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Alpha: A Field Report - A Course for Newcomers to Christianity

by Richard Cunningham

“From time to time in the discussion I have been able to ‘slip in’ a more New Church idea without drawing attention to it.”

Some of you will know that I live near Reading, and I’m a long way from any New Church society and so can’t attend regular Sunday worship. Instead, I’ve often attended a Church of England parish near to my home, where I join in many of the activities. You could find St. Barnabas, Emmer Green on the map if you wish.

This autumn, St. Barnabas has been running an ‘Alpha’ course. You may well have heard of it, or seen the red posters up as you pass church buildings. There is much basic information about Alpha on the Internet, and I refer you to:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alpha_course

I have been aware of it for some time, and decided to volunteer to help in running a course, but also to understand what it’s about and how it works.

In general then, the course is open to any member of the public, although the flavour and style seem to assume that it’s important to appeal to those in their twenties or thirties. The course makes no assumptions about religious knowledge, and encourages ‘what about’ types of questions. There are intended to be 11 sessions, held weekly, about two hours long each. There is intended to be one session that lasts a whole day.

Each session starts with a meal. Ours at St. Barnabas starts about 7pm on Thursday, when a light dinner is served. There is no charge for the meal, or for any other thing for someone attending in 'learner' role (my choice of words to explain the roles). Members of the parish congregation have volunteered to prepare the food. At about 7:45 we sit and watch the presentation material - it comes as a DVD which we watch on a TV set. The main presenter is Nicky Gumbel, whose name I had heard associated with Alpha a long time ago. The TV presentation sets the subject for the evening, and here is a sample of the session titles, which we have used (one title per week): "Is There More to Life Than This?", "Who is Jesus?", "Why Did Jesus Die?", "Why and How Should I Pray?", "Why and How Should I Read the Bible?"

After the TV presentation we sit in two rooms, each room has two 'leaders' (again, my choice of word) and 5 or so 'learners.' We discuss the content of the presentation and some ask questions. It is an important point that the 'leaders' are not there to answer the questions, but more to facilitate the discussion. At 9pm the session is over, and people are free to leave. So the basic outline could be summarised as Meal-TV-Chat.

Alpha has become a big operation. The Wikipedia article gives more detail, but at peak there were over 10,000 courses being run in the UK in 1998. The presentations and back-up material (mostly small books) show a level of polish and research one would expect in a large organisation.

My experience of Alpha, in just the one course, has been a little different to what you may have imagined from my general description above. First, of the 'learners' all of them (except one) were known in some way to the St. Barnabas community before, and several have been regular attenders at Sunday services. Quite a few have attended an Alpha course before, and some have been to our church Bible studies. The one person who is new has just moved into the area, and originates from another European Union country. We are doing only six of the 11 sessions: the leaders feel that 11 weeks is too long and they have selected the important sessions. We won't have a whole-day session; the subject of that session is 'the Holy Spirit' and seems to have four TV presentations to watch; it is suggested that it could usefully be held during a week-end.

The theology presented (might one say, 'assumed'?) is interesting. Several people in the New Church have suggested that I would have to 'bite my tongue' to avoid an argument over theology. This has not happened, and I'm pleased that's so. However, the presentations are at a very basic level of explanation and understanding, compared to what I think is common in the New Church. As an example, when the presentation asked the question "why did Jesus die" the strongest answer given in the TV presentation was "because He loves you." There was quite a stress on the word 'you'

in that answer. There was little about salvation achieved via the Lord's death, or for regeneration for each individual person.

From time to time in the discussion I have been able to 'slip in' a more New Church idea without drawing attention to it. For example, I suggested that being saved is strongly influenced by our character, which is formed by habit in our choices of right or wrong. There was some talk in the discussion session about 'instant forgiveness' but the depth of discussion has been limited (to my opinion) by both the limited understanding of spiritual processes (compared to New Church teaching) and the relative newness of the questions to the 'learners' (at least in my observation - which may well be simplistic or limited because I have had too little time with them).

So how has it all gone? Everyone seems to enjoy the sessions, and we have had good and steady attendance. We are now considering the next thing to do: will it be more of the same? More similar but somewhat different material? Will we form a Bible study group from this Alpha course? As I write, we have not reached a decision, but I expect that one of these will happen. I have enjoyed taking part, helping others extend their knowledge, and reviewing the material from my perspective. Everyone has been sincere and honest, and we have agreed we don't discuss each others' feelings and opinions to those who weren't there. I have found it interesting and enjoyable, and been pleased to be there to help it run.

From a New Church perspective, it is noteworthy that according to the Wiki reference, three of the fifteen sessions are given to the 'Person' and work of the Holy Spirit and cover the 'infilling' of the Spirit; speaking in tongues and healing via prayer, etc. So there are some significant issues with respect to theology, particularly the splitting up of the Trinity into three 'Persons'. However, with that caveat, the process I have experienced as mentioned above I found useful and friendly perhaps with the potential to offer other perspectives.

Moral Relativism

by Revd Jack Dunion

“In my view, moral relativism is this kind of enemy and it has been the mechanism by which the moral fabric of our society is today being gradually eroded.”

Recommended Readings: Judges 7:1-8; Matt. 7:13,14; Luke 21:36; Revelation 3:2; Apocalypse Explained 455[9]. Arcana Celestia (AC) 5955[2], 7602.

“So Gideon took the men down to the water. There the LORD told him, ‘Separate those who lap the water with their tongues as a dog laps from those who kneel down to drink.’ Judges 7:5

In the above references from Judges, those who *“lapped the waters with the tongue like a dog;”* stand for people within the church who are thirsty for truths and who wish to follow the Lord’s principles. The Midianites (the enemy) who Gideon is about to fight means those who do not care for truth, because they are merely natural and external AE 455[9]. According to Swedenborg, those who ‘lapped’ the water did so from their hand and three hundred of them were chosen to fight. While drinking from the hand, they would have kept their heads up remaining alert to any dangers around them. In other words, they were the watchful ones. We in the church all seek to drink of the truths of the Word. But if we are not also watchful, or stop sufficiently caring for the truths of the Word, the enemy can and will catch us unawares.

The enemy in question (the Midianites) represent *“truth which is not truth, because there is no good of life with it”* (AC 5955[2]). In particular, the Midianites represent a state where *“the delight of pleasures,” rather than goodness of life, is regarded as the goal*” (AC 7602). The Midianites successfully attack those who know the truth but fall into the trap of simply doing what is easy and feels good rather than making the necessary sacrifices for the sake of the Lord and the neighbour. Doesn’t the Lord warn us about such things in Matt. 7:13-14 *‘Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life’*”.

In my view, moral relativism is this kind of enemy and it has been the mechanism by which the moral fabric of our society is today being gradually eroded. And one of the reasons why we in the church need to be watchful is that its best weapon is an ability to spread its influence among well-intentioned people! The Lord warns us in Matt. 7:15 *‘Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves’*. For me, moral relativism is just that!

The “Internet Encyclopaedia of Philosophy” offers the following meaning for moral relativism: *“Moral relativism is the view that moral judgments are true or false only relative to some particular standpoint and that no standpoint is uniquely privileged over all others”*.

Being a fairly simple-minded person I like to try and understand things in a simple way. The following, therefore, is my simple view on how moral relativism has been used to deconstruct our moral base, and how I think it needs to be guarded against in our church today. As is my habit, I will begin with a short story/anecdote.

On a recent bus tour through the historic city of Edinburgh I was delighted to learn more about the Scottish athlete and Olympic gold medalist Eric Liddell (16 January 1902 - 21 February 1945). Eric was born in China to Scottish missionary parents who sent him to a boarding school near London. Whenever possible Eric would spend time with his family in Edinburgh and went on to attend Edinburgh University.

Although Eric's heart lay in following his parents into missionary work (he was to return to China in 1925 to serve as a missionary teacher) he was also a great athlete and won seven caps for his country playing rugby before giving up rugby to pursue his interests in track athletics. One of his most striking athletic achievements came when he was an amateur runner competing at the 1924 Summer Olympics in Paris. Having been brought up on strong Christian principles, Liddell refused to run in the heats for his favoured 100 metres because they were held on a Sunday. Instead he competed in the 400 metres held on a weekday, a race that he not only won, but also broke the existing world record!

What impresses me most about Liddell is not the fact that he broke the world record for the 400 metres, but that he stood strongly for what he believed in! I found myself thinking about the influences that would have led Eric Liddell to develop such strong principles and I wondered that, if his parents had brought him up differently, would he perhaps have stood just as strongly for principles that were a whole lot different? Maybe even those opposed to Christian values! Who knows?

This for me helps reveal something about how moral relativism can work and why it is having such an impact on our society today. Left unchecked, it will attempt to make inroads into all sections of society, including our church, and this no doubt through well-meaning people of strong principle. What better a way to spread a philosophy than through people who will fight on principle for the ideas it produces? What I think is alarming is the way in which the principles that underpin society are being subtly changed. This is a fairly easy thing to do for anyone who gains full spectrum dominance over society through the key mediums of communication, such as television, radio, the press and the education system.

For example, if a nation begins teaching its children that something is normal or morally correct, no matter what that may be, and they in turn teach it to their children, eventually this will become normalised, so that anyone who opposes or challenges this new 'norm' will look bad and will no longer be able to teach or promote what was previously seen as morally correct, because then we have created a whole new "norm". If big changes in this regard happened suddenly then people might be outraged. But if it happens gradually over generations then extremely different norms can be created with little reference to how firmly previous norms were held. Nor will

people who remember those norms be free to express what the past benefits of such norms were. This then means that, through the applied philosophy of moral relativism, literally anything could eventually become held in strong principle as 'the norm'; something which people will then vigorously defend as a morally correct principle. Yes, perhaps even the best of us! This influential potential has been demonstrated by a spectrum of people from Eric Liddell's missionary parents to the Nazi party; i.e. each were equally persuaded that their principles were morally correct.

To use a further example: say it became popular for people to put a coat on their pet dog before taking it out for a walk in wintertime. A new generation may grow up thinking this is normal because it is "morally relative" to the times. Eventually it could begin to look cruel if we don't put a coat on our dogs. As public opinion influences politicians then it might be demanded by the people that a law be passed allowing people to be prosecuted on the grounds of animal cruelty if they don't put a coat on their dog! Anyone then who tried to point out the folly of such a thing, or even highlight the truth of how animals burn fat to keep warm, would be instantly demonised, silenced and denied a voice through which they could defend their position. It would then eventually become unimaginable that anyone could be so cruel as to take their dog a walk in the wintertime without putting its coat on. This may well seem like a ridiculous example of what might become "morally relative", but we must bear in mind that many of the principles society lives by today seemed just as ridiculous yesterday!

In short, without principles which for us are hopefully drawn from the Word of the Lord as opened up and revealed in the heavenly doctrines of our church, we build our house on the sand (see Matt. 7:24-27).

Regardless of the direction the world decides to go in, we as a church must continue to uphold our New Church principles and allow the Lord alone to guide us in the direction we take. The Lord will then surely reward us with our own personal gold medal of a loving and wise approach to life. Eventually it may even lead us to the breaking of a new 'world record'!