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On Campaign Trail, Democrats Put Their Faith in Book of James

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By Benedicta Cipolla
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When Sen. [Barack Obama](#) talks about faith, he sometimes invokes the New Testament Book of James and its admonition that "faith without works is dead."

As she competed for the Democratic nomination, [Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton](#) of New York frequently did the same, often more regularly than Obama (D-Ill.), though what she called her "personal theology" sometimes took a different tack, saying that "works without faith is too hard."

[Sen. John F. Kerry \(D-Mass.\)](#) also called upon James in the 2004 election, saying, "There's a great passage in the Bible that says, 'What does it mean, my brother, to say you have faith if there are no deeds?' " Even back in 2000, in trying to characterize [George W. Bush's](#) outreach to African Americans as shallow, [Al Gore](#) invoked James in a speech to the [NAACP](#): "Show me thy faith without thy works, and I will show thee my faith by my works."

The repeated references to James highlight an often overlooked and sometimes criticized book of the Bible. For centuries, its supposed conflict with St. Paul and the Protestant doctrine of justification by faith alone relegated it to the sidelines of biblical scholarship.

Yet the book is finding new life in American politics, with James emerging as the Democrats' go-to theologian, and his epistle as their favorite passage of Scripture.

" 'Faith without works is dead' translates politically into 'rhetoric without action is dead,' " said Kevin Coe, co-author of "The God Strategy: How Religion Became a Political Weapon in America."

James stresses the theme of faith in action perhaps more than any other book of the New Testament. Unlike other New Testament letters, many of them attributed to Paul, James plays down dogma in favor of practical ethical guidelines that center on loving one's neighbor and, in particular, serving the poor.

Over the past several years, Democrats have succeeded in marshaling the religious left and have built a bigger audience attuned to biblical language. With its calls to serve society's marginalized and its critique of wealth, James represents a good fit for the party's perspective.

"It's a book that the left is likely to have a better chance of using effectively," Coe said.

Which isn't to say Republicans never cite James. Asked in a 2006 profile for Rolling Stone what drove his work to combat malaria, poverty and hunger in Africa, Sen. [Sam Brownback](#) (R-Kan.), responded, "Widows and orphans."

It was an oblique reference to James 1:27: "Religion that God our father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world."

James is one of seven "Catholic Epistles," so named because they address the general faithful rather than a particular community or individual, and offers instructions on how to live a moral life.

Some attribute its authorship to James, the brother of Jesus, a prominent leader of the early church in Jerusalem. Even though there was debate about the letter's authority, it nonetheless became part of the New Testament canon by the end of the 3rd century.

The book's emphasis on demonstrable works, at the expense, some have argued, of belief, has plagued the letter throughout history. In the preface to his 1522 New Testament, [Martin Luther](#) famously called it an "epistle of straw" for seeming to contradict his teaching of salvation through grace alone.

"It's not the case that Paul is arguing for faith versus works, as he is sometimes portrayed, and James is not arguing for works as if they were opposed to faith, but rather a complement to faith," said Thomas C. Oden, professor emeritus of theology and ethics at Drew University.

In his speeches and writings, 19th-century abolitionist [Frederick Douglass](#) used James in his calls for justice for emancipated slaves. "I love that religion that makes it the duty of its disciples to visit the fatherless and the widow in their affliction," he said, like Brownback invoking the spirit of James 1:27.

As the Social Gospel movement spread among Protestant churches in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, James's "faith without works is dead" theme dovetailed with the movement's emphasis on community betterment and improvements in education, health care and labor conditions. It's the same environment in which Clinton's Methodist background, with its tradition of social outreach, took hold in America.

One of Clinton's criticisms of Obama was that he is all talk and no action, a barb that sounds a lot like another line from her favorite epistle: "But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves" (James 1:22).

In response, Obama's campaign mailed fliers to Kentucky voters that said: "My faith teaches me that I can sit in church and pray all I want, but I won't be fulfilling God's will unless I go out and do the Lord's work." It wasn't an explicit tie to James, but the sentiment perfectly matched the epistle's thrust.

Citing James and its "faith in action" catch phrase might also signal an attempt to reach non-Christian voters who can nonetheless appreciate the idea of living life according to a set of deeply held values.

"I think people from the Jewish faith could read the book without any difficulties, and the same with Islam. It offers a theological perspective rather than christological," said the Rev. Patrick Hartin, professor of religious studies at [Gonzaga University](#) and the author of "A Spirituality of Perfection: Faith in Action in the Letter of James."

At the same time, James has a clear two-pronged message for Christians, said Karen Jobes, professor of New Testament Greek and exegesis at Wheaton College: "It's not enough to say I believe in Christ but do nothing to help my neighbor" but at the same time, "living ethically, apart from [Jesus Christ](#), is never enough."

In that sense, James is a perfect book for politicians to use: Its scriptural authority speaks to Christians, but its emphasis on ethical action speaks to everyone.

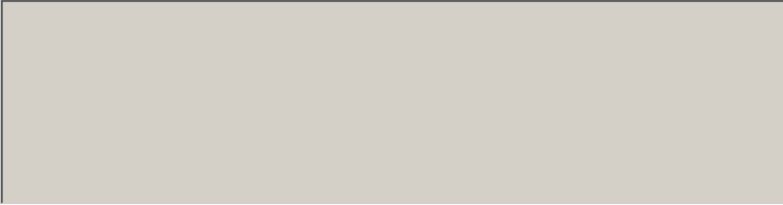
"In some ways Christianity can be domesticated too much, in the sense that it becomes a very private, individual religion," Hartin said. "One tends to forget its community aspect, and James is vital for that."

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