



Can A 'Lonely' Faith Save?¹

Misunderstanding was a troublesome problem of sixteenth-century doctrinal disputes. This was often aggravated by the fact that Protestant and Roman Catholic, in articulating their respective views, used the same terms in different ways.

Perhaps the most striking instance of misunderstanding between the two sides relates to their different uses of the term 'faith alone' in relation to justification. According to the Reformation view, believers are justified upon the basis of the righteousness of Christ, which God freely grants and imputes to them; therefore, this righteousness is received by the empty hand of faith alone. For the Reformers 'faith alone' (*sola fide*) was a watchword that preserved the distinction between justification and sanctification and emphasized the sheer graciousness of God's act in receiving sinners into his favour.

Though justified believers are also sanctified by the Spirit of Christ, the good works which are the fruit of faith play no role so far as justification is concerned. Faith alone justifies the believer, since faith is the believer's act of receiving what God graciously grants and imputes to him. If good works, even those that are the fruit of a living faith, are viewed as instrumental in justification, then the gospel of free justification is compromised and the confession of salvation by grace alone is imperilled.

Whenever good works are added to faith in relation to justification, Christ's work is no longer regarded as sufficient to save, but needs to be supplemented by human merit and achievement.

Paul and James

The Protestant insistence upon faith alone was bound to provoke a negative reaction among Roman Catholic theologians. Since Rome's doctrine of justification views faith as a mere assent to the gospel promise, faith must be 'formed by love' in order for justification to be maintained and increased. To say that faith alone justifies equates to teaching that a mere intellectual acceptance of the gospel promise is sufficient to save. The Protestant teaching on justification implies, according to its Roman Catholic critics, that believers are justified by an *inactive* and *unfruitful* faith. One of Rome's principal objections to the Protestant view is expressed in the question raised at the beginning of Romans 6: *'What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound?'*

According to this objection, if justification occurs by grace alone, apart from any works done in obedience to the law of God, and if believers simply receive it as a free gift with the empty hand of faith, then such a doctrine will encourage believers to live careless and sinful lives. What motivation will remain to encourage a serious pursuit of holiness or obedience to the commandments of God? According to Roman Catholic critics, the Protestant insistence that God justifies sinners by grace alone apart from works encourages carelessness with respect to the law and the gospel's call to holiness.

This objection has played an important role in the dispute regarding justification since the sixteenth century. A standard feature of Roman Catholic criticism of the Reformation view is that the doctrine of free justification dangerously undermines the need for good works in the Christian life. One form in which this criticism is expressed is the frequent complaint that the Reformation view represents a kind of 'legal fiction'. The Protestant doctrine of justification amounts to the claim that God treats sinners in justification as *if* they were righteous, when in fact they remain the sinners they were before. According to this complaint, when sinners are saved, they are not really changed by God's grace and their lives undergo no real amendment. It is important to note, however, that what

ultimately lies behind this objection is the implication that, when God declares men to be acceptable to himself, he *leaves them in their sins*: i.e. God's work of grace ends or terminates upon justification, and does not bring with it the grace of sanctification.

The reformers and the teaching of the Epistle of James

This objection is most clearly crystallized in the traditional Roman Catholic complaint that the Reformers neglected the teaching of the apostle James. The scriptural basis for the Reformation's view was, according to this objection, too one-sidedly based upon an appeal to Paul's New Testament epistles. Consequently, when Rome condemned the doctrine of the Reformation at the Council of Trent, no portion of Scripture was more frequently cited than the Epistle of James, especially the second chapter with its emphasis upon the role of works in justification. According to the Council of Trent, James 2:14-26 offers a convincing scriptural proof of the error of the Reformation's teaching regarding justification. Contrary to the insistence that justification is by grace alone through faith alone, apart from works, the apostle James teaches that believers are also justified by their works. The believer's justification is based upon God's grace, to be sure; but this grace produces good works done in obedience to the law of God, which also form part of the grounds for the believer's justification.

From a historical point of view, this claim against the Reformers is rendered credible by Luther's rather critical and unsympathetic opinion of the Epistle of James. By expressing a rather negative assessment of its teaching on justification, Luther gave credence to the traditional Roman Catholic complaint that the Protestant view of faith alone was one-sidedly Pauline and detrimental to an emphasis upon good works.

In his preface to the 1522 edition of the German New Testament, Luther remarked that the Epistle of James is a 'right strawy' (*recht strohern*) epistle. Though he had better things to say about James on other occasions, he nevertheless expressed his readiness to consign the epistle to the flames, rather than allow it to stand against the doctrine of justification by faith alone. From the Roman Catholic point of view, however, Luther's strong words expressed the general consensus of Protestantism and exposed the vulnerability of its emphasis upon justification by faith alone.

James 2:14-26 and the key questions

Due to the importance of this long-standing Catholic objection to the Protestant view, we shall look again at the teaching of James 2:14-26.

- What is the line of James's argument in these verses?
- What does he teach about the relation of faith and works, or of faith and justification?

Only when these issues have been addressed, can we conclude with a comprehensive consideration of the respective Roman Catholic and Reformation interpretations.

Since Calvin provides the most comprehensive and positive account among the Reformers of the relation between Paul and James on the doctrine of justification, we will regard his comments on this passage to be of particular importance for evaluating the Reformation perspective. When, subsequent to our reading of the passage, we take up the historic difference between Roman Catholic and Protestant views, we will be especially interested in the questions:

- Does the teaching of James 2 refute the Reformers' emphasis upon justification by faith alone?
- And, if it does not contradict the Reformers' view, how are we to understand its emphasis upon the role of works in the salvation and justification of genuine believers?

James 2:14-26

¹⁴ *What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him?*

¹⁵ *If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food,*

- ¹⁶ *and one of you says to them, ‘Go in peace, be warmed and filled’, without giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that?*
- ¹⁷ *So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.*
- ¹⁸ *But someone will say, ‘You have faith and I have works.’ Show me your faith apart from your works, and I will show you my faith by my works.*
- ¹⁹ *You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe – and shudder!*
- ²⁰ *Do you want to be shown, you foolish person, that faith apart from works is useless?*
- ²¹ *Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up his son Isaac on the altar?*
- ²² *You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was completed by his works;*
- ²³ *and the Scripture was fulfilled that says, ‘Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness’ – and he was called a friend of God.*
- ²⁴ *You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone.*
- ²⁵ *And in the same way was not also Rahab the prostitute justified by works when she received the messengers and sent them out by another way?*
- ²⁶ *For as the body apart from the spirit is dead, so also faith apart from works is dead.*

Even a first reading of these verses will clearly show the reason why they have played such an important role in traditional Roman Catholic polemics against the Reformation. In the course of his argument James reaches a conclusion that seems startlingly at odds with the Reformation doctrine of justification. He writes:

Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up his son Isaac on the altar? You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was completed by his works ... You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone.

James 2:21-23

While the Reformers appealed to the writings of Paul to advance their claim that justification is by faith alone, James seems explicitly to reject the teaching of faith alone in his explanation of the believer's justification. According to him, Abraham's example confirms that a person is *‘justified by works and not by faith alone’*. This seems to be clearly opposed to the Reformers' reading of Paul on the subject of justification, and raises a serious question as to whether their view was too narrowly Pauline. If James's teaching is permitted to shape our understanding of the justification of believers, then the vigorous Reformation emphasis upon grace alone and faith alone stands in need of serious modification. Even a superficial reading of James 2 seems to support Luther's concern that it fits uncomfortably with that of Paul, to put it mildly, or explicitly contradicts it, to put it more bluntly.

Two important things to note about James' teaching

Before drawing our own conclusions, we need to look carefully at the *context* for James's conclusion that Abraham was justified by his works. We also need to consider the *specific way* in which James speaks of justification. Only then can we determine how his statements relate to that of Paul. One of the best ways to interpret an argument is to discover the issue being addressed. This is particularly true when it comes to the interpretation of James 2:14-26.

What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him?

James 2:14

James begins by explicitly raising a question for consideration. The question is consistent with the *practical* character of his epistle; it is full of instructions about how the Christian life ought to be practised. Though verses 14-26 form a clear unit, they are not an abrupt insertion into the epistle, but a continuation of James's exhortations to live in accordance with *‘the royal law according to the Scripture’* (James 1:8).

The burden of the letter is that those who profess faith in Jesus Christ must live in a manner consistent with the gospel.

Within this context, James's question is quite straightforward and sets the stage for his subsequent argument. He asks whether there is any 'good' or 'benefit' when someone professes to believe but does not have 'works'. The reader is asked to imagine a person who makes a public declaration of faith in Jesus Christ, but whose faith is not accompanied by good deeds.

Linguistic features

There are several linguistic features of this verse that help to clarify the force of James's question. First, he uses the present tense: '*What use is it, brothers, if a man **says** he has faith.*' The focus is upon a professing believer, someone who is claiming to be a Christian. Second, James calls attention to the nature of this professed faith: '*Can **that** faith save him?*' Literally, the text reads, 'Can *the* faith save him?' The use of the definite article emphasizes that the faith of which this man boasts is a faith devoid of good works: it is a 'lonely' faith in the sense that it is unaccompanied by works. And third, James pointedly summarizes his question rhetorically, using a form that expects an emphatically negative answer. No one whose profession of faith is merely a matter of words should deceive himself by thinking that such a faith is able to save.

The form of the question

The precise form of James's question must be borne in mind in any consideration of this passage. James 2:14-26 is clearly framed by this question and its anticipated negative answer. In fact, so tightly governed by this question is this section that it would be possible to delete verses 15-25 and to place verse 26 immediately after verse 14.

What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him? ... For as the body apart from the spirit is dead, so also faith apart from works is dead.

The opening and closing verses form a kind of parenthesis around the intervening argument, which offers an extended illustration of James's principal point, namely, that a 'works-less' faith – a mere professing-to-believe without any accompanying works – cannot save. The question here is similar in its implications to other familiar passages in Scripture. In Matthew 15:8, Jesus quotes the words of the prophet Isaiah: '*This people honours me with their lips, but their heart is far from me.*' Isaiah describes people whose religion is of the lips and the teeth and the tongue alone. In a similar passage, Matthew 7:21, Jesus declares that '*Not everyone who says to me, "Lord, Lord", will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven.*' *It is only the person who does the Father's will whom Jesus will acknowledge as one of his disciples. To those who do not do the Father's will, however, he will say, 'Depart from me, you workers of lawlessness'* (Matt. 7:23). As in these comparable passages, James's focus is on a person who professes to believe, but whose life belies this profession.

If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, and one of you says to them, '*Go in peace, be warmed and filled*', without giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that? So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead (James 2:15-17).

A concrete example

Having raised the passage's governing question, James offers a concrete example. The purpose of his illustration is to lend tangible force to the question in verse 14. This is evident from the repetition of the phrase, 'what good is that?' in verse 16. James once again anticipates that his readers will respond with an emphatic agreement that such 'deed-less' faith is of no good whatsoever.

The illustration is a simple one. A Christian brother or sister needs clothing and food. What good would it do, asks James, to wish such a person well, but to do nothing to help him or her? The

expression here, 'Go in peace', is much like our English expression, 'Good-bye'; it literally means to wish someone well. Often, when conversations conclude with a 'good-bye', the expression is really little more than an empty phrase. The well-wisher who says 'good-bye' does not intend to do anything specific to address the recipient's need. The words are tossed out, but they do not express a heartfelt interest in the recipient's well-being. This is the kind of thing of which James is speaking here: a professing believer who wishes someone well, but has no real intention of acting upon his or her words. He wants to make a point similar to that made in John 3:9-11, where the person who professes to love God but does not love his brother is exposed as a hypocrite.

Of what use, then, is a faith that has no accompanying good works, that is 'by itself', all alone, having no evidence that it is alive?

But someone will say, 'You have faith and I have works.' Show me your faith apart from your works, and I will show you my faith by my works.

James 2:18

Verse 18 is one of the more difficult verses to interpret in this passage, since it is not clear which words belong to James's interlocutor and which words belong to James himself. A cursory review of the contemporary English translations will demonstrate how competent translators differ on the punctuation of this verse.

Three possible interpretations

Though the commentaries discuss this verse in quite technical and complicated terms, there are only three possible principal interpretations. The first takes the entire verse after the opening phrase to be the statement of an interlocutor or objector to James. This interpretation properly recognizes that the words James uses to introduce his interlocutor's statement, 'But someone will say', clearly implies that an objection to James's argument is anticipated. The problem with this view, however, is that the last part of the verse seems to be a statement that agrees with James's primary argument here, namely, that faith shows or demonstrates itself by works.

The second view punctuates the verse so that the objection of James's interlocutor is limited to the statement, 'You have faith but I have works.' However, the difficulty with this punctuation is that then the objector's statement does not appear to express a significant objection. Rather, it seems to amount to the assertion of a strange separation of faith and works, whereas James is arguing throughout the passage that they are inseparably linked.

Due to the problems posed by these two readings of verse 18, a third interpretation suggests that the text means:

*But someone will say, 'Do you have faith?' And I **will say**, 'I have works. Show me **your faith** apart from your works, and I by my works will show you my faith.'*

Advocates of this third view argue that the phrase, 'You have faith', which introduces the objection of James's interlocutor, could be taken as a question, 'Do you have faith?' They also note that the addition of the verbal idea, 'will say', after this question is permissible. However, what especially commends this particular reading of the verse is the way it fits in nicely with the context. Commenting on this point, James White argues that

The result fits perfectly ... with the context: the imaginary objector, responding to James's emphasis upon deeds, asks if James has faith at all. James, rejecting the abnormality already seen (faith that cannot prove its existence by actions), responds by saying that he possesses evidence, works, and that he can demonstrate the existence of his real faith by those very works. The objector cannot demonstrate the existence of faith without the corresponding actions.

The latter part of this reading of verse 18 expresses James's point that there is an inseparable connection between faith and works. This then leads quite naturally to the emphasis of the next verse, which contrasts true faith that works with a false faith that does not work.

The main point is clear

Despite the complexity of this verse and the various readings advocated by different interpreters, the main point, which is crucial to the right interpretation of the remainder of the passage, is not difficult to ascertain. Is there an inseparable link between (genuine) faith and works; or is it possible to separate them? James argues that true faith is a working, living faith; it is not lifeless or dead. Consequently, he speaks of a *synergy* between faith and works, when he describes saving faith as active 'along with' works (James 2:22). He strongly opposes any separation between faith and works, which would tear asunder what properly belongs together. Faith and works are two sides of a single coin; if you have the one, you will necessarily have the other. As James White notes: *'The contrast in this passage is not between **faith** and **works** but between **dead faith** and **living faith**.'*

Verification of genuine faith

A further feature of verse 18 deserves comment. The insistence on the inseparability of faith and works occurs within a specific context, namely, how the claim to have faith is verified or confirmed. When someone makes a profession of faith, the issue of its genuineness comes into focus. The words 'show' or 'prove' at the end of verse 18 calls attention to this issue. What is at stake is the visible demonstration or proof of the claim to have genuine faith. By introducing this verbal idea, the inseparability of faith and works is not only emphasized but also placed within the specific context of *the genuineness of a person's profession of faith demonstrated to others*. To state the matter negatively, the setting is not whether such a profession is known to be true by God. Rather, assuming that God knows perfectly well whether a profession of faith is valid, James focuses his attention upon the question of *how others can be assured that the claim to have faith is true*.

'Dead' orthodoxy

You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe – and shudder!

James 2:19

To illustrate the inseparability of true faith and works, James introduces the prospect of a species of faith that consists merely in giving one's assent to true propositions about God. The faith of someone who professes to believe, but who does no good works, is compared to the faith possessed by demons. Following closely the train of thought at the end of verse 18, James notes that a person may assent to the truth that 'God is one' and yet be devoid of good works. However, because this faith is literally a dead orthodoxy, such a believer is no better off than the demons. They also assent to the truth that God is one, but far from producing good works in them, their faith only causes them to tremble with fear. Such knowledge, which James is careful not to criticize, is nevertheless not the expression of a true and living faith.

The preposition used in verse 19 reinforces this contrast. It speaks of the demons believing '*that* God is one'; they do not believe 'in' or 'upon' God. However in the New Testament true faith is spoken of as an act whereby a person believes 'in' or 'upon' or 'into' Jesus Christ or the promises of the gospel.

Do you want to be shown, you foolish person, that faith apart from works is useless?

James 2:20

James employs strong language in describing the person who would maintain that a dead and unfruitful faith is able to save. The 'foolish person' is without soundness of mind; his thinking is vain and empty. Once again, as in verse 14, James here uses a rhetorical form that anticipates an emphatic negative response to his question.

One of the interesting features of verse 20 is the play on words used to underscore the apostle's main point that faith without works cannot save. The literal conclusion reached is 'the faith without works workless is'. The word translated as 'useless' (ESV) is a combination of the negative prefix, *a-*, which means 'no' or 'non', and the noun for 'works'. Though it does not come through well in translation, this play on words expresses a kind of tautology: faith without works is workless, that

is, it is barren, empty, unfruitful. And so we return to the question with which James began: Can the faith, which has no works, save anyone? What good is it, if a person claims to have faith, but has no works?

Two preliminary comments about Paul and James

Before taking up the second half of this passage, we need to make two preliminary comments about the relation between the teaching of Paul and James.

First, the contrast governing James's discussion in this passage is one between a true faith, which is inseparably joined with works, and a false faith, which is barren and lifeless. Only the former can save, James argues, not the latter. Those whose faith is without works are self-deceived in their profession; their profession of faith is no better than the dead orthodoxy of demons. This contrast is quite distinct from that found in Paul between faith, which is the exclusive instrument of justification, and works, which play no role as the basis for justification.

Second, the issue James addresses seems quite distinct from that addressed by Paul, particularly with regard to his treatment of the doctrine of justification. James is concerned about how the genuineness of someone's profession of faith can be demonstrated. Or, to state the difference in other terms, James focuses upon the *justification of faith* in the presence of others, whereas Paul focuses upon the *justification of the ungodly* in the presence of God.

The answer: No salvation without a 'lively' faith

Thus far in our treatment of James 2:14-26 we have focused primarily on whether a 'lonely' faith, barren of good works, can save. Having considered the question, we are now in a position to look at James's answer.

Was not Abraham our father justified by works, when he offered up Isaac his son on the altar? You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was completed by his works; and the Scripture was fulfilled that says, 'Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness' – and he was called a friend of God.

James 2:21-23

James appeals to the example of Abraham in order to show that the faith which saves is always active in good works. Like Abraham, whose faith led him to willingly offer up his son Isaac on the altar in obedience to the Lord, so all believers must exercise an active faith 'along with' their works. There is a synergism, a mutual working-with the other, of faith and works in the life of the believer.

However, the remarkable feature of James's appeal to Abraham is his use of the expression, 'justified by works'. Though his words and argument have their own integrity and meaning – which has to be determined without undue concern for harmonizing with Paul – the apparent contrast with the statements of his fellow apostle can hardly be missed. Whereas Paul appeals to Abraham's example to prove that we are justified freely by grace alone through faith alone apart from works (Rom. 4), James appeals to Abraham as someone whose faith was lively and active in good works. Just as Paul cites Genesis 15:6 (which speaks of Abraham's faith being reckoned to him as righteousness), so also does James. But James's purpose in appealing to this Old Testament passage appears to be quite different from, even contradictory to, that of Paul. Paul does so in order to show that believers are justified apart from works done in obedience to the law. This is the point he labours to prove throughout Romans 4: Abraham was justified before he received the seal of the righteousness of faith in circumcision. Before Abraham had done anything in the way of obedience, his faith was reckoned to him for righteousness. But James refers to Abraham in order to make a different point, one that appears upon first reading to be contradictory to Paul's.

The crux of the difficulty – a contradiction between apostles?

The crux of the difficulty here can be put in the form of a question: Does James 2:21-25 use 'justification' in the same sense as Romans 4? If the answer is yes, then the conclusion seems

unavoidable: James is contradicting Paul. If so, then we seem to be confronted with a dilemma: either Paul is right, or James is right, but they cannot both be right. You cannot say that believers are justified by faith apart from works of the law on the one hand, and then also say that believers are justified by works – at least not if the term justification is being used in the same sense in both instances. Any resolution of this issue must address the question whether James uses ‘justification’ in a sense different to Paul.

No contradiction – three possible interpretations

Those who insist that James is not contradicting Paul usually offer one of three possible interpretations of his claim that Abraham ‘was justified by works’.

1. First, some appeal to the question governing this passage, ‘Can that faith save him?’, and argue that James is using ‘justify’ as a synonym for ‘save’. On this interpretation, James is using the term ‘justify’ to refer inclusively to all that belongs to salvation. However, the great difficulty raised by this interpretation is that we have no instance of a similar use of this term in the New Testament.
2. Second, some suggest that James uses the term, not to refer to the initial justification and acceptance of sinners, but to a *final justification* that occurs in the context of the final judgment. The strength of this interpretation is that it takes the term ‘justify’ in a declarative sense; it refers to God’s pronouncement regarding the righteousness of the believer in the context of the final judgment. This use is attested in Scripture (cf. Matt. 12:37) and correlates well with how Paul uses it. However, this interpretation gratuitously inserts into the passage the idea of a future or final justification. This seems at odds with James, who locates the justification of Abraham within the context of his offering of Isaac upon the altar (Gen. 22). He is not referring to a *future* justification, but to one occurring in the *present*.
3. Third, some interpreters maintain that James is using the term in a *demonstrative* sense, that is, to refer to the demonstration and proof of Abraham’s righteousness. Abraham was shown to be just by his deeds, which were the evidence of his living and fruitful faith. Unlike the first two interpretations, this third interpretation seems compelling. Not only does it do justice to the context of verse 21 within the argument of the passage, but it also appeals to a recognized scriptural use of the term ‘to justify’. As we have already noted, James is opposing the idea that a dead and unfruitful faith may be saving. He is also concerned about how to test the genuineness of a public avowal of faith. In verse 18 he speaks of ‘showing’ a person’s faith by works and again in verse 20 he speaks of ‘showing’ how faith without works is useless. The focus of attention, therefore, within the immediate context of verse 21, is the public demonstration of the genuine character of a person’s claim to have faith. Thus, when James adduces the example of Abraham’s faith working along with his deeds, he is providing an example of a deed that demonstrates Abraham to be a righteous person. In this connection, it should be noted that James appeals to Abraham’s readiness to sacrifice Isaac, an event that is recorded in Genesis 22 and not Genesis 15. In whichever way we take James’s appeal to Genesis 15:6 in this verse, it is important to recognize that he is interested in the way Abraham’s faith produced works, which demonstrated the patriarch’s righteousness.

In addition to this important contextual consideration, it should also be noted that those who take James to be using the term ‘justify’ in this sense are not inventing a new use for the word. Rather, they are appealing to a use that is attested in the best lexicons and dictionaries of New Testament words.

There are several New Testament passages that use the word in this way. For example, in Luke 7:35 Jesus speaks of how ‘wisdom is **justified** by all her children.’ Wisdom is known and demonstrated by its fruits. The familiar proverb, ‘A gentle answer turns away wrath’, illustrates the principle: a gentle and restrained response lowers the temperature of a dispute and is a demonstrable fruit of wisdom. Similarly Paul, quoting the Psalms in Romans 3:4, says, ‘Let God be found true though everyone were a liar, as it is written, “That you may be **justified** in your words.”’ The idea here is that God may be ‘proved true’ and reliable by the works that he performs. Or

consider one other example, from 1 Timothy 3:16: *'Great indeed, we confess, is the mystery of godliness: He was manifested in the flesh, **justified** by the Spirit, seen by angels...*' The justification spoken of here is the vindication or demonstration of Christ's glory and person in his resurrection from the dead. These are all instances of a demonstrative or probative use of the verb 'to justify'. None of them allow the translation, 'to declare to be righteous before God'.

This demonstrative use best fits the context of James's statement that Abraham 'was justified by works'. Abraham, whom God reckoned to be righteous by faith, demonstrated and proved his righteousness by his willingness to sacrifice his son Isaac in obedience to God.

This is also apparent from verse 22, which draws a general conclusion regarding the relation of faith and works. James notes that the synergy between faith and works does not allow them to be pulled apart. We cannot have the one without the other, James argues, because faith finds its 'completion' in its works. In the same way that a good tree bears good fruit and, in doing so reaches its *telos* or perfection, so faith is completed or perfected by its works.

Abraham's willingness to sacrifice Isaac 'fulfilled' what was declared already in Genesis 15:6: *'Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness.'* Since this text is cited by Paul in Romans 4:3 and Galatians 3:6 to prove that believers are justified before God by faith alone, James's appeal to it is regarded by some interpreters as clear evidence that his doctrine of justification differs from that of Paul. For Paul justification is by faith alone; for James it is by faith together with its works. However, if James uses 'justify' in verse 21 to refer to the demonstration of Abraham's righteousness by his works, as we have argued, it is unnecessary to interpret his appeal to Genesis 15:6 in this way. James's appeal to Genesis 15:6 is the one occasion in which he specifically addresses the question of Abraham's righteousness *before God*, and in so doing he fully concurs with Paul's teaching: Abraham was justified before God by faith, not by works. When James speaks of Abraham's justification *before others*, he appeals to Genesis 22, because it records the way in which Abraham's faith was demonstrated or proved to be genuine. Consequently, James speaks of the event recorded in Genesis 22 as a 'fulfilment' of what was previously declared in Genesis 15. Fully consonant with the theme observed throughout this passage, Abraham's act of obedience served as a confirmation of the truth of God's earlier declaration regarding him in Genesis 15.

You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone. And in the same way was not also Rahab the prostitute justified by works when she received the messengers and sent them out by another way? For as the body apart from the spirit is dead, so also faith apart from works is dead.

James 2:24-26

James here brings his argument to a conclusion. Verse 24 boldly restates the principle already established from Abraham's example. Though made in generic terms, the point is the same as that made previously with respect to Abraham. He is using the term 'justify' in the same way as he used it in verse 21. Anyone whose faith produces works shows evidence of having a genuine faith. James also cites the example of Rahab as further confirmation. Rahab's readiness to protect the messengers who visited her in Jericho is an example of a true faith productive of good works. On the basis of her obedient faith, Rahab was justified, that is, confirmed or evidenced as a genuine believer.

James closes the passage by drawing a comparison to illustrate the intimate conjunction of faith and its works. In the same way that the body, if it were separated from the spirit, is dead, so faith, if it were separated from its works, is dead. Such a person whose faith is a 'lonely' faith, that is, a faith without works, cannot be saved.

Summary

We have discovered that one principal question is addressed throughout this passage: Can a deedless faith save anyone? The contrast governing this passage is one between a *living faith* on the one hand, and a *dead faith* on the other. A living faith is inseparably joined to its fruits; a dead

faith is unaccompanied by any fruits. A living faith works in synergy with its deeds; a dead faith is devoid of any deeds.

Assuming this contrast between a living and a dead faith, James's major claim, from the opening verse of this passage to its close, is that a person is saved only by a faith that is accompanied by works. James makes this point negatively by insisting that a 'works-less' or deedless faith cannot save anyone. This point governs the shape of his argument and provides the context within which to consider the examples of Abraham and Rahab. Furthermore, it is especially significant that James focuses his attention upon the demonstration of a person's public profession of faith. He not only argues that a dead faith cannot save; he also argues that we can only know whether someone's claim to faith is genuine by the good works it produces.

The contrast drawn between a genuine and a false faith is placed within the context of the demonstration of true faith before others. Just as true faith is evident from the works it produces, so false faith is evident from its failure to produce any works. James's interest, therefore, is in the confirmation of true faith by its fruits. Just as a good tree demonstrates its goodness by the fruit it bears, so true faith is known by its works.

If we keep in mind these features of the passage, then the meaning of James's remarkable claim that Abraham was 'justified by works' becomes apparent. He does not use this term in the same sense that Paul does to describe how a believing sinner finds acceptance before God. Rather he uses it to describe how a professing believer is confirmed in his righteousness, that is, shown to be a just person whose faith is fruitful and active in good works. Therefore, the error James opposes is that of the person who makes an idle boast of faith.

A Reformation Perspective on James and Paul

We are now in a position to return to the issue of the Reformation perspective on James and Paul. As noted earlier, James played an important role in sixteenth-century discussions about the doctrine of justification, and continues to play a similar role today. According to the Roman Catholic Church, James 2 constitutes a clear refutation of the Protestant view that justification is by faith alone. Because James speaks of a 'justification by works', the inevitable question arises whether this historic claim of the Roman Catholic Church is valid. Does the teaching of James differ from the Reformation view that believers are justified by faith, and not by works?

We have already noted Luther's response to this objection. He was prepared, if necessary, to jettison the Epistle of James in favour of the writings of Paul. For him, the doctrine of justification had to be preserved at all costs, even if this meant denying to James canonical status. Luther's negative opinion about James, however, does not tell the whole story so far as the Reformation view is concerned. Calvin, for example, in his *Institutes* addressed the question of the compatibility of the teaching of James and Paul, and maintained that, *when rightly understood*, they were fully compatible.

Calvin's treatment of the relation between the teaching of the two apostles is set within his extended exposition of the doctrine of justification in Book III of his *Institutes*. He proceeds on the presumption that James, as a minister of the gospel, does not differ from Paul in his basic teaching. Acknowledging that many Roman Catholic theologians viewed James's teaching as a contradiction of the Reformation doctrine of free justification, Calvin insists that James's 'statement must be so understood as not to disagree with Christ speaking through Paul's lips'. Since the same Spirit speaks through James as through Paul, Calvin insists that their respective views must be in harmony.

Calvin then observes the particular concern addressed by James:

At that time there were many – and this tends to be a perpetual evil in the church – who openly disclosed their unbelief by neglecting and overlooking all the proper works of believers, yet did not cease to boast of the false name of faith.

The occasion for the epistle was the empty boast of some professing believers whose lives were bereft of good works. Such a false or pretended faith is nothing but an 'empty image' of true faith. If we are to understand James, Calvin notes, then we must keep the Epistle's purpose in mind: the author aims to expose the hypocrisy of those who claim to have faith, but are not genuine believers.

After making this initial observation, Calvin turns to the most important part of his case for the compatibility of James and Paul. Those who cite James against the Reformation's understanding of Paul are guilty of a "double fallacy": one in the word "faith", the other in the word "justify". The key to resolve the difference between James and Paul lies in the recognition that the apostles are using these terms *in quite distinct ways*. Describing James's use of the word 'faith' Calvin notes that

When the apostle labels 'faith' an empty opinion far removed from true faith, he is making a concession that in no way detracts from the argument. This he sets forth at the outset in these words: 'What does it profit, my brethren, if a man say he has faith but have not works?' He does not say 'if anyone have faith without works' but 'if he boast'. He states it even more clearly a little later where in derision he makes it worse than devils' knowledge, and finally, where he calls it 'dead' ... Obviously, if this faith contains nothing but a belief that there is a God, it is not strange if it does not justify!

In other words, James is not describing *genuine* Christian faith, which rests upon the assurance of God's mercy alone for justification; rather, he is talking about the dead or *unfruitful faith* that his opponents parade before others, as *though* it were the genuine thing itself. Though Calvin leaves the comparison implicit, he clearly means to emphasize that James's use of the phrase 'faith alone' (i.e., a dead, 'works-less' faith) is in no way comparable to Paul's use of the phrase 'faith apart from works'. The contrast in James is between a *true* and false faith; the contrast in Paul is between *faith that rests upon God's mercy alone, and works that are regarded as the basis for the believer's acceptance with God*.

The second, and perhaps more significant fallacy relates to the word 'justify'. Due to the care with which Calvin states this point, we will quote his discussion at some length:

If you would make James agree with the rest of Scripture and with himself, you must understand the word 'justify' in another sense than Paul takes it. For we are said by Paul to be justified when the memory of our unrighteousness has been wiped out and we are accounted righteous. If James had taken that view, it would have been preposterous for him to quote Moses' statement: 'Abraham believed God' (Gen. 15:6; James 2:23), etc. For this is the context: Abraham attained righteousness by works because at God's command he did not hesitate to sacrifice his son (James 2:21). Thus is the Scripture fulfilled that says: 'He believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness' (James 2:23). If it is absurd that an effect precedes its cause, either Moses testifies falsely in that place that faith was reckoned to Abraham as righteousness, or, from that obedience which he manifested by offering Isaac, he did not merit righteousness ... Therefore, either James wrongly inverted the order – unlawful even to imagine! – or he did not mean to call him justified, as if he deserved to be reckoned righteous. What then? Surely it is clear that he himself is speaking of the declaration, not the imputation, of righteousness. It is as if he said: 'Those who by true faith are righteous prove their righteousness by obedience and good works, not by a bare and imaginary mask of faith.' To sum up, he is not discussing in what manner we are justified but demanding of believers a righteousness fruitful in good works. And as Paul contends that we are justified apart from the help of works, so James does not allow those who lack good works to be reckoned righteous.

In Calvin's interpretation of James 2, it is necessary to distinguish between the appeal to Genesis 15:6, which illustrates that Abraham was justified by God through faith alone, and the appeal to Genesis 22 which refers to Abraham's readiness to sacrifice Isaac upon the altar. Though Abraham was a justified person *antecedent* to his willingness to sacrifice Isaac, this willingness was a *subsequent* demonstration and confirmation of his righteousness. James, therefore, is using

the word 'justify' to refer to the subsequent acting of Abraham's faith, which demonstrated and proved that he was a righteous person whose faith was genuine. The teaching of James and Paul are, accordingly, in full harmony. In this passage, James teaches two things, neither of which is contradicted in any way by the teaching of Paul: *'An empty show of faith does not justify, and a believer, not content with such an image, declares his righteousness by his good works.'*

Calvin, therefore, sees no reason to find James's view at odds with that of Paul. So long as we pay attention to the respective contexts of their writings, their teaching is fully compatible.

Conclusion

Though it has long been maintained by Roman Catholic representatives that the Reformation understanding of justification by faith alone is incompatible with the teaching of James, our consideration of this passage demonstrates otherwise.

In the Roman Catholic appeal to James, it is often assumed that the Reformers used the term 'faith alone' in the same way in which James uses it. When they spoke of justification by faith alone, they were understood as affirming that believers are accepted and saved by God, even though their faith was a dead or unfruitful faith.

From the perspective of the Roman Catholic Church, the Reformers' affirmation of justification by faith alone was contradictory to the teaching of James 2, which argues that a lonely or unfruitful faith cannot save anyone. However, in our treatment of James 2, as well as in our review of Calvin's handling of the relation between James and Paul, we have seen that there is a great difference in the way James and Paul use the word 'faith'. When James strongly repudiates the idea that 'faith alone' can save anyone, he is opposing what Calvin calls an 'empty image' of faith, not true faith. The great contrast that James draws is between such dead faith and true or living faith. This contrast is quite different from that which Paul draws between faith and works, so far as their role in the reception of free justification is concerned. The Reformation perspective on justification was not that a lonely faith, that is, a dead and unfruitful faith, was the instrument of justification. Though faith alone receives the free gift of God's righteousness in Christ for justification, the faith that justifies is not an 'alone faith' but one that is always accompanied by fruitful works. Consequently, one of the principal objections of the Roman Catholic Church to the Protestant view of justification completely misses the mark. Even Luther, who spoke rather incautiously regarding the teaching of James, emphasized, as much as Calvin and the other Reformers, that a true justifying faith is a lively and fruitful faith. By speaking of 'faith alone' in respect to justification, however, they were unwilling to ascribe any value to the works of faith so far as the believer's acceptance with God is concerned.

Likewise, the Roman Catholic appeal to James 2 assumes that James uses the term 'justify' in the same way as Paul. On this assumption, it follows that James's insistence that a true believer is 'justified by works' confirms the Roman Catholic view. It is supposed that James teaches exactly what the Roman Catholic Church maintains, namely, that justification is maintained and increased by the merit of good works.

However, in our consideration of this passage, we argued that this is to misunderstand James's use of the term. Our reading of the passage is consistent with Calvin's claim that James and Paul use the word 'justify' differently, even as they use 'faith' differently. When Paul speaks of justification, he speaks of the act whereby believers *are accepted into God's favour*; justification is a gracious act of God whereby he pronounces the ungodly sinner to be acceptable to him in Christ. When James speaks of justification, he speaks of the way in which believers are *demonstrated* or *shown* to be righteous. Justification in Paul occurs *before God*; justification in James occurs *before others*. The Roman Catholic interpretation of James, therefore, fails to take into account the particular context within which James addresses the issue of justification.

The dispute between Roman Catholic and Protestant goes beyond the boundaries of their respective interpretations of James 2. In the broader theological framework of the Reformation view of salvation, free justification, which secures the believer's acceptance with God, is never separated from the Spirit's sanctification of believers in Christ. In order to preserve the sheer

graciousness of the gift of free acceptance with God, the Reformers strongly insisted upon a distinction between justification and sanctification. However, they also maintained that all believers, who are united to Christ by faith, are simultaneously justified and sanctified.

As Calvin was fond of expressing it, Christ is not given to believers for righteousness without also being given to them for sanctification (1 Cor. 1:30). To separate justification and sanctification would be akin to separating Christ's deity and humanity. The benefits of Christ's saving work for his people include not only reconciliation with God through his cross, but also renewal in obedience to his commandments by the Holy Spirit. According to Calvin, you can no more separate justification from sanctification than you can separate Christ and his Spirit. Whenever Christ indwells the hearts of believers, he always subdues them to obedience by his Spirit. In the fullness of his office, Christ is not only a priest but also a king, who rules in the hearts of his people by his Spirit and Word. The Roman Catholic Church's oft-repeated complaint, therefore, that the Reformation's view of justification undermines a life of good works, is without foundation.

For the Reformers, 'faith alone', far from being detrimental to the Christian life of good works, is the only basis and source of Christian obedience. To place works before justification, as though they played a role in obtaining God's acceptance, alters the character of the Christian's life of obedience. Rather than good works being the fruits of thankfulness, which are born out of the grateful awareness of the believer's acceptance by God, they are regarded as a means to obtain favour with God. If works are performed to obtain God's favour, however, they are no longer performed in good faith. They become corrupted by a self-seeking desire to curry favour with God, or to wrest from God a reluctant acceptance and forgiveness. According to the Reformers, the Christian's freedom is a freedom to obey God, not a freedom to sin or continue in disobedience. However, the obedience of faith is not constrained by a fear of punishment or falling into disfavour with God. Rather, it is a joyful delight in God and his will, which springs from an awareness of God's undeserved favour in Christ.

When justification undergirds the believer's sanctification, Christian obedience is no longer coloured by an anxious uncertainty regarding God's grace. Calvin expresses this point in his comments on James and Paul, when he insists that we should not place good works, which are the inevitable *effect* of true faith, before faith, which is the only *cause* of good works. Unless believers are acceptable to God by faith in Christ, it is not possible for their works to be pleasing to him. At the same time, it is impossible for those who know the grace of free justification and who are united to Christ by faith, not to be renewed in good works.

Therefore, the Reformation view of justification does not teach that believers can be saved or justified by a 'lonely' faith, that is, a faith devoid of any good works. While carefully guarding the sheer graciousness of the believer's acceptance with God solely on the grounds of Christ's righteousness, the Reformation perspective insists that those who are justified by faith alone are also sanctified by faith. The believer's freedom in Christ is no occasion for disobedience; it inevitably leads to a life of free and heartfelt devotion to God and others.

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Endnote

¹ Taken from chap. 3 of the author's book, *The Gospel of Free Acceptance in Christ*, published by the Trust (ISBN: 978 0 85151 939 5, clothbound, 352 pp., £16/\$28).