

Book Review

Ray Comfort, *Hell's Best-Kept Secret*, Whitaker House, 1989.

ANTHONY F. BUZZARD

Ray Comfort communicates a release from his own frustration over evangelism. "In August 1982 God saw my own feeble (and somewhat futile) efforts to reach the lost. He graciously reached down, took the blinders from my eyes, and revealed to me 'the key of knowledge' — the key to revival" (7). He begins with startling statistics. In the seventies there were reports that only 3% of those who made "decisions for Christ" joined a local church. Three months after a Luis Palau crusade at which 6,000 decisions were made, 947 had already "backslidden." Comfort asks, "Why are sinners turned off and tuned out" to the appeals of modern evangelists? The issue is "what sinners are being offered as Gospel . . . Softselling the Gospel is the tragedy of modern evangelism" (17).

The solution, says Comfort, is to preach more law and more judgment. He quotes John Wesley in support: "Before I can preach love, law and grace I must preach sin, Law and judgment . . . [I must say to the sinner] God's Ten Commandments are against you" (23).

Comfort details with vivid illustrations many of the superficial presentations of the Gospel now available in the evangelical "market." He then reminds us that in the teaching of Jesus "the good soil hearer who bore fruit first heard the word and understood it. We must make certain that the sinner hears the word and understands the word. He must not come to Christ still seeing the cross as foolishness; he must see it as the power of God" (40).

That statement reveals that Comfort has not been able to extricate himself from the "received" definition of the Gospel, which is the cause of the problems which he describes well. Referring here to the heart of Jesus' evangelistic method, the parable of the sower, Comfort immediately switches from the Gospel as Jesus preached it to a half-gospel which is concerned only with the death and resurrection of the Lord. When Jesus gave the parable of the sower he had said as yet not a word about his death and resurrection. Jesus was presenting the basis of his Gospel: the Gospel concerning the Kingdom of God of the future and how it may be entered. It was the "the word of the Kingdom" (Matt. 13:19) which Jesus said must be heard and grasped for rebirth into the Christian life. The problem with the current Gospel (based on a tradition dating to Luther and Calvin) is that it actually fails to tell us what Jesus preached as the saving Gospel. The parable of the sower and a mass of synoptic and Johannine material defines the Gospel as having as its essential primary content the Kingdom of God. Jesus began by commanding repentance with

a view to believing the Gospel of the Kingdom (Mark 1:14, 15). Paul was a tireless preacher of the same Gospel of the Kingdom (Acts 19:8; 20:25; 28:23, 31). But Comfort tells us almost nothing of the Kingdom and does not develop the theme which Jesus made the center of his saving mission, the Gospel about the Kingdom of God.

A stronger note of judgment in the offer of the Gospel may well be in order. But the omission of the Kingdom of God as the heart of the Gospel is the real flaw in the current definition of the Gospel. Methods are not the main weakness in preaching; the lack of biblical content is the real defect. Comfort quotes an interesting observation from the reformer Melancthon: "There are many who speak only of the forgiveness of sin, but who say little or nothing about repentance. If there is nevertheless no forgiveness of sin without repentance, so also forgiveness of sins cannot be understood without repentance. Therefore if forgiveness of sins is preached without repentance, it follows that the people imagine that they have received the forgiveness of sins, and thereby they become cocksure and fearless, which is then greater error and sin than all the error that preceded our time [of the Reformation]" (58).

Melancthon's point is a powerful one. But the same criticism could be mounted against Comfort's system. If forgiveness of sins is preached, even including the facts about the death and resurrection of Jesus, without the initial proclamation of the facts about the *Kingdom*, a false security and assurance may also be communicated. Jesus' theory of evangelism is encapsulated in Mark 1:14, 15. All of his teaching is really an expansion of that summary. Repentance for Jesus means changing the mind and the life *in order to believe the Gospel of the Kingdom*. Mark 4:11, 12 have dramatically important significance for evangelism: "They may see indeed without perceiving, and hear indeed without understanding; for if they were to perceive and understand, they might turn and be forgiven" (Translators' Translation). The issue for Jesus here is a grasp of the secrets of the Kingdom (Mark 4:11). Repentance and forgiveness depend upon an intelligent reception of that Gospel of the Kingdom as preached by Jesus. Repentance and forgiveness are not therefore secured simply on the basis of belief in the death and resurrection of Jesus. Without an understanding of the Kingdom of God, repentance and consequent forgiveness become impossible.

The death and resurrection of Jesus were later built on and added to the substructure of acceptance of "this Gospel of the Kingdom" (Acts 8:12; Matt. 24:14). Without the Kingdom of God at the heart of the Gospel, can Christ be communicated at all? Jesus is accepted only when his word of the Kingdom is received. And it can only be received when it is clearly presented. In current times, it is not. Faith has its genesis in "hearing and hearing by Christ's Gospel Message" (Rom. 10:17), exactly in harmony with Jesus' words in Mark 1:14, 15 and 4:11, 12.