



The Burning Bush—Online article archive

The Alpha Course and Its Ecumenical Association

By Rev. Ivan Foster (Former minister of Kilskeery Free Presbyterian Church)

A verse of Scripture which will set the theme for what I wish to say is found in Revelation 17:5, 'And upon her forehead was a name written, MYSTERY, BABYLON THE GREAT, THE MOTHER OF HARLOTS AND ABOMINATIONS OF THE EARTH.' In our English translation great emphasis is given to these titles, in that they are printed in capital letters. The titles here are emblazoned upon the forehead of a woman – the woman who is the very embodiment of sin, of corruption, of rebellion against God. We know from Scripture that God frequently uses a woman as a symbol of His church, but she is a virtuous woman, a pure woman. This woman is the very antithesis of the woman set forth in Scripture depicting the Church of Jesus Christ, the bride of Christ. This is a false bride; this is a harlot. In fact, in verse 16 she is described as a 'whore.' Without seeking to go into all the details that are revealed in Scripture regarding this woman and what she symbolizes, I want you to notice that she is spoken of as 'the mother of harlots and abominations of the earth.' She is the fountainhead of harlotry, the fountainhead of corruption, the fountainhead of everything that is opposed to godliness. She is 'the mother of harlots and abominations of the earth'.

I do not think that this woman's manifestation and identity will be fully recognised until the latter days. The Bible tells us that as this age progresses things are to get worse and worse, and as things get worse and worse, this woman will rise and become visible, and her influences and her ways will become ever more visible, and it will be seen that she is the mother of harlots, that every corruption and wickedness and evil manifested among men can be traced back to this fountainhead. That is significant, and it is significant in the light of the subject that I have been asked to speak about today -the Alpha Course and its ecumenical links and ecumenical promotion.

We heard, in the previous meeting, how the Alpha Course is a promoter of false doctrine; that it conveys error concerning the Saviour and the means by which He has ordained that sinners should be saved. That is very serious error. Is there, theologically speaking, any more serious error than that? I commend to you the message brought by the Rev Gordon Ferguson. Our brother spoke with the help of God and spoke graciously and kindly in exposing the errors of the Alpha Course. Now the characteristic of the Alpha Course that he dealt with was evident from its launch. The moment the teaching of the Alpha Course was put into print it could be seen that there was error, and there are many publications available that go into great detail on this particular subject. Mr. Ferguson mentioned some of them, and if you are not convinced of the dangers of the Alpha Course, you should give thought to what he recommended by way of publications.

But the subject that I wish to speak about did not become immediately obvious. While there was theological error there, which was obvious from the very first moment of the publishing of the Alpha Course, the impact of the Alpha Course and the direction in which it would push people, from an ecclesiastical point of view, did not become immediately obvious. I have to say, and I will seek to develop this, that error, of whatever form, can only promote one thing and will only drive people in one direction. Really that is the thrust



The Burning Bush—Online article archive

of that with which I want to deal. The prominent feature of the Alpha Course today is its embracing of Roman Catholicism and Roman Catholicism's embracing of it. In this very town, as in so many towns and villages in the land, you will find that wherever the Alpha Course is mentioned there is a promoting of the tenets of ecumenism and a promoting of ecumenism's ultimate goal: reunion with Rome.

Mr. Ferguson did me a favour at the end of his message, because in dealing with the error of the Alpha Course he brought in its links to Rome, so I do not need to go over the points upon which he briefly touched and I do not feel it is really necessary because the matter is self-evident. The truth of Alpha Course involvement with the promotion of ecumenism and the pushing of the people towards Roman Catholicism is there, staring people in the face, so I do not feel that I have to spend a lot of time dealing with that particular issue. Suffice it for me to say that the Alpha Course, in the person of the one most prominently associated with it, Mr. Nicky Gumbel, has embraced Roman Catholicism. He may not have declared himself a Roman Catholic but he has endorsed Roman Catholicism. That was seen in one incident in which he went to see the last pope, and he was presented to the pope along with his wife and his son. On many occasions he has spoken of the pope as a great man, as a great evangelist, as a great promoter of the truth of the gospel. That is quite contrary, of course, to the official teaching of the church to which Nicky Gumbel belongs. He is a minister of the Church of England, and the doctrine of the Church of England clearly indicates that Romanism is an embodiment of heresy, a promoter of that which is directly opposed to God.

The traditional Christian view of Roman Catholicism is one in which the pope is identified as antichrist. In the church you cannot indict a man with a greater theological crime than that, and yet that is what Baptists, Presbyterians, even Anglicans and Methodists have all been in agreement with regarding the pope. The office of the pope is seen as one that promotes the very doctrines of Antichrist, and yet Nicky Gumbel, to a large degree the author and originator of the Alpha Course, went to, and bowed before the pope and then came forth to the world to say, 'This is a great man, a great servant of God, a great promoter of the Gospel.' No man ever told a greater lie than Nicky Gumbel when he said that. So he has embraced popery. He has embraced it, he has endorsed it, he has encouraged people to embrace it, and popery has endorsed him – and that is important to know.

He was presented to the pope by an Italian priest, 'Father' Roniero. He and Nicky Gumbel had long been friends and he was the means of presenting him to the pope. Now this man, Roniero, has the 'honour' of being preacher to the papal household, so he lies close to the heart of Rome, and he lies close to the heart of Nicky Gumbel. It is not, therefore, surprising that he should be the means of introducing Nicky Gumbel to the pope. Also during Gumbel's visit to Rome when he was visiting the pope he met quite a few of the committees (if I may term them such) within the Vatican. During his five-day visit to Rome, he met representatives of the 'Congregation on the Doctrine of the Faith', the 'Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity', the Sant'Egidio Community, (do not ask me what it is!) and the 'Rome School of Evangelisation', run by the Emmanuel Community. He also met Cardinal Stafford who was, until recently, president of the Pontifical Council for



The Burning Bush—Online article archive

the Laity. We are not told what it is they discussed but we know that, subsequent to that meeting, he went around the world promoting the cause of Rome and the Alpha Course has been declared to be a chief instrument used by Rome for evangelizing.

I have a list taken from Alpha's own website (www.uk.alpha.org/churchleaders) which lists those leaders who endorse the Alpha Course. There are all sorts of leaders -the Archbishop of Canterbury of course, the Most Reverend Rowan Williams, but we have Cardinal Walter Casper, we have the Roman Catholic Archbishop of Johannesburg, we have the Archbishop of Lyons in France, we have Cardinal Sean O'Mally of Boston USA, we have the Most Reverend Sean Brady of Armagh in Northern Ireland and there are many others. I could go down the list and name them but really there is not much sense in doing that. As I say, the thing is self-evident – Nicky Gumbel has embraced Rome, and Rome has embraced him, and Rome freely acknowledges a debt to the Alpha Course, that its teaching promotes its cause. 'There is nothing in the alpha course', one Roman Catholic leader from Scotland said, 'that is contrary to our church doctrine. That is why we use it.'

Now anyone who loves the Lord Jesus Christ will really need no further instruction as to the dangers of the Alpha Course, they will not need to hear any more. It is not just that there has been an occasional Roman Catholic individual who has used this document to further that church; it has unofficially become the official document to promote Rome throughout the world. I do not want to weary you with quotations – endorsements from cardinals, bishops, archbishops, and other spokesmen say in various forms and fashions that this is the most exciting thing that has come along; this is that for which they have been waiting; it has brought new life to the Roman Catholic Church; it has caused their work to advance. Well, that ends the whole argument, the whole dispute; the matter is settled. That which is of God will not promote the kingdom of the devil, and that which promotes the kingdom of the devil cannot be of God.

I want to look at the Bible and consider why it is that we have such a phenomenon as this. This course, that at the first glance seemed to be so promising, seemed to carry in it the potential for accomplishing much good for the Lord Jesus, yet we find it not doing that, but instead promoting the kingdom of antichristianity in the world.

A Common Source

1. Let me start by saying that such a link-up between the Alpha Course and Roman Catholicism was inevitable.

I say that because I believe that there is a common source of all error; there is a kinship between every branch of error, no matter how different the errors may appear at first consideration. All error bears a common family likeness. The Scriptures teach us that every lie is of the devil. In John 8:44, the Saviour said to those who were opposing Him, 'Ye are of your father the devil.' He was talking to those who wore the garb of high ecclesiastical office in the Jewish church. He was not talking to the local representatives of the hell-fire club, but He said to these dignitaries, 'Ye are of your father the devil, and the lusts of your father ye will do. He was a murderer from the beginning, and abode not in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he speaketh a lie, he speaketh of his own: for he is



The Burning Bush—Online article archive

a liar, and the father of it.' There is a commonality with all lies; they all have a common source, the Devil, and I believe men and women listen to him. These lies have, over time, spread out from the common source and flowed hither and thither, north, south, east and west and as the end of this age comes you will find them all flowing back together again. That is important for us to know. All lies will ally themselves together against the truth.

We have a wonderful example of this in Luke 23:12, 'And the same day Pilate and Herod were made friends together: for before they were at enmity between themselves.' Up to that day on the Jewish scene Pilate and Herod had been opposing forces, opposing factions in the land of Israel. 'Never the twain would meet,' it would seem -until the Lord Jesus appeared. Then, 'they were made friends' who before had been enemies. Liars may well hate each other. You find the promoters of one lie hating the promoters of another lie, even though they have their origins from one common source. What suffering there has been in India with the Hindu hating the Muslim, and the Muslim hating the Hindu – both promoters of lies and falsehood - and they have hated each other most bitterly until they encounter the Gospel. Then they become allies against the Gospel, just as Pilate and Herod linked up in opposition to the Gospel. The disciples, in the Acts of the Apostles, indicate that the Lord Jesus was crucified and they name Pilate and Herod as the chief movers in that crime.

The link-up we are seeing between the Alpha Course and Roman Catholicism and the smiling of each into the face of the other, and the tenderness and the display of affection that the pope has manifested toward Nicky Gumbel and Nicky Gumbel toward the pope and their supporters towards one another is because there is a commonality between them. This alliance will especially be seen in the day when the truth of God arises. As I have already pointed out, Christ provoked this unity between those who up to that moment had been enemies. The many religions of this world that hate each other and fight each other to the shedding of blood over territory and prominence and advancement will lay aside their animosity as we approach the final stages of this age. Psalm 2, which is of course very much a prophetic psalm and is used to indicate the spirit that was at work in the day of the crucifixion (though it is not limited in its application to the crucifixion) says, 'Why do the heathen rage, and the people imagine a vain thing? The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against the LORD, and against his Anointed, saying, Let us break their bands asunder, and cast away their cords from us.' A unifying force that brings kings together, that brings the peoples of the earth together is the Lord and His Anointed, His Christ. I believe that as we approach the end of the age we will see that happening more and more across the world. What we see happening with the Alpha Course and the Roman Catholic church and ecumenism with its pressing for unity is an example of that moving of a spirit of unity among the enemies of God, the promoters of falsehood in the face of Christ. The orientation of the Alpha Course toward Rome is a natural thing and an inevitable thing.

The True Pedigree

2. Secondly, the link-up that has taken place shows us the true pedigree of the Alpha Course.



The Burning Bush—Online article archive

When I was a teenager I was warned about the company I was keeping. My father and mother were concerned about some of the characters with whom I was associated, and it is likely that other fathers and mothers were worried about the character their children were with. It usually ended with my parents saying, 'Now remember this, son, birds of a feather flock together.' People judge you by the company you keep, and this link-up between Alpha and the Roman Catholic church and the ecumenical, modernistic, anti-scriptural, anti-Bible churches of this land is indicative of the character of the Alpha Course.

Maybe I could go further than what Mr Ferguson graciously and kindly said. I believe that whatever elements of truth are found in the Alpha Course are there to cover the poison that it, in reality, is peddling.

Now, please, let me say this, that in every network of evil, in every conspiracy that the devil promotes, rarely do the people involved in that conspiracy realise what it is they are doing. In fact, they may well think that what they are doing is the very opposite of what is really being accomplished by their efforts. The devil not only dupes those that he targets, but he dupes those he uses to target a people.

There is no better example of what it is I am saying than that which you find in the Scriptures in the confrontations that took place between the Saviour and those that were being used by the devil. For instance, in Mark 12:13-15 we read, 'And they send unto him certain of the Pharisees and of the Herodians.' These are from opposing camps; this is an unnatural alliance. The Herodians might be termed secular, almost anti-Jewish. The Pharisees were the ultra-Jews. Here we read of their coming together, and coming to the Lord 'to catch him in his words,' to snare Him, to trip Him up. Notice what they say: 'And when they were come, they say unto him, Master, we know that Thou art true.' That is a true statement, that is the truth of God. No one will dispute that who loves the Saviour. He is true. He said Himself, 'I am the way, the truth.' So this is a true word they were saying. 'Thou art true, and carest for no man.' The sense, of course, in which they are using this is, 'You bow to no man; you are not afraid to speak the truth, irrespective of whether or not it runs contrary to some man's views; you are not subject to public opinion; you are an honourable individual, a faithful individual who holds to the truth no matter what.' And likewise that is the truth. Would God that each one of us who preach the Lord, and indeed each and every one of us who own His Name, cared not for public opinion, cared not what the latest fashion is, the latest fad, the latest trend, but just stood for Jesus, no matter what, for that is what He was like. So, again, this is a truth, 'Thou art true, and carest for no man, for Thou regardest not the person of men, but teachest the way of God in truth.' Now can you quarrel with anything there that is said? But it was truth uttered to conceal a poison, to promote an attack upon the Lord Jesus.

If you go to a store to buy rat poison (I do not know whether in these politically correct days you are allowed to poison rats!), you will find that the producers of the poison have dressed it up as the most succulent dish on the rats' menu; it is the top of the rats' choice; its smell is just what the rat loves. It does not smell or even taste of poison, it tastes of that which the rat loves to eat. The poison is concealed, and if the manufacturers of rat



The Burning Bush—Online article archive

poison have that wit, you can be sure the devil has it in an even greater measure! That is what he does, he dresses up his lie in the garments of truth; he presents his Jacob feeling like an Esau. The Saviour responded to these Pharisees and Herodians when they questioned Him, 'Is it lawful to give tribute to Caesar, or not? The gospel record says, 'But He, knowing their hypocrisy.' Instantly! Now you and I cannot have such an instant revelation of the hearts of men. It takes the most diligent, the most wise, the most alert of us a while, for out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaketh. So you have to analyse the words, to work out what is in their heart.

A reporter many years ago came to Dr. Paisley and posed a question to him of which he suspected the motive. He said in response, 'Are you drunk? Let me smell your breath.' Of course, the breath of the reporter would have been a giveaway if he was drunk. Just in a like fashion, we have to analyse the words, the breath of the liars to find what is really in their hearts. The Saviour in an instant knew their hypocrisy.

The Alpha Course has been around a long time, and a lot of people have looked at it and analysed it, and we have heard a summary by Mr Ferguson of the analysis of the Alpha Course, and it has been clearly seen that there is truth there. But there is deception, there is a misuse of truth in order to promote that which is not true, and I believe that it is becoming evident that the true pedigree of the Alpha Course is thus being revealed. Were it not for the mercy of God, you and I would never notice such deception. We would never catch on to the devil's ploys if it were not for the mercy of God.

Sitting in the previous meeting, I thought of the occasion of which we read in Luke 9, when the twelve apostles, which included Judas, went forth to preach. Look at what it says, for it is very important. At the beginning of the chapter we read, 'Then he called his twelve disciples together, and gave them power and authority over all devils, and to cure diseases. And he sent them to preach the kingdom of God, and to heal the sick.' And off they went, including Judas; and back they came, including Judas, and there was not one - not Peter, not John, not James, not Matthew - not one of them said, 'Lord, there is something funny about Judas. He does not quite preach right, he does not measure up somehow or other.' And when you link that with what you read in John 13, when the closing days of the Saviour's ministry were approaching and He was soon to be crucified, we are told in verse 21, 'When Jesus had thus said, he was troubled in spirit, and testified, and said, Verily, verily, I say unto you, that one of you shall betray me. Then the disciples looked one on another, doubting of whom he spake.' Nobody said, 'I knew there was something wrong with that fellow Judas.' Not one of them. In fact, we read that Peter said to John, who at that moment was leaning closely against the Saviour, 'Ask Him who it is.' Nobody suspected Judas, and not one of us would ever discover the devil's plants, his undercover agents, if it were not for the mercy of God. It took the Saviour to identify the traitor. I said earlier that those the devil uses to dupe others are themselves duped and that is very evident in the case of Judas, because Judas did not realise what it was that he was doing, even though he was told plainly on a number of occasions by the Saviour. But it was not until he had entered into the agreement to betray the Saviour and then saw the consequences of what it was that he had done that he cried out, 'I have betrayed the innocent blood.' And he went out and hung himself. Until that moment he did not realise



The Burning Bush—Online article archive

that he was the pawn in the devil's great scheme. The Lord Jesus in John 17 places upon Judas a term that is also used of the antichrist, 'the son of perdition.' We may loathe what Judas did, but you cannot have a Christian heart if you do not feel something for that poor fool, which is what each and every one of us would become, if it were not for the mercy of God.

The link-up that is taking place before our eyes shows us the true pedigree, I believe, of the Alpha Course, whatever truth may be found within it. Be I right or be I wrong, I feel that it is there to disguise the real purpose of this scheme. What great harm is wrought by such as are mentioned in Jude 4. 'There are certain men crept in unawares, who were before of old ordained to this condemnation, ungodly men, turning the grace of our God into lasciviousness.' That is what these schemes are all about, attacking the very heart of the Gospel to overturn it. The devil put forth his hand at Calvary and in the run-up to Calvary to slay the Son of God. That has ever been the devil's purpose, in every scheme of falsehood to murder Christ and His cause, to turn the grace of God into lasciviousness and deny the only Lord God, and our Lord Jesus Christ.

Cause for Alarm

3. I close with one further thought, and that is that the number of true believers deceived by such tactics should alarm us.

I have no doubt that there are genuine children of God who avidly support the Alpha Course. Just as it was in years gone by, when genuine believers in Jesus Christ avidly supported the tactics and the campaigns, and the philosophy, and the policies of Billy Graham. It was wrong; what he did was wrong. He promoted error. The evidence of that is becoming more clear every day, but that does not mean that good people were not involved in supporting him, and good people are involved in supporting the Alpha Course. Despite the many warnings that are given by God, believers still fall into the devil's trap, no matter how God has warned them. The Bible is full of warnings but we are like little children. I have raised six children and seen a few grandchildren also along the way, and every one of them is the same. When they are out with you, running in a certain direction, and you know what is there, you call on them not to go. The reaction seems to be, 'Oh, what do you know? I am perfectly alright,' and the next thing, they are ploughing a furrow in the ground with their nose, and a howl goes up!

They had perfect confidence that they could handle it, despite the warnings. That is how we are. God give us a spirit of humility that will cause us to fear what God has spoken in the plainest of warnings. The cause is ignorance of the warnings of God. That is why we fall victims into the traps – we just do not listen to God. Saints neither study nor pay heed to God's Word. 'My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge,' said the Lord through Hosea, and there is a simple principle in those words which applies to this day. We bring hurt upon ourselves because we do not heed the Word of God. God's Word delivers us from traps and snares. Psalm 119:105, 'Thy word is a lamp unto my feet, and a light unto my path.' How many of us walk according to that Word?

It is a sure sign of my getting old when I remember all the warnings I had in my youth.



The Burning Bush—Online article archive

When we were going off to school in the morning, away in the countryside, we had a couple of miles to walk out over hill and dale, and my mother would say, 'Take your coat.' In Ireland, that really did not take much working out, because no matter how the day started, inevitably somewhere during the day it would rain, especially where we lived in Fermanagh. As a youngster, I did not want a coat as I wanted to be able to run about and a coat was a nuisance. My mother used to say, 'A wise man always carries his coat.' How I hated being a wise man and carrying a coat. We are like that when it comes to the truth of God. We read in 2 Peter 1:19, 'We have also a more sure word of prophecy; whereunto ye do well that ye take heed, as unto a light that shineth in a dark place, until the day dawn, and the day star arise in your hearts.' Oh, walk by the light of God's Word. Never venture one step forward unless the light of God shows you it is a safe step to take. You remember how Joshua was deceived by the Gibeonites and he entered into a covenant with them, simply because he did not test their story. Oh, we get caught like that. The Bereans were commended to us by Mr Ferguson, and oh, how true it is that we need the spirit of the Bereans. 'These were more noble than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the Word with all readiness of mind, and searched the scriptures daily, whether those things were so.'

Do you ever wonder what sort of men Paul and Silas were? I cannot but think they must have been powerful personalities. You could not have stood in their presence without sensing the power of God upon them and the wonderful characters that they were. But that did not sway the Bereans; they did not say, 'Well, who am I to question this man?' No, they searched the scriptures daily to see if what these two preachers said was true. God give us a people like that. I feel that the spirit of the Bereans will cause us to recognise that the Alpha Course, irrespective of any good things that are to be found there stated, is underneath the ploy of the devil to promote a lie. May God teach us to walk humbly with Him and look out for the ploys of the devil.

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