

**1 Corinthians 15:29**

*“οι βαπτιζομενοι υπερ των νεκρων ”*

TS 5202L – Theological Foundations 2

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## **Introduction**

Text and Personal Translation:

Επει τι ποιησουσιν οι βαπτιζομενοι υπερ των νεκρων;

ει ολωσ νεκροι ουκ εγειρονται, τι και βαπτιζονται υπερ αυτων;

*Otherwise, what will the ones being baptized on behalf of the dead do?*

*If the actually dead are not raised, why are they being baptized on behalf of the dead?*

One writer summarily describes the claim of much of modern scholarly opinion about this passage as one of “exegetical agnosticism”<sup>1</sup> and even one commentator melancholically and emphatically declares, “[T]he meaning... will remain doubtful.”<sup>2</sup> Indeed, the interpretations of this verse have troubled exegetes almost from the very beginning of the Church and the myriad of interpretations is almost over-whelming. However, the interpretation of this single verse can either detract from the overall argument of Paul or become a well-placed line in Paul’s pastoral rhetoric concerning the bodily resurrection.

## **Context**

The letter to the Corinthians from Paul attempts to correct many difficulties, which were inherent to the congregation of Corinth. Paul opens with a call to reconcile concerning factions

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<sup>1</sup> Joel R. White, “‘Baptized on Account of the Dead’: The Meaning of 1 Corinthians 15:29 in Its Context,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 116, no. 3 (Autumn 1997): 487.

<sup>2</sup> Archibald Robertson and Alfred Plummer, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the First Epistle of St. Paul to the Corinthians* (ICC 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1961), 359.

within the church over baptism.<sup>3</sup> Then he moves on to confront other challenges to the health of the church (such issues as sexual infidelity, lawsuits, dietary regulations, marriage, proper taking of the sacrament of Communion, hyper-spirituality and charismatic expressions that denigrated the unity of love).

Then finally, in chapter fifteen Paul turns to several issues related around the question of the Resurrection. His irenic approach reminds the Corinthians of the central place within the Christian *ethos* for the Resurrection. The church lives entirely in the light of Jesus Christ's historical and bodily resurrection (15:1-28) and therefore has the certain hope of the future eschatological bodily resurrection (15:32-58).

### **Possible Explanations**

The proposed conjectures concerning the meaning of this particular verse have been numerous and various – even tabulated by some as up to 40 or more possibilities. While the range of possibilities is rather wide, the explanations typically turn upon the interpretations of several specific words within the phrase

*οι βαπτιζομενοι υπερ των νεκρων* . The following four categories cover most of the nuanced interpretations that have been proposed. Three of these categories pivot upon the specific word/s in question and finally one other interpretation that suggests punctuational variation as the answer.

*οι βαπτιζομενοι*

The metaphorical approach understands “being baptized” as a similar reference to the words of Jesus concerning his “baptism” of suffering and eventual martyrdom (Mark 10:38;

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<sup>3</sup> This particular discussion of baptism seems likely to be linked with the issue of 15:29 and may in fact point to some persons of the factions that viewed their baptism as pertaining to the merits of the person and ministry of one of the Apostles.

Luke 12:50). This view sees the “baptism” of the group in Corinth to which Paul refers as being those that will share in the “suffering” and “martyrdom” of Jesus. The strengths of such a view are that there is no difficulty with accepting the possible positive treatment by Paul of this group as an example (since Paul in no way contradicts this group). It also offers the benefit of tying in nicely with the following statements of Paul concerning suffering and possible martyrdom.

Another variation of the metaphorical interpretation of “baptism” understands the meaning as “‘identify’.”<sup>4</sup> This perspective also translates  $\upsilon\pi\epsilon\rho$  with the idea “as” rather than its basic genitival meaning. However, both these metaphorical views fail to treat the grammar as literally and as stringently as Paul’s usage elsewhere would dictate.

### $\upsilon\pi\epsilon\rho$

Fee argues that the meaning of  $\upsilon\pi\epsilon\rho$  is where “much of the debate hinges.”<sup>5</sup> The preposition  $\upsilon\pi\epsilon\rho$  – as found in this passage twice – is in the genitive case. This changes the typically locative meaning of “above” or “over” to the vicarious sense of “for, on behalf of, instead of, in the place of.”<sup>6</sup> In fact, it has been demonstrated sufficiently, that  $\upsilon\pi\epsilon\rho$  in the genitive should be treated much like the preposition  $\alpha\upsilon\tau\iota$ .<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> W. Harold Mare, “1 Corinthians” *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary* (Vol. 10, Gen. Ed. Frank E. Gaebelin; Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1976), 287-8.

<sup>5</sup> Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (NICNT; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1987), 736.

<sup>6</sup> BAGD 838-839; Max Zerwick and Mary Grosvenor, *A Grammatical Analysis of the Greek New Testament* (5<sup>th</sup> ed.; Rome: Editrice Pontificio Istituto Biblico, 2007), 529; Millard Erickson. *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1996), 814. Several other passages where Erickson notes  $\upsilon\pi\epsilon\rho$  is explicitly used with the genitive and bearing the sense “instead of” – Jn. 11:50; Rom. 5:6-8; 8:32; II Cor. 5:15; Gal. 3:15; Heb. 2:9.

<sup>7</sup> G. Abbott-Smith, *A Manual Greek Lexicon of the New Testament* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.; Edinburgh: T & T Clark Ltd., 1999), 457. See also the similar discussion in Erickson 814.

One who favored the locative sense, Martin Luther translated  $\upsilon\pi\epsilon\rho$  as “over” in this particular passage.<sup>8</sup> He creatively understood  $\upsilon\pi\epsilon\rho$  to be a locative reference to a believer being baptized *over* the grave of an unsaved loved one. However, the locative sense is specific only to the accusative case and not the genitive (which suggests a causative nuance)<sup>9</sup>, thus grammatically the option that remains carries some shade of vicariousness.

Some, such as Chrysostom and Erasmus understood  $\upsilon\pi\epsilon\rho$  as a reference to the confession of faith made at baptism – that is as the creedal confession of the Church to “believe in the resurrection of the dead.”<sup>10</sup> They would therefore perceive “baptism” to be literal and “the dead” to be a reference to themselves who were as good as dead – being sinful and in need of the life of Jesus Christ. One major difficulty with this interpretation is the complete lack of confessional grammar and syntax within the immediate context (with the notable exception of 15:3-5). It seems to be a far stretch to view this verse as any kind of catechetical confession. In addition, the dogmatic confessions that were employed later in the history of the church are not to be read back into the text when there is no apparent link. Finally, this stretches the grammatical range well beyond what is acceptable for  $\upsilon\pi\epsilon\rho$ .

By far the majority interpretation is that this verse is a reference to “proxy” or “vicarious” baptism, thus understanding  $\upsilon\pi\epsilon\rho$  to maintain its genitive function. How the remainder of the passage is nuanced is another issue altogether. The common consensus among those holding this view is to understand “baptism” and “the dead” as literally as possible. According to the

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<sup>8</sup> Fizmyer 579; Thiselton 1242; White 491.

<sup>9</sup> White 493n.40 and particularly 497n.63.

<sup>10</sup> Mare 287; Thiselton 1245-8.

suggestion of Gordon Fee, “this reading is such a plain understanding of the Greek text that no one would ever have imagined the various alternatives were it not for the difficulties involved.”<sup>11</sup>

There is also an almost parallel statement in 2 Maccabees 12:44, but the reference specifically says, “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 – italics added). Although the practice referred to in Maccabees seems to refer to sacrifices made on the behalf of the righteous who died fighting and thereby is described as a making “atonement for the dead” (12:45). While this offers one particular Jewish referent in support of the possibility of the practice of proxy sacramentalism for the deceased, are there any Christian references to such a phenomenon?

As early as Tertullian there is reference to a practice known among the Marcionites of proxy baptism for the dead.<sup>12</sup> Later on Epiphanius mentions a similar practice among the followers of Cerinthus and even John Chrysostom mentions the practice.<sup>13</sup> In the modern context, the Mormon Church has taken up this practice.<sup>14</sup> There is, however, no definitively known occurrence of such a practice in the first century Church. In addition, Paul writes about “the ones being baptized on account of the dead” without any single prohibition or even a concern for this practice that would then be incongruous with the Gospel. While throughout the rest of his letter, he seems to be clear in prohibiting practices that are considered antithetical to

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<sup>11</sup> Fee 764.

<sup>12</sup> Gerald Bray, ed., and Thomas C. Oden, gen.ed., *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: New Testament VII – I-II Corinthians* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 166: records Dydimus the Blind as also saying, “The Marcionites baptize the living on behalf of the dead unbelievers, not knowing that baptism saves only the person who receives it.” See also Tertullian’s *De Resurrectiones Carnis* 48 and *Adversus Marcionem* V.10.

<sup>13</sup> Fitzmyer 578.

<sup>14</sup> However, the Mormons only view this statement of Paul as an affirmation of the “truth” that was prophetically given through Joseph Smith who is the actual authority behind their practice.

the Evangelical Christian faith and specifically the doctrine of “justification by grace *through faith* [original italics].”<sup>15</sup> While this view is certainly the plainest reading, it is nevertheless to be rejected due to the strenuous difficulties inherent to its theological perspective.

Along these lines, the literal view still does not answer the question of who “the ones being baptized” and “the dead” were. Is Paul referring to *believers* being baptized or *unbelievers*? Is Paul referring to dead *unbelievers* or dead *believers*? Depending upon who the referents are reflects upon the reading of the passage significantly. If believers are baptized for the dead, why are they being baptized? Would it have a salvific effect – if “the dead” are in fact unbelievers will it save them? Would it accomplish baptism on behalf of the dead (believers) who had failed to be baptized prior to dying? Or is this a case for unbelievers coming to faith and being baptized to be someday joined to their believing and deceased loved ones?<sup>16</sup>

Therefore, the referents are not easily understood even with the vicarious (*υπερ*) interpretation given Paul’s failure to challenge the practice, since it gives a magical salvific connotation to baptism. Even an appeal to Paul’s usage of *ad hominem* argumentation is unsatisfactory in this regards, since it would work to denigrate the very core of the Gospel he was risking his life to preach and defend. It would seem to be counter-productive and rather presumptuous to simply assume, as many commentators do, that Paul is mentioning this “superstitious custom without approving it” and using it “to fortify his argument that there is a resurrection from the dead.”<sup>17</sup>

*τω νεκρω*

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<sup>15</sup> Fee 764.

<sup>16</sup> Fee suggests it refers to “either proxy baptism for converts that died before baptism or proxy for those who died before becoming believers” (767). This view (contra Fee) is rejected for the very reason Fee himself states (see Fee’s quote mentioned above).

<sup>17</sup> Mare 288.

Among those turning their argument primarily upon  $\tau\omega\nu \nu\epsilon\kappa\rho\omega\nu$  is Richard DeMaris' archeological case for "the emergence during the middle of the first century CE of a religious outlook [surrounding Corinth] focused intensely on the dead and the world of the dead."<sup>18</sup> He argues that this developing focus upon the dead and their world was brought to the fore in Corinth through the cultic *chthonic* centers for Palaimon (at Isthmia), Persephone and Demeter. Further, he gives evidence of funerary rites that were simultaneously occurring in Corinth that were distinct to the Roman and Greek populations respectively – that is cremation and inhumation – and may have preoccupied the attention of the Corinthians upon the dead.<sup>19</sup> DeMaris portrays the Greco-Roman influences upon the thinking of the Corinthian church as necessitating some such "rite of passage" to help the recently deceased along their journey to death.<sup>20</sup>

However, DeMaris is unable to present any cogent argument for the specific practice of proxy baptism found anywhere in the Greco-Roman world with the possible exception of this single reference here, which is untenable at best. In addition, he fails to grapple with the same problem that plagues several of the other interpretations – namely Paul's failure to condemn or even challenge such a practice as being against the very nature of the Gospel. This glaring discrepancy must be dealt with by any interpretation to be considered an authentic argument of Paul.

Another interpretation sees  $\tau\omega\nu \nu\epsilon\kappa\rho\omega\nu$  as a reference to the dead and dying bodies of the ones being baptized. This metaphorical perspective was held by the likes of

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<sup>18</sup> Richard E. DeMaris, "Corinthian Religion and Baptism for the Dead (1 Corinthians 15:29): Insights from Archeology and Anthropology," *Journal of Biblical Studies* 114, no. 4 (Winter 1995): 670.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 671-2.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 676-7 – He writes, "[V]icarious baptism was one among several funerary rituals the Corinthian Christians used to help the deceased community member through the difficult transition between life and death" (676).

Tertullian, Chrysostom, Epiphanius, John Calvin and Erasmus.<sup>21</sup> The strengths of such a view is that baptism can still be understood in its typical sense as literal water baptism and  $\upsilon\pi\epsilon\rho$  can retain its natural vicarious sense in the genitive. Opposed to this view is the simple straight forward reading of  $\tau\omega\nu\ \nu\epsilon\kappa\rho\omega\nu$  as those who are actually dead. In context, it seems to refer to those who are literally “dead,” rather than to simply an adjectival/verbal sense of “dying” especially given the grammatical construction of the sentence. This seems to necessitate baptism for other persons. The interpretation misconstrues the passive voice of the participle  $\beta\alpha\pi\tau\iota\zeta\omicron\mu\epsilon\nu\omicron\iota$  (being baptized) and reads it in the reflexive sense of “baptizing oneself” (which occurs nowhere else in the New Testament).

Anthony Thiselton defends a variant of this perspective, but he understands the natural sense of “baptizing” to be passive (rather than reflexive), but “the dead” to be those who are dying and are believers.<sup>22</sup> He sees this verse to be a reference to the dying believer entreating their unbelieving loved ones to believe (which he sees as implied) and “be baptized” in order to share in the blessings of the resurrection together. In this interpretation, the desired end of ‘baptism for the sake of the dead’ is to “fulfill the wish of a dead friend.”<sup>23</sup> Another notable Biblical scholar, Gleason Archer, lends support to this view through his own re-imagining of this text along the exact same lines as Thiselton. Archer specifically states that his understanding of  $\upsilon\pi\epsilon\rho$  within this context means “‘for the sake of’ rather than ‘on behalf of’.”<sup>24</sup>

While this view has many merits both theologically and grammatically, such a view seems almost presumptuously to read *into* the text rather than *from* the text. The proposed quaint

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<sup>21</sup> Fitzmyer 579; Thiselton 1242-3.

<sup>22</sup> Thiselton 1248-9.

<sup>23</sup> Abbott-Smith 75.

<sup>24</sup> Archer, Gleason L., *New International Encyclopedia of Bible Difficulties* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1982), 401-2.

illustrative vignettes aside, this interpretation is the most cohesive and compelling of all of the positions thus examined. To its benefit, it stays within the boundaries of Paul's evangelical baptismal perspective. It also lends itself readily to understanding each of the words as literally as possible. If it were not for another proposal by Joel White (described in detail below), this interpretation would remain the most cohesive and coherent of any.

### **Punctuation Variants**

One other proposal worth mentioning was given by W. E. Vine (following with work of Sir Robert Anderson) when he sought to alleviate some of the difficulties of this passage by changing the punctuation. He translated verse 29, "Otherwise what shall they do who are baptized? It is for dead persons if the dead do not rise."<sup>25</sup> This strategy, on the surface, seems plausible but it is rather suggestive and not entirely helpful. It also seems incongruous with the overall syntactical structure.

### **Preferred Explanation**

Joel White offers a rather illuminating and compelling argument for understanding this passage that is both consistent with Pauline theology, the Corinthian context and even furthers the irenic nature of Paul's instruction concerning the resurrection (rather than detracting from the flow of Paul's discourse). He posits, "ο ι β α π τ ι ζ ο μ ε ν ο ι is taken literally, υ π ε ρ is understood in its causal sense, and a metaphorical interpretation is posited for τ ω ν ν ε κ ρ ω ν (meaning "the apostles" including the reiterative α υ τ ω ν <sup>26</sup> at the

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<sup>25</sup> Thiselton 1243.

<sup>26</sup> There is a variant reading in the Majority Text that replaces α υ τ ω ν with τ ω ν ν ε κ ρ ω ν and lends credence to this construction. See White 494n.44.

end of the verse) [15:29a], while  $\nu \epsilon \kappa \rho \omicron \iota$  [15:29b] is construed as a reference to the literal dead.”<sup>27</sup>

This reading has the advantage of understanding  $\omicron \iota \beta \alpha \pi \tau \iota \zeta \omicron \mu \epsilon \nu \omicron \iota \upsilon \pi \epsilon \rho$  in a natural way and thus avoiding some of the pitfalls of the other metaphorical and improper grammatical interpretations. However, where the less natural reading enters into the discussion concerns the interpretation of  $\tau \omega \nu \nu \epsilon \kappa \rho \omega \nu$ . “The dead” in the first half of the verse are understood to be a metaphorical reference to the apostles themselves and Paul in particular. White posits that “the apostles” are meant by this phrase since Paul regularly refers to death as a “metonymy for suffering” particularly in his correspondence to the Corinthian church.<sup>28</sup> This is further advanced through four strongly parallel passages that present the Apostolic mission as closely linked to suffering and even death (1 Cor.4:9; 2 Cor.2:14-16; 4:10-11; 6:9):

“For, I think, God has exhibited us apostles last of all, as men condemned to death...”; “But thanks be to God, who always leads us in triumph in Christ, and manifests through us the sweet aroma of the knowledge of Him in every place... to the one an aroma from death to death...”; “Always carrying about in the body the dying of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body. For we who live are constantly being delivered over to death for Jesus’ sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh.”; “...as dying yet behold, we live; as punished yet not put to death....”<sup>29</sup>

This seems to present a coherent and plausible explanation for “the dead” being the apostles especially given the use by Paul of the plural “epistolary”  $\eta \mu \epsilon \iota \varsigma$  (we) right away in verse 30 in connection to the suffering and death that he (and indeed all the apostles counted with himself particularly as the immediate referent and with Christ as the first) faces “all the

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 493.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 495.

<sup>29</sup> All Scripture references are from the NAS 1995.

time.”<sup>30</sup> Paul then declares, “I die (ἀποθνῄσκω) daily” (15:31).<sup>31</sup> Then he furthers his argument by referring to suffering in Ephesus in connection with this “dying” and “death” (15:32). White perceives Paul’s discourse as a “rich tapestry of apostolic suffering portrayed metaphorically in terms of Paul’s ‘death’.”<sup>32</sup>

Perhaps the variation between the genitive and the nominative (in 15:29b) cases for “the dead” should also be considered in light of the interpretation being discussed. The usage of the substantival adjective *οὐκ ἐγεῖροισι* is preceded by the adverb *ὁλωσ*, which is arguably a reference to those who are “literally” or “actually” dead rather than simply a reference to the phrase “they are not raised” [*οὐκ ἐγεῖροισι*].<sup>33</sup> This has been suggested to distinguish those who have died among the apostles and those who remain, but are counted as “dead.”<sup>34</sup> This seems to be the likeliest rendering of *ὁλωσ* given that it immediately precedes *οὐκ ἐγεῖροισι* rather than *οὐκ ἐγεῖροισι*.

The reason for connecting the adverb to the adjective rather than the verb is simply to keep in line with the other occurrences of this particular adverb in Paul. In fact, it only occurs 4 times in the New Testament (Mt.5:34) and three of those are in First Corinthians (5:1; 6:7; 15:29).<sup>35</sup> Each time it modifies the nearest word (in 5:1 – the verb that precedes it; in 6:7 – the noun that follows it; and in 15:29 the adjective that follows it), rather than simply modifying a

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 494.

<sup>31</sup> Paul uses two semantically similar terms (though not grammatically the same) the reason being that he couldn’t have used the verbal form of *νεκροσ* is because it is reflexive rather than active/passive – see White 494-495n.48.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 496.

<sup>33</sup> Zerwick places it with the verb rather than the noun that follows – pg. 529.

<sup>34</sup> Fitzmyer 581; White 494 and especially footnote 43.

<sup>35</sup> Note especially the parallel in 6:7.

verb. This leads to a possible differentiation between “the dead” (15:29a) and “the literally dead” (15:29b) and “them” (15:29b) [i.e., “the dead” from 15:29a].

Therefore, the terminology being employed (i.e.  $\tau\omega\nu \nu\epsilon\kappa\rho\omega\nu$  and  $ο\iota \nu\epsilon\kappa\rhoο\iota$  ) may be read respectively as both figurative and literal in this context. The plural form that is strikingly and consistently used throughout Paul’s discourse in chapter fifteen (15:12 [2x], 13, 15, 16, 20, 21, 29 [2x], 32, 35, 42, 52) suggests that “the dead” be considered representative of both “death” and “those who are dead” and should be understood as specifically eschatological in orientation. This eschatological perspective shades the meaning of “the dead” here to imply ultimate victory over death and the grave having begun at the resurrection of Jesus Christ. While there had been ‘resurrections’ in the past history of Israel, none of these were specifically eschatological, whereas, the Pauline argument in this letter is entirely eschatological.

This shades the meaning of “the dead” to imply the end of death and specifically entailed those given the primary responsibility of proclaiming the death (and resurrection) of Jesus. The apostles themselves were chosen to bear the message of death (and victory over death) and lived as though dead already. Is it possible that “the dead” could also be understood literally in reference to the apostles? There were certainly apostles who had literally died (see Acts 12:2) by the time of the writing of this letter to the Corinthians. Perhaps there were others that were dead as well (even among the 500 that were witnesses of Christ’s resurrection). Paul himself was stoned and thought to be “dead,” though he miraculously got up and continued his itinerant proclamation of Christ (Acts 14:19). In fact, Paul later wrote to the Corinthians to remind them just how many times he had faced death as a minister of the Gospel (2 Cor.11:23-27). Certainly, in this context “the dead” and “the apostles” seem to be inter-related.

Paul's argument in chapter fifteen should not be stripped of its relation to the issues involved in chapter one.<sup>36</sup> The question of apostolic privilege was considered to rest upon the various members of the Corinthian fellowship upon the reception of water baptism under the ministry of a particular apostle. This privileged status was treated by the Corinthians as a mark of significance that caused divisions about which apostle each group belonged to and therefore which group was *more* privileged than the others were.

Given this context, the irenic style employed in 15:29 seems fitting rather than inconsequential to Paul's case. Paul has just argued for the meaninglessness of Christ's death if there is no resurrection. In fact, this would mean that there is no victory over sin and the grave and Christ's very life and goal was vanity. Therefore, Paul develops his argument for the resurrection by adding himself and his own suffering and "death" (as well as all of the apostles who were so readily claimed as the baptizers – and thereby endorsers – of various factions within the Corinthian congregation) as arguments against rejection of the bodily resurrection.

[I]f 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.<sup>37</sup>

White also reads  $\upsilon \pi \epsilon \rho$  as causative with the translational value "because of" or specifically "on account of."<sup>38</sup> This places the emphasis once again on the fractious members of the congregation that were claiming their baptism by certain apostles to place them as being

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<sup>36</sup> 1 Cor.1:13-17.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 498.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 497.

puffed up “on account of one...against the other”

[*υπερ του ενος...κατα του ετερου* ] (1 Cor.4:6).

Also, in favor of this understanding is the use of *υπερ* in the context of 15:3. There Paul declares, “Christ died for our sins”

[*Χριστος απεθανεν υπερ των αμαρτιων* ] and this was in accordance with the Scriptures and “of first importance.” Why does Paul not refer to Jesus specifically as “crucified,” but instead opt for the more general “died” especially since his preferred terminology is “crucified” (1 Cor.1:23; 2:2; 2:8; 2 Cor.13:8)? Further, considering the creedal tone of 15:3-6, it would seem likely that Paul would have used the preferred terminology of crucifixion. The inherent cohesiveness of 15:3 and 15:29-32 seems too unlikely to have occurred without Paul intentionally connecting the ministry and “death” of Christ with his own (and indeed all of the apostles). This context provides fertile ground for Paul’s argument concerning “baptism on account of ‘the dead’.”

Another link between 15:29 and the wider context is found in the reference to what those being baptized “would do” if not for the resurrection. Paul uses an interrogative opening in verse 29 with the use of *ποιησουσιν* (future active indicative third person plural *ποιεω* “they will do”) ‘who are being baptized on behalf of the dead.’ This is tied to his use of *ζωοποιηθησουσιν* (future passive indicative third person plural *ζωοποιεω* “they will be made alive”) in verse 22, where “in Christ all will be made alive.” So Paul’s question in v.29 concerning “what will they do” if there is no resurrection, and yet they are “being baptized on behalf of the dead,” seems to indicate that what Christ “will do” necessitates the future (and present) “doing” of the whole church. What will those “being

baptized on behalf of the dead” *do* that Christ Himself (according to their denial of the bodily resurrection) can’t *do*?

White also describes the link of 15:32 (being a part of the singular unit of Paul’s argument from 15:29-32) where Paul says that his fight with wild beasts in Ephesus would be worthless if it was only “from human motives” [κατα α ν θ ρ ω π ο ν ] to his concern that the Corinthians quit acting “like mere men” [κατα α ν θ ρ ω π ο ν ]. This link is suggested as a part of Paul’s overall corrective concerning the party-spirit of the Corinthians in regard to their apostolically ministered baptisms.<sup>39</sup> This places Paul’s instructions about “baptism on account of ‘the dead’” within the bounds of baptism on behalf of the apostles and of Christ himself who being dead is now alive.

This particular interpretation seems to answer many of the difficulties of the overall passage. The one predominant difficulty concerns the metaphorical reading of τ ω ν ν ε κ ρ ω ν , which may reach beyond the bounds of the grammar, but it is hoped that the explanation given above sufficiently answers such a difficulty. This difficulty, however, is not as insurmountable as many of the other positions difficulties are. It at least passes the tests of cohesiveness within the wider context of Paul’s letters to the Corinthians. Further, it falls within the range of Paul’s evangelical soteriological perspective, especially concerning the sacrament of baptism and its efficacy.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, the multiplicity of interpretations offered to explain 1 Corinthians 15:29 must be sifted through to find those that are the most plausible, coherent and consistent.

However, most of the interpretations must be rejected as highly implausible, (sometimes)

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 499.

incoherent, and inconsistent within the Pauline corpus. They tend to detract (and distract) from the overall aim of Paul in his homily on the resurrection and many also add to the Gospel the “necessity” of baptism for salvation, which is entirely foreign to Paul.

Rather the interpretations that present the most literal rendering of the terminology that Paul employs seem the most likely candidates. The proposal of Thiselton and Archer appears very plausible, coherent and consistent, but it fails to take into account the full context of Paul’s letter. Instead, 15:29 becomes a side story for Paul rather than a key verse in Paul’s overall dialectic.

While Thiselton and Archer’s proposal should not be easily rejected, it lacks the cumulative strength of White’s proposal. His interpretation offers the strengths inherent in a literal reading while also maintaining the cohesiveness of Paul’s overall irenic scheme. It presents 15:29 as a central claim of Paul in arguing for unity in the baptized “body” of Christ and the bodily resurrection of the dead.

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