

APPENDIX III

BAPTISM FOR THE DEAD I CORINTHIANS 15.29

IN view of the great amount of discussion which has centred around the phrase 'baptised for the dead' at 1 Corinthians 15.29 it has been felt worthwhile making some mention of it in a study of baptism in the New Testament.¹ The large number of different interpretations which have been given this verse is evidence of the difficulty it has occasioned in the minds of most exegetes. Some of these have never really attempted to come to grips with the basic problem, as for example the view that we may see here a reference, albeit oblique, to the baptism of Paul into the place of the martyred Stephen, an interpretation which is not merely highly improbable, but one which, we believe, does not even have the merit of being intrinsically true. Robertson and Plummer have made the suggestion that there are, in fact, only three possible approaches to the matter.² This suggestion, we believe, clears the way towards finding a possible satisfactory solution to the problem. The phrase may be interpreted as being a reference to normal Christian baptism, as a reference to an abnormal vicarious baptism, or as a reference to the baptism of friends or relatives of a dying Christian as the result of his or her testimony. To these three lines of approach we must add a series of criteria of interpretation which Findlay³ has suggested must be observed if our efforts to come to a meaning are to have any validity. These may be noted as follows, firstly, the expression 'those who have been baptised' (*hoi baptizomenoi*) must clearly refer to the recipients of Christian baptism, secondly, the phrase 'for the dead' (*huper tōn nekron*) points to a class of dead, presumably Christian, who had an interest in or connexion with the living. Finally, in view of the

'we also' (*kai hēmeis*) of v. 30, this particular action, whatever it may have been, must have been one with which Paul and his colleagues could have been associated. This final criterion of interpretation, it must be conceded, is certainly the weakest, indeed, it could be argued that it is a complete *non sequitur*, since v. 30 bears no specific relationship to v. 29, apart from the loose connexion that both are concerned with the preposterous results of denying the resurrection.

The view that the phrase under consideration bears a reference to normal Christian baptism is one that has found considerable support, although there are certain grave obstacles in the way of its acceptance. We may subdivide this interpretation into two groups; firstly, there are those who simply rearrange the punctuation so that the verse reads, 'Else what shall they do who are baptised? It is for corpses if the dead do not rise'. This view was originally popularised by the late Sir Robert Anderson⁴ and was, and is, accepted by many. The theological truth which is involved is unquestionable, baptism can never be divorced from Christ and its whole significance is dependent upon the fact of His resurrection, but it is difficult to see how this verse can bear this meaning. Two major points allow us to question the validity of the exegesis, in the first place, to translate the phrase, *huper tōn nekrōn* as, 'for dead persons' or 'for corpses' is to ignore the definite article before *nekrōn*, an article which makes these particular dead people a specific group. As Parry remarks, 'the article with *nekrōn* and the simple reference to *autōn* . . . alike prevent us from taking the words to be merely equal to death, in relation to death'.⁵ In the same way, to translate *huper* by 'in the interests of' or 'with an interest in' is a doubtful expedient, and a meaning for which we have been unable to find any classical parallel.

Somewhat akin to this view, although allowing full weight to the definite article, is that which proposes an ellipsis within the phrase of *tēs anastaseōs* before *tōn nekrōn*, but this is open to similar objections, especially as it requires the same meaning for *huper* as the previous suggestion. As Morris writes, this interpretation of the phrase 'involves a very questionable meaning for *huper*, and an inexplicable ellipsis'.⁶

Recognising the problems associated with the type of interpretation we have been discussing, many expositors have seen here a reference to some form of vicarious baptism. Parry, for example, states unequivocally, 'the plain and necessary sense of the words implies the existence of a practice of vicarious baptism at Corinth, presumably on behalf of believers who had died before they were baptised'.⁷ This is a view with which many commentators would concur, but nevertheless, we believe it to be open to objections just as serious as those associated with the first view which we examined. Of these objections the theological outweigh the exegetical, for a vicarious baptism of this nature borders upon magic. The practice which is imagined in this interpretation has generally been regarded as affording evidence of Hellenistic influences at work in the Corinthian church, but on the other hand, Stauffer has argued that such a practice could be derived from the late Jewish idea of praying for the dead (cf. 2 Macc. 12.40, etc.).⁸ The premises of Stauffer's argument are difficult to accept for two very important reasons. Firstly, such a practice of praying for the dead would be the first step towards a doctrine of Purgatory, for which no evidence can be found in the pages of the New Testament, which demonstrate that the apostolic teaching was 'after death, the judgment'. In the second place, it involves a complete misconception of the purpose of baptism. A practice of vicarious baptism involves an interpretation of baptism as a purely passive act, which, as we have sought to show in our earlier discussion of this matter, is quite undemonstrable from the New Testament, which, in every case, views baptism as an act of faith-obedience. Furthermore, such a practice would be to suggest that baptism is able to confer something, an idea, which although common from the second century onwards, is not to be found in the New Testament. To make the suggestion that not only did Paul not condemn such a practice, but, in fact, tacitly endorse it, is, especially in view of the rest of the letter, totally incredible to the present writer.

From the historical point of view this interpretation is also difficult to support. It seems extremely unlikely that such a practice as vicarious baptism would have arisen *de novo*, as it

were, in one isolated instance. There is no evidence that it was practised elsewhere apart from some *late* heretical sects, who, more than likely, derived their practice from a misunderstanding of the very text under discussion. From the exegetical standpoint we may note that this line of interpretation falls down on the second and third of Findlay's criteria.

This brings us to a consideration of the third suggestion, namely, that the phrase 'baptised for the dead' refers to the baptism of those who had been close to a departed Christian; a baptism as a result of his testimony to them and in order to be reunited at the resurrection. This view has recently been developed by M. Raeder⁹ who has shown that in this phrase *huper* has the final sense, 'for the sake of' or 'because of', a sense well attested by classical examples.¹⁰ Further, as Findlay agrees, *hoi nekroi* must be dead Christians, and we may accordingly translate as, 'Else what shall they do who are baptised for the sake of the dead?' This translation is given further weight if we accept the suggestion of Robertson and Plummer¹¹ to the effect that in this context *poiēsousin* could have the sense of 'gain' or 'profit', which would provide us with a final reading of, 'Else what shall they gain from it, they who are baptised for the sake of the dead, if the dead do not rise?' We are thus presented with a far more credible situation. Those in question were baptised not in order to remedy some imaginary deficiency on the part of the dead, but in order to be reunited with them at the resurrection. No doubt they would have been Gentile pagans, a class of which the Corinthian church seemed to have been largely made up, who through the testimony of a departed loved one, and in order to be certain of meeting them again, became Christians and were baptised. This suggestion also fits much better into the whole context of the chapter, and as Jeremias has shown,¹² with whom the writer is happy to find himself in substantial agreement on this issue, this particular verse marks a return to the apologetic of the earlier part of the chapter, broken by the excursus of vv. 20-28. Our thorny verse, thus, does not, as some commentators have maintained, mark an abrupt change in the apostle's thought.

Seen in this light, this verse represents the summation of the

apostle's argument concerning the reality of the Christian hope of the resurrection of the body, as opposed to the vague and pagan notion of the immortality of the soul. He has already shown that if Christ has not risen then the faith of the Christian is vanity, if Christ has not risen then those who have died 'in Christ' have perished, the Christian's hope is removed, and, furthermore, those who have been baptised for the sake of those who have died in Christ, in the hope of being reunited with them, are more hopeless and wretched than the rest. Viewed thus, this admittedly somewhat obscure verse becomes the coping stone of Paul's argument concerning the absurdity of denying the resurrection of the body.

NOTES

1. For a slightly fuller discussion of this verse see the present writer's article, 'Baptism for the Dead — 1 Cor. 15.29', *EQ*, (1965) **xxvii**. 3. (July) pp. 137ff.
2. A. Robertson and A. Plummer, 1 Corinthians in *ICC*, (1929) *ad loc.*
3. G. G. Findlay, 1 Corinthians in *EGT*, (1900) **ii**. *ad loc.*
4. Sir Robert Anderson, *The Bible or the Church*, (nd. ca. 1909) p. 234. G. W. H. Lampe, (*The Seal of the Spirit*, (1951) p. 94) expresses a similar viewpoint.
5. R. St. J. Parry, 1 Corinthians in *CGT*, (1926) *ad loc.*
6. L. Morris, 1 Corinthians in *TNTC*, (1958) p. 219.
7. R. St. J. Parry, *op. cit.*, *ad loc.*
8. E. Stauffer, *New Testament Theology*, (ET 1955) p. 299n.
9. M. Raeder, 'Vikariastaufe in 1 Cor. 15.29?' *Zeitschrift für die Neutestamentliche Wissenschaft*, (1955) **46**. pp. 258ff.
10. Cf. Homer, *Iliad* 15.660, 665, etc., Appolonius Rhodius 3.701, etc.
11. A. Robertson and A. Plummer, *op. cit.*, *ad loc.*
12. J. Jeremias, 'Flesh and Blood cannot inherit the Kingdom of God (1 Cor. 15.29)' *NTS*, (1955-56) **2**. pp. 151ff.