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# "Those Who Are Baptized *for* the Dead": Surveying 1 Corinthians 15:29 in Its Social Location, Paul's Other Writings, and the Creation Narrative

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## Abstract

First Corinthians 15:29 continues to tantalize exegetes. In response to some of the Corinthian Christians' denial of the resurrection of the dead (1 Cor 15:12), Paul engages in a comprehensive exposé on the certainty of future bodily resurrection on account of it being a present reality in Christ. His reference to the peculiarly Corinthian practice of baptism for the dead has generated a score of interpretive suggestions. This article argues that to get not only to a plausible explanation of "baptized for the dead," but to one that Paul could have affirmed, one needs to: (1) explore key biblical passages on the nature of human beings and their form of existence in death, and (2) situate 1 Corinthians 15:29 in the immediate context of the entire epistle and Paul's views on faith, baptism, and salvation expressed in his other writings.

**Keywords**:Death, Baptism, Resurrection, Annihilationism, Hedonism, Syncretism.

## Introduction

First Corinthians 15:29 is perceived by many Bible commentators as a major interpretive conundrum.[1] In this passage, Paul asks a rhetorical question, "Otherwise, what will they do who are baptized for the dead, if the dead do not rise at all? Why then are they baptized for the dead?"[2] Due to the seemingly enigmatic nature of "baptized for the dead," this verse has been the subject of much debate among Bible commentators. As with many theological issues, no single interpretation of this peculiarly Corinthian practice has gained a consensus. While for some commentators Paul is only referring in passing to an existing practice among some Corinthian Christians as he makes his case for the absolute certainty of the future resurrection of believers on account of Christ's resurrection,[3] for others, Paul is recommending it as a Christian rite.[4] This article argues that to arrive not only to a plausible explanation of "baptized for the dead," but to one that Paul could have affirmed, one needs to: (1) explore key biblical passages on the nature of human beings and their form of existence in death and (2) situate 1 Corinthians 15:29 in the context of the entire epistle and Paul's views on faith, baptism,

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1 Bernard Foschini, *"Those Who Are Baptized for the Dead" 1 Cor. 15:29: An Exegetical Historical Dissertation* (Worcester, MA: Heffernan, 1951), 97–98; John D. Reaume, "Another Look at 1 Corinthians 15:29, 'Baptized for the Dead,'" *Bibliotheca Sacra* 152, no. 608 (October–December 1995): 457; Robert Scott Nash, *1 Corinthians,* Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2009), 409; Raymond F. Collins, *First Corinthians* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1999), 556; David E. Garland, *1 Corinthians,* Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003), 716.

2 Unless otherwise specified, Bible texts quoted in this article are from the New King James Version.

3 John MacArthur, *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2007), 517; Joel R. White, "'Baptized on Account of the Dead': The Meaning of 1 Corinthians 15:29 in Its Context," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 116, no. 3 (Fall 1997): 487-499; Richard E. DeMaris, "Corinthian Religion and Baptism for the Dead (1 Corinthians 15:29): Insights from Archaeology and Anthropology," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 114, no. 4 (Winter 1995): 661-682.

4 Robert E. Clark, "Baptism for the Dead and the Problematic of Pluralism: A Theological Reconfiguration," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 30, no. 1 (Spring 1997): 105-116; J. Daniel Joyce, "Baptism on Behalf of the Dead: An Interpretation of I Corinthians 15:29-34," *Encounter* 26, no. 2 (Spring 1965): 269-277.

and salvation expressed in his other writings. The article ends with a reflection on a contemporary implication.

## A Biblical Perspective on Life and Death[5]

Before examining 1 Corinthians 15:29, it is important to reflect briefly on what the Bible says about the nature of human beings and their form of existence in death. The perspective laid out here will help respond to the two commonly held views about the nature of death and the state of the dead in the Greco-Roman world of the first century that influenced Corinthians' views on the bodily resurrection of the dead or their attitude towards deceased loved ones.

The Creation account gives an account of the origin of life on earth. Two key texts are considered on the creation of humans: Genesis 1:26, 27 and Genesis 2:7.

At creation, humanity was given the special status of being created in God's image:

> Let us make mankind in *our image*, in *our likeness*, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground. God created mankind in *his own image*, *in the image of God* he created them; male and female he created them. (Gen 1:26, 27, emphasis added)

The creation of humanity in the image of God is reiterated in Genesis 5:1 and Genesis 9:6. Genesis 5:1 simply states that "when God created mankind, he made them *in the likeness of God*" (emphasis added). Genesis 9:6 gives the very first clear implication of what it means to be created in God's image. It states that it is because humanity is created in the image of God that human beings should not shed the blood of one another: "Whoever sheds human

[5] My interest in this study and that of 1 Corinthians 15:29 began in the process of writing my PhD dissertation. See Boubakar Sanou, "A Biblical and Missiological Framework for Cross-Cultural Mission: A Case Study of the Lobi Funeral Rites in Burkina Faso (PhD diss., Andrews University, 2015), 58–69.

blood, by humans shall their blood be shed; for *in the image of God* has God made mankind" (emphasis added).

The image and likeness of God in humans has been the subject of many interpretations among scholars. Is image and likeness the same or are they referring to two different things? Is it physical, mental, or spiritual? Although this is not the focus of this article, I concur with the view that "bearing God's image does not imply so much resembling God [physically] as representing Him. Man is God's collaborator (Gen 2:4-6, 15) and lieutenant (Pss 8:3-8; 115:6)."[6] Since "the Hebrew word, *selem* ("image") is a representative in physical form, not a representation of the physical appearance,"[7] the likeness of God in humans should be understood as "the representational functions of humans" which include "everything that enables humankind to rule over their sphere as God rules in His."[8] The creation in the image and likeness of God sets humanity apart from other creatures, because only humanity (man and woman) has been granted this special status. Although no clear clues are given as to the features of the likeness of God, God's image in human beings and the dominion that was given to them over other creatures (Gen 1:26) probably have to do with humanity's relationship both to other creatures and to God the Creator. In other words, humans were created as relational beings.[9] Also, because the Bible further says that God is Spirit (John 4:24), it seems safer to see the image of God in humans in terms of their spiritual nature.[10] For Moshe Reiss, the image and likeness of God in humans are located in "some spiritual quality or faculty of the human person."[11] The creation of humans in the image of God, the highest conceivable status, affirms their

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6 Aecio E. Cairus, "The Doctrine of Man," in *Handbook of Seventh-day Adventist Theology*, ed. Raoul Dederen (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2000), 208.

7 John H. Walton, *Genesis,* The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 130.

8 Cairus, "The Doctrine of Man," 208.

9 Reiss, "Adam: Created in the Image and Likeness of God," *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 39, no. 3 (July–September 2011): 184.

10 "In Our Image" [Gen 1:26], *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*, rev. ed., ed. Francis D. Nichol (Washington, DC: Review & Herald, 1976–1980), 1:216.

11 Reiss, "Adam: Created in the Image and Likeness of God," 185.

dignity and worth.[12] God's assessment of his creation, including human beings, is unequivocal: "God saw everything that He had made, and indeed it was very good" (Gen 1:31). As this points to both "human dignity and the sanctity of human life,"[13] there is nothing inherently bad in physical matter.

Genesis 2:7 gives the two basic components of every human being, namely a physical body and the breath of life which is immaterial: "The Lord God formed a man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being." Scholars have also debated whether at death the body and spirit have an independent existence. Two main groups have emerged out of these debates.

Scholars such as H. David Lewis, Wayne Grudem, Gary R. Habermas, and James P. Moreland believe in the immortality of the soul on the basis of texts such as: "The dust returns to the ground it came from, and the spirit returns to God who gave it" (Eccl 12:7), "Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell" (Matt 10:28), and the parable of the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19–31). For them, between death and the resurrection, believers are in some kind of conscious state of intermediary existence. Lewis states that "throughout the centuries Christians have believed that each human person consists in a soul and body; that the soul survived the death of the body; and that its future life will be immortal."[14] Wayne Grudem unpacks his perspective on the nature of the immortal soul by defining death as "the temporary cessation of bodily life and a separation of the soul from the body. Once a believer has died, though his or her physical body remains on the earth and is buried, at the moment of death, *the soul (or spirit) of that believer goes immediately into the presence of God with rejoicing.*"[15] Gary R. Habermas and James P. Moreland push

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12 Ibid., 181.

13 Walton, *Genesis,* 134.

14 H. David Lewis, *Christian Theism* (Edinburgh, Scotland: Clark, 1984), 125.

15 Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1994), 816. Emphasis added.

this concept a step further by stating that in the intermediary state "the person enjoys *conscious fellowship with God* while waiting for a reunion with a new, resurrected body."[16]

For other scholars such as Joel Green and Edward Fudge, the body and the spirit cease to exist until the resurrection of the dead. Green states that:

> …death must be understood not only in biological terms, as merely the cessation of one's body, but as the conclusion of embodied life, the severance of all relationships, and the fading of personal narrative. It means that, at death, the person *really dies*; from the perspective of our humanity and sans divine intervention, there is no part of us, no aspect of our personhood, that survives death.[17]

Although Ecclesiastes 12:7 says that at death the spirit (*ruach*) returns to God,

> …in not one of the 379 instances of its use throughout the OT does *ruach* denote an intelligent entity capable of existence apart from a physical body, so far as man is concerned, and it must therefore be clear that such a concept is without basis as the teachings of the Scriptures themselves are concerned (see Gen. 2:7; 35:18; Num. 5:14; Eccl. 3:19–21; cf. on Num. 5:2; 9:6). That which here returns to God is simply the life principle imparted by God to both man and beast (see on Eccl. 3:19-21, where *ruach* is translated "breath").[18]

For Edward Fudge, a human being is an indivisible whole. The soul and the spirit are not parts into which a human may be divided. The soul refers to the living human individual; in other words, human beings do not have souls, they are souls. The spirit is a constant reminder that humans have their source in God.[19] He further asserts

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16 Gary R. Habermas and James P. Moreland, *Beyond Death: Exploring the Evidence for Immortality* (Wheaton, IL: Good News, 1998), 222. Emphasis added.

17 Joel B. Green, *Body, Soul, and Human Life: The Nature of Humanity in the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 179.

18 "The Spirit" [Eccl 12:7], *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*, 3:1104.

19 Edward William Fudge, *The Fire That Consumes: A Biblical and Historical Study of the Doctrine of Final Punishment,* 3rd ed. (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2011), 27.

that the consistent witness of the Hebrew Bible is that when a person dies, it is the entirety of their soul that dies (Ezek 18:20).[20]

Scholars who say that the soul is not a separate, spiritual part of a person that lives on after death argue that it was only when God breathed the breath of life into the inanimate body of Adam that it became a living being/soul (Gen 2:7).[21] This is the point of view from which this article is written. There is a difference between "breath of life," *ruach,* and "soul," *nephesh,* in Genesis 2:7. The soul "denotes humans as living beings after the breath of life entered into a physical body formed from the elements of the earth."[22] This is supported by the fact that the account of Genesis 2:7 says that "man *became* a living soul. Nothing in the Creation account indicates that man *received* a soul—some kind of separate entity that, at Creation, was united with the human body."[23] Also, humans were only given conditional immortality at creation, as attested to by Genesis 2:15–17: "The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it. And the LORD God commanded the man, 'You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat from it you will certainly *die*'" (emphasis added). Adam and Eve's conditional immortality was changed to mortality when they disobeyed God and ate of the forbidden fruit (Genesis 3). Death is simply the reversal of the process of creation. At death, the breath of life is withdrawn from the living being/soul,[24] and "when that happens, the person dies. He or she ceases to exist. The 'soul' is no more because the living person is no more."[25]

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20 Ibid.

21 "A Living Soul" [Gen 2:7], *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*, 1:223.

22 General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, *Seventh-day Adventist Believe: An Exposition of the Fundamental Beliefs of the Seventh-day Adventist Church* (Silver Springs, MD: Review and Herald, 2018), 94.

23 Ibid., 94. Emphasis is in the original.

24 Jacques B. Doukhan, *Genesis,* Seventh-day Adventist International Bible Commentary (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 2016), 79; "A Living Soul" [Gen 2:7], *SDABC*, 1:223.

25 Bryan W. Ball, "The Immortality of the Soul: Could Christianity Survive Without It?" *Ministry Magazine* 83, no. 5 (May 2011): 15.

Other Bible passages also highlight the fact that when people die, their bodily remains decay and they have no consciousness or activity until they are resurrected at Christ's return either to eternal life or to eternal damnation (Eccl 9:5, 6; John 5:25-29; 1 Thess 4:13–17; Matt 25:46). That explains why any attempt to contact the dead or do anything as an attempt to influence their fate is considered an abomination to God (see for example Lev 19:28; 20:6, 27; Deut 14:1, 2; 18:10–13).[26]

## Baptized for the Dead

## Background to 1 Corinthians 15:29

Understanding the immediate historical, cultural, and literary context of a Bible passage is a vital part of hermeneutics. Doing so enables Bible students to have a better understanding of the original audience, the circumstances that gave rise to the passage under study, and its literary form and flow. Before surveying various scholars' perspectives on 1 Corinthians 15:29, it is therefore important to situate it in the immediate context of the entire epistle.

Owing to its strategic geographic location, political importance, and its sponsorship of the biennale Isthmian games—second only to the Olympics in importance, Corinth became a very significant multicultural trading center in the Roman Empire. Because of its financial prosperity, the possibility of upward social mobility for all its residents, its hospitality toward foreigners, and its openness to novel ideas, Corinth became a melting pot of social, cultural, and religious values. Besides the city's reputation for commercial prosperity, it also had a reputation for moral decadence. It is estimated that even by the Greco-Roman pagan standards of its day,

[26] For an extended discussion on forbidden death-related practices in Scripture, see Sanou, "A Biblical and Missiological Framework for Cross-Cultural Mission," 80–83.

Corinth was considered a morally corrupt place to the extent that its very name was synonymous with debauchery and moral depravity.[27]

Unfortunately, many Corinthian Christians had not fully disengaged themselves from the gross immorality that was characteristic of their culture. Their professed separation from their pagan past did not result into a different moral standard. As such, some of them continued to indulge in some of the worst sins the larger society was known for (cf. 1 Cor 5:1; 6:1–18). Because of the correlation between relaxed moral standards and a faulty theology, Paul, the founder of the Corinthian Church (cf. Acts 18:1–17), wrote to Christians at Corinth this epistle in an attempt to correct various forms of aberrant behavior through formative doctrinal teachings directly related to matters of sin and commendable Christian living (cf. 1 Cor 4:14).[28] First Corinthians offers contemporary readers a glimpse into the life of a Christian community fraught with issues of identity, interpersonal relationships, belief, and practice.[29] In the words of N. T. Wright and Michael Bird, "if there was one Church that caused Paul to pull his hair out and made him age before his time, it was probably the 'Church of God in Corinth.'"[30]

Although 1 Corinthians 15 does not begin with "now about" as do other chapters (e.g., 7:1; 8:1; and 12:1) in reference to the problems the Corinthian Christians faced, it still falls within the same corrective/admonitory framework as hinted in verse 12, "… how do some among you say that there is no resurrection of the

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27 MacArthur, *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary,* 471; Verlyn D. Verbrugge, "1 Corinthians," in Tremper Longman III and David E. Garland, eds., *Romans-Galatians,* The Expositor's Bible Commentary, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), 11:244–247.

28 MacArthur, *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary,* 472.

29 Nash, *1 Corinthians,* 1.

30 N. T. Wright and Michael F. Bird, *The New Testament in Its World: An Introduction to the History, Literature, and Theology of the First Christians* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2019), 474.

dead?" Paul's response to this challenge constitutes the major thrust of the entire chapter.[31]

First Corinthians 15 is the most exhaustive discourse on the resurrection of the dead in Scripture. It can be divided into five major sections: the Gospel and the certainty of Christ's resurrection (verses 1–11), the consequences of denying the resurrection (verses 12–19, 29–34), implications of Christ's bodily resurrection (20–28), the physicality of the resurrection (verses 35–49), and the glorious transformation of the saved when they are ushered into eternal embodied life (verses 50–58). In its entirety, 1 Corinthians 15 is a complete rejection of two commonly held views about death and the state of the dead in the Greco-Roman world: annihilationism and hedonism. Those who espoused annihilationism believed that death is essentially the end of life for all humans and that there will never be any form of existence beyond the grave. Hedonism stems from the gnostic belief that there is a dualism between the physical and spiritual worlds. It was thought that only the spirit was potentially good and redeemable and that the matter was inherently evil and irredeemable. Death was considered only the end of material body, not the end of existence. This perspective has implications for how one relates to bodily desires. While ascetics opted to deny bodily desires as a way of subduing them so that the spirit could flourish, hedonists made the pursuit of bodily pleasure the most important thing in life. Believing in a dualism between the material and spiritual worlds also restricts life after death to the immortality of the soul—a belief that at death, the soul is freed from the material limitations of a physical body to enter an eternal disembodied state of existence.[32]

Each of these two views on the nature of death and the afterlife has damaging implications for Christian beliefs and practices.

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[31] Craig L. Blomberg, *1 Corinthians,* The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1995), 294; MacArthur, *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary,* 472; Collins, *First Corinthians,* 1, 6; Wright and Bird, *The New Testament in Its World,* 493.

[32] Carl P. Cosaert, "1 Corinthians," in *Andrews Bible Commentary,* New Testament, ed. Ángel Manuel Rodríguez (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 2022), 1651; Blomberg, *1 Corinthians,* 24, 295.

If there is no hope of existence beyond the grave, if matter is by nature irredeemable, if religion is first and foremost about the spirit, then there is no point in living a moral life.[33] The outworkings of annihilationism and hedonism are believed to be the background from which the rest of the problems in the Church of Corinth stemmed from.[34] For example, Carl Cosaert posits that:

> The aberrant behavior of the Corinthians was not an isolated issue. It was an outward indication that they had failed to understand fully the significance and implication of the apostolic proclamation of Christ's death and resurrection. The bodily resurrection of Christ from the dead affirms the value and importance of the body. It is also the basis of the Christian hope that the dead in Christ will be raised in bodily form at the return of Jesus. This reality stands in stark contrast to the negative view of the body commonly expressed in the Greco-Roman world. Accordingly, what Christians do with their bodies matters. It testifies to the transforming power of Christ in the world—the body will itself be transformed into a glorious body when Christ returns. Viewed from this perspective, Paul's discussion of the resurrection is the glorious foundation on which his entire letter is built, and it is the basis on which the Corinthians were to evaluate their lives.[35]

Annihilationism and hedonism are both in stark contrast with the biblical view on life, death, and the resurrection. One of the fundamental teachings of the Bible is that all the dead will be resurrected at the second coming of Christ; the righteous to eternal life and the wicked to eternal damnation (John 5:25-29). Annihilationism refutes that teaching by suggesting that death marks the ultimate end of life for the deceased and that there will never be any form of existence beyond the grave. Hedonism contradicts the biblical view of the nature of human beings and their form of existence in death.[36] Scripture testifies that the material world God created, including human beings, is good (Gen 1:10, 12, 18, 21, 25, 31). It also teaches that immortality is not realized at the time of death; the dead are in

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33 Blomberg, *1 Corinthians,* 24; Wright and Bird, *The New Testament in Its World,* 493.

34 Garland, *1 Corinthians,* 3–13; Cosaert, "1 Corinthians," 295; Wright and Bird, *The New Testament in Its World,* 493.

35 Carl P. Cosaert, "1 Corinthians," 1649. See also Blomberg, *1 Corinthians,* 294; Collins, *First Corinthians,* 16–17.

36 See section on "A Biblical Perspective on Life and Death."

their graves in an unconscious, nonexistent state (Eccl 9:5, 6; John 11:11–13), until their resurrection at Christ's return (1 Thess 4:13–17; 1 Cor 15:42–44). In addition, Scripture uses material terms to describe God's creation of new heavens and a new earth (Revelation 21–22). God will not get rid of the human body; he will transform and cloth it with an immortal body. Matter is therefore not inherently bad and irredeemable. The belief in the immortality of the soul is an open door to the cult of the dead, especially in contexts where it is believed that the dead continue to have an influence on the community of the living, could benefit from actions performed on their behalf, or that their favor and benevolence could be secured by means of mortuary rites.[37] Annihilationism and hedonism also reject the very heart of the Gospel and the ground for Christian hope—the bodily resurrection of the dead owing to Jesus' own resurrection (1 Cor 15:12–19). Without this central piece, Christianity, as a whole, has no factual basis.

First Corinthians 15 is a robust argument in favor of the certainty of bodily resurrection and the centrality of Christ's resurrection for the future resurrection of all believers and the ultimate victory over death. The crux of Paul's argument is that Jesus' resurrection informs every aspect of the Christian way of life and as such, Christians "must live in the present in the light of their own assured future."[38] Paul wanted the Corinthian Christians to steadfastly hold on to that central biblical teaching and live it out in their daily experiences. He ends his exhortation by urging them to be mindful of their status as God's people. As such, they need to take their cues from God, not from Corinthian deniers of the resurrection whose company has led them to bad behavior (1 Cor 15:33, 34).

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37 DeMaris, "Corinthian Religion and Baptism for the Dead (1 Corinthians 15:29)," 663; James N. Amanze, "Christianity and Ancestors Veneration in Botswana," *Studies in World Christianity* 9, no. 1 (2003): 44; Wei Hua, "Pauline Pneumatology and the Chinese Rites: Spirit and Culture in the Holy See's Missionary Strategy," in *The Spirit Over the Earth: Pneumatology in the Majority World*, ed. Gene L. Green, Stephen T. Pardue, and K. K. Yeo (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016), 78–98.

38 Wright and Bird, *The New Testament in Its World,* 493.

## Interpretative Options on 1 Corinthians 15:29

Although there exists a vast array of interpretive suggestions for 1 Corinthians 15:29, only the two that hold the most significant place in scholarship are discussed, namely: vicarious baptism and regular Christian baptism.[39] These two proposed interpretive options are reviewed in the light of key biblical passages on the state of human beings in death previously reviewed, highlights from the overview of the immediate context of 1 Corinthians 15:29, and Paul's teaching on faith, baptism, and salvation expressed in his other writings.

## Vicarious Baptism

Some commentators understand "baptized for the dead" as referring to some sort of baptismal ritual undertaken by a living Christian for the benefit of a person who had not yet been baptized at the time of their death. After noting that in second-century Gnostic and Gnostic-like groups "living believers were baptized on behalf of those in their sect or group who had died without being baptized," Craig Blomberg suggests that "given the Corinthians' tendencies towards early Gnostic belief and practice, it is not difficult to imagine something similar having begun among at least a few in Corinth already in the first century."[40] Referring to the well-established concern for the wellbeing of the dead among Corinthians, Richard DeMaris indicates that:

> 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. Such help was crucial, for the moment of death was thought to mark only the beginning of a long and sometimes difficult transition to the next world. In Greece this help began with proper mourning and burial rites and continued for some time in the form of periodic commemorations of the deceased, such as festivals. Remembering the dead also involved visiting the

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[39] Wright and Bird, *The New Testament in Its World,* 493; Reaume, "Another Look at 1 Corinthians 15:29," 457. According to Reaume, "Another Look at 1 Corinthians 15:29," 457, "more than two hundred interpretive solutions have been proposed, but only a few remain as legitimate possibilities."

[40] Blomberg, *1 Corinthians,* 299.

> grave, a visit that might include sacrifices and feasts held for them. A few Greek graves even had feeding tubes so that blood offerings and libations could be communicated directly to the deceased. Many of these practices appear to reflect a belief that the dead could benefit directly from actions performed on their behalf.[41]

As products of that sociocultural context, it is very likely that some Christians might have responded to the general concern for the dead by resorting to vicarious baptism. The intended beneficiaries would have been converts who had died before being baptized, or simply loved ones who had died without having had the opportunity to hear the Gospel and accept it.[42] Although Paul only refers to the practice without affirming or condemning it, some scholars are of the opinion that he used it to bolster his overall argument about the certainty of bodily resurrection. As such, they believe he condones the Corinthians' actions as a valid demonstration of their faith in the future resurrection of the dead. These scholars view baptism not only as an indispensable means of salvation but also as a sacrament which can be experienced vicariously to benefit the dead. Writing from the Mormons' perspective, who believe that salvation cannot be granted without baptism, Robert Clark states,

> God wants everyone to be saved, but baptism has not been an option for a great portion of the world's population, let alone baptism by the proper authority. These people can still be saved, but they are not exempt from the requirement of baptism. And because baptism is a physical ordinance, it has to be performed in the flesh. Those who have died without an opportunity to hear the gospel and be baptized thus need some means of access to this ordinance. This is accomplished by having a baptized member of the church stand as proxy for the deceased individual, allowing his or her body to be baptized for and in behalf of the one who no longer has a body.[43]

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41 DeMaris, "Corinthian Religion and Baptism for the Dead (1 Corinthians 15:29)," 663.

42 Wright and Bird, *The New Testament in Its World,* 493; Collins, *First Corinthians,* 556; Clark, "Baptism for the Dead and the Problematic of Pluralism," 108; Richard B. Hays, *First Corinthians,* Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (Louisville, KY: John Knox, 1997), 267; Nash, *1 Corinthians,* 410; Reaume, "Another Look at 1 Corinthians 15:29," 457.

43 Clark, "Baptism for the Dead and the Problematic of Pluralism," 108.

Daniel Joyce adopts the same view, noting that the key to the meaning of 1 Corinthians 15:29 resides in the proposition *hyper* (for) in *baptizesthai hyper tōn nekrōn.* For him, *hyper* means "in place of," or "for the benefit of." Consequently, he concludes that this "shows us that what is done is done for the dead and not for the living."[44]

Several difficulties are associated with understanding "baptized for the dead" as Paul's support for vicarious baptism. First, there is no biblical parallel to the practice of vicarious baptism in the early Church. First Corinthians 15:29 is the only scriptural reference to it.[45] Raymond Collins observes that:

> It is likely that the practice took place only in first-century Corinth, where religious syncretism was a fact of life even for Corinthian Christians. Paul's unusual use of the third person plural in a rhetorical question suggests that the practice may not have been widespread among the Corinthian Christians. Only a few of them may have practiced vicarious baptism on behalf of the dead.[46]

Thus, the Corinthian Christians who practiced vicarious baptism might have been influenced by the Greco-Roman religious environment prevalent in Corinth. As such, it is historically inaccurate to label this peculiarly Corinthian practice a Christian phenomenon.[47]

Second, vicarious baptism is out of step with Paul's soteriology. Paul could not have argued in favor of a belief that the dead could

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44 Joyce, "Baptism on Behalf of the Dead," 273.

45 White, "'Baptized on Account of the Dead,'" 490; Nash, *1 Corinthians,* 411; Taylor, *1 Corinthians,* 394; Collins, *First Corinthians,* 557; DeMaris, *The New Testament in Its Ritual World* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 13; Reaume, "Another Look at 1 Corinthians 15:29," 457, 458; Verbrugge, "1 Corinthians," 399 observes that "this is the only first-century reference to it anywhere in Christian literature."

46 Raymond F. Collins, *First Corinthians* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1999), 557. See also DeMaris, *The New Testament in Its Ritual,* 13. Cosaert, "1 Corinthians," 1614 also observes that "the openness to diversity in Corinth also had its challenges for the work of the gospel. It meant that some of the Gentiles who had come to faith in Christ in Corinth might have also been more open and accepting of other ideas and practices that were not in harmony with the gospel."

47 DeMaris, *The New Testament in Its Ritual World,* 13.

benefit directly from actions performed on their behalf by the living based on his convictions that "each of us shall give account of himself to God" (Rom 14:12) and "we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive the things done in the body [i.e., while the person was still alive], according to what he has done, whether good or bad" (2 Cor 5:10). Romans 14:12 and 2 Corinthians 5:10 indisputably refute the falsehood that a dead person has an opportunity to be saved because of mortuary rites performed on their behalf by their loved ones or the ecclesiastical bodies they belonged to. Death marks the close of individual human probation.

Third, Paul's perspectives on the interrelatedness of faith and baptism are at odds with the essence of vicarious baptism. In Romans 6:3, 4 and Colossians 2:12, baptism is presented by Paul as having a personal character since it symbolizes a believer's personal identification with Christ's death and resurrection. As an outward act of faith, baptism on its own does not have any measure of saving efficacy (Eph 2:8; Rom 3:28; 4:3; 6:3, 4). Thus, Paul's perspectives on faith and baptism preclude proxy baptism since this ritual clearly involves no active faith on the part of the deceased person for whom it is carried out. Nowhere in the Scripture is a case made in support of the idea that salvation is transferable from one person to another apart from their own belief in this life (cf. Matt 25:1–13, especially verse 9).[48]

Fourth, that Paul who wrote 1 Corinthians to address errors in the Church would endorse a mystical view of baptism in support of a fundamental aspect of his theology is implausible.[49]

From the above discussion, it is clear that the practice of vicarious baptism has no scriptural support. Apart from minimizing the fact that people are responsible for their own faith and relationship with God, the belief that the salvation of a deceased individual depends on the actions of the living through a postmortem ritual also openly

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48 Verbrugge, "1 Corinthians," 399; Blomberg, *1 Corinthians,* 305.

49 Mark Taylor, *1 Corinthians,* The New American Commentary 28 (Nashville: B&H, 2014), 393; "Baptized for the Dead" [1 Cor 15:29], *SDABC* 6:807; Reaume, "Another Look at 1 Corinthians 15:29," 459.

refutes the efficacy and all-sufficiency of Christ's atoning sacrifice on the cross.

## Regular Christian Baptism

Many other scholars reject the idea that baptism for the dead refers to proxy baptism for the salvation of those who died without being baptized. For them, Paul's argument is not about baptism as an indispensable means of salvation or that the living can do something to positively alter the fate of deceased persons before God. Rather than affirming this peculiar practice among some Corinthian believers, Paul simply mentions it in passing as he takes issue with the absurdity of denying the assurance of future bodily resurrection (1 Cor 15:12–34). He is only being descriptive rather than prescriptive when he makes mention of some Corinthian Christians who resorted to vicarious baptism for deceased individuals in the hope of being reunited with them at the resurrection.[50] He uses his own experience to emphasize that there would be no point for him to endure persecution and risk his life for the sake of the Gospel if there is no hope of the resurrection of the dead (1 Cor 15:30–32).

Scholars who reject the idea that Paul was legitimizing vicarious baptism in 1 Corinthians 15:29 suggest that the preposition "for" (*hyper*) in "*for* the dead" should be rendered "because of," or "on account of" the dead. Their assessment is that those who were undergoing baptism did so for their own benefit. In other words, what was done was for the living and not for the dead.[51] Two interpretations of the causal preposition "because of the dead," or "on account of the dead" have been proposed. One view understands the causal preposition as referring to individuals who decided to be baptized simply because they hoped that the rite of Christian baptism has efficacy to secure their reunion with their deceased

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50 Blomberg, *1 Corinthians,* 305; DeMaris, "Corinthian Religion and Baptism for the Dead (1 Corinthians 15:29)," 663; Ajith Fernando, *Acts,* The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 299.

51 White, "Baptized on Account of the Dead," 498; Nash, *1 Corinthians,* 411; Taylor, *1 Corinthians,* 394; Andrew B. Spurgeon, *1 Corinthians: An Exegetical Commentary,* India Commentary on the New Testament (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2011), 178.

relatives or friends who were Christians.[52] Although this could have been some Corinthians' view on baptism, such a nominal religiosity based only on the desire for future belonging to loved ones rather than experiential faith in Christ would not have been commended by Paul for the following two reasons: (1) in 1 Corinthians 10:1–22 he had already sternly warned them against any false evaluation of the significance of baptism, and (2) in his previous advice to them on godly living, he also emphasized the high value and necessity of active faith in Christ (1 Cor 13:12–13; see also Rom 1:7).

The other interpretation views the causal preposition "because of the dead," or "on account of the dead" as an allusion to living individuals who were giving outward testimony to their faith in baptism in response to the exemplary lives of deceased individuals who were persons of faith. In other words, the faithful influence and witness of deceased faithful Christians had motivated some individuals to surrender their lives to Christ.[53] This interpretive option is much more defendable knowing Paul's call for Corinthian Christians to imitate him as he models Christ-like behavior (1 Cor 11:1).

## Contemporary Implications

Although several contemporary implications can be gathered from this study of 1 Corinthians 15:29, only two will be discussed here. The first one is a warning against religious syncretism—the practice of directly or indirectly embracing two mutually exclusive principles from distinct religious traditions and trying to be loyal to both at the same time.[54] Because there is absolutely no biblical ground for vicarious baptism, the Corinthian Christians who practiced it could best be described as "innovative syncretists" who combined prevalent customs and rituals designated to influence

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52 Wright and Bird, *The New Testament in Its World,* 493; Cosaert, "1 Corinthians," 1652; Taylor, *1 Corinthians,* 394.

53 MacArthur, *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary,* 517; Cosaert, "1 Corinthians," 1652; White, "Baptized on Account of the Dead," 498; Nash, *1 Corinthians,* 411.

54 Amy Frykholm, "Double Belonging: One Person, Two Faiths," *Christian Century*, January 25, 2011, 20.

the fate of the dead with a core principle of Christian theology.[55] Unfortunately, multi-religious belonging continues to be a reality among many adherents to Christianity. Three major contemporary Christian advocates of double religious belonging are Paul Francis Knitter, John Chitakure, and Wei Hua. Knitter describes his blending of Buddhism and Christianity as a "passing back and forth" religious experience. He posits that this has enriched his Christian faith. He openly states for example that:

> Buddhism has enabled me to make sense of my Christian faith so that I can maintain my intellectual integrity and affirm what I see as true and good in my culture; but at the same time, it has aided me to carry out my prophetic-religious responsibility and challenge what I see as false and harmful in my culture…. Working for the Kingdom project, one invariably bangs into many problems, in both planning and execution. Buddhism has been for me a big, big help in dealing with these problems. In fact, while Jesus has provided me with the original vision and commitment to the Kingdom, Buddha has been indispensable in my struggling and dealing with all the problems I've faced as I've tried to understand and implement this vision and commitment over the years. I guess I'm saying that without Buddha, I could not be a Kingdom-builder with Jesus.[56]

John Chitakure admits that as a practicing Catholic he prays to God through Jesus; but that he does not hesitate to turn to his ancestors for help if Jesus delays in answering his prayers. Whenever his prayers are answered, he gives credit both to Christ and his ancestors. Arguing that as an African, his culture is inseparably linked to its religious traditions, Chitakure states that:

> When I die, I want both traditional and Christian rituals to be performed for the repose of my soul. I prefer that my soul becomes an ancestor first, then eventually retire to the Christian heaven, when it gets tired of protecting its family from evil spirits and people. If I miss the Christian heaven, like some of us will do, I still will become an ancestor—not a bad thing after all. I firmly believe that he who has two perspectives of understanding and interpreting the world is richer than the one who has only one worldview. I think that my two

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55 White, "'Baptized on Account of the Dead,'" 490.

56 Paul F. Knitter, *Without Buddha I Could Not Be a Christian* (Croydon, UK: Oneworld, 2009), 19–20, 408–409.

> worldviews make me richer than people who have only one religious perspective.[57]

Wei Hua contends that the Chinese customs of commemorating rites of the ancestors and Confucius "should be acknowledged and absorbed into the Christian faith through the fulfilling and transforming work of the Holy Spirit."[58] He sees a direct parallel between this common Chinese traditional practice and the biblical commandment to honor one's father and mother on the ground that "the objects of Chinese commemorating rites are not powerful gods, but deceased relatives and loved ones, including fathers, mothers, and Confucius," and that "unlike religion and idolatry, the purpose of the Chinese commemorating rites is not to pursue any supernatural power, but to express thanksgiving to ancestors and to pay secular respect to Confucius.[59] For him, once a person receives the Holy Spirit, pagan customs as a whole are no longer obstacles to their Christian faith.[60]

The above three examples show that religious syncretism is a global phenomenon among Christians. If in the Global North religious syncretism is a byproduct of religious pluralism,[61] in the majority of the Global South, the pressure to syncretize one's Christian faith comes from the relational notion of personhood. In these contexts, an individual is believed to be a full person only if he or she belongs to and participates in the life of the larger family, clan, and tribe. John Mbiti succinctly puts it this way:

> To be human is to belong to the whole community, and to do so involves participating in the beliefs, ceremonies, rituals and festivals of the community. … A person cannot detach himself from the religion of his group, for to do so is to be severed from his roots, his foundation, his context of security, his kinships and the entire group of those who

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57 John Chitakure, *African Traditional Religion Encounters Christianity: The Resilience of a Demonized Religion* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2017), 7.

58 Hua, "Pauline Pneumatology and the Chinese Rites," 79.

59 Ibid., 91, 94.

60 Ibid., 90.

61 Sanou, "A Biblical and Missiological Framework for Cross-Cultural Mission," 117–118.

> make him aware of his own existence. To be without one of these corporate elements of life is to be out of the whole picture.[62]

This perspective on personhood which places premium emphasis on sociocultural identity and community centeredness creates in the lives of many Christians a tension between pursuing full community membership and allegiance to Christ. Very often, because of social pressure to conform, the heart of the Gospel gets gutted by some sociocultural standards.

No matter the root cause of religious syncretism, faithfulness to biblical principles and allegiance to Jesus should never be overshadowed by any form of sensitivity to sociocultural norms or religious practices. The Word of God challenges Christians individually and corporately to turn away from their unbiblical practices. In many ways the Ten Commandments are God's instructions against dual allegiance and religious syncretism. For example, the first three commands (Exod 20:1–7) charge believers to give their undivided allegiance to God alone. Just as the Israelites were warned against rejecting Yahweh and serving other gods (Deut 11:16; 2 Kgs 10:23), so too were New Testament Christians warned against dual allegiance and syncretism (Matt 6:24; 1 Cor 10:14; Rev 22:15). The same warning is valid for believers of all eras and contexts.

The second implication from this study of 1 Corinthians 15:29 is that of the importance of modeling a spiritual walk with God. The plausibility that the faithful influence and witness of deceased faithful Christians had motivated some individuals in Corinth to surrender their lives to Christ is a call for Christians to grow in their relationship with Christ so that they can manifest a godly character worth imitating. By being good role models, Christians have the potential to inspire others to embrace the life changing power of the Gospel.

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62 John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (Oxford, UK: Heinemann, 1990), 2.

## Conclusion

A first reading on 1 Corinthians 15:29 is an enigmatic argument against the absurdity of denying the certainty of bodily resurrection. In the light of the Creation account, the immediate context of Paul's first epistle to the Corinthians, and his teaching on faith, baptism, and salvation in his other writings, "baptized for the dead" in 1 Corinthians 15:29 cannot be taken as Paul's affirmation of mortuary rites for the benefit of a dead person. As the rest of the epistle, the content of chapter 15 is corrective of erroneous Christian beliefs and practice. Therefore, it is unimaginable that Paul would use an erroneous practice in support of his argument in favor of a fundamental of Christian faith. The heart of his argument centers on the certainty and centrality of Jesus' resurrection and how that should inform every aspect of the Christian way of life. It has nothing to do with what the living can do to influence the fate of deceased persons.

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