

## **Rational or practical: Communication of the Gospel today**

Lecture given at the European Conference of the ICRC

Kiev, April 25, 2012

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### *Introduction*

It happened at the start of a taxi trip from Gouda to Utrecht in the Netherlands. The customer sitting beside the driver asked him: "How long will this ride to Utrecht take?" The driver answered "About half an hour." Then the man said: "Let us use this time well. Would it be okay with you if I told you what God has done to my soul?" The driver said: "What God has done to my soul? That sounds odd to me. But, okay, go ahead." The passenger then told about the wonder that God had entered his life, how he had come to know the Lord Jesus, and how since then he lived with God. When the taxi driver dropped his customer off in Utrecht, he said: "This has been a very special ride for me, Sir. I will never forget this."

To me this is a marvelous example how someone communicates the Gospel spontaneously with someone else. This person did that from a deep compassion for the eternal salvation of his fellow man. And in that way, he responded to the call of the Lord Jesus found in the mission command of Matthew 28. This is precisely the topic of my lecture, formulated as this question:

How can the church communicate the Gospel by using missionary catechism in a secularized culture? Please allow me to share with you some thoughts.

### *A fluid culture*

In Western Europe and certainly in the Netherlands we live in a culture whereby most people do not have a clue of what it is to live with the Lord, the God and Father of Jesus Christ, our Savior. The Jewish sociologist Zygmunt Bauman rightly typifies our culture as a fluid one. The most important characteristic of this culture is that it is unceasingly in motion and continually changing direction. Unchangeable matters do not fit such a culture. That certainly explains the ill fit of what God has revealed in the Bible as His Word and what constitutes His unchanging truth. For contemporary people, truth is not necessarily true even though I do not experience it as true (objective truth). But to them, truth is something that is true because they experience it as true (subjective truth). Only this belief gives modern individuals meaning and satisfaction. Therefore is the belief in an eternal God not necessary. It is much more an obstacle. A billboard pasted on a British bus made this obvious: "There is probably no God, now stop worrying and enjoy your life."

### *Tracks left by God*

Our culture is a fluid culture. That is one side to the matter. The other side is that today people still are religious. Even incurably religious, the Dutch theologian Dr. Harry Kuitert once said. You could also say: In our culture, we still find tracks left by God. Dr. Wim Dekker, another Dutch theologian, recently defended his PhD thesis with the title *The absence of God in our culture* (2011). He emphasizes explicitly the importance of certain tracks left by God. His view is inspired by the well-known German theologian Wolfhart Pannenberg. The latter held that the absence of God is a divine speaking by God, in particular of his wrath. Then, not being able to find a track left by God in itself is a very special track delivered by God. These issues are familiar to Reformed theology, even though now these are spelled out in a new way. In the first half of the last century, Dr. J.H. Bavinck, the missiologist, already said that man by its nature is a religious being. Bavinck saw religion as the result of human response to what God has revealed of Himself in his general revelation. That is based on the notion of the covenant that God has made with his creation. People are therefore not autonomous beings, unattached to God, even though they think they are. No, they are and remain God's creatures. And if they do not want to acknowledge that and create their own religious world,

we may regard that as the sublimation and substitution of the truth. Even then, that remains a response to God's revelation.

We see the remarkable situation of a fluid culture without a place for God on the one hand, and the current blooming of all sorts of religion on the other hand. That creates tension and in that strained arena the church is a living presence and is called to give an "answer to everybody who ask you a reason of the hope, which is in you" following 1 Peter 3:15. Being deeply moved about the salvation of fellow man, as Christ commands. Just like the man in the taxi. We believe—do we not?—that people will be lost without deliverance by Jesus Christ, because they are people since Genesis 3 and that we need his redemptive work for our eternal salvation. The Christian baptism has since ages been the sign and seal of that truth.

In this perspective, the church communicates the gospel in the context I just described. But what are here the do's and the don'ts? Such a focus on practice is what I want to dwell on now. And this brings me at the thesis for this lecture:

How can the church today use missionary catechism for communicating the gospel in a largely secularized culture?

Seen as system, that can be done according to the cognitive model, in which rational thought plays a central role. Also, that can be done according to the affective model, in which emotions and experience are at the center. More practically said: Should the church implement her call to communicate the gospel by focusing on the mind of man, or on the affections of man? Let me address this issue in more detail. To gain more perspective on solving this dilemma, I want to do that by becoming apprentice of the catechism of the Reformed tradition, in particular the well-known manual or primer *The Heidelberg Catechism* (1563). After doing that, I will return to our present context and seek factors directing us for doing missionary catechism. Finally, I will draw some sketches of courses that are carried out in Western Europe, for instance the Alpha course, as requested for me to do.

### *The cognitive model*

How should the church communicate the gospel with modern-day man? There is an approach that especially follows the cognitive model. Calling upon man's rational insight plays a great role in this respect. Its proclaimers prefer to speak about communicating the gospel as *apologetics*. This is an important point, because also in Christian faith our minds play a great role. Jesus commences his summary of God's law by saying we should love the Lord our God with our all our mind. We then see also that particularly the Early Church emphasized the cognitive element for communicating the gospel in no-christian world. They appealed to the common sense that God has given to mankind. Someone like the philosopher Justinus, living in the second century, used rational arguments to claim the inferiority of Paganism and the truth of the Christian faith. Later, the theologian Tertullianus repeated that. They showed that the Christian faith was far from foolish, but that it was highly reasonable to believe in the God of the Bible and unreasonable not to do so. Dr. P. Bouter, an expert on the Early Church, tells us that we notice in the apologetics of the Early Church that Christians then were not at all inhibited, but quite proud about their faith.

A well-known contemporary example is Tim Keller, the author of *The Reason for God - Belief in an Age of Skepticism*. (2008). Reverend Keller is pastor of the Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York City. He has chosen to communicate the gospel as type of apologetics according to the cognitive model. His drive is to demonstrate that it is an error and prejudicial to speak of Christian faith as unreasonable. Nothing is further from the truth. In dialogue with skeptics, he continually tries to remove all kinds of rational barriers. He attaches to the legacy of C.S. Lewis. He unmask the theories put forward by intellectuals as Dawkins, who attempt to show that the Christian faith is deceptive and therefore ought to be opposed as something harmful. The book by Keller I am

referencing consists of two parts. In the first part, he parses various rational objections against the Christian faith and in the second part, he covers a similar number of reasons for believing in God. If it concerns removing objections against Christian faith, he, for instance, deals with the belief that it naturally cannot be true that there is just one true religion. Or, the belief that a good God would not allow suffering. Or, the belief that science has debunked the Christian faith, so that the Bible cannot be taken literally. Keller shows that these negative qualifications concerning the Christian faith as such are based on presuppositions, which also are based on a personal belief or faith. Every right-minded person has such convictions. By showing that background, Keller teaches us that the issue at hand is not the opposition between faith and rational thought, but the opposition between the one faith and the other faith. In the second part of his book, he shows that if it concerns reason, there is nothing wrong with the Christian faith. The faith is not opposed to reasonableness. Even stronger said: disbelief is contrary to reasonableness. Keller uses the example of sin and demonstrates that it is more plausible to regard oneself as a sinner than to consider oneself a victim of circumstances. I cite Keller here:

“Many people have the impression that the Christian doctrine of sin is bleak and pessimistic about human nature. Nothing could be further from the truth. When I was brand-new in the ministry a young man came to see me whose wife had just left him. He was feeling angry at what she had done, guilty about his own flaws that had led her to do so, and despondent before the whole situation. I said that what he needed more than anything was hope. He quickly agreed and asked how he could get some. As gently as possible I said that the good news was—he was a sinner. Precisely because he was a sinner, he wasn’t simply the helpless victim of psychological drives of social systems” (Keller, *The reason for God*. Citation is from the English first ed, 2008, p. 160; citation in Dutch version, pp. 171-172; p. 182).

The relevance of the cognitive approach is the fact that Christian faith harbors an important cognitive element. Exercising the mind, gaining knowledge, using insights, working with cognitions, all belong to the conduct of faith. Therefore, it is quite valid to approach people in this way while communicating faith. We would thusly not do injustice to the gospel.

At the same time, this approach has a limited focus. In the first place, not every person is so rationally inclined that he is open for determining what could be rationally true or not. Following Lewis and Wright, Keller aims at young people with a higher education. That is the target group having the best antennae for the cognitive model. But in the second place, more is involved. Being faithful or unfaithful is not only a matter of being reasonable or not. Even though we have to recognize and admit to something as being reasonable does not yet say that we will believe that and not at all that we will arrive at having a relationship with God. Belief and unbelief are more so a matter of *willfulness*. And our will as humans is since Genesis 3 totally different than God had meant it to be. Instead of directing our will to God, it is directed against Him. Our will is bound to evil. And because our mind is ruled by our will, our will has to be made free from evil. Only then, can we by accepting the reasonability of faith surrender to God. That is what Luther clearly teaches us in answering Erasmus in his book *De servo arbitrio*. That our mind is darkened does not ignore the fact that it can be highly developed, but that our mind’s being subject to our bound will, will make the wrong choices. That is what the Bible calls sin. And man himself is responsible for that.

### *The affective model*

I have now arrived at the second model for communicating the gospel. That is the *affective* model, whereby emotions and experience have a determining role. Doing so allows one also to find a connecting factor to bring people in touch with Jesus and his salvation. In this model, the crucial factor is not rational cognitions, but the human need for having experiences, which gives them meaning and support in life. Truth in this context is not what is rationally true, but what is affectively trustworthy to them. This amounts to what each person considers personally true, to experience as

reliable. This belief puts us at the center of our fluid culture. Such we pertinently in many respects may call an emotion culture.

Choosing at random a channel on Dutch TV on a random evening may very likely bring one within a few minutes into contact with the emotional side of our culture. We see people crying without bounds, people profusely rejoicing or venting their anger, and so forth. Stories that portray the experiences of people score much higher than discourses held in a distant manner. Gerhard Schultze considers our culture to be an *Erlebniskultur*, an experiential culture. The average person of our time does not exist because he thinks (Descartes), but because he feels. The cultural philosopher Aad Verbrugge says in his book *A time of disquiet [Een tijd van onbehagen]*, that the focus on feelings is a reaction to the focus on thinking, the cognitions. Both developments, the emphasis on cognitions and on affections are variations of the Enlightenment in Western Europe. In both instances, it concerns the urge of man to liberate himself from norms he feels subject to and to determine for himself what he wants to think and to feel. We can regard the emotion culture in this fashion as a longing by the individual for freedom. Even though that often takes place in collectives, even by the masses, should not confuse us. Think of taking repeated snapshots through the lens of a camera that taken together shows a splintered range of images. In this way, feelings of individuals are momentarily observed, fixed, shared and then flow away again, each going its own way.

When we ponder this, we must admit that the Christian faith certainly is not against emotions, just like it also is not against rationality. Even more so, the experience of faith as a relationship with God is something that essentially belongs to our faith. Of old, we know of the experiential faith belonging to the Reformed tradition [bevinde], as expressed in the Second Reformation [Nadere Reformatie] and the Protestant Revival in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Also, mysticism in the Roman Catholic Church has ancient origins. And, not for nothing the Evangelicals and Charismatic groups these days place much emphasis on the affective side of faith. For many of them, for instance, conversion is not so much an ethical happening, but a deeply emotional happening and a radical break with the previous living experience. In such circles, one hears of a “wow experience” as deeply authentic experience of faith. In the expression of faith, in particular in music and song, this great emphasis on affections is continually made. In this affective model, what counts is not so much *what* one believes (doctrine), but in *Whom* one believes (the Lord).

At the same time, the followers of this approach are convinced in principle that one's affections have to be subject to the prescriptive function of the Word of God. That may not be so evident if they claim what counts is not so much *what* one believes, but also not in *Whom* one believes. The issue here is that of the religious atmosphere. In this approach, religious experiences do not have to be tested according to a criterion beyond one's affections. Instead, affections are allowed intuitively to seek what gives good feelings and what does not. In a book by T. van den Berk (1999), [title translated as *Mystagogics. Inauguration in the symbolic consciousness*], catechists are told how to discuss a movie following one's affections during catechism. Right from the start one takes a 'subjective' point of view that attributes great value to 'irrational' impulses while viewing the movie. The insight finally gained will then have to be linked with that subjective viewpoint. All one's knowing is examined according to a measure of experience (pp.167-168). This example shows that the affective model like that of the cognitive model, surely requires critical questions. According to Biblical standards, affections and experience are relevant to Christian faith. But if faith cannot be reduced to rational insight, that holds as well for feelings and emotions. Faith and affections can also not be identified. Here again we see that the will of man is of decisive importance. Feelings appear to attach themselves impartially to faith, but that image is bogus. Eventually our feelings also are gratified by what we want. If we want to love someone, then our feelings are filled positively. If we want to hate someone, then our feelings are filled negatively. Our will that since Genesis 3 is bound to evil, requires liberation from that evil, as does our mind. Only then will we have right feelings. Not what I feel is to be regarded as true and trustworthy, but what God says in his Word. Even if that

goes against my feelings. We must therefore not speak of experiential faith, but of faithful experiences. Starting with affections guarantees a malfunction in communicating the faith. Starting with one's feeling could just as easily lead to a relationship with Buddha as with Christ Jesus. Religion in this view is just as expansive as the many flows of human affections. All kinds of mysticism can just overflow with egoism, the antithesis of faith in Christ.

Our review of the cognitive model and of the affective model tells us that as such these approaches are not wrong. However, when we look at the position of the cognitive and the affective aspects in communicating faith, then our analysis needs an explicit criterion for knowing how to handle these aspects.

### *The Heidelberg Catechism*

I have good reason to seek certain starting points in our communication of faith in the Reformed tradition. Because these have been tested throughout the ages, we may learn much from these. I am referring to the points of departure and characteristics of the *Heidelberg Catechism* (HC). In his 52 Lord's Days and 129 questions and answers, this primer of faith offers us a precious synopsis of Christian faith and also a model for communication of faith today. It was designed for children who had been baptized. It aims to teach them to respond their baptism in faith, so that they can be incorporated in the congregation and become allowed to celebrate the Lord's Supper. The booklet was also not primarily written for communicating the gospel with people outside of the Christian congregation, but for those within. Still, in my estimate for the outreach by the church, the HC offers us certain handles that could well serve catechism in a missionary context. Allow me because of a time restriction to name only a limited number of learning points. In the first place, the HC spells out the goal of the life of a person, characterized as sharing in comfort in life and death, living as a comforted person. Being comforted here means having support, particularly in the midst of difficult circumstances. That is then also the learning goal. This anthropological angle is functional, because it is recognizable by humans of all time, also those of today. Also, the secularized people of our times need comfort and security. This learning goal generates an invitation directed towards contemporary man for entering a learning environment and discovering how one really could live as comforted person. The church tells us that this comfort should not be sought in an immanent world, but in the relationship with God. This contact with God holds for all situations of life, but also in one's death. In the second place, the type of learning the HC requires is an *existential* learning that reaches the core of our humanity. It is thoroughly a relational matter. Having such a relationship is warranted by the notion of the covenant, that is to say, that God Himself seeks relationships with people and wants to bring about that people become responsive in that bond. This relational as well as existential learning in the HC corresponds well with the need people have for contact, for communication. Humans cannot subsist by themselves. Unbeknownst to many, we are created to be associated with others, having relationships, being covenanted. The covenant is a network of relationships, by which man flourishes. That is why learning in the HC cannot be limited to intellectual truths, which we could weigh for value at a later stage. Far more, it is to learn to live in relationship with God. That surpasses all intellectualism and subjectivism, hence all non-commitment. This sort of learning has also to do with the perspective on *knowing*, we find buried in the HC. The type of knowing in the HC is far different than the abstract type of knowing as found in the Enlightenment. In the latter, knowing is directed onto *something*. Instead, in the HC knowing is directed towards *Someone*, namely God. This we can call the Biblical knowing, expressed in the Hebrew word *jada* concerning living in communion with the known one. Like the way man and wife know each other in the bounds of marriage. This knowing is connected with loving. In the next place, the HC teaches us that man learns *fully*. It is the *whole* person, with his mind, with his affections and his will. Not partially rational, not partially emotional but integrally encompassing all aspects of being fully human. This is so, because learning faith involves one's *heart*. In our heart, our mind, affections and will come together, interlinked with each other to integrally form a trinity. A beautiful

example of this we find in The Lords Day 7 of the HC in which true faith is inscribed as `a sure knowledge` and a `wholehearted trust.` This is a matter of the heart, involving the whole person and the relationships he has. Also, the total daily life of the believer is drawn into this learning process. Learning involves conversion and conversion impacts one's daily life in all its facets. Faith, command and prayer go hand in hand. But how can these essential starting points become reality in communicating the gospel? How did that happen in the story of the man in the taxi? Isn't something like this beyond our grasp? That may be so, but that is not the perspective of the HC. The entire range of faith communication in the HC is a thoroughly *pneumatological* event. It is entirely supported by the belief that the Holy Spirit will redirect the will of man, illuminate his mind, guide his affections and in this manner bring him as believer to `a sure knowledge` and a `wholehearted trust.` The learning environment for holding catechism is in the HC the working space of the Holy Spirit. In this perspective, we have to see the method of questions and answers in the HC. The teacher poses questions and the child answers. That is not only a functional, didactic happening, but fully a theological happening. By answering—using cognitions and affections—the child learn to appropriate personally and existentially the faith of the congregation. To be sure, by doing the child learns and by learning the child does. Learning is not a phase that precedes believing, but learning is the means whereby the Holy Spirit brings people to life in the relationship with Jesus Christ, one's "only comfort in life and in death." Finally, in this concept the faith community of the congregation is of crucial importance. The catechism teacher educates as teacher of the congregation and the catechism pupil is taught as child of the congregation. Learning in this respect is not individualistic, even though it is personal. The child learns personally while being included in the community of the congregation. It may put to practice what this means, not only as gift, but also as duty.

So far, I have treated several starting points of the HC. Amongst others, these characterize the way the gospel was communicated in the time the HC originated, but I am convinced these also hold for our situation today. To be sure, none of these starting points are bound to a certain culture. More so, they originate in and are founded on Biblical principles and therefore can be transposed to our present-day modern culture and hence be of lasting value.

### *Missionary catechism*

Following our apprenticeship of the HC, we now give our attention to the practice of faith communication nowadays. I want to focus on what we call missionary catechism. The Great Commission in Matthew gives catechism and instruction its own place. Therefore, it is legitimate for us to direct our attention on catechism as faith communication within the range of various forms of missionary work of the church. I call specific attention to the missionary courses that in the last decennium have spread throughout Western Europe, such as the Alpha course and such. How can such courses be fruitful for communicating faith? My view is that the characteristics of learning I gleaned from the HC can be incorporated in these practices. How this is to be done, requires some further explanation.

Several principles can be drawn out this discussion and I want to deal with these issues now. These recognize the specific characteristic of learning as communication of the gospel, whether that takes place in a taxi, or in a Bible study at home or in the lecture hall of a church.

Regarding the first issue, that of the learning *goal*, the HC teaches us that the truths of Christian faith are not just for people to examine noncommittally. More so, they need to be invited to learn this existentially. Not only regarding the content of faith (*fides quae*), but also the way by which is believed (*fides qua*). In this learning, the HC tells us, the crucial factor is that people come to live as baptized people. In my view such is very true for today. Missionary catechism is baptismal catechism, even though the reverse, saying that it is confessional catechism is correct as well, to prepare for the confession of faith. Obviously, such learning cannot be limited to just one course.

Even stronger: it is a characteristic of this learning that it takes place lifelong. One's entire life is a course of learning. Only from this perspective can we live as comforted man.

Now the issue of learning *content*. The content of learning serves to the learning goal. It is the instrument by which we learn to live as comforted, as baptized man or woman. If so, then the content does not originate in man oneself, otherwise we would circumambulate in our own immanent world. Such content we are to learn must come from above. That is the Word of God, having as its center point the liberating gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Now we hit the issue of the *teacher* who instructs pupils. From the perspective of the HC this person can only be someone who is a living member of the Church. Whom is convinced of the truth of what is taught, because he or she has learned that only such truth brings us to the goal. I emphasize here that the teacher is to be a witnessing Christian, inhabiting what he teaches. At the same time, the teacher remains a lifelong pupil. One never graduates from having a relationship with God. It is even so that one becomes a true learner regarding faith, when one becomes a teacher.

Now the issue of the *learner*. At the start of my lecture, I spelled out several characteristics of people in our culture. My advice is to take these seriously in carrying out missionary catechism. Also follow the maxim that learning is never timeless, but takes place in a concrete learning environment by concrete learning people. The pupil living in Heidelberg of 1563 is not the same as the pupil in Kiev of 2012. One has to research the properties of learners, even so far as understanding his habitus in the cognitive and affective climate. This inquisitiveness must lead to taking the learner by the hand and bringing him to the learning goal. That is what counts. Prof. Marc de Vries recently wrote a fine book on this, having the title: *Finding God. In dialogue with seekers* (Heerenveen, 2011).

Previously, I dealt with the problems of the rational and the emotional sides to contemporary people. In this regard, I also mentioned Keller as well as the charismatics. Perhaps we now could say, that linking up to both rationality as affections could serve as '*paths guiding*' [toeleidende weg] us to the one path of arriving at discovery.

That brings me back to the characteristic of *learning* in communication of the gospel. I invite you to listen with me to the story of the disciples on the road to Emmaus in Luke 24. There we read that Jesus instructs two people in the meaning of his resurrection. They think that Jesus has died and along with that the faith in Him. What do we now see? Jesus connects to their very starting point. That is the way He starts his narrative with them. The pericope starts with the characteristic of a dialogue. But at a certain point, the dialogue is overruled. A confrontation results in: "Oh foolish ones, and slow of heart. That you do not believe in all that the prophets have spoken." Then, Jesus not only associates Himself with the understanding of the disciples, but He instead reveals Himself to them. This confrontation surpasses the dialogue and forces a decision by the disciples. This happening makes me argue that despite all the good that can be said regarding dialogical learning for guidance, we cannot miss the confrontational moment in contemporary missionary catechism. That all is the work of the Holy Spirit, that marvelous Teacher.

And now something yet about the *form* in which learning is poured. That is, the *method* followed. The range of possibilities is now great. One can look for a method whereby the entire person, the cognitive, the affective, also the volitional and the human conduct are involved. It is fantastic that nowadays so many didactical tools are available to us. Yet permit me to place a theological warning here, namely that form and content must match. It is highly undesirable when communication of the gospel involves techniques that suggest issues clashing with the learning content. Allow me to use an example here. Perhaps you are familiar with the renowned picture "The Broad and Narrow Way." It is an example of learning to go the narrow path for reaching the Kingdom of God. This idea we call the content of learning. But it should not be the case that the content of our catechism is meant to be

found on the narrow way, whereas the design of catechism shows characteristics of the broad way. That would be a clash that downgrades the content.

*Once again: The taxi*

I now come to the final part of my lecture. I will cover three courses as these are used in the Netherlands. Due to limits of time, at this moment I cannot go into detailed analysis of each. In the print out of my lecture, I do present these as an addition. I reference here the course *Christianity Explored* (in Dutch translation), the course *Your spirituality* and the *Alpha Course*.

I started my lecture with the man in the taxi, who spontaneously shared his faith with the taxi driver. More than likely the man had never thought about a fluid culture, about traces of God, about a cognitive and affective model, and so forth. Yet we consider him a paragon of faith communication. He was a man deeply concerned with the eternal salvation of his fellow man. That is what is most essential.

Thank you for your attention

Harderwijk, April, 2012

W. Verboom

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## APPENDIX

Review of three missionary courses

### 1. *Christianity Explored* (abbreviation C.E.)

Published in The Netherlands by Ark Media in cooperation with the magazine “*Groei*”

First published 2011. Authors: Rico Tice, Barry Cooper and Sam Shammas. Study guide + Study guide for Leaders. C.E. is a course of 10 weeks about the Gospel of Mark. The participants become acquainted with the identity, the mission and the calling by Jesus. The curriculum has the following series.

#### *First series*

Week 1 to week 6, dealing with: Introduction; Jesus -Who was He? Jesus - Why did He come? Jesus -His death. What is grace? Jesus - His resurrection.

#### *Week end or day*

Treating: The Church. The Holy Spirit. Prayer. The Bible.

#### *Second series*

Week 7 to week 10, dealing with: What is a Christian? Continuing as a Christian. Choices – King Herod. Choices - James, John & Bartimaeus.

In the Leaders edition, programs are offered for 8 sessions, providing information on content and organization for the leaders of the course.

Aside from positive aspects, for instance that the course is faithful to Scripture and has respect for the participants, has a low threshold and is confidence inspiring, my critical assessment is as follows:

1. In the leaders edition certain Bible texts are drawn out of context: (example 2 Cor 4:1-6).
2. The cognitive aspect overrules. The affective side (for instance, one's life questions) needs more attention.
3. Overall, there is quite a gap between the participant and the text of the Gospel of Mark. Then an example of a prayer does'nt match, as well as posing the necessary question at closure: What is now your choice?
4. The course is built on the theology of regeneration (becoming born again). The connection between Christ and the reborn Christian is not clear. The leader and the participant are in my view both people who must live form the justification of the ungodly. The CE course differentiates too much between 'they and we'. Perhaps more attention for learning from the perspective of the covenant is in order.
5. A treatment of baptism as essential for Christian faith and the communion of the church is absent.
6. During the weekend, to sparse attention can be given to the Church, the Holy Spirit, prayer and the Bible. Too much material in too short a period.

## 2. *Your Spirituality (Y.S.)*

*A personal voyage of discovery past Christian sources.*

Published by Inside Out Publishers. Authors: Ronald van den Oever, Reinier Sonneveld, Mennu Helmus. Final editor: Theanne Boer. The course consists of a website, a publication, a course guide (with DVD) and a television series. Y.S. is a course of 7 sessions, during which the personal experience of Christian spirituality is sought for. The point of departure is the perspective of Gary Thomas found in his book *Sacred Pathways*, whereby he differentiates nine spiritual temperaments. The participant takes a walk together with others through the area of Christian spirituality. Each participant has a personal spirituality, one of the nine spiritual languages or a combination of various languages.

Thomas puts forward these languages:

1. The spiritual language of the nature
2. The spiritual language of our senses
3. The spiritual language of tradition
4. The spiritual language of simplicity
5. The spiritual language of ideals
6. The spiritual language of caring
7. The spiritual language of enthusiasm
8. The spiritual language of seeking foundations
9. The spiritual language of the mind

The course book has the following chapters: After Preface and Introduction: What is your spirituality (1). Your spiritual examples (2). Your spiritual source (3). Growing with your spirituality (4). Relationships and your spirituality (5). Continuing with your spirituality (6). Appendix 1: Famous

people and their Christian spirituality. Appendix 2: Advanced study in Christian spirituality. Appendix 3: Exercising Christian spirituality.

Background of the course as cited from the sourcebook: “Increasingly I notice that lots of people are looking for the meaning in their lives. People who consider themselves spiritual, but associate the church more with abuse than with spirituality.”

The course fits the framework of church planting, in the event the established churches do not connect to actual questions (Preface).

My critical assessment of YS is that next to positive aspects, for instance that the course has a low threshold and takes well into account personal living experiences of the participant, the following qualms arise:

1. The tack of starting with one’s own spirituality suggests the legitimacy of a spirituality that does not have to be Biblically sound and could conflict with the faith of the Church professed throughout the ages.
2. Instead of ‘ex-egisis,’ we encounter more ‘eis-egisis’ of the Bible.
3. The approach departing from the experiences of the participants suggests that their spirituality is normative. A large gap exists for doing justice to the spirituality according to the Bible.
4. The distinction between a general spirituality and Christian experiential faith is unclear. The angle goes from the general to the particular.
5. The notion of a personal spirituality is how heaven and earth match in one’s life. That is too vague and does not necessarily qualify as Christian.
6. There is no balance between the cognitive and the affective element in learning and between the individual and the community of the church.
7. The Introduction of the course is too negative about the established church.

### 3. The Alpha Course (AC)

The Dutch edition of the Alpha Course is referenced here. It originally began in the Holy Trinity Brompton parish in London. Since 1990, the AC is associated with the name of the Reverend Nicky Gumbel, pastor of this Anglican parish. Estimates are that 16 million people worldwide have done the course. As of January 2012, the course was presented in more than 600 locations in the Netherlands. In 2011, about 13.000 Dutchmen participated. A variation of the AC for youth is Youth Alpha. The material for the AC consists of a workbook for the participants and a guide for the leaders of the course. The content of the course is structured following the book by Nicky Gumbel: *Questions of Life. A practical introduction to the Christian Faith*. The course is offered as a noncommittal introduction to Christian faith. It addresses life questions and is relational, intimately related to the community of the congregation. An Alpha Supper precedes each session. The whole consists of 10 sessions having the aim to cover the basic beliefs of the Christian faith. After the 6th or 7th session the group gathers for a communal weekend outing devoted to the Holy Spirit. The following other subjects are treated in the course:

1. Who is Jesus?
2. Why did Jesus die on the cross?
3. How can we have faith?

4. Why and how should I read the Bible?
5. Why and how do I pray?
6. How can I resist evil?
7. How does God lead us?
8. Why and how should I tell others?
9. Does God heal today?
10. What about the church?

Several strong points of the course are: having a low threshold, being respectful towards seekers, and creating an open and friendly atmosphere. Remarkable is also the balance between sharing knowledge on faith and search for meaning, serving as an equilibrium between the affective and the cognitive elements.

My assessment of the AC also refers to some of its drawbacks.

1. There is too little balance between the Christological aspect of God's work and the pneumatological aspect. Therefore, the work and the fruit of the Holy Spirit can be overruled by the gifts and their fulfillment. Particularly the weekend outing regarding the Holy Spirit adds to that.
2. Much emphasis is placed on how a Christian differs from non-Christians. A dash of the theology of Kohlbrugge would be helpful: that is, acknowledging that even regenerated man remains sinner, must daily receive grace.
3. The course has too much a 'theologia gloriae' and too little a 'theologia crucis'.
4. The learning content is reductive of the faith of the Church through the ages (the *Apostolicum*)
5. Several Biblical core notions are missing or are marginally treated: the holiness of God, the depravity of man, the relationship between the Old and the New Testament, the doctrine of sin and redemption, and the covenant. Baptism is one-sidedly referred to as the sign of admission to the congregation (lesson 13).
6. If the course is not closely monitored, it can become alienated from church and congregation, classically understood.
7. The leader of the AC in the Netherlands has claimed that 45% of the participants already are church members wanting to *strengthen their faith*. My taxation is they long more for interiorisation and charismatic experience than an underpinning of one's knowledge.