Some Trajectories That Led Me Out Of The Shire

Timothy Berg

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When I shared my recent post about "Leaving the Shire" it became clear that this post might be misunderstood in some ways. I likened my time in Neo-Fundamentalism to The Shire of Tolkien's Lord Of The Rings. Probably these comments will make little sense apart from reading that earlier essay, and so I commend it to you here. One friend asked me, after reading the post, if it would be correct to summarize me as having left fundamentalism due to the books I had read. His helpful question made me reflect, and caused me to realize that my post, due to its format and its original intention, might well be misunderstood. So in several replies to his comment (on the FB OP where I first shared my blog post) I spelled out some of the details that the "Shire" post didn't deal with at all (due to its original audience and format). I have copied those comments here (with minor edits), on the chance that they might be a help or encouragement to someone else as well who is curious about what led me out of Neo-Fundamentalism.

Thanks for commenting brother. Your comments are always welcome, and I wouldn't worry about you quarreling, because I think I know you to be mature enough not behave in that fashion. In our limited correspondence, I've always known you to be courteous, civil, and deeply Christlike. I wish I had a hundred more conversation partners like yourself.

To your question, I understand why it seems that way from reading the article. I'm a big fan of looking for authorial intent behind every literary production (especially those of the biblical writers, but all writings should be treated with some kind of authorial dignity). This piece was originally written (as I tried to explain in a note at the beginning) for just a handful of friends (five to be exact, I believe). I forget some of the chronology, but I think I had just recently been removed from my position of service at the Church I had served in for over a decade (though I was told I could remain as a member who couldn't preach, teach, or serve in any leadership, if I so choose) due to the fact that I no longer believed in some of the things that were core to that Church (despite the fact that I still to this day would heartily affirm their doctrinal statement). I then voluntarily, following pastoral counsel, removed myself from the church and sought membership elsewhere. I think two other of my friends had already been removed from the mission field and church membership over similar issues, and one or two more could read the signs to know that they too were soon to exit. We barely knew each other at that point. But we found ourselves in a Fellowship now that seemed providential, while also being deeply painful. I wrote this piece in the midst of that deep turmoil in our hearts, simply to seek to encourage us with the realization that maybe our painful partings had been sovereignly ordained, and were less of the "end" that we felt, and more of a "beginning" that we could look forward to. And maybe, God was giving us in friendship to each other in a way we didn't even know we needed.

Naturally, writing in this format served this purpose well, but leaves much ambiguity when sharing more publicly to those who don't know all the details (some of whom have found in the essay a condescending tone that I never intended in its original readership, who of course all identified as "hobbits" who had changed locations, but not stature). I almost never shared it, but thought that I might when I realized others might find encouragement in it.

Trajectories That Led Me Out Of The Shire

So let me clarify the story in a more narratival fashion.

Reading The Lore Of The Dwarfs

Did I leave The Shire because I "read books from the wrong people?" The notion that such a thing is possible should in fact be a red flag that warns of walls erected where they shouldn't be. Anyone who is part of a group that teaches its members to "fear" influence from outside that group should look very carefully at what they are a part of. The gospel doesn't cower in fear from those who oppose it. The gospel doesn't fear confrontation with error - it seeks it out. The Great Commission is not to run and hide and protect biblical truth in a cave where no one can touch you - it is to take the truth into every nook and cranny of the world. And those nooks and crannies are necessarily filled with error. We don't run from engagement with outside ideas - we run to them. Actually, I read books from "outside the shire" before I ever entered the deeper areas of the Shire. One of the first biblical works I ever came across was Dan Wallace's "Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics." (My mom had purchased it to critique as heretical - but I loved it and kept it. I still have that copy). Using a Strong's Concordance (because I knew nothing else) I taught myself the Greek alphabet, and used Wallace as a "commentary" by looking up relevant passages in his Scripture index (naturally, much of his discussion was way over my head at that point). I was in my teens then.

While looking at Bible Colleges to attend, I took the inaugural "Hermeneutics" course being designed by my Pastor to replace the then current course at HBBC. We read Craig Blomberg's "Introduction to Biblical Interpretation," and it came at a time when my own heart was falling in love with Bible study. I assumed HBBC would be more of the same, and so I went as soon as I could. Blomberg had recommended Gordon Fee's work "How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth" and as a freshman entering Bible College I read Robinson's "Biblical Preaching" which also recommended Fee's work in one section. So I read Fee my freshman year. My sophomore year, I followed more wonderful footnotes from Fee's work to purchase William Mounce's magisterial Commentary on the Pastoral Epistles in the Word Biblical Commentary series. Over the next two years, I worked my way through the whole thing. I asked my first Greek teacher about Wallace (the standard intermediate grammar at the time) and BAGD (now BDAG, the standard advanced Greek Lexicon), and he told me to throw away BAGD ("it's German rationalism!") - I gave him a copy of Wallace - he was unfamiliar with it.

These things troubled me.

More troubling was that as I was reading, I was watching biblical scholars like Wallace, Mounce, Fee, and others, handle the Word of God with a deep respect and an academic integrity that was breathtaking. And it made the study that I was seeing in classes, in chapels, and throughout the school look childish by comparison. It was ironic - we claimed to be the only ones who "really took the Bible seriously" and opposed them (sometime even naming those men) as enemies of the Bible. But they were fighting real battles with passion against skeptics like Bart Ehrman, the most well-known Skeptic in North America, who was leading thousands to denounce the faith - and no one in my school even knew who he was.

We were instead fighting *against* the men who were fighting *for* the faith.

This trajectory went on for a long time at the back of my mind. And it started before I ever got a "Fundamentalist education."

So in that sense, yes, you are correct in your assessment - it was through reading books from outside the Shire that my mind was opened to the world beyond the hobbit abode. And it is usually the case that "strange customs" that cannot withstand serious scrutiny or open dialogue often resort to building Shire-like walls to protect themselves from outside influences. They propagate their beliefs by censuring anything that would challenge those beliefs.

Growing Engagement With The Biblical Texts

But there were several trajectories taking place in my heart at once. One of the others, and the one that ultimately led me "out" was that I too was studying the Bible. And as I repeatedly came to the "proof texts" that we commonly used to support our unique "distinctives" (not the "Baptist Distinctives," but the things that truly distinguished us from those outside our Shire), I came again and again, dozens of times over, to say, "huh - that Bible passage, studied well in its context according to the author's intent, actually doesn't say that. Oh well - I'm sure the other ones do say that." This trajectory too continued for years. Ever growing, and making me realize that the so called "biblical foundations" for the distintives that had erected a "wall" between us and Evangelicalism were increasingly, to my realization, less and less biblical.

So, on that trajectory, the Bible was the sole and only book that took me out of fundamentalism. I followed it and it alone out of the Shire.

And I mean that.

A Growing Love For The Gospel

A third trajectory that took place, and the one that broke the camels back, so to speak, was my increasing passion for the Gospel. I came to love it. I came to realize that it wasn't just for lost people as a way to get saved - it was for saved people as the deepest truth of our lives and sanctification. I read "The Gospel As Center" by Carson and Keller, and was deeply moved by its passion for the Gospel. I became obsessed with the Gospel, and realized that the understanding of the Gospel as our "first of all" truth was writ large all over Scripture - I just hadn't seen it before. Thus, my faith came to be totally reshaped. Whereas before, all truths I believed were equally important, now, there was a hierarchy of truths. The Resurrection of Jesus was most important. By far. Everything else was less important. By far.

And this gave me a courage I had never known. I came to realize that all of the things that had always troubled me could be critically examined, instead of just pushed to the back of my mind. I could look at them all with a deep honesty and ask, "Is this really true?" I had not ever been brave enough to *really* do that before (however much I told myself I had tested my beliefs, I had not really, because believing something else had not been a true option).

But the resurrection gave me courage. And because the Resurrection was now the ground of my faith, if it turned out that those other things weren't true, I would be ok. If everything else I had ever been taught turned out to be wrong, Jesus was till alive. And that was enough. It was *more* than enough. So I looked at my beliefs with an honesty that I had never examined my beliefs with before.

I came away still believing in the doctoral statement of SWBC. It was the statement I had been reared on (the BBFI-modified form of the 1831 New Hampshire Baptist Confession). And it was so solid to me. And still is. But I came away realizing that all of the other "distinctives" I had believed and taught just wouldn't hold up. They were patently unbiblical. And as I started looking more closely at the materials that had taught them to me, I was ashamed of myself. There was a rampant mishandling of Scripture. There was an often blatantly dishonest misrepresentation of the secondary sources relevant for each area of study, and usually a total ignorance of primary sources relevant to each field.

I had to abandon beliefs that I now knew were not true.

Perhaps the first of these for me was what I had been taught about the KJV. I had been blatantly lied to by authors of books I had read supporting "the KJV" position. And this became clear in a hundred different ways. (I spelled out here at length the details of why I no longer believe that "the King James Bible is the preserved Word of God for the English-Speaking people," or anything like the statement of my alma mater on the issue. The document is a little rough around the edges, since I've not since had much time to edit and proof-read it, but most of the data at least is there, for anyone who might find it helpful.) Shortly, similar things became clear about most of the other "distinctives" I had held.

Credo House Of Theology

An additional trajectory at this point in my life was "Credo House." I explained some of that trajectory here. It has been "blamed" by some as "the reason" that I "changed." That is somewhat silly. I came to hold at points quite different positions than those its founders hold. It was just a place to peek outside the Shire. This could have happened as I kept reading. It could have happened at a Seminary. It could have happened as I met more people. It was just a place to connect the hungry mind with good resources. But what it did do was give me better education. I set in a textual criticism course with Dan Wallace, and was able to talk at length with him. I had been taught my whole life he was a "bad guy" opposing the authority of Scripture. In reality, he was doing as much as anyone alive to defend its inspiration and authority. I set in a course on the Historic Reliability of the Gospels with Craig Blomberg. He was passionate to defend the gospels, the inspiration, and the historical reliability of the Bible. These were, for me, moments of Providence, as God let me meet men who had become some of my greatest heroes. And they removed the "vilification" that Neo-Fundamentalism so often casts on all who are outside the Shire. These were some of the most godly and Christlike men I had ever met, who loved and knew the Bible like no on in the Shire. I took the "Resurrection" course with Gary Habermass, and the Gospel grew even more important in my life.

Convergence

And so, as all these trajectories converged, I changed. I know, "Change" is a four-letter phrase in fundamentalism. But I don't see change as the enemy - I see truth as the goal. And so I did change.
I changed what I believed. I still held to the same doctrinal statement I had used as a teen. But the "extras" that had become so important had fallen apart for me. I explained that to my pastor, and he removed me from service in the church because of it. I shortly thereafter (despite the "gag order" placed on me that I held to for a time) spelled out more publicly what those areas were where I had changed (I shared those again here). I hope that can clarify what the article probably left vague. I don't demand that anyone else leave the Shire. God can work in it, just as He works powerfully outside of it (He certainly doesn't only, or primarily, work inside of it). Everyone must follow Jesus on their own journey. I only can recount mine, in the breathless pursuit of Truth, and of the Risen Christ.

[EDIT - While the next paragraph's weren't a part of the original series of comments/replies that I initially pasted into this post, they still so well capture my ultimate reason for leaving the Shire, written by me while I was still in it, and so I paste them here. Their original context and setting can be read here. It seems fitting to me to end on the note of words from my past self, echoing from within The Shire itself, at a time when "a great desire to follow Bilbo" was flaming up in my own heart.

> This leads me to another deeply related thought. I am bothered by the attitude that I experience more and more surrounding all of these issues.
>
> I believe that we should be able to hold the truth up without putting people down.
>
> I believe that we should be able to hold to our own distinctives in a way that is humble about our own shortcomings, and is willing to engage in conversation with orthodox believers who disagree with us, rather than with an attitude that is arrogantly unconcerned with what others think, and exclusive of all who refuse to submit to our thinking. I am frankly saddened by the attitude I have seen so often in myself and others. When we say of a place like Life Church "they are not helping people" [as I had been told in a recent meeting as a reproof of some positive words I had said about them] and then add in a parenthesis, in small type, "sure, they've helped a lot of people come to Jesus" that bothers me. Shouldn't "gospel" be in bold, and "distinction" be the parenthesis? When we suggest in our preaching that all Charismatics use "finger guns" and are possibly even under demonic influence [a claim made in a recent sermon on Acts 19 that universally condemned all charismatics], and give no credence to serious, orthodox continuationist theologians like a Gordon Fee, a D. A. Carson, a Wayne Grudem, a Craig Keener, or a Sam Storms, that bothers me. When we say XXXX can't be a member of our church, despite his begging to remain a member, because he landed in a slightly different point just a few notches from our own on the spectrum of orthodox soteriology [referring to a friend who had just been removed, not only from service, but from church membership, because he was "leaning towards" calvinism, despite the fact that our doctrinal statement, based on the New Hampshire Confession, had intentionally sought to be subscribable to by those from both positions], that bothers me. When I hear that parents think I shouldn't be teaching our teens because I might have come to a slightly different relationship methodology [I had publicly mentioned some concerns with "I Kissed Dating Goodbye" and its teachings, and some parents had apparently called for my dismissal over it], that bothers me.
>
> Is there absolutely no liberty to ever think? Does being on the "inside" demand slavish and unquestioning adherence to every one of our traditions on every tiny issue? Does questioning any small point of teaching immediately cast one into outer darkness? Is our theology really an "all or nothing" construct, where you accept the whole thing, on every tiny point, or you have basically joined the forces of Satan? If so, am I really comfortable living in that small of a box?
>
> I fear that if we continue to refuse to allow differences on these non-essentials, and so many like them, then every thinking person in our movement will eventually come to see an inherent inconsistency between the Bible we say we love, and some small area where we have misrepresented it. If these misrepresentations can never be challenged, I suspect these thinking people will simply leave, one by one, and go somewhere where they have the liberty to love God both with open Bibles and open minds.
>
> If I can share what I think would be a "CIT" [Central Idea Of The Text - kind of a shorthand for "the main idea"] of every single one of these issues, which I will try to spell out in letters to follow, it is this;

our particular (and relatively minor) distinctions have been over-emphasized at the cost of the unifying gospel of Jesus Christ.

I think this is why it bothers me so much. Perhaps it is an outplaying of our ecclesiology in which we emphatically deny any form of a "universal" body of Christ. Perhaps it is an isolationism that initially seemed wise but has now given a nod to the monastic. Perhaps it is an idolatrous re-imagining of Jesus in our own image so that He is for us and against anyone not like us. Perhaps it is simply such a history of separation from larger Christianity that we now have effectively forgotten that God's people are bigger than our small little corner of fundamentalism, and so is the God who accepts us both.

Whatever has sparked this misplaced emphasis, it bothers me on some deep level that we have made the things that divide us from other believers more important than the basic gospel confession that unites us. Distinction is good, and I think even important at times, but when it overshadows the fellowship of the gospel that unites all true believers, something has gone terribly awry.

The gospel itself has become somehow less important to us when that which separates us from other believers warrants a bold heading, and the gospel that binds us together is relegated to a mere footnote.

The gospel itself has become somehow less important to us when that which separates us from other believers warrants a bold heading, and the gospel that binds us together is relegated to a mere footnote. (Tweet This)

I fear that we have sacrificed the fellowship of the gospel on the altar of ecclesiastical distinctions.]

Thanks so much (I know that's a lot for an answer!), and I hope this can be a help.

Blessings!

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