

DEAD FAITH—WHAT IS IT?

A Study on James 2:14-16

by Zane C. Hodges

<http://www.he.net/~zhodges/>

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INTRODUCTION

Many Christians are sure they know what "dead faith" is. "Dead faith," they would say, "is the kind of faith that doesn't save anybody from hell." And they might add, "It is the kind of faith that doesn't produce the good works which prove that a person is a true Christian."

Of course, these opinions are usually thought to be based on the teaching of James 2:14-26. After all, that is the New Testament passage — and the only New Testament passage, by the way — which speaks of a dead faith. For many Christian people, the views expressed above are the only ideas about James 2:14-26 which they have ever seriously entertained. It is a major thesis of this booklet that those views cannot be sustained from the very passage which they are supposed to reflect.

But there is more. Our examination of James 2:14-26 will also attempt to show that, not only do these well-known opinions miss the point James is making, but they also make his actual teaching hopelessly obscure to the average reader. This is a way of saying that these popular views don't just narrowly misconstrue James's meaning. They miss it by a thousand miles!

In other words, to read James 2:14-26 correctly requires more than fine-tuning our previous conceptions about the text. It means discarding those conceptions completely and starting all over again from an entirely new vantage point. It means replacing our old pair of spectacles with a brand new pair in which the lenses are "ground" to the optical prescription that correctly perceives this inspired passage of God's Word.

THEOLOGICAL TRADITION

Some readers may be put on guard by the assertions we have just made. They may be inclined to feel that to suggest a new understanding of a well-known text is to call into question the historic convictions of Christian people down through the centuries. Surely, after many centuries of Christian teaching, the church will not just now discover the true meaning of an important Biblical passage, will it?

Ironically, such sentiments are likely to be expressed these days by many who call themselves Protestants. It is probably fortunate that these modern Christians were not around in the days of Martin Luther or John Calvin! They might well have discouraged those theological pioneers from expressing views which clashed with the church consensus of their own time. Indeed, it was the Emperor Charles V who was supposed to have said of Luther at the Diet of Worms, "A single friar who goes counter to all Christianity for 1,000 years must be wrong!"

Yet today many who feel they could have stood shoulder to shoulder with Luther at Worms do not accept Luther's principle of authority. They are reluctant to adopt any position which does not have a strong theological tradition behind it. And in feeling this way, they have actually surrendered one of the greatest convictions of the Reformation, namely, the supremacy of an appeal to Scripture over against the tradition of the church.

"But," someone will object, "would God allow His truths to be lost to the church at large over so long a span of time?" In reply, one may ask a counter question: "Why was there need for the Reformation in the first place? Would not the opponents of the Reformers have had just as much right to allege this principle against the new teachings?" In fact, as we know, the authorities of the pre-Reformation church did exactly that.

Accordingly, there can be no valid appeal to theological tradition — even post-Reformation theological tradition — against arguments that are basically about what the Biblical text actually says. All post-Reformation Christians should disallow such appeals. We therefore invite the reader to think about one fundamental question only: What do the Scriptures say?

JAMES 2—A STORM CENTER

But having said all this, one must also add that there is no such thing as a truly traditional interpretation of James 2:14-26. Instead, it is unmistakable that there is actually no consensus about the meaning of this passage — even among Protestants!¹

Naturally, there are those who construe James to be saying that salvation from hell (justification) is conditioned on works as well as on faith.² Others maintain that

¹ For a survey of views under a special set of categories, see W. Nicol, "Faith and Works in the Letter of James," in *Essays on the General Epistles of the New Testament*, Neotestamentica 9 (Pretoria: The New Testament Society of South Africa, c1975), pp.11-19. See also pp. 19-23. For the views of the Reformers themselves, see the interesting survey by Timothy George, "A Right Strawy Epistle: Reformation Perspectives on James," *Review and Expositor* 83 (1986): 369-382.

² For example, more than 100 years ago Barnes wrote, ". . . and as the Holy Spirit saw that there would be danger that in later times the great and glorious doctrine of justification by faith would be . . . abused, it was important that the error should be rebuked, and the doctrine should be distinctly laid down that good works are [italics his] necessary to salvation." Albert Barnes, *Notes on the New Testament: James, Peter, John and Jude* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, reprint ed. 1951 [orig. ed. n.d.]), p. 42. Even though this view is wrong, its candor is refreshing. Indeed, the prima facie impression the text makes on any reader who feels that eternal salvation is under discussion is precisely the view Barnes has expressed. Equally frank are the

justification is based on faith alone, and cannot be lost. However, they also say, if good works do not follow one's professed conversion, this lack of works demonstrates that such faith was a "dead faith" and hence that person was never justified at all.³ Most of the widely held views of James 2 are variations on these two popular ideas.

Obviously, all the views cannot be right. In fact, it is entirely possible that none of them are!

It is the thesis of this booklet that the latter is in fact the case. Not only is there no commonly accepted interpretation of James 2:14-26 in post-Reformation Protestantism, but indeed all of the major ways of reading this text are wrong. And not simply wrong, but seriously so. So incorrect are these views, that if James himself had heard them, he would have been both astonished and appalled!

This is a serious charge. We will support this charge in what follows. But for now it is sufficient to observe that James 2:14-26 remains a storm center in Christian thought. None of the common views can safely be affirmed to have any necessary prior claim on our consideration. Only a view that unmistakably grows out of the Biblical text itself can have final authority for the discriminating Christian reader.

A STARTING POINT

Not surprisingly, all of the common views claim to have the support of the Biblical text. Clearly, however, James could not be teaching all of them. In fact, as we have suggested, he may well have been teaching none of them! Therefore the question we must ask is, "What does the text of James actually say?"

We propose that the answer can only be found in bypassing the traditional method of study of this passage. We must take as our starting point the conclusion that James reaches at the end of his discussion — what we may call his "bottom line"!

In other words, we want to begin with the last verse of the passage, that is, with James 2:26. It is surprising to discover how small a role this particular verse plays in all of the writings on James 2. Yet its occurrence at the climax of James's remarks ought to be given its rightful weight. There is a sense in which, with this verse, James interprets all that he has said before, for he writes:

For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also (James 2:26).

statements of Nicol: "Logically, then, good works must be a condition of justification . . ." and, "From this it is clear that Paul might say: you must do good works, otherwise in the end God will not justify you." See Nicol, p.22. Thus does Nicol bid farewell to the Reformation!

³ This view is never more succinctly put than by Glasgow: "We are not saved by our good works, but if we are saved, we will do good works. Good works are not the ground of our salvation, but they are the outgrowth of it." See Samuel McPheeters Glasgow, *The General Epistles: Studies in the Letters of James, Peter, John, and Jude* (New York: Fleming H. Revell, 1928), p.29. But Glasgow's statement ill conceals the harsh fact that on this view good works are after all a condition of final salvation, even though they may not be called a "ground" in the sense of "cause." For when an end cannot be achieved apart from certain things being done, those "things" logically become conditions for the end in view. To deny this is to engage in a semantic game. Our point in fact is explicitly admitted by Samuel T. Logan, Jr., in "The Doctrine of Justification in Jonathan Edwards," *Westminster Theological Journal* 46 (1984): 26-52. Note particularly pp. 42-48.

One immediately notices here that James draws an analogy between dead faith and a dead body. But this transparent fact has not been properly treated by expositors. Obviously, if one encounters a dead body one assumes that it has died. To put it another way, this is a body that was once alive. This strongly implies that James can conceive of a "dead faith" as having once been alive. In other words, a person's faith — like his body — can die.

If the objection is raised that we carry the analogy too far, the reply should be, "Why?" Is there anything in the rest of the passage that shows that dead faith is not like a dead body in having once been alive? The answer is that there is absolutely nothing in this context that shows that the analogy does not hold at this basic level.

It follows that the view that a dead faith has never been alive is not derived from the text itself. Such a view, in fact, is really a begging of the question. Those whose theology does not permit the thought that a living faith may die are committing the common error of reading their own assumptions back into the text. But nothing shows that James held this view, and the analogy of a dead body strongly implies that he did not believe that "dead faith" had never been alive. Otherwise, the analogy would be weak and inappropriate to the subject matter.

Equally surprising is the fact that James is comparing faith to the body, while comparing works to the spirit. Who would not be tempted to reverse this comparison?⁴ After all, we feel inclined to ask, is not faith the animating principle, or spirit, which leads to the outward manifestation of good works?⁵

The answer is, "No"! At least it is "No" within the framework of this passage. The point James is making is that works are actually the key to the vitality of faith.⁶ His point is not that a vital faith is the key to works!

Yet this latter view is held by many readers of the passage. They have concluded — without help from the passage itself — that James must be talking about the necessity of having a living faith if we are going to produce good works! But on the contrary, as James's analogy shows, he is writing about the necessity of having works if our faith is to stay alive!

In other words, a body dies when it loses the spirit which keeps it alive. In the same way, a person's faith dies when it loses the animating factor of good works!

⁴ For example, Hort wrote: "The paradox must be intentional. The opposite is what most would be tempted to say: but it would be only superficially true." Fenton John Anthony Hort, *Expository and Exegetical Studies: Compendium of Works Formerly Published Separately: The Epistle of James* (reprint ed., Minneapolis: Klock and Klock, 1980), p.66. See the remarks of James Hardy Ropes, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle of St. James*, *International Critical Commentary* (Edinburgh: T.&T. Clark: 1916), p. 225.

⁵ Amazingly, this inversion of the idea is actually made by one commentator, who writes: "The spirit animates the body. In like manner faith must animate the works of life"! See O. P. Eaches, *Hebrews, James, and I and II Peter*, *Clark's Peoples Commentary* (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1906), p. 237.

⁶ For a strained attempt to handle the comparison of faith to a dead body without conceding that works are the animating, vitalizing factor, see R. A. Martin, *James, Augsburg Commentary on the New Testament* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1982), pp. 35-36. Martin reads into the passage the ancient way of deciding whether a body was dead or not, as though James had said, "We can know a body is dead when it has no breath (spirit)!"

Following these observations it should be clear that something is radically wrong with most of the popular readings of the passage. James says that works are the secret of a vital faith, and not the other way around. To make the passage say something else is to render the closing and climactic analogy of James 2:26 startlingly inept and confusing.

That James's conclusion is neither inept nor confusing is clear for all who hold to the verbal, plenary inspiration of Scripture.

FOR CHRISTIAN CONSUMPTION?

The realization that James's closing analogy implies that a living faith can die leads directly to another important question: Are the warnings of this passage aimed at Christians?

Here, of course, some of the common understandings of the text would respond affirmatively. All of those who hold that a Christian may forfeit his eternal salvation are comfortable with the view that the passage is a warning to believers to maintain themselves in a state of grace. Also, those who do not allow that a living faith can ever die feel compelled to apply the warnings to falsely professed Christians rather than to true believers.

But this latter view again begs the question. There is nothing in James's text to suggest that he directs his warnings about a dead faith at those who were never really saved at all. On the contrary, James addresses himself to people he calls "my brethren" (2:14). Earlier in the chapter he speaks of them as possessing faith in Christ (2:1) and warns them not to mix it with partiality toward men. Still earlier he describes his readers as born from above (1:16-18). The suggestion that James thinks of some of his readers as possibly unconverted is totally unfounded in this epistle.⁷

Consequently, the passage can be taken as a piece of Christian teaching addressed to people James regards as his Christian brothers. Once this is realized, the point of the analogy between dead faith and a dead body becomes plain. Christian people need to maintain good works in order to keep their Christian faith alive and vital.

Or, to put it another way, unless we act on our faith and live it out, our creed rapidly decays into mere dead orthodoxy. Good works are the "spirit" which animates the entire "body" of our Christian convictions. Without such works our faith dies.⁸ But does this lead to loss of eternal salvation?

FAITH CAN'T SAVE HIM, CAN IT?

⁷ Dibelius affirms: "But in all of the instances [in James] which have been examined thusfar what is involved is the faith which the Christian has, never the faith of the sinner which first brings him to God... The faith which is mentioned in this section can be presupposed in every Christian.... [James's] intention is not dogmatically oriented, but practically oriented: he wishes to admonish the Christians to practice their faith, i.e., their Christianity, by works" [italics his]. As far as it goes a better statement cannot be found in the literature on James 2. Martin Dibelius, James, rev. Heinrich Greeven, trans. Michael A. Williams, ed. Helmut Koester, Hermeneia (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, Eng. ed. 1976), p. 178.

⁸ Appropriate are the words of Gaebelein: "And there is a sense in which faith is a body, as in a system of doctrine or 'body' of truth. When so regularized and systematized it comes alive, James reminds us, only by being put into practice, acted upon, done." Frank E. Gaebelein, Faith That Lives (Chicago: Moody Press, 1955), p. 72.

It is certainly true that many readers have been convinced that the passage bears on our eternal destiny because of James's words in verse 14. There he writes:

What does it profit, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can faith save him? (James 2:14).

The really crucial statement here is the question, "Can faith save him?" The Greek of this question, however, is best rendered, "Faith can't save him, can it?" In other words, James expects his readers to reply, "No, faith can't save him."⁹

From this question it becomes apparent that James is not discussing a doctrine of salvation which is based only on faith. For this reason many interpreters have seen James as standing in opposition to the Pauline doctrine of justification by faith alone. Clearly, however, the kind of salvation James describes does not come by faith alone. If we must assume that Paul and James are discussing the same basic issue, then we are compelled to see them in conflict with one another.¹⁰

Of course, many expositors would not concede this point. They would maintain that Paul and James can, in fact, be harmonized.¹¹ But in the light of the question James has articulated in 2:14, with its clearly expected negative response, all harmonizations with a doctrine of sola fide (faith alone) are awkward and forced. Moreover, the remainder of the passage, with its emphasis on works, creates transparent obstacles to the harmonization process.¹² The absence of a universally or commonly accepted view of James 2 is in no small degree due to the failure of interpreters to really get rid of the apparent clash between Paul and James.

Not surprisingly, a kind of desperate effort has been made to avoid the impact of the question in James 2:14 by translating it, "That (that kind of) faith can't save him, can it?" But this is an unjustified exaggeration of the so-called "article of previous reference" in Greek and has nothing whatever to commend it here except the theological preconceptions that created this translation to begin with. With abstract nouns like faith and love, the article is perfectly normal when the noun is used as a subject.¹³ Precisely the

⁹ See Lorenzen, "The original Greek makes it clear ... that the rhetorical question calls for a negative answer: No! Faith without works cannot save! Works are necessary for salvation." Thorwald Lorenzen, "Faith without Works does not count before God! James 2:14-16," *Expository Times* 89 (1978): 231.

¹⁰ Lorenzen, for one, surrenders the process of harmonizing Paul and James. Lorenzen, p. 234.

¹¹ Among many in recent years who support the view that James and Paul can be harmonized are: G. R. Beasley-Murray, *The General Epistles: James, I Peter, Jude, II Peter* (New York and Nashville: Abingdon, 1965), pp. 27-31; Leslie Mitton, *The Epistle of James* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1966), pp. 103-108; D. Edmond Hiebert, *The Epistles of James: Tests of Living Faith* (Chicago, Moody Press, 1979), pp. 174-175; and R. A. Martin, *James* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1982), pp. 28-29, 33-36.

¹² Some indeed have sought a reconciliation between James and Paul in terms of differing concepts of works. Some time ago Lenski expressed a distinction that has often been asserted in one form or another since then. He states: "Paul and James deal with different kinds of works. Paul deals with law-works, which have nothing to do with true Gospel-faith.... James deals with Gospel-works, which ever evidence the presence of Gospel-faith...." R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Epistle to the Hebrews and of the Epistle of James* (Columbus, Oh.: Lutheran Book Concern, 1938), p.587. But this distinction cannot be substantiated and smacks of special pleading. Moreover the distinction has recently been trenchantly criticized and rejected by Moo. See Douglas J. Moo, "'Law,' 'Works of the Law' and Legalism in Paul," *Westminster Theological Journal* 45 (1983): 73-100.

¹³ For a relatively deft handling of the matter of the article, see J. P. Lange, *The Epistle General of James in his A Commentary on the Holy Scriptures: Critical, Doctrinal and Homiletical, with Special Reference to*

kind of construction we have in 2:14 is found with the word patience in James 1:3,4. But no one wants to render 1:4 as, "But let that patience have its perfect work." Thus also, in First Corinthians 13:4, where articles occur with "love," no one proposes to translate: "That love suffers long and is kind; that love does not envy; that love does not parade itself" The attempt to soften the blow of James's question in 2:14 by introducing a "that" before faith, is a form of special pleading which can summarily be rejected.¹⁴

No, the meaning of James's question is obvious. Faith does not save in the particular sense in which James means salvation. But what exactly is that sense?

SALVATION IN JAMES

One of the least examined preconceptions which has affected the interpretation of James 2 is the assumption that his use of the word "save" must refer to one's eternal destiny in heaven or hell. But this is a risky assumption as all observant readers of the Greek New Testament will know.

The Greek verb used in James 2:14 (σωζω) has a wide range of possible meanings which run the gamut from physical healing and rescue from danger, to spiritual deliverances of various kinds, to preservation from final judgment and hell. It is the interpreter's duty to examine each text where this verb occurs to ascertain its exact sense. In some places its sense is obvious, and in some it is not. Here it is not.

The rest of the epistle, however, is very helpful in determining James's meaning. In the concluding verses of his letter James writes:

Brethren, if anyone among you wanders from the truth, and someone turns him back, let him know that he who turns a sinner from the error of his way will save a soul from death and cover a multitude of sins (James 5:19,20).

Here the meaning of the verb "save" is plain. It refers to preservation of the physical life from death.¹⁵ Indeed, the Greek expression σωζειν την ψυχη ("to save the soul") is a standard and normal way of saying "to save the life." Furthermore there is no text in the

Ministers and Students (New York: Charles Scribner, 1869), p.82. He reduces the nuance to "thus [italics his] faith surely cannot save him." He adds further, "The reference therefore is simply to the faith in question, and the explanations of Theile (false faith), Pott (faith only) and similar ones are expegetical." This precision is lost by many modern writers, although it may now be argued that even this kind of "fine-tuning" overloads the semantics of the text. When James uses the word "endurance" in 1:3 without an article (as an object) and follows it immediately in 1:4 with an articular form (used as a subject), no one feels the need to comment on this. Nor should they feel this need in 2:14 with faith. Overrefinement in matters grammatical, however, is an academic vice that dies hard!

¹⁴ A. T. Robertson, *Studies in the Epistle of James* (Nashville: Broadman, n.d.), p.94 n. 2, assigns to the article "almost the original demonstrative force." But this is terribly unlikely here when it is not even true later in the passage where the article appears with faith at 2:17,20,22 (twice) and 26. Any student of the original language can examine James's text and see for himself that the article occurs with faith only when faith is a subject or has a possessive word qualifying it (as in verse 18). Otherwise there is no article. There is no recondate significance to the use of the article in 2:14! Quite rightly Dibelius, p. 152, rejects the special stress on the article: "Here Jas uses the article before 'faith' . . . , but this is not to be read 'this faith,' as many interpreters from Bede to Mayor have argued. Jas is not speaking of any particular brand of faith The only attributive which is expressed ... is this: faith which 'has' no works. But this is still the Christian faith and not an 'alleged, false faith.'" So much for building theology on an undetectable grammatical nuance!

¹⁵ Ropes writes of 5:20: "Note how here, as in 1:15, death is the result of sin." Ropes, p.315.

Greek Bible where it can be shown to have the meaning "to save the soul" from hell. First century readers, therefore, are not likely to have read the phrase in that sense.¹⁶

This should be kept in mind in James 1:21, where it would have been better to translate: ". . . receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your lives." In the larger context James has been talking about the death-dealing consequences of sin (1:13-15). Here he suggests that the antidote to that kind of consequence is the life-saving capacity of God's Word (1:21).

In speaking this way, James is firmly in the tradition of the Jewish wisdom literature, notably the book of Proverbs. Many of the proverbs affirm the death-dealing effect of wickedness and the life-saving effect of righteousness. For example:

The fear of the Lord prolongs days,
But the years of the wicked will be shortened (Proverbs 10:27).

As righteousness leads to life,
So he who pursues evil pursues it to his own death (Proverbs 11:19).

In the way of righteousness is life,
And in its pathway there is no death (Proverbs 12:28).

The law of the wise is a fountain of life,
To turn one away from the snares of death (Proverbs 13:14).

He who keeps the commandment keeps his soul (life),
But he who is careless of his ways will die (Proverbs 19:16).

Against this background, it is obvious what James means in 1:21 when he says that God's Word "is able to save your souls (lives)." But equally obvious is the point he goes on to make in the following verses when he writes:

But be doers of the Word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. For if anyone is a hearer of the Word and not a doer, he is like a man observing his natural face in a mirror; for he observes himself, goes away, and immediately forgets what kind of man he was. But he who looks into the perfect law of liberty and continues in it, and is not a forgetful hearer but a doer of the work, this one will be blessed in what he does (James 1:22-25).

The resemblance of all this to James 2:14-26 is striking. In 1:21-25 the inspired writer is saying that the readers will be "saved" (that is, their lives will be saved) if they are doers rather than just hearers of God's Word. And in 2:14-26, as one can now see, he is saying that they will be "saved" (in the same sense), not by what they believe (faith) but by what they do about what they believe (works).

¹⁶ Even our Lord's metaphor about saving/losing the life (Mt. 16:24-26; Mk. 8:34-37; Lk. 9:23-25) is best understood as founded on the literal meaning of the Greek phrase, which is quite plain in a text like Mark 3:4 ("to save life or to kill"). For lucid Old Testament examples of the sense "to preserve the life," see the following texts where the Greek version of the Old Testament (the Septuagint) used the Greek phrase we are discussing: Gen. 19:17 and 32:30; 1 Sam. 19:11; Psalm 109:31; Jer. 48:6. For the present writer's treatment of the Lord's metaphor about saving/losing the life, see *Grace in Eclipse* (Dallas: Redención Viva, 1985), pp.27-33.

Thus the word "saved" in 2:14 is most naturally construed in the same basic sense as that found in 1:21 and 5:19,20.¹⁷ It has nothing to do with the issue of eternal destiny at all, but deals instead with the life-preserving benefits that obedience brings to the Christian and which cannot be experienced by mere hearing or by faith alone.¹⁸

A NEW PERSPECTIVE

Once this point is perceived, a whole new perspective is opened up on James 2:14-26. To understand this famous passage one must forget the issue of eternal salvation. It simply is not the point under discussion. James is writing about the temporal life and the preserving of it.

All of the common contemporary readings of this passage come to grief on this simple mistake — they've got the wrong subject! But, as students of the art of interpreting literature will realize, this is one of the most devastating of all interpretive errors. Obviously, no text can be read correctly when the writer's real subject is not perceived!

It follows that all efforts to apply the passage as a whole to the issue of one's eternal destiny lead only to misunderstanding of the author's message. This erroneous perspective has produced many awkward attempts at harmonization with Pauline doctrine and, even worse, it has created bad theology. Ironically, the supposed teaching of James 2:14-26 has been used to develop a faith/works synthesis which neither Paul nor James ever believed or taught.

It is not too much to say that the misreading of James 2:14-26 is one of the most tragic interpretive blunders in the history of the church. It is a misreading which has played a major role in obscuring the simple message of the Biblical gospel. And whereas the Scriptures invite us to trust Christ and to find assurance of eternal salvation in the promises that God makes to the believer, this false conception of James 2 has been used to encourage people to find assurance in their good works. Moreover, while the Scriptures enjoin faith in Christ, this false view encourages people to try to have faith in their faith!

"How do I know I have really believed in Christ?" many have found themselves asking. The answer often given on the basis of James 2 is: "If you have good works, you can know that you have true or living faith." But this approach is catastrophic in its effects. The Bible never invites people to believe that they believe. It invites them to believe!

Thus one result of misreading James 2:14-26 has often been to render the concept of saving faith so abstruse and mystifying that one cannot certainly know whether he in fact really believes. But this is absolute nonsense! The Bible does not give the slightest encouragement to such confusion. If I have trusted Christ as my Savior, I can know that I

¹⁷ In connection with James 4:12, Laws points out that James echoes the Old Testament description of God as One who "kills and makes alive." She cites Deut. 32:39; 1 Sam. 2:6-7; and 2 Kings 5:7. Sophie Laws, *A Commentary on the Epistle of James*, Harper's New Testament Commentaries (New York: Harper & Row, 1980), p.188. This is congruent with the observations made above about the word "to save" in other passages of James.

¹⁸ James 2:14-26 is also treated as unrelated to the question of eternal destiny by R. T. Kendall, *Once Saved, Always Saved* (Chicago Moody Press, 1985), pp.170-172,207-217. Although Kendall relates 2:14 to the saving of the destitute poor person described in verses 15,16, his perspective on the passage is as close as anyone's to the present writer's.

have trusted Him just as surely as I can know whether or not I believe there is a China or that the earth orbits the sun.¹⁹

To invent a new and unique psychology for saving faith is not only absurd on its face, but it is absolutely contrary to the Scriptures themselves.²⁰ When Jesus asked the former blind man, "Do you believe in the Son of God?" and then identified Himself as this very Person, the response was a simple, "Lord, I believe!" (John 9:35-38). The man did not say, "I think I believe," or "I hope I have believed," but simply, "I believe"! In other words, this one-time blind beggar believed and knew he believed at the same moment.

And so does everyone who puts his trust in Christ! To say otherwise is an affront both to Scripture and to common sense. And all too often the supposed justification for this absurdity is a reading of James 2:14-26 which has nothing whatever to do with what the inspired author is actually saying.²¹

TAKING A FRESH LOOK

If we can free ourselves from the tyrannical grip of a heaven/hell mentality when we read James 2, then for the first time we can really hear the text speak, and we can profit from its highly practical message. To the extent, however, that we do not break out of the old mold entirely, to that extent we may hear the false echoes and resonances of our previous point of view. The reader is therefore urged to leave all preconceptions behind and to listen to the text in a fresh way altogether.

As an aid to this method, we shall begin with a slightly expanded paraphrase of James 2:14-17, which we express as follows:

"What good does it do, my Christian brothers, if someone among you says he has faith and yet does not act on that faith? Faith certainly cannot preserve his life, now can it? It would be the same thing as if one of you spoke to some Christian brother or sister who

¹⁹ There is nothing better in print on the relationship between everyday faith and saving faith than Gordon H. Clark, *Faith and Saving Faith* (Jefferson, Md.: The Trinity Foundation, 1983.) It should be read from cover to cover!

²⁰ The frequent assertion that James is contrasting two kinds of faith was far from obvious to earlier Calvinist expositors. So Manton wrote that "certainly" James "meaneth a pretence of faith otherwise there would be a direct contradiction [with Paul]...." See Thomas Manton, *An Exposition on the Epistle of James* (London: Banner of Truth Trust, reprint ed. 1968 [orig. ed., 1693]), p.232. This is also the view of Calvin himself, who writes that James means, "Unless you show fruits for your faith. I shall say that you have none." *Calvin's Commentaries: A Harmony of the Gospels Matthew, Mark and Luke, Volume III; and The Epistles of James and Jude*, trans. A. W. Morrison, eds. David W. Torrance and Thomas F. Torrance (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), p. 284. See also p. 283: "Just remember, [James]... is disputing with those who pretend insincerely to faith, but are entirely without it." Today the Calvinist exegetical tradition on James 2:14-26 is trapped in quasi-psychologizing about faith, but this quagmire is not to be blamed on writers like those just quoted.

²¹ Even though he holds that final salvation is in view, Nicol is absolutely correct when he writes: "James' point is not that faith without works is not faith; as faith he does not criticize it, but merely stresses that faith does not fulfill its purpose when it is not accompanied by works." See Nicol, p. 16. See his whole discussion here, especially the statement: "Our conclusion is that in this pericope James is not discussing different kinds of faith -- as the Reformed scholars we have cited assert; he emphasizes that those who believe must also do good works" (pp. 16,17). Plummer writes, "But St. James nowhere throws doubt on the truth of the unprofitable believer's professions or on the possibility of believing much and doing nothing." Alfred Plummer, *The General Epistles of St. James and St. Jude* (New York: A. C. Armstrong and Son, 1905), p.137.

was destitute of the necessities of life and you said, 'Go home peacefully and get warmed and filled.' But if you did not give them the very things they needed for bodily life, what good would it do? Would their lives be saved by your confident words? In the same way when faith stands all by itself, because you fail to act on it, your inactive faith is as dead as your useless words to your destitute Christian brother. It has no life-preserving power at all!"

A point often overlooked in these verses, but which the paraphrase seeks to bring out is the close link between "saving" (in the sense of saving the life) and the illustration of the destitute brother or sister. The fact that life-preservation lies at the core of the illustration is apparent, and this shows how meaningful this section is when read outside the heaven/hell misconception. One's destiny in heaven or hell is not the issue anywhere in these verses, or in the passage as a whole.

Likewise, once the true subject matter is perceived, the appropriateness of applying the word "dead" to inactive faith is transparent. A faith which cannot preserve the life from death is itself functionally dead!²²

THE OBJECTOR

Following this introductory section (2:14-17) a second unit introduces the words of an imaginary objector to James's ideas. Commentators have long found these words difficult to integrate into the argument of the passage. On the one hand, their full extent has been subject to question, and on the other hand their point has often seemed obscure and remote from the argument of the text.²³

It may be suggested, however, that the words of this new speaker (verse 18) ought clearly to go down through verse 19, since verse 20 evidently begins James's reply.²⁴ It may be suggested further that the thrust of these words is clearer when (as in a large majority of the Greek manuscripts of this epistle) we read "by" in verse 18 in place of the word "without."²⁵

²² See the quotation from Nicol in note 21.

²³ Sanguine indeed is the opinion of Cantinat that, though verses 18-19 are very difficult — perhaps the most difficult in the New Testament — these difficulties do not greatly affect our comprehension of the text! The exact opposite is the case: these difficulties, if left unresolved, significantly block our understanding. Jean Cantinat, *Les Épitres de Saint Jacques et de Saint Jude* (Paris: J. Gabalda, 1973), p.10.

²⁴ The evident unity of verses 18-19 as constituting the words of a single speaker is heavily attested in the literature. Many of those who have accepted this unity, however, have regarded the speaker not as an objector but as a pious ally who takes James's point of view. But this explanation is rightly dismissed by Davids because "no one has yet been able to find a case where this common stylistic introduction did not introduce an opposing or disagreeing voice." Peter H. Davids, *The Epistle of James: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, *New International Greek Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), p. 124. Among those treating the two verses as a unity are: Robert Johnstone, *Lectures Exegetical and Practical on the Epistle of James*, 2nd ed. (Edinburgh: Oliphant, Anderson and Ferrier, c1888), pp. 188-190; R. W. Dale, *The Epistle of James and Other Discourses* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1895), pp. 70,71; so apparently R. J. Knowling, *The Epistle of St. James*, *Westminster Commentaries* (London: Methuen, 1904), pp. 56-59; Joseph B. Mayor, *The Epistle of James*, 3rd ed. (London: MacMillan, 1910; reprint ed., Minneapolis: Klock and Klock, 1977), p. 101; and more recently, Christiaan E. Donker, "Der Verfasser des Jak und sein Gegner: Zum Problem des Einwandes in Jak 2 18-19," *Zeitschrift für die Neutestamentliche Wissenschaft* 72 (1981): 227-240; and Francois Vouga, *L'Épître de Saint Jacques* (Geneve: Labor et Fides, 1984), p. 87.

With these provisos, if the objector's words are read as high irony, their thrust will be clear. A paraphrase of the objector's remarks in verses 18-19 may be offered as follows:

"But someone is going to say, 'All right then! Let's say that you have correct beliefs and I have correct actions. Go right ahead! Take some belief of yours and make it visible by means of your actions. And if you can do that (but, of course, you can't!), then I will take my actions and will make my belief visible through them (utterly impossible!). Oh, I know! You'll claim that your faith in the unity of God is demonstrated by your good conduct.²⁶ I disallow that claim. The demons also believe the same thing you believe and they don't do good! They only tremble!' "

No doubt James had heard a similar piece of argumentation at sometime in a real-life situation. But the ironical tone in which he casts the imagined objector's thoughts was familiar in the diatribe style of the literature of his day.²⁷ This supposed second speaker in the dialogue heaps scorn on the idea that faith and works have a dynamic relationship in Christian experience, as James has suggested in the preceding verses that they have.

"How can faith be dead without works?" the objector is saying, in effect. Faith and works are two distinct entities, he continues, and the former does not have a demonstrable connection with the latter. Even if a God-fearing Jew claimed that his morality was rooted in his conviction that "God is one" (cf. Dt. 6:4), that claim was easily refuted. Demons held the same creed, and its only result was that they trembled. Obviously, then, all efforts to correlate conduct with creed were futile. So, at least, this objector wishes to affirm.

It is quite evident that this reading of James 2:18-19 is a far cry from the outlook of those who see a heaven-or-hell issue in this passage. The demons, we are often told, have a dead faith and illustrate how such faith is impotent to save from hell. But on our reading, the statement about the faith of demons is made by an objector to James's teaching. In that case, it can hardly be utilized as a valid spiritual insight! Besides, nobody has ever been saved from damnation by believing in the unity of God. Even pious but unconverted Jews believed that!

The problem here is really quite simple. The format of verses 18-20 shows clearly that the objector's remarks are not concluded until the end of verse 19. Verse 20 is a more or

²⁵ The case for our understanding of these verses is more fully argued by the present author in "Light on James Two from Textual Criticism," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 120 (1963): 341-350. As can be seen from the previous note, the decision to treat verses 18,19 as from a single speaker is not based on whether "by" or "without" is to be read in verse 18.

²⁶ The Greek phrase (*kalos poieis*) is here taken in the sense of "do good," "do right," which seems the most appropriate sense in Mt. 5:44;12:12; Lk. 6:27. It is also viable in Acts 10:33 ("you did the right thing to come") and even in James 2:8 ("If you keep the royal law . . . you are doing what's right"). Attention should be given also to the secular examples cited by Mayor, p. 101. In Hellenistic Greek one would be unwise to insist pedantically on the good/well differentiation so dear to strict English grammarians!

²⁷ The use of the challenge to "show me" in an ironical sense is well documented by Dibelius, pp. 154-155 n. 29. Especially parallel to James is a passage from Ad Autolytus 1.2, in which the Christian apologist Theophilus writes: "But even if you should say, 'Show me your God,' I too might say to you, 'Show me your Man and I also will show you my God.'" But this same ironic and unfulfillable demand is frequent in Epictetus, for example in the biting scorn of Discourses 3.22.99: "Who in the world are you? The bull of the herd or the queen of the beehive? Show me the symbols of your rulership!" For additional examples, see Dibelius.

less stylized way of beginning a reply.²⁸ The reply itself extends through verse 22 where the Greek verb for "do you see" is singular, and the reply concludes with verse 23. Only with verse 24 ("you see then") does the author return to a plural to address his entire audience.

But none of this has anything to do with eternal damnation. That subject is not even the objector's point! The issue is something altogether different: Are faith and works in the Christian's daily experience dynamically related? Does faith really die without the sustaining energy of works? Such thoughts, the objector is saying, are contrary to reality. He maintains that there is no visible, verifiable connection between faith and works, and all efforts to demonstrate that connection are in vain.

THE REPLY OF JAMES

The fact that verse 20 is indeed the commencement of James's refutation is signaled, as we have said, by the stylized opening formula: "But do you want to know, O foolish man, that faith without works is dead?" (verse 20). And with this opening remark, the inspired writer continues the thought he had expressed in verse 17 and to which the second speaker had objected in verses 18-19. The objection is foolish, says James, and faith without works really does die.

Does the objector really want to know this? James wonders. (The author had no doubt met some truly closed minds on this subject!) Well, the proof of James's point was readily available in a classic Old Testament text in which it would be sheer blindness not to acknowledge the obvious relation of faith to works. The incident, of course, was the high point of Abraham's obedience to the Lord — the offering of Isaac, his son, as a sacrifice to God.

This case study in the cooperation of faith and works was ideal for James's purposes. Both he and any Christian who might hold the objector's views would agree on one thing. Abraham was most certainly justified by faith. But could not anyone who sees this much see as well that Abraham was also justified by works? Indeed, was not the faith by which he was initially justified transparently enriched by his great act of obedience?

These thoughts are expressed by James in verses 20-23. A paraphrase of his words might be as follows:

"O senseless man! Do you really want to know that faith is genuinely dead without works? Take our father Abraham as an example. Isn't it obvious that he was vindicated by his works when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? Can't you see for yourself that his faith was cooperating with his works and his faith was actually matured by those works?"

"And was not all this an appropriate fulfillment of the divine declaration by which he was originally vindicated in God's sight; for the Scripture says that 'Abraham believed God,

²⁸ Note this same format in Paul: 1 Cor. 15:35,36 -- (Objector) "But someone will say, 'How...?'" (Response) "Foolish one, what you sow...."; and Rom. 9:19,20 -- (Objector) "You will say to me then, 'Why does...?'" (Response) "But indeed, O man, who are you to reply against God? Will the thing formed...?" The use of such structural markers as "but someone will say" and sharp-toned epithets directed at a senseless or ungodly interlocutor are well-known features of the diatribe style so prevalent in James's and Paul's day. For references see Mayor, pp. 99 and 102; Ropes, pp. 208 and 216; Davids, pp. 123 and 126.

and it was accounted to him for righteousness'? But now, in offering up his own son, this original divine acceptance of Abraham was substantiated and verified in the eyes of men who appropriately called him 'the friend of God.' "

This is a masterful response to an objection that James's readers must have heard, or else James would not have raised the issue in the first place. If one could not see the dynamic interaction between faith and works in Abraham's famous act of obedience, he could not see it anywhere.

Faith truly found, in Abraham's case, an indispensable ally in works. And Abraham's justifying faith, which included an implicit belief in the resurrecting power of God (Romans 4:17-19), was strengthened by an act which stretched that faith to its uttermost limits. For now Abraham was able to believe explicitly that God could even raise up this son whom he was just about to kill (Heb. 11:17-19).

No matter how one might meditate on this supreme crisis in the life of the patriarch, the conclusion was inescapable. The whole incident was a symphony in which the twin themes of faith and works were manifestly interwoven into a single harmonious refrain. And as clearly as faith had generated obedient activity, so too had obedient activity generated a richer faith.²⁹ But if Abraham had not acted, the danger to the continuing vitality of his faith was easy to see.

But this is all James wishes to say. There is no discussion here at all about the question of how a man can be declared righteous before God. In fact, the truth that Abraham was justified by faith is taken for granted and treated as common ground between James and his imagined objector (who no doubt represented views held by at least some Christians). What is at issue, rather, is post-justification faith.

This point is so obvious it ought not to need to be made. Yet it is commonly overlooked. Paul's great text on Abraham's justification (Gen. 15:6) is quoted as a "given" in the Abrahamic story. But the incident with Isaac occurred long afterward as every one of James's readers would know. But James artfully finds in this later faith a "filling full" of the earlier faith. Abraham's original justifying faith "was made perfect" ("was brought to maturity") by this later act of obedience which leaned so heavily on Abraham's original conviction about the promise of God.³⁰

The point for the readers of James is plain: Like Abraham they too have been accounted righteous before God by faith. Yet that original confidence in God can be expanded and developed by a life of active obedience. Abraham's submission to God in his greatest trial was ample proof of that. But the converse is also obvious. Not to permit our faith to develop and grow through an obedient life is to court spiritual hardening. Like a body

²⁹ About the statement in verse 22 ("by works faith was made perfect"), Adamson aptly observes: "The force of the statement seems to be that faith is fulfilled, strengthened, and matured by exercise." James B. Adamson, *The Epistle of James*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), p. 130.

³⁰ Hort, p. 64, explains "the Scripture was fulfilled" (verse 23) as follows: "The Divine word spoken is conceived of as receiving a completion so to speak in acts or events which are done or come to pass in accordance with it. The idea of filling, or giving fulness to, is always contained in the biblical use of fulfilling, though not always in the same sense." See also the stimulating discussion of Adamson, pp. 130-132.

which has lost its animating spirit, a workless faith in a Christian's experience is a telltale sign that his faith has lost all its vitality.

But about the whole idea that false professions of Christianity are detected by the absence of good works, James says absolutely nothing at all!

JUSTIFICATION BY WORKS

James is now ready to continue addressing all of his readers. Of course, in reality, he has been writing to them all along. The objector is a mere foil into whose mouth James could put the spiritually crass ideas that he wishes to refute, and thus he can avoid charging any of his readers with holding them. Presumably, however, if any of James's readers had been tempted to agree with the objector, those persons would now think better of espousing such views. And with this refutation out of the way, James is ready to round off the whole discussion with his concluding remarks.

These remarks (verses 23-26) may be paraphrased in this way:

"In conclusion, then, as you all can see, a man can be vindicated by works as well as being vindicated by faith. To illustrate: Was not Rahab the prostitute obviously vindicated by her works when she actively aided the spies to escape? Isn't that how she herself survived when everybody else in her city died? The point is plain: When Christian faith is disconnected from our works, it has no more vitality and life-preserving power than does a corpse which has been disconnected from its dynamic, life-giving spirit."

Two points must especially be noted in this significant conclusion. First, neither in these verses nor in those above does James ever speak of justification by faith plus works. Instead he speaks always of justification by works (verses 21 and 24a) or of justification by faith (verse 24b).

Verse 24 simply means that justification by faith is not the only kind of justification there is. James and his readers indeed agreed that justification before God is by faith alone. But some of his Christian readers might not have realized that one could also be justified by works, as had both Abraham and Rahab.³¹

Interestingly enough, the Apostle Paul would not have disagreed with this. Indeed, in Romans 4:2 he writes:

For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something of which to boast, but not before God (Romans 4:2).

No doubt Paul had encountered the thought that there was a sense in which Abraham truly was justified by works, and he does not dispute this idea. But he insists that such a justification would not be "before God"!

³¹ The word "alone," or "only," in Greek is adverbial in form and ought not to be construed as a modifier of "faith" in the sense of "by faith alone." This point is often ignored by writers. However, Lange grants that the Greek word for "alone" might be connected with the word "justified" in the sense, "not only by faith but by works a man is justified," but he argues that in fact it ought to be joined "adjectively" with the word faith. See Lange, p. 87. But in the New Testament, when the word *monos* ("alone") modifies a noun it normally has formal concord with the noun. The adverbial use is the only natural one here, i.e., "You see then that a man is justified by works, and not only (justified) by faith."

With this, of course, James's teaching is perfectly harmonious. Abraham was indeed justified by faith long before the incident with Isaac. But that incident, in its own good time, demonstrated to men that Abraham was on good terms with God, and so they called him "God's friend." On the level of practical performance, men saw him as a righteous person.

And so it can be with us as well. In fact, Jesus Himself taught, You are My friends if you do whatever I command you (John 15:14).

Here one cannot help but note that friendship with our Lord is based on obedience to Him just as Abraham's friendship with God was based on obedience. But this is an issue quite separate from that of salvation from hell. Clearly it is related to the Christian's experience of intimacy with God (see John 14:21-23).

Justification by faith, Paul teaches us, gives us a righteous standing before God. Justification by works displays our practical righteousness in such a way that we are vindicated before people. They can see by our works that we are in vital touch with our Maker and that we are on intimate terms with Him. Or, to put it another way, they can see our faith in God through our obedience to Him.³²

But James does not say that justification by faith cannot exist apart from justification by works. Nor does he imply this. To read such an idea out of James's words is possible only if we have first read our own idea into the passage. If any reader thinks he detects such an implication here, let him look again. This idea is not to be found anywhere in this text, and indeed not to be found anywhere else in the Bible.

But the second striking feature of James's conclusion is that, with the story of Rahab, James returns to his fundamental theme of saving the life (2:17). Clearly, this Gentile woman was in many ways a striking contrast to Abraham. But she was also like Abraham in that she acted on what she believed. Moreover, she was vindicated for all time and eternity as a woman with a vital, active faith in God.³³

³² Here we find ourselves comfortably in concert with John Calvin: "James did not mean to teach us where the confidence of our salvation should rest — which is the very point on which Paul does insist. So let us avoid the false reasoning which has trapped the sophists, by taking note of the double meaning: to Paul, the word [justification] denotes our free imputation of righteousness before the judgment seat of God, to James, the demonstration of righteousness from its effects, in the sight of men; which we may deduce from the preceding words, Shew me thy faith. etc. In this latter sense, we may admit without controversy that man is justified by works, just as you might say a man is enriched by the purchase of a large and costly estate, since his wealth, which beforehand he kept out of sight in a strong-box, has become well known." This is superbly put and immensely superior to most modern treatments of this issue. Calvin's Commentaries, pp. 285-286. Likewise very edifying are the comments of J. N. Darby: "James, remark, never says that works justify us before God [*italics his*]; for God can see the faith without its works. He knows that life is there. It is in exercise with regard to Him, towards Him, by trust in His word, in Himself, by receiving His testimony in spite of everything within and without. This God sees and knows. But when our fellow creatures are in question, when it must be said 'shew me,' then faith, life, shows itself in works." J. N. Darby, Synopsis of the Books of the Bible: Colossians-Revelation, new ed. rev. (New York: Loizeaux Brothers, reprint ed., 1942), p. 361.

³³ An indirect testimony to the depth of her vindication before men is to be found in the significant role Rahab played in pious Jewish legend. For specifics, see Laws, p. 137. Thanks to James, her name lives on today in Christianity as a challenging role-model for every born-again believer who, though already justified by faith, also aspires to be justified by works.

But Rahab also furnishes still another illustrative element which is not found in the Abrahamic incident. Rahab literally saved her own life (and her family's) by acting upon her true convictions and assisting the Israelite spies. Had these men not escaped their pursuers, Rahab would have died with the rest of Jericho's inhabitants. But by acting on her faith — in the very process of being justified by her works — she actually saved her own life!

James's readers could do the same thing if they were committed doers of the Word and not merely hearers (and believers!) of that Word (see 1:21-25). When it came to avoiding the death-dealing consequences of sin (1:13-15), it was certainly important to believe what one heard from the Scriptures. Surely no one was likely to act on something he did not believe. But it was not enough just to believe. One had to obey as well. If it was a case of escaping physical death which sin could so greatly hasten, faith alone could not save anyone. But faith that worked could. And this is the practical and crucial truth of which Rahab's action is the climactic illustration.

CONCLUSION

It is doubtless a tribute to the tenacity of inherited ideas that the real message of James 2:14-26 goes largely unheard in the church even today. But this sad fact is also an alarming reminder that the natural instincts of man gravitate almost without prodding to those views of eternal salvation which are inseparably interwoven with an insistence on good works.

The sheer, unadulterated saving grace of God has always been such a dazzling, blinding light to men that even after they have believed it they often harbor the secret opinion that there has to be a "catch" somewhere. Indeed, the Galatians suspected that there was such a catch not long after Paul had left them (Galatians 1:6-9).

But James 2:14-26 is not that catch! Contrary to the opinions that have been relentlessly repeated down through the years, James does not in any way insist on the presence of good works as a necessary (or inevitable) part of God's gracious deliverance of men from eternal damnation. Indeed, no writer has stated the truth that new birth is a divine gift more eloquently than James (1:17,18), and he is quite comfortable with the thought that Abraham was justified by faith unmixed with works. But James does pointedly insist that, after God's gratuitous justification has been received, the faith of a justified man needs to be kept vital and dynamic by good works.

This is not to say that the failure to perform good works will result in the loss of original justification. James never suggests any such idea as that. James does say, however, that even justified believers can be led astray on a pathway that ends in death (see 5:19,20). To avoid that outcome, faith must be kept alive and vital by faithfully acting in obedience to God's Word.

This is practical advice, to say the least. But it is advice for Christian people for whom the issue of heaven or hell has already been settled. To use James 2:14-26 to unsettle that issue for the modern Christian reader is a most serious error. Admittedly, this error is widespread and will no doubt have an audience in the church until the Lord returns. But it is comforting to know that the teaching will be totally and irrevocably forgotten as soon as the redeemed meet their Redeemer face to face. And far outlasting the feeble and

inadequate ideas that are drawn from misreading the message of James 2 will be the song of the eternally saved:

To Him who loved us and washed us from our sins in His own blood... (Revelation 1:5).

Let it be said plainly: Where the message of the cross is clearly understood, the blood of Christ is more than sufficient to give peace to the believer. Those who must look at their works to be sure that their faith is real, have not yet clearly understood the Gospel of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. It is not faith in our faith that assures us that we are eternally saved. It is faith in Him who loved us.
