

JAMES 2:14-26: CONTROVERSY WITHOUT CONTEXT

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INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this paper is to examine four different hermeneutical approaches to James 2:14-26. The necessity of properly interpreting this passage is threefold. Firstly, the text touches upon the subject of justification: how is sinful man made right with the holy God? This is a central question of the Christian gospel. Secondly, this text raises the question of the doctrine of Scripture: does the Bible contain contradictions? Thirdly, James 2:14-26 involves very pastoral matters of assurance and presumption. A simple example may serve to illustrate:

I recall a man of business whose methods were recognized by the whole community, including himself, as deviating widely from honesty and justice, and who said, in conversation about the Christian life: “I know that I am not living a good life; but then I’m not trusting in my own merits for salvation. I’m trusting in the merits of Christ, and in his death as my substitute on the Cross. And when I told this to the minister... he said I was all right.”¹

If the interpretation of James 2:14-16 is undisputedly necessary, it is just as undisputedly difficult. This difficulty exists because of the presuppositional “baggage” which many modern interpreters carry with them in coming to the text. What are these presuppositions? How do they control interpretation of James 2:14-26? These are the questions which the present paper hopes to answer.

The present paper shall consider perspectives coming from four divergent theological perspectives: liberal Protestant, Roman Catholic, non-Reformed Protestant, and Reformed Protestant. The approach shall be twofold. Firstly, this paper will present each perspective in its own terms, paying special attention to questions of faith, works, and justification. Secondly, the present writer will attempt to identify the hermeneutical principles at work and explain how these move each writer to his conclusion.

¹ *Social Religion* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1939), 98. Quoted in *Interpreter’s Bible*, vol. 12, ed. George Arthur Buttrick (New York: Abingdon Press, 1957), 42.

LIBERAL PROTESTANT

The liberal Protestant perspective on James 2:14-26 comes from the *Interpreter's Bible*.² The opening remarks cast James and his epistle in a very earthly mold:

The argument in this section as a whole reveals the writer as an earnest, commonsense moralist, unconcerned with the deeper spiritual problems of the relations between God and man, but wholly concerned with everyday conduct. Doctrine such as his would not produce great saints – let alone great mystics – nor was it designed to do so. Most Christians are neither saints nor mystic, but men and women desiring to fulfill properly the tasks of daily life, who become confused by what seem to them to be theological subtleties and who can understand only teaching that deals with their immediate needs. Such teaching James gives them, that and no more.³

Following this introduction, the writer considers and rejects the higher-critical supposition that James 2:14-26 originated in a pre-Christian Jewish or Jewish Christian controversy. His reasoning is straightforward: “[James] is refuting an argument... impossible in Judaism. Nor can a place for the ‘faith-not-works’ antithesis be found in pre-Pauline Jewish Christianity, as it is sometimes argued.”⁴ The opponents “against whom James inveighs” are men who “regarded themselves as Paulinists,” for “it is with Paul, and only with Paul, that the antithesis ‘faith not works’ enters Christianity.”⁵

Turning to questions of faith and justification, “James, of course, misunderstands Paul” on both counts.⁶ Pauline faith is “self-surrender” to God leading to vital moral living, not a dead intellectualism shared by demons. Moreover,

Paul’s use of justification is likewise misunderstood. To Paul this is the initial act in the spiritual life, by which God accepts the believing soul, pardons it, and starts it on its way. To James justification belongs not to the beginning, but to the progress or even to the end of the spiritual life; what he says is, in effect, that no one can attain to heaven unless he has good works as well as faith.⁷

² *Interpreter's Bible*, vol. 12, ed. George Arthur Buttrick (New York: Abingdon Press, 1957), 40-45.

³ *Ibid.*, 40.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 41.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*

James is not alone in his misunderstanding of Paul. Paul himself had to correct distortions of his gospel. “But the fact that Paul rejects this distortion of his message shows that it was current; and it was in this distorted form that it was known to James.”⁸ Yet James’ difficulty goes beyond ignorance. At heart, the problem is linked to three fundamentally different interpretations of Genesis 15:6: “in Judaism Abraham’s faith was reckoned to him *as a work* for righteousness; in James his faith *and* his works were reckoned to him for righteousness; in Paul this faith was reckoned to him *instead of works* for righteousness.”⁹

Turning to the question of works, these function firstly in an evidentiary way: “works *can* be shown; and their existence proves that faith must underlie them.”¹⁰ Yet works are not merely evidential; rather, they contribute something essential to one’s right standing with God:

In [vs. 21] and in vs. 23 Abraham’s faith and God’s blessing in Gen. 15:5-6 are treated as merely preliminary to and prophetic of the events of Gen. 22:1-14, where the far more explicit blessing is given only after the patriarch’s faith has manifested itself in a supreme “work.” ...it is with this “work” that the writer associates the title *friend of God*... God gave the title to Abraham because of his willingness to sacrifice Isaac.¹¹

By works, Abraham’s faith “was *completed* (aorist in the Greek), ‘attained perfection.’ This (vs. 23) is how Gen. 15:6 must be understood! And so (vs. 24) not *faith alone* justifies but *works* – although, of course, these must always be accompanied by faith; the writer naturally does not think of justification by works alone (cf. on vs. 18).”¹²

What presuppositions underlie the liberal Protestant perspective? Firstly, the liberal Protestant denies the inspiration of Scripture. In asserting that James misunderstands Paul, he tacitly admits that he does not believe the Holy Spirit superintended over the writing of James’ epistle. Secondly, the liberal Protestant denies the unity of Scripture: he quotes favorably an assertion that Scripture contains no less than three divergent teachings on justification. This second denial implicitly contains a third – namely, the denial of the inerrancy of Scripture. Lastly, the liberal

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ M. Dibelius, *Der Brief des Jakobus* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1921), 168. Quoted in Ibid., 42.

¹⁰ Ibid., 43.

¹¹ Ibid., 44.

¹² Ibid., 45.

Protestant ignores the greater context of James' epistle *as he himself has defined it*. He first asserts that James is a "commonsense moralist, unconcerned with the deeper spiritual problems of the relations between God and man."¹³ Yet he then asserts that James offers teaching (allegedly different from both Judaism and Paul) on how a man is made right with God. This is a glaring contradiction.

ROMAN CATHOLIC

The Roman Catholic perspective on James 2:14-26 comes from the *Navarre Bible*.¹⁴ The opening remarks attempt to place the epistle in its proper context, both dogmatically and historically: "Over the course of the centuries it has not been commented on to any great extent, probably because it has to do with moral as distinct from doctrinal matters; from the sixteenth century onwards commentators focused mostly on the subject of faith and works (cf. 2:14-26)."¹⁵

As the discussion turns to the questions of faith and justification, the writer compares James 2:24 with Romans 3:28 and finds no conflict:

However, although the terms used are identical, the perspective is different and there is no contradiction: St Paul says that faith works through love (Gal 5:6); but in his argument with the Judaizers he denies that the works of the Old Law are necessary: it is faith that is important. St James is emphasizing above all that faith must be reflected in one's behavior. Arguably St James is interpreting St Paul and correcting erroneous conclusions which might be drawn from a misreading of Paul.¹⁶

The problem is not with Paul or James; the problem is with those who want to separate faith from love and behavior. The commentary on v. 19 explains further:

St Bede says that it is one thing to believe God, another thing to believe in God, and another thing to believe "towards" God (*credere in illum*). "Believing him is believing that what he says is true. Believing in him is believing that he is God. Believing 'towards' him is loving him... Believing that he is God is something the devils are able to do. But believing and tending towards him is true only of those who love God, who are Christians not in name only but whose actions and lives prove them to

¹³ Ibid., 40.

¹⁴ University of Navarre, *The Navarre Bible*, 2nd ed. (New York: Scepter Publishers, 2005), 13-20, 33-37.

¹⁵ Ibid., 13.

¹⁶ Ibid., 19.

be so. For without love faith is of no avail. With love, it is the faith of a Christian; without love, it is the faith of the devil.”¹⁷

Saving faith includes within itself the love of God. It is this faith which justifies: “In this letter ‘justification’ means moral perfection, which is attained, once grace has been conferred, by the practice of virtue, by upright conduct; it is for St Paul what is usually termed ‘first justification’, that is, the union with God that comes with initial grace.”¹⁸

Turning to the relation between works and justification, there is again no conflict in sight: “For St James, ‘works’ are morally correct behavior, which must be in line with the religious faith one professes. For St Paul ‘works’ are the legal rules of the Old Law, which no longer have validity, now that Christ has promulgated the New Law.”¹⁹ In other words: James affirms the necessity of good works in justification, and Paul does not disagree.

A Christian receives “first justification” by faith, but must build up this “first justification” by works:

The Magisterium of the Church quotes these verses when it teaches that justification, righteousness, received as a free gift in the sacrament of Baptism, grows in strength as the Christian responds to grace by keeping the commandments of God and of the Church; the righteous, the just, “increase in the very justice which they have received through the grace of Christ, their faith is completed by works (cf. Jas. 2:22), and they are justified the more as it is written: ‘Let the righteous still do right’ (Rev. 22:11), [...] and again: ‘You see that a man is justified by works and not by faith alone (Jas. 2:24)’ (Council of Trent, *De iustificatione*, 10).²⁰

Thus the writers sees no contradiction between James and Paul at any point: both teach justification by grace maintained and increased through the believer’s love towards God.

What presuppositions underlie the Roman Catholic perspective? Firstly, the Roman Catholic denies the sufficiency of Scripture. At every key point he resorts either to unbiblical terminology or Magisterial Tradition: Saint Bede defines faith, the Council of Trent defines justification, and “first justification” is not found in Scripture. Secondly, the Roman Catholic writer extracts the teachings of James 2:14-26 from the greater context of James epistle. He admits the “main purpose of the

¹⁷ Ibid., 35.

¹⁸ Ibid., 19.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid., 36.

epistle is a moral and ascetical one.... it does not overtly deal with doctrinal matters, [although] these underlie the whole letter.”²¹ Yet he interprets the text of James in a decidedly *doctrinal* way.

NON-REFORMED PROTESTANT

The non-Reformed Protestant perspective on James 2:14-26 comes from Douglas J. Moo’s *James: An Introduction and Commentary*.²² Moo describes James’s concern as fundamentally pastoral rather than theological: “No profound theologian, James’ genius lies in his profound moral earnestness; in his powerfully simple call for repentance, for action, for a consistent Christian lifestyle.”²³ Consequently, James’ message is practical rather than doctrinal: “do the word.”²⁴

Moo offers assurances that James and Paul agree on matters of faith, works, and justification: “Understood in their own contexts, and with careful attention to the way each is using certain key words, it can be seen that James and Paul are making complementary, not contradictory, points.”²⁵ The key lies in understanding the different problem each is addressing:

[Paul] is countering a Jewish tendency to rely on obedience to the law (‘works of the law’) for salvation. Against an over-emphasis on works, Paul highlights faith as the sole instrument of justification. James, on the other hand, is combating an *underemphasis* on works, a ‘quietistic’ attitude that turned faith into mere doctrinal orthodoxy. Against this perversion of faith, James is forced to assert the importance of works.²⁶

When it comes to faith, James and Paul are not addressing the same problem: Paul describes faith forensically, whereas James denounces its perversion. Likewise, the works Paul denigrates are those “that *precede* conversion. The works in James 2,

²¹ Ibid., 18.

²² Douglas J. Moo, *James: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 16 of *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries*, ed. Leon Morris (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1989; reprint 2009).

²³ Ibid., 9.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid., 47.

²⁶ Ibid.

however, are the works that stem from and are produced by faith: works that *follow* conversion.”²⁷

The semantic differences continue when it comes to justification. In the Pauline epistles, “*dikaioō* is a term that denotes the initial *transfer* of a person from the realm of sin and death into the realm of holiness and life.”²⁸ Yet this is not how James uses the Greek word:

In James, *dikaioō* has a different meaning, a meaning that is well attested in the Old Testament, in the Gospel of Matthew and in many Jewish sources. In these sources *dikaioō* usually describes a verdict that is based on the actual facts of the case; a judge declares a person ‘righteous’ because that person can be proven, in fact, to *be* ‘righteous’ or innocent... What James is saying, then, is that ultimate, or ‘final justification’, the verdict pronounced over our lives in the last day, takes into account the works that must inevitably be produced by true faith.²⁹

There is no contradiction between James and Paul: “In theological terminology, Paul is speaking of the *imputation* of righteousness, James of the *declaration* of righteousness.”³⁰

What does it mean to say that God “takes into account” a person’s works in declaring him righteous? One possibility is that works *demonstrate* justifying faith:

A significant number of scholars think that James is using the word in a demonstrative sense. Abraham and Rahab ‘were justified by works’ in the sense that they demonstrated their righteous status by performing good works. Any conflict with Paul would then be removed, because, while he stresses that faith is the only condition for the *declaration* of righteousness, James would be arguing that works are the only way in which that righteousness can be *demonstrated*.³¹

Moo rejects this view on two grounds: “while there is some precedent for this meaning of *dikaioō*... it is not the usual meaning. More importantly, this meaning does not fit very well in James 2, where the question is not, ‘How can righteousness be demonstrated?’ but, ‘What kind of faith secures righteousness?’”³² As a result of this rejection, he draws the following conclusion:

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid., 48.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid., 49.

³¹ Ibid., 112-113.

³² Ibid., 113.

James is probably using *dikaioō* in a declarative sense, but he differs from Paul in applying the word to God's ultimate declaration of a person's righteousness rather than to the initial securing of that righteousness by faith. In other words, James uses 'justify' where Paul speaks of the judgment. It is this distinction, between what Wesley called 'initial justification' and 'final justification,' that explains the apparent discrepancy between Paul and James.³³

Both Paul and James use 'justification' to denote God's declaration that a sinner is righteous. Yet there is no conflict, because there are two different declarations:

James does not deny that Abraham was given a righteous standing with God on the basis of his faith, long before he offered Isaac in obedience to God. But he wants to emphasize that Abraham's faith was a vital, active faith and that God's verdict was reconfirmed on the basis of that activity. The initial declaration of righteousness on the basis of faith is given its ultimate meaning and validity through the final declaration of righteousness on the basis of a 'faith that works.'³⁴

In support of this distinction between 'initial' and 'final' justification, Moo cites both the Old Testament and the teachings of Christ: "In the teaching of Jesus, this meaning of *dikaioō* is also clearly found. He warned his listeners on one occasion: 'by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned' (Matt. 12:37)."³⁵

What presuppositions underlie Moo's non-Reformed Protestant perspective? Firstly, Moo seems to presuppose that faith itself, the act of believing, is the ground – rather than the mere instrument – of the Christian's justification. Notice how he speaks of faith as that which "*secures* righteousness,"³⁶ and how he twice refers to God declaring Abraham righteous "*on the basis* of faith."³⁷ The present writer believes that it is this theological presupposition which causes Moo to dismiss the demonstrative view: if faith itself is what "secures" righteousness initially, it must continue to secure it. In all of this, Moo sounds a decidedly Romish note. Secondly, Moo elevates lexical above contextual considerations in determining James' use of the Greek verb *dikaioō*. He admits that James' epistle focuses on a demonstrative theme ("do the word"), yet

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid., 117-118.

³⁵ Ibid., 113.

³⁶ Ibid. Emphasis added.

³⁷ Ibid. Emphasis added.

he rejects a demonstrative use of *dikaioō* in James 2:14-26 as “not the usual meaning.”³⁸ His attempt to buttress this claim by an appeal to Matthew 12:37 is dubious at best.³⁹

REFORMED PROTESTANT

The Reformed Protestant perspective on James 2:14-26 comes from John Calvin’s *Commentary on the Epistle of James*.⁴⁰ In his introduction, Calvin recognizes that controversy surrounds the epistle – yet he promises resolution: “There are also at this day some who do not think it entitled to authority. I, however, am inclined to receive it without controversy, because I see no just cause for rejecting it. For what seems in the second chapter to be inconsistent with the doctrine of free justification, we shall easily explain in its own place.”⁴¹

In his commentary on the text, Calvin finds no conflict whatsoever between James and Paul on the questions of faith, works, and justification. The ‘faith’ mentioned by James in v. 14 is not truly faith in any sense. James refers to it as ‘faith’ as a rhetorical concession, but in reality it is only “false pretence.”⁴² The same is true of the ‘faith’ mentioned in vv. 17, 18, and especially 19: “it would be ridiculous were any one to say that the devils have faith.”⁴³

Thus rejecting the reality of non-saving faith, Calvin regards as counter-contextual any attempt to portray James as modifying Paul on justification:

we ought to seek out a right interpretation according to the general drift of the whole passage.... When Paul says that we are justified by faith, he means no other thing than that by faith we are counted righteous before God. But James has quite another thing in view, even to shew that he who professes that he has faith, must prove the reality of his faith by his works. Doubtless James did not mean to teach us here the ground on which our hope of salvation ought to rest; and it is this alone that Paul

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Moo cites Matthew 12:37 as an example of Christ using *dikaioō* in a declarative rather than a demonstrative sense. Yet in Matthew 12:34 Christ asks, “How can you speak good, when you are evil? For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks.” *Holy Bible, English Standard Version* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2001). In the opinion of the present writer, such an immediate context for Matthew 12:37 – where Christ speaks of our words demonstrating the content of our hearts – reinforces rather than rules out a demonstrative use of *dikaioō*.

⁴⁰ John Calvin, *Commentary on the Epistle of James*, ed. and trans. John Owen (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1855; reprint Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 2005).

⁴¹ Ibid., 276.

⁴² Ibid., 310.

⁴³ Ibid., 313.

dwells upon.... we must take notice of the twofold meaning of the word justified. Paul means by it the gratuitous imputation of righteousness before the tribunal of God; and James, the manifestation of righteousness by the conduct, and that before men⁴⁴

To understand the different meanings of ‘justification’ in Paul and James, one need simply ask the question: *before whom?* Paul speaks of justification *before God*; James speaks of justification *before men*.

Good works play a purely evidentiary role in justification: “[Abraham’s faith] is said to have been perfected by works, not because it received thence its own perfection, but because it was thus proved to be true.”⁴⁵ Any notion that Abraham’s consent to sacrifice his son contributed to his justification is illogical, “since faith was imputed to Abraham fifteen years before the birth of Isaac.”⁴⁶ Thus, while works are a necessary *implication* of saving faith, they make no *contribution* thereto: “We, indeed, allow that good works are required for righteousness; we only take away from them the power of conferring righteousness, because they cannot stand before the tribunal of God.”⁴⁷

What presuppositions underlie Calvin’s Reformed Protestant perspective? Firstly, Calvin presupposes the sufficiency of Scripture. Nowhere does his exegesis go beyond what is “either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced” therefrom.⁴⁸ Secondly, Calvin carefully employs the *analogia fidei*. The *analogia* requires an interpreter to base all doctrines on “those teachings of the Bible that are so clearly and positively stated, and supported by so many passages, that there can be no doubt of their meaning and value.”⁴⁹ Scripture clearly teaches that even man’s best moral efforts are corrupt: “all our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment.”⁵⁰ Thus, as Calvin notes, “they cannot stand before the tribunal of God.”⁵¹ Finally, Calvin maintains a strong sense of the demonstrative

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 314-315.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 315.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 316.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 317.

⁴⁸ *Westminster Confession of Faith* (Willow Grove: Orthodox Presbyterian Church, 2005), 1.6.

⁴⁹ Louis Berkhof, *Principles of Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), 164.

⁵⁰ *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2001), Isaiah 64:6. See also Romans 3:9-20.

⁵¹ Calvin, *Commentary*, 317.

context of James' epistle: note his emphasis on interpreting "according to the general drift of the whole passage."⁵²

CONCLUSION

In the introduction to this paper, the present author claimed that the difficulty in interpreting James 2:14-16 arises from presuppositions brought by each interpreter to the text. In examining four perspectives on this text, various presuppositions have emerged. The liberal Protestant's presuppositions are rooted in an anti-supernatural worldview. The Roman Catholic's presuppositions are rooted in a commitment to the supremacy of Magisterial Tradition. The non-Reformed Protestant's presuppositions are rooted in a specific theological conviction. The Reformed Protestant's presuppositions are rooted in a commitment to the absolute sufficiency of Scripture provided both in text *and* context.

The present paper has demonstrated that *context* is indeed a commitment which must either be explicitly embraced or implicitly lost. All four perspectives acknowledged the demonstrative nature of the epistle, yet only the Reformed Protestant made the explicit commitment to this context in his exegesis. Consequently, it is not surprising to the present author that, of the four, only Calvin managed to diffuse the potential controversy surrounding James 2:14-26 without exposing the text of Scripture to other difficulties. James 2:14-26 inevitably becomes embroiled in controversy only when it is divorced from its context. Understood within its context, the message of the text is clear.

Calvin's conclusion – that whereas Paul describes forensic justification before God through faith alone, James enjoins evidentiary justification before men by works – safeguards the gospel, protects the integrity of Scripture, and offers a real measure for dealing with presumptuous "men of business." His conclusion will not satisfy committed liberal Protestants, Roman Catholics, or the non-Reformed. Nor should it. In the end, hermeneutics can identify questions of unbelief, authority, or conviction, but it cannot settle them. The only controversies hermeneutics can consider are those of texts *an sich* – texts *as texts*. Hermeneutics offers a method to address the controversies of texts and contexts. The controversies of the human heart can only be addressed by its Maker.

⁵² Ibid., 314.