
Review Article: The Alpha & Christianity Explored Courses

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On 24th May 2001 at All Soul's Church, Langham Place, a new evangelistic course called *Christianity Explored* was launched. Adapting and expanding an earlier course run at All Soul's called *Christianity Explained*, Rico Tice has largely devised the new ten-week course. No doubt some within the evangelical world wondered why a new course was needed. After all, wasn't the *Alpha* course originating from that other leading London church, Holy Trinity Brompton, clearly the most effective evangelistic course in the country?

In the promotion literature, *Christianity Explored* acknowledges its indebtedness to *Alpha* praising its 'excellent relational methodology'. However at the same time it makes clear that there are two clear distinctives, which make *Christianity Explored* quite different from *Alpha*. The first is the fact that it seeks to teach Mark's gospel. The second is that it seeks to teach the wonder of God's grace against the background of our sin and God's judgment. Thus to many minds, *Christianity Explored* is designed to be a viable and more Biblical alternative to *Alpha*, despite the promotion literature insisting that 'the two courses compliment each other'. In this article we seek to examine both courses in the light of Scripture. After Paul and Silas had preached in the Jewish Synagogue we are told that the Bereans '...examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true' and they are commended for this practice (Acts 17:11). If the Bereans examined even the apostle's teaching, how much more should we examine contemporary teaching?

Anyone involved with Christian ministry in this country, and indeed throughout the world, cannot ignore the massive impact that *Alpha* is having, and no doubt will continue to have in the future. According to its website, '*Alpha* is a 15-session practical introduction to the Christian faith. It's aimed especially at people who don't go to church.' Given this and similar statements found throughout *Alpha* promotional literature and on the back of *Alpha* manuals, we must assess the course from the perspective of the man or woman who is ignorant of the faith rather from those who are already Christians. This is particularly the case given that *Alpha* began in 1977 under Charles Marnham as a four week course for new Christians. The course grew under the leadership of John Irvine (who expanded it to ten weeks and introduced the Holy Spirit weekend) and Nicky Lee, until it was taken over by Nicky Gumbel in 1990. It was only then that the evangelistic potential of the course was realized. 'He [Nicky Gumbel] realized how this simple course in basic Christianity could be a powerful medium for evangelism. He quickly worked to give the course the kind of 'feel that would be particularly attractive to non-churchgoers'.

Among Christians *Alpha* has earned a rapidly spreading reputation based on its effectiveness. Both the *Alpha* website and *Alpha News* contain many commendations of the course from diverse theological positions. The Archbishop of Canterbury thinks,

...it's superb. I commend it wholeheartedly.' According to Steve Chalke of The Oasis Trust, '*Alpha* is the most effective and transferable introductory course to the Christian faith I know.' Whilst we would expect high praise from the late John Wimber and Loren Cunningham of YWAM, some comments come from more surprising sources. JI Packer believes that, 'The *Alpha* course is the most engaging way of passing on the basics of Christianity. It is a tool for evangelism and nurture that I highly commend.' More plaudits could be quoted from evangelists, Church leaders and Roman Catholic cardinals, suffice to say that there is no shortage of support for the course. If popularity is the mark of success then there is no doubt that *Alpha* is an unparalleled one. It seems that *Alpha* can do no wrong.

Yet despite this *Alpha* has not been without its critics. Indeed Nicky Gumbel seems to respond to some of them in his book *Challenging Lifesyle*:

There is a double standard in having a 'rosy view of ourselves and a jaundiced view of others' (Stott), for we point the accusing finger at others, but never turn it on ourselves. It makes us feel better to gloat over the sins and errors of others – hence our love of scandals. We lap up all the sordid details and every speck we collect helps us ignore the logjam in our own eye.

This applies not only to the moral faults of others, but also to doctrinal ones as well. Some doctrinal critics may agree with 99% of their opponent's view. We may agree on the Trinity, the person and work of Christ, the nature of the atonement, the authority of Scripture, and issues of morality, but we find what is objectively a minor area of disagreement and latch onto it. We feel we are not 'sound' unless we are constantly denouncing and condemning. So we write with poisoned pens. Could it be that we are blinded by the log in our own eye? Often we are so defensive, rigid, judgmental, intolerant, and even nasty and petty. Unless we first remove the plank of hypercriticism and censoriousness from our own eyes, we will not see clearly to remove the splinter from the eyes of others.

We would do well to heed Gumbel's warnings here, and any examination of *Alpha* or *Christianity Explored* which is written with a 'poisoned pen' or with a critical spirit must be eschewed. Despite the call of the New Testament not to judge, it does encourage us to be discerning, and this examination seeks only to do this in a humble, godly, and Christ-honouring way. Thus there is no malice or ill feeling intended on the part of the author. However, as WD Scholes points out, 'Evangelism has at its core a message of eternal significance and it is therefore imperative that we convey the biblical message'. Thus it is not enough to rely on the accolades of others, or trendy presentations, or on the fact that the course 'works'. Theology rather than pragmatism must be the basis of whether something is good. So the question we must ask of any evangelistic course is not 'Does it work?' but rather 'Does it honour Christ?'

It is too early to see the kind of impact *Christianity Explored* has made. As for *Alpha*, it is quite clear that there are things that are praise-worthy. It is a course which is exceptionally well produced. The quality and availability of the resources provide both church leaders and their congregations with a ready made evangelistic course so that it doesn't require a great deal of hard work to get a course going. That *Alpha* has encouraged so many Christians and so many churches to start doing evangelism must be a cause of much rejoicing. The other observation on these resources is that they encourage people to join in with a worldwide movement. It is always much easier to

identify oneself with something infinitely larger, and there is a real sense in which people feel that they can easily join in this huge network.

Another aspect of the whole *Alpha* initiative which is simply staggering is the intense zeal with which people long for others to become Christians. One of my abiding memories of the *Alpha* Conference I attended at Holy Trinity Brompton in February 1997 was the passion with which the organizers wished to see the world won for Christ. There can be no doubting the godly commitment to reaching those who have never known Christ, and I for one was rebuked by such commitment. The organizers of *Alpha* certainly think big, such that Clifford Longley has written, '...*Alpha* is an unqualified triumph. The reconversion of England, so oversold by Evangelicals so often, is suddenly almost believable'. Would that all Christians shared this longing for the reconversion of England!

Perhaps the most significant contribution that *Alpha* has made is the emphasis it places on the value of relationships. The practice of guests returning to the same group each week and enjoying a relaxed meal together insures that people are set at ease and are better prepared to listen to the talks and ask their questions. It is here that we part company from the otherwise excellent analysis of *Alpha* by Chris Hand. Hand is critical of that which contributes to the 'softly-softly' method including the good food, friendly conversations, and the 'small group feel'. However, this is precisely where *Alpha* is at it's strongest. It makes hearing the gospel accessible, and in part explains why so many seemingly unlikely people have wanted to do *Alpha*. It is not hard to see why *Christianity Explored* has adopted this emphasis on friendly, supper party based evangelism, and have rightly acknowledged their debt to *Alpha* in this.

There is indeed much to give thanks for in *Alpha* and there can be no doubt that there have been some who have been helped by the course. However, the observant reader will have noticed that what has been commended thus far has largely been the style of *Alpha* rather than the content. There can be no questioning the remarkable ability of the course to draw non-Christians in, but the question does remain as to what they are taught when they join the course. One of the characteristics of our post-modern culture is to exalt style over content, and we must be wary of simply assuming that because the style is good that the content is equally good.

The critical question is this: is the message of *Alpha* and *Christianity Explored* the message of the Bible? We shall attempt to answer that question by considering four main doctrines: the character of God, the nature of sin, the cross of Christ, and the work of the Holy Spirit.

The Character of God

Reading the *Alpha* written material, together with listening to the tapes and speakers at the *Alpha* Conference, one gets a clear and consistent message about the character of God. The message is that God is love. In the third session guests are told, 'God loves each one of us so much and longs to be in relationship with us as a human father longs to be in relationship with each of his children.' Elsewhere Nicky Gumbel makes clear that one of the foundation principles of *Alpha* is that God loves us.

What can be wrong with *Alpha* proclaiming this glorious, Biblical truth of God's love? Does not the apostle John state 'God is love' (1 John 4:16)? How can this be a problem? It is only a problem if this is the *only* characteristic of God which is

emphasized. Sadly this appears to be true of *Alpha*. To be fair we must note that the *Alpha* material does also speak of God's justice and other attributes of His character, but the overwhelming message of the course is that God is love.

Yet the Bible is clear that love is not the only attribute of the God who has revealed himself in creation and in the Scriptures. There is much that we could say about the God of the Scriptures, and yet *Alpha* appears to assume His existence rather than describe His character. So there is nothing in the course about Him being our Creator and all that the Bible unpacks from this great truth, namely that He is the great King and Sovereign over all that He has made. Hand makes the point well when he writes: 'In *Alpha* God is simply introduced to us as the one who can help us rather than as the self-existent and eternally glorious Maker of heaven and earth.'

Alongside the absence of God being our Creator is a failure to teach God's holiness. This is extraordinary given the fact that 'God is Holy' is taught far more frequently in Scripture than 'God is Love'. Indeed the adjective used most frequently in Scripture to describe God is 'holy'. At the risk of being accused of divorcing God's holiness from God's love, it is necessary to see the connection between these two aspects of God's character. The God of the Bible is a God of holiness whose love is all the more remarkable in that it is bestowed on upon wicked sinners. Indeed when we remove the holiness of God we undermine the love of God.

By contrast, *Christianity Explored* seeks to introduce even in the first week to the truth that God is our creator and has revealed Himself uniquely in Jesus Christ. Moreover, the value of working through Mark's gospel is quickly seen as we discover the awesome power and authority of this God-man, and realise that to be in rebellion against Him is a deeply serious business. To quote from the talk in week four, 'God is a God of holiness, of blazing purity, and he hates what is evil. When it comes to evil he doesn't lean back in a rocking chair and pretend nothing has happened, like a benevolent grandfather. No, evil matters to God.'

The Scriptures warn us that 'It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God' (Heb. 10:31). My fear is that guests on the *Alpha* course would never know this from the material they are presented with for they have only been presented with one attribute of the God of the Bible. Clearly time does not permit teaching everything about God's character in an introductory course, but *Christianity Explored* appears to be more faithful in conveying the character of God as both loving and holy.

The nature of sin

The consequences of misrepresenting the character of God are enormous. Nowhere is this seen more clearly than in *Alpha*'s treatment of sin. For as one follows the argument in the course, sin is presented as being seen in the 'mess that we make of our own lives'. The problem of sin is explained as 'the rubbish that clutters up our lives and clutters our world' and as 'pollution of the soul'. At the 1997 *Alpha* Leaders' Conference, Sandy Millar defined sin as, 'the difference between what we are and what we might have been'. However these are merely symptoms of sin and *Alpha* is clear on what is at the heart of sin when it states that the '...root cause of sin is a broken relationship with God...' The consequences of sin are then spelt out in terms of the pollution, the power, the penalty and the partition of sin.

Yet one cannot help feeling that for all *Alpha's* use of Biblical words, the course fails to define sin Biblically. The main reason for this is that it concentrates on the consequences of sin rather than on what sin actually is. Man without God is the subject of God's wrath. We are not slightly displeasing to Him, with the occasional foible; rather by nature 'we are objects of wrath' (Eph. 2:3) because we have offended against God and broken His holy law. The root cause of sin is not a 'broken relationship with God'; the root cause of sin is that mankind has universally rebelled against God's holy laws and therefore offended God himself.

Here we see the consequences of failing to teach that God is holy. Hand puts it clearly when he writes:

Alpha simply has no grasp of the holiness of God and of his wrath against sin. It has no concept of man having offended God. This explains why *Alpha* curiously answers the question 'why worry about sin?' by listing four **consequences** of sin. The consequences are true enough. But is all man-centred. They are the consequences **for us**. Surely the fact that we have offended against God is sufficient reason in itself to worry about sin. ...*Alpha's* analysis simply does not go anything like far enough. Its 'Christ' comes forth to deal with too small a problem' (emphases his).

However, *Christianity Explored* explains far more coherently what the Bible teaches about sin. Quoting Mark 12:30, the course charges us with the greatest crime, that is having failed to love God as we should and robbing Him of His rightful authority. Indeed the sound bite of the course epitomises the clear emphasis on sin—'we are more wicked than we ever realised', and it is excellent to see in which the course addresses the horror of our total depravity in a way that people can understand. By the end of week three we are left in no doubt that we are rebels against God and are in desperate need of a rescue. The urgency of Jesus' rescue mission has been sounded, and against the bleakness of human wickedness and divine judgment, the wonder of God's grace will be seen all the more clearly.

As we shall discover, our understanding of sin will inevitably affect our understanding of the cross. If the diagnosis is inaccurate then the cure will be ineffective. So what do *Alpha* and *Christianity Explored* say about the cross?

The Cross of Christ

In explaining the work of Christ on the cross, *Christianity Explored* focuses on Mark's account of the crucifixion. It is one of the clearest explanations of penal substitution that I have seen—God is angry at sin, Jesus is abandoned in our place, with the result that we can be accepted. One possible weakness here is that it could lead to the impression that Jesus was an innocent third party who received God's punishment, rather than the Bible's insistence that atonement was accomplished by God satisfying Himself by substituting Himself for us.

One of the aims of *Christianity Explored* is to teach the true nature of grace. Thus the week after explaining the cross, there is a whole session on the nature of grace. Linking God's grace with God's finished work on the cross, the guests are left in no doubt at all that forgiveness is a free gift to be received rather than anything that can be earned.

To suggest that *Alpha* is weak on the atonement may seem a travesty given all that it does say. Does it not devote an entire talk to answer the question 'Why did Jesus

die? Are we not told that ‘the cross lies at the heart of the Christian faith’? Is not John Stott quoted when referring to 1 Peter 2:24 that the cross sees the ‘self-substitution of God’? Certainly the course gives a number of Biblical references and teaches that the death of Jesus achieved justification, redemption, atonement and reconciliation.

There is much good material at this point, and yet there are two very important weaknesses as well. The first is that *Alpha* misses the very heart of the cross and so ultimately fails to answer the question it sets up to answer, the question ‘Why did Jesus die?’ The doctrine of penal substitution is simply not taught in the course. This is hardly surprising given that the righteous wrath of God has not been explained as being mankind’s biggest problem.

This lack of teaching on penal substitution results in *Alpha* getting in a muddle at this stage. For it wants to teach that Christ died as substitute, and indeed does teach this, and yet because it is not taught that Jesus died as *penal* substitute, bearing upon himself the wrath of God, we are left without any understanding of why Jesus had to die at all. Thus the cross of Christ ends up being little more than a visual aid that proves that God is self-sacrificial and loving. As Hand says, ‘Christ’s work on the cross is demoted to being a rescue act to save us from our problems rather than fulfilling the righteous demands of the holy law and appeasing the wrath of God’. The death of Jesus is presented as an act of love but without any connection with the reality of God’s holy anger. We are left thinking that Christ sacrificed Himself to rescue us from the consequences of sin because that was required by some impersonal and rather arbitrary justice system.

The second major weakness in this area is that for all its claims that ‘the cross lies at the heart of the Christian faith’, the cross in reality is not central. Far from it. After talk two which deals with the cross it is barely mentioned in subsequent sessions. This is extraordinary not only because the cross is at the heart of the Christian faith, but in light of the fact that *Alpha* is aimed at those who know little or nothing of the Christian faith. Moreover, this is indicative of a much bigger problem with *Alpha*. This is that it assumes too much too quickly and leaves the gospel behind in its zeal to teach on Christian living. It hardly seems appropriate to cover the person of Christ, the nature of sin, the atonement and regeneration in two sessions (such that the third session is entitled, ‘*How can I be sure of my faith?*’) leaving the remaining eleven sessions dealing with Christian lifestyle (including three sessions – as many as the evangelistic section – on the Holy Spirit). One of the great strengths of *Christianity Explored* is that it always roots Christian living in the gospel. Again and again we are taken back to the cross so that it’s plain that the cross really is does lie at the heart of both the way in and the way on in the Christian faith.

Given that the cross is clearly not the centre of *Alpha* there is a huge vacuum that must be filled. It is not hard to see what does fill that vacuum and therefore what the centre of *Alpha* really is. It is the Holy Spirit which ‘forms the *de facto* and *de jure* core of *Alpha*’.

The Holy Spirit

There is so much teaching on the Holy Spirit in *Alpha* with which classic evangelicals should take issue that is very hard to know where to begin. A standard Charismatic line

is taken on most aspects of the person and work of the Holy Spirit and we shall merely touch on some of the more alarming teaching of *Alpha*.

In the talk, '*How can I be filled with the Spirit*', a traditional Charismatic line is taken on the 'fullness of the Spirit' being a subsequent experience to conversion. As John Chapman has commented, 'This previously would have been called the 'baptism in the Spirit'. The name has changed but, alas, the understanding has not. This 'double phased' experience is argued from Paul's 'double experience' on the Damascus Road and later with Ananias (Acts 9), from the Samaritans (Acts 8), and from the Ephesians (Acts 19). What is disappointing is that these tired arguments were refuted decisively years ago'. There is nothing in Scripture to suggest anything other than that the believer receives all of the Holy Spirit at the point when he or she puts their trust in Jesus and are justified. Thus the teaching, 'Every Christian has the Holy Spirit, but not every Christian is filled with the Spirit' is seriously at odds with Biblical teaching.

Equally alarming is Gumbel's view of conversion. He writes, '...coming from the New Age movement [some] 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'. As Scholes points out, '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'. This appears to be yet another way in which the apostolic gospel is bypassed in an effort to make the gospel as accessible as possible.

Furthermore we are told that 'For many the decisive moment is the Saturday evening of the weekend'. For *Alpha* the decisive moment seems not to be the preaching of Christ and Him crucified, but when the Holy Spirit is invoked. But if, as the Scriptures teach us, the Holy Spirit comes at conversion this is quite extraordinary. Surely the moment when the guest repents and believes must be the 'decisive moment'. However this would explain why so much emphasis is put on the weekend when the Spirit comes. This came across very firmly at the *Alpha* Leaders' Conference in 1997 when the 'model' talk was the one entitled, '*How can I be filled with the Spirit?*'. Sandy Millar said that, 'HTB has a reputation for the Holy Spirit coming at these weekends'. Speaking of his own conversion he added that he feared that the speaker had left and that 'the Holy Spirit would have left with him'. There was almost a peculiar mystique about giving this talk. So Nicky Gumbel said, 'I knew that the Holy Spirit wouldn't come when I did it... I could see myself doing every talk but this one'. The message is consistent: the highlight of *Alpha* is the Holy Spirit weekend.

Yet isn't this teaching both to demean the Holy Spirit and to misunderstand His work? We cannot control the Holy Spirit in the way that *Alpha* implies; for like the wind that blows wherever it wishes (John 3:8) the Holy Spirit moves wherever he wishes and without human control. The Spirit is sovereign and He will work as He chooses and as God has promised, namely when the word of God preached. Ironically then *Alpha* ends up limiting the Spirit, the very thing which it accuses others of doing when it claims, 'For a long time in the church the person and work of the Holy Spirit

has been ignored, misunderstood and resisted'. Moreover if the Spirit's longing is to point to Christ and to bring Him glory then isn't it rather strange that Christ is so infrequently mentioned?

This lack of focus on Jesus is seen very clearly in the testimonies people give, testimonies, which *Alpha* quotes with approval in its literature. The first of five main *Alpha* testimonies in *Telling Others* is particularly revealing. It reads:

The one thing that 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 this power in my life at any cost so I found out where the church was, enrolled on the course and focused on the weekend. I felt like a dying man waiting for a life-saving operation. 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 (which I had identified as the main one) was at 4.30pm and simply hung on like a marathon runner weaving his way up the final straight with nothing but the finishing tape as the focus of his attention. I'll never forget that session. I felt as though I was being torn in two. Halfway through I just couldn't stand it any more. 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 couldn't hold out any longer. I'm not exaggerating when I say I was in agony. Then God came and then came the relief'.

Having no idea who this person is, we have to say that this is deeply troubling. They regard the talks on 'Who is Jesus?' and 'Why did Jesus die?' as 'pre-med'. The focus of their attention is specifically identified as being not the Lord Jesus, not the Cross, not even the Holy Spirit, but the third session, 'How can I be filled with the Spirit?'. Sadly such a testimony is repeated again and again. This is hardly surprising given that guests are taught, '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'. Still another said, 'I didn't want to come to the weekend and I did. But I would call myself a Christian now. I would say that I felt the Holy Spirit. I was feeling I was loved. It was really a tremendous overwhelming feeling of love'.

Many more things could be said about *Alpha*'s pneumatology, but in concluding this section we must say that this isn't simply a case of Christians having different views on whom the Holy Spirit is and what He does. It is that, but it is considerably more than that. For it seems that what is being presented is an entirely different view of conversion. More often than not *Alpha* seems to invite people to have an *experience* of God's love and of the power of the Spirit rather than calling for obedience to the message of the gospel. Scripture commands us to believe that Jesus is Lord which must lead to repentance of sin and a belief in the good news that 'Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners' (1 Tim. 1:15). Then, and *only then*, will the regenerate person be justified before a Holy God, be filled with all of the Holy Spirit, and have absolute assurance of anger propitiated, sins forgiven, and of heaven ahead. Needless to say that to be born again in this Biblical sense is a profoundly *emotional experience*. We are not suggesting for a moment that we must shun emotion or experience; rather we are insisting, as the Scriptures do, that there is content to what we believe and substance to our experience of God's grace.

Christianity Explored has seen the value of having a weekend or day away, but the content and expectation of the weekend/day is vastly different. Under the title 'You're never Alone', there are four talks—the church family, the Holy Spirit, prayer, and the Bible – as well as two Bible studies. Far from being ignored, there is faithful teaching on the person and work of the Spirit: his indispensability in bringing people to Christ; his indwelling of every believer; his illumining the Scriptures; his gifting of believers and his enabling us to fight the Christian life. Thus both Biblical teaching and weight are given to the Holy Spirit.

The best thing about *Christianity Explored* is its commitment to teaching Mark's gospel. In so doing it is able to make the transition from evangelism to discipleship smoothly as it follows the two key questions of Mark's gospel: who is Jesus? (chs 1–8) and what does it mean to follow Jesus (chs 9–16). Thus after the weekend/day away, there are four more weeks focussing on what it means to follow Jesus. One church I know has split the course in two so that after seven weeks of *Christianity Explored* they encourage guests to do the next four sessions under the title of *Discipleship Explored*. In so doing the course avoids the confusion of *Alpha*. The more one investigates *Alpha*, the more it seems that the authors haven't decided whether it is a discipleship course (as it started out) or an evangelism course (as it's ended up).

In conclusion, it would seem that for Bible-believing evangelicals there should simply be no choice between *Christianity Explored* and *Alpha*. Whilst until now it has been popular to use *Alpha* whilst making amendments to avoid some of the charismatic emphases, it seems that now that there is an obvious Biblical alternative there will be no need to do so. *Christianity Explored* faithfully and relevantly presents the apostolic gospel in all its majesty and splendour. May God use it to bring many to a saving knowledge of Himself.

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