



EQUIPPER

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Happy Advent!

During this joyous season of Advent, we celebrate Jesus' *comings* in reverse order: his *future coming* in glory, his *present coming* in the Holy Spirit and his *first coming* through his Incarnation and human birth. Common to all three is the one Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, who as God-in-the-flesh, is *Immanuel*—God with us (Matt 1:23).



Regarding the hope of his future coming, I am often asked, "Does GCI still believe in prophecy?" The short answer is, "Yes." But there is more to be said. Formerly we tended to emphasize the *what* and *when* of prophecy, using Scripture to speculate on the nature and timing of end-time events. But now, following Jesus' instructions (John 5:39-40), our focus is on the *who* of prophecy. We have come to understand that the purpose of all Scripture, including prophecies about Jesus' second coming, is to reveal the person and work of Jesus. In union with the Father and the Holy Spirit (through the Trinity) and with all humanity (through the Incarnation), Jesus is, in himself, humankind's Atonement with God.

Through his Incarnation and birth, the Son of God came to us as one of us—adding our humanity to his divinity. It is this first advent of Jesus that we celebrate at Christmas. Following his death, resurrection and ascension, Jesus (who remains human, now glorified) comes to us by sending the Holy Spirit, who forms the church, Christ's body on earth. And one day in the future, Jesus will come again bodily—presenting himself visibly to all people (John 5:25), and ushering in the new heaven and new earth (2Pet 3:13, Rev 21:1).

We celebrate all three aspects of this progressive coming of Jesus during Advent. All three are addressed in many biblical prophecies in both the Old and New Testaments. We must be careful not to misuse these prophecies by overlooking or otherwise distorting their primary message, which is the Atonement of God and humanity in the person of Jesus.

May our Advent celebrations this year and always, through the power of the Holy Spirit, be centered on Jesus Christ, to the glory of the Father.

-Ted Johnston, CAD communications

INSIDE THIS ISSUE

- 1 Advent & prophecy
- 2 Using *The Alpha Course* as a tool for outreach

Announcements:

1. For information about the GCI-USA 2011 Regional Conferences, go to <http://www.gci.org/event/11/conferences>.
2. To prepare for the Regional Conferences in 2011, we recommend viewing the videos of Ed Stetzer's workshops at the GCI International conference held this past summer in Orlando:
 - <http://vimeo.com/17164965> **Viral Churches**—how churches and denominations can participate in multiplying new churches.
 - <http://vimeo.com/17171103> **Comeback Churches**—key characteristics of churches that are experiencing growth and vitality.

Equipping pastors, ministry leaders and ministry workers for participation in ministry with Jesus.

The Alpha Course: a tool for outreach

By Becky Valekis, discipleship coordinator, CrossRoads Christian Fellowship, Tipp City, OH (See more pictures at <http://gci-usa.blogspot.com/p/seeking-lost.html>)

Our emphasis on local mission has produced a wonderful outreaching spirit and led to 65 baptisms in the last ten years. Now we have a new tool that helps us not only bring non-churched people to baptism, but also include them in the ministries of our church. In November, we completed the second running of **The Alpha Course** this year. The results have taken us by surprise. Alpha has not only opened the door of our church to new people, but also changed the lives of existing members.

Alpha covers the basics of Christianity in a 10-11 week-long class. It began about 25 years ago in London and has spread to almost every denomination in the world. Alpha answers such important questions as: Who is Jesus? How Does God Guide Us? How Can I Make the Most of the Rest of My Life? Each week, guests gather for about two hours, share an informal meal, listen to a talk on DVD on how Christianity approaches the question at hand, and then gather in small groups for discussion. It also helps guests experience God's love. Every part of Alpha is designed to tell people that their thoughts matter, their questions are relevant and their lives are valuable. For us, The Alpha Course has been:

- **An open door** - a way for those who are not believers or church-goers to learn what Christianity is all about. It is informal and relaxed so people can drop their defenses and ask their questions.
- **A place to begin** - where new believers are rooted in the faith and seasoned believers are refreshed. Alpha does this by teaching the basics of Christianity with which all Christians agree. As a result of our two uses in 2010, we've baptized seven new members from the communities surrounding our church building. Most are now serving in some way within our congregation.
- **A springboard** - to changed lives. We began last spring by inviting our members (including newer ones who do not have a GCI background). By the end of our first use of the course, we found people refreshed in their faith and energized to share the experience with others. They grabbed the opportunity to lead and serve in our fall Alpha course. Some now want to hold Alpha in their homes for family and friends who live nearby.

It is easy to start Alpha in your church, but it's important to prepare. Here are recommended steps:

- **Talk to God** - we asked our prayer warriors to pray for Alpha months before we began and they prayed all the way through.
- **Get your pastor's support** - Alpha can be entirely lay driven, but the pastor's support is essential.
- **Check out Alpha's website** (<http://alphausa.org>) - it provides course materials, information and coaching.
- **Attend an Alpha course or training event** - locations are posted on the Alpha website. Seek coaching from an Alpha veteran. Once you're connected with others, it's time to make your own plans.



Participants in CrossRoad's Alpha program
(Becky Valekis is at lower left)

Here are encouraging comments from participants and leaders in CrossRoad's Alpha program:

Ministry Leader: "We'd caught many 'fish' for the Lord, but had a mixed record when it came to keeping them on 'our boat.' This program, in tandem with other follow through ministry tools, has helped us plug these folks into our faith community. We now have a new advisory council with 5 of the 7 members being new to our denomination. A lot of these folks finalized their 'commitment' to Christ at the Alpha program and in serving as leaders in the second round. It gave them an immediate sense of ownership in Christ's mission. I can't say enough good about this effort, the way God blessed it, and the way it fits our Trinitarian understanding of God's love."

Long-time GCI member: "Alpha was a good review of basic Christianity and I re-committed my life to Christ."

New member/new Christian: "Before the Alpha Course I would have described myself as 'iffy' in terms of the Christian faith. At the retreat I dedicated my life to Christ for the first time and was baptized this past Sunday at church. I've also made a decision to become more active in serving in my church. I also enjoyed the good food with good people."

New member/new Christian: "Before Alpha I would have described myself as lost. I attended Alpha to learn more about God and at the Saturday retreat I accepted Jesus as my Savior. I want to help on the next Alpha do this for someone else."

New member: "I have considered myself a Christian most of my life, but I came to Alpha curious and with a lot of questions. I re-committed my life to Christ and I've made the decision to become more active in serving in my church."