

# The Harvester



## Preparing Souls

## To Serve The Lord



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## “Baptism for the Dead,” A Contextual Interpretation

By Brian R. Kenyon

In First Corinthians 15:1-28, Paul gave both the negative and positive consequences surrounding whether the resurrection is false or true, respectively (1 Cor. 15:1-28), and then he turned to specific activities with which the Corinthians were familiar to emphasize the meaninglessness of these activities if there is no resurrection. The first one he stated: “Else what shall they do which are baptized for the dead, if the dead rise not at all? why are they then baptized for the dead?” (1 Cor. 15:29, KJV). Paul is saying that those who are “baptized for the dead” have a problem if there is no resurrection (cf. 1 Cor. 15:20-28). “The dead” (τῶν νεκρῶν) is likely a reference to the Christian dead, because, as a general rule, if “the dead” does not have a Greek definite article, then it is to be taken as the dead in general, but if it has the Greek definite article, then it refers to Christians who have died (Kistemaker 560). The clause at the end of verse 29, “why are they then baptized for the dead?” (KJV, NKJ) is literally, “why then are they baptized for them?” (cf. ASV, NAS, ESV).

### Traditional Options

There are many views as to what exactly being “baptized for the dead” means. First, at face value it may seem that it is some sort of vicarious baptism for people who have already died (cf. Mormon practice). If so, Paul would be taking a “false practice of the false teachers to show the inconsistency of their theory of no resurrection” (Winters 217). Paul’s purpose in mentioning the practice, therefore, would not be to refute it (which he does not do),

but to show the ridiculousness of those who say there is no resurrection but still practice proxy baptism. One does not necessarily endorse a practice because he mentions it to prove a point (cf. Mt. 12:27).

One person being baptized for another person, whether dead or alive, is not Scripturally possible. At death, a person’s eternal destiny is sealed (Lk. 16:19-31; Heb. 9:27). The subject of salvation is required to possess active faith and obedience in this life (Mk. 16:16; Acts 2:38). The main weakness of this view, however, is that it makes the people practicing vicarious baptism the same ones who are denying the resurrection of the dead, but it does not seem likely that they would baptize for the dead if they actually thought the dead rise not. Also, this proxy baptism does not seem to connect with the immediate context. Furthermore, there is no indication that the practice occurred until the second century and that by heretical groups who mistakenly thought that Paul taught it here.

Second, some say that when compared to Romans 6:3-11, baptism, in being “baptized for the dead,” is to be taken as the act that unites us with the dead and the resurrection of the dead, of whom Christ is the firstfruits (McGarvey and Pendleton 152-153). Thus, if there is no

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resurrection, then baptism, which symbolizes the resurrection, is meaningless. The main weakness with this view is that baptism is not needed to be among the dead in general, which makes the view's emphasis as Christ being "the dead," but "the dead" is plural in Greek.

Third, some take the view that "the dead" refers to those who are "dead to sin." Thus, since one must die to sin to become a Christian, baptism is for those who are dead to sin (cf. Rom. 6:3-4) (Winters 219). The major weakness with this view is that it unwarrantedly mixes a figurative death in a chapter about physical death (and resurrection) with a literal resurrection.

Other views include: (1) being baptized over the graves of the dead (takes hyper to mean "over," but this assumes that baptism was by pouring); (2) being baptized out of respect for the dead saints, who while they were living, encouraged the ones now being baptized to be baptized; (3) being baptized to fill the vacant places left in the church by those who have died; (4) being baptized for those who are about to die; (5) being baptized by martyrdom or a baptism of blood (cf. Mk. 10:38; Lk. 12:50); and (6) being baptized on behalf of their own bodies which were about to die (Allen 190-191).

## A More Contextual View

A view that better fits the immediate and remote context reads: "Otherwise what will those do who are being baptized on account of the dead [i.e., the apostles]? For if the actually dead persons are not raised, why at all are people being baptized on account of them [i.e., the apostles]?" (Adapted from White 487-499). The keys for

this interpretation are given below.

"Baptism" is taken literally as immersion in water (Mt. 28:19; Mk. 16:16; Acts 2:38; 1 Pet. 3:21). "Which are [being, ESV] baptized" (οἱ βαπτίζομενοι = present passive participle) is literally "the ones who are being baptized." The question concerning baptism is all the more relevant in light of the warped view of some in Corinth that they were followers of the preacher who baptized them (cf. 1 Cor. 1:11-17).

"For [on behalf of, ESV]" (from hyper, ὑπέρ) in this construction (with the genitive case) can mean "in behalf of, for the sake of ... about, concerning" (Newman 187). This preposition can be used in a causal sense (Moulton 270-271). The causal sense is especially present in verses linked with suffering (Acts 5:41; 9:16; 15:26; 21:13; 2 Cor. 12:10; Eph. 3:13; 2 Thes. 1:5).

"The dead" (τῶν νεκρῶν) is a figurative reference to Paul and the other apostles, which, in a general sense, would include Apollos. As a general rule, if "the dead" has the Greek definite article, as here, then it refers to Christians who have died. Paul often refers to himself as being "dead," in this context (1 Cor. 15:31), elsewhere in the Corinthian letters (1 Cor. 4:9; 2 Cor. 4:10-11; 6:9), and in his other epistles (Rom. 8:36). Paul's referring to his suffering in arguing for the resurrection would fit into the flow of his argument in First Corinthians 15:20-28 (White 496-497). He has just shown that the resurrection

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vindicates the redemptive ministry of Christ, whose final achievement will be the abolishing of death (1 Cor. 15:25-26). But if there is no resurrection, then death has not been abolished and Christ's mission becomes a failure since He would have been shown to have suffered and died for His own sins (cf. 1 Cor. 15:17-18; Gal. 3:10-14), rather than for humanity's, as Paul maintains (1 Cor. 15:2; 2 Cor. 5:21). Paul identifies his sufferings with Christ's (2 Cor. 4:7-12; Col. 1:24; Phil. 3:10); thus, both Christ's suffering and Paul's own suffering as part of his apostolic ministry are vindicated by the resurrection.

"The dead" (νεκροί, with no definite article) refers to the literal dead. Again, as a general rule, if "the dead" does not have a Greek definite article, as here, then it is to be taken as the dead in general. Incidentally, "the dead" is without the Greek definite article in First Corinthians 15:12, 13, 15, 16, 20, 21, 29b, 32, and "the dead" is with the Greek definite article in 15:29a; 35, 42, 52.

The adverb *holos* (ὅλως), which means "at all; actually" (Newman 125), is taken attributively, modifying "the dead" rather than "are raised," hence the translation "actually dead persons." It is thus used this way to distinguish the "actually dead" from "the [figuratively] dead" in the first part of the verse. The "at all" in the above translation is retained in the second part of the verse because of the *ti kai* (τί καί).

White aptly summarizes:

If "truly dead" persons are not raised, what sense does it make for the Corinthians to be baptized on account of those who are "dying all the time," namely, the apostles? If there is no resurrection from the dead, then the Corinthians' allegiances to the apostles under whose ministries, respectively, they were converted is all the more ludicrous since the apostles, figuratively speaking are already dead. Apart from the resurrection, both the willingness of the apostles to suffer on behalf of the Gospel and the Gospel itself would be futile and pitiful mistakes, and the Corinthians would be fools to accept their message and be baptized because of it. Thus ... Paul's willingness to suffer becomes a powerful confirmation of the validity of the resurrection and is, in turn, confirmed by the by the Corinthians' baptism on the basis of Paul's life and message. (White 498)

## Other Contextual Advantages

There are at least four other advantages this interpretation offers (adapted from White 499). First, the context maintains its "logical force by making those who deny the resurrection roughly coextensive with at least some of the various groups involved in the baptismal controversy" mentioned in First Corinthians 1:13-17.

Second, this interpretation provides logical insight into the meaning of First Corinthians 15:32. While it does not settle the historical details surrounding "beasts at Ephesus," it does give insight into the phrase "after the manner of men [κατὰ ἄνθρωπον]" (1 Cor. 15:32). "If Paul were to approach his apostolic sufferings in the same manner as they approach baptism, it would be better for him and them together to adopt the attitude 'eat and drink, for tomorrow we die' because it is the hope of the resurrection that both legitimates his sufferings and gives him strength to bear up under them."

Third, First Corinthians 15:29 becomes an important pivot upon which the argument of the chapter turns, rather than being the "weakest link" in the argument.

Fourth, this interpretation provides further insight into important themes of First Corinthians as a whole, especially baptism's role in the division mentioned earlier (1 Cor. 1:11-17).

## Conclusion

"Baptism of the dead" has been somewhat of an enigma of interpretation to the modern reader. However, the interpretation above is soundly based in the context and provides seemingly much more reasonable meaning to the first readers and to Christians living today. Being baptized into Christ for the forgiveness of sins is worth every hardship and persecution that may result because "the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us" (Rom. 8:18).

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