

Research Article

Ecclesiology of Equality as a Critique of Social Preferentialism in the Church: (An Exegetical Study of James 2:1–13)

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Abstract. The church is called to embody a community of faith characterized by love, justice, and equality before God. Nevertheless, the persistence of social favoritism within contemporary churches continues to undermine this calling and contradict the gospel's vision of an inclusive faith community. This study aims to construct an ecclesiology of equality through an exegetical analysis of James 2:1–13 as a theological response to the problem of social favoritism in the church. Employing a qualitative literature study with an exegetical-theological approach, this research examines the literary and theological message of James 2:1–13 to formulate ecclesiological principles relevant to contemporary ecclesial practice. The findings reveal that James strongly condemns favoritism as incompatible with faith in Jesus Christ and presents equality, impartiality, mercy, and the law of love as foundational principles for the life of the church. Based on these exegetical findings, the study proposes an ecclesiology of equality that envisions the church as an inclusive, participatory, just, and compassionate community that affirms the dignity of every person, particularly those who are socially and economically marginalized. In conclusion, James 2:1–13 provides a robust theological foundation for challenging social favoritism and calls the church to embody God's impartial love through equitable relationships, communal participation, and justice in its life and ministry.

Keywords: accountability management restructuring; church task force committee; congregational ministry outcomes; church ministry; building up the body of Christ.

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1. Introduction

The church is called to be a community of faith that reflects God's love, justice, and equality. This calling is rooted in the doctrine of the *imago Dei*, which affirms that every human being possesses equal dignity before God, and in the redemptive work of Christ, who unites all believers into one body. Therefore, the church should function as a fellowship that does not discriminate on the basis of social status, economic condition, ethnicity, culture, or educational background in welcoming and involving its members.

Nevertheless, social preferentialism remains evident in the life of many churches. Individuals who possess wealth, social position, educational attainment, or influence often receive greater honor and broader access to leadership and decision-making processes, while the poor and marginalized are frequently neglected. This condition creates social stratification within the church and weakens its witness as a community that embodies the love of God (Zega, 2025).

Social preferentialism refers to the practice of granting preferential treatment based on status or influence rather than on the inherent dignity of every person before God. Such a practice contradicts the biblical teachings on love, justice, and mercy. Consequently, it is not

merely an ethical issue but also an ecclesiological one, as it affects the identity and life of the church (Halawa & Zega, 2023).

This problem was already present in the early church and was explicitly addressed in James 2:1–13. James rebukes the congregation for showing honor to the rich while humiliating the poor. Such favoritism is incompatible with faith in Christ and with the character of God, who shows no partiality (Pfeiffer & Harrison, 2008; Bergant & Karris, 2002).

To date, James 2:1–13 has primarily been interpreted in relation to Christian ethics, the relationship between faith and works, concern for the poor, and the prohibition of discrimination. While these interpretations provide valuable theological insights, the ecclesiological implications of this passage as a foundation for constructing an ecclesiology of equality have received comparatively little scholarly attention.

Previous studies, including those by Jawamara (2019), Halawa and Zega (2023), and Zega (2025), emphasize the importance of a faith expressed through love, justice, and impartiality. However, most of these studies remain focused on the ethical dimension and have not systematically developed James 2:1–13 as a theological foundation for constructing an ecclesiology of equality that rejects social preferentialism as an essential characteristic of the church's identity and communal life.

2. Preliminaries or Related Work or Literature Review

Social Preferentialism in the Life of the Church

Social preferentialism refers to the practice of granting preferential treatment to particular individuals or groups based on economic status, social position, educational attainment, power, or influence. Although such practices are often regarded as socially acceptable, they are fundamentally incompatible with the nature of the church as a community of faith founded upon love, justice, and equality before God (Halawa & Zega, 2023).

Scripture consistently affirms that God shows no partiality (Deut. 10:17; Acts 10:34; Rom. 2:11). Consequently, every form of discrimination based on social status contradicts the character of God and diminishes the dignity of human beings as His image-bearers (Zega, 2025). Within the contemporary church, social preferentialism is evident when individuals who possess wealth, authority, or influence receive greater honor and broader access to leadership and decision-making, while those from marginalized or disadvantaged groups are afforded fewer opportunities for meaningful participation. Such practices create social stratification that obscures the identity of the church as the body of Christ (Halawa & Zega, 2023).

This issue was already confronted in the early church through James 2:1–13. James strongly condemns the preferential treatment of the wealthy and the humiliation of the poor as actions that are incompatible with faith in Jesus Christ and the law of love (Bergant & Karris, 2002). Likewise, Pfeiffer and Harrison (2008) argue that this prohibition reflects the broader New Testament teaching that believers must evaluate others according to God's perspective rather than worldly standards.

Therefore, social preferentialism constitutes a serious threat to the life and witness of the church because it weakens Christian testimony, fosters injustice, and undermines the unity of the community of believers. For this reason, the church must develop an ecclesiology that places equality at its core, ensuring that every member is valued and given equal opportunities to participate in the life and ministry of the church.

Ecclesiology of Equality as the Theological Foundation of the Church

Ecclesiology concerns the nature, identity, calling, and mission of the church as the people of God. In the New Testament, the church is portrayed as the body of Christ, in which every member possesses equal dignity, value, and significance despite exercising different spiritual gifts and functions (1 Cor. 12:12–27). Accordingly, the life of the church should be grounded in unity, love, and equality.

The church's commitment to equality is rooted in the doctrine of the *imago Dei* (Gen. 1:26–27), which affirms that every human being possesses equal dignity before God regardless of social status, ethnicity, gender, or personal background. This principle is further reinforced through the redemptive work of Christ, who establishes a community of faith that transcends all forms of social division. The Apostle Paul declares that in Christ "there is

neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female" (Gal. 3:28), emphasizing that Christian identity surpasses every form of social stratification.

The metaphor of the church as the body of Christ (1 Cor. 12:12–27) further demonstrates that diversity of function does not negate equality of dignity. Rather, every member is mutually dependent and contributes indispensably to the growth and flourishing of the church. This understanding is consistent with the law of love taught by Jesus (Matt. 22:37–40), which calls believers to accept, honor, and treat every person with justice and without discrimination.

These theological principles are reaffirmed in James 2:1–13. James prohibits favoritism because granting special honor to the rich while humiliating the poor contradicts the character of God. Bergant and Karris (2002) argue that James criticizes the application of worldly standards within the Christian community, while Pfeiffer and Harrison (2008) explain that favoritism reveals an inconsistency between one's profession of faith and one's actual conduct. Consequently, James connects this prohibition with the "royal law," namely, the command to love one's neighbor as oneself (Jas. 2:8).

Based on this understanding, the present study views an ecclesiology of equality as a theological framework that rejects social preferentialism and every form of discrimination. The church is called to affirm the dignity of every member, provide equal opportunities for participation, and cultivate communal life grounded in the love of Christ. This framework serves as the theological foundation for the exegetical analysis of James 2:1–13 and for the formulation of an ecclesiology of equality as a response to social preferentialism in the contemporary church.

Previous Studies and State of the Art

Studies on James 2:1–13 have generally focused on Christian ethics, the relationship between faith and works, the prohibition of favoritism, and concern for the poor. Although these studies have significantly enriched theological understanding of the Epistle of James, research that develops James's critique of social preferentialism as the foundation for an ecclesiology of equality remains limited.

Jawamara (2019) argues that genuine faith must be expressed through acts of love. Through a strong exegetical analysis, the study demonstrates the relationship between faith and works; however, its primary emphasis remains on soteriological and ethical concerns without exploring the ecclesiological implications of the passage (Jawamara, 2019).

Halawa and Zega (2023) emphasize impartiality as an expression of Christian love. Their study demonstrates that discrimination violates the law of love but focuses primarily on the formation of personal Christian ethics rather than on the identity of the church as an egalitarian community (Halawa & Zega, 2023).

Using a feminist hermeneutical approach, Zega (2025) examines the elimination of discrimination against vulnerable groups and argues that discrimination contradicts the just character of God. While the study contributes meaningfully to discussions of social justice, it does not specifically examine James 2:1–13 as a theological basis for developing an ecclesiology of equality (Zega, 2025).

From an exegetical perspective, Bergant and Karris (2002) explain that James condemns favoritism toward the wealthy as an expression of worldly values within the Christian community. Similarly, Pfeiffer and Harrison (2008) maintain that partiality demonstrates an inconsistency between one's confession of faith and one's manner of life. Nevertheless, neither interpretation develops a systematic ecclesiological framework based on this passage.

Overall, previous scholarship has employed exegetical, biblical ethical, pastoral theological, and contextual hermeneutical approaches. These studies successfully illuminate the relationship between faith, the law of love, and the prohibition of discrimination. However, they have not comprehensively explored the ecclesiological implications of these themes for the identity and practice of the church.

Accordingly, the research gap addressed by this study lies in the absence of a systematic construction of an ecclesiology of equality based on an exegetical analysis of James 2:1–13 as a theological response to social preferentialism in the contemporary church. Unlike previous studies that primarily emphasize individual ethics and moral conduct, this research extends the exegetical findings toward the development of an ecclesiological framework that understands the church as a community characterized by equality, justice, participation, love, and solidarity with vulnerable groups. Thus, the novelty (*state of the art*) of this study lies in

integrating the exegesis of James 2:1–13 with ecclesiological reflection to formulate a theological model that is both biblically grounded and relevant to the contemporary church.

3. Proposed Method

This study employs a qualitative research design using a library research approach. An exegetical-theological approach to James 2:1–13 is applied to examine the historical, grammatical, literary, and theological dimensions of the text as the foundation for constructing an ecclesiology of equality. The study specifically focuses on a theological reflection on the practice of social preferentialism within the life of the church (Subagyo, 2004; Umrati & Wijaya, 2020).

The data sources consist of primary and secondary materials. The primary source is James 2:1–13, while the secondary sources include biblical commentaries, biblical dictionaries and lexicons, peer-reviewed journal articles, and other theological literature relevant to the research topic.

Data were collected through the selection and classification of relevant literature, followed by an exegetical and theological analysis of the biblical text. The findings of the exegetical analysis were then synthesized with ecclesiological concepts to formulate a model of an ecclesiology of equality as a theological response to the practice of social preferentialism in the contemporary church. Data analysis employed a descriptive-analytical technique involving data reduction, interpretation, comparison, and synthesis, resulting in a coherent and academically rigorous theological framework (Umrati & Wijaya, 2020).

4. Results and Discussion

The Context and Problem of Social Preferentialism in James 2:1–13

The Epistle of James was addressed to a community of believers facing various challenges to their faith in both spiritual and social dimensions. Within the socio-cultural context of first-century Jewish and Greco-Roman society, differences in social and economic status were deeply embedded in the structure of everyday life. Wealth, social position, and influence often determined the level of honor and acceptance a person received, whereas the poor and those lacking economic power were frequently marginalized. J. D. Douglas (2011) explains that Palestinian society during the New Testament period was characterized by significant disparities between the rich and the poor, with economic status often determining an individual's position in both social and religious life (Douglas, 2011). This social reality appears to have influenced the recipients of the Epistle of James, resulting in the practice of treating people differently according to their appearance and social standing.

According to Pfeiffer and Harrison (2008), James wrote his epistle to rebuke believers who failed to apply their Christian faith consistently in daily life. One manifestation of this inconsistency was the practice of showing partiality by honoring the wealthy while treating the poor unjustly. For James, such behavior demonstrated that the congregation continued to evaluate people according to worldly standards rather than according to the values of the Kingdom of God, which are founded upon love and justice (Pfeiffer & Harrison, 2008). Consequently, the issue addressed by James extends beyond social relationships to the very essence of Christian faith.

The primary concern criticized by James is the practice of partiality (*prosōpolempsia*), namely, granting honor or preferential treatment to individuals on the basis of outward considerations such as wealth, appearance, or social status. In James's illustration, a wealthy person dressed in fine clothing is given a place of honor, whereas a poor person wearing shabby clothes is assigned an inferior position (Jas. 2:2–3). Pfeiffer and Harrison (2008) argue that this illustration is not merely hypothetical but reflects an actual situation within the fellowship of the early church. Such behavior reveals that the Christian community had adopted the prevailing social values of its surrounding culture, where a person's worth was measured by wealth and social prestige.

Furthermore, Douglas (2011) observes that within both Jewish and Greco-Roman cultures, individuals possessing wealth and influence commonly received special honor in public gatherings, including religious assemblies. Such social conventions had the potential to shape the life of the church unless they were corrected by the principles of the gospel. Accordingly, James unequivocally rejects this practice and emphasizes that God shows no partiality. Instead, God has chosen those who are poor by worldly standards to be rich in faith and heirs of His kingdom (Jas. 2:5).

Accordingly, James understands social preferentialism not merely as a matter of social ethics but as a theological and ecclesiological issue. The practice of showing partiality demonstrates that the congregation had imported worldly values into the community of faith and had begun evaluating people according to social standards rather than according to God's perspective. For James, such behavior constitutes an act of injustice that violates the royal law of the Kingdom of God—namely, the command to love one's neighbor as oneself (Jas. 2:8). Therefore, the church is called to become a community that rejects every form of discrimination and cultivates relationships characterized by love, justice, equality, and respect for the dignity of every person as one created in the image of God.

Constructing an Ecclesiology of Equality Based on James 2:1–13

James 2:1 opens with the pastoral address *ἀδελφοί* (*adelphoi*), meaning "my brothers and sisters" or "my fellow believers." This expression marks the transition to a new section of the epistle while emphasizing the close relationship between the author and his readers. More importantly, the use of this term indicates that James's exhortation is directed to the community of believers as one family of faith. According to Pfeiffer and Harrison (2008, p. 975), the address *adelphoi* is more than a conventional greeting; it reflects the spiritual kinship established in Christ, which serves as the foundation for James's exhortations concerning the life of the Christian community. Consequently, this familial language conveys both gentle pastoral authority and a reminder that all members of the church share equal standing as members of the household of God (Pfeiffer & Harrison, 2008, p. 975).

Building upon James's critique of social preferentialism in James 2:1–13, this study constructs an ecclesiological understanding in which the church is called to become a community that reflects the character of God through equality, love, and justice in the relationships among its members. An ecclesiology of equality does not eliminate differences in function, spiritual gifts, or responsibilities within the church. Rather, it affirms that every believer possesses equal worth, dignity, and standing before God as a member of the body of Christ. This principle is grounded in the conviction that the church must not be shaped by the social values of the world but by the royal law of God, namely, the command to love one's neighbor.

Accordingly, James 2:1–13 provides a theological foundation for the church to cultivate a communal life that rejects discrimination, affirms the dignity of every individual, promotes equitable participation in the life and ministry of the church, and demonstrates preferential concern for the weak and marginalized as a tangible expression of faith in Jesus Christ. Such an ecclesiology enables the church to embody the values of God's kingdom by witnessing to a community characterized by justice, inclusion, mutual respect, and Christ-centered love.

The Church as a Community That Rejects Discrimination

James 2:1–13 affirms that the church must not become a place where discrimination based on social status, wealth, or outward appearance is practiced. James's rebuke of the congregation for honoring the rich while humiliating the poor demonstrates that showing partiality is incompatible with faith in Jesus Christ. Pfeiffer and Harrison (2008, p. 975) argue that genuine faith must be expressed through justice and impartiality, while Stamps (2004) explains that God evaluates people on the basis of faith rather than social status. Accordingly, the church is called to cultivate relationships founded upon love, acceptance, and justice.

James's prohibition, "show no partiality as you hold the faith" (Jas. 2:1), employs the Greek term *προσωποληψίας* (*prosōpolempsiaís*), which denotes the practice of treating individuals differently on the basis of wealth, social position, or honor (Sutanto, 2004, p. 1210). Barclay (2016, pp. 99–100) emphasizes that this prohibition concerns not merely outward behavior but also an underlying worldview that evaluates people according to worldly standards rather than God's perspective.

Halawa and Zega (2023) contend that discrimination against the poor is not merely a violation of social ethics but also a violation of faith in Christ. Because God's love is universal and inclusive, the church is called to treat every person equally regardless of social or economic background (Halawa & Zega, 2023).

Based on this exegetical analysis, this study argues that rejecting social preferentialism constitutes a defining characteristic of an ecclesiology of equality. The church is called to receive every person as a member of the body of Christ and to embody equality in

leadership, ministry, decision-making, and congregational empowerment. In this way, the church not only proclaims love but also lives it out through equitable participation, respect for the dignity of every individual, and solidarity with the weak and marginalized as a tangible expression of God's impartial love.

The Church as a Community of Love

James grounds his rejection of partiality in the "royal law," namely, the command to love one's neighbor as oneself (Jas. 2:8). Love is not merely an emotion but a concrete practice of honoring and treating every person with justice regardless of social status, economic condition, or position. Consequently, granting preferential treatment to the wealthy while neglecting the poor demonstrates a failure to fulfill the law of love. The church is therefore called to cultivate relationships rooted in the love of Christ, which affirms the dignity of every human being.

William Barclay (2016, p. 103) argues that the church should be a community free from distinctions based on social status. James 2:3 demonstrates that discrimination is manifested not only in inward attitudes but also in concrete actions, as the wealthy are honored while the poor are humiliated. Thus, the manner in which believers treat one another reflects the authenticity and quality of their faith (Barclay, 2016, p. 103).

This perspective is reinforced by Sibarani (2021), who maintains that the church is called to embody love, justice, and equality as expressions of the character of God. Accordingly, discrimination contradicts both the nature of the church as the body of Christ and its theological mandate to honor every human being as created in the image of God (Sibarani, 2021).

Drawing on the exegetical findings from James 2:1–13, this study maintains that love constitutes the central foundation of an ecclesiology of equality. The church is called to cultivate a community that is inclusive, just, and participatory, ensuring that every member is welcomed, valued, and empowered regardless of social status, economic condition, educational background, ethnicity, or social influence.

As a community of love, the church demonstrates Christ's love through acceptance, compassionate care, mutual service, accompaniment of those in need, and the provision of equal opportunities for participation in the life and ministry of the church. In doing so, the church bears visible witness to the love of Christ, who unites all believers into one body.

The Church as a Community That Affirms the Dignity of Every Person

James illustrates the prohibition against partiality through the example of a wealthy man wearing gold rings and fine clothing and a poor man dressed in shabby clothes entering the assembly (*synagōgē*). According to Pfeiffer and Harrison (2008, p. 975), this illustration reflects the social reality of the early Christian community, where social status significantly influenced how individuals were treated. Through this example, James demonstrates that discrimination had already entered the life of the church and therefore required theological correction.

In James 2:2, the conditional expression *ἐάν γάρ* (*ean gar*, "for if") indicates a situation that was genuinely occurring within the congregation. Barclay (2016, p. 101) describes the tendency to honor the wealthy as a "snobbery" that reflects the adoption of worldly standards for evaluating human worth. The contrast between the rich and the poor (*ptōchos*) emphasizes that neither wealth nor outward appearance should determine the honor accorded to individuals within the Christian community (Sutanto, 2004, p. 1210).

The exegetical analysis of James 2:1–13 demonstrates that every person possesses equal dignity before God. James rejects judgments based on wealth, social position, or influence and instead calls the church to recognize every individual as God's creation and an equal member of the body of Christ.

Similarly, Singal et al. (2025) argue that the church is not merely a religious institution but a community of faith that embodies love, justice, and equality (Singal et al., 2025). Respect for human dignity, therefore, is a necessary implication of the church's identity as the body of Christ.

On the basis of these findings, this study concludes that affirming the dignity of every person is a defining characteristic of an ecclesiology of equality. The church is called to cultivate a culture that welcomes, honors, and empowers all members without discrimination. This calling is expressed through just ministry, servant leadership, and equal opportunities for every believer to participate according to the gifts God has entrusted to

them. In this way, the church reflects the character of God, who receives every person by His grace in Jesus Christ.

The Church as a Community That Stands with the Weak

James 2:3 portrays a concrete instance of discrimination within the gathered assembly. The wealthy are assigned places of honor, while the poor are treated with contempt. Barclay (2016, p. 103) explains that this passage reflects the tendency of the early church to accord greater honor to wealthy individuals, thereby allowing social preferentialism to threaten the integrity of the Christian community (Barclay, 2016, p. 103).

According to Pfeiffer and Harrison (2008, p. 976), the expression *καλῶς* (*kalōs*) refers to the honorable place offered to the wealthy, whereas the poor are instructed either to stand or to sit by the speaker's footstool. This contrast reveals that the congregation evaluated individuals according to social status rather than recognizing them as fellow members of the body of Christ. Hasan Sutanto (2004, p. 1210) likewise argues that this choice of language reflects the practice of partiality that James explicitly condemns (Sutanto, 2004, p. 1210).

The exegetical analysis of James 2:1–13 further reveals God's special concern for the poor and marginalized. James's declaration that God has chosen those who are poor to be "rich in faith" (Jas. 2:5) does not romanticize poverty but rather emphasizes that God does not evaluate people according to worldly standards. Consequently, the church is called to identify with the weak and marginalized as an expression of God's love and compassion.

Based on these findings, this study argues that standing with the weak constitutes another defining characteristic of an ecclesiology of equality. Such solidarity does not represent a new form of favoritism but rather an expression of justice for those who have been marginalized. The church must therefore create equal opportunities for all people to participate, grow, and serve according to the gifts God has graciously bestowed upon them.

As a community that stands with the weak, the church is called to respond to social and economic struggles through inclusive ministry, empowerment initiatives, and equitable opportunities for participation. In doing so, the church bears faithful witness to the impartial love, justice, and mercy of God.

Implications of an Ecclesiology of Equality for the Contemporary Church

An ecclesiology of equality grounded in James 2:1–13 carries significant implications for the life and ministry of the contemporary church in addressing the practice of social preferentialism. Equality should not be understood merely as a theological concept but should be embodied in the church's relationships, ministries, leadership, and decision-making processes. The church is called to become a community that reflects God's impartial love by recognizing and affirming the inherent dignity of every person. Consequently, the church is to cultivate a community that is inclusive, just, and participatory, ensuring that every member is given equal opportunities to grow spiritually, serve faithfully, and contribute according to the gifts God has entrusted to them. In this way, the church faithfully embodies the values of the Kingdom of God by rejecting discrimination, promoting justice, strengthening communal fellowship, and bearing witness to the reconciling love of Christ within a socially diverse world.

Equality in the Fellowship of Believers

James 2:4 marks a theological turning point through the rhetorical question *οὐ διεκρίθητε* (*ou diekrithete*), "Have you not made distinctions among yourselves?" According to Pfeiffer and Harrison (2008, p. 976), the passive form *diekrithete* indicates that the congregation had become divided because it continued to be influenced by respect for social status. Barclay (2016, p. 105) explains that the term refers to an erroneous judgment of others, while Sutanto (2004, Vol. 2, p. 197) notes that *diakrinō* means "to distinguish" or "to judge," implying that discrimination originates from a distorted attitude of the heart (Barclay, 2016, p. 105; Sutanto, 2004, Vol. 2, p. 197).

James further describes the congregation as *κρίται διαλογισμῶν πονηρῶν* (*kritai dialogismōn ponērōn*), meaning "judges with evil thoughts." According to Sutanto (2004, Vol. 1, p. 1211), the congregation evaluated others using false standards, while Pfeiffer and Harrison (2008, p. 976) argue that they judged according to worldly values rather than

God's standards. Consequently, discrimination is not merely a social offense but also a sin that undermines both faith and the unity of the church (Sutanto, 2004, Vol. 2, p. 660).

The exegetical analysis of James 2:1–13 demonstrates that equality within the fellowship of believers is a necessary consequence of rejecting partiality. The church is founded upon faith in Christ rather than upon social status; therefore, every believer possesses equal dignity as a recipient of God's grace.

This understanding is supported by Thomas O'Loughlin (2022), who argues that "we are equal in baptism." Such equality does not eliminate the diversity of spiritual gifts but affirms the equal standing of all believers before God (O'Loughlin, 2022). Consistent with the doctrine of the *imago Dei*, the church is called to become a community that values every individual and provides equal opportunities for fellowship, spiritual growth, and ministry regardless of social status, economic condition, educational background, or ethnicity.

Equality in Leadership and Ministry

Equality in leadership and ministry recognizes that every member of the church possesses God-given dignity and spiritual gifts for the building up of the body of Christ. Based on James 2:1–13, the church must not evaluate individuals according to social status, wealth, or position, but according to their faith, character, and the gifts entrusted to them by God. Accordingly, every believer should be given equal opportunities to serve.

An ecclesiology of equality must be embodied concretely in the life of the church. In the midst of social preferentialism, the church is called to integrate the values of the Christian faith with the social realities of the congregation so that equality becomes not merely a theological doctrine but a lived reality in leadership, ministry, and fellowship (Manalu & Sianturi, 2026). This principle is consistent with the New Testament concept of the church as a "royal priesthood" in 1 Peter 2, which affirms the participation of all believers in ministry according to the gifts they have received (Putra & Santo, 2024). Consequently, church leadership should be understood as servant leadership characterized by equality, mutual complementarity, and shared responsibility.

The practical application of this principle requires the church to establish systems of ministry that are open, equitable, and free from discrimination. Equality does not abolish differences in function but affirms that every ministry possesses equal value before God. In this way, the church becomes a participatory and inclusive community that manifests the values of the Kingdom of God through servant leadership.

Equality in Ecclesial Decision-Making

Equality in ecclesial decision-making represents a practical expression of an ecclesiology of equality based on James 2:1–13. Social preferentialism may arise when decisions within the church are influenced disproportionately by wealth, social status, or the influence of particular individuals or groups. Therefore, the church is called to recognize every member as an integral part of the body of Christ so that its decision-making processes reflect love, justice, and respect for the entire community of faith.

This principle requires participatory leadership structures that are free from discrimination. O'Loughlin (2022) argues that contemporary ecclesiology encourages the church to move beyond hierarchical models toward more inclusive forms of governance by creating meaningful opportunities for lay people, women, and marginalized groups to participate in the life and decision-making processes of the church (O'Loughlin, 2022). Likewise, Sibarani (2021) maintains that the church is called to proclaim love, equality, and justice because every human being is created in the image of God (Sibarani, 2021).

Based on the exegetical findings of James 2:1–13, every member of the congregation deserves to be heard and respected in ecclesial decision-making according to his or her calling, responsibilities, and ministry. Accordingly, the church should cultivate a culture of communal discernment that actively involves the entire congregation in seeking God's will and promoting the common good. This principle requires church leaders to create meaningful opportunities for participation, including for those who have been marginalized. In this way, ecclesial decision-making becomes an expression of the Holy Spirit's work throughout the body of Christ while strengthening unity, shared ownership, and the church's witness as a community of the Kingdom of God.

The Church's Preferential Concern for the Vulnerable and Marginalized

James 2:5 begins with the exhortation ἀκούσατε, ἀδελφοί μου ἀγαπητοί (*akousate, adelphoi mou agapētoi*), "Listen, my beloved brothers and sisters," indicating that James's rebuke is motivated by pastoral love and a desire for the congregation to receive correction with open hearts (Sutanto, 2004b, p. 7).

James declares that God has chosen the poor to become "rich in faith" and "heirs of the kingdom." The verb ἐξελέξατο (*exelēxato*) emphasizes God's sovereign choice (Sutanto, 2004b, p. 261). Those who are despised by worldly standards are honored by God (Pfeiffer & Harrison, 2008, p. 976; Stamps, 2004, p. 2087). Furthermore, the phrase πλουσίους ἐν πίστει (*plousious en pistei*, "rich in faith") underscores that a person's true worth is determined by faith in God rather than by material wealth (Sutanto, 2004a, p. 1211). Consequently, discrimination against the poor stands in direct opposition to the will of God.

The exegetical analysis of James 2:1–13 demonstrates that standing with vulnerable and marginalized people reflects the just and compassionate character of God. The church is therefore called not only to reject discrimination but also to embody God's love through acceptance, pastoral accompaniment, advocacy, and compassionate care for those who are weak.

This preferential concern is expressed through ministries of compassion, empowerment initiatives, pastoral care, and the provision of equal opportunities for participation in the life and ministry of the church. Vulnerable and marginalized people are to be recognized as full members of the body of Christ, possessing equal dignity, spiritual gifts, and valuable contributions to the community. In doing so, the church bears faithful witness to the love, justice, and mercy of God in the contemporary world.

5. Comparison

The findings of this study both confirm and extend previous scholarship on James 2:1–13. Earlier studies have predominantly interpreted this passage from ethical, pastoral, and social perspectives, emphasizing themes such as the relationship between faith and works, the prohibition of partiality, and Christian responsibility toward the poor. While these studies have made significant contributions to understanding the ethical message of James, they have generally not developed the broader ecclesiological implications of the text.

Jawamara (2019) argues that authentic faith must be expressed through concrete acts of love, highlighting the inseparable relationship between faith and works. Similarly, Halawa and Zega (2023) emphasize impartiality as a practical expression of Christian love and identify discrimination as a violation of the law of love. Zega (2025) further broadens the discussion by addressing discrimination against vulnerable groups through a feminist hermeneutical approach and emphasizing God's justice toward marginalized people. Although these studies provide valuable ethical and pastoral insights, their primary focus remains on individual Christian conduct rather than on the theological identity and communal structure of the church.

Classical biblical commentators also provide important exegetical foundations for understanding James 2:1–13. Bergant and Karris (2002) interpret James's condemnation of favoritism as a rejection of worldly value systems within the Christian community. Likewise, Pfeiffer and Harrison (2008) explain that partiality reveals an inconsistency between one's confession of faith and one's daily practice. However, these interpretations remain largely exegetical and do not develop a systematic ecclesiological framework derived from the passage.

Building upon these previous studies, the present research offers a distinct contribution by integrating exegetical analysis with ecclesiological reflection. Rather than treating James 2:1–13 solely as an ethical exhortation, this study demonstrates that the passage provides a theological foundation for constructing an ecclesiology of equality. The findings indicate that James's rejection of social preferentialism should shape not only individual moral behavior but also the church's identity, leadership, ministry, fellowship, decision-making processes, and mission toward vulnerable and marginalized communities.

Compared with previous studies, this research expands the theological significance of James 2:1–13 in three important ways. First, it shifts the primary interpretive focus from personal ethics to ecclesiology by demonstrating that partiality fundamentally threatens the identity of the church as the body of Christ. Second, it systematically formulates the concept of an ecclesiology of equality based on the exegetical findings of James 2:1–13, thereby

providing a coherent theological framework rather than isolated ethical principles. Third, it translates this theological framework into practical ecclesial implications by proposing principles for inclusive fellowship, servant leadership, participatory decision-making, and preferential concern for vulnerable and marginalized groups.

Therefore, the novelty of this study lies in its integration of biblical exegesis and ecclesiological construction. By positioning James 2:1–13 as a theological foundation for an ecclesiology of equality, this research contributes a new perspective to contemporary James studies and offers a constructive theological model for churches seeking to address social preferentialism while embodying the justice, love, and inclusiveness of the Kingdom of God.

6. Conclusions

This study demonstrates that James 2:1–13 contains not only an ethical prohibition against showing partiality but also provides a robust theological foundation for constructing an ecclesiology of equality. Through an exegetical analysis of the text, the study finds that social preferentialism is presented as a form of sin that is incompatible with faith in Jesus Christ because it reflects a worldly perspective that evaluates people according to social status, wealth, and outward appearance rather than according to their dignity as bearers of the image of God. James grounds his rejection of such practices in the impartial character of God, the royal law of love, and the redemptive work of Christ, through which all believers are united as equal members of the body of Christ.

Based on these findings, this study constructs an ecclesiology of equality that affirms the church's calling to become a community of faith that recognizes the dignity of every human person, cultivates relationships characterized by love and justice, provides equal opportunities for participation in fellowship, leadership, ministry, and ecclesial decision-making, and demonstrates a genuine commitment to vulnerable and marginalized people. The equality envisioned in this study does not imply the elimination of differences in function, spiritual gifts, or responsibilities within the church. Rather, it affirms that all members of the Christian community possess equal worth, dignity, and opportunities for participation before God.

The principal contribution of this study lies in extending the interpretation of James 2:1–13 beyond the ethical perspective that has largely dominated previous scholarship. Whereas earlier studies have primarily emphasized the relationship between faith and works, the prohibition of partiality, or the ethics of love, this research demonstrates that James's critique of social preferentialism carries profound ecclesiological implications. Accordingly, James 2:1–13 should be understood not merely as moral instruction for individual believers but also as a theological foundation for shaping the identity, structure, and praxis of the church in ways that embody the values of the Kingdom of God.

From a practical perspective, the findings of this study suggest that contemporary churches should critically examine the various forms of discrimination that continue to exist within ecclesial life, including interpersonal relationships among congregants, leadership structures, ministry practices, and decision-making processes. The church is called to cultivate an inclusive, participatory, and just community that intentionally stands with the weak and marginalized as a visible expression of faith in Christ and as a faithful witness to the Kingdom of God within society.

This study is limited to an exegetical-theological analysis of James 2:1–13 and therefore does not evaluate the practical implementation of an ecclesiology of equality within the life of the contemporary church. Future research is encouraged to undertake empirical investigations into the application of the principles of an ecclesiology of equality across different Christian denominations and ecclesial contexts. Such studies would further assess the practical relevance and theological significance of James 2:1–13 for the life and witness of the contemporary church.

Based on the findings of this study, several recommendations may be proposed. First, church leaders and theological institutions should intentionally integrate the principles of an ecclesiology of equality into theological education, leadership formation, and ministerial training to foster communities characterized by justice, inclusion, and mutual respect. Second, churches are encouraged to review their organizational structures, leadership practices, and decision-making processes to ensure that opportunities for participation are not determined by social status, wealth, educational background, ethnicity, or personal influence. Finally, future scholars are encouraged to expand this line of inquiry through

interdisciplinary and empirical research that explores how an ecclesiology of equality can be implemented effectively in diverse ecclesial, cultural, and denominational contexts. Such studies will further enrich contemporary ecclesiological discourse and contribute to the development of churches that more faithfully embody the inclusive and transformative values of the Kingdom of God.

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