

Taking It to the Streets

Ray Comfort's bold street reaching makes people nervous, but he wants even the most timid Christian to learn to witness with confidence.

Crowds of people stroll along the Third Street Promenade in Santa Monica, California, on a busy Friday night. Some stop at the shops and outdoor restaurants on the wide sealed-off street, while others continue to the massive shopping mall at one end.

Groups stop to watch the free outdoor acts performing in the center of the street. Green-faced mimes polish imaginary windows, break-dancers do twirling headstands on cardboard mats, a drummer sits on a crate and rattles out a solo on pots and pans.

Beneath a sign that advertises The Psychic Cat, a long-haired white Persian cat wearing a purple robe that matches the one worn by his olive-skinned owner claws at a stick tipped with green catnip. His irresistible pursuit causes the end of the stick to dip into a box and clamp one of the many rolled up horoscopes. The proprietor unrolls the astrological forecast and reads it seriously to his customer.

A few yards away, inside a roped-off area, a small man named Ray Comfort stands on a stool at a microphone addressing the crowd and pointing a silver automobile antenna at a chart of the Ten Commandments. At his feet is a prop—a mummy that he's named Lazarus.

Comfort isn't on the Promenade tonight to give or receive a theatrical thrill or to siphon a few bucks from generous

passers-by who like his shtick. His routine is strictly serious business. Though it's Friday evening, Ray Comfort is holding church.

His salvation sideshow has appeared here nearly every Friday night for the last four years. With his blend of come-ons and comebacks rarely seen outside the Improv, he takes on all comers.

He even prays with his team beforehand that God will grace him with hecklers. He knows they draw crowds, and that's what he wants.

Tonight, a burly guy named John has unwittingly become the answer to Comfort's prayer and is fulfilling the heckler's role. A crowd has gathered at the sound of his taunts. Outside the roped perimeter John stands at a second microphone and screams repeatedly at Comfort, "If I love God, why the hell do I need to be born again?"

Comfort would be more than happy to lead him to Christ, but John will have no part of it. John is what Comfort calls the hardest kind of person to reach—a professing Christian who wants nothing to do with the radical gospel message.

"A lot of Christians don't like what I'm saying," Comfort says. "I try to follow in the footsteps of Jesus and speak of sin, righteousness and judgment. Often that will offend professing Christians. Often they will flip me off and use a four-letter word before they leave."

Since arriving in the United States from his native New Zealand 14 years ago, Comfort has been shaking up shopping-

mall sinners and pew-bound saints alike. Perhaps not since Jesus—or at least since Dwight L. Moody—has an evangelist used the Ten Commandments so often or effectively.

For church members his message is as unapologetic as it is for unbelievers: The truly saved who have escaped the wrath of God will always come outside the church walls to keep their fellow man from burning.

Comfort isn't the kind to hesitate at an opportunity to strike the rock-hard complacency that he believes typifies American Christianity. He claims that 80 percent of people converted at crusades are doomed to backslide. Churches are filled with "false converts," he says—victims of the "peace, joy and love" gospel that's been preached for decades.

Comfort's message is clear: Sin is a disease, and there is no cure for it but Jesus. It doesn't matter to him if he's preaching to a boisterous Santa Monica crowd on Friday night or to an attentive church congregation on Sunday morning. For Comfort, it's the message that counts.

Telling Hell's Best-Kept Secret

If Comfort sounds like something out of a past century, that's no accident. As often as he quotes the Bible he cites preachers and evangelists of old, such as Charles Spurgeon, Charles Finney, John Wesley, D.L. Moody and even Jonathan Edwards—the colonial "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God" preacher himself. Using illustrations, parables and anecdotes—and talking faster than a cattle auctioneer—he renounces modern evangelistic methods, complacency in believers and the so-called saved who have never sincerely

repented.

At once glib, blunt and reeking with satirical humor, he has shared his zeal in more than 700 churches and 4,000 open-air services and spreads it regularly via the 350,000 tracts his Living Waters Publications distributes every month. Hundreds of churches use his 18-video series, Excellence in Evangelism.

He has written 35 books, including How to Win Souls & Influence People and The Evidence Bible, which teaches how to refute evolution and prove God's existence and the authenticity of the Bible. The cover of his latest book shows Stephen being stoned to death (see Acts 7:57-60) and is titled God Has a Wonderful Plan for Your Life: The Myth of the Modern Message.

His signature book, Hell's Best Kept Secret, has sold more than 100,000 copies, and the audio edition even more. His message has riddled the heart of modern evangelism.

Comfort's basic theology and methodology are as simple as they are scriptural. They came to him in his native Christchurch, New Zealand, during an era when he preached each day in Cathedral Square.

One day he was reading a Spurgeon sermon that asked: "What will you do when the law comes in terror, when the trumpet of the archangel tears you from your grave, when the eyes of God shall burn into your guilty soul, when the book shall be open and all your sin and shame be punished? Can you stand against the angry law in that day?"

Says Comfort: "I remember looking at that and saying to myself, 'That's a little different than "God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life."'"

The next week he was in a church waiting to speak when he opened his Bible and happened to spot Romans 3:20: "Therefore by the deeds of the law there shall no flesh be justified in His sight: for by the law is the knowledge of sin" (KJV).

"I saw that the law was a schoolmaster to bring sinners to Christ," he says. "I wondered if I could use the same law, the Ten Commandments, to do the same thing."

He started asking those in the crowd at Cathedral Square if they had ever told a lie, even a small one; had ever stolen, even a paper clip; had ever lusted after a person, with even a passing glance. All would admit they had.

"Well, then," he would proclaim, "according to the Ten Commandments and in the eyes of God, you're a lying and thieving adulterer. Now, when you stand before God, how will He judge you? Will you go to heaven or hell?"

Comfort believes that before he can tell people there is a cure for their sin, he has to convince them they have the disease.

"So what I do is talk about sin, open up the Ten Commandments, show the reason for the cross and say that God commands all men to repent," Comfort says. "They have to see the need of a Savior before they really accept a Savior."

Prayers, Punches and Preaching

Back at the Promenade in Santa Monica, John the heckler is one of those who hasn't seen his own need for a Savior. He's still angry—and he's now insisting he has passed Comfort's sinless test and has never lied, stolen or lusted.

He demands the \$20 Comfort promises to anyone passing the test. Many in the gathering crowd voice approval and agreement. Comfort pulls a bill from his wallet, walks over to John and hands him \$20. John takes the money and quickly disappears into the moving crowd.

He's gone, and his anger with him—a testament, perhaps, to the fact that Comfort approaches his outdoor sessions with prayer and refuses to walk in fear. "I've never heard of a Christian in America today being stoned or burned at the stake for preaching open-air," he notes.

Of course, that doesn't stop people from becoming irate with Comfort in public. Recently a woman started cursing him while he preached. He asked her to stop, saying, "There are ladies present." When the woman replied that she was a lady, he told her, "Madam, you may be a woman, but you are no lady."

"She charged me like a bat out of heaven," he recalls. "As she was hitting me I was thinking this isn't the normal way a lady fights. They usually poke and slap, but she was actually punching, like Mike Tyson. She landed six good punches before my team pulled her off me."

She asked to get her purse, and the team let go of her, only to watch her deliver one more solid kidney punch to Comfort.

“But it was worth it,” he said. “She doubled my crowd.”

Comfort is willing to debate in public, much like the apostle Paul did on Mars Hill in Athens (see Acts 17:16-32). He even patterns his preaching methods from the book of Acts, moving the listeners from the natural to the spiritual, speaking to the crowd about Jesus by way of the law of Moses and by citing the accuracy of the prophets. The prophecies, he says, speak to the intellect, and the law of Moses speaks to the conscience.

Adds the evangelist: “The thing to do is strip a sinner of his self-righteousness, and the way to do that is by moral law. On Mars Hill,

Paul touched their conscience by showing them they had transgressed the first and second commandments with their idolatry.

“When we do that, we’ll see people soundly saved. Without the knowledge of sin in the heart, there is no repentance and no true salvation.”

That’s the message Comfort brought with him in 1987 when he first came to the United States. He came to hold a seminar and was prepared to deliver his teaching on “Hell’s Best Kept Secret,” but no one showed up.

The next year he was preaching his message in Hawaii when pastor Garry Ansdell heard it, rejected it at first, then researched it scripturally. He became convinced it was not only sound but revolutionary.

He called Comfort in New Zealand and offered him a position as

pastor of evangelism at his Hosanna Chapel in the Los Angeles suburb of Bellflower. In 1989, Ray and his wife, Sue, and children Jacob, Rachel and Daniel moved to the United States.

At first he received few invitations to share a message many clergy considered counterproductive to evangelism. In 1992, Bible teacher Bill Gothard saw Comfort's video and had him speak in a church in San Jose, California.

Impressed, Gothard copied the video and within a year showed it to 30,000 pastors. The same year, Teen Challenge founder David Wilkerson asked Comfort to speak at his Times Square Church in New York and later commented, "You will want to play and replay [his] message until you understand it."

Idaho pastor Chris Stockwell said he has listened to Comfort's one-hour audio tape 250 times. California pastor Ken Armstrong said it moved him to tears. In a recent e-mail, one woman said she used the message during a prison Bible study and that 60 prisoners confessed Christ.

Terry Meeuwsen, a co-host of The 700 Club, says that Comfort "brings us a word that cuts to the core of man's spiritual dilemma. To ignore it puts us in spiritual peril."

Facing the Hecklers

It's getting late, and the Friday night crowds now are dwindling at the Third Street Promenade. John the heckler is gone, and a young agnostic takes the microphone and asks why, if God is all-knowing, did He create imperfect man. Comfort explains that man was originally created perfect but fell because of his free will.

“What you are, even though you don’t realize it,” Comfort pronounces, “is a self-admitted criminal holding the judge, who is perfect, in contempt for judging you.

“The Bible says, ‘Who are you to judge God?’ Get on your knees and ask God to forgive your sins.”

The man ignores the plea and with cynicism asks: “Are babies innocent, Ray? Then why do babies die, Ray?”

Comfort explains infants also are the fruit of Adam, that death passes to all men, but adds that babies are not accountable until their youth.

“I didn’t teach my kids to lie or be selfish,” he says. “It’s sin that lies in their heart, and it’s sin that is stopping you from finding everlasting life.

“You’re like a little kid holding a stick of dynamite, and you’re fascinated by the flame. But if you don’t throw it away, you will perish. Come to your senses and ask God to forgive you and create in you a clean heart. Put your faith in Jesus. You’ll never be the same.”

Later, Comfort points out that preaching a hell-fire message without using the law to teach people about sin and show them why God is angry with them can leave hearers bewildered and angry. He compares it with the police coming to a person’s house and arresting the occupant without saying why, instead of coming to the house and telling the occupant he’s being arrested because they have found 1,000 marijuana plants in his

home.

He constantly fields questions about evolution, where Cain got his wife, why God allows evil or why He created Lucifer. Earlier in the evening, a man on the Promenade asked him how he knows there is a God.

“Look at that building over there,” Comfort had answered. “How do we know there is a builder? Because somebody built it.”

A half dozen of Comfort’s disciples have driven almost 24 hours from Canada to help him and to learn from him on this Friday night. Several of them mingle in the crowd, offering New Testaments, tracts and prayer. For the newly saved there is written information about local churches.

Yet this night repentance is not apparent. However, more than 5,000 people have walked past during the three-hour session, and several hundred have stopped to listen. No doubt, many would not have heard God’s Word in any other venue.

“I thank God that the apostles didn’t put carpet in the upper room and hang a sign out front saying ‘Service Tonight, All Welcome.’ They didn’t try to draw the people in. They went open-air and preached. I maintain that you can reach more unsaved people in one good half-hour of open-air preaching than the average church can in a year.”

It’s that kind of determination to confront sin publicly that in 1997 resulted in one of Comfort’s more unusual evangelistic efforts. He was driving his daughter Rachel through his neighborhood when she pointed out a billboard advertising a TV movie and showing Cleopatra laying on her stomach, nearly

naked.

The next day he purchased a 16-foot ladder, climbed onto the billboard advertising the ABC movie and stapled a large orange blanket over the Egyptian queen's body. He said he then sent a press release to 2,000 media outlets, admitting his crime and hoping to be arrested.

"With 67,000 registered sex offenders in California, I'd like to hear them justify putting up a billboard of a naked woman 300 yards from a public school," he says.

A man of action, Comfort's also a man of prayer, rising most nights about 1 a.m. to read the Bible, write his tracts and pray. If there is one abiding theme in his highly successful ministry, it is that during the last century believers have gotten soft on the kind of evangelism that brings true converts.

He boldly displays in his ministry office a poster that shows sinners drowning in a stormy sea beneath a dock where Christians are singing, ignoring the cries

of those slipping beneath the waves.

"I think we've become a gospel-hardened nation," Comfort explains. "In the last 100 years we've lost the mandate of the church. What we've tried to do is attract sinners to the church rather than take the church to sinners."

Just a Normal Christian?

The Promenade is almost empty. The evening has waned, and the crowds have too, and the green mimes, the break-dancers, the pots-and-pans drummer, and even the Psychic Cat have packed it in. A young man comes alongside Comfort and hands him a \$20 bill to replace the one he gave John the heckler. The donor slips back into the crowd, never waiting to hear Comfort say thanks with a voice that's grown hoarse.

In marketplace ministry like Comfort does, the fruits of labor are not always immediately available to taste. He savors the young man's gift, smiling for a second before putting the bill in his wallet. Though he preaches in large churches 20 to 30 times a year, and though his books, videos and tracts end up in hundreds of other churches, Comfort is—and says he always will be—a street preacher.

When asked about the brutality of preaching a message about sin and God's law in the middle of a busy shopping district on a Friday night in greater Los Angeles, he smiles again.

"Paul and the apostles preached everywhere they went," he notes. "I think I'm just a normal biblical Christian."

Tickets to Heaven

Ray Comfort will pay \$1,000 to anyone who finds him without a gospel tract—even if he's in a swimming pool.

The cafeteria in Bellflower, California, is busy serving a lunchtime business crowd that's interested in eating and getting back to the office. Pastor Ray Comfort enters the serving line armed with wit, a wallet filled with gags and his ever-present tracts.

Just as an actor never quite leaves his current character or a comedian can't keep from cracking jokes, Comfort is a preacher who never refrains from sharing the gospel. Though he attacks on many fronts, his chief weapon is a tract.

"The hardest thing about talking about God is bringing the subject up," he says. "Most of us can talk in the natural: 'How you doing? Nice weather.' But it's hard to bring God into it. These [tracts] do it for you."

He shows the cashier a picture of himself with an elongated head and asks, "Do you need ID?" To pay he produces a blank plastic card embossed only with the words "Another Major Credit Card." When a server passes the table, he stops her and to her delight turns her two \$1 bills into a \$5 bill. All get tracts.

In 1973, a New Zealand minister gave a \$90 printing machine to Comfort—a newly converted, long-haired surfer. Then 23, Comfort cranked out 100 of his first tracts about the root cause of racism. Today his Living Waters Publications cranks out about 350,000 each month.

Subjects (and quips by Comfort) include the Titanic's sinking ("It goes down well and is a great icebreaker") and titles such as "101 of the World's Funniest One-liners" ("If at first you don't succeed, don't try skydiving"); "The World's Best Optical Illusions"; "The IQ Test" and "The Bible Is Full of Mistakes."

Comfort insists that even the most timid Christian can use tracts. "Why not just leave a tract in a shopping cart and go

home and pray that God will use it?" he asks. "Some [tracts] even have a 10-minute fuse—you can give it to someone and you have 10 minutes to get away before they know it's a Christian tract."

Almost every morning Comfort leaves his one-story office building, walks across the street to the Bellflower Municipal Court and passes out tracts to the line of people waiting to pay traffic tickets.

Comfort is always tactful and never tractless. He estimates he personally has handed out 150,000 tracts and will give \$1,000 to anyone who finds him without a tract in his possession.

Someone challenged him to produce a tract once while he was swimming in a pool. He had one in his bathing trunks.

Convinced of their value, he makes 16 tracts available for downloading from his Web site, , free of charge. To Comfort, sharing the gospel personally is as natural as preaching it.

"Love must reach out," he says. "Love cannot sit on a pew and watch others go to hell."

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