

Alpha—Attend or Avoid?**Introduction**

In recent years the Alpha course has become virtually a byword for introducing people to the Christian faith. Alpha started life in 1977 as a modest, local church based initiative, described as ‘a means of presenting the basic principles of the Christian faith in a relaxed and informal setting’. Its home was then, and still is today, the Anglican Parish of Holy Trinity Brompton in London. Its first presenter was a man called Charles Marnham but today ‘the face’ of Alpha is the assistant curate, Nicky Gumbel, and to a lesser extent his boss, the vicar of Holy Trinity Brompton, Sandy Millar.

As a first step in our assessment I want to quote a short passage from Paul’s second letter to Timothy.

‘Thou therefore, my son, be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus. And the things that thou hast heard of me among many witnesses, the same commit thou to faithful men, who shall be able to teach others also.’ (2 Timothy 2:1-2)

Donald Guthrie, on page 151 of his commentary writes:

‘The idea is clearly to entrust something to another for safekeeping... The transmission of Christian truth must never be

left to chance... and is...
committed... only to reliable men
who will also be qualified to
teach others.'

All around the world, in a multitude of churches, representing a multitude of denominations, Alpha courses are being run. In these courses, the teaching of the Christian faith is being set aside by the local church eldership, and, by the use of a series of fifteen videos, is being entrusted into the hands of the Holy Trinity Brompton promoters and presenters of Alpha.

The question we need to consider is this: are men such as Sandy Millar and Nicky Gumbel 'reliable men' or 'faithful men' as Paul wrote to Timothy?

The 'Toronto Blessing'

Earlier, I said that Alpha first appeared in 1977, but in the mid 1990s, thanks to the efforts and input of Nicky Gumbel, it had what would be described in modern terminology as a bit of a makeover. This makeover, and the re-launching of Alpha, just happened to coincide with another event that was taking the then professing Christian world by storm – the so-called Toronto Blessing.

How did men like Sandy Millar and Nicky Gumbel react to the devilish claims of the Toronto Blessing? *Time* magazine carried a report in its issue of 15 August 1994 called *Laughing for the Lord*, and part of it said:

'It's Sunday evening in London's fashionable Knightsbridge neighbourhood. Though pathetically tiny flocks of Londoners attend many Anglican services, Holy

Trinity Brompton has a standing-room-only turnout of 1500... After the usual Scripture readings, prayers and singing, the chairs are cleared away. Curate Nicky Gumbel prays that the Holy Spirit will come upon the congregation. Soon a woman begins laughing. Others gradually join her with hearty belly laughs. A young worshipper falls to the floor, hands twitching. Another falls, then another and another. Within half an hour there are bodies everywhere as supplicants sob, shake, roar like lions, and strangest of all, laugh uncontrollably. This frenzied display has become known as the "laughing revival" or "Toronto Blessing"... After first appearing at Holy Trinity only last May, laughing revivals have been reported in Anglican parishes from Manchester to York to Brighton... At London's Holy Trinity, schoolteacher Denise Williams says she "came here a little sceptical" but soon was caught up in the fervour. "There was a lovely feeling of warmth and peace"... lines outside Holy Trinity now start forming an hour and a half before services.'

In September 1994 on Ulster Television's *Sunday Matters* a panel discussion was chaired by Sue Cooke and I made

reference to it in a little booklet that I wrote called *The Toronto Blessing is No Laughing Matter*.

This is part of what I wrote then:

'Amongst those taking part in the debate were a husband and wife team. The wife had been a "charismatic" Christian for a number of years but her husband declared that he had been an atheist... at a recent meeting where "Toronto-Linked" phenomena were breaking out he decided, rather reluctantly to go forward for prayer and this is how Robert described what happened:

"God for me was a historical figure but having seen what *it* did to my own wife and to other people *I can see that God was a living force* and touching people. I had to rethink my life and when I finally had the courage to go forward for prayer I found myself saying 'God come into my life'... since then I've been forward for prayer other times and I've, yes, I've fallen down but what *it's* made me do *is get in touch with myself*... I came to God with fear because I didn't know what was going to happen and I resisted the falling down, *but I felt a force that moved*" [demonstrating a pushing movement as he spoke]...

Later Sue Cooke addressed... Nicky and said to him: "Nicky... long-term this kind of thing has happened before in history and then it has disappeared" - In reply Nicky said:

"Well I think we have to look to the fruit... we're seeing people's lives changed - I mean Robert is an example of someone who came as an atheist and his life was changed *through an encounter with Jesus Christ.*"

In response to this claim by Nicky Gumbel that Robert had had an encounter with Jesus Christ I wrote:

'Examine carefully what Robert said and you will find *no mention of Jesus Christ* - all you find are "New Age ideas" of God as "it", "a living force", making me "get in touch with myself". There was no evidence of the true *Holy Spirit* glorifying Christ or "taking of the things of Christ and revealing them" (John 16:14).'

For Nicky Gumbel to interpret what Robert said as *an encounter with Jesus Christ* shows his total lack of discernment and his capacity to move comfortably in the world of what we now call 'the spin doctors' - in this case it was on behalf of the so-called 'Toronto Blessing'.

In an article in the Charismatic magazine *Renewal* in May 1995, Nicky Gumbel wrote:

'I believe it is no coincidence that the present movement of the Holy Spirit [referring to the Toronto Blessing] has come at the same time as the explosion of the Alpha Courses. I think the two go together.'

Another link between Toronto and Alpha was noted by Alan Morrison in an *Evangelical Times* article in November 1994. Alan Morrison wrote:

'The Airport Church in Toronto has... become the focus of international attention as church leaders from all over the world have attended there and "brought back" the phenomena to their own churches. In the UK the first recipients were the Anglican Holy Trinity Brompton... But there is another major contributing influence, which has been working among the churches today. One of the main harbingers of the "Toronto Experience" in the UK is an evangelistic ministry known as the Alpha course, a ten-week [as it was then] series of meetings first devised at Holy Trinity Brompton in 1977 and now overseen by Nicky Gumbel, curate of the Kensington Church... the acclaimed climax of the course is what is known as "the Holy Spirit weekend"... a residential weekend during which the participants receive teaching in talks entitled *What does the Holy*

Spirit do? and How can I be filled with the Holy Spirit? It is during this weekend that unusual phenomena are expected to occur... Nicky Gumbel says that "For most people the weekend is the crucial turning-point. There are more people converted at the Alpha weekend than at any other time."

Alan Morrison astutely added 'But what is it they are converted to?' We will consider that issue later!

So much for Nicky Gumbel and Toronto but what about Sandy Millar and Toronto?

A report in the *Evangelical Times* of September 1994 highlighted the role of Sandy Millar in the distribution of 'Toronto'. The report stated:

'People from all over the world are flocking to a small building a hundred yards from the end of the runway of Toronto airport... every night there are astounding scenes of people shaking with laughter, slipping into a trance, falling to the floor and crying... Back in the UK members of Holy Trinity Brompton have been undergoing similar experiences... The vicar, Sandy Millar reminded us of the "strange things that had happened the previous Sunday" and requested witnesses to step forward to recount their experiences. A young man duly

came forward and told of the ecstatic sensations he had had the previous week after Mr Millar had touched him and he had fallen to the floor... "Shall we try it again?" asked Mr Millar. The man assented. Mr Millar prayed. We held our breath. Mr Millar touched the man's forehead and then bam! Right on cue, his eyelids fluttered, his knees buckled and he was lowered to the floor where he started to gibber. Soon there were four bodies on the floor; two giggling, one gibbering and one silent. Then the curates began praying and touching the congregation, which was now falling about me.'

On 29 April 1995 I spoke at a Church in Glasgow on the subject of the 'Toronto Blessing'. When the meeting was over two young men and a girl spoke to me. They had just been to a large Christian gathering held at Wunderwest (Butlins near Ayr), and Sandy Millar had been one of the speakers.

He had 'laid hands' on two teenage girls from Northern Ireland to impart 'The Blessing' and one of them supposedly received 'the gift of tongues'. Later, in the middle of the night, this young girl was discovered by her friend rolling on the floor with staring eyes.

Her condition was so bad that next day her parents from Templepatrick had to come over and take her home. In the

words of the girl herself and her friends she 'believed she received something evil'. Certainly it was 'no blessing'.

Toronto, tongues and Alpha would, in the words of a well-known expression, appear to be 'inextricably linked'. In a report in the *Daily Telegraph* of 22 December 1990, Damian Thompson wrote:

'Caroline, a 28 year old Cambridge graduate, was taken to Holy Trinity Brompton by a friend who claimed it had changed his life. Within weeks she was put on an Alpha course... culminating in a weekend in Malshanger, a country house near Basingstoke, Hampshire. It was there she experienced doubts - "I felt my emotions were being manipulated" she says. "People would say - 'we need lots of tissues for this song' - as if every tear was carefully calculated." "Speaking in tongues" was de rigueur [necessary]. "They insisted so I made a silly noise. Everyone hugged and kissed me."'

It is my view that any pastor, preacher or Bible teacher who embraced, received and passed on the 'Toronto Blessing' and who believed and who still believes that 'Toronto' was a move of the Holy Spirit should not be entrusted with the solemn task of teaching the Word of God, for they are not, in the words of Paul to Timothy 'faithful men'. In the light of what you have just heard - I ask - are Nicky Gumbel and Sandy Millar 'faithful men'?

How the men of Alpha react to 'false gospels'

Another legitimate test I believe of whether or not Bible teachers are 'faithful men' – men to whom the task of teaching the Word of God can be entrusted – is to look at their reaction to obvious 'false gospels', whether those 'false gospels' claim to be Christian or non-Christian.

Roman Catholicism clearly presents a 'false gospel' and so 'faithful men' should confront it – not cooperate with it. Is that how the 'men of Alpha' react to Roman Catholicism? In what was a locally produced ecumenical/charismatic magazine called *Bread* the following report was published in March 1996.

'The first Ireland Alpha conference was held in St Patrick's College [A Roman Catholic college] Drumcondra on the 30th November and 1st December 1995. Speakers at the conference included Sandy Millar, vicar of Holy Trinity Brompton, London... Alpha courses have been organised in Catholic and Protestant parishes in Ireland, both north and south... Charles Whitehead of International Catholic Charismatic Services said "Alpha is an excellent introductory course for those who do not go to church or for whom an inherited Christianity has little meaning."'

So much for Sandy Millar and Roman Catholicism – but what about Nicky Gumbel?

The *Irish Catholic* newspaper of 10 September 1998 printed an article called *A Way To Grow The Church* – let me quote:

'Last weekend St Patrick's College, Drumcondra, hosted a conference on a new evangelisation course gaining in popularity worldwide... Nicky Gumbel, one of those who developed the Alpha course addressed the audience attending the Alpha conference... Gerard Gallagher explains how the Alpha programme works and how he is using it to develop the faith of the young adults in Ireland.. "Through Alpha I have witnessed young adults who have taken on new understandings of Christianity... Alpha is only a vehicle to be used. Follow up is essential... It is recommended that Alpha only be used within one denomination. Co-hosting it with other Christian faiths is not recommended as it only causes confusion."'

That Roman Catholic article mentioned the importance of 'follow up'. On the front page of *Alpha News* (July – October 1999), is a large colour photograph of 'Father' Raniero Cantalamessa and a smaller inset photo of him with Nicky Gumbel. Below these photos is written:

'Father Raniero Cantalamessa, the Preacher to the Papal Household in the Vatican has accepted an invitation from *the catholic Alpha office* to give a series of seven talks on video which will

be used as follow up teaching to Alpha in the Roman Catholic Church. The series entitled, "Drink From The Wells Of The Church" [not from The Word of God!] includes talks on the Bible, Prayer, The Church and The Power of Pentecost... David Payne, head of *the UK Catholic Alpha office* said, "These videos have just been published and we are very excited about their potential."

This little write-up in *Alpha News* failed to mention other titles in the video series such as 'The Eucharist Makes Us Holy' and 'Mary Our Model'. The reality is that Alpha is nothing more than an 'anorexic skeleton' of supposed Christianity which Rome then, in her video series, 'fleshes out' with all its unscriptural, soul-damning heresies.

On 17 June 2003, 'Father' Cantalamessa in his Vatican 'sermon' spoke on 'The Trinity' and said:

'For a believer, the Trinity is a mystery that is very familiar... Christian life, which begins with baptism in the name of The Father, of The Son and of The Holy Spirit develops submerged in the Trinitarian dimension, whether in confirmation, or in the sacrament of marriage or at the hour of death.'

Would you invite such a man to come and teach Christianity in your Church? Well, that's precisely what Holy Trinity Brompton did in the summer of 2003.

According to a report in the *British Church Newspaper* of 9 January 2004:

'In July 2003, Preacher to the Papal Household, "Father" Raniero Cantalamessa made an extended visit to Holy Trinity Brompton, headquarters of the Alpha movement... Cantalamessa's sermon to young people at Holy Trinity's "Home Focus Week" exalted *Mary* not *Christ* as "our hope and model."'

The report went on to say:

'Cantalamessa is closely involved with the international development of the Alpha course. The Papacy now has its own Alpha office. Roman Catholic Archbishop Ambrose Griffiths recently described Alpha as "The most powerful evangelistic tool which reaches out to those whom we need."'

In his talks, Nicky Gumbel regularly refers favourably to, and quotes favourably from, people who were or are faithful, practising Roman Catholics – people like Mother Teresa, Malcolm Muggeridge and Hans Kung.

Hans Kung, a controversial Roman Catholic theologian stated:

'No world peace without peace among the religions.'

And of course that's the popular view today amongst those human beings 'with clout' in the corridors of political and religious world power.

As well as these Roman Catholics Nicky Gumbel also made favourable references to:

- C S Lewis, who believed in 'Purgatory' and 'salvation' apart from Christ.
- William Temple, former Archbishop of Canterbury and President of the World Council of Churches, who, according to author Edward Panosian 'found rays of the same light which shone forth in Christ also in non-Christian religions'.
- William Barclay, described by Martyn Lloyd-Jones as 'the most dangerous man in Christendom'.
- John Wimber, Ecumenical/Charismatic founder of 'The Vineyard Movement' that in 1994 spawned the so-called 'Toronto Blessing'.

There is an upsurge of opinion in 'professing Christendom' today – both Catholic and Protestant – that there is hope for those who have never heard of Christ. Rome teaches it; Billy Graham teaches it; Clark Pinnock of 'Open Theism' infamy teaches it. This 'hope' can either be through 'natural reasoning' or 'God's wider mercy'.

To the list of those who hold out hope for those who have never heard of Christ you can add the name of Nicky Gumbel. Here are extracts from an article in *Evangelical Times* of August 2002 by Norman Mackay that critiques a book written by Nicky Gumbel called *What About Other*

Religions? – according to the article this book is referred to as ‘An Alpha Resource’. Norman Mackay writes:

‘The booklet seeks to tackle issues arising from the interaction of Christians with those of other faiths. Two questions are raised in the booklet. [1] Is Jesus the only way to God? [2] What about those who have never heard of Christ? Are they eternally lost? To the first question the booklet answers in the affirmative. Yet regarding the second we are told that many who do not hear of Christ are likely to be saved anyway.’

In short this Alpha Resource unashamedly endorses what has come to be known as the ‘wider hope’ theory. The ‘wider hope’ theory is grounded on the assertion that people can be saved by virtue of Christ’s death without ever consciously hearing of him or embracing the Good News concerning him. Rather than seeing the world as a harvest field of unreached peoples, we are led to believe that the planet is populated by millions of ‘anonymous Christians’. These people are going about their business as Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus and animists, totally oblivious of the person and work of Christ, yet are actually saved by Christ. The question is whether these incredible claims can actually be true. If what Nicky Gumbel’s book teaches was actually true, then why did the Apostle Paul apparently waste his time and energy writing these words in Romans 10:12-15?

'For there is no difference between the Jew and the Greek: for the same Lord over all is rich unto all that call upon him. For whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved. How then shall they call on him in whom they have not believed? and how shall they believe in him of whom they have not heard? and how shall they hear without a preacher? And how shall they preach, except they be sent? as it is written, How beautiful are the feet of them that preach the gospel of peace, and bring glad tidings of good things!'

As well as this 'wider hope' theory, many who subscribe to it, also subscribe to a 'natural reasoning' hope of salvation for those who have never heard of Christ.

God's Word demolished any notion of 'salvation through natural reasoning' when Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 1:21 that 'in the wisdom of God, the world by wisdom knew not God'. When it comes to a link between 'reasoning' and 'salvation' there must be an input of 'divine truth' – for Paul continued to say 'it pleased God by the foolishness of *preaching* [divine input] to save them that believe'. Even in the Old Testament God said in Isaiah 1:18 'Come now and let *us* [a divine input] reason together'.

As for God supposedly extending 'wider mercy' to those who practise non-Christian faiths, Romans 1:18 tells us that God does not 'reveal His mercy' to such people but rather 'His wrath'.

As was the case in the matter of the 'Toronto Blessing' it is again my view that any pastor, preacher or Bible teacher who cooperates with Rome rather than confronting Rome and who holds out hope of salvation to those who never hear of Christ: such a person, and Nicky Gumbel is one such person, should not be entrusted with teaching the Word of God, for he and they are not, in Paul's words to Timothy 'faithful men'.

So much for 'the men of Alpha', but what about 'the message of Alpha'?

The message of Alpha

As we come to consider this I want to quote from Acts chapter 20 as Paul is saying farewell to the Elders of the Church at Ephesus:

'And now, behold, I know that ye all, among whom I have gone preaching the kingdom of God, shall see my face no more. Wherefore I take you to record this day, that I am pure from the blood of all men. For I have not shunned to declare unto you all the counsel of God. Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock, over the which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers, to feed the church of God, which he hath purchased with his own blood.' (Acts 20:25-28)

As we continue to assess Alpha the question must be asked: 'Does Alpha declare all the counsel of God?' Are all the

vital and *crucial* elements that make up ‘*all* the counsel of God’ included in it?

When I’m asked what I think of Alpha, I very often reply by saying: ‘The Church of Rome endorses it, need I say more?’ Any Bible course that Rome is able to endorse cannot possibly be ‘Evangelizing the Lost’ or ‘Equipping the Saints’. But there are other deficiencies where Alpha is concerned and I want to look at them now.

The ‘God’ that Paul spoke of as he addressed the elders at Ephesus is of course the ‘Triune God’ of Father, Son and Holy Spirit revealed to us in the inspired Scriptures.

I believe that ‘The message of Alpha’ fails to ‘declare all the counsel’ of God The Father, of God The Son and of God The Holy Spirit.

In relation to The Father, I believe Alpha fails to adequately declare His *Majesty* – majesty is defined as ‘stateliness’ or ‘nobility’. When Isaiah had his vision of heaven we read:

‘In the year that king Uzziah died I saw also the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up, and his train filled the temple. Above it stood the seraphims... And one cried unto another, and said, Holy, holy, holy, is the LORD of hosts: the whole earth is full of his glory.’ (Isaiah 6:1-3)

The ‘stateliness’, the ‘nobility’, the ‘majesty’, that which brings ‘glory’ to The Father ‘upon the whole earth’ is ‘His

Holiness'. When the Lord was praying in John 17, He addressed His Father as 'Holy Father' in verse 11. This 'Holiness' has crucial and vital ramifications or consequences. A W Pink, on pages 43-45 of his book *The Attributes of God*, wrote:

'Because God is holy He hates all sin. He loves everything which is conformity to His law and loathes everything which is contrary to it... It follows therefore that He must necessarily punish sin... God has often forgiven sinners but He never forgives sin; and the sinner is only forgiven on the ground of Another having borne his punishment... For one sin God banished our first parents from Eden... The unregenerate do not really believe in the holiness of God. Their conception of His character is altogether one-sided... The "god" which the vast majority of professing Christians "love" is looked upon very much like an indulgent old man, who himself has no relish for "folly" but leniently winks at the "indiscretion" of youth. But the Word says "Thou hatest all workers of iniquity" [Psalm 5:5]; "God is angry with the wicked every day" [Psalm 7:11]... Because God is holy, we should desire to be conformed to Him. His command is "Be ye holy, for I am holy" [1 Peter 1:16].'

Back in 1869, C H Spurgeon, that 'prince of preachers' said:

'In holiness God is more clearly seen than in anything else, save in the person of Christ Jesus the Lord, of whose life such holiness is but a repetition.'

To grasp something of the *majesty* or the *holiness* of 'The Father' A W Pink drew attention to something vital and crucial to the process of our understanding of 'The Father' – he referred to 'His law'. If men are ever to appreciate 'God's Holiness' and their own lack of it, they need to be confronted with 'God's Law'.

Chris Hand, in his book *Falling Short*, writes of:

'...a failure to teach God's holiness. This is extraordinary given the fact that "God is holy" is taught far more often in scripture than "God is love". Indeed the adjective used most frequently in scripture to describe God is "holy."'

Tim Chapman (an Anglican curate) wrote a helpful article entitled *The Alpha Course Examined*, and on this point he wrote:

'Alpha is intended to be a presentation of the gospel that will bring people to faith... the Alpha material posits [lays down as a principle] that people are best brought to faith without God's holiness and sovereign rule over the world being taught. The

consequences of such a diminished definition of the character of God are enormous. Nowhere is this more clearly seen than in Alpha's treatment of sin. Alpha is clear to begin with on what is at the heart of sin when it states that the "root cause of sin is a broken relationship with God". The consequences of sin are spelt out in terms of the pollution, the power, the penalty and partition of sin.

But then as the argument in the course is followed, sin is presented as being "the mess we make of our own lives". The problem of sin is explained as "the rubbish that clutters up our lives and clutters up our world" and as "pollution of the soul". For all its biblical use of words, Alpha fails to define sin biblically. It does so by concentrating on the consequences of sin rather than on what sin actually is.'

I witnessed this failure 'to define sin biblically' at first hand when I went to hear an Alpha presentation at the Waterfront Hall in Belfast on 25 September 2000. The speaker was Nicky Gumbel and in a report that I wrote I said this:

'The whole thrust of Nicky Gumbel's message focussed upon man and his problems - there was nothing said about the world and

mankind as seen from God's perspective... God's love was mentioned frequently but "the fierceness of his anger" [Joshua 7:26] never got a mention. As a result there was no attempt to induce "reverent fear" of the Lord, which is of course the beginning of true "knowledge" [Proverbs 1:7]... There was studiously no reference to or use of the word "sin"... Man's problems were identified as "wrongdoings" but never was any yardstick identified in the... light of which man's actions could be classified as "wrongdoings" [in other words there was no mention of God's law, which of course is "the schoolmaster" ordained "to bring us unto Christ" (Galatians 3:24)].'

As an afterthought I could add Romans 3:20 where Paul wrote: 'by the law is the knowledge of sin'.

C H Spurgeon said, around 1886:

'I do not believe that any man can preach the gospel who does not preach the law. The law is the needle, and you cannot draw the silken thread of the gospel through a man's heart unless you first send the needle of the law to make way for it. If men do not understand the law they will not feel that they are sinners. And if they are not consciously

sinners, they will never value the sin offering. There is no healing a man till the law has wounded him, no making him alive till the law has slain him.'

Tim Chapman wrote of how Alpha was 'concentrating on the consequences of sin rather than on what sin actually is' and in Belfast that was the thrust of Nicky Gumbel's message. He basically took the audience on a 'pity-party guilt trip' where he focused on man's 'wrongdoings' and the resultant 'plight' and 'miseries'. Not once, in my hearing did Nicky Gumbel spell out the 'Divine Consequences' of man's 'wrongdoings' – of how God's Holiness is offended and His wrath incurred.

In a book called *Straight Talks* by Thomas Fitch, published in 1950, Mr Fitch in his preface wrote:

'The short addresses which comprise this volume were all delivered to Service personnel while I was on active service as a chaplain in the Army.'

One of these 'addresses' was entitled *Repentance* and in it [p34-36] Mr Fitch wrote:

'If we were to ask the question "What is repentance?" we would discover by a close investigation that there are many parts which combine to make up the whole... First then, confession. Confession is part of repentance but before there can be confession there must be conviction of sin, otherwise no

need of confession is felt...
Second, contrition. This is another part of the content of repentance. Let me point out that there is what is theologically known as *attrition* as well as *contrition* and these two require to be carefully distinguished. *Attrition* is simply sorrow because of the consequences of sin. *Contrition* is sorrow for sin. Sorrow that is aroused because the sin hurts another... The sinner, aware of his sin in no small way, becomes truly sorry for that which hurts the heart of God... An apology to gain an immediate advantage must never on any account be considered as true contrition.'

In Belfast Nicky Gumbel was certainly seeking to induce *attrition* in the hearts of his listeners but to the exclusion of *contrition*.

Such an approach, an approach central to 'The Message of Alpha' 'shuns to declare' the *majesty* of God The Father.

Then, in relation to The Son I believe Alpha fails to adequately declare His *Mission*: What was the mission of God the Son? The angel said to Joseph in Matthew 1:21 'thou shalt call his name JESUS: for he shall save his people from their sins'. The Apostle Paul wrote in 1 Timothy 1:15 'This is a faithful saying, and worthy of all acceptation, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners'.

We've all heard the three-fold explanation of how Christ saves people from sin: [1] From its *penalty* – by His dying as a substitute for sinners at Calvary, believing sinners can be 'justified' – totally pardoned from the *penalty* of sin. Then [2] Christ saves from sin's *power* – in the lives of believers, God, through the work and influence of the Holy Spirit 'sanctifies' His people, or as Charles Wesley wrote so well 'He breaks the power of cancelled sin'. Then [3] Christ will, when believers get to heaven, 'glorify' them by saving them from the *presence* of sin. That was the 'saving' *mission* of God the Son.

Chris Hand in *Falling Short* wrote:

'The consequences of sin are true enough. But it is all man centred... Alpha's emphasis does not go anything like far enough. Christ in Alpha, comes forward to deal with too small a problem... sin according to Alpha is more of a problem for us than it is for God... the misunderstanding of sin inevitably leads to a misunderstanding of the cross.'

Tim Chapman, in his article, wrote:

'Alpha gets off to a good start. After seeking to establish "Who is Jesus?" the session "Why did Jesus die?" tells us that "the cross lies at the heart of the Christian faith" (Alpha Manual page 10). We are told that the cross achieved justification, redemption, atonement and reconciliation and scripture

references are provided. Indeed there is a reasonable foundation to build on if one wanted to further investigate the Cross.

However the penal substitutionary nature of Christ's atonement is given very little weight - that Christ died not simply in our place but took upon himself the wrath of God against sin. It is skimmed over in the course. This is hardly surprising given that there is an incorrect view of the disease of sin in Alpha; the cure of the cross is similarly misrepresented. We are left with a hollow view of why Jesus had to die at all. Thus the cross ends up being little more than a visual aid, which proves that God is self-sacrificial and loving. The death of Jesus is presented as being an act of love yet without any connection with the reality of God's holy anger. This is a far cry from the biblical teaching on the atonement.'

In my own report of my visit to the Waterfront Hall I wrote:

'Jesus was presented as one who would be able to "satisfy" people... The answer to what was being put across as... man's "pity party" is, according to Nicky Gumbel, friendship and companionship with God. Whilst that is in part true... Friendship was elevated and

exalted above forgiveness as being the means to happiness for man... The real answer to happiness, with an ensuing friendship and companionship with God, is found in Psalm 32:1 "Blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered.""

The 'Jesus' of Alpha is portrayed more as a 'Solver of human problems' rather than as a 'Saviour from sin'. He comes across like a spiritual 'Jim'll fix it' character rather than 'The Good Shepherd who gave His life for His sheep'. He is presented as One who rescues people from the consequences of their 'wrongdoings' rather than as One who redeems people from the condemnation of their 'sins'. I think Alpha's Jesus would appeal to former soccer idol, George Best, with all his alcohol problems, but the Biblical Jesus would not – unless of course the Spirit of God did a dealing with him.

Alpha, by failing in the first place to adequately 'declare all the counsel of God' concerning the *majesty* of God The Father, fails secondly to adequately 'declare all the counsel of God' concerning the *mission* of God The Son.

Then thirdly, in relation to The Holy Spirit I believe Alpha fails to adequately declare His *Ministry*. What was to be the *ministry* of God the Holy Spirit?

The Lord Jesus Himself identified it in John's Gospel and there would clearly be two aspects to the Holy Spirit's ministry. The first applies to unbelievers, when the Lord said in John 16:8-11,

'And when he is come, he will reprove the world of sin, and of righteousness, and of judgment: Of sin, because they believe not on me; Of righteousness, because I go to my Father, and ye see me no more; Of judgment, because the prince of this world is judged.'

Matthew Henry wrote:

'Convincing work is the Spirit's work; he can do it effectually, and none but he. It is the method the Holy Spirit takes, first to convince, and then to comfort. The Spirit shall convince the world, of sin; not merely tell them of it. The Spirit convinces of the fact of sin; of the fault of sin; of the folly of sin; of the filth of sin, that by it we are become hateful to God; of the fountain of sin, the corrupt nature; and lastly, of the fruit of sin, that the end thereof is death. The Holy Spirit proves that all the world is guilty before God. He convinces the world of righteousness; that Jesus of Nazareth was Christ the righteous. Also, of Christ's righteousness, imparted to us for justification and salvation. He will show them where it is to be had, and how they may be accepted as righteous in God's sight.'

There we have the Holy Spirit's ministry to unbelievers clearly spelt out by the Lord Himself. But the Lord also

identified what the Holy Spirit's ministry to believers would be. In John 14:26 He said:

'But the Comforter, which is the Holy Ghost, whom the Father will send in my name, he shall teach you all things, and bring all things to your remembrance, whatsoever I have said unto you.'

Then in John 16:13-15 the Lord also said:

'Howbeit when he, the Spirit of truth, is come, he will guide you into all truth: for he shall not speak of himself; but whatsoever he shall hear, that shall he speak: and he will shew you things to come. He shall glorify me: for he shall receive of mine, and shall shew it unto you. All things that the Father hath are mine: therefore said I, that he shall take of mine, and shall shew it unto you.'

So, to summarise, the ministry of the Holy Spirit to unbelievers is to *convict of sin* and to *convert to Christ*.

His ministry to believers is to *teach* and to *transform*.

And overall his ministry, which again has at its heart the issue of 'sin' – the revealing of sin's 'penalty' to unbelievers and the removal of sin's 'power' in the lives of believers – *that ministry should not draw attention to the Holy Spirit, but should glorify Christ*.

I believe Alpha fails to adequately declare this ministry.

Tim Chapman, in his article *The Alpha Course Examined*, wrote in relation to what the Lord said in John chapters 14-17:

'These chapters teach us that there is an indissoluble connection between the word of God and the Spirit of God, a connection which runs right through Scripture... Given what Jesus teaches about His Holy Spirit we should expect Him [the Holy Spirit] to point towards Jesus and His words and not to himself.'

Earlier in his article Tim Chapman wrote:

'I would suggest that too much of the limited time in what is an evangelistic course is spent on the subject of the Holy Spirit... In the talk "How can I be filled with the Holy Spirit?", the fullness of the spirit is presented as a subsequent experience to conversion... There is scant evidence in scripture to suggest anything other than that the believer receives all of the Holy Spirit when he or she repents, puts their trust in Jesus and is justified. "Be being filled with the spirit" in Ephesians 5:18 is an ongoing command which acknowledges variation in filling among Christians but not a requirement to seek a second filling. The

teaching "Every Christian has the Holy Spirit, but not every Christian is filled with the Spirit" (Alpha manual, HTB Publishing, page 33) is at odds with Biblical teaching.'

Not only is Alpha's teaching on the ministry of the Holy Spirit 'inadequate' but it is also positively 'unscriptural'. Paul's command in Ephesians 5:18 to 'Be filled with the Holy Spirit' was given to *believers* who were already indwelt by the Holy Spirit in all His fullness – The Spirit was God's gracious gift to them at the moment of their conversion and He still is today. But this is not how Alpha portrays the 'fullness of the spirit'. For Alpha this can be an experience for *unbelievers*.

Tim Chapman rightly identified this 'unscriptural' misrepresentation when he wrote:

'Gumbel's reasoning suggests that there are two equally valid ways of becoming a Christian; one is to be persuaded by rational and historical explanations, and the other is by experiencing the Holy Spirit. To think thus is to ignore the fact that it is always the apostles' priority to present rational and historical explanations to all sorts of people wherever they proclaimed the gospel. It is the Holy Spirit who then applies these words to people's hearts and convicts them of their sin. This [Holy Spirit weekend] appears to be yet another way that the apostolic

gospel is bypassed in an effort to make things as accessible as possible... For many the decisive moment is the Saturday evening of the weekend... For Alpha the decisive moment is not the preaching of Christ and Him crucified, but when the Holy Spirit is 'invoked'... Surely the moment when the guest repents and believes must be the decisive moment.'

Friends, we must never forget that the Holy Trinity Brompton church and its leaders Sandy Millar and Nicky Gumbel were 'infected by' and 'carriers of' the diabolical so-called 'Toronto Blessing' and they clearly believe that if they can introduce people to similar 'Toronto-Type' experiences then that for them equates to that person becoming a Christian!

ITV broadcast a series of programmes that showed the experiences of a group of people who 'signed up' for an Alpha course. When it came to week four – 'The Holy Spirit Weekend' – none of them had professed to having become a Christian, yet here they were on their way to a 'weekend' where they were hoping to 'be filled with the Holy Spirit'.

TV cameras were only allowed to show Nicky Gumbel explaining this to the gathering of several hundred people – most of whom would not have been believers. When it came to the point where he was going to 'pray down the spirit' the cameras had to leave. Friends, this is not 'scriptural' this is 'spiritism' and the testimonies of people afterwards prove it.

Several of the group who were the subject of the TV series were interviewed as they left this particular meeting and for many it had been either a time of terror or of shock or both. Not only were they frightened but they were angry and there was certainly no mention on their lips of the glories of Christ or Calvary.

Tim Chapman wrote:

'On the Alpha leaders tapes there is a peculiar mystique about giving the talk "How can I be filled with the Holy Spirit?" Both Sandy Millar when talking of his conversion and Nicky Gumbel when talking of his giving this talk give a consistent message, that the Holy Spirit weekend is the highlight of Alpha. Yet isn't this teaching both to demean the Holy Spirit and to misunderstand his work... Moreover if the Spirit's longing is to point to Christ and to bring Him the glory then isn't it strange that Christ is so infrequently mentioned?'

In some instances the Holy Spirit has been put across as a 'passport to party-time'. Gerald Coates, one of the co-founders of 'Marches For Jesus' and director of the 'Pioneer' group of charismatic churches said:

'Alpha courses have been successfully used among our Pioneer network of churches... The course is fun and unthreatening - just like our Lord Himself.'

The Lord – 'fun and unthreatening'?

Try telling that to those who witnessed Him with a whip driving out the corrupt money changers from the Temple in John 2:15.

Try telling that to 'the goats' who according to Matthew 25:41 will be consigned to 'everlasting fire' by this 'unthreatening' Lord.

Gerald Coates is not alone in portraying the Holy Spirit as a 'conduit to celebrations'. Elizabeth McDonald, in her little booklet *Alpha New Life or New Lifestyle?*, has a section on page 20 entitled *The Parable of The Party*. Elizabeth writes:

'In Section IV, Gumbel says the Church, though God's Holy Temple, so often loses "the sense of the presence of God in its midst". He is making reference here to the Sunday meetings of believers rather than to the Church as the body of Christ and uses the parable of the Prodigal Son to explain that Sunday services should be like a "party". "Jesus was saying that... the Church is like... a feast and a celebration and at a party everyone has a good time. There's fun, there's laughter... Why shouldn't there be laughter at the biggest party of all? And that's what we're seeing today, laughter and fun and people getting drunk - not with wine, Paul says 'don't get drunk with wine - be filled with the Spirit'...Come to a party where you

can get drunk on God... I was at a party like that last night. It was a whole load of church leaders, and we invited the Spirit to come... It was a party thrown by the Holy Spirit... It was a fun place to be. The Church is meant to be a party... That's the sort of picture - a Holy Temple.""

'The message of Alpha' shuns to declare the *majesty* of God the Father.

'The message of Alpha' shuns to declare the *mission* of God the Son.

'The message of Alpha' shuns to declare the *ministry* of God the Holy Spirit.

This failure where Alpha is concerned is due to what I would call 'The Missing Link' - the missing link in Alpha is its failure to address *the seriousness of sin*.

They do not adequately explain the Father's *view* of sin.

They do not adequately explain the Son's *redemption* from sin.

They do not adequately explain the Holy Spirit's *conviction* of sin.

Earlier I made the comment:

'When I'm asked what I think of Alpha - I very often reply by saying "The Church of Rome endorses it - need I say more?'"

Perhaps this should not be a surprise for the truth is that Rome does not adequately explain the Father's *view* of sin. Rome categorizes 'sin' as either 'venial' or 'mortal'.

Rome does not adequately explain the Son's *redemption* from sin. Rome introduces concepts of 'eternal' and 'temporal' punishment.

Rome does not adequately explain the Holy Spirit's *conviction* of sin. Rome teaches that the Holy Spirit uses baptismal water, and miraculously transubstantiated bread and wine, in the hands of her consecrated priests, to deal with sin.

Alpha and Rome have a shared 'missing link'. Together they minimize and misrepresent *the seriousness of sin*.

As we come to our final assessment on Alpha I want to quote some verses from Matthew 7:15-18,

'Beware of false prophets, which come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravening wolves. Ye shall know them by their fruits. Do men gather grapes of thorns, or figs of thistles? Even so every good tree bringeth forth good fruit; but a corrupt tree bringeth forth evil fruit. A good tree cannot bring forth evil fruit, neither can a corrupt tree bring forth good fruit.'

Commenting on this passage, Bishop J C Ryle wrote:

'We must beware of false prophets. They will arise... we must be prepared for them and on our guard... There are thousands who seem ready to believe anything in religion if they hear it from an ordained minister... Their teaching must be weighed in the balance of Holy Scripture... Sound doctrine and holy living are the marks of true prophets.'

If 'teaching' is false then any resultant fruit from that 'false teaching' cannot, according to this passage be 'good' but will be 'evil'.

Am I saying that no one who attends an Alpha course can be 'saved'? – No I'm not. God is sovereign and if someone is genuinely saved whilst attending an Alpha course then it will be in spite of the course and not because of it. But that doesn't allow us to endorse Alpha. Paul in Romans 3:8 had to deny a charge that he was teaching that it was legitimate to 'do evil that good may come' and for us to endorse Alpha would be to 'do evil that good may come'.

The question must be faced up to:

Can an 'evangelistic course' that minimizes and misrepresents *the seriousness of sin* really produce 'good fruit'?

Tim Chapman wrote:

'The lack of focus on Jesus is seen very clearly in the

testimonies people give -
testimonies which Alpha quotes
with approval in its literature.'

Referring to various 'testimonies' Tim Chapman continues:

'This is deeply troubling... The focus of his attention is specifically identified as being not the Lord Jesus, not the Cross but the third session "How can I be filled with the Spirit?" Sadly such a testimony is repeated again and again. This is hardly surprising, as guests are made expectant of variously; "physical heat sometimes accompanies the filling of the Spirit and people experience it in their hands or some other part of their bodies". The experience is described as "glowing all over, liquid heat, burning in my arms when I was not hot". Still another said "I didn't want to come to the weekend and I did. But I would call myself a Christian now. I would say that I felt the Holy Spirit. I was feeling I was loved. It was really a tremendous overwhelming feeling of love". Again what is conspicuous by its absence in so many of these testimonies is any mention of Jesus and his atoning sacrifice on the Cross, which is the heart of the Biblical gospel.'

When I spoke publicly on Alpha in 2000, I made exactly this same point and I cited several examples. I mentioned the TV presenter Diane Louise Jordan. In the March – July 2000 *Alpha News* there were three pages devoted to her ‘testimony’. In those three pages there was not one reference to *sin*, *Christ* or *Calvary*. The major influences in her ‘claimed conversion’ were her emotional reaction to a visit to Lourdes and an encounter with an apparition of her dead sister in a hotel room in Argentina.

Since then, in the March – June 2003 *Alpha News* in two pages of ‘testimony’ by former female spiritualist Sam Ryan, yet again there was no reference to either *sin* or *Calvary*. In the July – October 2003 *Alpha News* in two pages of ‘testimony’ Leila Bagnall makes no reference to *Calvary*.

Disgraced MP, Jonathan Aitken refers to his ‘conversion’ in these terms, as apparently someone was praying for the Holy Spirit to descend on him:

‘I obeyed his instructions to stand with hands outstretched at waist height, palms upwards, praying that the Holy Spirit would come... At this point my palms suddenly began to tingle with a strange physical sensation which strengthened until my hands and wrists became hot and uncomfortable as though they were being charged with an electric current. Then I began to cry.’

Other apparent claimed Alpha converts would include former spice-girl Gerri Halliwell and page three topless

model Samantha Fox. The life-styles of these two ladies since their claimed ‘conversions’ would place lots of question marks over the validity of Alpha’s claim that they ‘came to faith’.

A ‘convert’ in the TV series – when asked what he had been ‘saved’ from – answered by saying ‘from the way he used to live’. He had embraced a ‘new life-style’ – but had he received ‘eternal life’?

From the ‘Tree of Alpha’ one can pick a large basket of ‘questionable testimonies’.

From the ‘Tree of Alpha’ one can also pick a large basket of ‘dubious endorsers’.

People are often known by ‘the company they keep’. In the November 1996 *Alpha News*, several pages were devoted to ‘endorsements’ from what were described as ‘Church Leaders and Evangelists’. Amongst those listed were:

- Gerald Coates and Roger Forster, charismatic joint founders of ‘Marches for Jesus’.
- Ken Gott, head of a charismatic centre in Sunderland who was smitten by the ‘Toronto Blessing’.
- Steve Chalke, who called for ‘street parties’ when Princess Diana died. In a review [in *Evangelicals Now* – June 2004] by Andrew Sach and Mike Ovey of Steve Chalke’s book *The Lost Message of Jesus* we read the following:

'If God is not angry and humans are not essentially guilty, then what job remains for the cross? Unsurprisingly, Chalke renounces a crucial biblical dimension of the atonement: penal substitution. For Chalke this is unnecessary and offensive... But the apostle John declares that the pouring out of God's wrath on Jesus is the very essence of love [1 John 4:10].'

In the 20 August 2004 issue of the *British Church* newspaper we read:

'Reformed commentators have heavily criticised Steve Chalke, "Evangelical" TV personality and director of Christian charity "Oasis Trust" for his strongly expressed criticisms of the biblical doctrine of penal substitution. He has now condemned the accounts of creation in Genesis and Exodus as "rubbish"... Steve Chalke said "My personal belief is that those who wish to read into Genesis chapter 1 that God made the world in six days are not being honest and scholarly. It won't be taught in the school [a new 'Christian Academy' to be

opened by Oasis trust] because I think it's rubbish. It's a bizarre thing to claim the Bible suggests that". [Comment: Does Steve Chalke not believe the fourth commandment? - "For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth" (Exodus 20:11).]'

- J John, leading 'evangelist' who was 'intoxicated by Toronto'.
- R T Kendall, former pastor of Westminster Chapel who endorsed Rodney Howard Browne.
- J I Packer and O S Guinness, endorsers of the 1994 ECT Agreement.
- Mike Bickle, founder of the so-called 'Kansas City Prophets'.
- George Carey, former Archbishop of Canterbury.
- Alpha has also consistently received endorsements from leading Roman Catholic Archbishops.

That's the sort of company that no faithful 'Child of God' would want to be seen in.

Conclusions

The real 'fruit' of Alpha:

- Questionable testimonies
- Dubious endorsers

The men of Alpha - *unfaithful*

The message of Alpha - *unscriptural*
The 'fruit' of Alpha - *unconvincing*

I see no reason to change my verdict on
Alpha:

The verdict that I reached in my talk in
2000,

THIS IS A COURSE TO AVOID.

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