

BOSTON UNIVERSITY

A PROGRAM STUDY OF “ALPHA”

IN AN AMERICAN UNIVERSITY CONTEXT

(A 10-WEEK INTRODUCTORY COURSE TO CHRISTIANITY)

A QUALITATIVE RESEARCH PROJECT

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I. Abstract

This program study of Alpha (a ten week introductory course to Christianity) in a University context applies William Abraham's critically reviewed definition of Christian evangelism¹ to an Alpha program offered recently on University campus in Boston.² The research data comes from personal observations as a participant observer of Alpha, the written testimonies of five recent participants, and four personal interviews with participants in the Alpha program. The study provides little evidence that the success of the Alpha program is related to a compromised or reduced version of Christianity. To the contrary, the findings make Alpha more resilient to this critique. Although running the Alpha program in a campus setting does create some difficulties, the findings generally point toward Alpha providing a substantial and fruitful mode of evangelism as defined by Abraham in his seminal book on Evangelism, *The Logic of Evangelism*. Every element of Abraham's definition of evangelism shows up in some form as an outcome of the Alpha program. The versatility of the program when it comes to addressing both the modern and postmodern sensibilities of today's college students emerges as the most surprising finding.

II. Introduction

The Alpha program originated in a theologically conservative branch of the Anglican church in England sometime in the 1990's. In the UK Alpha enjoys remarkable popularity as a church-based evangelistic program. Nevertheless, theological liberal critics have questioned its conservative theology and some theological conservatives question the program's controversial

¹ Abraham, William, *The Logic of Evangelism*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989.

²In Patton's terms I understand myself to be doing a "program evaluation." He defines this as "the systematic collection of information about the activities characteristics and outcomes of programs to make judgments about the programs, improve program effectiveness and/or inform decisions about future programming."

theology of the Holy Spirit. Both fault its designers for the absence of a sufficient self-critical moment in the history of the programs design and implementation. Instead, they allege that the interest of the program's designers has been toward marketing rather than critically evaluating, correcting or improving their product.

Recently the program has been used in a setting quite different from a conservative Anglican church; It has been used by students on University campuses in the USA. For the past three years a University-based Alpha program in Boston has experienced consistent growth not only in the numbers of participants, but in the number that have become Christians through Alpha. This new, non-UK, and non-church context coupled with the controversial theological concerns and the overall dearth of critical program evaluation warrants this program study on Alpha in an American University parachurch context.

III. Review of the Literature

A brief literature review helps clarify objectives and a methodology for the study. Admittedly, a full literature review stands outside the scope of this introductory study. Nevertheless three prominently featured issues surface in the contemporary literature on evangelism that help guide the research questions and methodology of this study. Those issues include: 1) The sobering realities of church attrition in the developed portions of the western world heightens interest in any evangelistic program that appears to be effective in post-Christian countries like UK and America; 2) The marketing practices of a great deal of contemporary evangelistic efforts (particularly church-growth movements) raises critical questions about whether or not the marketing impulse of such programs compromises or corrupts the Christian message of the program itself; 3) Any practice of evangelism raises fundamental theological concerns about the essence of Christianity, and nature of the church and salvation. In what

follows I use the insights of various theologians to briefly unpack these three issues, surface qualitative questions they provoke about the Alpha program, and set up the methodology of this program study.

In *The Future of the Apostolic Imperative: At the Crossroads of World Evangelization*, Carl E. Braaten³ reveals some sobering realities confronting the Christian church in this new millennium. Those realities include: 1) The missionary effort has collapsed in mainline Christianity; 2) 53,000 people per week leave the church in Europe and America never to return; 3) The center of gravity of world Christianity has shifted to the third world; 4) Western nations have once again become mission fields; 5) Millions who call themselves Christians are so only nominally. Within these sobering realities, Alpha stands out as a rare example of resurrected missionary effort within a mainline of European/American Christianity that is bringing a great number of non-Christians and nominal Christians back to Christianity. The program popularity and success in England and the US warrants qualitative study on the program around the questions: What makes it so effective? What is the secret of its success?

The enormous success of Alpha and the effectiveness of its designers at “marketing” it, however, has raised a variety of criticisms. For example, in *Truth Decay: Rethinking Evangelism in a New Century*, Todd Johnson highlights some of the potentially negative affects of some contemporary expressions of evangelism. In an attempt to reach non-Christians, evangelistic programs can tend to treat non-Christians like consumers. Does putting Christianity forward in a marketing sort of way distort the gospel requirement of dying to self. To be more specific, if a program treats non-Christians as consumers, will they, after “converting,” continue to act like consumers? In other words, will converts hang around a church just until they get bored, feel some pressure, take offense, or experience some conflict, or disagree? If they have

³ Ed. Carl E. Braaten and Robert Jenson. *The Strange New World: Re-evangelizing in a Post-modern World*.

been treated as a consumer in their introduction to Christianity, won't they do what any reasonable consumer does—go somewhere else to get the goods they are shopping for? A program study on any popular form of evangelism praxis ought to probe this problem. Does the program treat its participants as consumers? Do its members act like consumers? If so, can either be reconciled with the Christian ethos? Is there a reorientation of focus brought about through the program that alters this consumer mindset?⁴

These concerns about marketing evangelism illustrate the way in which the practice and study of evangelism raises questions that go right to the core of Christianity's essence. What is the essence of Christianity? Does the practice of evangelism under evaluation properly initiate people into that essence? Is there congruence between evangelism and discipleship—between the initiation to Christianity and a faithful more fully orbed expression of Christian maturity? Todd Johnson points out that becoming a Christian disciple involves being socialized into the Christian community, learning its language, internalizing its values, and participating in its meaning making activities such as liturgies and ministries. Evangelism is the first step in this process and when evangelism fails to be congruent with the catechesis, liturgy, and the ministry, the truth of the local community is compromised. Evangelistic praxis needs to attend to the congruence, or lack thereof, between the initiation into Christianity and the “essence” of Christianity.

There are those, however, who question the “essence” paradigm. Karl Barth, for example, critiques any human attempt to reduce Christianity to an idea or essence.⁵ For Barth, there can be no summary of what is signified by the Word of God. Likewise the work of

⁴ Another well-known principle of marketing involves increasing consumption by changing the product, hiding its bad qualities or lowering the price. Any program study on evangelism has to ask questions about whether the program has “compromised the product” in order to increase its acceptance.

⁵ Barth considered the attempt to reduce Christianity to an idea or essence the perpetual mistake of the modernists theological impulse.

Hendrik Kraemer continues the Barthian “anti-essence of Christianity” paradigm.⁶ The Bible, the revelation of God through Christ, is the fundamental authority and distinct from institutional Christianity. For Kraemer sin so permeates all of humanity that not only each religion, but even Christianity itself (its theology, institutions, local congregations, the church universal), suffers the discontinuation between itself and God’s revelation in Christ. Not only do all Christian institutions and local congregations fall short, but Christian theologians fall short. Thus, all theological attempts to reduce Christianity to an essence fail to recognize the infinite and qualitative difference between God and man.⁷

What does evangelism look like for those who reject the essentialist paradigm? For Kraemer the most important attribute of the Christian evangelist is that he or she does have the Bible which provides direct access to Jesus Christ. The role of the evangelist is not to give the non-Christian a denominational catechism or a dogmatic translation, but to preach the word and to be “the point of contact” between the non-Christian and Christ. People become a Christian because they want to have a relationship with a Christian. The messenger of the gospel interprets and translates the Christian revelation to those concerned in a way that conveys meaning to their life and consciousnesses.⁸

⁶ Kraemer (1888-1965) worked as a linguist in Indonesia, as a professor of the history and phenomenology of religion at Leiden University, and as the first director of the World Council of Churches’ Ecumenical Institute. He prepared *The Christian Message in a Non-Christian World* (Edinburgh: Published for the International Missionary Council by the Edinburgh House Press, 1938) to be a study book for an international council. It became a classic text in missiology. In it he puts forward an argument about the nature of the indigenous church where he defends the right of other churches to have church their own way. His work must be judged in part as a response to the relativism, pragmatism and subjective idealism of Earnest Hocking’s *Rethinking Missions: A Laymen’s Inquiry After One Hundred Years* (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1932), but also as a continuation of Barthian biblical theology.

⁷ Contra the idealism of Hocking who, in *Rethinking Missions*, saw Christianity as the pinnacle of religious evolution.

⁸ “The missionary’s task is to stand in dialectical relation to other religious traditions, saying both ‘yes’ and ‘no’, seeking to discern where God is at work and what is a corrupt response” in apostolic style of Paul. Yates, *Christian Mission in the Twentieth Century*. Cambridge UK: Cambridge University Press, 1994, 113.

Another concern that surfaces in the literature focuses on the theology of salvation undergirding the practice of evangelism. Stanley Hauerwas, John Howard Yoder & Bryan Stone for example, construe salvation as the initiation into a community, namely the church. Rather than conceiving of salvation as a private and decisionistic transaction between an individual and God—common among conservative evangelicalism—they see it as one’s socialization and incorporation by grace into a body (ecclesia) of fellow believers. Given this understanding of salvation, evangelism emerges as the dynamic visible witness of a confessing church—a community of people in relation with Jesus who worship Jesus in all things. Evangelism cannot, therefore be reduced to the proclamation of, or the apologetic defense of, a system of essential beliefs for the purpose of saving individuals. Rather evangelism occurs as a community provides a faithful embodied witness of a social alternative that the world cannot know or be on its own. Characteristics of those who follow Jesus in all things include such practices as peacemaking, sharing, caring for the poor. If these commitments and practices are not up-front and visible at the introduction to Christianity, i.e. in the practice of evangelism, then what is upfront is not fully Christianity but a mere caricature of it.

This diversity of views on evangelism poses no small challenge when it comes to doing a program study on evangelism. Into which of these camps will I locate this program study? By whose criteria, i.e. definition of evangelism, will I evaluate the program? Within this context William Abraham’s, *The Logic of Evangelism*, is most helpful. Abraham puts forward a robust definition of evangelism that touches on the emphasis of essentialists, the non-essentialists and the emphatic ecclesiologists. Abraham conceives the gospel as a complex message in the form of a narrative account of whom God is and what God is up to that includes, but far exceeds, the liberal or evangelical gospel. In this view evangelism is initiation and introduction into the

kingdom of God. It involves proclamation and owning certain intellectual claims as well as inclusion into the community of the church, appropriation of a moral vision, recognition and reception of certain gifts and capacities and the acceptance of forms of communal and individual discipline. Abraham therefore defines evangelism as that set of intentional activities governed by the goal of initiating people into the kingdom of God for the first time through appropriate instruction, experience, rites and forms. This initiation involves a fundamental reorientation of focus away from human-centered to God-centered—away from an anthropocentric horizon (of what we do or on what is done to us) to a theocentric horizon where the focus is on the majestic and awesome activity of a Trinitarian God whose actions on our behalf stagger our imagination and dissolve into impenetrable mystery.

Perhaps the greatest virtue of the polymorphous nature of Abraham's definition of evangelism is the way it accommodates the great diversity of emphasis brought to the theology and task of evangelism by these various thinkers, while at the same time avoiding some of their reductionistic problems. For example, he provides the essentialists a robust definition of evangelism that captures essential elements of Christianity without reducing Christianity to them. Those essential elements include a minimal amount of cognitive content that must be proclaimed and believed as well as introduction to communal and individual practices. This emphasis on the new community, the recognition and reception of certain gifts and capacities, and the acceptance of forms of communal and individual discipline feeds nicely into the concerns of Hauerwas, Willimon, Yoder and Stone when it comes to evangelism. And finally, his definition also emphasizes non-essentialist's concern of an understanding of evangelism that brings about the reorientation of focus to a theocentric horizon, that emphasizes majestic and mysterious activity of God. All of these elements provide categories to code the data in order to find out whether

such aspects show up in the process of the program and get internalized into the lives of program participants.

IV. Methodology

The data of this descriptive and evaluative program study of Alpha in a University campus setting comes from three sources. First, the student leaders of the Alpha program at the University where I serve as a chaplain welcomed me to the Alpha program.⁹ This allowed me to be a participant observer for the first five weeks of the Alpha program. Second, aware of my interest in doing qualitative research on Alpha, the student leaders put me in contact with five students who recently became Christians through Alpha. From these students I acquired written testimonies of their Alpha experience. Third, the student leaders of Alpha also put me in contact with four other students who granted me a 60-90 minute interview (see appendix A: Informed Consent Form). Three of these interviewed students became Christians through Alpha and one was a Christian coming into Alpha but experienced some “life change” through the Alpha program. Each interviewee had a chance to read back over their transcribed interview and one of them sent it back with some further clarifications.

In the interviews I sought to understand and to be able to describe the program from the perspective of participants and to surface data for the evaluation of the program. My initial statement in each interview was, “Tell me about your Alpha experience.” In two cases this was all it took to get 30 minutes of excellent data that touched on nearly every aspect of Abraham’s definition of evangelism. In the other two cases it took inviting statements like, “Tell me more”

⁹ Because of my role as a chaplain on campus the student leaders of Alpha not only felt like it would be appropriate, but they strongly encouraged me to attend Alpha. A day before Prof. Fraser informed me that I needed to inform all the participants (not just the leaders) that I was there as a participant observer (qualitative researcher) I was informed by one of the student leaders that a University official who granted the students the meeting space objected to any non-student involvement in the program. The students wanted to fight this or find a new location, but I thanked them for the offer and chose to bow out half way through the program.

or probing questions to get them to talk more about the program. These questions include: “What was it about the alpha course that you liked?” “What has changed in your life?” “What elements of the program (process or experience) had the greatest impact on you?” “What elements of the environment were most important in your experience?” “What about the people/leaders made the greatest impact on your life?” “What things could have improved the process for you or for others?”

The majority of my findings come from interviewees responses to this initial question and the probing questions. I derived seven primary codes from Abraham’s polymorphous definition of evangelism. Those codes capture the outcomes of Abraham’s understanding of faithful evangelism and include: acquisition of a minimal amount of cognitive claims, reorientation of focus, initiation into a new community, appropriation of a moral vision, acquisition of certain gifts/abilities, acquisition of new spiritual/religious disciplines or practices, and rather unusual experiences, emotions or alterations of dispositions that have come to be associated with conversion. By coding the data according to these categories I could analyze the prevailing concern of Todd Johnson and others about the congruence between evangelism, the initiation into Christianity, and discipleship, the more fully orbed expression of Christianity.

Knowing that I would be evaluating the program with Abraham’s robust definition of evangelism, I concluded the interviews by probing for comments on these various aspects of his definition if did not come up unsolicited in the interviewees personal story. Examples of the probing comments I used in the interview include: Talk about the effects of Alpha on your moral life or your vision of the moral good; Talk about the way in which Alpha may have surfaced certain gifts and capacities in you to serve as an agent of God in the world; Talk about the step from the Alpha program to the church; (see appendix B: Interview Guide). In nearly every case

these categories came up without probing. In the findings I footnote any responses that came from a more pointed probing question rather than emerging from the earlier broad question of tell me about your experience and how it has affected your life.¹⁰

In order to address Hauerwas and Stone's concerns about evangelism as initiation into the practices of a community I established a hybrid code. This code combined two already mentioned codes "initiation into a new community" and "acquisition of new spiritual/religious disciplines or practices" with a new subcategory "new attitude about the need for the community." I sought through this code to establish whether or not program participant emerged from Alpha perceiving and practicing Christianity as an individualistic private affair (a critique Stone brings against many conservative evangelical approaches to evangelism) or as initiation into a very different social alternative. Coding for such testimony not only surfaces whether or not program participants perceive the process as initiating them into a social alternative, but it helps surface their perception of the nature of that social alternative—an equally important concern of Hauerwas and Stone. In particular what practices distinguish this community from a non-Christian community?

In order to address the critical concern that the marketing influence of Alpha has corrupted its message, or that it treats non-Christians as consumers, I not only looked for examples of a "reorientation of focus" from a self to a God-centeredness, but I combed through the interviews to see if I could find evidence of prevailing individualistic, consumer attitudes. What follows are my findings.

¹⁰ The rationale for distinguishing the testimony as such is simply that the testimony of an outcome that comes out by probing counts as somewhat less than testimony that comes out without any such probing. The latter would likely be so emphatically present as an outcome in the participants life that no probing was needed.

V. Findings

Introduction

The findings of this program study begins with a brief description of the Alpha program and the history of its use in this particular university context. Next I unpack the major findings of this program evaluation in four categories: 1) Evaluation of Alpha using Abraham's robust definition of evangelism; 2) Evaluation of the nature of the *community* into which Alpha initiates people in view of Hauerwas and Stone's ecclesial concerns; 3) Evaluation of the *reorientation of focus* that occurs in the lives of participants in light of critiques about the marketing impulse behind Alpha; 4) Evaluation of the Alpha program in light of non-essentialist Postmodern categories of Barth and Kraemer. After stating the findings and attempting to ground them in the research data I provide a synthesis of findings and conclude with some personal reflections on the reliability and utility of these findings for program leaders, program designers and future research.

An Overview of Alpha and Its Use This Campus

The Alpha program consists of ten weekly gatherings of people interested in exploring Christianity. Each meeting lasts three hours beginning with a shared meal, followed by the viewing of video message that addresses some of the essential beliefs of Christianity, followed by discussion in smaller groups facilitated by a trained volunteer. One of the ten meetings occurs in a retreat setting (over night and away from the city) where the topic of the Holy Spirit is addressed.

The Alpha program has been offered on one university campus here in Boston six times in the past three years. The average attendance has steadily grown as has the number of formerly non-Christian students who experienced a conversion and now identify themselves as Christians.

Recounting the early discouragements and frustrations of the initial launching of Alpha on campus, the pioneering leader told me, “Alpha starts with well-meaning Christians, many of whom don't have many or any close non-Christian friends, and if they do, they don't have confidence that the course is something they would want their non-Christian friends to attend. As they get comfortable with the course, they invite friends to future courses, and as non-Christians become believers, they bring a larger circle of non-believers into the network because they had more non-Christian friends to start with.” The third time students offered the course, the attendance jumped considerably, the number of attendees required more than one discussion group, and several students became Christians. My personal observations of the program come from attending the sixth offering of Alpha on this particular campus, but the interviews surface information from virtually every offering on this campus.

The Elements of Abraham’s Definition of Evangelism in Alpha

In general all seven categories of Abraham’s robust definition of evangelism show up in some form as an outcome of the Alpha program in this University context. Not surprising to me, all four interviewees place a great deal of emphasis on the irreducibly social nature of coming to faith through the Alpha program. Unlike some emphatically individualistic and cognitive forms of evangelism Alpha places a great deal of emphasis on Abraham’s category of *community*.¹¹ Far from a private transaction between the individual and God, the participants can hardly distinguish their conversion to Christianity from their initiation into a new community.

For example, Jen refers to her becoming a Christian this way.

I think one of the big things that I realized *when I became a Christian was that I was immediately friends with a lot of the leaders of Christian Impact* (this is the name of the

¹¹ Some popular form of evangelism involve sharing cognitive content with an individual and inviting that individual to make a private decision to place their faith in the truth and, Jesus, the person behind and object of the truth claims.

student organization that provided the leadership for Alpha on her campus).¹² I was friends with some of them before, but I was *brought into the community with people that were totally giving their lives to Christ* and that was just how they lived. I was *immediately immersed with people*, it was just natural for me, of course, if you are going to live for Jesus then you are going to do everything for Jesus. I think that really helped in that I was *surrounded by people who were mature* in their walks with Christ and who really had their lives devoted to him.

Similarly Chris describes her conversion this way.

Those seven weeks, just *some amazing relationships developed*...we had just been through so much together...It was like a long journey and even in my “life group” (the name of the small group that she meets with weekly) now, it is composed of people who went through that journey and it is just so open in ways that other life groups just don’t tend to be because, yea, I don’t even understand fully, but it was a really amazing time.... The most important or *the hardest hitting impact of Alpha*, like what hit me hardest, *the community, huge!*”

All participants make at least some minimal reference to the *cognitive* content of the Christian faith that they learned and came to believe through the Alpha program. Jen, for example, sees Alpha as “a place that was safe and I could go to however I was feeling that day *and really learn more* about Christianity.” Alpha presents the cognitive content in the video-taped message by the program designer, Nicky Gumbel. Chris relates her story of wrestling with the cognitive content.

The video completely revolted me. I thought that it was a pack of lies. I thought everything he said was wrong...but afterward we would get in small groups...I wanted to tell everyone why the video was wrong...Dustin was very quiet and he would sometimes answer my question if I prodded him...I always respected their don’t knows...*they made me reformulate my own thinking*...but the faith in their eyes never dimmed...and that was a big witness to me.

Reflecting back on it now, Chris admits, “*The video set forth truth in a simple and clear way.*”

The cognitive truth claims embedded in the program enabled her to understand and believe central tenants of Christianity.

¹² Parentheses within the quotes are my additions for clarity. Italics are added to highlight the most seminal idea within the quote to the topic at hand.

Another very key thing that Alpha did for me the second week. I didn't understand who Jesus was. I had grown up technically a Christian, I went to church as a kid, I even read the Bible cover to cover, *but I didn't understand that Christians actually believed that Jesus died for their sins*. That was something I literally had never heard before with understanding. And *the video set that forth so clearly* it just bowled me over. And I thought it was ridiculous and untrue, but it was also something that I just didn't know that Christians believed. And since it is the cornerstone of Christianity, I didn't understand that Jesus was the cornerstone of Christianity. I didn't understand why people thought he was important at all. I kind of believed in God the Father at one point in my life never in this crazy Jesus guy. So, I think that was huge.

Within this community and in conjunction with the program content the students acquire new *spiritual/religious disciplines or practices*. Through the program they learn how to pray, to sing worship songs, to read and study the Bible, to share their faith. Mack refers to these simple disciplines as transformational.

“...hearing how the Bible spoke to Nicky Gumbel, how specific verses speak to him at different times, hearing him say if you want to read the Bible here is what to do: read it, ask what it means, ask how it applies to my life today. It has helped me refocus. *The simple presentation of how to do things has helped me* to read the Bible in a way that it comes alive.”

Participants also learn about and discover within themselves *gifts and abilities to serve as an agent of God*. All the participants make reference to personally growing in their capacity to serve as an agent of God. Jen's story, for example, reveals the way she, in the midst of her Alpha experience, began reach out to people around her and share her new found faith.

Some other people were coming (to Alpha) who still were not Christian and I would get so excited. One of the girls would come and I remember one day giving her a bag full of books to read. I guess I was really excited about things. She became a Christian a few months later. It was really cool. I was excited in general about Christianity. Toward the end of Alpha they asked me to lead Alpha in the spring. I thought I would help lead it, then found out there would only be three of us leading it. It stopped me, and I was like, whoa, I haven't been a Christian for very long and if I am going to be in charge of something I need to really prepare and I need to be informed, like I don't want to lead people astray. I guess since I became a Christian I met with people all the time and shared my testimony, and told them about stuff. So the part about talking with people and sharing God with them wasn't a new thing. I prayed about it and felt like I was supposed to lead and I remember one instance with a friend of mine who is in my math class, during the whole class I felt God was like, “Invite him to Alpha afterwards, invite

him to Alpha afterwards.” At this point in time I was so excited to share God with anybody I thought this must be my head just telling me that I should talk to him right after class. The whole class I kept being mad at myself, why didn’t I bring *Mere Christianity* (a Christian book by C.S. Lewis) with me. After class all I did was say hi, and he said to me, “Jen are you a Christian?” He had never asked this question to me before, maybe once in like the two years we have known each other. So I was like, oh, okay, and I invited him to Alpha and he actually ended up coming. I don’t know exactly where he is right now. We still talk, and he believes, but I don’t know completely where he is with making Jesus Lord of his life. But, that was really cool.¹³

The prevailing sentiment of interviewees when it comes to *morality* is that Alpha helped them internalize their own moral inability, weaknesses and failures and the need for salvation. Alpha helped at least one of the interviewed participants to *appropriate a moral vision* that she did not have coming into the program. Chris recounts a very moving experience during the course of the program when she began to internalize some of the rationale of Christian morality.

I wanted to know why pre-marital sex was wrong and I remember one person saying, “Because it hurts so much when you break apart.” That was something I was going through at the time and I could not deny the truth of it. That just hit me like a wall of bricks. Basically, their personal experiences resonating with mine had a huge impact on me just because they were the people who had experienced the same things I had experienced.

All of the respondents describe their experience as life altering. The *reorientation of focus* category seems to meld with other categories, particularly the category of *unusual experiences, emotions or alterations of dispositions that have come to be associated with conversion*. Each interviewee makes reference to perspective altering, life-changing experiences that to some level turn their focus away from self and/or the human plane to God and/or the supernatural plane. Andrew, for example, describes the reorientation of his focus this way.

I would think I was a good guy, but, in actuality, I did not practice, what I preached. Just feeling that everything was supposed to be for me, and sort of looking for ways in which I can satisfy what I need and not look out for other people. I guess now I'm getting more otherworldly or concerned about other people, rather than being selfish...I'm seeing my ego gradually fade away. I'm seeing that I'm not looking at myself as this great person.

¹³ In the second section of findings I will unpack more of the evidence of how Alpha introduces participants into Christian practices and awakens capacity in participants to serve as agents of God in the world.

*I'm looking at myself more as part of a greater being rather than unto myself. I guess now I'm starting to see that it's not all about me.*¹⁴

Jen marks her conversion at the point when she said a prayer that points toward a genuine reorientation of her focus.

I said, Jesus let me lay down my life for you, *I want to live for you.*

In summary, at least a vague semblance of Abraham's categories of faithful evangelism (initiation into a new community, acquisition of certain gifts/abilities, acquisition of new spiritual/religious disciplines or practices, acquisition of a minimal amount of cognitive claims, reorientation of focus, appropriation of a moral vision, and rather unusual experiences, emotions or alterations of dispositions that have come to be associated with conversion) emerge as outcomes of the Alpha program in this University context. A more finely nuanced understanding of some of these categories reveals how well the Alpha program stands up to the critical questions on evangelism that stand behind Abraham's categories. For example, how well does this new community into which the participants see themselves initiated stack up to Hauerwas and Stone's understanding of the church and the importance of congruence between the church and one's initiation into it, i.e., evangelism? Also, how well does the reorientation of focus that comes about through Alpha mitigate the pitfalls of its marketing impulse? Given this very limited sampling of program participants the findings of this program study on these questions cannot be in any way conclusive, but they can at least point future research in a direction that might lend greater credibility to these initial findings.

¹⁴ That's neat. And what about, has it affected your moral behavior? A: Meaning in terms of like sexual behavior? P: Yeah. Say like your sensibilities to moral things. Has there been any noticeable change? I mean you strike me as a just a good guy. Have you always been as good guy as you are? (laughter)

The Nature of the New Community

As already mentioned, all four interviewees place a great deal of emphasis on the irreducibly social nature of coming to faith through the Alpha program. But, what is the nature of this new community? In particular, what practices and perspectives do program participants identify that distinguish the Alpha community from a non-Christian community? And how do these practices compare to the distinctly Christian practices that Stone and Hauerwas associate with being truly incorporated by grace into Christ.

All program participants speak at length about the profoundly meaningful, yet simple, practice of conversing together over a shared meal and intentionally taking an interest in each others' lives. On the surface, meal conversation sounds so basic and mundane that it can hardly be considered a distinctly Christian practice. Yet, in the words of the program participants, the nature of this shared meal and conversation differed radically from anything they had experience. Jen, for example, describes the significance of the dinner conversation this way.

I remember Simeon (the Alpha leader) asking, "How was your day?" It wasn't like, "How was your day? Oh, you said good; That's great." But, actually being interested in how my day was. *I don't think I have ever had anybody in my whole life who would really want to hear everything about my day.* My parents would, but I wouldn't tell them. So I guess it was seeing that people really cared about me.

Chris also affirms the meaningfulness of this simple practice.

And the leaders were always really lighthearted and they would talk about, you know, ask you how your day was and really want to know about it. It didn't have to have anything to do with Jesus. It's so important that the Christian leaders take an interest in the non-Christian aspects of the people who come, because they are people who need a lot of love, no matter what they believe. *And I was really in need of a lot of love at that point my life. And so it was really neat to join a community like that...* They would like remember what classes I was in and ask how my mid-terms had gone that I'd been talking about the week before. Things like that, their huge. If I hadn't genuinely felt as if *they wanted to get to know me* I wouldn't have kept going.

Mack describes the environment around the meal and discussion groups as one of “*complete openness and vulnerability*” modeled by the leaders who share the “personal struggles, tough lessons you have had to learn in the past, talking from your own experience.” Soon this vulnerability becomes the “norm” the “way people start interacting; Its extremely different from everything else, the normal way of life, especially in the academic setting. I think it is how the church is suppose to behave, being completely open and honest with each other, holding each other accountable, *talking about our struggles* so we can support each other through them, and encouraging each other through the struggles... We have meals, for instance, where you sit down and talk about life. We don’t really talk about spiritual stuff during the meals, we just talk about how things are going. There is something about eating meals together.”

Not just the conversation, but the meal itself made participants like Andrew feel comfortable coming to Alpha. “They made me comfortable because they fed me... They had very good meals every occasion. I don't think I was ever dissatisfied.” Chris, likewise, comments, “Seriously, I was like, Spice (the name of one of the caterers for the meal), wow, they are going to give me Papa Jons pizza? I hate the dining hall! I’m so sick of it. So that was really big.”

Not only do participants comment on the meaningfulness of the conversation and relationship development that occurs over the meal, but many of them comment on a considerable awakening in their own lives of taking an interest in people’s lives and building deeper relationships. Chris shares, “I learned to be more generous. Friendships have grown deeper because I am now safe and can speak truth in love.” Andrew describes the effect of Alpha on his life this way.

I feel like I should give more in a conversation. I should talk more. I should become more active in more than a two-person conversation like we're having now. When there

are five people I should be become part of those five people...*I have been more communicative*. Before I would just hold things in. I would just seek my own interpretation... And I'm actually talking about it and realizing that, communication, I was given speech for a reason. So it makes sense for me to express my feelings to people.

Many of Christianity's most sacred rituals and stories center around a shared meal, but in addition to this practice of fellowshiping over a shared meal every week, Alpha introduces the participants to several other very specific practices that Christians have done since the first communities formed around Jesus of Nazareth. As a participant observer I was struck by and made note of the way the Alpha leader introduced the Christian practice of singing worship songs the first time that we did it.

As you all know Alpha is an introduction into the Christian faith. One thing that Christian communities have been doing for centuries when they come together is sing worship songs. Tonight we are going to do that. We will hand around some song sheets and invite you to feel free to join in if you like.

Chris shares her initial reaction to singing and other Christian practices that Alpha introduces during the course.

A lot of the things I hated about Alpha when I started going became my favorite part after I'd been going. Like singing for instance, I thought that was the worst thing ever, every time they sang at Alpha, and by the end it was the most meaningful part.

Other participants testify how they internalized various personal spiritual disciplines (e.g., praying, reading Bible) as well as corporate disciplines (e.g., singing, sharing food) and ministry disciplines (e.g., sharing their faith, healing) through the Alpha program.

Alpha is an introduction to Christianity, so we end up singing and praying together which is modeled in the New Testament. It is something which Christians do together. People don't have to if they are not comfortable, but people end up becoming extremely comfortable with it when they see everyone else doing it. They want to communicate with God in this way wherever they are in finding him. I think this creates this little church. We are not doing this as part of any church, but Alpha is its own church as much as church, as much as any community of believers. Often the guests won't want to pray the first couple times, but by the retreat guests were praying.

Jen found the emphasis on specific Christian practices very helpful. Prior to Alpha she considered herself an atheist and had read several books addressing the cognitive aspect of the Christian faith. The Alpha book that goes along with the course stood out as very different.

All these books were pretty intellectual and this one (referring to the Alpha book) was more practical. It was like, “This is how you are supposed to live if you are a Christian.” I think in that way I was hungry and it fed me more because *it was showing me what to do*. Definitely that prayer was helpful because I realize this whole time that people had been talking to me I didn’t know how to become a Christian. Nobody had shared that with me, so it was nice to have. If I want to become a Christian this is what I need to do. I need to pray this. Not exactly word for word, but this is the kind of thing I need to do. ...I think *it was probably not so much the intellectual* parts, like the first two talks being more intellectual, that really helped me. I was at a point where I was pretty sure how I felt about the intellectual thing. *It was more, how should I read the Bible? How do I pray? More of the practical. How does God guide us? What do we do in everyday life? Hearing how people did that.*

Another practice that came about as a result of the Alpha program is witnessing. Three of the four interviewees found themselves regularly sharing their faith in Christ with others as a result of Alpha. Two of the students went on short term mission trips within months of becoming Christians through Alpha. One plans to return to the mission field for at least a year. The other, a former atheist, plans to attend seminary next year. A third participant will spend the summer doing overseas mission work. In many ways the Alpha community that they have been a part of resembles the earliest ecclesial communities described in the New Testament. When they come together they share meals, they listen to biblical teaching, they sing, they pray for one another. When they leave they share their faith with others and have seen many new Christians added to their community.¹⁵

¹⁵ New Testament, Acts 2:42ff “And they were continually devoting themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. And everyone kept feeling a sense of awe; and many wonders and signs were taking place through the apostles. And all those who had believed were together, and had all things in common; and they began swelling their property and possessions, and were sharing them with all, as anyone might have need. And day by day continuing with one mind in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they were taking their meals together with gladness and sincerity of heart, praising God, and having favor with all the people. And the Lord was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved.”

As much as these communities resemble the earliest practices of the Christian church, at least one participant expresses in her interview the difficulty she had transitioning from Alpha to the more formal institutional church.

I think it would have been better if people had more of an organized effort to integrate people into the Christian community after becoming Christian. I think most of us felt sort of lost and disconnected, um, it was really hard for me to go to church because I didn't know anyone...I just would sort of stand there alone and that was for a good solid month. And felt miserable and alone at church until I began to branch out and make new friendships myself.

Running the Alpha program in a campus setting, as opposed to a local church, complicates that critical transition from the Alpha program to a local church. Unlike a church-based Alpha, the participants of a University based Alpha do not get into the habit of attending an actual church building. Regular attendance in a church building naturally assists participants in making that transition by helping participants to become familiar with a local church building and, even more importantly, a congregation who gather regularly in that building to worship. None of these participants had that. Nevertheless the others made that transition without any difficulty because the friends who invited them to Alpha also invited them to their church.

Another problem the University-based Alpha presents is that the community that forms during the program lacks not only the vocational, educational and generational diversity of a church congregation, but the activity of the congregation lacks the fully orbbed reality and ministries of the church. I suspect that this aspect of the program would draw fire from the emphatic ecclesial focus of Hauerwas and Stone. Likely, the greatest challenge that Stone and Hauerwas bring against Alpha consists of whether or not the practices into which these participants are initiated are indicative of the radical practices of truly Christian community. Those practices include things like loving enemies, peacemaking and caring for the poor. A hint of these practices does show up in Chris's story. She speaks of a very tangible physical

outpouring of generosity that she experienced during her initiation into Christianity through Alpha and the effect on her life.

So, I learned to be more generous, which was really cool. I'm not afraid about money anymore. I used to be terrified about being poor. And I went home this summer and I didn't have much money. And God was kind of telling me the whole summer like I'm going to show you how I'm going to take care of you. And everything from a girl I had met two weeks ago, Mimi Ko buying my plane ticket home to my pastor one-day just giving me a check for the exact amount of money that I needed at the time. I just don't fear money anymore. That's just such a huge change. (Laughter) It's really cool.

This experience of love and generosity not only flowed into her life, but she notices how it now flows out of her.

Relationships have grown so much deeper. And I'm happier. I love people more now. I remember, two weeks after becoming a Christian, I was just filled with love for the dining hall workers and all the random people on the subway, and I was so confused by that (laughter), but it was so cool to see. Like even now when people do things that wrong others, when people do things that hurt me, I just don't care. I'm like, OK it's an opportunity to show them love. Or when you can open a door for them or help someone to carry a heavy box. It's such a gift to be able to love on people. That's something I had never understood before.

Overall, the centerpiece of each participant's story was not the content nor even the practices of the community, but the relationships they formed with a believer who became a point of contact with Christianity. One participant goes so far as to refer to the person who brought him to Alpha and later to his church as his "other savior." Of the three perspectives of evangelism that I raise in the literature review (essentialists, ecclesialist and non-essentialist) the non-essentialists shows up most clearly. Participants place more emphasis on people and initiation into a community of love than they place on the ideas or practices of the community.

The Nature of the Reorientation of Focus

Of all the categories that derive from Abraham's definition of evangelism, the *reorientation of focus* category was not only the most difficult, but arguably the most important evaluation category to code. This code has the greatest possibility of unlocking the answer to the

marketing questions and concerns that critics raise about Alpha and other popular forms of evangelism. In particular, does Alpha produce converts who merely interpret their Alpha experience in terms of how it met their needs, or does it moves people beyond this consumer mindset to the point of bringing into question their own unexamined needs? Is there a shift of focus from “the self” or “anthropocentric” level to a “God” or “supernatural” level? To use the chief biblical metaphor of “the gospel” used by Abraham¹⁶ as well as Jesus, “Are people really introduced into the kingdom of God?” Is there that radical reorientation of focus that puts God in the center of their world-view rather than the participant—his or her needs, wants, capacities to comprehend, etc.?

Some evidence of just such a reorientation of focus emerges in participants testimonies in at least two ways: 1) participants explicitly interpret their experiences as moving them from a self-focus to a prevailing God-focus, 2) participants testify of supernatural experiences that broke them out of their more naturalistic and human-centered beliefs.

Andrew’s previously mentioned testimony provides an *explicit statement of moving from self-focus to God-focus*.

I would think I was a good guy, but, in actuality, I did not practice, what I preached. Just feeling that *everything was supposed to be for me*, and sort of *looking for ways in which I can satisfy what I need* and not look out for other people. I guess now I'm getting *more otherworldly* or concerned about other people, rather than being selfish...I'm *seeing my ego gradually fade away*. I'm seeing that I'm *not looking at myself as this great person*. I'm looking at myself more as *part of a greater being* rather than unto myself. I guess now I'm starting to see that *it's not all about me*.

This recurring theme of a transitioning from self-centeredness to God-centeredness comes up again in Andrew’s interview when he declares that early on in the course he often asked himself what he considers now a self-centered question, “Am I changing? Am I transforming myself to

¹⁶ I refer here to William Abraham—from whom I derived the codes for this research, not Abraham the patriarch of Israel in the Hebrew Scripture.

be more like God?” As the course went along he began to ask a different, more God-centered question, “Is God transforming me?” Andrew summarizes the way his life changed this way.

*I feel like I have been rocked sort of. Sort of like as the Boston Red Sox fans are emotional when the Red Sox lose and don't make it to the pennants I have sort of felt that that kind of transformation in me. I have felt a, I guess a *repulsion at what I used to be and sort of a happiness about what I will become because I've trusted in Christ.* And um, it's been hard. I mean, I had times when I felt like crying, crying because you know like I just realize the that I tried to do it all by myself. And just realizing the that none of it is possible without Christ makes me sort of disappointed for not trusting in him before. But, realizing that he's always there means that no matter how long it took me, He would always be there for me. So it was inevitable I guess. So, He was just waiting for me to unlock the door.*

For the other interviewees *supernatural experiences* play the major role in this kind of reorientation of focus. For example, Mack describes the way in which the Alpha program broke him out of his more naturalistic, self/human-centered beliefs.

I've also come to believe in the reality of God working today in supernatural ways. We also (referring to his experiences in the church he grew up in) didn't really have sermons on healing, or on spiritual gifts much either. Gifts of speaking in tongues, or gifts of intercession, or healing. I think Nikki Gumbel in the Alpha videos presents it in a very clear way that made me realize there is no real reason why these gifts wouldn't be here today, why God wouldn't work through these gifts in the Holy Spirit. So why not ask him for these things and expect these things. I think that has been one of the biggest way it has helped my growth as a Christian... I never had any real conception about these gifts. I had no real notion that God can heal today, or that I could ask him to do that. It would have been really weird for me to say, "Father in the name of Jesus Christ I ask that you would heal this person." To hear the videos, the presentation of, "Here are all the places where God promises to heal; Here is why God wants to heal; Here is why we are supposed to still ask for healing; And here is how to do it." There is no formula really. It has made me more comfortable. It has become a part of my life. I know how to do it.

Jen, likewise, describes an experience of the supernatural that initially unsettled her, but eventually brought about a radical reorientation from naturalistic atheism to super-naturalistic theism.

So then there is the Holy Spirit retreat for Alpha and I said I'm going to go on it. I don't know how much you know about this retreat, but essentially, Dustin, I don't know what you would call it, got filled with the Spirit or something happened. I guess this had never happened to him before, but Dustin ended up screaming, crying, slash laughing, slash

praying in tongues, slash whatever from this far away room. And like I knew that my body couldn't make this noise. And I got so freaked out by the experience that the next day I was probably the furthest from God that I have ever been. I said I don't want to talk to God, I don't know if this is a good thing or a bad thing. But I didn't want to deal with it. And I talked to the four guys who led me to Christ. I had never been exposed to any of that, . . . I just was very put off by it. I guess I was upset too because no one seemed to say anything after this. And I was kind of like well is this an every time thing—people just screaming out—I don't like this stuff. . . After that, from what I've heard, Dustin's life changed a lot. And it was really interesting too. On top of Dustin screaming, at the same time Bonnie was praying for me and started praying in tongues, a little. I was thinking, “Oh my goodness, this is so many things.” I was questioning for a while, “God, is this really from You?” This is something I really don't know about. The guys who led me to Christ don't do this stuff. I think they're kind of my measure for things. One-day a little while later I was just praying and just kind of it was really weird, I heard exactly what Bonnie had been praying, although I don't know what that meant and just felt the Holy Spirit come really strongly and it was confirming, like, “Hey that was for me, that wasn't something else.” And that was really good because it made me feel a lot better about the whole thing.

Chris shares at length about a truly remarkable experience she had at the Holy Spirit weekend.

But, even prior to that weekend, she had her own life-changing experience.

So about the seventh or eight week into Alpha. I had seen all the videos up through just before the Holy Spirit retreat, so up through “Prayer” (as in the topic of the seventh session) and I thought how ridiculous, why would anyone pray? And I was just walking along the street when I actually felt God's presence in a way that was more real to me than like this table right here is real to me. Basically, if I can believe this table in front of me is real, I can believe that that experience was real because it was just more real. I don't know anything with my entire being, but I knew that was true with my entire being. And basically God said, ‘Hello.’ I said, ‘Hello.’ And he said, ‘You can talk to me because of Jesus.’ And that was the end of the conversation. And I was just, yea, *complete consternation and horror was my first response to this experience*. I didn't tell anyone for three weeks.

In sum, the reorientation of focus of these participants appears to make Alpha at least somewhat resilient to the critique that its marketing impulse has corrupted its message and that its participants have been treated like consumers and leave behaving like consumers. Instead, their testimonies confirm a profound reorientation of focus that confronts and challenges self-centeredness or tame version of God as the ultimate satisfier of all of our unexamined felt needs.

Evaluation of the Program in Light of Non-essentialist Postmodern Categories

The most surprising insight I gained into what I now consider the secret brilliance of Alpha consists of its novel sensitivity to both the modern *and* postmodern sensibilities of the today's college students. After my first experience attending Alpha as a participant observer I left astounded at what I perceived to be an emphatically modern theological impulse dominating the program. By "theological modernist" I mean a rarified view of Christianity that reduces it to a neatly packaged, emphatically cognitive set of ideas proven by evidence and commanding belief. In this way Alpha appeared to resemble what Barth and Kraemer might critically label a denominational catechism or a dogmatic translation.¹⁷ The very first video of the Alpha program begins with an apologetic defense of the historical reliability of the Bible. What makes this a classically modernist theological move is the emphasis it places on evidence, facts, reasonableness. On several occasions participants make reference to the importance of this (what I am calling) "modernist impulse" running through the course. For example, Chris shares how this particular apologetic on the reliability of the Bible actually removed an obstacle that stood between her and the Christian faith.

Researcher: Can you tell me what ideas in the actual program had a profound impact on you? You mentioned some earlier, but in the videos, were there stories that the speaker told, or maybe just truth claims that he put out there, or particular Bible passages, that had a profound impact on you?

¹⁷ Reflecting back on the non-essentialist critiques of Barth, what makes this modernist impulse so repulsive is not simply the emphasis it places on evidence, facts and reason. Barth resist the apparent surrendering of Christianity to the implicitly flawed human criteria of truth. By propping the Bible and Christianity up with apologetic defenses, modernist concede that in order for something to be true it has to be reasonable with respect to the contemporary cannons of academy. But for Barth, the best of human reason is in no place to begin theological reflection. If even the best and brightest of modern thinkers could be duped into endorsing the War policies that brought about the First World War then clearly something greater and better than human reason has to start theological reflection and ground theological truth. Furthermore, the modernist impulse that tries to systematize and organize Christianity into a neatly packaged set of cognitive ideas is flawed. For Barth, the evangelist's responsibility comes down to preaching the word, not defending it, justifying it, propping it up with apologetic arguments.

Chris: Absolutely, the first week talking about the authenticity of the New Testament—huge. Just the fact that he said, “You know secular historians would agree with what I'm saying.” That was huge.

Researcher: But you argued against that right?

C: Oh yeah, I didn't accept that. But, it was the most compelling piece of evidence that he gave, and it made me think twice about saying that the Bible was just a fable anymore. I had to make more complex arguments, like maybe it had been miswritten down or the Catholic Church went and burned a lot of different conflicting doctrines. So I had to move beyond saying, “It's just a book written 2000 years ago. How can it be relevant?” I had to somehow justify the fact that it had been written and was this historically well documented. Like that's pretty impressive... (Alpha) definitely helped me realize that a lot of things that I believed about Christianity were just not what Christians believe. So that in a sense, the videos corrected me on that. And that was really cool. So it knocked a lot of my objections out the window just watching the video. Oh Christians admit that Christians do things wrong to, you know, things like that.

Other participants, likewise, find this “modernist impulse” helpful. They appreciate the way the videos put truth out there. “It was just like, this is the truth” said Jen in reference to the way the videos put forward truth claims, “I was a little bit interested in seeing if other religions were true, I wanted to see if Christianity is true or not.” Chris adds, “The video set forth truth in a simple and clear way.” Another participant puts it like this, “In retrospect, Alpha uniquely provided two things that were essential to the development of my faith: a comfortable atmosphere beyond any I've ever encountered, and *presentation of unmatched clarity.*”

But, despite the affirmation of this modernist impulse in Alpha, participants also express remarkable skepticism of modernity and as well as an affinity with postmodernism. For example, the following exchange occurred between five different students during one of the small group discussion times following a video an Alpha.

Gina: Our generation is skeptical. We grew up being told how objective and true and reliable science is only to find that its models are highly subjective. Take for example the model of the atom. We now know that the electron in an atom is not really like the ones pictured in our textbooks, but actually it consists of clouds.

Kirk: Our generation has been jaded by statistics. Is it fact or that you start with different premises?

Gina: Fact has been proven not to be fact anymore.

Chris: We are hungry for visible results and we don't see genuinely real and happy people. We need tangible evidence in real living.

Gina: Truth comes not in form of documentation. It has to resonate with me. It has to be knowable in more than a deductive, rational way. There are some truths that stick out in a way that others do not...

Chris: You have to see facts lived out in people's lives. I don't trust facts unless I know who they come from.

For these students truth derives not from abstract reason or scientific data as much as from believable people. The criteria of existential meaningfulness counts more than philosophical soundness or scientific evidence.

How is it then that Alpha accommodates this equally strong post-modern impulse in college students? It became very clear as I continued to attend Alpha programs and interview Alpha participants that Alpha cannot be reduced to an emphatically cognitive, modernist expression of Christianity. Its postmodern sensitivity and compatibility with the ideas and concerns of Barth and Kraemer surfaces in four very meaningful ways. First, as already mentioned, Alpha places as much emphasis on orthopraxy (correct Christian practices) as it does orthodoxy (correct Christian belief). The Christianity that participants get introduced to in Alpha cannot, therefore, be reduced merely to a set of ideas or absolute truths to be believed. The Alpha designers place a tremendous amount of focus on putting Christianity on display not just proclaiming ideas.

A second postmodern expression comes out in the way that Alpha structures the weekly program, the teaching content, and the Holy Spirit weekend so that participants leave with nothing less than a conception of a radically free personal God who cannot be placed into a

neatly packaged box, who has a way of upsetting the equilibrium of people's lives and ultimately defies human comprehension. In this way, the Alpha program can hardly be more compatible with the "non-essentialists" like Barth and Kraemer who resist any form of evangelism that reduces Christianity to system of reasonable beliefs. Along this theme Jen said at the conclusion of her interview, "In general Alpha seems to be different each time, so it is something you really have to trust God and through prayer, trust that he is going to take care of things. I guess that is one really big thing that I have learned being a leader, is to not look at something and be like oh my goodness that just went so awfully, because God really works through completely unexpected things." Chris tells how in the end her faith and personal transformation rested on something that transcended human reasonableness and persuasiveness

I know a girl named Sorcha; I think she gave up hope that I would ever become a Christian. She said to me, 'You know, your intellectual questions they just don't have answers.' But I always respected their, 'I don't know' more than if they had tried to give me some pat answer...and another thing, the people at the table every week, I would come back and I would attack them with questions they couldn't answer. And then they would come back the next week and do it again and the faith in their eyes never dimmed. Like usually when they couldn't answer my question they would say, "Yea, you know, I can trust God in that because of all the concrete things I have seen him do in my life. Kind of yea um just so *they believed in God enough just to trust him with what they didn't understand and that was a big witness to me.*"

The program particularly places a great deal of emphasis on the profoundly mysterious person of the Holy Spirit who upset the equilibrium of participants lives and defied their comprehension.

A third expression of the postmodern sensitivity of Alpha comes out in the tremendous emphasis it places on proclaiming the Bible without feeling compelled to defend it. According to non-essentialists like Barth and Kraemer, the Bible provides direct access to Jesus Christ and therefore ought to have a very prominent place in the evangelistic programs. The Bible need not be defended, tamed or demythologized; It needs only to be proclaimed; When it is it will have its effect. The program, retreat and the content of Alpha are set up to do just this. For example,

the center piece of each video is an ample sampling of biblical content. But, following the video the participants break into group of about eight people and discuss the content. Jen, speaking here as both a participant and now as a leader of Alpha, articulates the rationale behind the very free flowing, uncontrolled discussion times that follow the very controlled presentation of biblical content in the video. Through her experience as a participant and a leader she has seen the way that truth which might initially come across as repulsive wins out over time.

It was really nice to sit down and have the discussions. I probably remember the discussions more than I remember the videos. The philosophy that the leaders go into it (the discussions) with is that (participants) get there truth from the videos which then gives us (the leaders) the chance to then give a lot of grace. In that way we don't have to worry that the gospel is distorted in giving too much grace and not really putting in truth because they've gotten an hour or forty minutes worth of truth. We can let people say what ever they want and they'll realize when their finished a few days later that what they said made no sense. We can be assured that they've heard the word and we don't have to feel constantly pressured to share more truth since they have already heard it. People say radical things that we would obviously not agree with, but (we) listen to them and hear them out.

The confidence of the program designers in the power of the proclaimed word to have its effect points toward this non-essentialists, postmodern proclivity of the Alpha program—an emphasis that's puts a tremendous confidence in the supernatural power of God over the ability of human reason. As mentioned earlier, Chris shares the way in which the Bible, which she initially rejected, had its effect on her over time this way.

And then we watched the video, which completely revolted me. I thought it was a pack of lies. I thought everything he said was wrong and just completely um circular. You know he was basing truth, he was like, if we believe the Bible is true everything follows. But, I didn't believe the Bible was true so what he said had no meaning to me...I had about five things that I believed the Bible was wrong about. And on every single count God has shown me that I was wrong since then, which is really neat, but it has just made me convinced that there is truth and there is a right way to live that is not only good for me, but good for others.

A fourth expression of postmodern sensitivity occurs within the context of this uncontrolled discussion time where the role of a key player in the program emerges with, again,

remarkable postmodern sensitivity. In addition to the “objecting/questioning nonbeliever” and the “believing program leader” there exists several “Christian program participants” who regularly respond to questions or objections during the discussion time by merely sharing their own story, testifying of their own personal experiences with Christ. Chris refers to these players in her story this way.

I think it's really cool that there are those two like leaders and the non-Christians across this gulf from each other in away. And then there's these Christians who were swimming around in the middle. I think that's really cool, because the leaders in a certain sense they are taking a stand by being a leader of Alpha and saying, “This is truth I believe that.” None of the helpers ever do that. They just sort of gently say, “In my life this is what I've seen.” So they don't have that formal position that's really helpful I think.

This ongoing interplay between the very controlled proclamation of biblical content and the very uncontrolled time of responding to the content strikes me as the most notable characteristics of the Alpha program, the secret of its brilliance. The posture of the leaders toward this discussion time and the responses of Christian participants can hardly be more postmodernly sensitive. Rather than trying to defend the truth and argue their case they continually affirm the questioner and make it a safe place for participants to name their objections and for Christian participants to freely testify of their own faith and locate the truth of Christianity in their own personal experiences.

It was really good to be able to object. It was really good that the speaker in the videos was not a speaker at alpha, because then you can just say, whatever defaming remarks. You wanted to say... Yeah, so was it cathartic? Yes, I guess in some ways it was really good for me to like voice things that Christians had done to me in the past. And I were harmful or like anger at some Christians for not living life the way they said it should be lived for themselves and people saying yeah, that's true and accepting it. Yeah the acceptance was huge... Yeah, I think it's really neat because it's (Alpha) accepting of the postmodern worldview because you can have eight people sitting down in a small group with eight different conceptions of truths and all walk away with those same conceptions and be accepted and loved. But at the same time, the videos and the leaders present a modern point of view. They are saying this is truth. There is a right. There is a wrong, this is truth. And that's just the backdrop there. They don't say you have to believe this. They're just saying, “This is what we believe.” And Alpha is sort of predicated on people

saying why do you believe that?” with their postmodern sensibility. And so it's accepting and yet also drawing people back toward the truths.

This recurring cycle of proclaiming Biblical content and letting individuals process it harmonizes with the sort of postmodern current of Barthian/Kraemer's thought that resists equating Christianity with its institutional forms and emphasizes indigenizing the biblical content into a particular context.

Concluding Summary of Findings

The following is a summary of the above findings from this program study.

1. At least a vague semblance of Abraham's categories of faithful evangelism (initiation into a new community, acquisition of certain gifts/abilities, acquisition of new spiritual/religious disciplines or practices, acquisition of a minimal amount of cognitive claims, reorientation of focus, appropriation of a moral vision, and rather unusual experiences, emotions or alterations of dispositions that have come to be associated with conversion) emerges as outcomes of the Alpha program in this University context.
2. In many ways the community into which this Alpha program initiates its members resembles the earliest ecclesial communities described in the New Testament: sharing of meals together, caring for one another, praying for one another, devoting themselves to Christ and apostolic teaching, worshipping, witnessing.
3. In a few important ways this community does not resemble the first ecclesial communities. It lacks not only the vocational, educational, and generational diversity of those communities (and of many contemporary church congregations), but the activity of the community lacks the fully orbbed reality and ministries of the church including the practice of caring for the poor which shows up only vaguely as defining this Alpha community.

4. Running the Alpha program in a campus setting, as opposed to a local church, complicates that critical transition for non-churched participants to go from the Alpha program community to a local church community.
5. The centerpiece of each participant's story is not the content nor even the practices of the community, but the relationships they formed with a believer who became a point of contact with Christianity.
6. This Alpha program brought about a reorientation of focus in the lives of participants. That reorientation of focus consists of moving from a self-focus to a prevailing God-focus and moving from a more naturalistic and humanistic world-view to a supernaturalistic theistic world view.
7. Despite a modernist impulse running through the program, Alpha accommodates the postmodern sensibilities of college students in a manner that appears to have remarkable compatibility with Barth and Kraemer's commitments: the ineffability of God; the commitment to proclaiming God's word, the importance of "indigenizing" the biblical content into a particular context (in this case in the individual lives of program participants).

Personal Reflection on Findings

Coming into this study I did not expect to find all of Abraham's categories as outcomes of the Alpha program. I considered some of his categories to be the outcomes of a second phase of Christian formation/discipleship rather than initiation.

The weight that scholars like Stone and Hauerwas place on caring for the poor has been particularly unsettling for me as I think not only about Alpha, but about all forms of evangelism. Only a very subtle expression shows up as an outcome of Alpha. During the study, however, I found myself perplexed by this understanding of evangelism. It is unclear to me which of the ethical/moral commitments of Christianity one should make most central to Christianity and how

those ethical commitments should show up in the introduction to Christianity without becoming semi-Pelagian.

I am also still unsettled about the marketing critiques of Alpha. I am not quite sure what kind of data counts either confirming or refuting the claim that a particular evangelistic program has been corrupted by its marketing impulse. This is a problem that I would like to explore in further research.

As the study evolved and patterns began to emerge in terms of results of the program I found myself more and more interested in what particular aspect of the program contributed to certain outcomes. In some cases I explicitly asked the interviewee to comment on this. This data could provide some additional very meaningful research.

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Appendix A INFORMED CONSENT FORM

For the past three years, as a Boston University doctoral student in Practical Theology, I have been studying the topic of Christian evangelism. Next year at this time I anticipate launching a full-blown doctoral research project on evangelism in a University context. In order to prepare me for this research project I am taking a course in qualitative research designed to sharpen my research skills at gathering, analyzing and presenting data.

Evangelism as a whole has received very little theological attention. My hope is that this project and future research in the area of evangelism will provide constructive resources to the church and Para church organizations as they carry out evangelistic strategies within a University context.

Because of the phenomenal success of the Alpha program, and because of the interest various investors (people who have given money to our Real Life ministry to launch additional Alpha programs around the city), I have decided that the natural place to begin my research is by interviewing students who have gone through the Alpha experience and document their stories.

Questions that I hope to answer are: What makes Alpha work? What has the experience been like for those who have gone through the course? How has the course affected the lives of those who have gone through it? What aspects of the program contributed to the changes in people's lives?

The interview that I will be conducting will last approximate one hour. Your confidentiality will be protected. Your full name will not appear in the document and if you like I will gladly ascribe a pseudonym to you in the transcript. Your taped interview will be transcribed and a copy offered to you in the event that, after reading back over it, you want to clarify, amend or change anything you said in the interview. There are no risks and you can withdraw at any time.

I am hopeful that this investigation will help guide my future research on evangelism (dissertation topic) as well as my ability to serve as a university minister/chaplain. The findings of this initial study will be forwarded to the Missions Committee at Park Street Church, the Christian Union (both of whom have helped with the funding of Alpha), and the regional and national leadership of Campus Crusade for Christ.

By signing below you affirm that you have read and consent to participating in this study.

Name

Date

Appendix B
Interview Guide for Qualitative Research on Alpha Course
 November 2, 2004

Research Question: I want to find out how well the following elements of evangelism have been realized through this process:

Reorientation of focus from being man centered to God-centered;
 Initiation into a community of believers;
 Acquisition of a minimal amount of cognitive claims;
 Appropriation of a moral vision;
 Development of certain gifts and capacities to serve as an agent of God in the world;
 Experiences, emotions and dispositions that accompany initiation;
 The appropriation of certain rights;
 The appropriation of spiritual disciplines.

[] Sign Informed Consent Form

[] Turn both tapes on

[] Read Opening Statement

As you know I am interested in the story of people who have been through the alpha course. Let me encourage you not to guess what you think I might want to hear but tell your story and give your honest and most candid response to whatever questions come up along the way.

I. Opening question

Tell me about your alpha experience
 (Let interviewee carve the trajectory that they want to go on)
 Note nonverbals as certain points in the recording.

II. Possible Probing Questions

A. Life Change: What has changed in your life?

1. Behaviors
2. Perspectives/thinking
 - a. Describe your view of Christianity before and after Alpha
 - b. Describe your view of Christians before and after Alpha?
3. Feelings

4. Relationships/Social Life

B. Program: What elements of this program (process or experience) had the greatest impact on you?

1. Program Content

- a. What ideas (videos, stories, claims, Bible verses) had the greatest impact on you?
- b. How did your thinking change?
- c. What was your understanding of the gospel or of Christianity?
- d. What is it now?

2. Program Environment

What elements of the environment were most important in your experience?

3. People

What about the people/leaders made the greatest impact on your life?

4. What things could have improved the process for you or for others?

C. World View

Describe yourself with respect to modern and postmodern sensibilities

D. Church: Initiation into a community of believers;

1. Talk about the step from the Alpha program to the church
 - a. To the community
 - b. To the sacraments and rights
2. Talk about the effects of Alpha on your moral life or your vision of the moral good.
3. Talk about the way in which Alpha may have surfaced certain gifts and capacities in you to serve as an agent of God in the world

E. Spiritual Disciplines: The appropriation of spiritual disciplines.