Theological Underpinnings of Baptism for the Dead

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Lord, are there few that be saved?" (Luke 13:23). This question has troubled thinkers from Christianity's beginning. The faithful readily accept that, save Jesus Christ, there is "none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved" (Acts 4:12). Yet, the same loyal followers of Christ wrestle with the puzzling reality that countless persons have lived and died never hearing of Christ, let alone having had an adequate chance to accept the salvation he offers. What is their fate in the eternities? Are they forever excluded from salvation? Thomas V. Morris, former professor of philosophy at Notre Dame, describes this unexplained "scandal" in his book *The Logic of God Incarnate*:

> The scandal . . . arises with a simple set of questions asked of the Christian theologian who claims that it is only through the life and death of God incarnated in Jesus Christ that all can be saved and reconciled to

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> God: How can the many humans who lived and died before the time of
> Christ be saved through him? They surely cannot be held accountable
> for responding appropriately to something of which they could have
> no knowledge. Furthermore, what about all the people who have lived
> since the time of Christ in cultures with different religious traditions,
> untouched by the Christian gospel? . . . How could a just God set up a
> particular condition of salvation, the highest end of human life possible,
> which was and is inaccessible to most people? Is not the love of God
> better understood as universal, rather than as limited to a mediation
> through the one particular individual, Jesus of Nazareth? Is it not a
> moral as well as a religious scandal to claim otherwise?[1]

This "scandal," otherwise known as the soteriological problem of evil,
stems from the logical tension between three propositions: (1) God is
perfectly loving and just and desires that all of his children be saved;
(2) salvation comes only through an individual's appropriation of Christ's
salvific gifts; and (3) countless numbers of God's children have lived and
died without having a chance to hear about, much less accept, these
saving gifts. Would a truly loving and just God condemn his children
simply because they never heard of his Son or his salvific gifts? Some
very influential Christian thinkers have answered in the affirmative,[2]
and, consequently, some critics have labeled Christianity as a religion of
damnation rather than salvation.[3]

But such a pessimistic view need not prevail in Christian thought.
One optimistic response to the soteriological problem of evil is briefly
mentioned by Paul in the New Testament—vicarious baptism for the
dead, referenced in 1 Corinthians 15:29. It reads: "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?" In this chapter, Paul argues for the reality
and centrality of the resurrection to the Christian faith. In the course of

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1. Thomas V. Morris, *The Logic of God Incarnate* (Ithaca: Cornell University
Press, 1986) 174–75.

2. The list includes Tertullian, Augustine, Philip Melanchthon, Blaise Pascal,
John Calvin, John Sanders, and others. Representative statements from Augus-
tine and Calvin illustrate the point: "Many more are left under punishment than
are delivered from it, in order that it may thus be shown what was due to all."
Calvin asserted grimly and simply that "the vast majority of mankind will be lost."

3. Charles Darwin remarked, "I can indeed hardly see how anyone ought to
wish Christianity to be true; for if so the plain language of the text seems to show
that the men who do not believe, and this would include my Father, Brother and
almost all my best friends, will be everlastingly punished. And this is a damnable
doctrine." Charles Darwin, *Autobiography* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1958), 87.

his argument, he introduces this verse. For a majority of scholars, the verse is to be read literally, describing a practice of vicarious baptism of the living on behalf of the dead.[4] The implicit rationale behind this practice is to extend to those who are dead the blessings of baptism and salvation through proxy work: the living are baptized on behalf of the dead. According to Paul, this ritual connects with the belief in and expectation of the resurrection. The two—resurrection and baptism for the dead— are so connected, in fact, that Paul uses one as a way to argue for the other; the efficacy and purpose of proxy baptism become the premise for establishing the resurrection. To modern Christian ears, this must sound quite odd: Paul argues for the now firmly entrenched belief in the resurrection on the basis of what many now consider a heretical and unusual practice. Not only that, but there is evidence that this practice existed for hundreds of years among various Christian groups, including the Corinthians (or some other early saints with whom Paul and the Corinthians are acquainted), Marcionites,[5] Cerinthians or Gnostics, and Montanists.[6]

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4. Michael F. Hull, *Baptism on Account of the Dead (1 Cor 15:29): An Act of Faith in the Resurrection* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2005), 8, 11 n. 14. See Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1987), 766; and Jerome Murphy-O'Connor, "'Baptized for the Dead' (1 Cor 15:29): A Corinthian Slogan?" *Revue biblique* 88 (1981): 532. We will not attempt to argue for the literal reading of this verse here in the paper. Instead, we refer readers to our longer article "Baptism for the Dead in Early Christianity."

5. Born around AD 100, Marcion was raised as a proto-orthodox Christian by his father. Around AD 140, he entered Rome and converted many people to his own Christian theology, now quite distinct from other teachers of the time. It anticipated the teachings of Gnosticism, with ideas of strict dualism within the universe and that Yahweh from the Old Testament was a demiurge (a spiritual being of tremendous power who rebelled against the God of all creation). Because of Marcion's success, he became a marked target for heresiologists (heretic hunters) of the orthodox faith, both contemporary and those far removed (such as Epiphanius).

The Marcionite sect was completely estranged from proto-orthodox believers and met in its own communities rather than worship alongside other believers (as did the Gnostics). According to Epiphanius (late fourth century), Marcion and his followers had stretched into the vast majority of the Christian world: "The sect is still to be found even now, in Rome and Italy, Egypt and Palestine, Arabia and Syria, Cyprus and the Thebaid—in Persia too moreover, and in other places." See Epiphanius, *Panarion: Against Marcionites*, 22, in Frank Williams, trans., *The Panarion of Epiphanius of Salamis* (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 294.

6. See Paulsen and Mason, "Baptism for the Dead," 31, 39–42. For evidence of Montanist baptisms for the dead, see William Tabbernee, *Montanist*

This suggests something important about Christian theology in the early centuries of the faith. What Christian doctrines would undergird and motivate baptism for the dead? And what does this practice assume or imply about the theology of some early Christians? In this paper, we will attempt to answer these questions by highlighting important teachings of the New Testament and other early Christian texts that support the practice of vicarious baptism. We will focus primarily on three such doctrines: (1) the necessity of baptism for salvation; (2) the possibility of vicarious work (whether of the living on behalf of the dead or of the righteous on behalf of the unrighteous); and (3) the possibility of receiving salvation after death. These three beliefs provide the necessary groundwork for a vicarious baptismal theology to get off the ground, though each of the three has been seriously challenged in the history of Christianity.

The Necessity of Baptism for Salvation

Proxy baptisms are based on the conviction that the sacrament of baptism is necessary for salvation, and that none can, in the end, do without it. It stresses the absolute necessity of the ordinance for all, even those who never received the Christian message in this life. Within the New Testament itself, many texts support this understanding of baptism as essential to salvation. First, Christ himself is baptized, suggesting the necessity for Christians to receive the same ordinance. Further, the apostolic message includes the imperative to baptize the nations. For example, Mark 16:15–16—though likely a second-century addition[7]—declares the following: "And he (Christ) said unto them, Go ye into all the world, and

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Inscriptions and Testimonia: Epigraphic Sources Illustrating the History of Montanism (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1997), 414–19.

7. Joel Marcus, *Mark 8–16* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 1088–89. "Most scholars agree that 16:9–20 is non-Markan. . . . These verses are found in the overwhelming majority of manuscripts and in all major manuscript families and are attested already by Irenaeus (*Against Heresis* 3.10.5) in 185 C.E. and perhaps, even earlier, by Justin (*1 Apology* 45, around 155 C.E.). But they were almost certainly not penned by Mark, nor were they the original ending of the Gospel. Matthew and Luke follow Mark's narrative closely up to 16:8, whereas beyond it they diverge radically, suggesting that their version of Mark did not contain anything subsequent to 16:8. Verses 9–20, moreover, do not exist in our earliest and best Greek manuscripts, Sinaiticus and Vaticanus, both of which terminate at 16:8, as do the Sinaitic Syriac, about a hundred Armenian manuscripts, the two oldest Georgian manuscripts (from 897 and 913 C.E.), and all but one manuscript of the Sahidic Coptic."

preach the gospel to every creature. He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; but he that believeth not shall be damned."[8] Matthew's Gospel records a similar imperative as the risen Christ instructs the Apostles: "Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you alway, even unto the end of the world. Amen" (Matt. 28:19–20).

One finds a similar emphasis on baptism in the writings of Paul and Peter. Paul, for example, writes: "For ye are all the children of God by faith in Christ Jesus. For as many of you as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ" (Gal. 3:26–27). To "put on Christ," in this context, refers to becoming an heir of the Abrahamic covenant with its associated promises and blessings (Gal. 3:28–29); it is the method whereby men and women are brought into the family of God. In Romans, Paul connects baptism with the possibility of overcoming the death of sin to achieve life in Jesus Christ (Rom 6:1–5)—baptism is the method to secure salvation. In this passage of Romans, Paul also explicitly connects the symbolism of baptism with the resurrection, a move he makes more emphatically in 1 Corinthians 15:29 with his discussion of baptism for the dead.[9]

Peter makes a similar tie between baptism and the resurrection. In the third chapter of 1 Peter—*immediately* following his mention of Christ's preaching to the spirits in prison—the text says the following: "Baptism doth also now save us (not the putting away of the filth of the flesh, but the answer of a good conscience toward God,) by the resurrection of Jesus Christ: who is gone into heaven, and is on the right hand of God" (1 Pet. 3:21–22). The connection here that Peter makes between

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8. The phrasing here suggests that belief and baptism are necessary for salvation, but that only disbelief is required for damnation. Thus, if one takes a hard approach to this reading, then to believe and remain unbaptized leaves one in a state of flux and uncertainty—one is neither saved nor damned.

9. In *Paul the Convert,* Alan Segal even goes to the point of arguing that baptism has replaced circumcision as the necessary salvific rite, at least for Paul and other like-minded Christians. Segal argues that Paul understood baptism as a necessary ritual, for through it one begins the process of transformation into a divine angelic state. That transformation continues after baptism, with the culmination being a full transformation in the resurrection. Since baptism begins the transformation process, all Christians must be baptized, and this inevitably raises the issue of baptism for the dead. See Alan Segal, *Paul the Convert: The Apostolate and Apostasy of Saul the Pharisee* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), 119–26, 136–38.

Christ's preaching to the spirits of prison, baptism, and resurrection is very intriguing from an LDS viewpoint, especially as it could relate to baptism for the dead. In any event, 1 Peter explicitly ties baptism and resurrection as the means whereby we are saved—the two provide the possibility of salvation through Jesus Christ.

This belief in the necessity of baptism plays itself out in the historical record as well. For example, throughout the book of Acts, baptism is consistently reported as the mandatory initiation rite for converts into Christendom. Not only that, but Acts 2:38 also explicitly links baptism with forgiveness of sins: "Then Peter said unto them, Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins." This suggests that for the author of Acts, baptism is not merely an ordinance of introduction into the church, but it has real salvific value that plays itself out in the missionary efforts of the early Apostles. As one scholar puts the issue: "Those who receive the apostolic message, recognize Jesus as Lord and Messiah, repent, and are baptized in his name receive forgiveness, the Holy Spirit, and salvation."[10]

While we do not wish to maintain that all of the sources agree in every respect on the precise nature of baptism, we do argue that there is remarkable uniformity among many of the earliest Christian texts, especially the New Testament, about the *salvific* nature of baptism. Everett Ferguson[11] writes, "Although in developing the doctrine of baptism different authors had their particular favorite descriptions, there is a remarkable agreement on the benefits received in baptism. And these are present already in the New Testament texts. Two fundamental blessings are often repeated: the person baptized received forgiveness of sins and the gift of the Holy Spirit."[12] From this view of the essential nature of baptism one can understand the first part of a theology that supports the practice of vicarious baptisms for the dead. The second piece of such a theology is the possibility of vicarious work.

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10. Everett Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church: History, Theology, and Liturgy in the First Five Centuries* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2009), 170.

11. Everett Ferguson serves as Distinguished Scholar in Residence at Abilene Christian University. His book, *Baptism in the Early Church: History, Theology, and Liturgy in the First Five Centuries,* is a monumental and thorough examination of the history of baptism and baptismal theology in early Christianity.

12. Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church,* 854.

Vicarious Salvation

By vicarious work, we mean any act whereby one person may enable or make possible the salvation of others by doing something on their behalf, especially by doing something that others cannot do for themselves.[13] This belief stands at the center of baptism for the dead—the view that the living can perform some work that has salvific consequences for the dead. This does not mean, of course, that one's entire salvation is up to others. It only suggests that one person's salvation is not wholly unconnected from the work of others.[14]

In the Hebrew Bible, the most obvious example of vicarious work as we have defined it comes from temple rituals and the work of priests. In the Jerusalem temple, the priests performed such works as animal sacrifices, burning incense, and giving prayers on behalf of the people of Israel. These acts were not merely symbolic, but they were believed to have a real salvific effect on the community; the temple work was essential to a proper relationship with the Lord. The culminating ritual in this theology was the high priest's intercession on behalf of the people on Yom Kippur, or the Day of Atonement. On this unique day, the high priest would make a sin and burnt offering and then enter the holy of holies to sprinkle the blood of such offerings as an act of atonement (Lev. 16). The high priest's work removed the sins of the people and restored the people to God.

Similar themes of vicarious salvation appear in the New Testament. In the case of Paul, it is not far removed from his general theology to assume that vicarious ordinance work, particularly proxy baptisms for the dead, was a part of his own beliefs and teachings. Unquestionably, vicarious work—in the figure of Jesus Christ—is the central theme of Christian belief in Pauline theology; Christianity, for Paul, hinges on the salvific gifts of Christ. Christ is a "propitiation [atoning sacrifice] . . .

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13. This definition could also be expanded to include any type of work that affects the salvation of another, making the theme far more expansive and inclusive.

14. For Latter-day Saints, the idea that one's salvation (or, importantly, one's exaltation) depends on others comes most prominently in its doctrine of marriage: one cannot reach the highest level of exaltation and blessedness in the celestial kingdom without being sealed in an LDS temple to someone of the opposite sex. Thus, one's degree of blessedness, happiness, glory, and exaltation does in fact depend on others in a much stronger sense than we have outlined here.

for the remission of sins" (Rom. 3:25). Given Christ's role in atoning for the whole world, the entire tradition of Christian thought has vicarious work at its core. The author of Hebrews (perhaps Paul or someone influenced by Paul) even references the great temple tradition of the Old Testament, comparing the work of Christ to that of the great high priest (Heb. 4:14–5:10; 9:6–28; 10:5–18). In this way, then, Christ is the prime example of someone performing vicarious work on behalf of another, though this possibility of vicarious work does not end with Christ. Apart from the example of the high priest, Paul even recounts his own "sufferings for you," where, by his own exertion, he fills up "that which is behind of the afflictions of Christ in my flesh for his body's sake, which is the church" (Col. 1:24). In this context, Paul is the one performing vicarious work to make up for the shortcomings of the church as a whole. This suggests that Christ is not alone in his vicarious work. With the emphasis Paul places on baptism elsewhere in his writings (Rom. 6:1–5; Gal. 3:26–29),[15] "it is not a stretch to imagine a Pauline community practicing vicarious baptism for those who had died 'in the faith,' but without baptism."[16]

The *Apocalypse of Peter,*[17] a Christian text of the second century, provides another view on the question of vicarious work in which the righteous can affect the salvation of the condemned. The text presents scenes from the final judgment of the world where the wicked receive their eternal punishment from a just God. In chapter 14 of this work, at the final judgment, some of the damned souls are saved from eternal torment at the behest of those who are righteous. At this point in the Greek text, God says: "[I] will give to my called and my elect whomever they request of me from out of punishment. And I will give them a

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15. Lars Hartman, "Baptism," in *Anchor Bible Dictionary* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 587, while commenting on Galatians 3:26–29, mentions that for Paul, "there is no tension or contradiction to be seen between the two (faith and baptism). . . . One may say that faith is the subjective side of the receiving of the gift of salvation, baptism the objective side."

16. Jeffrey A. Trumbower, *Rescue for the Dead: The Posthumous Salvation of Non-Christians in Early Christianity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 37.

17. Not to be confused with the gnostic work of the same name. This text dates to roughly AD 100–150; it is first mentioned by Clement of Alexandria in AD 180. This apocryphal work was considered scripture by Clement but was likely composed in Egypt by an unknown author.

beautiful baptism in salvation from the Acherousian Lake which is said to be in the Elysian Field, a share in righteousness with my saints."[18]

By God's explicit permission, the text says that the righteous can save certain damned souls who are then released from eternal punishment and receive baptism (literal or figurative),[19] that they might be saved with their counterparts. This is vicarious work of the clearest kind, because God's elect make possible the salvation of the damned souls by interceding on their behalf. Dennis D. Buchholz argues that this scene "teaches a form of universal salvation, that is, if any who are saved request pardon for any wicked [person], . . . the latter will be released from punishment."[20] Interestingly, the later Ethiopic translation of the *Apocalypse of Peter* changes the wording of these lines so that no second chance could be interpreted from the text. This was likely done because "someone had theological objections to it."[21] Further, the *Sibylline Oracles,* which paraphrases this scene from the *Apocalypse of Peter,* contains a small interjectory note written by a later author declaring that the doctrine taught concerning damned souls was "plainly false: for the fire will never cease to torment the damned. I indeed could pray that it might be so, who am branded with the deepest scars of transgressions which stand in need of utmost mercy. But let Origen be ashamed of his lying words, who saith that there is a term set to the torments."[22] The idea that righteous people could intervene on behalf of the condemned and that their punishment would see an end was apparently held by the authors of the *Apocalypse of Peter* and the *Sibylline Oracles.* All of these texts show an important strain of theology in the early Christian faith— one that believed in and allowed for vicarious work. Moreover, this

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18. *Apocalypse of Peter* 14, translation from the Greek Rainer Fragment by Dennis D. Buchholz, *Your Eyes Will Be Opened: A Study of the Greek (Ethiopic) Apocalypse of Peter* (Atlanta: Scholars, 1988), 344–45.

19. The text doesn't clearly specify whether the baptism refers to some specific physical ordinance or whether it is a more spiritual or figurative cleansing of the unrighteous. But this need not trouble the argument here. The relevant theme of this text is that the righteous can perform a vicarious *work* for the dead, namely, choosing them to receive baptism. While it is indeed significant in our view that baptism is the rite discussed, the main issue is that of vicarious salvation, which, as defined above, is clearly illustrated in this text.

20. Buchholz, *Your Eyes Will Be Opened,* 348.

21. Buchholz, *Your Eyes Will Be Opened,* 348.

22. Montague R. James, *The Apocryphal New Testament: Apocryphal Gospels, Acts, Epistles, and Apocalypses* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1924), 524.

vicarious work was not only permissible, but had a real salvific effect. This secures the second part of a vicarious baptismal theology; the third part of such a theology concerns salvation for the dead.

Salvation after Death

Comments made by Paul the Apostle show that salvation for the dead had been on the minds of Christians since its earliest days. One of the earliest references to this teaching is found in Ephesians, which describes Jesus's triumph over all things, even over "captivity" itself, and briefly describes Christ's descent to Hades: "He [Jesus] had also descended into the lower parts of the earth" (Eph. 4:8–10, NRSV).[23] The triumph over "captivity" and the reference to the "lower parts of the earth" refer to Jesus's visit to Sheol/Hades, the place of resting for the dead, and his release of the prisoners there—what has been called the "Harrowing of Hell."

The epistle of Peter, specifically 1 Peter 3:19–21 and 4:6, also speaks of the Harrowing of Hell and Christ's evangelization of the dead. These verses read: "He (Christ) went and preached unto the spirits in prison; Which sometime were disobedient, when once the longsuffering of God waited in the days of Noah . . . wherein few, that is, eight souls were saved by water. The like figure whereunto even baptism doth also now save us"; and "For this cause was the gospel preached also to them that are dead, that they might be judged according to men in the flesh, but live according to God in the spirit." Chapter 4, verse 6, is more direct in its wording that those being taught are the "dead" (*nekrois*), meaning those who are physically dead rather than the vague term *spirits* (*pneumasin*). Scholars are divided over the relation of these two passages of scripture and whether or not they refer to the same event in which "spirits" and "dead"

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23. As one unnamed reviewer has helpfully pointed out, the Greek here is ambiguous. The "lower parts of the earth" could refer to Sheol, or it could refer to the earth itself, which is lower than the heavens. While we acknowledge this textual ambiguity, we feel that a good case can be made for reading these verses as referring to a descent into Hades. That case primarily depends upon the Jewish and Christian traditions, both before, during, and after the time of the New Testament, that discuss posthumous salvation and the Harrowing of Hell. For a fuller treatment of this topic, see Paulsen, Cook, and Christensen, "Harrowing of Hell," 56–77. See also Doctrine and Covenants 138 for a latter-day scriptural account of Christ's visit to the spirit world.

are equivalent, with Christ being the subject of both verbs.[24] Regardless of what stance is taken, some form of postmortem evangelism is clearly reported in the verses in question, particularly 4:6.[25] If the dead were indeed given an opportunity to accept the gospel of Christ, then certainly this would open room for the idea of proxy baptisms on their behalf. First Peter suggests baptism as requisite for salvation (3:21),[26] thus providing a basis for a theology that includes vicarious work for those who cannot perform rites for themselves.

Outside the New Testament, the first- or second-century collection of Christian hymns known as the *Odes of Solomon*[27] greatly expands on the Christian themes of the Harrowing of Hell and salvation for the dead. In Ode 42 of this text, Christ speaks and describes his original descent from God and his subsequent descent to Sheol:

> Sheol saw me and was shattered,
> and Death ejected me and many with me.
> I have been vinegar and bitterness to it,
> and I went down with it as far as its depth. (11–12)

The text then speaks of Christ's spiritual body and his formation of a community of the righteous among the dead:

> Then the feet and the head it released,[28]
> because it was not able to endure my face.
> And I made a congregation of living among his dead;

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24. John H. Elliott, *1 Peter: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New York: Doubleday, 2000), 654–58, 730–34.

25. For a fuller treatment of this topic, see Paulsen, Cook, and Christensen, "Harrowing of Hell," 56–77.

26. Hartman, "Baptism," 591, explains, "Although baptism is mentioned only once in 1 Peter, it plays an important role as a basic presupposition for the presentation in the epistle. In fact, it is so important that scholars have suggested that it represents (parts of) a baptismal liturgy or a baptismal homily. Even though such a supposition may go somewhat too far, there is a wide consensus that 1 Peter makes substantial use of ideas associated with baptism."

27. The *Odes of Solomon* is a collection of Christian hymns connected to the Johannine community of the late first or early second century A D. Available online at the Gnostic Society Library, http://gnosis.org/library/odes.htm.

28. The Odist's worldview holds that a soul will first depart the body's furthest extremity, the feet, exiting the head only at the final point of death. Death's release of Christ follows the same pattern.

and I spoke with them by living lips;
in order that my word may not fail. (13–14)

The captives of Sheol cry out and plead for Christ's pity and kindness, and Christ now offers them the brilliant promise of escape:

And those who had died ran toward me;
and they cried out and said, "Son of God, have pity on us.
And deal with us according to your kindness,
and bring us out from the chains of darkness.
And open for us the door
by which we may go forth to you,
for we perceive that our death does not approach you.
May we also be saved with you,
because you are our Savior." (15–18)

The final verses of Ode 42 indicate that Christ will fulfill all their requests. He hears their pleas and responds to their sincere faith and places his name on the foreheads of the new community of the righteous. This is the Christian rite of *chrism,* or anointing. Christians included the chrism as part of the baptismal ritual in the second century and likely in the first as well; in this rite, initiates were given an anointing with oil immediately before or immediately after baptism. The chrism in Ode 42 connects the initiates to Christ as they now permanently bear the divine name that has been given to Christ by the Father.[29] They now belong to him; indeed, Christ says "they are mine"[30]:

Then I heard their voice,
and I placed their faith in my heart,
And placed my name upon their head,
because they are free and they are mine. (42:19–20)

Given that the Christian author of the Odes would be familiar with both baptism and the chrism, and would understand that one

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29. The book of Revelation explains that those who conquer will personally receive the chrism from Christ: "I will write on you the name of my God, and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem that comes down from my God out of heaven, and my own new name" (3:12, NRSV).

30. In a clear reference to a premortal existence, the Odist indicates that God knew those who would be faithful and placed the chrism on their faces: "And he who created me when yet I was not knew what I would do when I came into being" (7:9); "And before they had existed I recognized them; and imprinted a seal on their faces" (8:13).

accompanies the other, as well as the fact that he specifically refers to the chrism given to the repentant dead of Sheol, it can be reasonably concluded that baptism is somehow in view here in the text.

These themes are echoed in the Apostles' Creed, which is the oldest Christian creed and is still used today as part of the baptismal liturgy of the Roman Catholic, Anglican, and Lutheran churches. The Apostles' Creed acknowledges a belief in "God, the Father almighty" and in "Jesus Christ, his only Son" who "descended into Hell." Though this idea was noticeably absent in the Council of Nicaea in AD 325, the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Council of AD 381 denounced any who did not affirm the descent; the fourth Council of Toledo made it a point to insert language describing the descent into their writings, and the phrase became a part of the universally accepted version of the Apostles' Creed of the eighth century.

Later, the Council of Sens (AD 1140), supported by Pope Innocent II, condemned an error that had begun to creep into the church surrounding Christ's descent into hell. This error, attributed to Peter Abelard, was the belief that Christ actually went to hell to save those in the underworld—an early Christian understanding of the doctrine. Instead, the Council of Sens declared that "the soul of Christ per se did not descend to those who are below [*ad inferos*], but only by means of power."[31] This change in understanding marked an important turning point for the theological rationale behind baptism for the dead, a significant moment that highlights the current challenges to a Christian theology of vicarious baptism for the dead.

Rejection of a Vicarious Baptism Theology

Each of the three doctrines behind a vicarious baptismal theology has been challenged by the Christian tradition. The essential nature of baptism and other sacraments was widely challenged following the wake of the Protestant reformation. The concept of vicarious work was also undermined by theologies that accept or lean toward the doctrines of total depravity, prevenient grace, predestination, or the impossibility of righteous works. If salvific works are irrelevant or impossible, as these doctrines suggest, then certainly there can be no vicarious baptismal theology. Many of these changes came following the Reformation,

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31. Alyssa Lyra Pitstick, *Light in Darkness: Hans Urs Von Balthasar and the Catholic Doctrine of Christ's Descent into Hell* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 20.

but some challenges to vicarious baptismal theology came much earlier. For example, Augustine of Hippo in the fourth and fifth century vigorously rejected any idea of posthumous salvation, despite being fully aware of the popularity of the doctrine for lay people as well as for prominent writers and despite his own unequivocal acceptance of Christ's descent into hell. For Augustine, the passages in 1 Peter made no reference to Hades. Augustine strived to explain away the possibility of salvation after death for at least three reasons. First, he felt it would undermine the authority of the church in this life. Second, he thought that "another" chance was unnecessary, for no one who had died since the Resurrection had any excuse for not learning of and accepting Christ. And third, he felt it would defeat the purpose of missionary work in mortality, concluding that "then the gospel ought not be preached here, since all will certainly die."[32]

Under Augustine's influence, Protestant Reformers also denied Christ's descent to hell. John Calvin, for example, completely rejects any notion of Christ visiting hell to save anyone. For Calvin, the idea of a "descent into hell" is simply a reference to the intense suffering that Christ endured on the cross. Calvin explains it away, much like Augustine, into metaphor by referring to Isaiah's prophecy of Christ's sufferings in Isaiah 53: "There is nothing strange in its being said that he descended to hell, seeing he endured the death which is inflicted on the wicked by an angry God."[33] He calls any objections to that explanation (specifically, the question as to why the Creed mentions Christ visiting hell *after* his burial when his suffering *preceded* it) mere "trifling" and dismisses the popular idea that Christ literally visited hell to save souls as "nothing but a fable" and "childish." Martin Luther was just as firm in closing the door on the possibility of salvation after death. He denied "the existence of a purgatory and of a Limbo of the Fathers in which they say that there is hope and a sure expectation of liberation. . . . These are figments of some stupid and bungling sophist."[34] In the aftermath of the Reformation, Christ's descent into hell would be reduced to an obscure view, with but few witnesses to the once-ubiquitous doctrine.

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32. Augustine, *Epistula* 164.4.13.

33. Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion,* 1:442.

34. Martin Luther, "First Lectures on the Psalms (Psalm 86)," in *Luther's Works* 11 (St. Louis: Concordia, 1976), 175.

Conclusion

And thus we find ourselves in the current state of Christian thought, one that by and large rejects the practice of baptism for the dead as an, at best, unusual and, at worst, heretical practice. Given some of the theological changes just outlined, this is not necessarily without reason. One can understand the distrust of such a practice when its theological rationale becomes muddled or out of place in contemporary Christendom. Indeed, the loss or rejection of any one of the three doctrines we have outlined—the necessity of baptism, vicarious work, and posthumous salvation—undermines the possibility of baptisms for the dead. In addition to other things, the practice of vicarious baptism needs at least this tripartite theology to support its existence. Given that many Christian denominations reject part or all of these three teachings, baptism for the dead falls by the wayside. But as we have tried to illustrate in this paper, this need not be the case. In fact, the Christian tradition has an abundance of resources within which a theology can be detected or constructed that supports vicarious baptism for the dead, and this theology originates in the earliest days of Christianity itself. It is for this reason that Paul can persuade the Corinthian saints of the importance of Christ's resurrection on the basis of baptisms for the dead, because that practice relies on teachings that were part and parcel of the early Christian faith.

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