Toward a Theology of the Words, not just the Works, in the Epistle of James

Young Sam Chae
(Baekseok University/Graduate School, Seoul, Korea)

James reveals his great concerns about the ‘word’ (λόγος), not just about the works, in his epistle.¹ For him, the prime characteristic of the perfect man (τέλειος ἀνθρώπος) is one’s ability to control his tongue or words (3:1; cf. 1:2-4). James even presents the fall (Gen. 3) from the vantage point of the failure to control the tongue or words. The uncontrolled tongue consumes the entire fallen cosmos with the fire of hell (3:1-12). Likewise, the faith ‘with only words’ is the kind of faith which fails to benefit the one who has it and even endangers his salvation (2:14-26). James also raises a harsh voice against the church members’ judging, slandering one another (2:1-4) with boasting words full of bitter envy and rivalry (3:14; 4:11-12, 13-16). Closing his letter in ch.5, James once again warns against ‘judging one another’ (5:9) and even against ‘making an oath’ (5:12). Further, James teaches the readers to use the right ‘words’ by confessing their sins and praying for one another (5:13-18).

On the other hand, James’ distinctive emphasis on how to use the words

¹) This paper was presented at the Pastoral and Catholic Epistles session in 2012 Society of Biblical Literature International Meeting, 7/23, Amsterdam, Netherlands.
does correspond to his presentation of the Gospel as well. It is particularly ‘the word of God’ that characterizes the birth and the essence of the Christians. The Father God willed to give birth to them through ‘the word of truth’ (λόγος ἀληθείας, 1:18). Therefore this born-again people of God have ‘the implanted word’ (τὸν ἐμφυτὸν λόγον, 1:21) in their hearts. If the verses 18-21 rightly indicate the rebirth of the believers (cf. 1 Pet 1:23; Isa 40:7-8; Jer 31:33), it is quite intriguing why James depicts the conversion in terms of the word of God, not of, for example, the Holy Spirit.

It is well known that the epistle of James is soaked in the teachings of Jesus. Martin Dibelius suggests that James represents a separate tradition distinctive from that established and guided by the Apostle Paul whose theology is deeply affected by the revelations from the risen Lord whom he met on the way to Damascus. Yet recently, a growing number of scholars


4) Dibelius, James, 117-19.