

Tolkien and the Adventure of Discipleship: Imaginative Resources for a Missional Ecclesiology

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Abstract

Ecclesiology seems to be an area of perennial struggle for evangelicals. In the current Canadian context this struggle is intensified by the crumbling of Christendom and the pressures of late modernity. This essay argues that the Middle-earth literature of J.R.R. Tolkien (*The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*) provides an important resource for imagining a missional ecclesiology that transcends the strictures of a Christendom mindset and faithfully resists the bifurcating logic of late-modernity. Leveraging the motif of the adventure of discipleship allows for the theological recovery of the unity of the identity and mission of the church and provides suggestive pathways towards the cultivation of a renewed evangelical ecclesiological vision.

“The world is changed. I feel it in the water. I feel it in the earth. I smell it in the air. Much that once was, is lost, for none now live who remember it.”¹ These words pronounced by Lady Galadriel at the beginning of Peter Jackson’s film adaptation of *The Lord of the Rings* could also be appropriated as an expression of the uncertainty experienced by Canadian pastors and church leaders as they are confronted by the end of Christendom. This confounding set of circumstances has caused resignation and despair among some pastors and Christian leaders. Others have responded by frantically scrambling for the newest program or method that promises to reinvigorate their flagging congregations, while others have been driven back to the theological foundations of the church in order to re-consider questions surrounding ecclesial identity and mission. Out of this latter group has emerged a fruitful dialogue known as “the missional church conversation.”² However, the conversation has encountered several formidable obstacles that have per-

1 *The Fellowship of the Ring*, directed by Peter Jackson (Alliance Atlantis, 2001).

2 The seminal work being: Darrell L. Guder, ed. *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998).

haps limited its impact upon local congregational life. While Christendom may be dying, the Christendom paradigm retains a voracious appetite for assimilating all thoughts and practices it encounters with the result that the term “missional” is now threatened with banality.³ In some contexts the term “missional” has been separated from its theological underpinnings and simply serves as a sexy adjective connected to the latest fad in church programming. In other contexts the term “missional” is simply used as a synonym for “outreach” or initiatives aimed at societal well-being. In both of these cases the term has been domesticated by the bifurcating logic of modernity that unnaturally divides church life into compartments and then pits those compartments against one another. That the term “missional” should suffer such a fate should not be entirely surprising, for paradigm shifts, like the one envisioned in “the missional church conversation,” require the transformation of the imagination. However, in its early years the “missional church” conversation has, in the assessment of one of the movement’s founding voices, “remained a relatively theoretic and abstract academic conversation about the Church.”⁴ The academic and intellectual dialogue needs to be supported by proposals with imaginative purchase. This essay is intended to serve as a contribution towards that end. It is my contention that J.R.R. Tolkien’s fantasy novels *The Hobbit* and the trilogy comprising *The Lord of the Rings* provide imaginative resources for developing a missional ecclesiology organized around the motif of the adventure of discipleship, which transcends the strictures of a Christendom mentality and the bifurcating pressures of modernity.⁵

The Bible presents to us the story of a people’s journey with their God.⁶ It is a journey made possible and continuously sustained by the God who comes to us in our weakness, bridging the gulf of our estrangement from Him and overcoming all of the roadblocks erected by our sin, in order to draw us into the Triune life of love. There is dynamism inherent to this life into which we have been drawn. Some of the earliest Christians referred to themselves as people of “the Way” (Acts 9:2).⁷ In his letter to the Romans, the apostle Paul describes Chris-

3 In a recent interview, Darrell Guder, one the founding voices in “the missional church conversation,” maintains, “I always say that the term ‘missional’ became a cliché with the speed of summer lightning.” “A Conversation with Darrell Guder,” *Missional Voice Newsletter* (Oct 2014): 12.

4 Allen Roxburgh, “The Missional Church,” *Missional Voice* (Oct 2014): 8; previously published in *Theology Matters* (Sept/Oct 2004) and *Theological Digest and Outlook* (Mar 2005).

5 Those interested in engaging in extended theological reflection upon Tolkien’s Middle-earth literature are encouraged to consult the following insightful and engaging works: Ralph C. Wood, *The Gospel According to Tolkien: Visions of the Kingdom in Middle Earth* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2003) and Fleming Rutledge, *The Battle for Middle-earth: Tolkien’s Divine Design in the Lord of the Rings* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004).

6 As a result, the use of the journey as a metaphor for the Christian life has had a long and distinguished history in the Christian theological tradition. Notable examples include references to Christians as *peregrini* (Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, 1.11), *viatores* (Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 2-2.18.4) and pilgrims (John Bunyan, *The Pilgrim’s Progress*).

7 Unless otherwise indicated, all biblical quotations will be from the NIV.

tians as being “led by the Spirit” (Rom 8:14). He also exhorts the Galatians to “walk in the Spirit” (Gal 5:16).⁸ Paul’s imagery resonates with the experience of the people of Israel who were led by the Lord through the wilderness to the Promised Land by a cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night (Exod 13:21-22). The Gospels themselves take the form of extended travelogues, as Jesus breathlessly leads his harried and bewildered disciples throughout Israel from one town to another, until they ultimately reach Jerusalem. In a sense the Gospels seem to be telling us that to be a disciple is to be on the road with Jesus. Or in the wonderfully provocative formulation of the theologian Stanley Hauerwas, “Christianity: it’s not a religion, it’s an adventure!”⁹

The adventure of discipleship begins with a call. Disciples do not appoint themselves. Dietrich Bonhoeffer goes to great lengths to emphasize this point in his treatment of Luke 9:57-62 in *Discipleship*.¹⁰ This passage, in which Jesus turns away three potential disciples, is almost incomprehensible to us in our Canadian context where many churches are desperate for new blood in order to pay the bills and keep their doors open. Yet in this passage Jesus seems to be on some type of anti-membership campaign. Bonhoeffer highlights how the first potential new member sought to appoint himself as a disciple, the second heard the call of the Lord, but then attempted to set his own terms for discipleship, and finally the third attempted to both appoint himself as a disciple and set the terms for his discipleship. Of the latter Bonhoeffer says, “It is obvious at this moment that discipleship stops being discipleship. It becomes a human program, which I can organize according to my own judgment and can justify rationally and ethically.”¹¹

One chooses to go on a vacation, but one is summoned to participate in a quest. Christianity is an adventure, but as Hauerwas insightfully remarks, “it’s an adventure we didn’t know we wanted to be on.”¹² This is quite apparent in rela-

8 Translation mine. The pilgrimage motif inherent in the Greek phrase πνεύματι περιπατεῖτε is somewhat obscured by the translation, “live by the Spirit,” offered by the NIV and NRSV.

9 Stanley Hauerwas, “Christianity: It’s Not a Religion: It’s an Adventure (1991),” in *The Hauerwas Reader*, ed. John Berkman and Michael Cartwright (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001), 522-35. The use of the language of “adventure” in connection with Christianity undoubtedly has a type of apologetic purpose for Hauerwas. In the de-storied context of modern Western society, people are languishing on account of having nothing to die, and hence, live for. This is perhaps accounts for part of the appeal of radical Islamic groups for young men in contemporary Western contexts. The apologetic potential of “adventure” for reaching men has been recognized by some popular Christian writers, but their construal of the Christian adventure seems to rest largely on culturally-conditioned accounts of gendered experience than on the material content of the Gospel itself. For example, see John Eldredge, *Wild at Heart: Discovering the Secret of a Man’s Soul* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2001).

10 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, ed. Geoffrey B. Kelly and John D. Godsey, trans. Barbara Green and Reinhard Krauss (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 60-61.

11 Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, 61.

12 Hauerwas, *The Hauerwas Reader*, 531.

tion to the hobbits that stand at the center of Tolkien's stories. Hobbits are by nature simple and unassuming people. They value stability and routine, and enjoy the simple pleasures of life. In fact, when the wizard Gandalf first encountered Bilbo and shared with him how much difficulty he was having finding someone in the Shire to go on an adventure, Bilbo replied, "I should think so—in these parts! We are plain quiet folk and I have no use for adventures. Nasty disturbing uncomfortable things! Make you late for dinner! I can't think what anybody sees in them."¹³ Yet for some reason, Bilbo is appointed by Gandalf as the burglar who will steal the precious jewel, known as the Arkenstone, right out from under the nose of the terrifying dragon, Smaug. In a similar way, at the beginning of *The Lord of the Rings*, it falls to Bilbo's nephew Frodo to carry the One Ring of Power to Mordor for the purpose of throwing it into the fires of Mount Doom—a fool's errand for which no sane person would ever volunteer.¹⁴ However, we must remember that it was not Frodo's idea to volunteer for this dangerous mission, he had been called.

The intrusive call of God bursts onto the scene disrupting the lives of those who are called; setting them upon an adventure they didn't even know they wanted to be on. It has been this way since the beginning of the history of redemption. Old Abram was just minding his own business, sitting comfortably in his recliner reading the Chaldean Times, when all of a sudden the word of the Lord came to him. "Get up and go! Leave your country, your people, and your father's household and go to the land I will show you" (Gen 12:1). Peter, Andrew, James and John were busy shining up their lures and mending their nets in anticipation of another ordinary day of work on the lake, when the Master appeared, saying, "Come, follow me and I will make you fishers of men" (Matt 4:18-22). We can only imagine the dumbfounded look on old man Zebedee's face as he was left standing all by himself with nets in hand. Then there was the tax-collector Levi. Accountants are not generally known for their spontaneity or sense of adventure, but when the Lord walked by and issued the command, Levi leapt up and left his unbalanced ledgers behind (Mark 2:14).¹⁵

The adventure of discipleship begins with a call and, as it turns out, God does not seem to call the people that we might expect. Consider, for example, the biblical figures mentioned just a moment ago. Who would have pegged a senior citizen and his post-menopausal wife to be the parents of a mighty nation with descendents as numerous as the sand on the seashore? Or who would have figured that an unknown preacher from the backwoods of Galilee surrounded by an

13 J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Hobbit* (London: HarperCollins, 1993), 16.

14 J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Fellowship of the Ring* (London: HarperCollins, 2001), 60-61.

15 It has been brought to my attention that an influx of younger "adventurous accountants" is changing the face of the accounting profession. I hope they will excuse my playful employment of this old stereotype.

inner circle of twelve uneducated rednecks, outlaws, and a foreign collaborator for good measure, was the Messiah gathering around himself the reconstituted twelve tribes of Israel? The apostle Paul, himself a rather unusual choice for the office of apostle to the Gentiles, sheds light on God's peculiar *modus operandi* when he tells the Corinthians, "God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things—and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before him" (1 Cor 1:27-29).

By placing the humble, unassuming hobbits at the center of his stories, Tolkien signals that his imagination has been seized by this Gospel reality. Hobbits, often referred to as "Halflings" by the other inhabitants of Middle-earth on account of their diminutive stature, are the little ones of the world.¹⁶ Hobbits are barely mentioned and hardly ever noticed by the great and the powerful of Middle-earth. These little ones are the last creatures that one would suspect to be called to participate in a quest of such importance. The hobbit Frodo seemed to recognize this himself. When the wizard Gandalf informed Frodo that he had been called to destroy the Ring, the hobbit protested, claiming, "I am not made for perilous quests."¹⁷ Tolkien, himself, offers the following commentary on his work and the place of the hobbits within it: "And the world being after all full of strange creatures beyond count, these little people seemed of very little importance. But in the days of Bilbo, and of Frodo his heir, they suddenly became, by no wish of their own, both important and renowned, and troubled the counsels of the Wise and the Great."¹⁸

Reflecting upon the call of God which comes to the disciple, Bonhoeffer observes, "Everyone enters discipleship alone, but no one remains alone in discipleship. Those who dare to become single individuals trusting in the word are given the gift of church-community."¹⁹ In other words, we could say that while each individual must respond to the call to discipleship, the proper subject of the quest is the company of disciples. While Frodo has his own particular responsibility as the bearer of the Ruling Ring, he is never left alone. The quest to destroy the Ring in the fires of Mount Doom is shared by a Fellowship composed of hobbits, humans, an elf, a dwarf, and a wizard. The success of their mission depends upon the members of this unlikely Fellowship learning to trust and depend

16 Ralph C. Wood preached a sermon entitled, "Christians as the Little Ones, the Hobbits of the World" at Good Shepherd Community Church in Toronto, Canada, where I was, at the time, serving as a pastor. It has subsequently been published in *Preaching and Professing: Sermons by a Teacher Seeking to Proclaim the Gospel* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 92-99.

17 Tolkien, *Fellowship of the Ring*, 60.

18 Tolkien, prologue to *The Fellowship of the Ring*, 2.

19 Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, 99.

on one another. This seems like a relatively tall order in light of the natural suspicion that elves and dwarves have for one another, yet by the end of the quest the graceful elf Legolas and the rough and rugged dwarf Gimli have become best of friends.²⁰ Here in Tolkien's presentation of the Fellowship, we hear echoes of Paul's great exclamation, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal 3:28). In Christ, the enmity which separates humanity from God and hence human beings from one another has been overcome. The work of Jesus, the friend of sinners, creates a community of friends. One of the identifying marks of the church in the New Testament is *koinōnia*, a Greek word meaning sharing, mutual participation, communion, which is sometimes even translated as fellowship. The fact that an accomplished linguist like Tolkien would choose the word Fellowship to describe the company of travelling companions is surely no coincidence. The *koinōnia* shared amongst members of the Fellowship is set in stark relief by the figure of Gollum, one of the most memorable and loathsome characters to appear in Tolkien's books. Gollum, whose name is derived from the sound of his disgusting, gurgling cough, was once a hobbit, but he was pulled into the orbit of the Ruling Ring.²¹ Enslaved under the power of the Ring, Gollum suffered a deformation of heart and will, which was also reflected in the deformation of his appearance. He isolated himself from all personal contact, living in complete darkness inside of a cave deep within the Misty Mountains, where he "created a pseudo-community of Himself and the Ring,"²² Gollum is as clear an illustration as one could ask for of the Protestant Reformers' understanding of the fallen human being. The Reformers described the condition of the fallen human being as *cor curvum in se*—the heart turned in upon itself.²³ Under the power of sin, the human being resembles a black hole that in its egocentricity attempts to pull everything into its gravitational field.

When we recall the Protestant Reformers' understanding of the condition of sinful humanity, the important place of the church in the economy of salvation is thrown into sharp relief. The Church is the place where sinful human beings turned in upon themselves are turned inside out by the love of Christ so that they

20 Wood, *Gospel According to Tolkien*, 130.

21 One of the most memorable aspects of Peter Jackson's film adaptation of *The Lord of the Rings* was the computer-generated figure of Gollum. Gollum's simultaneous enthrallment with and entrapment by the Ring produced some of the most memorable moments in the film, including Gollum's mantra-like address of the Ring as "my precious!"

22 Wood, "Christians as the Little Ones," 98.

23 The phrase seems to have come to prominence through Martin Luther's 1515-1516 lectures on Romans. Bernhard Lohse, *Martin Luther's Theology: Its Historical and Systematic Development*, trans. Ray A. Harrisville (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 71. It is also one of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's favourite images for describing the plight of fallen humanity. See for example, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Act and Being: Transcendental Philosophy and Ontology in Systematic Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 137.

live for God and for one another in the fellowship of the Holy Spirit. The *koinōnia* shared between the members of the body of Christ is the fruit of the great reversal of Sin accomplished through the death and resurrection of Jesus and the pouring out of the Holy Spirit. This means that the church is not simply an add-on or an afterthought to the Gospel, like the bonus paring knife thrown in when one purchases a set of indestructible scissors through a special television offer. Rather, the church is internal to the Gospel itself. As Bonhoeffer wrote in his doctoral dissertation at the astonishingly young age of twenty-one, “*the church is both a means to an end and at the same time an end in itself*.”²⁴ Protestants of evangelical persuasion have generally done a good job of affirming the first part of Bonhoeffer’s sentence, but the reality of the latter part has often been overlooked or neglected. In his *Ethics*, Bonhoeffer later expanded upon his earlier assertion, insisting that the church is a means to an end in that the entirety of its corporate life is “oriented toward effectively proclaiming Christ to all the world.”²⁵ However, as the church participates in the new humanity of Christ’s being-for-others, Bonhoeffer adds, “the goal of the divine mandate of proclamation and the beginning of its fulfilment have already been reached.”²⁶ The missiologist and patron-saint of “the missional church conversation” Lesslie Newbigin pointed in a similar direction when he wrote, “The church lives in the midst of history as a sign, instrument and foretaste of the reign of God.”²⁷

The church-community is a gift of God to the world, but the life of this company of disciples is dependent upon the grace of the gift-giving God. The Scriptures depict the Holy Spirit as the pre-eminent giver of gifts.²⁸ The Spirit lavishly bestows gifts upon the company of disciples so that they have everything they need to faithfully follow Jesus in every given context.²⁹ The reception of gifts is integral to the ongoing life and success of the Fellowship in the *Lord of the Rings*. This is obvious right from the beginning of the quest, for the thought that a fellowship of a mere nine people, including four hobbits, could overcome the vast and menacing war-machine of Mordor is rather ridiculous. In order to complete their quest the Fellowship must learn to rely on gifts beyond their own

24 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio*, ed. Clifford J. Green, trans. Reinhard Krauss and Nancy Lukens (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), 261.

25 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, ed. Clifford J. Green, trans. Reinhard Krauss, Charles C. West, and Douglas Stott (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 404.

26 Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 404.

27 Lesslie Newbigin, *The Open Secret: An Introduction to the Theology of Mission*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 110.

28 For a theology of the Holy Spirit shaped around the motif of gift and gift-giver, see Tom Smail, *The Giving Gift: The Holy Spirit in Person* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2004).

29 The statement “God gives his people everything they need to follow him” is a central contention of Stanley Hauerwas and Samuel Wells in their essay “The Gift of the Church and the Gifts God Gives It,” in *The Blackwell Companion to Christian Ethics*, ed. Stanley Hauerwas and Samuel Wells (Malden: Blackwell, 2006), 13.

fashioning. Although the members of the Fellowship are beneficiaries of numerous gifts over the course of their journey, for the purpose of our investigation we will narrow our focus to three types of gifts that are given to them.

The first are the gifts given to the members of the Fellowship by Lady Galadriel, one of the fairest and most powerful of all the elves.³⁰ Upon departing from the magical forest of Lothlorien, each of the members of the Fellowship is given a unique gift by Lady Galadriel. Aragorn is presented with a scabbard and a brooch, Boromir receives a belt of gold, Merry and Pippen are given small silver belts, a bow and a quiver of arrows is bestowed upon Legolas, Sam is the recipient of earth from Galadriel's garden, and Gimli's wish for a strand of Galadriel's hair is graciously granted. Last, but not least, Frodo receives from Lady Galadriel the light of Eärendil, a vial of light from the star of Eärendil caught in the waters of Galadriel's fountain. Galadriel presents the light of Eärendil to Frodo with the following benediction, "May it be a light to you in dark places, when all other lights go out."³¹ The gifts not only prove to be essential at various points for the continuation of the quest, they also serve as beacons of hope anticipating the day when the darkness which enshrouds Middle-earth will be lifted. These gifts of hope given to the Fellowship by Lady Galadriel are reminiscent of the whole new wardrobe given to the Church by the Spirit. Amongst the items waiting to be unwrapped and tried on are a belt of truth, a breastplate of righteousness, shoes of peace, a shield of faith, a helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit (Eph 6:14-17). It's all the company of disciples needs in order to stand firm against the forces of darkness, for they have already been defeated. Although they may rage and conspire against the community of disciples, they cannot ultimately triumph over them, for the victory belongs to the Lord.³²

The second set of gifts we will consider are those that Frodo receives from his uncle Bilbo. Before setting off for Mordor, Bilbo presents Frodo with a mithril-coat. Mithril is a special type of chain-mail that is "as supple almost as linen, cold as ice, and harder than steel."³³ He also gives Frodo the elvish dagger known by the name of Sting, which glows blue when it is in the vicinity of orcs and goblins. These items, which Bilbo acquired over the course of his own adventures, as depicted in *The Hobbit*, proved to be invaluable to Frodo and on at least one occasion were instrumental in saving his life. These gifts, passed on from one generation of hobbits to another, provide the opportunity to reflect upon gifts that are passed onto disciples by those who have gone before them in the faith.

30 Tolkien, *Fellowship*, 364-67; Rutledge, *Battle for Middle-earth*, 134-37.

31 Tolkien, *Fellowship*, 367.

32 For an evocative treatment of the Christian call to resistance in the face of a culture determined by the moral reality of death, see William Stringfellow, *An Ethic for Christians and Other Aliens in a Strange Land* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2004), 117-33.

33 Tolkien, *Fellowship*, 270.

The theological argument I would like to advance is rather straight forward: if Christ is risen from the dead and if he is faithful to his promise to never leave nor forsake his people, then the history of the church must be taken seriously as the theatre within which the Holy Spirit has lavished his gifts upon the faithful. The most obvious of these gifts of the Spirit mediated through ancestors in the faith are the Scriptures, but surely there is much that the contemporary company of disciples can learn from those who have walked before them in the way of the Lord. A form of evangelical *ressourcement* is needed.³⁴ However, it seems like the church today, having been caught up in our broader society's obsession with the new, may be in danger of neglecting or even forfeiting the great treasures that the Spirit has given to the church over the centuries. Like Frodo, the company of disciples can never know for certain when their future will depend upon a gift of God passed down from their parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents in the faith.

The third gift given to the Fellowship that I would like to highlight is the gift of lembas. Lembas was a special gift given by the elves to the Fellowship as they were preparing to set out from Lothlorien.³⁵ Lembas is a type of thin wafer-like elvish bread that stays fresh for extraordinarily long periods of time. A single bite of lembas is enough to fill the stomach of a grown man. Lembas sustains Frodo and his friend Samwise Gamgee for the majority of their journey. Without it, Tolkien writes, "they would long ago have lain down to die . . . It fed the will, and it gave strength to endure, and to master sinew and limb beyond the measure of mortal kind."³⁶ In the elven dialect, lembas means waybread or journeybread.³⁷ This elven waybread is suggestive of the manna with which the Lord fed the people of the old covenant as they journeyed through the wilderness and also of the bread broken by the people of the new covenant in response to the command of their Lord (Exod16; Matt 26:26-30). Both of these meals point to the Lord's provision of bread for his pilgrim people as they journey toward the Promised Land. Both of these moveable feasts point towards the one who is the bread which "comes down from heaven and gives life to the world" (John 6:33).

In light of the gracious character of the God who lavishly bestows gifts on His people, even the gift of His very self, it becomes imperative that disciples learn to be the type of people who are able to receive and depend on the gifts of God. Talk of becoming a certain "type of person" directs us to the importance of char-

34 Productive work in this vein is being done by evangelical theologians in Canadian contexts. An example is Hans Boersma's recent book, *Heavenly Participation: The Weaving of a Sacramental Tapestry* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011). The question of the reception of this type of theological work in evangelical congregations is not as easy to ascertain.

35 Tolkien, *Fellowship*, 360-61.

36 J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Return of the King* (London: HarperCollins, 2001), 915.

37 Tolkien, *Fellowship*, 360; Rutledge, *Battle for Middle-earth*, 329-30.

acter. Character is the answer one gives to the question “What is Jonathan like?” or “Tell me about Jennifer, what is she like?” In order to speak about someone’s character one must employ the language of the virtues. “Virtues,” according to the helpful definition of Glen Stassen and David Gushee, “are character traits that are stable, consistent, and reliable.”³⁸ The Christian theological tradition following the towering intellects of Augustine of Hippo and Thomas Aquinas has spoken of both the cardinal virtues: prudence, temperance, justice, and courage, and the theological virtues: faith, hope, and love.³⁹ Aquinas offers an important theological qualification of the virtues by reminding us that charity or love is the form of the virtues.⁴⁰ In other words, without love the other virtues are nothing. Only as the other virtues are taken up *by* and directed *to* the love of God in Christ can we speak of them as being Christian virtues. Protestants have often worried that talk of the virtues reinforces a type of works-righteousness.⁴¹ However, this is a misunderstanding of what Aquinas is saying. For by insisting that charity or love is the form of the virtues, Aquinas is not emphasizing works-righteousness, but rather he is insisting that the virtues are the result of the gracious work of the Holy Spirit in our lives in bringing forth the enduring fruit of “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control” (Gal 5:22-23). The Holy Spirit, however, does not work independent of us. While the virtues are not “works” in the sense of being meritorious achievements before God, the development of virtue does require work and effort. Athletic training metaphors appear in several places in the letters associated with the apostle Paul as a means of emphasizing the important place of discipline in the Christian life (1 Cor 9:24-27; 1 Tim 4:7-8). The disciplined training regimen of an athlete serves to prepare their minds and bodies to face the rigours of competition. Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon helpfully expand upon the place of discipline in the adventure of discipleship. “Discipline isn’t something like will power, to do things we do not want to do. Rather, discipline is the acquisition of habits through which we would not do anything other than what we are delightfully doing. Christian disciplines give us joy, because through discipline we acquire power that otherwise we would not have had.”⁴² In order to be a dis-

38 Glen H. Stassen and David P. Gushee, *Kingdom Ethics: Following Jesus in Contemporary Contexts* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2003), 60.

39 For a helpful introduction to the virtues from an evangelical Protestant perspective, see Jonathan R. Wilson, *Gospel Virtues: Practicing Faith, Hope and Love in Uncertain Times* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1998).

40 Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 2-2.23.8.

41 Bonhoeffer seems to have shared this concern about virtue-talk, even though his own construal of Christian discipleship as being drawn into conformity with Christ seemingly necessitates some sort of account of the virtues. Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, 114, 151-52, 279.

42 Stanley Hauerwas and William H. Willimon, *Where Resident Aliens Live: Exercises for Christian Practice* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 112.

iple, one must be disciplined by the story and practices of the Christian community. It is no coincidence that our English words disciple and discipline come from the same root. It is easy today to fall into the trap of thinking that discipline is contradictory to grace. However, the church is called to be both a gracious community and a disciplined community. It is, in fact, a gracious community only to the extent that it is a disciplined community. For grace without discipline, is not grace at all, but only mere tolerance—a form of what Bonhoeffer calls “cheap grace.”⁴³ Similarly discipline without grace, is not discipline but only lifeless legalism. The recovery of the church as a disciplined community of grace is perhaps one of the greatest challenges facing Christians in our contemporary Western culture.

The Fellowship that sets out on their quest to take the Ring to the fires of Mordor quickly discovers that it too must be a disciplined community. Food must be rationed, the trappings and comforts of the Shire must be left behind, individual desires and courses of action must be submitted to the good of the Fellowship as a whole and to the goal of the quest itself. The success of the company depends on the development of virtues congruent to the nature of their quest. The members of the Fellowship must cultivate perseverance so that they are empowered to carry on in hope when all hope seems lost.⁴⁴ They must learn to rely on wisdom in discerning the good in the midst of confusing and difficult situations.⁴⁵ Perhaps most interestingly, the fate of Middle-earth turns out to have been bound up with the mercy that the members of the Fellowship have learned to show towards the despicable Gollum.⁴⁶

Through their participation in the quest each member of the Fellowship is profoundly changed for the good. Perhaps the greatest transformation is seen in the character of Samwise Gamgee. As his name reflects, Samwise is a “simple” hobbit who, back in the Shire, served as Frodo’s gardener. The wizard Gandalf appointed Sam to accompany Frodo on the quest when he discovered Sam eavesdropping on their conversation.⁴⁷ Sam is a plump hobbit who relishes his meals; a culinary craftsman who grieves at the prospect of missing out on his richly-prepared delicacies. The quest for Sam is an extended journey of renunciation, until he ultimately finds himself stripped of all the trappings of comfort, all alone with the exhausted ring-bearer Frodo on the desolate slopes of Mount Doom. In an

43 “Cheap grace is preaching forgiveness without repentance; it is baptism without the discipline of the community; it is the Lord’s Supper without confession of sin; it is absolution without personal confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without the living, incarnate Jesus Christ.” Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, 44.

44 Wood, *Gospel According to Tolkien*, 104-107.

45 Wood, *Gospel According to Tolkien*, 77-87.

46 Wood, *Gospel According to Tolkien*, 148-55.

47 Tolkien, *Fellowship*, 60-63.

echo of Luke's description of Jesus setting his face towards Jerusalem, we are told that, "Sam's hobbit-face grew stern, almost grim, as the will hardened in him, and he felt through all his limbs a thrill, as if he was turning into some creature of stone or steel that neither despair nor weariness nor endless barren miles could subdue."⁴⁸ And so, Sam lifted Frodo onto his back, and Tolkien tells us, because "some gift of final strength was given to him," Sam was able to carry Frodo up the daunting slopes of Mount Doom.⁴⁹ In doing so, Ralph Wood suggests that "Sam becomes almost a Christopher, a Christ-bearer in his portage of Frodo up the mountain."⁵⁰ This ultimately is what the formation of character and the development of the virtues is all about. Not that disciples might become better or more accomplished people, but that the Holy Spirit would conform them to the image of the Lord Jesus Christ. Bonhoeffer clearly sounds this note at the beginning of his final chapter to *Discipleship*: "To those who have heard the call to be disciples of Jesus Christ is given the incomprehensibly great promise that they are to become like Christ. They are to bear his image as the brothers and sisters of the firstborn Son of God."⁵¹

All of these aspects of the adventure of discipleship—the call which the members of the Fellowship have received, the community they have been placed within, the gifts which they have been given, the character which has been formed in them—are not for their own sake, as if the members of the Fellowship were on some type of introspective journey of self-fulfillment. Rather the Fellowship has been propelled upon a quest that is undertaken for the sake of "the deliverance of the whole of Middle-earth from a ravenous Enemy."⁵² On the other hand, the success of the quest itself is inseparable from the calling of this peculiar company and the development of their character as a people who have learned to rely on the gifts that come to them from beyond themselves. When this is translated into ecclesial terms it means that the identity and mission of the church are inseparable. It signals the end of the troubling binary logic of modernity that has so influentially infiltrated the contemporary church. This false logic divided church life up into internal and external dimensions and suggested that congregations must decide between focusing their energies on worship *or* mission, dis-

48 J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Return of the King* (London: HarperCollins, 2001), 913. The allusion to Luke 9:51 becomes even more suggestive when one considers the historic tendency of preachers and exegetes to read the Lucan passage in conjunction with Isa 50:7: "Because the Sovereign LORD helps me, I will not be disgraced. Therefore have I set my face like flint, and I know I will not be put to shame."

49 Tolkien, *Return of the King*, 920. In this case, and throughout her book, Rutledge does an excellent job of highlighting how Tolkien's use of the passive verbal construction points to the presence of divine activity. Rutledge, *The Battle for Middle-earth*, 333.

50 Wood, *Gospel According to Tolkien*, 110.

51 Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, 281.

52 Rutledge, *Battle for Middle-earth*, 24.

cleship *or* evangelism, spiritual formation *or* outreach. This thinking is fatally flawed because it forgets that discipleship is an adventure and that the journey that the company of disciples is called to undertake is for the sake of the world. The adventure of discipleship is the spiritual location to which the church has been called within the unfolding drama of the *missio Dei*. Tolkien once commented that fantasy, at its best, can serve as “a far-off gleam or echo of the Gospel in the real world.”⁵³ With respect to developing a missional ecclesiology, this is surely one instance where truth is stranger than fiction.⁵⁴

53 J.R.R. Tolkien, “*The Monsters and the Critics*” and *Other Essays*, ed. Christopher Tolkien (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1984), 155, quoted in Wood, *Gospel According to Tolkien*, 107.

54 This essay originated in an address given to the national conference of the Congregational Christian Churches in Canada in the summer of 2014. I would like to thank those who attended the conference for their feedback and their encouragement to prepare the address for publication.