

The Alpha Course – Evangelistic Bible Studies

David Cloud

Fundamental Baptist Information Service

The Alpha course, “a short practical introduction to the Christian faith,” grew out of a study program started in the 1970s by Holy Trinity Brompton (HTB), one of the largest and most influential Anglican parishes. It is located at the heart of London’s most exclusive shopping district, Knightsbridge, and is just down the street from the world famous Harrods department store (owned by the father of Dodi al-Fayed, who was killed in the auto crash with Princess Diana in September 1997).

The program consists of 15 sessions and runs for ten weeks. It covers such basic topics as: Who is Jesus and why did He die? How and why should I read the Bible? Why and how do I pray? How does God guide us? What about the church? The course has been extremely successful among Anglican parishes, so much so that some churches that had been closed were reopened.

In 1991, the Alpha program was revised by Nicky Gumbel, one of the pastors of HTB, for use in other churches. Since then Alpha has crossed denominational lines and has grown rapidly. Only 600 people attended the courses in 1991, but by 1996, that number had exploded to 250,000 per year. By 1997, it increased to 500,000 participants worldwide. By 2002, it was estimated that 3.8 million people have taken the course. The materials have been translated into 14 languages.

The Alpha program has also grown rapidly in North America and has been promoted by Jack Hayford, Robert Schuller, J.I. Packer, Luis Palau and by many other well-known Christian leaders. *Christianity Today* for Nov 12, 2001, called the Alpha Course “the fastest-growing adult education program in the country.” More than 4,200 churches in the U.S. use the curriculum.

Many have asked me about Alpha, and I offer the following warnings.

Alpha’s doctrinal weakness is evident in its wide ecumenical appeal

Alpha has achieved wide ecumenical appeal. Nicky Gumbel of Holy Trinity Brompton stated the ecumenical philosophy of the HTB in these words: “We need to unite...there has been some comment which is not helpful to unity. Let us drop that and get on. It is wonderful that the movement of the Spirit will always bring churches together. He is doing that right across the denominations and within the traditions...we are seeing Roman Catholics coming now...Nobody is suspicious of anybody else...People are no longer ‘labeling’ themselves or others. I long for the day when we drop all these labels and just regard ourselves as Christians with a commission from Jesus Christ.”¹

Alpha has even been accepted by the Roman Catholic Church. In the February 1997 issue of *Alpha News*, the lead article was titled “Archbishop praises Alpha on Pope visit as Catholic church hosts conferences.” It noted that Archbishop of Canterbury George Carey praised the Alpha course in a speech in Rome during his official visit with Pope John Paul II in December of that year. In May 1997, more than 400 Catholic leaders attended an Alpha conference in Westminster Cathedral in London to be trained in conducting Alpha courses in Catholic parishes. The meeting received the blessing of Cardinal Basil Hume, the highest Catholic official in England². The courses were so popular with the Catholics that many other Alpha training conferences were scheduled for Catholic venues. In Belfast, Northern Ireland, Catholics and Protestants both are using Alpha. Two Catholic churches (Church of the Resurrection and St. Gerard’s) are meeting with Fort William Park and Rosemary Presbyterian churches and with St. Peter’s Church of Ireland “for prayer and training.”³ More recently, Alpha was endorsed by the archbishop of Baltimore, Cardinal William Keeler.⁴ The largest Alpha conference so far in the United States took place Mar 18-19, 1999, at St. Stephen’s Catholic Church in Winter Springs, Florida. It was attended by 600 people.

¹ *Renewal*, May 1995, p.16

² *Alpha News*, Feb 1997, p.1

³ *The Burning Bush*, Feb 1998

⁴ “Education through Alpha,” *The Ledger*, Lakeland, Florida, Mar 13, 1999, p.D3

The Alpha program has achieved this ecumenical acceptance because it is doctrinally weak. It refers to salvation, the cross, the death of Christ, etc... in such a general way that false doctrine is not refuted. It says salvation is by grace, for instance, but it does not say that salvation is by grace *alone* by faith *alone* through the blood of Christ *alone* without works or sacraments. It refers to the Bible as God's Word in a general sense, but it does not explain that the Bible is truly God's inerrant, infallible, supernatural Word that must be revered and obeyed in every detail, that the Bible *alone* is the authority for faith and practice. It refers to Christ's death on the cross, but does not plainly explain the vicarious atonement that was required for man's salvation. It refers to man's need, but it does not describe man as a totally depraved nature sinner. If Alpha were that specific, it is certain it would not be ecumenically popular in this apostate hour.

Alpha promotes charismatic confusion

It is important to understand that the explosion of Holy Trinity Brompton's (HTB) Alpha program coincides with that church's involvement in the "Toronto Blessing" or the "Laughing Revival" since 1994.

Among those who attended the Laughing Revival in Toronto in 1994 from England was Eleanor Mumford, wife of Pastor John Mumford of the Southwest London Vineyard. Upon her arrival back in England, she testified of her experiences in Toronto, and the Laughing Revival broke out in the Vineyard congregation, both in the general services and in various house meetings. One of these meetings in May 1994 was attended by Nicky Gumbel, the aforementioned Anglican priest from Holy Trinity Brompton who popularized the Alpha program. At the house meeting, Eleanor Mumford told of her experiences in Toronto and "invited the Holy Spirit to come." The moment she did that, strange things began to happen. One person was thrown across the room and lay on the floor howling and laughing, "making the most incredible noise." Another man lay on the floor "prophesying." Some appeared to be drunken. Gumbel testified that he had an experience "like massive electricity going through my body." Gumbel got himself together and rushed to a meeting at Holy Trinity Brompton, where he apologized for being late. When he closed that meeting with prayer and said, "Lord, thank you so much for all you are doing, and we pray you'll send your Spirit," the same strange phenomena were again manifested. One of those present lay on the floor with his feet in the air and started laughing like a hyena. (This information is gathered from material I collected on my visit to HTB in 1997.)

When Sandy Millar, vicar of Holy Trinity Brompton, found out about the spiritual slayings of Gumbel and other HTB people, he and the other leaders invited Eleanor Mumford to speak at both the morning and evening Sunday services on May 29. When Mrs. Mumford finished speaking, she invited the Holy Spirit to come. The Laughing Revival broke out in HTB, and the mainline British newspapers quickly broadcast it to the nation. On May 31, Millar and the pastoral director from HTB flew to Toronto to examine the "Toronto Blessing" firsthand. Thus, the Alpha program's explosion into international popularity coincides with Holy Trinity Brompton becoming a British headquarters for the unscriptural Laughing (or Drunken) Revival.

There is also a connection between Holy Trinity Brompton and the confusion that is being perpetrated by the Brownsville Assembly of God in Pensacola, Florida. In Jan 1995, a Pentecostal evangelist named Steve Hill was on his way back to the States from a missionary trip. Stopping over in London, he stayed with a charismatic Roman Catholic couple who open their home for visitors. Hearing of the happenings at Holy Trinity Brompton, Hill sought out Sandy Millar and requested that he lay hands on him. When Millar acquiesced, Hill was knocked down. This is how Hill describes it:

"I stepped over bodies to get to the pastor. When Sandy touched me I fell to the ground (I don't ever do that)...I was like a kid at a Toys 'R' Us...Then I got up and ran up to a couple and said, 'Pray for me, hey man this is good.' They touched me and wham! I went back down. Some of you God is going to hit in a powerful way. If you are hungry get prayed for a dozen times."⁵

Six months passed after Hill experienced a touch from the Laughing Revival spirit. On June 18, 1995, he was preaching in the Brownsville Assembly of God near Pensacola, Florida, when the Laughing or Drunken Revival broke out in what would become its greatest arena to date. John Kilpatrick, pastor of the Brownsville church, fell to

⁵ Steve Hill, *Father's Day Video*, Brownsville Assemblies of God Church

the floor and lay there for almost four hours. “When I hit that floor, it felt like I weighed 10,000 pounds. I knew something supernatural was happening.”⁶ He has been so “drunk” that he could not drive himself home.

The “Pensacola Outpouring,” as it has been called by many charismatics, has connections with the Laughing Revival in Toronto not only via Hill’s contact with HTB in London, England, but even more directly through visits of its members to Toronto. For several weeks before June 18, many members from the Brownsville Assembly of God had traveled to the Toronto Airport Vineyard Church to participate in the Laughing Revival. Just before he became the music leader at the Brownsville Assembly of God, Lindel Cooley attended the Toronto Laughing Revival meetings. The wife of Brownsville Assembly pastor, John Kilpatrick, visited Toronto two times accompanied by the wife of one of the church officers.⁷ Also, prior to the June 18 breakout of the Laughing Revival in Brownsville, a film featuring the “Toronto Blessing” was shown in the church.

The close connection between Toronto, Brownsville, and Holy Trinity Brompton is evident, and it is this type of unscriptural, subjective, hunger-for-the-miraculous approach to Christianity that is being promoted by the Alpha program.

The Alpha course itself is permeated with charismatic error

About halfway through the 10-week program, the leaders conduct “Holy Spirit Day” or even have a “Holy Spirit Weekend Away.” The purpose is to bring the participants into a charismatic experience. Note that the focus is on the Holy Spirit rather than upon Jesus Christ. The leader “takes them through the experience of receiving the Holy Spirit” and prays for the Holy Spirit to come upon them. Those who take the courses are urged to open themselves to the “slaying in the spirit” and other unscriptural experiences associated with the charismatic movement. They “shake like a leaf in the wind” and experience “glowing all over” and “liquid heat.” The participants are taught that “tongues speaking” can be learned. They are taught to expect extra-biblical revelations from God through dreams and “words of knowledge.” One of the Alpha sessions deals with the question, “Does God Heal Today?” It is treated from a charismatic-Pentecostal perspective. In the book *Questions of Life*, Gumbel says “tongues” can be used in worship, in prayer under pressure, and in intercessory prayer for other people. He treats “tongues” as a prayer language that Christians should exercise privately, and he claims that tongues must be “learned” through “perseverance.”⁸ He develops doctrine through human reasoning rather than through sound exegesis of the Word of God: “Languages take time to develop. Most of us start with a very limited vocabulary. Gradually it develops. Tongues are like that. It takes time to develop the gift. Don’t give up.”⁹ Nowhere in the New Testament do we see the Christians learning how to speak in tongues!

Nicky Gumbel was powerfully influenced by John Wimber, and there are many references to Wimber in Alpha material. In a video series, Gumbel traces his call to evangelism to a 1982 incident in which he received prayer from Wimber. As Wimber laid hands on him, “He experienced such supernatural power that he had to call out for it to stop.” Wimber also gave a “word of knowledge” that Gumbel had a gift of “telling others.”

John Wimber (1934-1997) was the founder of the Vineyard Association, comprised today of some 600 churches worldwide. In the mid-1970s, Wimber became affiliated with Fuller Theological Seminary and was strongly influenced by Fuller professor **C. Peter Wagner**, a pragmatic church growth expert. In analyzing church planting models, Wagner seems to be as impressed by “success” as with doctrinal purity. If a methodology “works” it has value, regardless of whether or not it is scriptural. Wimber applied this type of pragmatism to the practical side of Christian life and ministry. He focused more on experience and feeling than on doctrine. He warned against “worshipping the book” and mocked those who judge everything strictly by the Bible, saying they have “God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Book” (Wimber, as cited in *Counterfeit Revival*, p.109). On another occasion Wimber warned against being “too rigid” and “too heavily oriented to the written Word” (ibid.). One would say something like that only if he were attempting to promote things that were not in accordance with the Word of God. The Psalmist said the written Word “is a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path” (Ps 119:105). It

⁶ Kilpatrick, *Charisma*, June 1996

⁷ Dr. Herb Babcock, former member of Brownsville AOG, “That’s How They Do It in Toronto!” *The End Times*, Mar-Apr 1997, p.8

⁸ Gumbel, *Questions of Life* pp.140-144

⁹ Gumbel, *Questions of Life*, p.147

is impossible to be too strongly oriented toward the Bible! The Wimber mindset leaves one open to spiritual delusion. If the Holy Spirit operates contrary to the Word of God, there is no way to discern between the true Spirit and false spirits. This subtle undermining of biblical authority is one reason why strange and unscriptural things such as the Laughing Revival and the prophetic movement have swept through the Vineyard Association.

Wimber taught a course on “Signs, Wonders, and Church Growth” at Fuller Seminary in the early 1980s. Later he traveled to many parts of the world with his “signs and wonders” crusades, promoting his doctrine that the Christian life and ministry should be accompanied by experiential miracles to be authentic, that miracles produce faith. In his popular books *Power Evangelism* and *Power Healing*, Wimber promoted this idea: “Clearly the early Christians had an openness to the power of the Spirit, which resulted in signs and wonders and church growth. If we want to be like the early church, we too need to open to the Holy Spirit’s power.”¹⁰ In reality, kingdom power and the manifestation of the sons of God in glory will be enjoyed only when Christ returns, and we who live in this present world must patiently hope for those events (Rom 8:23-25). Wimber did not deny Christ’s coming or the power that will be manifest at that time, but he also taught his followers to expect kingdom power now. This carnal enthusiasm for the miraculous is the climate required for the manifestation of a Laughing Revival and other End Times error.

It is John Wimber’s pragmatic, experience-oriented, subjective approach to Christianity that is promoted through the Alpha program.

Pastor Paul Fitton makes the following observation in his report on Alpha: “The Alpha Course is being used to prime the pump, to condition the thinking of church people to accept the teachings and phenomena which we associate with the Toronto Blessing--phenomena which have no anchorage in Scripture; doctrines which otherwise would be rejected out of hand. These phenomena are unbiblical. There is no ground in Scripture upon which to anchor them. The Alpha course in its philosophy is New Age. It relies heavily upon experience; in practice it leads to experiences which are rooted in the occult: if they are calling down the spirit and they are possessed by that spirit, and that spirit is not the Spirit of God, then they have opened their minds to other spirits, to evil spirits.”¹¹

Evangelistic Bible studies: Reject the alpha program but not the alpha concept

The Alpha program itself is very dangerous, and we sound the loudest possible warning against participation in it. At the same time, the underlying concept is very interesting and could be used to good advantage by Bible-believing churches. Call them “Basic Christianity Bible Studies,” or “Basic Bible Truths,” or whatever other name is feasible. Evangelistic home Bible studies can be one of the most effective means for teaching the gospel in the careful, systematic way that is necessary for grounding people. The basic concept of Alpha is to provide a series of studies on the gospel and basic Christianity in a context that is casual, that allows the teacher to build a relationship with the students, and that allows the unsaved to relax and ask any questions that might be necessary to enable them to understand Bible truth.

The Alpha plan is described in the following information from a brochure that is used to advertise Alpha in England:

What Is Alpha? [an acrostic is formed with the first letter of the following sentences]

Anyone interested in finding out more about the Christian faith.
Learning and laughter. It is possible to learn about the Christian faith and have fun at the same time.
Pasta and pudding. Eating a meal together gives people an opportunity to get to know each other.
Helping one another. The small groups give you a chance to discuss issues raised in the talks.
Ask anything. Alpha is a place where no question is regarded as too simple or too hostile.

Who Is Alpha for?

Those wanting to investigate Christianity.
New Christians.

¹⁰ Wimber, *Power Evangelism*, p.31

¹¹ Fitton, “The Alpha Course: Is It Bible Based or Hell Inspired?” *Australian Beacon*, February 1998

Those who feel that they have never really got going as a Christian.
Newcomers to the church.
Those who want to brush-up on the basics.

What's Involved?

The evening Alpha course begins at 7 p.m. with supper followed by a talk. We then divide into smaller groups for coffee and biscuits [cookies] and discuss any questions raised from the talk, aiming to finish by 9:45pm.

The morning Alpha course begins at 10 a.m. with a talk followed by coffee and discussion groups, aiming to finish by 12 noon.

The brochure is attractive and colorful and is designed for mass distribution. It includes a tear-off form that can be mailed to the church by those who are interested.

I don't agree with the above Alpha philosophy in every detail, but I am merely pointing out that Alpha's basic goal is to offer a series of Bible studies in a relaxed environment to those who desire to know what the Bible teaches. The liberal ecumenical churches are achieving great success with this approach, because many people do have questions about the Bible and are willing to attend the sessions. There is no reason why Bible-believing churches cannot take a similar tack but provide a truly sound Scriptural answer to people. The details and logistics of the program can be approached in many different ways according to the desires of the leaders and the requirements of the particular situation.

A similar approach can be used by Bible-believing churches to advertise a series of Bible studies conducted in homes or at the church or some other location. Any knowledgeable preacher could design a series of basic Bible studies that cover the Gospel, then other basic aspects of the Christian life, such as the Bible, prayer, and the church. It would not be difficult for a preacher to write his own series of basic lessons for the Bible studies, but there are also many developed courses that could be used for this. A good course for this purpose is called *Basic Bible Truths* by Lester Hutson.¹² This consists of six lessons that carefully and systemically guide the seeker through the truths of the Gospel. It lacks a clear presentation of repentance, but this can be added by the teacher. Another possibility would be to use Source of Light materials. They have evangelistic and basic discipleship correspondence courses.¹³

Suggestions for using "Basic Christianity Bible Studies"

Use the Bible studies as a focus for mass evangelism programs (house-to-house literature distribution, radio broadcasts, etc...). Include a brochure announcing the "Basic Christianity Bible Studies" or "Learn Basic Bible Truths." Instead of trying to pressure people into praying a prayer before they understand the gospel, focus instead to get the interested ones involved in a series of Bible studies where a relationship can be established and they can be dealt with carefully. This is what Paul did. He preached the gospel to the masses, then took the interested ones aside and instructed them more carefully in the things of God (Ac 17:34; 18:5-11).

Use the Bible studies to reach out to specific neighborhoods. Bible studies can be conducted in many different neighborhoods by various men and women in the church and thus greatly expand the outreach. The Bible studies can become the focus for the soul winning efforts in the various neighborhoods. These are not "cell groups," but are evangelistic Bible studies with the goal of getting people saved and brought into the membership of the church (and incorporated into the full life of the church, including the regular services). The studies can also be used to provide basic discipleship for new Christians to establish them in the faith and to help the new Christians build close relationships with mature church members.

Use the Bible studies to target specific groups of people. Basic Christianity Bible Studies can be geared to specific groups, such as women, teenagers, foreigners, professionals, uneducated, deaf, etc... By offering Bible studies for a

¹² Berean Baptist Publications, 10250 North Freeway, Houston, TX 77037

¹³ Source of Light, 1011 Madison Rd., Madison, GA 30650-9399. 706-342-0397 (voice), 706-342-9072 (fax), sol1usa@aol.com

particular group, the church can focus on their special needs in a way that cannot be done during regular church services or Sunday School. For example, in American cities today there are large numbers of immigrants and visitors and students from other countries and cultures. They often need special consideration when the Gospel is communicated to them. Oftentimes they do not speak English well. It is not uncommon for them to be completely ignorant of the gospel or even of the most basic facts of the Bible and Christianity. The typical "Romans Road" gospel presentation that uses a few verses out of Romans will often be insufficient. They need to be taught the very basics of biblical truth, such as creation and the fall of man and the uniqueness of the Bible, before they can understand the gospel of Jesus Christ. All of that can be taught out of Romans, of course, because Romans itself begins with creation and the fall of man, but this is not what most people do when they present the "Romans Road." Many people will not be familiar with any of the terms of the gospel, such as sin and repentance and grace and faith. Unless those terms are carefully explained, they will "hear" the gospel, but they will not understand it. Too much of the soul winning activity in North America is of this nature because it is simply too shallow and hurried. Missionaries who work in other parts of the world understand this and develop ways of teaching the gospel effectively to their people, but too often personal workers in North America approach foreigners without proper knowledge of how they think and how to reach them. They try to reach them exactly as they would someone who has grown up in the Bible belt of the United States and they wonder why it doesn't work. Involving select groups of people in Bible studies that are geared to their needs and that are led by people who understand them can solve many of these problems.

A good series of Bible studies for use with many foreigners is *Firm Foundations: Creation to Christ* by New Tribes Mission. They have published an excellent aid for evangelizing those who do not have a Bible background. *Firm Foundations* is available in English, Russian, Spanish, Albanian, and other languages. There are 50 lessons designed for a one-year course, but they also have a plan for teaching the material in a shorter period. The teacher's manual includes three 17" x 22" color maps and one 17" x 66" color chart of the Bible events covered. The lessons begin with creation and follow God's revelation of the gospel progressively through the Bible, highlighting important themes. This course would be excellent for home Bible studies. It could also be used effectively in North American churches as a Sunday School class for people from other parts of the world who speak English as a second language. Many of these people are open to hearing about the Bible and Jesus Christ, but they often are confused by the standard preaching and teaching at churches because they don't understand even the basics of Bible truth.

Use the Bible studies to assist those who might not be able to attend a church. There are people of certain religions who are not allowed to attend a church, but they might be able to attend a home Bible study. Some Catholics fear attending a Protestant or Baptist church. There are young people and wives who are not allowed by their parents to attend a church. The Bible studies can be a means of reaching these people with the gospel.

Use the Bible studies with evangelistic revival meetings. It is said that only about 5% of people making professions at large (mass or city-wide) revivals go on to become active church members. Of course, one would suppose the percentage to be higher in local church revivals. Still, the percentage of those who don't "stick" is appallingly high in all types of evangelistic programs today. There are many reasons for this, one of the chief being that scores of those making professions do not truly understand the gospel and are, therefore, not fully committing themselves to Christ in biblical repentance and faith. It's one thing to say, "Yea, I'll go along with that; it sounds good," and quite another to be truly born again of the Spirit of God. If most of those coming forward in revivals were strongly encouraged to commit themselves to a six or ten or twelve-week Bible study course, and if godly, mature church members faithfully taught the course, we can only imagine that the lasting fruit of our meetings would be ten-fold greater than would otherwise be the case.