Notes on 1C 15.29: baptized for the dead?

Setting the Context – An Outline of 1Cor 15:
Refutation of the teaching denying the resurrection of the body:
"There is not a resurrection of the dead." [1–34 *cf.* 12]
> **The *historical* argument:** "Christ died…was raised" [1–11]
> This gospel saves when received and retained by faith.
> **The *logical* argument:** "If there is not a resurrection of the dead, neither was Christ raised" [12–28]
> If Christ is *not* raised, there are consequences:
> * gospel preaching is worthless and false
> * faith is worthless
> * believers are still in their sins
> * dead believers have perished
> * all believers are pitiful
>
> If Christ is raised, there are also consequences:
> * all will be raised
> * all enemies will be abolished
> * all will be subjected to God
>
> **The *practical* argument:** "If the dead are not raised at all, why then are they baptized for them?" [29–34]
> * why be baptized and die to self
> * why suffer and sacrifice for others

Answer to the question concerning the nature of the resurrection body: "How are the dead raised; with what kind of body do they come?" [35–58]
> **The essence of the body will be changed** [35–49]
> * a body related to the body which died
> * a body adapted to heaven
>   "imperishable" – not subject to decay, dissolution, interruption, death
>   "glory" – given to transcendent circumstances
>   "power" – capable of functioning without hindrance
>   "spiritual" – attuned to matters of the Spirit [God][1]
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> **The dead body will be raised** [50–58]
> * clothed with "immortality"
> * "death" will be "swallowed up"

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[1] If "spiritual" means "not physical, not material," or "spirit, immaterial" [as some, who deny a *bodily* resurrection, suggest], then what becomes of the "spirit" existing in the "body" that not only produced a "living soul," but defines "death" (Jas 2.24) and "resurrection" (Ezek 37.5–14), and is with Christ, but "naked," at death (2C 5.1–10)?

1Cor 15.29
Ἐπεὶ τί ποιήσουσιν οἱ βαπτιζόμενοι ὑπὲρ τῶν νεκρῶν; εἰ ὅλως νεκροὶ οὐκ ἐγείρονται, τί καὶ βαπτίζονται ὑπὲρ αὐτῶν;
Otherwise, what will they do, the ones being baptized on behalf of the dead? If the dead are not raised at all, why then are they baptized on behalf of them?

This is a much debated passage, with numerous interpretations. It well illustrates the point that believers should not attempt to establish a significant doctrine on a single obscure passage, particularly when that passage seems to suggest a teaching or practice diametrically opposed to the clear theology of Scripture as a whole.[2] When such an apparent conflict arises, it is probably best to capitulate to the possibility, if not the likelihood, of one's own misinterpretation, rather than set Scripture against Scripture.

Three [3] basic questions must be addressed:
1. Who are οἱ βαπτιζόμενοι [*the ones being baptized*]?
2. Who are τῶν νεκρῶν [*the dead*]?
3. What does ὑπὲρ [*for, on behalf of*] mean?

1. Who are οἱ βαπτιζόμενοι?
The use of the third person plurals, ποιήσουσιν [*they will do*] and βαπτίζονται [*they are baptized*], rather than second person plurals, might suggest that not all of the readers were involved in the practice, but only a specific group within the church is in view [*cf.* 7.29; 15.18]. This is not to suggest, however, that the church as a whole was opposed to the practice, otherwise, Paul's argument would have had little import. It would be pointless to reinforce his argument to the whole church by demonstrating the inconsistencies of a belief held and practiced by only an isolated group within the church.
The specific group could well refer to *new converts* in the church, as the present tenses of the participle [οἱ βαπτιζόμενοι] and the finite indicative [βαπτίζονται] would allow. They would in effect constitute a group within the church, even though all Paul's readers had also been baptized [1C 12.13 *cf.* 1.13–17; 6.11; Gal 3.26–27; Mk 16.16; *etc.*],

[2]In modern times, the Mormon practice of baptism for the dead is a unique example of this very issue. Outside of Mormonism, and despite the widespread varying interpretations of this passage, I know of no sect of Christendom that holds its view of this passage as a significant doctrine.

possibly, also, on behalf of the dead.[3] Whoever the reference is to, the use of the third person does not forcefully militate against a universal practice of 'baptism on behalf of the dead" in Corinth.[4] See below.

2. Who are τῶν νεκρῶν?

Paul uses the adjective νεκρός [*dead*] 13 times in 1Corinthians, all in chapter 15 [12–13, 15–16, 20–21, 29, 32, 35, 42, 52], accordingly, always in the context of the **physical** resurrection of Christ from "the dead" [*cf.* 15.3–4]. There is little doubt this chapter is speaking of **physical** death and resurrection, and certainly in 29b, νεκροὶ must be so understood. Unless Paul makes a radical transition to the "*spiritually* dead" in 29a, or "dead" in some other metaphorical sense, it too must be understood as those who are, or will be, *physically* dead.[5] Paul does use this adjective metaphorically of [living] believers "**dead** to sin, but alive to God" [Rm 6.11], those once "spiritually" **dead** in sin prior to conversion [Rm 6.13; 11.15; Eph 2.1, 5; 5.14; Col 2.13 *cf.* Mt 8.22; Lk 15.24, 32; Jn 5.25; 1P 4.6; Rev 3.1], and of those living presently in **dead** (mortal) bodies [Rm 8.10 *cf.* θνητός (*subject to death, mortal*, cognate of θνῄσκω, *to die*) in 8.11; 6.12; 1C 15.53–54; 2C 4.11; 5.4], but the sense here is almost certainly a reference to the *physically* dead.[6]

The difficulty is determining precisely who "the dead" are. Certainly, it is true "the dead" considered universally, *i.e., all* dead people, lost and saved alike, can be included under this rubric—in fact, generally that may be the case. However, why would living Christians be baptized for the *lost* among "the dead"? In certain contexts Paul clearly limits the phrase to [saved] believers [1Th 4.16], and this seems to be the case in 1C 15 [*cf.* 15.18–19]. Then the question arises as to why this

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[3]Indeed, the others in the church were likely the ones baptizing the new converts. In such a case, the purpose—*on behalf of the dead*—for both groups could no doubt be the same.

[4]The third person can be used as a rhetorical device to simply generalize realities or be less direct, and so refer to all in the church at Corinth [*cf.* 9.24; 2C 5.15; Rm 8.5; 10.15; *etc.*].

[5]Paul elsewhere normally uses the adjective νεκρός in this sense [Rm 1.4; 4.17, 24; 6.4, 9; 7.4; 8.11; 10.7, 9; 2C 1.9; Gal 1.1; Eph 1.20; Phil 3.11; Col 1.18; 2.12; 1Th 1.10; 4.16; 2Tm 2.8]. There is some question as to the sense in Rm 14.9 and 2Tm 4.1.

[6]The reader should take caution in making a sharp contrast between "physical" and "spiritual" death, for Scripture inseparably links them. Both the spiritual and physical comprise the complete person, and Christ redeems both [1Thess 5.23]. Nevertheless, Scripture likewise distinguishes the two kinds of death.

group in Corinth was being baptized for dead believers already "in Christ," who presumably had been baptized themselves [1C 12.12–13].[7]

Is there any sense in which "the dead" could be anticipatory or categorical without a strictly temporal setting? The most common understanding of 'the [physically] dead' is from a *temporal* perspective, *i.e.,* they were dead at *the time of reference*; they had already died when the baptisms occurred. However, the term is often—if not generally—understood from an *atemporal* or better, *omnitemporal* perspective, related to existing at any or all times, *i.e.,* 'the dead' is viewed simply as that category of reality, which exists at any given point in time [*e.g.,* when Jesus died], and at every point antecedent and subsequent to that that point in time. It is the category in which all people ultimately participate at some given point in time [Mt 22.31–32; Mk 12.25–27; 1Thess 4.13–17 *cf.* Jn 5.28–29; Rm 14.9; 2C 1.9; Phil 3.11; Col 1.18; 2Tm 4.1; Heb 6.2; 1P 4.5; Rev 1.5; 11.18; 14.13; 20.5, 12–13].[8] To view Jesus as "risen from *the dead*" is to view him as one [the first and *only* one, thus far] delivered from that universal category of humanity, not merely as one delivered from a particular group of "the dead" in reference to his own time.[9]

3. What does ὑπὲρ mean?
ὑπὲρ w/gen occurs 130 times in the Greek New Testament, 176 times in LXX. In the Greek construct ὑπὲρ with the genitive [primarily as a personal adjective/pronoun], the basic uses include:
- Representation/Advantage: *on behalf of, for the sake of* Mk 14.24; Lk 22.19–20 [1C 11.24]; Jn 13.37–38; 17.19; Acts 8.24; 21.26; Rm 8.27, 31, 34; 9.3; 10.1*; 15.30*; 16.4; 2C 1.6; 5.21; 9.14; 12.15; Eph 3.1, 13; 6.19*; Phil 1.4*; Col 1.7, 9*, 24; 2.1; 4.12*; 1Tim 2.1*; Heb 5.1;

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[7]Desperate attempts to find unbaptized Christians in the NT, particularly in the book of *Acts*, are generally motivated by presuppositions and practices based on tradition and emotion rather than the historical data. It would be quite unnecessary for Luke to recapitulate the complete 'conversion process' with every historical example of the new birth. Some could as well argue that there were some unrepentant Christians in the NT because there is not a record of repentance in every conversion example. The case is decidedly different in the epistolary material. Paul appears to have known only of Christians who had been baptized [Rom 6.3–4; 1C 12.13; Gal 3.27; Col 2.12], in complete accordance with Jesus' words [Mk 16.16 *cf.* Jn 3.3–5; 1Pet 3.21]—Paul's own case was no exception [Acts 22.16].

[8]The only exempt group of people would be those living at the time of Christ's return—at 'the end of *time*' [1Thess 4.13–17].

[9]This is clearly the sense in such passages as Col 1.18; Rev 1.5 where *rank* [πρωτότοκος, *first-born*], and not *chronology*, is the sense.

6.20; 7.25*; 9.7, 24; 1P 2.21; 1 Pet. 3:18; Judg 9.17; 1S 1.27*; 2.25*; 12.19*; 2Chron 30.18; Ezra 6.17; **2Macc** 1.26; **12.44***; Sir 4.28; 29.13, 15; Jer 18.20* [*relate to prayer on someone's behalf]

- Substitution: *in place of, instead of* (= ἀντί) (such instances also involve representation) Rm 5.6–8; 8.32; 1C 1.13; 2C 5:14–15, 20; Gal 2.20; 3.13; Eph 5.2, 25; 1Th 5.10; Titus 2.14; 1Tm 2.6; Phlm 13; Heb 2.9; 1J 3.16; 4Macc 6.28; Is 43.3–4
- Reference/Respect: *concerning, with reference to* (= περί) 1C 4.6; 2C 1.7; 7.4, 7, 12, 14; 8.16; 9.2–3; Eph 1.16; Phil 1.7; 4.10; Col 4.13; Nah 1.14
- Cause: *on account of, because of* Phil. 1:29; [impersonal, 2 Th. 1:5; Acts 9:16][10]

The only closely related passage to 1Cor 15.29 is the non-canonical **2Macc 12.44**, which is strikingly parallel:[11]

εἰ μὴ γὰρ τοὺς προπεπτωκότας ἀναστῆναι προσεδόκα περισσὸν καὶ ληρῶδες **ὑπὲρ νεκρῶν εὔχεσθαι**

For if he were not expecting the ones having fallen to rise up, excessive and silly to pray for dead ones. [lit.]

*For if he were not expecting that those who had fallen would rise again, it would have been superfluous and foolish **to pray for the dead**.* [RSV]

*for if he were not expecting the fallen to rise again, it would have been useless and foolish **to pray for them in death**.* [NAB][12]

The connection of prayer and ὑπέρ is common, and the sense is always *representation*—prayer is offered *on behalf of* or *for the sake of* others,

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[10]This use is quite rare, and is included here only because some exegetes consider it while discussing this passage.

[11]The Roman Catholic doctrine of 'praying for the dead' is rooted in this passage, which the Catholic Church views as canonical. It is curious that the Catholic Church has not also developed a doctrine of baptism for the dead, which might be construed in a number of configurations that would not necessarily conflict with other Catholic doctrines. For example, the Catholic Church might baptize for infants dieing without baptism, or those who received only a so-called "baptism of blood" or "baptism of desire." The sacramental idea inherent in infant baptism, and openly espoused in Catholic doctrine, could likewise influence the idea of vicarious baptism for dead people, or at least would not be inconsistent with it. However, both *prayer for the dead* and *baptism for the dead* [in the vicarious sense, see below] are both in conflict with clear biblical theology involving personal responsibility for sin and the individual's faithful response to the call of God.

[12]This translation is somewhat awkward; it seems better, yet still awkward, to translate, *to pray for them who are in death*. Either way, the NAB suggests a participle or dative underlies the translation, rather than an adjective.

the person[s] prayed for; it is never *substitutionary* [see above]. Likewise, in the Maccabean passage [12.39–45] Judas and his people pray *on behalf of* fellow Jews who had fallen because of idolatry, so this sin might be blotted out. In addition, they provided a sin offering for them. What motivated Judas and the others was the belief that those brethren who had died in idolatry would participate in the resurrection, and could only be blessed therein, if forgiven for this sin.

   This action of Judas and the others is not supported elsewhere in Scripture, and is contrary to biblical theology as a whole. Nevertheless, they may have acted only on the chance that their efforts would prevail, knowing they were unprecedented. On the other hand, perhaps the record only reflects a late development of thought written into the history of events, which may have never actually occurred.

   Whatever the background to the Maccabean passage, it bears a striking resemblance to 1C 15.29. In both cases, ὑπὲρ with the genitive plural of νεκρός [articular in 1C 15.29; anarthrous in 2Macc 12.44][13] expresses the object of actions by others, both in the context of the coming resurrection, and possibly with the same objective.

   Given the customary use of ὑπέρ with the genitive [and the similarity with 2Macc 12.44], the *representative*, rather than the *substitutionary*, sense of ὑπέρ seems more tenable in 1C 15.29. Nevertheless, there is no necessary connection between the two passages, and there is no evidence that each was an expression of a developing tradition concerning religious activities on behalf of dead people [saved or otherwise]. In addition, the natures of the two activities, prayer and baptism, militate against drawing too close an analogy. Prayer is by nature *representative*, whereas baptism is always a personal activity, never done *on behalf of* other people, *i.e.,* to accomplish something for others, unless 1C 15.29 is the one exception. Therefore, in this case, the *substitutionary* sense may seem more "natural," even though it is contrary to all biblical theology. Accordingly, that is the direction many interpretations lean, without, of course, expressing acceptance of the practice.

Many interpretations:
There are three general categories of interpretation that have received the most attention:[14] (1) *vicarious* baptism, Christians being water baptized for dead believers, who had not been baptized, (2) *metaphorical* baptism, the martyrdom of some Christians, and (3) *believer's* baptism, the water

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[13]Regardless of this difference, both genitives are *definitive*, even though in Maccabees the reference is clear, while in Paul, it is less clear.
[14]For a summary see John D. Reaume, "Another Look at 1 Corinthians 15:29, 'Baptized for the Dead,'" *BSac* 152:608 (Oct 95) pp. 457–476.

baptism of new believers.[15] Those who argue against *vicarious* baptism for the dead do so because there is no historical evidence for such a practice in the first century, and if such an act were being practiced, it is unlikely Paul would use something so contrary to his own theology as an argument for the resurrection, without at least correcting and condemning it. At least three things militate against understanding baptism as a metaphor for Christian martyrdom in this context. First, it would require a figurative meaning for "the dead" in a context where it elsewhere always has a literal meaning. Second, it is unclear how the martyrdom of some Christians would strengthen Paul's argument for the reality of a physical resurrection. Third, there is no historical evidence of martyrdoms in the Corinthian church at the time. With regard to the view that baptism for the dead is somehow a reference to the common water baptism of new believers, it has been argued that such views are generally too convoluted, and try too hard to circumvent the most obvious meaning of the terms as they stand.[16] Some have dismissed it almost flippantly: "the artificiality of this view is too apparent to require comment."[17]

Following is a more specific list of views of 1C 15.29, which seem to reach beyond the context.[18] There are many nuances not mentioned, existing in some of the views.
- Baptism of catechumens (*i.e.*, those being formally instructed in Christian doctrine) on their deathbeds. Marcionites [2nd century] baptized for already dead catechumens. However, there is no evidence of "catechumens" in the 1st century. On the contrary, the urgency of baptism as expressed in the NT militates against the tradition of teaching "catechumens," which generally lasted about one year [up to as long as two years!] before baptism.

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[15]There are many nuances in each of these categories, but these represent the three major approaches to the passage.

[16]Reaume discusses at least seven or eight variations of this last view, including his own.

[17]G. R. Beasley-Murray, *Baptism in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1962) 186. Beasley-Murray does recognize, however, that some among the Greek Fathers to the Reformers, and beyond, have held some variety of this view. However, he himself believes the practice was of the heretical vicarious variety, "an unethical, sub-Christian sacramentalism…a falling away from the baptismal theology implied in Paul's expositions of the subject," 190. He does attempt to address the difficulty of Paul using a heretical practice to make his argument, but Beasley-Murray's points are unconvincing.

[18]Sources for these views can be found in all the standard commentaries.

- Superstitious baptism practiced for those who had died as "outsiders" to the church. This idea is contrary to the meaning and purpose of baptism given in the NT, and effectively gives the lost a "second chance."
- Baptism of the graves *above* [ὑπέρ with the *local* sense is common in Classical Greek] relatives who had died in Christ. However, a locative meaning as "above" or "over" for the preposition ὑπὲρ with the genitive is not found elsewhere in the NT, and there is no historical evidence for any such custom of grave baptisms.
- Living believers baptized in place of deceased believers, who thus had ceased to be members of the church. This custom was practiced so that church membership would not be depleted. However, new converts would fill up the ranks of the church, so that there would be no need for such a practice. This also reflects an earthly view of the church as an ecclesiastical organization rather than a living organism of the body of Christ. There is no need to "fill up" the membership of the church.
- Living Christians who had themselves baptized for the sake of deceased believers, to show their yearning for them and assuring their connection with them and participation with them in the resurrection. This idea is neither implied in the text nor reflected elsewhere in Scripture. [The preceding views were mentioned in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, comments on this verse]
- Washings of the dead before burial, a standard Jewish custom; religious groups in the ancient Mediterranean supervised the burials of their own members. [*IVP – Bible Background Commentary: New Testament*, comments on this verse]
- The Jewish custom of purifying ablutions after association with dead bodies. [*WTJ* 48:2 (Fall 1986) p. 378] Neither this nor the preceding practice was known among Christians. Not only so, but is difficult to imagine how these ritual practices, of far less significance than Christian baptism itself, would reinforce Paul's argument for the resurrection.
- "The dead" in the first half of the verse refers to the apostles…another allusion to the fact that at least some of the Corinthian believers were taking undue pride in one apostle over another (1Cor 1.13–17), in this case the one under whose ministry they had been baptized. Paul's point was that if the dead are not raised, what difference does it make under whose ministry they were baptized since those apostles were already dead, figuratively speaking? In support of this metaphorical interpretation, there are other places in which Paul allegedly referred to himself or the apostles as "dead" [15.31; 4.9; 2C 2.14; 4.7–12 (*esp.* 11–12); 6.9]. However, these passages refer to the apostles as *about* to die, not already dead. The apostles are not the most likely antecedent of "the dead" in this passage, and it is simply unnatural to

refer to them as "dead." ["'Baptized on Account of the Dead': The Meaning of 1 Corinthians 15:29 in Its Context," Joel R. White, Journal of Biblical Literature 116 (1997): 487–99]

Although it is possible Paul referred to a heretical practice [as in any of the preceding views], it is difficult to believe that he would not correct such a practice contrary to his theology. Indeed, should he 'win' his argument for the resurrection with this point contributing to his case, his victory would be undermined by the false practice itself, resulting in a false argument on his own part. Some views, as follows, approach meanings that appear to more readily adhere to the context and biblical theology as a whole.

- "The dead" is…*the dead bodies. For in fact with a view to this art thou baptized, the resurrection of thy dead body, believing that it no longer remains dead.…the being baptized and immersed and then emerging, is a symbol of the descent into Hades and return thence. Wherefore also Paul calls baptism a burial…(Romans 6:4). By this he makes that also which is to come credible, I mean, the resurrection of our bodies.* [Chrysostom (4th cent.), Homily XL on 1Corinthians, 15.29]
- A roundabout way of saying "baptized so as to be able to participate in eternal life with Christians who have already died," hence baptized in the light of their own mortality as well. [*IVP – Bible Background Commentary: New Testament*]
- The concept of "baptize" in this verse is interpreted not in relation to the actual sacrament or ordinance of baptism, but is understood metaphorically and spiritually as meaning "identify." Thus, the idea would be "If there is no resurrection of the dead, why are believers identified as dead men? Why should they be crucified with Christ?" According to this view, Paul is saying, "I die daily," meaning "I am identified daily with Christ in his death." But a major problem with this interpretation is that it makes the preposition ὑπὲρ mean "as," whereas its basic meaning with the genitive is "for," "in behalf of," or "in the place of." [*The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, comments on this verse]
- In a radical departure from the usual method of punctuating the Greek text, this view reads the verse: 'Otherwise what shall they do who are baptized? for the dead? (that is, are they baptized to belong to, to be numbered among the dead, who are never to rise again?) Indeed, if the dead do not rise again at all, why are people baptized? For them? That is, are they baptized to be numbered among the dead who are never to rise again?'" This view seems to take ὑπέρ in the sense of εἰς [*into*], "baptized into the dead." ["*Those Who Are Baptized for the Dead.*" By Fr. Bernard M. Foschini, O.F.M., S.T.D. Heffernan Press, Worcester, Mass.]

- Paul writes in Rom 6.3-5 that Christians are buried with Christ in baptism and raised to walk in newness of life, and that they are united to him in his death and resurrection. That spiritual experience to which water baptism points is not simply a reference to 'the soul' but to the *whole person*, including his or her body. The early Greek Fathers concluded on this verse that Paul was asking what is the point of undergoing baptism at all, which was on behalf of bodies—the phrase *for the dead*, lit. 'on behalf of the dead [bodies],' is repeated twice—if they will simply disappear. [*IVP – New Bible Commentary*, comments on 1C 15.29-34]

Two possible interpretations emerge if one remains strictly within the boundaries of Scripture, and particularly the context of 1Cor 15:

1.	If Paul refers to a heretical practice among the Corinthians, which he does not correct, the probabilities of each element in the verse would render the following possible literal understanding:

> *What will those among you do, who are baptized in the place of those who have physically died? If the dead are not raised at all, why then are those in that group baptized for them?*

The use of the third person plural construction [τί ποιήσουσιν οἱ βαπτιζόμενοι, *what will they do the ones being baptized*], as stated above, can suggest a group within the Corinthian church practicing this baptism. Perhaps the whole church saw no need to practice this baptism, believing a few could do it for the whole, or perhaps the church as a whole was not in agreement with the practice. Nevertheless, the whole church seemed to condone it; otherwise, Paul's argument would have carried little weight [see above].

The referent of τῶν νεκρῶν throughout the chapter is the **physically** dead. Unlike *praying* for the dead, *baptizing* for the dead [when the referent is other than the one actually baptized] would not be natural in the strictly *representative* sense of ὑπέρ; the *substitutionary* [vicarious] sense would seem more natural. However, it would be pointless to baptize vicariously for baptized believers who had died.[19] Thus, the most likely candidates would be *unsaved believers*, probably not unbelievers, who had died without the benefit of baptism.[20]

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[19]Unlike the Maccabean situation of some praying for their brethren who had fallen in idolatry, with the hope of saving their souls, there is no indication of a similar situation in Corinth of "the dead" as those who had fallen from grace. Even if that were the case, a 'second' baptism [albeit, vicarious] is unheard of under the new covenant, and thoroughly inconsistent with new covenant theology. Prayer for the dead would be less inappropriate, if **any** posthumous action could be supported.

[20]A third category of pre-new covenant believers might be added, but would find little support in the context, and again, what would be the point of baptizing for them? They would have already been saved, if

The major difficulty with this view, or any variation of it, is that for such vicarious baptisms to affect a changed status of the dead would be diametrically opposed all biblical theology. Spiritual [salvific] decisions cannot be made vicariously. Neither is there any indication in Scripture that once a person has [physically] died he can have a second chance at salvation. Certainly, therefore, this could not have been a practice rooted in truth and so approved of by the apostle. This being the case, it seems incredible that Paul would raise the heresy as evidence for his argument for the truth of the resurrection without, at the same time, condemning the evidence. It is counter-productive to offer a falsehood into evidence to support a truth, even if that evidence logically supports the argument. Eventually, the falsehood would have to be exposed, and in so doing, its use as evidence would be undermined. Paul was not a pragmatist; his concern was always to correct error, which is clearly indicated by his incisive critical comments on the practices of the Corinthians throughout this letter.

2.   A more acceptable understanding is possible if τῶν νεκρῶν are viewed in an *omnitemporal*, rather than *temporal*, sense:[21]

> What will those do, who are baptized on behalf of the[ir own] dead [bodies]? If the dead [bodies] are not raised at all, why then are they baptized for them?

"The dead" are viewed as the class of humanity in which all participate, at any or all times, without regard to the present, or 'real,' time, from the perspective of the writer or speaker. In other words, "the dead" is that category of inevitability for all humanity, and believers act accordingly by being baptized with a view to their own participation in that reality. In effect, it is one's own [anticipated] dead body that he or she is baptized for [on behalf of], motivated by the promised resurrection of that body. If there is no resurrection of the body, why bother immersing the body?[22]

There is a sense in which the reality of being members of the class of "the [physically] dead" is hinted at by Paul when he writes of human mortality [Rm 8.10 *cf.* θνητός in 8.11 (7.24, θάνατος); 6.12; 1C 15.53-54; 2C 4.11; 5.4]. In Rom 8 and 1Cor 15 it is the *physical* body that is the focus of resurrection, and it is that same body, until the resurrection

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faithful, under the old covenant. Of course, those who deny the efficacy of baptism would add yet a fourth category of un-baptized saved believers. Again, it can be asked what purpose baptism for them would serve. It is this last group that many point to [see above views].

[21]See above p. 4.

[22]This view is clearly distinct from any view that "spiritualizes" τῶν νεκρῶν in this verse, *i.e.*, any view the might suggest τῶν νεκρῶν is a reference to those getting baptized because they are *dead in sin*, or something to that effect [Rm 6.13; 11.15; Eph 2.1, 5; 5.14; Col 2.13]. This view holds that τῶν νεκρῶν is literal, *i.e.*, a reference to physical death.

event, that is considered dead because of sin. Though each individual human spirit participates in a resurrection to eternal life 'here and now,' the individual's body must wait until the physical resurrection on the last day [*cf.* Jn 5.24–29]. Thus, the physical act of immersing the body emphasizes that the new birth experience is not strictly a "spiritual" experience, in the sense it only involves the immaterial [soul/spirit] side of the person. It likewise involves the material [body] side, albeit, as such, it will not participate in the resurrection until the eschaton. Nevertheless, the resurrection of the physical body completes the redemptive process in the individual, and until the process is complete, salvation is incomplete [Rm 8.18–23; 2C 5.1–10 *cf.* 1Th 5.23].

This view also takes ὑπέρ in its most common *representative* sense—each one is baptized *on behalf of* their own dead body—rather than the *substitutionary* sense, which, for baptism, would certainly be unprecedented and out of harmony with biblical theology as a whole.[23]

The objectors' arguments against resurrection could only have been *historical*, *i.e.,* considering the evidence of history—people do not rise, and have not risen, from the dead; therefore, they never will rise; this was the basic Pagan argument.[24] They could not have offered *revelational* evidence denying resurrection, without conflicting with, and discrediting, Paul's message, as well as Scripture. Likewise, Paul's argument throughout 1Cor 15 is *historical*, pointing to Jesus' resurrection as an event of history, and *revelational*, incorporating that event into the gospel message.[25] This piece of evidence was an integral part of the original gospel message preached to these Corinthians [6.14; 15.4, 12–17, 20 *cf.* 2C 1.9; 4.14; as it had been shortly before in Athens, Acts 17.18, 32].

Paul's argument presupposes *all* οἱ βαπτιζόμενοι [the ones being baptized] did so ὑπὲρ τῶν νεκρῶν [on behalf of the dead], otherwise, his argument would be meaningless to those *not* baptized on behalf of the

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[23]In the same way, prayer with or without ὑπέρ is always understood in the *representative* sense, whether for others [see above] or one's self [Rm 15.30 (w/ὑπέρ) *cf.* Mt 6.9–13; Lk 22.46; Jas 5.13; Acts 8.22].
[24]Isolated incidents of those raised only to die again would not falsify the antagonists' fundamental argument. Of course, the argument is fundamentally flawed in that it suggests nothing can happen that has not already happened.
[25]Paul's entire argument is *historical* and *revelational,* rather than *logical.* In other words, there is no *necessary* connection between salvation or eternal life and a physical resurrection. In other words, the faithful could enjoy eternal life in a disembodied state. However, that was not what Paul had received by divine revelation, and without the resurrection of Christ, the disciples would have difficulty convincing the public Jesus' ministry and teachings were valid, authoritative, and divine.

dead. As discussed above, all in the church were baptized, and the third person plurals [ποιήσουσιν, βαπτίζονται] were quite possibly references to recent converts in the church.[26] Therefore, "on behalf of the dead" either meant the same thing to all baptized believers—*i.e.*, an anticipation of the resurrection of the dead, or something different to those, at the time of writing, denying the resurrection. However, there is no indication in the context or elsewhere what it might have meant to those denying the resurrection. Perhaps some of those who, at the time of writing, denied the resurrection, at the time of their initial response to the gospel accepted the idea. Such a group could have later slipped back into old Pagan beliefs,[27] or may have been influenced by Pagan antagonists, and disavowed what they had always accepted. Additionally, some Pagan converts may have simply misunderstood the implications of the gospel for "the dead," with regard to resurrection. As they continued in the church exposed to apostolic and prophetic teaching on the resurrection, their disbeliefs were aroused, and the resurrection heresy took root in the church.[28]

Whatever the case, Paul recalls the preaching of the gospel to all his readers [15.1-8], which included the resurrection of both Christ and the faithful, and such preaching could not have occurred if the resurrection were not a central tenet of God's revelation. Otherwise, *no one* could have been baptized with *any* idea of resurrection in mind. Therefore, the apostle could ask, "If there is no resurrection, it could not have been preached, so why would anybody, at anytime, be baptized on behalf of the dead?"

Conclusion:

Two general understandings of "baptized for the dead" seem possible, based on the context: (1) some variety of heretical vicarious baptism for other people who had already physically died, or (2) some form of orthodox representative baptism for one's self who would physically die. The first is doubtful because the apostle would likely not incorporate a heretical practice in an argument for truth without correcting it. The second is less doubtful, but subject to criticism, because the practice is expressed in terms nowhere else found in the NT,

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[26]See above pp. 2-3.

[27]This could be the case of those converted out of paganism, which universally denied the idea of resurrection. This is likely at the root of the heresy in Corinth. Those coming out of a Judaistic background [Jews, proselytes, and Godfearers] would have had no difficulty with the idea of resurrection [denied only by the Sadducees in the Jewish tradition].

[28]This was an immature church with clear vulnerability on doctrinal issues. Nevertheless, it seems difficult to imagine a teaching so central to the gospel message could have been so utterly misconstrued.

and seem to be an awkward way of formulating an argument designed to convince readers of such an important truth. Of course, to Paul's immediate readers, the terms may have been very familiar and the argument not so awkward. Nevertheless, the second view is not in conflict with the grammar, context, or overall theology of Scripture.

The final solution may ever elude modern exegetes, but readers can likely rest in the confidence that whatever the meaning of the text, the believer's covenant relationship to the Lord does not depend upon it.