

“JUSTIFIED BY FAITH” . . . “JUSTIFIED BY WORKS”; ABRAHAM’S JUSTIFICATION, AS VIEWED BY PAUL AND BY JAMES

JOHN A. BATTLE

A new debate, and an old debate

There is a new debate in Reformed churches: What does it mean to be justified? And how is it accomplished? From the time of Luther and Calvin until about twenty or thirty years ago Reformed people agreed on the answers: To be justified is to be declared righteous by God, to have our sins forgiven. We obtain this justification through faith (belief) alone. Once a person is justified he never can lose that justification. Reformed churches taught that good works are the natural result of faith and the evidence of justification, but that they do not contribute in any way to our justification.

But now new voices have arisen in Reformed circles. While we achieve justification by faith alone, it is faith defined as faithfulness to God’s covenant requirements. Thus it is possible to fall out of justification. Paul’s statements that we are justified apart from the law are interpreted to be referring not to the whole law of God, but rather to the specifically Jewish laws of Moses. In this view we must maintain our justification by being faithful to the continuing law of God, to Christ and the fellowship of his church. The concept of “faith” is expanded to include these good works, and often is defined as “covenant faithfulness.”

These new voices are described and describe themselves with various terms, as the New Perspective on Paul, the Auburn Avenue Theology, or the Federal Vision. Prominent early popularizers of this movement were Norman Shepherd, former professor of theology at Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia and now a minister in the Christian Reformed Church; and N. T. Wright, formerly lecturer of New Testament at Worcester College, Oxford, and now bishop of Durham in the Church of England. Two scholars providing material to support this view have been E. P. Sanders of Duke University in North Carolina (he also taught at Trinity College, Dublin, and at Cambridge University), and James D. G. Dunn of the University of Durham. Currently many popularizers and spokesmen have arisen in conservative Reformed circles in America.¹ Of course, these many spokesmen do not agree among themselves on all points, but a general position is clear.

¹ Many of these men met for a colloquium at Knox Theological Seminary in Florida in August 2003: John Barach, Peter J. Leithart, Rich Lusk, Steve M. Schlissel, Tom Trouwborst, Steve Wilkins, and Douglas Wilson. They met for discussions with seven men who hold the traditional Protestant view under the leadership of E. Calvin Beisner. Papers of the colloquium are published in E. Calvin Beisner, ed., *The Auburn Avenue Theology, Pros & Cons: Debating the Federal Vision* (Fort Lauderdale, Florida: Knox Theological Seminary, 2004). See my review of this book in this issue of the *WRS Journal*.

As we would expect, many Reformed believers strongly criticize and oppose this new understanding of faith and justification. Therefore, a new debate is raging in conservative Reformed churches.

However new this debate may be among Reformed people, similar debates are not new in the church at large. Protestants and Roman Catholics have warred over the concept of justification by faith for centuries. Martin Luther discovered that he could never be justified by his good works, but only by faith. He found joy in Paul's declaration, "For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: 'The righteous will live by faith'" (Rom 1:17). He knew his good works never could earn acceptance with God: "However, to the man who does not work but trusts God who justifies the wicked, his faith is credited as righteousness" (Rom 4:5). He applied to himself what Paul told Peter: "We know that a man is not justified by observing the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ. So we, too, have put our faith in Christ Jesus that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by observing the law, because by observing the law no one will be justified" (Gal 2:16).

Protestant theologians since Luther's time have defended this view of faith and justification. John Calvin and Jonathan Edwards immediately come to mind. As well, the Protestant creeds uniformly affirmed this belief.

On the other hand, the Roman Catholic Church condemned the Protestant view of faith and justification in the strongest terms. In the Sixth Session of the Council of Trent, held in the sixteenth century, the church made the following declarations:

If anyone says that the sinner is justified by faith alone meaning that nothing else is required to cooperate in order to obtain the grace of justification, and that it is not in any way necessary that he be prepared and disposed by the action of his own will, let him be anathema. (Canon 9)

If anyone says that men are justified either by the sole imputation of the justice of Christ or by the sole remission of sins, to the exclusion of the grace and the charity which is poured forth in their hearts by the Holy Ghost, and remains in them, or also that the grace by which we are justified is only the good will of God, let him be anathema. (Canon 11)

These anathemas were directed against the Protestant teaching that we are justified by God through faith alone, solely on the merit of the righteousness and atonement of Christ. The Roman Catholic Church today still looks to Trent's formulations when it defines what it means by faith and justification.²

So the debate continues. It is a new debate, and it is an old debate.

² See the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Libreria Editrice Vaticana, Liguori Publications, 1994), Nos. 1987-2029.

Paul, James, and Abraham

Three central Bible passages in this debate are found in Romans 4, Galatians 3, and James 2.³ In Romans and Galatians Paul teaches that justification can come only through faith, exclusive of good works. He uses Abraham as an example to prove his point:

If, in fact, Abraham was justified by works, he had something to boast about—but not before God. What does the Scripture say? “Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.” (Rom 4:2-3, quoting Gen 15:6)

Consider Abraham: “He believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.” Understand, then, that those who believe are children of Abraham. The Scripture foresaw that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, and announced the gospel in advance to Abraham: “All nations will be blessed through you.” So those who have faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith. All who rely on observing the law are under a curse, for it is written: “Cursed is everyone who does not continue to do everything written in the Book of the Law.” Clearly no one is justified before God by the law, because, “The righteous will live by faith.” He redeemed us in order that the blessing given to Abraham might come to the Gentiles through Christ Jesus, so that by faith we might receive the promise of the Spirit. (Gal 3:6-11, 14, quoting Gen 15:6; 12:3; Deut 21:23; Hab 2:4)

So Paul insists that Abraham was justified by God apart from legal obedience. Rather, he was justified when he believed God’s promise to him, a promise that Paul calls “the gospel in advance” (Gal 3:8). In both these passages Paul confirms his point by quoting the same statement from Genesis: “Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness” (Gen 15:6).

So far the passages quoted favor the traditional Protestant understanding that, to be justified, we need only faith, belief in the gospel truths. However, Roman Catholic polemicists, along with the new movement in Reformed churches, are quick to cite James, who seems to contradict what Paul says, teaching that works are required as well:

What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save him? . . . You foolish man, do you want evidence that faith without deeds is useless? Was not our ancestor Abraham considered righteous for what he did when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? You see that his faith and his actions were working together, and his faith was made complete by what he did. And the scripture was fulfilled that says, “Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness,” and he was called God’s friend. You see that a person is justified by what he does and not by faith alone. (Jas 2:14, 20-24, quoting Gen 15:6 again)

In the Greek text of verse 14 the contrast may be even stronger. Most modern Protestant translations have supplied an adjective before the word “faith” that describes the faith as one

³ In particular, Rom 4:1-3, 9-25; Gal 3:6-9; Jas 2:14-24. Heb 11:8-19 is relevant to James 2.

without works, one that is expressed in words only.⁴ The Greek simply says, “Is *the faith* able to save him?”⁵ The wording shows that James is expecting a negative answer: “No, the faith is not able to save him.”⁶ The expression “the faith” could possibly be translated simply as “faith” in the abstract sense, or as the faith just described in that particular context, “the faith that has no works.” It is this second understanding that the English translators have sought to convey by the use of such adjectives as “that,” “his,” or “such.”

Both Paul and James take Abraham as an example. But they seem to take opposite sides. Paul says Abraham was “justified by faith,”⁷ whereas James says Abraham was “justified by works.”⁸ In fact, James concludes his discussion of Abraham by saying, “You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone.” (Jas 2:24)

We should not be surprised that Martin Luther, in the midst of his struggle with the prevailing Catholic theology, much preferred Romans and Galatians to the book of James. In his typically unguarded manner he once said of James that he would just as soon “cast it into the Tiber.” He believed that it contradicted Paul’s teaching and had virtually no “teaching of Christ” in it. The most detailed of his statements are found in his German translation of the Bible, in his preface to James (1522) and the preface to the New Testament (1524). Here he called James “a right strawy epistle compared to them [John’s Gospel, Paul’s epistles, especially Romans, and 1 Peter].” He stated that he “admired” the epistle, since it “lays down no teaching of man, and presses home the law of God,” but he denied its being “apostolic,” since it contradicts Paul “in giving righteousness to works” and does not “notice the Passion, the Resurrection, and the spirit of Christ.”⁹ When Luther republished his translation in 1545, he deleted these negative remarks about James.

Unlike Luther, Calvin and later Reformed writers had no problem accepting James as authoritative, and did not see a contradiction between James and Paul. For example, Calvin in the “Argument” to his commentary on James makes this clear:

⁴ Some English versions have the bare question, “Can *faith* save him?” (KJV, NKJV, Douay-Rheims-American Version, NRSV). Most others use the expression “that faith”: “Can *that faith* save him?” (ASV, NASB, ESV, New Jerusalem Bible). Others have equivalent expressions, “*his faith*” (RSV), “*such faith*” (NIV), or “*that kind of faith*” (NLT). Two interesting things to note are, first, that the two Catholic Bibles cited differ between themselves: “Shall *faith* be able to save him?” (DRA), and “Will *that faith* bring salvation?” (NJB); second, that the Revised Standard Version committee, sponsored by the National Council of Churches, has changed its wording from “Can *his faith* save him?” (RSV) to “Can *faith* save you?” (NRSV; note also the introduction of gender-neutral language). See the good discussion supporting the anaphoric use of the article (referring to the previous reference) in this passage by Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996) 219; Wallace would favor the translation “that/such faith.”

⁵ μὴ δύναται ἡ πίστις σῶσαι αὐτόν;

⁶ The negative particle μή, “not,” plus the indicative mood of the verb “is able.” If James had expected a positive answer, he would have used the negative particle οὐ.

⁷ Rom 3:28; cf. 4:1-3, 9, 13.

⁸ Jas 2:21, 24.

⁹ See the balanced discussion in Excursus II in Revere F. Weidner’s commentary on James in *The Lutheran Commentary* (New York: The Christian Literature Co., 1897), 88-91. Weidner points out that Luther’s real position is shown by (1) his testimony at Worms, (2) his translation itself, and (3) his many positive writings about various passages in James.

It appears from the writings of Jerome and Eusebius, that this epistle was not formerly received by many churches without opposition. 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. Though he seems more sparing in proclaiming the grace of Christ than it behooved an apostle to be, it is not surely required of all to handle the same arguments.¹⁰

In the text of his commentary Calvin took the common Protestant position that James is speaking of works as the evidence or the demonstration of faith.¹¹ He understood “a man is justified by works” in James 2:24 as employing a different meaning for the word “justified” than that used by Paul:

That we may not then fall into that false reasoning which has deceived the Sophists, we must take notice of the two-fold 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 men, as we may gather from the preceding words, “Show to me your faith.”¹²

Calvin saw the text of James as speaking of a sort of secondary justification, a justification before men. Thereby he subordinated James to Paul in terms of our justification before God, and solved the apparent contradiction. Is this the proper approach? A closer look at James is called for.

James' view of faith and works

The passage before us (Jas 2:14-26) deals with faith and good works. James emphasizes the importance of good works, as a necessary accompaniment to faith.

The principle stated

James begins by describing a faith that someone says he has, but that has no works with it. Such a faith, James says, is dead—it has no life, no value.

What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save him? Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to him, “Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed,” but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead. (Jas 2:14-17)

¹⁰ Quoted from John Owen's translation in *Calvin's Commentaries*, Calvin Translation Society edition (reprinted; Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1981), 22:276.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 312, 314.

¹² *Ibid.*, 315.

The following verse is more difficult to interpret. But I believe it simply confirms and makes definite the statement James has just made.

But someone will say, “You have faith; I have deeds.” Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by what I do. (Jas 2:18)¹³

Notice that James is quoting some unidentified speaker. There are a couple of variables in this verse. The first variable is the translation of the first word, *alla*, usually translated “but.”¹⁴ In most places in the New Testament this word is a strong adversative, showing a strong contrast. For this reason many understand the speaker to be an objector, someone who disagrees with James. A major problem with this interpretation is that the speaker seems to sympathize with James. For this reason some have taken a different sense for *alla*, one also allowed by Greek usage, though rarely. *Alla* may also mean a strengthening of the preceding clause—“(not only this), but rather,” or “indeed.”¹⁵ In this case Jas 2:18 would be understood as follows:

Someone could even put it this way, “You have faith; I have works. Show me your faith without works, and I will show you my faith by my works.”

The reason that James does not just say this himself is authorial modesty—he does not want to say he himself is doing good works, only that the Christian should be able to say that.

The second variable is the extent of the quotation. The Greek text does not include quotation marks; these must be supplied by the editor of the English translation. The older translations did not use quotation marks either, and thus avoided the difficulty of making a decision.¹⁶ Many modern translations, assuming that the speaker is some sort of objector and that, therefore, the second half of the verse must be part of James’ reply, stop the quotation after the first clause: “You have faith; I have works.”¹⁷ It seems best, however, to include the rest of the verse in the quotation of the unidentified speaker, since it completes the thought expressed in the first clause. The NASB translates the verse this way:

But someone may *well* say, “You have faith, and I have works; show me your faith without the works, and I will show you my faith by my works.”

This appears to be the best modern rendering of the verse, except that the first word could more clearly be translated “indeed.”

¹³ Quoting the NIV; I prefer a different translation of the first word, and disagree with the placement of these quotation marks in the NIV; see below.

¹⁴ ἄλλά. BDAG defines *alla* in this verse as introducing an objection, as “Well, someone will say,” but it notes an opposing view, p. 45.

¹⁵ BDAG allows this usage in 2 Cor 7:11 and perhaps in Eph 5:24. Several other examples of this usage are offered by H. E. Dana and Julius R. Mantey, *A Manual Grammar of the Greek New Testament* (Toronto: The Macmillan Company, 1927) 240-241. A good defense of its use in Jas 2:18 is given by J. B. Mayor, *The Epistle of St. James* (3rd ed., 1913; reprinted; Minneapolis: Klock & Klock Christian Publishers, 1977) 99-100.

¹⁶ KJV and ASV.

¹⁷ NKJV, NIV, ESV, NLT, RSV, NRSV. The NLT is distinct by suggesting that the objection is that either faith or works are acceptable: “Now someone may argue, ‘Some people have faith; others have good deeds.’”

Challenge to his reader

In the next two verses James confronts the reader, who may be a person who thinks he can have faith but does not need works to back it up.

You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that—and shudder. You foolish man, do you want evidence that faith without deeds is useless? (Jas 2:19-20)

To demonstrate his point James uses the demons as examples. They believe in God's existence, and that he is one God. They know that there are not many gods, as the pagans believed. Yet this is not saving faith. Unitarians, Jews, and Muslims also believe there is one God. The demons as spirit beings observe God and are accountable to him, even though they rebel against him. They also tremble, knowing God's power and ability to judge them. They even know that Jesus is God's Son, and that he has authority over them, and they recognized his apostles.¹⁸ However, they do not have saving faith. They do not believe all that God has spoken; they hope for a different outcome from the one he has declared. Their stubborn continuance in sin shows that they do not really believe God. Their "faith" is not genuine, and therefore they do not do good works. In the same way, people that claim to have faith but have no good works show that their faith is dead, "useless."¹⁹

James calls a person who does not appreciate what he is saying "foolish, senseless."²⁰ As if the example of the demons was not enough evidence, James contrasts their empty faith with that of two saints from the Old Testament, Rahab, and especially Abraham.

Abraham's genuine faith

In contrast to the demons, Abraham shows what genuine faith looks like. He believed what God promised, and as a result his works were different—he obeyed God.

Was not our ancestor Abraham considered righteous for what he did when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? You see that his faith and his actions were working together, and his faith was made complete by what he did. And the scripture was fulfilled that says, "Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness," and he was called God's friend. You see that a person is justified by what he does and not by faith alone. (Jas 2:21-24)

James looks back to Genesis 22, a time when Abraham was over a hundred years old. Abraham had already believed in the Lord, and already had several experiences in his life when the Bible declares that he was "justified."²¹

¹⁸ Matt 8:29; Luke 4:34; 8:31; Acts 16:17.

¹⁹ The UBS⁴ editors give a {B} rating to ἀργή ("useless") over νεκρά ("dead," in the Byzantine text). The original reading "useless" probably was changed to "dead" because of the use of "dead" in verse 26. A few manuscripts have κενή ("vain"), probably looking to the use of that term just seven words earlier.

²⁰ κενός, "empty"; when speaking of persons, "foolish, senseless."

Now he faced his greatest test: God commanded him to offer his beloved son Isaac as a burnt sacrifice. Not only was Isaac beloved to him, but he was the son that God promised, the one that would continue his line. God had promised Abraham that Isaac would be the one through whom God would bless the nations.²² It is for this reason that Isaac is called Abraham's "only" son, even though Abraham had already fathered Ishmael and had several other sons.²³ Abraham believed God's promise concerning Isaac, that Isaac would himself bear children. Isaac had to live. Therefore, he believed that God would provide another sacrifice,²⁴ or, failing that, if he had to actually go through with this terrible deed and sacrifice his son, God would raise him up again to fulfill his promise.²⁵ Abraham's belief is consistent with his parting words to the servants at the base of the mountain: "I and the boy will go over there. We will worship and then we will come back to you."²⁶

Such was Abraham's faith. It was still true, as it had been earlier, that Abraham believed "the God who gives life to the dead"; "against all hope" he "in hope believed"; he did not "weaken in his faith"; he "did not waver through unbelief," but "was strengthened in his faith and gave glory to God, being fully persuaded that God had power to do what he had promised."²⁷

James asserts that, when Abraham thus obeyed God, he was "justified."²⁸ He certainly does not mean that Abraham had not been justified before, because he goes on to say, "The scripture was fulfilled that says, 'Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.'" James quotes Gen 15:6, which transpired much earlier in Abraham's life. James is not speaking of Abraham's initial justification, or to a renewed justification, or to a final justification. Rather, the "justification" James is talking about is a state or condition in which Abraham lived. Abraham's whole life in Genesis is a life of faith, a life that reveals a man who is justified, one who lives in what the Westminster Confession calls "the state of justification."²⁹

When James says "Abraham was justified by works" and "a person is justified by works," he is tying works very closely to faith. He says of Abraham that "his faith was working together with (or by means of) his works."³⁰ It is in this way that Gen 15:6 was fulfilled: Abraham's belief resulted in his justification. For James belief requires good works. There is no belief without good works. Good works are the living expression of true faith. Throughout the believer's life his faith is the key to justification; but, if it is fruitless, faith is dead and does not bring justification.

²¹ Acts 7:2-4 and Gal 3:6-8 and Heb 11:8 (when he was 75 years old); Gen 15:1 (when he was 85 years old); Rom 4:3, 18-22 (when he was 99 years old); and now Jas 2:21 (when he was over 100 years old).

²² Gen 17:19, 21; 21:12.

²³ Gen 22:2; 25:1-6. Heb 11:17-18 calls Isaac his "one and only" son (using the term *μονογενής*) because Isaac was the child promised by God.

²⁴ Gen 22:8; cf. vv. 13-14.

²⁵ Heb 11:19.

²⁶ Gen 22:5; the Hebrew uses the plural verb, "we will come back."

²⁷ Rom 4:17-21, speaking of an earlier time, when Abraham was 99 years old.

²⁸ Jas 2:21; as Paul had said in Rom 4:22.

²⁹ WCF 11:5.

³⁰ Jas 2:22, ἡ πίστις συνήργει τοῖς ἔργοις αὐτοῦ.

This passage agrees with Paul's teaching, that true faith cannot exist without bringing forth good works.³¹ It certainly is appropriate for us to conclude that James recognizes the foundational position of faith regarding justification, and that his expression of being "justified by works" is a shorthand way of saying "is justified by a living faith that expresses itself in works."³²

The particular instance of Abraham's "justification" was his special obedience to God; this is when his state of justification expressed itself so that it could be observed. This agrees with Calvin's observation, quoted above, that James is speaking of our justification as the "manifestation of righteousness," "and that before men."

Rahab's genuine faith

James concludes this portion of his book with a second illustration and his final summarizing statement:

In the same way, was not even Rahab the prostitute considered righteous for what she did when she gave lodging to the spies and sent them off in a different direction? As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead. (Jas 2:25-26)

When the Hebrew spies came to Rahab's house, she already believed in the God of Israel. But this faith was put to the test, was exercised, when she received and hid the spies, confessed her faith to them, risked her life to save them, and hung the scarlet cord from her window.³³ These were the ways her faith was expressed and how it could be observed. James states that her faith was justifying faith—it produced works.

James compares "faith without works" to a dead body. What does he mean by "faith without works"? He obviously means an empty profession. He is not talking about "mere mental assent." If there were true "mental assent," there would be real conviction and resulting action. The absence of works proves that there is no "mental assent" at all. Faith is belief. When we truly believe something, we act on it; otherwise our "belief" is not genuine. The only kind of "faith" that does not produce good works is a false faith, a mere profession without genuine belief. This is what James means by "a body without a spirit," or by "faith without works."

Throughout this passage James is concerned about people who claim to be Christian, but who actually are not.³⁴ They actually do not believe what they say they believe, and thus they have no works that would come from a genuine faith. And he wishes to warn the Christians, so

³¹ E.g., in Rom 6-7; Gal 5:6. Jesus also taught this, Matt 7:17-18; 12:33.

³² E. W. Bullinger classified this usage in Jas 2:21 as a verbal "metonymy of the subject"; "the action is put for the declaration concerning it," *Figures of Speech Used in the Bible* (1898; reprinted; Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1968) 572.

³³ Josh 2.

³⁴ Note the expressions "if someone says" (v. 14), "someone says" (v. 16), and "show me your faith" (v. 18).

that they will be careful to cultivate their Christian lives and not fall into this unfortunate category.³⁵

Conclusion: The relation of works to faith

What then is the proper relation of works to faith? It is clear from James that one view is false. If faith produces only words, but not works, then it is a false, dead faith. Faith is not mere profession of belief.

Clearly, works are essential for there to be true faith. There are several possibilities as to how these two concepts can be related. Some of these concepts are incorrect.

Works are not the essence of faith

It is clear that both Paul and James regard works and faith as separate entities, even though they are intimately tied together. Paul clearly contrasts faith and works. James obviously distinguishes false faith from works, but he also speaks about even true faith as “working together with his works.” He does not identify true faith as works. Faith is belief; works are actions. Faith stands behind works; they are not the same thing.

Works are not the extension of faith

Some may hold that faith is a very broad term, and includes works within it. In that case faith would be both belief and works based on that belief. It is this definition that enables some Roman Catholics, for instance, to say they are saved by faith alone, since they include their participating in the sacraments and their other religious duties as a part of their “faith.” It is apparent in the text that both Paul and James distinguish faith from works produced by faith.

Works are the exercise or the expression of faith

For both Paul and James faith expresses itself in works. Just as a thought is expressed in words, so our faith is expressed in works. Yes, there are words of profession, and they are important. But even more important is the exercise of faith, the living of the Christian life. Faith never occurs by itself, it is always accompanied by the “other saving graces.”³⁶ This universal pairing of faith and works is not merely a coincidence, but a necessary result of true faith.

³⁵ God uses warnings as well as encouragements as a means to keep his elect persevering in faith and sanctification. Cf. WCF 14:2, where we are to exercise faith by “yielding obedience to the commands, trembling at the threatenings, and embracing the promises” of the Word of God.

³⁶ WCF 11:2.

Therefore, works are also the evidence of faith

This is the main point in James. It's not just that they are an evidence of faith, and that faith can occur without this evidence. Rather, because faith "works together" with works, because faith exercises and expresses itself in works, works are the true evidence of faith. Words can be an empty profession. Also, hypocrites can produce the appearance of good works, at least for a time. But the true believer, the one with true faith, will have to produce good works, and will persevere in them. At this point Paul, James, and all the other biblical writers come together.