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BAPTISM FOR THE DEAD

A STUDY OF 1 CORINTHIANS 15: 29

by J. K. HOWARD

FROM Zambia we welcome a new contributor to the QUARTERLY. Dr. Howard is a medical missionary who keeps up to date in his biblical and theological reading. We look forward to further contributions from him.

THE phrase "baptized for the dead" at 1 Corinthians 15: 29 is one which has been universally recognized as occasioning considerable difficulty in interpretation. Many and varied are the solutions which have been proposed, and of these most have not attempted to come to grips with the root of the problem, or else have been so improbable that little credibility may be given them. We may cite as an example the view held by some that the phrase is a reference, albeit somewhat oblique, to the baptism of Paul into the place of the martyred Stephen, an interpretation, we suggest, which is not only highly improbable, but does not even have the merit of being intrinsically true. Amid the maze of both probable and improbable solutions it would seem that the suggestion of Robertson and Plummer,¹ that there are in fact only three possible approaches to the matter, clears the way towards the possible finding of a satisfactory interpretation of this phrase. They have suggested that we may view the phrase as a reference to normal Christian baptism, as a reference to an abnormal vicarious baptism, or, finally, as a reference to the baptism of friends or relatives of a dying Christian as the result of his testimony. Before we turn to a consideration of these possibilities we should also consider the three criteria of interpretation for this passage which Findlay² has suggested must be observed if we are to come to a meaning which has any validity. These are: firstly, *οἱ βαπτισόμενοι* must refer to the recipients of Christian baptism; then, the phrase *ὑπὲρ τῶν νεκρῶν* clearly points to a class of dead, presumably Christian, who have an interest in, or connection with, the living. Finally, in view of *καὶ ἡμεῖς* (v. 30) this action, whatever it may have been, must have been one with which Paul and his associates could have

¹ A. Robertson and A. Plummer, 1 Corinthians in the *International Critical Commentary* (1929), *ad loc.*

² G. G. Findlay, 1 Corinthians in the *Expositor's Greek Testament*, Vol. II (1900), *ad loc.*

allied themselves. This final criterion of interpretation it must be conceded is certainly the weakest, and some have argued that in fact it is a complete *non sequitur*, since verse 30 bears no specific relation to verse 29, apart from the loose connection that they are both concerned with the absurd results of denying the resurrection.

The view that this difficult phrase bears a reference to normal Christian baptism is one which has found considerable support, but nonetheless, it presents certain grave obstacles to its acceptance. We may further subdivide this view into two groups. Firstly, there are those who simply rearrange the punctuation, so that the phrase reads (in English): "Else what shall they do who are baptized? It is for dead persons if the dead do not rise." This view was originally popularized by Sir Robert Anderson,³ and was thus explained by W. E. Vine:

It seems plain to me that the dead are, firstly Christ Himself. If Christ is not risen, then baptism is in the interests of . . . a dead Christ, but it is in the interests not only of a dead Christ but also of fellow-believers, by whom the significance of the ordinance is likewise expressed. They have borne witness in the past to their identification with Christ in their baptism, and have therein testified to the fact of His resurrection and of theirs, His physically, and theirs spiritually. . . . Baptism is in the interests of dead *persons* if there is no resurrection.⁴

The theological truth involved in this explanation is unquestionably true, for baptism can never be divorced from Christ; its whole significance is dependent upon the fact of His resurrection; in baptism the recipient, according to Paul (Rom. 6: 1-6), dies and rises again with Christ; but it is difficult to see how this phrase which we are considering can bear this meaning. There are two points which allow us to question the validity of this exegesis, firstly, to translate the phrase, "baptism in the interests of dead persons", is to ignore the definite article before νεκρῶν, an article which makes these particular dead a specific group. As Parry remarks, "the article with νεκρῶν and the simple reference in αὐτῶν . . . alike prevent us taking the words to be merely equal to death, in relation to death."⁵ In the same way to translate ὑπὲρ by the phrase "in the interests of", or "with an interest in", is a doubtful expedient, and a meaning for which we have been unable to find any classical parallel.

³ Sir Robert Anderson, *The Bible or the Church?* (n.d., c. 1909), p. 234.

⁴ Quoted in P. O. Ruoff, *W. E. Vine: His Life and Ministry* (1951), p. 97.

⁵ R. St. J. Parry, 1 Corinthians in the *Cambridge Greek Testament* (1926), *ad loc.*

Somewhat akin to this view, although allowing full weight to the definite article, is that which suggests that there is an ellipsis in the phrase of τῆς ἀναστάσεως before τῶν νεκρῶν but this is open to similar objections, especially as it requires the same meaning for ὑπέρ as the previous suggestion. As Morris writes, this interpretation of the phrase "involves a very questionable meaning for *hyper*, and an inexplicable ellipsis."⁶

If the phrase does not refer to normal baptism, and we have indicated that it is unlikely that it does, may it not be taken at its face value, that is, as a reference to a vicarious baptism? Many expositors have adopted the interpretation. Parry states unequivocally: "The plain and necessary sense of the words implies the existence of a practice of vicarious baptism at Corinth, presumably on behalf of believers who died before they were baptised."⁷ This is a view with which many commentators would concur, but, nevertheless, it is one which we believe is open to objections just as serious as those associated with the first solution to the problem which we examined. Of these objections the theological outweigh the exegetical, for a vicarious baptism of this nature borders on magic. The practice has generally been regarded as evidence of Hellenistic influences at work in the Corinthian church, but Stauffer has argued that this (hypothetical) practice was related to the late Jewish idea of praying for the dead (cf. 2 Macc. 12: 40, etc.), and both this practice and the supposed vicarious baptism were in the nature of an *oblatio pro defunctis*. Says Stauffer: "Paul writes about the Corinthian baptism of the dead quite in the spirit, indeed in the same form as the argument of 2 Mac. 12. Accordingly, he conceives the Corinthian *baptismus pro defunctis* as an analogy to the Jewish *oblatio pro defunctis*, i.e., as an act of intercession."⁸ While one may admire Stauffer's ingenuity, it is difficult to accept his premises for two very important reasons. Firstly, such a practice would have run contrary to the clear-cut concepts of the apostles—after death, the judgment. The practice of praying for the dead is the first step towards a doctrine of Purgatory, and we can find no evidence in the New Testament which could be reasonably adduced to support either. Secondly, and in some sense more importantly, it involves a complete misconception of the purpose of baptism. A practice of vicarious baptism involves the interpretation of baptism as a purely passive act, and this, in spite of all

⁶ L. Morris, 1 Corinthians in the *Tyndale New Testament Commentary* (1958), p. 219.

⁷ R. St. J. Parry, *op. cit.*, *ad loc.*

⁸ E. Stauffer, *New Testament Theology* (E.T., 1955), p. 299 n.

that has been said to the contrary, is quite undemonstrable from the New Testament. Baptism throughout the New Testament is viewed as an act of faith-obedience, an act of active partnership, demonstrated, incidentally, by the consistent use of the Active and Middle Voices. As Barth has written, "it may be shown, by exegesis and from the nature of the case that in this action the baptized is an active partner."⁹ Furthermore, such a practice would suggest that baptism is able to confer something, ideas which certainly became common from the second century onwards, but are not to be found in the Apostolic Age, and which, in fact, can only be considered magical. To suggest that not only did Paul not condemn such a practice if it existed, but, in fact, tacitly endorsed it, is, to us at least, incredible, especially in view of the remainder of the epistle.

From the historical point of view also this interpretation is difficult to support. It seems extremely unlikely that such a practice would arise in one isolated instance, and there is no evidence that it was practised elsewhere, except for some late heretical sects. From the exegetical point of view this solution falls down on the second and third of Findlay's criteria.

This brings us to a consideration of the third suggestion: namely, that here we have in this phrase "baptism for the dead" a reference to the baptism of those close to a Christian who had recently died being baptized as a result of his testimony, and in order to be reunited with him at the resurrection. This view has been recently developed by Miss Raeder¹⁰ who has shown that ὑπὲρ in this phrase has the final sense, "for the sake of", "because of", a sense well attested by classical examples. Further, as Findlay agrees, of νεκροί must be dead Christians, and indeed, it is difficult to see that they could be anything else. We may thus now translate the phrase, "Else what shall they do who are baptized for the sake of the dead?" This translation is given further weight if we accept the suggestion of Robertson and Plummer¹¹ to the effect that, in this context, ποιήσουσιν could have the sense of gain, giving us as a final reading: "Else what shall they gain from it who are baptized for the sake of the dead?" We have thus a much more credible situation: those in question were baptized, not in order to

⁹ K. Barth, *The Teaching of the Church Regarding Baptism* (E.T., 1948), p. 41.

¹⁰ M. Raeder, "Vikariataufe in 1 Cor. 15: 29?" *Zeitschrift für die Neutestamentliche Wissenschaft*, 46 (1955), pp. 258 ff.

¹¹ A. Robertson and A. Plummer, *op. cit.*, *ad loc.*

remedy some deficiency on the part of the dead, but in order to be reunited with them at the resurrection. No doubt they were Gentile pagans who through the testimony of loved ones who had passed away, and in order to be certain of meeting them again, became Christians and were baptized. Further, this suggestion fits into the context of the chapter, for, in spite of those commentators who maintain that verse 29 represents an abrupt change in the apostle's thought, it marks, in fact, a return to the apologetic of the earlier part of the chapter, broken by the excursus of verses 20-28, and now resumed.¹²

In view of what we have said, this admittedly obscure phrase represents the summation of the apostle's argument. If Christ has not risen then the Christian's faith is vanity; if Christ has not risen then those who have died "in Christ" have perished, and, with no hope, we become hopeless and wretched, especially those who have entered the Christian community and have been baptized for the sake of those who have died in Christ, hoping to be reunited with them. Thus seen, this bone of contention becomes the coping-stone of Paul's argument concerning the absurdity of denying the resurrection.

Kasama, Zambia.

¹² See J. Jeremias, "Flesh and Blood cannot inherit the Kingdom of God (1 Cor. 15: 29)", *New Testament Studies*, 2 (1955-56), pp. 151 ff.