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JAMES

DAN G. MCCARTNEY

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Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament

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To my former colleagues in the biblical studies departments
at Westminster Theological Seminary,
for their encouragement and support,

and

in memory of J. Alan Groves,
whose life so beautifully manifested the wisdom
that comes from above.

בַּרְכֵי אֱלֹהִים וְאֵינְנוּ כִּי־לֶקַח אֶתֹּו אֱלֹהִים:
בַּרְכֵי אֱלֹהִים וְאֵינְנוּ כִּי־לֶקַח אֶתֹּו אֱלֹהִים:
בַּרְכֵי אֱלֹהִים וְאֵינְנוּ כִּי־לֶקַח אֶתֹּו אֱלֹהִים:

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Author's Preface

The Epistle of James is perhaps best known for its declaration “Faith without works is dead” and its assertion that a nonworking “faith” cannot justify anyone. It is vital to the health of the church that we remember this. Orthodoxy is worthless unless it produces orthopraxy. Jesus declared, “By their fruits you will know them” (Matt. 7:20 KJV alt.), and he made it quite clear that not everyone who claims Jesus as Lord on the day of judgment will enter the kingdom, but only those who have done the will of the Father (Matt. 7:21–23). One cannot have Jesus as Savior without owning him as Lord, and one cannot have him as Lord without a commitment to obey him. The Epistle of James serves as a reminder that a faith claim and genuine faith are two different things.

This is not at all to set the voice of James against that of Paul. Paul, no less than James (and Jesus), insists that right belief must result in right behavior and that those who live wicked lives have no part in the kingdom of God (Gal. 5:21; Eph. 5:5). Even a mountain-moving faith, if it has not love, is nothing (1 Cor. 13:2). It is a grotesque caricature of Paul to turn his doctrine of justification by faith into a ticket to heaven by a one-time “receiving Jesus into your heart.” But James’s letter, perhaps even more clearly than Paul’s writings, warns Christians that faith in Jesus Christ means more than saying yes to an offer of free fire insurance.

James has other concerns, of course. His letter touches on a number of issues of practical Christian life: temptation, anger, speech, care of the poor, respect for everyone regardless of social status, relationships within the church, business plans, prayer, illness, and more. But the theme that runs throughout is James’s insistence that true Christian faith must make a difference in the way we deal with such life questions. In fact, James talks about faith considerably more than he talks about works as such. It is precisely because faith is so crucial that James insists that it must be genuine and active. Hypocrisy is as dangerous and insidious a problem for the church today as it was for the Christians of James’s day or the Jews of Jesus’s time. It is still possible, indeed easy, for religious people to deceive themselves into thinking that they are true believers and chosen by God, when all the while they belie their “faith” by living according to their own desires rather than God’s. It is precisely our amazing ability to deceive ourselves that makes James’s warnings so important. This commentary is offered in the hope that the epistle that it seeks to expound will be heard more clearly in the church of our day.

Several words of thanks are in order here. First, my thanks to my colleagues and the Board of Westminster Seminary for granting me a study leave to complete the manuscript. Second, I am indebted to my research assistant for one summer and now my colleague, Dr. Adrian Smith, for his help in digging up and preprocessing numerous journal articles and chapters in multiauthor works. Third, I greatly appreciate the patience that Wells Turner has shown in helping me get the details right. Fourth, I am tremendously grateful to Moisés Silva, first my teacher and advisor, then my colleague and friend, for giving me the opportunity and encouragement to delve into a book to which I had previously given little thought. Finally, how could I ever express adequate thanks to my wife, Kathy, dearest companion, most trusted advisor, faithful prayer partner, occasional research assistant, and best friend? The heart of her husband safely trusts in her.

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Introduction to James

The document known as the Epistle of James has a unique voice in the NT. Its orientation to practical theology, its interest in true godly wisdom and consistent Christian behavior, and its large supply of memorable phrases and aphorisms that encapsulate many aspects of the practical Christian life have made it useful for purposes of moral exhortation. However, it has been a lesser influence on the development of the church's theology, and until recently it has been somewhat neglected.

Further, the second half of James 2 appears at first glance to clash with certain statements by Paul on justification by faith. This, along with the less-developed Christology of James, led Martin Luther to question its validity as an expression of the gospel of Jesus, even calling it “an epistle of straw.”¹ Most of the Reformers, however, even Luther's protégé Melancthon (*Loci Communes* 9.5.12), along with most of the church throughout its history, took a more sober view and argued that James, when understood better, is not in conflict with Paul. The issue of James's relationship to Paul's theology will be examined in more detail both in the introduction and in the commentary on James 2. Indeed, a careful study of the letter leads to the conclusion that James's insistence on works is precisely because faith is important. A faith devoid of works is a faith devoid of life; a living, saving faith is one that has an effect on behavior, and therefore it is essential that a person's faith be a working faith.

1. The famous words appear in Luther's 1522 edition of his German Bible (an English translation is available in *LW* 35:362). Luther did not, however, exclude James from his NT. He grouped it along with Hebrews (!), Jude, and Revelation as being among the less-significant writings. Further, Luther's own theology is closer to James than he perhaps realized. In his preface to Romans he declares that real faith is “a living, busy, active, mighty thing, this faith . . . it is impossible for it not to be doing good works incessantly. It never asks whether good works are to be done; it has done them before the question can be asked, and is always doing them. Whoever does not do such works is an unbeliever. . . . Thus, it is impossible to separate works from faith, quite as impossible as to separate heat and light from fire” (*LW* 35:370–71). James surely would concur.

It is in fact the thesis of this commentary that James should be seen as a book about true faith as opposed to a false one. Far from minimizing faith, the author of James regards faith as supremely important, and it is for this very reason that it is crucial that a person's faith be genuine. People often deceive themselves, and it is quite possible for people to think that they have faith when in fact they are hypocrites. James, in the first chapter alone, uses three different words to describe this capacity for self-deceit: *πλανᾶω* (*planaō*, lead astray) in 1:16, *παραλογίζομαι* (*paralogizomai*, deceive) in 1:22, and *ἁπατάω* (*apataō*, deceive) in 1:26. Indeed, the issue runs all the way through James: the doubter's double-mindedness in 1:6–8, empty religiosity in 1:26, the pretense of loving neighbor while showing favoritism in 2:8–9, the empty, dead faith of 2:20, the contradiction of blessing God and cursing his image-bearers in 3:9 and of boasting while being false to the truth in 3:14, and the pretense of the merchant in 4:13 are essentially all referring to forms of self-deception. But James wants those who profess to believe in Christ to be real disciples and manifest living faith, and he wants to awaken people who complacently think that they are believers but do not act like believers—in other words, those who have deceived themselves. Further, the threats to faith that can come by way of persecution, illness, and the delay of the coming of the Lord are met with exhortations to persevere, which is the stance of faith. Truly, James as a whole is a book about genuine faith. Surely, there are few times more in need of James's insistence that faith be genuine than our own.

Controversy has continued to swirl about the book, however. Almost every aspect of interpretation, its author, its date, its original audience, its theological substructure, its organization (or lack of organization), its overall purpose (especially whether it is in any way a reaction to some form of Paulinism), its unity, and even the meaning of several of its words, phrases, and sentences have been heavily debated, and many matters remain without anything close to a scholarly consensus.

All these questions of introduction, authorship, dating, original audience, text, genre, and canonical acceptance are tangled together, and even the meaning of the text and the questions of introduction are interlinked. As a result, no obvious starting point presents itself. The question of authorship, for example, depends on when we date the letter and on the history of its use in the church, but dating is heavily dependent on identifying the original audience as well as the author, and the identity of the original audience is tied up with the author, date, and genre as well as the meaning of certain of James's statements. Change any piece, and the whole puzzle must be assembled differently.

Nevertheless, the book gives us some clues about these things, and if we listen sympathetically to its message and pay close attention to the world in which it was written, we can, with some measure of confidence, answer many of those questions. Fortunately, the book's central message is comprehensible regardless of its origins.

Excursus 2

Faith, Works, and Justification in James and Paul

I maintain that the Epistle of James is best read on its own terms, not as a “reaction” to Paul or even to a misunderstood Paulinism. The assumption, so often made, of a polarization between Pauline (Gentile) and Petrine (Jewish) Christianity in the first century, which Acts has glossed over, must be suspended until both Paul’s writings and the Epistle of James have been examined on their own terms.¹ It must be admitted, however, that whether or not James is directly or indirectly reacting to Paul, a comparison of James 2:24 with Rom. 3:28 seems to show a conflict between the two authors.

Romans 3:28 “For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law.”

James 2:24 “By works a man is justified and not by faith alone.”

James’s words “not by faith alone” seem to stand in direct contradiction to Paul’s formulation, such that many scholars, like Dibelius, regard it as “inconceivable” that James could be anything but a reaction to Paul (or a misunderstood version of Paul). The apparent irreconcilability even led Luther to offer his doctoral hat to anyone who could bring James and Paul into harmony.²

Whether or not James is reacting to some form of “Paulinism,” a close examination of both will show that no contradiction actually exists between James and Paul himself. They are using the shared vocabulary and examples of Judaism, but in different ways, since they are facing quite different problems. In particular, the texts cited are using the terms “justification,” “faith,” and “works” somewhat differently. Further, careful attention to the entirety of Paul’s letters and the entire message of James will demonstrate that although

1. Schlatter (1927: 419) made this point some time ago, and recently Bockmuehl (2006: 121–36) has reinforced it by his challenge to the entire paradigm of a Petrine versus Pauline Christianity.

2. The conversation is recorded in Luther 1914: 3.253, cited in Laato (1997: 44n8). Melancthon (*Loci Communes* 9.5.12) argued that James was not fighting Paul, but “refuting the error of those who think themselves to be righteous on account of a profession of doctrines.” Unfortunately, Melancthon failed to persuade Luther.

their interests are different, their underlying theological commitments are constitutive of the same basic faith in Jesus Christ.

Before looking at James 2:14–26 in relation to Galatians and Romans, we do well to pay attention to the context leading up to that passage.

As Laato (1997: 47) notes, the introduction to James's concerns in 1:16–25 gives the background for how James understands the law and the necessity of the believer's obedience.³ Here we see that James shares with Paul the notion of the priority of God's word in bringing salvation. Note the following:

1. James insists (like Jesus in Matt. 7:24, 26) that it is the doing of the word, not just the hearing of it, that leads to blessing (cf. Rom. 2:13).
2. It is, however, the word that is implanted and received that is able to save souls (James 1:21).
3. Further, the effective power of the word to bring life is according to the purpose of God (James 1:18), and this effectual word is the "word of truth" (cf. Eph. 1:13).
4. This word of truth is the source of the "bringing forth" (i.e., birth) of "us" as a "firstfruits" of creation (James 1:18), a reference to the initiation of the promised eschatological age (cf. 2 Thess. 2:13).
5. This birth-giving, fruit-producing implanted word is also the "law of freedom" (James 1:25).⁴
6. All this points to the fact that James has in the background the promise of Jer. 31:31–34 that in the eschatological age the law would be written on the heart (implanted), which constitutes the new covenant (cf. 2 Cor. 3).

Thus, 1:16–25 indicates that for James as much as for Paul, God's word is what makes alive and brings forth new life. That word, the word of truth, the word that is implanted and received, can only be the gospel.

Likewise, 2:1–13 is contextually important for understanding the latter half of James 2. James's concern is the problem of a disconnection between a professed faith and a life of faith, particularly in the problems of showing favoritism. Favoritism is inconsistent with faith (2:1) on many fronts; in particular, it disrespects the poor (which insults God; Prov. 14:31; 17:5) and is a denial of mercy, to which faith lays claim.

This passage also gives indication as to what James's conception of law is. It is, above all, the love command of Lev. 19:18 (cf. 2:8), just as it is for Jesus (Mark 12:31 and pars.) and Paul (Rom. 13:9–10; Gal. 5:14), and favoritism is out of conformity with this central command.

These set the context for James's discussion in 2:14–26 of the problem of a "faith" that is not really faith. If anything is clear from this passage, it is

3. This section is much indebted to Laato 1997, although I think that Laato may have made James too much like Paul.

4. Laato (1997: 50–51) shows how in 1:25 the "law of freedom" is the same as the "word" of 1:21–23, which one may either hear and not do or hear and do.

that faith devoid of commensurate actions (“works”) is “dead” (2:17, 26), useless (2:16, 20), a bare corpse (2:26). Such faith is given the name “faith” only because it is being claimed as such, not because it is real (2:14).

Thus, “works” are to faith as the breath of life (the “spirit”) is to a body. Further, works bring faith to expression and thus “fulfill” it (2:23) and “perfect” or complete it (2:22). Just as a prophecy is “fulfilled” or brought to its expected completion when the predicted event happens, so faith is fulfilled when it eventuates in works. This does not mean that works somehow turn faith into a living faith. It simply observes that living faith lives; it does not just lie there like a corpse.

This is the context for James’s specific reference to Abraham. The offering of Isaac, much discussed in Judaism as the manifestation of Abraham’s obedience, is the eventuation of Abraham’s real faith. Obedience does not produce true faith; true faith produces obedience. So when James says that faith “works together with his works” (2:22), he is speaking not of soteriology per se (since James knew that Abraham was called by God and that promises were given to him, including the declaration of his justification by faith, long before the offering of Isaac), but of the whole manifestation of Abraham’s life in God. Faith was “completed” by works, not vice versa.

We also should note that the particular “works” that James gives as examples are not Paul’s works of the law (for the Torah had not yet been given);⁵ they are works of faith, works that exemplify the fact that Abraham and Rahab trusted God. In the case of Rahab, her “work” was the sheltering of the Israelite spies,⁶ a manifestation of her belief that the Lord would do what he promised in delivering the land into the hand of the Israelites (Josh. 2:9).⁷ It is interesting that James here refers to the spies as “messengers” (ἄγγελοι, *angeloi*), a term not used in the LXX of Josh. 2, possibly because the spies were, in effect, those who could tell Rahab about God. Whether or not this is in James’s purview, Rahab, by receiving and sheltering the spies, in effect treated them in the same beneficent way that Jesus predicted some Gentiles (ἔθνη, *ethnē*, nations) would treat his disciples and thereby be received into the kingdom on judgment day (Matt. 25:32–40; cf. Matt. 10:42).

5. This, of course, is particularly true if Paul’s phrase “works of the law” specifically focuses on the “boundary markers” of the people of God, such as circumcision, Sabbath observance, and food laws (as per Dunn 1998: 356). The example of Rahab runs counter to any notion of these, and James, for all his interest in the law, never mentions these things, but only such things as are encompassed in the love command. But James’s explicit identification of Rahab as a prostitute should put to rest any suggestion that any aspect of the law as such is a prerequisite of, or constitutive of, faith.

6. The argument by Ward (1968) that both Rahab’s and Abraham’s “work” was the showing of hospitality not only is unsupported in the text (Abraham’s “hospitality” is not even implied and has to be deduced by circuitous means), but also misses James’s point, which is not that “hospitality” is *the* ticket to justification, but that genuine faith results in commensurate behavior.

7. One might object here that Rahab’s reaction was one of fear more than trust, but a fear that God will execute his promised judgment is effectively a nascent faith.

We are now in a position to examine James's use of the terms in relation to Paul's. First, the so-called faith that James discusses in James 2 is not the genuine faith that Paul makes crucial to one's relationship to God. James, as much as Paul, is concerned that Christians have faith in all circumstances (e.g., 1:3, 6; 2:1; 5:15; but throughout the letter; see "Controlling Theme: Genuine Faith" in the introduction). But James is deeply aware of the possibility of self-deception and hypocrisy, whereby people think that they "have faith" but are deluded. A life that is inherently and endemically out of accord with the faith that one avers is the best indication that no real faith is present at all.

James therefore regards it as obvious that if someone does not do the works of faith, it is a false faith that cannot save. Further, note that James does not even concede the term "faith" to such a position. James does not say, "If someone has faith but has not works . . ."; he says, "If someone *says* he has faith but has not works. . . ."⁸ He thereby indicates that the "faith" critiqued throughout James 2 is not genuine.

Paul never directly uses the term *faith* to refer to such a hypocritical and delusional faith.⁹ He does come close, however, in 1 Cor. 13:2, where he says, "If I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing." This is not all that far from James, for whom the "works" in view are manifestations of the love command.

Conversely, the "works" that Paul condemns are not the works that James commends (Machen 1976: 239).¹⁰ Whether or not Paul's concern with "works of the law" is focused primarily on those things that Jews understood to be the "boundary markers" of the people of God, such as circumcision, Sabbath observance, and food laws (so Dunn 1998: 356),¹¹ he has in mind some kind

8. A detail observed by Cranfield (1965: 185) and much earlier by Calvin (1948: 309–10).

9. Dibelius (1975: 175) also sees Paul and James operating with different meanings for "faith," but he further detects two kinds of faith even within the letters of Paul. One kind of faith is "the acceptance of the marvelous divine decree which justifies the sinner"; the other kind means "Christian convictions." For Dibelius (1975: 178), the apparent contradiction comes because James only sees the latter, or rather sees faith as a general trust in God. Space constraints prohibit a fuller treatment of this here, but in my opinion, Paul's concept of faith even in passages such as Gal. 3:23–25 and Rom. 3–4 includes not just acceptance of divine provision, but also the commitment to the message of the gospel, and it is precisely Paul's christological convictions that stand over against "works of the law" (Rom. 10:4). James, when he is not talking about the pseudo-faith that makes claims but does not act accordingly, thinks of faith in a way not so dissimilar to Paul (cf. 1:3–6, 18, 21 [receiving the implanted word]; 2:1 [faith in Christ], 5; 5:15; see also excursus 1 above).

10. Bauckham (1999: 134) makes a strikingly similar statement: "When Paul says that justification is not by works he does not have in mind at all these works done in faith. When James says that justification is by works he does not have in mind at all the works of self-reliance which compromise faith. Thus, beneath the surface of disagreement, there is a deeper agreement."

11. Dunn recognizes that "works of the law" does not refer exclusively to the "boundary" laws, but he argues that these are the points at issue, not just in Christian circles but for Judaism generally (as is evident in 4QMMT, a Qumran document that specifically talks about "some works of the law"), because they are what gave the Jews their distinct identity and what gave rise to the controversy among the Galatians. See the discussion in Dunn 1998: 354–66.

of actions that people do to establish their own righteousness (Rom. 10:3; Phil. 3:9) rather than accept the gracious provision of God in Christ's work on the cross (Rom. 3:24). This is a much different problem from the one that James faces, where people simply are not doing works (actions) that are the normal and necessary fruit of faith.

Paul, as much as James, is concerned that Christ be obeyed, not simply acknowledged (Rom. 2:8; 6:16; 2 Cor. 10:5), and that Christian faith be lived, not just claimed. Those who live a life of debauchery will not inherit the kingdom of God (Gal. 5:19–21), and the rebellious are “laying up a treasure of wrath for the day of wrath” (Rom. 2:5), very much like James 5:3. The characteristic “fruit of the Spirit” of Gal. 5:22–23 is, on the other hand, quite like what James mentions as true wisdom in James 3:17. Even the problem of a disconnection between faith and life is condemned in Titus 1:16: “They profess to know God, but they deny him by their works.” And before Paul is faced with the specific problem of “works of the law,” he resembles James in commending the Thessalonians for their “work of faith” (1 Thess. 1:3; cf. 2 Thess. 1:11; and the quotation of Ps. 112:9 in 2 Cor. 9:9).

Further, when Paul addresses the broad issues of law and righteousness, he is completely in agreement with James: in Rom. 2:13, it is not the hearers of the law who will be justified, but the doers—a statement virtually the same as James 1:22–25.

Finally, the “justification” that James has in mind is not precisely the same as the “justification” that Paul has in view (Calvin 1948: 315), although they are related. The meaning of the term as James uses it is taken up in detail in the commentary, but of the possible meanings for “justify,” only two are viable here: “to declare righteous” as in a court judgment or to “prove to be in the right” in some regard, that is, “to vindicate.”¹² When James says that a person is “justified by works” and refers to Abraham and Rahab as examples, he is referring either to the eschatological confirmation of righteousness at the last judgment (as in Matt. 12:37; Rom. 2:13) or to the effectual proving of righteousness. Jeremiah (1954–55: 371) argued for the former (see also Beyschlag 1897: 132–33; Moo 2000: 135). But as argued in the commentary, James's use of the aorist indicatives and the lack of any indication that James is thinking of future justification at this juncture point in the other direction. Just as Abraham and Rahab were vindicated by their works, so too is the person of faith of any age. This is essentially what Jesus says when he declares, “You will recognize them by their fruits” (Matt. 7:20). It also may be that James implicitly includes both meanings (Laato 1997: 69), in that the probative establishment of righteousness by works and the eschatological confirmation of righteous status are closely connected in James.¹³

12. The rare meaning “to make righteous” does not come into play in either Paul or James. The meaning “to clear a debt” is irrelevant here, as is the meaning “to give justice to.” See my comments on 2:21–24 above.

13. For example, 3:18: “The fruit [RSV: ‘harvest’] of righteousness is sown in peace for those who do peace.” This, probably an echo of Matt. 5:9, has in view the eschatological harvest.

In any case, there is no indication that James is thinking of justification either as a process or as a juridical declaration by which a person comes into right relationship to God.

It thus appears that whether one adopts the position of the “new perspective” on Paul that the justification in question involves the matter of who is established as a member of God’s people, or whether one takes the classical view that Paul is speaking of the believer being accepted as righteous before God (as is usually taken to be in view in Luke 18:14; Rom. 3:28, and similar passages) or being forgiven by God (as in Rom. 4:6–7), James is not directly contradicting Paul, for James is addressing neither of those two issues. For James, “justified” has the same meaning the word does when Jesus, in Luke 7:35, says, “Wisdom is justified¹⁴ by all her children.” It simply means “vindicated” by how it plays out.

We need to address one other matter here: the function and place of the law. James simply accepts the normal Jewish understanding of the law as speaking the will of God; it is the “word of truth” that makes believers a “firstfruits,” a word that, in accordance with the new covenant expectation of Jer. 31:33–34, is “implanted” in the believer in order to save souls. It is therefore a “law of freedom,” a “kingdom law” (royal law) that has its summary expression in the love command of Lev. 19:18. Paul, on the other hand, views the law as bringing slavery and death by “rousing” the flesh (Rom. 7:5). One should remember, however, that Paul’s usual and common view of the law is, like that of James, positive. It is the revelation of God’s will and character (Rom. 2:18) and is “good” (Rom. 7:12, 16). It is the improper use of the law that makes it not good (Phil. 3:9; 1 Tim. 1:8). When considered as the law of the Spirit, it brings freedom (Rom. 8:2).¹⁵

But did not Paul say that believers are no longer “under law” (Gal. 5:18)? Did not the gospel “abolish the law” (Eph. 2:15)? Quite apart from the fact that if what Paul meant was that the law of God is defunct, it would put him squarely contrary to Jesus (Matt. 5:17–18; Luke 16:17), a close look at the passages in question shows more clearly what Paul was getting at. In Eph. 2 Paul is specifically dealing with the law of “commandments and ordinances” that separate Jews from Gentiles, and he is indicating that the gospel now obviates the former distinctions. This “dividing wall” (Eph. 2:14) that kept Gentiles at a distance is now broken down. In Galatians Paul deals specifically with the problem of people who want to be “justified” by the law, that is, to

14. In Luke 7:35 ἐδικαιώθη (*edikaiōthē*, is justified) probably is a gnomic or proverbial aorist (expressing a general truth). James’s use cannot be simply axiomatic, however, because he specifies Abraham and Rahab as the subjects.

15. Although some exegetes understand the νόμος (*nomos*, law) of Rom. 8:2a as the “principle” of the Spirit of life, the same word is used to describe the “law of sin and death.” It is much better to understand the contrastive “laws” of Rom. 8 as the law that the Spirit writes on the heart (as in Rom. 2:15; 2 Cor. 3:7–8, 17, which have Jer. 31 in the background) in opposition to the law written externally in stone, which is engaged by the “flesh.” The law kills when it is a tool in the hand of sin (1 Cor. 15:56), but as a tool of the Spirit, it liberates.

achieve a status of righteousness before God by obedience to a set of commandments. As in Ephesians, the particular question is that of circumcision, which divides Jew and Gentile; but more broadly, the “Judaizers” at Galatia were, by insisting on circumcision, binding themselves to a fleshly approach to law—they were, to use the vocabulary of Rom. 10:3, seeking to establish “their own righteousness.” That use of the law is precisely what makes the law a killer, because if the law is treated as the source of blessing and curse (justification), and the law curses all nonperformance of it, then the result is death. All these questions James never engages.¹⁶ James’s problem is not people who are seeking to establish their own righteousness (as in Rom. 10:3; Phil. 3:9), but people who are not behaving in accordance with their professed faith in Christ.

Faith, real faith, for both Paul and James, is not just a verbalization of belief (Rom. 2:13; James 2:14; cf. Matt. 7:21), nor is it just thinking that certain doctrines are true (James 2:19), nor is it performing some assignment such as keeping the Ten Commandments (cf. the rich man in Matt. 19:16–22 and pars.), or going to church, or going forward at an altar call. Effective faith is, instead, a life orientation, an ongoing disposition of the heart toward faithfulness to God or loyalty to his covenant (including its ethical obligations). This is why Jesus (Matt. 4:17) and James (James 4:9), as well as Paul (Rom. 2:4), expect repentance and a change of life at the beginning of faith. It is also why Paul’s faith principle does not overthrow the law, but on the contrary is an upholding of the law (Rom. 3:31).

None of this is meant to deny a significant difference between Paul and James. They appropriated the same Jewish heritage, the same vocabulary, and the same story of Abraham, but they have applied it differently, not because they hold essentially different theologies, but because they are struggling with different problems from different vantage points and have different concerns. Only by listening to each man’s own voice can we avoid drawing false conclusions from one or the other.

Nevertheless, it may seem surprising that James would express himself in language that appears so contrary to Paul’s formulations, and it may provoke many, as it did Luther,¹⁷ to question the value or reliability of James. But let us approach the issue by way of an analogy. Suppose James had said, “What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but bows down to idols? Can that faith save him?” I doubt that such language would have raised any objections from anyone, even Luther. Some human actions, such as worshipping

16. Bauckham (1999: 151) rightly observes: “In what James says positively about the law there is very striking continuity between James and Paul. It is only in what James does not say that there is discontinuity.”

17. Although Luther expressed doubts about James, he shared James’s conviction regarding genuine faith, as is clear from his preface to Romans, where he says, “O, it is a living, busy, active mighty thing, this faith. It is impossible for it not to be doing good works incessantly” (*LW* 35:370). For more on this quotation, see note 1 at the beginning of the introduction.

idols, are so inherently contrary to genuine faith that anyone who claims to believe and does them should immediately be seen to be a fake. James says that one of those inherently contrary actions is inaction in situations where a brother's or sister's need is evident. Jesus says much the same thing as James when he declares, "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven" (in Matt. 7:21).

This highlights James's conviction that genuine biblical faith cannot be a bare acknowledgment of certain facts, not even the acknowledgment of biblical doctrines—for example, that there is one God only—since even demons acknowledge such facts (2:19). The Greek word for "faith" (πίστις, *pistis*), as well as the Hebrew word that it regularly translates (אֱמוּנָה, *ʿemûnâ*), ordinarily includes a component of commitment and faithfulness as well as intellectual belief. One might envision genuine believers, under threat of death, bowing to an idol and afterward despising their cowardice, but "believers" who do so continually and without compunction make a mockery of their own "faith," and that kind of "faith" cannot justify, in any sense of the word. To put it tautologously: James simply says that any "faith" that does not do the things that faith does is not faith.

Thus, although Luther and many readers since have construed James 2:14–26, and particularly the statement in 2:24, as a challenge to Paul's notion of justification by faith, it is no such thing.¹⁸ It is precisely because James is aware of the importance of faith (see, e.g., 1:6; see also excursus 1, "Faith as the Central Concern of James") that he is concerned that his readers' faith be genuine. And genuine faith is by nature active, doing deeds of faith, as Abraham and Rahab did. What James does challenge is the idea that by simply adopting a creed, saying the right words, or joining a church, one stands in line to inherit the kingdom of God. In a day when people often confuse justification by faith with justification by *profession* of faith, we do well to hear James's concern.

18. It may very well be a challenge to a perversion of Paul's doctrine, but it is easier simply to suppose that James is writing prior to the development of Galatians and Romans, and the similarity in terminology is due to a common Jewish environment, which both Paul and James used to answer entirely different questions. See, in the introduction, "Was James a Reaction to Paul (or Later Paulinism)?"