

Looking at THE ALPHA COURSE

*The following article appeared in The Times, 11 May 1996, " **WOMAN LEADS CHURCH BOYCOTT IN ROW OVER EVANGELICAL PIG-SNORTING**"*

A WOMAN has walked out of her church and is holding services in her living room, because she says she cannot bring herself to "snort like a pig and bark like a dog" on a Church of England course. Angie Golding, 50, claims she was denied confirmation unless she signed up for the Alpha course, which she says is a "brainwashing" exercise where participants speak in tongues, make animal noises and then fall over.

She has left the evangelical St Marks in Broadwater Down, Kent, with 14 members of the congregation and founded a church at home in Tunbridge Wells. She said: "I'll be a fool for the Lord any day, but I won't be a fool for man."

However, the church last night denied that she had been refused confirmation, and course organisers said she had misunderstood the nature of the event... "St Mark's is running an Alpha course at the moment which a number of people are attending. Those being confirmed this summer are attending the course as well."

Mark Elsdon-Drew, of Holy Trinity Brompton, said the Alpha course included lectures on the Holy Spirit. "It affects different people in different ways." He said the course had the "overwhelming support" of Church leaders and theologians: "The suggestion of animal noises in connection with the course is unwarranted and could not have been made by anyone who is familiar with the material."

Everyone is asking "What about Alpha?" What is it, and what are we to believe about it?

The Alpha course is an evangelistic initiative begun by Holy Trinity Brompton - perhaps better known now for its promotion of the Toronto Blessing.

The official history of the Alpha Course begins 16 years ago when a member of HTB, Charles Marnham, set up an informal home group to present answers to basic gospel questions. However, HTB curate, Nicky Gumbel, transformed the course into what we see today. [see endnote] It is designed to appeal to non-believers, with every detail - the food, flowers, hospitality and questions - aimed at disarming the unchurched.

The final weekend away is a vital part of the course - and this has attracted the most criticism, as it gives a chance for the leaders, if they are so disposed, to present the Holy Spirit in an experimental fashion to a captive audience. The course always ends with a Supper laid on to which more non-believers are invited, and so the process continues.

Whatever else can be said about the Alpha Course, it has been a runaway success. In 1991 there were just four courses involving 600 people; in 1993 there were fewer than 10 courses being held in Britain. Now there are an estimated 3,000 being run regularly three times a year, more than 500 of them overseas. These are being run by every denomination, including Catholic.

One difficulty in pinning down the problems with the Alpha Course is that each church running the course will use the materials in a different way. Thus it is feasible, in theory at least, that a church might avoid all controversy and simply use the course to preach the gospel to unbelievers. This does leave unanswered the question - why does any church need to buy a course to be able to preach the gospel?

However, there are deep concerns. Below I present some thoughts on the Alpha Course by a Christian (i) who grew

alarmed when viewing the course materials. It is a personal view but I believe it speaks for many.

Alpha certainly starts by preaching the gospel; the first three talks on Video One focus on the person and work of Jesus Christ, and the three talks on video Two which cover fundamental steps for new Christians, such as 'How can I be sure of my faith?', 'Why and how should I read the Bible?' and 'Why and how should I pray?' are all good. But as the course progresses, some of the talks tend to wander off into lengthy accounts of HTB's experiences of the Toronto Blessing and associated ministries, novel exegeses of various Biblical passages common amongst pro-Toronto preachers, calls for unity despite truth and an over-emphasis on the Holy Spirit, all of which are less than helpful, to say the least, to potential Christians.

Clearly the aim is to bring as many into God's Kingdom as possible but by the end of the course I cannot help feeling that the Toronto Blessing may have been the greater beneficiary.

The Alpha course was virtually unknown until Eleanor Mumford of the South-West London Vineyard church brought the Toronto Blessing from the Toronto Airport Vineyard church in Canada to HTB, via Nicky Gumbel in May 1994, (ii) and Nicky Gumbel spends a substantial amount of time relating to Alpha participants in video 3 talk 9, exactly how it occurred:

"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'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. (iii)

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 the spirits (1 John 4:3), and at the end of this talk are prayed for, corporately, to receive it. Thus, they are initiated into the Toronto Blessing without a whimper of protest amongst them.

"I believe it is no coincidence that the present movement of the Holy Spirit [TB] has come at the same time as the explosion of the Alpha Courses. I think the two go together."
[Nicky Gumbel, 'The Spirit and Evangelism', Renewal, May 1995, p15].

So one of my concerns is whether the TB, 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. Alpha also promotes, as does the leadership of the TB, 'unity' between Protestants and Roman Catholics, with no consideration, or perhaps realisation, of the unreconcilable doctrines of the two Churches, and so another concern is its trend towards ecumenism.

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 Experience. It focuses on a pragmatic/experiential rather than a proclamatory/doctrinal approach to spreading the gospel. 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 the method of evangelism favoured by Alpha. [Telling Others pp21-24;29-31].

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 spiritual and cultural changes going on outside Christianity, in which New Age experiential mysticism predominates.

Nicky Gumbel is aware of this paradigm shift from reason to experience: *"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"*. [Nicky Gumbel, Telling Others, p19].

Post-Christian neo-mysticism is already so pervasive that virtually every non-christian participant of Alpha - or any other evangelistic initiative - will reflect to some degree New Age thinking. In New Age philosophy "experiences lead to explanation" yet, like the Toronto Experience, the thrust of Alpha is towards the experiential, not 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 am sure that many people are being converted through the Alpha course, but I have a suspicion that some of those people are being converted to a Christian lifestyle rather than to Christ."*. [Ian Lewis, 'The Alpha Course', Evangelicals Now, Dec 1995].

The two testimonies given by Alpha participants at the beginning of the first Alpha video are prime examples of this. There are certain basic elements one would expect to hear in a classic conversion testimony: the conviction of sin leading to repentance and subsequent assurance of God's forgiveness and salvation through the death on the cross of Jesus Christ. But these are not there in any form in these two testimonies.

A relationship with God is referred to, as is the experience of the baptism in the Holy Spirit, prayer, an interest in Bible reading, church-going, Christianity and what Alpha has done for them. But Jesus and what He has done for them and a relationship with Him is not mentioned at all. Yet the Lord Jesus is the gospel, He is salvation, He is their new life 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. Many church goers read their Bibles and have an interest in church and in Christianity, but they are not saved.

Likewise, more compassion/understanding at work, more patience, tolerance, confidence and deep feelings of contentment can equally well be produced by a sense of psychological well-being. Without the cross they do not constitute salvation. The attempt by Nicky Gumbel to bring Jesus into the testimonies by asking 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."

These testimonies seemed to me to be, as Ian Lewis suggests, 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 video talk 14] and 'play'-times (iv), then the

transition from the counterfeit spirituality of the New Age to Christianity is really only one of degree, not kind. In which case I would echo the question of one evangelical minister who asked: "What is it they are converted to?"

EVANGELISM OR CHRISTIAN LIVING?

"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 unequivocal 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." [Ian Lewis, *Evangelicals Now*, Dec 1995].

THE HOLY SPIRIT WEEKEND

White Alpha training manual pp26-36/Video III talks 7-9 "We live in the age of the Spirit." [p29].

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 encourage now, in such a 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." [Telling Others, p19].

But it is the "rational and historical explanations" of sessions 1 and 2 which are the essence of the gospel (Acts 2:22-41; 6:9-7:60; 8:26-38; 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 (Romans 10:13,14). Nevertheless: "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." [Telling Others, p120]. This is the time when Nicky Gumbel invites the Holy Spirit to come and participants are filled with the Spirit. [Telling Others, pp117,120,123; Blue Alpha training manual p18]

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 (John 3:16; 5:24; Romans 10:9,10,13 and other refs). But most of the testimonies in 'Telling Others' seem to confuse the experience of conversion with the experience of baptism in the Holy Spirit.

But is this surprising when Nicky 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 Nicky Gumbel does not make it clear that this happens at conversion (2 Cor 5:17). Rather, he suggests this is due to a second experience: the baptism in the Spirit.

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:

"....my 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." [Interview in Renewal, Oct 1995, p16; Telling Others pp36-37].

Though the prayer at the end of these 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.

HOW CAN I RESIST EVIL?

Session 9 White Alpha training manual pp39-45/Video IV Talk 10.

In section II of this session Satan's tactics are listed: destroys; blinds eyes; causes doubt; tempts; accuses. All of these Gumbel applies to the area of Christian behaviour. Deception, the tactic focusing on belief, is omitted. 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. (v)

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. (vi)

HOW DOES GOD GUIDE US?

Session 10 White Alpha training manual pp46-51/Video IV 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.

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.

DOES GOD HEAL TODAY?

Session 12 White Alpha training manual pp58-62/Video V Talk 13

During this talk Nicky Gumbel tells Alpha participants of the visit by John Wimber 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 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...."

Nicky Gumbel gives no indication here that he or anyone else attending that meeting tested the spirits to ensure that everything came from the Holy Spirit.

And, of course, the fruit of the Holy Spirit does not come from "these experiences" but from the daily sanctification by the Holy Spirit through obedience to the Word (John 14:15;21;23-26;15:1-7;10;14-15).

Once again Alpha participants are not being warned of the very serious dangers of accepting anything and everything from anyone and everyone. So they will walk out of the cocoon of Alpha and straight into the path of the "enemy the devil [who] prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour". (1 Peter 5:8).

WHAT ABOUT THE CHURCH?

Session 13 White Alpha training manual pp63-68/Video V Talk 14

(1) ROMANISM

"The Alpha course is... adaptable across tradition and denominations... .I know of its uses in Catholic... churches."
[Martin Cavender in Telling Others].

Adaptable in what sense exactly? Alpha's publications manager advises that, while presentation of the 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) [Christian Herald, 9:12:1995].

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 8 and in section II of this talk 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."

I agree wholeheartedly with the last sentence but that is not the issue here. It is on the essentials that Protestants and Catholics do not have unity. That was the whole point of the Protestant Reformation. Discussing the price of unity in the Church, 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." [Warnings to the Churches, 1877, p128].

Still Gumbel says: "We need to unite... there has been some comment which is not helpful to unity. Let us drop that and get on. It is wonderful that the movement of the Spirit will always bring churches together. He is doing that right across the denominations and within the traditions... we are seeing

Roman Catholics coming now... Nobody is suspicious of anybody else... People are no longer '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." [Renewal, May 1995,p16]

'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 contributing - albeit unintentionally - to the undoing of the Protestant Reformation through the promulgation of ecumenism disguised as Christian Unity.

(2) UNITY AND FALSE DOCTRINE/TEACHERS

"A disunited church, squabbling and criticising makes it very hard for the world to believe". [Gumbel, Renewal, May 1995, p16]. Consequently "we make it a rule on Alpha never to criticise another denomination, another Christian church or a Christian leader." [Telling Others, p114; and this talk, section II].

Yet there are times when failure to 'criticise' - or rather to rebuke and correct (2 Tim 3:16; 4:2-5) - is actually to be disobedient to the Word of God. Although in talk five Gumbel only applied the rebuking and correcting to Christian behaviour, it also applies to false teaching. We must certainly not judge one another's sins or their hearts (e.g. Matt 7:1-5), or their personalities, but we are to test all teachings prophecies and practices against Scripture and judge whether they are true or false (1 Cor 2:15;16; 1 John 4:1).

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

Unity is also essential to Latter-Rain doctrine, to enable the incarnation of Christ into His physical body (the Church),

because He cannot incarnate a divided body. But Latter-Rain is a "different gospel" (Gal 1:6-7) with a faulty eschatology which is insinuating itself into Charismatic fellowships these days; one of its most successful routes being the Toronto Blessing (vii).

It is vital that we "earnestly contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints" (Jude 3). If not, we may find ourselves, and those new believers we have nurtured, part of the Apostate church.

(3) THE PARABLE OF THE PARTY

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

The Church will celebrate the marriage feast of the Lamb when the Lord Jesus returns, but I find no references to "fun" or "parties" anywhere in Scripture, except in denunciation. In 1 Corinthians 10:1-11 for example. Until Jesus returns and we attend the marriage feast of the Lamb, there is no place for "parties" or "festivals"; not even "to the Lord".

CONCLUSION

It may only be part of Alpha's teaching which does not accord with Scripture, but I would say with Paul: "A little yeast works through the whole batch of dough." (Gal 5:9).

Every Christian and every fellowship is able to witness to the gospel. Many fellowships create their own evangelistic courses under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. It should not be necessary to rely on the methods and techniques of another fellowship when we have all the instruction and teaching material we need in Scripture, all the experience we need in each of our relationships with the Lord Jesus and are each empowered by the Holy Spirit to go and do it. But if leaders do decide to use the Alpha course they should at least consider the following points in light of the concerns above:

- That they ensure non-believing participants have fully understood the meaning of the cross and are saved (sessions I and 2) before propelling them into a course on Christian Living. (sessions 3-14).
- That they ensure converts are fully aware of their conversion experience and are becoming stable in their daily relationship with the Lord Jesus before thrusting them into 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.
- That they ensure participants understand the different nature of the work of each person in the Trinity.
- That they ensure the fruit of the Holy Spirit, and his convicting and sanctifying work in a believer's life is not submerged beneath the gifts and the power of the Holy Spirit.
- That they ensure participants are taught to proceed from the Word to experience, not from experience to the Word.

- Following from this, that they ensure participants understand that deception regarding doctrine and supernatural phenomena has always been Satan's main weapon against the Church and that knowing and standing fast in the Word is our weapon of defence, as it was for Jesus (Matt 4:1-11).
 - That they ensure participants are taught to become Bereans (Acts 17:11) able to test everything against Scripture for themselves, not relying on leaders, who are not infallible (e.g. Gal 2:11-14), to do their thinking and living for them.
 - That they revise the booklist on pp72-75 of the white Alpha training manual as it tends to display a bias towards writers sympathetic to the Vineyard/Toronto Experience/Restorationist persuasion, while omitting other sound and more obvious choices in several of the sessions.
- 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."* [J.C. Ryle 'The True Church' in Warnings to the Churches, 1877, pp13-14].

[Note: Nicky Gumbel dates his call to evangelism (Tape Five of the video set) to the 1982 incident in which he received prayer from John Wimber. On that occasion, he experienced such supernatural power that he had to call out for it to

stop. Wimber gave a "word" that Gumbel had been given "a gift of telling people about Jesus".]

A much expanded version of this paper is presently available from Jo Gardner, price £1.25 incl. postage. Write to: Adullam Register/Alpha, 86 Manor Way, Croxley Green, Herts WD3 3LY. This paper and other material will also shortly be produced in the form of a booklet. Enquiries to Jo Gardner, not Banner!

FOOTNOTES

- (i) Letters to the author should be directed to Banner Ministries.

(ii) HTB in Focus: Alpha News, Aug 1995 p9. See also Wallace Boulton, ed., The Impact Of Toronto, 1995 pp20-24.

(iii) See Richard Smith, "Spiritual Drunkenness", Sept 1994.

(iv) See Wallace Boulton, ed., The Impact Of Toronto, 1995, p19.

Also David Noakes, Dealing With Poison In The Pot, audio tape, CFCM 95/04, side 1.

And Johannes Facius, 'Laugh? I Nearly Cried' in Prophecy Today, May/June 1995, p25.

(v) See for example, Robert M. Bowman, Orthodoxy And Heresy: A Biblical Guide To Doctrinal Discernment, 1993. And J.C. Ryle, Warnings To The Churches, 1877.

(vi) During the Leadership Consultation held in January and March 1995, by the Centre for Contemporary Ministry, it was noted that Wm Branham also practised impartation of the

Spirit, which others could then pass on. Arnott has likened the Toronto Blessing to a virus. (See Haggai 2:10-14).

(vii) See '[Birth of the Manchild](#)' in *Mainstream*, Spring 1995, ppi-5 for the eschatology being taught at some Vineyard churches.