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“Shall we, then, be baptized for the dead?”:

An Answer to the Problem of 1 Corinthians 15:29 and Vicarious Baptism

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Introduction

First Corinthians 15:29 is known for having many interpretations.¹ Thiselton numbers these to *at least* forty² and the majority of scholars concede that verse 29 contains a reference to “vicarious baptism,” maintaining that despite the plethora of alternative readings, or perhaps because of them,³ the “plain” reading is some variation on “vicarious baptism.”⁴ That this is the “plain” reading, however, is itself not so plain, but tenuous. First, there is no historical precedent or evidence for the practice. Second, vicarious baptism would contradict Paul’s own understanding of baptism. Third, it could be entering Paul into a series of self-contradictions via a seeming collusion with what would amount to a false baptism and therefore a false theology. Fourth, the concept of vicarious baptism is idiosyncratic in the extreme as regards the entire New Testament as well as the local context of 1 Corinthians 15. If “plain” means it is read in isolation, without interpreting verse 29 in its context, without Paul’s theology in mind, and without Paul’s terminological consistency and rhetorical strategy in mind, then vicarious baptism could be the “plain” reading. In other words, as an explanation, “vicarious baptism” invites as many problems and as many complexities as other readings, and so is not at all plain.

¹ This opening paragraph is responding collectively to the corresponding sections found in Gordon Fee, *First Epistle to the Corinthians*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1987); Roy Ciampa and Brian Rosner, *First Letter to the Corinthians*, PNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 2010); William F. Orr and James Arthur Walther, *I Corinthians*, Anchor Bible Commentary (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1976); and Joseph Fitzmyer, *I Corinthians*, Anchor Bible Commentary (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008).

² Anthony Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 2000), 1240. Thiselton, who was especially thorough in relating several competing views, and despite much perceptive exegesis, yet does not pick up on the full rhetorical energy at work within 15:29. See also Kenneth E. Bailey, *Paul Through Mediterranean Eyes: Cultural Studies in 1 Corinthians* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2011), 449.

³ Fee, 766.

⁴ Kistemaker states “the sense of the text escapes” him; for him, “verse 29 remains a mystery.” See Simon Kistemaker, *Exposition of the First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1993), 558-60.

In order to answer what it means to be “baptized for the dead,” one can first look at the context in which verse 29 appears. For example, chapter 15 of 1 Corinthians is concerned from start to finish with developing an extended argument, one which stretches all the way from 15:1 onward for fifty-eight verses. It opens in the Greek with *γνωρίζω δὲ*, sometimes translated as, “Now I make known to you,”⁵ signifying the beginning of a new argument or line of thought, and develops its theme consistently throughout the long chapter to end with an exhortation to steadfastness. The overarching theme is that of being raised from the dead, and is framed by Paul primarily through the lens of Christ’s own dying and rising. After examining this chapter more closely, I will show that the reference to baptism found at 1 Corinthians 15:29 could not possibly be referring to a practice in which people are being baptized on behalf of the dead, but is instead a rhetorically complex reference to what baptism is reduced to when resurrection is denied.

Overview of 1 Corinthians 15

Looking at the overall structure of this chapter in order to get a clearer picture of the specific context of 15:29, the first part of Paul’s argument comprises verses 1-11 and introduces the gospel itself along with its apostolic, and therefore authoritative, pedigree, one which Paul is wanting to “now make known” (*γνωρίζω δὲ*) to the Corinthians: “For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures” (1 Cor 15:3).

After this opening, Paul turns from setting up the argument to expounding it, starting in verse 12: “Now if Christ is proclaimed as raised from the dead [following conceptually from verse 3], how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead?” (1 Cor 15:12) This argument is developed steadily and in two sections: first in verses 12 through 20a, and second in verses 20b through 26, including verse 29. As I will explain in more detail below, verses 27 and 28, though important, are better understood as a parenthetical aside, and as such in their grandiosity could obscure the line of argument when trying to interpret verse 29 given that Paul continues and takes up the argument of verse 26 again in verse 29.

Before proceeding, one key element from verse 12 worth mentioning is who is being referred to in “some of you say (*λέγουσιν ἐν ὑμῖν τινες*),” indicating that there are “some” who are denying resurrection. Whether or not this is an historical group within the Corinthian community, or perhaps is merely rhetorical, considered in itself the argument section 12-19 gains much of its force as a response to this “some among you,” what can be called the “anti-resurrection group.”⁶ Being the introduction to a section of verses formed around an “if... then” argument structure, the “if... then” structure is itself a continuation of Paul’s response to this anti-resurrection group. This anti-resurrection group’s position is referred to again in verse 29, confirmed via the “if... then,” and also in verses 34b-36a, and as such their presence is pervasive.

⁵ In addition to “make known” (NASB, ASV, YLT), other major translations render *γνωρίζω* as “remind” (ESV, RSV, NIV), “declare” (KJV, NKJV), and even “clarify” (HCSB). They also all translate *δὲ* as indicating the transition to a new thought, from “Moreover” (KJV, NKJV), to the majority choice, “Now” (NIV, ESV, HCSB, NASB, RSV, ASV).

⁶ The length and forcefulness of the chapter indicates that it is likely there was some group of people who were disturbing the peace in Corinth, though for the sake of analyzing Paul’s argument it is not necessary that there be an identifiable historical group.

Moving on, the present study will not concern itself much with the final sections of chapter 15. Briefly, at verse 30 he takes a bigger turn in the progression of his overall argument to focus on what one is willing to suffer (using himself as an example), applying this of the previous section to the believer's life and death. The consequent moral exhortation follows at verse 33, that the Corinthians ought to steer clear of bad, corrupting company, which is to say the anti-resurrection group referred to above. In verse 34 Paul exhorts them further to come to their right mind, to wake up from their "drunken stupor" and stop sinning and stop going without knowledge. Paul then transitions to set up for another large section of the argument, beginning in verses 35 and 36 and stretching on to 49, in which his theme of the rising of the dead is applied in a new light in order to refute the "foolish" questioning of those (introduced in verse 12) who are without knowledge, doing so by giving a detailed account of this resurrection body and answering which types of bodies are or are not raised. Finally, Paul concludes his long argument triumphantly in verses 50 through 55, taking up much the same theme as in the previous section, and finishing in verses 57 and 58 with an exhortation predicated on the reaffirmation of the thesis that Christ, having abolished death, is victoriously risen: "But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory [over death] through our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that [since He is risen and you will thus rise, too] in the Lord your labor is not in vain" (1 Cor 15:57-58). By focusing thematically on both the fact and significance of the death and resurrection of Christ and their relation to the Christian throughout the chapter, Paul is showing the Corinthian reader-listener the meaning of his or her life and death in relation to this dying and rising Christ.

With the foregoing broader outline in view, it will be profitable to look more closely at how verse 26 speaks particularly to verse 29. Verses 27-28 are themselves an explanatory overflow of 26, a parenthetical explanation on the grandest scale of how the conclusion reached at verse 26 can be so, explaining how since everything is subject to Christ, death is no exception. Without the verses 27-28 "parenthesis," it reads: "26 The last enemy to be destroyed is death. ... 29 Otherwise, what do people mean by being baptized on behalf of the dead? If the dead are not raised at all [i.e. if death is not actually destroyed], why are people baptized on their behalf?" (1 Cor 15:26, 29) The conceptual framework being established, the thread connecting 26 to 29, is this refrain concerning the dead and the possibility of rising. Tracing this theme concerning the dead backwards yet a few more verses, we can see that not only is the theme of the dead consistent, but is woven throughout. For example, as noted above, verses 12-19 are a series of seven "ifs" concerning the dead; the first half of verse 20, by declaring the fact of Christ's having been raised, is the conclusion of these seven "ifs." Moreover, by stating that Christ has truly been raised from the dead, Paul then transitions to explain that this is significant for the Christian because Christ is thereby the "first fruits," which is to say a proof of resurrection and of what must *consequently* be true of the believer. After verse 20, the argument turns to further explain the thought raised in the second half of verse 20 concerning how Christ is the "first fruits."

Just as verses 12 through 20 form a unit, verses 21-26 form another unit, really a mini-argument or explanatory expansion expounding what might be called the cosmic significance of the second half of verse 20. Concluding the mini-argument, verse 26, spilling into verses 27-28, is a pivot for the larger argument in that it both echoes the main theme and completes a thought from verse 24 concerning the end (*τέλος*). Thus, built atop a twenty-verse argument, Paul is trying to demonstrate in verses 21-28 the significance of Christ's having been raised from the dead (*νεκρός*).

He then concludes the progression of this section at verse 29, the baptism verse, after which he applies verses 1-29 to verses 30-32 in order to establish that Christ's being raised gives effectual hope in the present hour to face imminent danger. After this unit, then, Paul again picks up the thread of his theme, and so reading verse 29 without the explanatory section 21-28 obscuring, but with verse 20 more directly in view, it shows clearly the continuity with the development of Paul's argument begun at the beginning of the chapter: "20 But now is Christ risen from the dead, and become the firstfruits of them that slept. ... 29 Else what shall they do which are baptized for the dead, if the dead rise not at all? Why are they then baptized for the dead?" (1 Cor 15:20, 29) The conceptual theme repeated throughout verses 12 through 20, that of being "risen from the dead," echoed again in verse 26, is therefore the thread which also runs through, animates, and gives structure to verse 29.

The Functional Elements of Verse 29

Now, let us look more closely at some of the key terms of the argument that relate to unravelling the riddle of verse 29. One of the major terms appearing in verse 29 and throughout the chapter is, as noted above, "the dead." Significantly, a form of the term "dead," from *νεκρός*, either *νεκρῶν* or *νεκροί*, appears thirteen times in chapter 15 alone. The term "death," from *θάνατος*, carrying a related but slightly different sense than *νεκρός*, also appears five times in this chapter.

Another key term which is used nineteen times in this chapter in conjunction with *νεκρός* is some form of the term "raised." "Raised" comes from *ἐγείρω*, sometimes translated as "risen," is generally found in the form *ἐγείρονται*, *ἤγειρεν*, or *ἐγήγερται*. A related term within the text is "resurrection," from *ἀνάστασις*, occurring four times. Hence, "dead/death," together with their corollary, "raised/resurrection," are Paul's joint theme.

νεκρός

As Paul uses it, the term *νεκρός* never seems to indicate dead *individuals*. Being raised from "the dead" also never refers to an explicit *group* of dead individuals from which one is raised. Appearing only in this chapter within the present epistle, Paul's usage seems much more categorical, abstract, collective, impersonal, and thus intimating neither persons nor groups, but a *state* of death, a *condition* of being dead from which one is or can be raised.⁷ The dead are, most simply, those in the *state* or *category* of death, and so to be raised from the dead is to be raised *not* from some finite group of dead persons or individuals, but from an impersonal *state* of death.

The reason the foregoing is significant is because in verse 29 people are apparently being baptized for "the dead," which according to scholarly consensus is taken to mean being baptized for specific dead individuals, but Paul does not use the term "the dead" as a reference to

⁷ Its appearance in other Pauline epistles is likewise abstract and categorical, and though almost always associated directly with Christ's rising, can be applied to the living (in relation to sin and trespasses). See also Rom 6:11, 13; 7:8; 8:10; Eph 2:1, 5; Col 2:13. These show yet more clearly the abstract nature of *the dead* in Paul's usage, even when applied to specific individuals or groups. In fact, when it is applied to specific individuals other than Christ it is most surely abstract, since they are living, otherwise the term functions almost inseparably from Christ's rising.

specific dead individuals. Therefore, since Paul does not link the collective notion of the dead with particular dead individuals, “dead individuals” is an eisegesis, a false inference not applicable to verse 29. It is thus important to understand that the Pauline notion of “the dead” is categorical and abstract, and therefore *precludes* interpreting it as a baptism on behalf of certain dead individuals.

For example, taking its first appearance in chapter 15 as typical of its usage, even setting its tone, nothing is indicative of specific individuals: “Now if Christ is proclaimed as raised from the *dead* (*νεκρός*, as *νεκρῶν*), how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the *dead* (*νεκρός*, as *νεκρῶν*)?” (1 Cor 15:12) Paul, asserting that Christ is raised from the dead, thus does not seem to indicate that there is some group of dead individuals from which He was raised, but the entirety of the dead taken as a categorical whole. The term “dead” as used by Paul here is comprehensive. The meaning of the sentence would be marred if the term “individuals” was supplied: “Now if Christ is proclaimed as raised from among the dead *individuals*, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead *individuals*?”⁸ If this were the case, then the reader would be sent on a trackless search for the implied dead individuals from which Christ was raised. Being “raised from the dead” carries more sense when understood as meaning raised from either the state of death or the category of being dead, which is to say when it refers generally to all who are dead, collectively, generically, and in the abstract, and not to a particular subgroup of dead persons or a discrete collection of *certain*, identifiable dead individuals.⁹

Though *νεκρός* in verse 12 could indicate a resurrection of “dead people,” it is again not so delimited as to make “the dead” refer concretely to one specific group of people among others, say the elect, but to a potentiality for resurrection intrinsic to the *state* of death. In this case it yet remains a reference to an abstract collective condition of death from which certain persons may or may not be raised. In Paul’s language it is the living and the raised who retain a uniqueness, not “the dead.” Thus the term *νεκρός* does not carry the sense of individuals who are dead and can be baptized for, a specific group of identifiable dead people for whom vicarious baptism might be efficacious.¹⁰

The term *νεκρός* is playing only a supportive role in verse 12, for the verse makes the same sense even if it is rendered without *νεκρός*. For example: “Now if Christ is proclaimed as raised,

⁸ A similar effect would occur if “individual” were to replace “persons.”

⁹ In English the term “people” can function in a likewise ambiguous way. For example, a person can point to a group of people and rightly say, “Look, at the people over there!” This is a very specific group of people being pointed to and so cannot include *all* people, just all *those* people. Yet the term “people” can also function to mean “the people,” as in the saying, “He is a man of the people.” In this second usage “the people” is non-particular, and functions as a general category which includes all people understood in a common, abstract, and collective sense. Paul’s use of “the dead” seems to make the most sense when understood in the light of the latter usage, otherwise one is left wondering which dead people Paul is referring to.

¹⁰ In contemporary English the term “movies” can also carry a similar sense, for when a person goes to “the movies” it is generalized so as to refer not to particular or specific movies, but a generic “place” into which certain movies can be put. A particular movie can be seen at “the movies,” but the term “movies” itself does not translate as having a specified or bounded number of movies, but is an unbounded category with an unspecified number of movies which a particular movie can enter or be removed from. It is a “realm” where particular movies can be encountered, but is not itself any one movie or fixed set of particular movies. And so, just as “the movies” refers to a place or realm of movies and not to particular movies, likewise, “the dead” refers to the state of death, the realm of the dead, and not to a fixed set or group of dead people. It is abstracted from the persons such that persons enter into it, becoming “the dead.”

how can some of you say that there is no resurrection?” As such, this statement carries the exact same meaning despite the subtraction of *νεκρός*, and this is so because it is implicit in the logic of the argument that “the dead” is not referring to a sub-group of certain dead people but to the dead taken as a collective, abstract category. If the argument in this verse were hinging on it meaning certain dead people, then it would fall apart if the term *νεκρός* were removed; clearly it does not.

The only time in this letter when specific persons or groups are referenced as being dead is when an entirely different term is used: *κοιμάω*, usually translated as “asleep.”¹¹ In these cases it is specific; it is “some,” “those,” and “we,” respectively, who have fallen or will fall asleep. *Asleep* (*κοιμάω*) is therefore reserved by Paul for specific persons or groups who are “dead.”¹² Since *κοιμάω* is a term reserved for specific persons or groups, the word *νεκρός* stands in relief as a distinct term referring not to certain individuals who are “asleep” in the Lord, but to death as a common state, a comprehensive condition, a blanket status, or a collective category abstractly incorporating all the dead, without individual distinction.¹³

Another representative example of *νεκρός* is found in verse 16: “For if the dead (*νεκρός*, as *νεκροί*) rise not, then is not Christ raised” (1 Cor 15:16). Like the above, this usage of *νεκρός* functions not to identify a specific sub-group of dead people, but refers to dead people “in general” as having via Christ the potential to be risen from the dead state.¹⁴ The verse would be marred if it were rendered in a particularizing way: “For if the dead *individuals* rise not, then is not Christ raised” (1 Cor 15:16).

Reading *νεκρός* in a particularizing way would reverse soteriological causation by absurdly rendering Christ’s resurrection dependent on these other particular individuals rising. If it were taken to refer to a subgroup of dead persons, and not to a potentiality coextensive within the whole category of the dead, then the logic therein would be asserting that Christ’s being raised is limited, not to the potentiality of rising in general, but to the rising of some specific sub-group of individuals. This would then make Christ’s resurrection dependent on other people rising. If this usage of *νεκρός* were the case, then it would even more absurdly make Christ’s having been raised in the *past* dependent on some other individual’s *future* rising. Needless to say, this would contradict Paul’s gospel and the adjacent doctrine of Christ being the first fruits, for the faithful would have to wait for others to rise in order to believe that Christ rose. The actual weight of *νεκρός* is therefore in the general *condition* of death, from which Christ rises so as to communicate the possibility of being raised from said condition. It could not refer to some particular person or subgroup in this condition, but to the condition of death considered in itself.

For Paul to argue “if the dead rise not” means that this issue of the *νεκρός* rising is a matter of principle, for the whole force of his argument here is that the *potential* for rising actually exists, and Christ is offered as the proof. And so, given that in Corinth “some” people are denying resurrection (15:12), not the resurrection of certain persons but in principle, then it only makes

¹¹ 1 Corinthians 15:6, 18, 20, and 51.

¹² This holds true throughout Paul’s epistles and the New Testament as a whole, and applies equally to Old Testament figures as to New, e.g. Acts 13:36.

¹³ This also creates a great difficulty for those who might assert that “baptism” in verse 29 refers to a baptism inspired or motivated on behalf of the apostles, martyrs, or saints, as these are generally assigned the term *κοιμάω*. No one in Paul’s mind is getting baptized for those who have “fallen asleep.”

¹⁴ It also cannot refer to “all the dead people” rising, for that would collapse/expand the meaning into soteriological universalism, universal salvation, which is certainly not what Paul is making a reference to.

sense to read Paul's argument as refuting this anti-resurrection group's blanket denial of resurrection when he discusses the dead rising. He is thus using the term *νεκρός* as a generic category or state from which rising is possible. Otherwise his argument becomes almost incomprehensible for, as has been shown, it would make Christ's rising dependent on the independent rising of some other (unidentified) sub-group of people and, at the same time, temporalize the term "rise" so as to therefore make Christ's past resurrection dependent on a present or future group's rising, completely negating the argument he spent the first eleven verses of the chapter setting up, thus emptying his argument and the very gospel of all its force.

The rest of the uses of *νεκρός* in chapter 15 of 1 Corinthians function in the same way, which is to say they are referring neither to a specific sub-group of dead individuals, nor to discrete collections of dead persons, but to a "state of the dead" from which, because of Christ, people have the potential to be raised.¹⁵ In fact, Paul's use of *νεκρός* is both consistent and impersonal. This has great significance for the interpretation of verse 29 because, when it speaks of baptizing "on behalf of *the νεκρός*," it means that for Paul this act of baptism would not and in principle could not have a specific person or sub-group of people in mind. In other words, verse 29 could *not* mean that in Corinth there was a practice that a living person, say, Jerry, was getting baptized "on behalf of" his long dead pagan grandfather Harry.¹⁶ In this chapter the term *νεκρός* never functions with such personalized specificity as regards those who are in the state of death, nor does it ever single out individuals from the collective category of "the dead" such that one could be baptized "on their behalf."

So what does it mean, then, if it cannot mean that living individuals are getting baptized on behalf of dead individuals? To answer we must account for the corollary concept accompanying *νεκρός* throughout this chapter: raised/risen. Noteworthily, each verse which uses the term "dead" (*νεκρός*) also uses some form of the concept for either rise, risen, raised, or resurrection. The dead is linked notionally with raised/risen. Not a single usage of *νεκρός* occurs without this sister concept nearby, including verse 29, so obviously the two ideas function inseparably in Paul, at least as regards the argument of chapter 15. In other words, the presence of the concept related to rising actually works to stabilize the meaning of *νεκρός*, indicating that Paul is not likely abandoning consistent usage for a different, more particularizing sense in this verse just because baptism is being mentioned. The stable connection linking the dead and resurrection thus helps to further demonstrate that Paul is not likely abandoning this interconceptual dyad in verse 29.

Making *νεκρός* all of a sudden mean some individual person or sub-group would be worse than awkward. Since the term "asleep" has already been used in 15:18 to refer to a specific sub-group, then one would have to show why Paul would not only *not* use the available term that carries the specifying meaning but also why he would alter his meaning and instead use a key technical term in a completely changed sense. Alternately, if one attempted to retain its abstract and comprehensive sense while still affirming vicarious baptism, then *νεκρός* would in verse 29

¹⁵ See also 1 Cor 15:13, 15, 16, 20, 21, 29, 32, 35, 42, and 52.

¹⁶ The assertion of individuality would also not be helped if Jerry was alleged to practice baptism "on behalf of," say, the esteemed saint Larry, for the context of Paul's argument presupposes a denial of resurrection, and his use of *νεκρός* yet excludes specific individuals. Thus, whether it was vicariously for a pagan or in honor of a Christian, opposing the denial of resurrection is Paul's continuous and immediate theme. As such, the problem cannot be resolved by a discussion of for whom any supposedly vicarious baptism was being performed, for no one is being referred to; one would have to supply an individual from imagination in order to accomplish this.

still mean “all the dead” and thereby turn verse 29 *not* into a reference to vicarious baptism of dead individuals but rather all the dead, which is to say universal salvation. Being “baptized for the dead” would then arbitrarily attribute to an anti-resurrection group a *belief* in universal salvation via vicarious baptism. This could hardly be a “practice,” however, for the reason that since *νεκρός* means all the dead, then one single baptism “on behalf of [all] the dead” would suffice to save everyone. If, moreover, one still insists on individualizing “the dead,” then one would have to further demonstrate why Paul would deviate from his otherwise customary linking of individual death with the explicit reference to being “dead in sin.”¹⁷

If...then

The preceding section brings the present investigation closer to finding the answer, for it seems that baptism for the sake of dead individuals is ruled out. To be even more certain a further question needs to be solved first: What does “otherwise” (*ἑπειδὴ*) in verse 29 refer to? This relatively uncommon term appears five times in the entire epistle, and in this context, as a rhetorical device, carries the sense of contrasting an assertion with a logical absurdity or an obvious falsehood for the sake of refining or adding clarity to a previous assertion or prior premise.¹⁸

For example, in 1 Cor 5:9-10 Paul states, “I wrote unto you in an epistle not to company with fornicators: Yet not altogether with the fornicators of this world, or with the covetous, or extortioners, or with idolaters; for (*ἑπειδὴ*) then must ye needs go out of the world.” What he is arguing is that although one ought to practice separation in principle and to some degree, one cannot yet absolutely separate oneself from all unsavory people because this is impossible while still in the world. In other words, since it would be absurd to “go out of the world” literally, Paul is *contrasting* a prior assertion with an absurdity so as to make that assertion clearer.

Whereas Paul provides the prior reference immediately in 5:9-10, in 15:29 the absurd statement is not immediately adjacent to the relevant previous assertion to which it refers. Hence, it is obscure which previous assertion the absurd statement is referring to.¹⁹ In the above it was shown that there was a *thematic* connection between verses 26 and 29, and also between verses 20

¹⁷ See Rom 6:11; 8:10; Eph 2:1, 5; and Col 2:13. These are no help in making *νεκρός* personal, however, for not only are they thematically unrelated to the argument in 1 Corinthians but they are themselves abstract references to being dead to/in sin *while still alive*, and when used this way are never linked with a concept of resurrection as in 1 Corinthians, but with alive (*ζῶω*), a theme which does not appear in 1 Corinthians at all.

¹⁸ See 1 Cor 5:10; 7:14 (where Paul says it is false that the children of a believing parent are unholy; clarifying that they are holy); 14:12 (seeming to carry the alternate sense of the term, but where Paul seems to be saying that it would be at least incongruent to be zealous for tongues in the Spirit such that it did not at the same time edify the Church; clarifying that in the pursuit of spiritual gifts they ought to seek to edify the Church); 14:16 (where Paul says it would be impossible for someone to say Amen to an unknown utterance; clarifying that they ought to speak in an understandable way); and here in 15:29.

¹⁹ Even though not prior, it could be argued that the second question of verse 29 is the absurd or false statement clarifying the first question. If this were so then not only would it reverse the standard structure, but it would only further cement that baptism for the dead is an impossibility and not a legitimate practice. The fact that the opening question in verse 29 is followed by another question, however, militates against this reversal, especially considering that the second question does not particularly clarify anything concerning baptism *qua* baptism, but is more fundamentally compounding the argument of verse 29 in favor of resurrection. The “if... then” structure being present also hearkens back to the previous seven, the terms and tone of which were established at verse 12.

and 29, but stronger than a thematic connection there is a key literary clue pointing to the actual source of the *ἐπεὶ* reference: the structure intrinsic to the entire section of verses 12-19.

Since verse 29 uses and is built from the same rhetorical *structure* organizing verses 12-19 (the “if... then” section), then verse 29 picks up naturally as a continuation of, and a reference to, that entire section via its repetition of the conspicuous and emphatic “if... then” motif. For example, following from the thesis in verse 12, verse 29 would read: “12 Now *if* Christ is preached, that He has been raised from the dead, [*then*] how do some among you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? ... 29 Otherwise (*ἐπεὶ*), what will those do who are baptized for the dead? *If* the dead are not raised at all, *then* why are they baptized for them?” (1 Cor 15:12, 29) The “if... then” device both extends and interconnects the contents of the argument, for the consequence of 12 is the premise of 29, and, considering the (3rd person plural) reference to persons in both verses 12 and 29, it is also likely the same persons of the anti-resurrection group being referred to. This means that those who reject the resurrection of the dead, the anti-resurrection group, are not actually baptizing vicariously for the dead, but baptizing according to the self-contradictory logic of their rejection of resurrection. The *absurd* element *ἐπεὶ* is referring to and contrasting is thus the idea that someone is being baptized for the dead, which is to say that just as no one is actually going out of the world in 5:10, likewise no one is *actually* baptizing for the dead in 15:29. In other words, Paul is highlighting the ridiculous and illogical consequences of their rejection of resurrection; he is not making oblique reference to a vicarious baptismal practice.

It is worthwhile to emphasize that the “if... then” structure is cumulative, and hence naturally more and more complex the further one progresses along the chain. Each iteration of “then” gets absorbed into the next iteration of “if,” and so on, until it creates an increasingly complex hypothetical scenario natural to the “if... then” form of reasoning. It does this step by step and in order to rhetorically expose some contradiction by degrees. This natural complexity is also compounded in verse 29 due to the intervening verses, and so together makes it all too easy to mistake verse 29 as a reference to vicarious baptism when really it is purely hypothetical, which is to say purely for the sake of argument so as to show how exceedingly ludicrous the anti-resurrection position becomes.

The foregoing can also put to rest a potential misunderstanding which otherwise would have to repurpose *ἐπεὶ* and the way in which it utilizes false, absurd, or incongruent statements so as to clarify or refine an argument.²⁰ In introducing the first half of verse 29, it follows via the subsequent contrast that we are being told by Paul that the first half of verse 29 is an absurd statement intended hypothetically in order to clarify/refine how a denial of resurrection creates a complete farce, in this case a complete farce of the anti-resurrection group's baptism. Despite the term's other possible sense (contexts that typically require it be translated as “since” or “seeing that,” though also tending to introduce an assertion which will subsequently be commented on), the “otherwise” or “else” sense of *ἐπεὶ* used in verse 29, as in 5:10, is a reference to impossibility, incongruence, and/or absurdity. This reading is confirmed by both the hypothetical “if... then” motif and the use of contrast, and also, more weakly, by the fact that it is typical of Paul's usage of the term as found in Romans 3:6, 11:6 (which also utilizes the “if... then”), 11:22; 1 Cor 7:14; and 14:16.²¹

²⁰ Likewise, one would have to show that *ὕπερ* not only can, but ought to mean “vicarious.”

²¹ It does not appear in Paul's letters outside of Romans and Corinthians (unless one includes Hebrews).

From another perspective, since the “if... then” series concludes with verse 20a,²² the reassertion of the gospel of the *risen* Christ, the *ἐπεὶ* of 29 could be hearkening back to the concluding assertion of the “if... then” series considered as a whole. As was shown above, the section of verses comprising 20b-28 are an explanatory interlude, and so despite being separated by eight verses, verse 29 follows logically from the thought of 20a: “20 But now Christ has been raised from the dead... 29 *Otherwise*, what will those do who are baptized for the dead [whether Christ or anyone else be in the state of death, since they are all equally and utterly perished]?” Verse 29 then immediately reasserts the “if... then” motif: “If the dead are not raised at all, why then are they baptized for them [who have utterly perished, even Christ]?”²³ The recapitulation of the “if... then” structure at the very least aligns the thought pattern of 29 with 12-20a, which therefore makes a very strong exegetical case for a rhetorical connection, which is to say a terminological and conceptual continuity. In short, what the terms mean in 12-20a are also what the terms mean in 29.

What is more, Paul's terminological consistency extends beyond verse 29. There are two further “if... then” arguments found in verse 32, making for a total of ten, and the last clearly uses it in the very same sense as 12-20a. Denying resurrection unto its hedonistic and utterly nihilistic conclusion, it says: “If the dead (*νεκροὶ*) are not raised, let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die (*ἀποθνήσκομεν*)” (1 Cor 15:32). In other words, if resurrection is not possible, then everyone is as good as dead already. As such, to avoid all the problems involved with individualizing *νεκρός* in this context, as discussed above, verse 32 is conclusively using the same terms in the same sense. Thus, confirming a terminological continuity beyond and therefore inclusive of 29, verse 32 helps to establish that Paul, for the sake of his argument, invokes *νεκρός* as a collective category in verse 29 in the form standard to his established rhetorical strategy. Verse 32, therefore, clarifies and stabilizes the meaning of Paul's use of *νεκρός* in verse 29.

Consistency among key terms being maintained, and since in verses 12-20a *νεκρός* almost certainly means a *state* of death, to follow the logic of the argument, if no one was raised from death (not even Christ), then it would mean that Christ was just one more among the *νεκρός*, perished along with everyone else. As Paul says: “But if there is no resurrection of the dead, not even Christ has been raised” (1 Cor 15:13). Thus, being consistent, when verse 29 comes, the implications of the argument are clear: they demand that, since according to the anti-resurrection group there is only the dead and perished, there would then be no point in being baptized *at all*, not on behalf of the dead, much less the perished, and so in effect their practice of baptism is done absurdly *as if* on behalf of the dead, which is what the *ἐπεὶ* functions to communicate. Thus the possibility of interpreting this as a reference to a vicarious baptism “on behalf of the dead” is destroyed, and moreover so because the terms of the argument being consistent, even Christ is just one among the dead (v. 13). Verse 29 is thus a denial of vicarious baptism when read as a self-consistent continuation and expression of the argument strategy comprising the “if... then” section of verses 12-20a.

²² The *νυνὶ δὲ* opening verse 20 shows that it is reacting, and therefore connected, to the previous section.

²³ Note also the strength of the word *perish*, from *ἀπόλλυμι*, carried via verse 18, and found throughout 1 Corinthians. See also 1 Cor 1:18-19; 8:11; and 10:9-10. This term carries the sense of being utterly ruined, destroyed, and so in context Paul is saying that a denial of resurrection amounts to being baptized not merely for the dead, but for the destroyed.

The force of Paul's position is that since they are practicing baptism, their baptism is not done for the dead, but for nothing. The entire structure of Paul's refutation of the anti-resurrection group is predicated not only on arguing hypothetically *as if* Christ is dead and unrisen, but being of a cumulative series it is thus also an increasingly binding argument. And so Paul's long "if... then" structure, being essentially: "*if no risen Christ, then futility*," the *νεκρός* in "if the dead" in verse 29 will not only carry the same use and sense of terms, but will also carry within itself the implications of each previous iteration of the motif. Thus verse 29 functions in the same "if... then" manner as verses 12-19, and, because it is in a series of cumulative hypotheticals, verse 29 also absorbs and carries the content and force of 12-19.²⁴

Since verse 29 has presupposed for the sake of argument that Christ is still among "the dead," its effect is to hypothetically remove Him from consideration within the logic of the argument series. In essence, verse 29 is arguing: "Absurdly contrasted with the reality of resurrection, what do people mean by getting baptized on behalf of, say, lifeless dust? If resurrection doesn't exist, then why are they being baptized on behalf of this dust?" The sense is clear that since it is absurd to say people are getting baptized on behalf of dust, it follows that no one is actually practicing baptism on behalf of dust. If they believe people are dead and gone, then they are practicing baptism for no reason. Another way to say it would be: "Otherwise, what do people mean by getting baptized for imaginary reasons? If the imaginary reasons don't exist, then why are people being baptized on behalf of imaginary reasons?" Paul is thus not saying that there are some Corinthians who say to each other, "Let's actually baptize on behalf of imaginary reasons," or "let's literally get baptized on behalf of dust," for the presupposition of Paul's argument is that no one *would* do this; no one would continue to practice baptism if it were for the dead. The problem with the vicarious baptism position is precisely that it is looking for imaginary, hypothetical dead people on whose behalf it is alleged some Corinthians were being baptized.

According to verse 12, the anti-resurrection group is denying resurrection, and yet they are practicing a baptism which assumes a factual belief in resurrection. Forcing their self-contradiction out into the open, Paul is declaring that they make baptism void through their denial of resurrection. This is so, according to Paul, because they are bound to the conclusions of his chain of argumentation, trapped by its logical development. Paul is saying the unrisable dead are not a motivation for baptism, not that the dead are their motivation. It is logically incoherent to claim that those who on the one hand deny resurrection are on the other hand practicing baptism vicariously on behalf of the dead. Paul's consistent use of language makes perfect sense without resorting to the notion of vicarious baptism. It is thus not the case that vicarious baptism is positively intended, rather the illogical consequence of regular baptism held in the light of their false belief about resurrection.

ὑπέρ

It is noteworthy that *ὑπέρ* means "on behalf of, for the sake of," and not necessarily "in replacement of," or "instead of." Some might see *ὑπὲρ* as meaning that people were being baptized

²⁴ There are two further "if... then" arguments found in verse 32, making a total of ten, and still using the primary terms consistently, in the last follows the logic of denying resurrection to its hedonistic and utterly nihilistic conclusion: "If the dead are not raised, 'Let us eat and drink for tomorrow we die'" (1 Cor 15:32).

“instead of” other people, but *ὕπερ* translates more naturally in this context as “for the cause of,” and so dovetails well with the meaning of *ὕπερ* we are assigning to the passage. Two representative examples (of about nine total) from 1 Corinthians can make this position clearer: verses 10:30 and 12:25. In the first, Paul states: “For if I by grace be a partaker, why am I evil spoken of for that (*ὕπερ*) for which I give thanks?” (10:30) It is the *ὕπερ*, the “cause,” the “sake” for which Paul gives thanks that he is “evil spoken of.” It is not the replacement of a cause, not an “instead of” a cause, but a cause “on behalf of” which he is being evil spoken of. The second example is similar: “That there should be no schism in the body; but that the members should have the same care one for (*ὕπερ*) another” (12:25). Care is not “instead of” or “in replacement of” the other, but “on behalf of,” “in the direction of,” “for/by reason of,” “in light of,” “oriented/predisposed towards,” “for the cause/sake of” the other.

An even more important issue related to *ὕπερ* is the temptation to put too much meaning or weight into it. It is an extremely common preposition used by Paul almost one hundred times. Yet, being in such a rhetorically complex place in verse 29, it is tempting to see in this *ὕπερ* more than is warranted. Quite simply, the “vicarious baptism” reading is eisegesis. Though on the surface it may be possible to read it in a more grand, theological manner (i.e., *ὕπερ* = vicarious), looking at Paul’s typical usage of the term it is more natural to conclude that it is much less grand. It can be simply “directional,” like being oriented favorably towards something. If this is the case, when in relation to a term in the genitive, as is the case for *νεκρός* (as *νεκρῶν*) in 1 Corinthians 15:29, it more probably means “of the cause or motive, for, because of, by reason of.”²⁵ As such, considered contextually, verse 29 would most likely indicate that, rather than “vicariously on behalf of dead individuals,” their denial of resurrection renders their baptism axiomatically dead, a baptism into resurrectionless death.

The problem, however, is not so much centered in or resolved by what *ὕπερ* means, but what *νεκρός* means contextually. For even if *ὕπερ* were argued to mean “as representative of,” or “for, instead of, in the name of,”²⁶ the combined meaning supplied by *νεκρός*, in the context of a reference to the absurd (*ἐπει*), and in the context of refuting an anti-resurrection party’s claims, even to be baptized “in the name of the dead” would not refer to vicarious baptism *per se*, but that of an empty, meaningless baptism. Paul is, quite simply, leveling an extremely harsh criticism, a sentiment confirmed by verse 36 when he declares, “You fool (*ἄφρων*)!”

In further support of reading *ὕπερ* in this sense for verse 29, the sense of *ὕπερ* indicating a “motive” or “reason” for an action, it is noteworthy that it flows naturally into the very concern raised in the next verse, verse 30, a concern which is precisely a question of *motivation* or *reason* for behavior: “And why do we stand in jeopardy every hour?” (1 Cor 15:30) In other words, what is to *motivate* a Christian to stand in such constant jeopardy? What *reason* does he have? Verse 32, then, continuing this exact same theme, invokes the term for profit and advantage, *ὄφελος*, which furthermore is to say this term is in the very next “if... then” verse and refers explicitly to the profit or advantage that would *motivate* a person to risk their lives for the sake of the risen Christ: “If from human motives I fought with wild beasts at Ephesus, what does it *profit* me? If the dead are not raised, ‘Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die’” (1 Cor 15:32). Thus considering that the

²⁵ H. G. Liddell and Robert Scott, *Greek-English Lexicon*, abridged edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1935).

²⁶ H. G. Liddell, Robert Scott, and Henry Stuart Jones, “LSJ: The Online Liddell-Scott-Jones Greek-English Lexicon,” accessed February 25, 2017, <http://stephanus.tlg.uci.edu/lsg/#eid=110140&context=lsj&action=hw-list-click>.

follow-up questions to verse 29 are questions of motive, of the reasons undergirding one's behavior, it seems contextually that the *ὕπερ* in verse 29 is therefore likewise concerned with the motive for baptism, and so it functions to call into question the anti-resurrection party's reason or motive for baptism, and is not at all concerned with whether they had some notion of vicariousness.²⁷

Contextually, *ὕπερ* refers to motive, something done "on behalf of" something. Yet, it would be artificial to extend its semantic range so as to smuggle in a reference to an implicit doctrine of vicariousness, substitutionary baptism, or some other such unprecedented theme. In other words, the baptism of verse 29 is a baptism conceptually "oriented towards" the dead as a consequence of Paul's argument, and not of their devising or intention.

Paul uses the preposition in order to expose the consequence for baptism that their error generates and thus demolish their position. It is in this sense "in the direction of" the dead, and so their baptism "on behalf of" the dead refers not so much to a theological or sacramental "vicariousness," but is a simple, grammatical reference pointing to baptism. Paul is arguing that for the anti-resurrection party the dead are the (absurd) motive for baptism. Thus, in order to make *ὕπερ* into a reference to vicariousness one would have to insert a corresponding *doctrine* of vicariousness, but this is nowhere to be found in reference to baptism, and as such is simply an unwarranted eisegesis. As such, in verse 29 Paul is saying the baptism is in functional rather than doctrinal or ideational relation to the dead. Though in actuality the dead do not doctrinally motivate the anti-resurrection party's baptism, because of their incredulousness their baptism is "functioning" in relation to the dead, and hopelessly so when considered in light of his argument. Being in the context of a rhetorical question, Paul is essentially asking: "What on earth are you baptizing for?"²⁸

²⁷ One can also follow the interrogative, *τί*, through verses 29-32, repeated four times. An indefinite pronoun, it threads through this argument to show that this series of questions rhetorically echo each other, and likely carry a similar intention.

²⁸ It is like when an adult asks a child "why" they are sticking a crayon in their ear; the adult does not really want to know, they just want to point out the absurdity of the child's doing it in the first place. Echoing verse 29, it would be like if the adult said: "Otherwise, what will those do who are sticking a crayon in their ear for their health? If the health is not maintained at all, why then are they sticking crayons in their ears for it?" In this case no one is thinking anyone is actually sticking crayons in their ear "for their health"; one is just trying to show the utter absurdity and self-contradiction of sticking crayons in one's ears at all, which is to say of doing something the very principle of which they deny. Belief in resurrection is the authentic motive cause of baptism, and so according to Paul since they deny the principle belief, i.e. resurrection, then they are absurd to practice the consequence of that belief, i.e. baptism.

Tying the Elements Together

The above conclusions were set-up by Paul largely in verse 12, which is setting the structure, the tone, and the terms for verse 29 when he states that *some* in Corinth were apparently saying that there is no resurrection: “Now if Christ is proclaimed as raised from the dead, *how can some of you say* that there is no resurrection of the dead?” (1 Cor 15:12). And yet, they were still practicing baptism. The question in verse 29, then, addresses the ground of their false understanding of the normal, which is to say resurrectional, baptismal formula.²⁹ And so Paul is ridiculing this faithless baptism by showing that it would be absurd to practice baptism if it were a baptism on behalf of the dead. Baptism would be meaningless if it were done on behalf of the dead if the dead do not rise, for it is a truism that without resurrection baptism is groundless. Since Paul is not risking his life to preach a merely hypothetical or imaginary resurrection (15:32), it is this faith-held fact of resurrection that motivates and makes baptism meaningful. Since some “foolish person” (1 Cor 15:34-36) is “saying” that there is no resurrection, Paul is arguing that their baptism functions as if on behalf (not of the asleep but) of the dead. The people falling prey to this foolishness are rendering their baptism, and fundamentally their faith, meaningless, and Paul is writing this extended apologetic argument in order to protect the faithful from this false anti-resurrection doctrine.

This also explains *why* Paul is reviewing the basics of the gospel along with the trustworthiness of the gospel claim at the opening of chapter 15. For the fundamental and highly attested assertion of the gospel in 15:3 and following concerns precisely the validity of Christ’s rising from the dead, the meaning of which baptism is affirming: “Whether then it was I or they, so we preach and so you believed” (1 Cor 15:11). This baptism also functions to affirm, “unless you believed in vain,” that the baptized, like Christ, will also rise from the dead, for this is the gospel “by which you are being saved” (1 Cor 15:2). This therefore shows the pervasive interconnectedness of the argument of chapter 15 as Paul brings the implications of the opening verses to bear on the anti-resurrection position which he is refuting.

This explains how “what shall they do” is functioning, as it is only a rhetorical question.³⁰ Paul is not actually wondering or inquiring into what they are planning on doing, but is instead pointing out how they are on the horns of a dilemma, for they both 1) formally practice baptism, and 2) at the same time deny what this baptism means. These two together therefore render baptism as if Christ were still among the dead and as though they were being baptized on behalf of the dead, and that they themselves remain implicitly dead. Since they are the ones saying

²⁹ People were baptized, at the very least, in the name of Christ: “Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?” (1 Cor 1:13) Cf. Romans 6:3-4: “Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was *raised from the dead* by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.”

³⁰ Both *The UBS Greek New Testament* (Kurt Aland, Barbara Aland, Florian Voss, and Barclay Moon Newman, eds., fourth revised edition [Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2001]) and the *Nestle-Aland Novum Testamentum Graece*, 28th Edition (Peabody: MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2012), place the first question mark (;) following the first instance of νεκρῶν: “ἐπεὶ τί ποιήσουσιν οἱ βαπτιζόμενοι ὑπὲρ τῶν νεκρῶν; εἰ ὅλως νεκροὶ οὐκ ἐγείρονται, τί καὶ βαπτίζονται ὑπὲρ αὐτῶν;” The “if” that follows the first question mark begins the next question and communicates the sense Paul is conveying quite nicely. The ESV, RSV, NRSV, ASV, and NASB translations retain this placement of the question mark, whereas the KJV, NKJV, and NIV do not.

resurrection does not happen, they divest baptism of its meaning, and so Paul's "what shall they do?" is pointing out this self-contradiction in the form of a rhetorical question.³¹

He asks the follow up, "Why are they then?" to cast doubt on why "they" (the anti-resurrection party) are performing normal baptism *at all* given that they deny what it means at its most radical level. By putting them consistently in the third person plural he is at the same time implicitly placing them (or showing that they in fact are) in a position outside the basic affirmation of the preached gospel. Since the issue tied up with verse 29 concerns the very foundation of the Gospel, which necessarily includes the resurrection (1 Cor 15:14, 17-19, 32), then baptism, the meaning of which Paul has argued is intrinsically linked with resurrection and thus the very Gospel itself, is a crucial point of entry into the community of those who affirm the resurrection. His critical questioning of the anti-resurrection party is thus perhaps rhetorically intended to cast doubt on whether this group can exist within the community of resurrection believers since they have denied the foundational testimony (1 Cor 15:1-11) which binds said community together.³²

Showing his displeasure, Paul says to the faithful, "Do not be deceived: 'Bad company ruins good morals'" (15:33). Thus, by showing in verse 29 that some have divested baptism of its meaning and purpose, the consequence being a corruption of good morals, he is likewise showing that the very ground of their entry into and position among those who believe in the resurrection is dubious - which well explains why Paul employs some of his strongest language in reference to this subject, as in verse 36 when he exclaims: "You foolish person!"³³ It is therefore clear that Paul does not write in verse 35 as though the person is innocently asking the question, but that they are stating (*λέγω*, in verse 35, also in 12) their question about the resurrection so as to cast doubt on it, a mood which extends to the mood of verse 29. Paul militates intensely against this false understanding of baptism, and so by showing its absurdity and thereby rejecting this so-called baptism "for the dead," the utterly perished, verse 29 stands not as an oblique reference to a strange baptismal practice, but as a vigorous defense of baptism being performed in a manner connected with its intrinsic, resurrectional intention, rooted in the gospel of a risen Christ.³⁴

³¹ It would be like a mother asking her children, "What do you mean coming in here with those muddy shoes?" She does not really want to know what they are doing, she knows what they are doing; like Paul, she is telling them that they have no business doing it in the first place, i.e. walking into a clean house (getting baptized) with muddy shoes (a denial of resurrection).

³² "Therefore, whether it was I or they, so we preach and so you believed" (1 Cor 15:11).

³³ Paul reserves a similar censure for the Galatians, calling them foolish when they, too, seem to have been "bewitched" by some other gospel, as per Galatians 3:1. Getting the gospel wrong obviously has serious implications in Paul's mind, and so he is likely seeking to protect the very gospel in 1 Corinthians just as he did in Galatians, thought rather than countering a "works salvation," here Paul is countering with great energy a divisive anti-resurrection party.

³⁴ This statement parallels how the mother's questioning of the children, "Why are you coming in here with muddy shoes?" is really a defense of the clean floor.