

**Missouri State University**

**The Dead in the Water: Paul's View of Baptism and  
Its Influence on 1 Cor 15:29**

**Submitted to Dr. Jim Moyer  
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**By  
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First Corinthians 15:29 “is one of the most hotly disputed passages in the epistle.”<sup>1</sup> With its uncharacteristically non-Pauline style<sup>2</sup> and complete lack of historical or biblical precedent,<sup>3</sup> the verse is an exegetical landmine that demands to be treated carefully. Nonetheless, “the ingenuity of the exegetes has run riot,”<sup>4</sup> the result of which is well over forty suggestions<sup>5</sup> on how to properly interpret this troublesome verse.

It is not the purpose of this writing to rehearse every possible interpretation.<sup>6</sup> The more traditional interpretation of vicarious baptism on behalf of the dead seems to be the most plausible and will be defended below. Despite the fact such a practice, again, has no other biblical or historical precedent, I contend that observations from Corinthian culture and archaeology are invaluable and shed a fair amount of light upon this particular read of the text. Ultimately, however, I will argue that the best interpreter of Paul is Paul himself—I will show that the Corinthian practice of vicarious baptism for the dead is best explained by Paul’s own view of baptism.

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<sup>1</sup> Hans Conzelmann, *1 Corinthians* (trans. James W. Leitch; Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), 275.

<sup>2</sup> William O. Walker, “1 Corinthians 15:29–34 as a Non-Pauline Interpolation,” *CBQ* 1 (2007): 84–103.

<sup>3</sup> Gordon Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 764.

<sup>4</sup> Conzelmann, *1 Corinthians*, 275.

<sup>5</sup> Fee, *The first Epistle to the Corinthians*, 762.

<sup>6</sup> One recent suggestion will be explored as an example of the response against an interpretation centered around vicarious baptism. Briefly, though, F.F. Bruce entertains the idea of vicarious baptism, but cautiously contemplates the idea that “the dead” refers to those who accept baptism for the purpose of being reunited with their departed Christian friends in the life to come. See his *I & II Corinthians* (NCB; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), 148–49. For a better articulation of this view, see Bruce D. Winter, *After Paul Left Corinth: The Influence of Secular Ethics and Social Change* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 103–105. In addition, Michael Hull’s fairly recent dissertation argues that “the βαπτιζόμενοι are those undergoing the rite of baptism. Their motivation for doing so is their steadfast faith in the resurrection of Christ and, concomitantly, of Christians. They believe the νεκροί are to be raised as Christ has been raised. They undergo the rite of baptism ‘on account of the dead’—on account of the fact that the dead are destined for life, having died hoping in the Lord’s promise of salvation.” See Hull, *Baptism on Account of the Dead (1 Cor 15:29): An Act of Faith in the Resurrection* (SBL Academia Biblica; Boston: Brill, 2005), 3. This means that the βαπτιζόμενοι are a distinct group within the Christian Corinthian community (see especially 229–35). Hull’s interpretation is intriguing, but I hesitate for two reasons. First, baptism seems to be a point of contention among members of the community as a whole (see 1 Cor 1:12–16; baptism is seen by the Corinthians as a rite that unifies an initiate with a particular leader)—Hull’s differentiation between baptized and unbaptized members in the Corinthian church is somewhat tenuous. Second, I disagree with his translation of ὑπέρ. See my argument below.

Before this can be done, though, a response must be given to William Walker's recent challenge against the authenticity of v. 29 because our interpretation hinges upon whether or not Paul even wrote it. If he did, then it necessarily engages the first-century Corinthian community and expresses Paul's own view on the matter. If not, the verse reflects nothing of Paul's thought process but rather that of a later interpolator.

*The Write Stuff: Questions of Authorship and Non-Pauline Interpolations*

Verses 29–34 have been regarded as *ad hominem* arguments<sup>7</sup> that build upon the larger apologetic of bodily resurrection in ch. 15. The actions mentioned here, those of the Corinthians and of Paul, all vehemently contradict “the position that there is no resurrection from the dead.”<sup>8</sup> If the Corinthians believe that the dead are not raised, then why βαπτίζονται ὑπὲρ αὐτῶν? If Paul himself did not believe in a bodily resurrection, why would he have faced the wild beasts in Ephesus? These questions reflect matters of practicality and (for Paul) common sense: they amount to absurdity if resurrection is denied.

But did Paul actually say any of these things? William Walker has convincingly argued that the passage “is an interpolation, neither composed by Paul nor included by him in the Corinthian letter.”<sup>9</sup> He makes the observation that the passage can stand on its own and that “the removal of vv. 29–34 would in no way alter the force of Paul's overall argument in chap. 15; indeed, the logic of the argument would be considerably clearer without these verses.”<sup>10</sup> The verses not only possess a “self-contained unity,”<sup>11</sup> they also possess a style and vocabulary that

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 760.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 763.

<sup>9</sup> Walker, “1 Corinthians 15:29–34,” 84.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 85. Walker goes further to say that if the passage “belongs” anywhere, it should be placed after vv. 12–19. It is here that “Paul discusses certain *theological* and *soteriological* implications of denying the resurrection, and this might be followed by reference to some *practical* and *ethical* implications of such denial,” namely, those found in vv. 29–34. To be placed, however, after a “majestic contemplation of God's ordered eschatological, sovereign purposes” [Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 1240] only underscores the fact that the passage is a square peg squeezed into a round hole.

is, Walker argues, non-Pauline.<sup>12</sup> In addition, the subject matter is quite unique: nowhere else does Paul<sup>13</sup> mention baptism of the dead<sup>14</sup> or the wild beasts in Ephesus. The quotation of Hebrew Scripture<sup>15</sup> and pagan literature also casts doubt on the passage's authenticity.

So if the passage did not originate with Paul, how did it find its way into the letter?

Walker offers a plausible scenario by drawing upon the work of Adolf von Harnack, who notes that the passage in question was included in Marcion's version of 1 Corinthians.<sup>16</sup> Since baptism on behalf of the dead was not unknown among Marcionite Christians,<sup>17</sup> Walker bases his theory concerning the origin of the passage on v. 29.

[Vicarious baptism by Marcionite Christians] suggests that vv. 29–34 became part of 1 Corinthians 15 no later than the middle of the second century and that Marcion himself approved of baptism on behalf of the dead . . . Indeed, such baptism was consistent with their view that salvation became possible only *after* the advent of Jesus. This raises the possibility that the practice itself originated in Marcionite or proto-Marcionite circles, as a means of salvation for people who had died before the time of Jesus. If so, 1 Cor 15:29 may have been inserted into Paul's letter by a Marcionite or proto-Marcionite interpolator in order to provide apostolic warrant for the practice.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Walker, "1 Corinthians 15:29–34," 84.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 88–92. There are ten words that are either *hapax legomena* or appear only once or twice more elsewhere in Paul's undisputed letters. For Walker, "this alone is sufficient to raise serious questions regarding Pauline authorship of 1 Cor 15:29–34."

<sup>13</sup> Nor is there any mention of the practice found elsewhere in the first century. For Walker, the lack of mention of the practice in early Christian literature only galvanizes his theory that the passage is a later, non-Pauline interpolation—absence here presents a problem for those who support Pauline authorship. However, there is no direct text-critical evidence for his theory. Indeed, "the matter must be decided on other grounds." Absence here curiously presents no problem for his argument. See his "1 Cor 15:29–34," 101–2.

<sup>14</sup> For more on v. 29, see below.

<sup>15</sup> Walker is convincing on this point. Although 1 Cor 15:32b appears to be taken from Isa 22:13b, it is the *manner* in which this verse is employed that raises Walker's suspicions. "What is surprising is the fact that although Paul elsewhere quotes the Scriptures only approvingly, to provide 'proof texts' for his own argument, the words of Scripture are employed in 1 Cor 15:32b to epitomize a position that the author strongly *opposes*." See Walker, "1 Corinthians 15:29–34," 98 (emphasis added). Not content with generalities, he makes the case for this by citing 1 Cor 1:19, 31; 2:9, 16; 3:19, 20; 5:13; 6:16; 9:9; 10:7, 26; 14:21; 15:25, 27, 45, 54, 55.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 102. The verse also appears in p46, which dates to about 200 BCE. When this is taken into consideration with the fact that Marcion enjoyed his notoriety during the first half of the second century, we can only conclude that the verse is a fairly early reading. For an excellent treatment of the textual tradition of 1 Cor, see Hull, *Baptized on Account of the Dead*, 71–84.

<sup>17</sup> See Ibid., 93 n64. "References to the practice among Marcionites appear in Chrysostom *Homiliae in epistulum ad Corinthos* 40, and perhaps in Tertullian *Adversus Marcionem* 5.10, and *De resurrectione carnis* 48. Didymus the Blind (fourth century) said that 'the Marcionites baptize the living in behalf of dead unbelievers, not knowing that baptism saves only the person who receives it.'"

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 103.

The insertion of the passage after v. 28 may have been due to the interpolator being “hesitant to break the obvious connection between the theological and soteriological features of vv. 12–19<sup>19</sup> and the soteriological and eschatological features of vv. 20–28. *If so, this would leave the insertion of the interpolation after vv. 20–28 as the only other reasonable option.*”<sup>20</sup>

As convincing as Walker’s arguments are, he fails to address the pressing issues of coauthorship and secretarial influence. E. Randolph Richards argues that there is more to first-century letter-writing than meets the eye.<sup>21</sup> While there is a consensus across the board that Paul utilized the services of an amanuensis in the composition of his letters, scholars “rarely discuss the actual mechanics of the letter-writing process.”<sup>22</sup> Secretarial involvement in letter-writing varied greatly and played a major role in the actual composition and final form of a letter.<sup>23</sup> Writing in the first-century was a corporate enterprise,<sup>24</sup> and Richards goes to great lengths to expose modern assumptions of Paul the letter writer<sup>25</sup> and to show that the letter-writing process was just that—a process.

Our “modern Western preference for individuality”<sup>26</sup> tends to overshadow the fact that letter-writing in the first century was a community effort. “Paul did not work alone,”<sup>27</sup> nor would the idea to do so ever have occurred to him. One need look no further than the letter address to see this.<sup>28</sup> Of particular interest here is 1 Cor 1:1, where Paul lists Sosthenes as a

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<sup>19</sup> Again, this is where Walker feels the passage appropriately “belongs.” See n4 above.

<sup>20</sup> Walker, “1 Corinthians 15:29–34,” 103 (emphasis added).

<sup>21</sup> See E. Randolph Richards, *Paul and First-Century Letter Writing: Secretaries, Composition, and Collection* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004). Richards does note the exception of 1–2 Thessalonians, where “commentators have long seemed more likely to grant Timothy a collaborative voice than in any other letters” (35).

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 19. The exception to the rule is Jerome Murphy-O’Connor, *Paul the Letter-Writer: His World, His Options, His Skills* (Good News Studies 41; Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1995).

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 60–93.

<sup>24</sup> In short, Paul did not relegate himself to the austere confines of an office on the fourth floor of the campus library. He more than likely worked in crowded, noisy conditions with his co-authors making notes, working through drafts, consulting with an amanuensis, and polishing final copies. For the full discussion, see Richards.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 20–31.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 27. See also n24 above.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

cosender. Despite an overwhelming tendency to regard the individuals named in the opening address as “nothing more” than cosenders or coworkers<sup>29</sup> (if they are even acknowledged as such),<sup>30</sup> Richards argues for a more integral role. “When Paul lists a cosender, there is no evidence to claim this is anything other than a *coauthor*.”<sup>31</sup> Sosthenes, according to Richards’ paradigm, had a hand in the actual composition of 1 Corinthians.<sup>32</sup>

The implications of corporate authorship weigh heavily upon Walker’s thesis. Granted, vv. 29–34 read nothing like what we find elsewhere in Paul and could rightly be labeled an interpolation. “Interpolation,” however, does not necessarily equal “non-Pauline.”<sup>33</sup> Perhaps Sosthenes contributed this portion of the letter (on Paul’s behalf) post-composition but

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<sup>28</sup> See also 2 Cor 1:1 (Paul and Timothy); Phil 1:1 (Paul and Timothy); Col 1:1 (Paul and Timothy); 1 Thess 1:1 (Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy); 2 Thess 1:1 (Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy).

<sup>29</sup> Some equate a cosender with an amanuensis. See Graydon F. Snyder, *First Corinthians: A Faith Community Commentary*, (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1992), 19. Although this is certainly plausible, Paul’s letters seem to differentiate between the two; if Tertius was truly a *cosender* of Romans, he would have been mentioned in the letter address instead of appending his own greeting at the end (Romans 16:22). As Richards shows, there is a difference between a cosender/coauthor and an amanuensis. See Richards, *Paul and First-Century Letter Writing*, 64–80.

<sup>30</sup> See Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 28. Conzelmann acknowledges Sosthenes to be no more than the “customary designation” of “brother,” which “hints at the distance between him and the ‘Apostle’” Paul. See his *1 Corinthians*, 20. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 70 allows Sosthenes an integral role as part of Paul’s “staff” but does not clarify what he means by this. Ben Witherington is unique in that he entertains the notion of Sosthenes being a coauthor. Ultimately, however, Witherington consigns him to the realm of amanuensis due to the fact that “I [and not *we*] is the dominant pronoun” throughout the letter. See his *The Paul Quest: The Renewed Search for the Jew of Tarsus* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 102. It must be reiterated, however, that, based upon n29 above, an amanuensis probably would not have appended his name at the beginning of a letter. In addition, the back-and-forth tension of chs. 8–10 could be explained by an in-writing dialogue between Sosthenes and Paul—this would very much allow for Witherington’s observation concerning the dominant use of a singular, first-person pronoun. I thus contend that Sosthenes was more than an amanuensis and had a more prominent part to play in the construction of the letter.

<sup>31</sup> Richards, *Paul and First-Century Letter Writing*, 35 (emphasis added).

<sup>32</sup> A coauthor’s level of involvement varied. See *Ibid.*, 109–121.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 99–108.

pre-dispatch. This would account for the disparities in vocabulary, content, and style.<sup>34</sup> Though the passage (may have) originated with Sosthenes, the fact that Paul signed off on the letter means that Sosthenes' words became his own.<sup>35</sup> Therefore, the passage may indeed be an interpolation, but that does not mean *de facto* that it is non-Pauline. Indeed, the intricate web of corporate authorship and secretarial influence rule out the modern idea that there exists an unadulterated "Pauline style" of writing. "Because Paul used coauthors and a secretary, his writing style was 'diluted.' His letters were *team* letters, so *statistical measures of style are not effective in determining authenticity.*"<sup>36</sup>

To reiterate, Walker's arguments are convincing. The passage does interrupt the flow of ch. 15, and Walker's historical reconstruction concerning the origin of these verses is indeed plausible. However, it is equally plausible (perhaps more) that the passage originated due to the complexities of the letter-writing process in the first century. Corporate authorship and secretarial influences are issues which are too easily dismissed (if addressed at all), but they

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<sup>34</sup> This is, of course, speculation, but scholars are nothing if not (plausibly) imaginative. This idea, however, only begs the questions as to why Sosthenes (and Paul) would feel compelled to include these verses in the first place. Perhaps word of vicarious baptism arrived after completion of the letter, and the passage was constructed in response to the practice. The writing team responds to the situation by laying out the practical implications for the Corinthians *and* for Paul of denying the physical resurrection. Speculative, yes, but plausible nonetheless. Against Walker, Murphy-O'Connor proposes that v. 29 is a logical continuation of vv. 20–28. "The climax of the discussion in vv. 20–28 would have triggered in Paul's mind an association of ideas which induced him to present apostolic labours as the next argument in favor of the resurrection. Since this is certainly the point in vv. 30–32, it is only reasonable to suppose that v. 29 fits into this line of thought." Verses 30–32, in other words, flesh out a general statement of apostolic labor (rather than Corinthian activity) that is presented in v. 29. See Jerome Murphy-O'Connor, "Baptized for the Dead (1 Cor., XV, 29): A Corinthian Slogan?" *RB* 4 (1981): 533–4. Also in line with Murphy-O'Connor's view of apostolic labors and suffering is Craig S. Keener, *1–2 Corinthians* (NCBC; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 128–29. But what of vv. 33–34? Murphy-O'Connor does not address whether or not they fit into this paradigm of "apostolic labours." His omission leads me to conclude that he believes they do not. If this is true, then it is not necessary for v. 29 to be pressed for such a meaning. Again, these are *ad hominem* arguments that contribute to Paul's larger apologetic of a bodily resurrection.

<sup>35</sup> Our Western penchant for intellectual property rights would have been unfamiliar to Paul (and his team) concerning this matter. Someone may say that 2 Thess 2:2 contradicts this idea, but the concern there is pseudonymous literature being dispersed in the name of Paul (or, in keeping with the "us" of the verse, in the name of Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy) and has nothing to do with the dyadic and collaborative nature of composing a letter.

<sup>36</sup> Richards, *Paul and First-Century Letter Writing*, 155 (emphasis added).

demand more serious attention than what they currently receive. Until such matters receive an adequate response, the passage must be taken as Pauline.<sup>37</sup>

Reading the Text: Questions of Interpretation

The greatest obstacle in properly interpreting 1 Cor 15:29 is the text itself: there is simply not that much to go on. Who are the dead? Who among the Corinthians is being baptized for the dead? Where did the Corinthian church get this idea of vicarious baptism, if that indeed is the idea behind this verse? How should ὑπέρ be translated with the genitive here? Efforts to translate this preposition in a causal or final sense simply do not satisfy here.<sup>38</sup> The more natural rendering offers “on behalf of” or “in the place of”<sup>39</sup> and thus lends towards an interpretation of vicarious baptism. Marcion certainly interpreted it this way. Again, this verse was included in his canon, and it is not at all unreasonable to presume that it provided the impetus for his community to participate in this form of baptism. This brings us to the crucial point in translation. It matters little whether one agrees or disagrees with Marcion on theological grounds—it must be remembered that Koine was, for him, a *living* language. Indeed, it was the *lingua franca* of the day. If he and his community interpreted ὑπέρ in this manner, then so should we who today study Koine as a *dead* language.

Translation issues also surround βαπτιζόμενοι/βαπτίζονται and τῶν νεκρῶν. Should these terms be taken literally or metaphorically? Unfortunately, the text itself (seemingly) does not readily answer these questions. As a result, interpretations abound as scholars seek to uncover this verse’s meaning. These attempts to elucidate the issue, however, have only clouded things even more. One can almost hear the exasperation in Fee’s voice when

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<sup>37</sup> Given everything above, even the terms “Pauline” and “Paul” are slippery. Any mention of “Paul” in this writing bears in mind the tenuous idea that the man is not an island unto himself.

<sup>38</sup> The notable exception here is Hull, *Baptism on Account of the Dead*, 29–36. However, I disagree with him for reasons outlined below.

<sup>39</sup> See Harald Reisenfeld, “ὑπέρ,” *TDNT* 8:512–13.

he says that “more than forty different solutions have been suggested”<sup>40</sup> in regard to this verse. “There has been only a trickle of new ideas, and certainly nothing close to a consensus on the proper interpretation has emerged. This has led to an exegetical agnosticism on the part of many scholars.”<sup>41</sup> The consensus, though, is that Paul is referring to some sort of vicarious baptism, and most work done on the verse is a variation on that theme. However, those supporting such a view must contend with four objections which are aptly summarized by Joel White.

- (1) There is a complete “lack of any contextual mooring.”<sup>42</sup> To argue for vicarious baptism is to suggest a complete break between vv. 28 and 29.
- (2) Why would anyone who denies the resurrection of the dead participate in rituals on their behalf?<sup>43</sup>
- (3) There is no historical precedent from the time of Paul for the practice.<sup>44</sup> Vicarious baptism does not enter the picture until a century later.
- (4) “Why would Paul muster as an argument a custom that seems so at odds with his entire theology?”<sup>45</sup> Surely Paul would be appalled by such a practice. Why did he not condemn it?

Carrying over White’s objections, James Patrick recently proposed that “new believers

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<sup>40</sup> Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 762. One senses not only exasperation but resignation (or perhaps humility): “One may consider it axiomatic that when there is such a wide divergence of opinion, no one knows what in fact was going on. The best one can do in terms of particulars is point out what appear to be the more viable options, but finally to admit ignorance” (762–3). Fee, with some reticence, says that “the most likely options are (a) that [the verse] reflects some believers being baptized for others who were or were on their way to becoming believers when they died (e.g. as in 11:30), but had never been baptized; or (b) that it reflects the concern of members of households for some of their own number who had died before becoming believers” (767).

<sup>41</sup> Joel R. White, “Baptized on Account of the Dead’: The Meaning of 1 Corinthians 15:29 in its Context,” *JBL* 3 (1997): 487. See 488–492 for a brief overview and critique of the major interpretive approaches. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 1240–1249, offers a more detailed survey and ultimately concludes that Paul is referring to vicarious baptism.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 489. Context is, rightfully so, Murphy-O’Connor’s constant theme as he seeks a different interpretation. See n33 above.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 490.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

were receiving baptism after conversion through the testimony of dead apostles, and in doing so were baptized into their name, an expression of allegiance in order to bring them greater honour.”<sup>46</sup> In other words, new converts were being baptized in the name of dead apostles. In this sense, βαπτιζόμενοι/βαπτίζονται and τῶν νεκρῶν are taken literally. “The dead” (τῶν νεκρῶν) are none other than the apostles who have proclaimed the message of Jesus to the Corinthians.

Patrick’s read of the text remains true to context of the letter as a whole, and he is to be commended for his insistence on recognizing the context of the passage. Concerning the immediate context, seeing the dead (τῶν νεκρῶν) as suffering apostles would explain the peculiarities of vv. 30–32 (although I disagree with him on this point—see below). Concerning the context of the entire letter, it carries over the honor contest of 1:12–15; being baptized in the name of an apostle brings honor not only to the apostle but to the initiate, as well. Given this, it seems somewhat lopsided to argue for a metaphorical read of “the dead” here when the whole of ch. 15 concerns itself with the resurrection of those who are literally dead, including Jesus (Paul’s exemplar for the resurrection). Any interpretation seeking to stretch the meaning of “the dead” beyond what the chapter addresses asks too much. Why would Paul consistently use the term in a literal fashion and then suddenly switch to a metaphorical meaning?<sup>47</sup> While it is true that Paul consistently recounts his gospel-induced sufferings in horrific terms throughout his

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<sup>46</sup> James E. Patrick, “Living Rewards for Dead Apostles: ‘Baptised for the Dead’ in 1 Corinthians 15.29.” *NTS* 1 (2006): 85. Patrick draws upon the previous work of White, “Baptized on Account of the Dead,” who takes a similar stance, and Murphy-O’Connor, “A Corinthian Slogan,” who rightfully insists that the context of ch. 15 must be taken into consideration when interpreting this verse. In any event, each of these scholars believes that vicarious baptism is not the underlying idea behind v. 29. For objections to vicarious baptism, see below.

<sup>47</sup> Co-authorship and secretarial involvement could be suggested as the reason for this disparity. It must be reiterated, however, that Paul signed off on the letter—as leader of the writing team, Paul could very well have eliminated the verse from the letter if he believed that it did not suit his purposes concerning an apologetic of bodily resurrection. The fact that it remains, regardless of how it came to be here, means that Paul believed it to carry on with his thought process, and in ch. 15 that thought process is concerned with bodily resurrection. “Dead” here should be taken literally.

letters, he does not do so here. This means that καὶ in v. 30 would be translated as “also;” it continues Paul’s *ad hominem* arguments but with a different thought.<sup>48</sup>

However, the initial objections to vicarious baptism that both Patrick and White raise are not warranted. The reason there appears to be a break between vv. 28 and 29 (Objection 1) is because there *is* one. As stated above, the vocabulary, style, and syntax of vv. 29–34 all suggest that the passage is indeed an interpolation. That does not mean, however, that it is non-Pauline (see above). Given this, though, why would Paul not object to a misappropriated ritual that (seemingly, to us) so obviously goes against his theology (Objection 4)?<sup>49</sup> He had plenty to say concerning improper behavior at the Lord’s table in 11:17–33. Where is his dissent now? The problem with this assumption is that we think that Paul should be concerned about the things we say he should be concerned about, and it bothers us when he is not. Paul almost certainly didn’t initiate the practice—there is nothing in Jewish literature or Paul’s letter’s to suggest such. Why, then, did he not condemn the practice when it seems to go against what we would call a “proper” Pauline theology? Perhaps he was ambivalent about the matter. “Paul’s noncommittal attitude, while not implying approval, would seem to suggest that he did not consider this to be as serious a fault as most interpreters do.”<sup>50</sup> Baptizing on behalf of the dead did no harm—neither did it do any good, but Paul does not seem to be too concerned about it. As much as it pains those of us who prefer a staunch, hard-headed Paul, perhaps he simply let the matter slide—much like what

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<sup>48</sup> To paraphrase, Paul would be saying, “And another thing . . .”

<sup>49</sup> An objection to the objection is 1 Cor 7:10–16. It is here that Paul allows for some sort of vicarious sanctification in a marriage between a believer and an unbeliever. [See Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethic* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1996), 357–361]. The difference, however, is the act of the baptism—there is a physical action taken by one for the sake of another. Vicarious sanctification, on the other hand, happens by virtue of the marriage relationship. On the other hand, 2 Macc 12:43–45 gives the account of Judas Maccabeus providing a sin offering on behalf of his slain soldiers. Given this, it is clear “that at least *some* Jews of Paul’s era held beliefs that might have made baptism for the dead an intelligible practice” [Ibid., *First Corinthians* (Interpretation; Louisville: John Knox Press, 1989), 267]. Paul does not explicitly express approval or disapproval one way or the other.

<sup>50</sup> Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 767.

happened with eating meat offered to idols. This practice seemed to have actually gained ground and caused some confusion. Paul then had to make a more cogent argument against the practice that appears somewhat convoluted (see chs. 8-10. Is Paul for it or against it?).<sup>51</sup> In the case of vicarious baptism, the practice did not gain ground or continue to cause confusion (like eating idol meat), as evidenced by its marked absence in 2 Corinthians. Paul simply let the matter die on its own,<sup>52</sup> and if Paul himself did not make a big deal out of the matter, then neither should we.

In addition, to say that vicarious baptism is a practice without precedent in Paul's day (Objection 3) ignores the fact that we indeed have a reference to the practice—Paul himself! Perhaps this reference is precisely the precedent that scholars have been looking for—after all, there is a first time for everything. While “the paucity of references to [the practice] by Christian writers suggests neither a widespread nor long-lived phenomenon,”<sup>53</sup> this simply means that the practice was *rare*, not *nonexistent*. In other words, the lack of historical parallels does not rule out *a priori* that Paul is referencing a practice other than vicarious baptism. The absence of any sort of parallel contemporary with Paul is a given, but the problem lies with the interpreter, not with the text, and certainly not with Paul.<sup>54</sup> That fact that we are unfamiliar (uncomfortable?) with the practice does not necessarily mean that Paul or the Corinthians were, as well. It is thus not too much to presume that Paul and the Christian community in Corinth knew about vicarious baptism for the dead. Citing archaeological data from first-century Corinth and its surrounding area, Richard DeMaris has shown that while there was indeed a great deal of overlap among

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<sup>51</sup> See n30 above.

<sup>52</sup> I am indebted to Rodney R. Reeves for his thoughts regarding Paul's “troubling” silence on the matter. His insight has always been invaluable.

<sup>53</sup> Richard E. DeMaris, “Corinthian Religion and Baptism for the Dead (1 Corinthians 15:29): Insights from Archaeology and Anthropology,” *JBL* 4 (1995), 673.

<sup>54</sup> 1 Thess 4:13–5:11 shows that some of Paul's congregations did indeed have ideas about the state of the dead. This does not necessarily *prove* that baptism for the dead is the best read of 1 Cor 15:29, but it does offer a rough parallel to show that the living were concerned with the affairs of the dead.

Greco-Roman chthonic practices, there was also a great deal of diversity. “An increasing awareness of regional variations in ancient religion . . . [has] made the generalizations of the past somewhat suspect.”<sup>55</sup> It is entirely possible that one of these regional variations was baptism for the dead.

White, unconvinced by DeMaris<sup>56</sup> and voicing Objection 2, perhaps oversimplifies the matter when he equates a denial of bodily resurrection with a lack of care for the dead. Although Hellenistic dualism indeed favored the spirit over the body,<sup>57</sup> this is not to say that such a view leaned “toward an antimaterialism which led to the denial *that anything done in the physical realm could have any effect whatsoever in the spiritual realm.*”<sup>58</sup> If this is true, then why the various rituals on behalf of the dead? For example, why would Greeks and Romans place a coin in the mouth of the dead to pay Charon to ferry them across the Styx if they did not believe that their actions in this realm had no effect in the next?<sup>59</sup> Expiration of the body signaled the *start* of the journey that was death—it was not the end in and of itself, and the living, particularly family members, bore the obligation of easing the critical transition from this life to the next. Given this, baptism for dead “was more likely undertaken for the recently deceased than for the long departed”<sup>60</sup> and was a ritual to guide the dead into the afterlife.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> DeMaris, “Corinthian Religion,” 663 (brackets original); citing Nancy Boodkis, “The Sanctuary of Demeter and Kore: An Archaeological Approach to Ancient Religion,” paper presented at the Archaeological Institute of America 1<sup>st</sup> Regional Symposium, Columbia, MO, 1987; summarized in *AJA* 91 (1987), 480–81.

<sup>56</sup> White, “Baptized on Account of the Dead,” 490 n15. “Unconvinced” is probably too strong a word. He does indeed laud the wealth of information amassed by DeMaris, but he also urges caution due to the complete absence for baptism of the dead elsewhere. Again, though, we do have Paul, and the mention of the practice is rare, not nonexistent.

<sup>57</sup> See the wonderful overview in N.T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 39–58.

<sup>58</sup> White, “Baptized on Account of the Dead,” 489 n13 (emphasis added).

<sup>59</sup> DeMaris, “Corinthian Religion,” 675. See 675–77 for further examples.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>61</sup> “Afterlife” for the Corinthians, given Paul’s apologetic in 1 Cor 15, was most likely seen on Platonic terms—the spirit of a recently departed loved one would, presumably, be joined with that of Jesus. See below. In the end, a great deal of scholarship hears Paul talking in terms of vicarious baptism. See Fee, *The First Epistle to the*

Letting Paul Speak for Himself

“Otherwise, what will 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>62</sup> In 1 Cor 15:29, Paul believes that the Corinthians<sup>63</sup> have embraced a *non sequitur*—why would they baptize on behalf of the dead if there is no resurrection? For Paul, the contradiction inherent with such a view is obvious. For us, however, it is not. The only thing we can glean from the verse is the fact that baptism and resurrection (and, by extension, death) are somehow complimentary to one another. The best recourse to further clarify this, then, is to let Paul interpret himself. How might his own views of baptism shed light upon such an obscure practice?

“There are four places in 1 Corinthians where Paul mentions baptism, more than in any of his other letters, yet baptism itself is never his principal topic.”<sup>64</sup> One of these places is v. 29, but given the obscurity inherent with the verse, nothing can be determined conclusively apart from what is mentioned above. Paul’s remarks in 1:12–17 make two things clear: (1) that the Corinthians do not understand what baptism entails in terms of its significance and (2) that Paul downplays the importance of baptism not for its own sake, but for the sake of the

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*Corinthians*, 767; Victor Paul Furnish, *The Theology of the First Letter to the Corinthians* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 91; Hays, *First Corinthians*, 266–68; Richard A. Horsley, *1 Corinthians* (ANTC; Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998), 206–207; William F. Orr and James Arthur Walther, *1 Corinthians* (AB; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1976), 337; Snyder, *First Corinthians*, 202–203; Witherington, *Conflict and Community in Corinth*; and Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, 338–39.

<sup>62</sup> 1 Cor 15:29. All Scriptures quotations are taken from the NRSV unless noted otherwise.

<sup>63</sup> Mark Given offered a keen insight as he reviewed this paper: scholarship tends to treat “the Corinthians” as a monolithic entity when the letters, in fact, show an obvious diversity among the group. The identity of “the Corinthians” is just as multi-faceted as “Paul” (see 4–7 and n37 above. As with “Paul,” any mention of “the Corinthians” bears in mind this complex diversity.) Given cites 1 Cor 15:12 as an example: “Some of you” say there is no resurrection from the dead. So who among the Corinthians is undergoing baptism? Is it a practice in which the entire community participates? Is it only those who believe in the resurrection? I would suggest that those undergoing proxy baptism are those who *deny* the resurrection. Again, v. 29 is placed within Paul’s larger apologetic of bodily resurrection, so it would seem fitting that he would use it as a response against those who deny bodily resurrection. I thus maintain (see my argument below) that the Corinthians have indeed embraced a *non sequitur*—it makes no sense to baptize for the dead if there is no resurrection.

<sup>64</sup> Furnish, *The Theology of the First Letter to the Corinthians*, 91.

misunderstanding that it has caused. He does not denigrate baptism in anyway.<sup>65</sup> In 10:1–2, Paul effectively says that the people of God, including Israel of the past, have always had a form of baptism, but “even this did not secure [Israel] against perishing in the desert and losing out on God’s final and greatest blessing.”<sup>66</sup> Again, the Corinthians’ misunderstanding of baptism<sup>67</sup> becomes clear here, and Paul feels the need to offer some corrective in vv. 6–13.<sup>68</sup> Finally, Paul argues in 12:13 that “what makes the Corinthians one is their common experience of the Spirit.”<sup>69</sup> Fee is right to note that it is the one Spirit, or more specifically the “common *reception* of the Spirit,”<sup>70</sup> that is the basis of this unity, and not baptism in and of itself. The Corinthians are thus baptized *into* one body of Jesus in the sense that the “body” of Jesus is the community of faith. For Paul, baptism is a *unifying* rite, and not one that encourages competition and division among the members of the one body.<sup>71</sup>

It is this idea of union that explains Paul’s use of baptism as part of his apologetic in 15:29. For Paul, baptism is not restricted solely to the ritual act nor is it solely an act of initiation into a group. It “is the inner as well as the outward act. It denotes the spiritual reality symbolized by the ritual.”<sup>72</sup> For our purposes, this “spiritual reality” is best conveyed in Rom 6:3–5, a passage that further explicates Paul’s thoughts in 1 Cor 12:13:

Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore, we have been buried with him through baptism into death, so that, just as Jesus was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.

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<sup>65</sup> So Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 60–62.

<sup>66</sup> Witherington, *Conflict and Community in Corinth*, 219.

<sup>67</sup> Paul’s tone in 10:1–5 seems to imply that Corinthians do indeed misunderstand the significance of baptism.

<sup>68</sup> Oddly enough, this discussion of baptism is entrenched in the argument concerning meat sacrificed to idols.. As mentioned above, eating meat sacrificed to idols is apparently not a bad thing, nor is it good, either (from what we can gather in chs. 8-10). Baptism here is thus used as a tool for Paul’s rather ambiguous argument concerning the larger issue of idol meat.

<sup>69</sup> Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 603. I follow Fee rather closely concerning this verse.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 605.

<sup>71</sup> The same idea is at work in Gal 3:27.

<sup>72</sup> James D.G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 444.

The significance of baptism that the Corinthians seemed to have missed was the idea of union not just with one another, but with Jesus. For Paul, the ritual act of baptism images the divine act<sup>73</sup> of union with Jesus<sup>74</sup> in two ways. First, it joins the baptized with Jesus in his death.<sup>75</sup> The phrase συνετάφημεν οὖν αὐτῷ, “we have therefore been co-buried with him,” in 6:4 is particularly interesting—the idea conveyed is that one shares a grave with Jesus. “Although Paul’s use of this term [συνθάπτω] is clearly metaphorical, it conveys the idea of ‘real death,’ since burial is the climactic moment in the ritual of dying, the point of no return.”<sup>76</sup> The Corinthians, denying a bodily resurrection of the dead (τῶν νεκρῶν) could possibly have envisioned proxy baptism as a way of joining the soul of the departed with that of a dead Jesus. This is certainly plausible given the Hellenistic dualism that privileged spirit over flesh.<sup>77</sup>

For Paul, however, that is not enough. Baptism not only joins one with Jesus in his death, but also in his resurrection. In 6:4b, the purpose (ἵνα) of being buried with Jesus is so that (ὥσπερ), just as Jesus was raised from the dead (ἐκ νεκρῶν), “we too might walk in newness of life” (4c). Lest we think that Paul is “only” exhorting the Romans concerning ethical conduct, he states in v. 5 that joining Jesus in death leads to a future joining in his resurrection. This fits well with Paul’s argument in ch. 15 because he is arguing for resurrection on two fronts—the resurrection of Jesus and the resurrection of the dead as evidenced by the resurrection of Jesus. In short, practicing the ritual act of baptism implies a belief in resurrection by default, and Paul calls out the Corinthians on their *non sequitur*.

### Conclusion

<sup>73</sup> I am following Dunn rather closely here. See his *Romans 1–8* (Dallas: Word Books, 1988), 311–12.

<sup>74</sup> See also Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 360.

<sup>75</sup> Even Jesus used baptism as an image in describing his own death. See Mark 10:38–39 and Luke 12:50.

<sup>76</sup> Robert Jewett, *Romans* (Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007) 398.

<sup>77</sup> See n56 above. This would then beg the question as to where the Corinthians got an idea like vicarious baptism. I suggest that they got it from Paul—they misunderstood his teachings concerning baptism (1:12-16 makes that clear) and carried on with a practice that Paul never taught them.

For translation purposes, the simplest and most natural read of the Greek text is indeed the best— “the baptized” and “the dead” are to be taken literally, and ὑπέρ is to be understood in a representative sense, all of which lends towards an interpretation of vicarious baptism on behalf of the dead. Proper historical method dictates the necessity of parallels and consistency, but there is almost always an exception to the rule—I suggest that vicarious baptism of the dead is one such exception. In addition, the passage is almost certainly Pauline—the complex mechanics of the letter-writing process in the first century must be given greater attention than what they currently receive. Until they receive a more refined response, I cautiously suggest that relegating troublesome verses to the dustbin of “non-Pauline interpolations,” despite all the careful work that has been done, might be taking the easy way out.

Ultimately, Paul never approved or disapproved of proxy baptism because it did not cause him the concern that it causes us. For the Corinthian community, the practice apparently subsided, and I believe that 1 Cor 15:29 was the reason for this. Paul reveals the inherent contradiction between the practice of baptism (in any form, but particularly baptism of the dead in v. 29) and the denial of bodily resurrection, and the force of his argument worked—the Corinthians ceased from participating in proxy baptism because Paul showed that it did not mesh with their belief that there is no resurrection from the dead. Again, for Paul, baptism and resurrection go hand in hand—why would one undergo baptism if the dead are not raised? The “dead in the water” testify to the resurrection of Jesus and to the future resurrection of those who are joined to him, and Paul reveals to the Corinthians that what they *say* they believe and what they *show* they believe are two different things.

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