

# “A Right Strawy Epistle”: Reformation Perspectives on James<sup>1</sup>

Timothy George

**Timothy George** is the founding Dean of Beeson Divinity School of Samford University, Birmingham, Alabama. He is the author of *John Robinson and the English Separatist Tradition*, *Theology of the Reformers*, and *Faithful Witness: The Life of William Carey*, as well as several scholarly articles. Dr. George also serves as a senior advisor for *Christianity Today*.

The history of theology is the story of how the church has interpreted the Bible. While many other factors must also be taken into account, the church has always tried to define its faith in terms of its grasp of the Word of God in Holy Scripture.<sup>2</sup>

This principle has important implications for the way we study the Bible today. It requires that we take seriously the exegetical tradition of the church as an indispensable aid for a contemporary interpretation of the Bible. It is not enough to come to the study of the text with the New Testament in one hand (even if we read it in the original Greek!) and the latest commentary in the other. We must also examine carefully how God has spoken in his Word to other Christians of different ages, in various cultures and life settings. How they have understood—and misunderstood—the Scriptures will significantly supplement our own investigation of the text.

The Scriptures have spoken in new and fresh and powerful ways throughout the history of the church. To take but one example, Paul’s reinterpretation of Habakkuk’s dictum, “The just shall live by faith,” rediscovered by Martin Luther through whom it was reclaimed by John Wesley, reemerged as pivotal text in Karl Barth’s *Commentary on Romans*. As faithful members of the “communion of saints,” that is, the church extended throughout time as well as space, we cannot close our ears to the living witness of the Scriptures through the ages.

## The Status of James Prior to the Reformation

At the time of the Reformation the Epistle of James emerged as a source of great controversy among the reformers themselves. In this study we shall see how James was treated, respectively, by Martin Luther, Huldrych Zwingli, John Calvin, and the Anabaptists. We may begin our investigation, however, by referring to a sermon on James 2:12 preached by the famous Anglican divine John Donne on February 20, 1628. In the introduction to the sermon he described James as

one of those seven Epistles, which Athanasius and Origen call’d *Catholic*; that is, universal; perchance because they are not directed to any one Church, as some others are, but to all the Christian world: And S. Hierom call’d them *Canonical*; perchance because all Rules, all Canons of holy Conversation are compriz’d in these Epistles: And Epiphanius, and Oecumenius call’d them *Circular*; perchance, because as in a Circle you cannot discern which was the first point, nor in which, the compass begun the Circle; so neither can we discern in these Epistles, whom the Holy Ghost begins withall, whom he means principally, King or Subject, Priest or People, Single or Married, Husband or Wife, Father or Children, Masters or Servants; but Universally, promiscuously, indifferently, they give ALL rules, for ALL actions, to ALL persons, at ALL times, and in ALL places.<sup>3</sup>

Donne’s description is a good summary of what could be called a “retrospective consensus” on the Epistle of James.

As “catholic, canonical, and circular,” its place among the New Testament writings seemed secure. Upon closer examination, however, the status of James in the early church appears less certain. It is not quoted by any Church Father of the second century, nor does it appear in the Muratorian canon, the famous list of Scriptures accepted by the Roman Church around 200.<sup>4</sup> The earliest undisputed reference to James among the Church Fathers appears only in the writings of Origen who accepted its authority but recognized that not everyone else did, a view shared by his disciple, Eusebius of Caesarea.<sup>5</sup> In the West Jerome gave credence to James by including it in his Vulgate version of the New Testament, although he too registered doubt concerning the apostolicity of its author.<sup>6</sup> Augustine, who wrote a commentary on James which is no longer extant, had no doubt that the author of the epistle was James, the brother of Jesus. This view, widely accepted during the Middle Ages, helped to secure for James a recognized status within the Christian canon.<sup>7</sup>

The Epistle of James attracted relatively little attention during the millennium between Augustine and Luther. The most frequently quoted text from the epistle was James 5:14, which became the classic proof text for the sacrament of extreme unction. When the British monk and church historian Bede wrote his commentary on James in the eighth century, he interpreted the oil of anointing as “oil which had been consecrated by a bishop”.<sup>8</sup> Thomas Aquinas repeatedly appealed to James 5 as the scriptural basis for the sacrament of extreme unction: “Extreme unction is a spiritual remedy, since it avails for the remission of sins, according to James 5:15. Therefore it is a sacrament.”<sup>9</sup> This view was recog-

nized as the official position of the Roman Catholic Church at the Council of Trent in the sixteenth century. The same council had earlier included the Epistle of James in its “Decree Concerning the Canonical Scriptures” and had declared anathema anyone who did not accept “in their entirety and with all their parts” the aforesaid sacred books.<sup>10</sup>

### **The Epistle of James and Luther**

Undoubtedly the most important event in the development of biblical studies during the Reformation was the publication of Desiderius Erasmus’s New Testament in 1516. It was the first complete edition of the New Testament ever to be published with a Greek text and a translation based upon it. Along with the Greek and Latin texts, printed side by side, Erasmus included his *Annotationes*, or critical remarks. Concerning James, Erasmus repeated the patristic reservation about authorship, drawing especially on Jerome. He then added his own doubts based on his analysis of the language and style of the epistle: “It just doesn’t measure up to that apostolic majesty and gravity. Nor should we expect so many hebraisms from the Apostle James who was the bishop of Jerusalem.”<sup>11</sup> Despite his criticism of James based on humanistic philology, Erasmus did accept the epistle as a proper part of the canon. In 1520 he published a paraphrase of James. During the reign of Edward VI, Erasmus’s New Testament *Paraphrases* were translated into English and, by royal decree, placed in every parish church in England.

As we shall see, Luther’s critique of James was far more radical than that of Erasmus. In his first published criticism of the epistle (1519), however, Luther merely echoed Erasmus’s remark: “The

style of this epistle is far inferior to the apostolic majesty, nor is it in any way comparable to Paul."<sup>12</sup> Although his main argument against James was more theological than philological, Luther used Erasmus's critical scholarship as a launching pad for his own more trenchant attack. In this sense, too, "Erasmus laid the egg which Luther hatched!"

Between 1515 and 1522 Luther's attitude toward James underwent a complete transformation. In the summer of the former year Luther began his lectures on Paul's Epistle to the Romans at the University of Wittenberg. In his "scholion" on Romans 3:20 he spoke of James and Paul in the same breath and saw no contradiction in their respective views on justification: "When St. James and the apostle say that a man is justified by works, they are contending against the erroneous notion of those who thought that faith suffices without works."<sup>13</sup> Does the phrase "justified by works" indicate that something other than faith in Christ is required for justification? Again, Luther quoted James (2:10), "Whosoever... fails in one point has become guilty of all of it," to prove the indivisibility of that "living faith which produces its own works."<sup>14</sup>

In his *Lectures on Romans* Luther could stress the compatibility of James and Paul because he had not yet developed his mature doctrine of justification by faith alone. Though he may well have experienced his "evangelical breakthrough" by 1515 (as most Luther scholars contend), he had not yet learned to formulate his insight into the gracious nature of God in terms of the sheer imputation of Christ's righteousness. For example, in the same *Lectures on Romans*, he interpreted the famous "*iustitia dei*" of Romans 1:17 as a progressive justification, a "growing more

and more" toward the achievement of a right standing before God. The Christian life was thus always a "seeking and striving to be made righteous, even to the hour of death."<sup>15</sup> By 1518, however, Luther had begun to speak of justification largely in forensic language: we are declared righteous by faith alone. In this view there was no direct correlation between the state of justification and one's outward works, as Luther made clear in his sermon on the Pharisee and the publican (1521): "And the publican fulfills all the commandments of God on the spot... by grace alone. So he went down to his house declared righteous. Who could have seen that, under this dirty fellow?"<sup>16</sup> This view of justification required the strongest opposition between faith and works. As Luther put it, "If faith is not without all, even the smallest, works, it does not justify."<sup>17</sup>

The formulation of Luther's mature doctrine of justification coincided precisely with his shift of opinion on James. A pivotal moment in this process was the Leipzig Debate of 1519 during which his opponent, John Eck, cited James 2:17 against Luther's position. Luther replied with the Erasmian critique of James's authorship, to which we have referred, and added that, in any event, one could not oppose one writing of the Bible against the whole Scripture.<sup>18</sup> Thus Luther was forced by Eck to distinguish various levels of authority within the Bible itself.

On Friday, April 26, 1521, Luther was spirited away from Worms by the soldiers of his prince Frederick the Wise following his heroic refusal to recant his teachings ("Here I stand. I can do no other. God help me.") unless persuaded by clear arguments from Scripture. "My conscience is captive to the Word of God," he

had said. Secluded in the Wartburg Castle, he worked furiously on his translation of the New Testament into German, first published in September 1522. In the preface to the so-called September Testament Luther set forth his famous verdict on the Epistle of James.

In a word St. John's Gospel and his first epistle, St. Paul's epistles, especially Romans, Galatians, and Ephesians, and St. Peter's first epistle are the books that show you Christ and teach you all that is necessary and salvatory for you to know, even if you were never to see or hear any other book or doctrine. Therefore St. James's epistle is really a right strawy epistle, compared to these others, for it has nothing of the nature of the gospel about it.<sup>19</sup>

What did Luther mean when he called James "a right strawy epistle" (*eyn rechte stroern Epistel*)? The image of straw recalls the Pauline metaphor of "wood, hay and stubble" (1 Cor 3:12), "*Holz, Stroh oder Heu*" in Luther's rendering, the faulty materials which some use in trying to build on the foundation of Christ.<sup>20</sup> Some doubtful epistles such as Hebrews were a mixture of worthless and valuable materials, but James was really (*rechte*) an epistle of straw!

In his "Preface to the Epistle of James" Luther cited three reasons for this harsh negative judgment. First, James contradicts Paul and all the rest of the Scripture in ascribing justification to works. Luther saw this as evidence of the deutero-apostolic character of the document, rather than an indication of a real conflict between Paul and the historical James. Second, it does not really preach or inculcate Christ. There is no mention of the passion, the resurrection, or the Spirit of Christ. Here Luther raised his standard for adjudicating the apostolicity of any New Tes-

tament writing:

This is the true test by which to judge all books, when we see whether or not they inculcate Christ (*ob sie Christum trieben oder nicht*).... Whatever does not teach Christ is not yet apostolic, even though St. Peter or St. Paul does the teaching. Again, whatever preaches Christ would be apostolic, even if Judas, Annas, Pilate, and Herod were doing it.<sup>21</sup>

Third, granted the good intentions of the author, i.e., to guard against a false view of faith without works, he was unequal to the task. Thus Luther concluded that the author must have been "some good, pious man, who took a few sayings from the disciples of the apostles and thus tossed them off on paper."<sup>22</sup>

Despite all of these strictures, Luther did not, as is commonly repeated, excise James completely from the canon. He included James in all of the editions of his German New Testament, although he did detach it from the usual order and placed it, along with Hebrews, Jude, and the Apocalypse, at the end of the Bible. It is true that on one occasion Luther said, "Away with James. I almost feel like throwing Jimmy into the stove, as the priest in Kalenberg did"—a reference to a local pastor who used the wooden statues of the apostles for firewood.<sup>23</sup> But this is a typical Lutheresque statement made near the end of his life (1542) in the heat of polemical exchange with his Roman Catholic opponents, who found James a ready-made weapon to use against the Reformation. More telling is the fact that after 1522 Luther withdrew his characterization of James as a "right strawy epistle" from subsequent editions of his New Testament. And, on several occasions, he preached from James in accordance with the lectionary of the church year. In one

of these sermons he referred to the passage in question (James 1:16ff.) as “a good teaching and admonition.”

Even this was grudging praise, however, for in the next breath he was saying how much better it would be, between Easter and Pentecost, to preach through Paul’s great chapter on the resurrection (1 Corinthians 15).<sup>24</sup>

Luther’s criticism of James, then, while incorporating elements of humanistic philology, was essentially theological in character. For him Christ remained the Lord and the Center of the Bible. Those writing which most clearly “inculcated Christ” were the “true and certain chief books” while the others, such as James, had to be relegated to the periphery. Since the doctrine of justification by faith alone was the “article by which the church either stands or falls,” James’s neglect or distortion of this important truth was sufficient reason for assigning it to a level of secondary significance.

### **The Epistle of James and Zwingli**

Luther was the catalyst for the Reformation not only in Germany but throughout all of Europe. Huldrych Zwingli referred to him as an “Elijah” and urged his congregation to buy and read his books, which poured forth from the printing presses of Zurich and Basel. John Calvin went so far as to call Luther his “father” in the Lord, although he had never met him in person. The Reformation in Switzerland, however, had both a different origin and social setting than that of Germany. It was an urban movement sustained by city councils rather than territorial princes. In the essential Reformation concerns, *sola gratia, sola scriptura, sola fide*, Zwingli and Calvin agreed with Luther over against the Church of Rome

on the one hand and the radical reformers on the other. Nonetheless, the shape of their theologies and the varying emphases they placed upon these cardinal doctrines were quite different. We can gauge the distinct character of Reformed (as over against Lutheran) theology by examining the comments of Zwingli and Calvin on the Epistle of James.

On January 1, 1519, Zwingli entered the pulpit of the Grossmünster in Zurich and began preaching, verse by verse, through the Gospel of Matthew. This event signaled his desire to reform the church on the basis of a careful exposition of Holy Scripture. Matthew was followed by Acts, then the epistles to Timothy, then Galatians, and so forth, until Zwingli had worked through most of the books of both Old and New Testaments.<sup>25</sup> Zwingli preached without manuscript or notes, and, sadly, few records of his sermons have survived. Fortunately we do have certain notes from Zwingli’s sermons on James, which were taken down by his friend Leo Jud and published the year following the reformer’s death in 1531.

Unlike Erasmus and Luther, Zwingli seems not have doubted the apostolicity of James. He referred to the author as the “Apostle James,” “St. James,” or even “the pious, holy, or divine James.” For example, both Luther and Zwingli agreed that James 5:14 provided no warrant for the Roman sacrament of extreme unction, but the basis of their objections varied. Luther challenged the authorship of the epistle and added that, even if it had been written by an apostle, no apostle had the right on his own authority to institute a sacrament.<sup>26</sup> Zwingli accepted the apostolic status of James, but argued a different interpretation: “James here has taught nothing other than sincere sympathy for

and visitation of the sick.”<sup>27</sup> On another, very different, occasion Zwingli hurled this same text at Luther. Arguing against Luther’s doctrine of the corporeal presence of Christ in the Lord’s Supper, Zwingli, not without a touch of irony, asked his opponent: When James enjoins the elders to pray for and anoint the sick, why does he not also say, “shall partake of the body of Christ with him,” especially when you hold that faith is established and sins forgiven through this eating?<sup>28</sup>

On the thorny issue of faith and works, Zwingli had no difficulty in harmonizing James and Paul. The two apostles merely directed their writings to different audiences:

Paul wrote against “works”-men (*operarios*) and superstitious, sanctimonious hypocrites. James, on the other hand, opposed ambitious boasters of vain faith, *pseudo-christianous*, who had received the gospel but were not living according to it.<sup>29</sup>

In an apparent slap at the Lutherans, Zwingli denounced those who “take away from faith the works of love, glorying only in the empty word, ‘faith.’”<sup>30</sup>

Therefore like Christ himself and Paul and James we warn them that they must show forth their faith by their acts, if they have faith.... Hence we preach the law as well as grace. For from the law the faithful and elect learn the will of God.<sup>31</sup>

Not only is James’s authority unquestioned, he is placed on an equal ranking with Paul and Christ! Unlike Luther, Zwingli did not feel the need to separate law and gospel into polar opposites. The law served a positive function in the Christian life insofar as it encouraged the active embodiment of faith. “Christ

will not let his people be idle,” Zwingli wrote. Moreover, “Those who have rightly understood the mystery of the gospel will exert themselves to live rightly.”<sup>32</sup> James was valued by Zwingli because, perhaps more than any other New Testament writing, its primary theme is the outworking of faith in action.

### The Epistle of James and Calvin

Zwingli’s effort to “rehabilitate” James as a proper book for Protestant Christians was advanced further by John Calvin, whose commentary on James, originally published in French in 1550, is perhaps the best sixteenth-century treatment of the epistle. Calvin was well aware of the disputes, ancient and contemporary, concerning the canonicity of James, yet he gladly included it among the authentic scriptures for, as he put it, “I can find no fair and adequate cause for rejecting it.” He regarded it as apostolic even though he doubted (here he differed from Zwingli) that it had really been written by the Apostle James. The precise identity of the writer was of immeasurably less importance than the divine origin of the book. And, if James seemed to preach less of the grace of Christ than we might prefer, “we must remember not to expect everyone to go over the same ground.” James, then, contains nothing unworthy of an apostle of Christ. It is a rich store of varied instruction on many aspects of the Christian life. It contains striking passages—this is Calvin’s rough outline of the book—“on endurance, on calling upon God, on the practice of religion, on restraining our speech, on peacemaking, on holding back greedy instincts, on disregard for this present life.”<sup>33</sup>

Calvin, no less than Luther, was convinced that a right standing before God

derived from sheer grace and not from human effort, as his (in)famous doctrine of double predestination clearly demonstrates. But he was also convinced, no less than Zwingli, that true faith would issue in righteous living just as a bud invariably yields a flower. Calvin tried to balance these two concerns in his exegesis of James 2:14-26, a pericope referred to by a modern scholar as “one of the most difficult passages” in the New Testament.<sup>34</sup> We shall look at three aspects of Calvin’s rich and nuanced interpretation of this passage.

### ***The Discourse of Faith and Works Is Related to James’s Concern for the Poor***

In his exposition of the first verse of the epistle (1:1), Calvin noted that James was writing for those “who need, not doctrine, but effective lines of encouragement.” In particular, they needed to be encouraged “to behave warmly and generously toward their neighbors.”<sup>35</sup> When James admonished his readers “to visit” (*episkeptesthai*) the widows and orphans (1:27), he did not exhort them to pay polite pastoral calls, but rather “to stretch out a hand for the relief of those who are oppressed.”<sup>36</sup> A prime example of faith without works is the comfortable Christian who greets a hungry neighbor with a “God bless you,” but does nothing to alleviate the other’s distress (2:16).

Calvin was not a social egalitarian; he taught that one’s economic status should be accepted as the result of divine providential ordering. But far from using this principle “to comfort the comfortable,” he upbraided the wealthy for their complacency and greed. The rich stand in danger of divine judgment because they have pampered themselves while their poor neighbors suffer from want.

Not for nothing does the Lord by his prophets throw sharp words at those who sleep on ivory couches, who pour on precious unguents, who entrance their palates with sweetness to the notes of the zither, to all intents like fat cattle in rich pastures. All this is said to make us keep a perspective in all our creature comforts; self-indulgence wins no favor with God.<sup>37</sup>

Calvin’s sermons on James were delivered at a time when streams of refugees were pouring into Geneva because of the persecution of Protestants in France, Italy, and other lands. Most of these were destitute people who arrived with virtually nothing. One of Calvin’s major activities as a reformer was to organize a system of social welfare and relief to meet the basic needs of those who sought asylum in his city. Many of the patrician families of Geneva resented the influx of foreign refugees and needed to hear, Calvin felt, James’s sermon on the sin of discrimination (2:8-11).

If you are cloaking your actions with a pretended charity, it will soon be stripped off. God bids us love our neighbors, not certain selected persons. Now the word *neighbor* is understood across the human race.... God expressly commends to us both the alien and the enemy, and all who in any sense might seem contemptible to us.<sup>38</sup>

For Calvin to be a “doer of the word” implied a willingness to share one’s wealth with the poor since, after all, everything we own has come from the hands of God (1:17).

### ***James Does Not Oppose Works to True Faith But Rather to a False Conception of Faith***

Medieval Catholic exegetes of this passage often distinguished between two

levels of faith—*fides informis* (unformed faith) and *fides formata* (formed faith). The former was a kind of elemental faith which implied an assent to the basic truths of Christianity but which could exist apart from the infusion of sacramental grace. *Fides formata*, on the other hand, was that faith which, informed by the habit of supernatural love, was active in good works. Such works were in fact requisite for the earning of merits which contributed toward the justification of the sinner.<sup>39</sup> Calvin was aware of this interpretation and explicitly rejected it. The scholastic schematization of salvation turned faith and grace into essentially human qualities (though they were also said to be gifts of God) which issued in an anthropocentric doctrine of justification. For Calvin, as well as for Luther, grace was the unilateral favor of God toward helpless sinners, and faith the gift which enabled sinners to grasp the divine promise of acceptance.

But how to reconcile this Protestant, even Lutheran, understanding of justification with James? Calvin suggested that James's polemic was directed against a pretended, flaccid faith that was only a pretext for unbelief. Thus James introduced his hypothetical interlocutor with, "If someone *says* he has faith..." James does not attribute genuine faith to such a hypocrite, nor does he at any point offer a full evangelical definition of faith. "Just remember, he is not speaking out of his own understanding of the word when he calls it 'faith,' but is disputing with those who pretend insincerely to faith, but are entirely without it."<sup>40</sup> No wonder, then, that James denies any salvific effect to this kind of faith, which is hardly worthy of the name.

Calvin underscored the interpretation

by pointing out certain stylistic features of James's discourse. Erasmus had represented this passage as a dialogue between one side that supported faith without works, and another that supported works without faith, with James steering a middle course between them. Such a reading, Calvin held, was untenable for it missed the deep irony in James's speech. Calvin saw 2:18 (*alla ... tis* = "But someone will say" RSV) as introducing a rebuttal to the vain boast of those who imagine they have faith, but whose lives reveal their faithlessness. The irony is continued in the next line as well: "Show me your faith without works"—an obvious impossibility, since, as he has just shown, such a faith is not real but dead (2:17).

This line of argument is further reflected in James's comment about the devils who believe and tremble. In this statement, Calvin felt, the irony was mingled with a touch of sarcasm: "It is quite ludicrous for anyone to say that devils have faith." Since even the devils tremble at the thought of divine judgment, one who only professes a vain, empty faith is worse off than the hosts of hell! In sum, this remark is simply further proof that "our whole discussion is not on the subject of faith, but on a certain uninformed opinion of God, which no more brings God and man together than looking at the sun lifts us up into the sky."<sup>41</sup>

***For James "Justification by Works" Refers to the Demonstration of Faith in Deeds of Love***

Calvin contended that James's intention was not to show the source or manner of one's attainment of righteousness (this is evident to all, he said!), but simply to stress a single point: that true faith is confirmed by good works. This is also the

key to the reconciliation of James and Paul.

When the sophists set James against Paul, they are deceived by the double meaning of the term 'justification.' When Paul says that we are justified by faith, he means precisely that we have won a verdict of righteousness in the sight of God. James has quite another intention, that the man who professes himself to be faithful should demonstrate the truth of his fidelity by his works. James did not mean to teach us where the confidence of our salvation should rest—which is the very point on which Paul does insist. So let us avoid the false reasoning which has trapped the sophists, by taking note of the double meaning: to Paul, the word denotes our free imputation of righteousness before the judgment seat of God, to James, the demonstration of righteousness from its effects, in the sight of men; which we may deduce from the preceding words, *Show me thy faith, etc.*<sup>42</sup>

The examples of Abraham and Rahab are test cases of this interpretation. Abraham was reckoned righteous by God more than thirty years before he sacrificed his son Isaac (cf. Gen 15:6), but in that act of obedience Abraham "revealed the remarkable fruition of his loyalty" to God. The character of Rahab the harlot is cited to show that God expects all believers, both those of great renown and those of lowest degree, to demonstrate their faith in good works. Indeed, Calvin went so far as to say that "at no time was any person, of whatever condition or race or class, reckoned among the justified and believing if they did not show works."<sup>43</sup> In this sense Calvin was willing to allow that we are not justified by faith alone—that is, by a bare and empty awareness of God; we are justified by works—that is, our righteousness is known and approved by its fruits.

## The Epistle of James and the Anabaptists

The Epistle of James continued to stir controversy throughout the sixteenth century. It was quoted at the Council of Trent not only to buttress the sacrament of extreme unction but also to support the Roman Catholic doctrine of justification.<sup>44</sup> James was also a favorite writing of the radical reformers. They frequently quoted James 5:12 ("Do not swear") as a warrant for their eschewal of all oaths, and James 1:5 ("If anyone needs wisdom, let him ask of God") as a basis for the direct, unmediated revelations they claimed to have received.<sup>45</sup> This latter verse was also a favorite text of the Mormon prophet Joseph Smith.

More commonly, the Anabaptists used the Epistle of James as a foil for what they perceived as the mainline Protestant doctrine of "cheap grace." Melchior Hofmann lambasted those who cried "Believe, believe; grace, grace," but whose faith was fruitless and dead (James 2:17).<sup>46</sup> Menno Simons explicitly refuted Luther's denigration of James as a "strawy epistle."

The Lutherans teach and believe that faith alone saves, without any assistance by works.... And therefore the important and earnest epistle of James is esteemed and treated as a "strawy epistle." What bold folly! If the doctrine is straw, then the chosen apostle, the faithful servant and witness of Christ who wrote and taught it, must also have been a strawy man; this is as clear as the noonday sun. For the doctrine shows the character of the man.<sup>47</sup>

Menno was disturbed by the anti-nomian tendencies which he felt were latent in Luther's doctrine.

They strike up a psalm, *Der Strick ist entzwei und wir sind frei*, etc.

(Snapped is the cord, now we are free, praise the Lord) while beer and wine verily run from their drunken mouths and noses. Anyone who can but recite this on his thumb, no matter how carnally he lives, is a good evangelical man and a precious brother.<sup>48</sup>

The Anabaptist concept of discipleship as a willful repudiation of the old life and a radical commitment to Jesus as Lord could not tolerate such a lackadaisical abuse of the grace of God.

### Conclusions

What conclusions can we draw from this overview of Reformation perspectives on the Epistle of James?

Luther's one-sided emphasis on justification by faith, though necessary and correct in itself, led him to overly-disparage the equally evangelical (in the sense of "pertaining to the gospel") message of James. Using a Christocentric hermeneutic, Luther arrived at a "canon within the canon." He allowed Scripture to be its own critic and followed the principle of *Christum triebet* to the near exclusion of James. We cannot follow Luther in this respect, but neither should we be too harsh in our criticism of him either. While all Scripture is inspired by God, it is not all to be interpreted univocally. Few Christians today would advocate capital punishment for disobedient children or mandatory beards for all pastors (Deut 21:18ff.; Lev 21:5). In practice, if not in theory, everyone makes a discriminatory use of the canon. Witness "favorite verses" or "favorite books," the "Roman" road of salvation, or even the printing of the New Testament and (sometimes) Psalms to the exclusion of the rest of the Bible. Luther was right to evaluate and interpret the Scriptures in the light of Jesus Christ, since

Jesus himself did this "You have heard it said ... but I say unto you." Luther was wrong in that his grasp of the message of Jesus Christ was too restricted.

The more positive reception of James in the Reformed tradition and among the Anabaptists is a welcome corrective to Luther's harsh judgment. Yet here too we must be on guard. Just as an over-emphasis on *sola fide* can result in antinomianism, so the preaching of works, unleavened by love, can issue in legalism. Later Calvinists gave way to this temptation as they scrupulously sought evidence of their election in their good works.

We should also be wary of a too easy harmonization of James and Paul. Zwingli and Calvin give the impression that the two apostles saw eye to eye, almost as if they had just ironed out the differences between them over a long distance conference call! Each should be seen, however, as delivering his own unique, uncompromised word from the Lord to the community of believers of which he was a part, and through that community to the larger "communion of saints" through the ages. Still, when James and Paul are placed alongside the other witnesses of the biblical revelation, they both, separately and together, present an aspect of the gospel which the church today needs urgently to hear: namely, that while faith and works may be distinguished, they can never be separated. In our time no one has expressed this truth better than Karl Barth: In the act of faith "we have to do with the being and activity of the living God towards us, with Jesus Christ Himself, whom faith cannot encounter with a basic neutrality, but only in the decision of obedience."<sup>49</sup>

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>This article first appeared in *Review and Expositor* 83 (Summer 1986) 369-382. Used by permission. Note that some minor editorial changes were made, especially changes to conform the piece to this journal's format.

<sup>2</sup>Indeed, Gerhard Ebeling has argued that not only the history of theology, but the entire history of the Christian church should be read as the history of the interpretation of the Bible. See his perceptive essay, "Kirchengeschichte als Geschichte der Auslegung der Heiligen Schrift," *Wort Gottes und Tradition* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1964) 9-27.

<sup>3</sup>"A Lent-Sermon Preached at Whitehall, February 20, 1628 [1628/9]" in *The Sermons of John Donne*, vol. 8, ed. Evelyn M. Simpson and George R. Potter (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1956) 335.

<sup>4</sup>Joseph B. Mayor, *The Epistle of James* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1892), *passim*, cites many parallels between James and early Christian literature. Recent scholarship has not followed Mayor's lead in seeing these parallels as evidence of James's early acceptance in the church. Cf. Martin Dibelius, *James*, trans. Michael A. Williams (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976) 51-61; Sophie Laws, *A Commentary on the Epistle of James* (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1980) 6-26.

<sup>5</sup>Cf. The list of Origen's citations from James in Mayor, *James*, lxiii-lxiv. Origen described James as "the epistle which is current" (*en tē pheromenē lakōbou epistolē*). Eusebius (*Ecclesiastical History* III.25) classifies

James among the "disputed" writings (*antilegomenōn*) as opposed to the "agreed upon" books (*homologoumenois*) of the New Testament. Eusebius *Kirchengeschichte*, ed. Eduard Schwartz (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1952) 104.

<sup>6</sup>Cf. Jerome, *De viris illustribus* 2: J. P. Migne, *Patrologiae cursus completus, Series Latina* 22:642f. [hereafter, *MPL*].

<sup>7</sup>Cf. Paulus Bergauer, *Der Jakobusbrief bei Augustinus* (Vienna: Verlag Herder, 1962). Bergauer displays great erudition in discussing Augustine's high view of James in order to prove the (rather moot) point that Luther in his disparagement of James was not a good Augustinian! We only learn of Augustine's "expositio" of James from his book of retractions: *Sancti Aurelii Augustini Retractationum*, ed. Pius Knoll (Leipzig: G. Freytag, 1902) 169-170. Lingering doubts about James's authenticity continued in the East, especially among the Syrian Christians. For example, Paul of Nisibis, a Nestorian theologian, placed James among the *antilegomena* as late 545. See James H. Ropes, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle of James*, The International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1916) 97-98.

<sup>8</sup>Venerabilis Beda, "Expositio super Divi Jacobi Epistolam," *MPL*, 93:39. Bede held that James was placed before the epistles of Peter and John in the canon because the church at Jerusalem, over which James presided, was the "fons et origio" of the preaching of the gospel.

<sup>9</sup>Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, III Supplement, question 29, article I.

<sup>10</sup>The author of the epistle is called "James the Apostle and brother of the Lord." *Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent*, trans H. J. Schroeder (London: Herder, 1941) 99-100, 17-18.

<sup>11</sup>*Annotationes in epistolam Jacobi* (Basel, 1516) 1026: "Nec enim referre videtur usquequaque majestatem illam et gravitatem apostolicam. Nec hebra-ismi tantum quantum ab apostolo Jacobo qui fuerit episcopus Hieroso-lymitanus expectaretur."

<sup>12</sup>"Resolutiones Lutherianae super propositionibus suis Lipsiae disputatis," quoted in Ropes, *James*, 25.

<sup>13</sup>*Luther's Works*, American ed. (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1972 [hereafter, *LW*]) 25:235.

<sup>14</sup>*LW*, 25:235-236.

<sup>15</sup>*LW*, 25:152, 251-252.

<sup>16</sup>*D. Martin Luthers Werke, Kritische Gesamtausgabe* (Weimer: Bohlau, 1883 [hereafter, *WA*]) 17:404.

<sup>17</sup>*WA*, 7:231. For a fuller exposition of the development of Luther's doctrine of justification and its contrast with patristic and scholastic views, see Timothy George, *Theology of the Reformers* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1986).

<sup>18</sup>*WA*, 2:425.

<sup>19</sup>*WA DB*, 6:537; *LW*, 35:362. Luther's sharp caricature of James may have been in part a reaction to the excessive praise heaped upon the epistle by his colleague and later opponent, Andreas Bodenstein von Karlstadt. In 1520 Karlstadt had published a treatise, *De Canonicis Scripturis Libellus*, in which he stoutly defended the canonicity of James. A recent interpreter has gone

so far as to say that “perhaps it is because of Karlstadt that the book of James was kept in the Protestant Canon.” Calvin A. Pater, *Karlstadt as the Father of the Baptist Movements* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1984) 22.

<sup>20</sup>*Das Neue Testament Deutsch von D. Martin Luther* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1983) 404.

<sup>21</sup>*Ibid.*, 420. *LW*, 35:396.

<sup>22</sup>*LW*, 35:397. In *Table Talk*, Luther set forth the hypothesis of the Jewish authorship of James: “I maintain that some Jew wrote it who probably heard about Christian people but never encountered any. Since he heard that Christians place great weight on faith in Christ, he thought, ‘Wait a moment! I’ll oppose them and urge works alone.’ This he did. He wrote not a word about the suffering and resurrection of Christ, although this is what all the apostles preached about.” *LW*, 54:424.

<sup>23</sup>*WA*, 39/II:199; *LW*, 34:317. Cf. Paul Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, trans. Robert C. Schultz (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966) 81.

<sup>24</sup>*WA*, 21:349.

<sup>25</sup>Zwingli never preached on the Apocalypse, whose canonicity he doubted. Cf. G. R. Potter, *Zwingli* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976) 61. Scholars have only recently begun to examine Zwingli’s contribution as an exegete. See the very helpful article by Fritz Schmidt-Clausing, “Die unterschiedliche Stellung Luthers und Zwinglis zum Jacobusbrief,” *Reformatio* 18 (1969) 568-585.

<sup>26</sup>*LW*, 36:118.

<sup>27</sup>*Huldrych Zwingli: Writings*, vol. 1,

ed. E. J. Furcha and H. W. Pipkin (Allison Park, PA: Pickwick Publications, 1984) 102. Calvin differed from Zwingli in that he believed the anointing in James referred to a genuine sacramental action. He saw it, however, as a temporary gift of healing valid only for apostolic times, “which God withdrew from the world fourteen hundred years ago.” *Calvin’s New Testament Commentaries*, ed. David W. Torrance and Thomas F. Torrance (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972) 3:314-315.

<sup>28</sup>*Zwingli: Writings*, 2:264.

<sup>29</sup>“In Epistolam Beati Iacobi Brevis Expositio,” *Huldrici Zuinglii, Opera*, ed. M. Schuler and J. Schultheiss (Zürich, 1838) VI/2:249.

<sup>30</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 271.

<sup>31</sup>*Zwingli and Bullinger*, ed. G. W. Bromiley (London: SCM, 1953) 273.

<sup>32</sup>*Ibid.*, 108.

<sup>33</sup>*Calvin’s Commentaries*, 3:259.

<sup>34</sup>Dibelius, *James*, 154.

<sup>35</sup>*Calvin’s Commentaries*, 3:261, 282.

<sup>36</sup>*Ibid.*, 275.

<sup>37</sup>*Ibid.*, 307. This is from Calvin’s comment on James 5:5.

<sup>38</sup>*Ibid.*, 279. Calvin assigned the relief of the poor to the deacons. See Robert M. Kingdon, “The Deacons of the Reformed Church in Calvin’s Geneva,” in *Mélanges d’histoire du XVIe siècle offerts à Henri Meylan* (Geneva: Droz, 1970) 81-90.

<sup>39</sup>See Heiko A. Oberman, *The Harvest of Medieval Theology* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1962), *passim*, but esp. 468-469.

<sup>40</sup>*Calvin’s Commentaries*, 3:283. Cf. also Zwingli’s interpretation: “Iacobus ergo quum fidem iustificare negat, non de vera illa, viva, et efficaci

perque caritatem operante fide intelligit, cui in scripturis instificatio et salus tribuitur, sed eam (quam iactant quidam) quae non fides (tametsi eam ita appellent) est, sed potius opinio, taxat et reprobatur, quam et idcirco mortuam fidem appellat, quod caritate (quae vera vita est) careat.” *Zuinglii Opera*, VI/2:271.

<sup>41</sup>*Calvin’s Commentaries*, 3:284.

<sup>42</sup>*Ibid.*, 285.

<sup>43</sup>*Ibid.*, 287.

<sup>44</sup>*Canons and Decrees of Trent*, 34, 42.

<sup>45</sup>On James 5:12, see Peter Rideman, *Confession of Faith* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1950) 117-180, 200, 204; on James 1:5, Melchior Hofmann, “The Ordinance of God,” in *Spiritual and Anabaptist Writers*, ed. G. H. Williams and Angel Mergal (London: SCM Press, 1957) 203. James 5:12 is also cited in article seven of the Schleithem Confession: *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 19 (1945) 243-253. To my knowledge, no Anabaptist of the sixteenth century produced a commentary on James. However, Francis Stancaro, a leader of the “evangelical rationalists” in Poland, published a commentary on James at Basel in the 1540s. See G. H. Williams, *The Radical Reformation* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1962) 721.

<sup>46</sup>Hofmann, *Spiritual and Anabaptist Writers*, 201.

<sup>47</sup>*The Complete Writings of Menno Simons*, ed. John C. Wenger (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1956) 333.

<sup>48</sup>*Ibid.*, 334.

<sup>49</sup>Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1956) IV/1:765.