

THE ALPHA COURSE IN THE LIGHT OF SCRIPTURE 1

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“If the trumpet give an uncertain sound, who shall prepare himself to the battle?” (1 Corinthians 14:8). This text speaks about the need for clarity in the preaching of the Word of God. If the trumpet gave an uncertain sound, people would not know whether it was a call to battle or not. Was it a call to soldiers to be alert because there was danger, and the soldiers needed to be prepared to fight? Or was it just some other sound that was being played? Was it entertainment? Was a feast being called for? Or was it a warning being sounded on the trumpet calling to preparation for battle? The importance of clarity is very strong in this verse. Paul is saying that we need to be clear, we need to see the necessity for warning people about their danger and showing them that they need to be right with God.

We need to be certain as to the presentation of the Gospel. We do not want a woolly gospel, a gospel that is all things to all men; we do not want a gospel that is acceptable to those who deny the deity of Jesus Christ or those who deny the full verbal inspiration and inerrancy of the Bible. We do not want that sort of gospel because those people will not accept the truth of the Word of God. So we want a gospel that is plain, that people understand without a shadow of a doubt; we have to remember men are travellers to eternity. We are all moving through this world and we need to be prepared for the day we die. One day, you and I will be summoned. The call will come and we will stand before a most holy, most pure God. Those not prepared for death will be lost eternally, so it is so important that we have a clear message, that we sound it out, for, ‘if the trumpet give an uncertain sound, who shall prepare himself to the battle?’

That is why we need to examine the Alpha Course in the light of Scripture.

The Alpha Course started, in a sense, in 1997 when a man called Charles Marnham, who was a member and worker in Holy Trinity Church in Brompton, London, decided to have some basic Bible lessons for people in the church - a very commendable thing. It was later developed by Nicky Gumbel, who was a barrister, Oxford and Cambridge educated. He entered the ministry and became curate of Holy Trinity Brompton, and now he is the vicar of that church. That church, we may add, was very much associated with what is called ‘the Toronto Blessing.’

Let me mention the Toronto Blessing. Many people in the Toronto Blessing were grunting like pigs and barking like dogs, which was a very strange way of trying to show that they were filled with the Holy Spirit – something that you will not find anywhere in the Word of God. Also, inside the Toronto Blessing there was much heresy, and much that was disorderly and utterly wrong. When someone was bringing a word of prophecy inside the Toronto Blessing all was quiet, but when the Bible was read, they played music; they were more intent on hearing some so-called ‘prophet’ than they were on hearing the Scriptures, the Word of the living God. There were so many other things that we could describe in connection with the Toronto Blessing that show us that it was not a move of the Holy Spirit; it was a false thing that was worked up, and great sensations were taking place, but people were not being dealt with by the Spirit of God. In fact, I remember reading of a man - and this was quoted with approval by the Toronto Blessing people - as he was preaching on hell, the congregation broke out in uncontrollable laughter. Is that not strange? Someone is preaching about hell, the most serious and awful of subjects, and the congregation starts to laugh and then that is described as holy laughter or laughter in the Spirit. Surely, it is laughter that is provoked by the devil. The things of God are serious and not to be treated lightly.

What is the Alpha Course about? It is called a basic introduction to Christianity. It is described as a fifteen-session practical introduction to the Christian faith. It is aimed specifically at those who do not normally go to church rather than from the point of view of those who are already Christians. It is an introduction to the Christian faith and is based upon the book, *Alpha, Questions of Life*, written by Rev Nicky Gumbel. In the course material is supplied for the leaders, and other material supplied for the participants in the course. This material is copyrighted, so all are meant to keep to it when using it for teaching in the local church. Fifteen lessons take place mid-week; they start with a meal and then there is a forty-five minute talk. Pastor Chris Hand who has done an excellent critique of Alpha has very helpful information on the course and I have drawn on this as well as on other writers.

The first talk is ‘Christianity - boring, untrue and irrelevant?’ That certainly will grip most minds. Christianity, the message of the Word of God, boring, untrue, irrelevant – that is what the man in the street thinks, and so he would be arrested by the thought that here is the answer to the idea that Christianity is boring and irrelevant. Videos are available, so if you wanted an Alpha Course in your church not much preparation is needed because you simply watch the videos or use the course material and quote almost word-for-word from the book written by Nicky Gumbel. When the study is finished folk break into smaller discussion groups of about a dozen people. This is not meant to be threatening: people are able to contribute, to ask questions and find out more and the idea is that none are intimidated, frightened, or overwhelmed. And I have to say concerning the book, it is written in a very readable style. Nicky Gumbel is an able writer and a very good communicator.

In the chapter containing the second lesson, ‘Who is Jesus?’ there is much that is very valuable and helpful. Nicky Gumbel sets forth a high view of Jesus Christ. He holds Him to be the Son of God, to be without sin, to have died on the cross for sinners and he clearly speaks about the resurrection of Jesus Christ. You will know that many will seek to explain away the resurrection. Gumbel deals with those pseudo explanations and gets right to the heart of the matter. There is no doubt in the chapter who Jesus Christ is, that He died on the cross, that He really and truly rose again, and that He performed mighty miracles. It would be difficult to find fault with this chapter on Jesus Christ; there is belief in His life, belief in His death, and belief in His resurrection. There is a very different spirit in the writing of Nicky Gumbel from the writing of someone like Steve Chalke.

It is strange that Gumbel recommends Chalke, because they have totally different spirits; Steve Chalke is nowhere near evangelical: he speaks of penal substitution – that the penalty was laid on Christ and that He was the substitute for sinners and bore their punishment – as ‘cosmic child abuse.’ He suggests it would make God ‘a vengeful Father punishing His Son for an offence He has not even committed.’ That is totally antagonistic to the spirit of the Word of God, totally antagonistic to the spirit of the Gospel. But I have to say that Nicky Gumbel has a different spirit, and he seems to hold a very high view of Jesus Christ. Now you may say, ‘This is grand; this is exciting. We need courses to introduce us to the Bible and we need courses to introduce the unconverted to Jesus Christ.’ But we must examine Alpha to see if it is Scripturally sound.

In Acts 17 no less a person than the apostle Paul was in Berea, and he had a way of teaching that was most wonderful. At the start of the chapter, we are shown the method that Paul used. His manner was to go into the synagogue, and Acts tells us he ‘reasoned ... out of the scriptures.’ He explained the scriptures: he set his proposition before the Jewish people as to who the Messiah was, ‘opening and alleging, that Christ must needs have suffered.’ He went to the Old Testament, and when he spoke of Christ, they may not have perceived to whom he referred. They may have thought, ‘Christ? That is Messiah.’ The Hebrew word, *Messiah* is *Christos* in the Greek. So, those Jews in Thessalonica were hearing about the Messiah.

They accepted and believed that Messiah would come. Paul took the Old Testament and from scripture after scripture he showed that the Messiah must needs suffer and rise again from the dead. He set the necessity of His death and resurrection before the Thessalonians. The Jews thought the Messiah would come as a king, as a great general, and that like David He would lead them in battle and emancipate them from Roman dominion – a hated dominion. They had not understood their own scriptures about the Messiah. So Paul, Sabbath after Sabbath explained the scriptures, showing that the Messiah must die, that the Messiah must rise again, and thus he introduced them to the work of the cross, the shedding of blood. He could show the types with the blood of animals, and then he clinched it all by saying, ‘This Jesus, Whom I preach unto you, is Christ. He meets all the criteria. He is the One Who was born in Bethlehem as the Scriptures foretold; He was virgin-born; His life was sinless; He fulfilled Psalm 22, Zechariah 13:7, Isaiah 53. All that we see concerning the Messiah is fulfilled in Jesus Christ.’

That is what Paul preached in Thessalonica, and when there was opposition, he went to Berea and preached the same message. What did the people in Berea do? Well, they were very cautious. They did not say, ‘O, this is a great man, this is very impressive. We will just take him at his word because he seems to know what he is talking about.’ No, the Bible says, ‘They received the Word with all readiness of mind, and searched the scriptures daily, whether those things were so.’ They wanted to find it out, ‘Is this the truth or not? They wanted to know for certain.’ That really is the key for us. What about the Alpha Course? Are there nice, friendly people running it? Are there evangelicals running it? We do not say, ‘That is all right. Let us support it one hundred percent. It is reaching out to the lost, we have heard of people being converted. It is a great tool in evangelism, so we will use it.’ No, we have a greater duty, and that is to find out what it is all about and whether there are any problems.

A One-sided View of God

The first problem I identify is this: Alpha presents a one-sided view of God. It is very much focussed on the love of God. The love of God is absolutely scriptural. 1 John 4 verses 8 and 16 contain the words: ‘God is love’, and there is no greater love than the love of God. His heart is filled with love. In a sense, you and I know nothing about real love because we are sinful creatures; but God is love. If you want to know what true love is you find it in God. The God Who is almighty is a God of love. But love does not sum up God, if I can put it that way. There is so much more about God, whereas the whole thrust of the Alpha Course is the love of God: ‘God loves every one of you. God loves you so much He wants to be in a relationship with you.’ You know how it is if a young man falls in love with a young woman and she is not so keen on him. All he can do is dream about her and talk about her, and every day he thinks about her, and when he talks to his friends he describes her and tells how much he is in love with her. She does not want to know him. You know what you think: ‘Why does he not understand she is not interested?’ In a sense, that is the way Alpha speaks of God’s love. ‘God loves you so much, and God wants to be in a relationship with you’, as if God were the weak party and we were the party that plays what is called, ‘hard-to-get.’ It is true that by nature we are not interested in God. But the aspect of God’s character that is predominant in the Alpha Course is God so keen to have a relationship with us. It is vital to know that God is love, but according to the Shorter Catechism, which gives a very good definition, ‘God is a Spirit, infinite, eternal and unchangeable in His being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness and truth.’ God is a holy God, and that aspect is very much overlooked in Alpha. I am not saying that it is totally absent, but that it is overlooked. It is interesting that the Bible has more to say about the holiness of God than about the love of God.

God is a God of justice and judgment. If you read through Alpha you will not see the word ‘hell.’ In a sense, there is no hell in Alpha’s teaching. I know that people do not want to hear

about hell. John Blanchard wrote a book, *Whatever happened to Hell?* and he said that he did some research and discovered that very few people had any books about hell. He went to some ministers, and one minister said, 'I have a book on hell but I do not know where it is.' Hell is the absent subject from many pulpits. The devil does not want us to think about hell; he does not want preachers to preach about hell – but here is the paradox: Jesus Christ, Who is love, spoke about hell. Some have calculated that He spoke more about hell than He did about heaven. It was Jesus Christ Who spoke about the rich man and Lazarus. Lazarus died, was carried by the angels into Abraham's bosom. 'The rich man also died, and was buried; and in hell he lift up his eyes, being in torments.' That is a solemn subject, and it is a subject we cannot avoid. We cannot bury our heads in the sand and pretend that there is no hell; we cannot pretend that everybody is going to heaven. We cannot even take the idea that those who are never saved and do not have their sins forgiven will be annihilated. There are some people who teach annihilation – that the punishment for rejecting Christ is to be wiped out. We cannot hold to that because Christ said concerning Judas Iscariot, 'Good were it for that man if he had never been born.' If he had never been born he would not have existed, and non-existence would have been preferable for Judas. The Bible says, Judas 'went to his own place.' It is a fearful thought that there is a hell, but if we get a one-sided view of God and we just see God in terms of love, we forget about His justice, we forget about His holiness, we forget about His punishment of sin.

I obtained from the Internet something written by a Church of England curate (from the same denomination as Nicky Gumbel), Rev Tim Chapman, who serves at St Thomas's Church in Little Sheldon, Cambridgeshire. He has something to say concerning this fact that Alpha is one-sided in the way it presents God. He says, '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 in Scripture than God is love. Indeed the adjective used most frequently in Scripture to describe God is "holy." The God of the Bible is a God of holiness, Whose love is all the more remarkable in that it is bestowed upon wicked sinners. Indeed, when we remove the holiness of God we undermine the love of God. The Scriptures warn us that "it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God." Would those on the Alpha Course know this from the material they are presented with? I fear they would not. I have friends who respond by suggesting that while the course is weak on this, it is made up for in the follow-up courses to Alpha. It is my concern that while that may be the case (I have not been involved in any follow-up courses to comment), Alpha is intended to be a presentation of the Gospel that will bring people to faith. It can therefore be assumed that the Alpha material posits that people are best brought to faith without God's holiness and sovereign rule over the world being taught.' Now that was written by a man who used the Alpha Course and was not happy with it; and it was his vicar who asked him to write the appraisal from which I have just quoted. So the problem was identified by Tim Chapman. It is also identified by Chris Hand, in his detailed study on the Alpha Course.

When the holiness of God is undervalued, there is a defective view of sin and a defective view of hell. It is closed out of one's mind. If you do not have a right view of God all else will be off-centre. You must have your view of God right. That is so important. Remember the Shorter Catechism, which I quote again. In reply to the first question, 'What is the chief end of man?' the answer is, 'Man's chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy Him for ever.' We glorify God and enjoy Him when we come into a right relationship with Him. That is brought about by repentance for sin and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

So the first problem we have with Alpha is that it has a defective, one-sided view of God, and that is disastrous.

(To be continued)

