection.<sup>53</sup>

Since βαπτίζω probably refers to literal Christian baptism in this context, of οἱ βαπτιζόμενοι may be identified in one of two ways. Some identify this construction as a reference to all believers, while the majority hold that this construction refers to a specific group of individuals within the church. The third person present tense form of the verb βαπτίζονται (v. 29b) suggests that this activity was currently being practiced by a group of individuals and was probably well known by the Corinthians.<sup>54</sup> Thus the former suggestion is extremely doubtful, as Paul probably would have used the first person or second person plural form if he were referring to all believers or to the Corinthian believers (cf. vv. 17, 51). As Fee states,

This is one of the rare instances in the letter where Paul addresses a community matter only in the third person plural. In other instances (e.g., 4:18-21; 15:12-19), even when "some" are specified, the rest of the argument is directed at the community as a whole in the second person plural. Since that does not happen here, one may surmise that this is the activity of only a few.<sup>55</sup>

τῶν νεκρῶν. Some suggest that νεκρός refers metaphorically to the spiritually dead in verse 29a.<sup>56</sup> Others suggest that the first occurrence of νεκρός in verse 29 refers to "dying bodies."<sup>57</sup> The majority of commentators hold that this word refers to literally dead persons in both occurrences, with varying suggestions as to their identity.

The first suggestion is possible, as the word νεκρός is used both literally and figuratively in the New Testament and by

<sup>52</sup> Paul used βαπτίζω 13 times (10 times in 1 Cor.). He utilized the word literally with reference to initiatory baptism eight times (six times in 1 Cor.), excluding the two occurrences in 15:29. In the remaining three occurrences Paul used this term in a nonstandard way with reference to a believer being identified with Christ in His death (Rom. 6:3), the Israelites being identified with Moses (1 Cor. 10:2), and believers being immersed by the Spirit of God (1 Cor. 12:13).

<sup>53</sup> In other words this interpretation is less repetitive, since verses 29 and 30 do not both refer to the apostles' suffering.

<sup>54</sup> W. Harold Mare, "1 Corinthians," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, 12 vols. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1977), 10:287.

<sup>55</sup> Fee, *1 Corinthians*, 763, n. 15.

<sup>56</sup> Murphy-O'Connor, "Baptized for the Dead," 536-37; cf. Fee, *1 Corinthians*, 765.

<sup>57</sup> Calvin, *1 Corinthians*, 36; O'Neill, "1 Corinthians 15:29," 310; and Bengel, *Gnomon of the New Testament*, 330.

Paul.<sup>58</sup> However, this interpretation is doubtful, since the literal sense is plainly in view throughout the entire context (15:12, 13, 15, 16, 32, 35, etc.). In addition Paul clearly used νεκρός literally in the immediate context (v. 29b). The suggestion that verse 29a is a Corinthian slogan may alleviate some of the difficulty with the occurrence of two distinct nuances within verse 29, but this hypothesis is doubtful for reasons already enumerated.

Similarly, the second suggestion is likewise doubtful as this understanding of νεκρῶν as "dying bodies" is without parallel in the New Testament and would differ with consistent Pauline usage in chapter 15.<sup>59</sup> In addition, this understanding requires an ellipsis such as τῶν νεκρῶν (σωμάτων) or a tenuous connection of νεκρός with a derivative found in classical Greek in order to produce the sense of "corpses."<sup>60</sup>

Since Paul consistently used νεκρός in a literal sense throughout 1 Corinthians 15 and since the literal sense is apparent in the second half of verse 29, a literal understanding of νεκρός as referring to "dead individuals" is preferred.

Who are τῶν νεκρῶν? Was Paul referring to dead believers, unbelievers, or catechumens who died before being baptized? Grammar suggests that the articular construction τῶν νεκρῶν refers to a specific group of dead individuals (with the anarthrous noun νεκροὶ referring to the dead in general).<sup>61</sup> Pauline usage in chapter 15 confirms this. Paul seems to have been distinguishing between the dead in general (vv. 12, 13, 15, 16, 20, 21, and 29b) and Christians who had died (vv. 29a, 35, 42, and 52).<sup>62</sup>

For example later in the chapter the resurrection of dead believers is clearly in view as indicated by the references to "a heavenly body" (vv. 40, 47-49), "a spiritual body" (vv. 44, 46), and a body "raised in power" (v. 43). However, in verses 12-29, the anarthrous construction is used consistently to denote the general concept of "the dead" in speaking of Christ being resurrected from

<sup>58</sup> R. Bultmann, "νεκρός," in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 4:893; cf. Matthew 8:22; John 5:21; Ephesians 5:14.

<sup>59</sup> Bauer, Arndt, and Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 534-35.

<sup>60</sup> O'Neill, "1 Corinthians 15:29," 310-11.

<sup>61</sup> Blass and Debrunner, *A Greek Grammar of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 133.

<sup>62</sup> Anarthrous constructions (i.e., the dead in general) are found in verses 12, 13, 15, 16, 20, 21, and 29, whereas articular constructions (i.e., the Christian dead) are found in verses 29, 35, 42, and 52 (Raeder, "Vikariatstaufe in I Kor. 15:29?" 258-59; Jeremias, "Flesh and Blood Cannot Inherit the Kingdom of God," 155; and Howard, "Baptism for the Dead," 140.

the dead (vv. 12, 15, 20) and the general resurrection of the dead (vv. 13, 15, 16). In addition verse 29 seems to resume Paul's former argument in which he demonstrated the absurdity of denying the resurrection of dead believers and which he concluded by referring specifically to deceased believers (vv. 18-19). Based on Paul's apparent distinction between "dead believers" and the "dead in general," the object of the preposition ὑπὲρ is probably dead believers.

This observation leads to the question of whether these believers had been baptized or were catechumens who died before being baptized. The latter suggestion depends on the existence of an initiatory procedure in Corinth that historically developed much later. The normal practice in the early church was for baptism to follow immediately after conversion (Acts 10:47-48; 16:31-34; 18:8; 19:5).<sup>63</sup>

Thus the possibility of a convert dying before being baptized was improbable, contrary to what some have suggested.<sup>64</sup> Added to this improbability is the fact that this activity in Corinth involved more than one individual and would have had to be well known to the Corinthians for Paul's argument to have force. Rather than referring to an exceptional case where a convert died before baptism, Paul was most likely referring to the more common case of dead believers who had already been baptized.

ὑπὲρ. The prepositional phrase ὑπὲρ τῶν νεκρῶν has been the major focus in the controversy on this passage. The preposition ὑπὲρ with the genitive normally has the meaning of "on behalf of," emphasizing representation (e.g., Eph. 5:2, 25; 1 Thess. 5:10; Titus 2:14), or "instead of," emphasizing substitution (e.g., John 11:50; 2 Cor. 5:14-15; Gal. 3:13; Phile. 13),<sup>65</sup> with the person as the object of the preposition (also see Rom. 5:6, 8; 8:32; Gal. 2:20).<sup>66</sup> In

<sup>63</sup> Beasley-Murray, "βαπτίζω," 1:146.

<sup>64</sup> Fee, *1 Corinthians*, 767; Goudge, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 149-50; and C. K. Barrett, *A Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians* (New York: Harper and Row, 1968), 364.

<sup>65</sup> The distinction between the two ideas becomes blurred at times since the idea of representation can include substitution and vice versa. For example in the passages relating to Christ's vicarious sacrifice, Christ is presented as both the substitute and representative (Harris, "Prepositions and Theology in the Greek New Testament," 3:1196-97).

<sup>66</sup> Fee, *1 Corinthians*, 763; Maximilian Zerwick, *Biblical Greek*, trans. and ed. Joseph Smith (Rome: Pontificii Instituti Biblici, 1963), 529; George B. Winer, *Greek Grammar of the New Testament* (Edinburgh: Clark, 1870), 479; C. F. D. Moule, *An Idiom Book of New Testament Greek*, 2d ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1953), 64; and Dana and Mantey, *A Manual Grammar of the Greek New Testament*, 111.

this case the preposition is used to express favor or advantage accrued to a person. As a result most contemporary commentators view the phrase ὑπὲρ τῶν νεκρῶν as denoting an esoteric practice of vicarious baptism in which an individual was apparently baptized as a substitute for the benefit of a dead person.<sup>67</sup>

Although this is a natural rendering of the text, the major difficulties with this interpretation are the complete lack of historical evidence for this alleged practice in the first century and the theological problem of Paul appealing, without qualification, to a practice that implies that baptism has saving efficacy.<sup>68</sup> In addition, since the object of the preposition τῶν νεκρῶν probably refers to dead believers, the interpretation of vicarious baptism is doubtful, as these dead believers had most likely observed the rite of baptism before their death.

Another suggestion that maintains the substitutionary sense of ὑπὲρ is that Paul was referring to individuals who were converted and baptized to take the place of deceased believers.<sup>69</sup> This sense would be parallel to Philemon 13, in which Paul spoke of Onesimus as "ministering in the place of Philemon." Here the emphasis is more on substitution than on any benefit accrued by Philemon (cf. Col. 1:7).

The preposition ὑπὲρ can also be used to denote the cause or reason of an action as in the sense of "for," "because of," or "on account of" (see Rom. 15:9; 2 Cor. 12:8).<sup>70</sup> In the New Testament this preposition is used to indicate the cause of suffering or slander (Acts 9:16; 21:13;<sup>71</sup> 1 Cor. 10:30; 2 Cor. 12:10; Phil. 1:29; 2 Thess. 1:5), the cause of praise and thanksgiving (Rom. 15:9), and the reason for prayer (2 Cor. 12:8).<sup>72</sup> In the passage in question, the resulting sense would be that some new believers were being baptized because of the influence of dead believers.<sup>73</sup> The

<sup>67</sup> Fee, *1 Corinthians*, 764; Conzelmann, *1 Corinthians*, 227; Beasley-Murray, *Baptism in the New Testament*, 187; and Riesenfeld, "ὑπὲρ," 8:512-13.

<sup>68</sup> Fee, *1 Corinthians*, 764.

<sup>69</sup> That is, "What will they do who are being baptized to take the place of dead believers?" (Johnson, "1 Corinthians," 1257).

<sup>70</sup> Blass and Debrunner, *A Greek Grammar of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 121; Lenski, *1 Corinthians*, 690; see 2 Corinthians 12:8; Romans 15:9; cf. Bauer, Arndt, and Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 839; and Riesenfeld, "ὑπὲρ," 8:514.

<sup>71</sup> Cf. Acts 5:41. Here ὅτι is used in the place of ἵθι in a parallel construction.

<sup>72</sup> Riesenfeld, "ὑπὲρ," 8:514-15.

<sup>73</sup> Bauer, Arndt, and Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 132.

chief criticism of this view is that Pauline usage prefers the sense of "on behalf of" with a person as the object, whereas the sense of "because of" or "on account of" is preferred when the object is a thing.<sup>74</sup> The causal sense of ὑπὲρ is, however, used by Paul with a person as the object either explicitly or implicitly on at least a few occasions (Acts 9:16; 21:13; Rom. 15:9; Phil. 1:29).<sup>75</sup>

Closely related to this understanding of ὑπὲρ is the suggestion that this preposition is functioning in 1 Corinthians 15:29 with the final sense of "for": being baptized "with the purpose of becoming united with their deceased Christian relatives at the resurrection."<sup>76</sup> This understanding of ὑπὲρ with a final sense is evident in the context of Paul's sufferings for the Corinthians' comfort (2 Cor. 1:6), although this usage seems to be uncommon.<sup>77</sup> The major problem with this view is that the phrase ὑπὲρ τῶν νεκρῶν would require a significant ellipsis or additional explanation to arrive at a coherent interpretation.<sup>78</sup> However, other passages utilizing the final sense of ὑπὲρ similarly have to be filled out by the exegesis of the text.<sup>79</sup>

Others have suggested that the preposition demonstrates the local sense of "over" as in "over the graves of the dead."<sup>80</sup> This understanding is doubtful, as there is no historical evidence for this practice in the first century. Also this local sense of the prepo-

<sup>74</sup> Harris, "Prepositions and Theology in the Greek New Testament," 3:1196-97; and Fee, *I Corinthians*, 763.

<sup>75</sup> The causal sense is particularly evident in Acts 9:16 and 21:13, since ὑπὲρ is substituting for ὅτι in the parallel construction found in Acts 5:41 (Riesenfeld, "ὑπὲρ," 8:514).

<sup>76</sup> Jeremias, "Flesh and Blood Cannot Inherit the Kingdom of God," 156.

<sup>77</sup> Beasley-Murray highlights the rarity of this usage (*Baptism in the New Testament*, 186). Blass and Debrunner suggest that this sense is found in Philippians 2:13 (*A Greek Grammar of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 231). However, Riesenfeld and Harris translate the only other occurrence of ὑπὲρ in 1 Corinthians 15 with a final sense: "for the expiation of our sins," verse 3 (Riesenfeld, "ὑπὲρ," 8:514; and Harris, "Prepositions and Theology in the Greek New Testament," 3:1197).

<sup>78</sup> That is, "baptized in order to be united with their deceased Christian relatives at the resurrection" (Jeremias, "Flesh and Blood Cannot Inherit the Kingdom of God," 156).

<sup>79</sup> Schnackenburg gives the example of 1 Corinthians 15:3 and Galatians 1:4, where the statement "Christ died for our sins" is interpreted to mean "Christ died in order to redeem us from our sins" (*Baptism in the Thought of St. Paul*, 102).

<sup>80</sup> Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, ed. Hilton Oswald, trans. Martin Bertram (St. Louis; Concordia, 1973), vol. 28: *I Corinthians 7-15*, 146-54. This view is also suggested with reservation by F. W. Grosheide, *1st Epistle to the Corinthians*, *New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 373.

sition, although common in classical Greek, is applied only figuratively in the Koine period.<sup>81</sup>

Still others suggest this preposition is used in 1 Corinthians 15:29 with the sense of "concerning" or "with reference to," as in believers being baptized with reference to the resurrection of the dead.<sup>82</sup> This interpretation is doubtful, since it requires a significant ellipsis such as "baptized with reference to [the resurrection of] the dead."<sup>83</sup>

Although the first understanding of ὑπέρ is most in keeping with Pauline usage with persons as the object,<sup>84</sup> the theological difficulties presented by Paul's nonqualification of an erroneous practice suggest that this occurrence may involve a different nuance such as "because of the influence of dead believers," "in order to be united with dead believers at the resurrection," or perhaps even the understanding of new converts "taking the place of dead Christians."<sup>85</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Having examined 1 Corinthians 15:29, a number of conclusions can be made. First, the baptism referred to is probably literal water baptism of Christians. Second, the phrase "the ones who are baptized" most likely refers to a small group of individuals rather than the church as a whole. Third, "the dead" for whom some individuals were being baptized were in all probability dead believers. Fourth, these dead believers had presumably experienced Christian baptism before they died. If these four observations are true, it is extremely improbable that the proposition ὑπέρ denotes vicarious baptism for the benefit of the dead, as there would be no value in such a practice, since the dead in question would already have been "saved" and probably baptized. With the additional problem of vicarious baptism and Pauline theology, the improbability of 1 Corinthians 15:29 referring to vicarious baptism becomes insurmountable.

<sup>81</sup> Bauer, Arndt, and Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 838; and Riesenfeld, "ὑπέρ," 8:507-8.

<sup>82</sup> A. T. Robertson, *A Grammar of the Greek New Testament in the Light of Historical Research* (Nashville: Broadman, 1934), 632; and Barnes, *Barnes' Notes on the New Testament*, 793. This nuance also occurs with a person as the object as in John 1:30 (Riesenfeld, "imip," 8:514).

<sup>83</sup> Robertson and Plummer, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the First Epistle of St. Paul to the Corinthians*, 359; and Edwards, *A Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 423.

<sup>84</sup> Fee, *1 Corinthians*, 763.

<sup>85</sup> See n. 10.

Therefore only three of the more than two hundred interpretations of 1 Corinthians 15:29 remain strong possibilities. One view translates ὑπέρ with the sense of "in the place of" as in new believers' being baptized to take the place of dead Christians. A second possibility translates ὑπέρ with the final sense: "in order to be reunited with their loved ones at the resurrection." A third view translates ὑπέρ with the sense of "because of": new believers' being baptized "because of the influence of deceased Christians." The first suggestion is perhaps less convincing, since it could be said that all believers take the place of deceased believers and yet Paul was evidently referring to a select group within the church. The final two suggestions are closely related semantically and fit the context well, as they both refer to a select group within the church and include an emphasis on the resurrection as the implied motive for these practices.

Perhaps the most plausible interpretation is the third option, since it makes sense without a significant ellipsis. No doubt many individuals in the early church were influenced by the testimony of other believers who had recently died or who were martyred. For example Paul may have been influenced by Stephen's testimony when Stephen was arrested and stoned (Acts 7). Although all three interpretations are not immediately evident from initial readings of the text, all three respect the contextual framework of Pauline usage and theology.

In light of the minor role this verse plays in the overall argument of 1 Corinthians 15, it is ironic that the verse has received so much attention in the literature. This disproportionate attention is justified, however, if this passage refers to a practice implying the saving efficacy of baptism. Was Paul referring to a practice fundamentally opposed to his theology of salvation by faith alone as the majority of modern commentators suggest? According to the evidence revealed by this study, this is highly improbable.

In addition there is no biblical warrant given in this passage for instituting the practice of baptism for the dead. Both the ancient and modern practices of baptism for the dead are apparently founded on misinterpretations of this verse.

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