

Lessons from a preacher's life

As *The Archer and the Arrow* points out more than once, preaching is not just a skill or a set of techniques; it is a way of life. And it is inextricably bound up with the personality and character of the preacher.

The preacher's life and character and personality not only shape the kind of preacher he is—his sense of humour, his communication style, his habit of mind, his manner, his strengths and weaknesses; they also reveal the extent to which the preaching of the word has penetrated his own soul. They show whether he has also been preaching the gospel to himself, and repenting at its call. Indeed, one of the dangers of itinerant preaching (and internet preaching) is that the character and life of the preacher is largely hidden from us.

Now it is not really possible for you to learn much about the life and character of Phillip Jensen via a book. You may pick up something of his personality from the style and illustrations, and glean a little of the way his mind works from the logic of the content. But have the principles put forward in this book been seen in his own life and ministry? And if so, how?

Below, I have gathered together some reflections on Phillip and his preaching contributed by colleagues and friends around the world. I have asked them to share some of what they have seen in Phillip and his preaching that others could learn from. I hope that as you read their thoughts (and those that I have added at the end), you will be encouraged to consider how Phillip's example might be a challenge to you and your preaching.

Paul Grimmond

R Kent Hughes, Sr Pastor Emeritus, College Church in Wheaton, Illinois, USA

My wife Barbara and I first met Phillip and Helen Jensen when they were guests in our home during a national conference on reformed theology that our church was hosting. The event was the beginning of a lifelong friendship that extends to our children, and now to our grandchildren.

Along with our shared interests in biblical exposition, the singular event that bound my soul to that of Phillip was when he pointed out, before the whole assembly, that this convocation of Calvinists was ironically devoid of biblical exposition which, of course, was at the heart of John Calvin's ministry. The ensuing kaffuffle was memorable and salutary.

Over the years, I came to understand that Phillip whole-heartedly believes in (to borrow Jim Packer's term) the 'divinity of Scripture', and thus in its sufficiency and potency. In respect of the Bible's divinity, Phillip's painstaking exposition leaves no doubt that he believes it with all his heart, just as he does the divinity of Christ. And more, while many preachers mouth platitudes about the sufficiency and potency of Scripture, his fearless wide-ranging application to every area of life and ethics (in the aggressive context of a secular university) demonstrates his belief in its adequacy and power.

The reality is that amidst the cosy climate of evangelical culture, it is expected that a preacher affirm a high view of Scripture—and he may blithely do so without believing it with all his heart and, in effect, merely 'believe' that he believes it.

Phillip's preaching has served as an example to me, and many others, to embrace the divinity of Scripture with all our hearts and therefore to speak "as one who speaks oracles of God" (1 Pet 4:11).

As many know, Phillip wore two hats for over a quarter of a century as Rector of St Matthias Anglican Church (in Centennial Park in Sydney's East) and as Chaplain to the University of New South Wales, and he grounded his ministry in both venues on serial biblical exposition (Calvin's *lectio continua*). This has informed my ministry in several ways. First, it demonstrated that biblical exposition and evangelism are not mutually exclusive, as is commonly thought. The ministry at both the university and in the church was intensely expository and intensely evangelistic. This is because Christ is in all the Scriptures (Luke 24:25-27, 44-47, *passim*). As a skilled biblical theologian, Phillip always preaches Christ, and because he preaches him from all the Scriptures, the Christ and the gospel he preaches are deeply rooted in the soil of the Old Testament. As a result, they are historically grounded and theologically compelling. Phillip preaches Christ, not as a flat one-dimensional figure, but as the awesome, multi-dimensional, polychrome Messiah who "died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures" and "was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures" (1 Cor 15:3, 4).

To link Christianity to an ideology, however radical it may be, is to de-radicalise it, because biblical Christianity is more radical than any philosophy or system. Phillip has understood this, and his commitment to allowing the text to speak for itself, plus his determination to bow to the discomfiting "surprises" (his word) of the text, means that his preaching characteristically has a prophetic edge. The times when Phillip taught at the Wheaton Workshop on Biblical Exposition, the attending pastors considered this truth one of their great takeaways—and it has certainly been that for me. There is nothing status quo about biblical exposition. A commitment to preach and apply what the text says is to forego a quiet life and shoulder the prophet's mantle. It is to preach with penetrating relevance.

Prophet that he is, Phillip is no dour seer. He is a man of good cheer with an infectious laugh—and the ability to laugh at himself. He embraces all of life with a gospel-first joy. It is a privilege to know him as a fellow preacher and friend, and to benefit from his example.

Paul House, Associate Dean and Professor of Divinity (Old Testament), Beeson Divinity School, Birmingham, Alabama, USA

I met Phillip and Helen Jensen in Ambridge, Pennsylvania in Spring 2000 when I was teaching at Trinity Episcopal School for Ministry. He was visiting the USA as part of a leave from his duties at St Matthias and at the University of New South Wales. I had met his brother Peter the prior semester, so I had some inkling of Phillip's work. My wife and I visited Phillip and Helen in Sydney in 2002, and they invited us to attend the wonderful Mid Year Conference for university students in the Blue Mountains. Phillip then delivered the Conger Preaching Lectures at Beeson Divinity School in Birmingham, Alabama in 2006 while I was serving as Acting Dean. As a beneficiary of his ministry, I am grateful that his ideas on preaching are now collected in this volume.

In every contact I have had with Phillip and in every recording I have heard of his preaching, I have appreciated his understanding of his job. He knows that God has assigned him to, and gifted him for, the task of being a pastor-teacher of God's sufficient word to God's people. Other people are more gifted speakers than Phillip.

Other people are more gifted exegetes than Phillip. Other people may love people more than Phillip, though he excels in this area more than I suspect he gets credit for doing. Other people are even, believe it or not, more courageous than Phillip. What makes him so unique, sadly so in my opinion, is that he perseveres in the combination of speaking, explaining, caring and showing courage more than most, certainly more than I. How does he do it? Can others do it?

First, he does it because he knows Christ has set him apart to be a pastor-teacher (Eph 4:11). Phillip clearly values all sorts of ministries. He has few if any traces of clericalism staining his ministry. But he embraces his setting apart for full-time teaching of God's word to God's people. He does not seem to wish he could be anything else, though he is aware he has the ability to be many other things.

Second, he does it because he knows and welcomes the fact that the pastor-teacher's primary function is to teach God's people the unsearchable riches of God found in the Bible, God's written word. His theories are irrelevant. His stories are not primary. The Bible is primary. Its outline is his theological framework. Each passage's structure and thrust are what he knows he must stress. He is not an entertainer, a director of religious exercises, or an evangelical guru. He is an ambassador of the King of kings, one charged with presenting a message of eternal life to dying subjects. He does not desire another book or another message. This book and this message transformed his life, and he is satisfied with its author and his life-changing power.

Third, he does it because he trusts the word to be sufficient for God's people. This may be his greatest 'secret'. He does not change the Bible's message or insert his own views of what people need, because he trusts the Bible. He trusts that it is sufficient for doctrine, correction and training in righteousness because it is breathed out by God (2 Tim 3:14-17).

So many evangelical preachers go wrong at this point. They believe the Bible is God's word, without error, and the source of all truth. But they do not always trust the Bible to be what they say they believe it is—the living, active and transforming word of God (Heb 4:12). So they choose a topic and fit the Bible to their views, or impose a topic on a text, or they fill the message with anecdotes that do not illuminate the passage. Phillip rarely does so. He has seen the Bible change so many lives he believes it will do so again.

Fourth, he does it because he cares for people. He listens to them. He calls out the best in them. He brings God's love to them. He risks his status with them to share the truth with them.

Fifth, he does it because he practices his craft. He studies. He teaches different audiences. He invests in the next generation so that they might take God's people farther than he has done.

Can others do what he does? Of course they can. There is no reason Phillip should be so unusual. Happily, he has many faithful colleagues at home and abroad. I have also seen young people get serious about their vocation, their task, and their faith through Phillip's ministry in Australia and the United States. God continues to work, and I believe that a new generation of expository preachers may well be used of God to spark renewal in Australia and elsewhere. How Phillip would love it if every member of the next generation of ministers of the gospel surpassed his faithfulness and effectiveness! Until then, he will keep serving Jesus, and I will remain grateful for Phillip and the way he has cared for and challenged me.

David Jackman, preacher and author, recently retired president of the Proclamation Trust, London, UK

I still vividly remember the effect that Phillip had on the evangelical scene in the UK when first he became known here in the 1980s. Sydney Anglicanism was known to us through a string of individuals with strong links to Britain—TC Hammond, Hugh Gough, Marcus Loane, Broughton Knox. The reputation was of deep devotion to Scripture, along with uncompromising Reformation and Protestant convictions. We knew that there was a strong evangelistic edge, not only from the Billy Graham Crusades and men like Bishop Jack Dain, but also through the work of the Department of Evangelism and its ebullient director, John Chapman, who had become known in England a decade earlier. But nothing prepared us for the shock and challenge of Phillip's early visits. He was God's man in God's time; of that there can be no doubt.

It is hard for those who did not live through it to realize just how difficult and divisive the clashes between the new charismatic movement and traditional (classical) evangelicalism had become in the 70s and early 80s. The triumphalism and heady excitement of those days led some vocal charismatics to prophesy the imminent collapse of an outmoded conservative evangelical pattern. Many evangelicals in my own peer group were blown over by these claims and capitulated to the new culture. As a result, evangelical pulpits were being lost to purposeful Bible teaching. As a method of communication, preaching was pronounced old-fashioned, ineffective and redundant to this new wave of spirituality.

Early in the 80s Dick Lucas, whose expository ministry at St Helen's had been so signally blessed by God for the past twenty years, began a rear-guard action by holding small conferences for young ordained Anglicans to teach them how to preach the Bible ("the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth"). A small group of Free Church ministers, of whom I was one, who valued cross-denominational fellowship with like-minded Anglicans, joined forces with Dick and in 1984 the EMA (Evangelical Ministry Assembly) was born, two years before the formation of The Proclamation Trust.¹

In God's providence, Phillip came to us precisely at that juncture. He had the advantage of coming from overseas and planning his return. As he so often told us, he had a return air-ticket in his pocket and could afford to be direct! But the 'overseas' of Australia was one towards which many British people felt very warmly, not only through family ties, but because it was a cultural halfway house between the UK and the USA. For years we had experienced a constant flow of American pundits analysing what was wrong with British evangelicalism and seeking to colonize the colonizers, resulting in predictably deaf ears and hardened hearts. But this was different. Here was someone much closer to us, but able to stand apart from us, who was able to put his finger on our weaknesses and bring us face to face with our shortcomings. It might have hurt, but the only way to avoid being put down as 'whingeing Poms' was to listen and learn. This is not the place to analyze the content of those EMA addresses and subsequent preaching conferences in the 80s and early 90s. The recordings are available from the Proclamation Trust archives; but the effect was electric and the shock waves still reverberate.

What made Phillip's contribution so significant to the development of a newly confident and effective conservative evangelicalism? Firstly, it was preaching, with

¹ The EMA held annual conferences for ministers and church leaders in June each year. At this time, they were held in St Helen's Bishopsgate, in the heart of London's CBD.

all the fire, conviction and vigour that only the spoken word can produce. This was not a book, or a course, or even a seminar, but a fellow pastor pouring out his heart in God-given wisdom. It communicated as nothing else can. Secondly, it was biblical preaching—not necessarily the detailed textual analysis of consecutive exposition, but always a biblical text acutely observed, related to its context both in its book and in the whole sweep of biblical theology. This was what yielded such rich dividends when the contextualized biblical message was related to the contemporary context, with its parallels and contrasts. So, thirdly, it was connected preaching, as the Bible attacked the jugular and began to challenge our superficial understandings and slapdash remedies. All of which meant that it was inescapable ‘in your face’ preaching, for which British practitioners are not widely known! There was little nuancing; just big broad brush strokes which were unquestionably challenging and alarmingly accurate. A spade was never described as an agricultural implement.

There is a downside to this, of course. Statements which are designed to shock, and stimulate thought about areas of life that have been studiously ignored for a long time, can be turned into mantras by those who have benefited from them—and then repeated and applied without reference to context. The result can sometimes appear wooden and sound doctrinaire, to the detriment of the original. But perhaps the greatest characteristic of Phillip’s ministry in the UK over these twenty plus years was its warmth, firstly in terms of his zeal and passion for the glory of the Lord Jesus and then with regard to his fellow ministers and Christian workers.

However much we were being dissected, we always knew it was for our good and the motivation was the honour of Christ and the forwarding of his work. The preacher may say, “I don’t know why I’m telling you men this, because I don’t suppose you’ll ever have the guts to do anything about it ...” but nothing is more likely to get you up and going. I still remember Phillip explaining to us that the Anglican Church was failing to do any ‘fishing’ because the boat that was supposed to be in the world was sinking as a result of the world being in the boat. The smug agreement of the assorted Baptists and independents was shattered moments later by the comment, “And if that’s what I think about the denomination I belong to, what do you think I’m going to say about the denominations I have chosen not to belong to?!” There followed an even more devastating attack on the folly of fishing from a pier that is so high with a rod so long that the chance of hooking anything is minimal. We knew it was for our good and it produced a good deal of change for the better.

Phillip’s ministry in the UK has had a profound and lasting effect in focusing, clarifying and energizing many evangelical pastors in their ministry priorities and practice over the years. He has been faithful in exposing weakness, honest in applying God’s word, penetrating in his cultural analysis and realistic in his practical applications to the church. He has reached us, touched us and shaped us, not least the younger generation of pastor-teachers and evangelists, in a way that few others could or have done. We are thankful to God for him and his unique role. Like most great preachers, his style is individual, idiosyncratic and inimitable, but his message is accessible, faithful, incisive and much needed. Thank you, Phillip, for preaching the Word to us.

Dick Lucas, former rector, St Helen’s, Bishopsgate, London, UK

Recently I listened again to Phillip Jensen’s first series of addresses at our Evangelical Ministry Assembly some 20 and more years ago. They were entitled ‘Changing the Church’ and caused a considerable stir. Yes, I’ve no doubt he meant to shake us up by

his radicalism, and a few—I think very few—were much offended. (One such exploded in annoyance more than once just behind where I was sitting.) But, come to think of it, that must have been the case quite often when the Lord was speaking.

However, when the shock element was forgotten, I know those who benefited enormously from these sessions, not least younger brethren in ministry beginning to wonder if it were ever possible to shift the log jam in traditional church life, and get things going in a biblical direction. For myself, I was greatly helped; and looking back, you might even say that these talks were ‘prophetic’.

I suppose you might question for yourself an application here or there, but you could not deny the speaker’s right to expose horrible errors, or to insist on the practical implementation of agreed theological truths—this latter being the big thrust throughout his series. The blunt honesty could be a bit breathtaking but, frankly, it was a tonic, if a strong one. Perhaps we British are not used to really straight talking, but if at EMA we won’t tolerate a rude awakening, who will? In fact, future visits from this man have proved that in many a heart there is a warm appreciation for his liberating ministry.

John Chapman, evangelist, Bible teacher and author, Sydney, NSW, Australia

I have had the pleasure and privilege of listening to Phillip’s preaching during most of his ministry life. He is, in my opinion, one of the finest preachers in the world. I have detailed below some of the reasons that have led to this conclusion. He is not always a good model to copy because of his unique gifts. However there is much we can learn from him.

1. His view of Scriptures

As you listen to Philip preach, you will soon realize that he has an unshakable confidence in the Bible as the word of God. Because of this, he works hard to ensure that he understands the part of the Bible he is expounding. That is why he is crystal clear when he expounds the Scriptures. His teaching always communicates that he wants me to understand the passage and to change my life so that I live in accordance with it. In this, he is a model to us all.

2. His ability to communicate

Philip is one of the best communicators I have heard. He has his mind tuned to the audience. He knows how to read the signs that come from them. He is not averse to backtracking and re-teaching a concept that he senses has not been properly understood. This often causes him to preach for longer than most. This is fatal as a model to those who do not have his skills in communication. He is serious with the Bible but is often humorous in expression and illustration. It is clear that he wants me to understand the passage at hand and live by it.

3. His clarity of mind

One of the things I have most admired about this preacher is his clarity of mind. When he has finished you are in no doubt as to what he thinks this part of the Bible means. You may not always agree with him but you are never left saying, “What is he talking about?” Philip possesses a rapier-like mind, and he works hard at understanding the passage at hand in the light of the entire revelation of God—with the consequence that we are generally given a ‘big picture’ understanding of the

Bible. Never does he fail to point people to the Lord Jesus when he preaches, and everything is set in its gospel context, so it is possible to come to salvation by listening to him no matter where he is preaching from in the Bible. Preachers often neglect this aspect of preaching. In this he is a great model to follow.

4. His clarity of expression

Because of his fine mind, he is often confronting and sometimes says outrageous things to provoke attention. He is unique in this and is always able to get you on board again when he has your attention. I have seen others try to copy this with disastrous consequences. It is because the matter at hand is clear in his mind that it is clear when he communicates.

Andrew Heard, Lead Pastor at Central Coast Evangelical Church, Erina, NSW, Australia

Personally, Phillip's preaching has been formative, not only in that it introduced me to Jesus and shaped my world view, but also in its power to hold out to me the assurance that the word of God and its preached form is powerful. I listened most to Phillip during the time when preaching was coming in for a battering. Many were suggesting that preaching was an old form of communication that was destined to go the way of the horse and buggy. But those critiques always seemed hollow when, week by week, I was sitting under this preaching ministry that was absolutely transforming my life! To me these critics seemed like a bachelor criticizing marriage as unfulfilling and unrewarding. Obviously they'd never actually experienced what it could be like.

If I could describe where the impact of Phillip's preaching came from, it would be his God-given ability to open the Scriptures. Not only did he help me see what was actually being said in the word but, by the Spirit of God, Phillip drew me into the world of the Bible (God's world)—so much so that for 45 minutes at a time (or often longer!) I was dragged through this incredible experience of being made to enter the mind of God in the word of God over the whole history of God's revelation in the Scriptures in such a way that my thinking, my outlook and my values were radically transformed.

He constantly helped me enter the story of the Bible in such a way that I was made to step out of my small corner of life and see the massive movement of God in eternity, working his purposes out in time, which then enabled me to gain proper perspective back in my corner of the world. I so often felt he opened windows that had either been shut or at least smeared with dirt, so that I was able to see this whole new world of thinking which was so profoundly different from my own thinking. When this ability was combined with his prophetic gift to take the word and shine its light on our contemporary experience, he regularly smashed my petty idols and gave me taste for a life lived in a radically different way with God at the centre.

My guess is that much of what he brought to preaching, which made it so powerful, was his own sold-outness to biblical thought above all other thought, whatever the cost—and an assumption that we should almost expect to see the Bible in conflict with natural thought because one was the pure revelation of God inspired and infallible, whilst the other was a fallen human attempt to think ourselves away from God. Phillip has never cared for social or academic respectability, and has cared so little for what others think that he seems to me to be a man who is truly prepared to engage with the Scriptures with thorough honesty. If it says it, no matter what it is,

then he will hold it personally and teach it courageously. This ensures that the word is never shackled, but unleashed to speak with utter clarity into our world.

Paul Grimmond, Unichurch Training Pastor at the University of NSW, Sydney, NSW, Australia

In the time I have known Phillip, and in the many hours of conversation I had with him during the writing of this book, a number of things have stood out for me as being marks of Phillip's life as a preacher.

1. A willingness to learn and obey

As you've probably realized, Phillip is strong-willed and fiercely determined—the kind of customer you wouldn't want on the other end of the phone if you worked in a complaints department. He has prodigious intelligence and gifts coupled with a powerful personality, and it would have been very easy for Phillip's ego to have taken over completely. I think one of the crucial things about Phillip's preaching ministry has been God's work in teaching him to submit to the truth of the Bible.

Not many people know this, but in his early years as a Christian Phillip was firmly Arminian in his theology, and argued vigorously for his position. But after several months of debate he had no arguments left, and slowly and painfully his mind was turned to understand the absolute authority and sovereignty of God and the grace of election. This is one example among many.

In my view, one of the reasons Phillip has been so used by God is that he has been consistently willing to let the Bible say what it says and to repent so as to live in light of that truth. By God's grace, Phillip has learned humility—he has developed as a man who seeks to submit his life to God. Perhaps more than any other trait, this is the key to understanding Phillip's preaching.

2. Stubbornness in the service of God

But it's important to see that Phillip's strong-willed stubbornness is not only a problem to be overcome, it is also a strength of his character as a preacher. It's displayed most particularly in Phillip's independence of mind. One of the key things that he learnt from his formative teachers at Moore College, Broughton Knox and Donald Robinson, was the importance of letting the Bible say what it says, irrespective of academic debate or popular opinion.

This isn't to say that Phillip is anti-intellectual. In fact, he is far from it—I know of few people who read more widely or who work as hard at the biblical text. But it is important to note that Phillip has been willing to stand against the intellectual tide on many important issues over the course of his ministry because he sees his conscience bound first and foremost to the word of God. When Phillip feels that a particular academic debate has been used to sidestep the meaning of the Scriptures, he is willing to ignore the debate entirely.

I have often noticed that when Phillip reads the Bible and finds a phrase or an idea that seems strange, instead of glossing over it, he works at understanding it. When God's word says something that is outrageous and that the world thinks is foolish, Phillip will stand up and teach it as the truth, ignoring of the howls of protest that come as a result. As Phillip himself would say, there's something eccentric about all good preachers.

This is of course a personality trait that, untempered by humility before the word of God, would be intolerable. But God has taken a potential weakness and made it a great strength of Phillip's preaching.

His great stubbornness has been used in other ways as well. Despite a deep-seated distaste for reading, Phillip reads an incredible number of books. In spite of his natural repugnance for sitting at the desk, Phillip spends dogged hours in his study, working hard at reading the text of the Bible.

I am not saying that Phillip is perfect. And those who have worked with him can testify to moments of infuriation with his obstinacy. But I have no doubt that God has used this part of his character in particular to make him a preacher who has changed a generation.

3. Learning in the theatre of life

Perhaps one of the other things that has kept Phillip from being overwhelmed and led astray by his strength of character has been a life formed in the service of others in the real world. Phillip didn't just talk about evangelistic preaching, or learn it in theory, but spent hours and hours in hundreds of evangelistic dialogue meetings, talking and arguing with people of all sorts of different backgrounds about why we need to know Jesus.

He has also spent countless hours in private conversation with those to whom he ministers. Phillip loves people deeply and is profoundly committed to them. His theology and preaching have always grown out of seeking to understand and apply the Bible in the rough and tumble of ministry life. Phillip hasn't run away from conflict but has entered into situations where he has felt over his head and tried to learn and grow as a result. Phillip has learned his craft in the theatre of life.

4. Learning in relationship

Fourthly, it is worth pointing out the significance of Phillip's marriage to Helen. In her, God gave to Phillip a highly intelligent and incredibly industrious intellectual companion. There is little doubt in my mind that Helen's deep faith, her clear grasp of biblical truth, her self-discipline and her no-nonsense approach to life have all had their effect on Phillip. A preacher is never who they are apart from the close relationships that God gives them.

5. A lesson for young preachers

A crucial observation, particularly for young preachers reading this book, is that Phillip is not in his 60s who he was at 16. It is easy to desire the ability to preach like our heroes. But it is also easy to forget that our heroes have taken years to be formed into the people that we see before us today. Preachers become who they are over the course of their preaching life. They grow in knowledge and they grow in obedience.

But on the flip side, Phillip is who he is in his 60s because of lots of little decisions made along the way, including some decisions he made when he was 16. Decisions to change his mind theologically. Decisions to minister in one place and not another. Decisions to pursue theology rather than a career in academia (which was open to him). Like all of us, Phillip's life is a work in progress. God is day by day fashioning him as his servant and his preacher. But equally, Phillip has been aiming for who he is now since the age of 16!

6. The grace of God

Let me finish with one last crucial observation. There have been many preachers as godly and faithful as Phillip who have experienced significantly different results from their ministry. Phillip ended up ministering for many years at the University of New South Wales, but it all happened because of God's quiet hand at work behind the scenes. Phillip never planned to go UNSW in order to raise up a generation of preachers for the gospel (which is what ended up happening), but God had planned for him to do it.

Over all and through all and in all is God our heavenly Father, who works in all things for his own glory and honour. Perhaps that, more than anything else, is what the preacher must remember. God's providence will determine the size and shape of the footprint our preaching makes. Our responsibility is to be faithful.