The Life & Impact of Phil Parshall

Connecting with Muslims



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1 The Life and Legacy of Phil Parshall

Gary R. Corwin

Dr. Phil Parshall is to contextualization among Muslims what Thomas Edison was to the utilization of electricity. Phil hasn't been afraid to experiment, but he has always done so while respecting where the real power lies: in the power of God and the gospel to bring about change in the most recalcitrant sinner. He has always recognized, and has also warned others, of the great danger in mishandling that power in the process of communicating the gospel.

Speaking of Thomas Edison, it is interesting to note that Parshall's paternal grandfather, a modestly successful welder/businessman, often spoke proudly of doing work for Edison when he spent winters near their home in Fort Myers, Florida. Parshall notes in his memoir that his "grandmother derived even greater joy relating her stories about playing bridge with Mrs. Edison."[1]

It must be acknowledged here at the outset that Phil Parshall and his dear wife, Julie, are to me not only subjects to be researched and written about, but dear friends of many decades. I will do my best to be objective, but I feel obliged to warn the reader upfront.

Sources required to adequately address the life and legacy of Phil Parshall must obviously include the usual ones that illuminate his formative years, his ministry labors in two very different contexts, and his substantial literary output. But there must also be those sources that show the relational connections that influenced his views, that spread and built on his insights, and that significantly influenced the organizations with which he has been associated. It is beyond the scope of this chapter to address all that, but it is likely that the reader will discover many of the relational connections related to Parshall's views addressed in this and other chapters in this book. This chapter, however, will focus more narrowly on his life and work, gleaned primarily from his memoir *Divine Threads*. It will conclude with my assessment of Parshall's impact missiologically and personally in the lives of others.

1 Parshall, *Divine Threads within a Human Tapestry*, 13.

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The Formative Years

Phil Parshall was born November 5, 1937, the youngest of two sons. Phil's father worked for his father in the welding business that the latter had established. Unfortunately, the strained relationship between the two over many years produced negative ripple effects for Phil and others in the family. While Phil's father was never physically violent, his hot temper, complaining spirit, and impulsive behavior resulted in him developing few genuine friendships. Phil's mother was, in fact, the only long-term friend that Phil can recall his father having.[2]

Phil's recollections indicate that the loving relationship Phil's father had with his mother may have been the one positive life pattern that Phil received from him. His parents had an intimate relationship for more than fifty years, most poignantly remembered in Phil's mind by the hours they would sit and talk with each other. He credits their example with helping him to become an incurable romantic with his own wife, Julie. From his mother, Phil learned "discipline, tenacity, and the value of hard work… . I can only speculate where I would be today without the example and quiet exhortations that consistently flowed from her life."[3]

Phil's other significant early influencers were his grandparents: "My grandfather was always exhorting me to be true to my word … encouraging me to be a person of integrity." To his "cheerful grandmother," Phil credited the only small religious influence of his childhood. "At some deep level of subconsciousness, I absorbed some of her desire for God."[4]

The Path to Conversion

During Phil's teen years, his father came to have a strong desire to pack up his family and find his fortune in greener pastures. Those pastures included stints in several Florida cities: Palmetto, Tampa/St. Petersburg, and Miami. For part of those years, Phil and his brother, Jimmy, stayed with their grandparents back in Fort Myers, enjoying more stable surroundings and experiencing some of the diversions of misspent youth.

Over the years, and with his grandmother's encouragement, Phil sporadically attended her rather liberal Episcopal church. He was an altar boy for a time and carried the cross in procession. While in Tampa, at another Episcopal church, he also went through what for him was a boring pre-confirmation ordeal of memorizing church creeds. He went on to experience the pomp and ceremony of confirmation conducted by the bishop, but he also

2 Ibid., 14.
3 Ibid., 15–16, 18.
4 Ibid., 18.

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knew upon later reflection that he "had no real grasp of any biblical teaching or spiritual reality."[5]

After the brothers rejoined their parents in Miami, following a period with their grandparents, something significant happened in March of 1955 that changed the trajectory of Phil's life. Though he drove alone a considerable distance to attend the early service at an Episcopal church, he said "there was absolutely no cognitive encounter with Christian truth… . But deep in my innermost being was a restless soul waiting to be unleashed."[6]

The catalyst for the next step in the new trajectory in Phil's life came about in a crowded Miami high school hall with a casual invitation from a female student with whom he was acquainted. She invited Phil to attend a cookout that evening "with lots of fellows and gals. Doesn't cost anything. Try and make it. Here's the address."[7]

Phil showed up with another friend, and after a pleasant hour of eating and conversation, he was ready to leave. But just then someone called out for everyone to come inside. The hundred or so teens entered the house and sat on the floor. Phil heard music and testimonies from teens who reverently spoke about Jesus and described their life-changing encounter with him. Then Ray, the owner of the house, spoke for about forty-five minutes, focusing on Ephesians 2:8–9 and emphasizing grace and the free gift of eternal life. When Ray gave an invitation, Phil raised his hand. He prayed with "an extremely pretty girl," who spent more time with him explaining the gospel from John, Romans, and Ephesians: "She asked if I was ready for the Kingdom. With seventy-five percent attention on the message and twenty-five percent attention on the messenger, I said a one hundred percent 'Yes.' A simple prayer followed that revolutionized my life."[8]

Early Discipleship

Over the next six months Phil began the metamorphosis from being "a carnal young man of the world" and a "biblical illiterate" to becoming a responsive and faithful follower of Christ. There were some bumps along the way. One was that Phil fell madly in love with the beautiful young girl who had counseled him to faith. She, however, let him down gently. "She must have realized my ego and spirituality were both at a fragile state." Other ongoing battles were "controlling sexual urges and refraining from cursing."[9]

5 Ibid., 27.
6 Ibid.
7 Ibid., 29.
8 Ibid., 29–31.
9 Ibid., 31–32.

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A more heartbreaking challenge at this time, though, was trying to help other members of his family find what he found in Christ. After hearing his overly forceful presentation concerning his conversion, his mother told him, "Go to bed and sleep it off. You will have forgotten all about it in the morning." His father, he later learned from his brother, had called the Miami police and asked them to investigate this cult to which their son had become attached. Phil, in reflecting on the frustrating seventeen years before any member of his family became a believer, said, "I attribute much of that delay to my insensitive initial and ongoing presentation of the Gospel."[10]

Ray and Sue became Phil's mentors, and their house became his second home during the months following his conversion. There was a constant flow of young people through the home, and Ray and Sue always had time to counsel and interact with them. Phil commented that "Ray is the most fruitful personal soul winner that I have ever known."[11]

The fellowship and spiritual encouragement Phil received at the "Ranch" (Ray and Sue's home) meant a great deal to him as a graduating senior that spring, particularly since his parents didn't attend his graduation. His father "never felt comfortable in formal situations," and his mother "was probably at work." In spite of this, Phil felt it was an "okay night as I spent it with my new friends from the Ranch."[12]

Personal Growth and Educational Journey

The summer following his high school graduation, Phil took evening summer school classes at the nearby University of Miami while working during the day "grinding and painting metal in an ornamental iron shop." His goal at that point was "to become a wealthy certified public accountant." But during that summer Ray became convinced that Phil "showed potential for the ministry." Even though ministry was not on Phil's list of career options, Ray could be very persuasive. "During one session with him that went well past midnight, I finally gave in and agreed to go … to Chattanooga to attend Tennessee Temple College, but only for one year."[13]

Phil's arrival at the fundamentalist, independent Baptist Tennessee Temple was quite a culture shock for him and the other fourteen students who arrived from Miami. The sanctions against movies, hand-holding, mixed swimming, etc. were hard to imagine, let alone follow; but eventually the new students got on board and discovered they could survive. Phil majored in Bible, and summarized his time at the school this way:

10 Ibid.
11 Ibid., 32.
12 Ibid., 32–33.
13 Ibid., 33.

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> Dr. Lee Robertson, the president, was held in highest esteem by all the students. It was my privilege to be baptized by him. Though certainly not an Ivy League school academically, Temple provided a sincere and godly environment which was just perfect for me as a six-month old babe in the Christian faith.[14]

While at Tennessee Temple, Phil heard a great deal about world missions, particularly through the annual missionary conference. The story behind Jim Elliot's martyrdom, accounts of attempts to reach Stone Age natives in Irian Jaya, and descriptions of Islam as "an impregnable barrier to the Gospel" all greatly impacted Phil's emotions. "Gradually the Holy Spirit weaned me from my personal desire for wealth and security, and in 1958 I made my covenant with the Lord for missionary service. I had been a Christian for three years."[15]

> As I looked at the lost world statistically, it became evident Islam and Communism were the neglected ideologies that needed Christ. At that time only Muslim countries were open to missionary presence. My heart moved in that direction. A fellow student from Pakistan pressed upon me the need for Christian witness in his country which was 97 percent Muslim. It was not too long before he had a recruit. At last, I had found a cause big enough to live for and, if necessary, to die for.[16]

Prior to his graduation from Tennessee Temple, Phil concluded that he needed further training in missions. Moody Bible Institute was highly recommended to him, and the school's one-year program would meet his needs. So putting aside his budding, but far from cemented, relationship with Julie, he was off to Chicago. While there he learned a lot more about missions, but even more powerful in his life was the Keswick teaching of the possibility of a more victorious experience of spiritual life through seeking a deeper reality of the indwelling Christ. This teaching was well represented among the faculty at Moody, and its message of the "exchanged life," of "not I, but Christ," spoke strongly to Phil.[17]

> This hunger for God became almost obsessive. Books were read, Keswick leaders consulted, passionate prayer made, all with the goal of becoming more intimate with my Lord and Savior…. It would, however, take time…. late one afternoon, I entered this empty Prayer Room and began to cry aloud to the Lord for the "higher-plane experience." Oh, how my thirst for God had crescendoed to the point of utter desperation! "Now, Lord, yes, now, send

14 Ibid., 34.
15 Ibid., 36–37.
16 Ibid., 37.
17 Ibid., 41–42.

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