



STATEMENT DA501

Evaluating Alpha

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If your church is looking for help in evangelism and discipling spiritual newborns, you might be asked to evaluate a popular course named for the first letter of the Greek alphabet, *Alpha*. Alpha is “a 15 session practical introduction to the Christian faith designed primarily for non-churchgoers and new Christians.”¹

The course began in London in 1976 when Anglican pastor Charles Marnham invited people interested in the Christian faith to his home for a meal and discussion. In 1981, John Irvine lengthened the course to 10 weeks and added a weekend of teaching on the Holy Spirit. Under Nicky Lee in 1985, it grew at a rate of over 100 new students every week. Since the early 1990s, with Nicky Gumbel and Sandy Millar leading, over 600 attend *each week* at Alpha’s home church, Holy Trinity Brompton. Moreover, more than 10,000 Alpha Courses are now running in 77 countries, and it is quickly spreading to prisons, businesses, and schools.² In the United States, Alpha is offered in over 2,000 churches and in more than 48 denominations.

Testimonies to Alpha’s value have come from leaders in Roman Catholic, Anglican, Episcopalian, Presbyterian, Methodist, Baptist, and Pentecostal churches, as well as many other denominations. Fuller Seminary promotes Alpha, with commendations coming from such theologically diverse sources as Dr. George Carey (the Archbishop of Canterbury), J. I. Packer, Gordon Fee, and the late John Wimber.

An evenhanded appraisal of Alpha will acknowledge both beneficial and detrimental aspects of the programs. We will begin with an evaluation of the six “New Testament principles” on which Alpha is based.

FOUNDATIONAL “NEW TESTAMENT PRINCIPLES”

Principle 1: “*Evangelism is most effective through the local church. It mobilizes a whole army of evangelists and is friendship based.*”³ Alpha assists churches that want to train members in friendship evangelism. Teams of trained evangelists can then go out to universities and elsewhere. “But missions are more likely to bear

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lasting fruit if they are based in an ongoing program of local church evangelism, which has the great advantage of continuity of relationships.”⁴ Amen. We can agree with that.

Principle 2: *“Evangelism is a process. People gradually see the picture and gradually build trust.”*⁵ Agreed! The Holy Spirit’s regeneration occurs during a moment of which we are unaware, but conversion, involving our conscious turning from idols of self and the world to Christ as Savior and Lord, often occurs over a longer period of time.

Principle 3: *“Evangelism involves the whole person.”*⁶ Yes! The Alpha talks generally exemplify well-reasoned content for the mind and illustrations that appeal to the emotions and the will.

Principle 4: *“Models of Evangelism in the New Testament include Classical, Holistic and Power Evangelism.”*⁷ No! The New Testament has only one (classical) model of evangelism. Social work and divine miracles may contribute to a milieu for evangelism but do not, in themselves, communicate the gospel.

Admittedly, evangelism and social action “go hand in hand,” and they are “fundamentally linked,”⁸ but they are also fundamentally distinct. What we must do for the poor is not the good news. The good news is about what Christ did once-for-all.

Signs and wonders also may provide a climate for believing the gospel, but miracles are not the essence of the gospel. They did not always accompany the presentation of the gospel in biblical times. We must test to see whether they are from God, sleight-of-hand, psychology, or the devil. Those that are of God can no more be manipulated than the wind. Biblical “power evangelism” preaches the classical gospel — the “power” of God unto salvation (Rom. 1:16).

Principle 5: *“Evangelism in the power of the Holy Spirit is both dynamic and effective.”*⁹ Yes. None of us, however well trained or experienced, is sufficient to evangelize, regenerate human nature, or unite people to Christ and His body. We simply sow the seed or water it.

Principle 6: *“Effective Evangelism requires the filling and refilling of the Spirit.”* Yes, but not as defined by *Alpha*. Believers repeatedly need to be filled with the Holy Spirit (Eph. 5:18), but what is meant by the Spirit’s filling? What are its results and purposes? Stay tuned...

STRATEGIES AND METHODS

The plan for each session of a church-sponsored friendship evangelism may be instructive. A typical Alpha evening begins with a light meal, preferably in a home, to help people relax and get acquainted. After a welcome and some songs of worship, people listen to one of Gumbel’s talks. Following a coffee break, participants meet in prearranged groups of about 10 to 12 to discuss the topic. Three or four trained leaders from the church become involved with each group.¹⁰

Leaders encourage student participation by using Alpha's attitude of openness. Gumbel explains, "We emphasized that everyone should be allowed to ask any question they liked in their small groups. Nothing should be treated as too trivial, threatening or illogical. Every question would be addressed courteously and thoughtfully. It also became a policy that the people were given freedom to return or not. No one was going to chase them."¹¹

Alpha may help us to make learning about the faith enjoyable. "It is possible," Gumbel says, "to learn about the Christian faith and to enjoy the experience!" His illustrations are often humorous. "Laughter and fun are a key part of the course, breaking down barriers and enabling everyone to relax together."¹²

Church educators may be challenged by the extensive preparation required of many leaders and teachers in Alpha conferences prior to offering the course.¹³ In a carefully planned weekend away, regional advisers explain how to (1) start an Alpha Course; (2) draw in new people; (3) train, inspire, and deploy a leadership team; (4) run a small group; (5) lead worship; and (6) minister to, and care for, people during and after the course. A detailed timeline for planning begins seven to nine months in advance.

Alpha provides job descriptions for the leader, the director, the small group coordinator, small group leaders, small group helpers, greeters, runners, the task force coordinator, the dinner coordinator, task force members, the book table coordinator, the treasurer, the worship leader, the weekend retreat coordinator, and the weekend entertainment coordinator.¹⁴

Alpha also prepares advertising materials: sample press releases, bulletin inserts, and invitation letters. It has a leader's guide, a student manual (workbook), Gumbel's talks in *Questions of Life* (also on audio and video) and *How to Run the Alpha Course*, and follow-up materials. Busy leaders certainly appreciate having all this handed to them.

STANDARDS FOR EVALUATING ALPHA'S CONCEPTS

To evaluate the content of any introduction to Christianity, we must understand what Christianity is. As J. Gresham Machen concisely defined it, "Christianity is life founded upon doctrine."¹⁵ "A creed," Machen pointed out, "is not a mere expression of Christian experience, but on the contrary it is a setting forth of those facts upon which experience is based."¹⁶ Are experiences in Alpha based on sound doctrine?

Fair evaluations of Alpha also should be made in terms of its stated purpose. For its introductory intent, we should expect the gospel (*kerygma*) and the "milk" of the Word, not its "meat" (e.g., detailed discussions of Trinitarianism). How well, then, does Alpha introduce the Christian faith and life to nonbelievers and to new believers?

APPROACH TO NON-CHRISTIANS

A quick survey of Gumbel's talks does not do them justice, but it may provide enough context to make responsible assessments (space precludes discussion of all 15 talks).¹⁷

Talk 1: *"Christianity: Boring, Untrue, and Irrelevant?"* The Christian faith is not only interesting, but it is also true and viable. It fits the facts of history (e.g., Jesus' physical resurrection), and it gives all of life meaning and purpose.

Talk 2: *"Who Is Jesus?"* This well-reasoned case that Jesus is Lord starts with His claims and then tests three hypotheses concerning His identity: liar, lunatic, or Lord of all. Gumbel supports the validity of Jesus' astounding claims by His teaching, works, character, fulfillments of Old Testament prophecies, and physical resurrection. He quotes F. F. Bruce, Frederick Kenyon, C. S. Lewis, Bernard Ramm, Wilbur Smith, Josh McDowell, and other noted Christian scholars.

Talk 3: *"Why Did Jesus Die?"* Our greatest problem is sin in its pollution of our souls, its addictive power, its just penalty, and its eternal isolation from God. Nevertheless, God loves us, and through Jesus' atoning death, He has delivered us from the guilt and penalty of sin and reconciled us to Himself as His restored children.

Following this third talk, Gumbel invites sinners to offer a "Suggested Prayer of Commitment to Jesus Christ":

Lord Jesus Christ,

I am sorry for the things I have done wrong in my life. (Take a few moments to ask His forgiveness for anything particular that is on your conscience.) Please forgive me, I now turn from everything which I know to be wrong. Thank You that You died on the cross for me so that I could be forgiven and set free.

Thank You that You offer me forgiveness and the gift of Your Spirit. I now receive that gift.

Please come into my life by Your Spirit to be with me forever.

*Thank you, Lord Jesus. Amen.*¹⁸

Talk 4: *"How Can I Be Sure of My Faith?"* Gumbel wants believers to "know" that they have eternal life (1 John 5:13). "Our assurance of our relationship with God stands firmly based on the activity of all three members of the Trinity."¹⁹ Assurance is founded on God's promises of eternal life, on Christ's atonement, and on the Spirit's inner witness. "The wonderful news is that it does not depend on me. It depends on what Jesus has done for me. It depends not on what I do or achieve, but on His work on the cross. What He did on the cross enables Him to give us eternal life as a gift (John 10:28). We do not earn a gift. We accept it with gratitude."²⁰

Gumbel adds that the barrier between God and us is removed because God loved us (John 3:16) and laid on Jesus the iniquity of us all (Isa. 53:6). Jesus made it possible for the barrier between God and us to be removed: "Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (Rom. 8:1). The Holy Spirit then brings about changes in our character and relationships. The Spirit's inner witness assures us that we are God's children and that assurance is not arrogant when based on the Word of God, the work of Jesus, and the witness of the Spirit.

In evaluation, Alpha bases salvation experience on the facts of the gospel. The first four talks affirm the deity of Christ, our sinfulness, Jesus' death for our sins, and the fact of his bodily resurrection. It stresses assurance of eternal life on the Word, the Atonement, and the witness of the Spirit. I rejoice insofar as the gospel is preached in this way.

Gumbel's invitation justifiably adds receiving the Spirit, since "Jesus enters our lives by the Holy Spirit."²¹ "No one can say 'Jesus is Lord,' except by the Holy Spirit" (1 Cor. 12:3). The Spirit convicts people of sin and indwells and baptizes them into Christ's body. So long as the conscious reception of the Holy Spirit is not another prerequisite of justification, but rather an expression of the way in which we receive the ascended Christ into our lives, this invitation has value. It invites a new believer to begin personal communion with the Lord via the indwelling Spirit.

As helpful as this is, the talks fail sufficiently to emphasize that justification is *not* by works. Alpha does not adequately highlight the Protestant distinctive of justification on the basis of grace *alone*, through the work of Christ *alone*, appropriated by faith *alone* (Rom. 11:6). Alpha's effective strategies may be used to advance the cause of those who add legalistic conditions (works) to salvation, such as is often done by Roman Catholics and others.

Another serious omission is the new birth. "Unless a man is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God" (John 3:3). Regeneration is too crucial to leave out, even in an introductory presentation of the faith.

Contemporary pagans who know more about the fictional "Force" than about God first need to be introduced to *the living God*. Anyone "who comes to him [God] must believe that he [a personal being] exists [independent of the world] and that he rewards [actively in history] those who diligently seek him" (Heb. 11:6). As did Paul in ancient Athens, Alpha ought to explain humanity's dependence on, and accountability to, the divine Judge. Then the need for the gospel of Christ can make sense (Acts 17:16–31).

Despite Alpha's strengths, these weaknesses make it unwise to use Alpha as it is. Too much is at stake for the lost, who need God and His grace *alone*.

TEACHING FOR NEW CHRISTIANS ON SCRIPTURE AND GUIDANCE

Talk 5: "Why and How Should I Read the Bible?" God inspired men to write every verse of the Bible. With God as the author, Gumbel argues, the Scriptures must be "without error" and serve as our "supreme authority" for all matters of creed and conduct.²²

As solid as Gumbel's view of the Bible sounds, he still needs to add that the Bible is the only inerrant authority for faith and experience. Without "only," extrabiblical "infallible" notions of Roman Catholics, cultists, and "prophetic" speakers can become authoritative, with the inevitable effect of undermining Scripture's rightful role of supreme authority.

Gumbel also considers the Bible a love letter through which God speaks to us today. Interpreters, says Gumbel, should ask three appropriate questions of a biblical passage: What does it say? What does it mean? And how does it apply to me?²³ Without more adequate principles of interpreting what Scripture means and how it applies, however, Alpha students may read into it countless "inerrant" ideas and feelings not given by inspiration. Not even the importance of the context is mentioned. It is momentous to

profess to speak God's Word. The Old Testament considers those who claim to speak for God and talk out of their own hearts to be deserving of separation from God's people and death (Deut. 18:20-22; Jer. 23:16, 31, 36; 29:21; Zech. 13:3).

Talk 7: "*How Does God Guide Us?*" Gumbel states that "sometimes a verse seems almost to leap off of the page at us."²⁴ That can be a dangerous method of finding God's will. Reliable guidance comes through verses in their literary context. Gumbel also finds biblical instances of guidance through strong impressions, desires, dreams, visions, angels, circumstances, and the counsel of friends. "In this area of guidance," Gumbel admits, "we all make mistakes."²⁵

We might make fewer mistakes if we called for the coherence of all these factors with scriptural teaching. It is difficult to recommend Alpha until it seeks guidance from God, who cannot deny Himself (Heb. 6:18); but Gumbel abandoned the acid test of noncontradiction in a chapter on the alleged paradox of the Trinity and of physics in another book.²⁶ I cite a resolution of the alleged paradox in physics in my *Integrative Theology* and find no apparent contradiction in the Incarnation or Trinitarianism. These doctrines are complex and not fully comprehended, but they are not logical nonsense.²⁷

Talk 13: "*Does God Heal Today?*" Alpha teaches that miraculous healing may occur, but not everyone is supernaturally healed and no one can avoid death. These basic points are well founded and helpful. The course does not place enough stress, however, on the importance of God's will in prayers for healing, and it misapplies the "greater things" believers will do (John 14:12).

Other interesting Alpha talks are Talk 6: "*Why and How Do I Pray?*" Talk 11: "*How Can I Resist Evil?*" Talk 12: "*Why and How Should We Tell Others?*" Talk 14: "*What about the Church?*" Talk 15: "*How Can I Make the Most of the Rest of My Life?*" These talks are generally helpful in guiding new Christians by means of the Scriptures.

NEW CHRISTIANS AND THE HOLY SPIRIT

A distinctive feature of Alpha is its weekend away with the following three talks on the Holy Spirit:

Talk 8: "*Who Is the Holy Spirit?*" Having the characteristics of a Person, the Spirit was active in creation and with particular people at particular times. The Father promised the Holy Spirit in the new covenant (Jer. 31:33; Ezek. 36:26-27; Joel 2:28-29). Jesus reaffirmed the Spirit's coming (Luke 24:49; Acts 1:8), and the predictions began to be fulfilled at Pentecost for you, your children, and all whom the Lord our God will call (Acts 2:29, 33). He who is Counselor, Comforter, and Encourager sets the weak free and enables them to fulfill their divine calling.

Talk 9: "*What Does the Holy Spirit Do?*" He regenerates us (John 3:5-8), indwells us (Rom. 8:9), and makes us mutually related as sons and daughters of God (Rom. 8:14-17). The Spirit helps us develop family likeness, gives security, promotes unity, and bestows gifts on each member. There is urgent need for the gifts to be exercised. The church cannot operate at maximum effectiveness until each person is playing his or her part. So far, this is fine.

Talk 10: *“How Can I Be Filled with the Holy Spirit?”* Instead of a clear definition of the Spirit’s filling, Gumbel offers crude illustrations, likening it to the filling of a glass, a balloon, or a sponge. Impersonal illustrations are futile, because the Holy Spirit is a Person. The point, Gumbel alleges, is that “we all need more of the Holy Spirit.”²⁸ Does that make sense? How can believers get more of an omnipresent personal Spirit, who already abides in their lives individually and collectively?

We might come closer to the figurative meaning of the “filling” of the Spirit if we asked, “How does the spirit of one person (mentally, emotionally, and volitionally) figuratively ‘fill’ the spirit of another?” Believers in Christ are filled with the abiding Spirit when their *minds* are devoted to Spirit-revealed and Spirit-illuminated truths. Their desires and wills are then consonant with His. The point of the analogy of the Spirit’s “filling” is *not* that we get more of the Spirit, but that we actively yield more holistically to the Spirit.

Alpha tries to repeat unrepeatable Pentecostal phenomena. A unique sound at Pentecost, like a violent wind from heaven, filled the house (Acts 2:2).²⁹ In Gumbel’s application, “Sometimes when people are filled, they shake like a leaf in the wind. Others find themselves breathing deeply as if almost physically breathing in the Spirit.”³⁰ Gumbel unjustifiably transfers a wind in the environment to a shaking within. Neither the breathing nor the shaking comes from the Bible.

Gumbel also tries to repeat the unrepeatable “tongues of fire” that separated and came to rest on each of the 120 at Pentecost:

They also saw something that resembled fire (Acts 2:3). Physical heat sometimes accompanies the filling of the Spirit and people experience it in their hands or some other part of their bodies. One person described a feeling of glowing all over. Another said she experienced “liquid heat.”

Still another described “burning in my arms when I was not hot.” Fire perhaps symbolizes the power, passion and purity the Spirit of God brings to our lives.³¹

Tongues of fire (Acts 2:3) were neither repeated in Acts 8, 10, or 19 nor alluded to in the rest of the New Testament. They are not symbolic of something normative for new or mature Christians. Unfortunately, Alpha’s unbiblical advocacy of literal heat may encourage desires for other questionable and potentially occult phenomena.

What indications of the Spirit’s filling at Pentecost *are* repeatable? An overlooked result of the filling at Pentecost is Peter’s well-reasoned defense of the faith. Gumbel mentions the power with which Peter spoke³² but overlooks his apologetic reasoning. Filled with the Holy Spirit, Peter argued from Messianic predictions to their historic fulfillment and concluded that Jesus is “both Lord and Christ” (Acts 2:36). The Holy Spirit used Peter’s factual data and logical reasoning to bring 3,000 Jews to faith in Jesus as the Messiah!³³ Spirit-filled “Pentecostals” reason cogently from historical data in defense of the faith (cf. 1 Peter 3:15).

What else results from the Spirit's filling? Those filled at Pentecost and subsequently "experienced the power"³⁴ and "love"³⁵ of God and were "released in praise."³⁶ We do need power as well as truth in ministry, but we ought to avoid the tendency to focus on power alone. Opponents could not withstand the power of a "filled" witness like Stephen, nor could they comprehend the *wisdom* and *grace* with which he spoke (Acts 7:8, 10).

Gumbel also refers to the ninefold fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22–23) and Paul's exhortation to be filled with the Spirit continuously (Eph. 5:18). He fails, however, to mention what followed: joyful fellowship in praise to God with varieties of music (Eph. 5:19) and Christlike relationships between husbands and wives, parents and children, employers and employees (5:20–6:20).

Alpha does not merit recommendation until it bases its teachings on the nature and results of the Spirit's filling strictly on the Bible, the supreme authority for belief and experience.

NEW CHRISTIANS AND SPEAKING IN TONGUES

What is another indication of the Spirit's filling, according to Gumbel? "They received a new language."³⁷ "The word for 'tongues,'" he explains, "is the same word as that for 'languages,' and it means the ability to speak in a language you never learned. It may be an angelic language (1 Cor. 13:1), which presumably is not recognizable, or it may be a recognizable human language (as at Pentecost)."³⁸

Gumbel admits, "Not all Christians speak in tongues"; it is "not necessarily a sign of being filled with the Spirit"; it is "not the most important gift"; and "there are no first or second class Christians."³⁹ Since not all Christians speak in tongues, he is unwise to feature this gift in a course for new Christians.

Gumbel asked friends how to get the gift of tongues. They told him, "If I wanted to receive the gift of tongues I had to cooperate with the Spirit of God; I needed to open my mouth, and start to speak to God in any language but English or another known to me. As I did, I received the gift of tongues also."⁴⁰ Scripture gives no hint that any such instructions will help the Spirit give one the gift. The Spirit gives the gifts as *He* wills (1 Cor. 12:11).

Alpha needs to add some criteria by which to distinguish tongues and other manifestations of God from manifestations of deceptive spirits. Without such criteria, Alpha may further the unbiblical practices of being "slain in the Spirit" (collapsing allegedly under the Spirit's power), sounding like animals, and losing control of one's self like an infant. It is not surprising that British reporters link Alpha to "Toronto blessing" experiences. "Alpha emphasizes the importance of everyday miracles and coincidences...and those who embrace Alpha's teachings often fall down in a shaking fit. This demonstrative entry to the faith is known as the Toronto blessing."⁴¹ Indeed, representatives of Holy Trinity Brompton (HTB), where Alpha was developed, visited the Toronto Airport Vineyard in the mid 1990s and thereafter HTB became Britain's leading exponent of the Toronto Blessing.

The purpose of the Spirit's filling and gifts is to renew believers in "knowledge in the image of [our] Creator" (Col. 3:10) and "in true righteousness and holiness" (Eph. 4:24). Insofar as Alpha's Holy Spirit weekends open the door to behavior in the image of animals and infants, it is a travesty on the Spirit's purpose. God wants our worship in spirit and truth (John 4:24). The Spirit of truth wants us to love Him with all our mind as well as all our heart (Matt. 22:37). As Paul did in public, we will sing and pray so that the church will be edified in the spirit *and* understanding (1 Cor. 14:5, 14-15).

Alpha has much that could be used for great good, but, sadly, its defects are leading non-Christians to trust Christ *and* works. Its flaws, also, may lead new Christians into counterfeit experiences not founded on revealed truth about spiritual realities.

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- 1 "Welcome to Alpha," 3. All Alpha materials are available from the Alpha Head Office, Holy Trinity Brompton, Brompton Road, London SW7 1JA, United Kingdom, or in America from Cook Ministry Resources, 4050 Lee Vance View, Colorado Springs, CO 80918-7100, and Alpha North America, F.D.R. Station, P.O. Box 5209, New York, NY 10150, USA.
- 2 "What Is Alpha?" Updated 18 July 2000 (<http://www.alpha.org.uk/whatis.htm>).
- 3 *How to Run the Alpha Course* (Colorado Springs: Cook Ministry Resources, 1997), 25. (Emphasis added on each of these main points.)
- 4 *Ibid.*, 26.
- 5 *Ibid.*, 28.
- 6 *Ibid.*, 29.
- 7 *Ibid.*, 31.
- 8 *Ibid.*
- 9 *Ibid.*, 34.
- 10 *Ibid.*, 44-48.
- 11 *Ibid.*, 16.
- 12 *Ibid.*, 43.
- 13 *Ibid.*, 59.
- 14 *Ibid.*, 113-28.
- 15 J. Gresham Machen, *What Is Christianity?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1951), 22.
- 16 J. Gresham Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1946), 19.
- 17 See Nicky Gumbel, *Questions of Life* (Colorado Springs: Cook Ministry Resources, 1993, 1996).
- 18 *The Alpha Course Manual* (Colorado Springs: Cook Ministry Resources, 1995), 75.
- 19 *Questions of Life*, 59.
- 20 *Ibid.*, 62.
- 21 *Ibid.*, 60.
- 22 *Ibid.*, 74-76.
- 23 *Ibid.*, 83.
- 24 *Ibid.*, 107.
- 25 *Ibid.*, 117.
- 26 Nicky Gumbel, *Searching Issues* (Colorado Springs: Cook Ministry Resources, 1996), 105-19.
- 27 Gordon R. Lewis and Bruce A. Demarest, *Integrative Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 1: 270-80; 2:349-50.
- 28 *How to Run the Alpha Course*, 36.

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- 29 *Questions of Life*, 151.
30 *Ibid.*, 152.
31 *Ibid.*
32 *How to Run the Alpha Course*, 34.
33 See also Acts 4:8–12.
34 *Questions of Life*, 151.
35 *Ibid.*, 152.
36 *Ibid.*, 153.
37 *Alpha Conference Speaker Notes* (New York: Alpha North America, 1997), 10–11.
38 *Questions of Life*, 155.
39 *Speaker Notes*, 11.
40 *Questions of Life*, 160
41 vanessa.thorpe@observer.co.uk (9/5/00). For an extensive critique of the Toronto blessing see Hank Hanegraaff's *Counterfeit Revival* (Waco, TX: Word Publishing, 1997).