

## **The Alpha Course**

An Evaluation from the Theological Perspective  
of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod  
December 2021

### ***History, Beliefs, Practices***

#### **Identity:**

Alpha is a study course that introduces participants to the Christian faith.

#### **Founder(s):**

Nicky Gumbel

#### **Statistics:**

According to the Alpha website, as of 2018 over 1.3 million people worldwide had participated in Alpha, with 29% of that number attending the Alpha Youth course. The course has been presented in 169 countries in 112 languages and offered by an estimated 30,000 churches and organizations.<sup>1</sup> Alpha courses have been held in many denominations, including Baptist, Lutheran and Roman Catholic churches. In 1993, Holy Trinity Brompton, Alpha's founding church, began an Alpha course in a British prison; the course is now used in 137 British prisons, as well as in prisons in 16 other countries, including the United States.

#### **History:**

The Alpha course began in 1979 at Holy Trinity Brompton, a Church of England parish in London. The course was originally a review course for church members, but in 1991, Nicky Gumbel, a member of the clergy at Holy Trinity, revised and expanded Alpha to teach unbelievers about the Christian faith. Alpha stands for "A—Anyone interested in finding out more about the Christian faith; L—Learning and Laughter; P—Pasta (eating together gives people the chance to know each other); H—Helping one another (small groups are used for discussion of issues raised during the lectures); A—Ask anything. No question is seen as too simple or too hostile."<sup>2</sup> Holy Trinity Brompton was also a center for the "Toronto Blessing," a charismatic movement of "holy laughter" and other spiritual manifestations that began in 1994 at the Airport Vineyard church in Toronto.

Alpha lesson topics cover the meaning of life and the truth of Christianity, Jesus' identity and His life, death and resurrection, faith, reading the Bible, prayer, God's guidance, the Holy Spirit, resisting evil, witnessing, healing, the Church and the Christian lifestyle. The Alpha course book,

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.alpha.org/global-impact/>, accessed July 22, 2021.

<sup>2</sup> Timothy C. Morgan, "The Alpha-Brits Are Coming," *Christianity Today*, February 9, 1998, at <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/1998/february9/8t2036.html>, accessed July 22, 2021.

*Questions of Life* by Nicky Gumbel, anticipates and answers questions that might be asked by unbelievers.

### **Texts:**

The Alpha course provides course manuals and video resources for participants and leaders. Additional books by Nicky Gumbel include *Who Is Jesus?* (2005), *Searching Issues: The Most Common Questions Encountered in the Search for Faith* (2011), *Is God A Delusion?* (2012) and *The Jesus Lifestyle* (2017). Other Alpha books are available on a variety of topics, including reading the Bible, the Holy Spirit, prayer and Christianity and science.

### **Beliefs and Practices:**

According to Alpha teachings, salvation is found only through faith in Jesus Christ: “We cannot earn God’s forgiveness, but Jesus Christ died on the cross so that we might be reconciled to God.”<sup>3</sup> Jesus alone “was the perfect sacrifice since He alone lived a perfect life. Jesus’ blood purifies us from all sin (1 John 1:17).”<sup>4</sup> Course participants are told that they must “open the door” to let Jesus into their lives. “Jesus will never force His way in. He gives us the freedom to choose.”<sup>5</sup> The course manuals include a “suggested prayer of commitment to Jesus Christ.”<sup>6</sup>

Alpha teaches that Scripture is the inspired Word of God. “The Bible is God’s love letter to us and its purpose is to bring us into relationship with Him—‘salvation through faith in Christ Jesus’ (2 Timothy 3:15).”<sup>7</sup> The Bible is “our supreme authority for what we believe and how we act.”<sup>8</sup>

The movement does affirm the Trinity, though does not discuss in detail the relationship between the three persons and one essence of the Triune God. Instead, it places a greater emphasis upon the third person of the Trinity and his work in the life of the Christian.<sup>9</sup> Concerning the Holy Spirit, Alpha explains, “Until we become Christians the Spirit’s work is primarily to convict us of our sin and our need for Jesus Christ, to convince us of the truth and to enable us to put our faith in Him (John 16:7-15).”<sup>10</sup> After conversion, the Holy Spirit lives in every Christian, but some Christians are said to have “only the ‘pilot light’ of the Holy Spirit in their lives. Others have the full power of the Spirit.”<sup>11</sup> Some people long for this filling of the Spirit while others are not sure if they want it, “in which case they do not really have a thirst.”<sup>12</sup> The Alpha course

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<sup>3</sup> Nicky Gumbel, *The Alpha Course Manual: A Practical Introduction to the Christian Faith* (Colorado Springs: Cook Ministry Resources, 1995), 17. This is a workbook with lesson outlines, Bible verses and space for notes by participants.

<sup>4</sup> Nicky Gumbel, *Questions of Life* (Naperville, IL: Alpha North America, 2016), 45.

<sup>5</sup> Gumbel, *Questions of Life*, 55.

<sup>6</sup> Gumbel, *Alpha Course Manual*, 75.

<sup>7</sup> Gumbel, *Alpha Course Manual*, 21.

<sup>8</sup> Gumbel, *Questions of Life*, 81.

<sup>9</sup> Gumbel, *Questions of Life*, 64, 105.

<sup>10</sup> Gumbel, *Questions of Life*, 117.

<sup>11</sup> Gumbel, *Alpha Course Manual*, 44.

<sup>12</sup> Gumbel, *Questions of Life*, 130.

book provides seven steps to follow if participants wish to be filled with the Spirit and receive the gift of tongues.<sup>13</sup> Tongues may be an earthly language previously unknown to the speaker or “a form of prayer which transcends the limitation of human language.”<sup>14</sup> Gumbel comments that not every Christian has to speak in tongues, and those who do not are not second-class Christians.

The Alpha course includes a lesson on miraculous healing today. The course book states, “Nowhere in the Bible does it suggest that healing was confined to any particular period of history. On the contrary, healing is one of the signs of the kingdom which was inaugurated by Jesus Christ and continues to this day.”<sup>15</sup> Although Gumbel comments that not every Christian has to speak in tongues, and those who do not are not second-class Christians, the gift of tongues seems to be as prominent in the course as belief in Jesus.

The new birth in Christ is linked to being filled with the Spirit, not to Baptism.<sup>16</sup> Alpha teaches that in Holy Communion “the bread and wine remind us of the broken body and shed blood of Jesus Christ on the cross” and symbolize Christian unity.<sup>17</sup>

New believers are encouraged to break with their past and make a new start as they follow Jesus. They are encouraged to offer their bodies, sexuality, time, ambitions and finances in sacrifice to God (Romans 12:1). Believers should not take an interest in horror movies, Ouija boards or palm readers. The Alpha course book states that marriage is the lifelong commitment between one man and one woman.<sup>18</sup>

### ***A Lutheran Response***

The Alpha course rightly teaches that salvation is found only through faith in Jesus Christ, whose death atoned for the sins of the world. There seems to be little emphasis on the need for repentance, although this is mentioned in the prayer of commitment in the course manual. Alpha instructs believers in living a lifestyle pleasing to God, although some critics have suggested that the course might be too easily adapted to conform with differing worldviews. For example, in 2000, an Episcopal church in California added an “Alpha for the Gay Community” to its usual course program.<sup>19</sup>

Alpha rightly teaches that Scripture is God’s inspired Word, although the course does not emphasize the work of the Spirit in the Word and water of Baptism or His work in enlightening people through the Gospel (Romans 1:16-17). According to Holy Scripture, Baptism with water in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit is a “washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit” (Titus 3:5). Jesus said, “Unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter

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<sup>13</sup> Gumbel, *Questions of Life*, 142-143.

<sup>14</sup> Gumbel, *Questions of Life*, 137.

<sup>15</sup> Gumbel, *Questions of Life*, 176.

<sup>16</sup> Gumbel, *Questions of Life*, 116.

<sup>17</sup> Gumbel, *Questions of Life*, 194.

<sup>18</sup> Gumbel, *Questions of Life*, 200.

<sup>19</sup> Latonya Taylor, “Evangelism: Adaptable Alpha Course Draws Praise and Worry,” *Christianity Today*, November 12, 2001, at <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2001/november12/14.27.html>, accessed July 23, 2021.

the kingdom of God” (John 3:5). The bread and wine of the Lord’s Supper do not merely symbolize or represent Jesus’ body and blood. Christ Himself is present in His holy Supper, as the apostle Paul writes, “The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ?” (1 Corinthians 10:16).

While the Alpha course places a special emphasis on the gift of tongues, the course correctly teaches that it is not necessary for every believer to speak in tongues. Concerning tongues and other gifts of the Spirit, *The Lutheran Church and the Charismatic Movement*, a report of the Commission on Theology and Church Relations (CTCR), states: “The gift of the Holy Spirit does not necessarily include extraordinary spiritual gifts. While Lutherans rejoice in the gracious promise that the gift of the Holy Spirit will be given to all generations of believers (Acts 2:39), neither the Scriptures nor the Lutheran Confessions support the view that this gift of the Spirit necessarily includes such extraordinary spiritual gifts as tongues, miracles, miraculous healings, and prophecy (1 Cor. 12).”<sup>20</sup>

Another CTCR report, *The Charismatic Movement and Lutheran Theology*, states that “the Christian church today will accept with joy and gratitude any gift that the Spirit in His grace may choose to bestow on us for the purpose of edifying the body of Christ ... It will take care lest it quench the Spirit by neither praying for nor expecting God's presence and power in building His church. But it will also take seriously the admonition of the apostle to “test the spirits to see whether they are of God, for many false prophets have gone out into the world.” (1 John 4:1; 1 Cor. 12:10) The church should seek the Holy Spirit and His gifts where God has promised them, in the Word and sacraments.”<sup>21</sup>

### ***Links and Websites***

*The Charismatic Movement and Lutheran Theology* (LCMS Commission on Theology and Church Relations, 1972)

<https://files.lcms.org/wl/?id=djwP88nkQWDXiZLIPN0507oxzBiMTITz>

*The Lutheran Church and the Charismatic Movement* (LCMS Commission on Theology and Church Relations, 1977)

<https://files.lcms.org/wl/?id=mgp2Q1pQW0DOPvFpughLzrDf771T7Jb>

*Spiritual Gifts* (LCMS Commission on Theology and Church Relations, 1994)

<https://files.lcms.org/wl/?id=qgB7EujDeowjVhScYSRn7KDKYg3Qn10R>

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<sup>20</sup> *The Lutheran Church and the Charismatic Movement* (LCMS Commission on Theology and Church Relations, 1977), 8.

<sup>21</sup> *The Charismatic Movement and Lutheran Theology* (LCMS Commission on Theology and Church Relations, 1972), 28-29.