

BAPTISM FOR THE DEAD

By

Glenn Giles

March 6, 2007

The phrase “baptized for the dead” in I Cor. 15:29 is one of the most difficult and one of the most disputed phrases in I Corinthians. Commentators have listed up to 36 different explanations for this phrase¹. The *normal* reading of this text tends toward the understanding that people could be baptized vicariously for those already dead so that they (those who are already dead without Christ) could be saved. This causes a two-fold problem:

First,

there is no historical or biblical precedent for such baptism. The NT is otherwise completely silent about it; there is no known practice in any of the other churches nor in any orthodox Christian community in the centuries that immediately follow, nor are there parallels or precedents in pagan religion².

and secondly there is a theological problem of how

Paul can appeal, without apparent disapproval, to a practice that stands in such contradiction to his own understanding both of justification by grace *through faith*, which always implies response on the part of the believer, and of baptism as a personal response to grace . . . It smacks of a ‘magical’ view of sacramentalism of the worst kind, where a religious rite, performed for someone else, can have saving efficacy. That lies quite outside the NT view of things.³

These issues have lead scholars and others to search for a better understanding of what might be the true meaning of what Paul is saying here. In the following I will discuss briefly three views⁴ which have come out of those searches.

Of the many understandings of this phrase⁵ “the majority of scholars think that Paul is referring to some form of vicarious baptism”⁶. This understanding of “vicarious baptism” has been my understanding in the past with my caveat added that Paul is not condoning the practice but simply making a point that even behind this erroneous practice there is the concept of the idea of the resurrection of the dead. This point seems to be noted in the next phrase of the same verse: “If the dead are not raised at all, why

¹ See Archibald Robertson and Alfred Plummer, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the First Epistle of St. Paul to the Corinthians* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1983), 359, and Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 1240-49.

² Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 764.

³ *Ibid*, 764-65.

⁴ These three were chosen and they were the only three considered worth mentioning by Robertson and Plummer.

⁵ Other understandings include understanding “baptism” as the suffering and death of being martyred, the term “dead” referring to the ‘soon to be’ dead bodies, “baptism” as a washing, etc. (See Thiselton, 1242-49, for these and more).

⁶ Fee, 766.

then are they baptized for them?” So the whole point of Paul’s statement would then not be the condoning of the practice but the irrationality of the act if indeed the dead are not raised at all, a point that would support the main argument of I Cor. 15 (i.e., that there is a resurrection of the dead).⁷

A second understanding takes the expression “baptism for the dead” to refer to “ordinary Christian baptism” but with the phrase having the meaning “with an interest in the resurrection of the dead’, *i.e.*, in expectation of the resurrection”⁸. This interpretation however does not seem to be an interpretation that does justice to the semantic range of the Greek word “υππερ” translated “for” in the phrase “baptized for the dead” and is therefore dubious.

A third interpretation that does have some appeal and can do justice to the Greek word υππερ (supported by several scholars⁹) translates the phrase “baptism *for the sake of the dead*”. Thiselton states that, translated this way, it

refers to the decision of a person or persons to ask for, and to receive, baptism as a result of the desire to be united with their believing relatives who have died. This presupposes that they would share the radiant confidence that they would meet again in and through Christ at the resurrection of the dead.¹⁰

Robertson and Plummer state,

The reference is to something exceptional, but which may often have occurred at Corinth and elsewhere, and which the Apostle would approve. Persons, previously inclined to Christianity, sometimes ended in being baptized out of affection or respect for the dead, *i.e.* because some Christian relation or friend had died, earnestly desiring and praying for their conversion.¹¹

Thiselton quoting G. G. Findlay, states further,

Paul is referring . . . to a much commoner, indeed a normal experience, that the death of Christians leads to the conversion of survivors, who in the first instance

⁷ Cf. Robertson and Plummer, 359, for their evaluation of this view as “highly improbable” even though this practice may have existed as assumed by the church father Tertullian in his treatise “On the Resurrection of the Dead” (around 200AD). See Tertullian’s discussion of this in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. 3, edited by Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1999), 581-82. There Tertullian states, “But inasmuch as ‘some are also baptized for the dead,’ . . . Now it is certain that they adopted this (practice) with such a presumption as made them suppose that the vicarious baptism (in question) would be beneficial to the flesh of another in anticipation of the resurrection; for unless it were a bodily *resurrection*, there would be no pledge secured by this process of corporeal baptism.” Robertson and Plummer believe that this practice referred to here by Tertullian existed “perhaps only among heretics”. Fee, 764 note 17, states that the church father Chrysostom (*hom. 40 in I Cor.*) “describes such a practice among the Marcionites”. Note that today this is a practice of the Mormons

⁸ Robertson and Plummer, 359.

⁹ Including Robertson and Plummer and Thiselton.

¹⁰ 1248.

¹¹ 359-60.

‘for the sake of the dead’ (their beloved dead) and in the hope of re-union, turn to Christ—*e.g.*, when a dying mother wins her son by appeal ‘Meet me in heaven!’ Such appeals, and their frequent salutary effect, give strong and touching evidence of *faith in the resurrection*.¹²

This third understanding would mean that a non-Christian would be baptized or at least initially be prompted to come to Christ out of the influence of their relationship with a close friend or loved one who was already a Christian but who had died. The initial drawing of the Christian’s loved one or friend to Christ would have occurred through that Christian’s own personal life and relationship with the non-Christian. Because of that Christian’s life, the friend or loved one turns to Christ with a desire of joining the Christian in Heaven. The *initial* motive of joining one’s friend in Heaven would of course have to be joined with and even overshadowed by one’s desire to be with Christ since one’s individual relationship *with Christ* is the central purpose of baptism in Paul’s teaching (cf. Romans 6:1ff).

Although the first and third interpretations above seem to be the most appealing to me, I am not totally swayed or comfortable with either. The first seems possible but I am uneasy with Paul’s lack of stating that it is an aberrant form of baptism not acceptable to him. The third interpretation, while also possible, seems to necessitate some “reading in between the lines” to bring about the understanding stated above. This being said, I, as of this moment, would agree with Thiselton that the third interpretation seems “*the least problematic*”¹³. In the final analysis, however, we will probably have to admit that we cannot know for certain what the true meaning of this passage is at this time in history.¹⁴

With respect to practical matters, proper hermeneutical rules require us to “interpret the unclear passages with reference to the clear”. Hence, this would necessitate (because of the other more clear passages in the NT) that we understand this passage as *not* condoning any vicarious baptism for anyone who has already died (or for that matter, any one who is still alive!) **nor** that the only and primary motive necessary for a candidate for baptism be the singular desire to be united with their loved-one in Heaven.

¹² 1248.

¹³ 1249.

¹⁴ A future more complete understanding is possible if future archaeological or ancient paleographical discoveries are made that shed light on this passage. At this time however, Fee is correct when he states (767), “finally we must admit that we simply do not know”.