

# Problems With ALPHA

**Success Sells.** The *Alpha* Course, an introduction to Christianity launched by evangelical Anglicans in London, has been a huge success. The course is radically simple in its formula. It consists of 10 dinner meetings and what is sometimes called a "Holy Spirit weekend." Basic Bible lessons are presented in a witty, trendy way and discussed in a group setting.

*Alpha* aims to be non-denominational, and its success as an evangelizing tool is praised by Baptists, Catholics, and Lutherans, among many others. The ELCA Division for Congregational Ministries promotes *Alpha* and provides testimonials by ELCA pastors and laity about *Alpha's* effectiveness, and assures Lutherans that *Alpha* is "biblically sound and faithful to our confessional understanding" (Great Commission Congregations, Winter 2001, p.7).

On the one hand, given the enormous success of *Alpha*, it may seem petty to criticize it at all. There are good "Lutheran" sentences in the material. On the other hand, the program as a whole raises troublesome questions about how "biblically sound" *Alpha's* understanding of the gospel is. For example:

**1. Sin is not so Serious.** In theology as in medicine the correct diagnosis of a problem is crucial to identifying the right cure. The first problem with *Alpha* is that it underestimates the seriousness of sin. Sin is repeatedly "the things we do wrong" or "the things we know are wrong" (*Alpha Course Manual*, p.75) Apart from the bad we do, we are free and able to commit our lives to Jesus.

In fact, sin is so much more; it infects even our good works. As Luther often said, quoting Isaiah: "All our righteous deeds are filthy rags" (64:6). Sin is a power that ensnares us, catching us in its web so we cannot free ourselves. We cannot produce belief; we cannot escape sin.

**2. The Cross Fades.** Having misdiagnosed the human predicament, it's no surprise that *Alpha* misjudges the "cure" of the cross. To be sure, *Alpha* gets off to a good start. We are told that our greatest need is for forgiveness (*Why Jesus*, p.7), and that "by his death Jesus made it possible for us to be forgiven." (p.7) He "gave his life as a ransom" (p.12), "paid the ransom price to set us free" (p.12).

In spite of these claims, the cross doesn't function as

the heart of what it's all about. In the *Alpha* course the cross merely jump-starts the process of transformation. What reigns in center stage, instead, is experience, that is, experiencing the Holy Spirit and growing in holiness.

**3. *Alpha's* New Law: Be Filled with the Spirit.** Lessons 8, 9, and 10 – "Who is the Holy Spirit?" "What Does the Spirit Do?" and "How Can I Be Filled With the Spirit?" – form the climax to the fellowship that is fundamental to *Alpha* and illustrate the shift of emphasis away from the cross to a "renewal" experience of "the full power of the Spirit." The content of subsequent lessons, especially #11: "How Can I Resist Evil?" and #13: "Does God Heal Today?" provide further evidence of *Alpha's* appeal to experience, especially "renewal" experience.

A. Some have only "the 'pilot light' of the Spirit." According to *Alpha*, "Every Christian has the Holy Spirit, but not every Christian is filled with the Spirit" (Lesson #9). "Some Christians have only the 'pilot light' of the Holy Spirit... Others have the full power of the Spirit" (Lesson #10).

Five reasons this doesn't work: (1) Can the Spirit be quantified, measured, so some have little and others have more? (2) How do you know for sure when you have been "filled?" (3) How do you know if you are half or fully filled? (4) If an experience is exhilarating, is it evidence of the Spirit? (5) Since even Satan disguises himself an angel of light (2 Cor. 11:14), how do you know if you have been filled with the Holy Spirit or an imposter?

B. Using Texts Out of Context. *Alpha's* basis for asserting that not every Christian is filled with the Spirit is a misreading of Ephesians 5:18: "Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery. Instead, be filled with the Spirit." Here's 5:18b in context with 19:

"Instead, be filled with the Spirit, addressing one another in songs and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with all your heart, always and for everything giving thanks in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ to God the Father."

The context is the "walk" (Eph. 5:2, 15), how to conduct oneself; and how to be "filled with the Spirit" is explained by the 3 participles (addressing, singing, giving

thanks). The Ephesians are being given practical advice on conduct in worship; they are not being told they have only the pilot light of the Spirit and they need a "renewal" experience.

C. Spirituality You Can Experience. According to *Alpha* "filling with the Spirit rarely happens imperceptibly .... It will be obvious to others" (Lesson #10).

The problem is: Outside of the Word and sacraments there is no certainty. Experience is always mixed, ambiguous. There is nothing "obvious to others." There is no experience that gives certainty. The Christian life is not measurable; it is always by faith alone, as Luther taught.

D. The Push for Charismatic Experience. *Alpha* claims that the gift of tongues is a special mark of being filled with the Spirit. To be sure, speaking in tongues can be an exhilarating experience, but we must not lose sight of the fact that it can be duplicated by the devil (2 Cor. 11:14). Speaking in tongues is not unique to Christianity; it can be found in non-Christian religions and cults. No experience is unambiguous.

E. The Pressure to Achieve Emotional Highs. "We are to be continuously filled," says *Alpha* of experiencing the Spirit, referring once again to Ephesians 5:18 (Lesson #10). Kim Erickson, *Alpha* director at Hosanna! Lutheran in Lakeville, Minnesota, has said: "Believers can always know more and experience more of God." (*Metro Lutheran* 10/01, p.10).

The directive to continuously strive for and produce the experience of being filled leads to spiritual doubt and pride. Those who don't experience "filling" inevitably doubt God or themselves. Those who think they have the "full power of the Spirit" think they have "more" than other Christians. They regard others as having less, only the "pilot light" of the Spirit.

Contrary to *Alpha's* claim, the assurance of salvation does not come from any experience or experiences but solely from the cross and baptism into the death of Christ. The good news is that you don't have to experience anything special to be a Christian. If you feel warm and connected to people and larger purposes, wonderful, but don't lean on these experiences. When you feel empty or dead inside, remember that salvation

doesn't depend on your experience. Trust only in the promises of God.

4. **The Main Thing**. Church leaders often say that the gospel is the main thing, and no matter what controversies swirl around us the main thing is to keep the main thing the main thing. Sounds right? Wait a minute! What is the gospel? The gospel is that Jesus Christ died and rose again for you and me, and it is finished. This has real world consequences. Otherwise the gospel is mushy, sentimental love, being nice.

A. The **freedom** of the gospel is intrinsic to the gospel. Freedom is not an extra. For Lutherans the sole sufficiency of the cross cannot be tampered with because it frees us from sin, death, and the law. Some churches and renewal movements require (or imply you are lacking something if you don't have) the historic episcopate, the papacy, good works, a "renewal" experience – in addition to the gospel. These become a new law, our freedom is lost, and the gospel distorted.

B. Luther's way of **using the Bible** in terms of the cross alone, law and gospel, sin and grace, cannot simply be tacked on as an extra. Proof-texting cannot be used to take away the sole sufficiency of the cross. All of Scripture is to be read in light of Christ and his cross, and no proof-texting can be used to undermine the sole sufficiency of the cross. Additional requirements like renewal experiences, the historic episcopate, or good works, take away the freedom we have in the cross alone.

C. What about **the sacraments**? They are basic to what God does to bring salvation. Their minimal role in *Alpha* cannot be corrected by tacking on a lesson on sacraments. The Lord's Supper is never mentioned. Baptism, though briefly mentioned in Lesson #14, is not described as infant baptism. This is a telling omission because infant baptism is a model of how salvation comes to *all* of us: Salvation is God's doing. Through the Word and sacraments God claims us, creates faith, gives life. We cannot produce faith, add to it, verify, or guarantee it.

What's at stake in *Alpha* (and CCM) is "the main thing." *Alpha* is successful, popular; it produces results. But what a high price for success, popularity: distorting the gospel. Salvation is at stake.