

**Baptized for the dead:
A review of 1 Corinthians 15:29**

Stephen Bernard Ubi

Religious Studies Department

Faculty of Arts

Adeleke University

Ede, Osun State Nigeria.

Abstract

Over the years, baptism and the dead in 1 Corinthians 15:29 have been understood from numerous readings by scholars. These various extrapolations have attempted a possible understanding of the text. However, we still do not have a uniform interpretation. Because the text's original author did not have more than a single interpretation, this paper was able to establish a near-real (if not actual) meaning of baptism and the dead in 1 Corinthian 15:29. This article used a historical-grammatical method of biblical exegesis to discover that poieousin and baptism were used in unique ways to create a contextual harmony with their counterpart Bible verses. In all its appearance, the verbal form of poieousin is in the context of persecution. Hence, the paper concluded that baptism in 1 Corinthian 15:29 is a synonym to persecution or other maltreatments that gospel workers face while preaching to people. In the light of succeeding verses, it was discovered that the dead in the texts are people like the Ephesians in the time of Paul, that demonstrated some animalistic behaviours by rejecting the gospel and by "daily" trying to kill Paul. Those who carry the gospel of Jesus today must understand that such a decision does not go without solemn sacrifice.

Keywords: Baptism, The dead, Poieusin, Septuagint

Introduction

One complex text in the Bible is 1 Corinthians 15:29 that says, "...If the dead are not raised at all, why are people baptized for



them?" The text has "up to 200 different explanations."¹ It is challenging for someone to say the exact meaning of the text conveniently. However, and unfortunately, Paul did not intend more than one meaning of the text. Paul did not intend that there should be more than one understanding of the text of 1Cor. 15:29. If that is the case, it will not be out of place to conclude that the Church at Corinth understood the text in line with Paul's original intention. Many interpretations given to the text by scholars tilt to explain that baptism in 1 Cor. 15:29 was a practice done by living Christians for dead Christians or that it was a hidden practice that people in Corinth did. Put side-by-side; these meanings seem to instead create gaps in the line of thoughts of New Testament theology on these subjects. In the first place, the kind of baptism generally accepted by scholars about the text is water baptism. However, the disciples of Jesus understood that water baptism is only conducted after the person has been taught "to observe all" the teachings of Jesus (Matt. 28:19-20). They understood that those who "believe" and are baptized are those that will be saved (Mark 16:15-16). They knew that "it is appointed unto men to die after this judgment" (Hebrew 9:27).

The New Testament Church understood that salvation could not be imputed by baptismal representation because everyone, "small and great," will "stand before God" (Revelation 20:12) on that day and be judged based on individual "works" (Matthew 25:32-33; Daniel 12:1-3). Paul knew that "The person who sins will die... (and) the righteousness of the righteous will be upon the righteous person, and the wickedness of the wicked will be upon the wicked person" (Ezekiel 18:20). So the question is: if Paul's theology about the dead is biblical, how come the same Paul say that people, including him, are being baptized for the dead? Could it be that there is something other than what we know about the text? These are what the paper will seek to find out. The article shall use a biblical exegetical method of research in a historical-grammatical hermeneutics. The work shall look at the context, the language usage within the text and inter-textual analysis.

¹ The NET Bible, New English Translation Bible (1996), Biblical Studies Press in www.BibleWorks.com

As stated above, 1 Corinthians 15:29 is a knotty text that has challenged Bible scholarship. Opinions on this text are more diverse than researchers imaginations. Anthony explains the text from a literal perspective where he sees baptism for the dead as a way of making salvation possible for them.² This perspective is one of the positions held by scholars and was highlighted by John Reaume, who grouped the interpretation of the text into three categories, namely:

(A) vicarious baptism that is water baptism undertaken by a living individual for the benefit of a dead person who had died without being baptized; (b) metaphorical baptism, which refers to either martyrdom or Paul's suffering; and (c) Christian baptism, water baptism of a new believer.³

Reaume concluded that only these three groups of interpretations are possible with the texts. However, in the face of Pauline theology, William argued that "the reference to baptism on behalf of the dead (v. 29), the allusion to fighting with beasts in Ephesus (v. 32a), the use of the quotation from the Hebrew Scriptures (v. 32b), and the quotation from pagan literature (v. 33) argue against Pauline authorship."⁴ William believes that Paul would not have written that part of the texts, and he concluded that not just that there is "absence of evidence...", there is also "textual alteration" which may have occurred to the text during that time.⁵ William may have observed this from Richard's point of view. Richard claimed that the tone of verse 29 does not have a

²Anthony Bernard Derosse, "A Case of Literal Christian Baptism as Referring to Actual Salvation in 1 Corinthians 15:29" *Submitted In Partial Fulfillment of BE504 Hermeneutics and Research Methods*, (Shepherds Theological Seminary, December 2014), 16.

³John D. Reaume, "Another Look at 1 Corinthians 15:29: Baptism for the Dead" *Bibliotheca Sacra* Vol.152 (October to December 1995), 457-475.

⁴William O. Walker, "1 Corinthians 15:29-34 as a Non-Pauline Interpolation" *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* Vol. 69, No. 1 (January 2007), 84-103

⁵William O. Walker, "1 Corinthians 15:29-34 as a Non-Pauline Interpolation" *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* Vol. 69, No. 1 (January 2007), 84-103

contextual flow even though the thoughts of the succeeding verses are rhetorical in their nuances' nature and concluded that "the living were thought to be obligated to help the deceased become integrated into the realm of the dead."⁶

Another argument was flagged by Bernard Foschini, who claimed that the text should be seen as "sacrament regeneration... (which) could be understood as expression *finality*: they are baptized in order to obtain the resurrection of the dead; or *favour*: they are baptized in favour of the dead bodies, or *causality*: they are baptized for the sake of resurrection of the dead."⁷ Again this is a little closer to Reaume's tripartite rendition already highlighted above. To this end, Ben Oliver strongly maintained that 1Cor. 15:29 be "interpreted in complete harmony with its context" and "in the light of the event of the time in which Paul wrote"⁸ – in this case, resurrection.

The first point is that our interpretation must agree with the resurrection theme of the entire verse. Secondly, understanding the text may not have a literal flow of thought since the verse does not have a contextual flow.

Alf Birch describes 1 Cor. 15:29 thus: "What shall they do that are baptized with reference to the dead? If the dead are not raised at all, why then are they being baptized with reference to them? Why go on with a symbolism that has reference to death, burial and resurrection if there is no resurrection to symbolize?"⁹

⁶Richard E. DeMaris, "Corinthian Religion and Baptism for the Dead (1 Corinthians 15:29): Insights from Archaeology and Anthropology." *Journal of Biblical Literature* 114, no. 4 (1995): 661-682.

⁷Bernard M. Foschini, "Those Who are Baptized for the Dead, 1 Cor. 15:29," *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* Vol. 13, No. 2 (April 1951), 172-198

⁸A. Ben Oliver, "Why Are They Baptized for the Dead?: A Study of I Cor. 15:29." *Review & Expositor* 34, no. 1 (January 1937): 48-53.

⁹Alf Birch, Baptism for the dead, *Ministry International Journal for Pastors*, April 1981, in <https://www.ministrymagazine.org/archive/1981/04/baptism-for-the-dead>, Accessed Date: February 11, 2019.

Context of the text

Upon his arrival into Corinth from Athens, Paul lived with Aquila and Priscilla, who shared in his occupation of tent-making (see Act 18). He started his work in the synagogue where Crispus was the first person he baptized (Act 18:8), and later Gaius and “the household of Stephanus” were baptized by Paul (see 1Cor. 1:14, 16). While in the city, Paul observed that fornication, idolatry, adultery, incest, homosexuality, theft, greed, drunkenness and many other vices, common today, were practised by citizens of Corinth. However, many believers in the city gave up these practices for Christianity’s sake (see 1Co 6:9-11). But after they had believed in Jesus, schism almost tore the Church apart (1 Cor. 1-4) to the point where unbelievers were now the ones to judge Corinthian Christians (see 1 Cor. 6:1).

The Church was so attacked that the sexual immorality practised among believers was not done by even unbelievers (1 Cor. 5:1). Hence, all of these, in addition to marriage (1 Cor. 7), eating food offered to idols (1 Cor. 8-9), leadership exemplified in head covering (chapter 11), spiritual gifts (chapter 12-14) and resurrection were discoursed by Paul in the first epistle. No audience was as challenging to nurse as was the Corinthian congregation. Because of these peculiarities, Paul limited the number of persons he baptized “so that no one can say that you were baptized in my name” – (1Cor 1:15). Paul did not write to advocate new theological ideas. No! He wrote to correct the wrong things that the people reported to him about the Church at Corinth (1 Cor. 1:11). One of the themes addressed was the resurrection of believers who have fallen asleep in chapter 15 of first Corinthians. However, at the time of his writing, Paul was at Ephesus, and he intended to remain there “until Pentecost” (see 1Cor. 16:8), which was why he instead wrote than speak to them face to face.

Semantic

First Corinthians chapter 15 verse 29 contains some strong Greek vocabularies that demand a proper understanding of their semantics. If the phraseologies of these vocabularies are understood in the light of biblical studies, it may aid the nature of

the meaning we give to the text. For this to be done, the following Greek words from 1 Corinthians 15:29 shall be examined:

Figure 1

SN	Greek Words	Pronounced	Parsing	English Bible Understanding
1	ποιήσουσιν	<i>poiesousin</i>	verb indicative future active 3rd person plural form of ποιέω(to do)	Shall they do
2	βαπτιζόμενοι	<i>baptizomenoi</i>	verb participle present passive nominative masculine plural from βαπτίζω(I baptize)	Which are baptized
3	βαπτίζονται	<i>baptizontai</i>	verb indicative present passive 3rd person plural from βαπτίζω (I baptize)	They are baptized
4	νεκρῶν	<i>nekron</i>	adjective nominative masculine plural no degree from νεκρός (dead)	The dead
5	νεκροὶ	<i>nekroi</i>	adjective genitive masculine plural no degree from νεκρός (dead)	The dead

***Poiesousin* (ποιήσουσιν)**

The subject-verb directed to the object of Paul's argument in 1 Cor. 15: 29 is the Greek *poiesousin*. It comes from the verb *poieo*, interpreted as 'I do', 'I make' or 'to do', 'to make' and other similar clauses. It expresses and qualifies an action. *Poieo* appears 567 times in the New Testament. The verb usually describes things that people 'did' either in response to specific situations or as a demonstration of an action taken by the actor or actors.¹⁰ When *Poieo* appears in the New Testament, it is

¹⁰Grimm Wilke edited by Joseph Henry Thayer. *A Greek-English Lexicon Of The New Testament*. Edited by Joseph Henry Thayer. International Bible Translators, 1998-2000. In www.BibleWorks.com.

usually a demonstrative verb that informs whether or not the subject in a sentence is being acted upon. For instance, in his dream, Joseph was instructed by an Angel to act. When he woke from his sleep, Joseph "did as the angel of the Lord commanded" (see Matt.1:24) – in which case the subject (Joseph) demonstrated the action. John the Baptist was the one who 'made the way straight for the Lord – Matt.3:3. "Anyone who 'does' God's will" is called Jesus' brother – Mark 3:35. Jesus also commanded: "'Do' to others as you would have them 'do' to you (Luk 6:31). The 'doing' and or the 'making' goes on and on.

Interestingly, the 'do' that appears in 1 Cor. 15:29 is not a typical kind of *poieo* like it is in other verses above. In this text, *poieo* is used as *poiesousin*, which takes an indicative future active verb of the third person plural. Unlike the Greek perfect active indicative verbs (where the action is said to have been completed), the indicative future active verb connotes that the action has happened or is ongoing and will happen in the future. All through the New Testament, the form of this action verb (*poiesousin*) appears only five times (used only by John and Paul). Careful investigation of all five indicates that the action is imposed on the noun in the sentences where they appear. Let us look at the five verses in the New Testament where *poieo* takes the form of *poiesousin*:

Figure 2

S/N	The Text	The Message	Context
1	John 15:21 NLT	They will do all this to you because of me, for they have rejected the one who sent me.	Believers' Persecution for Christ's sake
2	Joh 16:2 KJV	They shall put you out of the synagogues: yea, the time cometh, that whosoever killeth you will think that he doeth God service.	Believers' Persecution for Christ's sake
3	Joh 16:3 NIV	They will do such things because they have not known the Father or me.	Believers' Persecution for Christ's sake

4	1Cor. 15:29 NLT	If the dead will not be raised, what point is there in people being baptized for those who are dead? Why do it unless the dead will someday rise again?	Believers' Baptized for the Dead's sake
5	Rev 17:16 KJV	And the ten horns which thou sawest upon the beast, these shall hate the whore, and shall make her desolate and naked, and shall eat her flesh, and burn her with fire.	Persecution of the Whore of Revelation

In all occurrences of *poieo* where it appeared as *poiesousin* in the New Testament, the verb is rendered in the *indicative future third person plural* form. The Greek *indicative* mood is usually a mode made " for statements or questions of fact."¹¹ And it is used to support a point. As Ray and Thomas point out that "in Greek, there is only one mood which demonstrates the reality of the action – the indicative." According to them, the other (three) moods are used to "express potential action."¹² This has led scholars to believe that baptism and dead in the text are used in the literal sense. More so, the indicative future "generally denotes what *is going to take place*. It is just the present vividly projected into the future."¹³ It means that the action verb in 1 Cor. 15:29a is one that started then and is to be accomplished or continued in the future from Paul's time of writing – though the action is a fact of a currently occurring event. The implication of the presence of *poiesousin* in 1 Cor. 15:29 makes it possibly easy to understand that those baptized for the dead in the text were not limited to Christians in the time of Paul. Instead, it was an ongoing action that was to be concluded or continued in the future.

¹¹ Lois K. Fuller, *You Can Learn New Testament Greek* (Jos: Africa Christian Textbooks, 2002), 14,341.

¹² Ray Summers and Thomas Sawyer, *Essentials of New Testament Greek* (Nashville, Tennessee: Broadman and Holman, 1995), 12, 116.

¹³ William Hersey Davis, *Beginner's Grammar Of The Greek New Testament* (Oregon: Wipf and Stock, 1999), 87.

Poiesousin in The Septuagint (LXX)

The Septuagint is one of the oldest ancient manuscripts of the Bible. It was so named because about "70 Jewish scholars... took part in the translation process" of the Hebrew Bible into Greek LXX Bible. They did the work between 285BC and 247BC. As a Hebrew Bible of the Old Testament, the LXX version provides us with good Greek etymological information that can aid the understanding of some New Testament reading. *Poiesousin* appears 40 times in the Old Testament Greek Bible (the LXX). While the idea we have discussed above remains, the following are found about *Poiesousin* in the LXX:

1. In all its 40 appearances, it is used in the imperative mode. It again stresses the fact that the subjects are under obligation to either act or be acted upon (see Exodus 28:4; 30:35; 31:6, and 11; Lev. 23:19, Num. 4:26; etcetera)
2. The actions are forced of the subjects the same way it does in 1Cor. 15:29 (see Deut. 25:9, 1Sam. 11:7; Job 5:12; Isa. 33:23). In Isaiah 39:7, *Poiesousin* is used to highlight the suffering that Babylon will impose on God's people.
3. More than 80% of *Poiesousin* in the LXX is imposed on their corresponding subject (see Ezekiel 16:41; 23:25, 29 & 34; 25:14 33:31, 32).
4. Daniel 11:32 used the verb in the exact ambience of working for God in the perilousness of Pauls' context. It says, "He will flatter and win over those who have violated the covenant. But the people who know their God will be strong and will (do) resist him. (see also verse 35).

Baptism

Another word in the text is baptism. At least three different identified types of baptism were used to express deferent ideas in the New Testament. Their meanings are derived according to their functions. The word is from the Greek *baptizo*, which means, in a proper sense, "1. to dip repeatedly, to immerse,

submerge..." In another sense, *baptizo* means "2. to cleanse by dipping or submerging, to wash, to make clean with water..." The unconventional understanding of *baptizo* is its metaphorical use to mean 3. "Overwhelm."¹⁴ In Romans 6, Paul described the immersion or submersion of Christians in water as a symbol of their participation in the death and resurrection of Christ. This was the proper use of the verb. In Luke 11:38, washing off of some parts of the body is called baptism.

The Baptism of the Holy Spirit

In the New Testament, the expression baptism of the Holy Spirit is used to describe the overwhelming control of the Holy Spirit. John the Baptist was the first to use this expression in the New Testament, and his audience understood him when he said: "...Someone is coming soon who is greater than I am. I baptize you with water, but He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit!" (Mar 1:7-8 see also Luk.3:16, etc.). The baptism of the Holy Spirit is the Spirit's empowerment to do God's perfect will and to act out God's purpose. In John chapter three Jesus expounds this by saying "...Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit" (John 3:5 NIV). The first thing the Holy Spirit does is to find a dwelling place in the hearts of all who invite Him (Romans 8:9-11; Ephesians 2:21-22; 1 Corinthians 6:19). Without the Holy Spirit, it is highly impossible for anyone to do anything that can please God. The Bible described the Holy Spirit as our Comforter (see Isaiah 11:2; John 14:16; 15:26; 16:7). It is the Holy Spirit of God that convicts us of sin (John 16:7-11). No matter the level of exegetical activities in scholarship, proper understanding of the Bible can only come through the Holy Spirit. He is the only one that can guide exegetes to appropriate Biblical interpretations (John 16:13) since it was He who "moved" all the Bible authors to write what they wrote (2Pe 1:19-21). More so, being the one that inspired the writings of all of God's words (2Tim 3:16), the Holy Spirit is the only one that can impress the truth of the Bible (John 14:17; 16:13; 1 Corinthians 2:12-16) as He is also the best Bible

¹⁴Grimm Wilke, *A Greek-English Lexicon Of The New Testament*, Edited by Joseph Henry Thayer, International Bible Translators, 1998-2000. in www.BibleWorks.com.

instructor (John 14:26; 1 Corinthians 2:13). If the Spirit does all of these, it becomes impossible for such a person to die since he is alive by the Spirit (Romans 8:2). Physical death for such a person is only asleep (1 Thess. 4:13-18). These irresistible activities in a person are the 'baptism of the Holy Spirit.'

These experiences were not available among the disciples until after Jesus had ascended. In Matthew 4:19, Mark 1:17, John 1:37-50, etcetera, Jesus employed the disciples, and for three-plus years He trained and fortified them for ministry. However, after His resurrection, the disciples returned to their previous occupations (see John 21:3). But Jesus did not relent. He identified with them in their career that He might teach them to value the conversion of a sinner over a million catch of fish. The Lord participated fully in their desired profession. He gradually led Peter to understand that there were (and there are still) more sheep that need salvation than the fishing profession (John 21:15-18).

Notwithstanding, Jesus did not blame them because He knew that the baptism of the Holy Spirit was yet to be received by them, so he commanded them saying, "For John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit." (Act 1:5 NIV). Even at this very point, the disciples still did not comprehend their Messiah's mission, so they asked Him again, "Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?" (Act 1:6 NIV). Still, Jesus' response indicates that the kingdom will not come until after the gospel has been preached to the world. He made them understand that it was not their business "to know the times or dates the Father has set by his authority" (Act 1:7). But that the baptism of the Holy Spirit, which He was going to baptize them with, will propel them to act in a certain way. He said: "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (Act 1:7-8 NIV).

Therefore, a person is baptized by the Holy Spirit if these Spirit-filled experiences are present in their life. They begin to manifest the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22-23). As Paul has said that "Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its

passions and desires. Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit" (Gal 5:22-25 NIV). The baptism of the Holy Spirit is simply a situation where the Holy Spirit overwhelms an individual with the power to do the work of God in words, actions and all life's endeavours.

Synonymous Baptism in the New Testament

The Synonymous use of baptism was first mentioned in the New Testament by Jesus: "I have a terrible baptism of suffering ahead of me, and I am under a heavy burden until it is accomplished" (Luke 12:50). Here Jesus was talking about the suffering He would experience. Because this baptism would be challenging for the innocent Son of God to bear, He said He was "under a heavy burden" to accomplish it. When the time fully came for Jesus to go through the Baptism, He prayed that the experience should pass without Him undergoing it. However, He ended the prayer with "yet I want your will to be done, not mine" – (Mat 26:39 NLT). The nature of the agony Jesus was about to face overwhelmed His control. Jesus saw the social rejection of Him blend with the physical and emotional torment of man to unite with all available powers of darkness against Him.

He felt that by sin, He was being separated from His Father. The gulf was so broad, so black, so deep that His Spirit shuddered before it. This agony He must not exert His divine power to escape. As man, He must suffer the consequences of man's sin. As man, He must endure the wrath of God against transgression... That those whom He had undertaken to save, those whom He loved so much, should unite in the plots of Satan; this pierced His soul. The conflict was terrible.... The sins of men weighed heavily upon Christ, and the sense of God's wrath against sin was crushing out His life... In His agony, He clings to the cold ground as if to prevent Himself from being drawn farther from God. The chilling dew of night falls upon His prostrate form, but He heeds it not. From His pale lips comes the bitter cry, "O My Father, if it

is possible, let this cup pass from Me." Yet even now, He adds, "Nevertheless not as I will, but as Thou wilt"... Terrible was the temptation to let the human race bear the consequences of its own guilt while He stood innocent before God. If He could only know that His disciples understood and appreciated this, He would be strengthened. Rising with painful effort, He staggered to the place where He had left His companions. But He "findeth them asleep."¹⁵

The Greek verb '*baptizo*' (from which the English baptism got its derivation) does not always imply baptism in the Bible. The verb is rendered differently according to the contextual-grammatical nature of the passage where they appear. Inflicted sufferings are similarly called baptism. "James and John, the sons of Zebedee," came to Jesus and requested to sit side by side with the Master. In reply, Jesus said to them, "You don't know what you are asking! Are you able to drink from the bitter cup of suffering I am about to drink? Are you able to be baptized with the baptism of suffering I must be baptized with?" (Mar 10:35-38 NLT). Not knowing the weight of their request, they affirmed their ability to undergo the same kind of baptism. However, understanding that in the future, the disciples will be empowered by God to experience the baptism of suffering, Jesus said to them: "...You will indeed drink from my bitter cup and be baptized with my baptism of suffering" – (Mar 10:39 NLT). From the way the conversation goes, it is apparent that Jesus' disciples understood this baptism in the light of suffering. Pater described this baptism as the ability to have good conscience even in the face of persecution: "And this prefigured baptism, which now saves you – not the washing off of physical dirt but the pledge of a good conscience to God – through the resurrection of Jesus Christ" (1Peter 3:21 NET). Significantly, baptism is also a symbolic/synonymous way of expressing the suffering the sufferer has no control over.

¹⁵ Ellen G. White, *Desire of Ages* (USA: Review & Herald, 1898), 686 – 688.

Baptism in 1 Cor. 15:29

It is interesting to know that 1 Cor. 15:29 has many specialities within that single verse. Scholarship wonders about the extrapolation of baptism in 1 Cor. 15:29, the uniqueness of the identical opposites of the verb baptism in the text is also incredible. *Baptizo* appeared twice in the text and yet nuanced differently. They are as follows:

βαπτιζόμενοι(*baptizomenoi*) and
βαπτίζονται(*baptizontai*)

This is the only instance in the New Testament where the verb *batizo* takes *baptizomenoi* (participle present passive nominative masculine plural). Secondly, this is the only instance again in the New Testament where the *batizo* also takes the form of *baptizontai* (verb indicative present passive 3rd person plural) – differing from the first. So the verbal rendering of both *baptizomenoi* and *baptizontai* appeared only once each in the entire New Testament, and the two verbs came with variant identities. Yet, both are only found in 1 Cor. 15:29.

νεκρῶν (the dead) and or νεκροὶ (the dead)

Again, another word for consideration is the 'dead.' In the New Testament, death does not always imply the cessation of breath. Jesus called a disciple to follow Him. One of the would-be disciples requested Jesus to wait because he wanted to bury his father first. In response, Jesus "...said to... him, "Let the dead bury their own dead, but you go and proclaim the kingdom of God." (Luke. 9:59 60 NIV). In this story, two kinds of characters are demonstrated. The dead and those who should proclaim His kingdom of God. However, since dead people cannot act (see Ecc. 9:5), the 'dead' mentioned in Luke 9:60 are those who place priority on the things of this world over the paramount proclamation of the kingdom. It is these dead people that Jesus said in John 5:25, "...will hear the voice of the Son of God...and will live."

In the context of 1 Cor. 15:29, the Greek for 'dead' is *nekros*, and it means 'lifeless' or 'dead' (of a person or a thing). However, in 1

Cor. 15:29, the word appears twice, rendered differently as (1) *nekron* and (2) *nekroi*. These two mean the same thing as lifeless, dead, etcetera. Besides its literal meaning of "put to death," when rendered *nekron*, the word figuratively mean "stopping the use of bodily members and functions for immoral purposes."¹⁶ So as we read Col 3.5, we find that the *nekros* there does not talk about physical death but the act of giving to unrighteousness. It also implies "...dying, of the constant danger of being killed (2Cor 4.10)...."¹⁷

Death in Paul's Writing

In his writings and more than any other author, Paul used this metaphoric symbol of death to depict the life of sin. In Romans 6, he addressed the reality that when one accepts Christ and is baptized, he is considered "dead to sin and alive in God" (Rom 6:11). In the real sense, people who are baptized do not literally die. However, Paul considered the experience of baptism (and relationship with Christ) as being dead to sin. The exciting part is that he talked about two kinds of death in order to convey his message. In verse 4, he refers to baptism as a symbolic death undergone by believers in order to participate in the literal death of Christ. While the death of Jesus is literal, believers' death (in baptism) remained symbolic. As we read in verse 13, Paul calls those who practice "unrighteousness" as dead while those who do righteousness are said to be alive (see Rom. 7:4). From the book of Romans, it is clear that a living fellow who is without Christ is already considered a dead person. Hence, it is not out of place to say that, for Paul, only those who have given their lives to Christ are alive (See Rom. 8:11). It is imperative to understand this because Paul's genre explains his belief (of sinful life meaning death and life under Christ's control meaning alive). According to him, the acceptance of the gospel "will be even more

¹⁶Barbara Friberg, Timothy Friberg, Neva F. Miller, *Analytical Lexicon of The Greek New Testament*. (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2000) in www.BibleWorks.com

¹⁷Barbara Friberg, Timothy Friberg, Neva F. Miller, *Analytical Lexicon of The Greek New Testament*. (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2000) in www.BibleWorks.com

wonderful because "it will be life for those who were dead" – (Rom 11:15 NLT).

In his letter to Christians in Ephesus, Paul also emphasized that before the time of his writing, the believers there "were dead in transgressions and sins" (Eph. 2:1 NIV). He stressed that we all "were dead in our transgressions" until God "made us alive together with Christ" (Eph. 2:5 NAS) "This is why he said: "Wake up, sleeper, rise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you." (Eph. 5:13 NIV). Similar to what he said to the Roman Church, Paul explains that the brethren at Colossae were also once dead: "having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through your faith in the working of God, who raised him from the dead. When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins." (Col 2:12-13 NIV).

Our understanding of a life of sin to mean death in the language of Paul must not be taken for granted if we must understand some of his other writings. Somewhere in Hebrews 6:1-2, he talked about the living sinner as dead even in view of concentrating his interest in the resurrection from the dead. Two kinds of 'dead' are being discoursed within these verses:

"Therefore, leaving the discussion of the elementary principles of Christ, let us go on to perfection, not laying again the foundation of repentance from dead works and of faith toward God of the doctrine of baptisms, of laying on of hands, of resurrection of the dead, and of eternal judgment" (Heb 6:1-2 NKJ). – see also Heb. 9:14).

This idea did not just emanate from Paul. Early believers understood that life without Christ is dead. James renders it this way: "In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead. As the body without the Spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead." (Jam 2:17, 26 NIV). Hence, we can conclude that sinners only "have a reputation of being alive," but they "...are dead" (Rev 3:1). After seeing all these, concerning 1 Cor. 15:29, it is convincing that the dead in the text cannot mean

literal people who have ceased from breathing but figuratively people who are yet to accept Jesus in their actions.

Discussion

Even though 1 Cor. 15:29 has been knotty and scholarship has almost given up on it, careful exegetical observation shows that Paul was not, in any way proposing literal baptism for literal dead people. This position is reached for several explanatory reasons that are discussed here:

1. Paul's Theology of baptism and the dead

If the text is to be interpreted at face value, it would mean that Paul was proposing a new doctrine, and if this is true, then we cannot but accept that Paul is a bunch of contradictions. However, since such an assumption cannot ally with the personality of Paul, we can only seek an explanation from a severe exegetical appeal.

2. The Uniqueness of the text

1 Cor. 15:29 contains some unique semantics that demands serious study to unravel their meanings. Scholarship has struggled, over the centuries, to identify the purpose of both baptism and the dead in the text. This has led to numerous hermeneutical juxtapositions. Secondly, the double appearance of *baptizo* within the text is not just unique from the entirety of the New Testament. They are rendered differently from themselves even though they convey a single message. These factors must not be overlooked when translating the text because we were not present as were Paul's audience. But we know that Paul's use of such unique forms of *baptizo* to express his thought must have a profound implication for the message he intends to send. The third uniqueness in the text is that of the presentation of *poiesousin* as the action verb. Throughout the New Testament, *poieo* has been used to demonstrate an action done to or by an object/subject to another object/subject. When *poieo* found its way into 1 Cor. 15:9, it took a peculiar form of *poiesousin*. This form of *poieo* is used only five times in the New Testament, and in all these five forms, they are used to describe imposed actions on the objects that qualify them to be in those texts. The first use of it is found in John 15:21, where Jesus expressed that believers

will go through Persecution for His sake. This ideology is reechoed in John 16:2 and resonated in verse 3 from the same unconditional persecution standpoint. The fifth (the fourth is discussed last) presence of *poiesousin* in the New Testament is that of Rev 17:16, where again the symbolic prostitute is persecuted by the metaphorical "ten horns."

The fourth use of *poiesousin* is that of 1Cor. 15:29, where the work of this paper originates. In this verse, believers are made to be baptized for the dead. The undertaking of baptism in the text does not suggest any exercise of individual volition. Instead, like their other four counterpart occurrences in the New Testament, the use of *poiesousin* is imposed on the noun (believers) in the text. Therefore, even if we take 'baptism' in the literal sense, we cannot run away from the fact that such baptism was/is imposed on those who received it against their wish. It is now established that in the five uses of *poiesousin* in the New Testament, the verb sets an uncomfortable situation on the nouns they act upon. With this internal evidence, one can say that the baptisms mentioned in 1 Cor. 15:29 should not be understood in the sagaciousness of literal baptism. Here is why: as seen above, the verbal function of *poieo* takes the form of *poiesousin*, which reflects on two forms of *baptizo*— each of which is also uniquely different from any other *baptizo* in the New Testament. Hence, the closest (or actual) interpretation of baptism in 1 Cor. 15:29 is vicarious baptism which Jesus Christ explained in Mark 10:38-39 and Luke 12:50. When Jesus used baptism here, He did not do so in figurative terms. He used baptism as a synonym – a concept His disciples were familiar with. This is not strange for the New Testament audience. David Hill rightly identified that the first book of Peter is "directed to Christian communities undergoing suffering." He suggests that since the subject of baptism is clearly understood from other parts of the Bible, it would be needful to give special attention to its occurrence in first Peter (even though baptism occurred only once in 1Peter). Hill submits that the idea of baptism in 1Peter is more of suffering than it is baptism.¹⁸ The "human pain and suffering is indeed a reality which is perceived

¹⁸David Hill, "On Suffering and Baptism in I Peter." *Novum Testamentum* 18, no. 3 (July 1976): 181-189

and interpreted variously at different times."¹⁹Therefore, it is easier to explain the baptisms in 1 Cor. 15:29 as a synonym of persecution.

In like manner, people who do not accept Jesus, though they live, are already (unless they repent). This idea is applauded by Dougherty, who referred to Romans 5:12, Ephesians 2:1,5, Romans 6:13, 1 Timothy 5:6 and Colossian 2:13 – all of which are Paul's epistles where he referred to people who live lives of sinfulness as dead even when they are alive. Dougherty also went further to stress:

Thus Paul designates all believers, before conversion, as being *dead*. They were living bodily, but spiritually speaking, they were *dead* in trespasses and sins. This conclusion he undoubtedly received from the words of Christ when He said, "Let the dead bury their dead" (Matt. 8:22; Luke 9:60). "For this, my son was dead, and is alive again"; "for this thy brother was dead, and is alive again" (Luke 15:24, 32). The apostle John conveys the same thought in 1 John 3:14: "We know that we have passed from death unto life because we love the brethren. He that loveth not his brother *abideth in death*." Baptism is a symbol of conversion from death to life, spiritually in this present life, and literally from physical death to physical life through the resurrection of the dead, after the manner in which Christ was resurrected.²⁰

¹⁹John J. Pilch, "How We Redress Our Suffering: An Exercise In Actualizing Biblical Texts." *The Polish Review* 48, no. 1 (2003): 21-42.

²⁰C. H. Dougherty, Baptism for the dead, *Ministry International Journal for Pastors*, June 1963, in <https://www.ministrymagazine.org/archive/1963/06/baptism-for-the-dead>, Accessed Date: February 11, 2019.

It is now established that the dead in 1 Cor. 15:29 cannot mean those who have stopped living. Instead, the dead in the text are living people who have not accepted Jesus in the way they live.

3. Internal evidence

A careful study of the successive verses (1Cor. 15:32) explains what is happening in verse 29. Here, Paul alluded to his fight in Ephesus by saying: "If after the manner of men I have fought with beasts at Ephesus, what advantageth it me, if the dead rise not? let us eat and drink; for tomorrow we die." (1Co 15:32 KJV). It is effortless to link this experience to what happened in Acts 28. But, while chapter 28 of Acts is an event that occurred at Melita, the fight in 1 Cor. 15:32 took place at Ephesus, and the story is well recorded in Acts 18.

Paul had travelled from Galatia and Phrygia (Acts 18:23) and came to Ephesus, where he discovered a wide range of evangelism opportunities. Gentiles were willing to hear the gospel, but the Jewish hostility would not let him. So for about two years, he was teaching the gentiles in the school of Tyrannus (Act 19:8-9). Many people abandoned the idol worship of Diana and embraced Christianity. This became a threat to the idol manufacturing company of Demetrius (Acts 19:24). Demetrius contacted his down-liners whom he psyched into an uproar against Christianity. This animalistic propensity in the Ephesians made Paul to tarry at Ephesus and could not visit Corinth, hence his letter (1 Cor. 16:8). While at Ephesus, his life was "in jeopardy every hour" (1 Cor. 15:30) because the people of Ephesus hunted his life and "he fought" them like he would have fought "while beast" (1 Cor. 15:32). Paul described this experience in 1 Cor. 15:29 as being baptized for the dead (those people with animalistic tendencies) in Ephesus. For Paul, it was the fact that the people did not believe in resurrection that made them merry and concluded: "...let us eat and drink; for tomorrow we shall die" (Isa 22:13) – an unpardonable sin to "the LORD of hosts" who heard them and said "Surely this iniquity shall not be purged from you till ye die..." (Isa 22:14). In addition, the Septuagint also confirmed that the verbal form of *poiesousin*, connotes the idea of persecution as categorically shown in Isaiah 39:7.

Conclusion

This study has shown that baptism in 1 Corinthians 15:9 is synonymously used to refer to persecution, disorders, or any other difficult situation encountered by Christians. The 'dead' here is used to describe people of Ephesus (or any persons) who demonstrate rejection and hostility towards the preaching of the gospel. Hence, as Christians undergo vicarious baptism in order to rescue those perishing in sin, they do so with the hope that even if they are killed while working for God, the resurrection of the dead will crown their martyrdom. Therefore, it is concluded that, while baptism in the text remained the difficulties and persecution that Christians go through, the dead refers to living humans who have refused to associate with the gospel that gives life. This conclusion was reached after observing that while the forms of baptisms in the text were unusual, the action verb (of *poieousin*) also took a persecuting form to nuance with the other four occurrences in the New Testament and the Septuagint. Given the Christian religion, any different interpretation of this text may be against the general theology of the Bible since Pauline writings already establish the position of the Bible on the subjects discoursed.