

Video ventures: Two alternatives to 'Alpha'

by [Jason Byassee](#)

This article appears in the [April 5, 2005](#) issue.

Since Alpha appeared in 2001 in Great Britain, several efforts have been made to create alternative versions of that popular evangelistic video series. Though approaches differ, the new versions are generally inspired by Alpha's success in helping seekers to learn about the Christian faith, and in helping churches to offer a compelling overview of the faith in an informal, encouraging setting.

One recent series, *Living the Questions*, bills itself as an “unapologetically liberal alternative to Alpha.” But whereas Alpha offers a somewhat systematic introduction to basic issues—God, Jesus' life and death, the Holy Spirit—from the perspective of a theologically conservative believer (Nicky Gumbel), *LTQ* offers a collage of persons, stories and arguments which seems to assume an audience of people involved enough in church to have been wounded by its fundamentalist versions.

Another new set of video catechetical materials is *Beginnings*, put out by Cokesbury, the United Methodist publishing house. Like *LTQ*, though in a different key, *Beginnings* tries to do nonfundamentalist outreach.

Beginnings is hosted by Rob Weber, pastor of a United Methodist Church in Shreveport, Louisiana. He is such a relaxed presenter one may get impatient for him to get to the punchlines and reveal the relevance of his stories. But he wears well. After a few presentations, the listener is eager for the next anecdote, knowing that it will be entertaining and that it will address a vital question. Weber uses humor and speaks with plainspoken conviction. He creates a safe space for believers or nonbelievers to talk.

For Weber, the important question is not “If you died tonight, do you know where you would go?” but “If there's a loving and creative God, why is the world so messy? And how do I find purpose in it?” To expect quick and tidy answers to prayer, he observes, is to treat God like a gumball machine. Weber treats the Bible critically but

not as a dead historical document. He quotes Martin Luther: “the Bible is alive—it has hands and grabs hold of me, it has feet and runs after me.”

The videos offer 20-minute sessions filmed before a small group gathered in a studio. Topics are organized roughly according to the traditional “way of salvation”—from creation, to sin, to justification, to sanctification and so on. The topics are introduced not with churchy lingo, but with questions like “Is this all there is?”; “Who is Jesus and why should I care?”; and “What happens when I die?”

The accompanying book with the same title by Andy Langford and Mark Ralls offers material for students who want to dig deeper. Video segments and chapters alike begin with a story from the Gospels in which a character meets Jesus, told—especially with Weber narrating—so that we identify with the character and meet Jesus in judgment and grace. Intellectual qualms are not ignored—one segment is called “If I don’t feel lost, why do I need to be found?”

While contemporary in its references, *Beginnings* also embraces classical forms of faith. Weber tells of being drawn by Thomas Merton’s work to worship at a Trappist monastery. The result: “In the hospitable living of some people who loved Jesus, I met Jesus. Or Jesus met me.” The videos include allusions to lots of other theological figures (John Ortberg, Mother Teresa, Frederick Buechner, Anne LaMott, Richard Foster, Walker Percy) who serve as reference points for listeners and suggest resources for further study .

If there is a criticism to be made of *Beginnings*, it is that it seems aimed primarily at individuals, without much attention to politics or social justice. Its writers do aim to shift from asking “I questions” to posing “We questions” in a forthcoming series that will consider spiritual practices, life in community, and mission in the world. This first series has been used in some 1,600 churches in North America and seen by 20,000 people.

The 13 presentations that constitute *Living the Questions* include “Restoring Relationships,” “Compassion: The Heart of Jesus’ Ministry” and “Lives of Jesus.” The sessions are made up of interviews with a dozen participants, each of whom is seen several times throughout the series. Each presentation is a collage, with a musical introduction (jazz versions of hymns), reference to a spiritual practice (walking a labyrinth, journaling), and a kind of aesthetic interlude (scenes of an orchid nursery, shots of a potter at work).

Some participants share personal experiences: a childhood in Korea (Siyong Park), the life of faith in the segregated South of the U.S. (Emilie Townes), a childhood lived in poverty (Minerva Carcaño). Tex Sample's stories, always entertaining and compelling, are a highlight of the series. But while the testimonies and stories are moving, their relevance to the topic at hand is not always clear.

LTQ conveys the richness of the Christian tradition in the various personalities, stories and cultures presented. It also succeeds in lifting up the importance of social justice in Christian faith (for example, one clip shows El Salvadorans and North Americans working on a Habitat for Humanity effort). In this respect, *LTQ* improves upon Alpha.

The central figures of the series—Marcus Borg, John Dominic Crossan, John Shelby Spong and John B. Cobb Jr.—are all known for their revisionist views of Christian tradition. Most members of congregations will not know who these figures are or why they are important, and people who are investigating Christianity will have a hard time deriving from their comments a coherent introduction to Christianity.

What the speakers clearly have in common is an antipathy to fundamentalism. "Fundamentalism has a genocidal germ: 'We alone have the truth,'" says Crossan, who offers what he calls a safer alternative. Spong, a retired Episcopal bishop, declares that "the people who think they understand God are always hurtful to other people. . . . Certainty never gives love, righteousness never gives love, orthodoxy never gives love." For Lloyd Geering, a minister from New Zealand and a member of the Jesus Seminar, a group that has investigated the historical Jesus, the church is fast becoming the enemy of Christianity rather than its guardian.

Much of *LTQ* is devoted to articulating what these Christians do not believe in, which includes Genesis as a literal account of creation, the miracle stories in the Bible, and the divinity and physical resurrection of Christ.

These videos might generate some good discussion if the audience is familiar with the Jesus Seminar and has come prepared to discuss critical arguments. But the series may confuse and even dismay those who have chosen to pursue questions of faith within the church.

The critical claims about the dangers of certainty are offered with disturbing certainty. Orthodoxy "never" expresses itself in love? What about the orthodoxy of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Martin Luther King Jr., Dorothy Day, Oscar Romero and Mother

Teresa, to name a few counterexamples? If fundamentalists are those who see the world as divided into the “saved” and “damned,” *LTQ* comes close to being a perfect mirror image.

This posture of over-againstness causes *LTQ* to fall into incoherence at times. For example, Geering is featured declaring that the liberal nation-state guards the aspirations of Christianity better than the church does. But the chief opponent of such a view, Stanley Hauerwas, also makes an appearance in these videos. He is shown arguing that the doctrine of the Trinity keeps Jesus’ death from being a case of divine child abuse, since it’s God himself who dies on the cross.

Hauerwas fits the series, apparently, because he is arguing against a “literalistic” view of atonement—never mind that he would sharply disagree with other participants on many other issues. Given the discordant mix of voices assembled for the series—Jesus Seminar scholars, a womanist theologian (Townes), a process theologian (Cobb), and the likes of Hauerwas and Sample—one has to have a seminary degree to detect the real theological battlelines.

The Hauerwas segment on the Trinity reveals another problem: Wait, what’s the Trinity? We are never told—an odd omission for any introduction to Christianity. A similar problem arises when Heather Murray Elkins, a liturgist at Drew University Theological School, recounts a lovely story about a young man who is told that his father’s disapproval of him is overcome in baptism, in which God proclaims “you are my beloved son, with you I am well-pleased.” The viewer may well wonder at this point: So what’s baptism?

Jason Byassee and Debra Bendis are editors at the Century.