

CHRISTIAN HIP HOP AS A FORM OF WORSHIP EXPRESSION

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Doctor of ministry program
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In partial fulfillment of
The requirements for the course
BMIN 7550
Worship and congregational formation

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Due: July 23, 2020
Submitted: August 7, 2020

Christian hip hop is a genre of music that is chock full of worship elements, storytelling and evangelistic motifs. Sadly however, the church has historically viewed this genre of music in a negative light. Therefore, it is important to provide a twenty-thousand-foot view of worship expression, and then zero in on Christian hip hop as one type of expression. There are several questions that one must consider prior to engaging in an informed discourse on Christian hip hop. First, what is worship and how is it expressed? Second, what is hip hop and why should it be important to Christianity? Third, why does the church view Christian hip hop in a negative light? Fourth, is it okay for the church to borrow elements from pop culture and express them in worship? Fifth, should the church incorporate elements of Christian hip hop into corporate worship expression? The church needs to become more informed on Christian hip hop and to view it as a valid form of worship expression.

So, what is worship anyway? How should it be expressed in the church today? Sadly, I believe many Christians do not take the time to flesh out these two important questions. To most, worship is what Christians do on Sunday mornings when they attend church. They sing, they pray, they read the bible, they listen to a sermon, a few give money and then they go home. Today, worship has become more of a formula rather than a fascinating encounter with the divine. According to the *Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon* the Hebrew word for worship is *shachah*. *Shachah* is a word that means to bow down, or to depress and to prostrate oneself. In this definition of worship, the worshipper acknowledges and shows reverence to a being superior to himself. This is the foundation of every

worship expression. Simply put, worship can only be valid if the worshipper acknowledges the presence of a being greater than himself.

In the book of Genesis, we read about God's created order for the world. The first verse of the Bible states, "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth."¹ Therefore it is clear that God is superior to all other forms of creation. As the story progresses, we read of human's superiority within God's creation. Scripture states, "Then God said, "Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground."² Here we are presented with humanity's unique role in creation, with the recognition that humanity is part of creation, not separate from creation. Finally, we move to Genesis 3 and we see Satan enter the picture. The temptation he offered was simple. The snake told Eve that she could be equal to God. In Genesis 3:5 Satan says, "For God knows that when you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil."³ In other words, Satan was attempting to negate God's superiority. He wanted both Adam and Eve to view themselves as equals with God. Eventually Adam and Eve disobey God and fall captive to the deception, and sin enters the world.

After a few major setbacks, like the flood for example, God chose to forgive humanity. Later in the biblical story we read about faithful men and women who recognized the superiority of God and acted upon their devotion to him. This is

¹ Genesis 1:1, NIV

² Genesis 1:26, NIV

³ Genesis 3:5, NIV

where worship enters the picture. Worship can further be defined as acts of devotion to God who is the great “I AM.” As a result, it is safe to assume that any act born out of devotion and obedience to Yahweh is a type of worship expression. The first time the word worship is used in the NIV translation of the bible, is found in Genesis 22:5 where Abraham tells his servants to “Stay here with the donkey while I and the boy go over there. We will worship and then we will come back to you.” It is difficult to understand how a loving God would command a father to sacrifice his son as an act of worship. However, if we view this interaction through the lens of devotion it makes more sense. God was testing Abraham’s devotion to see how committed he really was. As God entered a covenant relationship with Abraham and a system of worship expression was formed. In David Peterson’s book, *Engaging with God: A Biblical Theology of Worship* he states, “Abraham, Isaac and Jacob built altars throughout Canaan to mark the sites where God manifested himself to them under various names. Sacrifice was not offered at any spot which might happen to be convenient, but only at those sites in particular.”⁴ As the descendants of the Abrahamic promise grew in number, more worship regulations were instituted. This becomes especially clear under the leadership of Moses and later the Levitical priesthood.

Many believe the earliest biblical account that we have of singing is the *Song of the Sea* by Moses, Miriam and the Israelites in Exodus chapter fifteen. After witnessing how God parted the Red Sea and destroyed the Egyptian army they were

⁴ David G. Peterson, *Engaging with God: A Biblical Theology of Worship* (Downer Grove: IVP Academic, 1992), 314.

exhilarated. With joy, they not only sang but played the timbral and danced. The song contained poetic elements that communicated how God delivers through his mighty power. Yet, I do not see in the text where God disapproved of the song, the instrument or even the dance, nor do I see where God commanded that expression be offered to him. The song seems to be spontaneous in nature and provided an emotional response to a very difficult situation. It wasn't until king David assumed power, that singing, playing instruments, and dancing became a part of the collective worship expression. According to scripture David was a very skilled musician. Music was important to king David so naturally it became important to the subjects of his kingdom. In the book, *David and the Psalms* by Michael Ruzala and Wyatt North they state, "Music may have been an outlet for David, who was skilled on the harp from the time of his youth. David saw music not merely as a pastime but also as worship."⁵ In 1 Chronicles 25 king David appointing musicians to serve at the temple which his son Solomon would ultimately complete. From that point on we see the use of singing and the playing of music as a part of the Jewish worship expression.

As the scripture transitions to the New Testament, we read countless passages where Christians are commanded to sing as a type of worship expression. For example, in Ephesians 5:19 the bible states, "speaking to one another with psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit. Sing and make music from your heart to the Lord."⁶ The commandment to sing is clear, but the playing of instruments along

⁵ Michael Ruzala and Wyatt North, *David and the Psalms* (Washington DC: Wyatt North Publishing LLC, 2015), 69.

⁶ Ephesians 5:19, NIV

with signing has been a topic of much contention. However, it is important to note that musical genres change over centuries and evolve with the culture of the day. As Christianity grew throughout Rome, it became part of the majority, no longer forced to take up residence behind the senses. As a result, Christian worship expression became a much larger part of the global musical narrative. James White in his book titled, *A Brief History of Christian Worship* states, "The five hundred years after the New Testament period saw enormous changes in every aspect of Christian worship."⁷ From the middle ages, to the reformation, up to the American restoration, new worship expressions emerged. Christian hip hop is one of the latest worship expressions to emerge in our postmodern culture. Whether we prefer the genre or not, the truth is hip hop has played a major part in forming our culture today. Therefore, the church must decide what to do with this genre of music that is so prevalent in the lives of our young people.

So, what is hip hop and why should it be important to Christianity? First, it is important to note that hip hop is not just a genre of music but a cultural description. Hip hop music was born out of the black and brown struggle in America. Hip hop, at its very core, is black cultural music. During the civil rights movement, blacks united against fighting the oppressive hand of Jim Crow. Our vision was clear and our purpose was simple; to be treated as equals and to defeat segregation. Our leaders were Martin Luther King Jr., Malcom X, Medgar Evers, James Baldwin, and Rosa Parks. When these leaders were assassinated and or died from natural causes, the civil rights moment suffered great loss. Eventually, black Americans won the

⁷ James White, *A Brief History of Christian Worship*. (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1993), 40.

battle of segregation but during the process uncovered a much larger war on social injustice. One huge problem, was the economic disparity between whites and people of color.

Bakari Kitwana in his book titled, *The Hip-Hop Generation: Young Blacks and the Crisis in African American Culture* suggests that black Americans born between 1965 and 1984 were the primary architects of the hip hop culture. During the great migration, approximately six million blacks moved out of the rural south and relocated to the Northeast, and West seeking economic opportunities in white urban communities. However, mortgage discrimination and redlining in the inner city stifled their upward mobility. For many black Americans, poverty became a way of life due to new shape shifting forms of discrimination. *Can't Stop Won't Stop: A History of the Hip-Hop Generation* by Jeff Chang states "The optimism of the civil rights movement and the conviction of the black and brown power movements gave way to a defocused rage."⁸ There was a cultural shift taking place in New York city that would later take the world by storm. Originating in the South Bronx, hip hop music was the cultural expression of black and brown people frustrated with systemic discrimination. The hip hop culture provided an outlet for young people to relieve stress, speak their minds freely and to fight injustice.

The date of hip hop's origin has been the subject of much debate. However, most hip hop historians conclude the birth of this cultural phenomenon began in the early 70's. The producers of the Netflix documentary *Hip Hop Evolution*, provide a detailed overview of its beginnings. From DJ Kool Herc looping break beats from

⁸ Jeff Chang, *Can't Stop Won't Stop: A History of the Hip Hop Generation* (New York: Picador, 2005), 12.

black funk music, to MC Cock La Rock and DJ Hollywood serving the first MC's, to Africa Bamabaataa giving a name and legitimacy to the movement. Grandmaster Flash was the master engineer of the turn tables and Russell Simmons became the first hip hop mogul. Eventually, hip hop found its way to the mainstream media through household names like Kurtis Blow, Run DMC, the Beastie Boys and LL Cool J. In the early to mid 80's, hip hop was music that the youth consumed which lacked any real substance; until Public Enemy began to deliver more social content. As the social awakening continued in hip hop, a more realistic and painful form of expression began to manifest. Black and brown Americans were still suffering through poverty, broken homes and an oppressive police system that specifically targeted minority communities. The rise of gangster rap in the late 80's and early 90's provided the mainstream media with another picture of what hip hop culture. However, it is important to note that gangster rap was just one form of expression under the umbrella of hip hop music. This is where the Christian understating of hip hop began to change dramatically.

Historically, Christians have viewed hip hop through the lens of gangster rap. In most pop music the themes of sex, money and the use of drugs are laced throughout its content. When hip hop made mention of these themes, in addition to fighting injustice and shooting back at the police, the Christian world stopped listening. Sadly, some never listened in the first place. In the book titled *The Hip Hop Church: Connecting with the Movement Shaping our Culture* Kitwana, speaking of the white majority states, "They are not trying to preserve the art and culture of hip hop. Hence, they magnify sex and drugs and glorify the anti-authority and

materialistic components of hip hop. In the process, they define it inaccurately.”⁹ As a result, hip hop music was not to be consumed by Christians because of its negative content. I do believe there is truth to this position, yet Christians tend to forget that in every secular expression of art, evil elements can be presented. However, the bible teaches us to be in the world and not of the world.

In turning a deaf ear to hip hop, I believe Christians are avoiding a very important piece of the American social conversation. Jesus Christ was a man who conversed with people living in systems of injustice. Throughout scripture Christians are taught to be aware of injustice. We are called to show compassion and empathy toward the marginalized. Hip hop music can be used as a research tool to help Christians understand the struggle on the tactical level in black, brown and poor communities across America. Micah 6:8 states, “He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.”¹⁰ The church will encounter difficulty performing justice, if we fail to learn how injustice manifests itself in 2020. In fact, in Jesus’ first sermon, he specifically speaks to those living in systems of injustice and how the Gospel provides a response to their dilemma. When Christians neglecting the voices of those suffering through injustice, we have completely missed the mark. Jesus further states in Luke 4:18 “The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to

⁹ Efrem Smith and Phil Jackson, *The Hip Hop Church: Connecting with the Movement Shaping our Culture* (Downers Grove: IVP Books, 2005), 8.

¹⁰ Micah 6:8, NIV

proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free.”¹¹ Jesus does not call the church to live as a monastic community devoid of relationships with non-believers. On the contrary, Jesus calls Christians to live a life that causes others to ask about the hope that we have in Christ. However, I understand that Christians do not hold the equal conviction and comfortability in carrying out this mission mantra. Some are extremely comfortable in allowing their lights to shine in the darkest of places. Others fear their lights might be snuffed out amid these dark places. Therefore, this becomes more of an issue with our theological suppositions, and perhaps our own temptations, rather than an issue with hip hop.

The church’s negative view of hip hop has stifled our ability to understand the prevailing systems of injustice that still live in our black, brown and poor communities. Instead of seeking to understand hip hop, many Christians have vilified the music and painted the entire culture as no good. In doing this we have neglected our very own Christian pioneers that have worked to elevate the name of Jesus within the hip hop culture from its inception. Christian hip hop also known as CHH, has been around since the early 80’s. Over the past decade, CHH has finally started receiving the support it missed for well over thirty years. It is difficult to find any real significant work on the history of Christian hip hop. Online publications like *The Holy Hip Hop Database* and *Rapzilla.com* are the go to sources for limited historical information. Much of what is known about CHH has been passed down by its early pioneers, now in their late 50’s and early 60’s. The first

¹¹ Luke 4:18, NIV

CHH record was released in 1982 by a New York rapper named Peter Harrison, also known as MC Sweet. Unsurprisingly, the song was titled *Jesus Christ*. In the song, MC Sweet talks the greatness of God in sending Jesus to take away our sins. The song is a celebration anthem in which MC Sweet tells his listeners so shout “Jesus Christ!” However, it wasn’t until the arrival of DC Talk that CHH started to receive the recognition it deserved. Yet, DC Talk departed from the funk/hip hop instrumentals and incorporated a more of a pop and rock sound which made it appeal to larger white audiences. Following DC Talk was TobyMac who pushed the genre further than it had ever been. Meanwhile gritty CHH artists like the Gospel Gangstaz, who were more connected with the street culture, were not as widely known. Today artists like Shai Linne, Lecare, Andy Mineo and Bizzle dominate the CHH scene and have caused Christian rappers to become household names.

Consumers of CHH identify a plethora of worship expressions in the music. In fact, CHH is an ecclesia or assembly in the fundamental sense of the word. Its membership is diverse and constantly growing. The ministers of music are the producers, engineers and beat makers. Its preachers are the rappers and singers. The attendees are those who embrace the CHH culture. The CHH ecclesia, like all other churches, is called to express their faith through worship expression. Scripture states in Colossians 3:16, “Let the message of Christ dwell among you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom through psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit, singing to God with gratitude in your hearts.”¹² If you strip away the hip hop instrumental in CHH music, you are left with faithful

¹² Colossians 3:16, NIV

expressions of prayer, meditation, testimony, confession, doxology, pain, hope, fear, love, joy, evangelism and even exegesis of the scripture. Today, CHH music function as psalms to our postmodern culture. Each CHH artist, offers a unique perspective as they navigate their walk of faith. In liturgical churches, ministers often share the prayers of faithful Christian men and women during their corporate worship expression. Similarly, traditional evangelical churches sing from hymnals that often share the spiritual exploits of the artist. For example, *Amazing Grace* by John Newton was a song written from the experience of sailing through a violent storm off the coast of Ireland. Most Christians know this song and sing it often as a part of their worship expression. Therefore, I believe wholeheartedly that CHH content is a valid worship expression and should be used in our corporate worship settings.

However, those in Christianity who disapprove of CHH suggest that artists take the secular and attempt to make it holy. An example of this dichotomy is the debate between Dr. Scott Aniol professor of church music and worship at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary and CHH recording artist Shai Linne. In the *Debating, Christian Rap* discourse Dr. Aniol states, "If our tone of voice expresses love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, or self-control, it is good; and if our tone of voice expresses impurity, sensuality, enmity, strife, or fits of anger, it is sinful."¹³ Here, Dr. Aniol suggests the tone of hip hop does not come from the fruit of the Spirit, yet CHH artists are choosing to adopt this tone of expression. On the other hand, Shai Linne states, "But I would argue that how

¹³ Scott Aniol and Shai Linne, *Debating Christian Rap*. <https://religiousaffections.org/news-reviews/pdf-of-entire-debate-with-shai-linne/> (accessed August 6, 2020)

people respond to music is culturally conditioned and not universal.”¹⁴ From these responses, we see a conversation that has taken place among Christians since the church was established.

Is it okay for the church to borrow elements from pop culture and express them in worship? To answer this question, I believe we must look at church history. Jesus, Peter, Paul and the early church fathers had to deal with culture’s impact on the church. First, Jesus states in John 15:19 “If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world.”¹⁵ We must remember that Christians should not follow the world’s standard of ethics. We are called to a higher standard; we are called to be a peculiar people. Secondly, the apostle Peter would say, crave the word like newborn infants crave milk and avoid all forms of malice. Our desire is conforming into the image of Christ through the study of the word. Yet, the apostle Paul says, “To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some. I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings.”¹⁶ The church has a mission of sharing the Gospel of Christ with everyone we meet. We are called to become incarnational in the lives of people we are attempting to reach. We strive to call people out of darkness and bring them to the light.

As the Catholic church came to power, global evangelism became increasingly important. Therefore, the Catholic fathers viewed feast days as an

¹⁴ Scott Aniol and Shai Linne, *Debating Christian Rap*.

¹⁵ John 15:19, NIV

¹⁶ 1 Corinthians 9:22, NIV

opportunity to share an alternative message with the world; in addition to separating itself from Judaism. In 325 AD, the Council of Nicaea determined that Easter should fall on the Sunday following the first full moon after the spring equinox. In other words, the world was celebrating bunnies and baby chicks but the church would celebrate the resurrection of Christ. Today Christians give their children Easter baskets filled with candy and place their children on the lap of an Easter bunny at the mall. Most Christians are not bothered by this type of pagan cultural appropriation. However, when young Christians adopt expressions from hip hop culture, controversy ensues. We must remember that all culture was pop culture at some point in time. Jesus wore a robe and sandals to worship, we wore suits and ties. Jesus read the scripture from a scroll, we use power point, phones and tablets. I do not believe cultural advancements are evil in and of themselves; it is how we use them that counts. What messages are we communicating through the mediums we use? In *Perspectives on Christian Worship*, edited by J. Matthew Pinson, Dan Kimball states, "Emerging worship is simply expressions of worship that are relating to how people in today's culture communicate, learn, and express their love to God."¹⁷

So, should the church incorporate elements of Christian hip hop into its corporate worship expression? I believe the answer to this question depends on several factors. How does the church view pop culture holistically? What are the demographics of the church? Is the church comfortable with change? What is the

¹⁷ Matthew J. Pinson, *Perspective on Christian Worship*. (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2009), 295.

church's desired end state? There is no one size fits all approach for corporate worship expression. In fact, the beauty of the church is its diversity of culture unified in submission to Christ. Therefore, all cultures should be respected and honored in our local congregations. Leanne Van Dyk in her book titled *A More Profound Alleluia: Theology and Worship in Harmony* states, "These themes come together in the straightforward Pauline assertion that through Christ we both Jew and Gentile have access to the Father by one Spirit."¹⁸

Many churches strive to avoid anything related to pop culture in their worship expression. These are typically liturgical and fundamental churches that create their own liturgies or adhere to traditional evangelical expressions. I believe trying to incorporate elements of CHH in these congregations would not be fruitful. Any change to corporate worship within these congregations, tend to cause dissention. Additionally, largely homogeneous congregations often cater to the majority. If members do not care for CHH, then any attempt to incorporate it would be futile. Therefore, the best practice for these churches, is educating its members on the culture. Many believers are not aware of the CHH subculture; which aspires to make disciples and elevate the name of Jesus. Fortunately, there are a host of parachurch organizations and nonprofits that churches can support. Although incorporating CHH in worship would be ill advised for these churches; offering prayers and providing financial support are ways in contributing to the CHH culture. Our CHH artists and leaders are global missionaries that lack support. Walter

¹⁸ Leanne Van Dyk, *A More Profound Alleluia: Theology and Worship in Harmony*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 4.

Hidalgo book titled, *The Rising Ministry and Spirituality of Hip Hop* states, "I have concluded that it's those churches, which are overwhelmingly Pentecostal and non-denominational, that are at the forefront of utilizing Hip-hop culture to draw youth and young adults living in the margins into a relationship with God."¹⁹

Demographics are important when considering the suitability of incorporating CHH into a church's worship expression. Assuming the congregation sees value in pop culture, CHH can be a useful tool for connecting with members and even the local community. Congregations with a mix of cultural identities must ensure each culture is respected and honored. The local community should feel welcomed to attend corporate worship services. This atmosphere is created by ensuring everyone has a voice. Yet, due to the abundance of differing genres, it would be advisable to avoid using CHH instrumentals during corporate worship. Some churches would welcome it, while others would disapprove of its use. However, the lyrics contained in most CHH music can be used in public prayers and in sermons and congregational readings. Many CHH artists create amazing spiritual reflections that can be used as icebreakers for small groups and even larger bible studies. The rhythmic style of the music lends itself well to sound bites for presentations, provides an avenue for scripture memorization, and sermon illustrations. In fact, alliteration is used in most three point practical sermons at churches across all America. It is high time for the church to view CHH in a more positive light and realize that preachers have been rapping from the pulpit for years.

¹⁹ Walter Hidalgo, *Beyond the Four Wall: The Rising Ministry and Spirituality of Hip Hop*. (Bloomington: AuthorHouse, 2011), 361.

In summary, the purpose of this research paper was to ascertain if the church should use Christian hip hop as a form of worship expression. The simple answer to this question is yes. I would also suggest the church has used elements of CHH for years without realizing it. Our poor theology of worship and how it is should be expressed must be revamped. Many believers have not taken the time to study hip hop culture and its significance to Christianity. The outcome is a negative view of the entire hip hop culture, even toward brothers and sisters in Christ who labor to advance the message of the cross. If we fail to see positive elements within pop culture, we willfully isolate ourselves from sharing the Gospel with the most vulnerable. Therefore, I conclude that the church must be proactive and not reactive in its use of CHH as a form of worship expression. Hip hop has spread throughout the world and we are in danger of failing to “making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil.”²⁰ as the apostle Paul states in Ephesians 5:16. The Lord created diversity to be enjoyed and celebrated. Food, sports, language, dress and music communicate to the world who we are as people. If the church silences a culture, they have squandered an opportunity to witness.

²⁰ Ephesians 5:16, NIV

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