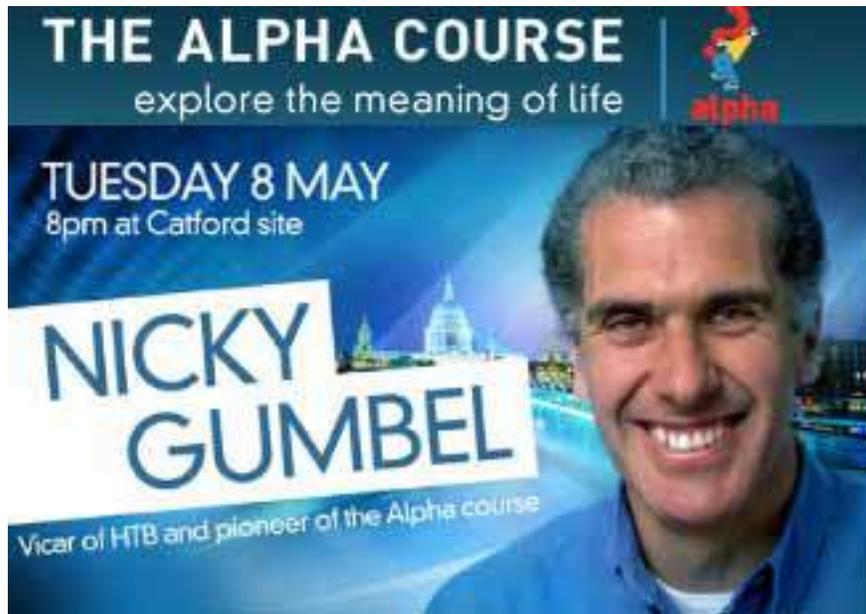


## THE ALPHA COURSE: THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO NICKY GUMBEL

By Rev. Ken Silva, Southern Baptist pastor-teacher, Jan 23, 2013



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Unless you've been living under a rock for the last 15 years, you will at least have heard of *The Alpha Course*. Written by ex-Barrister turned Anglican Curate Nicky Gumbel, it styles itself as a friendly, fun and non-threatening 'practical introduction to the Christian faith'. Summarised in Gumbel's best-selling book *Questions of Life*, *Alpha* involves people attending fifteen 40 minute talks, spread over ten weeks.

In line with Gumbel's theology and church affiliation (Holy Trinity Church of England, Brompton), *Alpha* is fully ecumenical<sup>1</sup> and thoroughly charismatic in content. Three of the fifteen talks centre on the Holy Spirit – including a primer on 'tongues' – with another entirely dedicated to 'healing'. Only two talks focus on Jesus Christ, with none at all on God the Father. Literally millions of people have completed the course, which is currently running in thousands of churches worldwide, Protestant and Catholic.<sup>2</sup> The format, with its social meals, 'weekend away' and opportunity for small-group discussion after each session, have helped ensure its continuing popularity as a major medium for modern church evangelism.

*Alpha's* actual 'gospel' content is minimal. Talk one is about the meaning of life and the relevance of Christianity. Talk two presents historical evidence for the reliability of the Bible as a true record of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. From talk four onwards, *Alpha* treats the audience as if it were Christian and deals with topics such as assurance, the will of God and prayer. That leaves talk three, entitled 'Why Did Jesus Die?', as the only direct gospel section in the whole course. From this chapter, the 'gospel according to Gumbel' can be summarized as follows:

- The root cause of sin is a broken relationship with God.
- Everyone has done bad things and consequently our lives are in a mess.
- Sin has polluted us and will ultimately lead to eternal isolation from God.
- God loves us and longs to restore our lost relationship with Him.
- In Christ, God self-substituted Himself, paying sin's penalty on the cross.
- To become Christians and receive all the benefits of the cross, we must pray to God, saying sorry for our wrong-doing, thanking Jesus for dying for us and asking Him to come into our lives and fill us with His Spirit.<sup>3</sup>

Although Gumbel mentions sin over thirty times in talk three, he presents it almost entirely as something people *do*, omitting an explanation of what people *are* by nature. People do what they do because they are what they are. *They sin because they are sinners*. Yet, apart from writing 'Gen 3' in brackets at one point, Gumbel skips any exposition of the doctrine of original sin – how sin entered the world through our first parents' rebellion in the garden of Eden ([Rom 5:12-19](#)). His audience is not informed that by Adam's disobedience all have been constituted sinners. No *Alpha* attendee learns that they were therefore conceived in sin and born with a depraved principle of evil permeating their very nature ([Psa 51:5](#), [Eph 2:3](#), [Isa 48:8](#), [Psa 58:3](#), [Gen 8:21](#), [John 3:6](#), [Rom 7:18](#)).

A mere 45 minutes after commencing a humorous evangelical presentation, one which omits half of the doctrine of man's depravity, Gumbel invites his millions of viewers to pray a prayer saying 'sorry for sin' and asking Jesus to come into their lives. Yet, in reality, the dire need of his audience has never really been exposed. They may willingly say a very earnest and

sincere ‘sorry’ to God for all their wrong doings, without ever having understood by the convicting power of the Spirit through God’s word, that they are by nature incurably bad, unfit for heaven and undeserving of grace and mercy, while the just wrath of a holy and righteous God hangs over their head.

Gumbel does touch on self-righteousness, but his ‘wife, car and exam jokes’ are so numerous and distracting that the force and seriousness of this sin – which has damned more people than most other sins combined – is not pressed home. Thus while many audience members may confess in a prayer, even with tears, that they are sorry for their sins, since they have never had their depravity scripturally exposed, their refined and cultured souls would quickly rise up in anger were a faithful preacher to really press them as to their true lost and helpless condition (by nature), and show them that every good (even religious) thought, word and deed in their entire life has amounted to nothing more than filthy rags in God’s sight ([Isa 64:6](#)).

Gumbel is clearly anxious neither to come over as too ‘heavy’ nor to unduly disturb his audience about their sinfulness. Anything serious he says about sin is quickly followed by a joke or a witty one-liner. A master of positive body language, Gumbel never frowns, even managing a full-teethed grin when speaking of the judgment of God. Sins of omission never receive a mention, despite the greatest sin in the Bible being something a sinner does *not* do ([Matt 22:36-38](#)). Again, Gumbel neglects to emphasize that every single sin is *against God* and constitutes an act of rebellion ([Psa 51:4](#)). Many sincere people are deeply upset about their sins, who have never once realised that their sin is against God and that their depraved nature is like a clenched fist before heaven’s throne.

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.*"<sup>4</sup> 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.<sup>5</sup> 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.*"<sup>6</sup>

Gumbel's treatment of sin's consequences is so brief and cryptic that most listeners probably do not hear it, never mind grasp the solemnity of what is at stake. On the video Gumbel never mentions the word 'hell' nor warns his audience to flee from the wrath to come. *Alpha* mentions 'eternal isolation from God', but for those 'in the know', this clever phrase allows for Gumbel's seriously erroneous belief in the eventual *annihilation* of all who die in their sins.<sup>7</sup>

Despite majoring on the Holy Spirit, Gumbel never mentions His work of convicting of sin ([John 16:8](#)). But what is conviction of sin? Few Christians can define this vital theological term and even less can discern when it is present. Conviction of sin is not:

- the ordinary smiting of a guilty conscience
- a mere head knowledge of what the Bible says about sin
- a shallow acknowledgement that "*I've made a lot of mistakes.*"
- a mere fear of going to hell
- even an admission of sin (Pharoah, Saul, Balaam and Judas all said "*I have sinned.*" and went to hell).

True Holy Spirit conviction is a *proper sense of the dreadfulness of one's sinnership and sin against God* ([Psa 51:4](#), [Lu 15:18](#)). It is when a person inwardly feels and owns the wickedness and rebellion of their depraved heart. A stranger to conviction is a stranger to repentance; and a stranger to

repentance must be a stranger to salvation for, “*Unless you repent you will all perish*” ([Lu 13:5](#)). Which raises another term that is little understood throughout evangelicalism, namely repentance. Gumbel gives it one brief mention, also using the synonym ‘turn’ a couple of times – but he neither develops nor emphasizes this vital theme. Repentance was John the Baptist and the Lord Jesus’ first spoken word in public ministry ([Matt 3:1](#), [Mk 1:15](#)). Paul defined the very gospel itself as ‘repentance and faith’, and summarized the message he had preached throughout his entire life as simply, “*repent and turn to God*” ([Acts 20:21](#), [26:20](#)). But theological terms need to be defined carefully. Repentance is not:

- Penance or restitution
- Mere tears and trembling ([Acts 24:25](#))
- Fear of judgment. “*Multitudes desire to be saved from hell (the natural instinct of self-preservation) who are quite unwilling to be saved from sin. Yea, there are tens of thousands who have been deluded into thinking that they have ‘accepted Christ as their Saviour’ whose lives plainly show that they have rejected Him as their Lord. For a sinner to obtain the pardon of God, he must forsake his way.*”<sup>8</sup>
- Remorse. “*...we must all learn to distinguish between the sorrow that comes from being caught & the sorrow that comes from a deep, inward hatred of sin and longing for the glory of God that is the distinguishing feature of the regenerate person.*”<sup>9</sup>
- Confession or admission of sin. Salvation is never promised to those who confess their sin ([1 John 1:9](#) is a promise to Christians).
- Reformation or turning over a new leaf.

True Biblical repentance, which always accompanies genuine believing faith, may be defined as follows: *a complete change of one’s sinful heart, involving a turning from sin to God, which results in a change of life.*

Clearly no one can turn to a righteous God without first turning from their own unrighteousness. When God reveals to the sinner a real consciousness of what he is in God’s sight, and he personally recognizes his wickedness and inner corruption, he is willing to repudiate sin from his heart.

Repentance is not someone saying, “*I felt guilty about my adultery so I stopped it years ago.*” It is rather, “*I now realise I am a lost, undone and guilty sinner through and through, deserving nothing but the eternal wrath*

*of God in hell.*” It is a permanent change of outlook, ambition and heart (mind, will and affection) wrought by the Holy Spirit of God.

How shockingly different all of this is to *Alpha*, whose notion of repentance goes no deeper than being sorry for wrong-doing and asking for forgiveness. Gumbel illustrates accepting Christ (he avoids the Biblical word ‘saved’ like the plague) from the life of the late John Wimber, one of America’s most notorious charismatic false teachers. Just prior to ‘becoming a Christian’, Wimber understood ‘in a flash’ that he had “*hurt God’s feelings.*” As he sobbed his way through a prayer, he realized that God had been with him all his life. While on his knees ‘believing in Jesus’ he had a horrible thought – “*I hope this works, because I’m making a complete fool of myself.*”<sup>10</sup>

Gumbel’s limited understanding and presentation of the theology of sin, leads to a faulty explanation of why Jesus died. Despite giving various illustrations of Christ’s death, including the old ‘swap the Bible from one hand to the other’ visual image, Gumbel misses the central point of the atonement. The Bible reveals that God’s righteous anger and wrath burn constantly against sin and sinners ([John 3:36](#), [Rom 1:18](#), [2:5](#)). To save sinners from wrath ([Rom 5:9](#)) penal substitution took place on the cross. Simply put, the righteous anger and wrath of God against sin was poured out on His own Son ([Isa 53:5](#) & [10](#)). This glorious truth is denied by false teachers like Steve Chalke and Clark Pinnock. Gumbel’s position on penal substitution (God punished Jesus) is spelled out in *Questions of Life*: “*Some people caricature the New Testament teaching and suggest that God is unjust because He punished Jesus, an innocent party, instead of us. This is not what the New Testament says. Rather Paul says ‘God was...in Christ’ [[2 Cor 5:19](#)]. He was himself the substitute in the person of his Son...We can come back to the Father and experience his love and blessing...That is what God has made possible through his self-substitution on the cross.*”<sup>11</sup>

Although Gumbel later refers to [Isa 53:6](#) and says that, “*God transferred our wrong-doings onto Jesus,*”<sup>12</sup> he denies that God actually *punished* His own Son. Here, at the heart of *Alpha*, is a serious error, for scripture plainly teaches that it was God’s will to bruise His own Son ([Isa 53:10](#)). Calvary involved divine punishment. That is why the word *chastisement* is used ([Isa 53:5](#)). The iniquity God laid on Christ stands for the wrong itself, the guilt incurred and the punishment to which it gave rise. Literally in Hebrew it means that the Lord ‘made to meet upon Him’ the punishment due to us all. Wrath was poured out on Christ, as He

vicariously identified Himself with sinners, being judicially made sin for them on the cross ([2 Cor 5:21](#)).

So, while *Alpha* places a great emphasis on the love of God, through its comments on penal substitution *it obscures the greatest manifestation of that love*. When writing of the wrath-appeasing sacrifice of Christ on the cross that has rendered God merciful to sinners – what is called propitiation – the Bible says literally, “***This is love indeed, not that we loved God, but that He loved us, and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins***” ([1 Jo 4:10](#)).

Small wonder that after a weak explanation of sin and wrath, and a confused presentation of the cross, Gumbel’s invitation to ‘accept Christ’ comes up short. Rather than exposing unbelief as a sin and urging his audience to repent while there is time, Gumbel tells them that they have no need to receive Christ if they are ‘not ready’ and need more time to ‘go away and think about it’. However, to those who are ‘ready’, he counsels, “*picture Christ standing in front of you.*” Gumbel’s ‘image of Christ’ is holding a blank cheque, offering the untold riches of heaven to any who will let Jesus fill in their name. The hardest part of becoming a Christian is just getting out those difficult words, “*I’m sorry, I was wrong.*” Once anyone prays ‘the prayer’ to ‘receive Christ’, they are assured by Gumbel, “*If you’ve asked Him to come in, He has.*”

This ‘all you have to do is ask’ mentality has lulled millions into a false sense of security. Biblical ‘calling on the name of the Lord’ is never presented as some kind of isolated magic bullet. [Isa 55:6-7](#) shows that such a call must be attended by other actions such as, seeking the Lord, forsaking one’s wicked ways and returning to God. Even in [Rom 10:9](#), *calling follows believing*. In other words it must be an enlightened call, issuing from a broken heart ([Isa 61:1-3](#), [Lu 4:18-19](#), [Matt 5:3-5](#), [Psa 51:17](#)). What does God do for the repentant soul? He reveals the all-sufficiency of the person and work of Christ. The Holy Spirit opens the heart to receive God’s word ([Acts 16:14](#)), and powerfully applies it to the mind and conscience, resulting in the new-born soul being able to say, “*One thing I know, that, whereas I was blind, now I see*” ([John 9:25](#)).

In reality, most who claim conversion through *Alpha* point to the middle ‘weekend away’ as their moment of faith. The physical sensations many receive at the end of the Saturday night session on ‘How can I be filled with the Spirit’ –when Gumbel invites the Holy Spirit to ‘come’ – convince

multitudes that they have become Christians. Of course, this is the opposite of objective Biblical faith that rests on God's word alone. On the day of judgment how many *Alpha* attendees will say, "*Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Thy name, and in Thy name have cast out devils, and in Thy name done many wonderful works?* ", to which the Lord will reply, "*I never knew you: depart from me* " ([Matt 7:21-23](#)). The few genuine souls who are saved *in spite of Alpha* do not compensate for the thousands who are lost *through Alpha*. It is a fearful and sorrowful fact that multitudes of *Alpha* attendees have said the sinner's prayer and are now convinced they are Christians, who haven't come within a mile of understanding their real condition as bankrupt sinners before a holy God. Remember, *Alpha* was written by a man who himself does not have a conversion moment but says simply, "*There was never a time when I did not have a relationship with God...I sincerely hope that's what will be the case with my children.*"<sup>13</sup>

*Alpha* is neither solemn enough, nor sound enough, nor safe enough to be used by any individual or church who takes Biblical evangelism seriously. May God grant faithful Christians to take a stand against this erroneous course.

#### **Notes:**

1. *Alpha* refers to the RC Church more frequently and positively than any other religious body.
2. A 'Gumbel approved' *Catholic Alpha* exists, which includes extra talks such as 'Why should I go to Mass?' Adverts for *Catholic Alpha* appear in *Alpha's* newspaper, *Alpha News*.
3. Summarised from Ch. 3 of *Questions of Life*, Nicky Gumbel (Kingsway, Eastbourne, 1993), and from video talk No. 3, *The Alpha Course* (Alpha International Publications, Brompton, London, 2000).
4. *Alpha News*, July 1997, p. 1.
5. *Evangelism, Which Way Now?*, Mike Booker/Mark Ireland, Church House Publ, London, 2003, p. 23.
6. *Alpha News*, March-June 2004, p. 7.

7. Confirmed in a letter from Holy Trinity Brompton to Michael Penfold dated 23rd March 2005
8. *Genuine Salvation*, A. W. Pink, International Outreach, Ames, IA, 1999, p. 121.
9. *Repentance*, Richard Owen Roberts, Crossway Books, Wheaton IL, 2002, p. 86.
10. *Questions of Life*, Nicky Gumbel, Kingsway, Eastbourne, 1993, p. 54.
11. Ibid, pp. 52-53.
12. Ibid, p. 63.
13. Video Talk 4, *The Alpha Course*, 2000.