

‘A’ is for *Alpha*, ‘B’ is for Berean

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Introduction

The ‘Decade of Evangelism’ has fostered a climate in which churches and ministers are keen to grasp at resources that help in evangelism and outreach. In this atmosphere the *Alpha* course has flourished.

It is not difficult to understand why this is the case. *Alpha* is exceptionally well produced and is backed up by a wealth of resources and extra materials. Among Christians it has earned a rapidly spreading reputation based on its effectiveness. The commendations from diverse theological positions, such as those from the Archbishop of Canterbury,¹ J I Packer,² and Roman Catholic cardinals,³ add to give *Alpha* a catholic appeal. More specifically, the course also appears to fulfil a number of criteria that ought to keep the evangelical constituency happy – the Cross is mentioned, the Bible is used and apologetics are employed to convey the Christian message in a credible manner.

Further, *Alpha* is tailor-made to motivate Christians into getting involved in evangelism, since the course is ideally suited to operate in a home-group environment. Apart from galvanizing congregations into action, *Alpha* appeals to non-Christians at a number of levels. The overall quality of the resources, the emphasis on fellowship, and as the course becomes more popular, the power of word-of-mouth recommendations are powerful incentives to encourage non-Christians to do an *Alpha* course. So too is the fact that it is not necessary to run the course from a church building: many unbelievers who would not dream of going into a church are more at ease in a friend’s home. If the gospel is to be effectively proclaimed at the turn of the century, this is surely an approach that merits serious consideration.

Session titles seek to answer pertinent questions such as ‘Who is Jesus?’⁴ ‘Why Did Jesus Die?’⁵ and ‘Why and How Should I Read the Bible?’⁶ As groups of Christians and non-Christians meet together and discuss these questions, perhaps after a meal, using the *Alpha* manual, it is not difficult to see why the format has proved popular and successful. The questions and claims made in the sessions are backed up by Scripture references. This adherence to the Bible, in tandem with the apologetic nature of the early session titles, would seem to confer upon *Alpha* a positively evangelical character. This perception can only be reinforced when one realizes that books like John Stott’s *Basic Christianity*⁷ and J I Packer’s *Knowing God*⁸ are ‘Recommended Reading’.⁹ Fellowship is a key element of *Alpha*, beginning with simply meeting together to study the course, and climaxing in a weekend house-party or day away.

If all this were not enough, a nationwide advertising campaign is about to be undertaken.¹⁰ It seems that *Alpha* can do no wrong, and that it is destined to go from strength to strength, garnering more praise and plaudits along the way. *Alpha* is an undoubted success story for Holy Trinity Brompton, the Anglican church that holds the copyright and publishes the course. Nicky Gumbel, curate at HTB, is author of the book *Questions of Life* on which *Alpha* materials are based.¹¹ Understandably perhaps, HTB zealously guards both the form

and content of *Alpha*; in their view there is no need to tailor the course content to a specific parish situation. Why change what is a proven and winning formula? Anyone using *Alpha* needs to be aware that they are obligated to use the *whole* course and cannot adapt its contents by omission or addition. What could be thought of as an over-restrictive and bitter pill is made easier to swallow when it is remembered that *Alpha* is popular and effective.¹²

Importantly, *Alpha* succeeds in being relevant at a cultural level. We live in an age where, in areas as diverse as politics and television, style is winning the victory over substance. Nineties man and woman are simply uninterested in anything that is not presented in the current idiom. For Christians this means we must meet the challenge of presenting the gospel credibly in a culture that is largely biblically illiterate and is wary of a message that challenges and requires a change of life. In attempting to meet this challenge, *Alpha* is a paragon of stylish presentation, which is essential in a society obsessed with image.

The most important thing, however, is that people are becoming Christians through being introduced to the gospel through the *Alpha* course. Although this must be held in tension with the recognition that it is God's word alone that leads to faith, and not any particular course or style of presentation, it seems clear that God is using *Alpha* to extend his Kingdom.

Untouchable

In the light of these positive observations it must seem churlish to criticize *Alpha* at all. However, I think there are several valid reasons why we should examine *Alpha*.

First, I would argue that *Alpha's* considerable reputation should not mean that it is automatically exempt from critical examination. It is not, as many seem to think, untouchable. Although *Alpha* is distinctive among the other courses available – for example, no other initiative is either as vigorously proactive in its self-promotion, or organized as broadly at a national level – it must be remembered that these factors serve only to consolidate its status, without necessarily reflecting its content. Since so many people are likely to come into contact with the course, is it not fair to suggest that *Alpha's* undoubted popularity renders scrutiny obligatory?

Secondly, superb as the *Alpha* materials and presentation are, it would be careless simply to assume that they are unaffected by the current malaise of placing style over substance. Whilst ways must always be sought of communicating the gospel to contemporary society, the Christian message is unchanging. Thus we must cut through the packaging and examine the *message* that *Alpha* conveys.

Thirdly, we must be aware for whom the course is intended. Although many churches use the course with their existing congregations, its stated *raison d'être* is to bring non-Christians into the Christian family. It is therefore of the utmost importance that what unbelievers are being introduced to is, in fact, the Christian faith. When we assess *Alpha's* claim to be a 'practical introduction to the Christian faith',¹³ it is vital that we take on the perspective of the man or woman who is ignorant of the faith.

Fourthly, and most importantly, by what – or by whose – standard is Christian teaching measured? It is not enough to rely upon the accolades of others, or on trendy presentation, or the fact that the course is deemed to have worked elsewhere. No, the criterion by which all

Christian teaching must be judged is the truth of the Bible (2 Tim 3:16; 1 Thess 5:21), and we should be unashamed to engage in the Berean habit of ‘testing everything with the Scriptures every day’ (Acts 17:11). Biblical truth *does* matter, and we must be vigilant to ensure that God’s standards are met in our teaching.

As Christians concerned to evangelize the nation, we would be failing in our duty if we did not consider these four points. Evangelism has at its core a message of eternal significance, and it is therefore imperative that we convey the biblical message. With these considerations in mind, three significant theological problems emerge which permeate *Alpha*. Firstly, the seriousness of sin is given only scant attention; secondly, Christ’s vicarious atoning death on the Cross is inadequately dealt with and ‘Christ crucified’ is not central to *Alpha*; thirdly, there is a Charismatic emphasis on being filled with the Holy Spirit as a second stage in conversion.

What follows is a brief, and by no means exhaustive, examination of these three major theological faults.

The Problem of Sin

Before a doctor can prescribe a cure, he must make an accurate diagnosis of the patient’s condition. Unless the full extent of the disease that afflicts the patient is known, the cure will be ineffective. And for an effective cure to be fully appreciated the patient must be aware of the seriousness of the disease.

This is analogous to the human disease of sin and God’s cure of the Cross (‘it is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick’ (Matt 9:12)). In the matter of salvation, there must be a correct assessment of the condition of the person to be saved; and unless we appreciate our true condition before God, we will not recognize our need for a saviour. Also, without an accurate view of the human condition we will have defective views regarding the means necessary for salvation; if we think we are only *partially* bad, then we will be satisfied with a solution that is only *partially* from God. Our perception of sin informs our view of the Cross. As the Cross is central to Christianity it is vital that we establish how severe the problem of sin is.

The popular notion that sin is ‘the things we do wrong’ is far removed from the Bible’s teaching on the matter. Sin goes to the very core of our being, to our hearts. Our natural spiritual condition is not a happy one. We are dead (Rom 5:12; Eph 2:1, etc), in bondage to the devil (2 Tim 2:25-6), blind and deaf (Mark 4:11), unable to be taught (1 Cor 2:14), and naturally sinful through birth (Ps 51:5) and practice (Gen 6:5). We are all sinners (Rom 3:23), and the penalty for sin is death (Rom 6:23). The inclination to sin goes much deeper than the wrong things we do, or the wrong thoughts we have: it is indivisible from our very being – it is from the heart (Mark 7:21) and cannot be escaped. The reality that a just and holy God cannot look upon sin (or sinners), and that we are creatures fully deserving of God’s wrath (e.g. Eph 2:3; Col 3:6) must be faced up to. It is only in this context that the salvation won on the Cross can be fully appreciated.

However, *Alpha* deals inadequately with mankind’s sinful rebellion and the eternal consequences of the Fall. The problem of sin is explained as ‘the rubbish that clutters up our lives, and clutters our world’¹⁴ and as ‘pollution of the soul’.¹⁵ The fact that our nature is

corrupt and our hearts are predisposed to evil is not the same as saying that sin ‘pollutes’.¹⁶ At this crucial point *Alpha* does not deal with the *fact* of sin, but with the *feelings* sin causes: ‘It gets in the way, leaving us feeling dead on the inside, often guilty.’¹⁷

To muddy the water by introducing a synthetic and arbitrary distinction between the fact and feelings of sin is dangerous. The absence of the *feelings* associated with sin does not mean that we are acquitted of our guilt. The human condition is such that we are always guilty of sin. The Buddhist does not *feel* ‘dead on the inside’,¹⁸ much less guilty – but the fact remains that he is still as much a sinner as anyone else, and is in *fact* spiritually dead. To reduce the problem to *feelings* of guilt is to turn God into a psychiatrist, as if sin is not so much a problem for God as for us. It is also to ignore God’s holiness. To present sin as being a problem of the here and now is to turn it into something that merely requires a therapeutic cure. This is a spiritually perilous approach, for sin is the eternal problem of mankind, and makes us deserving of God’s wrath. To quote Jonathan Edwards, we are ‘sinners in the hands of an angry God’. Hell is an unpopular concept, within the church and in the secular world, but in seeking to be faithful to the gospel we cannot avoid discussing it. Sadly, *Alpha* omits this eternal perspective.

If people think, ‘I’m not really *that* bad – but I’ll say sorry to God anyway, because it might make me feel good’, what place does that leave for the Cross? A proper evaluation of the Fall and of man’s hopeless condition is a missing element in *Alpha*. This must be the starting-point of evangelism; people must be told what they are saved *from* before they can be saved *to* something. The gospel is good news precisely because of this predicament, which we ourselves are unable to do anything about. It is only when we realize this that we see how great God’s grace, mercy and love are, as expressed in the Cross of Christ.

The Cross of Christ

If there is an incorrect view of the disease of sin in *Alpha*, it is logical to presume that the ‘cure’ of the Cross will be similarly misrepresented.

Alpha gets off to a good start. After seeking to establish ‘Who Is Jesus?’¹⁹ the session ‘Why Did Jesus Die?’²⁰ tells us that ‘the cross lies at the heart of the Christian faith’.²¹ We are told that the Cross achieved justification, redemption, atonement and reconciliation, and Scripture references are provided. Indeed, there is a reasonable foundation to build upon if one wished to further investigate the Cross. However, the penal substitutionary nature of Christ’s atonement is not stressed – the fact is that Christ died in our place, paying the penalty for our sin. It is vital that this is understood – only then can the significance of the Cross as God’s answer to the problem of sin be appreciated.²²

There is a further problem. Simply put, despite fine words, the Cross is, in reality, *not* central to *Alpha*. If *Alpha* is ‘a practical introduction to the Christian faith’²³ is this not a glaring inconsistency, especially when the centrality of the Cross has been declared? When the course is examined as a whole, there is hardly a mention of the Cross. One could be forgiven thinking that the centrality of the Cross and Jesus Christ’s work of atonement has been usurped. If the Cross is not at the centre of the message, to what faith are people being converted? Instead, the Holy Spirit is promoted to a position of centrality. It is as if the Cross is built up, only to be knocked down. In *Alpha*, the Cross may be *said* to be central, but if it is not in practice, then the conclusion must be that something else is being elevated to a position

of centrality. Three sessions are devoted specifically to the Holy Spirit, and these form the *de facto* and *de jure* core of *Alpha*.

Paul's concern was to 'preach Christ crucified' (1 Cor 1:23); if the Cross is not central to the message, to what faith are people introduced? It cannot be to the biblical gospel (cf Gal 1:6-10), for the Cross is the central point of the gospel. The *Alpha* participant is told in session 3 that: 'The Cross lies at the heart of the Christian faith'; yet why is it that the Cross that is declared central is barely mentioned in subsequent sessions? We must set our eyes, and those of unbelievers, on Jesus (Heb 12:2); it is of extraordinary importance that all evangelism draws people to the Jesus of the Bible, the Jesus of God's gracious redemptive-historical act, and the Jesus of the Cross and resurrection. Our message should focus on nothing 'except Jesus Christ and him crucified' (1 Cor 2:2).

The Holy Spirit

From the poor treatment of sin flows a flawed view of the Cross and a displacement of Jesus' centrality. The vacuum that this creates is filled with *Alpha's* focus on the Holy Spirit. Three sessions are devoted to this: 'Who is the Holy Spirit?'²⁴, 'What Does the Holy Spirit Do?'²⁵ and 'How Can I Be Filled With the Spirit?'²⁶ There is strong evidence of a shift in emphasis at this point.

Firstly, these units form the climax to the fellowship that is fundamental to *Alpha*. They are designed to be taught in rapid succession during a house-party, over the course of a weekend.

Secondly, previous units have focused upon the basic truths of Christianity in a largely rational and historical way. Now there is a strong change in emphasis, with three units dealing exclusively with the Holy Spirit. In comparison, just one unit looked at the problem of sin and the solution of the Cross. Given the relative amount of time spent on these topics, the reasonably alert reader should recognize that the course is not well-balanced.

Thirdly, suspicions that *Alpha's* concentration on the Holy Spirit betrays a reliance on Charismatic theology are confirmed in 'How Can I Be Filled With the Spirit?' It is here that we must stop and ask questions. Given that *Alpha* has already sought to present the fundamentals of the faith, and that the questions 'Who is the Holy Spirit?' and 'What Does the Holy Spirit Do?' have already been considered – which are surely only of relevance to those who are already Christians – why are we now being told *how* to be filled with the Spirit? Does Christian conversion not entail being filled with the Spirit? This must be the same as asking, 'How can I become a Christian?' And yet the question is not answered along the lines of 'believe on the Lord Jesus Christ' (Acts 16:31) or 'repent and believe' (Mark 1:15). Instead, *Alpha* presents being filled with the Spirit as a *second* conversion experience. In retrospect, the teaching in the other Holy Spirit sessions ushers this Charismatic view of conversion in.

Each of the three sessions merits some further comment.

'Who is the Holy Spirit?'

In the introduction to the first of these three sessions, we are told that the Holy Spirit has been ‘ignored’, ‘misunderstood’, and ‘resisted’.²⁷ There is of course some truth in this. Christian teaching must always be balanced in accordance to Scripture; where it is not, some element of Christian truth must necessarily be ignored and thereby misunderstood. If in the past this has affected the church’s teaching on the Holy Spirit, caution must now be exercised, so that in correcting this the Spirit is not emphasized over and above the Father and the Son. The Holy Spirit can be resisted, and is (Acts 7:51), by those who do not listen to God and obey his word. This does not mean that man is stronger than the Spirit of God. Even when his Spirit is resisted, God’s sovereignty overrules. If it were otherwise, man would be more powerful than God, and able to reject and resist him even when he wants to come into our lives. This is not the case; Lydia was converted in Acts 16:14 because ‘The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul’s message’; Paul’s conversion on the Damascus road (Acts 9) is a salutary example that God’s purposes prevail over man’s will. Fortunately, God has taken the initiative, and for this we must be thankful.

Another problem is evident here. We are told that the reason the Holy Spirit has been ignored is because of ‘a greater concentration on the Father and the Son’.²⁸ To a new Christian (or an unbeliever), this can only be confusing: without any knowledge of the Holy Spirit’s role in relation to the Father and the Son, the teaching in ‘Who is Jesus?’ and ‘Why Did Jesus Die?’ is being undermined. This reflects negatively on the Cross and Jesus. Further, it establishes an environment in which *Alpha’s* Holy Spirit teaching will be unquestioningly accepted.

The session concludes with the statement: ‘We now live in the age of the Spirit.’²⁹ We have been in the ‘age of the Spirit’ since Christ ascended, when he left the Holy Spirit as his ‘vicar on earth’, to be active in the mediation of all that God provides for his people under the New Covenant. Another sense in which we are in the ‘age of the Spirit’ is that if someone has the Spirit of God, they belong to God. We are also in the ‘in-between’ times, the period between Jesus’ First and Second Comings. These are the ‘last days’ (2 Tim 3:1). We enjoy the first-fruits of the Spirit (Rom 8:23), but still struggle with the reality of sin and suffering. Paul told the Thessalonians that they were to look forward to the parousia, the Second Coming. We too are waiting for the parousia, the Royal visit, when Jesus will return to earth in glory (1 Thess 4).

However, in today’s spiritual environment, to talk of living in ‘the age of the Spirit’ is fraught with danger. This is due to the inherent New Age overtones associated with the phrase. New Age mysticism believes we are entering ‘the age of Aquarius’, also known as ‘the age of the spirit’. Nicky Gumbel is well aware of the New Age connotations that can be seen in these parts of the course, but sees this as being positive. In *Telling Others*,³⁰ he writes: ‘[those] 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.’

To rely on New Age methodology, where knowledge is gained through *experience* and *feelings* rather than through *learning* and application of the *mind*, is at odds with Romans 12:1-2, where we are told of the importance of the mind: ‘Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God – this is your spiritual act of worship. Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is – his good, pleasing and perfect will.’

This, of course, is not to say that *Alpha* is associated with the New Age movement; however, it does embrace New Age thinking. Nicky Gumbel's reasoning suggests that there are two equally valid ways to become a Christian: one is to be persuaded either by 'rational and historical explanations', or alternatively by 'experiencing the Holy Spirit'. To think thus is to ignore the fact that it was always the Apostles' priority to present 'rational and historical explanations' to all sorts of people (Acts 2:22-41; 8:26-38; 17:16-33, etc) wherever they proclaimed the gospel. In essence the gospel of Jesus Christ *is* both rational and historical. Moreover, the unbeliever, if they are to enter into eternal life, must accept with their *mind* the rational and historical gospel, through the Holy Spirit's power to convict of sin and guide into repentance. Is this not the wonderful way we experience the Holy Spirit's power?

Without wishing to upset a hornet's nest, the focus on 'experiencing' the Holy Spirit in *Alpha* is undoubtedly a reflection of HTB's involvement in, and propagation of, the Toronto Blessing. The content of sessions such as 'How Can I Resist Evil?'³¹ and 'Does God Heal Today?'³² provides other examples of this Charismatic focus.³³

'What Does the Holy Spirit Do?'

This session sets out to deal with how the Spirit acts in the areas of adoption into God's family (Rom 8:14-17), helping us to pray (Rom 8:26), enabling us to understand God's word (Eph 1:17-18) and spiritual gifts (1 Cor 12:1-11). None of these are dealt with particularly well, and the Holy Spirit's vital role in conversion and sanctification is inadequately covered.

The session concludes with the statement: 'Every Christian has the Holy Spirit, *but not every Christian is filled with the Spirit*'³⁴ (my italics). Given the Charismatic thrust of *Alpha's* Holy Spirit teaching, this should alarm us. This is laying the groundwork for the introduction of ways to 'experience' being filled with the Holy Spirit. It also strongly suggests that conversion is a two-stage process, in the second stage of which 'the power of the Holy Spirit'³⁵ is experienced.

This implies that the Holy Spirit's work in sealing us when we were converted (Eph 1:13-14 and 4:30) is merely a precursor to something else, to something somehow better. To propose that conversion, in which the Holy Spirit is integral, is not the 'main event' is to call it inadequate. How does a young Christian, or an *Alpha* participant who has become a Christian earlier in the course respond to this statement? It is irresponsible and dangerous to say, 'not every Christian is filled with the Spirit'; this can lead to destructive doubts about assurance of salvation. Assurance does not come from post-conversion experience or experiences, but solely from the evidence of the Cross and resurrection.

Romans 8 has been described as the 'Mount Everest' of the New Testament, and it is here that Paul deals at length with the Christian's life through the Spirit. Note particularly the freedom with which Paul refers to the Holy Spirit as the 'Spirit of God' and the 'Spirit of Christ' (e.g. vv 9-11). To take Paul's terminology, *Alpha* is saying that not every Christian is filled with Christ. One of Paul's key phrases is 'in Christ' (or a cognitive), which he uses over 160 times. Paul believes the Christian to be somebody 'in Christ'. To be 'in Christ' is to be 'in the Spirit'.

Alpha directs us to Ephesians 5:18: 'Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery. Instead, be filled with the Spirit.' This is used to support the claim that 'not every Christian is

filled with the Spirit'. However, in Ephesians 4:17-5:21, Paul is instructing the Ephesians to live godly lives: they are not to seek a post-conversion 'experience', but simply to stop behaving like the ungodly pagans! It is wrong to read Ephesians 5:18 out of context, as a pretext to support the claim that we are to seek a further 'filling'. Scripture is perspicuous to the believer; to render 5:18 as meaning something that is not clear from the context highlights the danger of relying upon 'proof' texts that really offer no proof at all.³⁶

If there is flimsy evidence to support the claim based on Ephesians 5:18, then there is even less in Revelation 22, used to answer 'How?' to be filled with the Spirit: 'The Spirit and the bride say, "Come!" And let him who hears say "Come!" Whoever is thirsty, let him come; and whoever wishes, let him take of the free gift of the water of life.' If Revelation 22:17 is a model for *becoming* filled with the Holy Spirit, it rather begs the question how can the Spirit invoke himself? The plain meaning of this verse is that it applies to Jesus' Second Coming; it is looking forward to Jesus' return, for which we must be ready, and has nothing to do with filling by the Spirit as an experience subsequent to conversion.³⁷

The picture brought to mind by *Alpha* is that of the Christian at the foot of a ladder. Conversion only brings us to the foot of the ladder, with the tantalizing prospect of a fuller experience at the top. The ladder can only be climbed by being 'filled with the Spirit'. This is a dangerous and wrong view. It can lead to division and dissent when those who think they have 'climbed the ladder' believe they are superior to those who have not. And how is one to know when the ladder has been climbed? Is there only one rung to be climbed, or are there many rungs, with increasingly euphoric experiences to be had the higher one climbs? The assertion would seem to mean that the Holy Spirit is present in varying quantities and proportions in all Christians. Following this erroneous logic leads to the nonsensical position that a Christian can be full or empty (or presumably any proportion in between) of the Spirit. This can only raise more questions and doubts. How can you know if you have been 'filled'? How can anyone be expected to have assurance of salvation if they think something else is required? If *Alpha* proponents counter by saying that this 'filling with the Spirit' is *not* at odds with assurance of salvation, then it is clearly a spurious 'Jesus-plus' teaching, and must be rejected.

Put another way, *Alpha* posits a scenario in which all Christians are flying in an aeroplane; those who have had a second 'filling' stretch out in the luxury of first class, while those who have had a conversion consisting merely of one decisive moment sit in cramped second-class accommodation. The only way the inferior second-class passengers can improve their lot is to undergo an external experience as proof of a 'filling'. Only then can they climb the greasy pole that is the ladder to first class.

The only evidence that can be called upon to demonstrate a 'climbing' is subjective, external and man-made. If it is thought that a ladder must be climbed before we can be filled with the Spirit, assurance cannot come from Scripture; it can only come from personal experience. If the validity of this filling is not to be questioned by fellow-climbers it must also be a demonstrably external phenomena. This is why gifts such as tongues are emphasized later on. Such gifts may come from God, but sadly they can be hijacked and counterfeited by the devil (2 Thess 2:9-10). The assurance of being at the top of the ladder is based on the experience that propelled you there. When the remembrance of that experience is dimmed, or a new and more beguiling experience is pedalled, that assurance is undermined, and new experiences are sought. Witness the nefarious Toronto Blessing. The Christian's assurance of being filled

with the Spirit is based on the solid foundation of the Cross and the word, and not on the top of a shaky and wobbly ladder.

The link between the Holy Spirit and Jesus must be emphasized; when we are born again – a regeneration made possible only through Jesus’ birth, death, resurrection and ascension – we receive the baptism of the Holy Spirit according to the fullness of the New Testament (Acts 2:38; Rom 8:9; 1 Cor 12:13). In this baptism we are united to the risen Christ. The Holy Spirit rested upon Jesus so that we can benefit from his fullness. How, then, can there be an additional filling?

‘How Can I Be Filled with the Spirit?’

The most obvious criticism is that the question is left unanswered. One is left to draw conclusions from inferences. As we shall see, this is dangerous.

The focus here is on experience. The objective, of rationale and logic appealing to the mind (cf Acts 8:35; 17:2; 17:16-33; etc), seen in the early sessions has been abandoned in favour of the subjective – ‘Experience is different for everyone’. Aside from being a transparently obvious statement, in this context it is also a blatant appeal to feelings and emotions. The reality of the Cross and resurrection has been left behind; the *Alpha* participant is now being brought into the arena of subjective experience. The New Testament suggests a different approach.

Luke 24:13-35 tells of Jesus’ appearance to two of his followers on the Road to Emmaus after the resurrection. As they walk, Jesus rebukes them for being ‘slow of heart to believe...’ and ‘beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself’. The two have been kept from recognizing Jesus, but when ‘he took bread, gave thanks, broke it and began to give it to them their eyes were opened and they recognized him...’ The instant they recognize that the man they walked with is Jesus, he disappears. The two men certainly underwent what we would call an ‘experience’. Yet the experience they were exhilarated by is described in verse 32: ‘Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?’ Note what happens here; it was Christ’s *word* that provided the ‘experience’. Jesus spoke to them and taught them the Scriptures. It is the truth of the word of Christ that leads to faith (Romans 10:17) and to Christian experience. The Bible does not teach us that subjective experience leads to explanation, much less to faith.

When people challenged Jesus to provide an ‘experience’ by performing a sign, he denounced them as ‘A wicked and adulterous generation’ (Matt 12:38-45; 16:1-4; Mark 8:11-12; Luke 11:16; 11:29-32). The only sign to be given to such people was ‘the sign of the prophet Jonah’ (Matt 12:39-40; Luke 11:29-32). This pointed to his own death and resurrection; Jesus demands faith based on his death on the Cross and his resurrection; Jesus demands faith based on his death on the Cross and his resurrection.

Jesus was infinitely more than a conjurer and magician. If Jesus were to perform miracles and signs ‘on demand’ it would reduce God to the level of someone who exists to serve us and who can only attract a following if he ‘performs’ adequately. Fortunately, God is not some sort of cosmic David Copperfield; he is the Sovereign God, who will judge all men and to whom we must give an account of ourselves; and he alone can save us from our deserved

punishment. In John 20:30-1, the ‘miraculous signs’ (i.e. Jesus’ miracles) are to be seen as *significant* redemptive events (especially the resurrection), which are recorded so that ‘you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name’.

It was not the experience of Jesus performing miracles that saved people – it was his death on the Cross that enabled a holy God to look upon sinners. Why would Jesus prefer to preach than heal people and perform miracles unless it was the *word* that was of real *significance* to his eternal purposes (e.g. Mark 1:32-2:13)? Experience is often unreliable and is always subjective; the truth of the gospel is absolutely and eternally true (John 14:6; Heb 13:8; etc). To which should we be appealing in our evangelism? We need to recapture the vision that evangelism or indeed any Christian ministry must faithfully preach and teach the God-given word. The Bible focuses on proclamation, not experience. Christian experience is derived from the word (c.f. Luke 24).

After emphasizing ‘experience’ through novel exegesis of passages from Acts, perhaps inevitably 1 Corinthians 14 is turned to. It is the gift of tongues upon which *Alpha* seizes. We are taught techniques to receive this gift – ‘Go with the flow!’, ‘Open your mouth and begin to speak’, ‘Keep going with it!’ Since we are given no answer to the question ‘How Can I Be Filled With the Spirit?’ are we to assume that the Spirit has filled us when we receive the gift of tongues? No other answer seems likely from the session. By leaving the question unanswered, the willing but ignorant participant is likely to conclude that the gift of tongues is the mark of being filled with the Spirit.

If tongues are to be focused upon, better exegesis of 1 Corinthians 14 would be necessary. The broader meaning of Paul’s discussion is effectively ignored with the result that a particular emphasis is placed on tongues. In 14:1-19 Paul discusses the use of tongues among believers; in 14:20-5, he warns them about using tongues in front of unbelievers. It is spiritually immature to do so (14:20). Paul refers the Corinthians to Isaiah 28, to illustrate that God uses unintelligible speech as a sign of judgement. God judged the Israelites through Assyrians speaking another language (Isa 28:11). Evangelism must mean reaching out to unbelievers. If an unbeliever comes to a church meeting and hears unintelligible language, they are likely to assume that ‘you are out of your mind’ (1 Cor 14:23) and reject the gospel – without having heard it explained properly. Tongues are a sign of judgement to unbelievers (14:22; Isa 28:11). Paul wants to bring unbelievers to repentance and a recognition of God (14:25). Just as tongues are a sign of judgement on unbelievers, so prophecy is a sign of God’s goodness to believers (14:22); it is only through the (comprehensible) preaching of God’s word that we can come to repentance (14:24). Paul has already put tongues and prophecy in their proper perspective, in 1 Corinthians 14:18-19. Paul thanks God that he speaks in tongues, yet insists that ‘in the church I would rather speak five intelligible words to instruct others than ten thousand words in a tongue’. Some may attempt to justify an emphasis on the gift of tongues by pointing out that Paul himself exercised the gift. Paul, however, tells us it is more valuable to ‘instruct others’. *Alpha* ignores the wider meaning of Paul’s discussion: this distorts his message and is not in fidelity with the Bible’s true teaching.

It would be less pernicious and more faithful to Scripture if a wider definition of the *charismata* were developed, as opposed to the emphasizing of tongues. The *charismata* (‘grace-gifts’) include not only ‘miraculous’ gifts like tongues and healing, but also ‘non-miraculous’ gifts such as administration skills and teaching. Using biblical terminology

reminds us that it is difficult to think of any Christian as ‘non-charismatic’ as all Christians have received *charismata* from God.

Christian experience *is* often affirming and exhilarating, but we must not lose sight of the fact that it can be easily duplicated by the devil (2 Cor 11:14; 2 Thess 2:9-10). It is perilous automatically to equate supernatural events, such as speaking in tongues, with the divine (2 Thess 2:9-10). It is worth noting that speaking in tongues is not unique to Christianity; phenomena that might be termed ‘tongues’ can be found in non-Christian religions. However, what is unique to Christianity is the gospel of Jesus Christ. It is the inherent subjectivity of experience that renders it vulnerable in Spiritual warfare (e.g. Eph 6:10-20). We must put on the full armour of God (6:11) and arm ourselves with ‘the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God’ (6:17). God’s truth is objective and provides protection in the battle, and offers a means of attack. Unless we think rationally, critically or logically and arrive at conclusions based on objective facts and truth, the authority of Scripture will be undermined, because we will be persuaded to place experience above all else.

Curiously, *Alpha* does not refer the participant to Jesus’ teaching about the Holy Spirit found in the gospels, and in particular in John 14-17. John 14:16-17 tells us how Jesus will ask the Father (who denies the Son nothing) to send another *parakletos*, rendered ‘Counsellor’ in the *NIV* and ‘Helper’ in the *NKJV*. In Greek ‘Paraclete’ is a legal term and refers to an advocate for the defence, an encourager, and a strengthener. The identity of the Paraclete is revealed in 14:17 – he is ‘the Spirit of truth’. Jesus has already called himself ‘the truth’ (14:6); in Isaiah 65:16, God calls himself the ‘God of truth’; the Paraclete is therefore in equality with the Father and the Son.

John 14:26 reveals more about the Paraclete: Jesus tells the disciples that the Holy Spirit ‘...will remind you of everything I have said to you’. Jesus believed his words to be sufficient for the disciples in their mission. The miracles and signs and wonders Jesus performed, while important in fulfilling the Old Testament prophecies and in confirming his identity, are not of importance in mission (n.b. Matt 12:38-9; John 10:22-42, etc); it is the word that is to be taught (c.f. Matt 24:35). Jesus tells the disciples in John 16:12-15 that the Holy Spirit will guide them ‘into all truth’, and will bring glory to himself; this passage is very Christ-centred – the work of the Holy Spirit will always point to Christ.

Jesus prays in John 17:17: ‘Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth.’ The means by which followers of the Son are to be sanctified, or set apart to be holy, is the truth of the word. The Holy Spirit (16:13) leads followers into the truth. For us today, this does not mean that we are led into endless fresh new truth or experiences, but into appreciation of the truth of the apostolic gospel. The reason Jesus’ followers have to be sanctified is to be ‘sent into the world’ (17:18). To be sanctified is to be mission-minded; to be sanctified is to be immersed in the ‘word of truth’.

There is an indissoluble connection between the word of God and the Spirit of God; and both point to Christ.

The question must be asked: why is Jesus’ own teaching on the Holy Spirit largely ignored? Is it because Jesus’ focus on the truth and the word is at odds with *Alpha*’s own agenda?

A brief survey of the New Testament reveals that the Spirit, for example, speaks (e.g. Acts 1:16; 8:29; 10:19; 13:2); teaches (e.g. John 14:26); witnesses (John 15:26); searches (1 Cor

12:11); wills (1 Cor 12:11); and intercedes (Rom 8:26-7). *Alpha*, despite its focus on the Holy Spirit, ignores these important features of the Holy Spirit's ministry.

Hard Questions

Hard questions must be faced. Churches and ministers must honestly discern their intentions. Is a faithful presentation of the whole gospel of Jesus Christ (Acts 20:27) being sought, or is it the salving of collective or personal consciences, through the use of a course that comes with the accreditation of making evangelism 'easy' and 'effective'? Is the attitude one of 'it's better to do something than nothing', even when that 'something' dangerously distorts the truth of the gospel? In giving many of those involved in evangelism what they *want* (i.e. numbers!), can *Alpha* give those on the receiving end, the unconverted, what they *need*; that is, to hear the saving gospel as presented by Jesus and the Apostles, and preserved for us today in the Bible? Is it good enough to say that 'I only use the bits of *Alpha* I want to' or 'I correct the parts I don't like with the Bible'? What about churches which run the course for existing Christian members? By using *Alpha* at all, is the course not perpetuated, leaving those less discerning vulnerable to the erroneous teaching? With reference to the Holy Spirit teaching in the course, do you become a Christian when you believe in Jesus or when you have been 'filled with the Spirit' after a preparatory and inferior 'conversion'? Is it *Alpha* that is being presented, or the gospel (of 2 Cor 4:4-5)? Most importantly, is *Alpha* 'another gospel' (Gal 1:6-9)?

Concluding Remarks

There are ministers and churches that not only recognize their duty to be involved in evangelism but also see *Alpha* as the answer to their perceived need; that is, for a course that will make their outreach and evangelism successful when measured in numerical terms. This may be particularly the case in parishes where the minister is not physically able to devote the time necessary to develop an original course, or where parish resources and priorities render a more rigorous approach difficult. In these situations the lure of *Alpha's* reputation and presentation may be too much to resist, with the result that the course is embraced wholeheartedly. It is unfortunate when pragmatic thinking prevails over biblical thinking in this area. The Bible not only contains the mandate for evangelism and outreach, but also, by definition, the definitive model for presenting the gospel. It is the Bible that should be turned to first, before *Alpha* is even considered. It is sometimes difficult to see where pragmatism ends and manipulation begins.

Rather than propagating the errors, subtle and flagrant, in *Alpha*, we should be concentrating on sowing the seed of the word of God (Luke 8). It is only the word of God, through the Holy Spirit (John 16:5-11), that can convict people of their sin and lead them to recognize that the human need is for a Saviour, and *not* an experience. Our sinfulness means that a holy God cannot look upon us – we are separated from God by our sin. We need to be reconciled with God. True reconciliation is only achieved through the Lord Jesus Christ. This was established conclusively on the Cross: evangelism must be Cross-centred, Christ-centred and word-centred, with an earnest desire to see true Christian conversion.

Paul warned Timothy '...the time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine...' (2 Tim 4:3). We are in such an age now. In the current Christian constituency (particularly

among those happy to call themselves ‘Evangelicals’), doctrine and proclamation have been jostled to the back of the queue by, among others, liberalism, ecumenism, politicism and charismaticism. The importance of a well-defined understanding of biblical content must not now be subverted further by pejorative comparisons to ‘experience’. When this happens, openness to the Holy Spirit degenerates into a quest for spiritual ‘power encounters’.

As Evangelicals our concern is the ‘evangel’ and not other gospels (Gal 1:6-10). Let us hold fast to the word (1 Cor 15:2) and to the faith (Heb 4: 14). Let us be the Bereans of our times, testing *everything* with ‘the Scriptures every day’ (Acts 17:11).

Alternatives

Two Ways to Live is an excellent tool for personal evangelism. The *Christianity Explained* course is designed for discussion groups, and introduces Christ through Mark’s gospel. Both are theologically accurate and reliable. Also, their presentation is at least as good as *Alpha’s*. Also highly recommended are *A Fresh Start* and *Know & Tell the Gospel*, both written by Australian evangelist John Chapman.

All of these resources are available from St Matthias Press, who also publish a wide range of superb, ‘interactive’ Bible studies and other material.

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Endnotes:

- 1) *Alpha Register* November 1997-February 1998, page II: ‘I think it’s superb. I commend it wholeheartedly...’
- 2) *Alpha Register* ‘The *Alpha* course is a most engaging way of passing on the basics of Christianity. It is a tool for evangelism and nurture that I highly recommend.’
- 3) *Alpha Register* ‘I found the course compulsive reading. It is a fine and compelling presentation of the Christian faith’ (The Rt Revd Ambrose Griffiths, Bishop of Hexham and Newcastle Dioceses).
- 4) *Alpha* pp 4-9; *Youth Alpha* pp 1-4
- 5) *Alpha* pp 10-12; *Youth Alpha* pp 5-8
- 6) *Alpha* pp 17-20; *Youth Alpha* pp 11-14
- 7) *Alpha* p 12
- 8) *Alpha* p 36
- 9) Each session ends with suggestions for ‘Recommended Reading’.
- 10) See, for example, *The Times*, Wednesday 11 February 1998, and *Alpha News*, March-June 1998.

11) *Questions of Life – A practical introduction to the Christian faith* by Nicky Gumbel, published by Kingsway. This is essentially the *Alpha* course in book form.

12) *Alpha Copyright Statement:*

‘Sandy Millar, Vicar of Holy Trinity Brompton, writes:

“We have always been keen to allow individuals who are running an Alpha course the flexibility to adapt where it was felt necessary to allow for locally-felt needs and where there was the desire to retain the essential elements, nature and identity of the course. Experience has shown though that this has been misunderstood and the resulting loss of integrity in some courses has given rise to considerable confusion. Now that Alpha is running all around the world we have reluctantly had to draw up a copyright statement more tightly in order to preserve confidence and quality control. I am sure you will understand.”

(1) With the exception of books published by Kingsway (in which the author is stated to hold the copyright), all Alpha resources and materials, including booklets, tapes and graphics, are copyright to Holy Trinity Brompton.

(2) In no circumstances may any part of any Alpha resource be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or any information storage or retrieval system, without permission in writing from the copyright holder or that holder’s agent.

(3) Use of Alpha resources is permitted only in conjunction with the running or promotion of an Alpha course. Resale, or the obtaining of payment in any other connection with any other Alpha resource is not permitted.

(4) Holy Trinity Brompton asks that the name ‘Alpha’, or names similar to it should not be used in connection with any other Christian course. This request is made in order to:

- avoid confusion caused by different courses having similar titles;
- ensure the uniformity and integrity of the Alpha course; and
- to maintain confidence in courses listed on the Alpha register.

(5) Holy Trinity Brompton accepts that minor adaptations to the Alpha course may occasionally be desirable. These should only concern the length of the talks or the number of sessions. In each case the essential character of the course must be retained. *Alpha* is a series of about 15 talks, given over a period of time, including a weekend or day away, with teaching based on all the material in *Questions of Life*. If the Alpha course is adapted, the person responsible must:

- only use such a course in their own church or parish;
- not allow such a course to be used elsewhere; and
- not publish or promote such a course..

This statement supersedes all previous statements relating to copyright in any Alpha resource. I August 1997.’ (Re: paragraph (4) – it is difficult to see how HTB could assert ownership of the name ‘Alpha’. It is a Bible word, used by Jesus in describing himself as ‘the Alpha and the Omega’ in Revelation 1:8, 21:6 and 22:13.)

Tricia Neill, Alpha’s International Director, gives this advice:

‘...our experience is that it is rarely successful to cut material from the course. For example, the Methodist church surveyed its congregations and found that disappointment with the course corresponded to removal of the teaching on the Holy Spirit weekend or day away’ (*Alpha News*, November 1997-February 1998, p 8).

13) ‘The *Alpha* course is a ten week practical introduction to the Christian faith. It is designed primarily for non-churchgoers and those who have recently become Christians.’ The same, or

similar, statements are found throughout *Alpha* promotional literature and on the back of the *Alpha* manuals.

- 14) *Youth Alpha* p 5
- 15) *Youth Alpha* p 6
- 16) *Youth Alpha* p 5
- 17) *Youth Alpha* p6
- 18) *Youth Alpha* p 6
- 19) *Alpha* pp 4-9; *Youth Alpha* pp 1-4
- 20) *Alpha* pp 10-12; *Youth Alpha* pp 5-8
- 21) *Alpha* p 10
- 22) CF James Denny *The Death of Christ* and *The Christian Doctrine of Reconciliation*; Leon Morris *The Cross of Jesus* and *The Apostolic Preaching Of the Cross*; Jim Packer *What Did The Cross Achieve? – The Logic of Penal Substitution*. The importance and gravity of the issue at stake is explained in these works, among others. In today's theological climate, where penal substitution is increasingly viewed as being 'an immoral exchange' it is all the more vital that we are firm on this issue.
- 23) CF note 12.
- 24) *Alpha* pp 30-3; *Youth Alpha* pp 23-6
- 25) *Alpha* pp 34-6; *Youth Alpha* pp 27-30
- 26) *Alpha* pp 37-40; *Youth Alpha* pp 31-4
- 27) *Alpha* p 30
- 28) *Alpha* p 30
- 29) *Alpha* p 33; *Youth Alpha* p 25
- 30) Nicky Gumbel *Telling Others: The Alpha Initiative* (Kingsway). This is 'An instructive manual for all those who want to hold an *Alpha* course'
- 31) *Alpha* pp 41-6; *Youth Alpha* pp 35-40
- 32) *Alpha* pp 53-5; *Youth Alpha* pp 45-8
- 33) For example, in 'Does God Heal Today?' the 'Recommended Reading' is distinctly unbalanced, consisting of: 'Power Healing' and 'Power Evangelism' by John Wimber, and 'Dancer off her feet' by Julie Sheldon.
- 34) *Alpha* p 36; *Youth Alpha* p 30
- 35) *Alpha* p 37

- 36) Cf John Calvin *The Epistle to the Ephesians* (Eerdmans); John Stott *The Message of Ephesians – God's new society* (IVP); etc
- 37) Cf Paul Barnett *Apocalypse Now and Then – Reading Revelation Today* (AIO); John Richardson *Revelation Unwrapped* (MPA); etc.