

Baptism for the Dead

An Exposition by Robert Jackson

I believe that the sound interpretation of 1 Corinthians 15:29 is well within our grasp, although the verse does seem very mysterious initially. My position is that it is a reference to water baptism (immersion) for the forgiveness of sins, and I argue for that view here.

The Wider Context – 1 Corinthians

The general context of the verse is, of course, the book itself. However, 1 Corinthians is not a "book" as such, it is a letter. Any letter must be read just as you would read a letter today – from start to finish. More than in narrative and poetic sections of the Bible, epistles build up an argument – they are coherent treatises with an occasional (specific) purpose. Taking verses out of context is always dangerous, but I am led to feel that it is never more dangerous than in a New Testament epistle.

The occasion of 1 Corinthians (which is at least Paul's second letter to the church) is the divisions (1:11) and worldliness (3:3) of the church. There is all manner of immorality (5:1), idolatry (8:7) and debauchery (11:21) in the church, not to mention elitism (4:8) and charismatic indulgence (14:26). I could go on, suffice to say that the root of all of their sins is a heightened eschatological framework. They were far too focused on the *already* of God's redemptive work, and had lost sight of the *yet to come*. They were kings in their eyes; they had been perfected, esteemed and exalted by God; they could do anything they wanted, because Jesus had already cleared them totally of all wrongdoing – so went their thinking.

It is this misguided eschatology that underpinned all their heresies and faults. Hence, Paul's basic concern in the letter is (while clearly establish what God has done) ultimately to focus the church on what is yet to come. When this framework is clearly seen, the letter comes to life, right from the first few chapters. It is obvious why chapter 15 is the clear summation of the entire book – it is perhaps the greatest and most inspiring analysis of the yet to come in all Scripture!

✚ The wider context of 1 Corinthians is concerned with broadening the church's understanding of what is yet to come.

The Intermediate Context – 1 Corinthians 7-15

Narrowing in, it is also clear from 7:1 that Paul is answering a series of questions which they had asked Paul in a letter, which was probably written in response to an earlier letter which Paul had sent them (5:9). This goes a long way to explaining many of the more bizarre turns of phrase from then on. It is anyone's guess what Paul is referring to in 7:36 (compare the KJV, NIV, NASB and RSV!), but what's clear is that the church knew exactly what Paul was talking about – they'd asked about it in their letter. Just as if we were replaying to an email today, Paul did not bother detailing all of the points

they had raised – he focuses on answering their questions. I believe that this also underlies a lot of chapters 12-14. We must be aware that we are ultimately voyeurs, reading someone else's mail, and are subject to that limitation.

- ✚ The intermediate context is that Paul is answering a series of questions, which helps to explain why a lot seems to be "unsaid".

The Immediate Context – 1 Corinthians 15

Now we come to the chapter itself. Primarily, Paul is defending his abrasive and restrictive limitations in the previous chapter by opening their eyes to how great things to come are. But there is a greater purpose, which is generally to set right their eschatological views by balancing their understanding of God's redemptive work. Death is not yet destroyed (v26), Jesus has not yet asserted his ultimate authority (v28); we are not yet perfectly in tune spiritually (v44); we not yet completed and made eternal (v53). All this is yet to come; it is sealed and assured, but, nevertheless, it is still yet to come.

This also picks up on the intermediate context, because it is clear that Paul is responding to the Corinthian claim that resurrection is impossible (v12). He is almost certainly quoting from their letter in v35. He sets his refutation of this claim on the basis that he is expounding the gospel itself (v1-3) – it is a sustained theological discussion, and our problem verse lies in its midst. Paul's master stroke is that, in responding to their erroneous claim, he is not merely refuting, he is expounding – expounding the exact message of the Day of Reckoning which he had been eager to get out the whole time.

- ✚ The immediate context depends heavily on the wider and intermediate contexts.

The Verse Itself – 1 Corinthians 15:29

Before zooming out and across to survey key New Testament points on immersion (baptism) itself, this seems the appropriate time to hone in on the verse itself. Paul is in the midst of presenting a series of arguments showing that resurrection is a fact – first for Jesus, and also for us: rejecting resurrection means rejecting the Gospel message. His first key argument, then, is that Christ himself was raised (v12), and his other great argument is that every believer will also be raised (v52).

Between these two main arguments, we seem to be presented with two shorter (but not necessarily less significant) arguments. The second one is clear enough: Paul's hope to be resurrected is what motivates and underpins his very life (v30-32 – compare v15); resurrection can not and must not be a fantasy, or else salvation is as well!

The first of the shorter arguments is because people are "baptized for the dead". I see no reason to assume that Paul is talking about a marginal or obscure practice here – why should he, when he is trying to convince the church of such a central teaching? I also would dispute any inference that Paul is merely referring to, and not actually approving of, the practice. I see no doubt that Paul does agree with it; he himself is using it as an example of normal practice! So there we have the difficulty contextualized.

- ✚ In the verse, Paul is defending the Gospel teaching of the resurrection in some way.

The Thematic Context – New Testament Immersion

What do we know of immersion, as Paul would have taught his beloved church in Corinth, and which underpins the soteriology of the New Testament? There was initially the immersion of John the Baptist (Matthew 3:6), but it had passed away by this time (Acts 19:1-5). The most significant verse in this matter is from the hand of Paul himself: Ephesians 4:5 – there is only “one baptism”. Just as there is one God, so there is one immersion. Paul would not have tolerated or approved of any other teaching. This is the immersion of 1 Corinthians 12:13 – the immersion by which we enter God's church.

But what else do we know about this immersion? It enters us into Christ (Galatians 3:26-27); it saves us (1 Peter 3:21); and it is a participation in the death and resurrection of Jesus (Romans 6:3-4). This last point is central to our discussion. Immersion is not just into Christ, but, more specifically, into his *death*. It unifies us with Christ's death, and looks forward to us being unified also with him in resurrection (Romans 6:5). Immersion, then, is *into* death and *through* death, looking forward to resurrection.

This is very significant, because immersion does not really affect our material life at all – it does not take away the temporal consequences of our sin; it doesn't lengthen our physical life, nor does it make it any easier. Immersion, then, has no use in this life at all! All of its benefits are spiritual (eternal forgiveness, the indwelling of the Spirit and entry into Christ's spiritual Kingdom), and they all look to ultimate fulfilment at our physical death – it is then that we shall behold God face to face, and be spiritually perfected; it is then that we will be in complete rest before God's eternal throne.

Immersion, then, is not only through death, it is with a view toward death, since it is not for this life. I would go so far as to say that immersion is *for* our death, because unless we died, it would have no use, and it is only in death that its benefits are culminated.

✚ There is only one immersion, and it is for salvation. It is done through Jesus' death, and with a view toward our own death.

Answering Opposing Views

My opinion is not original; Ferguson makes basically the same point in "Prepared to Answer". However, there are literally dozens of other views out there, none of which commend themselves to me as highly as the one I have already given. I will only look at a few of the main ones. The most natural reading, some would argue, is the one taken to its logical conclusion by the Mormons. They perform proxy baptisms on behalf of dead people, based on this verse. This practice flies in the face of all biblical teaching on salvation, and must be discarded, because immersion is based the individual's own faith (Colossians 2:12) and repentance (Acts 2:38). The main interpretive problem with this view, then, is that it contradicts the *thematic context* of the verse – that is, what the New Testament teaches about salvation and immersion.

Others suggest that there were some Corinthians (perhaps a certain faction?) which had taken to the aforementioned practice. Paul, they argue, was not agreeing to their practice, but pointing out their hypocrisy in carrying on with such a practice if they don't believe in resurrection. This puts Paul on shaky ground indeed, and leaves one

wondering (a) why he does not go on to rebut the practice? and (b) why he would use such a weak argument to support such a central doctrine?

In other words, the idea that it was some rogue marginal activity does not account for the *immediate context* – that of Paul drawing on powerful arguments to defend the climax of the Gospel message. This view does not fit the context; and it would relegate a key theological argument to the realm of erroneous, unbiblical practices.

Some would say that we cannot pinpoint the meaning so surely, because Paul is so unclear in his wording. This is basically the "we can't know, and shouldn't bother asking" view. But look to the intermediate context – Paul is referring to a series of questions they asked; we need not expect him to detail everything they wrote, he is merely responding to their questions. This prompts us to search for what Paul could reasonably be referring to; and we know that there is indeed only one immersion! By coming to terms with the intermediate context, and working within its bounds, I am sure that it is possible to exposit the passage, as I seek to have done.

Others would counter by saying that immersion is never spoken of in this way in other passages. This view sums up many people's initial reaction to the verse: "It couldn't be baptism for the forgiveness of sins, because it is obviously talking about something completely different." But the same is true of Galatians 3:27, where Paul is emphasising the New Creation, and talking about immersion in a basically unique way. But does anyone conclude that he is referring to a different immersion? Far from it, he is deepening our understanding of the one true baptism, and the same is true of 1 Corinthians 15:29.

We must remember that the wider context of 1 Corinthians is Paul's emphasis on what is yet to come, and it is because of this key underlying doctrinal preoccupation that Paul speaks of immersion in a unique way. In so doing, he is making a powerful point about immersion, one which we would do well to remember: immersion is not for this life; it focuses us on the life to come. Just as we were immersed with a view toward our eternal existence, so we need to live for the next life, and not for this present one. We are citizens of heaven (Philippians 3:20).

Conclusion

So, my view is simple: "Baptism for the dead" is simply another way of referring to water immersion for the forgiveness of sins. Paul is referring to the only immersion which exists, the only one which he has available – the immersion into death, through death and for death; the one in which every believer must partake. We were all immersed for the dead. Which ones? Ourselves, of course! We were immersed with a view toward, and for the sake of, our own deaths; that's what immersion is all about. It is not for this life, but for the life to come.

Paul's point in the verse, then, is likewise straightforward: Why did you guys bother getting immersed if you have no hope of being resurrected? If you'll never live beyond the grave, what benefit did you gain from being immersed at all? It's a powerful point indeed! They, without doubt, were all immersed for the forgiveness of sins, so the point would have driven home powerfully.