

JAMES 2:14-26: DOES JAMES CONTRADICT THE PAULINE SOTERIOLOGY?

ROBERT V. RAKESTRAW
Criswell College, Dallas, TX 75201

A perennially difficult issue in the epistle of James is the author's treatment of faith, works, and justification in Jas 2:14-26. The paragraph is difficult to interpret not only because of the complexity of the language and argument itself, but also because of James' seeming contradiction with the soteriological emphasis of Paul.¹ Does James contradict Paul regarding the basis on which God justifies sinners? Does Paul contradict James? Are there two equally-valid ways of justification set forth in the NT--a way of faith and a way of works--which, when properly understood, reveal the waste and tragedy of the Reformation and Counter-Reformation struggle over *sola fide* and the subsequent centuries of division within the Christian Church?

Paul maintains adamantly that "a man is justified by faith apart from observing the law" (Rom 3:28; see also Gal 2:16 and Rom 9:23), yet James argues equally strenuously that "a person is justified by what he does and not by faith alone" (2:24).² The contrast is striking. Luther's celebrated phrase, "*ein recht strohern Epistel*," to describe the letter of James is not a mere archaism.³ In more recent years J. T. Sanders has

¹ A brief survey of the literature on the faith-works issue in Paul and James is found in M. Dibelius, *James*, rev. H. Greeven (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975) 174 n 132. More extensive bibliographies on this and related issues are in C. Brown and H. Seebass, "Righteousness," *DNTT* 3 (1978) 374-77; and P. H. Davids, *Commentary on James* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982) xxi-xxxviii. The last mentioned work will be designated James, and the briefer study by Davids (see n 9) *James*, GNC.

² Unless otherwise indicated, biblical citations are from the New International Version.

³ Luther's comment on James as a "right strawy epistle" is found in the Preface to his 1522 edition of the NT. It appears only in this edition. Elsewhere Luther states: "He

set James and Paul in such direct opposition that the Bible reader is virtually compelled to choose one over the other.⁴ E. C. Blackman insists that the view of James is "a deliberate contradiction of Paul."⁵ J. C. Beker contends that the writer of James ignores Paul's gospel of grace apart from law and, instead, "understands the gospel to be a Christian interpretation of the Torah."⁶ And S. Laws believes that attempts to harmonize James and Paul and thus produce an apostolic consensus are probably fruitless. . . . Paul could surely never have tolerated James's explicit assertion that justification is not by faith alone nor his lack of attention to an initial saving act of God that makes faith and consequent good works possible. However much one may modify the superficial contrast, a basic lack of sympathy must remain.⁷

Similar points of view are expressed by G. Bornkamm, R. Bultmann, J. Dunn, and G. Schrenk.⁸

Because the allegations--both written and spoken--of a genuine contradiction between James and Paul continue to confuse and even demoralize the people of God by undermining their confidence in the unity--and thereby the authority--of scripture, a continual need exists for those with a high view of biblical inspiration to address the problem. Renewed interest in the theme in the current theological debate calls for fresh analyses of the matter.

The primary purpose of this essay is to examine the issue of faith and works in Jas 2:14-26, particularly vv 20-24, to ascertain whether or not there is a genuine conflict between James and Paul on the matter of justification. A secondary purpose is to illuminate the section itself and

[James] does violence to Scripture, and so contradicts Paul and all Scripture. . . . I therefore refuse him a place among the writers of the true canon of my Bible; but I would not prevent anyone placing him or raising him where he likes, for the epistle contains many excellent passages." See J. Dillenberger, ed., *Martin Luther: Selections From His Writings* (Garden City: Anchor, 1961) 18-19, 35-36. Also see D. O. Via, Jr., "The Right Straw Epistle Reconsidered: A Study in Biblical Ethics and Hermeneutic," *JR* 49 (1969) 253-67.

⁴ J. T. Sanders, *Ethics in the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975) 115-28.

⁵ E. C. Blackman, *The Epistle of James* (London: SCM, 1957) 96.

⁶ J. C. Beker, *Paul the Apostle* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980) 251.

⁷ S. Laws, *A Commentary on the Epistle of James* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1980) 132-33.

⁸ G. Bornkamm, *Paul* (New York: Harper and Row, 1971) 153-54; R. Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament* (2 vols; New York: Scribner's Sons, 1955) 2: 162-63; J. Dunn, *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1977) 251-52; G. Schrenk, "dike," *TDNT* 2 (1964) 201. A less severe contrast between Paul and James is seen in J. H. Ropes, *The Epistle of St. James* (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1978 printing) 204-5.

thereby draw upon its rich insight for Christian theology and ethics. Because of the abundance of solid expository material on our text, both older and more recent, this article is not a verse by verse study.⁹ Our intention, rather, is to investigate and clarify the theological-ethical dimensions of the faith-works issue, especially from the perspective of James' use of Abraham, and to view James' understanding of the patriarch's justification vis-a-vis Paul's discussion of the same.

Our central presupposition has already been suggested. In opposition to the views of Sanders, Blackman and others of similar mind we maintain, from a standpoint of scriptural solidarity and infallibility, that there is no genuine contradiction between the Jacobean and Pauline texts. However, we recognize the need for a satisfying basis for this position. Mere theological assertions regarding the fruit-bearing character of genuine faith do not alleviate the prima facie tension between the apostles. To the task stated above, therefore, we now turn.

⁹ Some generally helpful English-language commentaries on James, although of uneven quality and varying theological persuasions, are those by Davids, Dibelius, Laws, and Ropes mentioned above, as well as: J. Adamson, *The Epistle of James* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976); P. H. Davids, *James* (GNC; San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1983); D. E. Hiebert, *The Epistle of James* (Chicago: Moody, 1979); J. B. Mayor, *The Epistle of St. James* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1954 printing); C. L. Mitton, *The Epistle of James* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1966); D. J. Moo, *The Letter of James* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity, 1985); J. A. Motyer, *The Message of James* (Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity, 1985); A. Plummer, *The General Epistles of St. James and St. Jude* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1891); B. Reicke, *The Epistles of James, Peter, and Jude* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1978); A. Ross, *The Epistles of James and John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1954); E. M. Sidebottom, *James, Jude, and 2 Peter* (London: Nelson, 1967); R. V. G. Tasker, *The General Epistle of James* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957); C. Vaughan, *James* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1969).

Other significant materials relating to Jas 2:14-26, in addition to Via in n 3, are studies in *DNTT* vol. 1 (1975), "Faith" (O. Becker and O. Michel, 587-606); vol. 3 (1978), "Righteousness" (C. Brown and H. Seebass, 352-77), "Work" (H. C. Hahn and F. Thiele, 1147-59); and E. L. Allen, "Controversy in the New Testament," *NTS* 1 (1954-55) 143-49; J. A. Brooks, "The Place of James in the New Testament Canon," *SWJT* 12 (1969) 41-55; C. E. B. Cranfield, "The Message of James," *SJT* 18 (1965) 182-93, 338-45; W. Dyrness, "Mercy Triumphs Over Justice: James 2:13 and the Theology of Faith and Works," *Themelios* 6, 3 (1981) 11-16; L. Goppelt, *Theology of the New Testament* (2 vols; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982) 2. 199-21,1; H. P. Hamann, "Faith and Works in Paul and James," *Lutheran Theological Journal* 9 (1975) 33-41; I. Jacob, "The Midrashic Background for James II, 21-23," *NTS* 22 (1975) 457-64; J. Jeremias, "Paul and James," *Exp Tim* 66 (1954-55) 368-71; T. Lorenzen, "Faith without Works Does Not Count before God! James 2:14-26," *Exp Tim* 89 (1978) 231-35; A. C. Thiselton, *The Two Horizons* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980) 422-27; A. E. Travis, "James and Paul, A Study," *SWJT* 12 (1969) 57-70; R. B. Ward, "The Works of Abraham: James 2:14-26" *HTR* 61 (1968) 283-90; J. A. Ziesler, *The Meaning of Righteousness in Paul* (Cambridge, 1972) 9-14.

I. *Concerns of James and Paul*

A resolution of the apparent conflict is aided by the thesis, popularized in recent years through an influential article by J. Jeremias,¹⁰ that the concerns addressed by James and Paul are quite different, and thus necessitate separate lines of argument and different theological languages. C. L. Mitton writes:

The kind of error Paul is seeking to correct in Romans and Galatians is very different from the error which James is resisting, and our statement of a truth varies according to the error we are opposing. If we ourselves were arguing against antinomians, who believed that moral conduct in a Christian was of little importance, our arguments would be very different from those we should use if our opponents were 'legalists' who believed that good conduct alone secured all the benefits of religion. So we must remember that in general Paul is urging his case against Judaizers, who believed salvation depended, in part at any rate, on doing the works of the law, whereas James was ranged against antinomians who believed that inward faith was all that mattered.¹¹

Paul and James “are not antagonists facing each other with crossed swords, they stand back to back, confronting different foes of the Gospel.”¹² “Paul is attacking self-righteous legalism, and James self-righteous indifference.”¹³ When we thus understand the different areas of concern addressed by Paul and James we are helped considerably in understanding that the apparent conflict between them is not genuine opposition. A careful reading of Romans, Galatians, and James reveals behind the argument of each apostle the kind of false teaching being refuted.

This raises the question of which author wrote first or taught first. Did Paul presuppose James, or did James presuppose Paul? While we maintain that neither Paul nor James was directly opposing the other, we ought to ask whose theology had been disseminated first among the diasporic Jewish Christians whom James is addressing. The position of most commentators-- J. Mayor is a notable exception¹⁴--is that Paul's theology is in some way the prior doctrine, and that James is seeking to

¹⁰ Jeremias, "Paul and James."

¹¹ Mitton, *James* 104.

¹² Ross, *James and John* 53.

¹³ Brown and Seebass, "Righteousness" 370.

¹⁴ Mayor, *St. James* xci-cii.

correct a distortion of the Pauline teaching on justification by faith apart from works. This view does not necessitate the writing of Romans or Galatians before James, but depends upon the prior knowledge and subsequent corruption of Paul's basic soteriology. While the majority view appears preferable, it should not be insisted upon. Furthermore, by leaning in this direction we are not suggesting that James is systematically developing his argument in close relation to the Pauline teachings. P. Davids notes that "it is possible that James is reacting to Paul, but if so it is a Paulinism so garbled and misunderstood that every term is redefined and no trace of a conflict over Jewish cultic rites remains."¹⁵ To Davids, "it seems best to understand James to be refuting a Jewish Christian attempt to minimize the demands of the gospel rather than a misunderstood Paulinism."¹⁶ It is difficult, however, to avoid seeing some glimpses of Paul's thought--however distorted--in Jas 2:14-26.¹⁷ C. Brown appears correct in stating that "James' position presupposes the radically non-Jewish separation of faith and works wrought by Paul."¹⁸

A further stage in the commonly-attempted resolution of the apparent conflict between James and Paul is to demonstrate the different meanings of terms employed by the writers. According to Jeremias, Mitton, Davids, and others, three highly significant words--faith, works, and justify--are used by both James and Paul, yet with widely different meanings.¹⁹ All are found together in Paul in Rom 3:28 and Gal 2:16, and all are in Jas 2:24, which, as Davids observes, "must be viewed as a *crux interpretum*, not only for James, but for NT theology in general."²⁰ Because of the great importance of these three terms we will consider their meanings in James and Paul to ascertain what differences there may be between the writers and how such differences affect their arguments. Following that, we will examine the arguments of James and Paul from the life of Abraham.

¹⁵ Davids, *James* 21.

¹⁶ Ibid. See also Plummer, *St. James and St. Jude* 138-48.

¹⁷ However, we ought not to see "by faith alone" in 2:24 as a deliberate reference to Paul, as does Jeremias, who writes that there can be no doubt 2:24 presupposes Paul, for the thesis "by faith alone" which James apparently contradicts, "is nowhere met with in the whole literature of Judaism and of the earliest Christianity except only in Paul" ("Paul and James" 368). The error here (and in Via, "Right Strawy Epistle" 257) is in failing to realize that the phrase "by faith alone" never actually occurs in the Pauline corpus.

¹⁸ Brown and Seebass, "Righteousness" 369.

¹⁹ Jeremias, "Paul and James"; Mitton, *James* 104-8; Davids, *James* 50-51.

²⁰ Davids, *James* 130.

II. Terminologies of James and Paul

Faith

Whereas Paul champions justification by faith, James teaches that justification is "not by faith alone." For James, however, *pistis* ("faith") in vv 14-26 is equivalent to the intellectual acceptance of theological assertions, particularly the monotheistic creed (which even the demons believe) mentioned in v 19. His emphasis at the beginning of the paragraph (2:14) on the vocal agreement with right doctrine ("if a man *claims* to have faith") and his deliberate use of the article ("such faith") indicate the kind of faith he has in mind. In addition, his speaking of "faith *by itself*" (v 17) and "faith alone" (v 24) reveal that his concept is one of mental agreement. And, as Davids notes, "the fact that James writes *you believe that* rather than 'you believe in' shows that he is thinking of intellectual belief rather than personal commitment."²¹ Paul, however, considers faith as reliance upon God that brings salvation and its fruits. The conclusion to his magisterial development of justification stresses faith as trust which brings peace with God, and with it rejoicing--even in sufferings (Rom 5:1-5). In addition, the object of Paul's faith is the blood of Christ (Rom 3:25), whereas the object of the faith discussed by James is Judaistic (and probably Christian, see 2:1) doctrine.

Yet James does not deny the propriety of theological orthodoxy and belief, for he tells the objector "you do well" for affirming the Shema (2:19). He argues rather that faith *without works* is barren and useless. Nor is James saying that faith, properly understood, does not save, for this would be tantamount to a direct contradiction of Pauline soteriology. What he teaches is that one's verbal profession of or signature to a set of right beliefs does not effect salvation (v 14). As D. Moo contends, "it is absolutely vital to understand that the main point of this argument, expressed three times (in vv 7, 20, and 26), is not that works must be added to faith but that genuine faith includes works. That is its very nature."²² A. Thiselton cautions further that in our text James is not simply the negative corollary of Paul.

James is not merely attacking an inadequate view of faith, but is also giving what amounts to a fairly sophisticated and positive account of the logical grammar of his own concept of faith. . . . He is saying that his

²¹ Davids, *James*, GNC 49.

²² Moo, *James* 99.

concept of faith would *exclude* instances of supposed belief which have no observable backing or consequences in life.²³

With Paul faith is entailed in the very concept of justification, whereas with James right actions are entailed in the very concept of faith. J. Ropes writes that "James's real contention in vv 20- 22 is not so much of the necessity of works as of the inseparability of vital faith and works."²⁴ It is thus wrong to infer or imply that James contributes in any way to a low view of faith; he rather elevates and characterizes positively the kind of faith that pleases God and is instrumental in the salvation of men and women. This is not to say that the actual occurrences of the word "faith" in Jas 2:14-26 contain this full sense of of the word, for we have just said otherwise. But by focusing upon the is mental aspect of faith--something good in itself--as being only part of justifying faith, James thereby teaches the depth and maturity of faith as God intends it to be.

We have seen, then, that there is a difference in the emphasis put upon "faith" by Paul and James. To each, faith is good and necessary for salvation, but James emphasizes the intellectual-objective aspect of faith and Paul the volitional-subjective aspect which actually *includes* the former and which should *follow* it. A person must believe what is true and then act from the heart upon that truth and personally trust the object of his or her faith. This kind of faith is saving faith. It brings justification apart from works, and it issues in a Christian life full of good works (Eph 2:8-10). There is no genuine contradiction between James and Paul on the matter of faith, but an awareness of the distinctive emphasis each gives to the word helps to dispel the notion that a real conflict exists.

Works

Whereas Paul teaches that justification is "apart from works of law" (Rom 3:28, RSV) James contends that a person--such as Abraham or Rahab--is, at least in part, "justified by works" (2:21, 24-25, RSV). The majority of recent writers hold that the *erga* ("works") in James refer to practical deeds of righteousness, particularly works of charity done as the fulfillment of the royal law of love (see 1:21; 2:8-13). These deeds are the spontaneous fruit or expression of saving faith. Works for Paul, however, according to most of the same interpreters, are the keeping of the Mosaic commandments (e.g., circumcision, dietary regulations) and perhaps the Rabbinic accretions to the law. These

²³ Thiselton, *Two Horizons* 424. See also Mitton, *James* 109.

²⁴ M Ropes, *St. James* 219.

may be the old covenant regulations themselves, or such works done in a legalistic spirit, in order to procure favor with God by one's own merits.²⁵

Quite recently Moo has questioned this prevailing understanding of *erga*. In his view, "in general, Paul and James mean the same thing by 'works': actions done in obedience to God."²⁶ Moo contends that Paul's concept of works is much broader than the popular interpretation allows. In Rom 9:10-11, the closest Paul comes to giving a definition of "works," the apostle states that Rebecca was told concerning her children, "the older will serve the younger," before the twins had done anything good or bad--"in order that God's purpose in election might stand: not by works but by him who calls." Moo contends that "in these verses, it is clear that 'works' includes anything that is done, 'either good or bad.'" In addition, in Romans 4, "the 'works of Abraham,' in which he could not boast, must clearly be 'good works.' And yet Romans 4 is closely tied to the argument in 3:20-28, where 'works of the law' is used."²⁷ Paul thus seems to view "works of the law" as a specific kind of "works"--those done in obedience to the Mosaic law. "Paul's purpose, then, is to exclude all works--not just certain works or works done in a certain spirit--as a basis for justification."²⁸ Moo also questions the commonly--held view of James' "works" as works of charity. While James certainly stresses fulfillment of the law of love in chapter two and elsewhere, the specific events chosen by him from the lives of Abraham and Rahab (vv 21-25) do not clearly involve acts of charity. Abraham's action in particular is an act of personal obedience to God (v 21).²⁹

Moo's argument is convincing, and should receive considerable attention on the popular level now that his commentary has replaced the older work by R. V. G. Tasker in the Tyndale New Testament Commentaries series. Paul and James, then, mean the same thing by "works"--actions done in obedience to God and in the service of God. The difference between them is in the context in which these works are done--in the sequence of works and conversion. "Paul denies any

²⁵ Some who hold, in general, to this view of *erga* in James and Paul are Jeremias, "Paul and James"; Davids, *James* 50-51; Dyrness, "Mercy Triumphs Over Justice" 14, 16; Laws, *James* 129; and Vaughan, *James* 56.

²⁶ Moo, *James* 101.

²⁷ Ibid. 101-2.

²⁸ Ibid. 102. See also D. J. Moo, "'Law,' 'Works of the Law' and Legalism in Paul," *WTJ* (1983) 73-100. Mitton (*James* 107-8), while stating that "works" in Paul usually means "works of the law," contends that Paul also uses "works" to describe "good works" and that this is the sense of "works" in James.

²⁹ Moo, *James* 102.

efficacy to pre-conversion works, but James is pleading for the absolute necessity of post-conversion works."³⁰

An interesting twist to James' argument emerges from the fact that in vv 21 and 22 Abraham's works are considered as the basis for his justification (the question in v 21 assumes the answer yes), yet only one work--the offering of Isaac--is mentioned. Perhaps, as Davids suggests, the works refer to the ten testings which in the Jewish tradition Abraham endured. This is rendered plausible by the interest in testing James has already shown in chapter one, and particularly by the fact that the binding of Isaac which James cites forms in Jewish tradition the capstone of a series of tests, with the binding and subsequent release seen as evidence not only of Abraham's obedience to God but also of the value of the previous works.³¹ It is simpler and more natural in the immediate context, however, to understand "by his works" as a formula for "by his conduct."³² The plural is used because throughout the paragraph "works" are repeatedly discussed alongside of faith (ten times in the thirteen verses), and for James to switch to the singular "work" would interrupt the flow of the argument and distract the reader from the essential point that works are the necessary outgrowth of genuine faith.

It does not appear, then, that there is a significant difference in the general meaning of "works" for Paul and James. For James works are obviously good. For Paul, while he employs the formula "works of law" when developing his argument for justification by faith apart from works, there is no hint that these works in themselves are negatively perceived by him. Paul rather seeks continually to "uphold the law" and its works (Rom 3:31; 7:7-18). A resolution to the alleged conflict between James and Paul is thus not augmented by recourse to an understanding of *erga* that is substantially different for each apostle.

Justify

A third term used by James and Paul is *dikaioo*, translated in many English versions (e.g., A V, RSV) as "justify." James contends that Abraham and Rahab were justified ("considered righteous," NIV) by their works, whereas Paul asserts that people are justified by faith.

³⁰ Ibid. Calvin writes: "As Paul contends that we are justified apart from the help of works, so James does not allow those who lack good works to be reckoned righteous" (*Inst.* III. xvii.12). Calvin's discussion of James and Paul, while recognizing the different senses in which "faith" and "justify" are used, does not treat "works" as having a different meaning for the apostles (*Inst.* III. xvii. 11-13).

³¹ Davids, *James* 127-28. See also Dibelius, *James* 162.

³² Dibelius (*James* 162) recognizes this possibility. See also Laws, *James* 135.

Unless we are willing to grant that the apostles are in opposition we must examine the precise meaning each gives to *dikaioo*.

The explanation of Calvin has frequently been followed by conservative commentators. In his view, "we are said by Paul to be justified when the memory of our unrighteousness has been wiped out and we are accounted righteous." James, however, is not speaking of this imputation of righteousness. Rather, it is as if he said: "Those who by true faith are righteous prove their righteousness by obedience and good works, not by a bare and imaginary mask of faith."³³ J. Adamson, in sympathy with this position, translates v 21: "Was not our father, Abraham, shown to be in the right by works, when he offered his son Isaac on the altar?"³⁴ This demonstrative-analytical sense of *dikaioo* is thus held to be distinct from the declarative-forensic-judicial usage found in Paul.

Once again the prevailing view has been questioned. Moo, while acknowledging that there is some precedent for the meaning of *dikaioo* as *demonstrate*, states that this is not its usual meaning. "More importantly, this meaning does not fit very well in James 2, where the question is not, 'How can righteousness be demonstrated?' but 'What kind of faith secures righteousness?'" Moo contends that James is probably using *dikaioo* declaratively, "but he differs from Paul in applying the word to God's ultimate declaration of a person's righteousness rather than to the initial securing of that righteousness by faith." James thus uses "justify" where Paul speaks of the judgment.³⁵

First of all, in reply to this recent challenge, it is probable that *dikaioo* in James is used in a certain declarative or judicial sense--the pronouncing of one righteous, as in a court of law, on the basis of some observable criterion or criteria.³⁶ This is the dominant meaning of the term in the LXX, in the Pseudepigrapha, and often in the NT.³⁷ However, Moo's contention that *dikaioo* in James 2 refers to the sinner's ultimate or final justification at the last judgment is not as readily apparent. While Moo argues persuasively that this significance of the term has ample precedent in the OT, Judaism, and the teaching

³³ Calvin, *Inst.* III. xvii.12. See also Vaughan, *James* 56.

³⁴ Adamson, *James* 128.

³⁵ Moo, *James* 109; see also 110-111. Reicke (*James, Peter, and Jude* 34-35) also understands James to be referring to the last judgment.

³⁶ Davids (*James* 51, 127), however, prefers the demonstrative sense.

³⁷ Dibelius, *James* 162-65; Moo, *James* 109-11. W. Sanday and A. C. Headlam offer six reasons supporting the declarative-forensic sense in the NT (*The Epistle to the Romans*, 5th ed. [Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1902] 30-:31). See also J. H. Moulton and W. R. Howard, *A Grammar of New Testament Greek* (4 vols; Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1920) 2.397.

of Jesus (e.g., “by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned,” Matt 12:37),³⁸ it is not necessitated by the text, and seems to add an extraneous element to the argument. This is not to say that the final judgment is absent from James 2 (q.v; vv 12-14), but that James moves from a focus upon that judgment to an emphasis upon right conduct for the helping of the needy now (vv 15-17) and the alerting of mere professors to their barren and perilous condition now (vv 18-26). It is correct to see the final judgment as the ultimate backdrop for vv 14-26, but the most obvious sense of the paragraph indicates that the justification of Abraham and Rahab is something that occurred during their earthly lives. This in-life justification was of course prerequisite to their final justification but is not identical with it. The fact that Abraham and Rahab were justified when they did certain things (vv 21, 25) is, as Moo admits, an important objection to the final judgment viewpoint.³⁹ While there is no Greek adverb for “when” in the text, the aorist participles for “offering” Isaac and “housing” the spies may have the temporal significance, and most likely do here (so AV, RSV, NIV, NASB, and Phillips).⁴⁰

Why must our choice be limited to either initial or final justification? It is of course evident that James is not referring to the initial declarations of righteousness--i.e., at the “conversion” experiences--of Abraham and Rahab, for if this were the case James would be teaching, in opposition to Paul, that a person is justified initially by right actions. But this does not necessitate a concept of final judgment to explain James' meaning. Instead, the plain sense of the text argues for some kind of justification during the lifetimes of Abraham and Rahab, concomitant with a specific action or actions of each. As M. Dibelius indicates, Abraham in James 2 is not considered a justified sinner but a righteous man who is recognized or declared to be righteous and rewarded by God. The expression “was justified” thus means approval by God, which Abraham received not merely at the final judgment but already during his lifetime.⁴¹ A parallel is in 1 Macc 2, where the dying Mattathias gathers his sons for a final exhortation to be zealous and, if necessary, to die for the covenant of their fathers. As Mattathias refers to the fathers one by one, he mentions in each case two things--a noteworthy deed or character trait and its reward. “Joseph in the time of his distress kept the commandment, and became lord of Egypt.”

³⁸ Moo, *James* 109-11.

³⁹ *Ibid.* 109-10.

⁴⁰ “The aorist participle records an action antecedent to the announcement of justification; the verdict pronounced on Abraham arose 'out of' (*ek*) the act of offering up his son” (Hiebert, *James* 192).

⁴¹ Dibelius, *James* 162.

Phinehas, "because he was deeply zealous, received the covenant of everlasting priesthood." "Caleb, because he testified in the assembly, received an inheritance in the land." These are rewards experienced during the lifetimes of these leaders of Israel. Thus Abraham, placed at the head of the list, is to be understood similarly: "Was not Abraham found faithful when tested, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness" (v 52, RSV)? Abraham's reward began during his life on earth. God declared that his servant was truly righteous and his friend.

It appears, therefore, that both Paul and James use *dikaioo* in a declarative-judicial sense, but that the emphasis in Paul is upon the sinner's initial justification by God at conversion (e.g., Rom 5:1), whereas James' focus is upon the declaration by God (and perhaps by people) during a believer's lifetime that he or she is truly a righteous person (e. g., Jas 2:21, 25). With this understanding, sinners are indeed justified by a trusting faith without works (Paul), and such justified believers are then considered righteous often during their lives from observation of their actions (James).

III. *Abraham in Genesis and James*

Having considered the quite different errors addressed by Paul and James and the manner in which their vocabularies are adjusted accordingly, we now turn to two closely-related and often-confusing matters: the way in which James uses the life of Abraham to develop his argument, and the way in which James' references to Genesis differ from those of Paul in Galatians and Romans.

With regard to the argument of James, the question of 2:20⁴² and the concluding statement of 2:24 indicate quite clearly the central point James is making in vv 21-23: a faith that has no deeds concomitant with it is useless, barren, and unprofitable in the matter of one's justification.⁴³ However, before we can fully grasp the unfolding of this thesis in vv 21-23, and the argument of Paul as well, we need to outline briefly certain crises in Abraham's life from the book of Genesis.

Upon leaving Ur with his father Terah to go to Canaan, Abram journeyed only as far as Haran, where he and his wife lived until Terah died (Acts 7:2-4). Understanding Gen 11:31-32 and 12:1-3 to refer together to God's call and promise to Abram while he was still in Ur,⁴⁴

⁴² Reicke (*James, Peter, and Jude* 33) places v 20 as the conclusion to vv 18-19, not as introductory to vv 21-24 as NIV. Hiebert (*James* 189), however, recognizes the transitional character of v 20.

⁴³ Ropes, *St. James* 217.

⁴⁴ While the pluperfect "had said" (AV, NIV) in Gen 12:1 is not the usual translation of the Hebrew (which merely employs the imperfect with the waw consecutive), it is

and knowing that Abram was married when he left Ur and "settled" for quite some time in Haran (11:31; 12:5), Abram was an adult but not likely over 65 when called by God. In support of this *terminus ad quem* we consider that Abram was 75 when he left Haran and entered Canaan (12:4-5), and it is reasonable to assume he spent ten or more years in Haran to acquire all that he did (12:5). It need not concern us here whether or not his stay in Haran involved a lapse of faith and obedience. The point is that Abram was most likely converted at or prior to his original call in Ur. Otherwise, God would have made the amazing promises of 12:1-3 to an unconverted man, and in that condition Abram would have obeyed God--leaving his country and people. Against this is the fact that Heb 11:8 commends Abraham as a man of faith because when called he "obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going." Even if this suggested time of Abraham's conversion to the one true God is not accepted, his conversion certainly took place soon after Abram's entrance into Canaan, for we see him at that time building altars and calling on the name of the Lord (12:7-9).

The next major crisis occurs when Abram "believed the Lord, and he credited it to him as righteousness" (Gen 15:6). Because the patriarch's impregnation of Hagar occurred after he had been in Canaan for ten years (Gen 16:3), and because the events of Gen 12:10-14:24 seem to necessitate several years at least (see 12:10, 16; 13:2, 6), we may approximate his age as close to 85. Now, when Abram seemingly could not perform the righteous act he wished to do--i.e., have a son to inherit the promises--God accepted his faith as righteousness. It is most important to realize that Abram was already a converted man when he believed that God would give him an heir from his own body, resulting in offspring as the stars of heaven. This is the word of God which Abram believed, and his faith on this occasion was that which was credited or imputed to him as righteousness. Abram was surely not "saved" or justified initially at this time as commentators frequently state or assume.⁴⁵ Of course Gen 15:6 expresses exactly the truth of

both grammatically permissible and preferable here (D. Kidner, *Genesis* [Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity, 1967] 113 n 1; J. J. Davis, *Paradise to Prison* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1975] 166. H. C. Leupold, however, prefers the usual rendering "said" (*Exposition of Genesis* [2 vols; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1942] 1.410). Kidner (113-14) and Davis (164, 166) thus consider the call of God to have been given to Abram while still in Ur. Note also "had told" in Gen 12:4.

⁴⁵ See, e.g., Hiebert, *James* 192, 195; and Tasker, *James* 67. Others correctly note that Gen 15:6 does not describe Abraham's confession of salvation: Davis, *Paradise to Prison* 186; Leupold, *Genesis* 1. 478-79; H. G. Stigers, *A Commentary on Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976) 154.

justification by faith and describes the justified character of Abraham throughout his lifetime as a believer. The statement here, however, refers to one event that showed Abraham's original justifying faith in operation.

When he was 99 (Gen 17), after waiting over 14 years, and after wrongly fathering Ishmael, Abram believed God again--believing this time that Sarai (now 89) would be the mother of the offspring promised in Gen 15:1-6. This revelation resulted in the names of Abram and Sarai being changed and Abram and Ishmael being circumcised. The crisis, however, was in Abraham's believing God's specific promise to give an heir from the seemingly "dead" bodies of him and his wife (Gen 17:15-17,21; Rom 4:18-22).

The final crisis, for our purpose, is Abraham's offering of Isaac in Genesis 22. Since Isaac was born when Abraham was 100 (Gen 21:5), and since Isaac was old enough to carry the firewood (22:6), Abraham was perhaps 115-125. The significance of this event is that when it was over God declared Abraham to be a man who feared and obeyed him (Gen 22:12,18), and acted in total faith (Heb 11:17-19). After some 50 or more years Abraham died at the age of 175 (Gen 25:7).

With the above outline in mind we return to James 2. Verse 21 appears clear in light of the previous examination of "justify." The question, which assumes the answer yes, instructs us that Abraham was "justified" or "considered righteous for what he did when he offered his son Isaac on the altar." This is certainly not Abraham's initial justification, nor his final justification at the last judgment, but is one occurrence in his lifetime when God declared his servant to be a righteous person, because he feared and obeyed God (Gen 22:12, 18). God desired Abraham and subsequent generations to know that the patriarch--a man who had come to know the one true God many years before--was indeed one who believed God and acted upon that belief. "You see that his faith and his actions were working together⁴⁶ and his faith was made complete by what he did" (v 22). James is not teaching that Abraham's faith before Genesis 22 was insufficient to save, but that his faith was perfected--brought to its intended goal, accomplished its intended purpose⁴⁷--by the offering of Isaac. "As the tree is perfected: by its fruits, so faith by its works."⁴⁸

In v 23 James recalls Gen 15:6 and teaches that in the event of Genesis 22 the declaration of Genesis 15 some 30 or more years earlier⁴⁹

⁴⁶ *synergei* (imperfect active indicative) signifies that this working together of faith and works was not a unique Occurrence, but was characteristic of Abraham's life.

⁴⁷ *eteleiothe* (BAGD 809).

⁴⁸ Mayor, *St. James* 104.

⁴⁹ According to the Rabbis this took place 50 years earlier (Mayor, *St. James* 104).

was "fulfilled" or made full. Here is a most strategic move in the argument. When Abraham began to offer Isaac he was prevented by God. He did "work"--up to a point (v 22)--but the offering was as much an exercise of faith as a work since Abraham didn't actually sacrifice Isaac. At every step in the drama he had to work and exercise faith in God's promise to give him offspring through Isaac--the very one he was about to slay. When God intervened, however, the work that Abraham had begun, and was about to complete, was not allowed to continue. His faith in God was therefore accepted and credited to Abraham's account as righteousness (i.e., as a work of righteousness⁵⁰) in lieu of the work that Abraham would have done if he were able. In addition; James weaves into his argument the tradition that Abraham was declared to be God's "friend" (2 Chr 20:7; Isa 41:8), indicating that the patriarch was one who exercised both faith and obedience toward his God.

In what sense was the scripture of Gen 15:6 "fulfilled" in the Genesis 22 account? "Fulfilled" here is not referring to prediction-fulfillment, as Ropes understands it,⁵¹ but connotes rather that Gen 15:6 was shown to be in agreement with the Genesis 22 narrative. James' approach in chapter 2 is typical of the midrashic method: a primary event or text is cited (v 21), the text is discussed. (v 22), and then a secondary text is added to the discussion (v 23).⁵² Gen 15:6 was thus "fulfilled" or made full in the sense that the truth of God expressed therein--that Abraham was a person whose firm trust in God's promises was accepted for righteousness--agreed with the theological meaning of Genesis 22 and actually blossomed fully in the offering of Isaac. Even more than in Genesis 15, Abraham in chapter 22 had to trust God. The truth-principle of Gen 15:6, which characterized Abraham from his initial conversion to his death, was gloriously revealed in the offering of Isaac. Abraham's willingness to offer his son brought out the full meaning of the words in Gen 15:6. His action made it clear that Abraham had the caliber of faith that God reckoned for righteousness, whether initially, finally, or throughout one's lifetime. This was a faith

⁵⁰ "Righteousness" in Jas 2:23 seems to have the sense of "fulfilling the divine statutes"--the righteous deeds which issue from the righteous person, the one who has been declared righteous through faith (BAGD 196 2a). This appears to be the notion of *dikaioσυνη* in such scriptures as Matt 3:15; 5:20; Acts 10:35; 1 Tim 6:11; 1 John 2:29; 3:7, 10; as well as in the two other occurrences in James (1:20; 3:18). In James there is thus a profound ethical quality to the word. See also Moo, *James* 110-111. "Additional Note" on justification.

⁵¹ Ropes, *St. James* 221.

⁵² Davids, *James* 129; R. N. Longenecker, *Biblical Exegesis in the Apostolic Period* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975) 23-28.

that did what God commanded. "Abraham was justified by the kind of faith which involves obedience, even costly obedience."⁵³ While the argument could proceed smoothly from v 22 directly to v 24 (and would certainly seem to *strengthen* the argument thereby!), James adds v 23 to emphasize the faith-foundation for Abraham's actions.

In v 24--the scripture said to contradict Paul most sharply--James concludes the argument from Abraham by stating that a person is declared to be righteous "by what he does and not by faith alone." The alleged conflict with Paul, however, disappears when this verse is read in the light of the previous verses, the Genesis account, and the different concerns and vocabularies of Paul and James. How can one be declared or said to be righteous if all one knows about the person is his or her affirmation of a set of doctrines? James' point is certainly not that orthodox belief is wrong, but that such faith must be active in the tangible experiences of life in order for God or anyone else to declare its owner a truly righteous person. The central element in the Jewish concept of righteousness was that of active, visible, and practical deeds, and the thoroughly Jewish writer, James, is teaching here that a person of "faith" without such deeds cannot be justified--cannot be declared righteous. C. E. B. Cranfield says it well: "Had there been no works, Abraham would not have been justified; but that would have been because the absence of works would have meant that he had no real faith."⁵⁴

IV. *Abraham in Galatians and Romans*

Bible students have often been confused by the way in which Paul argues from the life of Abraham when this is placed alongside James' use of the patriarch. Both use the same leading example and both quote from the same leading text (Gen 15:6) to arrive seemingly at opposite conclusions. The two chief texts in which Paul argues from the Genesis account are Romans 4 and Galatians 3.

Paul's argument in Galatians 3 is to convince those in the churches who had begun the new life of the Spirit by faith (as evidently many had) that they were "foolish" and "bewitched" to think that they could add to their Christian standing before God and reach the goal of final salvation by human effort through works of law (vv 1-5). Abraham is then introduced in v 6, where Paul quotes Gen 15:6 to establish his point: Abraham believed God and this faith was credited to him for righteousness. He stood righteous before God by faith. As noted above,

⁵³ Mitton, *James* 113.

⁵⁴ Cranfield, "Message of James" 340.

of this key scripture states exactly the truth-principle of justification by he faith, even though the event in Abraham's life where it is mentioned is not his initial conversion. The scripture also depicts the general character and actions of Abraham from his conversion to his death. It is used here by Paul to demolish the false teaching that adherence to works of law was essential for attaining salvation at any stage in the life of a person. "Those who *believe* are children of Abraham" (v 7). The Christian life is begun by faith and is *lived* by faith. Of course, just as James insists, works are necessary in the life of the believer, but these are to be works of love that spring from faith (Gal 5:6; 1 Thess 1:3), not works of law when these issue from fear or from disbelief of the sufficiency of divine grace under the new covenant. "Now that faith has come, we are no longer under the supervision of the law" (v 25).

In Romans 4 we find Paul again using Gen 15:6. Following his classic statement in 3:21-31 concerning God's imputed righteousness through faith apart from works, Paul then considers Abraham as a central example of this doctrine. Abraham's justification was not by works (v 2), for he believed God and this was credited for righteousness--a righteous standing before God (vv 3-5). Paul thus uses the event of Genesis 15, when Abraham as a justified man for many years again had his faith reckoned for righteousness, to establish that the patriarch was a person justified by faith, not works. Paul goes on to explain that Abraham was reckoned righteous when he was approaching 85--long before his circumcision at the age of 99 (vv 9-12). The apostle is seeking especially to establish the fact of Abraham's justified condition because of his belief in God's promises, not because of his obedience to God's laws, however important those laws may have been (vv 13-17). It is the faith-principle of Gen 15:6 that is important to Paul and to his argument. Paul is not saying that Abraham was converted initially in Genesis 15, but that he was a converted, justified person in Genesis 15. He was a man of faith before the promise of Gen 15:1-5 was given and he showed this by his trust in God's word at that time.⁵⁵

Paul continues developing the faith-principle in Rom 4:18-24, but here he uses Genesis 17 to make his point. When Abraham was 99 and

⁵⁵ E. Kasemann's (*Commentary on Romans*, 4th ed. [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980] 110) statement on Rom 4:1-8 that Paul "does not have in mind here either a quality or a meritorious work of the patriarch but the latter's devotion to the issued word of promise, according to which God wills and acknowledges nothing but faith," needs to be adjusted by the realization that Abraham's faith-devotion to God's promises was a quality of the patriarch's life. K. Barth (*The Epistle to the Romans*, 6th ed. [London: Oxford University, 1963] 121) asserts: "Abraham believed. Here is the action which makes him what he is; here is the hidden source of all his well-known works (iv. 2). As a believer Abraham is what he is."

Sarah 89, Abraham believed God's promise that *Sarah* would be the mother of the seed promised in Genesis 15. He and Ishmael were then circumcised. Once again Paul uses Gen 15:6 (vv 22-24), obviously not because Abraham was justified initially at this time, but because the *principle* underlying this doctrine of justification by faith--believing God's promises and having this faith credited for righteousness--again was shown to be operative in the patriarch's life.

Several events in Abraham's life, then, argue for the Pauline doctrine of justification: the initial call and promise to Abraham (Gal 3:6-9) and the experiences of Genesis 15 and 17 (Rom 4). (Even the offering of Isaac is a profound statement of Abraham's faith according to Heb 11:17-19.) Paul's central application from the life of Abraham is that "those who have faith are blessed along with Abraham the man of faith" (Gal 3:9). While his concern is the faith that initially justifies, thereby procuring a righteous standing before God, the principle applies also to the faith that is continually accepted for righteous deeds throughout a believer's life--those deeds which a justified person would do in certain situations if it were possible to do something other than trust.

With this understanding of Paul's use of Abraham, it is now apparent that there is no conflict with James. While both use the same leading example and the same leading text, they do not arrive at opposite conclusions. Paul refers to Gen 15:6 and Genesis 17 to show the necessity of faith--to argue that no one, not even the law-abiding Abraham, is justified initially by works, even if those works are good in themselves. Paul refers to Abraham's trust in God, concerning his offspring in Genesis 15 and 17, to emphasize that Abraham was declared to be righteous through faith, not works. He could not work in those two instances, for he had tried and failed to produce seed through Sarah. God therefore credited Abraham's unshakeable faith in the promises as righteousness. But Abraham's faith is not presented as a work, as in later Judaism. Paul teaches that it is this kind of faith--a faith that believes apart from works--that is the medium for a person's initial justification, procuring a righteous standing before God and leading to exploits for God.⁵⁶

James refers to Gen 15:6 and Genesis 22 to show the necessity of works--to establish that Abraham's faith was an active, obedient faith" which resulted in this already-justified man being *declared* righteous.

⁵⁶ We are not saying here that a person's faith is equivalent to the righteousness of Christ that brings salvation. Faith is rather the God-appointed means whereby a person receives the righteousness graciously given by God. see Kasemann, *Romans* 111-12; and R. Haldane, *Exposition of the Epistle to the Romans* (London: Banner of Truth, 1958 reprint) 162-71.

For James the formula "the scripture was fulfilled" (2:23) holds a major clue to the way he uses Gen 15:6. The truth of this scripture was made full and blossomed beautifully when Abraham believed God and acted upon that belief by offering his beloved son. Similarly, James' insertion that Abraham was called the friend of God (v 23) reveals that James is not talking about Abraham's initial justification through God's imputed righteousness, but a personal relationship whereby Abraham, through obedient faith, maintained close fellowship with God.

V. Conclusion

Does James contradict the Pauline soteriology? Are there really two ways of salvation presented by Paul and James? This article has sought to demonstrate that there is no genuine conflict between the apostles. As C. Vaughan writes, "Paul was expounding the way of justification. James was describing the life of the justified. Paul was combating Jewish legalism; James was combating antinomianism."⁵⁷ James is not contrasting two methods of salvation--one of faith and one of works--but two kinds of faith: one which saves and one which does not.

In Rom 2:13 Paul sounds very much like James: "For it is not those who hear the law who are righteous in God's sight, but it is those who obey the law who will be declared righteous." The apostles do not oppose each other, but work together to combat the enemy on different fronts. Paul stresses the initial justification of a sinner by grace through faith without works, whereas James stresses the continuing justification of a believer by grace through faith which issues in works. Paul's words in Gal 5:6 can be thought of as the text James is expounding: "For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value. The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love." As Davids states, "to argue that James directly attacks Paul is to argue that James is a consummate blunderer, for he fails to meet Paul's arguments at all and instead produces a work with which Paul would have agreed"⁵⁸

The ethical ramifications of Jas 2:14-26, as well as of the entire epistle, are enormous. The situation which James faced was in essence not dissimilar to that in the Church today. L. Goppelt wisely observes that James was confronting

a Christianity for which God and justification by faith alone had become metaphysical theories. People were so convinced of these theories that

⁵⁷ Vaughan, *James* 56.

⁵⁸ Davids, *James*, 21.

they no longer had any impact on conduct. Such a Christianity of conviction can come about in a variety of contexts. It can be a lifeless orthodoxy that suffocates in intellectualism; it can also be a middle-class Christian liberalism that lives in conformity with the world and turns grace into cheap grace.⁵⁹

Whenever people trust in their religious activities for salvation, God's servants must strenuously and without compromise declare Paul's message of justification by faith. Whenever those in the churches consider correct doctrine to be the distinguishing mark of true Christianity, James' message that only an obedient faith is a saving faith must, just as forcefully, be proclaimed. "As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead" (Jas 2:26).

⁵⁹ Goppelt, *Theology of NT* 2. 209.

This material is cited with gracious permission from:

The Criswell College
4010 Gaston Ave.
Dallas, TX 75246
www.criswell.edu

Please report any errors to Ted Hildebrandt at: thildebrandt@gordon.edu