

“Saved by Faith [Alone]” in Paul Versus “Not Saved by Faith Alone” in James

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Introduction

In contrast to Romans 3:28 where Paul states, “For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from works of the Law,” James writes in 2:24, “You see that a man is justified by works and not by faith alone.”¹ As a result, the relationship between faith, works, and justification in the teachings of Paul and James have been much debated.

On the one hand, there are those scholars who argue that the teaching and theology of Paul and James are contradictory and incapable of harmonization. No doubt the most famous of these is Martin Luther, who referred to James as a “right strawy epistle”² and in his Preface to the book states that James

... is flatly against St. Paul and all the rest of Scripture in ascribing justification to works [2:24]. It says that Abraham was justified by his works when he offered his son Isaac [2:21]; though in Romans 4 [2:22] St. Paul teaches to the contrary that Abraham was justified apart from works, by his faith alone, before he had offered his son....³

More recent scholars give a similar assessment. “What we encounter [between Paul and James] is not simply a tension but an antithesis.... There are no grounds for blurring the fact that James 2:14ff. visibly appears to have been written intentionally in opposition to Paul’s statement.”⁴ J. T. Sanders argues that James “misunderstands Paul,” “opposes

the writings of Paul,” and “rejects Pauline tradition.”⁵ Ropes writes that “James shows no comprehension of what Paul actually meant by his formula [saved by faith and not by works] . . . and he heartily dislikes it.” Furthermore he “would have deplored as utterly superficial and inadequate James’s mode of stating the conditions of justification.”⁶ Compare also Bultmann who states, “. . . Paul’s concept of faith is . . . utterly misunderstood. For Paul would certainly have agreed with the proposition that a faith without works is dead (2:17, 26) but never in the world with the thesis that faith works along with works (2:22).”⁷

On the other hand, there are those who seek to argue that James and Paul are in agreement and that no conflict exists. Marxsen argues that what James

... attacks is the idea that the Pauline formula should be accepted as valid with *this* interpretation of faith [a faith without works].... The author . . . brings out what Paul means by faith by means of an addition. In other words, what Paul signifies by ‘faith’ can now be expressed only by ‘faith and works.’... His aim is to bring back a Paulinism that has been misinterpreted and distorted to the truly Pauline position.⁸

Mitton also argues that “James is entirely at one with Paul.”⁹

Still others argue that James and Paul do not contradict each other but are dealing with different issues and fighting dif-

ferent foes. Thus there is “no disagreement between James and Paul, only a slight variation of emphasis.”¹⁰ “The polemic of James . . . was not directed at the thesis of Paul, but at a slogan derived from it.”¹¹

The false views which Paul and James are opposing, in Rom. 4 and here respectively [James 2:14-26], are different. Paul is combating the idea that men can put God under an obligation to themselves. . . . James is opposing the idea that a real faith can exist without producing works of obedience. The difference of aim accounts to a large extent for the differences of language. There is no need to infer any significant disagreement between their fundamental positions.¹²

Formally, Ro 3:22 (justification by faith without the deeds of the law) and Ja 2:24 (justification by works and not by faith only) are sharply opposed theses. In reality the differences are modified if we take account of the different applications of the terms.¹³

The present article will explore the argument of James in 2:14-26 with the purpose of seeing if he and Paul are indeed in disagreement. We shall do so by examining: (1) The terminology of Paul and James; (2) the context of James 2:14-26; (3) key issues found in James 2:14-26; and (4) James 2:14-26 and the rest of the New Testament.

The Terminology of Paul and James

Individual words in any language usually bear a range of possible meanings. If a person looks up any particular word in a dictionary, he or she will find a number of possible meanings associated with the word because the semantic range of words vary. Some possess many different, possible meanings. Others possess only a few. It is difficult, however, to think of any word in the English language that has

only one specific meaning. Within the norms of language words almost always possess a range of meanings.

Within the writings of Paul and James this is also true. In James, for example, the word “trial (*peirasmōs*)” is used positively in 1:2 and 12. In 1:13-14 its verbal form “tempted (*peirazō*),” however, is used negatively. It should not therefore surprise us that the same word may be used by James and Paul in different ways and possess different meanings. There are two terms used in James 2:14-26 that possess meanings quite different from the normal way that Paul uses these terms. These terms are: “faith” and “believe (*pistis*–*pisteuō*)”¹⁴ and “works (*erga*).”

“Faith” and “Believe”

In James the noun “faith” is found sixteen times. Five are found outside 2:14-26 (1:3, 6; 2:1, 5; 5:15) and the rest are contained in our passage (2:14 [2], 17, 18 [3], 20, 22 [2], 24, and 26). The verbal form “believe” is found only three times and all occur in our passage (2:19 [2] and 23). The five occurrences of “faith” outside our passage indicate that a different faith is being described there than the “faith” James begins to discuss in 2:14-26. In 1:3 the “faith” described is one that successfully encounters trials and as a result produces endurance. In 1:6 it is a “faith” that endures in prayer and as a result receives wisdom from God. In 2:1 it is “faith” in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory.¹⁵ In 2:5 the poor of this world who are heirs of the kingdom are described as rich in “faith.” In all these instances “faith” is portrayed positively. It is never viewed as merely an intellectual assent to doctrinal propositions.

In 2:14-26 “faith” is viewed quite differently, and it appears that the faith

being discussed is that of a real or hypothetical opponent whom James has engaged in a diatribe. This opponent's understanding of faith is quite different from that of James himself. This can be seen by observing how this faith is described:

- 2:14a—It is a faith that possesses no works;
- 2:14b—It is a faith that cannot save;¹⁶
- 2:17—It is a faith without works that is dead;
- 2:18a—It is a faith that is distinct and separate from works;
- 2:18b—It is a faith without works;
- 2:18c—It is contrasted with a faith shown by works;
- 2:20—It is a faith without works that is useless;
- 2:22a—It is contrasted with a faith that works along with works;
- 2:22b—It is contrasted with a faith perfected as a result of works;
- 2:24—It is a faith that is alone; and
- 2:26—It is a faith without works that is dead.

The verbal cognate "believe" also helps us to understand the kind of faith possessed by James's opponent:

- 2:19a—It is assent to the biblical proposition that God is one;
- 2:19b—It is a kind of faith that even demons possess; and
- 2:23—It is contrasted with the kind of faith Abraham possessed.

From the above it is obvious that a distinction must be made between "faith" as it is understood by James and "faith" as it is understood by his real or imaginary opponent. It is doubtful that James would acknowledge that his opponent's kind of faith is true or real faith. He hints at this in 2:14a when he describes his opponent's faith as follows, "What use is it, my brethren, if someone *says* he has faith but he has not works." As numerous commentators point out, James does not say, "What use is it, my brethren, if

someone *has* faith but has not works."¹⁷ James appears to have intentionally worded his introductory statement in a way that indicates that his opponent does not have true Christian faith. This interpretation finds support in 2:14b where James states, "Can *that* faith save him?"¹⁸ The use of the article *hē* indicates that James is asking whether *the* specific kind of faith he has just described can save the man. Still further support for this view comes from 2:18. Here the imaginary opponent¹⁹ describes his faith as being one totally independent of works. "But someone may well say, 'You have faith and I have works.'"

In Paul "faith" almost always refers to a whole-hearted trust in God that salvation can be received as a gracious gift apart from any meritorious works because of the death and resurrection of his Son, Jesus Christ. Faith for Paul involves "man's total response to and involvement with Jesus Christ."²⁰ Accompanied with the gift of the Spirit it involves a new creation (2 Cor 5:17) in which the believer has been raised to newness of life and has become a slave to righteousness (Rom 6:18). It involves an obedience of faith (Rom 1:5). Thus Paul would never say that "demons believe," as James does in 2:19, because of the different meaning he gives to the terms "faith" and "believe." The faith of James's opponent involves merely intellectual assent to propositions such as "God is one." It is a belief *that* certain propositions are true. Paul's use of the words "faith" and "believe" involve faith *in* God and his Son. It is not merely propositional, although that element is present. It is also relational! Faith for Paul involves a relationship of grace and love toward God that results in a transformed life; for James's opponent faith involves nothing

more than assent to doctrinal truths. Yet even the demons possess a correct understanding of such doctrinal propositions and assent to their truth. In fact their theological understanding of doctrinal propositions is undoubtedly more correct than ours due to their supernatural nature, but such knowledge does not result in their salvation!

“Works”

The term “works” also possesses a range of possible meanings, and it is used quite differently in James and Paul. In James it is used fifteen times and always positively. This is true both for the twelve times it is used within our passage and the three instances it is used elsewhere (1:4—associated with endurance, 1:25—contrasts with the mere hearing of the law of liberty; 3:13—are the results of good behavior). In our passage it is used in:

2:14—From 2:15-16 it is clear that it refers to such things as clothing the “naked” and feeding the hungry, i.e., works of loving kindness;

2:17—The works mentioned here refer to the actions described in 2:15-16;

2:18—In these three instances works refer to the works mentioned in 2:17;

2:20—Here works refer to the faithful obedience of Abraham;

2:21—Here works refer to Abraham’s obedience in offering up Isaac as a sacrifice;

2:22—In these two instances works refers to Abraham’s offering of Isaac in 2:21;

2:24—Here works refer to the kind of actions mentioned in 2:15-16, 21;

2:25—Works here refer to Rahab’s protecting God’s messengers; and

2:26—Here it refers to the works of loving kindness, obedience, and faith mentioned in 2:15-17, 21, 25.

It should be noted that in 2:14-26, and in the rest of James, “works” are always seen positively and, when described,

involve acts of loving mercy, kindness, and obedience to God. They are performed from a faith that “works through love.” They have nothing to do with ritualistic or ceremonial actions.

In Paul, however, “works” possess a very different meaning. In Romans and Galatians they are frequently described by the expression “works of law” (Rom 3:20, 28; Gal 2:16 [3]; 3:2, 5, 10). Works are antithetical to grace (Rom 11:6). They are an attempt to boast before God, place God under obligation (Rom 4:2), and as a result earn justification (Rom 4:4). Consequently, “works” are a way of seeking righteousness that is inimical to faith (Rom 9:30-33), and it is impossible to achieve justification through this method (Rom 3:20). The specific “works” that Paul has in mind are: circumcision (Rom 4:1-12; Gal 5:3, 6; 6:15; 1 Cor 7:19; cf. Acts 15:1, 5); ritualistically keeping certain days (Gal 4:10); abstaining from certain food and drink (Col 2:16); etc. It should be noted that clothing the naked and feeding the hungry do not appear in Paul’s polemic against works. Paul is not arguing against faith needing to be accompanied by loving acts of kindness and mercy. These are not the works that he is opposing. He is not opposed to good deeds done in obedience to God. These kinds of works are spoken of quite positively in Paul.²¹ He is opposed, rather, to performing certain ritual acts found in the Old Testament for the purpose of acquiring a standing before God. Such “works” deny the adequacy of “by grace through faith” and ultimately trust in the “works” one does to achieve justification.

It is clear that, although Paul and James are using the same terms for “works,” they attribute different meanings to them, just as in the case of “faith.” These meanings

lie well within the semantic range of these terms, but they are not identical. In fact they are antithetical. As a result Paul's words in Romans 3:28 ("For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from works of the Law") can be interpreted, "For we maintain that a person is justified by a whole-hearted trust in God's grace and mercy and not by seeking to merit favor with God through such acts as circumcision and the keeping of the ritual law." On the other hand, James's words in 2:24 ("You see that a man is justified by works and not by faith alone") can be interpreted, "You see that a person is justified by a faith that works through love and not by a sterile assent to religious propositions unaccompanied by works."

The Context of James 2:14-26

The value of the context of James 2:14-26 for understanding this passage is debated. Some suggest that the discussion of "faith" in 2:14-26 picks up the theme begun in 2:1-13. "In this section St. James proceeds to enlarge on the meaning and nature of that faith in Jesus Christ which was spoken of in ver. 1 as inconsistent with *prosōpolēmpsia* [personal favoritism]." ²² There are several parallels between these two sections: "faith" (2:1 and 14ff.); clothing (2:2 and 15); person in need (2:2 and 15-16); the expression "you do well" (2:8 and 19); "called" (2:7 and 23); "if a man . . ." (2:2 and 14). Ties between the present passage and chapter one include: "faith" (1:3, 6 and 2:14ff.); "works" (1:4, 25 and 2:14ff.); the contrast between "hearing and doing" and "faith and works" (1:22-25 and 2:14-26); concern for the needy (1:27 and 2:15-16). ²³

On the other hand, Dibelius has argued that "A connection between this treatise [2:14-26] and the preceding one cannot be

established."²⁴ That there are allusions in 2:14-26 to what has preceded is obvious. Yet there does not appear to be any intimate or necessary tie between our passage and what has preceded. Thus James 2:14-26 can be understood, for the most part, without the help of its context. As so often in works of wisdom, the logical ties between sections are loose and play no major role in understanding the meaning of individual sections. Our present passage can be understood without major dependence upon the material that has preceded or that follows. The general argument against merely hearing and not doing in 1:22-25 and some of the vocabulary ties with 2:1-13 help throw some light on the issue James deals with in 2:14-26, but they do not play a determining role on how to interpret our passage. Thus, due to the constraints of space, we shall proceed to the discussion of the key exegetical issues involved in 2:14-26.

Key Issues Found in James 2:14-26

The structure of this passage involves three sections. The first consists of 2:14-17, which begins with a question about faith not having works (2:14b) and concludes with a summary (2:17) about faith not having works that forms a kind of *inclusio*. The second section consists of 2:18-19 where James interacts with the comments of a real or imaginary opponent. The third section (2:20-26) is also introduced by a question. It likewise involves a rhetorical question based on the fact that faith apart from works is useless. The section concludes again with a kind of *inclusio* that faith apart from works is dead (cf. 2:20 and 26).

Section One—2:14-17

The first section begins with the ques-

tion, “What use is it...,” that introduces the following diatribe. This expression is frequently associated with a diatribe (cf. 1 Cor 15:32; Sirach 20:30; 41:14). The question assumes “before God in the last judgment” and is soteriological in nature (1:12, 21; 4:12; 5:20). The conditional sentence (“If a [person] has . . .”) need not imply that this is a hypothetical question. It is more likely that we have here an actual situation that James encountered on more than one occasion. This is suggested by the present tense of the verb “say” (*legō*). We have already noted the fact that James does not state that the person *has* faith but only *says* that he has faith, and that *this* [literally—the faith just referred to] faith cannot save. He is not saying that faith, in the sense that both he and Paul understand it, cannot save, but that the faith referred to in 2:14a and described in 2:15-16 cannot save.

In 2:15 and 16 James provides an example of what he means by the works that must accompany faith. This “is such a crass example of faith without works that the nature of any such situation becomes clear to all.”²⁵ Whether the illustration is a real one that reflects the situation of James or merely hypothetical is unclear, but this does not affect the argument. “Without clothing” need not mean that the people described are naked and totally without clothing. It probably means that they are inadequately dressed and may refer to their lacking the outer garment worn over a tunic (Matt 5:40; Luke 6:29; John 13:4; cf. James 2:6). “Daily food” refers to the food needed for that day. It is not the same word used in the Lord’s Prayer. The needs that James highlights indicate that by “works” he is not referring here to ritual laws or what Paul calls “works of law.” They refer rather to

the most basic form of love and compassion, mercy and kindness.

The kind of faith James claims is unable to save is one that can see a fellow Christian, i.e., a brother or sister, in such terrible circumstances and instead of providing what is needed utters pious platitudes—“Go in peace, be warmed and filled.” The first of these platitudes is a semitic idiom (Judg 18:6; 1 Sam 1:17; 20:42; 29:7; 2 Sam 15:9; Mark 5:34; Luke 7:50; Acts 16:36) that means something like, “May the Lord bless you as you go.” The latter two banalities are in either the middle or passive voice. There is little difference, however, as to how they are to be understood in this sentence. They are trite and loveless wish prayers such as, “May God provide your needs.”

“What use is that?” repeats exactly the “What use is it?” of the opening verse of our passage. The expected answer is of course, “None whatsoever!” Here Paul would be in complete agreement. The faith described in these verses cannot save, because it is not a faith that “works through love (Gal 5:6).” The example James provides in these verses brings to mind Jesus’ parable of the Sheep and the Goats. In this parable the separation of the sheep to eternal life and the goats to eternal punishment is based on their behavior toward “the least of these my brethren (Matt 25:40).” The sheep fed believers (the brethren) who were hungry, gave them something to drink when thirsty, welcomed them as strangers, clothed them when naked, and visited them when sick and in prison. It should be noted that two of these actions (“feeding the hungry” and “clothing the naked”) are found in the illustration of James. Whether James was aware of and even patterned his example after Jesus’ parable is impossible to say.

The thought, however, is the same. The behavior reflected toward the least of the brethren, i.e., the believing community, is a behavior that is ultimately directed toward God and the Savior of these brethren (cf. Matt 10:40-42; 1 John 3:17-18). Such behavior is a much more accurate reflection of their attitude (or “faith”) toward God than any mere confession such as found in 2:19.

“Even so” introduces James concluding summary of this section (2:14-17). This same expression is used in similar fashion in 1:11; 2:26; 3:5 to draw a conclusion from a preceding analogy or example. “Faith, if it has not works, is dead, being by itself.” It is difficult in an English translation to indicate the article that stands before “faith.” It is clear in the Greek text, however, that James is referring specifically to the faith noted in 2:14 and illustrated in 2:15-16. “If it has no works” parallels the exact same expression in 2:14. This so-called “faith” is described as “dead.” In 2:20 such a faith is referred to as “useless.” The reason is that it is “by itself.” Similar expressions for “by itself” are “without works” (2:18, 20, 26) and “alone” (2:24). The response shown in the example is so heartless and lacking of mercy that even the qualified approval given in 2:19 to a demonic-like assent to a theological proposition is not given here! This faith is “dead.” This indicates that “Works are not an ‘added extra’ any more than breath is an ‘added extra’ to a living body.”²⁶ The faith that James is describing may fit the possible semantic range of the word “faith” in James’s day, but it does not fit what “faith” means in the context of the Christian faith!

Section Two—2:18-20

There are a number of exegetical diffi-

culties associated with these verses. In a now famous quotation, Dibelius refers to 2:18 as “one of the most difficult New Testament passages....”²⁷ Some of the difficulties involve: “Who is the person raising the question and how should we understand the question? Is the questioner an ally of James repeating his views or an opponent?” The second main question involves where James’s reply to the question begins. Does it begin in 2:18b, 2:19, or 2:20? There are three main alternatives regarding the identity of the questioner:

- (1) He is a supporter of James who attacks the idea that one can have faith apart from works. Thus the “you” refers to his and James’s opponents, and the “I” to his and James’s views. This ally argues against the suggestion that faith and works can be separated. They are not two, acceptable alternatives. This allows the “you” and “I” to correspond more consistently to the opponent’s view (“you”) and James’s and his supporter’s view (“I”) throughout the passage. Thus we should understand 2:18 and 19 as essentially James’s and his ally’s response to their opponents.
- (2) It is a straw man James uses to argue (either in favor of James or in opposition to him) that faith can (or cannot) be separated from works.
- (3) It is an opponent of James who argues that faith and works are separate virtues or gifts. Some have faith whereas others have works. They can exist separately. Just as some are ordained for works (note the deacons of Acts 6), others are ordained for prayer and ministry of the word, i.e., faith (note the apostles of Acts 6). The opponent, like Paul in 1 Corinthians 12:4ff., believes that “faith” and “works [healing]” are separate gifts.

Various arguments are given in support of each of these positions. We shall, however, due to considerations of space, argue only for the last of the alternatives.

The opening expression “But someone may well say” opens a diatribe that usually involves an opponent whose view is being stated (1 Cor 15:35; cf. also Rom 9:19; 11:19; Luke 4:23). This suggests that in 2:18 the question comes from an adversary. Also the normal way of interpreting the “But (*alla*)” of 2:18 is as an adversative. It is far more common to interpret the Greek word *alla* as “But” than “Indeed” as the first view requires.²⁸ The first view also requires us to think that James is now introducing a third person into the argument, whereas it seems more likely that he is dealing with the same opponent who is now responding to what James has said in 2:14-17.

It is better therefore to interpret 2:18 as introducing the argument of an opponent. Where, however, does the opponent’s argument end? It seems best to see it as ending in 2:18a and to have James’s counter argument begin with “Show me...” in 2:18b.²⁹ These verses then should be understood as follows. An opponent challenges what James has said in 2:14-17 by saying, “You have faith and I have works.” The problem with this statement is that the opponent attributes to James “faith” and to himself “works,” and this view is the opposite of what James has been arguing in 2:14-17. One would expect from the mouth of James’s antagonist, “You have works and I have faith.” Here, however, the “you” and “I” should be understood more like “one” and “another” or as *allos . . . allos* in Greek. It must be acknowledged that the latter understanding is a weakness in the interpretation advocated.³⁰

The objection being raised in 2:18 is the view that faith and works can be separated and isolated from each other. A person supposedly can possess one or the

other. Thus one may have faith and another works. Consequently, the man who possesses works should not condemn the man who has faith (and *vice versa*). To this James responds in 2:18b that such a division is impossible. One cannot have faith without works. “Show me your faith without the works” means “Demonstrate to me how you can have faith without works! I (or “a person”) can demonstrate to you my faith only by my (“his” or “her”) works!” In the whole discussion it is not the content of faith that is the issue, but its lack of works. This James makes clear in his next illustration.

“You believe that God is one.”³¹ This can be understood either as a rhetorical question or as a statement. The faith being challenged by James centers on the *Shema*, which plays an important role in the history of God’s people.³² The faith being described is essentially creedalism, i.e., an intellectual assent to some proposition about the nature of God. Faith here is simply the approval of a theological statement. It does not involve belief *in* or personal trust *in* God but belief *that* or a belief *about* God. The response “You do well” indicates that the confession is both correct and good. Its inadequacy becomes immediately apparent, however, by the next statement.

“The demons also believe, and shudder.” Here James describes clearly the kind of faith he claims cannot save. The fact that such a faith cannot save is self-evident. The demons, allies of Satan doomed to hell, can also claim the kind of faith that James’s opponents possess. They even possess a better “creedalism,” because of their supernatural knowledge!³³ Their knowledge is also more existential than that of James’s opponents, for the demons “shudder”³⁴ as a result

their knowledge. For James such a faith is dead. Correct confession apart from works of love rises no higher than the faith of demons. True faith must be accompanied by works of love.

Section Three—2:20-26

The third section of our passage, like the first, begins with a question (cf. 2:14 and 20). It will also, like the first, end with a summary statement (cf. 2:17 and 26). Furthermore, just as the first section begins with a question (“ . . . if someone has faith without works can this save him?”) and concludes with a parallel statement (“Even so faith, if it has no works, is dead”), so the third section also begins with a question (“ . . . that faith without works is useless?) and concludes with a parallel statement (“ . . . so also [literally – even so] faith without works is dead).³⁵ In the first section we find statements such as “faith without works cannot save” (2:14) or “faith, if it has no works, is dead” (2:17). In the concluding section such statements occur three times: “faith without works is useless” (2:20); “justified by works and not by faith alone” (2:24); and “faith without works is dead” (2:26).³⁶

The third section begins with the question, “But are you willing to recognize, you foolish fellow, that faith without works is useless?” Such a direct, harsh address is characteristic of the diatribe style (cf. 1 Cor 15:36; Rom 2:1). The term “useless” is composed of the negative prefix “a” attached to the root “*ergon*” which means “work.” The result is the adjective *argos, ē, on* that appears in text as *argē*. Thus we have a pun—Faith without works” is “workless” or “useless.”

In 2:21-24 James appeals to the example of Abraham, who is referred to as “our

father.” James is probably appealing to a common hero that he shares with his readers. The question as to whether Abraham was justified by “works when he offered his son Isaac” expects a positive answer from his readers. This is evident from the use of *ouk*. There is a clear difference between James’s and Paul’s use of Abraham as an example, even though both appeal to the same text, Genesis 15:6.³⁷ James, when he refers to Abraham’s faith, refers to his offering up of Isaac. Paul refers to Abraham’s faith as occurring before his circumcision and his offering of Isaac (Rom 4:10-14) as he trusted in the promises God made to him (Rom 4:18). Like Paul, James refers in these verses to Abraham’s “justification.” Again, however, as in the case of the terms “faith” and “works,”³⁸ we should not assume that James and Paul mean the same thing in their understanding of the term “to justify” in Genesis 15:6.³⁹

The terms “justification” and the English synonym “righteousness” refer to the same Greek term. These terms and the verb “to justify” all stem from the same Greek root. For Paul, this refers to the gift of righteousness based on the work of Christ that is appropriated by faith alone. It is primarily a forensic or legal term referring to one’s status or standing before God. It is not primarily a word describing human virtue. Some “righteous” people were in fact far from virtuous (cf. Gen 38:26; Luke 18:14). For Paul, justification comes instantaneously upon initial faith. It is not a virtue that develops after initial faith. It is a judicial pronouncement of innocence, not a moral quality of personal piety.

For James the adjective “righteous” and the noun “righteousness” refer primarily to a moral quality. In 1:20 it refers to the

moral quality of life that God demands. In 3:18 it is used in the expression “fruit of righteousness.” The exact meaning in James of this common expression is unclear.⁴⁰ What is certain, however, is that the meaning is ethical in nature and not forensic.⁴¹ When compared to Pauline usage (cf. Rom 1:17; 3:10; Gal 3:11), it is clear that the adjective “righteous” in 5:6 and 16 bears an ethical and moral meaning rather than a forensic one.

In 2:21, 24, and 25 the verb “justify” and in 2:23 the noun “righteousness,” however, must be interpreted in light of “Can that faith save him?” of 2:14. Thus “being justified” and “being reckoned righteous”⁴² are the equivalent of “being saved.” They do not refer to the moral virtue of Abraham and Rahab but the salvation and righteous standing God has attributed to them in light of their working faith. The forensic nature of these expressions is seen in the passive nature of the verb in 2:21, 24, and 25 (they are “divine” passives) and the term “reckoned” in the quotation found in 2:23.

We have already shown that James is arguing against a view of faith that involves merely mental assent. Such a faith will not save (2:14). In fact, it is not faith in the Christian sense at all. True, saving faith is accompanied by works, which are the fruit of faith. When James refers to “works,” he is clearly not referring to “works of law.” He is also not referring to deeds of mercy and love isolated from faith. The works that he refers to are always associated with faith in the Lord Jesus Christ (2:1). Thus “by works” in 2:21-22 should be understood as “by a faith that works through love and obedience (cf. Gal 5:6)!” There is no thought here of “works of law.” We can therefore translate 2:21 by the following paraphrase,

“Was not Abraham our father justified by a faith that manifests itself in works of love, when he offered up Isaac his son on the altar?”

Because of the use of the singular “you” in v. 22, James is probably addressing his opponent of 2:19-20. “You see” in v. 22 can be understood in the sense of “You are able to see with your eyes through the example of Abraham....” This would mean that the verb “justified” should be interpreted as demonstrative in nature, i.e., Abraham’s justification was demonstrated or shown by his visible works, i.e., the works “you see.” The offering of Isaac serves as an example of 2:18 in that Abraham shows his faith, which brought him justification, by this work. More likely, however, “You see” should be interpreted as in 2:24, “You can see logically as a result that. . . .” This meaning fits the context of James 2:14-26 better in that the basic issue involves, “What kind of faith secures righteousness?”⁴³ The difference between Paul and James in their use of the term “to justify” involves the temporal dimension envisioned. Paul refers to the initial, proleptic pronouncement of God’s judicial verdict upon faith. James is referring to the verdict in the final day when a person stands before God. In that day Abraham’s faith would be demonstrated by his life of obedience and love. James has more in mind what Paul says in Romans where he states concerning the righteous judgment of God that he

... will render to each person according to his deeds: to those who by perseverance in doing good seek for glory and honor and immortality, eternal life; but to those who are selfishly ambitious and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness, wrath and indignation. There will be tribulation and distress for every soul of man who does evil, of the Jew

first and also of the Greek, but glory and honor and peace to everyone who does good, to the Jew first and also to the Greek . . . for it is not the hearers of the Law who are just before God, but the doers of the Law will be justified (Rom 2:6-10, 13).⁴⁴

Verse 22 can also be understood either as “You are able to see . . .” or “You can see therefore. . .” The latter is more likely. Although only a single “work” is mentioned in 2:21, the plural “works” is used in order to maintain the symmetry of 2:14, 17, 18, and 20. The tense of “was working with” (an iterative imperfect—the only imperfect found in the entire letter) implies, however, that this was but one of many works by which Abraham demonstrated his faith.

A chiasmic parallelism is contained in this verse—“Faith (A) was working with his works (B) and as a result of the works (b), faith (a) was perfected.”⁴⁵ Mussner rightly points out that this is not an equal parallelism. He states, “James does not say that—and this is especially important to observe—works worked together with faith but the reverse. Faith worked together with his works. That means that what is primary in importance for James is faith.”⁴⁶ James clearly sees faith as primary. Works do not produce faith. James never entertains the idea that works can exist independently of faith. Earlier in 1:22 James gives the command to be doers of the word (cf. “works”) and not hearers only (cf. “faith”).⁴⁷ No thought is given to the possibility that one can be a “doer” but not a “hearer.” Apparently both James and his opponent(s) would agree that doing and works are dependent on hearing and faith! Faith (and hearing) is prior to and produces works (and doing)! Works bring faith to perfection. Yet faith and works should not be thought of as separate entities. “The relation between

Abraham’s faith and his works is not properly one of consequence, demonstration or confirmation, all of which terms assume a measure of distinction between the two: for James they go together in a necessary unity. . . .”⁴⁸

The example of Abraham begun in v. 21 comes to conclusion in v. 23 with “and the Scripture was fulfilled” and the quotation of Genesis 15:6. This quotation is also quoted by Paul in Romans 4:3 (cf. also v. 9); and Galatians 3:6. The term “fulfilled” is not used in the frequent prophecy-fulfillment schema in which it is so often found in the New Testament. It is used, rather, in the sense that Abraham’s faith referred to in the OT quotation is demonstrated or proven by his acts of faithful obedience and especially in his offering of Isaac on the altar. Such faithful obedience shows that Abraham truly “believed” God, and this was reckoned (a divine passive for “God reckoned it”) to him for righteousness.⁴⁹ The reference to Abraham being called a “friend of God” is not found in the Old Testament. Several suggestions have been made,⁵⁰ but it is probably best to see James as building on such passages as 2 Chronicles 20:7 and Isaiah 41:8 (cf. Isa 51:2) that refer to Abraham as “my beloved.”

Of all the statements found in 2:14-26 none raise more theological problems than v. 24. It is ironic that the specific affirmation “justification by faith *alone*” does not come from any statement found in the letters of Paul but rather from James. And James is arguing that justification is not by faith alone! “You see,” which is addressed to James’s Christian readers (note “you” is plural and the readers are the “brethren”—1:2, 16, 19; 2:1, 5, 14; etc.), introduces the conclusion, “A man is justified by works and not by faith alone.”

There is no getting around the fact that, if James means by the words “works” and “faith” the same thing that Paul means in Romans 3:28, we have a clear and undeniable contradiction! Yet, we have argued that “faith” and “works” possess a semantic range of possible meanings and that Paul and James choose from these possibilities different “meanings” for these terms. If we translate this verse according to James’s usage of these terms, we have the following: “In conclusion you see that a man is justified by a living faith that works through love and not by a dead faith that involves merely an assent to certain doctrines.” It is doubtful that Paul would disagree with this, although it is equally doubtful that he would have phrased this thought the way James did.⁵¹

James provides a second illustration in v. 25 to support the illustration given in 2:23-24. This involves Rahab. It is unclear as to why James uses the illustration of Rahab in conjunction with Abraham. Some have suggested that they were both examples of ideal proselytes. In 1 Clement 10-12 they are placed together, along with Lot, as examples of hospitality and faith. Regardless, Rahab’s action in protecting the “messengers” serve as another example of how a faith which produces works leads to justification. Although her faith is not specifically referred to, works must be seen as stemming from her faith. The example of Abraham sets the pattern by which we should interpret the second, similar example (“In the same way”). The entire context, which deals with faith with/without works, likewise requires us to see Rahab’s works as being associated with her faith.

A concluding summary (“For just as”) brings not only the third section, but also the entire passage to its conclusion. The

analogy is difficult in that it compares faith that is dead without works, to a body that is dead without the spirit. Thus we have a comparison of faith with the body and works with the spirit! This is strange.⁵² We should not, however, press the details of the analogy, but seek to understand its main point. Apart from the spirit the body is dead! In a similar way faith apart from works is dead! One cannot separate them. The body is dead if it has no spirit (2:26); faith is dead (2:17; cannot save—2:14; useless—2:20) if it has no works! For James faith and works are not separate entities that can exist independently. Even as a coin cannot have only one side, so Christian faith cannot possess only one side. It requires both faith, in the sense of mental assent, and works.

James 2:14-26 and the Rest of the New Testament

Up to this point we have sought to understand James’s argument in 2:14-26. In opposition to a real or hypothetical opponent he has sought to demonstrate that a person is saved by a faith that is life-changing and accompanied by acts of lovingkindness. Mere intellectual assent to theological propositions, even if correct, is insufficient, because it rises no higher than demonic faith. “According to [James and Paul], a man is saved by faith alone, but the faith that saves is not alone—it is followed by good works which prove the vitality of that faith.”⁵³ In this section we shall seek to establish that James’s teaching on this subject is in accord with the teachings of the rest of the New Testament. In fact, the danger encountered by James in the first century elicited a theological response that may be extremely relevant today. For a Christianity that has been satiated with a nominal Lutheran

“saved by grace alone” and a flippant Baptist “once saved always saved,”⁵⁴ the message of James is both timely and necessary.

First of all we can begin by comparing the message of James with that of John the Baptist. John proclaimed, “Repent . . . bear fruits in keeping with repentance” (Matt 3:2, 7). The message of Jesus also demanded repentance and faith (Mark 1:15) accompanied by “good works” (Matt 5:16). Jesus also warned that mere profession of him was insufficient, for “Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven . . .” (Matt 7:21). In 1 John 3:17-18 we read, “But whoever has the world’s goods, and sees his brother in need and closes his heart against him, how does the love of God abide in him? Little children, let us not love with word or with tongue [in James—faith and hearing], but in deed and truth [in James—works and doing].” “The fact that Christianity must be ethically demonstrated is an essential part of the Christian faith through the New Testament”⁵⁵ is obvious.

What about Paul, however? We should not assume that the places where Paul is engaged with his opponents and argues for faith “alone” apart from works of law are the totality of his message. There are numerous places where Paul gives teachings that seem to be in complete accord with that of James. We have already quoted Galatians 5:6—“For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything, but *faith working through love*” (author’s italics). Elsewhere Paul refers to: “obedience of faith” (Rom 1:5; 6:16; 15:18; etc.); “every good deed” (2 Cor 9:8); “faith and love” (1 Thess 1:3; 3:6; 1 Tim 2:15; 4:12; 6:11; 2 Tim 1:13; 2:22; 3:10;

Tit, 2:2; Phlm 5); “word or deed” (Col 3:17); “work of faith” (1 Thess 1:3; 2 Thess 1:11); etc. The relationship of the “indicative and imperative” in Paul should be noted. Paul believed that faith in Christ involved having died with him and that this led to a new life in which faith worked through love (Rom 6:1-23). Thus the indicative (faith) and the imperative (works) are not separate teachings but are intimately associated.⁵⁶ In a similar manner, Paul also knew that the faith was not the greatest of Christian virtues. Love was more important still (1 Cor 13:2, 12).

Conclusion

Much of the discussion centering on James 2:14-26 concentrates on a central theme of the Reformation—“justification by faith.” The need for the debate on that issue, and its stalwart defense by the Reformers forever puts us in their debt. As in many theological debates, however, the focus and debate on the central issue often results in a neglect of related but, for the moment, peripheral issues. These peripheral issues are not unimportant, but, being on the edge of the debate, they are often relegated to a lesser role and importance. Unfortunately, this has occurred with respect to the issue of justification by faith.

Justification is but one of several metaphors and images used to describe what occurs in the experience of becoming a Christian. It may be the most, or at least one of the most, important of these metaphors. Yet, like any other metaphor, it is unable to express all that occurs when a person becomes a Christian. There are numerous other metaphors that indicate that much more occurs at conversion than a person receiving a new, legal standing before God or being “reckoned” righ-

teousness. Other relational metaphors are also used to describe this relationship: reconciliation; peace; in Christ; forgiveness; adoption; saints; etc. Other metaphors are used to describe the “metaphysical” change that has taken place in this experience: died to sin; raised in newness of life; passed from death to life; born again; new creation; baptized by the Spirit; etc.

The discussion concerning “good works” is all too often set purely in the framework of justification by faith. What is the relationship between the new standing of righteousness that a person possesses and Christian living? Is “justification” simply a legal fiction? The debate all too often loses sight of the fact that justification is not synonymous with Christian conversion. If, when a person is justified, he is also born again and made a new creation through the gift of the Spirit, the issue of whether faith must be accompanied by works is a moot one. Good works are not an option for the believer, but a necessary fruit. A “good tree bears good fruit” (Matt 7:17). A true faith, unlike mere intellectual assent, must bear good fruit. Such good fruit or works can never be the cause of salvation. Here the Reformation cry of “justification by faith alone” must be affirmed at all costs. But James’s warning that the faith that saves cannot be alone but will be accompanied by works must also be affirmed. This seems to be especially true at the present time.⁵⁷

ENDNOTES

¹ All biblical quotations are from the updated edition of the New American Standard Bible.

² The full quotation is that whereas John, Romans, Galatians, Ephesians, and 1 Peter “. . . show you Christ and teach you

all that is necessary and salvatory for you to know. . . . St. James’s epistle is really an epistle of straw, compared to these others, for it has nothing of the nature of the gospel about it.” See *Martin Luther’s Basic Theological Writings*, edited by Timothy F. Lull (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989) 117. For the German text see WADB 6, 10 (Weimar Edition of Luther’s works, Die Deutsche Bible, vol. 6, p. 10).

³ *Luther’s Works: Word and Sacrament* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1960) 35:396.

⁴ J. B. Souček, “Zu den Problemen des Jacobusbriefes,” *Evangelische Theologie* 18 (1958) 467.

⁵ Jack T. Sanders, *Ethics in the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975) 121-122.

⁶ James Hardy Ropes, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle of St. James* (The International Critical Commentary; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1916) 35-36.

⁷ Rudolf Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament* (London: SCM Press, 1955) 2:163. Cf. also Dan Otto Via, Jr., “The Right Strawy Epistle Reconsidered: A Study in Biblical Ethics and Hermeneutic,” *The Journal of Religion* 49 (1969) 257, “. . . one cannot say that while Paul and James differ in the realm of definitions, there is really no conflict between them. It cannot be shown that they disagree merely on the meaning of words but agree in basic concepts. They also disagree in their basic understanding of man, disagree on what constitutes man’s wholeness or well-being.”

⁸ W. Marxsen, *Introduction to the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1970) 230-231.

⁹ C. Leslie Mitton, *The Epistle of James* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1966) 8.

- ¹⁰G. B. Caird, *New Testament Theology* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994) 190.
- ¹¹Leonard Goppelt, *Theology of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982) 2:209.
- ¹²C. E. B. Cranfield, "The Message of James," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 18 (1965) 341.
- ¹³Joachim Jeremias, "Paul and James," *Expository Times* 66 (1954) 371. Compare William Barclay, *The Letters of James and Peter* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1976) 72-74. Much earlier Augustine argued that "the statements of the two apostles Paul and James are not contrary to one another when the one says that a man is justified by faith without works, and the other says that faith without works is vain. For the former is speaking of the works which precede faith, whereas the latter, of those which follow on faith, just as even Paul indicates in many places." See Saint Augustine, *Eighty-Three Different Questions* (The Fathers of the Church; Washington: Catholic University of American Press, 1982) 196.
- ¹⁴It is unfortunate that in English two different words are used to describe the noun and verb that in Greek possess the same root.
- ¹⁵There is a great deal of confusion as to exactly how this expression should be interpreted.
- ¹⁶The question is introduced by the Greek particle *mē*, which expects a negative answer.
- ¹⁷Cranfield, p. 338, rightly points out, "This fact should be allowed to control our interpretation of the whole paragraph."
- ¹⁸Cf. again Cranfield, p. 338, "By 'that faith' . . . the writer means that thing which the man in question wrongly calls 'faith'; he does not imply that he himself regards it as faith."
- ¹⁹The interpretation of this very difficult verse is discussed below.
- ²⁰Thorwald Lorenzen, "Faith without Works Does Not Count before God! James 2:14-26" *Expository Times* 89 (1977) 233.
- ²¹Cf. Rom 2:7; 2 Cor 9:8; Eph 2:10; 1 Thess 1:3; 2 Thess 1:11; etc.
- ²²Joseph B. Major, *The Epistle of St. James* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1954) 95; cf. also Ralph P. Martin, *James* (Word Biblical Commentary; Waco: Word Books, 1988) 77-79; Christoph Burchard, "Zu Jacobus 2:14-26," *Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft* 71 (1980) 28-30; Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Letter of James* (The Anchor Bible; New York: Doubleday, 1995) 235-236.
- ²³See Timo Laato, "Justification according to James: A Comparison with Paul," *Trinity Journal* 18 (1997) 47-61, who argues for the importance of 1:16-25 for understanding our passage.
- ²⁴Martin Dibelius, *James* (Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975) 149.
- ²⁵Peter Davids, *The Epistle of James* (New International Greek Testament Commentary; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982) 121.
- ²⁶*Ibid.*, 122.
- ²⁷Dibelius, 154.
- ²⁸Dibelius, p. 150, states that ". . . no reader could have supposed that someone other than an opponent of Jas is introduced by the formula 'but someone will say.'"
- ²⁹So RSV, NRSV, NIV, NEB, NAB, but contra NASB .
- ³⁰For a similar view and a more detailed discussion, see Scot McKnight, "James 2:18a: The Unidentifiable Interlocutor," *Westminster Theological Journal* 52 (1990) 355-364. For an opposing view see Laato, 78-81.
- ³¹There is a textual problem here in that some manuscripts omit the article and have a different word order, but no significant issue of interpretation is at stake.
- ³²Cf. Deut 6:4; Josephus, *Antiquities* 3.91; 4.201; 5.112; Rom 3:30; 1 Cor 8:4-6; Gal 3:20; Eph 4:6; 1 Tim 2:5; etc.
- ³³Note Mark's statement concerning the accurate perception of the demons with respect to Jesus' identity. Cf. Mark 1:24, 34c (this Markan editorial comment is especially important); 3:11; 5:7.
- ³⁴See Sophie Laws, *A Commentary on the Epistle of James* (Harper's New Testament Commentaries; San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1980) 126-128, who sees this term as coming out of the practice of exorcism.
- ³⁵W. Nicol, "Faith and Works in the Letter of James," *Neotestamentica* 9 (1975) 7-9.
- ³⁶For the attempt (unconvincing to this writer) to interpret 2:20-24 as a chiasmus, see John G. Lodge, "James and Paul at Cross-Purposes? James 2,22," *Biblica* 62 (1981) 200-207.
- ³⁷Dibelius's statement, p. 164, serves as a helpful warning—"Whoever comes to Jas after a look at Paul (Rom 4) must completely forget Paul's interpretation of Gen 15:6

(faith reckoned as righteousness)."

³⁸See above pp. 4-8.

³⁹Cf. how Luke uses the term "good" in 18:19 and 23:50. In 18:19 Jesus is quoted as saying "No one is good except God alone." Yet in 23:50 Joseph of Arimathea is described as "a good and righteous man."

⁴⁰See Phil 1:11; Heb 12:11; Amos 6:12; Prov 11:20 (LXX); cf. also 2 Cor 9:10; Isa 32:16-18.

⁴¹John Reumann, "Righteousness" in *the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982) 150.

⁴²It is unfortunate that in English we use two different words ("justify" and "righteousness") to describe this verb and noun that possess the same root.

⁴³Douglas J. Moo, *James* (Tyndale New Testament Commentary; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985) 109.

⁴⁴See Klyne R. Snodgrass, "Justification by Grace—To the Doers: An Analysis of the Place of Romans 2 in the Theology of Paul," *New Testament Studies* 32 (1986) 72-93.

⁴⁵The NASB and REB preserve this chiasmic structure in its translation of 2:22. It is lost, however, in the NIV, RSV, NRSV, and NAB.

⁴⁶Franz Mussner, *Der Jakobusbrief* (Herders Theologischer Kommentar zum Neuen Testament; Freiburg: Herder, 1964) 142.

⁴⁷Cf. Rom 2:13. The close association of hearing and faith is reminiscent of Paul's words in Gal 3:2 ("hearing with faith") and Rom 10:14, 17 ("faith comes from hearing").

⁴⁸Laws, 134. Cf. Cranfield, p. 341, who states, "The verse [2:22] is then tantamount to an emphasizing of the inseparability of faith and works."

⁴⁹For a parallel argument with respect to Abraham's righteousness, cf. 1 Macc 2:52.

⁵⁰See, for example, Lodge, 208-13, and Johnson, 243-44.

⁵¹Cranfield, p. 341, comments, "The clue to the understanding of verse 24 . . . is the recognition that here, as in verse 14, the author is making a concession to his opponents' use of terms. He does not himself believe that a faith which does not produce works is really faith at all, but for the moment he accepts his opponents' way of speaking, and so is forced to deny that a man is justified by faith alone. 'By faith alone' is right, if what is called 'faith' is really faith; but, if something which can exist without producing works is meant, then the formula *sola fide* will not do."

⁵²Cf. Luther's comment, "He [James] presents a comparison: 'As the body apart from the spirit is dead, so faith apart from works is dead' [Jas. 2:26]. O Mary, mother of God! What a terrible comparison that is! James compares faith with the body when he should rather have compared faith with the soul!" This is found in *Luther's Works*, 54:425 (WA, TR, p. 157).

⁵³Bruce Manning Metzger, *The New Testament* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1965) 254.

⁵⁴The present author has no problem with these expressions if they are properly understood. However, the abuse and misunderstanding encountered today may be very much like that which James encountered and sought to combat in his day.

⁵⁵Barclay, 73.

⁵⁶Cf. Rom 6:6, 11, 14 and 12-13; 6:17-18 and 19; 8:9-11 and 12-13; 1 Cor 5:7b and 7a; Gal 5:25a and 25b; Col 3:1a and 1b; 3:3 and 2, 5; 3:9b-10 and 9a.

⁵⁷It is evident that James is well aware of the fact that salvation is "by grace." His references to human sinfulness (3:2), the fact that all stand guilty before God (2:10), and the need for mercy (2:13) reveal this.