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# Vicarious Baptism for the Dead: 1 Corinthians 15:29

*Daniel B. Sharp*

HANS CONZELMANN CALLED 1 Corinthians 15:29<sup>1</sup> “one of the most hotly disputed passages in the epistle [of 1 Corinthians].”<sup>2</sup> This verse, which mentions being baptized on behalf of the dead, has puzzled biblical commentators for centuries. Conzelmann affirms that exegetes of this verse have “run riot” and notes that there are at least two hundred different interpretations of this passage.<sup>3</sup> According to Gordon Fee, at least forty different explanations exist; he also maintains that “no one knows in fact what is going on.”<sup>4</sup> Commenting on this passage, Michael F. Hull notes that “the vast majority of exegetes and commentators hold that 15:29 is a reference to some form of vicarious baptism.”<sup>5</sup> In recent years, however,

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1. One of the most interesting things about 1 Corinthians 15:29, given the disputed nature of the passage, is the agreement in the textual tradition about how the passage reads in the Greek. The Nestle-Aland *Novum Testamentum Graece*, 28th ed.; Westcott and Hort’s *The New Testament in the Original Greek*; and Tischendorf’s *Novum Testamentum Graece* all give the same reading for this passage. Thus, for this paper, 1 Corinthians 15:29 refers to the Greek text as follows: Ἐπεὶ τί ποιήσουσιν οἱ βαπτίζομενοι ὑπὲρ τῶν νεκρῶν; εἰ ὅλως νεκροὶ οὐκ ἐγείρονται, τί καὶ βαπτίζονται ὑπὲρ αὐτῶν.

2. Hans Conzelmann, *1 Corinthians: A Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians*, trans. James W. Leitch (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), 275.

3. Conzelmann, *1 Corinthians*, 276.

4. Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1987), 762–63.

5. Michael F. Hull, *Baptism on Account of the Dead (1 Cor 15:29): An Act of Faith in the Resurrection* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2005), 10–11; see 11n14 for a long list of examples of this kind of interpretation.

many scholars have attempted to understand 1 Corinthians 15:29 as something other than vicarious baptism, with Hull himself contributing the most thorough examination of the topic.<sup>6</sup> One reviewer of Hull's work wrote, "[Hull's] careful examination of the historical background, in particular, should lay to rest any notion that the passage concerns vicarious baptism."<sup>7</sup> Another reviewer declared, "The major contribution of [Hull's] study is to confute any view that Paul refers to some anomalous or aberrant practice of vicarious baptism."<sup>8</sup> In this paper I will review four recent attempts to understand 1 Corinthians 15:29 as something other than vicarious baptism and determine if the vicarious baptism interpretation has really been laid to rest.<sup>9</sup>

I will begin by reviewing the unique approach of William O. Walker, who agrees that vicarious baptism is the most obvious reading of 1 Corinthians 15:29 but claims the entire passage is a non-Pauline interpolation.<sup>10</sup> I will then examine the paper of Joel R. White, who assigns a symbolic meaning to the phrase "on behalf of the dead," thereby

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6. See, for example, Hull, *Baptism on Account of the Dead*, 10–11; James E. Patrick, "Living Rewards for Dead Apostles: 'Baptised for the Dead' in 1 Corinthians 15.29," *New Testament Studies* 52 (2006): 71–85; John D. Reaume, "Another Look at 1 Corinthians 15:29, 'Baptized for the Dead,'" *Bibliotheca Sacra* 152, no. 608 (1995): 457–75; William O. Walker, "1 Corinthians 15:29–34 as a Non-Pauline Interpolation," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 69 (2007): 84–103; and Joel R. White, "'Baptized on Account of the Dead': The Meaning of 1 Corinthians 15:29 in Its Context," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 116 (1997): 487–99.

7. Ronald D. Witherup, review of *Baptism on Account of the Dead (1 Cor 15:29): An Act of Faith in the Resurrection*, by Michael F. Hull, *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 69 (2007): 150–51.

8. David E. Garland, review of *Baptism on Account of the Dead (1 Cor 15:29): An Act of Faith in the Resurrection*, by Michael F. Hull, *Review of Biblical Literature* 3 (2006); see [http://www.bookreviews.org/pdf/4900\\_5113.pdf](http://www.bookreviews.org/pdf/4900_5113.pdf).

9. For a more complete analysis of the history of the interpretation of this verse, see Bernard M. Foschini, *Those Who Are Baptized for the Dead, 1 Cor. 15:29: An Exegetical Historical Dissertation* (Worcester, MA: Heffernan, 1951); Hull, *Baptism on Account of the Dead*; and Mathias Rissi, *Die Taufe für die Toten: Ein Beitrag zur paulinischen Tauflehre* (Zurich: Zwingli, 1962).

10. Walker, "Non-Pauline Interpolation."

interpreting this passage as something other than vicarious baptism.<sup>11</sup> I will briefly examine some of the assumptions that James Patrick accepts, particularly focusing on his notion that “the dead” referred to in verse 15 are dead Christians. He thus concludes that vicarious baptism is not a viable interpretation. I will close with a detailed examination of Hull’s work.<sup>12</sup>

### William O. Walker: A non-Pauline interpolation

Walker’s thesis is simply stated in the title of his paper, “1 Corinthians 15:29–34 as a Non-Pauline Interpolation.” He believes that the passage in question does not originate with Paul and was a later insertion into the text. He bases his thesis on the following arguments:

1. Context: 1 Corinthians 15:29–34 is out of place in its current location in the letter. He argues that it breaks up the logic of Paul’s argument.<sup>13</sup>
2. Vocabulary: Walker argues that the vocabulary in this section is non-Pauline and points to another author.<sup>14</sup>
3. Content: Here Walker’s argument rests on the assumption that although the text is clearly speaking about vicarious baptism, Paul would not have approved of such a practice and therefore it must be non-Pauline.<sup>15</sup>
4. Self-contained unity of the verses: He states that the text holds up as an independent unit and is not dependent on the rest of the text.<sup>16</sup>
5. Textual variants: Walker recognizes that no textual evidence supports his claim that this is an interpolation but argues

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11. White, “Baptized on Account of the Dead.”

12. Patrick, “Living Rewards”; Hull, *Baptism on Account of the Dead*.

13. Walker, “Non-Pauline Interpolation,” 88.

14. Walker, “Non-Pauline Interpolation,” 92.

15. Walker, “Non-Pauline Interpolation,” 94–95.

16. Walker, “Non-Pauline Interpolation,” 100.

that the lack of textual evidence does not invalidate his assertion.<sup>17</sup>

6. Walker argues that, taken together, these five points bolster his conclusion that this section is an interpolation.<sup>18</sup>

Walker is correct that his cumulative evidence helps support an interpolation argument, but his evidence is insufficient to reject the Pauline origin of 1 Corinthians 15:29.

Walker admits that the cohesiveness of 1 Corinthians 15:29–34 “does not prove the passage is an interpolation.”<sup>19</sup> This fourth point can only reinforce an already established argument. Likewise, the lack of textual evidence (point 5)—while not necessarily disproving his thesis—does not tip the scales in its favor. One cannot claim that one’s theory is true because there is no evidence for it! Thus arguments 4 and 5 are helpful only as confirming evidence if points 1, 2, and 3 establish a compelling case that 1 Corinthians 15:29–34 is a non-Pauline interpolation. If they do not, then points 4 and 5 are irrelevant.

Walker’s line of reasoning about vocabulary (point 2) is potentially compelling. If Walker could establish a significant percentage of unique words, that might strengthen his case. Walker finds that 38.46 percent of the vocabulary in this passage “appears to be not typically Pauline.”<sup>20</sup> Relevant to verse 29, however, Walker notes that *ὄλως* is the only atypical word, but even that is not unattested since it appears two other times in the Pauline epistles.<sup>21</sup> Substantially weakening his case, however, is the fact that both of these uses of *ὄλως* occur in 1 Corinthians (5:1 and 6:7). In sum, while Walker may present a compelling case that the vocabulary of verses 30–34 is not typically Pauline, he does not establish any reason to consider 1 Corinthians 15:29 as non-Pauline.

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17. Walker, “Non-Pauline Interpolation,” 101–2.

18. Walker, “Non-Pauline Interpolation,” 102.

19. Walker, “Non-Pauline Interpolation,” 100.

20. Walker, “Non-Pauline Interpolation,” 89.

21. Walker, “Non-Pauline Interpolation,” 89.

Thus, given that the textual evidence, the logical coherence, and the vocabulary arguments have little bearing on 1 Corinthians 15:29, Walker's thesis rests on content and context, two ideas that are closely related.

Regarding content, Walker writes, "Two items in the content of 1 Cor 15:29–34 are both surprising and perplexing and appear to constitute strong arguments against Pauline authorship."<sup>22</sup> One of these items, fighting with wild beasts in Ephesus, is outside the scope of this paper. The other, however, is baptism for the dead. Walker agrees that the "normal" rendering of this text is to understand it in reference to vicarious baptism on behalf of the dead. He also recognizes that those who have struggled against this interpretation have done so in vain and under the following logic:

1. The text appears to speak, without disapproval, of vicarious baptism on behalf of the dead.
2. It is highly unlikely, however, that Paul would have approved of such a practice. Therefore,
3. The text must be speaking of something other than vicarious baptism on behalf of the dead.<sup>23</sup>

Walker agrees with the assessment that such interpretations are little more than "examples of exegetical distress and caprice."<sup>24</sup> He then offers this alternative syllogism:

1. The text appears to speak, without disapproval, of vicarious baptism on behalf of the dead.
2. It is highly unlikely, however, that Paul would have approved of such a practice.
3. Therefore, the text is most likely non-Pauline in origin.<sup>25</sup>

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22. Walker, "Non-Pauline Interpolation," 92.

23. Walker, "Non-Pauline Interpolation," 94.

24. Walker, "Non-Pauline Interpolation," 94.

25. Walker, "Non-Pauline Interpolation," 95.

Walker, however, fails to establish that this is any less capricious. Both arguments assume the validity of the second premise: that Paul is unlikely to have approved of vicarious baptism. But why not? Walker quotes Fee's emphasis on Paul's teaching of "'justification by grace through faith' and of 'baptism as personal response to grace received.'"<sup>26</sup> He also cites J. Paul Sampley, who expresses disbelief in the idea of vicarious baptism within 1 Corinthians 15:29 because it "seems to suppose either that grace is transferable or that one can be a surrogate believer for another."<sup>27</sup> This, then, is the essence of Walker's argument against Paul's acceptance of vicarious baptism: grace cannot be transferred, and one has to accept Christ through faith to receive grace and then be baptized as a response to that faith.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to delve into the relationship between justification, faith, works, and sanctification within the theology of Paul. For simplicity's sake I will focus on one issue at hand: is there any evidence in the writings of Paul that grace or holiness is something that can be transferred from a believer to an unbeliever? If there is, then Walker's understanding of justification by faith is incomplete and flawed, and thus his assumption that Paul would object to the practice of vicarious baptism may not be accurate.

One argument in favor of transferable grace within Pauline theology is in 1 Corinthians 7:14, which explains that "the unbelieving husband is made holy through his wife, and the unbelieving wife is made holy through her husband. Otherwise, your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy" (1 Corinthians 7:14 NRSV). The larger context of this passage is about marriage within the church; the issue concerns whether a Christian should remain married to a non-Christian—someone who has not responded to Christ. Paul's answer to the question is that they should remain married for the reason given in verse 14 cited above.

Commenting on this verse, Conzelmann avers, "It looks as if holiness is crassly regarded as a thing; it is transferable, without faith (and

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26. Walker, "Non-Pauline Interpolation," 93.

27. Walker, "Non-Pauline Interpolation," 93.

even baptism) being necessary.”<sup>28</sup> Stated in other words, Paul teaches that the sanctified state of believers in this life—that which removes them from the evil powers of the world—can be vicariously transferred to the nonbelievers of their household. According to Albert Schweitzer, “the unbelieving partner, through bodily connection with the believing, has a share in the latter’s being-in-Christ and thereby becomes with him a member of the Community of the Sanctified.”<sup>29</sup>

Obviously this transference is not the same as vicarious baptism, nor does it show that Paul would have approved of vicarious baptism. What it does establish is that Walker’s assumption that Paul does not see grace as something transferable is not a full picture of grace within 1 Corinthians: one who has not responded with faith to Christ can be sanctified and a partaker of Christ’s community through the faith of one’s spouse. While this does not prove that Paul would have accepted vicarious baptism, it is sufficient to show that Walker has not established his second assumption—“it is highly unlikely . . . that Paul would have approved of such a practice.”<sup>30</sup>

Walker attempts to demonstrate that 1 Corinthians 15:29–34 is a non-Pauline interpolation. I have already shown how his arguments about textual evidence, logical coherence, and vocabulary<sup>31</sup> do not strengthen his thesis; his argument rests on content and context. Though his argument about content is based on the assumption that Paul would not have supported vicarious baptism, I have shown that he has not established that claim.<sup>32</sup> I do not need to prove that Paul would have accepted vicarious baptism. It is enough to show that Walker’s reason for why Paul would have rejected it—that grace cannot be transferred—is contradicted by Paul’s own teaching elsewhere in this epistle. Therefore, lacking any reason to

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28. Conzelmann, *1 Corinthians*, 121.

29. Albert Schweitzer, *The Mysticism of Paul the Apostle*, trans. William Montgomery (London: Black, 1931), 128.

30. Walker, “Non-Pauline Interpolation,” 95.

31. At least as it pertains to 1 Corinthians 15:29.

32. Walker, “Non-Pauline Interpolation,” 95.



assume that Paul would have rejected vicarious baptism, Walker's second assumption is not reliable. Therefore his argument based on content fails.

Thus Walker's only remaining argument that 1 Corinthians 15:29–34 is a non-Pauline interpolation regards context. He claims that 1 Corinthians 15:29–34 is an insertion that breaks up the logical flow of 1 Corinthians 15 as a whole.<sup>33</sup> The problem with this claim is simple: Walker admits that he does not understand what the practice of baptism for the dead was or what it could possibly mean.<sup>34</sup> Since he does not profess to understand the logic of or reasoning for the practice, how can he claim that the passage does not rationally follow 1 Corinthians 15:28? Schweitzer, in his book *The Mysticism of Paul the Apostle*, gives a convincing argument about the logic of 1 Corinthians 15:29 and how it fits into the eschatological nature of the preceding verses.<sup>35</sup> In fact he calls it “the test case for the right understanding” of all the Pauline sacraments and how they function in the eschatology of Paul.<sup>36</sup> White, in his interpretation of 1 Corinthians 15:29, claims, “Far from being the weakest link in the argument of chapter 15, v. 29 becomes an important pivot upon which the argument of the chapter turns.”<sup>37</sup> Whether Schweitzer or White is correct in describing the logic of 1 Corinthians 15 is not the point; the critical issue is that Walker argues that 1 Corinthians 15:29–34 is a non-Pauline interpolation because it does not flow logically within the context of the chapter. In order for Walker to build his argument on context, he needs to prove that this passage cannot make sense. He has not proven that. Many interpreters have seen a logical flow within the passage, but Walker has not shown why they are incorrect or why their reasoning is unsound.<sup>38</sup>

In sum, Walker's assertion that 1 Corinthians 15:29–34 is an interpolation, particularly as it pertains to verse 29, rests chiefly on his

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33. Walker, “Non-Pauline Interpolation,” 88.

34. Walker, “Non-Pauline Interpolation,” 93–95.

35. Schweitzer, *Mysticism of Paul*, 283–87.

36. Schweitzer, *Mysticism of Paul*, 283.

37. White, “Baptized on Account of the Dead,” 499.

38. In my conclusion, I will argue for a logical flow in 1 Corinthians 15 that makes sense of vicarious baptism.

understanding of content and context, since I have shown that his other arguments having to do with a lack of textual evidence and some coherence within verses 29–33 are not valid. Because the issues raised by non-Pauline vocabulary do not exist in verse 29, this argument also does not strengthen his case. Pertaining to content, I have shown that Walker did not establish his second presupposition—that surely Paul would have disapproved of vicarious baptism—but took this as a given. Regarding context, I have argued that where Walker sees no logical flow others have seen a logic that he has not refuted. Thus Walker’s attempt to explain 1 Corinthians 15:29 as a non-Pauline interpolation remains unconvincing and is clearly motivated by his unproven assumption that Paul would have disapproved of vicarious baptism for the dead.

### Joel R. White: The figuratively dead

Turning my attention to White’s article, I review his claim for the following “correct interpretation”<sup>39</sup> of the verse under discussion:

Otherwise what will those do who are being baptized on account of the dead (that is, the dead, figuratively speaking; that is, the apostles)? For if truly dead persons are not raised, why at all are people being baptized on account of them (that is, the apostles)?<sup>40</sup>

To establish this interpretation, White, relying heavily on Scott J. Hafemann, argues convincingly that Paul sees suffering as a central characteristic of his apostleship.<sup>41</sup> The four passages he cites also discuss death (1 Corinthians 4:9; 2 Corinthians 2:14; 4:7–12; 6:1–10). Therefore, White asserts that “being given over to death” is a “metonymy for suffering.”<sup>42</sup> He then concludes that since suffering is what it means to be an apostle and since being “given over to death” is the same as suffering,

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39. White, “Baptized on Account of the Dead,” 494.

40. White, “Baptized on Account of the Dead,” 494.

41. White, “Baptized on Account of the Dead,” 495–96.

42. White, “Baptized on Account of the Dead,” 495.

therefore “the dead” (οἱ νεκροὶ) can be a metonymy for the apostles. Thus his parenthetical addition to 1 Corinthians 15:29: “what will those do who are being baptized on account of the dead (that is, the dead, figuratively speaking; that is, the apostles)?”<sup>43</sup>

The problem with White’s analysis lies in his final step: being given over to death is not the same as being dead. The descriptions that Paul uses, whether of a person sentenced to death (1 Corinthians 4:9) or of a prisoner being marched in a Roman triumphal procession (2 Corinthians 2:14), include images of people who are facing certain death but are yet alive. They are not metaphorically dead but are metaphorically dying. In one of the passages White cites, Paul specifically uses the participle οἱ ζῶντες (the living ones) to identify himself (2 Corinthians 4:11). In another, 2 Corinthians 6:9, Paul is dying but identifies himself as being alive, ὡς ἀποθνήσκοντες καὶ ἰδοὺ ζῶμεν. Paul never uses “the dead” to refer to himself or the apostles. On the contrary he calls them “the living.” The apostles, then, are living and suffering for Christ, even dying for Christ, but they are not “the dead.”<sup>44</sup>

White expects the reader of 1 Corinthians to understand that τῶν νεκρῶν in 1 Corinthians 15:29a refers to the apostles in a metaphorical way although the word has not held that meaning at any previous point in the epistle. As stated above, White uses four scriptures to establish this argument, but three of them are from 2 Corinthians and would have been inaccessible to the original audience of 1 Corinthians.<sup>45</sup> Thus

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43. White, “Baptized on Account of the Dead,” 494.

44. There are thirty-five references to the word *dead* (νεκρός) in the undisputed Pauline epistles. Thirteen of these are in 1 Corinthians 15. While in the wider Pauline corpus, especially in Romans, *dead* can have a metaphorical meaning, specifically about being dead to sin as opposed to being alive in Christ (Romans 8:10, for example), these metaphorical references never take the word *dead* to mean the apostles. Additionally, all occurrences of the word νεκρός in 1 Corinthians 15 refer to the literal dead.

45. Paul possibly could have explained this metaphorical use of “the dead” to mean an apostle during his personal ministry to the Corinthians or in some earlier, now lost letter. If that were the case, however, it does not explain why Paul has to explain the metaphorical connection between suffering and apostleship in 2 Corinthians. The fact that Paul goes to such lengths to explain the relationship between suffering and

the original reader of this epistle would have been able to use only 1 Corinthians 4:9 to establish that connection:

δοκῶ γάρ, ὁ θεὸς ἡμᾶς τοὺς ἀποστόλους ἐσχάτους ἀπέδειξεν ὡς ἐπιθανατίους, ὅτι θέατρον ἐγενήθημεν τῷ κόσμῳ καὶ ἀγγέλοις καὶ ἀνθρώποις.

For I think God has exhibited us apostles as last of all, as though sentenced to death, because we have become a spectacle to the world, to angels and to mortals. (1 Corinthians 4:9 NRSV)

White does not establish why ἐπιθανάτιος (“as though sentenced to death”) should be synonymous with νεκρός (“the dead”). As Hull puts it, “Whereas White spends pages explaining how Paul is identified as an apostle . . . he does not explain . . . how the dead of 15:29a are to be identified with the apostles.”<sup>46</sup> To further complicate White’s argument, νεκρός is used twice in 1 Corinthians 15:29, and he assigns a different meaning to each usage: one metaphorical and one literal.

According to White, the contextual clue for the dual meanings of “the dead” arises from the use of ὄλωσ. White wants ὄλωσ to modify νεκροί—to give it the sense of “the actually dead.” This then serves to indicate that the reference to the dead earlier in the verse is not to the actual dead but to the metaphorical dead. The reader is then to deduce from the reference in verse 31, “I die daily,” that Paul specifically and the apostles generally are the metaphorically dead.<sup>47</sup>

The problem with this reasoning is that this chapter is about the *actual* resurrection, the *real* raising of the dead. By having ὄλωσ modify νεκροί rather than ἐγείρονται, the verse loses the force of this argument. Paul is not teaching that the *actual dead people* will rise, but rather that the dead people will *actually rise*. Once one understands that ὄλωσ modifies *rise*, there is no longer any reason to believe that the dead refer

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apostleship in 2 Corinthians points to the fact that the Corinthians did not understand this principle.

46. Hull, *Baptism on Account of the Dead*, 47.

47. White, “Baptized on Account of the Dead,” 493–94.

to anything other than the actual dead (as it does every other time in this epistle).

One scholar noted:

White contends that the same word is used in the same sentence to mean entirely different things. . . . White has reached beyond the pale. On account of this distressing lacuna, White's reading seems less than credible. . . . Ultimately, White's reading, jerry-built around a not-so-subtle ellipsis, which identifies some νεκροί with living apostles and some with dead believers, is also untenable.<sup>48</sup>

I agree with this assessment. While White does show a connection between suffering and even metaphorical dying and apostleship, he fails to demonstrate how the metaphorical dying come to be called the dead. His attempt to use ὄλως as the contextual indicator is unsatisfying because it undermines the force of Paul's larger argument throughout 1 Corinthians 15 that the dead people will actually arise. White's proposed interpretation should be rejected.

### James E. Patrick: Resurrection of believers

Patrick argues that the practice described in 1 Corinthians 15:29 was "an expression of allegiance to honour not only Christ but also the 'patron' apostle in whose testimony the convert believed."<sup>49</sup> What he means is that some apostles who had been known to the Corinthians had died. Their teachings, however, lived on and continued to attract believers, and people would get baptized to honor these dead apostles. According to Patrick's theory, the apostles could not receive that honor unless they were resurrected someday. Therefore, the practice of being baptized on account of the testimonies of the dead apostles in order to honor them makes sense only if the dead are raised. Knowing this

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48. Hull, *Baptism on Account of the Dead*, 47.

49. Patrick, "Living Rewards," 71.

background, Paul uses this as a compelling argument in favor of the resurrection in 1 Corinthians 15:29.<sup>50</sup>

To support this interpretation, Patrick relies on ten criteria developed by earlier exegetes. Particularly relevant to this study are four of them: criterion number three dealing with the identity of “the dead,”<sup>51</sup> and criteria numbers four, six, and seven, which discuss the meaning of *for*.<sup>52</sup> Patrick principally rejects an interpretation of vicarious baptism for the dead based upon these criteria.

The third criterion is really just the argument of Joachim Jeremias that identifies the dead in 1 Corinthians 15:29a as dead Christians and not pagans.<sup>53</sup> Jeremias’s work has been accepted by a number of scholars and deserves consideration here.<sup>54</sup> He notes:

In the whole chapter the Apostle is carefully distinguishing between νεκροί and οἱ νεκροί, νεκροί without an article denoting the dead in general (vv. 12, 13, 15, 16, 20, 21, 29b, 32), οἱ νεκροί denoting the deceased Christians (vv. 29a, 35, 42, 52).<sup>55</sup>

He bases his assessment on the work of Maria Raeder, who argues that the dead must refer to dead believers because the context indicates that as the only possibility.<sup>56</sup> I disagree, however, with this conclusion.

John D. Reaume builds on the works of Jeremias and Raeder and notes, “Grammar suggests that the articular construction τῶν νεκρῶν refers to a specific group of dead individuals (with the anarthrous noun

50. Patrick, “Living Rewards,” 71, 79–80, 82, 85.

51. Patrick, “Living Rewards,” 74.

52. Patrick, “Living Rewards,” 75–78.

53. Patrick, “Living Rewards,” 74.

54. J. K. Howard, “Baptism for the Dead: A Study of 1 Corinthians 15:29,” *Evangelical Quarterly* 37/3 (1965): 141; Hull, *Baptism on Account of the Dead*, 30, 104; Patrick, “Living Rewards,” 74; and Reaume, “Another Look,” 462–63. For the source of Jeremias’s ideas, see also Maria Raeder, “Vikariatstaufe in 1 Cor 15:29,” *Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft und die Kunde der älteren Kirche* 46/3–4 (1955): 258–60.

55. Joachim Jeremias, “Flesh and Blood Cannot Inherit the Kingdom of God (1 Cor. XV:50),” *New Testament Studies* 2/3 (1956): 155.

56. Raeder, “Vikariatstaufe,” 260.

νεκροί referring to the dead in general).<sup>57</sup> This varies from the explanation of Friedrich Blass, Albert Debrunner, and Robert W. Funk, who say that the article often distinguishes between the concept of the dead and the collective dead.<sup>58</sup> Reaume, however, states that “Paul seems to have been distinguishing between the dead in general (vv. 12, 13, 15, 16, 20, 21 and 29b) and Christians who have died (vv. 29a, 35, 42, and 52).”<sup>59</sup>

Raeder, to support her interpretation that the specific dead must refer to dead Christians, cites verses 18 and 23.<sup>60</sup> She claims these verses are relevant because they provide the immediate context of verse 29. For Reaume, the evidence that the dead are Christians comes from later passages in which the word νεκροί, coupled with the article, describes a “heavenly body,” “a spiritual body,” and a body “raised in power.” These phrases must describe what the resurrection of the believers will be like and thus indicate that, within 1 Corinthians 15, the use of νεκροί with the article indicates believers.<sup>61</sup>

What Reaume fails to take into account are the doubts and questions about the resurrection in Corinth: David Garland points out that the Corinthians “failed to comprehend how an earthly body that is physical and perishable can be made suitable for a heavenly realm that is spiritual and imperishable.”<sup>62</sup> The Corinthians were operating under a duality of the physical and the spiritual realm that made the idea of a physical resurrection seem impossible.<sup>63</sup> First Corinthians 15:35–58 contains Paul’s response to this confusion. His answer is that this earthly, or terrestrial, body will be replaced by a celestial, or heavenly, body (1 Corinthians 15:40). Just as the body of the seed that goes into the ground is different from the body of the wheat that comes out of

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57. Reaume, “Another Look,” 470.

58. Friedrich Blass, Albert Debrunner, and Robert W. Funk, *A Greek Grammar of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), 133.

59. Reaume, “Another Look,” 470.

60. Raeder, “Vikariatstaufe,” 260.

61. Reaume, “Another Look,” 470–71.

62. Garland, review of *Baptism on Account of the Dead*, 3.

63. Garland, review of *Baptism on Account of the Dead*, 3.

the ground, so shall the bodies buried in the ground be different from the type of body that resurrects (1 Corinthians 15:37–38). That body was corruptible, and the new body will be incorruptible. That body was natural, and the new body will be spiritual (1 Corinthians 15:42–44). This transformation is performed by the power of God.

The point is that the “heavenly,” “spiritual” body “raised in power” that Reaume describes is Paul’s description of all resurrected bodies. It is not the dichotomy between the resurrected Christian and the non-believer that is being discussed but the dichotomy between earthly and resurrected bodies. To assume that the resurrection applies only to those who died in Christ is to assume a theology that directly contradicts the teachings of Paul.

In 1 Corinthians 15:22 Paul states, ὡςπερ γὰρ ἐν τῷ Ἀδὰμ πάντες ἀποθνήσκουσιν, οὕτως καὶ ἐν τῷ Χριστῷ πάντες ζῶσοιθηθήσονται. I translate this scripture the same way as the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV): “for as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ.” One commentary notes about this verse:

The argument, that πάντες must have the same meaning in both clauses; πάντες in the first clause must mean the whole human race; therefore πάντες in the second clause must mean the whole human race, is somewhat precarious. The meaning may be, “As it is in Adam that all who die die, so it is in Christ that all who are made alive are made alive.” It is still more precarious to argue that “in Christ shall all be made alive” implies that all mankind will at last be saved. The meaning may be that all will be raised, will be quickened, which is not the same as saying that all will be saved.<sup>64</sup>

I find the initial interpretation of πάντες difficult. There is no reason (other than preconceived theological ones) to restrict the meaning of the word *all*. The structure is clear: all people die through Adam; all people will be made alive in Christ. I do, however, agree that saying all will be made alive is not the same as saying all will be saved. Paul

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64. Archibald Robertson and Alfred Plummer, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the First Epistle of St. Paul to the Corinthians* (New York: Clark, 1911), 353.



promises a universal resurrection but not a universal salvation. This teaching is not unique to 1 Corinthians; the same teaching can be found in Romans.

In Romans 5:11–17 Paul outlines two effects on humanity brought about by Adam and overcome by Christ: death and sin. He then concludes with this statement:

Therefore just as one man's trespass led to condemnation for all, so one man's act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all. For just as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous. (Romans 5:18–19 NRSV)

“Justification and life” (δικαίωσιν ζωῆς) in verse 18 is literally the “justification of life”—“life” (ζωῆς) being a genitive of purpose.<sup>65</sup> Adam brought the condemnation of death to all; Christ justifies all to life. This represents a universal escape from the power of death. Although disobedience has brought sin to many, many will be made righteous through Christ, thus indicating that Christ's salvation is not universal. These verses in Romans parallel Paul's teachings of a universal resurrection but a limited salvation.<sup>66</sup>

Logically, when Paul teaches in 1 Corinthians 15 that in Christ all are made alive, that is exactly what he means—everybody. Paul then clearly teaches that this universal resurrection does not occur all at once: “Ἐκαστος δὲ ἐν τῷ ἰδίῳ τάγματι” (“but each in their own order,” 1 Corinthians 15:23). This universal resurrection is ordered. Jesus will come forth first followed by those who belong to Christ (1 Corinthians 15:23). Paul further explains how Christ will hand the kingdom over to his

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65. Joseph A. Fitzmyer, in *Romans: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New York: Doubleday, 1993), 421, argues that genitive of purpose is one possible interpretation.

66. Although not necessarily evidence of what Paul actually believed, the book of Acts does attribute to Paul the teaching of universal resurrection, though not universal salvation; see Acts 24:15, which speaks of a resurrection of both the just and the unjust. John 5:29 also teaches that a universal resurrection for the just and the unjust was part of early Christian theology.

Father after the last enemy—namely death—has been conquered. Then God will be all in all (1 Corinthians 15:24–28).

This discussion about universal resurrection in 1 Corinthians 15:20–28 is the *immediate* context of 1 Corinthians 15:29. Raeder has argued that “the dead” of 15:29 should be understood as Christians, based on the immediate context of verses 18 and 23.<sup>67</sup> Jeremias, J. K. Howard, Reaume, and Patrick have accepted her conclusions. I have shown, however, that the verses immediately preceding verse 29 discuss universal resurrection. The arthrous and anarthrous constructions of νεκροί within 1 Corinthians 15 distinguish between the concept of the dead and the collective dead, not between the Christian believer and the rest of the dead. This usage is exactly what one should expect from the grammar itself.<sup>68</sup>

In his third criterion, Patrick rejects a reading of vicarious baptism, in part because he has accepted Jeremias’s argument that the dead being referred to are dead Christians. He does not present any new arguments for this but relies on Jeremias, Raeder, and Reaume. Based on this evidence, he concludes that “thus the context . . . undermines interpretations such as . . . the practice of [being] . . . baptized vicariously for dead ancestors.”<sup>69</sup> Since, however, 1 Corinthians 15 deals with universal resurrection and is not limited to the resurrection of believers, Patrick’s conclusions therefore do not follow.

Based on additional criteria, Patrick further disagrees with a reading of vicarious baptism because he rejects the meaning of ὑπέρ as “on behalf of.”<sup>70</sup> He presents two reasons for rejecting this interpretation: first, Patrick assumes that Paul would not have approved of such a practice. He then claims, “If Paul were to cite a practice which he did not agree with to support his argument for the resurrection, his opponents could justly accuse him of theological inconsistency. Therefore interpretations involving vicarious baptism ‘on behalf of’ the dead . . . do

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67. Raeder, “Vikariatstaufe,” 260.

68. Blass, Debrunner, and Funk, *Greek Grammar*, 133. See specifically entry 254, column 2, point (2).

69. Patrick, “Living Rewards,” 74.

70. Patrick, “Living Rewards,” 76.

not fit.”<sup>71</sup> Because Patrick gives virtually no justification as to why Paul would reject such a practice, I find it difficult to argue against such a claim. I will allow my response to the similar assumption made by Walker to stand here.

Second, Patrick rejects a meaning of ὑπέρ as “on behalf of” because he finds no evidence for the practice of vicarious baptism:

It would be expected that a baptismal practice existing in Corinth in the mid-first century CE would have parallels or precedents of some sort which may be cited as evidence for this type of baptism, whether Jewish, pagan, orthodox Christian or heretical religious practice.<sup>72</sup>

Since this argument is very similar to Hull’s, I will respond to it below.

### Michael F. Hull: The dearth of evidence

In recent years the major work dedicated to the topic of 1 Corinthians 15:29 is Michael F. Hull’s *Baptism on Account of the Dead*.<sup>73</sup> In this volume Hull examines the history of interpreting this text.<sup>74</sup> He also does a close reading of the meaning of the verse itself and concludes:

We cannot say, solely from the literary context, what 15:29 means. On the one hand, 15:29 could read as a reference to vicarious baptism. On the other hand, 15:29 could read as a reference to ordinary baptism. Yet, we do know that 15:29 must mean one or the other. It cannot mean both.<sup>75</sup>

Hull explores the historical context of Corinth for evidence of vicarious baptism and deduces that “something like vicarious baptism was nowhere to be found. We concluded that without any historical

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71. Patrick, “Living Rewards,” 77–78.

72. Patrick, “Living Rewards,” 78.

73. Hull, *Baptism on Account of the Dead*.

74. Hull, *Baptism on Account of the Dead*, 7–50.

75. Hull, *Baptism on Account of the Dead*, 112.

foundation whatsoever, vicarious baptism was not a viable interpretation of 15:29.”<sup>76</sup> One reviewer wrote, “[Hull’s] careful examination of the historical background, in particular, should lay to rest any notion that the passage concerns vicarious baptism.”<sup>77</sup> Given this “dearth of an exterior or interior historical parallel,”<sup>78</sup> Hull proceeds to create his own interpretation for the text based on an understanding of ordinary baptism and not on vicarious baptism.

Hull acknowledges that his reading contradicts the majority interpretation of this text. Most scholars have come to the conclusion—which Conzelmann labels the “normal” understanding of the text—that this verse speaks of vicarious baptism on behalf of the dead. While this practice may sound strange to us today, it is not without its ancient precedents.

Richard E. DeMaris writes:

Both ancient Greek and Roman societies devoted considerable resources to the dead, in part for fear of them but primarily because the living were thought to be obligated to help the deceased become integrated into the realm of the dead. . . . Many of these practices appear to reflect a belief that the dead could benefit directly from actions performed on their behalf, particularly at the grave.<sup>79</sup>

One of the earliest examples of the living doing something to benefit the dead can be found in Plato’s *Republic*:

Begging priests and soothsayers go to rich men’s doors and make them believe that they by means of sacrifices and incantations have accumulated a treasure of power from the gods that can expiate and cure with pleasurable festivals any misdeed of a man or his ancestors.<sup>80</sup>

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76. Hull, *Baptism on Account of the Dead*, 256.

77. Witherup, review of *Baptism on Account of the Dead*, 150–51.

78. Hull, *Baptism on Account of the Dead*, 37.

79. Richard E. DeMaris, “Corinthian Religion and Baptism for the Dead (1 Corinthians 15:29): Insights from Archaeology and Anthropology,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 114 (1995): 663.

80. Plato, *Republic* II 364B–C, ed. and trans. Paul Shorey, Loeb Classical Library 237 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1937), 133.

Here Plato betrays knowledge of a practice among some groups that performing sacrifices and certain festivals could expiate not only for their sins but also for the sins of their ancestors, which practice is more relevant to this study. Thus the idea that the sacrifice of one could have an atoning effect on the life of a dead ancestor is an ancient belief that dates back to at least Plato. Plato goes on to explain that the books of Musaeus and Orpheus teach that this vicarious work has an effect on people beyond the grave.<sup>81</sup> Erwin Rohde explains:

Participation in the Orphic ceremonial enables the descendant to obtain from the gods “pardon and purification” for his departed ancestors who may be paying the penalty in the next world for misdeeds of the past.<sup>82</sup>

In addition to these Orphic rights, Karl Barth informs us that “the Greek world was also acquainted with vicarious Dionysian orgies for the uninitiated dead.”<sup>83</sup> Conzelmann associates Ovid’s *Fasti* with these Dionysian rituals.<sup>84</sup> Thus one can see that the concept of performing a ritual on behalf of the dead was not unheard of in the Hellenistic world.

Nor was this practice unheard of in the Jewish world. According to 2 Maccabees 12:43–44 (NRSV),

He also took up a collection, man by man, to the amount of two thousand drachmas of silver, and sent it to Jerusalem to provide for a sin offering. In doing this he acted very well and honorably, taking account of the resurrection. 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 [ὕπὲρ νεκρῶν]. But if he was looking to the splendid reward that is laid up for those who fall asleep in godliness, it was a holy and pious thought. Therefore he made atonement for the dead, so that they might be delivered from their sin.

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81. Plato, *Republic* II 364E–365A.

82. Erwin Rohde, *Psyche: The Cult of Souls and Belief in Immortality among the Greeks*, trans. W. B. Hillis (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1950), 344.

83. Karl Barth, *The Resurrection of the Dead*, trans. H. J. Stenning (New York: Revell, 1933), 174.

84. Conzelmann, *1 Corinthians*, 275.

Jeffrey A. Trumbower, in his work *Rescue for the Dead: The Posthumous Salvation of Non-Christians in Early Christianity*, comments on this quotation from 2 Maccabees:

From this one learns nothing about the historical Judas's views in 164 BCE. Rather, one gains access either to the views of Jason of Cyrene (modern Libya) . . . or to the author who epitomized his work. Jason's five volumes, now lost, were condensed into one volume (now known as 2 Maccabees) by an anonymous epitomizer at some time in the late second century or early first century BCE. Jason, the anonymous epitomizer, or both, thought that Judas's collection for the sacrifice was for the posthumous salvation of the individual sinners.<sup>85</sup>

Most relevant to our current discussion is the view expressed by either Jason or the epitomizer about the resurrection. The writer uses this story to prove the reality of the resurrection: these people do something “for the dead,” ὑπὲρ νεκρῶν. However, if the dead were not to rise again, it would be foolish to pray for them. Paul applies this same logic and language in 1 Corinthians 15.<sup>86</sup> This demonstrates that at least some Jews from the first century BCE believed in doing vicarious works for the dead. This answers both Patrick's and Hull's claim that there should be some type of historical precedent—there is, within both the Hellenistic and the Jewish background of Paul's world.

Hull is not unaware of these references, but he denies that they provide any evidence for vicarious baptism. He acknowledges, “That is not to say, however, that there are no general parallels in terms of some form of posthumous salvation for the dead, even dead Pagans, in Paul, the NT, or the early Church, . . . but it is to say that there is nothing quite like vicarious baptism.”<sup>87</sup>

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85. Jeffrey A. Trumbower, *Rescue for the Dead: The Posthumous Salvation of Non-Christians in Early Christianity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 27.

86. The correlations between the logic and language of 1 Corinthians 15:29 and 2 Maccabees 12:43–44 are currently noted by the NA28.

87. Hull, *Baptism on Account of the Dead*, 37.

Hull wishes to draw a line between vicarious baptism and other vicarious works, offerings, or prayers for the dead. He bases his conclusions on that distinction, although it appears to be arbitrary. Clearly Paul's Jewish and Hellenistic background provides precedents for the idea of vicarious acts on behalf of the dead. Why would a pagan converting to Paul's Christianity not bring with him the Orphic ritual of performing sacrifices and incarnations on behalf of the dead and transfer that onto the Christian ordinance of baptism? Why would a Jewish follower of Paul not adapt the temple practice of sacrificing on behalf of the dead to the ritual of baptism? Once the practice of vicarious acts on behalf of the dead has been established in the time and culture of Paul, which Hull accepts, on what historical evidence does one rule out baptism for the dead? Although Hull argues that "something like vicarious baptism" is nowhere to be found in Paul's culture, his thesis requires a very narrow definition of the phrase "something like" in order to be true.<sup>88</sup> Hull defines vicarious baptism as "living persons . . . [being] baptized in the place of dead unbaptized persons . . . to secure the (presumed) benefits of baptism for those who die without baptism."<sup>89</sup> This is strikingly similar to the practice described in 2 Maccabees: A living person provides a sin offering on behalf of a dead person unable to perform that offering, the purpose of which is to secure for the dead person the (presumed) benefits of that offering. True, this is not vicarious *baptism*, but it is certainly "something like" vicarious baptism.

To review, Hull argues that the text of 1 Corinthians 15:29 could support a reading of vicarious baptism.<sup>90</sup> He then rejects such a reading because he "made a concerted effort to find some semblance of a custom to ground a reading of vicarious baptism."<sup>91</sup> But Hull's assertion that "something like vicarious baptism was nowhere to be found" in Paul's world must be rejected.<sup>92</sup> I have shown pagan and Jewish practices, as

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88. Hull, *Baptism on Account of the Dead*, 256.

89. Hull, *Baptism on Account of the Dead*, 10.

90. Hull, *Baptism on Account of the Dead*, 256.

91. Hull, *Baptism on Account of the Dead*, 256.

92. Hull, *Baptism on Account of the Dead*, 256.

well as early Christian practices and beliefs, in which the custom of vicarious baptism may be grounded.

The question of what is to become of those who died before Christ's appearance is one that engaged early Christian writers, many of whom gave various speculative answers within their texts. One idea was that Christ himself, after his death and before the resurrection, taught and baptized some of the dead. This view is found in the *Epistle of the Apostles*, an early Christian text from around "the third quarter of the second century."<sup>93</sup> In this text Jesus descends into the underworld and visits Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. He invites them to travel from the underworld into heaven, but before they can make that journey he gives them "the right hand of the baptism of life and forgiveness and pardon for all wickedness."<sup>94</sup> Trumbower explains, "Here, the righteous of the Old Testament were not perfect, but needed forgiveness and pardon as well as baptism."<sup>95</sup> This text testifies of a concept within Christianity that the dead needed to be baptized in order to reach heaven.

In the *Shepherd of Hermas*, it is not Jesus who baptizes the dead but rather the dead apostles who perform that function. In that text a man has seen a vision of a tower, and an angelic messenger interprets the vision for him. As a part of this vision, the man has seen forty stones coming up out of the water and asks what they mean:

The apostles and teachers, who preached the name of the Son of God, continued preaching, only now to those who had fallen asleep before them, and it was they who gave them the seal through preaching. This is why they descended into the water and rose up with them again.<sup>96</sup>

Earlier the text explains that the "seal" is baptism.<sup>97</sup>

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93. J. K. Elliott, ed., *The Apocryphal New Testament: A Collection of Apocryphal Christian Literature in an English Translation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 556.

94. Elliott, *Apocryphal New Testament*, 573.

95. Trumbower, *Rescue for the Dead*, 48.

96. *Shepherd of Hermas*, *Similitude* 9.16.5.

97. *Shepherd of Hermas*, *Similitude* 9.16.2–4; Trumbower, *Rescue for the Dead*, 48.



These Christian texts highlight a belief in the necessity of baptism and that even those righteous fathers who had died without Christ's baptism would require that ordinance. Granted, these texts do not seem to refer to vicarious ordinances; the living are not doing anything to benefit the dead. Other texts, however, do support the idea of vicarious works for the dead. Trumbower documents several of these and emphasizes how the righteous pray for or petition God on behalf of the dead and in so doing move them from torment to a happy state.<sup>98</sup> These texts document a belief in the posthumous salvation of the pagan through prayers or other actions of the believers.

The *Pistis Sophia* is one example from early Christianity of a text that supports a belief in vicarious work by a believer for a nonbeliever. This text specifically states that the Christian must perform a vicarious ordinance on behalf of the sinner. In the passage in question Mary asks Jesus a question about what can be done by someone who has performed all the "mysteries" for themselves but has a kinsman who has not and has died. Mary specifically wants to know how to help that dead kinsman inherit the (Gnostic) light kingdom. Jesus responds by telling her that in order to save a dead kinsman a person must repeat the same mystery that saved him or her but this time must think of the person who is dead.<sup>99</sup> Here the text clearly teaches that vicarious ordinances must be performed by the living for the dead.

In addition to these primary texts, early Christian literature gives secondary accounts of baptism for the dead. These are chiefly reported by church fathers as the heretical works of the gnostics or other "unorthodox" groups. Hull notes that Tertullian, John Chrysostom, Epiphanius, and Ambrosiaster all discuss vicarious work on behalf of the dead as a continuing practice among some (albeit heretical) Christians but then accepts Jeremias's claim that "the gnostic vicarious baptisms, which are mentioned in the patristic literature, are of no help for the understanding of our verse [1 Corinthians 15:29] because they

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98. Trumbower, *Rescue for the Dead*, 49–52, 56–90.

99. *Pistis Sophia* 3.325–27.

evidently have their origin in a misinterpretation of our verse itself.”<sup>100</sup> The truth is that we simply do not know the relationship between these Gnostic practices and this verse. They may have derived from a “misinterpretation” of this verse, but the only evidence we have of that is the writings of the church fathers, which are clearly not objective voices.

These patristic sources support the reality that a concern for the dead specifically and vicarious baptism in particular are not unique to Corinth and did not disappear from history. Whether one practice derived from the other or whether they arose independently is not historically established. Hull argues that if one accepted vicarious baptism in Corinth one would have to explain why the practice disappeared almost as soon as it was invented.<sup>101</sup> This, however, is not an accurate picture of the ancient world—vicarious baptism did not suddenly disappear in ancient Christianity. The patristic evidence Hull himself cites proves that the practice continued on for centuries. Jeffrey Trumbower and David L. Paulsen (with several assistants) have investigated this subject and have catalogued vicarious baptism and work for the dead in early Christianity.<sup>102</sup>

Hull wishes to ignore all this evidence because it stems from so-called heretical groups, but as scholars have argued, “The modern methodology of historical research requires us to examine the historicity of the practices without prejudice inherent in labels from one’s enemies.”<sup>103</sup> These patristic citations demonstrate that the practice of baptism for the dead did not disappear from sight almost immediately. The claim

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100. Hull, *Baptism on Account of the Dead*, 42.

101. Hull, *Baptism on Account of the Dead*, 223.

102. Trumbower, *Rescue for the Dead*; David L. Paulsen, Roger D. Cook, and Kendel Christensen, “The Harrowing of Hell: Salvation for the Dead in Early Christianity,” *Journal of the Book of Mormon and Other Restoration Scripture* 19/1 (2010): 56–77; David L. Paulsen and Brock M. Mason, “Baptism for the Dead in Early Christianity,” *Journal of the Book of Mormon and Other Restoration Scripture* 19/2 (2010): 22–49; David L. Paulsen, Kendel J. Christensen, and Martin Pulido, “Redeeming the Dead: Tender Mercies, Turning of Hearts, and Restoration of Authority,” *Journal of the Book of Mormon and Other Restoration Scripture* 20/1 (2011): 28–51; and David L. Paulsen, Judson Burton, Kendel J. Christensen, and Martin Pulido, “Redemption of the Dead: Continuing Revelation after Joseph Smith,” *Journal of the Book of Mormon and Other Restoration Scripture* 20/2 (2011): 52–69.

103. Paulsen and Mason, “Baptism for the Dead in Early Christianity,” 43.

that these writings are a “misinterpretation” of 1 Corinthians 15:29 has more to do with the controversies of orthodoxy and heresy in early Christianity than with the practices in Corinth during the time of Paul.

In sum, Hull admits that the wording of 1 Corinthians 15:29 could support vicarious baptism, but he rejects such a reading for three main reasons:

1. “There is a dearth of an exterior or interior historical parallel. Except for the rare patristic secondary references, . . . nowhere in the history of early Christianity do we find anyone baptizing in such a fashion or writing thereof. Nowhere in intertestamental Judaism or the pagan religions of late antiquity is there anything comparable to vicarious baptism.”
2. “There is a complete lack of biblical parallel. Such a custom is nowhere alluded to in the Bible.”
3. “Such a reading is a complete rupture within the context of 1 Corinthians 15:29–34.”<sup>104</sup>

To answer his first point I have argued that some practices are *comparable* to vicarious baptism. A member of a faith tradition performing a ritual for a dead person in order to improve his or her standing in the afterlife is exactly *comparable* to vicarious baptism. Only the ritual is different—the primary ritual of Judaism (temple sacrifice) or the rituals of the various mystery religions are substituted by the ritual of Christian baptism. With this direct comparison, the underlying theology is the same.

Hull is too dismissive of what he calls “rare patristic secondary references.” He simply dismisses the numerous historical examples of people being baptized for the dead because he deems the evidence “heretical.” The modern equivalent of Hull’s argument would be to discuss baptism for the dead today. If one were to assert the claim that no Christian group practices baptism for the dead today, this would be a polemical argument. Millions of members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints both consider themselves Christians and believe

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104. Hull, *Baptism on Account of the Dead*, 37–38.

in baptism for the dead. Millions of other Christians, however, do not consider the Latter-day Saints to be Christians and do not believe in baptism for the dead. So do Christians practice baptism for the dead? If a historian were to look at the practice today one would be amiss to claim that “nowhere in the history of [present] Christianity do we find anyone baptizing in such fashion.” Indeed, a group that considers themselves Christians and baptizes in behalf of the dead provides evidence for the modern-day practice. Likewise, in ancient Christianity evidence points to groups of people (not just one) who considered themselves Christians and practiced baptism for the dead. Hull is incorrect when he maintains a lack of evidence for the practice of baptism for the dead. He knows he is wrong, but he dismisses the evidence because he rejects the practitioners.

In addition, Hull downplays these sources because they are “rare,” but as Tobias Nicklas notes in his review of Hull’s work, the counter-argument to this claim is that our picture of early Christianity is by no means complete.<sup>105</sup> To dismiss something as rare assumes that one has all the pieces of the puzzle. We simply do not have that much information about early Christianity.

Hull’s second claim is biased toward canon. We have seen evidence in the *Pistis Sophia* for vicarious works and for similar practices in the *Shepherd of Hermas* and the *Epistle of the Apostles*. Why should these books be given any less historical weight than the Bible, especially since the determination of canon was made by the same group that decided vicarious baptism was heretical and argued against the Marcionites and other groups?

The modern equivalent of our earlier example would be to examine only the literature of non-LDS Christians and to conclude that no scripture supports baptism for the dead. If one were to examine the canon of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, one would find scriptural support for the practice. Canon is defined by a given group,

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105. Tobias Nicklas, review of *Baptism on Account of the Dead (1 Cor 15:29): An Act of Faith in the Resurrection*, by Michael F. Hull, *Review of Biblical Literature* 3 (2006); see [http://www.bookreviews.org/pdf/4900\\_5114.pdf](http://www.bookreviews.org/pdf/4900_5114.pdf).

and thus to limit one's authoritative texts to the Bible is to reflect only one view of early Christianity and ignore other ancient evidence.

Hull's first two arguments fail because they do not account for comparable rituals to vicarious baptism, because they fail to give weight to the historical evidence of so-called heretical groups, and because Hull gives bias to the Bible. His third argument fails for the same reason that Walker's did before him: many exegetes have been able to make sense of 1 Corinthians 15:29 without seeing any logical rupture.<sup>106</sup>

## Conclusion

Having spent much time examining this issue, I have determined that the majority of modern exegetes who reject a reading of vicarious baptism in 1 Corinthians 15:29 do so for the following reasons:

First, they accept the argument of Raeder and Jeremias that "the dead" in 1 Corinthians 15:29a refers to dead Christians. I have argued that a closer reading of 1 Corinthians 15 shows that Paul is arguing for a universal resurrection and that Jeremias and Raeder are mistaken.

Second, many reject this reading because they claim a lack of evidence that such a practice ever existed. Borrowing on the work of Trumbower, Paulsen, and others, I have shown that several early Christian groups practiced baptism for the dead and that Jewish and pagan groups performed comparable ordinances on behalf of the dead within their tradition.

Third, and probably most important—although often unstated—most modern exegetes who deny that 1 Corinthians 15:29 is about vicarious baptism do so because they assume that the practice contradicts the theology of Paul.

Paul emphasizes that an individual must have faith in Christ in order to be justified. Howard, Walker, Patrick, and others have a difficult time understanding that Paul could accept vicarious baptism for the

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106. I will argue for my own interpretation of the logical flow of 1 Corinthians 15 below.

dead because they assume that the practice requires no response on the part of the dead. They understand vicarious baptism to be a magical action that saves the dead because the dead (being dead) cannot exercise faith.<sup>107</sup> Howard wrote, “A practice of vicarious baptism involves the interpretation of baptism as a purely passive act . . . baptism throughout the New Testament is viewed as an act of faith-obedience.”<sup>108</sup> The reason the dead cannot respond, Howard explains, is because “after death, the judgment[comes].”<sup>109</sup>

I have shown that many of the Christian texts examined above refute the view that the dead are dormant and incapable of responding to Christ. The texts of early Christians demonstrate their belief that the dead could be taught. If the dead can be taught, either by Christ (as in the *Epistle of the Apostles*) or by dead apostles (as in the *Shepherd of Hermas*), then an objection to vicarious baptism on behalf of the dead because it denies that people must have faith in Christ would be invalid. Christian texts show that the dead can exercise faith in Christ.

Fourth, Walker and Hull have argued that a reading of vicarious baptism in 1 Corinthians 15:29 disrupts the logical flow of the chapter.<sup>110</sup> I have argued, however, that the immediate context of 1 Corinthians 15 is a discussion of the resurrection—more specifically the universal resurrection. Paul is attempting to demonstrate to the Corinthians a proof of the literal resurrection of all people (1 Corinthians 15:22) and therefore connects vicarious baptism and resurrection. A vicarious baptism for the dead would be useful only if they were to be resurrected.

Hull, in his close examination of the role of baptism in the theology of Paul, concludes that baptism is the moment when Christ puts his seal upon an individual.<sup>111</sup> Baptism for Paul is a symbol of death and resurrection (Romans 6:3–5), the act that allows one to be sealed

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107. See, for example, Howard, “Baptism for the Dead,” 139.

108. Howard, “Baptism for the Dead,” 139–40.

109. Howard, “Baptism for the Dead,” 139.

110. Walker, “Non-Pauline Interpolation,” 88; Hull, *Baptism on Account of the Dead*, 39.

111. Hull, *Baptism on Account of the Dead*, 240–50.

Christ's at his coming. If one is "planted" with Christ in death through baptism, one will then resurrect with Christ in the future (Romans 6:5). To claim that baptism is simply a demonstration of faith in Christ,<sup>112</sup> or that one gets baptized to honor a dead apostle,<sup>113</sup> does not grant accurate attention to the relationship between baptism and resurrection within the epistles of Paul. Paul sees a relationship between being baptized and being raised with Christ. Baptism, along with faith, can be understood as the act that moves someone from the resurrection of the unjust to the resurrection of the just.

An interpretation of vicarious baptism on behalf of the dead in 1 Corinthians 15:29 assumes the following historical context and logic: within Corinth some of the Corinthian saints were being baptized on behalf of dead people who had not accepted Christ in their lifetime. This was done because they understood that the dead could respond to Christ.<sup>114</sup> They also understood that baptism was the ritual that sealed one as Christ's at the resurrection—moving a person from the resurrection of the unjust to the resurrection of the just.<sup>115</sup> This practice is logical only if all people are resurrected and if there is a difference in the type of resurrection people will receive. Paul, in 1 Corinthians 15, argues for the reality of the bodily resurrection. He begins by providing evidence for the resurrection of Jesus Christ (1 Corinthians 15:3–10) and then contends that those who have died in Christ will be resurrected (1 Corinthians 15:18–20). He continues by claiming that as in Adam all die so in Christ all will be made alive. This is the only way that death can be destroyed and that Christ will become victor over all (1 Corinthians 15:21–27). Building on this belief in a universal resurrection and the practice that grows from it—vicarious baptism on behalf of the dead—Paul shows further evidence in support of the universal resurrection. How foolish the practice would

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112. Walker, "Non-Pauline Interpolation," 93.

113. Patrick, "Living Rewards," 71.

114. That this is not a unique belief or a peculiar belief is evidenced by the early Christian writings about work for the dead cited above.

115. The early Christians believed in the universal resurrection as evidenced by Romans 5:12–21; 1 Corinthians 15:21–27; Acts 24:15; John 5:28–29.

be if all were not resurrected. He continues with that line of reasoning to show how foolish his own sacrifices would be if there was no resurrection (1 Corinthians 15:30–34). Paul’s argument then transitions into the nature of resurrected bodies (1 Corinthians 15:35–58).

I believe that the preceding logic makes sense of 1 Corinthians 15:29 in context and shows that the practice of vicarious baptism on behalf of the dead would not break up the logical flow of the epistle. I conclude, like Karl Barth, that Paul is “here in fact alluding to the custom of vicarious baptism”;<sup>116</sup> grammatically and textually this is the most honest reading, and it certainly makes sense within the context of 1 Corinthians 15.

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116. Barth, *Resurrection of the Dead*, 174.