

Alpha: Another Road To Rome?

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The Alpha program, founded by Nicky Gumbel, a former Oxford educated barrister-turned-Anglican priest has become very popular in North America. A brochure published for the Alpha Texas Conference in Austin, Texas, scheduled for January 8th and 9th, 1998 detailed the goals and objectives of the course. It stated:

The Alpha Course is a ten-week practical introduction to the Christian faith. It is designed primarily for non-church goers and those who have recently become Christians. Alpha is a flexible and practical model that can work for a group of any size. Churches and Christian organizations of every background and denomination are discovering it to be a simple and effective way of presenting the gospel of Jesus Christ in a non-threatening manner for people of all walks of life.[1]

Charisma, December 1999, also contained an article that provided additional information about the Alpha program and how it is being promoted and marketed. The article, written by journalist Clive Price titled "Alpha Course Supporters Urge British To Party With God On New Year's Eve" was introduced the following way:

Lying on a bed of nails? That does not sound like the most orthodox way of spearheading a \$1.6 million evangelistic media campaign for the closing days of the twentieth century. But as British pastor Sandy Miller puts it, the aim of the Alpha Project's millennium initiative is to help people "get the point" of the year 2000.[2]

Although Nicky Gumbel's Alpha course was founded at Holy Trinity Brompton in 1991, the effectiveness of the course was not realized until a few years later after the "Toronto Blessing" was transported to England from Canada in May of 1994. It was then that Church leaders of Holy Trinity Brompton received a dose of the "blessing" through Eli Mumford who had just returned from Toronto.

On May 24, 1994, Elli Mumford met with several leaders of Holy Trinity Brompton. As Mumford prayed at this meeting, the “transferable blessing” from the Toronto Airport Vineyard was manifest. Sandy Millar, the highly regarded vicar of Holy Trinity Brompton, decided that Elli would preach the following Sunday morning. After giving her testimony about her ‘Toronto experience,’ Elli asked the congregation to stand while she prayed the Lord would bless and give them all He had. Immediately people began to laugh hysterically, weep, shake, jerk, bark and roar. [3]

Alpha Endorsers

A brochure called “Alpha: A Model for Dynamic Growth in the Local Church” advertised twenty-two major conferences that were to be held throughout North America for the year 2000. In this same brochure a number of high profile Christian leaders endorsed Alpha, each one making positive statements.

For example, The Most Reverend and Right Honorable George Carey, Archbishop of Canterbury, England stated: “Alpha is superb and a great blessing to many. I commend it wholeheartedly.”[4] Jack Hayford, president of King’s Seminary said, “I see Alpha as a strategic tool, sensitively crafted to address today’s secularized seekers with satisfying answers to their spiritual hunger.”[5] And Cardinal William H. Keeler, Catholic Archbishop of Baltimore stated: “We are hearing wonderful testimony of the good news touching and even transforming the lives of individuals who attended Alpha courses.”[6]

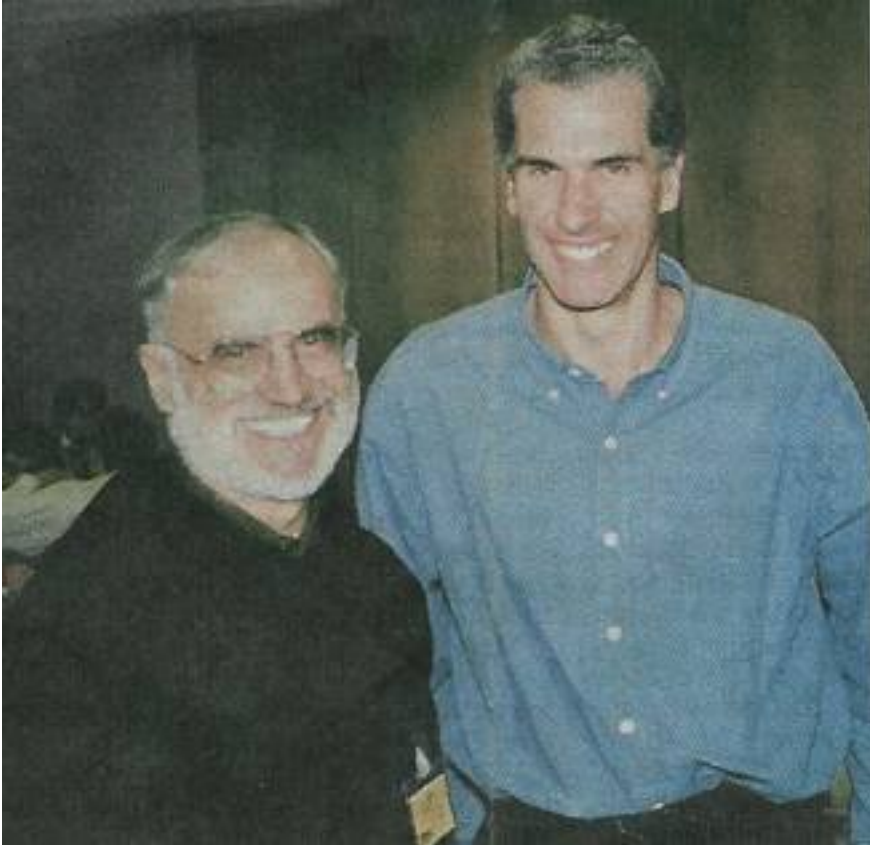
Other sources indicate the Alpha course has an ecumenical flavor. A front-page headline of Alpha News stated “Roman Catholic Bishops Applaud Alpha as Course Spreads Through Church.” According to this article, an increasing number of Roman Catholic leaders are enthusiastically endorsing the Alpha Course.

In May of 1997, about 450 attended London's Westminster Cathedral Hall where the first Roman Catholic Alpha conference took place. Sandy Miller and Nicky Gumbel led the conference. A message of encouragement was received from Cardinal Hume, the Archbishop of Westminster.[7]

Bishop Ambrose Griffiths, Roman Catholic bishop of Hexham and Newcastle, introduced the conference. The Bishop stated that the Alpha Course was a "powerful evangelistic tool which reaches out precisely to those whom we need." "We should have the humility to learn from other Christians and I am delighted that we are doing this today," he said.[8]

Alpha: Another Road to Rome

While visiting in the United Kingdom recently, I was handed an article taken from the religious section of the London Daily Times. The title of the article immediately caught my attention: "An Unholy Alliance? How Roman Catholics and Evangelical Protestants are Coming Together." [9] Prominently centered beneath the headline was a photo of Father Raniero Cantalmessa, "Preacher to the Papal Household" and next to him was Rev. Nicky Gumble, the founder of the Alpha Bible Study course.



Ranerio Cantalamessa Nickie Gumbel

A paragraph beneath the photograph caught my attention. This is what I read:

“Alpha, the basic evangelization course, has been key to promoting Catholic - Evangelical dialogue. In Catholic parishes it is followed up with materials developed by Father Ranerio Cantalamessa, who is Preacher to the Papal Household, and a welcome guest at Alpha's birthplace, the evangelical church Holy Trinity Brompton.”

According to this article, Rev. Gumble and Cantalamessa have formed a ministry partnership associated with the Alpha program. "There is an obvious holiness about Ranerio that radiates through him," Gumble stated in the article. [10]

While the article mentioned that Alpha has significantly promoted evangelization and dialogue between Catholics and Evangelicals, a question crossed my mind. Who actually is being evangelized? Is it possible that the Roman Catholic Church would attempt to use the

Protestant-based Alpha program as a clever ecumenical bridge to unsuspecting "separated brethren" who they claim have strayed away from the mother of all churches that is based in Rome?

As I read further, my suspicion that there may be a hidden agenda was confirmed. "Many Catholic students are also involved in the Christian Union and go to prayer groups in the Evangelical Churches. One of the fruits of Vatican II has been a new awareness of Scripture and this is a real area of cross-fertilization," I read. [11]

This spiritual "cross-fertilization" that has occurred as the result of Alpha and other ecumenical programs has led Catholics and Evangelicals to openly discuss the theology that separates them. The article continued: "There has been quite a lot of dialogue about Mary and the infallibility of the Pope and also the sacraments," says John Noble, one of the Charismatic leaders to have "discovered Mary" through contact with Catholics. [12] Or how about this statement made by David Mathews, senior pastor of the New Harvest Community Church: "Within the Evangelical community there is a growing understanding of the saints." [13]

So where will this lead in the future? Will the Alpha evangelization program that is embraced by Rome bring people to a true understanding of the simple gospel? The facts seem to indicate there may be some confusion. A Christianity that focuses on Mary, the saints, or the sacraments and not on Jesus, is a foreign to the Bible.

[1] Brochure, The Texas Alpha Conference, January 8-9, 1998, p 2

[2] Clive Price, Charisma, December 1999, "Alpha Course Supporters Urge British To Party With God on New Year's Eve" p 38

[3] Roger Oakland, New Wine or Old Deception? The Word For Today, Costa Mesa, 1995, p 30-31

[4] "Alpha: A Model for Dynamic Growth in the Local Church,"
Conferences for 2000, published by Alpha North America, New York,
2000.

[5] Ibid.

[6] Ibid.

[7] Ibid.

[8] Ibid.

[9] Bess Twiston Davies, "An Unholy Alliance? How Roman Catholics
and Evangelical Protestants Are Coming Together," The London Times,
October 5, 2002, p 46

[11] Ibid

[12] Ibid

[13] Ibid