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# BAPTISM IN THE PAULINE EPISTLES

## With Special Reference to the Corinthian Letters

### 1. INTRODUCTION TO THE ISSUE OF BAPTISM IN THE PAULINE CORPUS

#### a) The definition of the Pauline Corpus

With regard to the integrity and authorship of the Pauline corpus, I accept as genuine nine of the ten epistles generally designated as Pauline, including Colossians and II Thessalonians, and I take Ephesians to be from the hand of a close disciple of Paul, but I do not accept the Pastoral epistles as Pauline, so the awkward passage of Titus 3.5 will happily be given a miss here. Nothing I have to say should be nullified if you reject my assessment of the present scholarly consensus on this question. With regard to the source-critical fragmentation theories which seemed to abound in New Testament studies a generation ago, I can find no compelling reason why any of the relevant baptismal passages should be regarded as post-Pauline interpolations into genuine letters, though several may be pre-Pauline statements which the Apostle inserts within his letters. This carries the theoretical possibility of Paul using baptismal material to an end other than that to which it was first intended. I would, however, resist any suggestion that the baptismal passages are somehow not indigenous to the epistles concerned.

#### b) The nature of the Corinthian Epistles themselves

In Colin Morris's *Epistles to the Apostle: Tarsus Please Forward* [1974 p.154], we have a fictitious and humorous reconstruction of what might have been the other side of the Corinthian correspondence: the sort of things the Corinthians might have written to Paul. Morris juxtaposes these reconstructed letters with selections from the Apostle's letters which serve to answer the points raised by the congregations to which Paul writes. One such letter, purported to be from a member of the church at Corinth, deals with the matter of baptism within the Corinthian fellowship in this way:

Dear Paul,

I am writing to ask a favour of you. My brother, after a long spiritual struggle, has decided to join the church here. Since he is widely known in the Cenchræ area (he is in fact the Deputy Chief Harbour Pilot) I am most anxious that he should become a real Christian and not get involved with those cliques who by their behaviour and belief seem to me to be utterly heretical about many aspects of the Faith. I was wondering therefore whether you would be prepared to baptise him yourself on your next visit so that he will get off to a good start. Don't be falsely modest. This is *your* church (under Christ of course) and though I myself was baptised by others - since you were in prison at the time - I count myself as one of your disciples, cherish your teaching and quote you constantly in debate against the factions which, in my view, Cephas, Apollos and others have deliberately encouraged.

Could you give me some idea when you might be passing this way again? I will then make the necessary arrangements.

Yours Always,  
Elephas

The reply of Paul is given as the familiar section of I Corinthians 1.13-17. This is all a bit hypothetical but it illustrates well that the doctrine of baptism is not the central issue that Paul seeks to address in the Corinthian epistles, nor, indeed for

that matter, within any of his epistles. The *conditional and occasional nature* of all of the Pauline epistles *must* be recognised when we come to approach the subject of baptism, or any other theological theme embedded within them. The letters will be unable to answer all of our questions as fully as we should like or with the clarity we should wish.

We recognise this to some extent within certain areas, such as the impropriety of universally applying I Corinthians 14.34a. Nothing more aptly illustrates this than the pungent comment by Pinchas Lapide in his contribution to *Paul: Rabbi and Apostle* [1984, pp.35-36], when he says: 'All of Paul's occasional letters, though they contain personal responses to specific Roman, Galatian and Corinthian questions raised during the middle of the first century A. D., have been absolutised with complete disregard for their original intent, eternalized and universalized on all five continents by his disciples. Just because a few gossiping women in Corinth could not keep their mouths shut during the worship service, millions of women throughout the churches of the world must now keep silent.' This lesson of proper interpretation must be extended to baptism too, and we should do well to heed the spirit of Rabbi Lapide's advice.

### c) The Baptismal Vocabulary used in the Pauline Passages

In addition to the common verb βαπτίζω (13 times in Paul: Romans 6.3 twice; I Corinthians 1.13,14,15,16 twice, 17; 10.2; 12.13; 15.29 twice; Galatians 3.27) and the noun βάπτισμα (3 times in Paul: Romans 6.4; Colossians 2.12; Ephesians 4.5), several related words enter our discussion. The verb ἀπολούεσθαι occurs in I Corinthians 6.11 in what is normally taken to be a baptismal context. The corresponding noun λουτρόν (denoting the act of washing) appears once in the letter to Ephesians 5.26 and once again in the difficult passage of Titus 3.5. As well as these clearly defined and generally accepted baptismal terms, σφραγίζω and σφραγίς are often associated with the concept of baptism in the thought of Paul by most interpreters. The verb is used four times in the Pauline corpus [Romans 15.28; II Corinthians 1.22; Ephesians 1.13 and 4.30]. The noun occurs twice [Romans 4.11 and I Corinthians 9.2].

Two further points are worth noting. The dominant note throughout those verses which speak of Christian baptism uses the verbal forms in the passive voice. Many have rightly seen in this grammatical point an emphasis on the Divine Initiative in the act of baptism. Secondly, there are no clear baptismal passages in the earliest of Paul's letters, those to the church at Thessaliniki, nor are there any clear passages within either Philippians or Philemon.

## 2. THE DOMINANCE OF ROMANS 6.3-6 IN MODERN DISCUSSION

### a) The need to set the context of Romans 6

The central passage that most of us turn to when discussing Paul's teaching about baptism is Romans 6.3ff. Paul gives at that point one of his most expansive treatments of the theme in language that is poetically and figuratively captivating. Once heard, who can forget Romans 6.3? 'Do you not know that all of us who have been baptised into Christ Jesus have been baptised into his death?'

The same imagery is taken up in Colossians 2.12 (and possibly in Philippians 3.10), where it is creatively attached to the understanding of the Christian as one who is also co-resurrected with Christ. James D. G. Dunn [1980, p.174] has remarked about the close connection between these two verses, which both 'speak of baptism as a means of or an instrument to being buried with Christ, or as the context in which the would-be Christian was buried with Christ. Paul is here clearly evoking the powerful symbolism of baptism (probably by immersion) as a burying (out of sight)

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of the old life.' Rudolf Schnackenburg, *Baptism in the Thought of St Paul*, describes this text from Romans 6 as the *Locus Classicus* for any discussion of Paul's concept of Baptism as Salvation-Event, giving the section the most extensive treatment of any within his book. My own Doktor-Vater, G. R. Beasley-Murray, in his able handling of the theme, *Baptism in the New Testament* [1962, p.126], introduces the Pauline material with an exhaustive treatment of what he terms 'the most extensive exposition of baptism Paul has given'. He declares with some justification that 'it is preferable to interpret obscure passages in the light of the clear'. I have no doubt that he is right in pursuing this methodology, yet I am not completely happy with it. My misgiving is because baptism, as such, is not the central theme of the argument in Romans 6. In fact, it is little more than an incidental illustration of the main point of Paul's thought, the unity that exists between Christ and the believers *as the basis for the Christian's ethical lifestyle*. The ethical perspective is the most important point Paul seeks to make to the Corinthian believers. Marcus Barth goes so far as to say that: 'In the Pauline letters intimations regarding baptism occur only in ethical contexts. Decisive elements of the life and conduct in faith are structured after the model of baptism.' [p.88]

In short, by proceeding in the fashion of many New Testament scholars, by insisting that Romans 6.3-6, and the closely related Colossians 2.12, must determine all else that Paul has to say about the concept of baptism, are we not in danger of making too much of the baptismal teaching in Romans, important and highly creative though it is, and imposing that understanding upon the Corinthian passages? The subject of baptism is not, after all, ever brought up again within the Epistle to the Romans. Nor is it in Colossians, although there might be some justification for pursuing the associated co-resurrection theme in Colossians 3.1-4 further within that epistle, as long as we recognise that the subject of baptism has been laid aside.

Ironically, the epistles in which Paul discusses baptism most fully, the Corinthian epistles, are hardly ever taken by scholars to be the starting point for any study of the matter. An alternative approach, therefore, would be to begin by examining these two Corinthian letters where Paul discusses baptism at greater length. We may then avoid the temptation to read I and II Corinthians through the eyes of Romans, and yet still have an opportunity to compare our results with the important passage of Romans 6.3-6 and the related Colossians 2.12. It may seem a methodological quibbling point, but I remain convinced that it is an essential way to proceed. I would not doubt the need to include Romans 6.3-6 within any detailed study of Paul's doctrine of baptism, but first let us turn our attention to the letters to the church at Corinth.

### **b) The central section of I Corinthians 1.13-17**

Within these five brief verses are concentrated nearly half of the clear references to baptism within Paul's letters. This might lead us to suppose that the subject was extremely important for the Apostle in his discussion with the Corinthian church members, yet Paul concludes this section with an assessment of baptism which runs in the opposite direction and comes close to denigrating the practice. 'For Christ did not send me to baptise but to preach the gospel' [I Corinthians 1.17] sounds almost as if the practice of baptism is being set against the proclamation of the gospel. For some this has meant that any sacramental understanding of the practice of Christian Baptism is contrary to Paul's teaching. By examining the material in the Corinthian epistles more closely, we may correct that false understanding and set the relationship between baptism and preaching, between works and faith, on more solid ground.

3. THE CORINTHIAN EPISTLES: EVIDENCE SURVEYED

Seven major passages in the Corinthian epistles are generally said to contain references to baptism. Each has been well-rehearsed within the major commentaries and we can only look at the critical points at issue within each of the passages. Taking them in order of appearance, we will note the most significant themes which are common to the passages and introduce some of the critical issues of interpretation.

a) I Corinthians 1.11-17

The critical question here is whether Paul means to disparage the practice of baptism. This seems extremely unlikely, given the place that baptism has within the rest of the Corinthian epistles, not to mention Romans and Galatians. What Paul intends is surely to undercut the basis of any claim made by a member of the Corinthian church that Paul had been the person who baptised him. It is a question of factions within the church at Corinth which occasions Paul's teaching.

The reference to baptism in the name of Paul [v.13: *εἰς τὸ ὄνομα Παύλου βαπτίσθητε*] probably has as its counterpart an agreed tradition of baptism in the name of Jesus Christ. Both assume baptism 'in the name of' as an expression of discipleship to the one in whose name the baptism occurs. Thus verse 15 gives the reason why Paul rejoices that he has not baptised more members of the congregation and helps correct any faulty misunderstanding about the relationship that baptism has to Paul's apostolic mission as a preacher of the gospel. It is on the grounds of a faultily perceived discipleship pattern that he utters verse 17, not as a disparagement of baptism as a practice of the Church. Perhaps G. R. Beasley-Murray's distinction between secondary and second-rate is worth quoting here: 'Baptism is secondary to the proclamation, in that it depends upon it and embodies it; but as it is the God-ordained mode of faith's appropriation of the gospel and of God's appropriation of the believer, it can never be said to be of second-rate importance.' [p.180] In short, baptism should not be set against the preaching of the gospel on the basis of verse 17, but should be seen as complementary to it.

b) I Corinthians 6.11

The first critical question on this verse concerns the use of the verb *ἀπολοῦσθαι* and whether it actually means Christian baptism. That it does seems the almost universal opinion of exegetes and there is little firm evidence to dispute it. Schnackenburg points out, however, that the use of a middle voice verb is slightly unusual: Paul prefers passive voice verbs when describing baptism. An appeal to Acts 22.16, where both verbs (*βαπτίζω* and *ἀπολοῦσθαι*) appear, should settle the matter in favour of a genuine description of Christian baptism, as opposed to mere ritual absolutions in water. Much more important is the fact that the reference to baptism is immediately followed by language describing the believer's sanctification and justification, as if to make a significant link between baptism, justification and sanctification. All three verbs here are passive voice and in the aorist tense, suggesting an earlier experience on the part of the believer. Once again it is 'in the name of' language (*εἰς τὸ ὄνοματι κυρίου Ἰησοῦ χριστοῦ*). There is, indeed, no mention of faith as such within the verse, but we can safely say that faith is presumed to be present and lies behind the more generalised description of the believer's justification and sanctification. I remain puzzled why the Apostle has the reference to justification *follow* that of sanctification. Should we press the logical order here too much? Beasley-Murray describes the three verbs as expressing 'coincidental action' [p.164], but is that a sufficient explanation? Somehow I think not.

The parallel in Ephesians 5.26 also speaks of a ritual washing, sanctification and

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cleansing all in the span of a compact sentence. Could this be a reference to the ritual cleansing ceremony which brides regularly underwent as part of their preparations for marriage? The immediate context certainly seems to fit. In any case it is worth noting how baptismal language comfortably fits around language of sanctification and cleansing. In both these passages, the ethical implications of baptism, particularly as they relate to the life style of the believer, are driven home.

### c) I Corinthians 7.14

The baptismal connection in this passage is often doubted, not without good reason. Neither of the major Pauline baptismal verbs is used. It is only by a rather fanciful stretching of sanctification language and mention in the second half of the verse of 'cleansing' that exegetes are able to see baptismal imagery lying behind the verse. I doubt whether this is baptismal imagery and cannot help but wonder whether the reference to parents and children has led some to so interpret it. Can we really stretch this passage, even assuming that a close connection between baptism and a strong covenant theology is demonstrable in Paul, to refer to baptismal practice or teaching? In any case this cryptic verse brings us no further in understanding baptism as a doctrine in Paul. We do best to pass this one by.

### d) I Corinthians 10.1-6

Without doubt this is one of the most difficult passages to interpret of all those we are examining. It is difficult for a variety of reasons, not least because it contains a reference to baptism into Moses (καὶ πάντες εἰς τὸν Μωϋσῆν ἐβαπτίσαντο) in verse 2. Sometimes this has been taken as a further instance of 'baptism in the name of' someone. For instance, G. R. Beasley-Murray says: 'If the Jews at this time did view the Red Sea crossing as a baptism, Paul has it put in Christian terms, as is evident from the key phrase, 'they were baptised *to* Moses' (εἰς τὸν Μωϋσῆν). Baptism 'to Moses' is modelled on baptism 'to Christ' (εἰς Χριστόν); the latter is the key to understanding the former, not vice versa.' [p.185]

The nature and approach of Paul's use of the Old Testament, particularly his use of typology, is critical when discussing this passage. Rudolf Schnackenburg explains it well: 'It is characteristic of Paul's typological exposition, however, that he does not search out all the possible prefigurations in the Old Testament, as this soon took place in the ancient Church in a marked fashion; he selects a few Christologically and ecclesiologically significant figures (Adam, Abraham, Moses) and events to illuminate his proclamation of Christ and to gain fruitful applications for the Churches.' [pp.91-92] Schnackenburg is indisputably correct in his fundamental point, that Paul moves from Christian fulfilment to Old Testament prefigurement *in that order*. He interprets the Old Testament in the light of what he knows to be true about the New Covenant in Christ. This is especially borne out here in I Corinthians 10.2, where he refers to the Old Testament patriarch Moses in a way wholly consistent with the other major passage where he writes of Moses, namely Romans 5.14. There Paul again moves from his understanding of Christ as embodying all of Redeemed Humanity within himself and fastens upon Moses as a convenient anti-type (the word *τυπος* is actually used!) for this analogy. We can readily see that in Romans 5.14 Moses embodies all of Unredeemed Humanity within himself.

A second major area of debate among New Testament scholars has been the precise relationship between Paul and other Jewish allegorizing traditions, such as Philo, when they come to interpreting the reference to 'the Rock'. The Old Testament image is familiar, taken from Exodus 17 and Numbers 20. In Oscar Cullmann's opinion, the 'Rock' is never interpreted in a Messianic sense within later

Jewish writings. The well-known and problematic descriptions of Philo of Alexandria must, however, be taken into account. The most important is *Legum Allegoria* II 86, where *πέτρα*, *λόγος* and *σοφία* are all brought together in a highly creative fashion. Underlying this allegorical exegesis is the Wisdom Christology we now are beginning to recognise was so influential within the earliest stages of Christianity. We should not rule the evidence contained within Philo out of bounds. At the very least he provides a valuable comparative point, which differs from that of Christianity not on the basis of method of scriptural exegesis but on the content of christological understanding.

The reference in *Legum Allegoria* II 86 is worth examining more closely, for it provides a fascinating parallel. The critical verse, at least as far as the reference to *πέτρα* and *σοφία* is concerned, reads: *ἡ γὰρ ἀκρότομος πέτρα ἢ σοφία τοῦ θεοῦ ἔστιν*. This is quite straightforward and has often been appealed to by scholars commenting on I Corinthians 10. They usually also point out that Philo follows this with a description of the Rock, this Wisdom of God, also providing manna to supplement the water and sustain the people of God as they wander about in the wilderness. Some scholars are quick to point to this as remarkably reminiscent of John 6.48-58, where Jesus is called the Manna from heaven. Still others have attempted to base a strong sacramentalism, involving both baptism and the eucharist, on the basis of the typological descriptions contained in I Corinthians 10. I suspect their hearts have run away from their minds: I find myself hard pressed to see that it has any exegetical basis here in Paul's epistle.

To return to Philo, the line just quoted is not the first occurrence in the passage of the unusual qualifying word *ἀκρότομος*, usually translated as 'hard', 'sharp-edged' or 'flinty'. It appears, interestingly, in the previous sentence, referring to God's own wisdom which is said to be sent forth in a stream (*ὁ θεὸς τῆς ἀκποτόμου σοφίας ἑαυτοῦ τὸ νόμα ἐπιπέμφει*). Unfortunately, this reference to God's own wisdom is lost in the translations (for instance, in the translation of F. H. Coulson and G. H. Whitaker in the Loeb edition). We thereby miss a significant connection in Philo's thought, a link which is quite interesting. The adjective shifts from *σοφία* to *πέτρα* in successive sentences and carries with it an accompanying shift in antecedents, that is, from God to the Rock. Philo also uses the phrase *ἀκρότομος πέτρα*, or an approximate one, in at least three other places [*De Somniis* II 221; *Mos* I 210; and *Decalogue* 16]. In each he deliberately exploits the Old Testament imagery from Exodus, and in two of the three there is a deliberate play on the words *ἀκρότομος* and *ἀκρότατος*.

Another part of 'the puzzle of Philo's Rock' comes in the form of the Septuagint text of Joshua 5.2-3. There the same word *ἀκρότομος* is used of the stones used for the circumcision of the children of Israel. The relevant section reads: *Ποίησον σεαυτῷ μαχαίρας πετρίνας ἐκ πέτρας ἀκροτόμου, καὶ καθίσας περὶ τεμε τοῦς υἱοῦς Ἰσραηλ*. This is, of course, built on the story of Exodus 4.25 and seems to be taken directly from it except that the word *ἀκρότομος* is not actually used there. A completely different word is used (*ψήφον*). Worth noting at this point is the fact that in *Codex Alexandrinus* Joshua 5.2 ends with the insertion of the words *ἐκ δεύτερον*. Is this the deliberate interjection of a New Covenant motif? Is it not strange that this passage should be the very one that springs to Philo's mind (and perhaps to Paul's if he is following the same trajectory), when discussing the 'Rock' in the wilderness. In other words, this passage speaks of circumcision, a New Covenant (if *Codex Alexandrinus* is to be believed) and the 'Rock' all in one place. Could it be that the use of *ἀκρότομος πέτρα*, for Philo the same as *σοφία τοῦ θεοῦ*, is tied intimately to his understanding of the New Covenant and made the object of his fanciful allegorical interpretations of *ἀκρότομος* and *ἀκρότατος*? How far is this

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really from Paul's own thought, given the added fact that the title of the Old Testament book itself (Ιησοῦς!) is so pregnant with meaning? Are we right in rejecting the parallel to Paul with which Philo presents us, especially when the New Covenant idea is perhaps lurking around somewhere backstage just waiting for its cue to make a grand entrance? Perhaps some young, enterprising Ph.D. student would deign to tackle the 'puzzle of Philo's Rock'.

The final point to emphasize on I Corinthians 10.1ff. is that the whole paragraph is concerned with the ethical life-style which Paul is calling the Corinthians to adopt. We must not forget the context, in spite of the attendant problems and various temptations to wander which this passage presents. As Beasley-Murray so aptly remarks in his opening comments on these verses: 'The chief requirement for understanding this greatly misused passage is to recognise that v.1 has a context and that v.6a is an unfinished sentence.' [p.181] As 9.24-27 clearly indicates, the context is the ethical exhortation of the Apostle to the Corinthians.

### e) I Corinthians 12.13

This is perhaps the most important of the baptismal passages within the Corinthian epistles for it is the clearest instance of the use of *ἐν* + *βαπτίζω* to indicate the element in which baptism takes place. Paul declares that: 'By one Spirit we were all baptised into one body'. Baptism language (as clearly indicated by the use of the verb *βαπτίζω*) is bonded together with a description of the work of the Spirit in the life of the believer. Baptism (by the Spirit!) is the channel whereby the Christian's entry into the Body of Christ, the Church, is effected. This is the first encounter with such an idea clearly set forth within the Corinthian epistles. As Beasley-Murray states: 'For the first time we meet here an explicit declaration that baptism leads into the Church.' [p.167]

What does this mean? We can draw an all-important link between the activity of the Spirit and the rite of water baptism. Beasley-Murray is quick to do this by calling attention to the parallel to I Corinthians 6.11. In fact he relies heavily upon this verse in chapter 12 as the basis for undermining a suggestion that Spirit baptism and water baptism could be separate and distinct. Interestingly, he criticises Ernest Best's *One Body in Christ* on this score.

Secondly, in connection with 12.13, the sole baptismal reference in Galatians [26-27] comes to the fore. There Paul declares that all Christians 'have been baptised into Christ' (*εἰς Χριστὸν ἔβαπτισθητε*). By a simple substitution of comparative phrases we can make all sorts of interesting connections in Paul's teaching. We can take the 'in Christ' in Galatians 3.27 (*εἰς Χριστὸν*) to be an equivalent to 'in one body' in I Corinthians 12.13 (*ἐν σῶμα*), while at the same time drawing attention to the fact that both these phrases are shorthand for 'in the name of Jesus Christ'. Galatians 3.27 thus becomes a sort of nexus, a bridging verse, from one set of ideas to another. This has been the most common pathway followed by New Testament exegetes.

One final point, stressed by Beasley-Murray, seems fundamentally correct. He wishes to emphasise that the thrust of both passages [Galatians 3.27 and I Corinthians 12.13] is toward a corporate understanding of the believer's entry into the Body of Christ. 'The believer is baptised "to one body": not so as to *form* the Body but to *participate* in it, to be added to it.' [p.170] The Body of Christ is thus defined by Christ and not vice versa. This is a fundamentally important concept to keep in mind as we face our own day with its tremendous pre-occupation with the personal, the subjective, the individualistic tendency.



## f) I Corinthians 15.29

It is within this passage, more perhaps than any of the others we are considering, that the conditional nature of the Pauline epistles can be seen most clearly. We do not really have much clue about what this verse *really* means. The scholarly debate still rages concerning the baptismal practice alluded to when Paul mentions 'baptism for the dead' (ὑπὲρ τῶν νεκρῶν). Does it refer to an actual custom within the Corinthian church? Does he mean to sanction such a practice or is he simply letting them know that he is aware of their practices without necessarily agreeing with them? Does the cryptic Greek phrase mean 'baptism for the dead' or should we take it to be 'baptism of the dead'? Where does the practice originate? Was it introduced by Paul or some other Christian leader within the Corinthian setting or, alternatively, does it refer to some indigenous practice perhaps taken from the native environment? These are just some of the questions which revolve around the nebulous words of I Corinthians 15.29.

Hans Conzelmann notes in connection with this passage that 'the ingenuity of the exegetes has run riot' [p.276], mentioning that over two hundred different explanations of the verse have been offered. Perhaps one of the most interesting is that of Albert Schweitzer, who argued that the dead on whose behalf some of the Corinthian church members were allowing themselves to be baptised were thought to benefit, in that they were to rise from the dead at the coming of the Lord at the parousia, instead of being required to wait until the end of the temporary Messianic age, as the normal Jewish expectation would have demanded. This exegesis is no doubt seen by Schweitzer to accord with his interpretation of the immediately preceding verses in I Corinthians 15.23-28, which he takes to make a distinction between the temporary Messianic Age and the Eternal Age to Come. I am quite sympathetic to this interpretation of 15.23-28 but find little justification for the explanation offered for 15.29.

Conzelmann's figure of two hundred various explanations of the verse was given in 1975; no doubt many more have since been added. I doubt if any more light has been shed to penetrate the darkness. The verse remains as inscrutable as ever. Conzelmann himself feels that the wording of the verse demands the passage be understood as a veiled reference to vicarious baptism on the part of the Corinthians.

The reference to baptism here should be interpreted only with due respect paid to the surrounding context. I Corinthians 15 is not designed as an extended treatise on the nature of baptism, but as an intricate, self-contained argument about the nature of the resurrection body of the believer, as based upon Paul's understanding of the Lord Jesus Christ's resurrection. The reference to baptism thus is incidental, superfluous and tangential to this larger concern. We should be very amiss to base much of our baptismal theology or practice upon these cryptic words. Perhaps the clearest indication of this is that we can readily remove the verse from the chapter without any serious damage to the flow of the argument. Indeed, it is so incidental to the case Paul puts forward that it might even be called an unnecessary distraction, better deleted altogether.

The verse makes one other potentially important contribution to do with the connection between the rite of baptism and a highly sacramental view of it. To quote C. K. Barrett: 'The idea of vicarious baptism (which is that most naturally suggested by the words used) is usually supposed to be bound up with what some would call a high sacramental, others a magical, view of baptism. Immersion in water is supposed to operate so effectively that it matters little (it seems) what body is immersed.' [p.364] Barrett does not, of course, agree with the implication of this verse, for he immediately adds that 'This however was not Paul's view'. I Corinthians 15.29 may have a role to play in some sacramental interpretations of the practice of baptism, but

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on very dubious exegetical grounds. Let us hope that those who argue for a highly sacramental view of baptism do not rest all their eggs in this basket!

### g) II Corinthians 1.22-23

Here the baptismal imagery is expanded to include 'sealing' and an important additional way in which the Apostle describes the Christian experience of baptism comes to the fore. The sealing is spoken of in terms of the gift of the Spirit which the believer is said to have given to him by God as a down-payment (*ἀρραβών*).

The sealing language is reminiscent of two other passages within the epistle to the Ephesians [1.13-14 and 4.30]. In both passages the other two elements, namely the baptism in the Holy Spirit and the idea of the promise, are present. In 1.13-14 the sealing is done by the Spirit (*τῷ πνεύματι*) and a passive voice verb is employed. In 4.30 the same dative form is used, as is the passive verb (*ἐν ᾧ ἐσφραγίσθητε*). In 4.30 the temporal connection of the salvation described is spelled out, not in terms of the possession of the Spirit, but as a down-payment as in 1.13, but more generally in terms of a future redemption. We could rightly translate *εἰς ἡμέραν ἀπολυτρώσεως* as 'with a view toward the day of redemption'.

As we noted above in connection with I Corinthians 12.13, Paul seems clearly to be thinking of Spirit baptism within this section. The precise connection of such Spirit baptism with a water baptism Paul never clearly defines, much to our aggravation. We must not drag the references to baptism in the Second Century documents, such as the Epistle of Barnabas 11 and the Shepherd of Hermas 9:16:3-4, into the debate at this point, even though the authors make the firm association between water baptism and sealing that we sometimes would like to see. James D. G. Dunn comments at this point in his *Baptism in the Holy Spirit* [1970, p.133]: 'It was only when the living consciousness and experience of the Spirit became less immediate and more a conclusion to be drawn from a ceremony rightly performed that the seal terminology came to be applied to the visible and public rite performed by men.'

Yet, Beasley-Murray insists that there are some grounds for associating the seal of the Spirit more directly with the act of water baptism: 'Thus the "seal of the Spirit" is neither baptism in water, nor a baptism of the Spirit divorced from the rite of baptism: it is the "baptism of the Spirit" in association with the laying of the Name of Jesus on a believer in the rite of baptism.' [p.174] In short, 'the "seal of the Spirit" is a synonym for the possession of the Spirit secured in baptism' [p.175]. We see how important the whole idea of baptism 'in the name of' is for such an interpretation. Beasley-Murray appeals to the use of the aorist participle *σφραγισάμενος* in II Corinthians 1.22 as indicating a definite time in the past life of the believer - the act of baptism itself.

I believe that Beasley-Murray has overstated his case here and has sought to associate the baptismal rite with a passage in which Paul is employing imagery that is not necessarily baptismal, and by that I mean water baptism, in nature. We must avoid the tendency to take any and all references to Spirit baptism as necessarily implying water baptism. The fact that 'Spirit baptism' is a much more wide-spread and flexible concept in Paul's writing that 'water baptism' should prompt us to tread carefully. Dunn's cautious words of advice on II Corinthians 1.21-22 are well heeded: 'It is the Spirit, then, and all that he effects by way of assurance and protection, transforming and empowering, who alone fills Paul's thought and terminology in these verses. Whether faith and baptism play any part in these events is quite immaterial to the thought and intention of this passage.' [p.134] Perhaps this is slightly overstated. I would be hesitant to say that baptism and faith are 'immaterial' to the matter, but Dunn is correct in emphasising the centrality of the Spirit within the

verses.

#### 4. THE CORINTHIAN EPISTLES: EVIDENCE ASSESSED

Through our brief survey of the Corinthian baptismal references we have encountered several themes which remain consistent problems for the interpretation of the passages. Much of the assessment of the contribution of the Corinthian epistles to the subject of baptism rests upon three questions of interpretative debate:

- a) The meaning of 'baptism in the name of' within Paul's thought.
- b) The weight of aorist verbs in the discussion.
- c) The significance of 'seal' language as a baptismal expression.

#### 5. FOUR CRITICAL AREAS OF RESEARCH INVOLVING THE PAULINE CONTRIBUTION TO THE DOCTRINE OF CHRISTIAN BAPTISM

In recent years much work has been done by New Testament scholars attempting to define more precisely the Pauline contribution to New Testament theology. Our discussion of baptism must inevitably both reflect and contribute to this larger concern. I suggest four areas in which such research has been going on and, more importantly, needs to go on if we are to glean Paul's contribution to the meaning of Christian baptism for today.

##### a) The Eschatological Framework of Paul's Teaching on Baptism

Some of the most fruitful investigations into the Pauline teaching in recent years have been in the area of the Apostle's eschatological teaching. Perhaps the best recent example has been the contribution by J. Christiaan Beker, entitled *Paul the Apostle: The Triumph of God in Life and Thought* [1980]. Yet this area of eschatological belief is not unconnected to the doctrine of baptism. W. F. Flemington hinted at this connection twenty-five years ago: 'Probably we come nearest to grasping the Pauline teaching when we view baptism as a sacrament of 'realised eschatology'. Divine sonship, the possession of the Spirit, the power to know God and to do his will, were all blessings connected ... [with] the age to come. Baptism is the pledge to the Christian that here and now these blessings are his to be laid hold of.' [p.150]

This theme needs to be pursued further, particularly with regard to the later Pauline letters, Colossians (and Ephesians), where a strong note of co-crucifixion and co-resurrection with Christ is found within the description of the Christian evidence.

##### b) The Relationship between Grace, Faith and Baptism

Another central issue in Pauline studies today is the nature of the covenantal relationship. New Testament scholars from both ends of the theological spectrum, and indeed all points in between, are vigorously engaged in defining Paul's precise understanding of the New Covenant. An added feature in recent years is the welcome entry of Jewish New Testament scholars into the fray, perhaps an inevitable result of the resurgent interest in the historical Jesus and the fact that Jewish scholars are eager to recapture Jesus for Judaism (if that is the correct metaphor!). A corollary to this surge in scholarship is that the wedge is thus driven further between Jesus and Paul, and Christianity is laid at the feet of the Apostle himself. The seminal work of E. P. Sanders took on that of his own teacher W. D. Davies and sought to redefine Paul's relationship to Palestinian Judaism in *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* [1977]. The result is an interesting, and very stimulating, debate about the relationship between grace and works within the Apostle's thought, and this includes the role that baptism plays. At the risk of oversimplification, we might ask, 'Is baptism an act or channel of grace or a human response to such a work?'

G. C. Berkouwer, in *The Sacraments* [1969, p.132], warns against the 'false

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dilemma between baptism as involved with man's act of faith and the act of God.' We could press this warning to include the false dilemma of interpreting baptism as *either* a mere symbol (as Berkouwer suggests Zwingli did), *or* as functioning *ex opera operato* (as he suggests Heitmüller did). A similar point is made by Herman Ridderbos in *Paul: An Outline of His Theology* [1977, p.411], when he says: 'There can consequently be no suggestion that in Paul baptism can in any sense whatever be detached from faith ... faith is the implicit presupposition of baptism and for this reason faith can be spoken of apart from baptism.'

The question remains a vital one for Pauline studies and no doubt will continue vital for a long time.

### c) The Trinitarian argument as falsely based on Paul's Epistles

We should avoid the temptation to read Trinitarian formulations into the New Testament documents, particularly into these baptismal passages. This has often been suggested with respect to I Corinthians 6.11, for instance, since Father God, Jesus Christ and the Spirit all appear together. It is perhaps wiser to accept that such passages may be properly described as 'Triadic' and avoid loading them with the weight of centuries of doctrinal development. All the elements for such development are undoubtedly present, but we should avoid the anachronistic approach. This issue carries us into the relationship that New Testament exegesis has to historical theology and needs to engage scholars from both disciplines.

### d) The Mystical Interpretations of Paul's Thought and Baptism

Mystical interpretations of Paul's thought have abounded, particularly among German New Testament scholars influenced by or reacting to the History of Religions School in the last century. One of the most famous books in this category is Albert Schweitzer's classic, *The Mysticism of Paul the Apostle* [1931]. Schweitzer wrote in that magisterial volume: 'If baptism possesses the power of effectually adding the believer to the number of those who are to be partakers in the Kingdom of God, its effect can, since Jesus' death and resurrection, only be understood as being the bringing into force of that union with Christ in His death and resurrection, which prepares the way for participating in the glory of Christ. It is on the basis of the mystical being-in-Christ, as the centre of his teaching, that Paul explains baptism.' [pp.261-2]

Such interpretations of Paul's thought as Schweitzer's have mostly relied heavily on Romans 6 for their justification; Schweitzer cites Romans 6.3-5 immediately following the section quoted. However, mystical interpretations of Romans 6 falter when they fail to recognise that the focus of the passage itself is not just on the believer's mystical union in Christ's *mystical* death, but on the believer's participation in Jesus Christ's *historical* death on Calvary. Paul consistently speaks of Jesus' death in concrete, historical terms. We run the risk of missing this emphasis if we insist on taking the whole to be only, or primarily, a description of Jesus' mystical death which effects salvation for the world, into which the believer mystically enters via baptism.

In his the most helpful analysis of this problem, *Dying and Rising with Christ* [1967], Robert C. Tannehill admits that baptism is indeed in Paul connected to the notion of dying and rising with Christ. But the latter idea has a much broader significance in Paul's thought and should be examined in its own right. Tannehill suggests that the connection is pre-Pauline and was widely recognised within the churches at large. The statement at the beginning of Romans 6.3 (*ἡ ἀγνοεῖτε*) could, and probably should, be so interpreted. Tannehill argues that the language of dying and rising with Christ is intimately related to lordship of Christ over the believer. It implies a change of dominion. He says: 'The motif of dying and rising

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with Christ is important to Paul because it brings out this decisive transfer and connects it to the death and resurrection of Christ.' [p.21] The death of Christ and a death on the part of the believer is seen by some to be accomplished through the agency of baptism. Such a direct equation would, in my opinion, do violence both to the text and meaning of Romans 6. Tannehill is quick to point out that traditional baptismal interpretations of the phrase *εις Χριστον* [in Christ] in 6.3a, as a shorthand expression for *εις το ονομα του Χριστου* [in the name of Christ] need to explain how Paul can move immediately also to describe baptism as *εις τους θανατου αυτου* [in his death] in 6.3b.

Tannehill is forced to interject the notion of a corporate or inclusive person at this point to salvage the sense of the passage. He is influenced by Gnostic Redeemer ideas here and so falls into complex problems involving the dating and sources. We would do well to avoid the explanation if it rests only on such evidence. But Tannehill is correct in drawing our attention to the fact that language about dying and rising with Christ is infinitely more complicated and widespread than has often been recognised. We must not allow our baptismal ideas to obscure the significance of the motif within Paul's thought.

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