



*Heidi M. Kendall, Artist*

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### **Video “Why I Hate Religion, But Love Jesus” Goes Viral The Wired Word for February 12, 2012**

#### **In the News**

Jefferson Bethke is a 22-year-old Christian artist with the ability to put his beliefs into poetry. In a four-minute spoken-word video, he stands in a courtyard and rhymes about why he hates religion but loves Jesus. Bethke has captured the attention of a large number of people who are attracted to Jesus but not the church, and who may believe in Christian teachings without belonging to organized religion. Since its posting in early January, the video has “gone viral” (been passed around like a virus), with over 18 million views to date. “What if I told you Jesus came to abolish religion?” he begins. “I mean, if religion is so great, why has it started so many wars? Why does it build huge churches, but fail to feed the poor?” He correctly points out that religion has given spiritual endorsement to many military campaigns over the centuries, and that there have been times when scarce resources have been invested in church buildings instead of food programs. Bethke charges the church with hypocrisy when he says, “Religion might preach grace, but another thing they practice.”

His vision of the church is this: “If grace is water, then the church should be an ocean. It’s not a museum for good people, it’s a hospital for the broken.” He goes on to say, “Now let me clarify, I love the church, I love the Bible, and yes, I believe in sin. But if Jesus came to your church, would they actually let him in?” Bethke perceives an enormous gulf between Jesus and the church, and says that “Jesus and religion are on opposite spectrums. See, one’s the work of God, but one’s a man-made invention.” In language that is more at home in a Christian rap video than a theological essay, he claims that “Religion puts you in bondage, while Jesus sets you free. Religion makes you blind, but Jesus makes you see. And that’s why religion and Jesus are two different clans. Religion is man searching for God, Christianity is God searching for man.”

Bethke’s work has inspired numerous video responses, including “I Hate Religion, and Jesus Too,” “Why I Dislike Your Poem, But Love God,” and “Why I Love Religion, and Love Jesus.” He was interviewed on “CBS This Morning” and received a rhyming response on the show from a priest named Edward Beck. The video was even featured in a column by David Brooks in *The New York Times*, who said that Bethke’s protest is “symptomatic of a lot of



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the protest cries we hear these days. This seems to be a moment when many people -- in religion, economics and politics -- are disgusted by current institutions, but then they are vague about what sorts of institutions should replace them.”

So is it true that Jesus came to abolish something called religion? Wired Word editorial team member Timothy Merrill considers Bethke’s attitude to be “a typically American individualistic expression, something that is engrained in our independent spirit, nurtured from the very beginning since getting off the boat at Plymouth Rock.” Merrill responds to such sentiments by pointing to all the hospitals, colleges, universities, food banks, rescue missions and soup kitchens which would fail to exist without organized religion. Churches, synagogues and mosques are the “franchises” of religion, and they often provide day care, counseling and education in communities across America. Merrill acknowledges that the “hate religion, love Jesus” people can go it alone, but he wonders how many people they have cared for, counseled and educated compared to what religion does when it gets organized.

Editorial team member Frank Ramirez reports that a number of younger leaders in his denomination are talking about the possibility of “being Christians without being part of a fellowship.” He fears that accountability will be lost if people are not sharing together as a body. “It can be something as simple as not needing to shell out any cash to keep the church heated in the winter, if you’re in love with Jesus and not with people,” he says. “But it also means that you only have to encounter believers and opinions with which you are in agreement, which is what our culture is doing politically.”

Is there a way to love religion and love Jesus? David Brooks concludes his column on Bethke by saying, “Effective rebellion isn’t just expressing your personal feelings. It means replacing one set of authorities and institutions with a better set of authorities and institutions. Authorities and institutions don’t repress the passions of the heart, the way some young people now suppose. They give them focus and a means to turn passion into change.” Perhaps religion can give rise to a better set of authorities and institutions, for people who love Jesus and want to do his work in the world.

More on this story can be found at these links:

[Why I Hate Religion, But Love Jesus, YouTube](#)

[Why I Hate Religion, But Love Jesus spoken word lyrics, RapGenius](#)

[Losing His Religion, CBS This Morning](#)

[How to Fight the Man, The New York Times](#)



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### **The Big Questions**

What are the aspects of church that cause people to “hate religion”? And what are the factors that inspire people to say they “love Jesus”?

Jefferson Bethke attacks hypocrisy in the church, pointing out that Christians don’t always practice what they preach. How is this a legitimate criticism, and where do we need to work to restore integrity to organized religion?

If people are turned off by the obligations of religion, how can the church present the demands of faithfulness in a positive light?

Did Jesus organize his followers, and if so, how? What structures did the early church put in place to advance its ministry and mission?

How do you define “religion”? Is there a better way to describe the practice of discipleship?

Why has Bethke struck a nerve with his video? Are people interested simply in videos that challenge authority, or is something deeper being touched?

### **Confronting the News with Scripture**

Here are some Bible verses to guide your discussion:

**Isaiah 58:6:** “Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke?” (For context, read 58:1-14.)

The prophet Isaiah draws a contrast between false and true worship, saying that those who practice false worship serve their own interest on their fast day, and oppress all of their workers (58:3). Those who practice true worship, on the other hand, work for justice, feed the hungry, house the homeless and clothe the naked (58:6-7). True religion avoids the charge that Bethke levels at religion when he says that it builds “huge churches, but fails to feed the poor.”



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### Questions:

In what ways do we practice false worship today, and what changes can we make to move closer to the true religion described by Isaiah? Where can connections be made between the work of justice and the worship of God?

**Matthew 5:17:** “Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill.” (For context, read 5:17-20.)

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus makes clear that his mission is to complete the work that God started through religious law and the work of the prophets. He is not devoted to the destruction of all that has come before him. He predicts that “not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished” (5:18). Jesus tells his followers that “unless \*their+ righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, [they] will never enter the kingdom of heaven” (5:20).

### Questions:

What does Jesus mean when he says he came to “fulfill” the law and the prophets? How does Jesus complete what has come before him? What sort of righteousness does he challenge us to practice? Describe how this might have a positive effect on the church and community.

**Matthew 23:27-28:** “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which on the outside look beautiful, but inside they are full of the bones of the dead and of all kinds of filth. So you also on the outside look righteous to others, but inside you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness.” (For context, read 23:23-36.)

Jesus accuses the scribes and Pharisees of focusing on religious obligations such as tithing, while neglecting “the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith” (23:23). He criticizes them for focusing on outer appearances instead of inner purity (23:28), and for persecuting the prophets of God (23:34). He calls them hypocrites, because they speak religious truths but do not practice them.



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### Questions:

In the church today, where do we focus more on outer appearances than on inner purity? Bethke says, “Religion’s like spraying perfume on a casket.” What effect does this have on people outside the church, especially members of the younger generation? How can we better align our words and deeds?

**Luke 21:37-38:** “Every day \*Jesus+ was teaching in the temple, and at night he would go out and spend the night on the Mount of Olives, as it was called. And all the people would get up early in the morning to listen to him in the temple.” (For context, read 21:29-38.)

After his triumphal entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, Jesus teaches in the temple. He uses this holy place as a location for telling parables and making predictions about the coming of the kingdom of God (21:29-33). Although he has predicted the destruction of the temple (21:5-6), he does not attack it himself. In fact, he cleansed it because he was upset that it had become “a den of robbers” (19:45-46).

### Questions:

Describe the position Jesus takes toward the organized religion of his day. Does he hate it, tolerate it or concentrate on purifying it and improving it? What steps can we take to follow the example of Jesus today?

**Hebrews 10:24-25:** “And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching.” (For context, read 10:19-39.)

The author of the letter to the Hebrews challenges us to persevere in times of struggle, holding fast “to the confession of our hope without wavering” (10:23). To overcome our difficulties, he advises us to provoke one another to love and good deeds, meet together and encourage one another. All of this appears to be done in the context of the community of faith.

### Questions:

One of Bethke’s criticisms is that religion “tells single moms God doesn’t love them if they’ve ever had a divorce.” How can Christians do a better job of encouraging one another, and of provoking one another to love and good deeds? What can be done to improve the quality of our meeting together?



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**James 1:26-27:** “If any think they are religious, and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless. Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.” (For context, read 1:19-27.)

James insists that Christians be doers of the word of God, not merely hearers. This includes personal self-discipline such as being quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to anger (1:19). But it also involves care for the vulnerable of the community, especially orphans and widows. James predicts that doers of the word will be “blessed in their doing” (1:25).

Questions:

How does organized religion help us to practice religion that is “pure and undefiled before God”? In what ways does a decision to “hate religion” reject a biblical pattern of organized mission and ministry? How does a narrow focus on loving Jesus limit the practice of the Christian faith?

### **For Further Discussion**

In what ways are churches and religion pulled down by the maintenance of buildings and organizations, and how can they focus more on Jesus’ ministry and mission?

Bethke says, “If grace is water, then the church should be an ocean. It’s not a museum for good people, it’s a hospital for the broken.” What keeps us from sharing our brokenness in church, and how can we reconnect religion to the healing ministry of Jesus?

James says that “the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy” (James 3:17). While organized religion will never be able to embrace this heavenly wisdom completely, what concrete steps can be taken to nurture these spiritual qualities in the life of the church? Which one are you willing to incorporate into your life?

Identify several inaccurate and unfair criticisms of religion in Bethke’s video. Although his love for Jesus is admirable, are there aspects of his passion that may not be sustainable?



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Where does he need to deepen his understanding of the relationship between Jesus and the Christian community?

What are the advantages of separating Jesus from religion? What are the disadvantages? How can the two be held together in a faithful and edifying way? Following the observation of New York Times columnist David Brooks, how can organized religion give people “focus and a means to turn passion into change”?

### **Responding to the News**

The Christian community is required not only to preach grace, but to practice it. Jefferson Bethke’s video challenges us to align our words and deeds, practice a true religion that cares for the needy and build ministries of support and accountability into the life of the church. This week, don’t reject the institution of the church; instead, work to build a better one.

### **Other News This Week**

Fallout continued from the controversy over the Susan G. Komen for the Cure Foundation’s funding for Planned Parenthood. A Komen vice president, Karen Handel, resigned \this week after Komen reversed its decision to stop funding particular Planned Parenthood projects. Handel does not support the mission of Planned Parenthood, since the organization provides abortions, and she stood behind Komen’s decision not to renew aspects of its longstanding partnership with Planned Parenthood.

But the controversy arose over grants to support Planned Parenthood’s breast cancer screening programs, not abortions. Is there a way to separate women’s health from the issue of abortion? Why do reproductive issues always create such controversy? What role can Christians play in shedding light on these issues, instead of additional heat? (See Matthew 5:9, Galatians 5:22-23, Acts 15:39, Mark 5:25-34.)

More on this story can be found at these links: [Komen Foundation VP Resigns, Blasts Planned Parenthood](#), [CNN Komen Vice President Resigns as Details Emerge on Planned Parenthood Debate](#), [The Washington Post](#)



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### **Closing Prayer**

Lord God, we stand convicted of the charge of hypocrisy, because we know that we have not always practiced what we preach. Forgive our failures, and help us to build a church that is truly a hospital for the broken, one in which all of your children are accepted, healed, helped and challenged to grow in faith and good works. In Jesus' name. Amen.

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