

“AS THE BODY WITHOUT THE SPIRIT”: JAMES’S EPISTLE ON FAITH AND WORKS

BRIAN M. HAUGLID

When Latter-day Saints emphasize the importance of exhibiting faith in Christ by works, they commonly refer to the second chapter of the Epistle of James. Surely this epistle is one of the most pragmatic of the twenty-seven books of the New Testament. James considers works to be the lifeblood principle of faith: “For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also” (James 2:26). James consistently focuses on the *actions* of individuals—for example, the use of the tongue and the treatment of widows.

After I address the historical authenticity and authorship of the Epistle of James, I will analyze the Greek words for *faith* and *works* and discuss Elder James E. Talmage’s teachings on these terms. I will then demonstrate that all the chapters in James’s epistle, even while not specifically referring to the terms *faith* and *works*,¹ support James’s primary injunction that we be “doers of the word, and not hearers only” (James 1:22).

HISTORICAL AUTHENTICITY AND AUTHORSHIP

Surprisingly, the Epistle of James was not readily accepted as part of the New Testament canon. Even though it was considered one of the Catholic epistles (that is, one written to a general rather than a specific audience),² the Epistle of James was not included in early Christian canons such as

Brian M. Hauglid is an associate professor of ancient scripture at Brigham Young University.

those by Marcion (d. 144),³ Irenaeus (d. 202), Muratorian (d. ca. second century), and Eusebius (d. 340). It is not known for certain why this epistle was disputed; it may have been a question of authorship. Jerome (d. 420), speaking of James as the brother of the Lord, said: “He wrote only one Epistle, which is reckoned among the seven Catholic Epistles, and even this is claimed by some to have been published by some one else under his name, and gradually, as time went on, to have gained in authority.”⁴ However, from as early as the third century, both Origen (d. 254) and Eusebius refer to James as the author of the epistle.⁵

Although specific reasoning and evidence concerning the question of authorship no longer exist, these divergent views indicate that concerns arose over this issue. In any case, in AD 367, Athanasius included the Epistle of James in his authorized collection of the twenty-seven books of the New Testament, which became the officially accepted canon in AD 382. Inclusion of the Epistle of James was not questioned again until 1522 when Martin Luther, in his preface to the New Testament, called it “an epistle of straw.”⁶ “Because of what he saw to be James’s rejection of the Pauline doctrine of justification by faith, Luther denied that the epistle had apostolic authority; and in his translation of the NT he relegated it from its canonical position to the end, together with his equally disliked Hebrews, Jude, and Revelation.”⁷ Despite the previous questions of authorship and Luther’s concern with James’s emphasis on works, James’s teachings are generally highly valued by Christians.

FAITH (*PISTIS*) AND WORKS (*ERGON*)

Among the most quoted verses in the Epistle of James is the declaration that “faith without works is dead” (James 2:26). Throughout his epistle, James uses the Greek terms *pistis* for “faith” and *ergon* for “works.” Identifying these Greek words and defining them helps us see that James’s use of *pistis* and *ergon* varies from the generally accepted view in Christianity.

Faith is seen in two distinct ways in the modern Christian context: (1) “It is applied objectively to the body of truth (‘the Christian faith’) to be found in the Creeds, . . . Councils, . . . teachings of doctors and saints, and, above all, in the revelation contained in the Bible.” (2) Subjectively, “it is the human response to Divine truth, inculcated in the Gospels as the childlike and trusting acceptance of the kingdom and its demands.”⁸ Christians view the subjective part of faith as a supernatural event wherein

the “Christian can make an act of faith only in virtue of God’s action in his soul,” and this is possible “only in the context of the Christian revelation.”⁹ Latter-day Saints also recognize faith as a spiritual gift (see Moroni 10:11). However, an important difference emerges regarding the emphasis on obedient activity, which grows out of faith.

Christian faith in its subjective sense as a “childlike and trusting acceptance”¹⁰ likely emerges from the Greek word *pistis*, which has both the sense of “trusting” and “worthy of trust.”¹¹ However, “inasmuch as trust may be a duty, [*pistis*] can come to have the nuance ‘obedient.’”¹² In fact, the Septuagint renders a common form of *pistis* from the Hebrew *amin*, which when referring to “God’s requirement, order, or command . . . implies acknowledgment of the requirement and man’s obedience.”¹³

Even in later Judaism, “faithfulness is also obedience. Hence the Law and commandments are among the objects of faith. In the [rabbinic] writings to believe in God and to obey God are equivalent in meaning.”¹⁴ Faith as obedience is an idea found in the New Testament, particularly in Hebrews 11, which cites examples of many Old Testament prophets who exhibited their faith through obedience.¹⁵ Although most modern Christian scholars now interpret *pistis* as the “saving faith which recognizes and appropriates God’s saving work in Christ,” with obedience being implied,¹⁶ I believe James says it differently—for one to exercise faith in Christ, one must exhibit obedience to God through good works.

The Greek term *ergon* is translated as “works.” Its fundamental meaning is to “denote action or active zeal in contrast to idleness.”¹⁷ In the Septuagint “many words which denote conduct in general are brought under the concept of work.”¹⁸ According to rabbinic Judaism, “he who has learned Torah and yet acts contrary to it blasphemes God. Christianity, however, demands a preaching of action, . . . and contradiction between word and act is a denial of Christ.”¹⁹ Many Pauline scholars view *ergon* in a “completely negative sense whenever it is a matter of human achievement.”²⁰ James, on the other hand, emphasizes works within the context of faith in Christ, not as a negative but as a natural, positive outgrowth of faith: “Yea, a man may say, Thou hast faith [in Christ], and I have works: shew me thy faith [in Christ] without thy works, and I will shew thee my faith [in Christ] by my works” (James 2:18). James’s epistle follows the meaning of *pistis* and *ergon* as defined by the Septuagint and rabbinic Judaism, connecting them to faith in Christ.

The Epistle of James clearly teaches that faith and works complement each other and belong together. In fact, it is impossible to separate them. In a way, faith is like water. We think of water most often in its liquid form, but when the temperature is substantially increased or decreased, the water changes to steam or ice. In comparison to each other, ice and steam may look different, but they are still essentially the same compound of elements. In the form of steam, water can serve to power engines. When it converts to ice, it can be used as a cooling agent or act as a solid layer over bodies of water on which heavy vehicles may drive. So it is with faith. Our service in the Church, our enduring of trials and tests, our obedience to commandments—these works are all expressions of our faith. Faith and works are of the same compound. They are inseparable. You cannot have one without the other. In other words, good works are to faith as steam and ice are to water. This is the essence of the Epistle of James.

TALMAGE ON FAITH AND WORKS

A review of Elder Talmage’s understanding of faith and works helps Latter-day Saints better appreciate James’s teachings. In 1899, Elder Talmage published the first edition of *A Study of the Articles of Faith*. This highly valued and well-known study represented the first formal analysis of each of the articles of faith by a Latter-day Saint scholar. Talmage’s eloquent examination of faith, like James’s, clearly distinguishes between faith and belief. He writes, “Belief, in one of its accepted senses, may consist in a merely intellectual assent, while faith implies such confidence as will impel to action.”²¹ Talmage defines belief, faith, and works (very much in harmony with the Hebrew and Greek definitions stated above) and emphasizes how both faith and works should be centered in Christ. “Belief is in a sense passive, an agreement or acceptance only; faith is active and positive, embracing such reliance and confidence as will lead to works. Faith in Christ comprises belief in Him, combined with trust in Him. One cannot have faith without belief; yet he may believe and still lack faith. Faith is vivified, vitalized, living belief.”²²

In a 1914 article titled “Prove Thy Faith by Thy Works,”²³ Elder Talmage demonstrates his concern that modern translations of the Bible view the terms *faith* and *belief* as synonyms:

Belief is the mechanism, like a locomotive standing with tank empty and fire-box cold upon the track; faith is the fire and the resulting steam that gives it power and makes it work such miracles

as had never been dreamed of in days of yore. Faith is vitalized, energized, dynamic belief. . . . Strange, is it not, that there are yet those who hold that the use of the term belief in the Holy Scriptures means empty, intellectual, negative belief, and that alone? Because of the fact, already cited, that in early English the term belief was used as a synonym of faith, we find it occurring and recurring in our translation of the Scriptures given to us as the Holy Bible, when by the context it is absolutely plain, and, by derivation beyond all question, that living belief, or actual faith, was intended, and that the term meaning this did occur in the original.²⁴

Elder Talmage further notes, “James, an Apostle of the Lord Jesus Christ, found it necessary to warn the people against belief as a saving principle if left to stand alone.”²⁵ Elder Talmage demonstrates that the entire Epistle of James was written with the fundamental assumption that true faith in Christ will lead to good works.

TEXTUAL STUDY OF THE EPISTLE OF JAMES

In his epistle, James emphasizes the need to exercise faith and identifies appropriate works that grow out of true faith, such as prayer, visiting the sick and afflicted, controlling the tongue, and using the priesthood. He also shows that lack of faith is demonstrated through inappropriate works such as double-mindedness, deception, pride and riches, and sin in general. James wrote this epistle “to prevent the danger of separation (*diastasis*) between faith and works. . . . It is this coherence of faith and deeds that gives the unifying theme to the entire document and makes it a genuinely Christian writing.”²⁶ James identifies various activities that the follower of Christ should pursue. Faith is the element that holds these disparate subjects together. James illustrates the active faith of believers with his instruction to follow the path to perfection, seek wisdom, and avoid the sins of pride. His use of the imperative tense throughout the text further evidences his concern that we put our discipleship into action.

Perfection

According to James, afflictions try faith, which then strengthens patience. “But let patience have her perfect work, that ye may be perfect and entire, wanting nothing” (James 1:4).²⁷ The word for perfection in the Greek (*telos*) refers to “fulfillment” or “completion” and “denotes that which has reached maturity or fulfilled the end contemplated.”²⁸

Perfection, then, in the Epistle of James is more akin to spiritual maturity rather than absolute sinlessness.

James clearly teaches that to gain perfection one must perfect faith through good works: “Thou believest that there is one God; thou doest well: the devils also believe, and tremble. But wilt thou know, O vain man, that faith without works is dead? Was not Abraham our father justified by works, when he had offered Isaac his son upon the altar? Seest thou how faith wrought with his works, and by works was faith made perfect?” (James 2:19–22). The phrase “the devils also believe, and tremble” indicates that passive belief is not enough: faith must impel the disciple to acts of righteousness. President Joseph F. Smith explains Satan and his followers’ fatal flaw as a lack of pure intelligence: “There is a difference between knowledge and pure intelligence. Satan possesses knowledge, far more than we have, but he has not intelligence or he would render obedience to the principles of truth and right. I know men who have knowledge, who understand the principles of the Gospel, perhaps as well as you do, who are brilliant, but who lack the essential qualification of pure intelligence. They will not accept and render obedience thereto. Pure intelligence comprises not only knowledge, but also the power to properly apply that knowledge.”²⁹

President Smith would agree with James that faith (pure intelligence) and obedience (works) are inseparably connected.

Interestingly, a number of parallel verses can be identified between James’s path of faith to perfection and the Savior’s teachings in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew. A comparison of the two shows that James’s epistle reiterates the Savior’s command that His disciples “let [their] light so shine before men, that they may see [their] good works and glorify [their] Father which is in heaven” (Matthew 5:16).

Matthew	James
Rejoice in trials (see 5:12).	“Count it all joy when ye fall into many afflictions” (JST, 1:2).
“Ask, and it shall be given you” (7:7).	“Ask of God, that giveth . . . liberally” (1:5).
“Be ye therefore perfect” (5:48).	“Be perfect and entire, wanting nothing” (1:4).

Matthew	James
"Judge not unrighteously, that ye be not judged" (JST, 7:1).	"For he shall have judgment without mercy, that hath shewed no mercy" (2:13).
"Let your communication be, Yea, yea; Nay, nay" (5:37).	"Let your yea be yea; and your nay, nay" (5:12).
"Blessed are the meek" (5:5).	"Shew . . . meekness of wisdom" (3:13).
"Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth" (6:19).	"Your riches are corrupted" (5:2).
"Whosoever is angry with his brother shall be in danger of his judgment" (JST, 5:24).	"The wrath of man worketh not the righteousness of God" (1:20).
"Not every one that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, . . . but he that doeth" (7:21).	"What doth it profit . . . though a man say he hath faith, and have not works?" (2:14). ³⁰

As Jesus does in the Sermon on the Mount, of which James likely was aware, James gives counsel on what the faithful should do to reach perfection or spiritual maturity. One powerful example James uses to illustrate the connection between spiritual maturity and faith is in the controlling of the tongue: "For in many things we offend all. If any man offend not in word, the same is a perfect man, and able also to bridle the whole body" (James 3:2). James characterizes the tongue as "a little member, and boasteth great things" (James 3:5), "a fire, a world of iniquity: . . . and setteth on fire the course of nature; and it is set on fire of hell" (James 3:6), "but the tongue can no man tame; it is an unruly evil, full of deadly poison" (James 3:8).

President N. Eldon Tanner was as blunt as James. He said: "The tongue is the most dangerous, destructive, and deadly weapon available to man. A vicious tongue can ruin the reputation and even the future of the one attacked. Insidious attacks against one's reputation, loathsome innuendoes, half-lies about an individual are as deadly as those insect parasites that kill the heart and life of a mighty oak. They are so stealthy and cowardly that one cannot guard against them. As someone has said, 'It is

easier to dodge an elephant than a microbe.”³¹ Learning to control the tongue, according to one commentator, is “overcoming the tendency of the mouth ‘to stay open when it were more profitably closed.’”³²

To attain perfection, or completeness, according to the Epistle of James, the believer is expected to exhibit a living, vitalized faith. This faith is manifest by good works such as patience and control of the tongue.

Wisdom

James discusses two kinds of wisdom: the wisdom of the world and the wisdom of God: “Who is a wise man and endued with knowledge among you? let him shew out of a good conversation his works with meekness of wisdom. But if ye have bitter envying and strife in your hearts, glory not, and lie not against the truth. This wisdom descendeth not from above, but is earthy, sensual, devilish. . . . But the wisdom that is from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, and easy to be intreated, full of mercy and good fruits” (James 3:13–15, 17).

James inextricably ties wisdom to good works. Like true faith that leads to righteous works, true knowledge correctly applied is wisdom that will lead to appropriate action. Nowhere is this more poignantly portrayed than in the account of the First Vision. After reading James 1:5, “If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not; and it shall be given him,” Joseph Smith recorded:

Never did any passage of scripture come with more power to the heart of man than this did at this time to mine. It seemed to enter with great force into every feeling of my heart. I reflected on it again and again, knowing that if any person needed wisdom from God, I did; *for how to act I did not know*, and unless I could get more *wisdom* than I then had, I would never know; for the teachers of religion of the different sects understood the same passages of scripture so differently as to destroy all confidence in settling the question by an appeal to the Bible. At length I came to the conclusion that I must either remain in darkness and confusion, *or else I must do as James directs, that is, ask of God.* (Joseph Smith–History 1:12–13; emphasis added)

Joseph Smith’s willingness to act on his faith, “as James directs,” produced consequences beyond what even the Prophet himself could understand at that time. The effects of Joseph’s decision to apply James’s

directive continues to unfold in both collective and individual ways and will likely do so until the work is done. Joseph may have read many other verses that taught about faith, but it was this verse in James that most profoundly compelled him to go into the grove of trees and offer his prayer of faith. Elder Bruce R. McConkie expressed it well: "This single verse of scripture has had a greater and a more far reaching effect upon mankind than any other single sentence ever recorded by any prophet in any age. It might well be said that the crowning act of the ministry of James was not his martyrdom for the testimony of Jesus, but his recitation, as guided by the Holy Ghost, of these simple words which led to the opening of the heavens in modern times."³³

Works of Pride

James exposes some common manifestations of pride that the spiritually alert should avoid. These sins of pride are opposite of the fruits or works that grow out of true faith. James identifies some of these vices as coveting, killing (see James 4:2), adultery (see James 4:3), and greed (see James 5:1–5). James clearly ties these acts to pride with the question, "Know ye not that the friendship of the world is enmity with God?" (James 4:4). President Ezra Taft Benson observed that the meaning of pride is enmity or hostility toward God or our neighbor.³⁴ Well aware that pride is the source of evil, James counsels: "God resisteth the proud, but giveth grace unto the humble. . . . Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and he shall lift you up" (James 4:6, 10).

Whether encouraging one to attain perfection, to seek wisdom, or to abhor the sins of pride, the Epistle of James bases its approach on the application of faith. Its pragmatic themes build on the notion that "faith without works is dead" (James 2:26).

James's Use of the Imperative Tense

The imperative command found throughout the letter displays James's desire for our dynamic discipleship. The following are some examples of his imperatives:

Chapter 1

"Be perfect and entire" (1:4).

"Ask of God" (1:5).

"Ask in faith" (1:6).

"Rejoice in that he is exalted" (1:9).

“Be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath” (1:19).

“Lay apart all filthiness” (1:21).

“Receive with meekness” (1:21).

“Be ye doers of the word” (1:22).

“Visit the fatherless” (1:27).

Chapter 2

“Hearken, my beloved brethren” (2:5).

“Love thy neighbor” (2:8).

“Keep the whole law” (2:10).

“So speak ye” (2:12).

“Shew me thy faith” (2:18).

Chapter 3

“Shew out of a good conversation” (3:13).

“Lie not against the truth” (3:14).

Chapter 4

“Submit yourselves . . . to God” (4:7).

“Resist the devil” (4:7).

“Draw nigh to God” (4:8).

“Cleanse your hands” (4:8).

“Purify your hearts” (4:8).

“Be afflicted, and mourn, and weep” (4:9).

“Humble yourselves” (4:10).

“Speak not evil” (4:11).

Chapter 5

“Go to now” (5:1).

“Be patient” (5:7).

“Stablish your hearts” (5:8).

“Grudge not” (5:9).

“Swear not” (5:12).

“Confess your faults” (5:16).

“Pray one for another” (5:16).

THINGS OF LASTING VALUE

James counseled: “Go to now, ye that say, To day or to morrow we will go into such a city, and continue there a year, and buy and sell, and get gain: Whereas ye know not what shall be on the morrow. For what is your

life? It is even a vapour, that appeareth for a little time, and then vanisheth away. For that ye ought to say, If the Lord will, we shall live, and do this, or that" (James 4:13–15). These verses point out that the time we are given in this life will eventually pass like a vapor and that we should focus our attention on the things that are most worthy—things that bring us closer to God. In the same vein, the Nephite prophet Amulek said: "For behold, this life is the time for men to prepare to meet God; yea, behold the day of this life is the day for men to perform their labors" (Alma 34:32).

Although James's epistle may have raised questions in the minds of some earlier Christians, it is a blessing that his inspired message on faith and works was providentially preserved for later generations. The words *faith* (*pistis*) and *works* (*ergon*) were defined to demonstrate their strong connection to obedience and faith as a living belief. Elder Talmage's thoughts on faith and works helped to illuminate James's views. The concepts of faith and works throughout the Epistle were examined according to three of James's general themes: perfection, wisdom, and pride. Finally, James's use of the imperative tense was shown to demonstrate his desire to reinforce an active faith.

Like the instructions of James to couple our faith with good works, the Lord has given similar counsel today: "Wherefore, if ye believe me, ye will labor while it is called today" (D&C 64:25). The Epistle of James is an articulate expression of the interrelationship between faith and works for Christians of his day and ours: "For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also" (James 2:26).

NOTES

1. The term *faith* is used sixteen times in the Epistle of James, thirteen times in chapter 2. *Works* occurs thirteen times, twelve times in chapter 2.
2. Traditionally there are seven Catholic epistles: James; 1 and 2 Peter; 1, 2, and 3 John; and Jude.
3. Marcion rejected the entire Old Testament and accepted only the Gospel of Luke and ten epistles of Paul.
4. As found in Bruce M. Metzger, *The Canon of the New Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 235.
5. Eusebius assumes James is the brother of Jesus (see David Noel Freedman, ed., *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, 6 vols. [New York: Doubleday, 1992], 3:622–23).
6. Freedman, *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, 3:622.
7. Freedman, *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, 3:622. "It is sometimes suggested that James's argument is prior to Paul's and that Paul wrote in part to answer

- it, but while Paul's argument on justification does not require James's to explain it, the strongly polemical tone of James's language indicates that he knows a position which he is concerned to refute: 'and not by faith alone'" (Freedman, *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, 625). See section 2 on James and Paul in the entry "James, Epistle of."
8. F. L. Cross, ed., *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 499.
 9. Cross, *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 499.
 10. Cross, *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 499.
 11. Gerhard Friedrich, ed., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 10 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1968), 6:175.
 12. Friedrich, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 6:175.
 13. Friedrich, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 6:187. See also Deuteronomy 9:23; Psalm 119:66.
 14. Friedrich, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 6:199.
 15. Friedrich, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 6:205; see also Ether 12:7–22.
 16. Friedrich, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 6:208.
 17. Friedrich, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 2:635.
 18. Friedrich, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 2:637.
 19. Friedrich, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 2:651.
 20. Friedrich, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 2:651.
 21. James E. Talmage, *A Study of the Articles of Faith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1983), 87.
 22. Talmage, *A Study of the Articles of Faith*, 88; see also James E. Talmage, *The Vitality of Mormonism* (Boston: Gorham Press, 1919), 79.
 23. James E. Talmage, "Prove Thy Faith by Thy Works," *Improvement Era*, August 1914, 940–47.
 24. Talmage, "Prove Thy Faith," 941.
 25. Talmage, "Prove Thy Faith," 942. Concerning the writings of Paul, Talmage writes, "The spirit of all of Paul's writings is to the effect that when he thus spoke of a saving faith he meant faith; he did not mean mere belief, but belief plus the works which that belief comprises and postulates, and such combination is faith" (943).
 26. Ralph Martin, ed., *World Biblical Commentary* (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1988), lxxix.
 27. "Note James' characteristic corroborations of a positive statement by a negative clause: *entire, lacking in nothing; God that giveth and upbraideth not; in faith, nothing doubting*" (Martin R. Vincent, *Word Studies in the New Testament*, 4 vols. [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1975], 1:725).
 28. Vincent, *Word Studies in the New Testament*, 1:724.

29. Joseph F. Smith, *Gospel Doctrine* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1977), 58.
30. Adapted from the *World Biblical Commentary*, lxxv–lxxvi. Note other parallels this commentary cites.
31. N. Eldon Tanner, in Conference Report, April 1972, 57.
32. Martin, *World Biblical Commentary*, 109.
33. Bruce R. McConkie, *Doctrinal New Testament Commentary*, 3 vols. (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1973), 3:246–47.
34. Ezra Taft Benson, in Conference Report, April 1989, 3.