NEW WINESKINS, OLD WINE: ALPHA AS THE FUTURE OF WESLEYAN THEOLOGY

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"Intelligent, biblically based...for the inquiring mind, there is nothing better around than the Alpha course," states evangelist Tony Campolo. "If you've ever wondered 'why Jesus?' you'll hardly find a better answer than this," according to evangelist Luis Palau. "Alpha is definitely a powerful tool for reaching the lost for Christ and helping them mature in their faith," states Bill Bright, founder of Campus Crusade for Christ.

Across denominations and para-church groups, from England to South Africa to South Korea, the Alpha "short course" in Christianity has in only ten years literally swept the globe. Beginning in 1992 with only five courses offered through Holy Trinity Brompton Anglican Church in London, the Alpha course has grown to over twenty million participants worldwide, and still growing. Through a unique combination of worship, prayer ministry, video presentation and small group discussions, thousands have been drawn into a personal relationship with Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord, while also producing renewed spiritual vigor and enthusiasm among formerly mainline Protestant denominations.

Although utilized across the Body of Christ from Catholicism and Anglicanism to Pentecostalism and non-denominational settings, and containing numerous charismatic/Pentecostal distinctives (i.e. the extraordinary charisms such as healing, speaking in tongues, prophetic words), in many ways Alpha presents a vision of Christian faith and practice that is distinctly Wesleyan in form and content (e.g. worship and evangelism as core practices of the Christian life, especially as nurtured in small groups grounded in prayer and Scripture study). Moreover, through upholding a Biblical soteriological vision rooted in the actual physical death and Resurrection of Jesus Christ as key to salvation, through a grounding in intercessory prayer, mealshearing and the active agency of the Holy Spirit in all phases of Alpha, many theological distinctives that were once considered constitutive of early Christians, and

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then early Wesleyan identity, are presented in a new format for a new generation. To paraphrase Sandy Millar, vicar of Holy Trinity Brompton, “Alpha simply seeks to present the age-old message of the Gospel in a new packaging.”

Therefore, in response to the growing need for effective and faithful world evangelization (especially within the “10/40 window” of North Africa, Asia and the Middle East), and in response to the need for revitalization among established denominational bodies, this paper seeks to offer a theological analysis of why Alpha has proven so effective both in evangelism and church renewal. More specifically, written from a Wesleyan-evangelical soteriological perspective that affirms the need for personal conversion to Jesus Christ through a Spirit-empowered growth in grace from justification to eventual “perfection in love,” this paper will highlight some of Alpha’s Wesleyan distinctives, but with special attention given to pneumatology (i.e. the Person and work of the Holy Spirit). Through such analysis, hopefully four questions will at least be partially answered. One, what makes Alpha so effective? Two, what makes Alpha distinctively Wesleyan? Three, what possible directions does Alpha point Wesleyan theology and practice towards in the coming generation? Four, what does Alpha tell the entire Body of Christ about what the Holy Spirit may be trying to say to it concerning where the Lord Jesus Christ wishes to lead the churches in the coming years?

WHAT MAKES ALPHA SO EFFECTIVE: THE HOLY SPIRIT OR McDONALD’S CHRISTIANITY?

In spite of Alpha’s overwhelming success, the program has not been without its critics. For example, in a 1998 paper delivered to an evangelical Anglican audience, Pete Ward, the Archbishop’s adviser on youth ministry offers this critique of Alpha:

Alpha is a recognizable product and brand label . . . McDonaldization is driven by numbers, efficiency is assessed by counting, how many burgers cooked in numbers of minutes . . . Alpha exhibits a predilection for numbers . . . it measures its success and presents itself for approval primarily on the basis of numerical success. Alpha is a work of God, but it is also a religious cultural industry offering products to consumers.6

Although written from a perspective generally favorable to, yet still somewhat critical of Alpha, Wards’s critique poses a simple, yet vital question—namely ‘why is Alpha so effective?’ Is Alpha simply the best-marketed product on the Christian marketplace exhibiting what sociologists refer to as ‘McDonaldization’ with its core criteria of predictability, efficiency, calculability, and control through non-human production? Or does Alpha represent a legitimate move of the Holy Spirit and therefore to be recognized as such and actively promulgated otherwise (similar to Camaliel’s insight in Acts 5:39) we may find ourselves “fighting against God?”

In order to answer this question as objectively and systematically as possible, I will utilize the four key criteria that sociologists claim is representative of McDonaldization (i.e. predictability, efficiency, calculability, and control through non-human production) and
apply them to the Alpha short course. Following such a brief analysis, I will then pose the critical counter-question of whether McDonaldization itself is necessarily opposed to the Gospel, or more precisely, which aspects of McDonaldization can be considered in any ways antithetical to central claims of the Christian Gospel. Finally, I will transition into a more formal theological analysis of Alpha’s understandings of the Holy Spirit and whether or not its pneumatology may offer a better explanation for Alpha’s success.

A primary criterion that characterizes “McDonaldization” of contemporary Western cultures is predictability. When one orders a Big & Tasty hamburger in California, one assumes that it will taste more or less the same as Big & Tasty burgers in New York, Nebraska, and arguably even in Mexico or Russia. Predictability is key to corporate success, especially within a global economy. How accurate a descriptor is “predictability” for the Alpha program, however? In one sense, Alpha is highly predictable. Each lesson is presented in the student manual, complete with guiding questions asked by group leaders utilizing the leader’s guide. The fifteen talks range from “Who is Jesus?” and “Why did Jesus die?” to “How can I be filled with the Holy Spirit?” and “Does God heal today?” Pedagogically, Alpha is a highly structured curriculum, especially when the suggested video-tapes are utilized. Therefore, at least a form of predictability is key to Alpha, and arguably a reason contributing to its success.

What about efficiency? Again, Alpha is a highly efficient presentation of the Christian faith from a non-cessationist (i.e. charismatic-Pentecostal) Biblical perspective. The Person, death and Resurrection of Jesus Christ are central to Alpha, especially in offering numerous opportunities for personal conversion to Jesus Christ. Similarly, the Person, activity and experiential verification of the Holy Spirit’s presence and work are well emphasized, especially through a special Holy Spirit weekend mid-way through the course. Additionally, spiritual disciplines of prayer, Scripture study and resisting evil are addressed. Finally, key theological issues of ecclesiology, assurance of salvation and evangelism are represented in a manner that is Biblically well grounded, sensitive to current divisions within Christianity, while still open to new movements of the Holy Spirit. Through presenting such basic Christian teaching in a relatively short time of ten weeks, for three hours a week (with no homework!), Alpha truly can be described as “efficient” in some sense, and again arguably a contributing factor to its success.

What about calculability? In one sense Alpha does make extensive use of statistical analysis, especially in charting its exponential growth rate throughout the past decade. Additionally, through the use of follow-up questionnaires following each course and training event, the Alpha movement makes earnest attempts at tracking numbers of courses being offered, numbers of participants, and feedback concerning motivations for participating in Alpha and how Alpha might be improved. Thus, when evaluated sociologically Alpha does show a concern for statistical analysis similar to corporations such as McDonald’s or Burger King. When evaluated theologically, however, such a concern for statistical analysis can also be attributed to other factors. Similar to Biblical and early Christian catechetical emphases placed upon “recounting the mighty acts of the Lord,” (e.g Acts 2:43-47; Cyril of Jerusalem’s “Catechetical Lectures,” etc.) the key theological question is not whether statistics are being utilized, but for what purpose or end? If the concern is strictly self-promotion of either Alpha, a particular church, leader or even denomination, then such sta-
istical analysis is rightly denounced as idolatrous manipulation for one’s own ends. If the end and purpose of utilizing statistics is to reach the lost for Jesus Christ, then calculability is instead better understood as a form of testimony to the mighty things the Lord has done, and thus a form of Christian witness. For example, a significant part of each Alpha course or training event is time set aside for personal testimonies by those who have attended and been impacted by the Alpha course (e.g. conversion stories, the Holy Spirit’s assistance in overcoming addiction, overcoming intellectual doubts, etc.). Therefore, rather than only being described sociologically, the criterion of calculability can also be explained as a form of Christian witness consonant with Biblical Christianity.

What about the fourth criterion of McDonaldization—i.e. control through non-human production? Here, the answer becomes much less clear. On one hand, Alpha is a standardized curriculum in which attending a training seminar is greatly encouraged, and thus exhibits a form of control. On the other hand, every Alpha course is extremely different simply because the people participating are different, bringing different needs, concerns and life experiences to the meals, worship and small group discussion. Similarly, through constant intercessory prayer centered in the active, ongoing work of the Holy Spirit, each Alpha course is different because God sovereignly chooses to work in different ways, at different times, according to the different lives and responses of the people present in each course. To quote John 3:8, “The Spirit blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes.” In short, although highly uniform in many ways, little control exists with Alpha simply because the Holy Spirit cannot be controlled or manipulated for one’s own purposes.

The final criterion of control is not only where the McDonaldization label breaks down sociologically, but more importantly, theologically. If the Holy Spirit truly is central to Alpha’s success, then the first three criteria of McDonaldization must be re-evaluated concerning any perceived incompatibility with Christianity. First, “predictability” can also be described theologically as catholicity—i.e. Jesus Christ founded one Church, the Body of Christ, with Himself as the Head. Predictability does not necessarily mean uniformity, but rather, similar to Pauline teaching on the variety of gifts and ministerial offices within Christ’s Body (e.g. 1 Corinthians 12:14), a certain type of predictability as catholicity is both Biblically warranted and appropriate for the healthy functioning of the Body—namely, like a physical body, ears will always function like ears, feet will always function like feet, etc.

Second, “efficiency” understood Biblically can simply be known as fruitfulness. Although efficiency as its own end can be considered counter to Biblical fruits of the Spirit such as patience or the call to steadfast endurance within Christian life, utilizing the Biblical metaphor of the vine and the branches (i.e. John 15:1), in order to maintain greatest fruitfulness, a certain level of pruning (i.e. a type of “efficiency”) is both warranted and necessary.

Finally, although “calculability” can rightly be considered problematic if quality of disciples or the unity of Christian believers is compromised, intrinsic to Christian identity itself is the calling for world evangelization (i.e. Matthew 28:19-20) and thus being concerned about reaching as many lost people as possible should be a highly significant concern, provided numbers do not compromise faithfulness to Jesus Christ. Therefore, when evalua-
ed theologically, rather than strictly sociologically, Alpha's success may very well be attributed to Biblical distinctives such as catholicity, fruitfulness and evangelism, but simply presented in new forms—namely, "old wine in new wineskins:"

**WHAT MAKES ALPHA DISTINCTIVELY WESLEYAN?:**  
**THE SPIRIT-FILLED LIFE**

In many ways, what makes Alpha perhaps most distinctively Wesleyan is simply its Christ-centered, salvation-focused teaching and complete reliance on the Holy Spirit, as rooted in small group prayer and Scripture study (i.e. parallel to early Methodist class meetings). Granted, Alpha does arise specifically from a second-generation charismatic/Pentecostal movement within the Church of England and thus can and should be understood first under such a designation. While acknowledging its charismatic Anglican inception, however, Alpha's pneumatology is both highly consonant with and perhaps even paradigmatic for both historic and future Wesleyan pneumatological emphases. Such pneumatological emphases include, but are not limited to the following:

1. personal evidence of the Holy Spirit's activity;
2. extraordinary activity of the Holy Spirit not being limited to the apostolic era;
3. The Holy Spirit working primarily through the structures of corporate worship and the guided leadership provided within small groups;
4. linking of the Holy Spirit's activity to spiritual practices such as prayer and Scripture reading;
5. the Holy Spirit as central to all aspects of evangelistic practice.

In listing these five Wesleyan pneumatological resonances within Alpha, of course the critical question is raised concerning how exactly to read both John Wesley and then by extension how to read the later Wesleyan traditions which followed. Concerning the first point, as the historical work of Richard Heitzenrater has demonstrated, the historiographical issues surrounding Wesley's theological life are less than straightforward and lie far beyond the scope of this brief analysis. On this point, I can only rely on the historically-contextualized foundational theological readings of Randy Maddox and Ted Campbell, who both point to the apostolic foundations for Wesley's pneumatology, especially in Wesley's predilection for pre-Nicene Christianity and a dynamic economic Trinitarian theology of the "three-one God" who saves us. Such a reading of Wesley through the lens of his early Christian sources (e.g. the Macarian "Spiritual Homilies") is crucial for highlighting the non-cessationist leanings of Wesley's pneumatology (while of course bracketing the precise charism of tongue-speaking). Perhaps most striking, both as a reading of Wesley's pneumatology, and for the constructive purposes of this paper, is not only Wesley's non-cessationist, pre-Nicene leanings, but also his scathing indictment of Constantinian forms of Christianity, claiming that "Constantine calling himself a Christian—and pouring of wealth and power on the Christian church, the clergy in particular—was productive of more evil to the church than ten persecutions put together."

In summary, the pneumatology that both shaped and was espoused by John Wesley should be read first as being non-cessationist, indeed even "enthusiastic" (a charge leveled by many of Wesley's own critics), and then read dogmatically within a dynamic soteriologically-rooted Trinitarianism. Similarly, Alpha, although rich in its dogmatic implications, always first stresses the actual, verifiable Personal Presence of the Lord in His Holy Spirit as central prior to any other theological topics (other than initial conversion) being expli-
cated (e.g. ecclesiology). Practically, of course, this means that the success or failure of any given Alpha course is linked to whether or not the Lord Himself, His Presence and His Activity have remained the primary agent and foundation for evangelism and renewal.

FROM CELL-GROUP TO HOUSE CHURCH?: 18
WHAT THE SPIRIT MAY BE SAYING TO THE WORLD CHURCH...

Regarding questions three and four with which this paper opened, the answer may be one and the same—namely the future of Wesleyan theology and practice may very well be inextricably intertwined with what the Holy Spirit is saying to the world-wide Body of Christians. In order to give a provisional answer to what the Holy Spirit may be saying to both Wesleyan theology and world Christianity, I propose the following thesis:

Alpha signals a transition from a congregationally-based, denominational, cessationist Christianity to a non-cessationist, trans-denominational Christianity rooted in large corporate worship, under-girded by a more household-based Christian identity.

In his book Houses That Change the World: The Return of the House Churches, missiologist Wolfgang Simpson proposes a radical set of fifteen theses concerning how Christianity may be shifting its locus of identity both currently and in the coming years. Reading the Alpha course as part of a transitional movement towards a more household-based form of Christian identity, Simpson proposes the following set of theses:

1) Christianity is a way of life, not a series of religious meetings; 2) [it's] time to change the 'cathegogue system' of Christian worship following the reign of Constantine and the move towards cathedral-style worship modeled on the Jewish synagogue; 3) The Third Reformation of Christianity will be a reformation of church structure; 4) Church houses will move to house churches in which Christians will share their material and spiritual lives more like family members living together in household; 5) The church has to become small to grow large, meaning the greatest chance for fulfilling the Great Commission of world evangelization will come in the form of the "increased surface area" that house churches provide in witnessing to under-evangelized areas (e.g. neighborhoods, apartment buildings, etc.); 6) No church is led by a pastor alone, but instead is led by a combination of elders reflecting the Biblical five-fold office of apostles, prophets, pastors, evangelists and teachers; 7) The right pieces [of Biblical ministry are] fitted together in the wrong way and thus must return to the Biblical model of a network of Christian households from which they first arose; 8) Ministry will then be out of the hands of bureaucratic clergy and on towards the priesthood of all believers; 9) [Churches must] return from organized to organic forms of Christianity; 10) [Churches must move from worshipping our worship to worshipping God; 11) [Churches must] stop bringing people to church, and start bringing the church to the people; 12) [Churches must] rediscover the Lord's Supper as a real supper with real food (i.e. linking eucharist with love-feast); 13) [Churches must] move to denominations to city-wide celebration; 14) [Churches must] develop a persecution-proof spirit (and corresponding persecution-resistant structure!); 15) The Church comes home—namely the base-unit of the Christian familial household will be restored to its original Biblical primacy.

Although Simpson's precise theological analysis lies well outside the scope of this paper, even if a cursory presentation of his prognosis is only partially correct, then Alpha could (and perhaps should) be seen as a significant transitional movement signaling a
monumental shift in historic Christian identity. For example, even among evangelical and Pentecostal churches that have restored lost Christian distinctives (e.g. justification by faith, the extraordinary charisms, etc.) it is often historic (i.e. post-Constantinian) Christian patterns of pastoral leadership and denominational Christian identity that are still retained (e.g. the recurring move towards a cathedral-based Christianity). Of course, one can easily explain the house-church movement as only a necessary structure under a persecuting national or regional government (e.g. Chinese house-churches) or a faddish movement that will quickly lose steam and collapse into denominationalism. Although there may indeed be much truth to such potential counter-claims, significant evidence may be starting to accumulate that would signal Alpha as truly being an important historical movement, not only in further promulgating non-cessationist (i.e. charismatic) Christianity, but also perhaps signaling a shift in the primary locus of Christian identity as well—namely restoration of the Christian household as a trans-denominational reality of Christian existence in the coming decades.

Concerning the first point, as the historical and demographic analysis of Phil Jenkins's *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity* well argues, the future of world Christianity in the coming decades should be marked by an increase of “southern Christianity” (i.e. roughly Pentecostal) as normative. Through his analysis of both population projections and current rates of evangelistic conversion in Latin America, Africa and Asia (coupled with increased decline of established Christianity in the Western world), the future of Christianity may very well look more ‘pre-modern’ with dramatic accounts of healings, overcoming spiritual evil, prophetic utterances, etc. as increasingly normative of Christian identity. For example, simply through tracing current demographic trends, Jenkins states that, “One way or another, inside the Catholic Church or outside of it, Third World Christianity is becoming steadily more Pentecostal.” If Jenkins’s analysis is fundamentally correct, then Alpha, (as a movement primarily among western-Anglo cultures) should simply be seen as one place in which such drastic transformation of Christianity is occurring, but with a surprising twist—namely such a transformation is occurring largely under the auspices (and often even ecclesial structures) of the old Christendom of Western Europe and North America. For example, a cursory glance of the countries most impacted by Alpha includes not only Britain and its former colonies (e.g. Canada, Australia), but most of Western Europe.

Concerning the second point of Alpha signaling a potential shift in locus of Christian identity, I can only offer these concluding words. First, throughout the history of Christianity, reform has often come from the locus of particular Christian households, but without any wholesale adoption of a “house-church” model as normative. For example, although the context of the Wesley household (i.e. Samuel & Susanna) is noted among historians as being influential upon the later development of the brothers Wesley, neither Wesley’s own vision, nor later Wesleyan traditions advocated a complete abandoning of Christendom models of Christian identity (i.e. parish or cathedral Christianity) in favor of household Christianity. Therefore, only time will tell if Simpson’s analysis proves correct, and Alpha signals a transition into a new structure of post-Christendom apostolic household-based Christianity.

Second, even if Simpson’s analysis only proves partially correct, house-church
Christianity is nonetheless a growing phenomenon, and as such a movement to be recognized, if not actively promulgated, especially if the Holy Spirit seems to be speaking such a word to a growing number of world Christians. For example, although Simpson’s formal analysis is worthy of its own attention, perhaps what is more striking is the global and inter-Christian (i.e. ecumenical) reception and engagement of Simpson’s book. Countries as diverse as Belgium, the UK, Namibia, the Phillipines, and the U.S. are all well represented within the book’s commentators. Perhaps most striking (and worthy of corporate discernment of the Holy Spirit by the world-wide Body of Christ) is a comment made by an anonymous Mongolian believer who stated, “This is exactly the type of church I have seen in action, and what the Holy Spirit has revealed to us, before the missionaries came.”

The truest test of such world-wide discernment of what the Holy Spirit might be saying to global Christianity is of course how such personal revelation corresponds both with Biblical witness and with the Spirit’s utterances elsewhere within the Body of Christ, especially where no direct connection/influence among Christian believers can be traced.

CONCLUSION: ALPHA AS THE FUTURE OF WESLEYAN THEOLOGY?

In conclusion, as this paper’s analysis has hopefully demonstrated in part, the Alpha movement perhaps should be seen as a significant movement both for Wesleyan Christianity and throughout the world-wide Body of Christ. First, contrary to potential concerns that Alpha’s success may only be attributable to marketing savvy, as sociological analysis itself helps to demonstrate, rather than McDonaldization, the Holy Spirit is perhaps a better explanation for Alpha’s success. Second, although arising from a charismatic Anglican background, Alpha is consonant with Wesleyan theology and practice, especially in its non-cessationist, Christ-centered pneumatology from initial conversion to growth in the Holy Spirit. Finally, although subject to further corporate and personal discernment, the Alpha movement may also signal what the Holy Spirit is saying to both Wesleyan Christianity and the Church catholic—namely a continuing and increasing movement towards a more household-based Christianity, empowered by the Holy Spirit for the salvation of the world.

NOTES

1. I must thank the “Walk to Emmaus” community of First United Methodist Church, South Bend, IN, and all those involved with the initial Alpha program for tirelessly laboring for church renewal and reaching the lost for Christ. Special thanks must be given to Jim Traughber, Lois Esselstrom, Sarah Wood, and Rich Fox for their prayers, meals, and desire to lead others to Christ through Alpha.

2. All endorsements are courtesy of Alpha News, the quarterly publication of the Alpha program.

3. Alpha News (statistics updated yearly).


5. The “10/40 window” has become a popular descriptive phrase among evangelical missionary agencies, and refers simply to the latitudinal lines that correspond to the area of the world currently least exposed to Christian witness.


8. I must thank Bethel College (IN) professor of sociology Tim Johnson for his sharing of resources and sociological insights that helped shape the analysis of this section, even if at the end of the day I remain a bigger fan of McDonald's hamburgers.


10. Although the ecclesiological issues at stake in this statement lie far beyond the scope of this paper, as an evangelical Catholic seeking a renewed emphasis on evangelism within Catholicism (esp. in the former Christendom of Western societies), I am committed to the Catholic Church’s ecclesiological teachings concerning the structural unity of the Church as it is rooted in the eucharist, and the ongoing charismatic teaching office of the Church’s appointed pastoral leadership under Pope John Paul II. Having noted such a commitment, given the reality of the Holy Spirit’s charisms being freely given outside of the particular structures of Catholicism, sometimes even more powerfully depending on Christian receptivity to divine grace, one must also be ever committed to listening to what the Holy Spirit may be saying throughout Christianity. Given Alpha’s phenomenal growth rate across communal and denominational boundaries, at the level of foundational Christian teaching, Alpha may well prove to be one small, but significant plank in not only leading the lost to Jesus Christ, but also in helping to bridge former divisions within Christianity. Such a Catholic-evangelicalism rooted in soteriology and evangelism as the basis of Christian unity is arguably not only truly Wesleyan, but arguably even what it means to be truly catholic—i.e. the Church’s unity is Jesus Christ, the One Lamb slain for the salvation of all (including even the angelic hosts) who call upon the blood of Jesus (Revelation 12:11).

11. Although there are many ways to trace Wesley’s pneumatology, given the Holy Spirit’s Presence and Activity within Christian worship and its Biblical proclamation of the Word, perhaps the best place to start would be Wesley’s homiletical theology. Here I must lean extensively on the homiletical synthesis of Wesley provided by Kenneth Collins in his A Faithful Witness: John Wesley’s Homiletical Theology (Wilmore, KY: Wesley Heritage Press, 1993), especially in noting Wesley’s non-cessationist tendencies.


16. Please see Mark Kurowski’s “First Step Towards Grace: John Wesley’s Use of the Homilies of Macarius the Great” in Methodist History, 36:2 Jan. 1998, 113-124. Kurowski’s reading of Macarius is essentially correct, especially in noting a problematic “proto-Pelagian strain within the homilies in which divine grace does not seem to be the primary initiator of initial conversion within the ‘Spiritual Homilies.’ Although such a systematic concern is well justified, and likely an accurate reading of Macarius, Kurowski’s reading of Macarius fails to note the numerous charismatic distinctives of the Macarian corpus, including Spirit-baptism, pneumatic deliverance as part of the Spirit’s sanctifying power, revelation by the Holy Spirit, etc.

18. Within my own ecclesial context of South Bend, IN, household-based Christianity is common. For example, following the initial outpouring of the Holy Spirit to initiate the Catholic charismatic movement (late 1960s early 70s), such pneumatic outpouring was quickly followed by a desire to reclaim the household's primacy within Christian life, resulting in the formation of People of Praise covenant community (of which my family and I are underway members).


20. It can of course be argued that even while working under the ecclesial structures of declining Western Christendom (e.g. the Church of England) that Alpha may be one small, yet significant way in which the structures themselves are also changing, especially if analyses such as Simpson’s prove correct.


23. A likely scenario is that both household and Christendom Christianity will continue to co-exist, perhaps even indefinitely until Christ’s final return in Glory. Generally, however, where the Church is persecuted, either through national governments (e.g. China, Sudan) or more subtly in the West through cultural institutions such as the secular media, educational structures, etc. house-church Christianity will seem more warranted. One sizeable house-church movement that reflects both dynamics of direct external persecution and the more subtle forms of cultural attacks/exclusion is the Phillipino-based, trans-national “Alpha-Catholic” movement called “Couples for Christ.” (www.cfcglobal.org.ph/aboutus/introduction.htm).


25. I am here relying on a basic principle usually applied within fields such as textual criticism—namely, one can offer a provisionally greater "rationalistic" authenticity to a set of data that corresponds quite closely without any recognizable direct influence other than Scripture itself and the activity of the Holy Spirit. Of course, as the Biblical witness itself well demonstrates, the Holy Spirit (or the Spirit’s activity) often does not conform Himself to what human beings regard as rational, or what is expected (John 3:8; Acts 2:12).