

H. E. Phillips: The Preacher

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"We are determined to teach the pure gospel as it is taught in the New Testament, nothing more and nothing less. . . . We have no policy but to be scriptural, fair, sincere, and faithful in our work" (Searching the Scriptures, Jan. 1960, p. 2). This aim expressed by H.E. Phillips and James P. Miller perfectly captures the spirit of the preaching done by brother Phillips in the 25 years I have known him. How did God prepare and raise up this servant? What avenues of proclamation have been utilized in his evangelistic work? What is his manner of presentation in gospel preaching?

Preparation

Harlin Elwood Phillips was born 31 October 1916 near Bowling Green, Kentucky. Elwood's paternal grandfather was an elder at the Twelfth St. church of Christ in Bowling Green (1927-37), where the young man was baptized in November 1929 by A.B. Barret (1879-1951). Young Elwood was especially close to his grandmother, Mrs. Charles (Ella Martin) Phillips (1873-1971). She often read the Bible to the five Phillips brothers. After Elwood heard Foy E. Wallace, Jr. (1896-1979) in a gospel meeting at Twelfth St., he wanted to be baptized and preach the gospel. He asked "Grandma" if he was old enough.

With a loving embrace she suggested that I read the book of Matthew and come and talk with her again. Each time I came back she wisely suggested that I carefully read the next book, until I had finished the book of Acts. . . . The power of this influence still lives in me and my children and my grandchildren ("Ella Martin Phillips," Searching the Scriptures, Dec. 1971, pp. 372-73; for more detailed account, cf. Earl Kimbrough, "A Grandmother's Wisdom," Ibid., Oct. 1981, pp. 524-25).

The Bible often mentions the role of godly parents and grandparents in raising up men and women of great faith. God said of Abraham, "For I know him, that he will command his children and his household after him, and they shall keep the way of the Lord" (Gen. 18:19). In the face of his duty to God, Moses was not afraid to spurn the beck and call of the king's court, but he learned to exercise such faith from his parents and was especially trained by his mother (Exod. 2:5-10; Heb. 11:23-24). Mothers and grandmothers can do no greater work than to teach children "the holy scriptures," to exemplify godliness before them, and so to raise up Timothy's to bless this sin-cursed world (1 Tim. 2:9-15; 2 Tim. 1:5; 3:14-15). We, too, can raise up men like Timothy and Elwood today if we bring up our children "in the nurture and admonition of the Lord" (Eph. 6:4). Elwood's spiritual training is reflected in this observation, "From the earliest traces of memory he recalls being taught the Bible at home by his parents and being carried by them regularly to Bible school and worship" (Kimbrough., op. cit.).

In 1931 the Charlie Phillips family moved to Nashville, Tennessee, where Elwood attended high school. Four years later he married Pauline Younger, the daughter of a Presbyterian preacher. In spite of her family's opposition, she was converted to the truth (ca. 1940). Polly's deep convictions and staunch support of the truth have been a mainstay to her beloved Elwood as they

have labored together in the gospel through all of these years.

Brother Phillips did not learn to preach in college classes, although as an adult he would later attend the University of Tampa and the first semester of Florida Christian College (now Florida College) in 1946. His training to preach came through the local church and the help of experienced evangelists. His family first attended the Grace Avenue church of Christ in Nashville, and in 1934 went to the Lischey Avenue church, where he "began 'making talks' and teaching in 1938" (see biographical sketch in Melvin D. Curry, ed., *The Doctrine of Last Things*. Florida College Annual Lectures 1986, p. xvii). He preached his first full sermon away from home in Cottontown, Tennessee in January of 1942. If we are to have more Timothy's and Elwood's, local churches must provide vigorous and sound teaching to young people, provide opportunities and arrangements for young men to Work alongside experienced preachers, and provide occasions for younger men to develop their talents in public teaching.

The early influence of Foy E. Wallace, Jr. deepened through the years as brother Phillips saw and heard him proclaim the positive truths of the gospel while also challenging error in its strongholds and its citadels. Foy's powerful lessons in the 1930s-40s on the dangers of premillennialism and institutionalism were never to be forgotten. Neither were the night classes taught at Grace Avenue in the 1930s by H. Leo Boles (1874-1946). By all account, Boles saturated his auditors with Scripture and a love for it. Batsell Baxter said, "His Bible classes were full of information, free of speculation, true to the book," and N.B. Hardeman observed, he was one of the best Bible teachers of all that have gone before.... He filled his audience with a love for the truth and with courage to defend it. He spoke with confidence and knowledge that carried convictions. Weak and ailing people were heartened by what he had to say (L.L. Boles and J.E. Choate, *I'll Stand on the Rock: A Biography of H. Leo Boles*, pp. 209 and 227 respectively).

Brother Phillips read carefully Boles' wide ranging articles in the *Gospel Advocate*.

F. B. Srygley (1859-1940) also made deep impressions for truth on young Elwood both by articles in the *Advocate* and by the spoken word. Two Sundays per month Srygley preached before the Lischey Avenue church in Nashville and Elwood was in the audience when the veteran warrior came to the pulpit with the help of two brethren and a cane and sat in a chair to preach his last sermon there. To read of the spirit of such men is to realize that they kindled the same fire in the hearts of others like H.E. Phillips. Boles remarked upon "The Passing of F.B. Srygley,"

No one has sacrificed more time from home and family for the cause of Christ than Brother Srygley. No one has endured more hardships, suffered more bitter persecution, and been slandered more than was he. Those who read his editorials can bear testimony that he waged a relentless warfare against every encroachment on the truth of God and against the enemies of the church of our Lord.

Brother Srygley never faltered, evaded, or compromised any truth or righteous principle. . . . He was as courageous in criticizing his friends as he was in defending the truth against enemies. His

genial good nature helped him in offering criticism and corrections, and removed the sting of the critic (Gospel Advocate, 15 Feb. 1940, p. 148).

In like manner, brother Phillips has endured hardships, opposed every encroachment on the truth, and criticized his friends when necessary in a spirit of love (see, for instance, his review of Yater Tant's abortive unity plan, in *Searching the Scriptures*, Dec. 1982-May 1983).

During his Nashville years, Elwood was influenced also by the conservative and dedicated teaching of H.M. Phillips 1887-1960; not related). With uncanny foresight H.M. Phillips warned in 1929 that "the church is liable to get top heavy with organizations" parallel in principle to the missionary society, including church hospitals, universities, health resorts, "orphan homes, old ladies' homes, and clinics. . . . So far as I know, the church, as such, has no organization but the local congregation" ("Is This Scriptural?" *Gospel Advocate*, 13 June 1929, p. 577; reprinted in *Gospel Guardian*, 15 Sept. 1960, pp. 289, 301). Such warnings were not lost on Elwood, who heard H.M. at Lischey Avenue a number of times. As the 1930s-40s wore on, brother Phillips and other good brethren recognized a creeping softness among certain churches and preachers.

The preparation of H.E. Phillips as a preacher is instructive to us. It shows a happy combination of individual efforts, home influences, church work and strong preaching. Whenever and wherever a local church concentrates on edifying all its members and on sounding out the word of the Lord, there is the potential for God raising up men willing to endure any trial and to make any sacrifice necessary to spread the gospel of Christ (Eph. 4:16; 1 Thess. 1:8). Gospel preachers should give special emphasis to the charge of 2 Timothy 2:2, "And the things that thou hast heard of me among many witnesses, the same commit thou to faithful men, who shall be able to teach others also."

Proclamation

Brother Phillips has used every avenue and opportunity he could find to spread the gospel. He had a very responsible job with a sheet metal company in Nashville and moved to Tampa, Florida in 1940 with this job. While supporting himself, he helped with the preaching at the Sulphur Springs and Belmont Heights churches in Tampa. About 1942/43 the church at Dover near Tampa asked him to labor with them on a full time basis; he agreed, and gave up his secular job. After preaching for churches in Lake City (1944) and Clearwater (1945), brother Phillips was invited to work with the East University Avenue church in Gainesville in 1953. Finally returning to Tampa in 1960, his efforts have been concentrated there with the Forest Hills (1960-75) and Fletcher Avenue (since late July 1975; briefly called Northwest) churches. His heavy duties for many years, his advancing age, and his health problems have taken their toll. Though H.E. continues to serve as an elder, brother Everett Hardin carries most of the load of preaching at Fletcher Avenue. Two outstanding features of his work with local churches have been a constant emphasis on the need for sound teaching and the constant expression of personal love, especially by extending to people the hospitality of his home.

While working hard to build up the local church where he lives and labors, he has also been untiring in his efforts to reach souls with the gospel far and wide. In addition to his use of

Searching the Scriptures, gospel meetings have been conducted through much of his life at the rate of 7-12 per year and including some 20 states. Before the full onslaught of liberalism, many such meetings were held in Nashville in the 1940s, where he once preached before an audience of 1,000 people at a closing service. These travels have carried him as far away as Italy, Switzerland, England and Germany.

The pen as well as the pulpit has been utilized by brother Phillips in spreading the gospel. His articles appeared in the old Gospel Broadcast, the Apostolic Times, and occasionally in the Gospel Advocate. James P. Miller (1915-78) and H.E. Phillips saw the dangers of liberalism rapidly developing and jointly put out the Southeastern News Letter (called Florida News Letter the first few months) beginning in March 1958 in an effort "to keep brethren talking and discussing their differences. . . . We were too late with this effort, and besides we learned that it was not the right way to deal with false teachers" (H.E.P., "Editorial," Searching the Scriptures, May 1973, pp. 259-62, see p. 260).

Therefore, in January 1960 they launched Searching the Scriptures with a determination "to teach the pure gospel as it is taught in the New Testament," to allow brethren to freely discuss "controversial matters," and in all things "to be scriptural, fair, sincere, and faithful" (joint "Editorial . . . A New Paper Is Born," Ibid., Jan. 1960, p. 2). After two years H.E. took full editorial responsibility to allow brother Miller "to intensify his labors in other fields," although Miller continued promoting the paper and was listed as a co-editor through December 1969 (H.E.P., "Editorial," op. cit.). When brother Phillips passed the editorship to the capable hands of Connie W. Adams in May 1973, the circulation exceeded 6,500 per month. Only eternity can measure the great good accomplished through this medium, which remains a bastion for truth until this day.

Brother Phillips has used other avenues of proclamation. He has done some radio preaching and edited church bulletins. Phillips Publications was established in 1947 and has published 17 books, booklets, and tracts which he authored. His Church Officers and Organization was later expanded and published as Scriptural Elders and Deacons (1959), which was reprinted by Cogdill Foundation Publications in 1974 and has sold out again. His 1952 booklet "Must I Attend Every Service of the Church?" was reprinted in the Guardian of Truth (19 Nov.-17 Dec. 1987, pp. 686-87; 707-709; 741-42). For many years Phillips Publications offered tape recordings of many sermons and debates, and brother Phillips hired a professional reader (Richard Lupino) to provide a set of New Testament tapes.

The efforts put forth by brother Phillips in spreading the gospel seem endless. He worked 18-20 hours a day, seven days per week, until heart attacks in January 1967 and August 1971 forced him to "slow down and take it easier" (H.E.P., "Editorial," op. cit.). Even his slower pace would outrun many of us. His continued health problems are a tribute to his sacrificial labors in the gospel. He will be embarrassed by our recounting some of these things, but our purpose is not to draw him larger than life or to suggest that he is a perfect man. He would detest such implications and idolatry. Our purpose is to express love and gratitude to him for his faithful labors in the gospel, and also to stir up greater zeal, unselfishness, and dedication on the part of all who read these lines! The Bible underscores many of its greatest lessons by the record of the

example of godly men and women. Such servants of the living God can still be found today, if we have eyes to see.

Presentation

The style and manner of presentation of H.E. Phillips in the pulpit is impressive, but not from the standpoints of eloquence or egotism. His preaching is above all scriptural in focus and content. It is Book, chapter, and verse preaching. Bible passages are read and quoted. Bible texts are dissected and discussed. Appropriate illustrations are used, but the Bible itself dominates his presentation. The meaning of God's Word is sought in its context and then applied to modern situations, questions, dangers, trials, and challenges. As a college student I first heard brother Phillips point out that the "banqueting" of 1 Peter 4:3 is equivalent to modern social drinking. Further research has confirmed the accuracy of what he taught on that issue at Forest Hills 25 years ago in such clear and simple language.

Brother Phillips occasionally refers to some commentator or reference book, but he always makes his final appeal to Scripture because he believes he can cite no higher authority than God himself. Human learning has never enamored him. He exemplifies as fully as any man I know what the Holy Spirit commanded, "If any man speak, let him speak as the oracles of God" (1 Pet. 4:11). He truly believes the Word is sufficient to meet, every true spiritual need, of the human race (2 Tim. 3:16-17). This does not mean that he considers himself incapable of erring on a given point, but it means that he considers the Bible as the final standard of measurement on any and every point under discussion. Not only does he measure the teaching of other men by this standard, but also he is willing for other men to measure his teaching by this standard (1 Cor. 4:6; 1 Jn. 4:6).

The preaching of H. E. Phillips is utterly sincere. To hear him preach is to be aware that his very soul is appealing to the soul of each listener. Pride, pretense, and personal promotion are utterly absent in his presentation. The man is lost in the message he brings. "For we preach not ourselves, but Christ Jesus the Lord; and ourselves your servants for Jesus' sake" (2 Cor. 4:5). He is engrossed too much in the search for hungry souls and in the reality of man's eternal destiny to be a clock-watcher or a card-puncher determined to "get out on time."

Preaching at the North Meadows church in Murfreesboro, Tennessee in the mid-1970s in a gospel meeting, brother Phillips discussed Romans 12 and the importance of each and every Christian being alert, active, and alive as members of the body of Christ. His sincerity and concentration on the lesson at hand made it seem as if the Apostle Paul himself were there delivering the message of inspiration to the audience. His preaching aims not at obtaining praise but at the progress of truth in the hearts and lives of us all.

Brother Phillips is militant in his preaching, and makes no apology for it. He is "set for the defense of the gospel," and God has given him the spirit "of power, and of love, and of a sound mind." He is therefore not "ashamed of the testimony of our Lord" nor afraid of "the afflictions" we may suffer at the hands of unlearned, unsound, and unreasonable men (Phil. 1:17; 2 Tim. 1:7-8; 2 Pet. 3:17; 2 Thess. 3:1-2). He has nothing but disdain and disgust for the sweet, soft, syrupy

spirit of compromise. Not only does he disagree with every departure from the truth of God, but also he detests every departure. "Therefore I esteem all thy precepts concerning all things to be right; and I hate every false way" (Psa. 119:128). I can not count the times I have heard him warn both in public preaching and in private conversation about the dangers of the philosophy which says, "Accentuate the positive, eliminate the negative." The warning of Christ is echoed by the preaching of H.E. Phillips, that "ravaging wolves" come under the pretense of broad smiles and in "sheep's clothing" (Matt. 7:15).

Brother Phillips strives to speak and preach the truth in love (Eph. 4. 15). His constant appeal is to the truth of Scripture and the love of God. His love for saints and sinners is evident in his presentation but there is not the least indication of toleration for sin, not even for his best friends. I count myself rich to have such a friend as brother Phillips who would not hesitate to talk and plead with me if he thought I was turning toward sin or error.

I will always remember his sermon at the Knollwood church in Xenia, Ohio on Sunday morning, 16 September 1979, emphasizing the need to be thankful. The whole tenor of this sermon reflected his own deep love for God and man, and his deep desire to express that love. He impressed me more deeply with the need to express gratitude and love toward those who bless and help us in life. In fact, this article is a small expression of love and gratitude to God for the blessings he has brought into my life through his servant H.E. Phillips, and to brother Phillips for his willingness to be so used of God. I mean to include sister Phillips in that same expression.

Time and space fail me to tell more of the preparation, proclamation, and presentation of H.E. Phillips, the preacher. Many are the lessons to be learned as we reflect upon his life. May God help us all to be more tireless, determined, and unselfish in spirit as we labor to take the gospel of Jesus Christ to a lost and dying world. May God help us all to show more hospitality and consideration to younger preachers and to all brethren who need our encouragement. May God help us all to strive to be scriptural, sincere, militant, and loving as we preach the gospel of Christ, and to be "scriptural, fair, sincere, and faithful" in all our work and conduct in this life. In so doing, we honor not H.E. Phillips, but rather the God who made us all and who seeks to save us all!

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