

HOW TO ENERGIZE YOUR FAITH: RECONSIDERING THE MEANING OF JAMES 2:14-26

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I. Introduction

The members of a small group Bible study gather to discuss personal evangelism, none of whom have ever persistently shared their faith. How passionate do you suppose their conversation will be? The members of another small group Bible study also meet to discuss personal evangelism. But in this group, each Christian is taking bold steps to win others to Christ. They are actually doing evangelism, not just talking about it. It is not too difficult to visualize how differently each group might present their beliefs about reaching the non-Christian for the Savior. Nor is it too complicated to understand how one's belief in evangelism might be energized by the work of evangelism. Good works bring vitality and spirit to our faith. At the risk of oversimplification, this elementary but dynamic principle is what pervades Jas 2:14-26.

Because of various theologies and dogmas, evangelical exegesis of James 2 has unfortunately maintained a fixed focus that has obscured its perception of the chapter. In fact, I find that the traditional perspective of James 2 is so ingrained in our thinking that it is difficult for us to examine the passage with freshness and openness. The major traditional perspective on James 2 that stands out as a barrier to exegesis is the proposition that true faith always results in *consistent* good works in a believer's life.¹ James 2 is most often used as the proof text for this conception.² According to

this viewpoint, James 2 is addressing the problem of people who falsely profess to have faith.³ False faith, it is reasoned, is merely an “intellectual” faith inadequate to produce the necessary good works that prove that such a person is a true Christian. Support for this definition of faith is thought to be resident in the statement of Jas 2:14, “Can such faith save him?”

¹The word *consistent* is a vital element in this statement. Note that we are not suggesting that true faith can exist without ever producing good works of any sort. See my article, “The Faith of Demons: James 2:19,” *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society* 8 (Autumn 1995): 39-54. Cf. also Zane C. Hodges, *Absolutely Free: A Biblical Reply to Lordship Salvation* (Dallas: Redención Viva, 1989), 215.

²Many authors find this viewpoint in James 2. James B. Adamson, *The Epistle of James*, in *The New International Commentary on the New Testament*, ed. F. F. Bruce (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1976), 120-24; Peter Davids, *The Epistle of James*, in *The New International Greek Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1982), 49-51, 120-21; Edmond D. Hiebert, *The Epistle of James* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1979), 43-45; Robert V. Rakestraw, “James 2:14-26: Does James Contradict Pauline Soteriology?” *Criswell Theological Review* 1 (Fall 1986): 31-50; John Polhill, “Prejudice, Partiality, and Faith: James 2,” *Review and Expositor* 83 (Summer 1986): 395-404; R. E. Glaze Jr., “The Relationship of Faith to Works,” *The Theological Educator* 34 (Fall 1986): 35-42. The list of sources for this viewpoint could be greatly extended.

³This approach to the book overwhelmingly dominates theological thinking. For example, in the opening paragraph to his entire commentary, Hiebert remarks, “The author’s central aim is to challenge the readers to test the validity of their faith.” D. Edmond Hiebert, *James*, 13. MacArthur writes, “His entire epistle consists of tests of true faith...” John F. MacArthur Jr., *The Gospel According to Jesus: What Does Jesus Mean When He Says, “Follow Me”?* revised and expanded ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1994), 252.

On the contrary, James addresses his readers as Christians, employing the term “brothers” (*adelphoi*) 19 times. Three of these uses are found in the intimate address, “my beloved brothers” (*adelphoi mou agape toi*). In the epistles, only 1 Corinthians has a greater use of the term “brothers” (39 times). Romans and 1 Thessalonians tie with James for 19 uses.

(NIV), or that of 2:17, “Thus also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.” Further support is garnered from the mention that *even the demons believe* (2:19)—a supposed example of false faith. In the final analysis, dead faith is equated with no faith at all. It is a false faith.

If this is James’s purpose for 2:14-26, one of two primary responses surfaces. First is the response of complacency. I might say to myself, “I know I’m a Christian and bound for heaven. By God’s grace, I have enough good works in my life to show it. These verses have no application for me because they are addressed to people who have false faith.”

A second response is that of an unhealthy questioning of my salvation. I might say to myself, “I’ve trusted Christ as my Savior and thought I was a Christian. But now I’m not sure if I really have enough good works to prove it.” Regardless of which response is the result, complacency or unhealthy introspection injures the Christian spiritually and the real impact of the passage is neglected.

James is one of the NT books that is extremely relevant for the twentieth-century church. Like American evangelicals, the Jewish Christians to whom James addresses his challenges are ensnared by worldliness (1:27b; 4:4) and are idolizing economic prosperity (2:2-4; 4:13). Their desire for material gain has prevented them from caring for the practical needs of others less fortunate (1:27a; 2:15-16).⁴ But much of the strength of James’s rebuke of worldly Christians goes unheeded. The blame for this may well lie at the feet of the true-faith-versus-false-faith theology that has been made to override all other concerns in James

⁴It must be admitted that the situation of 2:15-16 is a realistic possibility for genuine believers (“*one of you* says to them,” v 15a [italics added]). Since an epistle must be read in light of the occasion for writing (the life situation of the audience), it is highly likely that James is addressing a life situation that is actually taking place among his readers. By beginning his description with “If

2 and the epistle as a whole.⁵ In my opinion, the primary purpose of the latter half of James 2 is to incite within the *Christian* reader the need to be active in doing more good works that meet practical needs.⁶ That kind of exhortation is radically lost if we force on the unit a false faith/true faith purview.

The very heart and method of James's appeal in chapter 2 is to arouse

a brother or sister" (2:15), James confronts the relationship of one believer to another. Any attempt to find in 2:15-16 so-called "false believers" is gratuitous. Since these Jewish Christians had been scattered either throughout Palestine or other nations (1:1), additional burdens were placed on their finances. Lacking the kind of generosity that characterizes the very nature of God Himself (1:5, 17; 5:11), these Christians found ways to treat those with material needs rather mercilessly (2:2-6; 12-13).

⁵Note how MacArthur transforms James's appeal for Christians to repent of worldliness into an address to non-Christians: "One of the most comprehensive invitations to salvation in all the Epistles comes in James 4:7-10." MacArthur, *The Gospel According to Jesus*, 252. If this passage is a "comprehensive invitation to salvation," one wonders why there is an absence of such words as "faith" (*pistis*), "believe" (*pisteuō*), "(eternal) life" (*zōē*), "forgiveness" (*aphesis*), "forgive" (*charizomai*), "save" (*sozō*), "salvation" (*sōtēria*), and other terms that might invoke the thought that an invitation to salvation was being offered. To make matters worse, "Christ" or a related term is not mentioned in the passage, and His death and resurrection are not found in the entire book. Scholars have noticed the absence of these truths in James. Simon J. Kistemaker, "The Theological Message of James," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 29 (March 1986): 56.

⁶James is generally recognized to be a very practical book with less of a theological intent. Donald W. Burdick, "James," *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank E. Gaebel (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1981), 12:164; William Dyrness ("Mercy Triumphs Over Justice: James 2:13 and the Theology of Faith and Works," *Themelios* 6 [April 1981]: 12) remarks, "Most would agree

acts of mercy from those who *know they have already received* the mercy of God.⁷ James simply does not question the fact that his readers are true Christians. He appeals to them based on the reality of their new birth. Perhaps the most transparent statement to this effect is 2:1, “My brothers, as believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ, do not show favoritism” (NIV).⁸ All that James has to say is designed to shake us “as believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ” from the comfort of worldliness and challenge us to meet the practical needs of others such as the needs of an orphan or a widow (1:26). He does so without ever finding it necessary to scrutinize our experience of salvation.

Many other Scriptures contradict the proposition that “all true Christians will produce good works that are pleasing to God.” For example, the teaching of 1 Corinthians 3 must be brought into the discussion. Concerning the future evaluation of a Christian, Paul explains that each

with him [M. Dibelius] that James does not contain a developed theology.” It is puzzling, then, why the heavy theological emphasis is seen to dominate James 2. A practical approach is much more in harmony with the nature of the rest of the book.

⁷James 2:12 is sufficient evidence that a key motivational technique for the author is to base his exhortation on the very fact of their assured conversion. N.B., the NLT’s free rendering of 2:12b, “remember that you will be judged by the law of love, the law that set you free.” Such statements are inappropriate for unbelievers or so-called “false Christians” who have never been set free.

⁸Here the NLT (“how can you claim that you have...?”) and the NRSV (“do you with your acts of favoritism really believe...?”) read the Greek prejudicially.

⁹It is the quality (1 Cor 3:10) and motives (1 Cor 4:5; Heb 4:12-13) of a believer’s works that are evaluated. It follows logically, then, that some Christians will *appear to us* to be doing consistent good works that prove they are saved, while *the Lord* views them as disobedient Christians like the worldly Corinthians (1 Cor 3:1-3).

¹⁰The second person singular form of *blepō* (“you see”) is used in Jas 2:22, making it evident that James is personally responding to the objector’s comments

believer must stand before the Lord Jesus Christ one day to have his works examined. At that time all of our deeds will go through a “fire” that tests their quality. In some cases a believer’s works may appear to be “good works” to others. But his inner motives may be impure (cf. Matt 6:1-18; 1 Cor 4:5; Heb 4:12), making the quality of his works unacceptable to God and therefore “burned up.” Of this person Paul says, “He shall suffer loss, yet he himself will be saved” (1 Cor 3:15). This is an undeniable case of a Christian who is bound for heaven but does not produce enough good works to ultimately please the Lord and be rewarded.⁹ Like 1 Corinthians 3 and the Corinthian church, the pages of Scripture contradict the idea that genuine Christians will consistently yield fruit that pleases the Lord. The Bible is filled with commands directed to true believers to be busy in doing good deeds (Col 1:10; 2 Thess 2:17; 1 Tim 2:10; 5:10; 6:18; 2 Tim 2:21; 3:17; Titus 2:7, 14; 3:13, 8, 14; Heb 10:24; Jas 3:13; 1 Pet 2:12). It never presumes that good works will be done just because true faith exists.

II. Three Central Teachings from James 2

There are three correct perspectives that arise from James 2. First, James is teaching that *speaking* our faith without *doing* our faith cannot meet practical needs. We see this illustrated in Jas 2:16 by a brother or sister who is without clothing, in need of daily food. James continues, “and one of you [i.e., one of you Christians] says to them, ‘Depart in

and is arguing for the visibility of faith.

¹¹Cf. Zane C. Hodges, *The Gospel Under Siege: Faith and Works in Tension*, revised and enlarged ed. (Dallas: Redención Viva, 1992); 34.

¹²*Contra* Kistemaker, “Theological Message of James,” 58; and Glaze, “Relationship of Faith to Works,” 41.

¹³Hodges, *The Gospel Under Siege*, 34-35.

peace, be warmed and filled,' but you do not give them the things which are needed for the body, what does it profit?" Seeing a fellow Christian in need of food and clothing, this believer *says* to the destitute one, "Go, and may you be well cared for." "What good is that?" James replies. The point is that faith (i.e., true faith, if the term is needed for some) by itself, without works, cannot meet the practical needs of a person. Faith just cannot do that. But deeds can.

A second correct perspective in James 2 is that by its very nature faith is invisible, but can be seen through our good works. It cannot be concluded from this that good works must be present for true faith to exist. Nevertheless, works make visible to other people the faith that is visible only to God. An imaginary opponent challenges James by saying, "You can't see faith. Show me, even though I know you can't." James responds by declaring, "Indeed, you can see faith! You can see how Abraham trusted God when he offered Isaac on the altar. His faith and works were cooperating so that his faith became visible through his works."¹⁰

A third correct perspective in this section is that when good works are added to our faith, our faith in Christ is matured. This is exactly the experience of Abraham. "Do you see that faith was working together with his works, and by works faith *was made perfect* (i.e., matured; Greek: *teleiōō*)?" (2:22). Abraham's faith was matured when he added works to it.¹¹ Certainly James is not suggesting that Abraham's work of offering his son Isaac in sacrifice proved his faith was genuine.¹² The sacrifice of Isaac took place as much as thirty-five years after Abraham's justification by faith. Were

¹⁴Robert W. Funk, "The Letter: Form and Style," in *Language, Hermeneutic, and the Word of God* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1966), 257, 269; Paul Schubert, *Form and Function of the Pauline Thanksgivings* (Berlin: A. Topelmann,

there not many other earlier events that could validate Abraham's faith just as clearly? The point of v 22 is not the substantiation of faith but the maturation of it. Romans tells us that Abraham initially trusted in the God of resurrection, i.e., that God could bring life to his dead body (Rom 4:17-20). But when he offered up Isaac, Hebrews tells us (11:17-19) that he believed that God would resurrect his son from the dead.¹³ His belief in the resurrection was put to the test (cf. Gen 22:1) and as a result of his works, his faith was matured.

III. Hermeneutics, the Epistles, and James 2

It is now common to view an epistolary introduction as an authorial device that announces the central themes of a letter.¹⁴

Like the growth of a flower, the prologue of an epistle is the thematic bud and the body of the epistle is the full blossom. Further, the conclusion and the introduction will often be joined with verbal and conceptual links that form a harmony of ideas, confirming the themes.¹⁵ These two hermeneutical principles form a check and balance system for interpretation. If I find in the body of an epistle several basic themes that are not found in the prologue or the epilogue, my exegesis may likely be faulty.

Traditional approaches to James 2 flounder against these hermeneutical tests.¹⁶ The issue of true faith/false faith does not appear in the introduction

1939), 25-26, 76-77. I have argued this in another article as it relates to the exegesis of Phil 1:6; "Does Philippians 1:6 Guarantee Progressive Sanctification? Part 1," *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society* 9 (Spring 1996): 37-58.

¹⁵Technically, this harmony of the prologue and epilogue forms an *inclusio*.

¹⁶Dyrness cites Dr. Newton Flew (the bibliographic information is not mentioned) as suggesting that James 1:1-10 (but especially vv 2-4) "lists all the topics James will cover in his letter" (the quote belongs to Dyrness). Dyrness, "Mercy Triumphs Over Justice," 15, n. 17.

or conclusion of the letter. Nor does the introduction concern itself with a conception that true faith results in consistent good works. The opening of the epistle reveals that the saints to whom James writes are undergoing trials that are testing their faith (1:2). While some are convinced that this test is designed to separate genuine faith from spurious faith, such thinking is not readily evident. On the contrary, the testing process itself is a mark that one is within the family of God. As an OT believer, Abraham faced a test of his faith when he was commanded to offer up his son Isaac (Gen 22:1; Heb 11:17)—a test that forms the essential backdrop to the mention of this incident in Jas 2:22. The Father is in the business of putting his children into situations that will develop their trust in Him.

The potter does not examine defective vessels...What then does he examine? Only the sound vessels...Similarly, the Holy One, blessed be He, tests not the wicked but the righteous, as it says, “The Lord trieth the righteous.”¹⁷

What the introduction does present is a contrast between a mature faith and immature faith. James reminds his readers that trials can lead to endurance, and endurance should be permitted to “have its perfect [*teleios*] work, that you may be perfect [*teleios*] and complete, lacking nothing” (1:4).¹⁸ The same Greek root used in 1:4 is employed by James in 2:22 (*teleioō*)

¹⁷These words are taken from Rabbi Jonathan, *Gen. Rab.* 55:2, cited with agreement in Peter H. Davids, “Theological Perspectives in the Epistle of James,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 23 (June 1980): 98. Cf. also Ps 11:5; Jer 20:12, where the Lord tests the righteous, but not the wicked.

¹⁸The NIV of 1:4 states, “so that you may be *mature* and complete” (italics added).

¹⁹The words *teleios* and *teleioō* are regularly used to denote maturity (1 Cor 2:6; 3:1; 14:20; Eph 4:13; Phil 3:15; Col 1:28; 4:12; Heb 5:14). William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, translated by Walter Bauer, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of

to describe the maturing of Abraham's faith. If the believer will respond to trials with joy and allow endurance to have its perfecting (maturing) work, he will develop a mature, complete character.¹⁹ Since immediately following the Jas 2:14-26 context the author brings up the thought of maturity again (3:2), there is no reason to think that the concept should not be given much greater weight in the James 2 unit than any conception of a so-called false faith.²⁰

III. The Analogy of the Body and Spirit

If we were to construct an analogy between the body and the spirit and the words "faith" and "works," how would we normally state the analogy? Invariably, our first response would be to say that "faith" corresponds to spirit and "works" corresponds to "body." Our reasoning would be that faith forms the inner motivating force and any good work must have faith behind it in order for it to be a valid good work, pleasing to God.

Chicago Press, 1979), *s.v.* *teleiōō* and *teleios* 809-810.

²⁰Of all NT books, the Epistle of James uses the words *teleiōō* and *teleios* second in frequency (6 times) only to Hebrews (11 times). Other uses besides those mentioned above include 1:17 and 1:25.

²¹Hodges suggests that this summary or conclusion to 2:14-26 might be a starting point for understanding the passage. Zane C. Hodges, *Dead Faith: What Is It? A Study on James 2:14-26* (Dallas: Redención Viva, 1987), 7-8.

²²To this might be added the thought that James states that the man only "says" he has faith (2:14). But with the use of *legē tis* ("someone says"), there is no inference that the claim is devoid of reality. Plummer notes this fact: "St. James is not insinuating that the man says he has faith, when he really has none. If that were the case, it would be needless to ask, 'can his faith save him?' The question would be, 'can his profession of faith save him?'" Alfred Plummer, *The General Epistles of St. James and St. Jude*, in *Expositor's Bible* (London: Hodder &

Such a theology is precisely what Paul teaches (Gal 5:16b; 1 Thess 1:3). Unfortunately, this is one of the causes of our misguided views of James 2. Paul's thoughts are erroneously superimposed on James. But James actually affirms the very opposite correspondence in the analogy. He summarizes this whole section (2:14-26) by saying, "For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also."²¹ It should be carefully observed that "body" corresponds with "faith," and "spirit" corresponds with "works." A body without the spirit is analogous to faith without works.

James is teaching that faith without works is simply a cold orthodoxy, lacking spiritual vibrancy. Practically speaking, we might think of a "dead church." This is not to say that those gathering as part of this assembly are not Christians. As noted earlier, James's concerns are more practical than theological. The real issue for these believers is the absence or presence of a freshness, vitality, and energy in their faith. When a Christian engages in practical deeds to benefit others, James says our faith comes alive.

IV. Objections to This Interpretation of James 2

A. The Salvation in 2:14

In rethinking James 2 with these insights, several objections may be

Stoughton, 1897), 137. Dibelius correctly interprets: "One cannot read into the words should claim [to have faith]...that what is meant here is a false faith, one which is only alleged. James certainly never sets correct faith over against such an alleged faith." Martin Dibelius, *James*, ed. by Helmut Koester, translated by Michael A. Williams, revised by Heinrich Greeven (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976), 152. In addition, the exhortation to "so speak and so do" in 2:12 along

raised against the overview presented so far. One might object by asking, Does not Jas 2:14 refer to a false faith that does not save? After all, it says, “What does it profit, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can faith save him?”²² This objection is balanced on the unstable assumption that “save” ($\sigma\bar{\omega}\bar{\zeta}\bar{\rho}$) in the verse is to be interpreted as a deliverance from eternal damnation. An exegetical conjecture as foundational as this must be proved as the intent of the author rather than assumed by the interpreter. There are numerous places where the NT (as well as the OT) refers to “saved” or “salvation” but the reference is not to justification or eternal life.²³ Lexicographically, the nature of the salvation or deliverance cannot be found in the Greek words $\sigma\bar{\omega}\bar{\zeta}\bar{\rho}$ (“save”) or $\sigma\bar{\omega}\bar{\tau}\bar{\epsilon}\bar{\rho}\bar{\iota}\bar{\alpha}$ (“salvation”) themselves. Instead, it must be determined from context. This exegetical-hermeneutical consideration must be allowed to bear on Jas 2:14.

Some versions have tried to assist the reader by translating 2:14, “Can *that* faith save him?” (NASB, italics added) or “Can *such* faith save him?” (NIV, italics added). Each of these translations have no clear justification from the Greek. They may also lead to the erroneous conclusion that there is a kind of faith in Christ that brings eternal life (“true faith”) and another kind of faith in Christ that does not bring eternal life (“false faith”).²⁴

with the tacit reference to boasting in 2:13 (*katakauchatai*) set the stage well for a contrast between words and actions as stated above—a contrast clearly surfacing in the parable of 2:15-16 and the diatribe of 2:18-19. Cf. the similar argument of Roy Bowen Ward, “The Works of Abraham: James 2:14-16,” *Harvard Theological Review* 61 (1968): 283-84. Exhortations against evil boasting, both explicit and implicit, surface within the epistle regularly, showing the addressees struggled with this sin (1:9; 2:13; 3:14; 4:16).

²³See, for example, Joseph C. Dillow, *The Reign of the Servant Kings: A Study of Eternal Security and the Final Significance of Man* (Hayesville, NC: Schoettle Publishing Co., 1992), 111-33.

In the Scripture, however, faith placed in Christ always results in eternal life. The Bible only mentions two responses to Christ: faith and no faith. What is labeled as false faith must be categorized biblically either by faith or unbelief. If the response envisioned is unbelief, then the word “faith” should not be used. In Jas 2:14, the NKJV, KJV, NRSV, and RSV are fully correct to translate simply, “Can faith save him?”²⁵

If James is asking “Can faith alone get a person to heaven?” a serious contradiction exists with other Scriptures because the question posed in the Greek of 2:14b demands a negative answer: “Faith cannot save him, can it?” Without a doubt, Paul declares that faith alone justifies us before God (Rom 1:17; 3:22, 26, 28, 30; 4:3, 5; 5:1; Gal 2:16; 3:8). Evangelical attempts to impose a true-faith-produces-works solution on the passage are not helpful.²⁶ However, could it be that James is *not* talking about being saved from hell? Resistance to this possibility is strong. At least two objections are raised. First, some think that the merciless judgment mentioned in

²⁴Radmacher points out that the multitude of adjectives used by proponents of perseverance theology to describe faith (e.g., false faith, genuine faith, intellectual faith, etc.) are never found in the Bible. Earl D. Radmacher, “First Response to ‘Faith According to the Apostle James,’ by John F. MacArthur, Jr.,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 33 (March 1990): 37.

²⁵The article appears with faith (*he pistis*). Wallace argues against Hodges (*Gospel Under Siege*, 23) that the article is anaphoric rather than simply used with an abstract noun. Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1996), 219. Hodges has in his defense the uses of the article with faith (*pistis*) in the following context (2:17, 18, 20, 22, 26). Wallace still insists that the article in 2:14 is anaphoric and speaks of two kinds of faith. But even if the article were anaphoric, this use of the anaphoric article merely points back to an antecedent use of the word “faith.” (Cf. Nigel Turner, *Syntax*, in *A Grammar of New Testament Greek*,

2:12-13 must be the final judgment. As a result, the “save” in 2:14 must relate to eternal life.²⁷ But surely this exegesis cannot avoid the charge of a works salvation since according to 2:13 the doing of mercy (= works) will bring mercy in judgment (= forgiveness and eternal life).

The reading of Jas 2:12-13 as a reference to our eternal destiny in heaven or hell also confuses the NT teaching on the Judgment Seat of Christ for the believer (2 Cor 5:10) with the final judgment of the unbeliever (Rev 20:11-15). If space permitted, a more detailed analysis could be presented to show the need to separate the Christian’s judgment

ed. James Hope Moulton [Edinburgh: T & T Clark, LTD, 1963], 3:173.) The anaphoric article would be adequately translated like the RSV, “Can *his* faith save him?” (italics added). This rendering avoids reading into the verse any theological ideas about the nature of the faith under discussion. Cf. also A.T. Robertson, *A Grammar of the Greek New Testament in the Light of Historical Research* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1934), 755.

²⁶The popular ditty “Faith alone saves, but the faith that saves is never alone,” is attributed to the Reformed preacher John Owens. Although it is rhythmic enough to sound noteworthy, in actuality it is self-contradictory. Rephrasing the aphorism, we might say, “Faith without works saves, but the faith that saves without works is never without works.” If the faith that saves is *never* alone, i.e., faith and works are “inseparable,” it seems as if works will need to accompany the initial faith by which we are first born again. But that conclusion sets itself squarely against Paul and the NT teaching on justification by faith alone.

²⁷Gale Z. Heide, “The Soteriology of James 2:14,” *Grace Theological Journal* 12 (1992): 82-83.

²⁸See note 7 above. For an understanding of the “law of liberty,” see Zane C. Hodges, *The Epistle of James: Proven Character Through Testing* (Irving, TX: Grace Evangelical Society, 1994), 44, 56.

²⁹Thomas R. Schreiner, “Perseverance and Assurance: A Survey and a Proposal,” *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 2 (Spring 1998): 45. Cf. also Robert L. Saucy, “Second Response to ‘Faith According to the Apostle James’ by John F.

life. James addresses a person who plans a future business deal in another country without taking into consideration how long he might live. “For what is your life? It is even a vapor that appears for a little time and then vanishes away. Instead you ought to say, ‘If the Lord wills, we shall live and do this or that’” (Jas 4:14b-15). James is clear: “Life is fleeting! It is best that you include God in your plans, for He alone has the power to preserve your life or to take it.”

The final two uses of “save” in the book of James (1:21; 5:20) both use the phrase, “save the soul,” perhaps better translated “save the life.”³³ Studies on this phrase have been developed by Dillow and Hodges,³⁴ and do not need to be repeated here. The following conclusions can be drawn. First, in the LXX, the phrase means “deliverance from physical death,” and *never* relates to eternal salvation. Second, the NT continues to use the phrase in the identical sense (Mark 3:4; Luke 6:9; cf. 9:56, Majority

found in Jas 1:21 and 5:20.

³³James 1:21, 5:20, and 1 Pet 1:9 (using the noun phrase, “salvation of the soul”) are the only verses where the NT phrase is translated other than “save the life” (cf. Matt 16:25; Mark 3:41; 8:35; Luke 6:9; 9:24).

³⁴Dillow, *Reign of the Servant Kings*, 116-22, 189-91; Hodges, *The Gospel Under Siege*, 26-27; *Absolutely Free*, 120-21.

³⁵The metaphorical meaning cannot be developed here. It appears to carry the meaning of “a life delivered from being wasted on temporal pursuits and therefore eternally rewarded” (Matt 8:35; 16:25; Luke 9:24). See Zane C. Hodges, *Grace in Eclipse: A Study on Eternal Rewards* (Dallas: Redención Viva, 1985), 28-33. It is not impossible that this meaning is to be found in Jas 1:21 and 2:14.

³⁶Only theological prejudice can find false believers in this text. James 5:20 sets forth a scenario of someone among the Christian readers who “wanders from the truth” and then another brother “turns him back.” If James is entertaining the thought of a so-called (false) Christian, how can such a person wander from the truth that he has never embraced? How also is he to be “turned back” to

Text and the TR). Third, building on the literal meaning of the phrase (deliverance from physical death), Jesus taught a metaphorical meaning of the term “save the life.”³⁵ Fourth, in Jas 5:20, it is a fellow believer (“Brethren, if anyone *among you*,” italics added; 5:19) whose “soul [life] is saved.”³⁶ To further clarify that physical death is in view, the verse adds the words, “from death.”³⁷ The fifth point is an observation not directly made by Dillow or Hodges. The use of the phrase, “save the life” in 1:21 and 5:20—the first and last use of the word “save”—constitutes another *inclusio* in the book. Like parentheses around written material, it appears that James intended to use this *inclusio* to mark out a controlling theme for the intervening material and the remainder of his uses of “save.” We conclude, then, that there are very good reasons why James 2 may be saying, “Can faith alone save you from the devastating consequences of sin, ending in physical death?”³⁸

At first, the thought of being saved from physical death seems rather insipid.³⁹ However, James’s Jewish readers would have been steeped in the OT. According to the OT, sin naturally leads to an early physical death. Even the one commandment that contains a promise (“Honor your father and mother”) promises a long life on the earth (Eph 6:2). It is a clear fact that sin tends to shorten one’s life. James’s point is that just because someone believes in Christ does not mean he is going to escape

something he never had in the first place?

³⁷Physical death rather than eternal death is demanded by the verse because 1) the Christian’s eternal destiny is secure, with no threats of eternal damnation. Yet they can be subject to the death of 5:20; 2) James’s first mention of death resulting from sin can only be understood as physical death since sin “when it is full-grown, brings forth death” (1:15). The death under consideration results from the maturation of sin, not the inception of sin. Such a maturation is not

the devastation of sin and its ultimate consequence of physical death. New Testament Christians must realize that physical death is still a serious penalty for sin (1 Cor 11:30).

B. The Faith of Demons (2:19)

The second major objection to our approach to James 2 is this: Does not Jas 2:19 demonstrate the nature of a false faith when it mentions the faith of demons? Since I have dealt with this verse more thoroughly in another article,⁴⁰ I will summarize the salient arguments that respond to this objection. Three factors militate against using Jas 2:19 as evidence of a false faith. First, the content of the faith described in 2:19 is not Christ but monotheism. The text says, “You believe that there is one God...

necessary for either spiritual death in the life of the believer (broken fellowship) or eternal death for an unbeliever.

³⁸For a similar treatment, see R. Larry Moyer, *Free and Clear: Understanding and Communicating God’s Offer of Eternal Life* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1997), 72-77. There are at least two other options for the salvation of 2:14 that do not take the word to speak of eternal life. First, Kendall suggests that the “save” relates back to the “poor man” of 2:6 and that the context (2:15-16) focuses on the needs of the poor. Since this is the case, 2:14 expresses the impossibility of faith alone to save the poor man. R. T. Kendall, *Once Saved, Always Saved* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1983), 216.

Another option is to understand the “salvation” to relate to the Judgment Seat of Christ described in 2:12-13. Hodges advises that this meaning is not likely. Among several reasons, he points out that Scriptures do not teach elsewhere a salvation related to the Judgment Seat. Hodges, *James*, 61. He may be right. Yet, it is attractive because of the contextual closeness of 2:14 with 2:13. The flexibility of the word “save” lends itself to thinking this way. James could be arguing that faith without works cannot deliver a person from a merciless evaluation at the Judgment Seat of Christ. This would reflect the metaphorical use of the phrase, “save the life.” See note 35 above.

³⁹“But with this interpretive construct Hodges unknowingly renders James’s

Even the demons believe.” No one has ever been justified before God by faith that God is one. So then, using Jas 2:19 to compare false faith to true faith is a proverbial “comparing apples to oranges.” If the passage said, “You believe that Jesus is the Christ and your Savior; the demons also believe that,” then *perhaps* we could draw a theological lesson on the nature of faith.⁴¹

Second, it is theologically unsound to compare any kind of faith (true or false) expressed by demons with faith in Christ exercised by people. Where faith is concerned, the spirit world cannot be compared with the human world simply because there is no salvation for demons even if

argument from Abraham completely irrelevant (the issue in the patriarch’s case is obviously not the preservation of his physical life).” R. Fowler White, “Review of Zane Hodges’s *The Gospel Under Siege*,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 48 (Fall 1984): 428. The illustration of Abraham (2:21-22) comes after the objector’s challenges (2:18-19) and therefore moves beyond the focus of 2:14 alone. Abraham is most appropriate to demonstrate justification by works and the visibility of faith in works. But it must also be admitted that death surrounds all of James’s illustrations. Faith cannot preserve the life of a fellow Christian without food (2:15-16). By his obedience, Abraham preserved the life of his son. If the Lord sought to kill Moses for his disobedience in circumcising his son (Exod 4:24-25), then perhaps Abraham also averted his own death by his obedience in sacrificing Isaac. Rahab also preserved her life and the life of her family by her works.

⁴⁰Hart, “The Faith of Demons: James 2:19,” 39-54.

⁴¹Some hold that demons do indeed believe in Christ. Yet there are no passages that use the word “believe” (*pisteuō*) of demons other than Jas 2:19 (cf. Matt 8:29, par Mark 5:7, Luke 8:28; Mark 1:24, par Luke 4:34; Mark 3:11; Luke 4:41). The emphasis does not fall on faith but on knowledge (“I know who You are,” Mark 1:24; par Luke 4:34). Demons certainly know that Jesus is the Christ in the same way they know the authority of Paul as an apostle (Acts 19:15). In my opinion, however, demons do not believe in Christ because in the NT faith is always a personal appropriation of the truth of Christ’s death. In other words, for a demon to believe in Christ would mean that he would trust that Christ died

they did believe (Heb 2:16).

Third, it is highly likely that the words of 2:19, which include the phrase “the demons believe,” are not the teachings of James. Instead, they are the words of the imaginary objector that James introduces in v 18.⁴² It is surprising for some to discover that serious confusion exists on how far the objector’s words should extend. In an examination of varying English versions, the ending quote marks of the objector’s speech can be found in four different locations.⁴³ How far, then, do the objector’s words extend? In 1 Cor 15:35-36 and Rom 9:19-20 where an imaginary objector is introduced, the apostolic reply is initiated with a statement about the foolishness of the objector. James 2:19 is very parallel with the censorious address, “O foolish man.” Verse 20, therefore, begins James’s reply and v 19 originates in the mouth of the objector.

Time and space limitations prevent further exegetical details. But what

for *his* sins. But demons understand that Christ did not die for the spirit world.

⁴²While the opponent is imaginary, the content of his objection probably represents the opinion of several teachers within the assembly. Cf. 3:1. The rebuke of v 20, “do you want to know...?” (“When will you ever learn...?” NLI) reflects their desire to teach but their unwillingness to learn—a blemish that must be conquered by all teachers and preachers.

⁴³Hart, “The Faith of Demons: James 2:19,” 48-49.

⁴⁴It is significant that James never uses phraseology such as “justified by faith that produces works,” “justified by faith and works,” or any such combination. It is strictly, “justified by works.”

⁴⁵Works are transparently the means of the primary “justification” with which James is concerned. (He does, of course, make reference to justification by faith.) Any attempt to read James as if he were redefining Pauline justification by faith is fully misdirected. The NLT and TEV have no grounds for repeatedly adding to James the phrase “with God.” For example, “our ancestor Abraham

can be said (though without further proof) is that the objector denies the visibility of faith in someone's works, while James insists that it was clearly seen in the works of both Abraham and Rahab. So then, for the three reasons listed above, Jas 2:19 must be eliminated as a support for a false faith/true faith theology.

C. Justification by Works

A third objection centers on the concept of justification by works in James 2. The question is often asked, Is not James implying that if someone is truly justified by faith, he will do good works? Appeal may be made to v 24 for support: "You see that a person is justified by what he does and not by faith alone" (NIV). In answer to this objection, it may be helpful to discover that in Scripture, justification means "to be declared righteous." But there are three kinds of justification in the Bible. First, there is a justification by faith alone, which is a justification before God. Paul is clear in teaching that justification by faith is in the sight of God (Rom 3:20; 4:2; Gal 3:11). The good news of the gospel is that at the first moment of faith, the new believer is forensically declared to be just as

was declared right with God because of what he did" (NLT, v 21), effectively puts Paul at odds with James. The rendering, "we are made right with God by what we do, not by faith alone" (NLT, v 24), brings inerrancy into question and denies the sole condition (faith) for eternal life. Cf. also v 25.

⁴⁶In like manner, to the teachers (or anyone else) who wish to talk their faith rather than do it, James commands that wisdom be shown (*deiknumi*) rather than spoken (3:13).

⁴⁷Hodges, *The Gospel Under Siege*, 33-34.

⁴⁸Calvin agrees. "That we may not then fall into that false reasoning which has deceived the Sophists, we must take notice of the two-fold meaning of the word *justified*. Paul means by it the gratuitous imputation of righteousness before the tribunal of God; and James, the manifestation of righteousness by the conduct,

righteous as Christ is righteous!

A second kind of justification is a justification by works (or faith and works) before God. That kind of justification is always presented in Scripture as heresy as is evident by Paul's discussions in Romans and Galatians (Rom 3:20, 28; 4:2, 6; Gal 2:16; 3:2, 5, 10). But a third kind of justification in the Scriptures is a justification by works. James specifically mentions the phrase "justified by works" three times (2:21, 25, 26).⁴⁴ Justification by works is in the sight of *people*, not God.⁴⁵ This is the logical conclusion given the fact that James is responding to an objector who holds that faith cannot be seen. James calls on him to "see" (*blepō* v 22; *borao* v 24) how Abraham's works justified him.⁴⁶ Paul, in full harmony with James, considered the possibility of Abraham being justified by works "but not before God" (Rom 4:2).⁴⁷

With this in mind, one can better approach the meaning of v 24. The traditional understanding labors, unsuccessfully in my opinion, to harmonize the verse with Paul by insisting that saving faith will inevitably produce good works. Far too much must be read into the verse to satisfy objectivity. A greater harmony with Paul is achieved by understanding the verse as delineating two kinds of justification.⁴⁸ Several translations (KJV, NKJV, ASV, NJB) of v 24 utilize the word "only" rather than "alone": "You see then that a man is justified by works, and not by faith only"

and that before men, as we may gather from the preceding words, 'Shew to me thy faith,' &c. In this sense we fully allow that man is justified by works . . ." (italics original). John Calvin, *Commentary on the Catholic Epistles*, translated and ed. by John Owen (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1948), 314-15.

⁴⁹The grammatical issue is whether the Greek *monos* ("only," "alone") is used adverbially or adjectivally. Adjectivally, it would modify the noun "faith," and be translated "and not [justified] by faith alone." Adverbially, it would modify the

(NKJV). This translation opens the door to the alternative that James is referring to two different kinds of justification. His readers need to comprehend that justification by faith is not the only way a person is “declared righteous.”⁴⁹ The world is watching and it is good works that justify in the eyes of others.

D. Dead Faith

What then does James mean by “dead faith” (2:17)? The only definition James offers is that dead faith is a faith that “does not have works” and is “by itself.” For Paul, that is the very faith that brings justification before God (Rom 3:28; 4:5-6; Gal 2:16). Evangelicals have been content to interpret dead faith as a false faith. The closest syntactical parallel to Jas 2:17 is found in Rom 7:8b, “For apart from the law sin is dead” (NASB).⁵⁰ No one would suppose that Paul intended to say that apart from the law sin was “false sin” or an unreal sinfulness.⁵¹ Sin is still real and true sin, even apart from the law. The thought is that sin lies dormant and unrecognized until the law arouses it to action. In the same way, faith apart from works is true and real faith. But works have a way of enlivening faith and arousing

verb “justified” and be translated, “not [justified] only by faith.” Hodges argues that in most cases when an adjectival use is employed, *monos* has a grammatical agreement with the noun. But in Jas 2:24, the normal adverbial form is used; Hodges, *The Gospel Under Siege*, 159, n. 12. Therefore, James says (reordering the clauses), “A man is not justified by faith only, but [also] by works.”

⁵⁰This parallel is all the more impressive when the Greek of the Majority text of v 20 is read, “. . .that faith without works is dead.”

⁵¹“That sin was ‘dead’ does not mean that it did not exist but that it was not as ‘active’ or ‘powerful’ before the law as after.” Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1996), 437. In the same way, “dead faith” does not mean that (true) faith did not exist.

⁵²Again, we insist that the *Christians* to whom the book is written do *not* have control of the tongue. If this is not the case, then most of the exhortations in

it from abeyance.

If the Critical Text of 2:20 is accepted, faith without works is considered “useless” (*argos*). But regardless of the reading in v 20, James has implied this uselessness of faith without works by calling into question its “benefit” (*ophelos*, vv 14, 16). James, however, does not insinuate that faith without works cannot give eternal life. His interest resides in pragmatic matters. He has prepared for the thought of a useless, “dead” faith in 1:26-27. In those verses he faulted a devotion to the Lord that did not control the tongue or care for the needy. He concludes that, “this one’s religion is useless (*mataios*).” If a Christian does not bridle his tongue, is that reason to question his conversion? Said politely, such an interpretation misses the point.⁵² James is declaring that religious devotion that does not act mercifully to the needy or does not speak mercifully to others is devotion that is impractical.

It is valuable to return to the themes of the epistle introduced in the opening remarks of the book. After James reaffirms that endurance can

the book are inchoate. On the one hand, these believers blessed God; but they also criticized their fellow brothers and sisters with the same mouth (3:9). A judgmental spirit flourished among them (2:3-4; 4:11-12). Other sins of speech are mentioned directly or indirectly (1:17; 2:14, 16, 18; 3:14; 4:1, 13, 16; 5:9, 11).

⁵³Cf. the Lord’s rebuke of the disciples, “you of little faith” (*oligopistoi*), used five times in the gospels (Matt 6:30; 8:26; 14:31; 16:8; Luke 12:28). Cf. also *oligopistia* (“small faith”; NKJV, “unbelief”) in Matt 17:20.

⁵⁴The error in the thinking of these Christian readers was their view of God. Specifically, they doubted God’s generosity and goodness to give wisdom (1:5-7), or for that matter any good gift (1:17-18). Being deceived about His character (1:16), the trials that came upon them were thought to be God’s enticement to evil (1:13). With such thinking, it was natural to be bitter at God. Having misunderstood His compassion and mercy (cf. 5:11), they failed to express mercy to the poor (2:6, 13; cf. 3:17). God is a giving God (1:5; 4:6), but they would not

mature our faith, he admonishes us to ask God for the wisdom we lack. But we must “ask in faith, with no doubting, for he who doubts is like a wave of the sea driven and tossed by the wind” (1:6). In this context, there is no impression that those who lack faith in prayer are false Christians. To the contrary, the terminology identifies an immature believer.⁵³ While the readers trusted God for their eternal life, they doubted He would give them wisdom.⁵⁴ The result of this lack of faith is that the believer’s life becomes unstable and immature (1:8). This theme of immaturity is carried further in 2:5 where James affirms that the economically poor believers are “rich in faith.” The tacit contrast is between a poor (weak) faith and a rich (mature) faith, not a true faith and false faith. Finally, the elder as a righteous man can offer a “prayer in faith” (5:15) for the sick. To do so is to offer a prayer that “works” (5:16; Greek: *energeō*). Once again, it is ludicrous to suppose that James contrasted a prayer offered in true faith with some sort of prayer offered with false faith. But he does

imitate Him (2:16). All of this evidences their immature faith.

⁵⁵R. T. Kendall, *Once Saved, Always Saved*, 212.

imply that not all Christians are able to offer such mature, powerful prayer. All of these factors lead to a single conclusion: “dead faith” for James is an immature, weak faith and not a false faith as so many have supposed.

V. Conclusion

We have discovered three central lessons in this passage. First, *speaking* our faith without *doing* our faith cannot meet practical needs. It is easy for us to talk our faith yet not do it. We are sometimes of the opinion that if we have talked about it, we have done it. If we have talked about the crisis pregnancy center and our stand against abortion, we think we have done it. We gather together in a prayer meeting and talk about prayer, so we think we have done prayer. We talk about evangelism, the poor, and other issues, yet we still avoid the effort of acting on our faith! The end result is a self-deception about how well we are doing in our dedication to God (1:22, 26).

There is one group of Christians who are most susceptible to the self-deception of talking our faith and not doing it. Notice that immediately following Jas 2:14-26, James directs his attention to the subject of the tongue (3:1ff). In the very first verse of this new unit, he describes the ones who most easily fall prey to talking faith but not doing it: teachers of biblical truth! The irony of this is that we evangelical teachers and preachers

who need to learn this truth most desperately are the very ones who have obscured it the most. By reducing James to a theological treatment on the nature of faith, it is easier for us all to avoid the real unsettling challenges of James to help others like the poor. Even my own writing on the obligation to move beyond merely talking our faith does not go beyond talking my faith. While I may find a sense of fulfillment from the Lord in exhorting others to do good works, I am not by that writing and teaching released from the obligation to be engaged in good deeds myself.

Second, faith that is invisible can be seen through good works. You can see a person is trusting God by their works. If we do not see the good deeds, he or she may still be a Christian. But his or her faith is not visible. Yet when good works are there, we can say, “Yes, I can see that that person is trusting God.”

Third, when good works are added to our faith, our faith in Christ is matured. We cannot move on to maturity until we actively participate in meeting the needs of the unfortunate, such as the care of widows and orphans. The way that I energize my faith, then, is to act on the real thrust of James 2. I must add to my faith the good works that will meet

practical needs.

R. T. Kendall has an incisive observation about the James 2 passage that makes a very relevant conclusion. He writes:

What startles me is the number of people who insist that one must have works to show he is saved but who themselves have virtually nothing of the very works James has in mind! They wish to use James as a basis of “assurance by works” but not the kind of works James has in mind—caring for the poor. I have yet to meet the first person who holds (or preaches) that giving another “those things which are needful to their body” must follow faith to show that it is saving faith indeed. We prefer to be selective in our use of James.⁵⁵

We who hold firmly to the truth that faith alone brings justification without works of any sort must not be guilty of Kendall’s criticism. Let us lead the way in good works flowing from love and the power of the Spirit. Let us energize our faith to its fullest.

