

James & the Spirit of the Law

AT THE TIME OF THE REFORMATION, Martin Luther was so taken by his interpretation of what he called *salvation by grace*, which he pulled from Paul's letters, that he looked upon the Letter of James as "an epistle full of straw." Luther believed that James stood in direct opposition to the superiority of grace over deeds as a means of salvation.

However, in this matter Luther may have been creating a controversy that is not present. The Letter of James indeed contradicts the point Paul

makes that Abraham was declared righteous by his faith, and not his works. But the point in the larger context is that anything that calls itself faith but which does not exhibit fruit is no faith at all, but an empty declaration.

Or, as James puts it, "For, my dear short-sighted man, can't you see far enough to realize that faith without the right actions is dead and useless?" (James 2:20, Phillips).

Indeed, this letter, though relying heavily on a tradition of Hebrew Wisdom literature, does not insist on strict observance of Jewish practices, although if the author is indeed James, he and the members of his community likely kept the Torah in a strict fashion. What James does call for is impartiality in matters of wealth and poverty, justice, mutual aid, and obedience to the spirit of the Law. So the letter says at one point, "Don't I beg you, only hear the message, but put it into practice; otherwise you are merely deluding yourselves" (James 1:22, Phillips). And what could be more true to the message of love filled than this statement? "Religion that is pure and genuine in the sight of God the Father will show itself by such things as visiting orphans and widows in their distress and keeping oneself uncontaminated by the world" (James 1:27, Phillips).

—Frank Ramirez



BUDGET CRUNCHING

Examine that part of your congregational budget that relates to mission beyond your community.

How do you evaluate the use of your money by agencies? What percentage do they use for fundraising? Staffing? What percentage is used in direct services? How does the agency treat clients? Are you satisfied with the giving practices of your church?

Enough

DURING MY THREE YEARS of service in Kinshasa, Zaire, I witnessed the absolute poverty and suffering of many close friends. While I tried to respond, I often found myself saying, "It's never enough."

With my volunteer salary of \$50 a month, I was often utterly overwhelmed. The few dollars or bag of rice I could give felt like a drop in the bucket. Even if I helped a few, the needs were endless. "It's never enough."

I began to question why God would bring me here to witness this overwhelming suffering without giving me the resources I needed to respond.

How do you balance your limited means with the great needs of the world?

Eventually I came to understand how Zairians were surviving. They called it African Solidarity. When you have a little bit, you share. When you're in need, you ask friends and family for help. Everyone gives as they are able, because no one is sure when they will need to ask.

A wonderful sense of community is built when every person contributes as they are able. Now it seems egotistical to think I could or should take on the burdens of the world. I know God brought me here with limited means to participate and suffer with others, as one of many in God's family. I give as I can, and help those in need think how they can share in their turn.

If we act together in solidarity with others, there can be enough.

—Krista-Anne Rigalo

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