Salvation of the human soul through the death of Jesus Christ is the core belief to the religion of Christianity. Through that salvation, the death of the physical being may never affect the soul of a human, and she may gain admission to the Kingdom of Heaven. However, a crucial question remains. How is one to justify his salvation to attain entrance into heaven? According to Paul—one of Jesus’ most outspoken converts—“no one will be justified by the works of the law but by faith in Jesus Christ” (Gal 2:16). Simply stated, no matter what a sinner may, or in this case, may not do, he will always have salvation in Jesus Christ so long as he believes in Him (Blackwelder, 486). Conversely, any student of the Bible can say that there is another form of justification offered by James; “man is justified by works and not by faith alone.” (James 2:24). To him, in order for a soul to obtain entrance into heaven, he must not only have faith but do good deeds as well (Easton, 45).

Part of the Pauline theory is that the soul will be saved through Christ alone. While Paul discusses this belief thoroughly in Romans, the focus of this argument will be from Galatians, specifically Galatians 2. Galatians is believed to be the oldest epistle and thus Paul’s first discourse on the issue of faith and works (Popkes, 129). As discussed earlier, Paul makes his case clear in Galatians 2:16. In his argument, Paul contradicts the orthodox Jewish belief that the Law is the only way to Heaven (Betz, 116). Instead, he states that if we believe in Christ we become “justified by faith in Christ” and “if righteousness comes through the law, then Christ died for nothing” (Gal 2:16, 21). Paul wanted to direct his readers, through this letter, to the Spirit of Christ and away from the Law (Blackwelder, 439).

James 2:14-26 however, appears to be in direct contradiction to this Pauline theory. While James is not professing the works of the Jewish Law, he is adamant in his belief that works are needed in addition to faith to justify a person (Easton, 45). He claims that if faith, “doesn’t have works, [it] is dead by itself” (Jas 2:17). Essentially, James states that faith without works cannot save a sinner, even if he believes in Christ, because he has not demonstrated that faith to God by his works (Dibelius, 157).

The contradiction between these two epistles has caused much debate and worry in the Christian world, in addition to a lack of confidence in the Bible (Rakestraw, 32). The big question has become which disciple to believe? Is the
soul justified only by faith, or are good works necessary for salvation? Some Christians have decided there is no chance at resolution between these two epistles and that readers simply must choose one over the other (Rakestraw, 32). However, reconciliation between Paul and James is possible. Once one looks at the main purposes and audiences of their writings, much of the controversy disappears, and it may be argued that they appear to agree. Despite an apparent contradiction of theology, James and Paul simply had too many differences, primarily with their targeted audiences, in the writing of their letters for them to use the same definition of justification, works, and faith causing the epistles to appear ambiguous.

There are several reasons why discrepancies in Paul’s and James’ definitions of the three key words might exist. For one thing, both men were writing for very different audiences. Paul’s audience was a group of converts in a rather rural setting (Blackwelder, 438). While James’s letter went to an impoverished and downtrodden group of Jewish-Christians in fairly destitute areas of the new Christian sphere (Dibelius, 43). As a result, the messages of these letters are very different due to the different needs of these people. This causes the definitions of the words “faith,” “justify” and “works” all to have dissimilar meanings in order to convey the particular message of each letter (Maxwell, 375).

Paul sees himself as being commissioned to spread the gospel and its true meaning to the Gentiles, one group of which was the Galatians—the newly converted people of Galatia (Dunn, 5-6). This region, as stated earlier, was rather rural and many of the converts did not speak Greek. Pockets of paganism and Judaism existed and many of the new Christians tried to work some of their old beliefs into the new faith (Blackwelder, 438). Many conservative preachers also came to the region and told the people they must adopt the Jewish Law in order to be justified in Christianity (Blackwelder, 430). The new and now confused converts began to practice the old Jewish Laws in order to obtain their salvation. In light of the Judaizers corrupting his converts, Paul’s goal was to return the Galatians back to Faith and away from the Law that was infiltrating his teachings (Blackwelder, 430). Paul’s chief “concern was the sinner’s basis for justification with God…he [is] writing of a declaration of righteousness” (Jenkins, 64).

In James, a man believed to be James the so called brother of Jesus, writes to Jewish Christians in some Greek speaking provinces of Rome (Dibelius, 12). James addresses his letter to “the twelve tribes in the Dispersion” (Jas 1:1). This means his letter is to all Jewish-Christians, those living in Palestine and out, in addition to all of the partial converts (Easton, 12). These people were not great mystics or great Christians in any sense of the word, which explains why they are described as being “poor” (Easton, 12). There-
fore, James is “unconcerned with the deeper spiritual problems of the relations between God and man, but wholly concerned with everyday conduct” (Easton, 40). James simply strives to give them something to fill their daily lives, not to confuse them with deep theological studies (Easton, 40). Simple good acts are easy to do, while deep faith is difficult to understand. In addition, to James, the mere profession of faith from the spiritually poor does not carry out the Christian ideal of faith, but that works are necessary not just for justification, but also to improve the plight of others in the destitute places he sent this letter. James’ goal in his letter is to inspire the richer individuals to help out the “poor” and less fortunate people as well as prevent secularization of the church with a simple and understandable definition of faith (Dibelius, 46).

In light of these two explanations, it is easy to see why there would be discrepancies between the definitions of the three key words of these epistles, justification, faith, and works. The audiences of both men were distinctly different groups and would read the meanings of each letter in opposite ways. One such group, which James addressed, had been steeped in the Jewish tradition for a long period of time and was familiar with its rules, while the other group, which Paul addressed, had been steeped in good works and simply was in danger of losing its faith in Christ (Betz, 309). The purpose of each letter was to prevent the addressees from the extreme behavior they had adopted, polar opposites from the other. James is fighting against a false faith that “disconnects it from works” and Paul, who is fighting old Jewish Law infiltrating his teachings (Popkes, 134). These different purposes and audiences caused the definitions of the three key words to be unlike in each epistle.

Today, justification is defined as “to prove to be just, right or reasonable” or “to show reason for an act to be done” (Webster.com). Paul and James do not use this definition however. They each create their own. Interestingly enough, both men use Father Abraham as the crux of their arguments over justification. In Jewish tradition, Abraham was justified only by works of righteousness—his willingness to sacrifice Isaac on the alter to please God for instance (Easton, 42). However Paul and James, both former Jews, view this act differently from, no doubt, their early beliefs. Paul states that because Abraham had faith “those who have faith are blessed like Abraham…” (Gal 3:6). In other words, “his faith was the basis of his obedience” (Blackwelder, 502). James on the other hand, saw that Abraham’s justification came from both his faith and his works (Easton, 42). Abraham’s “faith was active together with his works, and by works, faith was perfected” (Jas 2:22). Abraham had faith enough in God to potentially sacrifice his son and then he went to perform the action to prove he had faith.

By drawing on the story of Abraham, Paul and James prove that they are using different definitions of justification because they use different points in
Abraham’s story (Maxwell, 376). To Paul, Abraham is justified when he first believes God, but James states that Abraham is justified when he performs the action of placing Isaac on the altar. According to James, one gets rewarded for his works at the end of life by being declared righteous as Abraham was, that is the definition of justification (Popkes, 135). However, to Paul, the meaning of justification is God accepting the soul and allowing it to repent and continue on its spiritual journey (Easton, 41). Paul uses “justification” to mean “to impute righteousness” while James uses it to mean “show to be righteous” (Maxwell, 376).

In addition to justification, Paul and James use different definitions of the word “faith.” Faith to most Christians today is an unyielding trust in of our Lord God. However, James speaks of a faith that “the demons also believe” and Paul speaks of a faith that is “led by the Spirit (Jas 2:19; Gal 5:18). The faith of demons and the faith of true believers cannot possibly be the same kind of faith. The faith of Pauline theory is a faith of devotion, while that of demons is an effortless faith of the certainty of God’s existence. Faith to Paul is surrendering of oneself entirely to God; no simple demon-like intellectual belief will suffice in this kind of faith (Easton, 41).

This is proven by Paul’s use of a singular faith in his discussion (Rakeshaw, 36). Paul states that “faith alone” and “faith by itself” demonstrate the mental agreement with God (Gal 2:17,24). However, James uses “you believe that” in place of the word “faith” proves his definition of faith is an intellectual belief (Rakeshaw, 36). With these two differences taken into account, it would make logical sense to see why James would cite a need for works and Paul would not. To Paul, good works are implied in a living faith because of how Jesus Christ taught Christians to live, but James’s definition requires active involvement to make his faith synonymous to a living faith (Jenkins, 66).

The last key word used by these two men is “works”. Again, they used this word in two different ways. Paul is dealing with the works of the Jewish Law or The Law, and James is arguing for Christian works as a whole (Jenkins, 63). James exhorts Christians to “look after orphans and widows in their distress” (Jas 1:27). He does not tell his followers to avoid unclean food or to perform castrations or to follow any other Jewish Law. Paul, on the other hand, repriamds Peter for refusing to eat with Gentiles—an old Jewish tradition— not for performing works of good faith (Gal 2:14). It is important to note that the “law” is disconnected from “works” to James (Popkes, 130). James’ definition of works is are “deeds of righteousness” and are “the spontaneous fruit or expression of the royal law of love” (Rakestraw, 37). Paul’s definition of works are the keeping of the Mosaic commandments completed in a legalistic spirit as to obtain favor with God (Rakestraw, 37).
Reconciliation between Paul and James

Even when the definitions of these words are misconstrued, it is still quite possible to believe and argue that James and Paul are writing the same message and hold similar beliefs. As noted in Galatians 6:2, Paul states that Christians are to “carry one another’s burdens” and in Galatians 6:9 he says that Christians “must never get tired of doing good.” Paul is telling his followers to do good things, agreeing to the same tenants as James. Betz even argues that in Galatians 6:9, Paul is telling Christians to follow the Law, but through the believer’s faith, not because it’s in the Torah (310). The only thing Paul is denying is that the works bring justification (Betz, 117).

In the book of James, the author does not deny that faith is important as well. James 2:24, the verse containing the example of Abraham’s justification, the “writer naturally does not think of justification by works alone” (Easton, 45). In addition James simply states that faith is perfected by works (Jas 2:22). Therefore, faith must already be present before a person’s works will mean anything. As stated previously, James’ definition is such that works are needed to make it the living faith of which Paul speaks. Faith is still of vital importance when it comes to the justification of the soul before God. In addition, it can be argued that James is not contradicting Pauline theory. He is simply arguing against the distortion of the Pauline theory that many had come to believe (Easton, 41). Some held that the dead faith that James speaks of is the same of which Paul speaks. Paul himself declares this idea blasphemous in Romans 6:1-12 asking, “How can we who died in sin still live in it?” (Easton, 41).

From the definitions above it is easy to see that Paul's and James’ beliefs were not as different as one might initially suppose. The Jewish Christian readers of James and the Gentiles that read Paul were at two separate points in their spiritual journey. Paul’s readers are new to Christianity and confused by its tenets, and James’ readers have lost sight of a true faith. Paul is confronting “self-righteous legalism and James self-righteous indifference” (Rakestraw, 34). As a result, their letters required different definitions of the key words “faith,” “justification,” and “works.” Faith to Paul is an all consuming belief in Jesus and the need to do good for Him. Justification to James is showing God that a sinner is, or can be, righteous through his good works. In addition the works of James are not the works of the Law, which is what Paul is trying to tell his readers to avoid. Finally, in spite of all of these differences, Paul still expects his followers to do good deeds and James wants his to have faith. Both men tried, and succeeded in spreading the gospel to humanity and now their teachings, no matter how contradictory they may seem, are preserved forever in our Bibles.
Bibliography


