

What are Alpha Groups, and are They Legitimate?

by Robert Sungenis

If you haven't seen it already, you may soon. Alpha is coming to town, dressed in a big red suit and shaking from laughter like a bowl full of jelly, and he's going to find out who wants to be naughty, not nice.

As they have done for the past forty years, liberal Catholics, entrenched in the chanceries and academic institutions of America, are attempting to distance themselves from the historic and distinctive teachings of the Catholic Church. Their latest venture is "Alpha," a parish-level spiritual program that falls somewhere on the spiritual Richter scale between engrams and Renew 2000.

Under the guise of ecumenism, Alpha seeks to break down Catholic/non-Catholic barriers by subtly circumventing established Catholic doctrine; rather than, as true ecumenism should be taught, highlighting the basic points of agreement between Catholics and non-Catholics. As such, Alpha is merely another attempt by Catholic liberals to distort Vatican II's teachings.

It is no surprise that Alpha's founders are Protestants. Most of them are associated with the Toronto Blessing group -- the notorious Pentecostal revival gatherings initiated a few years ago which featured such oddities from the participants as uncontrolled laughter, animal-like noises (e.g., barking, oinking, howling, etc), and uncontrolled bodily gyrations, all in the name of Christ and spirituality.

In their continual fraternizing with the aberrations of Protestants, many of today's bishops and priests have given their allegiance to both the Toronto Blessing and the Alpha curriculum. Due to declining numbers in their churches, they have resorted to Alpha techniques to give their churches a "shot in the arm," and it has increased their numbers substantially.

Unfortunately, these same clerics have failed to understand why their numbers have been declining in the first place -- they haven't been teaching the Gospel at their churches. Instead, they have been teaching a pseudo-gospel of wood, hay and straw, and yet are so surprised when people don't respond to it. They turn the Eucharist into a symbol and celebration instead of a sacrifice for sins; they employ songs with hardly a smidgen of doctrinal content; they turn homilies into liberal social propaganda instead of exegetical commentaries on the weekly Scripture readings; they hardly ever say a word against divorce, contraception, abortion, homosexuality, pornography, and other social sins; they never preach about Hell and judgment; they teach the wisdom of the world and encourage people to seek for miracles. In short, they are doing precisely what Paul warned against in 1 Corinthians 1-4 -- they are preaching a gospel devised by man, not God. And since they have sowed the wind, they are now going to reap the whirlwind (Hosea 8:7).

The Alpha course designer, a Rev. Nicky Gumbel, asserts in the book *Questions of Life*: "I believe it is no coincidence that the present movement of the Holy Spirit has come at the same time as the explosion of the Alpha course. I think the two go together." Rev. Gumbel's reference

to "the present movement of the Holy Spirit" is to the Pentecostal Toronto Blessing of the 1990's -- one of the most irreverent, blasphemous and obnoxious endeavors in human "spirituality" ever to hit planet earth.

One person who has studied the Alpha program from the inside is Gillian Van Der Lande. When asked about whether the program adhered to Catholic teaching, she reported in *Christian Order* (1999):

"As a Catholic who has participated in full in an Alpha course in a Catholic parish and who has viewed, read, and studied the course materials, my short answer to the above question is an unequivocal No. The reason for this is twofold. Firstly, by commission and omission, the Alpha material proposes an ecclesiology and a sacramental theology contrary in essence to the teaching of the Church. Secondly, the underlying principle of the methodology used in the small group discussion held after each of the 15 Alpha video sessions, acts against the principle of religious freedom upheld by the Church. The questions are formatted in such a way as to elicit responses from subjective criteria alone. This does not respect and protect the right of participants to freely answer and clarify points from the objective criteria of the Church's teaching when the need arises. Thus, in effect, it silences that teaching and encourages the Alpha 'magisterium' to stand, develop, and be absorbed....On the question of sacraments, Alpha is seriously deficient from a Catholic point of view. There is only recognition of Baptism and the Eucharist explicitly."

Evidence of this is clear. In the book written by Rev. Gumbel it states: "Teaching on the sacraments is limited, in the sense that we only teach in Alpha what all the major denominations and traditions are agreed about."

This kind of teaching, of course, is an abomination in the sight of God. Vatican II never taught such things. The Catholic Church is to be the leader of the spiritual world. She is to show the other churches and religious groups what true spirituality is, which includes teaching them about all the sacraments and their meaning, as well as all other Catholic doctrine. Ecumenism occurs when we point out places where our faith and the faith of non-Catholic churches intersect, but it should never involve the watering down of Catholic doctrine so that it becomes more "Protestant" and thus more acceptable to the separated brethren.

In accord with its de-Catholicizing agenda, however, Alpha seeks to neutralize the ordained office of the Catholic priest. Gumbel advocates a thoroughly Protestant conception of the priesthood, that is, "the priesthood of all believers" (*Questions of Life*, p. 230). The Catholic priests who are presently heading up Alpha groups are considered leaders, but without the accompanying teaching that they are uniquely qualified to offer the Catholic sacraments and teach historic Catholic doctrine. It is no surprise the Alpha eliminates the word "sacrifice" from any mention of the Mass.

Alpha also teaches that Baptism is merely the means by which someone becomes "a member of the Church....a visible sign of what it means to be a Christian....it signifies cleansing from sin, dying, and rising with Christ to a new life and the living water which the Holy Spirit bring to our

lives" (*Questions of Life*, p. 221). Essentially, then, Alpha destroys the historic Catholic teaching on Baptism, which regards it not merely as a sign, but a sign that does what it signifies. That is, Baptism is the means by which God infuses grace and washes away Original Sin. Baptism is salvation, not merely a sign of salvation. As taught by Alpha, there is no difference between Catholic baptism and the baptism offered by Baptists, Presbyterians or Methodists.

Of course, we wouldn't expect the Blessed Virgin Mary to have any part in the Alpha program either. True to form, She is eliminated from any mention in the course curriculum. There is also an implicit rejection of Marian dogma, especially the Immaculate Conception and the Assumption.

Last but not least, one of Alpha's main attractions is the emphasis on speaking in tongues. Taking its cue from the Toronto Blessing, Alpha depends heavily on manifestations of glossalalia in order to give the movement a certain other-worldliness; the impression that it is coming directly from God and by-passing the normal channels by which God works in the Church. As is common in such groups, pressure is put on the participant to seek the gift of tongues, and if they do not, then they are subtly ostracized.

Van Der Lande writes: "...people are told to pray and ask for this gift according to a certain format." As Rev. Gumbel says in his book, *Telling Others*: "Open your mouth and start to praise God in any language but English or any other language known to you and believe that what you receive is from God. Don't let anyone tell you that you made it up" (p. 147). The leaders are asked to pray for people to receive the gift of tongues "not because it is the most important gift but because the Alpha course is a beginner's course and the gift of tongues is a beginner's gift...Both in the Bible and in experience it is often the first obviously supernatural gift of the Spirit which people receive" (Gumbel, p. 129).

Gumbel's teaching is the typical mixture of truth and error common among groups that push tongues and other spectacular manifestations (including the mimicking of animal sounds and falling backward by being "slain in the Spirit"). On the one hand, Gumbel's Alpha program gives the appearance of wisdom by issuing various disclaimers regarding their pursuit of tongues and miracles; on the other hand, in actual practice, such pursuits are vigorously directed and constantly emphasized as if they WERE the most important things in the Church. In some parishes where Alpha is presently being taught, sacraments are withheld from those who refuse to participate in the course.

The heresy of Alpha seems to be growing by leaps and bounds. In 1998, Alastair Emblem, writing in the article: "Alpha: The Start of Something Big?" for the Catholic Charismatic movement in the United Kingdom stated:

"One of the most outstanding signs of revival is the Alpha course, a ten-week introduction to basic Christianity which is growing so fast and wide that it is difficult to grasp the true extent of its impact...In addition, the growth in international courses is now starting to follow the same explosive pattern. In 1997 there were 1,200 international courses running, and currently there are at least 67 countries running Alpha, including Russia and many other former Communist countries in Eastern Europe...What is behind all the impressive statistics? Essentially, nothing

new -- in fact at heart it is exactly the same as happened at the beginning of the Church: the proclamation of the Gospel, the Good News of Jesus Christ. The essential message of Christianity is presented in a clear, compelling, and vibrant way which makes it accessible and relevant to the needs of the 20th century."

Although Emblem touts this movement as a worldwide blessing of God, its underlying goal to neutralize all distinctive Catholic doctrine, and its undue emphasis on tongues and miraculous phenomenon, shows that it is nothing but a worldwide deception orchestrated at the highest levels. Unfortunately, the teaching of Protestant Pentecostal sects has been allowed to seep into Catholic Churches ever since the 1960's, all in the name of ecumenism, but it is a false ecumenism, a total distortion of the teachings of Vatican II. It is a blatant attempt to create a new breed of Christian -- a Protestant/Catholic hybrid -- who is anti-traditional and anti-doctrinal. This hybrid Christian claims he loves Christ, but in reality he really loves himself, and those who help promote the extraordinary power he envisions for himself. He is in love with the miracles he can perform at will, especially tongues-speaking. Religion is at his command and there is no need to be directed by the traditional regimens of yesteryear. He is free and he is happy. In reality, however, he is in the most cleverly disguised bondage the Devil has ever devised.

The Toronto Blessing and the Alpha curriculum are anything but a movement of the Holy Spirit. They are, as Jesus warned, examples of a wicked and spiritually adulterous generation (Matthew 12:39). As Paul warned, they are examples of the devil coming into the Church masquerading as an angel of light (2 Corinthians 11:14-15); seeking to deceive people by appearing very spiritual (Matthew 24:24; Revelation 13:13-14). After the initial enthusiasm and spiritual-high wears off, there will be nothing but despair and judgment in its wake. Do not be deceived.

For more on Tongues and other associated phenomenon, especially with regard to how such manifestations are predicted in Scripture as a sign of apostasy, please read our article "Speaking in Tongues: A Historical, Psychological and Biblical Analysis"