

With this essay the Institute continues a series of posts it initiated in the fall of 2016, with contributions from members of the Company of Teachers designed to relate the Reformed tradition to current events. Feel free to reproduce these pieces and cite them as you see fit.

On Racing Fuel and Fire

Imagine a large party, filled with fireworks, thrown at night.

The party is held in honor of a famous resident of a small town, in a beautiful, hidden part of the world.

It's his birthday – he has lived to a ripe, old age, and is loved by, well... almost everyone. The part of the evening comes when he must give a speech.

He has planned his speech - especially *what will happen at the end of it*.

He speaks, and after he bids everyone a “very fond farewell” – poof! He disappears!

The nephew of the man who disappeared, rushes back to his uncle's house, to see if everything's okay.

When he arrives, he discovers... a wizard, waiting by the fire!

Perhaps you know the story already – you've read the books, or watched the movies: It's the beginning of “The Lord of the Rings”!

The wizard - Gandalf the Grey - has a task for Frodo, the nephew of Bilbo Baggins: Frodo and his friends must take the Ring of Power to the Elves in Rivendell.

When they deliver the ring, their job will be done, and they can return to the comfort of their homes!

Frodo and his friends - after all - are Hobbits: They do not like grand adventures – adventures make you late for supper; they take you away from your snug Hobbit-hole!

Yes, Frodo and his friends want to be done with their dangerous work as soon as possible!

They wish it could be over and done with in a day or two!

None of them really want to go on the dangerous journey from The Shire, where they live, to Rivendell, the valley of the Elves.

And, indeed, on the way to Rivendell, they encounter the most fearsome enemies of all: The Nine Riders!

Nine riders, each ten feet tall, undead, kings of old, who now serve the Dark Lord, Sauron – the Evil Being who is trying to conquer Middle Earth.

The Nine Riders chase Frodo and his friends for days, and they just barely escape, landing safely in Rivendell, under the protection of the elves. Surely this must be the end of the journey for Frodo and his friends! They can hand off the Ring of Power, and be done with it. They'll return home, victorious, with a great story.

But if you know this story, then you know this is only the beginning: Frodo and his friends will have to take the Ring of Power across Middle Earth - "through many dangers, toils, and snares" - to the Land of Mordor, where the Dark Lord, Sauron lives, and throw it into Mount Doom.

They are in for a much longer, harder time than they expected. Their troubles will not end tomorrow, or the next day. They are in for the long haul...

You can imagine their disappointment, and the grim determination they had to summon to begin their long, dangerous journey to Mordor, the kingdom of the Evil One...

That's it, isn't it? When we face what seems like overwhelming, persistent difficulty, our strongest desire is to be done with it! A long, hard road in the same direction seems daunting, when a snug Hobbit hole is waiting for us, only a few miles behind.

I'm going to go out on a limb, and say I sense an extraordinary desire for immediate change in people I talk with both in and outside the church. I would also say there's a general feeling that things can't go on the way that they are, and the sooner they change, the better.

If I had to say what's driving our desire for a change now, I would say there are at least two things at work in the world, and our lives, that are driving this change in a threatening AND destructive manner: Division and speed.

The first must seem like the most obvious. We seem to be experiencing more division than we have in the recent past: Red and Blue, Right and Left, Black and White, Men and Women, Rich and Poor. These divisions have always been with us, but they seem much more pronounced, now.

The second – speed – may seem less obvious, but it acts almost like racing fuel, poured on the fires of our division – our divisiveness. The speed with which we are updated on events, and persons, and the speed with which we are asked to come to terms with them, are almost too much to bear, and we end up making snap decisions about, for example, the content of our neighbor's character. Speed, used in this way, is not to our benefit, and it may be used this way, deliberately, by people who do not have our best interests at heart.

Division and speed: Divide and conquer is usually done best at blitzkrieg pace, to the blitzkrieg bop.

What if all of this is not going to change today, tomorrow, next week or even next year? What if it's going to be a much longer process? If that is the case, then we should look to people who have lived faithfully in times like - or even more difficult than - ours. Consider the example of Vaclav Benda and his family. Rod Dreher¹ describes Benda and his family, this way:

Benda "was a Czechoslovakian mathematician, Roman Catholic, and leading anti-communist dissident. He spent time in jail with Vaclav Havel," a fellow dissident and future President of the Czech Republic.

"Benda believed that Communism maintained its iron grip on the people by isolating them, fragmenting their natural social bonds. The Czech regime severely punished the Catholic Church, driving many believers to privatize their faith, retreating behind the walls of their homes so as not to attract attention from the authorities.

Benda's distinct contribution to the dissident movement was the idea of a "parallel polis" – a separate ... society existing alongside the official Communist order. ..."

Under this kind of rule – Communist government – change would not happen quickly. And so the questions became: What do we do in the meantime? What kind of habits do we form so we can sustain life in our parallel polis – our Christian society within an intensely anti-Christian society?

The answer for Benda and his family was simple: "Faith, Family, and Books!" – and they especially read *The Lord of the Rings*, together!

Dreher continues:

'Faith, family, and books: that's what the Bendas are all about. Their [living] room is an icon of [this] way of living.

It is also a holy place, Kamila (the wife of Vaclav) shared this, "Because we lived just down the street from the place where the secret police tortured people, victims would often come here as soon as they were released, just to talk." They knew there would be comfort at the Bendas' house.

This is the house in which they raised their children. Kamila told me that she..., read to her kids *two to three hours every day*.

"Every day?" I asked.

"Every day," she said. It was part of their... formation.

J.R.R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* was a cornerstone of the family's imagination. I asked Kamila why.

¹ <http://www.theamericanconservative.com/dreher/building-the-shire/>.

“Because we knew Mordor was real. We felt that their story” – the hobbits and others resisting Mordor – “was our story too.”

We do live not under Communist rule – not even close.

But there are forces at work in our society that, if we are not aware of them, and if we don't organize our way of life against them, will do us long term damage. These destructive forces will not go away overnight, and it appears that God intends to transform us through our engagement – even disengagement – with them, slowly over time.

What must we do? At least these four things:

Build friendships with people who are very different from you, politically, socially, religiously, and invite them into a home like the Bendas – one that is an icon of God's grace, peace, and welcome.

Recognize that there is more information coming at us, more quickly than we can possibly take in, and that the great temptation, is to make snap judgments about events, and about the content of our neighbor's character.

Read adventure stories about boys and girls, men and women who set out against great odds, and persist in a long, hard journey that teaches them to grow in wisdom, strength, and perseverance.

Worship, Sunday by Sunday. Come, listen to a different story – the story of how the world is slowly, lovingly, graciously being put back together by God.