



CHAPTER 1

THE BANANA AND AMERICAN ATHEISTS, INC.

*“For a great and effective door has opened to me,
and there are many adversaries.”*

—1 CORINTHIANS 16:9

Would you have the courage to face me in a debate in front of 250 atheists at our national convention?”

These were the words of Ron Barrier, the national spokesperson for American Atheists, Inc.

It was February 2001. A week or so earlier, I had been sitting in my office when I had an idea. I had written a book on atheism, published a booklet called “The Atheist Test” that had sold close to a million copies, and spoken on the subject of atheism hundreds of times. I figured that might qualify me to speak to American Atheists, Inc. So I sent them an email stating the above and asking if they would consider me as a guest speaker, but leaving out the fact that I was a Christian author and preacher. My thought was that

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if God could open the Red Sea, He could easily open atheist doors.

They respectfully declined my offer.

But then I began getting emails from Ron Barrier. It was rather strange. He didn't want me to speak to atheists, but he wanted to start a dialogue with me. In retrospect, it was possibly God putting thoughts into his atheist mind. We emailed back and forth a few times before he suddenly challenged me to a debate at their annual convention in April. After I replied that I would *love* to debate him, and would even pay my own airfare from Los Angeles to Orlando, Ron said that it was on.

To ensure he had enough debate material, I sent him a copy of my book *God Doesn't Believe in Atheists*. A week later he pulled out of the debate. I presumed that he read the book. I was a little disappointed, because it looked like God didn't want me to speak at the American Atheists' National Convention after all.

OFF AND ON

I soon began to get emails from irate atheists when they learned that the debate had been canceled. One of them accused me of being a "chicken" for pulling out of the event, but I pointed out that it was Ron who deserved that title. A short time later, Ron issued the following statement (his capitalization):

Without going into detail, the answer to the burning question on everyone's lips is, YES, I DID INITIALLY ASK HIM TO DEBATE AND, YES, I DID WITHDRAW

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THE INVITATION AFTER I READ HIS IDIOT BOOK
“gOD DOESN’T BELIEVE IN ATHEISTS.”

Apparently embarrassed by the incident, he renewed the debate offer and “sweetened the pot” by flying me to Orlando at their expense.

It was Friday the 13th, 2001. Good Friday. I had taken an associate with me, and as we entered our plush hotel room in Orlando, we noticed a generous gift basket with a welcome card. My associate picked up a bunch of grapes, popped one in his mouth and said, “Wow! And I didn’t think atheists were such ni—” Suddenly he grabbed his throat, choked, and fell to the floor. (He was just kidding, of course.) The basket was a very nice gesture.

The next day, about forty Christians showed up from around the country, including a reporter, the publisher of *God Doesn’t Believe in Atheists*, and a film crew from CrossTV. I was concerned that their permission to film the debate was a bit flimsy. All I had was an email from Ron Barrier that simply said, “I don’t care what you do!”

When the crew quietly entered the convention hall to set up, a security guard asked them what they were doing. She turned out to be a Christian and said that she would be in prayer for the debate.

We then went into the atheists’ bookstore where they kindly gave me a table on which I could place free copies of my book. While we were in the store, Ellen Johnson, then president of American Atheists, introduced herself and asked if the three large cameras in the convention hall were ours. When I said that they were, she replied, “Good. We will make sure we give you plenty of time to set up.”

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It was like a dream come true. Not only had I been given permission to fill their convention with Christian literature, but I would be presenting my case for God's existence to around 250 atheists, as well as filming it, and the debate—along with the gospel—would be broadcast live over their website.

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I was a little nervous because I was about to do a parody that made fun of atheism, and I wasn't sure if I could get my listeners to crack a smile. Atheists don't see atheism as worthy of being parodied, because they don't think it's ridiculous to believe that everything made itself. Christians think differently. I had been doing the banana parody off and on for about twenty years and always got a laugh from Christian audiences. But this was going to be different.

THE COKE-BANANA PARODY

I started by giving some statistics about Elvis impersonators in the United States. Here is the transcribed opening, from the "BC/AD" ("Barrier-Comfort Atheist Debate") recording:

I would like to share, firstly, some life-changing statistics with you. So please listen carefully. According to an unofficial account, in 1960 there were 216 Elvis impersonators in the United States. In 1970, 2,400. In 1980 there were an estimated 6,300. In 1992, 14,000! Which

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means by the year 2010, *one in four people in the US will be an Elvis impersonator.*¹

Thankfully, they laughed. It was Bette Midler who said, “If somebody makes me laugh, I’m his slave for life.” I didn’t have 250 slaves for life, but I was thankful to be able to break the ice. So I picked up the Coke can and began:

Millions of years ago there was a massive explosion in space. It was a big bang. No one knows what caused it, but from this bang issued a huge rock, and on the top of the rock formed a sweet, brown, bubbly substance. Then, over millions of years aluminum crept up the side of the bubbly substance and formed itself into a can, then a lid, and then a tab. Millions of years later, red paint and white paint fell from the sky and formed itself into the words “Coca-Cola, trademark, 12 fluid ounces.”²

Then I said that anyone in his right mind knew that if the Coca-Cola can was made, there *must* be a maker. If it was designed, there *must* be a designer.

That’s when I produced a banana and said,

Behold, the atheist’s nightmare. If you study a well-made banana, you’ll find on the far side there are three ridges. On the close side, two ridges. If you get your hand ready to grip a banana, you’ll find on the far side there are three grooves, on the close side, two grooves. The banana and the hand are perfectly made, one for the other.

You’ll find the Maker of the banana, Almighty God, has made it with a non-slip surface. It has outward indicators of inward contents: green, too early; yellow, just right; black, too late. If you go to the top of the

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banana, you'll find, as with the Coca-Cola can, the makers have placed a tab at the top, so God has placed a tab at the top. When you pull the tab, the contents don't squirt in your face.

You'll find that the wrapper is biodegradable and has perforations, usually three or four. Notice how gracefully it sits over the human hand. Notice it has a point at the top for ease of entry. It's just the right shape for the human mouth. It's chewy, palatable, easy to digest, and it's even curved toward the face to make the whole process so much easier. That's if you get it the right way around.³

Some thought that it was funny. And they hadn't just cracked a few smiles. They *did* laugh, although not as enthusiastically as Christian audiences had so many times before. Of course, their laughter may have been cynical.

After a lively question-and-answer time, Ron Barrier came over and we shook hands. He even let me give him a hug. Some angry atheists came up to the platform and spat out a little sarcasm, while a number of others asked me to sign their books, which was unusual but kind of nice.

Andy Butcher, the reporter who attended the debate, published his account in a well-known Christian magazine:

Evangelist Ray Comfort stepped into the lion's den armed with a can of Coca-Cola and a banana . . .

Comfort's humor drew laughter and applause at first—but the reception got decidedly chillier as he went on to challenge evolution and atheism's foundations and when he quoted Scripture.

He produced a Coca-Cola can and presented his "theory" of how it came into existence—formed by chance over millions of years. To believe that was "to

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move into an intellect-free zone,” he said, “to have brain liposuction.” Then he pulled out from his jacket pocket what he called “the atheist’s nightmare”—a banana.

Comfort said the banana, like the Coca-Cola can, had been cleverly designed for human use—and, unlike the can, was biodegradable . . .

Some members of the audience laughed and booed as Comfort spoke about sin and the need for salvation. In the question-and-answer sessions one man challenged Comfort to eat some strychnine-laced peanuts he offered, to prove the veracity of the gospel passage that claimed Jesus’ followers would be able to drink poison and not be affected. Comfort declined, but said: “I know where I’m going if I do eat them.” . . .

Later Comfort said that he had been grateful for the warm reception he had received. “Getting in there was no problem, it was getting out I was worried about,” he laughed. “[But] they were very gracious. It was an opportunity to give God’s Word uncompromisingly to some who usually wouldn’t listen.”⁴

I didn’t know it then, but the reporter’s observation that “Comfort’s humor drew laughter and applause *at first*” would prove to be noteworthy some years later. Yes, God had graciously opened atheist doors to the gospel—and now the adversaries were about to come pouring in.



THE NO-AUDIENCE TV VERSION

“For we have been made a spectacle to the world . . .”
—1 CORINTHIANS 4:9

It was a cool September morning in California in 2003. Actor Kirk Cameron and I were at beautiful Hume Lake, just north of Los Angeles. The air was still and crisp, perfect for filming an episode of “The Way of the Master.” I couldn’t have ordered anything better.

This was our television program’s second season, and at that time it was airing in more than seventy countries. It had become very popular, not only because of its unique content, but because it was cohosted by Kirk, once known as “America’s sweetheart.” It is no exaggeration to say that he had been featured on the covers of heartthrob magazines almost weekly during most of the 1980s.

When a nationally known Bible teacher once asked me, “How did you get an *international* ministry?” I told him that it was easy. You simply have a wildly popular Hollywood

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actor call you and suggest combining his ministry with yours.⁵

When my wife, Sue, and I once had dinner at Kirk's parents' house, I saw old photos of Kirk as a teenager with President Ronald Reagan and with Lucille Ball. As a star of *Growing Pains*, Kirk was so popular that Lucille Ball came to his trailer on the set to meet him while they were both taping a TV special. Kirk was embarrassed to admit later that, at the time, he was just a seventeen-year-old kid and had no clue who she was.

I was extremely pleased that there was no wind as we were preparing to film at Hume Lake, because our backdrop for the program was the actual lake, and it looked like a mirror. It was picture perfect.

The episode we were filming was on the subject of atheism, and of all the arguments against atheism, one of the simplest and most logical is the teleological argument of design. Anyone with an intelligently designed and working brain can look at the beautiful design of nature and intuitively know that a Creator exists. Of course, atheists would disagree, but this is the teaching of the Bible and the result of common sense:

For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and Godhead, so that they are without excuse. (Romans 1:20)

For more than twenty years prior to this day, I'd been teaching on the subject of atheism, and I had included the teaching in the script of the television program we were about to film.

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KIRK'S WARNING

As a rule, I would write a script, Kirk would give his wisdom, then we would tweak it together. But this time I wanted to vary from the script a little. As Kirk was going over each page for the final time, I grabbed a Coke can from the film crew and went searching for a banana. We were filming at a camp, and I made my way to the kitchen in hopes of finding one. And I did. It wasn't perfect, but it would do the trick.

I had been using the routine with the Coke can and banana since the 1980s down-under in New Zealand, when I preached in the open air. As I did so I would often wear a T-shirt that read "I don't believe in atheists . . . see back," and on the back would be "The *fool* has said in his heart 'There is no God.'" After moving to the United States in 1989, I incorporated the routine into the opening of my standard teaching on atheism.

As we waited by Hume Lake for the production crew to adjust the lighting, I was aware that Kirk had never seen the routine. I had intentionally left it out of the script because I had done it so many times, thinking I could easily wing it without the aid of a teleprompter. Knowing he wasn't familiar with it, I quickly ran through it for his approval. We often made last-minute improvements to the script, and I was sure that he would love it.

But to my surprise he had serious misgivings, saying that atheists would mock me for it. I told him that I was used to being mocked; after many years of preaching in New Zealand, it was par for the course. Christians thought the routine was funny, and so did some of the atheists at their national convention. "The Atheist Test" booklet opened with

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the banana routine, and it had by then sold over a million copies. Besides, this program was intended for Christians, not for atheists.

Kirk was very gracious and didn't make a big deal of it. So we filmed it despite his misgivings, kept it in the finished program, and never gave it a second thought.

THE NEW YORK ATHEIST DEBATE

Fast forward a few years. Our "Way of the Master" TV program was now award-winning and airing in 170 countries. In 2007 I had talked Kirk into doing a televised debate with atheists. It took a bit of persuading on my part because he was so well-known in the secular world, and it was bound to attract secular media attention. I was often mocked for my faith, but Kirk had been America's sweetheart. Not just America's sweetheart, but reruns of *Growing Pains* in countries like China had made him extremely popular around the world. His appeal was a huge benefit for our program and its evangelistic success. Many times we heard of non-Christians channel-surfing and seeing "Mike Seaver" with a Bible. Kirk's sitcom character was a fast-talking, good-looking, likable teenage rebel, and he was the last person they expected to see with a Bible on his lap. So they beached themselves on a Christian network and stayed to hear the gospel. His involvement was a godsend for our show, and we didn't want to blow it by making unwise decisions.

One concern was that atheists had no reputation to lose, and so they might get angry in a deliberate attempt to draw media attention. There was a famous incident years earlier where a program that began as a cordial debate ended with

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chairs being thrown across the studio. It became big news. We didn't want that to happen, so we both agreed that we would be extremely gracious—*over-the-top, non-combatively gracious*. Our agenda was simply to proclaim the gospel and to do it with love and kindness.

We had planned to hold the debate in a well-known church in Hollywood. But as we were ironing out the details, one of the atheists pulled out. Then I found out about something called “The Blasphemy Challenge.” On January 30, 2007, ABC News reported:

Brian “Sapient” is an average-looking 30-year-old guy who works out of his basement in Philadelphia. His job? Well, Brian is taking on God.

“Wow, that’s a dramatic way of putting it,” says Brian, who asked that “Nightline” not use his real last name for safety reasons. But however he defines his challenge, Brian is on the cutting edge of a new and emboldened wave of atheism.

“There isn’t any good reason to believe in God,” asserts Brian. “It’s that simple.”

What’s wrong with God?

“What’s wrong with the tooth fairy?” asks Brian. “There’s nothing wrong with something that most likely doesn’t exist.”

There are an estimated 20 to 30 million atheists in the United States these days, and some of them say they feel like a persecuted minority.

“Atheists are completely vilified. And it’s OK,” says Kelly, an atheist who works alongside Brian and also asked that her last name not be used.⁶

Brian and Kelly had the idea to publicize atheism by blaspheming the Holy Spirit publicly. The Bible labels it the

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unpardonable sin, and they didn't believe it; neither were they scared. It wasn't long before they had over eight hundred people who posted online video clips of themselves saying that they denied the Holy Spirit, thinking that was blaspheming the Holy Spirit.

Brian told ABC News that he was open to dialogue with Christians, saying, "If they want to come to the table and present their evidence, I will present my evidence. And we will see how much of theirs is based on faith, and how much of mine is based on fact."⁷

About a year earlier Kirk and I had done an interview with ABC *Nightline*, so we contacted them and suggested a debate about the existence of God. They were more than congenial. We then researched the likes and dislikes of Brian and Kelly, and purchased gifts for each of them.

However, there were a couple of problems. Brian was seriously fearful of flying, and he was also afraid of crowds—with a particular concern that a Christian crowd would turn violent. The second fear was unfounded, but we settled on a venue in New York that was within driving distance for him and Kelly. I also assured him that we would not invite thousands of Christians. The debate would be private, held in a small church building, and the audience would be limited to about one hundred people.

We allowed our opponents to bring fifty people, and instead of inviting our supporters to come to the debate, I simply asked the church in which we were filming to provide fifty people for the audience. That would prove to be a *big* mistake.

Then Kirk and I flew to New York.

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Over the years of traveling together, it was very common for Kirk to be recognized and for airlines to freely upgrade us to business class because of his celebrity. Flight attendants would say that when they were teenagers they had his poster on their bedroom walls. I took advantage of this interest and would have him sign special gospel tracts that had his picture, to give to those who approached us. Kirk loved it because it gave purpose to his popularity. Instead of running *from* crowds, we ran *to* them for the gospel's sake.

On one occasion we were walking through the Chicago airport when I noticed a young lady sitting on the floor leaning against a wall. I walked over and gave her one of our Million Dollar Bill gospel tracts, and asked, "Have you heard of Kirk Cameron?" She said that she had. "Would you like to meet him?" She looked at me and gushed, "Oh, yes!" I called Kirk over, and they chatted for a few minutes, then he signed her Million Dollar Bill. As we walked away, I glanced back and saw her very sincerely mouth the words "*Thank you!!*" I felt like Santa Claus on steroids. Meeting Kirk was something I was sure she'd never forget.

THE DEBATE

We arrived in the excitement of New York City. As we approached the destination, security quickly ushered us past a small crowd and into the back room of a traditional church building. There we met our atheist friends for the first time and gave them their gifts. We then went over the program with the moderator, and a little later we began filming.

To my surprise, the moderator allowed the audience to react with applause. Normally, after the initial introductions,

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the moderator would ask the audience to hold their applause, for obvious reasons. I presumed that would happen here. But it didn't. The result was that the fifty atheists were like delirious fans at a Super Bowl. Anytime a member of their team made any sort of point, as far as they were concerned, it was a winning touchdown. But anytime we said something, there was comparatively little audience reaction. This was probably because most of the audience members the church had provided were nice traditional church folks, who politely gave obligatory applause. I'm sure that they

It would have been very discouraging, without the consolation that we had been faithful to the Great Commission.



didn't have a clue who we were, despite Kirk's fame. The impression that a point had been scored every time the atheists spoke was powerfully convincing.

There were two other factors that played against us.

The first was that the moderator was a well-known TV personality who had visited our facility in California a year or so earlier to interview us about our ministry. As we gave him a tour of the studio, he took us aside and confided that he was a Christian. He asked us not to announce that, saying that if it became widely publicized that he was a believer, it might compromise his very high-profile job.

However, when he opened the debate up for audience questions and I did my best to answer a question about why there is human suffering, he wouldn't let it go. He was on

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the edge of being antagonistic. I found it strange because I expected him to be unbiased.

A few years later he was fired from MSNBC for saying something filthy about a female conservative politician on live television.⁸ It was then that his bias made sense.

Another element that played against us was our desire to avoid contention. What we didn't realize was that many Christians wanted to see a brutal war of words. It was a battle between two opposing worldviews; they understandably wanted to see the atheists put in their place, and what they had hoped to see didn't happen.

With the enthusiastic applause from the atheist audience, the antagonistic moderator, and our deliberate lack of a fighting attitude in battle, the general perception was that we had failed. Miserably.

So in the following days, few said, "Way to go, guys! You faithfully preached the gospel!" Instead, the Internet was alive not only with atheists mocking us, but with well-known Christians writing articles like "The Way of the Disaster." It would have been very discouraging, without the consolation that we had been faithful to the Great Commission.

But things were about to get worse.



CHAPTER 3

THE BANANA CLIP

*“I have become all things to all men,
that I might by all means save some.
Now this I do for the gospel’s sake . . .”*

—1 CORINTHIANS 9:22,23

Around that time someone mentioned to me that the banana clip was all over the Internet. I couldn’t think why it would be. But I soon found out. An anonymous atheist had created his own YouTube video in which he captured the banana scene from our TV program and removed the Coca-Cola portion. That meant there was no longer a comparison between the two and it was no longer obvious it was a parody. He then argued that the banana didn’t originally look like that. The popular yellow variety I had used was the result of thousands of years of domestication by humans, so it had nothing to do with God making it for mankind.

The clip was embarrassing, but it was just another bump in the road. It would soon be forgotten. So I thought.

But the YouTube clip went viral when Professor Richard Dawkins mockingly did my routine during a television inter-

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view and a number of times while addressing university students, calling me “The Banana Man.” That suddenly spawned numerous spinoff videos of me wearing banana suits or holding bunches of bananas, and even Banana Man cartoon strips.

Professor Lawrence Krauss and other high-profile atheists used the clip in their university lectures as an example of the ultimate dumb creationist argument.

When I was in public strangers would yell, “Hey, Banana Man!” and run off laughing. I saw videos of hecklers yelling at open-air preachers down under in Australia, telling them that they sounded as dumb as “Banana Man.”

When I was invited to do interviews on atheist radio programs, I had the impression they were taken aback when they heard that I could actually string whole sentences together. Atheists from around the country would show up with their cameras as I regularly preached in the open air at Huntington Beach in Southern California, trying to get me to say something crazy so their video would go viral.

Respected churches began questioning me, wanting to know if I *really* believed that the banana was proof of God’s existence. Adding to the embarrassment was the fact that I had dragged Kirk into the circus with me. His wise words of warning came back to haunt me many times.

SOME WELCOME ADVICE

A few years later, my friend and preaching buddy Stuart Scott was driving with me to Huntington Beach, where we preached every Saturday for many years. “Scotty” was a wealth of wisdom. His understanding of science amazed me.

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We would often talk about the wonders of creation and be in awe at the utter genius of the Creator.

During one of these drives, Scotty shared his thoughts about the Banana Man fiasco. He reminded me that it had given me an instant international profile among atheists. He was right, though it wasn't the sort of profile I enjoyed. I had become infamous in the atheist community.

Yet there was something strange about my infamy. *Atheists didn't feel threatened by Banana Man.* They invited me on their programs and let me talk about anything I wanted to talk about, and that included sharing the gospel with their atheist audiences. The “clown” could actually juggle words, and if he breathed a little fire, who cares? It was a kind of entertainment for them. After Scotty's encouragement, I began to see things from a different perspective.

And so I embarked on a strange and wonderful journey.

I started to notice that when I was on atheist programs, they typically garnered more than the normal attention—some receiving hundreds of thousands of YouTube views. When atheists reviewed our movies (such as “180” and “Evolution vs. God”),⁹ they would get a massive audience. The original “Banana Man” clip¹⁰ from our TV show quickly topped over a million views and inspired dozens of popular spinoffs.

I continued to be a curious object of atheist fascination. *How could any sane human being believe what I believed*—that the banana was actually made by God for man, when it had so evidently been genetically modified by man?

My blog became so inundated by atheists that I changed its name to the more fitting “Atheist Central.” Thousands of skeptics faithfully frequented it and left so many comments

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(sometimes over a thousand on a post) that it was almost impossible to adequately moderate it.¹¹

They stayed despite rules requiring that they respectfully capitalize “Jesus” and “God” and that they not mock or use bad language, or they would be banned. If I did ban someone, other atheists would plead for me to let the person back in. It was as though I had cut off a limb.

I tried to analyze why so many thousands of unbelievers would daily read and comment on a Christian site. When I asked why they kept coming back, some said that I was like a train wreck. They couldn’t look away for a minute because they might miss something interesting:

Really, Comfort’s books and ideology can best be described as one massive train wreck. Except, instead of a train, we have his life.¹²

Others said that they were there to correct me for my unscientific remarks and for what they saw as misinformation about evolution. Whatever the case, it was Banana Man that brought them there, and for that I was grateful. Jesus said we are to be fishers of men (see Mark 1:17), and here the fish were jumping into the boat.

GOING BANANAS

The day after I interviewed outspoken atheist Professor “PZ” Myers for our movie “Evolution vs. God,” he posted an entry on his blog with the headline “I met Ray Comfort tonight.”¹³ He included photos of us taken during the interview while two atheists used bananas to sword-fight in the foreground. Others created special Wiki pages about Banana Man.¹⁴ There

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were also Banana Man videos in other languages, as well as mocking Banana Man songs and Banana Man posters.

When I was interviewed on “The Atheist Experience,” a webcast and cable TV show, the hosts kept a banana in view for the entire one-hour interview. But they did allow me to share the gospel, and despite that, it became their most popular video, with over 500,000 views.¹⁵

Atheists found that they could increase interest in their YouTube videos by using my name in a derogatory way. If they called a video “Ray Comfort is Satan,” it would generate thousands of views. Someone took one of our interviews of a woman in Hollywood, in which there was a clear gospel presentation, and renamed it “Ray Comfort Gets Destroyed.” Our original clip had only 30,000 views but their version quickly received hundreds of thousands of views.¹⁶

A well-known atheist began reading my books out loud to other atheists, word for word—including the gospel messages.



A well-known atheist began reading my books out loud to other atheists, word for word—including the gospel messages. Then he would provide his own opposing commentary.¹⁷

Two nationally syndicated television programs from my home country of New Zealand requested interviews, and both sent camera crews to Southern California. One of them, *Sixty Minutes New Zealand*,¹⁸ asked if they could bring up the subject of Banana Man, but at that time I didn’t feel comfortable in that skin and didn’t give them permission. Despite that, both programs painted the ministry in a very positive light.¹⁹

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Atheism TV produced a low-budget series called “Banana Man & CrocoDuck Boy,” based on Batman and Robin.²⁰ Someone wrote “The Banana Song.”²¹ When I spoke at churches, atheists would show up with a camera and request interviews. Some were very respectful and let me share the gospel, which they then posted online.²² Others weren’t so nice.

The Huffington Post “Religion” page had an article titled “Ray Comfort’s 2006 Hysterical Banana Argument Demonstrates What Creationists Mean By ‘Proof.’”²³ One artist, creating a series of sketches for YouTube, described drawing me in a superhero suit:

Comfort would grab thin air manifesting a zipper, pull a banana peel around him and then emerge as Banana Man . . . a superhero coming out of a banana has got to be one of the strangest things I’ve drawn yet.²⁴

To atheists, I had become the international celebrity-idiot poster-boy for creationism.