The Alpha Program: Charismatic Evangelism for the Contemporary Age

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Introduction

British Christianity has stumbled across the big idea that has eluded it for most of its feeble Decade of Evangelism. It is not so much a big idea, as a small one brilliantly executed. Its popularity owes little to mission strategies or the thaumaturgical extravagances of the Toronto Blessing. Its milieu is mundane and domestic.¹

The extract above is the observation of a leading secular media reporter on religious affairs in the UK. It is a telling quote that puts the increasingly popular Alpha program in perspective—one that denotes its Charismatic roots, its innovatory strategies, and its mass appeal in Christian churches.

A simple depiction of the Alpha program is that of a unique evangelizing course designed specifically for the contemporary age, and one that advertises itself as “a ten week practical introduction to the Christian faith.” The founders of Alpha have set it out as a project constructed to present the simple principles of Christianity in a relaxed and informal environment to those enquiring about the faith. There is the opportunity to discover, as the Alpha program advertising poster proclaims, whether or not Christianity really is “Boring, Untrue and Irrelevant.” Alpha also attempts to reach those already convinced but who wish to refresh their faith or desire to go further in their Christian journeying. The Alpha course, then, is multifaceted. To some degree this accounts for its success. Yet, there are other explanations too, since Alpha marks an accumulation of the lessons learned within charismatically inclined evangelical quarters over several decades, and the development of techniques that make use of sociological, psychological, and business organization insights.

Over the last few years Alpha has constituted a vast enterprise of evangelism, one informed by Charismatic theology and praxis. The endeavor, which began in the UK, has been supported by tens of thousands of others.

¹ Damien Thompson, The Times, 2 February 1998.
across the world, representing practically all denominations and traditions. This paper seeks to explore the wider context of Alpha, namely, its Charismatic emphasis and the thinking that has gone into the program over a number of years. It seeks to survey the content and working philosophy of Alpha, consider a number of the controversies that surround it, and attempts to measure its success by various criteria. The findings reported in this paper are based on a nation survey of Alpha among churches of various denominations in the UK.

Alpha’s International Appeal

Alpha has to be put in historical perspective. As an evangelizing enterprise it proved to be a rather late contribution to the so-called “Decade of Evangelism” of the 1990s in UK churches. It followed two large-scale evangelizing campaigns that were inspired largely by Charismatic/Pentecostal groupings. “The Jesus in Me” (JIM) campaign was instigated by the Elim Pentecostal denomination, while “From Minus to Plus” was the idea of the South African evangelist Reinhard Bonnke. Both campaigns turned aside from the large-scale soul-winning crusade and placed a greater emphasis on distributing booklets and persuading people to pay a visit to their local church. Both were, for the most part, monumental failures.

In September 1998, over 4,000 churches came together to launch the first £1 million so-called national Alpha initiative in the UK. Alpha seemed to display certain advantages that earlier initiatives lacked. Not least of these was its emphasis on group dynamics and the opportunities it offered to know more about the faith through discussion and questioning. To be sure, the program had been in existence for several years. By the end of the 1990s, however, Alpha moved to center stage in UK Charismatic churches, promoted by its founders at Holy Trinity in Brompton, London (more colloquially known as HTB). Towards the end of 1998 nearly 2,000 billboards were posted in towns and cities nationwide, while advertising space was taken out in hundreds of national and local newspapers. This was the first national initiative aimed at bringing the program to saturation point in order to enhance a greater public awareness of what Alpha amounted to.