alpha
New Life or New Lifestyle?

A biblical assessment of the Alpha Course

by

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First published in Great Britain in 1996
by St Matthew Publishing Ltd
1 Barnfield, Common Lane, Hemingford Abbots,
Cambridgeshire, PE28 9AX, UK

Tel: 01480 399098
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www.stmatthewpublishing.co.uk/home.htm

Copyright © Elizabeth McDonald, 1996
Various minor revisions and additions, 2000-2019
Scripture passages added in full, 2018

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ISBN 0 9524672 6 7

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Preface

The *Alpha Course,* which was started at Holy Trinity Church, Brompton, London (HTB) has caught the imagination of large numbers of churches as a means of evangelism in today's climate. However, it has also raised questions and caused concern among many. What might there be in it, or missing from it, that causes these doubts and hesitations?

This booklet seeks to help you clarify possible apprehensions and questions. It contains a critique of the Alpha Course, based on its videos and other HTB material, which Elizabeth McDonald originally put together for her home church. It is a personal assessment, and not exhaustive, but we believe it will be valuable to you in making your own appraisal because it has already proved so for others.

Elizabeth also added in a letter to me that, in her opinion, Nicky Gumbel over-emphasises what we are saved *to* at the expense of what we are saved *from*. This imbalance is a general trend in 'new' evangelical circles at present and seems to be increasing in prominence particularly in those churches which have embraced the Toronto Blessing (the two often go together). It stems from teaching that God is primarily love when the scriptures point to the primary characteristic of God as being holy. God's holiness is mentioned twice as many times in Scripture than His nature as love or loving. In fact, no Gospel message in Acts proclaims God's love for sinners – see the Appendix. The result of emphasising God's love is that the need of repentance for sin and the consequences of that sin in the sight of a holy God who must, and will, judge it is hardly mentioned.

Christians are being presented with a deficient, deceptive, and dangerous understanding of God and the basis of our relationship with Him. I am convinced that there are now many in the churches who believe they are Christians but are not, because they have never truly repented of sin and become dependent on Jesus Christ both as Saviour and Lord. The result is a church which is in many respects no different to the world and is also wide open to receive every deceptive teaching and activity presented to it.

Jo Gardner, Adullam Register,
May 1996

Introduction

Prove all things; hold fast that which is good
(1 Thessalonians 5:21)

The Alpha Course is arguably the most popular evangelistic programme in use in Britain's churches at present. Alpha's publications manager advises everyone

> "to do the course exactly as we've laid out for the first time - because we know it works" **[1]**.

At first glance this advice seems well and good, but in fact a purely pragmatic approach to spiritual things is not scriptural and can even be very dangerous... Certainly, as Tricia Tillin of Banner Ministries has said, *"the natural desire of every Christian is to see souls saved...",* but I also agree with her subsequent statement:

> "...at the same time, we cannot simply close our eyes to all evangelistic outreaches trusting that they are Biblically sound. There are two questions we must ask: What is the ultimate aim, and what kind of gospel will be preached?" **[2]**.

Referring to Matthew 23:15, Robert Bowman of the Christian Research Institute writes:

> "The Pharisees were extremely zealous in missionary work, but all they succeeded in doing was leading more people into their error. Zeal in witnessing or evangelising does not indicate that a religious group is God's people" **[3]**.

Today we might apply that to Jehovah's Witnesses for example.

Alpha seems to start well. It makes many gospel statements: the three talks on Video I speak about the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ, and those on Video II cover fundamental steps for new Christians concerning assurance of their faith, reading the Bible, and prayer.

However, as the Course progresses, some of the talks tend to wander off into (a) lengthy accounts of Holy Trinity Brompton's experiences of the 'Toronto Blessing'/'Toronto Experience' (TB/TE) and associated movements, (b) novel exegeses of various Bible passages common amongst pro-TB preachers, (c) calls for unity despite truth, and (d) an over-emphasis on the Holy Spirit. All of these are less than helpful to potential Christians.

Consequently, though the aim of Alpha may genuinely be to bring as many into God's Kingdom as possible, by the end of the course I can't help thinking that the Toronto Blessing may be the greater beneficiary...

(I)
Alpha's Connection with the Toronto Blessing

The Alpha Course has been used at Holy Trinity Brompton (HTB), Church of England, since 1977, yet was virtually unknown elsewhere until Eleanor Mumford of the South-West London Vineyard church brought what soon became widely known as 'The Toronto Blessing' (TB) or 'Toronto Experience' (TE) back from the Toronto Airport Vineyard church in Canada to HTB, via Nicky Gumbel, in May 1994 **[4]**.

In Talk 9 of the Alpha Course, Gumbel spends a substantial amount of time relating to Alpha participants exactly how this occurred:

> "We went to their house ... where a group of leaders of their church was meeting ... Ellie Mumford told us a little bit of what she had seen in Toronto ... it was obvious that Ellie was just dying to pray for all of us ... then she said *'Now we'll invite the Holy Spirit to come'* and the moment she said that, one of the people there was **thrown**, literally, across the room and was lying on the floor, just howling and laughing ... making the most incredible noise ... I experienced the power of the Spirit in a way I hadn't experienced for years, like massive electricity going through my body ... One of the guys was prophesying. He was just lying there prophesying..."

Gumbel returned to HTB where he apologised for being late for a meeting due to what had happened. Asked to close this meeting in prayer he says:

> "I prayed *'Lord, thank you so much for all you are doing and we pray you'll send your Spirit'* and I was just about to say *'in Jesus name, Amen'* and go out the door when the Spirit came on the people who were in the room. One of them started laughing like a hyena..."

There are a few observations to make here...

The first is the unquestioning acceptance by both groups of such unusual manifestations. Similarly, the invocation of the Spirit was not queried. Secondly, I think it is pertinent to note that the Spirit came *before* the name of Jesus could be brought into the prayer. Thirdly, if one man really was prophesying, then he was speaking directly to these people from God and his words should have been heeded, tested, and applied. But it seems they were completely ignored.

Later in this same talk, and again in Talk 7, Gumbel compares the behaviour of recipients of the Blessing (as do all TB/TE leaders) to the 'drunken' behaviour of the apostles on the day of Pentecost. He says,

> "they [the apostles] looked as though they were drunk: some of the manifestations were the same as that of a drunkard."

Although this exegesis is a convenient explanation of the 'spiritual drunkenness' being seen at TB meetings, it is not the Biblical one, and has not been preached as such until now. The vast majority of the crowd in the Scriptural account were "amazed" and "confounded" not because the apostles were showing "all the signs of inebriation" (Talk 7), and which the passage itself nowhere implies, but because ***"we do hear them speak in our tongues the wonderful works of God"*** (Acts 2:6-12). The crowd formed because of the sound of these tongues (v6) which were clear and easily understood. It was only a minority within the crowd who accused the apostles of being "full of new wine" (v13), and there is no indication in the passage that, of such a large crowd, theirs was the *considered* judgment.

Jesus told His disciples that equipment for witnessing and service was the purpose of Pentecost - and it is likewise the purpose of the Baptism of the Holy Spirit today. The result of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost was a lengthy and powerful *sermon* by the apostle Peter which brought approximately 3000 people to faith in the Lord Jesus Christ almost immediately:

> "And being assembled together with [His disciples, Jesus] commanded them that they should wait for the promise of the Father, Which, saith he, ye have heard of me. For John truly baptized with water; but ye shall be baptized with the Holy Ghost not many days hence … ye shall receive power [ability, capability, strength, authority] after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you: and ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth" (Acts 1:4-8).

> "And when the day of Pentecost was fully come, they were all with one accord in one place. And suddenly there came a sound from heaven as of a rushing mighty wind, and it filled all the house where they were sitting. And there appeared unto them cloven tongues like as of fire, and it sat upon each one of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Ghost … But Peter, standing up with the eleven, lifted up his voice, and said unto them, Ye men of Judea, and all ye that dwell in Jerusalem, be this known unto you, and hearken to my words … let all the house of Israel know assuredly, that God hath made that same Jesus, whom ye have crucified, both Lord and Christ. Now when they heard this, they were pricked in their heart, and said unto Peter and to the rest of the apostles, Men and brethren, what shall we do? Then Peter said unto them, Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the Holy Ghost … And with many other words did he exhort them … Then they that gladly received his word were baptized … And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers … Praising God" (Acts 2:1-47).

The outpouring of the Holy Spirit was *not* given that we may lie on the floor on our backs with our feet in the air laughing like hyenas (Talk 9). Gumbel's description of the antics that went on in the vestry of HTB after their invocation of the Spirit seems to me to bear no resemblance at all to what happened on the day of Pentecost **[5]**.

Yet Alpha participants are being taught all this, as part of an evangelistic/Christian Living course, as though it is normal and desirable, with absolutely no mention made of the need to test it; and at the end of this talk they are prayed for, corporately, to receive it. Thus, they are all initiated into the Toronto Blessing without even a hint of protest amongst them. Nicky Gumbel says,

> "I believe **it is no coincidence** that the present movement of the Holy Spirit [the TB] has come at the same time as the explosion of the Alpha Courses. I think **the two go together**" **[6]**.

If the two *"go together"*, as Nicky Gumbel - the primary architect of the Alpha Course as well as the primary recipient of the Toronto Blessing in the UK - states they do, then it is important that we look at the characteristics of the TB in order to better understand the *"explosion"* – the sudden appeal - of Alpha…

(A) Problems with the Toronto Blessing

The Toronto Blessing originated with Rodney Howard-Browne the 'Holy Ghost Bartender' **[7]*.***

There are some perceived problems with the Blessing which we cannot afford to ignore, but must honestly consider in the light of Scripture:

(a) The focus of worship is removed from the Father and the Son and placed instead on the Holy Spirit, contrary to John 14:26; 15:26; and 16:13-15:

> "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.**"
>
> "But when the Comforter is come, whom I will send unto you from the Father, even the Spirit of truth, which proceedeth from the Father, **he shall testify of me.**"
>
> "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 show you things to come. **He shall glorify me**: for he shall receive of mine, and shall show it unto you. All things that the Father hath are mine: therefore said I, that he shall take of mine, and shall show it unto you."

This is paralleled in the New Age movement's emphasis on the *"coming of the Age of the Spirit (Aquarius) and consequently the demise of the Age of the Son (Pisces) and all who follow him"* **[8]**.

(b) There is an over-emphasis on the power and - selective - gifts of the Holy Spirit: tongues, words of knowledge, healing, and prophecies - which are never tested against Scripture; for example: ***"Let the prophets speak two or three, and let the other judge"*** (1 Corinthians 14:29). The gift of discerning of spirits is noticeable by its absence.

(c) The fruit of the Holy Spirit is seen to be tangible 'feelings' of love for Jesus, etc., as produced by these experiences, rather than the life-long sanctification by the Word, which is based on faith, not sight **[9]**. Once those feelings wear off, the believer returns for a top-up.

(d) The unbiblical practice of invoking the Holy Spirit is a common feature of TB meetings:

> "If worshippers call out for the Spirit to descend upon them, the response may come from anywhere in the spirit world. The manifestations may well be spectacular, but counterfeit" **[10]**.

(e) Many of the experiences/manifestations have no scriptural backing - except in the negative; and, in fact, are more comparable with the works of the spirits of Eastern Mysticism and other unhealthy spirits than with the works of the Holy Spirit of God **[11]**. Describing his visit to the Toronto Airport Vineyard church, David Noakes says:

> "The 'Toronto twitch', for example, is explained as a power surge from the Holy Spirit. But Jesus did not go around having sudden power surges He couldn't control [neither did His disciples] ... many of the jerkings I saw in Toronto I would identify as being due to the spirits of voodoo. Some are due to spirits of martial arts. Some are due to spirits of lust. I would have no hesitation in declaring that animal noises do not come from the Holy Spirit. I have seen far too much of people manifesting animal noises and being delivered from the spirits of those very animals they are imitating" **[12]**.

(f) Ultimately, unfortunately, the nature of the blessing proves to be experiential not Word-based, soulish not spiritual, ultimately self-seeking not God-seeking **[13]**.

(B) The Theology Underlying the Toronto Blessing

Latter-Rain, Word-Faith, Kingdom-Now, Restorationism

Essentially, the Latter-Rain movement is a 'Christianised' form of the secular theory of evolution which, beginning with the physical evolution of man from primitive life-forms, will culminate, so we are told, in the spiritual evolution of man into gods. This will supposedly be achieved through man's realisation of his 'Christ consciousness' or the 'Christ within' which, the New Age gurus tell us, is now beginning to occur as we move from the Age of Pisces to the Age of Aquarius.

This is, of course, nothing other than belief in the lie which Satan told Eve in the Garden of Eden: ***"Ye shall not surely die"*** (Genesis 3:4-5), yet it is finding its way into the Christian Church through the Latter-Rain movement's teaching on the 'Manifest Sons of God', as well as Word-Faith teachings on the 'deification of man'. The Latter-Rain worldview also incorporates the closely interrelated doctrines of Kingdom-Now, Dominionism and Restorationism.

These teachings are post-millennial and triumphalist (they replace the Lord Jesus with the Church). They also include within them Replacement Theology, which is a subtle form of anti-semitism **[14]**.

Latter-Rain doctrine was rejected as heretical by the Assemblies of God in the 1950s, though accepted by other Pentecostal leaders such as William Branham - who was a direct influence on Paul Cain of the Kansas City Prophets, Oral Roberts, Kenneth Hagin - the so-called 'father' of the Word-Faith movement, and three of the Fort Lauderdale Five who, for many years, published the widely read magazine *New Wine*. Having bubbled along underground for a number of years, Latter-Rain teachings have now resurfaced in various forms in many Charismatic churches on both sides of the Atlantic: in particular the Vineyard group of churches under the leadership of John Wimber.

The Kansas City Prophets are based at the Metro Vineyard church, the pastor of which is Mike Bickle, whose recommendation of the Alpha Initiative can be seen in various editions of *HTB in Focus: Alpha News*; for example: August 1995, p3 **[15]**.

Whilst there is no overt Latter-Rain theology being taught on the Alpha Course videos, the remark made by Sandy Millar, the vicar of HTB, at the beginning of Video I:

> "Is it possible to attract people to the Christian faith today, in the sort of numbers that we need?"

...raises the question: *"need"* for *what*? Every unbeliever *needs* personal salvation; that is why the gospel is preached. But Millar did not say that. The paragraph of which his comment is a part concentrates on the *Church's* need for members: for *"new growth and new life"* of the *Church*.

Revival of the Church would be wonderful, but Scripture actually tells us that the opposite will happen before the return of the Lord Jesus **[16]**. For example:

> "Then shall they deliver you up to be afflicted, and shall kill you: and ye shall be hated of all nations for my name's sake. And then shall many be offended, and shall betray one another, and shall hate one another. And many false prophets shall rise, and shall deceive many. And because iniquity shall abound, the love of many shall wax cold. But he that shall endure unto the end, the same shall be saved" (Matthew 24:9-13).

> "Let no man deceive you by any means: for that day shall not come, except there come a falling away first" (2 Thessalonians 2:3).

> "For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but after their own lusts shall they heap to themselves teachers, having itching ears; And they shall turn away their ears from the truth, and shall be turned unto fables" (2 Timothy 4:3-4).

However, Restorationist/Kingdom-Now theology *needs* vast numbers of Christians so that the *Church* - united, militant and triumphant - can bring about God's Kingdom on earth and then hand it over, restored to its Edenic state, to Jesus at His return.

Obviously, that is a violent distortion of, amongst other scriptures, Acts 3:21, which tells us:

> "Jesus Christ … Whom the heaven must receive until the times of restitution of all things, which God hath spoken by the mouth of all his holy prophets since the world began."

Nevertheless, it is an eschatology being taught and believed in many Charismatic Fellowships today: corporate, not individual, repentance is necessary to achieve the numbers required to form *"God's endtime army that will march through the land to victory"* - the ultimate aim of evangelism being *"the establishing of the Kingdom of God apart from Christ's return"* **[17]**.

Hopefully, that is not what Millar meant. But, in the context of his support for the TB, as well as his enthusiasm for the Alpha Initiative, and in light of the many deceptive doctrines skewing the Church today we cannot just dismiss, unexamined, the possibility that it may well mean precisely what it seems to.

So, one of my questions is whether the Toronto 'Blessing', which is being experienced at HTB, can possibly be divorced from the Alpha Initiative. In view of the similarities of emphasis and content between the two, I'm not sure that it can. Consequently, I am concerned that, in using the Alpha Course, churches may inadvertently be introducing participants to the TB, along with all that this is a forerunner of, by the back door **[18]**.

It is worthy of note that, on 5th December 1995, after almost two years of the TB being spread around the globe, the board of the Association of Vineyard churches removed the Toronto Airport Vineyard church (TAV) from the Vineyard organisation. John Wimber (Vineyard's late leader) said he felt that "the leaders of TAV have strong convictions which could not be reconciled with Vineyard values and the pastoral leadership and correction coming from the Vineyard Board". *However, another possibility is that since the TB was by that time being widely dispensed from Pensacola, Vineyard would make itself appear less extreme if it distanced itself from the progenitor. This had the added bonus of encouraging many of those doubting the TB to accept Pensacola as a reasonable alternative* **[19]**.

(II)
Power Evangelism

Heavily influenced by the 'Signs and Wonders' ministry of John Wimber in the 1980s, power evangelism has been one of the preparation grounds for the Toronto Blessing/Experience. Power Evangelism centres on a pragmatic and experiential, rather than a proclamatory and doctrinal, approach to spreading the gospel:

> "Where evangelism is integrally related to the supernatural power of the Holy Spirit" **[20]**.

As such it tends to shift the focus away from the shed blood of Jesus on the cross and onto the supernatural works of the Holy Spirit carried out by men. This is also the method of evangelism favoured by Alpha **[21]**.

Dave Hunt, of Berean Call Ministries in America, has written of power evangelism **[22]**:

> "The over-emphasis upon and obsessive seeking after the *power* of the Spirit has caused many to forget that He is the 'Spirit of truth' who leads us into 'all *truth*', and the '*Holy* Spirit' who purifies our lives to God's glory ... The power that is manifested in miracles is more highly regarded than the power of truth to change hearts and deliver from bondage to sin ... Sound doctrine loses its importance, while experiences are eagerly cultivated and made the basis for understanding God's will and even for interpreting His word ... In contrast ... Paul declared 'the power' is in the preaching of the cross:
>
> > 'For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ: for it is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth; to the Jew first, and also to the Greek' (Romans 1:16).
> >
> > 'For the preaching of the cross is to them that perish foolishness; but unto us which are saved it is the power of God' (1 Corinthians 1:18).
> >
> > '… a great multitude both of the Jews and also of the Greeks believed' (Acts 14:1).
>
> "When Christians are more impressed with 'miracles' and 'results' than with adherence to sound doctrine the church is in serious trouble ... We too often fail to make certain that those who are called upon 'to decide for Christ' fully understand the decision they are being asked to make ... The emphasis throughout Scripture, and to which the church must return today, is clearly placed upon truth and *understanding*:
>
> > 'And we know that the Son of God is come, and hath given us an understanding, that we may know him that is true, and we are in him that is true, even in his Son Jesus Christ. This is the true God, and eternal life. Little children, keep yourselves from idols' (1 John 20-21).
> >
> > 'Why do ye not understand my speech? Even because ye cannot hear my word' (John 8:43)."

(III)
Alpha and the New Age

All of this heightened interest amongst Charismatic Christians in 'Signs and Wonders' and the supernatural experiences of the Toronto Blessing is a reflection of various spiritual and cultural changes going on outside Christianity, of which New Age experiential mysticism is a predominant force.

Nicky Gumbel is aware of this paradigm shift from reason to experience. He says:

> "In the Enlightenment, reason ruled supreme and explanation led to experience. In the present transitional culture, with its 'pick-and-mix' worldview in which the New Age movement is a potent strand, experiences lead to explanation" **[23]**.

Yes, it is true that in New Age philosophy *"experiences lead to explanation"* - and neo-mysticism is now so pervasive in the world that virtually every non-Christian participant of Alpha, or any other evangelistic initiative, will to some degree have imbibed New Age thinking - but in Christianity:

> "If experience becomes relevant in certain areas it becomes relevant in applying the Word" **[24]**.

Yet, like the TB/TE, the thrust of Alpha is towards the experiential and away from the written Word.

One pastor who has made use of the Alpha Course writes:

> "One of the problems of proclaiming the gospel in a post-modern world is that culture itself warms much more readily to lifestyle than to doctrine. But the Christian lifestyle is not Christian faith ... I have a suspicion that some of those people are being converted to a Christian lifestyle rather than to Christ" **[25]**.

The two testimonies given by Alpha participants at the beginning of the first Alpha video are prime examples of the above. There are certain basic elements one would expect to hear in a classic conversion testimony: (1) conviction of sin leading to repentance; (2) subsequent assurance of God's forgiveness; and (3) proclamation of salvation through the death on the cross of Jesus Christ. Yet these are absent in *any* form in these testimonies.

As for the ***"new creation"*** of which Paul speaks in 2 Corinthians 5:17:

> "Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new."

...the good news would seem to be that there isn't one. Before she became a Christian, one of these two participants recalls that she was happy with her life prior to attending Alpha and saw no reason for change:

> "I now realise that my personality hasn't changed at all, but I feel that what has happened, *I'm actually getting more out of what I already had there,* and I think that's really God's work doing that" [Video I][*emphasis mine*].

A relationship with God *is* sometimes referred to by Alpha participants, as is the discovery of prayer, an interest in Bible reading, in church-going, in Christianity, and what Alpha has done for them. However, Jesus and what *He* has done for them, and a personal relationship with *Him* are not mentioned at all. Yet the Lord Jesus *is* the gospel. He *is* salvation. He *is* their new life. These things being so, how can He possibly be so completely overlooked in a basic conversion testimony?

Adherents of false religions claim a relationship with God, and a prayer life, but they are not saved. Some churchgoers read their Bibles and have an interest in church and in Christianity, but they are not saved.

Likewise, more compassion or understanding at work, more patience, more tolerance, more confidence, and deep feelings of contentment, as claimed by so many Alpha Course converts, can equally well be produced by a general sense of psychological well-being. Without the cross they do not constitute salvation.

The attempt by Gumbel to bring Jesus into this particular girl's testimony by asking her exactly what had made these differences was met with a blank look and the response:

> "Just the relationship that I've developed with God. Simple as that" [Video I].

All these testimonies seem to me, as the pastor quoted above suggests, to be only evidence of conversion to a Christian lifestyle, not to Christ. And when the "Christian lifestyle" is an endless round of 'blessings', supernatural 'experiences', spiritual 'parties' [see Talk 14] and 'play' times **[26]**; none of which is noticeably different from *non*-Christian spiritual experiences, then the transition from the counterfeit spirituality of the New Age to that of Alpha's Christianity is really only one of degree, not kind. Thus, I would echo the question of one evangelical minister who asked:

> "What is it they are converted *to*?" **[27]**.

(IV)
Evangelism or Christian Living?

In his introduction to the Alpha videos, Sandy Millar recognises that:

> "Most people need time in which to consider the most important claims they have ever had to face."

It is curious then, that time is *not* given to Alpha participants in which to consider the person and work of Jesus Christ before they are rushed into the rest of the course.

> "Scripture tells us that salvation comes through hearing the gospel, and I would expect any course aimed at non-Christians to concentrate primarily on the facts of the gospel. The Alpha course deals with the basics of the gospel in two sessions ... While these are unequivocally gospel presentations, the remainder of the course deals essentially with what may be described as Christian living ... When we used an adapted version of the course in our church, non-Christians were left behind by about the sixth week. They still had very fundamental questions about what Christians *believe*, which were not answered by talking about how Christians *live*, and for this reason the course seemed more suited to people who have already made a commitment to Christ" [*emphasis mine*] **[28]**.

(A) The Holy Spirit Weekend

The White Alpha Training Manual pp26-36, Talks 7-9

> "For a long time in the church the person and work of the Holy Spirit has been ignored. There has been a greater concentration on the Father and the Son" [p26].

> "We live in the age of the Spirit" [p29].

These statements in the *Alpha Training Manual* are misleading for a couple of reasons...

Firstly, since an unbeliever or new Christian would not know the nature of the work of the Holy Spirit in relation to the Father and the Son, the statements effectively marginalise the first two sessions on the Person and work of the Lord Jesus and serve to prepare the participant to accept unquestioningly anything that may occur during the weekend which centres on the Holy Spirit.

Secondly, Christians have always referred to the period of time between the first and second advents as the age of Grace, or the Church age. That has not changed. Why then encourage, in today's precarious spiritual climate, the New Age concept of the Age of Aquarius (the spirit)?

Continuing his observations on the New Age, Nicky Gumbel writes:

> "I have found on Alpha that those from an essentially enlightened background feel at home with the parts of the course which appeal to the mind, but often have difficulty in experiencing the Holy Spirit. Others coming from the New Age movement find that rational and historical explanations leave them cold, but at the weekend away they are on more *familiar territory* in experiencing the Holy Spirit" **[29]**.

But it is the *"rational and historical explanations"* of sessions 1 and 2 which are the essence of the gospel, as preached by Peter, Stephen, Philip, and Paul, in the book of Acts:

Peter's sermon:

> "Ye men of Israel, **hear these words**; … Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins … **And with many other words** did [Peter] testify and exhort … Then **they that gladly received his word** were baptized: and the same day there were added unto them about three thousand souls. And **they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine**…" (Acts 2:22-42).

Stephen's sermon:

> "And [Stephen] said, Men, brethren, and fathers, **hearken**; The God of glory appeared unto our father Abraham, when he was in Mesopotamia, before he dwelt in Haran…" (Acts 7:1-60).

Philip's sermon:

> "Then Philip opened his mouth, and began at the same scripture, and **preached** unto [the Ethiopian eunuch] Jesus…" (Acts 8:26-40).

Paul's sermon:

> "Then Paul stood in the midst of Mars Hill, **and said**, Ye men of Athens … God that made the world and all things therein … hath appointed a day, in which he will judge the world in righteousness by that man whom he hath ordained; whereof he hath given assurance unto all men, in that he hath raised him from the dead…" (Acts 17:16-33).

...and which the unbeliever must grasp and accept with his *mind*, under the convicting and illuminating power of the Holy Spirit, if he is to repent and experience salvation in his heart:

> "For whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved … So then faith **cometh by hearing**, and hearing by **the word of God**" (Romans 10:13-17).

Moreover, it is by the renewing of his *mind* that the Christian is transformed and made holy:

> "…be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect will of God" (Romans 12:1-2).

> "The **law** of the LORD is perfect, converting the soul: the **testimony** of the LORD is sure, making wise the simple. The **statutes** of the LORD are right, rejoicing the heart: the **commandment** of the LORD is pure, enlightening the eyes" (Psalm 19:7-11).

...and without holiness we will not see God (see Hebrews 12:14). Nevertheless, on Alpha:

> "At the end of the course I send out questionnaires ... if there is a change I ask when that change occurred. For many, the decisive moment is the Saturday evening of the weekend" **[30]**.

This is the time when Gumbel invites the Holy Spirit to come and participants are filled with the Spirit **[31]**.

I find this extremely worrying. The *"decisive moment"* should surely be the point at which a person steps over from eternal death to eternal life through the *conversion* experience:

> "Verily, verily, I say unto you, He that **heareth my word**, and **believeth on him that sent me**, hath everlasting life, and shall not come into condemnation, but **is passed from death into life**" (John 5:24).

> "That if thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved. For with the heart man believeth unto righteousness; and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation … For **whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved**" (Romans 10:9-10,13).

Yet most of the Alpha testimonies given in Nicky Gumbel's book *Telling Others* seem to confuse the experience of conversion with the experience of baptism in the Holy Spirit.

But is this surprising when Gumbel himself seems to treat conversion as a preliminary to the main event? The breath of new life into a repentant sinner is taught in Talk 7, but Gumbel does not make it clear that this happens at *conversion*. Rather, he suggests it is due to a second experience: the baptism in the Spirit.

References to Isaiah 61:1-3 and to Samson's freedom *"from the ropes that bound him"*, for example, are applied to the Holy Spirit despite the fact that in Luke 4:16-21 Jesus is quoting the Isaiah passage with reference to Himself (the first part of this passage in Isaiah was fulfilled at His first coming, and the remainder (vs 2b-11) will be fulfilled at His second coming, thus the Lord did not complete the quote when He read it aloud in the synagogue):

> "The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me [Jesus]; because the LORD hath anointed me [Jesus] to preach good tidings unto the meek; he hath sent me [Jesus] to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to them that are bound; to proclaim the acceptable year of the LORD [the Lord's first coming], and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all that mourn; To appoint unto them that mourn in Zion, to give unto them beauty for ashes, the oil of joy for mourning, the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness; that they might be called trees of righteousness, the planting of the LORD, that he might be glorified… [the Lord's second coming]" (Isaiah 61:1-11).

> "And there was delivered unto him [Jesus] the book of the prophet Isaiah. And when he had opened the book, he found the place where it was written, The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he hath anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor; he hath sent me to heal the brokenhearted, to preach deliverance to the captives, and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty them that are bruised, To preach the acceptable year of the Lord. And he closed the book, and he gave it again to the minister, and sat down … And he began to say unto them, This day is this Scripture fulfilled in your ears" (Luke 4:16-21).

It is the shed blood of the Lord Jesus that frees us from the things that bind us:

> "If **the Son** therefore **shall make you free**, ye shall be free indeed" (John 8:31-36).
>
> "Stand fast therefore in the liberty wherewith **Christ hath made us free**…" (Galatians 5:1).
>
> "Unto him [Jesus Christ] that loved us, and **washed us from our sins in his own blood**" (Revelation 1:5).

Likewise, in Talk 9, when discussing Paul's conversion, Gumbel places the emphasis not on Paul's meeting with Jesus Christ but on his subsequent baptism in the Spirit.

On preparing participants for baptism in the Holy Spirit, Alpha Course leaders are advised to

> "take time to sort out difficulties of understanding, belief and assurance; lead to Christ" **[32]**.

To say that to be unsaved is a difficulty *"of understanding, belief and assurance"* is, I would suggest, an understatement of some magnitude! Coupled with the un-biblical practice of invoking the Holy Spirit at this point in the Course, it is necessary to ask whether it truly *is* the baptism in the Holy Spirit these participants are experiencing. The ramifications, if it is not, are obvious and terrible **[33]**.

The following testimony is an alarming example of the confusion between conversion and baptism in the Holy Spirit, but it is by no means the only one:

> "[M]y wife encouraged me to read an article in a magazine about the Alpha course at HTB. What had stuck in my mind was how the work of the Holy Spirit was described as of paramount importance. I knew in my heart I had to have his power in my life at any cost. So I ... enrolled on the course and focused on the weekend where the work of the Holy Spirit is discussed ... Never mind the weeks of pre-med, I just had to get into the operating theatre ... I looked at the order of play, saw that the third session on *'How can I be filled with the Spirit'* (which I identified as the main one) was at 4:30pm and simply hung on like a marathon runner weaving his way up the finishing straight with nothing but the finishing tape as the focus of his attention ... the prize was so near but we were getting there so slowly. I literally wanted to scream out *'Do it now! Do it now! I can't hold out any longer'*. I'm not exaggerating when I say I was in agony. Then Nicky Gumbel invited the Spirit to come and oh, the relief..." **[34]**.

(Though not included in the extract above, Dominionism and Triumphalism are also evident in the last three paragraphs of the full testimony as given in *Renewal* [p17].)

Once that extraordinary testimony has sunk in, a couple of things become apparent:

Firstly, as with the testimonies on the Alpha Course videos, even the *basic* elements of a conversion testimony are missing. In fact, the gospel of Christ is referred to here as *"pre-med"* in which, the participant plainly states, he had no interest. The *"prize"* was not considered to be salvation but this other experience - the unavoidable implication here being that *it is not the Holy Spirit coming upon the saved, but a false and unholy spirit falling on the unsaved*...

Secondly, not only did Gumbel not seek to correct the focus of this participant away from the Spirit onto the Lord Jesus where it rightly belongs, and ensure he had actually been saved, but he also gave the testimony a prominent place in his book *Telling Others* as a witness and example to others.

One Sunday following this experience, the Holy Spirit supposedly directed this man to a Vineyard church sixty miles away from his home in order that a long-standing problem with his back might be healed. I do have to question whether this direction did come from the Holy Spirit… not because I don't believe that the Holy Spirit can lead us to a particular fellowship or meeting for a specific blessing, or word, or healing, but because it seems a little too coincidental that it was to a *Vineyard* church that this man was led. Surely the Holy Spirit knew of other churches, ministering in the gifts of the Spirit and more faithful to the Word (and perhaps nearer to this man's home), to which He could have directed this man? It is completely understandable, given how much emphasis was placed on Vineyard throughout the Alpha Course talks, that Vineyard should have been uppermost in this man's mind, but in light of Vineyard's track record it is necessary to question whether the Holy Spirit *was* directing this man…

This participant is now a helper on Alpha courses at HTB.

In Talk 8, Gumbel says:

> "When we come to Christ the first thing the Holy Spirit wants to do is to assure us of that relationship, and that we are totally, totally forgiven."

Although he continues, *"the Holy Spirit witnesses to our **spirit** that we are children of God"* all of the subsequent examples focus on soulish (tangible) feelings and experiences. The testimony at the beginning of Video I, in which *"a sensation of energy … as if I had 5000 volts thrashing through my body"* is understood to be the Holy Spirit's assurance of salvation, is only one example of the results of such teaching. Experiences of this kind can be, and are, produced by any spirit wanting access to a believer's life. I am not convinced they come from the *Holy* Spirit.

We can know we are *"totally, totally forgiven"* because the Bible says so, and it is to *the Word* that the Holy Spirit leads us, and through which He sanctifies us. Praise God that our assurance of salvation – whilst *accompanied by a sense of peace in our spirits* – does not rest on our unreliable feelings and experiences!

The misuse of Ephesians 5:18-20 and Revelation 22:17 in Talk 8, in order to initiate Alpha participants into the Toronto Experience, is inexcusable:

> "And be not drunk with wine, wherein is excess; but be filled with the Spirit" (Ephesians 5:18).

In the Ephesians passage, Paul is not commanding the believers to experience a second Pentecost; but is rebuking them for behaving like pagans and unbelievers. Verse 18 is a *contrast* not a *comparison* between the fruit produced by the Holy Spirit and the fruit produced by the sinful nature. It is a call by Paul, not for baptism (empowerment for building up the Church) but for sanctification, for some evidence of the fruit of the Holy Spirit in their lives which at that point was seriously lacking.

Far from rolling around in the aisles or uncontrollable laughing or any other such unbiblical experiences, Paul says the manifestation of being filled with the Holy Spirit is the sober and joyous worship of God:

> "Speaking to yourselves in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord; Giving thanks always for all things unto God and the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ" (Ephesians 5:19-20).

Is this what Alpha attendees were doing as a result of their experiences on the Holy Spirit weekends?...

And the passage in Revelation has absolutely nothing to do with Pentecost (the Holy Spirit is hardly going to invoke Himself) and everything to do with the physical return of the Lord Jesus Christ at the end of the age:

> "And the Spirit and the bride say [to the Lord Jesus], Come. And let him that heareth, say [to the Lord Jesus], Come. And let him that is athirst [for the Gospel] come. And whosoever will, let him take the water of life [salvation] freely" (Revelation 22:17).

Though the prayer at the close of these three talks includes repentance, the gospel talks are not, at this point, uppermost in participants' minds, and the corporate request *"inviting the Holy Spirit to come and fill us"* is then made by all in the room.

The content of these talks on the Holy Spirit overlaps to such an extent that they could quite easily have been combined into one address. In fact, each aspect of the Holy Spirit's work could have been included in the relevant sections of the other talks. The Spirit's conviction of sin in an unbeliever, for example, fits in with Talks 2 and 3; assurance of salvation in Talk 4; teaching believers the Word in Talk 5; enabling believers to pray in Talk 6; producing fruit and empowering us for ministry in Talk 15 and so on **[35]**.

Through these talks the focus has thus shifted very definitely from the cross of Christ to the power of the Spirit. And, from all the foregoing, it is anyway questionable which spirit that might be...

For Gumbel's teaching on 'Unity in the Family' in this talk please see section ***(F) What About the Church?*** *below.*

(B) How Can I Resist Evil?

The White Alpha Training Manual, pp39-45, Talk 10

In section II of this session, Satan's tactics are listed. He destroys, blinds eyes, causes doubt, tempts, and accuses. Gumbel applies all of these strategies to the area of Christian *behaviour*. Deception, Satan's attack focusing on *belief*, is omitted from the Alpha videos. This oversight can be deadly. Deception concerning doctrine is Satan's most powerful weapon against the Church, and new Christians need to be made aware just how practised Satan is at deceiving Christians through false doctrines and false spiritual experiences **[36]**.

When asked by His disciples what would be the signs of His return, the Lord's first words in response concerned *deception*:

"**Take heed that no man deceive you**. For many shall come in my name, saying, I am Christ; and shall **deceive many** … many false prophets shall rise and shall **deceive many** … Then if any man shall say unto you, Lo, here is Christ, or there; believe it not. For there shall arise false Christs, and false prophets, and shall show great signs and wonders; insomuch that, if it were possible, they shall **deceive the very elect**" (Matthew 24:4-5,11,23-24).

A great deal of the content of the letters to the New Testament churches were warnings against being deceived by heresies and false teachers – the list of references is almost endless:

"But I fear, lest by any means, as the serpent beguiled Eve through his subtlety, so your minds should be corrupted from the simplicity that is in Christ. For if he that cometh preacheth **another Jesus**, whom we have not preached, or if ye receive **another spirit**, which ye have not received, or **another gospel**, which ye have not accepted, ye might well bear with him" (2 Corinthians 11:3-4).

"I marvel that ye are so soon removed from him that called you into the grace of Christ into **another gospel**: Which is not another; but there be some that trouble you, and would **pervert the gospel of Christ**. But though we, or an angel from heaven, preach **any other gospel** unto you than that which we have preached unto you, let him be accursed. As we said before, so say I now again, if any man preach **any other gospel** unto you than that ye have received, let him be accursed" (Galatians 1:6-8).

"O foolish Galatians, who hath **bewitched you**, that ye should not obey the truth, before whose eyes Jesus Christ hath been evidently set forth, crucified among you?" (Galatians 3:1).

"Let no man **deceive you** by any means:…" (2 Thessalonians 2:3a).

"Now the Spirit speaketh expressly, that in the latter times some shall depart from the faith, giving heed to **seducing spirits**, and doctrines of devils" (1 Timothy 4:1).

"But there were **false prophets** also among the people, even as there shall be **false teachers** among you, who privily shall bring in **damnable heresies**, even denying the Lord that bought them, and bring upon themselves swift destruction. And many shall follow their pernicious ways; by reason of whom the way of truth shall be evil spoken thereof. And through covetousness shall they with **feigned words** make merchandise of you" (2 Peter 2:1-3a);

"Let that therefore abide in you, which ye have heard from the beginning. If that which ye have heard from the beginning shall remain in you, ye shall also continue in the Son, and in the Father" (1 John 2:24).

"Beloved, **believe not every spirit**, but **try the spirits whether they are of God**: because many false prophets are gone out into the world … Hereby know ye the Spirit of God: Every spirit that confesseth that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is of God: And every spirit that confesseth not that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is not of God: and this is the spirit of antichrist, whereof ye have heard that it should come; and even now already is it in the world … We are of God: he that knoweth God heareth us; he that is not of God heareth not us. **Hereby know we the spirit of truth, and the spirit of error**" (1 John 4:1-6).

"For **many deceivers** are entered into the world, who confess not that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh. This is a deceiver and an antichrist. Look to yourselves … Whosoever transgresseth, and abideth not in the doctrine of Christ, hath not God. He that abideth in the doctrine of Christ, he hath both the Father and the Son. If there come any unto you, and bring not this doctrine, receive him not into your house, neither bid him God speed" (2 John 7-11).

One of the main factors in the unquestioning acceptance of the TB/TE is that many believers simply do not realise they are capable of being deceived, and that not everything that is supernatural necessarily comes from God; despite there being many cases in Scripture where such happenings originate in the occult:

> "Then Pharaoh also called the wise men and **the sorcerers**: now the magicians of Egypt, they also did in like manner with **their enchantments**. For they cast down every man his rod, and they became serpents" (Exodus 7:11-12a).
>
> "But there was certain man, called Simon, which beforetime in the same city **used sorcery**, and **bewitched the people** of Samaria … To whom **they all gave heed**, from the least to the greatest, **saying, This man is the great power of God"** (Acts 8:9-11).
>
> "And it came to pass, as we went to prayer, a certain damsel possessed with **a spirit of divination** met us, which brought her masters much gain by soothsaying" (Acts 16:16-18).
>
> "And I stood upon the sand of the sea, and saw a beast rise up out of the sea … And I saw one of his heads as it were wounded to death; and his deadly wound was healed: and all the world wondered after the beast … And I beheld another beast coming up out of the earth … And he exerciseth all the power of the first beast before him … And he doeth **great wonders**, so that he maketh fire come down form heaven on the earth in the sight of men, And **deceiveth them** that dwell on the earth by the means of those **miracles which he had power to do** in the sight of the beast … And he had power to give life unto the image of the beast, that the image of the beast should … speak…" (Revelation 13:1-3,11-15).

Nicky Gumbel points out in this talk that occult activity *"always comes under the guise of something good"*. The Toronto 'Blessing' is seen as *"something good"*. How strange then that neither he nor anyone else at HTB thought to test the Toronto spirit before accepting it and then passing it on to everyone else **[37]**.

A solid grounding in essential doctrine, the cultivation of the Berean spirit that searches ***"the Scriptures daily, whether those things (that Paul taught the believers) were so"*** (Acts 17:11) and a familiarity with eschatology are vital in combating deception in these last days. None of these is experiential. All of them require application of the mind. All of them have been in short supply in the Charismatic movement to date.

(C) How Does God Guide Us?

The White Alpha Training Manual, pp46-51, Talk 11

The *"Guiding Spirit"* and *"more unusual ways"* of guidance referred to in this talk, especially guidance by angels, need *thorough* testing against Scripture in today's religious climate in which false prophets and occult spirit guides, masquerading as angels of light, abound.

For millennia, spiritists have been mediums for familiar spirits and divining spirits. Now, as New Agers are regarding themselves as channellers for their spirit guides, so too there is an alarming trend emerging amongst experience-orientated Christians to talk of their 'angel' guides **[38]**.

A testimony in *HTB in Focus, Alpha News*, Aug 1995, in which Jesus is referred to as *"a guiding light"* (p14), is just an inkling of what may be to come.

(D) Why and How Should We Tell Others?

The White Alpha Training Manual, pp52-57, Talk 12

Please see my comments in **Part (II) Power Evangelism** above.

(E) Does God Heal Today?

The White Alpha Training Manual, pp58-62, Talk 13

During this talk, Nicky Gumbel tells Alpha participants of the visit by John Wimber and some of his helpers to HTB in 1982 to demonstrate God's power to heal. He says:

> "John Wimber then said *'We've had words of knowledge.'* These are supernatural revelations, things that they couldn't have known otherwise about the conditions of people in the room ... specific details were given, accurately describing the conditions ... as the list was responded to, the level of faith in the room was rising"

Gumbel says that he still felt *"cynical and hostile"* until the following evening when he was prayed for:

> "So they prayed for the Spirit to come ... I felt something like 10,000 volts going through my body ... The American [on Wimber's team] had a fairly limited prayer. He just said *'more power'* ... it was the only thing he ever prayed. I can't remember him ever praying anything else ... Now we've seen many kinds of these manifestations of the Spirit on the weekends ... these manifestations ... and the physical healings themselves are not the important thing ... the fruit of the Spirit ... these are the things that matter, **the fruit that comes from these experiences**. So we began to realise that God heals miraculously... [*emphasis mine*]."

Bearing in mind that his warning in Talk 10 about occult activity disguising itself as something good used healing as an example, it is surprising that Gumbel gives no indication here that he or anyone else attending this meeting tested the phenomena (or those bringing them) to ensure that everything came from the *Holy* Spirit. Gumbel surely knows that, like healings, words of knowledge and prophecies can also come from an occult source. That they are factual or come to pass does not prove their source is God. They could equally well come from a spirit of divination, and if they do, they and the person uttering them must be rejected:

> "If there arise among you a prophet, or a dreamer of dreams, and giveth thee a sign or a wonder, And the sign or the wonder come to pass, whereof he spake unto thee, saying, Let us go after other gods, which thou hast not known, and let us serve them; Thou shalt not hearken unto the words of that prophet, or that dreamer of dreams: for the LORD your God proveth you, to know whether ye love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your souls" (Deuteronomy 13:1-11).

> "And it came to pass, as we went to prayer, a certain damsel possessed with a spirit of divination met us, which brought her masters much gain by soothsaying. [She] followed Paul and us, and cried, saying, These men are the servants of the most high God, which show unto us the way of salvation. And this she did many days. But Paul, being grieved, turned and said to the spirit, I command thee in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her. And he came out the same hour" (Acts 16:16-18).

I am not saying that this is necessarily the case here, but everything claiming supernatural origin must be tested, no matter how renowned the person producing the words, revelations, healings, etc., might be. The fact that the *"level of faith"* of the congregation rose in response to the accuracy of the words given merely indicates the extent of the gullibility of those present, not the source of the words, neither any healings which may have followed.

To hear the prayer *"more power"* so many years before the TB where, along with *"more Lord"* it has become a kind of mantra, startled me. With no mention of the name of the Lord Jesus, the American praying for him gave Nicky Gumbel no indication of whom he was praying to or what sort of "power" he was praying for. Worse still, Gumbel did not ask him. A prayer of that kind is an open invitation to any spirit to do anything it chooses in the life of the recipient.

And, of course, the various aspects of the fruit of the Holy Spirit – love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance (Galatians 5:22-23) - do not come from *"these experiences"* but from the daily sanctification by the Holy Spirit through obedience to the Word:

> "If ye love me, keep my commandments. And I will pray the Father, and he shall give you another Comforter, that he may abide with you forever; Even the Spirit of truth … He that hath my commandments, and keepeth them, he it is that loveth me … and I will love him, and will manifest myself to him" (John 14:15-26).

> "I am the true vine, and my Father is the husbandman … Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, except it abide in the vine; no more can ye, except ye abide in me" (John 15:1-6).

> "This I say then, Walk in the Spirit, that ye shall not fulfil the lust of the flesh" (Galatians 5:16-25).

Regarding this talk, one pastor who examined the course was concerned that:

> "The emphasis on technique rather than faith in these areas seems to me to be less than helpful, and fails to address these issues in their true biblical context" **[39]**.

Once again Alpha participants are not being warned of the very serious dangers of accepting anything and everything from anyone and everyone. Thus, they will walk out of the cocoon of their Alpha Course, straight into the path of their ***"adversary the devil [who], as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour"*** (1 Peter 5:8), and because they will have no idea how to deal with him, they will, sadly, be devoured by him.

(F) What About the Church?

The White Alpha Training Manual, pp63-68, Talk 14

(1) Romanism

> "The Alpha course is ... adaptable across traditions and denominations ... I know of its use in Catholic ... churches" **[40]**.

"Adaptable" in what sense exactly? Alpha's publications manager advises that, whilst *presentation* of the Alpha material can be adapted to suit, the *content* should be followed exactly (he makes particular reference to the weekend dealing with the Holy Spirit in this respect) **[41]**.

If the content of the Course teaches the fundamental historical and theological facts and doctrines of the Christian faith as recorded in Scripture, then, having tested and proved that to be so, any Protestant church using Alpha could follow the Course exactly. But could a Catholic church do that?...

In Talk 5, Gumbel teaches, from 2 Timothy 3:16, that the Bible is useful for teaching, correcting, and rebuking - which of course it is:

> "It's how we know if something is wrong. How do we know that what Jehovah's Witnesses believe is not right? We have to put it alongside the Bible - also the Moonies - and test it. And if you do that, I think you'll find it's not consistent with the teaching of the New Testament" [Talk 5].

Protestantism teaches salvation by grace alone through faith alone, but Romanism adds to the cross man's good works and a whole host of other un-biblical doctrines such as purgatory, penance, transsubstantiation, indulgences, prayers to/for the dead/saints, papal infallibility, Mariolatry, sacerdotal mediation, etc, etc. So, if we *"put [Romanism] alongside the Bible"* we can see that *"it's not consistent with the teaching of the New Testament".* Romanism falls into the category described by Paul as *"the concision"*: its doctrines *"mangle"* [2699: *Katatome*] the gospel of Christ or add to it a *"confidence in the flesh"*:

> "…beware of the concision. For we are the circumcision, which worship God in the spirit, and rejoice in Christ Jesus, and have no confidence in the flesh … And be found in him, not having mine own righteousness, which is of the law, but that which is through the faith of Christ, the righteousness which is of God by faith" (Philippians 3:2b,3,9).

> "O foolish Galatians … Received ye the Spirit by the works of the law, or by the hearing of faith? Are ye so foolish? Having begun in the Spirit, are ye now made perfect in the flesh? … For as many as are of the works of the law are under the curse … for … no man is justified by the law in the sight of God, it is evident: for, The just shall live by faith … the law was our schoolmaster to bring us unto Christ, that we might be justified by faith" (Galatians 3:1-27).

> "For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: [salvation] is the gift of God: Not of works, lest any man should boast" (Ephesians 2:4-9).

> "Neither by the blood of goats and calves, but by his own blood he entered in once into the holy place, having obtained eternal redemption for us … the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without spot to God, purge your conscience from dead works to serve the living God" (Hebrews 9:11-28).
>
> "For it is not possible that the blood of bulls and of goats should take away sin … we are sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all. And every priest standeth daily ministering and offering oftentimes the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins … For by one offering he [Jesus Christ] hath perfected forever them that are sanctified" (Hebrews 10:1-18).

Romanism bears not a little resemblance to the teachings and works of the Pharisees so scathingly denounced by the Lord in Matthew 23:1-28:

> "For they bind heavy burdens and grievous to be borne, and lay them on men's shoulders; but they themselves will not move them with one of their fingers … And call no man your father upon the earth: for one is your Father, which is in heaven … But woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye shut up the kingdom of heaven against men: for ye neither go in yourselves, neither suffer ye them that are entering to go in" (Matthew 23:1-36).

It is a false religion that will *never* relinquish a single one of its unscriptural tenets to the truths of Scripture.

Nevertheless, in common with the leaders of the Toronto Blessing, the Alpha Course promotes unity between Protestants and Roman Catholics: in section II of this talk - also in Talk 8 - Gumbel teaches Alpha participants that the differences between Protestants and Catholics are

> "totally insignificant compared to the things that unite us ... we need to unite around the death of Jesus, the resurrection of Jesus; the absolute essential things at the core of the Christian faith on which we are all agreed. We need to give people liberty to disagree on the things which are secondary."

But it is precisely on the *essentials* that Protestants and Catholics do *not* have unity. That was the whole point of the Protestant Reformation. Every one of the Canons anathematizing Protestant doctrine decreed at the Catholic Council of Trent in the 16th Century *still stands*. In fact, unscriptural doctrines are yet being added to the Roman belief system; for example, the doctrine that Mary is co-redemptress with Christ is a recent addition and is not, by any stretch of the imagination, a *"secondary"* issue.

Discussing the price of unity in the Church at the end of the 19th century, Bishop Ryle wrote:

> "Our noble Reformers bought the truth at the price of their own blood, and handed it down to us. Let us take heed that we do not basely sell it for a mess of pottage, under the specious names of unity and peace" **[42]**.

Still Gumbel says:

> "We need to unite. There has been some comment which is not altogether helpful to unity. Let us drop that and get on ... the movement of the Spirit will always bring churches together. He is doing that right across the denominations ... we are seeing Roman Catholics coming now ... People are no longer 'labelling' 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" **[43]**.

'Labelling' is a psychological/sociological term. In this inclusivist age in which truth is believed to be relative (note the convenient lack of relativism of that particular 'truth'!) the word is usually used not to define the labellee, but to discredit the alleged labeller. Used in this sense, as Gumbel does, it is as ridiculous to *"drop all labels and just regard ourselves [Protestants and Catholics] as Christians"* as it would be to refuse to label jam, 'jam', and marmalade, 'marmalade'. Yes, there are some similarities but, essentially, one is sweet and the other is bitter. Whether we like it or not, Rome's 'gospel' is bitter: a vast number of Catholics have not heard the gospel in their churches and Protestants cannot just assume they are saved.

'Adaptability' of the Alpha Course to *include* Catholics, not necessarily to *convert* them, is referred to in Alpha as *"unity"*, and I am concerned that Alpha is helping to undo the Protestant Reformation through the promulgation of Ecumenism disguised as Christian Unity **[44]**.

(2) Unity and False Doctrine/Teachers

Unity is the keyword of the Church Growth movement, which would agree with Nicky Gumbel that *"a disunited church, squabbling and criticising makes it very hard for the world to believe"* **[45]**.

Consequently,

> "We make it a rule on Alpha, never to criticise another denomination, another Christian church or a Christian leader" / "Actually we must stop judging one another" **[46]**.

Yet there are times when failure to *"criticise"* - or rather to rebuke and correct - is actually to be disobedient to the Word of God:

> "All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, **for reproof, for correction**, for instruction in righteousness" (2 Timothy 3:16).
>
> "Preach the word; be instant in season, out of season; **reprove, rebuke, exhort** with all longsuffering and doctrine. For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but after their own lusts shall they heap to themselves teachers, having itching ears; And they shall turn away their ears from the truth, and shall be turned unto fables" (2 Timothy 4:2-4).

Although in Talk 5 Gumbel only applied the rebuking and correcting to Christian behaviour, it is also to be used to counter false teachings, as the references above from Paul's letter to Timothy show. We *are* to test *all* teachings, prophecies and practices against Scripture *and* judge whether they are true or false:

> "But he that is spiritual **judgeth all things**" (1 Corinthians 2:15a).
>
> "**Prove all things**; hold fast that which is good" (1 Thessalonians 5:21).
>
> "Beloved, believe not every spirit, but **try the spirits** whether they are of God: because many false prophets are gone out into the world" (1 John 4:1).

Far from swallowing without question everything we are told, however widely respected the teacher may be, believers are to test all that passes for doctrine; to correct and rebuke those in error - for *their* sake! – and to disassociate from those who *continue* to preach false doctrine:

> "[The Bereans] were noble than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness of mind, and **searched the Scriptures daily, whether those things were so**" (Acts 17:11).
>
> "**In meekness instructing those that oppose themselves**; if God peradventure will give them repentance to the acknowledging of the truth" (2 Timothy 2:25).
>
> "I beseech you, brethren, mark them which cause divisions and offenses **contrary to the doctrine** which ye have learned; **and avoid them**. For they that are such … deceive the hearts of the simple" (Romans 16:17-18).
>
> "Whosoever transgresseth, and abideth not in the doctrine of Christ, hath not God … If there come any unto you, and bring not this doctrine, **receive him not into your house, neither bid him God speed**: For he that biddeth him God speed is partaker in his evil deeds" (2 John 1:9-11).

The Lord Jesus, as well as Paul, John, and Jude all 'called out' and publicly named those who publicly opposed the truth (Matthew 18:15-17 applies to private trespasses), and we must do the same for the sake of those believers following them **[47]**:

> "Then Peter took him, and began to rebuke him, saying, Be it far from thee, Lord: this shall not be unto thee. But he turned, and said unto Peter, get thee behind me, Satan: thou art an offense unto me: for thou savourest not the things that be of God, but those that be of men" (Matthew 16:21-26).
>
> "Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites … ye blind guides … Ye fools and blind … ye are like unto whited sepulchres … Ye serpents, ye generation of vipers" (Matthew 23:1-36).
>
> "But when Peter was come to Antioch, I withstood him to the face, because he was to be blamed" (Galatians 2:11-21).
>
> "And their word will eat as doth a canker: of whom is Hymenaeus and Philetus; Who concerning the truth have erred" (2 Timothy 2:17-18a).
>
> "For there are many unruly and vain talkers and deceivers … Whose mouths must be stopped, who subvert whole houses, teaching things which they ought not … One of themselves, even a prophet of their own, said, The Cretians are always liars, evil beasts, slow bellies. This witness is true. Wherefore rebuke them sharply, that they may be sound in the faith" (Titus 1:10-13).
>
> "I wrote unto the church: but Diotrephes, who loveth to have the pre-eminence among them receiveth us not. Wherefore, if I come, I will remember his deeds which he doeth, prating against us with malicious words" (3 John 9-10).
>
> "Beloved, when I gave all diligence to write unto you of the common salvation, it was needful for me to write unto you, and exhort you that ye should earnestly contend for the faith which was once delivered unto the saints. For there are certain men crept in unawares … turning the grace of God into lasciviousness, and denying the only Lord God, and our Lord Jesus Christ … Woe unto them! For they have gone in the way of Cain, and ran greedily after the error of Balaam for reward, and perished in the

> gainsaying of Core. These are spots in your feasts of charity … clouds they are without water … trees whose fruit withereth, without fruit, twice dead, plucked up by the roots" (Jude 3-4,10-12).

The reason we must do this is because our salvation is not a trivial matter. The Lord's sacrifice for us must not be perverted or corrupted in any way whatsoever, else it ceases to be the Gospel and it ceases to save us. There must be no poison (death) in the pot:

> "So they poured out for the men to eat. And it came to pass, as they were eating of the pottage, that they cried out, and said, O thou man of God, there is death in the pot. And they could not eat thereof" (2 Kings 4:40).

Participants of Alpha are not being taught this. And, as with recognisably false doctrines outside mainstream Christianity – JWs, Mormons, Romanists, etc. - so with the less obvious heresies and false teachings of Latter-Rain, Restorationism, *et al*, operating *within* mainstream Christianity. They are *"not consistent with the teaching of the New Testament"*, and Gumbel is right:

> "All these heresies, all these cults were around in a very similar form in New Testament times and they [the apostles] dealt with them and the answers are there in the Bible."

Today, however, instead of recognising that, just like the Gnostic heresies of the 1st Century and their 20th Century equivalents, these groups are preaching ***"another Jesus, whom we have not preached"***, we, like the compromised Corinthians to whom Paul was writing, are welcoming them with open arms.

According to Ephesians 4:3-6, Christian unity comes through our being baptised by one Spirit into ***"One Lord, one faith, one baptism, One God and Father of all"***.

In John 17, the Lord Jesus only prayed for the unity of all believers *after* He had prayed for the sanctification of His disciples by the *truth*, which He immediately went on to define - for *our* benefit, not His Father's - as God's Word (v17):

> "Sanctify them through thy truth: **thy word is truth**" (John 17:17).

Shortly before this, Jesus had told His disciples that one of the works of the Holy Spirit was to guide them into all truth:

> "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 show you things to come. He shall glorify me: for he shall receive of mine, and shall show it unto you" (John 16:13-14).

So, according to the Apostle John the Holy Spirit unites believers/churches ***"that they may be one"*** *through God's written Word*. Since the Holy Spirit does not contradict Himself, there can therefore only be unity within Biblical truth/sound doctrine; there cannot be unity despite Biblical truth/sound doctrine. Those who do not preach or follow the truth, have broken the unity of the believers **[48]**.

Unity is also essential to Latter-Rain doctrine: to enable the supposed incarnation of Christ into His physical body (the Church) because He cannot incarnate a divided body, so that the Church may become the 'Manifest

Sons of God'. But Latter-Rain is ***"another gospel"*** (Galatians 1:6-7) with a twisted eschatology which is insinuating itself into Charismatic Fellowships these days - one of its most successful routes being the Toronto Blessing/Experience **[49]**.

It is vital that we ***"earnestly contend for the faith which was once delivered unto the saints"*** (Jude 1:3). If we do not, we may find ourselves, and those new believers whom we have nurtured, part of the Apostate Church. This is *very* serious. Christian/Church unity is also essential to the New Age goal of global unity. The Apostate church is the thin end of this wedge, the middle of which is religious inclusivism/syncretism and the wide end the one-world religion under the control of the False Prophet during the reign of the Antichrist and his one-world government:

> "Let no man deceive you by any means: for that day shall not come, except there come a falling away first, and that man of sin be revealed, the son of perdition; Who opposeth and exalteth himself above all that is called God, or that is worshipped; so that he as God sitteth in the temple of God, showing himself that he is God … Even him, whose coming is after the working of Satan with all power and signs and lying wonders. And with all deceivableness of unrighteousness in them that perish; because they received not the love of the truth, that they might be saved. And for this cause God shall send them strong delusion, that they should believe a lie: That they all might be damned who believed not the truth, but had pleasure in unrighteousness" (2 Thessalonians 2:3-12).
>
> "And they worshipped the dragon … and they worshipped the beast … and power was given unto him to continue forty and two months … over all kindreds, and tongues, and nations. And all that dwell upon the earth shall worship him, whose names are not written in the book of life of the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world" (Revelation13:1-18).
>
> "…and I saw a woman sit upon a scarlet-coloured beast, full of names of blasphemy … having a golden cup in her hand full of abominations and filthiness of her fornication. And upon her forehead was a name written, MYSTERY, BABYLON THE GREAT, THE MOTHER OF HARLOTS AND ABOMINATIONS OF THE EARTH … And I heard another voice from heaven, saying, Come out of her, my people, that ye be not partakers of her sins, and that ye receive not of her plagues … And in her was found the blood of prophets, and of saints, and of all that were slain upon the earth" (Revelation 17:1-18:24. See also Daniel chapters 8 and 9).

(3) The Parable of the Party

In section IV, Gumbel says the Church, despite being God's Holy Temple, so often loses *"the sense of the presence of God in its midst."*

He is making reference here to Sunday meetings and other regular groupings of believers, rather than to the Church *per se* as the body of Christ, and he uses the parable of the Prodigal Son in Luke 15 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'* [but see my comments earlier on Ephesians 5] ... *'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..."

But David Noakes writes of his visit to the Toronto Airport Vineyard church:

"Luke 15 was brought to us as a Scripture that tells us in these days that God is a God of parties. God is partying. Lots of jokes from a great big fun God. I don't know what sort of God that is. I haven't found that God in the Bible. My God is a consuming fire. He's a God of grace and compassion and love but I don't trifle with the God I know. I don't go partying with balloons and fun and jokes and things. When I find God weeping over the state of the Church I can't go around with balloons in my hand ... and yet the Scripture is misused and taken to say this is God; a God of parties. I understand that Scripture as a God of mercy and compassion and forgiveness, always ready to receive back the repentant sinner. I find nothing about God partying. Yes, the celebration was to indicate the greatness of His love and the greatness of the restoration, but it was used [at Toronto] for a totally false purpose" **[50]**.

The Church will celebrate the marriage feast of the Lamb when the Lord Jesus returns, but I too find no references to *"fun"* or *"parties"* anywhere in Scripture - except in denunciation. In 1 Corinthians 10:1-7, for example, Paul reminds the Corinthians of God's anger toward His people Israel in the wilderness because they did not patiently wait for Moses to return from the mountain; but built themselves a golden calf and held a festival: eating, drinking and indulging in revelry:

"And when the people saw that Moses delayed to come down out of the mount, the people gathered themselves together unto Aaron, and said unto him, Up, make us gods, which shall go before us; for as for this Moses, the man that brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we wot not what is become of him [as for the Lord Jesus, who brought us up out of sin and has delayed his return to the earth, where is he?]. And Aaron said unto them, Break off the golden earrings, which are in the ears of your wives, of your sons, and of your daughters, and bring them unto me … he made it a molten calf: and … built an altar before it; and Aaron made proclamation, and said, Tomorrow is a feast to the LORD. And they rose up early on the morrow, and offered burnt offerings, and brought peace offerings; and the people sat down to eat and to drink, and rose up to play. And the LORD said unto Moses, Go, get thee down; for thy people, which thou broughtest out of the land of Egypt, have corrupted themselves: They have turned aside quickly out of the way which I commanded them: they have made them a molten calf, and have worshipped it, and have sacrificed thereunto … Now therefore let me alone, that my wrath may wax hot against them, and that I may consume them" (Exodus 32:1-10).

"Moreover, brethren, I would not that ye should be ignorant, how that all our fathers were under the cloud, and all passed through the sea; And were all baptized unto Moses in the cloud and in the sea; And did all eat the same spiritual meat; And did all drink the same spiritual drink: for they drank of that spiritual Rock that followed them: and that Rock was Christ. But with many of them God was not well pleased: for they were overthrown in the wilderness. Now these things were our examples, to the intent we should not lust after evil things, as they also lusted. Neither be ye idolators, as were some of them; as it is written, The people sat down to eat and drink, and rose up to play … Wherefore let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall" (1 Corinthians 10:1-7,12).

It made no difference to God that the festival was ***"to the Lord"*** (v5), or that they had all been freed from Egypt and had all been partakers of the ***"spiritual Rock that followed them: and that Rock was Christ"*** (1 Corinthians 10:14). They were still forbidden entrance to the Promised Land.

Paul's point here is to compare the Christian life with the wilderness experience of the people of Israel. We may have left Egypt (a type of the world, according to Scripture) but we have yet to enter the Promised Land. Until Jesus returns, and we attend the marriage feast of the Lamb, there is no place for *"parties"*, not even *"to the Lord"*.

> "Then came to him the disciples of John, saying, Why do we and the Pharisees fast oft, but thy disciples fast not? And Jesus said unto them, Can the children of the bridechamber mourn, as long as the bridegroom is with them? But the days will come, when the bridegroom shall be taken from them, and then shall they fast" (Matthew 9:14-15).

Those days have come. We are awaiting the return of the bridegroom and in the meantime, we are to:

> "Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour: Whom resist steadfast in the faith" (1 Peter 5:8-9).

> "[N]ourished up in the words of faith and of good doctrine … Till I come, give attendance to reading, to exhortation, to doctrine … Meditate upon these things; give thyself wholly to them … Take heed unto thyself, and unto the doctrine; continue in them: for in doing this thou shalt both save thyself, and them that hear thee" (1 Timothy 4:6-16).

...remembering that:

> "true worshippers ... worship the Father in spirit and in truth: for the Father seeketh such to worship him. God is a Spirit: and they that worship Him must worship Him in spirit and in truth" (John 4:23-24) **[51]**.

In the last section of this talk, Gumbel tells Alpha Course attendees that the Church is the Bride of Christ. Cleansed, restored, and forgiven by the blood of Jesus on the cross, he says the Church is to be:

> "holy and without blemish … in love with Jesus ... One of the things we've found in the last few weeks as people have experienced the power of the Spirit ... we're falling in love with Jesus Christ"

Well, feelings of being *"in love with Jesus"* do not make us holy. Experiences of *"the power of the Spirit"* do not make us holy. Going to spiritual parties to get spiritually drunk that we may lose control of our minds and bodies is certainly not the way to holiness. Far from it. It is through the renewing of our minds, through self-control, through obedience to the truth, and through our hope in Jesus Christ that we are made holy:

> "I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service. And be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God" (Romans 12:1-2)

> "Wherefore gird up the loins of your mind, be sober, and hope to the end for the grace that is to be brought unto you at the revelation of Jesus Christ; As obedient children, not fashioning yourselves according to the former lusts in your ignorance: But as he which hath called you is holy, so be ye holy in all manner of conversations … Seeing ye have purified your souls in obeying the truth through the Spirit … As newborn babes, desire the sincere milk of the word, that ye may grow thereby" (1 Peter 1:13-2:3)

> "Looking diligently lest any man fail of the grace of God" (Hebrews 12:15a)
>
> "Looking for that blessed hope, and the glorious appearing of the great God and our Saviour Jesus Christ" (Titus 2:13).

How true the prophecy uttered in Azusa Street in 1906 has proved to be:

> "In the last days three things will happen in the Great Pentecostal Movement: There will be an over-emphasis on power, rather than on righteousness; there will be an over-emphasis on praise, to a God they no longer pray to; there will be an over-emphasis on the gifts of the Spirit, rather than on the lordship of Christ."

Nicky Gumbel asks:

> "Are we worthy to be the bride?"

Are we "worthy to be the bride"?...

(G) How Can I Make the Most of the Rest of My Life?

The White Alpha Training Manual, pp69-71, Talk 15

I am aware that the title of this talk is designed to appeal to the enthusiasm of new converts to continue along the Christian way, but its similarity to the Word-Faith/Prosperity/Health and Wealth teaching, which is very much a 'what's-in-it-for-me-in-this-world?' gospel, suggests a way of life that bears no resemblance whatsoever to true discipleship.

However, the content of the session belies its title, focusing on Romans 12:1-21, and reminding participants that as *"God did not spare His own Son, so it is just a little thing for us to give our lives to God as a living sacrifice".* Hopefully, despite all the questionable and even outright unbiblical teaching in the preceding few talks, Alpha participants will be able to grasp both the necessity and ramifications of this.

(V)
Eschatology and Church History

The basics of Christian discipleship include an eager expectation of, and preparation for, the return of our Lord Jesus:

> "And as he sat upon the mount of Olives, the disciples came unto him privately, saying, Tell us, when shall these things be? And what shall be the sign of thy coming, and of the end of the world?" (Matthew 24:1-25:46).
>
> "But I would not have you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning them which are asleep, that ye sorrow not, even as others which have no hope. For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so them also which sleep in Jesus will God bring with him. For this we say unto you by the word of the Lord, that we which are alive and remain unto the coming of the Lord shall not prevent [precede] them which are asleep. For the Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God: and the dead in Christ shall rise first: Then we which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air: and so shall we ever be with the Lord. Wherefore comfort one another with these words" (1 Thessalonians 13:18).
>
> "But of the times and the seasons, brethren, ye have no need that I write to you. For yourselves know perfectly that the day of the Lord so cometh as a thief in the night … But ye, brethren, are not in darkness, that that day should overtake you as a thief … Therefore let us not sleep, as do others; but let us watch and be sober" (1 Thessalonians 5:1-11).
>
> "Behold, a door was opened in heaven: and the first voice which I heard was as it were of a trumpet talking with me; which said, Come up hither, and I will show thee things which must be hereafter … And I saw heaven opened, and behold a white horse; and he that sat upon him was called Faithful and True, and in righteousness he doth judge and make war … And I saw an angel come down from heaven, having the key of the bottomless pit and a great chain in his hand … And I saw a great white throne, and him that sat upon it, from whose face the earth and the heaven fled away; and there was found no place for them" (Revelation 4:1-20:15).
>
> "And I saw a new heaven and a new earth: for the first heaven and the first earth were passed away … And I heard a great voice come out of heaven saying, Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and he will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself shall be with them, and be their God. And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away … And he said unto me, Write: for these words are true and faithful … He that overcometh shall inherit all things; and I will be his God, and he shall be my son" (Revelation 21:1-22:6).
>
> "Behold, I come quickly: blessed is he that keepeth the saying of the prophecy of this book … I Jesus have sent mine angel to testify unto you these things in the churches … And the Spirit and the bride say, Come. And let him that heareth say, Come. And let him that is athirst come. And whosoever will, let

him take the water of life freely … He which testifieth these things saith, Surely I come quickly. Amen. Even so, come Lord Jesus" (Revelation 22:7-21).

However, God's cry for His People Israel in Hosea 4:6-18:

> "My people are destroyed for [i.e. through] lack of knowledge … My people ask counsel at their stocks, and their staff declareth unto them: for the spirit of whoredoms hath caused them to err"

…applies no less to His Church, as evidenced in the unquestioning acceptance amongst many Christians of every new 'shepherd', 'prophet', 'doctrine' or spiritual 'experience' that comes along.

If new disciples are to finish the race that they (and we too) have begun, then at least *some* instruction in eschatology and relevant elements of Church history (persecutions, heresies, the Reformation) would be useful.

> "…bonds and afflictions abide me. But none of these things move me, neither count I my life dear unto myself, so that I might finish my course with joy" (Acts 20:23b-24).

> "Know ye not that they which run in a race run all, but one receiveth the prize? So run, that ye may obtain … they do it to obtain a corruptible crown; but we an incorruptible. I therefore so run, not as uncertainly … lest that by any means … I … should be a castaway" (1 Corinthians 9:24-27).

> "Ye did run well; who did hinder you that ye should not obey the truth?" (Galatians 5:7).

> "I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith: Hence there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, shall give me at that day: and not to me only, but unto all them also that love his appearing" (2 Timothy 4:7-8).

> "Wherefore seeing we also are compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset us, and let us run with patience the race that is set before us, Looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith; who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the same, and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God" (Hebrews 12:1-2).

(VI)
Conclusion

I believe we have a grave responsibility in these spiritually perilous times to ensure that we do not introduce any teaching into our fellowships which does not accord with the written Word of God. Surely, any system of instruction should be thoroughly tested in the light of Scripture before being used as a basis for teaching.

Some have countered any need for safeguarding against the risk of introducing false teaching into our churches by suggesting that we don't vet sermons from visiting speakers before we allow them to speak to our congregations, so why should we apply such a rule to the Alpha Course?

Well, firstly, it is not usual for churches to invite someone to preach or teach when the elders *knowingly* disagree with what may be taught. And secondly, I don't think we can anyway compare one fairly short sermon, given by a visiting speaker to a fellowship of believers - who are mature enough in the faith to be able to test what is being said and sieve out the dross while holding on to the good - with an entire teaching course of 15 talks given to non-Christians who are completely ignorant of Scripture.

Also, while the elders may not know what a visiting preacher will say until he says it (though perhaps they should), the Alpha videos and training manuals tell us exactly what will be taught. If we run the Course from the videos, we have to use everything that is on them; fast-forwarding the bits we may not agree with is not a practical option. It is anyway prohibited by HTB.

Neither is it enough to say that any errors can be corrected in discussion groups afterwards. Proverbs 22:6 tells us to ***"Train up a child in the way he should go: and when he is old, he will not depart from it."*** This applies to children in the faith as much as it does to children in age, and it concerns belief no less than behaviour. We would not deliberately teach our children something we knew was wrong with the excuse that we could correct it later. So, if we know that some teaching is wrong before we teach it, why teach it? Why not just teach what is right to begin with?

It may only be *parts* of Alpha's teaching which do not accord with Scripture, but Paul warns that ***"A little leaven leaveneth the whole lump"*** (Galatians 5:9). Though Paul is speaking here of the yeast of the law, the yeast of lawlessness is just as damaging. Ultimately it is not the leaders of Alpha, or anyone else, who will stand responsible before God for the spiritual health of those nurtured in our churches, but we ourselves.

Every Christian fellowship is able to witness to the gospel under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. It should not be necessary to rely on the methods and techniques of another church when each fellowship has all the instruction and teaching material it needs in the Bible, all the experience it needs in each of its members'

relationships with the Lord, and the capacity to be directed by the Holy Spirit as to how and when to go and do it.

Further, if a formulaic course of talks is the method that God wants us to use for evangelism, then wouldn't He have included such a thing in His Word? And wouldn't it have been used by the Church long before now?

Lastly, bearing in mind that the tendency of Church evangelism today is to preach a God of love but not a God of holiness or judgment, and thus to emphasise what we are saved *to* at the expense of what we are saved *from* (a re-definition of the gospel, which we have no right to do) it is, therefore, surely necessary that in any evangelistic outreach we undertake we ensure that:

- Non-believing participants have fully understood the meaning of the cross and are properly saved before propelling them into a course on Christian Living;

- New Christian participants are fully aware of their *conversion* experience and are becoming stable in their daily relationship with the Lord before introducing them to the baptism of the Holy Spirit for which they are not yet ready and which could allow into their lives the influence of an alien spirit through ground given, albeit unintentionally;

- Participants grasp the different roles of each Person in the Trinity;

- The *fruit* of the Holy Spirit, and His convicting and sanctifying work in a believer's life, is not submerged beneath the *gifts and power* of the Holy Spirit;

- Participants are taught to proceed from the Word to experience, not from experience to the Word; and that they know the crucial difference between the biblical experience (singular) of the Christian life as the daily application of, and obedience to, God's written Word, and the unbiblical experiences (plural) characteristic of the Toronto Blessing/Experience;

- Participants understand that *deception* regarding doctrine and supernatural phenomena is Satan's main weapon against the Church and that knowing, and standing fast in, the Word is *our* weapon against him - as it was for the Lord Jesus (please see Matthew 4:1-11);

- Participants are taught to become Bereans (as in Acts 17:11); able to test everything against Scripture for themselves; not relying on leaders, who are not infallible (e.g. Galatians 2:11-14), to do their thinking and living for them. This has been the particular failing of the 'Heavy Shepherding' movement within some Charismatic churches during the last few decades; it has failed to produce Scripture-literate, discerning Christians. Also, we must teach new believers to keep their eyes fixed on Jesus, ***"the author and finisher of our faith"*** (Hebrews 12:2).

I would also suggest that churches running Alpha disregard the recommended booklist on pp72-75 of the *White Alpha Training Manual* as it tends to display a bias towards writers sympathetic to the Toronto Experience/Restorationist persuasion, whilst omitting other sounder and more obvious choices in several of the sessions. Whilst, for example, many good and biblically sound books have been written on the subject of

healing, 2 of the 3 books listed in this section for the Alpha Course are written by John Wimber. At least two of the recommended authors for Talk 3 do not agree with the biblical view of Hell, preferring the fundamentally different idea of annihilation. And while *Chasing the Dragon* may be an interesting autobiography, it does not claim to be a textbook on the Holy Spirit. It should not be too difficult for any church to compile its own recommended reading list.

In 1877 Bishop Ryle wrote:

> "The Lord Jesus Christ declares, '***I*** will build My Church' ... Ministers may preach, and writers may write, but the Lord Jesus Christ alone can build. And except He builds, the work stands still ... Sometimes the work goes on fast, and sometimes it goes on slowly. Man is frequently impatient, and thinks that nothing is doing. But man's time is not God's time. A thousand years in His sight are but as a single day. The great builder makes no mistakes. He knows what He is doing. He sees the end from the beginning. He works by a perfect, unalterable and certain plan" **[52]**.

And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship,
and in breaking of bread, and in prayers ... Praising God, and having favour with all the people.
And the Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved
(Acts 2:42,47).

ENDNOTES

[1] Mark Elsdon-Dew, CHRISTIAN HERALD, 09:12:1995, p.2.

[2] Tricia Tillin, *Networking: A Global Vision*, in MAINSTREAM, Winter 1993, p.3.

[3] Robert Bowman, *Orthodoxy and Heresy: A Guide to Doctrinal Discernment*, 1993, p.25.

[4] HTB in FOCUS: ALPHA NEWS, Aug 1995, p9. See also Wallace Boulton, ed., *The Impact of Toronto*, 1995, pp.20-24.

[5] See Richard Smith, *Spiritual Drunkenness: Its Causes, Consequences and Cures*, audio tape, I.T.S., 1994/22.

[6] Nicky Gumbel, *The Spirit and Evangelism*, in RENEWAL, May 1995, p.15.

[7] Ed Tarkowski, *Laughing Phenomena* [sic]*: Its History and Possible Effects on the Church*, 1995, pp.5-6.

[8] David Forbes, PROPHECY TODAY, Nov/Dec 1994, p.12. This parallel is widely noted; see, for example: David Noakes, *Review of Leadership Consultation Held at Bawtry, Jan 1995*, (Leadership Consultation on the current situation in the Charismatic churches), audio tape CFCM 95/07, March 1995, side 1.

[9] See, for example: Chris Hand, *False Fruit*, audio tape IFB/192, July 1995, side 1.

[10] Clifford Hill, PROPHECY TODAY, Sept/Oct 1994, p.12. See also David Noakes, *Review of Leadership Consultation*, audio tape, CFCM 95/07, March 1995, side 1.

[11] See Reachout Trust, *Gods of the New Age*, video tape, 1988. See also Mick Brown, *Unzipper Heaven, Lord*, in SUNDAY TELEGRAPH MAGAZINE, Oct 1994, pp.26-30, and subsequent interview, *What Happened Next? Toronto and the Telegraph Reporter*, in EVANGELICALS NOW, Feb 1995, p.1. See also Nader Mikhaiel, *Slaying the Spirit: The Telling Wonder*, 2nd edition, 1995. See also Philip Foster, *Suggestibility, Hysteria and Hypnosis*, 1996.

[12] David Noakes, *Dealing With Poison in the Pot*, audio tape, CFCM 95/04, Jan 1995, side 1.

[13] See Jack Dunnigan, *A Shoppers Paradise*, in PROPHECY TODAY, Nov/Dec 1994, pp.10-11. See also Johannes Facius, *Laugh? I Nearly Cried*, in PROPHECY TODAY, May/June 1995, pp.24-26. See also Intercessors for Britain, *Soul or Spirit?*, in TORONTO: BLESSING OR BLIGHT? 1995, pp.6-7.

[14] See David Forbes, *The Influence of Latter-Rain Teaching on the Charismatic Movement*, audio tape CFCM 95/03. See also Tricia Tillin, *Restorationism, Toronto and the Latter-Rain*, 2 audio tapes, 1994. For teachings of the New Age see Constance Cumbey, *The Hidden Dangers of the Rainbow: The New Age Movement and Our Coming Age of Barbarism*, 1983. For comparisons of New Age with Latter-Rain teachings see Ed Tarkowski, *Laughing Phenomena*, pp.25-40.

[15] For information on the Kansas City prophets, refer to various audio tapes available from Banner Ministries. For information on the Word Faith movement see, for example, Hank Hanegraaff, *Christianity in Crisis*, 1993. Also, various audio tapes available from Banner Ministries.

[16] See Intercessors For Britain, *Revival or Survival?*, 1995.

[17] MAINSTREAM, Summer 1994, p.8.

[18] For other relevant information on the Toronto Blessing see: Clifford Hill, ed., *Blessing the Church?*, 1995. See also, Stanley Jebb, *No Laughing Matter*, 1995. See also Leigh Belcham, *Toronto: The Baby or the Bathwater?*, 1995. See also Bill Randles, *Weighed and Found Wanting: Putting the Toronto Blessing Into Context*, 1995. See also various articles in editions of MAINSTREAM and PROPHECY TODAY. See also various audio tapes available from Banner Ministries.

[19] Letter from the Board of Vineyard churches to all Vineyard pastors, Dec 1995.

[20] Nicky Gumbel, *Telling Others: The Alpha Initiative*, p.20.

[21] Gumbel, *Telling Others*, pp.21-24, 29-31.

[22] Dave Hunt, *Beyond Seduction: A Return to Biblical Christianity*, 1987, pp.77-78, 238, 257. See also John Goodwin, *Testing the Fruit of the Vineyard*, 1990, pp.8-15. See also Michael Horton, ed., *Power Evangelism*, in POWER RELIGION: THE SELLING OUT OF THE EVANGELICAL CHURCH? 1992, pp.61-138.

[23] Gumbel, *Telling Others*, p.19.

[24] David Noakes, *Dealing With Poison in the Pot*, audio tape, CFCM 95/04, side 1.

[25] Ian lewis, *The Alpha Course*, in EVANGELICALS NOW, Dec 1995.

[26] See Wallace Boulton, ed., *The Impact of Toronto*, 1995, p.19. See also Noakes, *Poison in the Pot*, side 1. See also Johannes Facius, *Laugh? I Nearly Cried*, in PROPHECY TODAY, May/June 1995, p.25.

[27] Alan Morrison, *How the Toronto Blessing Came to Town*, in EVANGELICAL TIMES, Nov 1994, p.17.

[28] Lewis, *Alpha Course*, EN, Dec 1995.

[29] Gumbel, *Telling Others*, p.19.

[30] Gumbel, *Telling Others*, p.120.

[31] Gumbel, *Telling Others*, pp.117, 120, 123. See also *Blue Alpha Training Manual*, p.18.

[32] Gumbel, *Telling Others*, pp.116-120. See also *Blue Alpha Training Manual*, p.17.

[33] See Jesse Penn-Lewis, *War on the Saints*, 1912, pp.47-55. See also Clifford Hill, *The Toronto Blessing: True or False?*, in PROPHECY TODAY, Sept/Oct 1994, pp.11-12.

[34] Nicky Gumbel, Interview in RENEWAL, Oct 1995, p.16. Also, Gumbel, *Telling Others*, pp.36-37.

[35] See, for example: Mike Taylor, *The Holy Spirit and the Believer: A Look at the Scriptures*, in MAINSTREAM, Spring 1995, pp.6,9.

[36] See, for example: Bowman, *Orthodoxy and Heresy*. See also J.C. Ryle, *Warnings to the Churches*, 1877.

[37] During the Leadership Consultation on the current situation in the Charismatic churches, held in January and March 1995 by the Centre for Contemporary Ministry, the following remarks were made concerning the "catch-it-and-pass-it-on" nature of the Toronto Blessing:

> "David, you said that William Branham laid hands on people and that was how they received the Spirit, and then they could go and lay hands on people and they would receive the Spirit, and that was how it was passed on. This raises the concept of 'infection' and the terms being used in connection with the Toronto Blessing. In the article in the Daily Telegraph, John Arnott was quoted as saying: 'What

we are seeing here is a virus from God. A wonderful, wonderful virus from God'. Now, that jarred with me and I went to the dictionary and looked up 'virus' and found four column inches of definition. 'Virus' goes back to Latin, Greek and Swahili roots, and there are two meanings of the word 'virus'. All the meanings, and their derivatives, are placed under these two meanings: One is 'poison', the other is 'venom', and all those meanings, every single one of them, is based on those two meanings. There is no other meaning of 'virus', or its derivative. But you know why people are going to Toronto? They are going to 'catch' this thing. That is the term used; so that they can spread it to other people. It's this concept of infection" [David Forbes, *The Influence of the Latter-Rain Teaching on the Charismatic Movement*, audio tape, CFCM 95/03, side 2, comments made during discussion group at end of talk].

In contrast, Nicky Gumbel has said:

"I have not had the opportunity of meeting any of the people who are supposed to be the roots [of the TB]. We are praying not for the spirit of 'X' to fill people, but for the Holy Spirit to fill them. I think it is irrelevant that so-and-so is *linked* with so-and-so, who once *met* so-and-so, who was into something that wasn't very good" [Wallace Boulton, ed., *The Impact of Toronto*, 1995, p.83].

The prophet Haggai, however, would seem to warn against this view and show that associations DO matter:

"*In the four and twentieth day of the ninth month, in the second year of Darius, came the word of the LORD by Haggai the prophet, saying, Thus saith the LORD of hosts; Ask now the priests concerning the law, saying, If one bear holy flesh in the skirt of his garment, and with his skirt do touch bread, or pottage, or wine, or oil, or any meat, shall it be holy? And the priests answered and said, No. Then said Haggai, If one that is unclean by a dead body touch any of these, shall it be unclean? And the priests answered and said, It shall be unclean. Then answered Haggai, and said, So is this people, and so is this nation before me, saith the LORD; and so is every work of their hands; and that which they offer there is unclean*" (Haggai 2:10-14).

[38] See Tricia Tillin, *Banner Headlines News Update*, BMX22, Dec 1995.

[39] Lewis, *Alpha Course,* EN, Dec 1995.

[40] Martin Cavender, quoted in Gumbel, *Telling Others*.

[41] CHRISTIAN HERALD, 09:12:1995.

[42] Ryle, *Warning*s, p.128.

[43] Nicky Gumbel, Interview in RENEWAL, May 1995, p.16.

[44] See Stanley Jebb, *Reformation, Renewal, Romanism*, audio tape. (A warning to Evangelicals / Charismatics about Ecumenism). See also Ryle, WARNINGS. See also M. De Semlyen, *All Roads Lead to Rome: The Ecumenical Movement*, 1993. See also Dave Hunt, *Evangelicals and Catholics, Declaration of Unity: The Gospel Betrayed*, in THE BEREAN CALL, May 1994, quoted in MAINSTREAM, Summer 1994, pp10-11. See also Dave Hunt, *A Woman Rides the Beast: The Roman Catholic Church in the Last Days*, 1994, chapters 22-28. See also various audio tapes available from Banner Ministries. See also the March/April 1996 edition of DISCERNMENT (P.O. Box 129, Lapeer, USA), which focuses on Ecumenism / Church unity.

[45] Gumbel, Interview in RENEWAL, May 1995, p.16.

[46] Gumbel, *Telling Others*, p114. See also this Talk 14, Section II) / *The Impact of Toronto* p.83.

[47] See Tricia Tillin, *Thy Word is Truth*, in MAINSTREAM, Winter 1993, p.9. See also Bowman, *Orthodoxy and Heresy*, pp.27-32.

[48] See Hunt, *Beyond Seduction*, pp.3-4. See also Ryle, *Warnings*, pp.103-107; 110-112; 127-128.

[49] See Tricia Tillin, *Birth of the Manchild*, in MAINSTREAM, Spring 1995, pp.1-5 for the eschatology being taught at some Vineyard churches, referred to by John Wimber in his letter to Vineyard pastors, Dec 1995, under the heading '*Other Concerns*'.

[50] Noakes, *Poison in the Pot*, side 1.

[51] See Stewart Dool, *A Table in the Wilderness*, audio tape, Dec 1995. See also Jacob Prasch, *The Toronto Blessing Is It? Understanding of the Golden Calf*, video tape, Moriel Ministries, 1995.

[52] Ryle, *Warnings*, pp.13-14.

Appendix

The following short article comprised an Appendix to the original booklet.

Please bear in mind, as you read it, that Nicky Gumbel teaches unbelievers that "the heart of the Christian gospel is this: God loves you" [Talk 1, Edition 2] and "Why did he [i.e. Jesus] die? ... The answer, in a nut shell, is because God loves you" [Talk 3, Edition 2].

The gospel of love... or the Gospel of God?

by Philip Foster
St. Matthews, Cambridge, May 1996

The book of Acts is the only biblical account of how the apostles preached the gospel. This is important because it is often assumed that the four Gospels and the Epistles are also direct sources of how the gospel message should be preached.

The gospels were written for churches or for people who were already believers, or who had recently believed. They gave information about 'all that Jesus began to do and to teach...' As is generally agreed, the gospel of John is to some extent different in that it was written 'that you may believe and have life in His name', however the second part of the book (i.e. from Chapter 13 onwards) is intended for the intimate disciples of Jesus.

The Epistles and Revelation were, of course, all written to believers or churches; thus, they were not intended as gospel messages.

So only Acts can give any idea of the *content* of gospel messages preached to unbelievers - both Jew and Gentile.

The sermons contained in the book are found in the following Chapters: Acts 2:14-40 (J), 3:12-26 (J), 7:2-53 (J)*, 10:34-43 (G), 13:16-41 (J), 14:15-17 (G), 17:22-31 (G), 22:2-21* (J), 24:10-21*, and 26:2-29*... where '(J)' represents proclamation before a predominantly Jewish audience and '(G)' represents proclamation before a predominantly Gentile audience. Those marked with a * represent legal defences before a court.

Briefly, what are the main themes?

(1) That Jesus is Messiah, fulfilling the Law and the prophets. That He was crucified and rose from the dead and that, through repentance, there is forgiveness and the gift of the Holy Spirit.

(2) In addition, for Gentiles: that God is Creator and Judge who now calls all to repent by faith in Jesus.

What is conspicuous by its absence is any mention of the Love of God in these sermons. In fact, the word 'love' does not occur in Acts.

This is almost a complete reversal of current trends in gospel preaching. These days 'God loves you' is more or less where people start. Here sadly is the bad news: that is not the gospel. Sinners are under Wrath. Yes, they *are* loved by God,

but unless they repent and turn to Christ, they remain under Wrath - they will not *know* that God loves them; indeed, they cannot know. Therefore, telling them that 'God loves them anyway' will lead either to pride ('I am worth something!') or dismissal, 'who cares!' Frankly, the last thing that middle-class Westerners need to hear is that God loves them. Rather, the reverse is true: that God demands their repentance, for then and only then can they discover that God really does love them.

Even in the gospels, Jesus does not *tell* sinners that He loves them. (He befriended them, but that is action, not a matter of words.) One interesting example of this point is found in Mark 10:17ff; the story of the rich young ruler. In v21 *we readers* are specifically told that Jesus loved him. But Jesus never tells *him* that! When the man goes away sorrowfully, Jesus does not shout out after him, "I love you!"

It is intriguing to note that all other references to love in the gospels are not part of proclamation. (Look them up in the concordance.) Even in the gospel of John, references to the love of God occur very rarely in the record of Jesus' public ministry; and the majority of *these* are from Chapter 13 onward, when Jesus is with the twelve disciples.

Earlier references are: John 3:16 (which is either John's commentary or part of a one-to-one conversation of Jesus with Nicodemus, and not therefore public proclamation), John 5:42, John 11:5, 13, 36, and John 12:43. None of these references is directly connected to the message proclaimed.

The Prodigal Son and The Lost Sheep

What then of the stories of the Prodigal Son and the Lost Sheep? Both have been used as gospel parables, and, in a sense, they are. However, the context - particularly in the case of the prodigal son - is often not recognised. He is, after all a prodigal *son*. In other words, he has a Father before he leaves! This is not true of a Gentile sinner (such as most of us are). We do not start off with God as our Father, wander away, and then get welcomed back. Jesus' ministry was primarily to the *children, the lost sheep of the house of Israel* (Matthew 15:24 and Mark 6:27, compare also Galatians 2:15). These stories were addressed to Jewish people and were about coming *back* to God as their Father. We *can* use them as part of the gospel message, but they are not the main message for Gentiles who are not children of God except by adoption through the cross of Christ.

I have very serious concerns that we evangelicals/charismatics are preaching another gospel, 'the gospel of love', rather than the gospel of 'repent and believe' – which is the gospel of God.

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The Alpha Course has taken the Christian churches by storm. Many newcomers to the church are greeted with the words, "Have you done an Alpha Course?"

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Is this the Gospel? This booklet may help you to decide.

ISBN 0 9524672 6 7

9 780952 467267 >

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