

Be For Him or Against Him

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Hip-Hop is a cultural movement that began among those who dwelled in the urban areas of New York City in the early 1970's. Since then it has spread all over the world. Throughout the history of Hip-Hop, rappers have acknowledged a higher power than themselves. However, Hip-Hop for the most part contradicts the ways of the Christian God.

Hip-Hop has become a way of governing life. The culture is not from God; therefore, it should not be used by the people of God to describe anything that is of God. Therefore, it cannot be exploited as a Christian way of living. God will not embrace what the world has developed as a means of glorifying that which is sin filled. God will not embrace those who are only looking for money, power or respect. When Jesus came to this earth, He was not looking for any of the above. He sought to glorify God. In doing so, He changed the world. The individual who claims to follow or have a relationship with God is misguided when he or she make music that glorifies anything but God. To many, Hip-Hop culture represents an upliftment of self and beating the system by any means necessary. This was not Jesus' mission statement. He sought to uplift God and deny Himself. In a recent poll on Hip-Hop.com 18% of the people felt that Hip-Hop should be a new religion while 43% believe in Hip-Hop over God. Lawrence Parker, Hip-Hop pioneer and founder of the Temple of Hip-Hop, says:

We look at the spiritual life as a performance before God. God is the headliner, and the stage is the world, and so you're always an opening act, no matter how popular and successful you become. What you're doing is opening for God. A society of responsible Hip-Hoppers, a group of people who believe that Hip-Hop is of divine origin. We believe that not only is Hip-Hop divine, but the temple is divinely ordained, because we accept it as that. In accepting that Hip-Hop is of divine origin, our temple becomes sanctioned by our God. (Parker, 2)

Parker is trying to merge what he loves (Hip-Hop) into a lifestyle that he knows is right (following God). The two will never intertwine properly. God's people are to be set apart according to what the bible says (*New King James Version of the Holy Bible*, John 17:19, Acts 26:18, Romans 15:16, 1 Thessalonians 4:3). 1 Corinthians 6:11 states, "And such were some of you. But you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus and by the Spirit of our God." They are not to embrace the world's practices and slap God's name on them, using them as their own.

Currently, what Hip-Hop produces is for the most part negative. It perpetuates the notion that light skinned women are more beautiful than women with dark skin. It gives the idea that being lazy is acceptable, that sleeping around is cool, and making money by any means necessary is a wonderful thing. In 2004, the women of Spelman College rejected the visit of rapper Nelly because his music portrayed women in a distasteful

light. If this culture is producing positivity, then why are the cultures' own people criticizing it? Hip-Hop's defense is that this is simply reality; that they are just reporting what they see. God doesn't simply call His people to be reporter, but He calls them to action. God calls His people to do something about the "reality". Hip-Hop would say that some women in this world really act like bitches and hoes. God says regardless of if the people act up, you don't. Because Hip-Hop was started in the secular world it is naturally consumed by the world. Therefore, a culture that is consumed with the world is not properly able to completely please God. Applause is in order for Kanye West for the second verse of his song, 'Jesus Walks' on his College Dropout album, which says:

I ain't here to argue about his facial features/ Or
here to convert atheists into believers/ I'm just
trying to say the way schools needs teachers/ The
way Kathie Lee needed Regis/ That's the way y'all
need Jesus/ So here go my single, dog, radio
needs this/ They say you can rap about anything
except for Jesus/ That means guns, sex, lies, video
tapes/ But if I talk about God, my record won't get
played, huh?/ Well, let this take away from my
spins/ Which will probably take away from my
ends/ Then I hope this takes away from my sins
(www.azlyrics.com).

However, West says when explaining his song 'Jesus Walks', "It talks about my relationship with Him, [how I'm] trying to live a secular life but still have God in my life." (Simona, 1) How can one live a secular life but still have God when God teaches that one is either hot or cold and the lukewarm (those who claim to love Him but are living a secular life) will not be accepted by Him (Revelation 3:16). There is clearly a contradiction here.

The members of Run-DMC experienced a spiritual rebirth in the early 1990s and Joseph Simmons ultimately was ordained Reverend Run. However, upon examining the lyrics of Reverend Run's new album entitled *Distortion* only two songs even allude to God. The first one called *High and Mighty Joey* narrates his life before having a "revelation". At the end of the song he stated that his eyes were opened one day and his life changed. Another song, *The Way*, discusses the people he preaches to and prays for. The message in this song is basically that he is here to help other people, which is wonderful because that's what Jesus would say. That's two songs out of ten, which is twenty percent. You can't effectively represent God for twenty percent of your life. He wants 100% representation. God wants your whole life.

Of the modern-day artists, Nasir Jones has been one of the most outspoken speakers about God: He named his 1996 album *It Is Written* and his 2001 LP *God's Son*. Lyrically, he's asked questions like the following in his song "Heaven":

If heaven was a mile away/ and you could
ride by the gates/ would you try to run inside
when it opens? / Would you try to die today? /
Would you pray louder, finally believing his
power? / Even if you couldn't see, but you
could feel, would you still doubt him?
(www.ohhla.com).

Nas is calling the listeners of Hip-Hop to think about spiritual matters. There is nothing wrong with this. The most noticeable contradiction that Nas makes is his language. The use of vulgar language is ever present in his music. In one song he talks about Condoleezza Rice and how she had oral sex with the president. He spews lyrics and denigrates many things that he doesn't like. God doesn't like this. God is one of peace, not one of conflict.

Even Curtis Jackson didn't forget to include requests to God on his *'Get Rich or Die Tryin'* album on tracks like *"Many Men"* and *"Gotta Make It to Heaven."* Tupac mentioned God throughout his career, making records like *"Lord Knows," "I Wonder If Heaven Got a Ghetto"* and *"Thugz Mansion."* Other artists got on the Jesus bandwagon like *Hammer's "Pray,"* Bone Thugs-N-Harmony's *"Crossroads"* and have gotten much airplay. Therefore, God is nothing new to the game of Hip-Hop. The only problem is the aforementioned artists are not seemingly committed to the One that they are calling on and alluding to. Some rappers make two songs about God while creating numerous other tracks that are about the women they lust after, how much pride they have in themselves, how much money they have, the crimes that they commit, drug and alcohol addictions just to name a few. God is not glorified when people make songs that don't give Him all the praise and honor (Job 36:24). He is definitely not pleased when people make songs about Him when they are really not living a life pleasing to God (Isaiah 29:13). God describes these peoples' heart as being far from Him. He is not even pleased when such people give Him a "shout out" after winning an award. Even Jada Pinkett, when hosting a recent BET music award show made mention of this phenomenon that occurs so often at Hip-Hop award shows. She said that one of her rules for artists was that they could not come up and 'thank God' if they could not perform their craft in church.

At the 2005 VIBE awards, Jayceon Taylor (The Game) won for Hottest Hook for his song with Mary J. Blige "Hate It or Love It." Taylor raps about gang-banging to get money and how he used to threaten to kill people over shoes. When he won he declared from the stage that, "I want to thank God, from whom all blessings flow." That same night Clifford Harris (T.I.) won for Best Street Anthem for his song "U Don't Know Me." It's loaded up with the N-word and boasts about how nasty he is and how he's going to shoot people. In his victory speech, he too, gave thanks to God. ODB, Black Eyed Peas, Lil Kim and nearly every other Hip-Hop artist do this as well, all of whom by no means glorify the Lord in their music or what is known of their personal lives.

Some veteran rappers are overwhelmed by the lawless direction of Hip-Hop. Its artists such as Mason Betha, also known as Mase felt the need to abandon Hip-Hop for

lack of values. Mase, who enjoyed an extremely successful musical career, traded it in for church ministry. "I left because I had to get my mind right," he said. "I wasn't mentally ready to deal with how Hip-Hop was and the role I played in Hip-Hop. I had to do it for me and for the sake of my spirituality." It was very commendable that Mase would leave the Hip-Hop arena to become closer to God. Now that Mase is back on the Hip-Hop scene, he has since appeared on the "*Lean Back*" remix with Fat Joe and Eminem. He has not stood out and proclaimed God, but he has blended in with the rest of his counterparts who don't even claim to know God like He does.

While promoting his film, *Never Die Alone*, Earl Simmons said, "I know the real reason I'm here on this earth is to speak the word, bring more people to Jesus, that's my career. [Music and film] are just jobs. These are just jobs. These are things I asked God for, and he's given them to me (www.hiphopgame.com)." Just to clarify, Simmons was on the set of a movie in which he plays a drug dealer when he said the most important thing is to teach people the ways of Jesus. This seems contradictory.

"It's good to have some faith in God," said Diplomats member Jim Jones, who has named his upcoming LP '*On My Way to Church*'. "I came up in the church, I know what it's all about," he said. "If [the current rise of religion in Hip-Hop] is a trend, that's a bad thing - that's some bullshit. Any time I mention the Lord, I'm genuine about it. God is my nigga. He's my big homie. I hope I always remember that and never lose contact with what the reality is (www.mtv.com)." This is the exact mindset that is saturated in the Hip-Hop community; that God is good for a minute but not a whole lifetime. In this statement he seems to not want other Hip-Hop artists to completely involve God in the music. God cannot be seen as "yo nigga". This is making Him too common when He is not common at all. He is righteous (Ezra 9:15) and niggas have no righteousness apart from God (Deuteronomy 9:6).

A side bar is in order to make mention that yes, everyone on this earth can make mistakes; even do things that are wrong which can seem hypocritical or contradictory. However, this is not the issue of focus. Tupac released a song called "*Only God Can Judge Me*." He was accurate in this statement. This research is not meant for condemnation; Jesus didn't come to this world to condemn so His people should not either. John 3:17 says, "For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved." This research is meant to persuade those practitioners of Hip-Hop to simply choose a side. God's side is truth and light. Any other side is not. Also, I am aware that Rev. Run made a song called "*Reverend Run Sermon*" in which he told the audience that Hip-Hop artists should be encouraged, and not talked about by church folks for their wrong doings. If someone didn't tell him about God, he would never be where he is today. He also notes that prominent rappers like Snoop Doggy Dogg will one day be proclaiming God's word.

Some fans of Hip-Hop would say that God is ever present in Hip-Hop. The authors of 'Jesus and the Hip-Hop Prophets', Alex Gee and John Teter advocate that Tupac and Lauren Hill are modern day prophets because they bring a message to the people that is relevant to everyday life. According to the bible, a prophet is someone who brings a message from the Lord. Every prophet in the bible that pleased God got a word from Him and then gave it to the people. If they did not do this they would be considered

a false prophet. How can Tupac have a word from the Lord but barely mention the Lord?

Teter and Gee say that Tupac described his mother in the song “*Dear Mama*” as loving him like the bible teaches us to love. She was patient, she was kind, she didn't leave him alone, and she cared for him. In their opinion, people specifically the Hip-Hop generation, cannot understand the language nor relate to the stories in the bible. Therefore, they have to find God in an alternate outlet (namely Hip-Hop music). Tupac's mother loved him. This is good. The fact alone that she loved him does not qualify her to be righteous in God's sight. The fact that Tupac wrote about her does not make him a prophet. God's word stand forever (Isaiah 40:8, 1Peter 1:25) so it will be relevant forever. Those seeking the Lord's true word should not turn to Hip-Hop to find it.

Hip-Hop is a culture that takes pride in its trend setting ability. If this is true, then the Hip-Hop generation should be the first to change the game and not fall in line with it. Just because Hip-Hop is reflective of society as a whole is no excuse. Hip-Hop practitioners have the ability to be a distinct voice that will work for positive change. Instead, Hip-Hop has blended in with the rest of society that already disrespects our women, leisurely executes violence, makes money the number one priority, supports gun manufacturers by constantly using and plugging their products in music, and pleases the flesh with whatever is desired.

Hip-Hop leaders have the numerical and monetary resources needed to change the world in a positive way. For example, there are over a half of a million children in the foster care system. Over half of those children are minorities. The money and talent is there for every minority child in the foster care system to be placed into a home. According to the various reports, Curtis Jackson and Sean Combs have at least 85 million dollars between them. The resources are there for the entire Hip-Hop community to ban together fight injustices like police brutality. It is possible for every child in Africa to have their basic needs met. Jesus came to this world to impact it in a positive way. Like Jesus, Hip-Hop was controversial in its prime. Just because it is controversial does not automatically make it bad. However, Hip-Hop is not likely to ever mobilize into any movement that will result in an outcome which pleases God until the practitioners of Hip-Hop change the music altogether. In changing the music, you change the mindset of the people and consequentially, the culture. Unfortunately, Hip-Hop music at the current moment is not changing.

For the sake of fairness, remnants of God can be found in the music. Every time someone raps about how they need love, they are rapping about God because God is love. They want God and they don't even know it. Anytime someone raps about their own father being gone and they wish he would have been there, they are longing for God because He is the perfect Father who will never leave them or forsake them (Hebrews 13:5). Anytime someone raps about how they have to go to court and how they wish they would not get the full jail sentence they deserve, they are longing for God because He is a just judge and is full of mercy (Deuteronomy 4:31). When you hear Hip-Hop artists talking about how their mate is cheating on them and they wish they would not do that, they are longing for God because he is faithful. When Hip-Hop artists speak about the chaos in the streets and how they wish it would end, they are longing for God because

nothing about Him is chaotic; He is peaceful. “For God is not the author of confusion but of peace...” (1Corinthians 14:33a)

In closing, there is only one solution for success; GOD. All the money, talent, or fame in the world cannot compare with what God has to offer. Hip-Hop must, choose this day who it will serve. “... choose for yourself this day whom you will serve... but as for me and my house we will serve the Lord.” (Joshua 24:15)

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Study Questions

- Name two major rap artists that include God in their lyrics?
- Is Hip-Hop a legitimate religion? What type of salvation or sanctuary can it provide?
- Should rap and Hip-Hop artist be held accountable by their fans when they record songs that contradict their moral character?
- Considering the outlined contradictions, can God and Hip-Hop truly co-exist within the same artistic medium?