Verbum Vitae

The *Crux Interpretum* of 1 Cor 15:29: What is at Stake and a Proposal

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Abstract: This short paper tackles the much-discussed *crux interpretum* of 1 Cor 15:29. Biblical scholars have tended to analyse word for word the expression οἱ βαπτιζόμενοι ὑπὲρ τῶν νεκρῶν and present various hypotheses, with the idea favored by the scholarly majority being that of vicarious baptism for the dead. I propose a new reading of 1 Cor 15:29 in its literary and rhetorical context of 1 Cor 15:12–34. Here, what those who believe in Christ do (v. 29), what the apostles do (v. 30), and what Paul does (vv. 31–32), are put together as good practices which become incomprehensible if there is no resurrection of the dead. Vicarious baptism cannot be considered a good practice because it is at odds with Paul's concept of baptism, and because it was later even considered heretical and aberrant. In this context, the paper proposes to read ὑπέρ with a sense of finality, i.e. "for/in view of," and to see in ὑπὲρ τῶν νεκρῶν a brachylogy (as Paul employs elsewhere in his letters) for "for/in view of the resurrection of the dead." Therefore in 1 Cor 15:29 Paul presents the positive example of the people who undergo baptism as a public manifestation of faith, in the hope of taking part in the final resurrection together with all the dead, especially with those who are "in Christ." To the new reading corresponds this new translation: "Otherwise, what will they do those who have themselves baptised for/in view of (the resurrection of) the dead? If the dead are not raised at all, why then do they have themselves baptized for/in view of (the resurrection of) them?"

Keywords: 1 Cor 15:29; baptism in Paul; vicarious baptism; resurrection in Paul

In 1 Corinthians 15:29 we are confronted with one of the most difficult Pauline *crux interpretum*, about which much has been written.[1] In this contribution, after a brief survey of the research done so far, we would like to help the reader understand the main interpretative challenges of 1 Cor 15:29 and also to present an alternative proposal to the majority reading of vicarious baptism.

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[1] Already in 1925 Karl Barth (*Die Auferstehung,* 102) considering 1 Cor 15:29 a *crux interpretum*, said that he did not have anything satisfactory to say about it.

1. *Status quaestionis*

The very first interpreter of 1 Cor 15:29 is Tertullian (*Res.* 48; *Marc.* 1:4; 5:10) who refutes the idea that Paul advocated the vicarious baptism, which was performed by the Marcionites. The Fathers essentially followed this position,[2] as did the Scholastics and even the Reformers.[3] It was only in the twentieth century that vicarious baptism became the most popular interpretation of 1 Cor 15:29, although other readings did not disappear.

Giving an impressive overview of interpretation up to 1951, in his five articles Bernard M. Foschini finds over 40 different readings, dividing them into three categories: 1. Baptism in the metaphorical sense; 2. Baptism in the proper sense, but not as the sacrament; 3. Baptism as a sacrament of the New Law.[4] About 10 years later, Mathias Rissi published the first monograph entirely devoted to this *crux interpretum*.[5] Reviewing the *Wirkungsgeschichte* of the verse, he reduces to four the different interpretative possibilities: 1. A phrase from a convert's baptism confession; 2. An oblique reference to martyrdom; 3. Ritual washing of a dead body before burial; 4. Vicarious baptism.[6] We have to wait until 2005 to find an important new monograph about 1 Cor 15:29. In that year Michael F. Hull published his work proposing that the passage concerns ordinary Christian baptism – not some mysterious, aberrant form of vicarious baptism, which is otherwise unknown in the NT – as a witness to faith in the resurrection of the dead; and provides a good survey of the research, starting from the Fathers but focusing on the more recent interpretations.[7] In 2007 William O. Walker believes he has found the solution to all the interpretative problems of 1 Cor 15:29: the pericope of 1 Cor 15:29–34 is an interpolation, neither composed by Paul nor included by him in his letter, but by the Marcionites.[8] Walker bases his thesis on four arguments: the verses are out of place in that location; the vocabulary is non-Pauline; the text is speaking about vicarious baptism therefore it cannot be Pauline; 1 Cor 15:29–34 holds up as an independent unit. But Daniel B. Sharp aptly confutes it, and shows that Walker's thesis is untenable.[9] This position will be confirmed in our contribution demonstrating the argumentative unity and development of 1 Cor 15:12–34. In 2012 another useful *status quaestionis* was published by Joel R. White.[10] In it he shows that several scholarly works – published in the 15 years

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2   We have the exception of Ambrosiaster (*Com. 1 Cor.* 15:29), who thought that vicarious baptism was administered to living Christians on behalf of Pagans who died without being baptized.

3   For a schematic *status quaestionis* up to the Reformation, see English, "Mediated," 420–423.

4   Foschini, "Those who are Baptized," 260–276, 379-388 [1950]; 46–78, 172–198, 276–283 [1951].

5   Rissi, *Die Taufe*.

6   Rissi, *Die Taufe*, 52–57.

7   Hull, *Baptism*.

8   Walker, "1 Corinthians 15:29–34," 84–103.

9   Sharp, "Vicarious Baptism," 38–44.

10   White, "Recent Challenges," 379–395.

before 2012 – dispute the majority position of vicarious baptism, posit a casual nuance for the preposition ὑπέρ in 1 Cor 15:29, and take the literary context of this verse more seriously; White also confirms his earlier reading in reference to the apostles as "the dead," and to the honour given to them by the baptized.[11]

But we have to add two more recent contributions which were not included in any of the previous *status questionis.* In 2017, Roger D. Aus interprets 1 Cor 15:29 in connection with the texts of Early Judaism regarding the intercession for the dead. According to Aus, Paul speaks about some members of the Corinthian community who have themselves baptized again on behalf of the dead, as a form of intercession for them, therefore his proposal can be grouped with the one of vicarious baptism.[12] In the same year Hanoch Ben Keshet published a contribution on his website, reworking his 2016 article about 1 Cor 15:29.[13] He finds in the verse, addressed only to the Jewish Christians of Corinth, a Jewish burial practice performed in the hope of the resurrection, a practice which would later be developed in the medieval *Taharat Hamet*. Therefore, he presents his translation of 15:29: "Otherwise, what do they achieve, those, who themselves are purifying [the dead] for the benefit of the dead? If, actually, the dead are not arising, why, then, are they themselves purifying [them] for their benefit?" As we are going to see, his proposal should be grouped with the one regarding ritual washing. After this concise but useful survey of the research, we can observe the main interpretative problems of the text of 1 Cor 15:29.

2. What is at Stake in 1 Cor 15:29

Considering the history of the research into 1 Cor 15:29 from a methodological point of view, we have to notice that the discussion is often based on historical precedents or phenomenological parallels in the surrounding religious cultures. In fact, on the one hand, we have scholars like Richard E. DeMaris[14] and Sharp[15] who affirm that there are analogous phenomena in Jewish and Greco-Roman funerary cults, and on the other hand, we have scholars like Hull[16] and Dieter Zeller[17] who think that there is no evidence of parallels to baptism for the dead in the ancient world prior to or contemporaneous with Paul. But in this way, we are at an impasse.

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11   White, "Baptized," 487–499.
12   Aus, *Two Puzzling Baptisms*, 74–124.
13   Keshet, "1 Corinthians 15:29," 1–19; Keshet, "Whether Jews," 331–348.
14   DeMaris, "Corinthian Religion," 661–682.
15   Sharp, "Vicarious Baptism," 53–66.
16   Hull, *Baptism*, 37–38.
17   Zeller, "Gibt es religionsgeschichtliche Parallelen," 68–76.

For our part, to get out of this situation and to shed light on a more apt interpretation of 1 Cor 15:29 we believe that it is necessary to bear in mind the literary and rhetorical context. The verse is part of the wider passage 1 Cor 15:12–34 (first argumentation of 1 Cor 15:1–58)[18] which aims to demonstrate the indissoluble bond between the resurrection of Christ and the final resurrection of the dead. This is the arrangement of the passage:

Thesis on the link between the resurrection of Christ and that of the dead (v. 12)
Demonstration in three steps (vv. 13–32):
A. Negative consequences of the denial of the resurrection (vv. 12–19);
B. Positive affirmations of the resurrection of the dead (vv. 20–28);
A'. Other negative consequences of the denial of the resurrection (vv. 29–32);
Peroration (vv. 33–34).

Particularly in unit A', returning to the negative consequences first discussed in vv. 12–19, we find an *argumentum ad absurdum* related to the conduct of the Christians: if the dead do not rise again, all the things the Christians do in the present become incomprehensible. Moreover, we can outline the arrangement of vv. 29–32 as follows, marked by three different examples:

What those who believe in Christ do (v. 29);
What the apostles do (v. 30);
What Paul does (vv. 31–32a);
The consequences for everyone (proverb) (v. 32b).

In unit A', due to the involvement of various subjects who through their actions reveal their hope in the final resurrection of the dead, we can see a positive progression. Thus the overall meaning of the unit is quite clear, but in this context v. 29 needs to be analysed carefully. From a syntactical point of view, the verse consists of a rhetorical interrogative sentence followed by a real conditional with an apodosis derived from another rhetorical question. In fact, in v. 29 Paul affirms that if there is no resurrection of the dead, then the actions[19] of οἱ βαπτιζόμενοι ὑπὲρ τῶν νεκρῶν are incomprehensible. This Greek expression finds a perfect parallel and a synonym in βαπτίζονται ὑπὲρ αὐτῶν,[20] which could be also considered a repetition. Moreover,

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18 For the rhetorical arrangement of 1 Cor 15:1–58, see Bianchini, *The Apostle Paul*, 73–78.
19 The future ποιήσουσιν is to be considered a logical present with a subjective or self-involving aspect, cf. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 1241.
20 Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 1240: "D² and Peshitta replace the final αὐτῶν with τῶν νεκρῶν, but this is clearly late and secondary."

taking a cue from White,[21] we present the three fundamental lexical and grammatical problems that give rise to the different interpretations of the verse:[22]

οἱ βαπτιζόμενοι
a. those who undergo baptism with water
b. those who undergo metaphorical baptism (e.g. sufferings, martyrdom)
c. those who undergo ritual washing

ὑπέρ
a. substitutionary ("instead of" or "on behalf of")
b. final ("for the benefit of")
c. causal ("because of" or "on account of")
d. locative ("over")

τῶν νεκρῶν
a. dead people
b. dead bodies
c. dead in a metaphorical sense (e.g. the apostles)

3. Towards a New Proposal

Now that the time has come for an exegetical analysis, we shall consider each of the expressions in the text in order to come to a good interpretation of 1 Cor 15:29. Starting from οἱ βαπτιζόμενοι,[23] we wonder what the expression refers to. This group must be carefully differentiated from those who deny the resurrection, the group signified by the τινές of vv. 12, 34. It is unlikely that οἱ βαπτιζόμενοι could be linked with another group of Corinthians (otherwise, we would have found τινές again), or with the rest of the Christian community in Corinth (in which case we would have found ἄλλοι, cf. 1 Cor 9:12; 14:29, or οἱ πλείονες, cf. 2 Cor 2:6; 4:15). Rather οἱ βαπτιζόμενοι should be linked with the people inside or outside Corinth who receive baptism.

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21 White, "Recent Challenges," 380–382.
22 Moreover, the punctuation of this verse in itself is questioned but, as pointed out by Fitzmyer, *First Corinthians*, 581, alternative interpretations of the text in NA[28] make 1 Cor 15:29 unintelligible.
23 Probably, it should not be interpreted as a passive voice, but as a middle voice indicating a choice and an involvement on the part of those who are baptized. We can also agree with the definition of Timothy A. Brookins and Bruce W. Longenecker (*1 Corinthians 10–16*, 161) who use the category of "permissive middle." On other hand, Keshet ("1 Corinthians 15:29," 3–7) reads βαπτιζόμενοι as middle voice with an active value (he speaks of an indirect middle), but it is difficult to justify this choice because for that, Paul could have used the normal active voice of βαπτίζω as he does in 1 Cor 1:13, 16[2x],17.

But which baptism? We need not look for a meaning beyond the literal one. Above all, because the verb βαπτίζω in 1 Corinthians is always employed to indicate the usual Christian rite (in some ways also in 10:2[24]). Therefore, the proposals of metaphorical baptism or ritual washing are not convincing.

Moving on to a consideration of the preposition ὑπέρ, if we read it in the substitutionary sense, it then suggests the most accepted hypothesis of a vicarious baptism. Thus, it could be a rite that is performed in the place of and on behalf of the dead who had not received it yet. In support of this hypothesis, as we have already seen, the exegetes have looked for parallels in the Greco-Roman religion and in Judaism. Unfortunately, these elements are external to the text and context of 1 Cor 15:29 and do not adequately confirm such a hypothesis. Besides, such a view is further invalidated by the fact that Paul presents the baptism ὑπὲρ τῶν νεκρῶν in 15:29–32 as a positive example; this fact is evident from the proposed literary and rhetorical arrangement of the text. The idea of vicarious baptism, with its impersonal and substitutionary character, is at odds with the Pauline meaning of baptism, linked to the gift of the Spirit to the person who become son of God (1 Cor 12:13; Gal 3:26–29). Thus it would be unreasonable for Paul to refer to it in order to support his argument. Later, the writings of some Church Fathers speak of vicarious baptism as an aberrant practice performed by heretical Christian groups.[25]

Another possibility, followed by a few exegetes,[26] is the interpretation of ὑπέρ in a locative sense, which would mean that the Apostle was indicating a baptism performed over the graves of the dead believers. This custom is not documented in any way by the sources. What is more, we hardly find a case of ὑπέρ plus genitive in the locative sense in the NT. Therefore, only the hypotheses of either the final or the causal interpretation of ὑπέρ are left, and we intend to analyse them by paying attention to the sentence in its entirety.

Before that, it is necessary to address the meaning of τῶν νεκρῶν. In 1 Cor 15, the plural of νεκρός, with or without the article, always indicates the dead who are destined for the resurrection according to Paul (vv. 12, 13, 20, 21, 42): dead people, not simply dead bodies. Therefore, this must also be its meaning in verse 29.[27]

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24 As Fitzmyer, *First Corinthians*, 381, clearly explains, Paul coins the phrase εἰς τὸν Μωϋσῆν ἐβαπτίσθησαν in 10:2 on the basis of the baptism of the believers, which is the *primum analogatum*: the experience of the people in the desert is interpreted in the light of its similarity with the Christian rite, with which it shares the nature of a saving gift.

25 Cf. Barbaglio, *La prima lettera ai Corinzi*, 832. The third Council of Carthage in 397 explicitly prohibited every kind of vicarious baptism, saying in its sixth canon: "Deinde cavendum est ne mortuos etiam baptizari posse fratrum infirmitas credat, cum eucharistiam non dari mortuis animadvertit."

26 E.g., Grosheide, *Commentary*, 372–373.

27 The original idea of White ("Baptized," 494) to see in νεκρῶν a reference to "the apostles" is not so convincing, also because at the same time he assigns the normal meaning of "the dead" to νεκροί, proposing two different uses (real and metaphorical) of a word in the same verse. Cf. Sharp, "Vicarious Baptism," 44–47, for a valid confutation of this hypothesis.

At this point, putting together what we have demonstrated thus far, we can offer a complete interpretation of the verse. Some scholars support the causal interpretation of ὑπέρ, meaning "on account of the resurrection of the dead": those who undergo baptism do so because of their faith in the resurrection of Christ and all Christians,[28] or because of their desire to take part in the resurrection together with the dead believers.[29] Those who suggest a final interpretation of ὑπέρ read "for the benefit of the dead" in the sense of being reunited with their loved ones, who were already Christians, and are now dead.[30]

For our part, we propose to find in 1 Cor 15:29 ὑπὲρ τῶν νεκρῶν a brachylogy, a figure of speech condensed to express a thought. We can find brachylogical syntagmata elsewhere in Paul's epistles,[31] some of them having a similar grammatical form to that of our verse (ὑπέρ + genitive): ὑπὲρ τοῦ ὀνόματος αὐτοῦ "to spread his name" (Rom 1:5), ὑπὲρ ἀληθείας θεοῦ "in order to show that God's promises are true" (Rom 15:8), ὑπὲρ τῶν ἁμαρτιῶν ἡμῶν "in order to remove our sins" (1 Cor 15:3), ὑπὲρ τῆς πίστεως ὑμῶν "for the strengthening of your faith" (1 Thess 3:2).[32] In the aforementioned cases, Paul employs ὑπέρ with the sense of finality in connection with a brachylogy. Particularly, the quotation of 1 Cor 15:3 belongs to the same context of our verse, thus we can propose the hypothesis that the same construction in 1 Cor 15:29 also works in the same way. Moreover, we can add that the final meaning of the preposition, as stated by BDR § 231.2 and attested to in classical Greek, is determined by the fact that it introduces what one wants to and can attain, therefore translated as "for, in view of." We think that this translation of ὑπέρ is applicable also in some other Pauline occurrences such as in 2 Cor 1:6; 12:19; Phil 2:13.

Now it is important to observe that in the context of 1 Cor 15 we find four occurrences of the same syntagma in connection with νεκρῶν, that is (ἡ) ἀνάστασις (τῶν) νεκρῶν (vv. 12, 13, 21, 42), which leads us to infer that the brachylogical expression of v. 29, in which only τῶν νεκρῶν is mentioned, can be understood to mean "the resurrection of the dead." However, in this case, why is the very important word "the resurrection" omitted? In our opinion, with the deliberate omission of ἀνάστασις, Paul aims to emphasize the dead with whom one will again be reunited at the resurrection. Thus, the Apostle hints at the idea that he presented for the first time in the consolation passage of 1 Thess 4:13–18. Finally, we believe that 1 Cor 15:29 can be rendered in this way: "Otherwise, what will they do those who have themselves baptised for/in view of (the resurrection of) the dead? If the dead are not raised at all, why then do they have themselves baptized for/in view of (the resurrection of) them?"

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28   Hull, *Baptism*, 235.
29   Ciampa – Rosner, *The First Letter*, 784.
30   E.g., Raeder, "Vikariatstaufe," 258–260.
31   Jermo van Nes (*Pauline Language*, 208) says about brachylogy: "This figure of omission must be distinguished from ellipsis because brachylogy is only essential to thought and not to grammar (e.g. 1 Cor. 11:16)."
32   Cf. BAGD, 1030.

In conclusion, we suppose that in 1 Cor 15:29 Paul presents the positive example of people who undergo baptism because it is a public manifestation of faith, in the hope of taking part in the final resurrection together with all the dead, especially with those who are "in Christ."[33] The purpose of this verse, as Schnabel[34] points out, is to show that if there were no resurrection, then the Christian rite itself would be meaningless because it would be deprived of its effects with regard to death, eternal life, and union with Christ. If, on the one hand, baptism in our context is functional to the Pauline argumentation in favour of the resurrection, then on the other, it is presented in its eschatological dimension, as the foundation of the final hope of every Christian. Indeed, precisely because they have decided to receive baptism, they can look forward full of hope and with the certainty derived from their faith, to their ultimate destiny: as they have shared the fate of the first Adam, so will they also share the fate of the second Adam (cf. 15:44–49).

With this short article we have aimed to make clear what is really at stake in the *crux interpretum* of 1 Cor 15:29, above all underlining the importance of the literary and rhetorical context for the interpretation, which are elements neglected by scholars. Consequently, we have proposed a new reading of the verse with ὑπὲρ τῶν νεκρῶν as "for/in view of the resurrection of the dead," and a new interpretation with the positive example of the group of people who undergo baptism in the hope of taking part in the final resurrection together with all the dead, especially with those who are "in Christ." We are by no means saying that this is the last word on 1 Cor 15:29, but we do hope to have provided some useful insights for further research.

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33   Our position is only apparently similar to Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 1248. Because, taking a cue from Maria Raeder, firstly he does not reject the idea of vicarious baptism, secondly he reads ὑπὲρ τῶν νεκρῶν as "for the sake of the dead" and thirdly, he thinks that the reunion with the dead is only with believing relatives.

34   Schnabel, *Der erste Brief*, 944.

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