



Lessons from Atheists:

How Christians are Driving
Today's Seekers to Atheism
—By Making Us Look Childish

and What We Can Do About It

Hi, this is Fred Heeren. I want to introduce you to a different kind of evangelistic organization, one that is taking steps no others are taking to reach unchurched people.

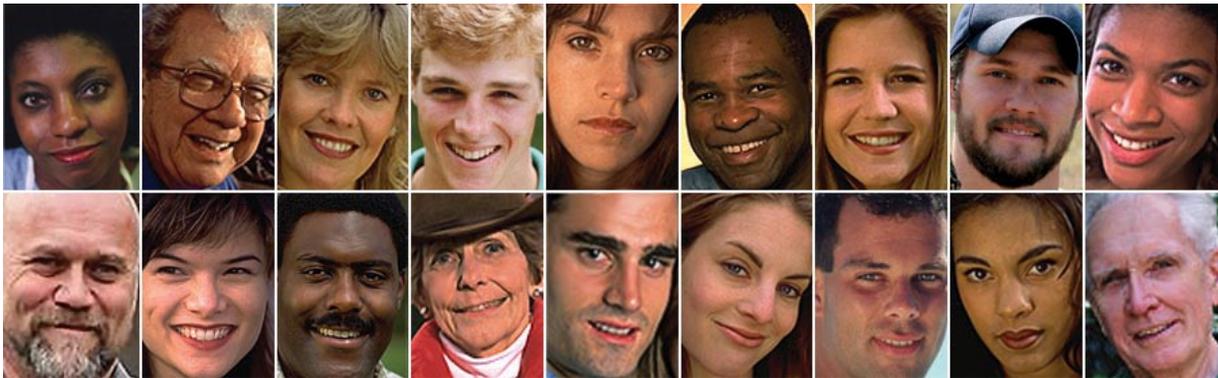
Step 1:

Taking seriously what the Bible says about outsiders:

“Be wise in the way you act toward outsiders.” – Col. 4:5

May “your daily life win the respect of outsiders.” – 1 Thes. 4:12a

“And if you greet only your own people, what are you doing more than others?” – Matt. 5:47a



Step 2:

Looking into the mirror of their eyes:

Being a science journalist, I'm in a good position to do some firsthand investigating to learn precisely how Christians are viewed by the people who are most alienated from us.

To show you who these outsiders are, and how Christians appear to the m, let me introduce you to a few of the hundreds of friends and acquaintances I've been making over the last four years:

Melanie was raised a Catholic, and when she married, she and her husband served as music leaders in a mainline Protestant church. One Sunday morning, while Melanie's husband was driving from one church to another to help with music, he was killed in a car wreck. Melanie was widowed at 22, just a year into her marriage. She says she finds

it easier to believe in **no** God than to be angry at the God she used to trust. “Comforting” Christians sounded nutty to her, but when she met Drew, she knew she had found someone who represented the voice of reason.

All right, he doesn’t look like the voice of reason here, but **Drew** was a reasonable guy who saw little point to the rituals and boring sermons of his parents’ church. As he was studying for his masters degree in psychology, he was drawn to the best-selling books by the New Atheists. The “*bronze age deity*” of the Christians has made them hateful and destructive, they told him, which helped explain his relatives. Atheism started making sense to Drew, and he began attending atheist meet-ups, where he made a number of friends—including me, the group’s token Christian. I still remember our conversations the first two times I saw him: I sat next to him at a comedy club listening to an atheist comedian and drove with him to a target practice called “Godless Pistol Wavers.” A few years later, he and Melanie asked me to officiate at their wedding (in an Irish pub). But after Melanie delivered her baby daughter, she texted me that she can’t look at her growing child without thinking that Someone is behind all this. *Don’t tell Drew*, she said.



MARKUS HAUSAMANN

Matthew was a Mormon who earnestly sought a sign from God for years, the expected “burning in his bosom.” Feeling nothing, he read up on the lack of archeological evidence for Mormonism’s claims and decided that all religion is a hoax.

Devin, who believed that all religious people are hypocrites, is now dying of multiple myeloma. He dismisses Christian apologists, who treat skeptics like the enemy. I was one of the few people who visited him in the hospital during his stem cell replacement therapy and then repeatedly at his home to bring him groceries. He’s now fascinated by this concept we discuss called “grace.”



JUDY DOLLARD

Julia never experienced the same emotional highs as her fellow worshipers at the International House of Prayer, and when her “brainwashed husband” committed most of their savings to the church, she separated herself from both him and God.

Dale was a church historian who had been part of the scholarly search for the historical Jesus. He drifted into atheism when he decided that modern historical methods could not be applied to Jesus—So why believe any of it? We spent many Saturday afternoons together going over the Gospels and history, culminating in a friendly debate at Midwest Skeptics.

While preparing to become an evangelical missionary, **Denver** asked his professors why obsolescent, erroneous cosmological beliefs became part of Scripture—and they told him he should just have faith. Denver *lost* his faith.

Chase and **Brenda** are ex-Catholics who were hurt by their abusive families and then denounced by them all over again after becoming atheists. This solidified their decision.

Charles is the young man people call on in the Kansas City area when they want to get a rattlesnake off a golf course. He and I caught five different kinds of snakes when we went “herping” together. He loves snakes and loves studying their evolution. His pastor told him he must choose between evolution and Jesus. Charles chose evolution.



JORDAN JOHNSON

Last, I should also mention **Alan**—not because he’s a non-believer, but because he represents legions of Christians who are wanderers, without Christian fellowship or a church home, because their views and questions are not welcome there. As a boy in the 60s, he had been fascinated by dinosaurs, space, and the natural world—interests that continue to occupy his mind today. His fellow evangelicals demeaned his beliefs that ran so contrary to their “Scriptural” ones, and so he stopped going to church as a young man. For decades, he didn’t find fellowship that felt honest to him until he started attending our first Christian/Atheist discussions.

I could fill a book with stories of other atheist, agnostic, and wandering Christian friends (in fact, I’m now writing such a book) who have had a bad experience with Christians or with a twisted version of our message. I believe that God wants us to give them a good experience with Christians and our message. But how many Christians are even making contact with these people?

Step 3: *Befriending free thinkers*

Befriending atheists was not what I set out to do when I began a discussion group called “The Provocateurs.” Every time I invited my seeking or doubting friends to church with me, they declined. So one day I asked them: “How about if we just get together for a discussion, and our first topic will be: “What’s wrong with today’s evangelical Christians?” They all came. We talked for six hours, until the hosts kicked us out. The group was going fine until I started visiting the atheist groups in the Kansas City area. When I invited these hardcore, anti-religionists to my group, my “wandering Christian” friends fled. That left me with a growing group of atheists.

We renamed the group “Provocateurs & Peacemakers”—and we tried again with 25 Christians and 25 atheists signed up to come for four sessions, but when the four meetings were over, once again, most of the Christians never came back.

The atheists didn’t have bad breath. But a number of recent studies reveal that atheists are the most disliked minority in America. Least likely to get elected to any office. The farthest out-group from our Christian in-groups. The last ones you want your son or daughter to marry or to invite over and tell you: “Guess who’s coming to dinner.”

For the past four years, these alienated people have taught me several graduate courses worth of apologetics information about where their real problems lie with our faith—starting with the very word *faith*. As they’ve told me their personal stories, I’ve listened carefully and then commiserated with them over their mistreatment at the hands of religious people. I’ve tried to convey the difference between what Jesus taught and what these people did to them.

I’ve addressed their intellectual concerns—and sometimes resolved them. But not always.



Leading Lazy Readers group.

I let them know that I too have been wrestling with the problem of evil, the fate of the unevangelized, the commands to kill in the Old Testament, etc. But because I don’t pretend to always have easy answers, Bible-Answer-Man-style, and because I’m a science journalist, they’ve often asked me to be the speaker at their groups. Science, after all, is the one thing in their lives they believe they can trust. Easy, agenda-driven answers are never to be trusted.

Various skeptics groups meet around the city three or four nights a week. I'll get along with a few members after their meet-ups, and I get as many of my reasonable or more open-minded Christian friends as I can to go out with us after our Provocateurs meet-ups, to generate friendships that can weather our differences. Some of them are easy to talk to and eager for discussion with a rational Christian—others don't want to hear any of it.

Step 4: *Learning what doesn't work:*



I've learned a lot from them. I've learned what most bugs them about Christians. I've learned that *denouncing* non-believers, rather than engaging them, doesn't work. Duh.

Neither does:

- Being known mainly for what we're *against* rather than who we're *for*.
- Expecting to convert people to Christian morality before they know Christ.
- Reinforcing a Christian reputation for ignorance, arrogance, condescension, dishonesty, cult-like manipulation, insensitivity, and judgmentalism.
- Sticking to a party line no matter what (and quickly losing their respect) rather than letting them know when we also wrestle with the same tough issues.
- Basing arguments on “scientific” evidence that most scientists don't accept.
- Launching right into attacks to “prove them wrong” rather than starting with common ground.
- Training Christians to use strained apologetics arguments that do more damage than good.



Provocateurs & Peacemakers group.

Step 5: *Learning what does work:*

The friendships we're building daily with atheists and agnostics give us experience with their real questions, stories, and needs, not just an apologist's ivory tower view of them. They have taught us the importance of:

- Gaining a reputation as peacemakers.
- Approaching them with respect, humility, empathy, and an understanding of the real world.
- Dealing with their questions, not just those in apologetics books.
- Using only scientific or historical evidence that has the consensus of the authorities they respect behind it.



Asking skeptics in Chicago about life's big questions.

- Finding new, creative ways to explain Biblical and gospel truth to people who usually tune out as soon as they think they've heard it all before.
- Showing that we are willing to work—both with Christians and anyone else—on the issues that should be of concern to us all: the battle against disease, poverty, crime, war, hunger—and the promotion of peace, medical and general scientific research, better food distribution, clean water, and education.



McQUISTON PBS TV

Discussing belief with Bernard Leikind, Senior Editor of *Skeptic* magazine.

Day Star is working alongside young people, non-believers of all ages, and academics to raise our standards for how we respond to their questions. My board and I want to change the perception of Christians as science *opponents* to science *promoters*, from culture warriors to peacemakers, from adversaries to friends. Right now, few Christians are aware of what we've learned. We hope you'll begin receiving our info-reports (visit our [Info-Reports](#) page) so we can share it all with you. We want you to join us in carrying out our vision for a future when millions of non-believers like the ones at the beginning of this booklet know real Christ-followers who have befriended them—and are equipped to be a voice of reason and love.

Step 6: *Let's shake up the status quo!*

Let's stop doing the routine Christian busywork that completely misses the non-believing skeptic—using current standard operating procedures for preaching at them, or limiting our preaching to our own choir—and let's start doing the harder, more creative work of actually reaching their hearts and minds. Christians already have decades of experience to demonstrate...

How to miss them:

Unbelieving skeptics tend to avoid places where they'll hear the Christian message. And they dismiss anything that sounds too much like the wacky-sounding stuff they've heard before. So Christians are missing them in two ways: First, we aren't getting our message into the places where they are, physically. And second, most of what they do hear from us sounds abrasive and foreign to them. We aren't talking about anything they care about. So at Day Star, we have been learning ...



RICHARD LEWIS

Provocateurs & Peacemakers group.



Speaking at Chicago's Adler Planetarium.

How to bring them together— with a two-fold strategy: Get into their settings, and get into their shoes

A. Into their settings:

This is what Jesus did supremely, coming to our terrestrial habitat to seek and to save those who are lost—even becoming one of us—and not to be served, but to serve. Day Star's others-centered approach finds its model in Christ's servant attitude. And the Lord has opened up doors for us to get into the places where skeptics go to get their information:

- Their discussion groups (as we do at Midwest Skeptics, Kansas City Freethought Society, Midtown Freethinkers, Franklin County Philosophers, Community of Reason, etc.)
- Their conferences (recently they asked me to dialogue with them on a panel at The University of Kansas “ReasonFest” and the University of Omaha’s “Midwest Freethought Conference”); in past years I’ve done lots of speaking about cosmology and the meaning of life at universities around the country and in Asia, Mexico, and South America.



TARA MCKENZIE SCHLOTZHAUER

On panel at Midwest Freethought Conference.

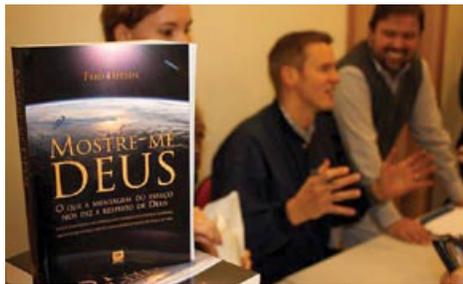


Speaking with the help of a Portuguese translator in Campinas, Brazil.

- Their bookstores (Barnes & Noble, etc.) with our first book, *Show Me God*, and their magazine racks with our magazine, *Cosmic Pursuit*. *Show Me God* is reaching people in 5 language versions in 44 countries.
- Their media: newspapers, magazines, radio & TV shows.



Teachers in China read our *Cosmic Pursuit* magazine.



Signing Portuguese translation of *Show Me God* after speaking in Rio de Janeiro.



Talking about space discoveries, in Washington, DC.

B. Into their shoes:

- We start out by recognizing them, not as enemies, but as fellow human sojourners, sharing many of our same human concerns.
- The way to reach people who see science as the main thing to trust, the final authority ... is to write responsibly about science.
- To earn trust and credibility with skeptical readers, we’ve worked to get our research and our science news stories published in international journals like *Nature*, as well as by the popular press they regard most highly: *The Boston Globe*, *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Washington Post*, *Scientific American*, etc. (visit our [Articles](#) page to view some of them)



- Rather than writing apologetics literature that quotes fellow apologists and only gets read by Christians, we receive our information about God’s world from the discoverers themselves: Nobel prize-winning physicists, NASA team leaders, world-renowned paleontologists (like Lucy-discoverer Donald Johanson, Berkeley’s Tim White, Richard Leakey and Meave Leakey)—sources skeptics trust. And we get close to the evidence by going to the labs and fossil fields around the world where we can examine their findings for ourselves.

Day Star brings pre-believers the gospel message in a step-by-step way in our literature, giving them multiple opportunities to grasp it and for the Holy Spirit to work, rather than using a one-time, take-it-or-leave-it approach.



PETER LOURIE

Interviewing a member of the Leakeys’ “Hominid Gang,” who found hominid skull and mandible pieces, near Lake Turkana, Kenya.

Turning the science stumbling block into a stepping stone

My work as a science journalist has created an open door for me into the skeptics’ groups, but even more so into the minds of science readers everywhere, who want to increase their science knowledge.

Normally, pre-believing skeptics don’t think Christians are trustworthy, and so they won’t read anything written by Christians about science, especially by Christian apologists whose research seems to consist mainly of reading other apologists—and who take an adversarial approach to skeptics. So we’re trying something that hasn’t been done often enough by evangelists, by laboring to establish credibility and trust with well-read seekers who only trust mainstream sources.

We want to show that becoming a Christian does not mean that we must buy into some agenda-driven, dishonest, Christianized brand of science. We need not be afraid of the evidence—we can let it lead us where it will. This work is also filled with fun and adventure: The book I’ve been writing for years about paleontology will bring readers along with me to places where we can see the evidence being dug out of the ground for ourselves:

- To Chengjiang and Weng’an, southern China, where we bump along dried riverbeds with the Chinese scientists who discovered the earliest animals in Cambrian and Precambrian rocks. They also discovered the earliest craniates, chordates with a head, near the start of the Cambrian radiation. I wrote about this for *The Boston Globe*.



JUNYUAN CHEN

Earliest chordate (*Haikouella*) in early Cambrian rock, Chengjiang, China.



DAYSTAR RESEARCH

Meave Leakey and team leave the truck to begin a day of fossil prospecting in Koobi Fora, Kenya.

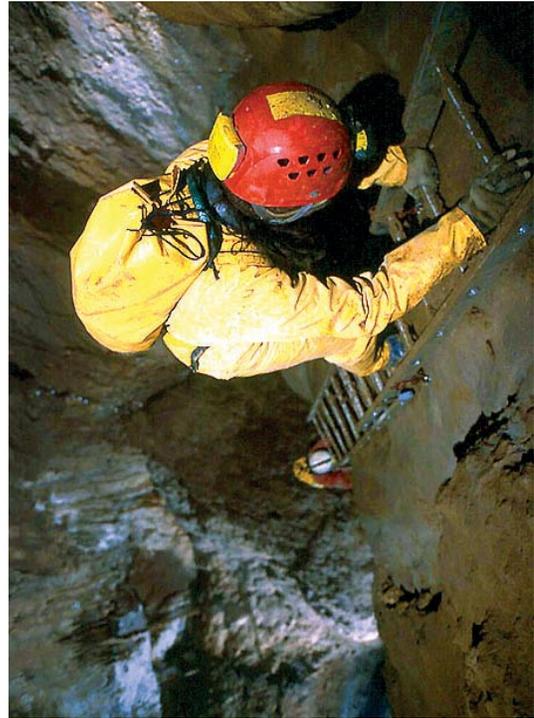
- To *Koobi Fora*, Kenya, where I scoured the desert floor with mother-daughter team Meave and Louise Leakey, who found specimens that season demonstrating that two million years ago, two other *Homo* species lived contemporaneously with *Homo erectus*. Only in the last 20 thousand years or so does the planet contain only one species of our genus. I wrote about the Leakeys’ recent work for *Scientific American*.

- To locales in Argentina and Brazil, where José Bonaparte, the father of Argentine paleontology, is finding the fossils of the earliest mammals, in early Triassic strata. At Lake Barreales, we dig beside fossil hunters who found the steps in lineages leading from tiny, bipedal, prosauropod dinosaurs to the giant, quadrupedal, sauropod dinosaurs, the most massive creatures ever to walk the earth. I ended up interviewing 20 other dinosaur hunters from around the world and wrote about the steps in the evolution of these giants for *Nature*.



DAVSTAR RESEARCH

Interviewing Jorge Calvo during the excavation of one of the world's largest dinosaurs, a sauropod near Lake Barreales, Argentina.



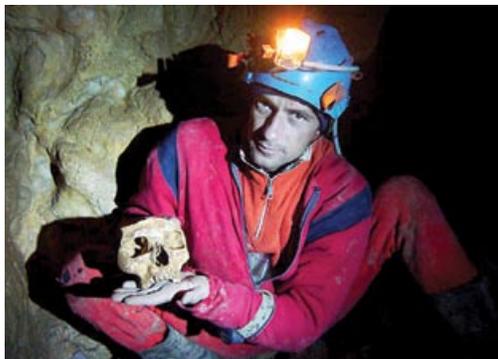
GHERASE MIRCEA

Climbing up the "chimney" to *Peștera cu Oase*, inside the Carpathian Mountains, Romania.

- And to *Peștera cu Oase*, one of the world's most inaccessible galleries, beneath Romania's Carpathian mountains, reachable only via an hour's triathlon of cave diving, swimming, and climbing, to join Erik Trinkaus's crew in their excavation of 40,000-year-old skulls, the earliest modern human fossils in Europe—who appear to have interbred with Neanderthals. I wrote about the discovery of these earliest modern humans in Europe for *The Washington Post* and for *New Scientist*.

Books that reach beyond Christian bookstores

Earlier in my investigations, I published a book about big bang cosmology called *Show Me God*. It contained interviews with Nobel prize-winning astrophysicists, NASA team leaders, and renowned cosmologists like Stephen Hawking and inflation theory pioneer Alan Guth. About the same time, I also wrote a first draft for a book about evolution, which essentially repeated what my favorite Intelligent Design apologists at the time were saying. That was back in the 1990s. As I read more widely and became convinced that I had been wrong about issue after issue, I threw away that book and started over.



GHERASE MIRCEA

Ștefan Milota finds the earliest known modern human in Europe (dated 40,000 years old).

I'm now writing *Evolution Story: How We Know What We Know About Paleo*, a book that interweaves the story of life (from hydrogen to humans), the stories of the paleontologists and biologists who made seminal discoveries, and the story of my own evolution from young earth creationist at Bob Jones University to Intelligent Design proponent to mainstream science journalist—who believes that God used evolution to create us.

We want to use science, not to prove scientists wrong (especially in the countless cases where many of us Christians have been wrong), but to get people thinking about why our universe has taken this fascinating trajectory from hydrogen to humans. Doesn't this look like purpose? Does it make any sense that a "Purposer" would fine-tune the universe for life and mind and then take no interest in the outcome?

I have more books in the pipeline: about how atheists "abducted" me and purged my evangelical brain of platitudes, about ancient creation mythologies compared with the grandeur and orderliness of creation in Genesis, and about what we can know historically about the origins of the Bible, examining the evidence for its uniqueness and inspiration.

Day Star's Mission

Our mission is to educate (especially in science, history, and Biblical studies) for the purpose of more effective evangelism. We want to show pre-believers that becoming a Christian can be a step forward, not backward. We want to help Christians gain a reputation for being peacemakers, not bigoted bullies. We want to re-introduce Jesus' new commandment, involving an *agape* love that goes beyond reciprocal altruism and kin altruism. We want to gain a reputation for loving our neighbors, loving the aliens in our midst, and loving even our enemies.

We want to raise both the scientific and theological standards used by the Church, to encourage more care in our exegesis and application of God's Word. We want to remind Christians of the words of Christ: "Blessed are the merciful," "Blessed are the peacemakers," "Judge not, that you be not judged," "All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two [love] commandments." We want to lead people to ask: What kind of a world would we have if everyone actually followed those words?

We want to encourage both believers and non-believers to follow Jesus—and to explain why doing that is committing ourselves to the best. If God ever spoke, there are no better words that resonate with the human conscience than those of Jesus. If ever God wanted to communicate a sign of how much he cares about us, there is no greater sign of his love breaking into our history than the one we have at Calvary.



With Louise Leakey and Fred Spoor, searching for hominids in East Turkana.

How can we make a dent?

Day Star will reach agnostics, atheists, people of other faiths, and "wandering Christians" through our next books, through getting our message onto their radio and television programs, through public speaking events, through magazine articles, and through the multiplication of the discussion groups we are already pioneering locally, bringing together Christian believers and non-believers.

Because of my work as a science journalist, our organization has been on a 14-year "anti-publicity" campaign; I learned back in 1999 that my science editors will not publish someone associated with "proselytizing." But now I'm excited about finally coming out as a Christian evangelist and getting the word out about what I've learned—from God's world, from God's Word, and even from God's atheists.

I've learned from the challenges of my atheist and agnostic friends, who have been my closest friends, during the past four years while I've run these two local meet-up groups for them.

I've learned how they misunderstand the Christian message, and how easy it is to do so when so many Christians misunderstand science. But this is beginning to change.

Our Provocateurs and Peacemakers group brings in speakers who bring us up to date on a variety of topics. There's not much we haven't covered—everything from dinosaur evolution to SETI to pseudoscience to the meaning of life to gun control to global warming to the causes of war to how to develop positive relationships.

Our “Lazy Readers” group is like a book club, except everyone brings whatever book or blog or article they've been reading, takes three minutes to tell us about it, and then the group takes three minutes to discuss it. Last time we went through 20 books! After both these meetings we usually go out to a nearby café and spend a couple more hours in more informal conversations.

What a perfect focus group—activist atheists asking their toughest questions. Many of these are the same questions seekers are being exposed to through the New Atheist books, blogs, and YouTube videos. The Lord is using my interactions with them every day to adjust my style and to show me new ways to put his message before well-educated science readers. The atheists' eager interaction with this approach bodes wonderfully for what the same approach will do with more open, seeking people. Even among the atheists, many would like to believe, but are afraid that the message of Jesus is only for children.



With Rodolfo Coria inspecting bones from *Giganotosaurus*, the world's largest carnivore, in El Chocón, Argentina.

DAVSTAR RESEARCH

What's the message?

My unbelieving friends constantly ask me how I, a science journalist, can take the huge step beyond recognizing “purpose” in the universe to putting my faith in Jesus Christ. *Why not some other religion?* I've been answering them the way our next book will answer seekers:



There are really only two steps between an atheist and me. Once we take the first step to recognize the purpose this universe clearly displays, then the next step we can take, the one I've taken, is to commit ourselves to *the best* we can find to explain that purpose, among all philosophical systems and claims of revelation. The one that best fits the conscience and the needs of human beings. I find that in Jesus Christ and his message. Because among all the attempts people have made to reach God ...

- Only in Jesus—and his cross—do we find God reaching us, instead of our best efforts to reach *Him*. It's a turned-around sacrifice. It's the one message that's not a merit system.
- Only in Jesus do we have hope for *all* of us, not just the righteous or the most religious. Jesus says, “I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.” (Matt. 9:13). In this sense, this is the most inclusive of all belief systems.
- Only in Jesus are our good deeds motivated from the heart—by gratitude—not from compulsion. We don't have to spend our lives desperately hoping that perhaps we'll do enough good to outweigh our bad and earn our way into God's favor.
- Only in Jesus do we see *love* as God's central attribute. No other message emphasizes the love of God, or God as love, or love fulfilling all the moral rules, the way we see in the words of Jesus, and Paul, and John.

- Only Jesus satisfies what appears to be our ultimate need: personal fellowship with God. A love relationship that never ends.
- If we search all through history and through all the claims of revelation, looking for a God who cares about us enough to communicate with us and give us a clear sign of that care, for me there's one place that shines out like a beacon—Calvary—and there's one time, about 2000 years ago, where we hear bells and whistles go off, pointing us to a God who cares about His creatures. A God who has broken into human history to demonstrate both love and justice in the most personal, most dramatic way possible. "There is no greater love than this, that one lays down his life for his friends."



Speaking in Campinas, Brazil



This is a different kind of evangelism and a different kind of evangelistic organization, poised to reach neglected, educated seekers and New Atheist-reading young people so that they can finally grasp the gospel as good news. We depend upon donations for our support and are currently in need of funding in order to take our next steps. Thank you for giving your time to learn about us!

Looking to Jesus,

Fred Heeren

P.S. If you're likeminded with us and see the importance of this outreach, we'd be so grateful if you'd join us in it through your financial support. We're looking for gifts from new donors and regular partners now to move forward! Our next steps will begin to reach skeptics through (1) the publication of our next two books (one about evolution and faith, and the other about what I've learned from my last four years among atheists), (2) getting these messages onto radio and television programs, (3) outreach through magazine articles, (4) outreach through a new website and through social media, and (5) outreach through the multiplication of Provocateurs & Peacemakers groups around the country.

Our budgeted campaign goal is \$200,000. We need many small donations and a considerable number of large ones to meet this budget. All are appreciated! Your gift will reach and impact today's skeptics, "wandering Christians," and New Atheist-reading young people in ways no one else is doing.

Please go to our [Donate](#) page to make your contribution, whether you make a monthly or a one-time gift. Also, if you'd like to receive our biannual info-reports (packed with useful info at the intersection of science and faith), request them on our [Info-Reports](#) page.

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