

Phillip Marshall: Knowing biblical languages deepens biblical understanding

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EDITOR'S NOTE: This interview has been edited for length.

Phillip Marshall has been an assistant professor of biblical languages at [Houston Baptist University](#) since 2008. He is a member of Founders Baptist Church in Spring, where he serves part-time as the pastor of adult education and discipleship. From deep in the heart of one Texan, he shares his background and thoughts on Christian higher education. To suggest a Baptist General Convention of Texas-affiliated leader to be featured in this column, or to apply to be featured yourself, [click here](#).

Background

Where else have you served, and what were your positions there?

My only other full-time academic position was at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Ky., where I was an instructor of Old Testament interpretation, exclusively teaching biblical Hebrew courses in the 2007-08 academic year. I have also taught as an adjunct or visiting professor at the extension campuses of Reformed Theological Seminary and Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, as well as some church-based seminaries and training programs—The Expositors Seminary, The Bible Seminary and the Midwestern Center for Theological Studies.

Where did you grow up?

I grew up in Mississippi in a small town called Long Beach. My father was a career Navy man from Tennessee who served 23 years in the Construction Battalion—a “fighting Seabee.”

My mother was from Vietnam. Around age 15, she sneaked away from her family’s village in the middle of the night to move to the big city of Saigon so she could earn some money making wooden crates.

The two of them met during the Vietnam War, married, had two sons in Vietnam and then had three more sons in Mississippi. I was number four. Incidentally, the first four of us were born in four consecutive years.

I lived in the same house all 17 years of my life before moving to Washington, D.C., to study at Georgetown University.

How did you come to faith in Christ?

Although my father grew up in Tennessee in a Southern Baptist context, he was turned off by the hypocrisy he saw and abandoned the church as soon as he graduated high school and joined the Navy.

My mom was and still is a Buddhist. She and her Vietnamese friends pooled their resources together to hire a monk to start a Buddhist temple in my hometown.

Amazingly, neither my father’s atheism nor my mother’s Buddhism were forced upon me.

My exposure to the Christian gospel message initially came from my grandma and aunts in Tennessee, who during summer vacations would take me to the Southern Baptist church Dad had left behind.

Even though I didn’t submit to the truth of the preaching, those

experiences implanted two senses within me: a sense of fear that I might someday be accountable to God and a sense that this God had spoken through the Bible.

Throughout my teenage years, I kept seeing signposts, reminders God was there—finding a gospel tract and reading through it, receiving a Gideon New Testament and reading the materials about how to become a Christian, stumbling across an evangelistic booth at the local fair and staying to listen while my teenage friends bailed out and finally, getting caught stealing something from my neighbor who, instead of calling my dad or the police, told me about the second chance he had received from Jesus.

When I was in ninth grade, one of my older brothers asked a gal to start dating him. She refused unless he'd start attending church with her; so, he leaned on me to go along with him. Interestingly, when that relationship ended soon thereafter, he quickly ended his church going.

For some reason I felt compelled to continue attending that little Baptist church. A few years later, right before my last year of high school, God finally opened my eyes to see my sins deserved the just condemnation of God, and no amount of playing church could remove that.

I needed grace, and the atoning work of Jesus was God's answer for my sin. So, I put my faith and confidence in Jesus the Son of God, repented of my sinful lifestyle and submitted myself to the Lord Jesus Christ.

Where were you educated, and what degrees did you receive?

- Ph.D. in Old Testament Studies from Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2007
- Master of Divinity from Westminster Theological Seminary in California, 2000
- Bachelor of Arts in biblical studies from The Master's College, 1995

- Undergraduate studies in Russian language, linguistics and Soviet politics from Georgetown University, 1991

About education

Why do you feel called into education?

I really was a mediocre student growing up. For example, when I was in grade school, I remember our class having to take this really odd test. Then, a few weeks later, it was announced several of the students from our class would be going to another school one day a week in order to participate in a special program for accelerated and gifted students. I wasn't one of them. So, I just performed to the level expected of me through junior high.

I was average. But when I got to high school, I got the language bug and started taking Spanish and French with two teachers who were sisters. They must have seen my yet untapped language ability through my eagerness to learn, and they began to invest in me and to inspire me. They made me believe I could learn and do great things with my education.

Even more important, they invested in me as a person. They welcomed me into their lives, let me spend time with them and their families outside of class, offered wise counsel and even taught me how to drive.

I learned from them that good education is more than the transfer of knowledge. A good teacher pours himself or herself into the student. Every good teacher or professor I've had since then has done the same, and I aspire to do likewise for my students.

How does being a Christian influence your work in

education?

It really affects everything: the content of what I teach, the way I teach and the reason I teach.

Teaching biblical languages means teaching others to read biblical texts in the original languages, to discern what the authors said and how they said it and why that matters for the follower of Jesus and for the church.

These texts, however, are not merely artifacts of human experience. They also have a divine origin and authority, revealing God's mind, character, intentions and plans. Through them we can know God—and ourselves—better.

The implication, then, is if the study of Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek helps my students to know the biblical texts better, then I am helping them to know God better. That's motivating.

Furthermore, Scripture says, "Whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do everything to the glory of God" (1 Corinthians 10:31). Since teaching is a subset of "whatever you do," then I purpose to do all my teaching as an act of worship to God. I attempt to teach my courses with excellence and rigor, with grace and love toward others, because this glorifies him.

What is your favorite aspect of education? Why?

I find great joy in seeing students realize they can do what I'm asking them to do, and then watching them actually do it.

I often tell students the purpose of these years in the university or seminary is not to learn everything there is to know. Rather, these are times to get training in the tools that will enable them to engage in a lifetime of learning. Each course represents adding another set of tools to their tool belt.

One day I will be gone, but I will live on in my students if they have learned how to study for themselves and feed themselves with what I trained them in.

What is your favorite class to teach? Why?

I love to teach the Elementary Hebrew class. One reason is between Greek and Hebrew, many people just assume Hebrew is the more difficult of the two. After all, most students are at least familiar with some of the letters of the Greek alphabet, and there are many words and roots in English that have come to us from Greek.

The consonants in Hebrew, on the other hand, are non-Roman in their form. The vowels are dots, dashes and strokes around the consonants, and the writing is read from right to left. What could be more difficult than that?

I take it as a personal challenge to convince students beginning Hebrew that this language is fun to learn and just as easy to acquire as any other language—and sometimes easier. I think I've been successful on this score.

Another reason I enjoy this class is it gives students access to the Old Testament texts in a way that deepens their appreciation for the message of the book or passage they might be reading.

For example, Hebrew authors frequently employ word repetition as a device to structure a passage or to emphasize a concept. It is impossible to notice this in our standard English translations since repetition is considered bad form in our language. Additionally, Hebrew poets frequently use sound correspondences and puns, but you can't appreciate these things without reading the Hebrew text.

Name the three most significant challenges and/or influences facing education.

The introduction of online delivery methods is challenging because the community experience and the quality of instruction one finds in face-to-face education is harder to reproduce online. This growing method of teaching is not going to go away; so, schools will have to work especially hard to create the quality and value of online education.

Another challenge I see for Christian education is the cultural collision we are seeing between the sexual revolution being advanced by LGBTQ+ activists and Christian institutions—churches, private schools, benevolence organizations—holding traditional views of family and sexuality rooted in Scripture and millennia of tradition. Christian colleges and universities are increasingly being bullied to get on the “right side of history” and to support the sexual revolution, even if doing so contradicts the teaching of the Bible. If school administrators, trustee boards and faculty do not maintain the courage of their Christian convictions on these matters, the Christian character of the institutions will be unrecognizable within a few generations.

What do you wish more people knew about education?

I wish more people understood the value of the liberal arts for their university education. While I agree it's important for students to gain marketable skills as they approach graduation, there is so much more to being human than being a worker.

I think it was John Piper I once heard say the true goal of an education is not to make a living, but to live. I believe it's in the liberal arts where we really learn how to think critically, to learn to be self-aware, to ponder the deep and weighty matters of who we are and why we're here.

And I believe the best kind of liberal arts is ultimately a Christian liberal

arts education that starts with God and his revelation, for “the fear of the LORD in the beginning of wisdom.”

I wish every student seeking a degree would or could minor or take a second major in one of the humanities disciplines like languages, literature, philosophy, history, etc., especially with those topics being informed by biblically-grounded Christian convictions and reflection.

About Baptists

Why are you Baptist?

I am a Baptist by conviction. I studied for my Master of Divinity degree at Westminster Seminary, Calif., among Presbyterians. While grateful for that experience and the theological training I received there, I came away convinced biblically and theologically that baptism was for professing believers, rather than believers and their children, and that the local congregations were each accountable to Jesus as the head of the church, not to a higher-level hierarchy.

At the same time, I believe—along with Baptists historically—churches can and ought to cooperate together in things like missions, ministerial training, education and ministries of mercy. Being Baptist involves ecclesiastical independence without isolationism.

What are the key issues facing Baptists—denominationally and/or congregationally?

Baptists traditionally have been described as people “of the Book.” But I think that in our modern Baptist context, it is too frequently the case that our congregations, and even our pastors, are marked by a lamentable biblical illiteracy.

Students who come to HBU from Baptist churches often do not recognize

major people, events, stories or doctrines that come from the Bible This situation reflects a lack of personal Bible reading and biblical teaching from pastors and other teachers.

I would like to see a recovery in Baptist life of training pastors who preach the word of God with a sense of its authority and sufficiency to convert the lost and to edify the saints so they grow in conformity to the Savior. In short, I long to see more pastors who, like Apollos, are “mighty in the Scriptures” (Acts 18:24).

What would you change about the Baptist denomination—state, nation or local?

Another historical characteristic of Baptist life has been the commitment to a regenerate church membership (this goes hand in hand with believer’s baptism). However, maintaining a regenerate church membership is impossible without the practice of church discipline.

I think our denominations would be stronger if our churches would learn to implement a biblical model of church discipline. Discipline is not punitive, but redemptive. Pursuing wayward members should be seen and done with a tender heart to restore them to the Lord and to the church.

Removing from membership always is the last resort, a step reserved only for those who remain in unrepentant sin and thereby bring disrepute upon the Lord and his church.

About Phillip

Tell us a little about your family.

My wife Cheryl and I have been married for 25 years. She has taught piano for almost that long and is active in mentoring and counseling women through the local church and beyond. She’s an excellent speaker and is

energized by teaching the Bible to other women in small classes or in larger retreat and conference settings.

Our oldest son JP is a junior in accounting at Houston Baptist University and serves as a resident assistant and a leader in campus ministries.

We also have boy-girl twins, Andrew and Kathryn, who are in ninth grade with Classical Conversations of Katy, a one-day-a-week homeschool cooperative. They both are black belts in Tae-Kwon-Do and love doing musical theater.

What is your favorite Bible verse or passage? Why?

Here are a two. First is Ezra 7:10—“For Ezra had set his heart to study the Law of the Lord, and to do it and to teach his statutes and rules in Israel.” Ezra provides a great model here for anyone who would teach God’s word—study it, obey it and then teach it. Many want to teach God’s people but attempt to do so without conscientious labor in the study of God’s word or without a godly life of obedience that should adorn the teaching. May God raise up many more who will join the “scribal order of Ezra.”

Second is 2 Corinthians 5:9—“So whether we are at home or away, we make it our aim to please him.” In the context, Paul is asserting that whether living on in the body or living in the presence of Jesus away from the body, his ambition is to please his Savior. Everything else serves this single purpose in Paul, who elsewhere urges us to “do everything to the glory of God.” I desire this single-minded ambition in my own life, for I know if I do pursue the glory of God as my chief end, he will take care of everything else.

Name something about you that would surprise people who know you.

I used to break dance.