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The Epistle of James is one of those books in the Bible that almost didn't make it at all. It certainly didn't appeal to some of the Bishops who were making the original lists of Holy Books for what we now call the New Testament. Some lists did include his Epistle, but Tertullian, one of the early Christian Church authorities, also left out James altogether in his list and even if the Bishop Eusebius, writing about the time of the Emperor Constantine, did at least include the Epistle of James, he calls it one of the disputed books. While it is true that the later Church Councils reinstated James as part of what we now call the New Testament, there was a lot of heated discussion on the subject.

In c. 405, Pope Innocent I sent a list of the sacred books to a Gallic bishop, Exsuperius of Toulouse. Christian scholars assert that, when these bishops and councils spoke on the matter, however, they were not defining something new but instead "were ratifying what had already become the mind of the Church."

Thus, some claim that, from the 4th century, there existed agreement in the West concerning the New Testament canon, and that, by the 5th century, the Eastern Church, with a few exceptions, had come to accept the Book of Revelation and thus had come into harmony on the matter of the canon. Nonetheless, full dogmatic articulations of the canon were not made until the Council of Trent in 1546 for Roman Catholicism, the Gallic Confession of Faith in 1559 for Calvinism, the Thirty-Nine Articles in 1563 for the Church of England, and the Synod of Jerusalem in 1672 for the Greek Orthodox.

The most famous of James' critics was Martin Luther. The teachings of James clearly upset Luther who called the Epistle of James the "Gospel of Straw". Luther's objection to the Epistle was that as far as he was concerned it seemed to contradict what Paul was saying about justification or salvation by faith, and what is more to Luther, it didn't seem particularly evangelical.

The popular assumption that the author of the letter, James, was one of the original 12 disciples is generally contested by many scholars. James the Son of Zebedee was martyred in 44 AD which is too earlier a date from other evidence and James the Son of Alphaeus, the other likely apostle, was virtually unknown in all but one other mention in the Bible. There is some better if ambiguous evidence for the suggestion that it was in fact James the brother of Jesus (or half-brother) who wrote the letter. Some biblical scholars point out that the Greek is too high a standard to be that of James the brother of Jesus, but regardless of the authorship, it is the teaching of James which sets it aside from the other books of the New Testament.

In his writing James appears to have absolutely no interest in the parts of the faith that require great learning. It would be hard for example, to imagine James taking part in discussions about intellectual theology. The theologians who criticise James appear to think he is saying “by your good deeds you can get to heaven”. James’ theology is only theology at the most basic level but just because it is simple it doesn’t mean it should be set aside. If Jesus could summarise the entire law with the two commandments focused on love – and if Paul could rank the expression of love as the greatest of the three things that last forever, is James doing anything different by grounding the expression of this love in suggested action?

If we were to go back a little in history we would probably soon see why James was focused on widows and orphans. In an age where, since only the man of the household might be expected to get meaningful employment, it was indeed an extreme misfortune to suddenly find a family without a breadwinner.

In Deuteronomy for example there is a rule which insists the picking over of what is left after the harvest of grapes, of olives and of sheaves of wheat should be set aside for widows and orphans. (Deuteronomy 24: 17-22). God is also described in one of the Psalms as one who cares about orphans using the term “Father of the fatherless” (Psalm 68, verse 5) and Jesus himself uses much the same metaphor when he assures his listeners: “I shall not leave you fatherless” (John 14.18). We are reminded as well about Ruth gleaning in the fields.

The modern equivalent of what James was responding to is seen in what happens where a large-scale disaster strikes in an area where there are few social protection measures in place.

I suspect if James were writing today he might still be talking of orphans and yet as you read on into James he was concerned for a number of other practical situations. If we extend his principle of caring for those in trouble, to caring for those now currently in trouble, I would imagine that James would be making some very direct and indignant statements about the growing gap between the rich and the poor that we find in operation in virtually every developed nation today. He would be speaking out against the growing dependence on Foodbanks and the way in which our care of the poor in our society is at worst, bad, or even appalling and shameful

James does not spell out precisely how we should be caring for the widows in their distress – or for that matter how we might care for any others, like new immigrants or those who are unskilled or unemployed. It is true that it is sometimes embarrassing to insist that we are called to address serious problems

when their real solution might well mean first acknowledging that the problems only got that way in the first place as a result of our national complacency.

James is right to remind us to attend to the tasks our faith claims to be important. Our only question can be about which tasks actually matter. As society has changed and developed, problems grow in unexpected areas and if we care for our neighbours we need to constantly rethink how our priorities need to be adjusted.

If the occasionally unpopular James is right, we can understand some in the Church feeling a bit uncomfortable. It is one thing to see ourselves as Christian and to ask our leaders to help build our understanding of Church history and theology. It is quite another to see ourselves as James would have us see ourselves as being required to be practitioners of compassion. To follow James: pure and undefiled religion is visiting the widows (for today he would be looking at doing something for any of a host of our neighbours who are getting a raw deal).

The challenge James lays down is a simple choice. Shall we join the critics in claiming the inclusion of his letter in the Bible was a mistake, or will we accept his simple message and act accordingly?

Amen.