The Lord Of The Rings And My Departure From The Shire

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[Note - This brief essay was written several years ago for a handful of friends who were reflecting together on the fact that we found ourselves increasingly ostracized and pushed out of the Fundamentalism in which we had all either been raised, or had at least of long time been a part. We each shared a history in Fundamentalism, and a love for LOTR. Apart from these twin similarities, I'm not sure these brief musings would even make sense. But we took encouragement in it, and I thought I'd share it here as well, in order that perhaps someone else might be encouraged as well.]

Concerning Hobbits

The Lord Of The Rings is, of course, a book "concerned largely with hobbits, and from its pages a reader may discover much of their character and a little of their history." As I read it through now, it increasingly strikes me how much the people I have grown up around resemble the simple little Halflings described by Tolkien. There is a beautiful simplicity to these people, and an uncomplicated nature. "They do not and did not understand or like machines more complicated than a forge-bellows, a water-mill, or a hand-loom." Ambition is rare. Simple-mindedness is common. The humble life of a gardener is normal.

When I first fell in love with Bible study and exegesis, I sought out a Bible College, seeking to take my own learning further. This is simply what one does in the circles I was raised in if he has any inkling of love for Bible study. As I have interacted with students, teachers, and preachers in that movement, I have found a common theme. As with Hobbits, "a love of learning (other than genealogical lore) was far from general among them..." Thus I spent eight years pursuing serious biblical studies in an environment surrounded by people who were, ironically, doing very little serious Bible study themselves.

Nonetheless, there were occasional exceptions. “A love of learning (other than genealogical lore) was far from general among them, but there remains still a few in the older families who studied their own books, and even gathered reports of old times and distant lands...” Few indeed have been those I have chanced upon who truly desire deeper learning of Scripture, history, and theology, and such desire has usually sparked an instant friendship between us. A love of the Bible, and a passion for studying it deeply has been the foundation of so many of the “Fellowships” I now count most dear to me. But such academic passions are nonetheless rare among hobbits. This does not mean of course that hobbits don’t read. Rather, it speaks to the peculiar type of books which they prefer, and the requirement that such books be entirely “right” (interpreted as, “agreeing with my position”) before they be read, and above all that no book be read which might challenge the thinking of a hobbit. “Hobbits delighted in such things, if they were accurate: they liked to have books filled with things that they already knew, set out fair and square with no contradictions.” Such books stocked my own shelves for years, and I fear they are the books that fill the bookshelves of most in modern day Fundamentalism.

I am reminded of the distinction that Roger Olsen made between Fundamentalism in its origins, as a movement formed around basic theological truths, and what Fundamentalism has today become. Olsen describes this transformation, noting;

> “While originally seeking simply to preserve classical protestant theology and defeat liberal accommodation to modern thought, Fundamentalism ended up developing a new form of protestant theology that was rationalistic, separationistic, and absolutistic. That is, full blown fundamentalist theology tended to develop absolute systems of internally coherent doctrinal propositions that must either be accepted entirely without question or rejected totally. Anyone who questioned even one point of a fundamentalist protestant doctrinal system could be accused of heresy if not apostasy.”

Fundamentalism began as a desire to defend the major truths of the faith, (known as the “essentials,” or “fundamentals”), while allowing liberty in the “secondary” issues. But it morphed into something altogether different. The development continued to the point that Fundamentalism became a system that was more known for what it was *against* than what it was *for*. Things like a demand for total abstinence from alcohol, peculiar "standards" of dress, peculiar attitudes towards a particular 17th century translation of the Bible, fierce rejection of Calvinistic soteriology as heresy, and the required total rejection of contemporary (Christian!) music trends became the true hallmarks of the modern Fundamentalism I came to know (what might be better called "Neo-Fundamentalism"). "Separation," not just from sin, but from other believers, simply because they disagreed, became the single most important practice. While the rest of the Evangelical world waged real battles against liberalism, agnosticism, and the new atheism, Fundamentalism retreated into an increasingly shrinking corner of the world. Separation even from broader Evangelicalism became a normal defining mark of a “true fundamentalist.” This was an ironic twist considering the fact that Evangelicals were generally defending each of the “fundamentals” from which the movement had originally earned its name.

Eventually, Neo-Fundamentalist theology was flattened out until no one point of doctrine was more important than any other. A pre-tribulational perspective on the timing of the rapture was as certain as belief in the deity of Jesus (yes, some pastors in the movement actually say that). Believing in the verbal "preservation" and inerrency of the original language texts behind the KJV was equated with belief in the inspiration and inerrancy of Scripture itself. Acceptance of contemporary worship music clearly meant the abandonment of a pursuit of holiness.

No doubt the emphasis on minors was well intentioned, but it didn’t have the desired effect. It turns out that you can’t really major on the minors and still claim to believe in the importance of the majors. Over emphasizing the non-essentials didn’t make the non-essentials more important; rather, it made the entire concept of “essentials” disappear altogether. At the end of the day, the “Fundamentals” became eclipsed by all of the minor "not-so-fundamentals." In this modern system, total conformity is the name of the game. Every church in this system must have virtually the same style of worship, the same kind of preaching, the same basic governmental structure, the same English Bible version, and the same attitudes towards almost all theological, political, and ethical issues. Chances are, if you walk into such a church today, almost everyone will even be dressed essentially the same. What started as a desire for conformity in only the most basic of Christian confessions has come to mean conformity in almost every conceivable area. Olsen notes of modern Fundamentalism that, "Little room is left for opinion or interpretation. All true Christians will think exactly alike on virtually every point of doctrine, lifestyle, sociopolitical thought and virtually everything else."

This was Fundamentalism (or Neo-Fundamentalism) as I came to it. As Tolkien notes, we surely practiced some "...peculiar words and customs..." though it is hard to realize this while still a hobbit who has never seen the outside world. For the hobbits generally never see things from the perspective of the world outside their own little boundaries. They run their own institutions, appoint their own leaders from within and generally mingle little with the outside world. "While there was still a king they were in name his subjects, but they were, in fact, ruled by their own chieftains and meddled not at all with events in the world outside." Hobbits tend rather to cluster in small groups, and to carefully protect whom they fellowship with, separating from one another over the tiniest of differences. "All Hobbits were, in any case, clannish and reckoned up their relationships with great care." This "separation" from any dissenting voice protects them, they suppose, from outside influence, and ensures the continuation of conformity. The Hobbits truly are a sheltered and simple people. They would not themselves consider this a bad thing in fact. They find great comfort in their isolation. They find a kind of special safety in being entirely separated from the larger world, where there are people different than their own, and things strange to their sight. They prefer rather the isolated countryside. They each, quite literally, and quite happily, live in a hole in the ground. They are commonly known to the rest of the world as "hole-dwellers." The isolated community they have forged for themselves they call the Shire.

The Shire

The history of the Shire is as instructive as that of Fundamentalism;

> "The Hobbits named it the Shire, as the region of the authority of the Thain, and a district of well-ordered business; and there in that pleasant corner of the world they plied their well-ordered business of living, and they heeded less and less the world outside where dark things moved, until they came to think that peace and plenty were the rule in Middle-earth and the right of all sensible folk. They forgot or ignored what little they had ever known of the Guardians, and of the labours of those that made possible the long peace of the Shire. They were, in fact, sheltered, but they had long ceased to remember it."

Desire though they might to protect themselves by shutting out the world outside, Fundamentalism would do well to heed Gildor's words, "But it is not your own Shire,' said Gildor. 'Others dwelt here before hobbits were; and others will dwell here again when hobbits are no more. The wide world is all about you: you can fence yourselves in, but you cannot for ever fence it out.'"

Of course, there once were some connections with the broader Evangelical world. Once, in the distant past, it was commonplace to make friends and acquaintances with Christians outside of their particular theological orientation. But such friendships have in Neo-Fundamentalism become more and more rare over the years. The Shire into which I was born had long since condemned such relationships. Now, such people are generally feared. In fact, even those who associate with those on the outside might be feared, though they are themselves still part of Neo-Fundamentalism. "Secondary separation" is the inevitable product of such a bent towards isolation. For, "as the days of the Shire lengthened they spoke less and less with the Elves, and grew afraid of them, and distrustful of those that had dealings with them;

and the Sea became a word of fear among them, and a token of death, and they turned their faces away from the hills in the west."

As this isolation has increased over the years, some have refused to be so bound, and have simply left the Shire. I've seen others leave, and perhaps it could be said of me, like Frodo, that, "half unknown to himself, the regret that he had not gone with Bilbo was steadily growing." I suspect there has always been in me a desire to step outside of the Shire and see the world beyond. At different times, when reading books from those outside our groups, it was as if, "...as he was speaking a great desire to follow Bilbo flamed up in his heart." Perhaps this spark has been in me for some time. It flared up in my heart from the first time I read "How To Read The Bible For All Its Worth" as a freshman in undergrad, and realized that an egalitarian, Pentecostal scholar could read the Bible far better than anyone in the Shire was reading it. Oh, they could condemn the Gordon Fee's of the world, for sure. I will never forget one preacher exploding with passionate disagreement at the positive way I had quoted Fee in my pretend "Thesis" which he critiqued. His response is of course rare, for most in the Shire wouldn't even know who Fee was, and if they did, would be far less kind to him and his views. They can condemn such authors, certainly. There is no shortage of that. But the hobbits cannot begin to match their exegetical, historical, and theological skill. Great battles have been raged by such heroes for years in the Evangelical world, fighting the true enemies of the Faith, but hobbits are not generally even equipped to fight on those battle fields. They rather mostly squabble among themselves, and as those wars rage, "little of all this, of course, reached the ears of ordinary hobbits."

I think this yearning has flared up every time I've read such books. Perhaps I've always yearned for the true excitement that such adventurers face. Maybe I have always longed to join those heroes in battle. Their stories had come to me so far only as tales of a far distant land and people, but maybe even then I desired to explore. Maybe some of us always knew we were called to such adventures, but we didn't want to raise issues, cause problems, and risk division. Maybe, we have been as silent as Gandalf when he said, "I let the matter rest, watching and waiting only, as we have too often done."

I think some perceptive friends have always known that I couldn't really stay. A few kind words have come over the years from those with watchful eyes who have admonished me, "We can usually guess what you are thinking. I knew Bilbo, too. To tell the truth, I have been watching you rather closely ever since he left. I thought you would go after him sooner or later; indeed I expected you to go sooner, and lately we have been very anxious."

The last few months have of course meant much painful soul searching. It has been as if I always knew that some day things would come to a head, and I would be forced to leave. I remember speaking with close friends years ago (during my freshman year of HBBC) predicting such a needed departure. We could tell even then that some day a division would be forced upon us, and we would find ourselves unwelcome. We always thought such a time far distant. But now, circumstances outside our own control have forced upon us the present distress. As I've taken steps further and further to the edge of the Shire, I've sensed on the one hand a growing anticipation of the adventure that might lie outside the simple bounds of my upbringing. Yet on the other hand, I have sensed a growing pain as I realize more and more the hurt that leaving may cause myself and those I love. The realization has struck me that, "...flying from the Shire would mean more painful partings than merely saying farewell to the familiar comforts of Bag End." And yet, as I think on what my own destiny might be, and what my future might hold, I find encouragement as I hear the words of Merry ring in my ears, "... you are miserable, because you don't know how to say good-bye. You meant to leave the Shire, of course. But danger has come on you sooner that you expected, and now you are making up your mind to go at once. And you don't want to. We are very sorry for you." A handful have tried to persuade me to stay. I understand their pleas, but I cannot heed them. "'I must go,' said Frodo. 'It cannot be helped, dear friends. It is wretched for us all, but it is no use your trying to keep me.'"

And thus, a sort of steady determination has set in upon me. There is a growing sense that things truly have fallen out according to a plan I never could have seen. Gandalf mentions that even in his own absence, the Shire was never truly lacking such direction, and truly, even in my loneliest moments, my life in the Shire was never without it. "Even though when I was far away there has never been a day when the Shire has not been guarded by watchful eyes." The hints of this Providence in my own life bring me great hope. I feel I might answer a question like Frodo asked of Sam, when he had to come to terms with whether it was really curiosity and desire for adventure that pulled him from the Shire, or whether it was something far more important, and far more Sovereign;

> "'Do you feel any need to leave the Shire now – now that your wish to see [the Elves] has come true already?' he asked. 'Yes, sir. I don't know how to say it, but after last night I feel different. I seem to see ahead, in a kind of way. I know we are going to take a very long road, into darkness; but I know I can't turn back. It isn't to see Elves now, nor dragons, nor mountains, that I want – I don't rightly know what I want: but I have something to do before the end, and it lies ahead, not in the Shire. I must see it through, sir, if you understand me.'"

The Fellowship

The more this sense of finality and purpose sets in upon me, the more I fear to walk this "very long road into darkness" alone. The more I face such fear, the more grateful I become for the friendships we have each forged together. I plan to heed the advice, given Frodo, "Do not go alone. Take such friends as are trusty and willing." I feel so much that our own providential friendship has been the forming of a Fellowship in its own right. I feel strongly that there is no accident in our coming together. I feel that the trials we have each faced have been our own "Council of Elrond," and have, especially over the last several months, formed among us each our own bond. I hear Elrond's ominous words describing the forming of our own Fellowship, "'You have done well to come,' said Elrond. 'You will hear today all that you need in order to understand the purposes of the Enemy. There is naught that you can do, other than to resist, with hope or without it. But you do not stand alone. You will learn that your trouble is the trouble of all the western world. The Ring! What shall we do with the Ring, the least of rings, the trifle that Sauron fancies? That is the doom that we must deem.'"

> "That is the purpose for which you are called hither. Called, I say, though I have not called you to me, strangers from distant lands. You have come, and are here met, in this very nick of time, by chance as it may seem. Yet it is not so. Believe rather that it is so ordered that we, who sit here, and none others, must now find counsel for the peril of the world."

Of course this doesn't mean that any of us could ever be asked to walk the same path all the way. Each of us must take our own unique path, as we are led. As Elrond notes of each of us who go freely as companions, "You may tarry, or come back, or turn aside into other paths, as chance allows. The further you go, the less easy it will be to withdraw; yet no oath or bond is laid on you to go further than you will. For you do not yet know the strength of your hearts, and you cannot foresee what each may meet upon the road." I will walk the road with my companions for as far as our journey will take us together. No doubt we will face points when we each must decide how much further we will go. Just as the Fellowship faces at Lothlorein a choice, so we too must each decide how far we will travel down the path together.

The Road

There is, apparently, a Road that leads directly out of the Shire, and into the great world outside. It is upon this Road that the small band of ordinary hobbits set their feet when they at last decided to depart from the Shire. When at last this ragtag band takes its last step on the ground of the Shire, Merry pronounces upon them what they have each perhaps feared, and yet also longed for. "'There!' said Merry. 'You have left the Shire, and are now outside, and on the edge of the Old Forest.'"

I feel that such a pronouncement has been unalterably made now about my own life. I have, in some ways unintentionally, but certainly irreversibly, left Fundamentalism. I feel this quite certainly now. To be clear, I have not left Fundamentalism in its original sense, and certainly not in any doctrinal departure from its origins (all of which I still affirm), but rather in its modern form, or what I have called "Neo-Fundamentalism." I have stepped out of what Fundamentalism has become, never to return, and hopefully never to look back. I have set myself upon a road perilous, frightening, and yet full of the hope of adventure. I confess to being at times afraid, and crying out like Frodo, "But where shall I find courage... That is what I chiefly need." Yet I hear the assurance that, "Courage is found in unlikely places." I wish that I knew where the Road will take us, but I do not. Even the wise Elrond would confess, "I can see very little of your road; and how your task is to be achieved I do not know."

And so we have set ourselves on this Road, and taken up our own Quest, and we press ever on. "'At least for awhile,' said Elrond. 'The road must be trod, but it will be very hard. And neither strength nor wisdom will carry us far upon it. This quest may be attempted by the weak with as much hope as the strong. Yet such is often the course of deeds that move the wheel of the world: small hands do them because they must, while the eyes of the great are elsewhere.'"

What put us upon this path? How did our journeys begin? Perhaps we each would answer in a different way. Maybe we all set out of our own doors and joined the path at different points. But I suspect we could each think back to the beginnings of our own quest, and hear encouragement in the reminiscence of Frodo about words of Bilbo now in the distant past;

> "'It's a dangerous business, Frodo, going out your door,' he used to say. 'You step out into the road, and if you don't keep your feet, there is no knowing where you may be swept off to.' Do you realize that this is the very path that goes to Mirkwood, and that if you let it, it might take you to the Lonely Mountain or even further and to worse places?' He used to say that on the path outside the front door at Bag End, especially after he had been out for a long walk.'"

Perhaps, each of us, in our own way, on our own Quest, can begin to understand like Frodo, that our path was not chosen by us. It has been assigned to us by One far Greater. Surely nothing encourages us more than the realization that, as Gandalf enlightens Frodo, a Providence watches over each of us, and appoints to us our own Quest. May we find encouragement in the truth of which his words remind us, "Behind that [Bilbo finding the Ring] there was something else at work, beyond any design of the Ring-maker. I can put it no plainer than by saying that Bilbo was meant to find the Ring, and not by its maker. In which case you also were meant to have it. And that may be an encouraging thought." As Elrond realizes something of Frodo's grand destiny at the Council, may we each begin to understand a little more clearly our own. "'If I understand aright all that I have heard,' he said, 'I think that this task is appointed for you Frodo; and that if you do not find a way, no one will. This is the hour of the Shire-folk, when they arise from their quiet fields to shake the towers and counsels of the Great.'" Perhaps it was always planned that from the simple Hobbits of the Shire would rise a few small Hobbits not content to stay within its bounds. Perhaps it was always planned that these few small hobbits would rise to far greater ends than their beginnings seemed to warrant.

Perhaps it was always planned that we should be these hobbits.

May we be valiant to arise from our quiet fields of ease! May we be courageous to fight the battles that are assigned to us! May we shake the towers and counsels of the Great! May we each take up our own Quest, and please the One who has chosen it for us!

Let us walk the Road that has been set before us. Let us show courage and bravery. Let us never fear or shrink back from danger. If foes assail, press on still. If the Enemy attacks, do not falter. If friends desert you, do not be dissuaded or turned back. Why? Because we are convinced that the One who is most truly and fully the Lord of *All* Rings walks this Road with us. He has laid the path ahead. But more encouraging than that is this realization – as we travel this Road, He is in fact walking with us every single step of the way. He was the One who placed us in the Shire, and put us among the halflings. He is the one who made us hobbits. He is the One who brought a Quest to our doors which we would never have chosen for ourselves. He is the One who pulled us out that door, and set us on the Road which, for me at least, could only ever take me out of the Shire. I will follow Him wherever He leads, and walking this Road, which He directs, is the life to which I now commit myself.

When will it end?
How far will it go?
How long will I walk it?
What adventures will it bring?
What dangers will I face?
I can answer none of these questions.

And that is Ok.

For I know the One who walks this Road with me.

"The Road goes ever on and on
Down from the door where it began.
Now far ahead the Road has gone,
And I must follow, if I can,
Pursuing it with weary feet,
Until it joins some larger way,
Where many paths and errands meet,
And wither then? I cannot say."

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