

Jeff Bethke answers questions about Jesus from American history

By [Edward J. Blum](#)

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How does a college kid produce a Youtube sensation about Jesus that received 27 million hits? And become a *New York Times* bestselling author with [Jesus > Religion: Why He is So Much Better than Trying Harder, Doing More, and Being Good Enough](#) before his 25th birthday?

[Jeff Bethke's breakthrough video](#), "Why I Hate Religion, but Love Jesus," resonates with millennial evangelicals. They want faith in Jesus without the shackles of political parties. They want to be hip without being hypocrites. How else could lyrics such as these receive a mass following?

I mean, if religion is so great, why has it started so many wars?

Why does it build huge churches, but fails to feed the poor?

Tells single moms God doesn't love them if they've ever had a divorce?

But in the Old Testament, God actually calls religious people whores.

Amid raising money for social justice causes through [making candles](#), producing new Youtube videos with his wife, [Alyssa Bethke](#), and preparing for the birth of their first child, Bethke was kind enough to grant me an interview. (We have a mutual friend in Professor [Lisa Szefel](#), whom we both admire.) I posed questions that Americans have had about Jesus, coming from [my and Paul Harvey's research](#).

*Q: When Europeans first crossed the ocean to the Americas, some Native Americans asked how they could communicate with Jesus. In the Bibles that were brought, Jesus did not speak their languages and Jesus never lived in their land. One Native American reportedly asked a Puritan missionary, "What country man Christ was. . . and where was he born?"*

A: I love this question! Sadly I think this breakdown was partially a fault of the Reformation and how a very key element to Paul and the New Testament was left out because those weren't the particular issues the Reformation was fighting against or for. I'd argue when you read the New Testament there is this extremely heavy thread between the scandal of Jew and gentile being mixed together under the

lordship of Jesus and labeled as a new humanity or “new man” in Ephesians 1. I’d argue that the main thrust of the book of Romans main isn’t justification by faith, but how God is creating a new Israel (humanity) where all tribes, tongues, languages are welcome. This is what made the first-century church so scandalous—gender barriers were crushed, socio-economic barriers were crushed, too. And the beauty of the end of Revelation is that all tribes and tongues stand before the throne singing in their own language! Because we haven’t emphasized this part, we emphasize a “come do it exactly how we do it” mentality which shows itself in examples like the one above.

*Q: After his failed uprising in antebellum Virginia, the slave Nat Turner was interviewed by a white attorney who then published [The Confessions of Nat Turner](#) (1831). When asked if Turner now believed that God wasn’t on his side (since Turner was about to be executed), Turner responded, “Was not Christ crucified?”*

The kingdom of Jesus is upside-down and almost antithetical to common notions of empire, power, and violence. Many followers of Jesus (including Paul, Peter, and others) suffered deaths like these and even warned us to expect it! That’s what the kingdom of darkness does to the kingdom of light. It quenches and attempts to kill it. What’s crazy is that through self-giving love and suffering, the kingdom of light shines even brighter and expands. I love this [quote from Pastor Brian Zahnd](#), “At the cross Jesus reveals a God who would rather die than kill his enemies.”

*Q: In 1915, after 30 years of immigration from southern and eastern Europe had changed U.S. religious demographics, one author asked in The Virility of Christ, “Why do we never think of Jesus as Jewish?”*

This is a great question and one I think gets to the heart of most misunderstanding about Jesus and the scriptures. We don’t realize he was a Jew, trained as a Jew, and in a Jewish community. For pete’s sake he was a rabbi! I guess the reasoning would be the outplay of all idolatry in that we forge a God made in our image, rather than the other way around. So because of that, down through the ages, we’ve made him more like us and forced him into our contexts, languages, and customs. All of this is compounded by the fact that Judaism changed significantly after Jesus left with the destroying of the Temple and the dispersals.

*Q: In Upton Sinclair’s novel [They Call Me Carpenter](#) (1922) Jesus comes down from a stained-glass church window in LA. When he tries to leave the church, a witness remarks, “I thought you belonged to the church.” Jesus responds: “I’m not sure. I*

*have been wondering—am I really needed here? And am I not more needed in the world?”*

There has been this big divide in the church between Christians who have a high emphasis on salvation, cross, going to heaven; some have a high emphasis on kingdom, here and now, social justice. The false dichotomy arises because we don't see they are actually intertwined together. One of my favorite theologians, N.T. Wright, notes you can't have one without the other. Can't have a kingdom without a cross, and can't have a cross without a kingdom. The way the Gospel writers tell the story, they are specifically lining up everything to get the point across that what Jesus did is how God became king here on earth. And the fascinating thing is he did that through the cross. The sign above him that was in mockery actually was a prophetic truth that yes, he was King of the Jews, but also king of the whole world the minute he gave himself as a sacrifice of self-giving love and exhausted the powers of evil. The cross was the king's throne. Now that sounds completely ridiculous and upside-down from everything we are taught. But in the Christian worldview, usually if it's upside-down and backwards it's probably the way of Jesus. The first shall be last; the last shall be first. He didn't come to be served but to serve and so should we. The kingdom is inaugurated in his cross, and unleashed at his resurrection. The church then becomes his primary witness to that resurrection power. We are people pointing to him saying, a new world was opened up. God is re-created in this world. And he invites us to be co-creators and redeemers with him on this massive project.

*Q: In 1957, three years after the Supreme Court decision of Brown v. the Board of Education and two years after the Montgomery Bus Boycott, a writer to Martin Luther King Jr. asked him, “[Why did God make Jesus white](#), when the majority of peoples in the world are non-white?”*

This is slightly comical and depressing at the same time. Because Jesus wasn't white. He was a Middle Eastern Jew living in Palestine! He would've looked a lot more like the people who ran planes into the World Trade Center than your suburban Minnesota businessman. Another thought I've been chewing on lately is as a white, privileged, American male, I have every privilege on my side (race & gender). When I read the scriptures, I should be deeply, deeply, deeply careful. More often than not I'm the one Jesus is railing against. I'm not Lazarus at the gate; I'm the rich man. I'm not the oppressed; I'm a citizen of the empire. Those thoughts are sobering but also something anyone with any form of societal privilege needs to

take into account.

*Q: In the TV show Family Guy, Peter Griffin notices that a used record store [clerk looks a lot like Jesus](#). Peter asks, "You look familiar, do I know you? . . . Are you Jesus Christ?"*

Finding Jesus in the unexpected is something he quite often does. From his own mouth he said when we love and serve our neighbor and give water, food, and the like to the lowly we are giving it to him. Imagine if we took that seriously? I know I sure can more.

*Our weekly feature Then and Now harnesses the expertise of American religious historians who care about the cities of God and the cities of humans. It's edited by [Edward J. Blum](#).*

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