

# ANOTHER VIEW OF FAITH AND WORKS IN JAMES 2

ROBERT N. WILKIN

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## I. INTRODUCTION

How one understands any given passage is dependent, at least in part, on his understanding of the book in which it is found. James 2:14-26 is a prime example.

E. D. Hirsch, in his book *Validity in Interpretation* suggests that the interpreter of any literature must make a series of genre guesses. Correct guesses, those that rightly understand what the author is saying, are called *intrinsic genres*. Incorrect guesses are *extrinsic genres*.<sup>1</sup>

Hirsch illustrates that extrinsic genre guesses result in a wrong understanding of the author's point with Donne's poem, "A Valediction Forbidding Mourning." When his students misinterpreted the poem, he attempted to correct them. They were unmoved, however, because they felt the particulars of the poem fit their genre conception. They were unwilling to see that Hirsch's genre guess *better fit* the particulars.<sup>2</sup>

It is the contention of this article that something similar has occurred in the exegesis of Jas 2:14-26. The genre conception most often given somewhat fits the particulars of the passage; thus proponents of that view see no need to consider any other view. However, there is good reason to believe that another genre understanding *better fits* the particulars of the passage.

James 2:14-26 has long been recognized as a crux passage. A recent article in *Bibliotheca Sacra* by C. Ryan Jenkins laid out four interpretations:<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> E. D. Hirsch, Jr., *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1967), 88-89.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 73-74.

<sup>3</sup> C. Ryan Jenkins, "Faith and Works in Paul and James," *Bibliotheca Sacra* (January–March 2002): 63-64.

- ❖ View A. In this view James 2 shows that works are instrumental in a sinner's justification before God. Those who propose this view assert that James was arguing that a sinner's acceptance with God depends on both faith and works.
- ❖ View B. James was dealing with physical deliverance from the devastating affects of sin. James was not addressing unbelievers concerning [eternal] salvation...James then was referring to justification/vindication *only before others* in a nonsalvific context.<sup>4</sup>
- ❖ View C. James was stating that a Christian's justification before God depends not on faith alone but, on faith and works and...he was directly refuting Pauline theology (as expressed in Romans 4 and Galatians 2–3). This view is not committed to the inerrancy of Scripture.
- ❖ View D. James's concern was to refute antinomianism by showing that one's true conversion will be "justified" objectively by works... James sought to show that a person who possessed faith in Christ will be justified (i.e., vindicated as a true Christian) by his or her works, and that a mere profession of faith that is not vindicated or evidenced by works is not characteristic of genuine conversion.

We might call these views respectively, the Arminian view, the temporal deliverance view, the New Testament scholar view (since many scholars see no need to harmonize Scripture or uphold inerrancy), and the traditional view. The traditional view is the one defended by Jenkins in his article and it is the traditional Reformed understanding of James 2.

In this article I will attempt to show three things. First, the traditional understanding has some difficulties. Second, the temporal deliverance understanding has points in its favor. And third, the traditional Reformed understanding of the perseverance of the saints is not dependent on the traditional understanding of James 2.

## II. DIFFICULTIES WITH THE TRADITIONAL UNDERSTANDING

### A. THE USES OF BROTHERS (*ADELPHOI*) IN JAMES

James addresses his readers with one of three designations: "brethren," "my brethren," and "my beloved brethren." While this could quite

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<sup>4</sup> Italics his.

naturally refer to Jewish people, regardless of their spiritual condition, the evidence in the epistle suggests that each time James designates his readers as “brethren,” he is indicating that they are fellow heirs of the grace of God. Therefore, his readers are believing Jews who have been part of the *diaspora* (1:1).

In his first use of *adelphoi* James says, “My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience” (1:2-3). It would be very odd for James to be encouraging unbelieving Jews to count their trials as joy. Odder still would be to speak of the testing of their faith. The very first use strongly suggests that the brethren James has in mind are Jewish believers.

The second use is in 1:16-18.<sup>5</sup> James calls his readers “my beloved brethren” and then explains that God “brought us forth by the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of His creatures” (1:16, 18). That the new birth is in view is undisputed in the commentary literature. The context clearly shows that the brethren of 1:16-18 are regenerated.

Verse 19 begins, “So then, my beloved brethren.” The most natural understanding of *brethren* here is that it continues to refer to the regenerate brothers of the immediately preceding context.

James’s next use of *adelphoi* is as follows: “My brethren, do not hold the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory, with partiality” (2:1). In the first place, this is a continuation of a string of uses that refer to regenerate people. In the second place, James specifies here that these brethren have faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. Thus there is little doubt that regenerate people are in view in this section (cf. 2:5, “my beloved brethren”).

The next use of *adelphoi* is in Jas 2:14. If “my brethren” now refers to unregenerate people, James is making an abrupt change with no hint of this fact. In fact, all through Jas 2:14-26 he refers to the faith of his readers, and of Abraham.

Verseput strongly defends the regenerate status of the readers. He writes, “‘The twelve tribes’ casts the readership with surprising clarity in

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<sup>5</sup> The word *adelphos* does occur in 1:9. However, there it is not direct address. I have excluded the uses of the term in 2:15 and 4:11 as well for the same reason. All excluded uses are in the singular and are not designations for the readers.

the role of true Israel.”<sup>6</sup> A footnote appears here in which he continues, “The clear assumption of the author that his audience was homogeneous in its belief in ‘our Lord Jesus Christ’ (2.1) prohibits understanding *tais dōdeka phylais* to refer to the Jewish community at large.”<sup>7</sup>

Soon thereafter he continues, “Thus, in the language of the author, *pistis*—which has already been described in 2.1 as ‘the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ’ (*tēn pistin tou kyriou hēmōn Iēsou Christou*)—can readily function as the single most essential identifying feature of the religious community of the ‘brethren’ to whom he writes.”<sup>8</sup>

Verseput concludes: “James is not seeking to downgrade the importance of ‘faith’ in 2:14-26. On the contrary, faith retains its role as the primary distinguishing feature of the community.”<sup>9</sup>

Without examining all of the other uses of *adelphoi*,<sup>10</sup> the following are representative and support the conclusion that regenerate people are meant:

<sup>6</sup> Donald J. Verseput, “Reworking the Puzzle of Faith and Deeds in James 2:14-26,” *New Testament Studies* (January 1997): 97.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 98. It should be noted that Verseput later writes, “The author of the epistle insists that one’s Godward service—i.e., faith—cannot be divorced from righteous deeds, for obedience is the most holy form of faith” (p. 115). Does he mean that all true believers always or characteristically produce good works? It is unlikely he means that, for earlier in the same paragraph he writes, “neither are ‘works’ understood as the natural product of faith, the visible sign of an inner disposition, for on the discourse level the independence of the two elements, faith and works, has been and is maintained throughout” (p. 114). Most likely what Verseput means is clarified in the conclusion: “Piety without righteousness is vain and ineffectual, unable to achieve the recognition of God, whereas deeds of obedience to the divine will can be said to constitute the proper and valid religion which God approves. Viewed in this light, it becomes evident that James is not seeking to downgrade the importance of ‘faith’ in 2:14-26. On the contrary, faith retains its role as the primary distinguishing feature of the community. But as the prophets of old had denied the efficacy of sacrifice without obedience, so faith without works is dead” (p. 115).

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 115.

<sup>10</sup> I chose not to discuss Jas 2:19 and the faith of demons in the text of the article. My reasons are threefold. First, we have addressed that verse and issue extensively elsewhere. For a detailed discussion of Jas 2:19, see John Hart, “The Faith of Demons: James 2:19,” *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society* (Autumn 1995): 39-54. See also Zane C. Hodges, *The Epistle of James: Proven*

My brethren, let not many of you become teachers, knowing that we shall receive a stricter judgment. (Jas 3:1)

This most naturally refers to regenerate individuals. James would not likely be telling unbelieving Jews that not many of them should seek to be teachers in the church! Besides, the Judgment Seat of Christ is the most natural understanding of this future judgment. Compare the uses of *adelphoi* in 3:10, 12 and 4:11.

Therefore, be patient, brethren, until the coming of the Lord...Do not grumble against one another, brethren, lest you be condemned [literally, *judged*]. Behold, the Judge is at the door! (Jas 5:7, 9)

These verses, in comparison with Rom 14:10-12, show that this concerns the Judgment Seat of Christ as well. Why James would tell unbelieving Jews to be patient until the Lord comes back is hard to grasp. It is much more natural if he is understood as addressing regenerate individuals. Compare the uses of *adelphoi* in 5:10, 12, and 19.

This, of course, doesn't fit well with the traditional understanding of Jas 2:14-26 which sees "brethren" as a flexible term that includes believing and unbelieving Jews. Then the call to works in Jas 2:14-26 is seen as the means by which "brethren" determine whether or not they have true faith. If all the brethren addressed have true faith in Christ, a different genre conception is necessary.

## B. THE USE OF *Sōzō* IN JAMES

A second way to evaluate our genre understanding of James is by considering the uses of the word *sōzō* (to save) in the book. While an author is not bound to use the same word the same way each time in an epistle, it is a possibility which one should explore. The evidence

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*Character Through Testing* (Irving, TX: Grace Evangelical Society, 1994), pp. 64-66. Second, the argument that demons don't believe in monotheism and hence illustrate false faith is patently false. The Gospels make it clear that the demons not only believe in monotheism, but they also believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God (see, for example, Matt 8:29). Not only that, but why would James use the great shema of Israel, something dear to every Jewish believer, to introduce false faith? Third, Jesus did not die for demons. There never has been, nor will there ever be, any eternal salvation for demons. Thus regardless of what they believe or do, they are ultimately doomed.

strongly suggests that the four uses of *sōzō* in James, outside of Jas 2:14, refer to temporal deliverance, not to eternal salvation from hell.<sup>11</sup>

Here are the other four uses, with comments:

Receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls. (Jas 1:21)

James made it clear in 1:16–20 that he was talking to “my beloved brethren” (1:16, 19), whom he identifies as those whom God “brought forth by the word of truth”—a reference to their new birth. If James has not shifted his attention to different readers, the people in 1:21 who need saving are born-again brothers in Christ. Clearly born-again people do not need eternal salvation. They do, however, need temporal salvation from the deadly consequences of sin in their lives (cf. 1:15).

The temporal deliverance understanding of 1:21 is supported by the expression *sōsai tas psychas hymōn* (to save your souls). In the Septuagint and the NT this expression always or nearly always refers to the saving of one’s physical life.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Some barely even consider this evidence. See, for example, Jenkins, “Faith and Works.” He mentions only two of the five uses. He writes, “In objection to view B, it seems unnatural to assume that James 1:21 and 2:14 refer to a ‘physical’ salvation rather than an eternal one, especially since the word ‘soul’ (*psychē*) and not ‘life’ (*zōē*) is used in 1:21” (74). Since *psychē* is not found in 2:14, he is really commenting on only one of the five uses. And then his discussion is based on a single word and not the expression “saving the psyche” (*sōzein tēn psychēn*), which in the Septuagint (see fn. 12) and NT always refers to the physical deliverance of one’s life. Compare, for example, Matt 20:28 (cf. 27:42); Mark 3:4; 10:45 (cf. 15:30); Luke 6:9; Acts 27:22 (cf. v. 31); and 1 Pet 3:20. When the Lord Jesus spoke of laying down His life for us, He used *psychē*, not *zōē* (Matt 20:28; Mark 10:45; John 10:11, 15, 17).

<sup>12</sup> See for example, Mark 3:4, “Is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good or to do evil, to save life [*psychēn sōsai*] or to kill?” (Cf. Luke 6:9); “For the Son of Man did not come to destroy men’s lives [*psychas anthrōpōn apolesai*] but to save them” (Luke 9:56, MT); “There will be no loss of life [*psychēs*] among you, but only of the ship...Unless these men stay in the ship, you cannot be saved” (Acts 27:22, 31); “In the days of Noah...eight souls were saved [*oktō psychai diesōthēsan*] through water” (1 Pet 3:20). This expression occurs approximately eight times in the Septuagint as well, always with the sense of saving the physical life (Gen 19:17; 32:30; 1 Sam 19:11; Ps 30:7; 71:13; 109:31 [108:31 in the Septuagint]; Jer 31:6; see also Job 33:28, which some might un-

Additionally, the readers were to receive the word “already implanted” in them, which supports the idea that they are born-again believers and that the deliverance is temporal.

Finally, James makes it clear that by “receiving the word” he does not mean believing it. In this context, receiving the word is being “doers of the word, and not hearers [= believers] only” (1:22; cf. vv. 23, 25).

There is one Lawgiver, who is able to save and to destroy.  
Who are you to judge another? (Jas 4:12)

The saving and destroying here appears to be general in scope. God is the one who saves and destroys in all senses, temporal and eternal. Yet there is reason to believe James has the saving and destroying of *physical* life specifically in view. What follows in the illustration of Jas 4:13-17 deals with this life. James says, “your life...is even a vapor that appears for a little time and then vanishes away” (v. 14). James 4:12 fits perfectly with the temporal deliverance genre understanding.

The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise him up. (Jas 5:15)

Eternal salvation is not in view here. This use of *sōzō* clearly refers to the *saving* or healing of one’s life from an illness that could well lead to physical death (cf. vv. 19-20).

He who turns a sinner from the error of his way will save a soul from death and cover a multitude of sins. (Jas 5:20)

Verse 19, which precedes this verse, says “Brethren, if anyone among you wanders from the truth, and someone turns him back...” The potential wanderers are *brethren...among you*. This suggests that James is not thinking of unbelievers, but believers, who wander away from truth. If so, then he is warning here that physical death may well occur if a fellow believer doesn’t turn him from his sin.

Dr. Charles Ryrie comments: “*any among you*. The reference is evidently to Christians, and the *death* is physical death which sin may cause (1 Cor 11:30).”<sup>13</sup>

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derstand as Job hoping not to lose eternal life, but which is best understood as him hoping not to lose physical life).

<sup>13</sup> The Ryrie Study Bible, loc. cit, italics his.

In light of the other uses of *sōzō* in James, one should at least be open to the possibility that temporal salvation is in view in Jas 2:14 as well.<sup>14</sup>

### C. THE USE OF *Sōzō* IN 2:14

What did James mean in 2:14 when he asked, “Can faith save him?”<sup>15</sup>

If *sōzō* here refers to salvation from eternal condemnation, then the traditional view seems mandatory. Otherwise James would be teaching that salvation from eternal condemnation requires faith plus works, in clear contradiction to the Gospel of John, Romans 3–4, Galatians 2–3, and a host of other texts.

However, there is an apparent connection between the first and second uses of *sōzō* in James. Some commentators have noted that Jas 1:21 and 2:14 are parallel in thought.

If in 1:21 James is warning genuine believers that they must be doers of the word to escape temporal judgment, then the idea that 2:14–26 is proclaiming the same idea seems reasonable. This, combined with the other three uses of *sōzō* in James, provides good reason to reconsider the temporal salvation understanding here.

Additionally, the fact that he is addressing *brethren* in this passage supports the temporal judgment view.

## III. TWO TYPES OF FAITH IN JAMES 2?

The traditional view hangs on a slender thread. Indeed, it hangs on one letter, the definite article preceding the word *faith* in 2:14.

If the definite article with *pistis* in 2:14 does not support the two types of faith understanding, then that position collapses, regardless of what is said about any other word in the passage.

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<sup>14</sup> For more discussion of this point see Earl D. Radmacher, “First Response to ‘Faith According to the Apostle James,’ by John F. MacArthur, Jr.,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* (March 1990): 39–41.

<sup>15</sup> Because of the use of *mē*, the Greek expects a negative answer: Faith can’t save him, can it? However, that still doesn’t tell us what type of deliverance is in view.



If James were concerned that some of his readers were not regenerate, he would surely make this clear. However, the evidence is less than overwhelming.<sup>16</sup>

Repeatedly James refers to the faith of his readers. Unless James is referring to two different types of faith in Christ, one saving and one non-saving, the matter is beyond dispute.

In the first place, if we exclude Jas 2:14-26 from consideration, there is no evidence for a non-saving type of faith in any of the remaining 5 uses of *pistis* in James (1:3, 6; 2:1, 5; 5:15). For example, in the immediately preceding context, faith in 2:1 obviously refers to genuine faith. "My brethren, do not hold the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory, with partiality." One would think that if the entire epistle were concerned with antinomianism and false professions, then we would find repeated evidence of non-saving faith in the entire epistle, and not just in 2:14-26. Possibly James could have modified the word "faith" in such a way that saving faith had one designation (e.g., *genuine faith*) and non-saving faith a different one (e.g., *disingenuous faith*). Yet as Radmacher pointed out in a response to a paper presented at the 1989 ETS annual meeting by John MacArthur on faith in James, such modifiers are not found in James:

Faith...is used sixteen times in James without ever needing a modifier. Yet the following modifiers with "faith" are sprinkled through MacArthur's paper: "counterfeit" faith, "authentic" faith, "spurious" faith, "imitation" faith, "nominal" faith, "passive" faith, "sluggish" faith, "intellectual" faith, "sensual"

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<sup>16</sup> In his 1989 Evangelical Theological Society address, John MacArthur indicated that "it is common for apostolic writers to include in letters addressed to churches stern warnings for those whose profession of faith was questionable." He then cited the Epistle of Hebrews and the Second Epistle to the Corinthians. He suggested they both contain warnings to false professors. Then he gave this conclusion: "So the fact that the epistle was addressed to the 'brethren' does not prove Hodges' point [that the warnings of James 2 cannot be directed at false professors]." John F. MacArthur, Jr., "Faith According to the Apostle James," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* (March 1990): 29. In the first place, he fails to deal with any of the uses of "brethren" in James. Second, he fails to show that the warnings in Hebrews or the admonition in 2 Cor 13:5 are indeed addressed to false professors. And finally, even if epistles by other authors (or the author himself) had sections addressed to false professors, what evidence is there that James did this in this epistle?

faith, “dead” faith, “traditional” faith, “demon” faith, “heart” faith, “spiritual” faith, “vital” faith, “transforming” faith, “personal” faith, “orthodox” faith, “actual” faith, “real” faith, “obedient” faith, “saving” faith, [and] “efficacious” faith.<sup>17</sup>

In the second place, evidence for two types of faith anywhere in the Bible is quite suspect. The late Reformed scholar and apologist Gordon Clark wrote an excellent book entitled *Faith and Saving Faith*. In it he showed that all faith is a conviction that something is true. He indicated there was no such thing as two types of faith:

In spite of the popularity and supposed superior spirituality of the contrast between a *mere* intellectual proposition and a *warm*, living person, it rests on a mistaken psychological analysis. Even Berkhof admits, with at least an appearance of inconsistency, that “As a psychological phenomenon, faith in the religious sense does not differ from faith in general...Christian faith in the most comprehensive sense is man’s persuasion of the truth of Scripture on the basis of the authority of God.”<sup>18</sup>

Clark acknowledges that not all that one believes is saving. However, his point is that it is the object of the faith that makes saving faith saving, not the faith.<sup>19</sup> If Clark is right, there aren’t two different types of faith, and the traditional understanding of Jas 2:14-26 cannot stand.

Finally, the eleven uses<sup>20</sup> of *pistis* in Jas 2:14-26 call into question whether James was talking about two types of faith.

What does it profit, my brethren, if someone says he has *faith* but does not have works?” (Jas 2:14, emphasis added)

Is the person saying he has non-saving faith, or saving faith? It wouldn’t make sense if a person were claiming non-saving faith. Who

<sup>17</sup> Radmacher, “First Response,” 37.

<sup>18</sup> Gordon H. Clark, *Faith and Saving Faith* (Jefferson, MD: The Trinity Foundation, 1983), 107, italics his. See also the entire section, 91-118.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 107-110.

<sup>20</sup> Those who suggest the supposed distinction in Jas 2:14-26 fail to actually consider more than a few uses of *pistis* in the passage. See, for example, Jenkins, “Faith and Works,” 65-66. In his word study of *pistis*, he fails to examine even one use of the word in 2:14-26 or anywhere in James.

would make such a claim? Thus this must refer to genuine faith, whether the person actually has it or not.

However, the traditional view focuses not on what the man is claiming, but on the very fact he is proclaiming faith, yet he lacks works to back up the claim. The traditional view suggests that the word “*says*,” combined with “but does not have works” is James’s way of saying that the profession is false.

Why did James speak of his profession in the first half of the verse, but not the second half? This point is a bit of a problem for the traditional understanding.

In the two previous verses James had exhorted regenerate brethren, “*So speak and so do* as those who will be judged by the law of liberty” (italics added). In 2:1-13 James chastised his readers for not rightly treating the poor in their assemblies. Now in 2:14 James follows up with the question of what happens to the person who speaks but does not do. Thus the word “*says*” in verse 14 need not question the profession at all. James’s point may well be that professing genuine faith that is indeed genuine is not enough to please God. To please God one must also have works.

Can faith save him? (Jas 2:14b)

This is the second use of *pistis* in the verse. Here the traditional view would expect to find, “Can that *profession of faith* save him?” But we don’t find that.

*Pistis* here most naturally talks about the same faith as the first use. If that faith was genuine faith, as it surely was, then so is this one.

Of course, many understand the definite article here to serve as a demonstrative pronoun. Hence some understand this as *such faith* or *that faith*. Then they conclude that this suggests the faith itself is false faith.

Yet that would require a demonstrative pronoun to modify *the claim*, not the faith: “Can *that claim of faith* save him?”

Additionally, it is questionable whether we should draw any special significance from the presence of the article. The article is also found with *pistis* in 2:17, 18, 19, 22, and 26. *In fact, every time pistis occurs in the nominative case in James, it is always articular.*

In Greek abstract nouns routinely carry the article where the English does not. Greek has “the love” or “the faith” where English simply has “love” or “faith.” A parallel passage using the abstract noun *agapē* is found in 1 Cor 13:1-4ff.

The anarthrous *agapēn*, the noun in the accusative case, occurs three times in verses 1-3. Then twice in verse 4 and once in verse 8 the noun is found in the nominative case, with the definite article present in each case. No commentators suggest that we are talking about some substandard form of love in verses 1-3 that is proved by the use of the article in verses 4 and 8. No one says the article means we are talking about *false* love in verses 4 and 8.

The same situation occurs in James 2. Every nominative occurrence in this chapter is articular. However, the article does not occur with *pistis* in verses 14, 18, and 24, where two accusatives and one genitive appear.

And in none of the other uses of the articular construction in 2:14-26 is this alleged distinction found.

Do you see that [the] faith was working together with his works? (Jas 2:22a)

James is speaking of Abraham and his faith in offering up his son Isaac. Surely this was true faith. James is not saying *Do you see that such faith was working together with his works?* In verse 20 we read “[the] faith without works is dead.” If that is false faith, and the definite article in 22 refers back to that false faith, then Abraham had false faith when he offered up Isaac!

And by works [the] faith was made perfect. (Jas 2:22b)

Again, this is the faith of Abraham when he was about to plunge the knife into Isaac and sacrifice his only son. If there is such a thing as inadequate faith, this isn't it. Yet the definite article is used just as in verse 14.

You see then that a man is justified by works, and not by [the] faith only. (Jas 2:24)

James is concluding his comments on the justification of Abraham by works before men. It is reasonable to take *monon*, translated “only” in the NKJV, as an adverb here.<sup>21</sup> Then the verse could be understood in this way, “You see then that a man is justified by works, and not only by faith.” In other words, James is thinking of two justifications. Abraham

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<sup>21</sup> Bauer, Danker, Arndt, and Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 659, takes *monon* as an adverb here. However, it suggests it means “in isolation.”

was justified by faith in Genesis 15. Then decades later he was justified by works in Genesis 22. The former was before God. The latter was before men. This is in keeping with Paul's comments regarding Abraham and justification by works in Rom 4:2, "For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God." In any case, no matter how one understands verse 24, *pistis* here clearly refers to genuine faith.

There is strong support for the idea that *pistis* in Jas 2:14-26 refers to genuine faith. The evidence suggests that the problem James was confronting was not the type of faith his readers had. Rather, the problem was that they were not acting in a loving way toward one another.

#### IV. THE TEMPORAL DELIVERANCE UNDERSTANDING HAS POINTS IN ITS FAVOR

##### A. THE EMPHASIS ON PROFITABILITY IN JAMES 2:14 AND 16

Repetition of phrases in a context often provides clues to proper interpretation. James 2:14-17, the first portion of 2:14-26, opens with the words "What does it profit?" Those words occur again after the illustration of Jas 2:15-16. The exact same phrase "what does it profit" (*ti to ophelos*) occurs as the very last words of verse 16.

Authors often indicate emphasis by placing words or phrases first or last in a sentence or paragraph. Here we find the same phrase occupying both places of emphasis.

Why does James twice ask the question, "What does it profit"? The obvious answer is because he is discussing profitability!

First James discusses possible profit to the materially advantaged believer who fails to provide for his needy brothers and sisters. He then discusses the possible profit to those needy brothers and sisters who receive a kind word, but no tangible help. James' answer is the same in both cases. What do kind words without material support profit either kind of person? Nothing. The believer who closes his heart on needy brothers in his church will not profit. He will experience God's judgment here and now. The needy brothers and sisters will not profit either. They will go home cold and hungry. That is a lose-lose situation. James is saying that faith without works benefits neither the one who fails to give nor those who fail to receive. This in turn helps us understand the expression "faith without works is dead."

## B. "FAITH WITHOUT WORKS IS DEAD"

The repetition of "what does it profit?" helps unlock the meaning of verse 17 (and the repeated expression in verses 20 and 26). Verse 17 immediately follows the second use of "what does it profit?"

James 2:17 reads, "Thus also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead." In light of the repeated phrase and the obvious emphasis on lack of profit, it is reasonable to understand James to mean, "Thus also faith by itself, if it does not have works, *does not profit*." Deadness here is clearly figurative, and points to the lack of profitability. There is no profit in cold dead orthodoxy, for the rich or the poor believer.

Why didn't James just say that, then? Why introduce the idea of deadness? There are three logical reasons.

First, James has already introduced the idea that "sin, when it is full-grown, brings forth death" (1:15). Thus the believer who commits the sin of failing to help disadvantaged believers in his church is on the path of death. He may not die immediately. But he will certainly not escape God's temporal judgment (2:14). That believer is on a deadly course.

Second, the needy brothers or sisters who remain in want are a step closer to death themselves. Left unaided, literal death is possible. In any case, they are not experiencing the life that God wishes them to have.

Third, the idea of death has as its opposite life or vitality. Thus James is making the point that loving works directed to fellow believers in need give vitality and life to our faith. James doesn't say that faith—or true faith—makes our works good, as is commonly thought. In that case he would have said, "Thus also works by themselves, if they do not have faith, are dead."

Verse 26 says, "For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead." There the first element in each case is body/faith and the second is spirit/works. Faith is likened to the body, not the spirit.<sup>22</sup> The energizing spirit of a Christian is his works, not his faith. His faith is the body that must be energized by the spirit which is works.

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<sup>22</sup> John Hart, "How to Energize Your Faith: Reconsidering the Meaning of James 2:14-26," *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society* (Spring 1999): 47-48. Hart says, "James is teaching that faith without works is simply a cold orthodoxy, lacking spiritual vibrancy...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."

Many assume James is saying something like this: “Thus also faith by itself, if it has no works, is not *true* faith.”<sup>23</sup> While that makes sense within the traditional grid, one wonders if it fits James. Whether faith has works or not, it is by definition still faith. James didn’t say, “faith without works is not faith.”

The traditional view understands this phrase in verses 17, 20, and 26 to refer to what characterizes one’s whole life, not brief moments of one’s life.<sup>24</sup> Thus if a person’s life is generally characterized by good works, he has genuine, that is, living faith. That same person may have turned his back on needy believers many times over the years. Yet the traditional view would say that in none of those instances was his situation comparable to Jas 2:15-17 because, while he was negligent on occasion, his life was generally characterized by good works.

Yet is this consistent with James? James does not give illustrations based on what *characterizes* one’s life, but on what occurs or doesn’t occur *at specific moments in time*. In verses 15-16 James gives an example we can all relate to. If any of us fails to meet the needs of believers around us, then *at that moment* our faith is unprofitable, dead, and lifeless. We have failed to enliven our faith. Our orthodoxy has lost its vitality and has become cold and dead. The illustration does not concern the whole of one’s life.

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<sup>23</sup> Jenkins, “Faith and Works,” 66, says, “James, however, was contrasting a dead faith (which is only an intellectual assent) with a living faith that produces works and subsequently vindicates that profession.” He and others point to the word “dead” in Jas 2:17, 20, 26 in the expression, “faith without works is dead” as describing a special type of faith that is not true faith. However, three points argue against this. First, if this is the overriding issue in James, why is only one modifier used for the bad kind of faith, and that only three times? Second, why is there no positive modifier for the good kind of faith anywhere in the epistle? And third, is it really accurate to say that the word “dead” identifies some unique kind of faith? Is it not more accurate to say that the predicate nominative modifies the phrase “faith without works”? Faith is dead or unprofitable when it is not joined with works. But it is still faith.

<sup>24</sup> See, for example, Jenkins, “Faith,” p. 78 (“although faith is the sole instrument by which the righteousness of God is revealed in fallen sinners [Rom 1:17; 4:5], it will nevertheless be normatively and objectively demonstrated in the fruits of regeneration.” Ryrie, a Free Grace advocate, is alone in adopting the view that Jas 2:14-26 teaches that good works will occur somewhere, somehow, sometime, but that they will not necessarily persist or be characteristic.

Similarly, when James considers the examples of Abraham and Rahab, he does not speak of what characterized their lives. He speaks of one incident in each of their lives. In that instant their faith was active and mature. We are not told, for example, whether or not Rahab's life from that point onward was characterized by godliness.

I have a 1984 Diesel Mercedes Benz automobile with 250,000 miles on it. But you know what? My Mercedes is the best car I've ever had. I typically rent cars several times each year while on speaking engagements. They are usually new cars with less than 10,000 miles on them. And I always come home appreciating my car.

As good as my Mercedes is, however, it won't run without fuel. *A car, no matter how fine it is, is dead without fuel.* Does that mean that if a car ever runs out of fuel, it ceases to be a real car? Of course not. It means that it loses its energizing force. So also, faith without works is like a car without fuel. It won't do what it is designed to do. Works are the fuel that makes our faith profitable, productive, and lively.

A believer whose life is generally characterized by good works may go through times when he is unproductive because he fails to put his faith to work. Whenever a believer has faith without works, he is in a dead, unproductive condition, experientially.

Now my concern is not what characterizes my car generally. My concern is whether my car works when I need it.

What do we do if a car is out of fuel? We fill it up so the car is alive again. We don't go out and buy a different car! So, too, a believer whose spiritual life is dead (i.e., his faith is not combined with works) needs to get to work. The problem is not that he needs to believe something different. Notice that nowhere in his epistle does James call for faith in some other object. James is concerned that his readers need to look around them and start meeting needs.

### C. THE JUDGMENT OF BELIEVERS IMMEDIATELY PRECEDES AND FOLLOWS 2:14-26

James 2:14-26 is preceded and followed by verses dealing with the judgment of believers. Serving as bookends to the passage, 2:13 and 3:1 certainly test one's understanding of 2:14-26.

The traditional view sees 2:13 and 3:1 as referring to a generalized final judgment of all of humanity. The proposed purpose of that judgment is to announce who gets into the kingdom and who doesn't. Thus 2:13, 2:14-26, and 3:1 are understood as calling for people to try to do enough good works to get into the kingdom. The traditional view, of



course, points out that these works are motivated, empowered, and even done by God, so there is no ground for boasting or merit. Still, the traditional view does assert that James is saying that in order to get into the kingdom one must persevere in good works.

But is that a reasonable understanding of 2:13 and 3:1? Jesus promised in John 5:24 that the one who believes in Him “shall not come into judgment.” The judgment in view there is the Great White Throne Judgment (Rev 20:11-15). No believer will be judged to determine his eternal destiny. That is set the moment one believes in Christ. Otherwise what does “will not come into judgment” mean in John 5:24?

Yet the NT authors are clear that there is a time of judgment for believers. Paul calls it the Judgment Seat of Christ (Rom 14:10-12; 2 Cor 5:10). John calls it the believer’s day of judgment (1 John 4:17).

James, at the end of the epistle, speaking of Jesus’ soon return, says “the Judge is standing at the door” (5:9). We know that this judgment will occur after the Lord returns to rapture the Church unto Himself (1 John 2:28). Either it will occur during the Tribulation, or in the few months between it and the start of the Millennium (Dan 12:11-12).

James 5:9 is parallel to Rom 14:10-12. Both Paul and James warn believers not to grumble against one another because the Judgment Seat/Judge is coming soon.

The purpose of the judgment of Christians is to recompense us for the deeds that we have done. Whatever we sow in this life, we will reap in the life to come (Gal 6:7-9; see also 1 Tim 4:8; 2 Tim 4:6-8; 1 Pet 4:13; 5:2-4).

James 2:13 is at the close of the discussion about showing partiality to the rich and mistreating the poor in the church (2:1-13). The point is that if we fail to show mercy to the needy among us, we will have a tougher judgment at the Judgment Seat of Christ. Only by showing mercy to others will we receive special mercy at the Bema.

James 2:14-26 follows and builds on the necessity of meeting the needs of fellow believers. The focus is on temporal judgment here and now, as contrasted with future judgment at the Bema in 2:13.

Then in 3:1 James begins his discussion on proper use of the tongue with another reminder about the Bema. In the early church any man could speak at the Lord’s Supper. Some were designated as teachers. These were elders who did more of the teaching than other men in the assembly. James warns here that one should not take lightly the idea of being a teacher in the church. At the Bema those who have had that role

will incur a stricter judgment. Failure to reverence God's Word in one's teaching will be a great mark against one at the Bema.

The verses immediately before and after Jas 2:14-26 are dealing with genuine believers. They are called "my brethren" (2:1, 5; 3:1). Only believers will be at the Bema, which is what James is referring to. James would never warn unbelievers to be cautious about becoming teachers in the church. Nor would he warn unbelievers of the need to be merciful to believers in the church.

That the bookends relate to the judgment of believers supports the interpretation that 2:14-26 concerns the judgment of believers as well.

## V. REFORMED THEOLOGY DOES NOT REQUIRE THE TRADITIONAL UNDERSTANDING

In my opinion even those who are five-point Calvinists should be open to the temporal salvation understanding for two reasons. First, it in no way contradicts the Reformed position. Reformed theology believes that God disciplines His children. Second, as we've already seen, the evidence strongly favors the temporal salvation view.

Let's consider the first point more fully.

Reformed theology agrees with the idea that if genuine believers willingly sin, God will bring temporal judgment upon them. Reformed theology sees the temporal judgment of genuine believers in view in passages such as 1 Cor 11:30. Most, but not all, would also see the temporal judgment of genuine believers in Jas 5:19-20 and 1 John 5:15.

Thus the idea of temporal judgment is not itself antithetical to Reformed theology. One could maintain a strong view of the perseverance of the saints and still hold that whenever a believer fails to put his faith to work, it is unproductive and will not deliver the believer from God's temporal judgment.

Reformed theology need not react to the temporal judgment view of James 2 as though its entire system of thought would crumble if that interpretation were adopted.

Now the loss-of-salvation view of James 2 is clearly antithetical to the Reformed doctrine of eternal security. But the temporal judgment view affirms eternal security. It merely understands James to be saying something which Reformed thought admits is found in the apostle Paul's writings and in those of other OT and NT authors.

## VI. CONCLUSION

Far from being an epistle of straw, James is an epistle of steel. And Jas 2:14-26 is one of the most powerful passages in the entire Bible. It is a call to action. Get to work. Don't just talk the talk; walk the walk.

Look around you, find needs, and meet those needs. If you do, your life will be enriched now and forever. If you don't, you are on a deadly course that leads to pain and ultimately to premature death.

R. T. Kendall holds the temporal deliverance understanding of Jas 2:14-26.<sup>25</sup> His remarks on this passage challenge both the traditional view and our complacency in the face of need around us:

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 the body" must follow faith to show that it is saving faith indeed. We prefer to be selective in our use of James.<sup>26</sup>

It's time to reevaluate our understanding of Jas 2:14-26.

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<sup>25</sup> R. T. Kendall, *Once Saved, Always Saved* (Chicago: Moody, 1983), 208-217; see also 171-72. It should be noted that Kendall believes the person lacking temporal salvation in 2:14 ("Can faith save him") is the needy brother (of 2:6) illustrated in the next two verses (vv. 15-16). Thus his view is that faith without works cannot save the needy brother from his destitute condition. See pages 171-72, 209, 216-17.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 212, italics his.