

## EVALUATING THE “ALPHA COURSE” – IS IT OF GOD?

INTRODUCTION – It is said that the founder of the Alpha Course is Nick Gumbel. His full name is Nicholas Glyn Paul Gumbel. His father was a German Jewish lawyer from Suttgart during the early days of Nazi Germany. The family migrated to Britain and Nick’s father became a successful barrister in their new homeland. Nick’s mother, Murial, was quite successful in her own right. She served on the Greater London Council for many years between 1967 and 1986 and was Mayor of the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea. Nick Gumbel was an avowed atheist until his conversion while studying at Trinity College in Cambridge. He read through the New Testament and said that he had found what he had been looking for all his life. After graduating in law in 1976 (born in 1955) he followed in his father’s career and practiced law. Meanwhile he became a regular worshipper at Holy Trinity Brompton Church at Knightsbridge. In 1982 he announced his decision to leave the bar to train for ordination in the Church of England. In 1983 he began his theological studies at Wycliffe Hall in Oxford. After some difficulty in finding a curacy, Nick joined the staff of his ‘home’ church of Holy Trinity Brompton in London as a curate in 1986. He was ordained priest in 1987. He was officially installed as vicar of the church in 2005. He was awarded an honorary doctorate by the University of Gloucestershire as recognition of his contribution to the wider church via the Alpha Course. [[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nicky\\_Gumbel](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nicky_Gumbel)]

Nick Gumbel did not start the Alpha Course. Alpha Course was already in existence in his local church when he became the curate of the church. However when he arrived he developed and transformed it and popularized it to its present global status. [[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nicky\\_Gumbel](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nicky_Gumbel)] As such he is attributed as the founder of the Alpha Course. In this manner, he is considered the "founder" of the present Alpha Course.

- **The Content of the Alpha Course** – It is good to know the person’s background in order to know his teachings. They are quite related to one another especially when it comes to the understanding of God’s holy and precious Word. The person's theological background and associations, especially present day associations, will reveal quite a lot about the person and his teachings in light of God's Truth.

**Evaluating the tract "Why Jesus?"** – Alpha Course has to be evaluated against the Word of God and not any denomination. This is the just way. Nick Gumbel wrote a book called "Why Jesus?" which is supposed to be a tract on evangelism. The main emphasis of the tract is the love of God. It contains enough "biblical truths" like the love of God and the quotation of a few Bible verses such as John 3:16 to make it look like a Bible tract about salvation. It is logically presented in terms of progression of thought. Gumbel began by saying that to be a Christian is to have a relationship with God. He continues with why we need God. He says that man has an emptiness inside him and nothing can fill this emptiness except God. God satisfies man's hunger for the meaning and purpose in life; man's hunger for life beyond death; man's hunger for forgiveness. The problem with Gumbel's approach is that he seems to be afraid of using the word "SIN." He did quote Romans 6:23 where the word "sin" is mentioned but Gumbel does not use the word "sin" at all. He circumvents the usage of the word "sin" well by substituting it with the word "wrong." That Jesus came to die for man's sins is what the Bible teaches. There is no other way to begin the gospel than the fact that all men are sinners. All mankind are not just sinners but totally depraved sinners unable to save themselves. The fact that Gumbel shied away from using the word "sin" is sufficient to charge him with preaching another gospel. But

because he used the word "wrong" to replace the word "sin", it is hard to actually charge him for preaching a false gospel. He has definitely diluted the gospel to the point of making it palatable to all. This is more dangerous than preaching the false health and wealth gospel of the Charismatics which is obviously false; whereas Gumbel's gospel in his Alpha Course is very subtly erroneous. If one is not careful and accepts the "Christ" of Gumbel, one will end up thinking one is saved when in reality it is most likely not so.

It is also obvious that Gumbel omitted to mention Hell as the final destiny of all who die in their sins without Christ. How important is the mention of Hell in the presentation of the gospel? Jesus says in **Mark 9:43-48** (KJV), *"And if thy hand offend thee, cut it off: it is better for thee to enter into life maimed, than having two hands to go into hell, into the fire that never shall be quenched: 44 Where their worm dieth not, and the fire is not quenched. 45 And if thy foot offend thee, cut it off: it is better for thee to enter halt into life, than having two feet to be cast into hell, into the fire that never shall be quenched: 46 Where their worm dieth not, and the fire is not quenched. 47 And if thine eye offend thee, pluck it out: it is better for thee to enter into the kingdom of God with one eye, than having two eyes to be cast into hell fire: 48 Where their worm dieth not, and the fire is not quenched."* [Emphasis added] The beginning of every genuine salvation is the poverty of spirit which can only come about when sin and death and Hell are clearly explained. That is why the apostle Paul spent three long chapters (Romans 1-3) to demonstrate convincingly that all have sinned and come short of the glory of God! Gumbel failed to do this from the onset of his lengthy tract.

Gumbel's presentation of Christ is also very lacking. The virgin birth of Christ and Christ's perfection as the God-Man was not explained. There was no Bible verse to substantiate his explanation of Christ's deity and resurrection. The words of men like C S Lewis and Lord Darling, the Chief Justice of England, were used instead. No matter how "great" men might be, their words can never be a substitute for the perfect Word of God. Without explaining that Christ was the perfect man, how could Gumbel explain that Jesus was the most qualified to die for anyone? Gumbel's message of salvation in Christ has fallen short of the Bible's standard. Furthermore, he failed to emphasize that it is by believing in Jesus Christ only that saves and to add good works or the traditions of man or the church to this fact is totally false.

Gumbel's explanation of the "freedom" that comes with believing in Christ includes: freedom from guilt, from addiction and from fear. He failed to mention the most important aspect of "freedom" that believing in Christ will avail the believer, which is freedom from the bondage of sin, death and Hell. The Bible says in **Romans 6:23** (KJV), *"For the wages of sin is death; but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord."*

According to Gumbel, after "salvation" the "believer" is free to know God; to love; and to change. Gumbel's explanation of the freedom to know God is not too far off from the Bible in that he says "the things we do wrong cause a barrier between us and God: 'your iniquities have separated you from your God' (Isaiah 59:2). When Jesus died on the cross he removed the barrier that existed between us and God. As a result he has made it possible for us to have a relationship with our Creator. We become his sons and daughters. The Spirit assures us of this relationship and he helps us to get to know God better. He helps us to pray and to understand God's word (the Bible)." [page 12] Based upon what Gumbel says, it appears to be correct. However, what is most lacking is the mention of "SIN" and that believers have died to sin with Christ and that HOLINESS is the key and the most important for believers in Christ who transforms every believer. It is the subtle mixture of error by omission mixed with a dosage of truth that makes Gumbel's gospel so appealing to the Charismatics, neo-evangelicals and the Roman Catholics. A person is given the notion that he has a relationship with God but on his

own terms, still retaining his old self with a superficial outward change that is nothing more than a man-centered positive thinking psychological delusion with no eternal value.

- **The Association of the Alpha Course** – Just because the Roman Catholics use the Alpha Course does not make it a good enough reason to condemn a course. It is enough to sound out some bells in the believer's head as warning signs that a man-centered religion would approve a course that is supposed to be "God-centered." The testimony of the founder speaks for itself. "In a 2012 interview with the Catalyst ministry at Willow Creek Church, Gumbel stated, 'Alpha runs in every arm of the Church. It's growing the fastest in the Catholic church. There are a billion Catholics in the world—many in Latin America, and in France where 99% are Catholic. But the course runs exactly the same no matter the denomination. In Alpha, we stick to the foundational pieces of the Christian faith we all agree upon: Jesus, the cross, the resurrection, the Bible, prayer. What unites us is infinitely greater than what divides us. We focus on what unites us. We present a united front to the world. In every different part of the body of Christ—Presbyterian, Baptist, Lutheran, non-denominational, Catholic, Pentecostals, Bulgarian Orthodox, Coptic Orthodox—Alpha crosses all divides. No matter the church, Alpha sticks to the same key ingredients: food, a presentation of the gospel, and talking. The gospel is unchanging. It's the power of God. The key part of Alpha's success is the work of the Holy Spirit. We're still not sure why Alpha works. But it does.'" [<http://apprising.org/2013/01/08/nicky-gumbel-tells-alpha-course-attendees-go-back-to-your-catholic-parish/>] Does Gumbel not know that what divides the Roman Catholics and true believers is a gap that is as wide as the chasm between heaven and hell? Roman Catholics believe in the gospel of the Bible PLUS the traditions of the church. The true believers of the Lord Jesus Christ believe that only Jesus saves and what Jesus did on the cross for all believers was all that was needed to save sinners to the uttermost. To add traditions or good works to the mixture of the gospel message transforms the gospel message into a false gospel. There is no compromise to this truth! Gumbel either does not know this truth or does. If he does, greater would be his condemnation to "hide" this and allow such a crucial understanding of God's Word to be deliberately omitted to the danger and detriment of the naïve and undiscerning souls who read and believe the "half" gospel of Gumbel!

Michael J Penfold observed rightly when he warned, "Shockingly, Gumbel never explains that good works cannot save. As a Church of England Curate, he well knows that the average Anglican or Catholic *Alpha* attendee is trusting in christening, baptism, confession, Mass attendance, church membership, confirmation and good deeds to get them to heaven. Does Gumbel address this crucial issue? Tragically no – not even a single paragraph explaining the difference between 'grace' and 'works'. Gumbel never expounds the foundational truth of salvation 'by faith *alone*, through grace *alone*, in Christ *alone*'. This is no doubt one reason why the Roman Catholic Church finds *Alpha* so acceptable. Catholic Bishop Ambrose Griffiths commends *Alpha* for being a "*powerful evangelistic tool...it doesn't contain anything that is contrary to Catholic doctrine.*" Thousands of Roman Catholics have completed *Alpha*, said the sinner's prayer, received the 'spirit' and spoken in tongues, without ever realising that the rosary, prayers to Mary, confession to a priest and the seven Romish sacraments are all unscriptural 'good works', that not only play no part in salvation, but are an abomination to God. What appreciation have Catholic *Alpha*-goers gained of the once-for-all sacrifice of Lord Jesus, if they continue to have part in the sacrifice of the Mass and the idolatrous works-dominated system of Rome after 'making a commitment' on *Alpha*? Interestingly, Gumbel has admitted that the

sections in *Questions of Life* about baptism and holy communion were carefully scripted to enable them to be used by Roman Catholics and evangelicals alike. In February 2004, after shaking hands with the Pope in the Papal Audience Centre in the Vatican, Gumbel said, “*It was a great honour to be presented to Pope John Paul II, who has done so much to promote evangelisation around the world...what unites us is infinitely greater than what divides us.*” *Alpha News*, March-June 2004, p. 7. [[http://www.webtruth.org/articles/what-is-the-gospel-21/the-gospel-according-to-gumbel-\(the-alpha-course\)-40.html](http://www.webtruth.org/articles/what-is-the-gospel-21/the-gospel-according-to-gumbel-(the-alpha-course)-40.html)]

**CONCLUSION** – The recipient of the gospel of Jesus Christ will walk along the narrow path all the days of his life on the earth until he arrives at the narrow gate that opens to eternal life. The one who says he believes in Christ and walks the broad way all the days of his earthly sojourn will enter the broad gate that leads to everlasting death and condemnation in the fires of hell that quenches not. Writing a tract or booklet on salvation is not a trivial matter and definitely not a joke! If it is written in a manner that presents a distorted message of salvation, those who read and believe such a message will be damned on the Day of judgement when they die. They will not enter heaven but will find themselves in hell for eternity! Sadly and tragically, Gumbel has tampered with the gospel message by the tract that he wrote entitled "Why Jesus?" He might mean well and might sincerely want as many as possible to believe in Christ but diluting the gospel message, hence changing the message entirely in the process, is not the way. In fact, Gumbel has done more harm than good by his Alpha Course, i.e. if the tract "Why Jesus" is a true and accurate representation of Gumbel's overall theology and presentation of the gospel. Those who have embraced Gumbel's gospel and brand of theology must stop immediately and warn others who use or endorse or subscribe to the Alpha Course. The Alpha Course deludes a sinner into thinking that he has a relationship with God but in reality he is still an enemy of God. The Alpha Course is not the beginning of a new life in Christ but sadly it is the alpha (beginning) of the end. The sinner must reject the Alpha Course and turn to only Jesus Christ, who is the Alpha and the Omega, and surrender to Him and accept Him as his Lord and Saviour, according to the Scriptures. The sinner cannot accept Christ on his own terms and be transformed by the power of the Holy Spirit into a saint. That can only happen on God's terms. Gumbel's presentation of the gospel falls far short of God's biblical standard. Amen.