

# THE SIMPLIFIED ETHICS OF JOHN MCCANDLISH PHILLIPS



John McCandlish Phillips, born in Glen Cove, NY, was a born-again Christian and a star reporter for *The New York Times* for 21 years, from 1952 to 1973. In an era of legendary writers such as David Halberstam, Richard Reeves and J. Anthony Lukas, Phillips was said to be among the very best. Gay Talese—another of those legends—once called him “the Ted Williams of the young reporters... the only one guy I thought I was not the equal of.” His editor, Arthur Gelb, described him as the most original stylist he had ever edited.

Phillips became a Christian as a young man, in 1950, just before entering the U.S. army. Faith in God and compassion for human souls would become hallmarks of his life—and of his reporting. His stories, Talese wrote, “were invariably distinguished by their fine use of language, their slightly archaic, almost biblical precision and conciseness, often their humor, and always the author’s compassion for his subject.” Talese also wrote that Phillips “is not interested in winning a Pulitzer Prize.... He wants to redeem people.”

Phillips retired from *The Times* in 1973 to pursue a wider variety of endeavors. In particular, he mentored young Christians; wrote books such as *The Bible, the Supernatural and the Jews*, and *What Every Christian Should Know about the Supernatural*; and supported the work of the New Testament Missionary Fellowship, an evangelical church that he co-founded in 1962—and which continues to minister in Manhattan and the greater New York City area today. He remained a faithful and prayerful servant of God until his death, at 85, in 2013.

***“Always remember that, in public accusation, the irreducible, elementary, primary, essential requirement is that it be factually accurate.*”**

***If it truly is, you have every right to take it to print or on air, but short of that, it may just be character assassination, a thing which the Scriptures specifically forbid.***

***Budding journalists of about college age are often quite interested in talking about journalistic ethics.***

***I hope it will not shock you if I say that I find it a question of little interest, because youthful pride often lurks behind that professed interest – as if it were up to us to devise a special, superior, and perhaps somewhat complex, code of ethics that will satisfy our pretensions, when journalistic ethics are so basic, so simple and so self-evident as to require a strong commitment to them, but little elaboration.***

***God gave us the core ethic in the words, “You shall not bear false witness.”***

***In journalistic usage, You shall be as accurate and balanced and fair and faithful to the facts as you possibly can be. You will not lie. You will not distort. You will not make things up. You will not embroider your story for effect. You will not state it out of balance.***

***Finally: The Author of the book of Hebrew told of those “who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, gained what was promised, escaped the edge of the sword, whose weakness was turned to strength,” who dared to become network news anchors and managing editors and newspapers publishers – I am reading from the Amplified Bible here – “So let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the Author and perfecter of our faith.”***