

Cruciform Press

Foreword by Owen Strachan

DOES GOD

LISTEN TO RAP?

CHRISTIANS & THE WORLD'S MOST CONTROVERSIAL MUSIC

Curtis "Voice" Allen

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Christians and the World's Most Controversial Music

Curtis “Voice” Allen

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This book is for my three sons,
Santiago, Giovanni, and Mateo.
I pray you learn that, even if it looks like
God hasn't spoken on an issue, deeper study
of his Word often shows that he has spoken,
and it's obvious, in subtle ways.

I love you, boys.

–Curtis Allen

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FOREWORD

Owen Strachan

October 21, 2013

Ten years ago, in a galaxy far, far away, I stood before a crowd of the whitest men you've ever seen, and I rapped. It was quite a day.

But that's not the end of the story, pregnant as it already is. I wasn't the only rapper in the room at Covenant Life Church in Gaithersburg, Maryland. Curtis "Voice" Allen was there, too. And he, unlike me, was a serious rapper.

Gulp.

It was 2003. There I stood, ready to battle Curt. I could do no other. But it might have been better for me if I had. During this break from Mark Dever's teaching on the Puritans at CLC, Curt ate my rhymes for lunch, and all before the watching crowd of Dever, C. J. Mahaney, Michael Lawrence, and Joshua Harris.

There are parts of Maryland I'll never be able to enter again, because they'll laugh if you say my name.

I met Curt that day, and saw his evident skill and ability. But more seriously, I saw something else: his deep love for the Lord. He was from the mean streets of DC,

and I was from the mean country roads of Maine, but we instantly connected. Over the years, I listened to his albums, profited from his rich reflection on Scripture, and watched as the Lord used him and several other important artists to bring Christian hip-hop to the church.

That last sentence is important. Hip-hop had to come to church, sneaking in the back door. It wasn't invited. This isn't to say that all who were unfamiliar with it were hostile; not all were. But Christian rap had a tough time breaking in. As one who studies evangelical history, it's rather poignant—and not a little bitter—to think about how, two centuries ago, African-Americans were an alien presence in many Christian congregations, and how, two centuries later, gospel rappers found themselves in the same place.

In the face of bewilderment and opposition, brothers like Curt persevered and the Lord blessed their way. Now, in 2013, Christian rap is mainstream evangelical music. Believing rappers land—and stay—on the Billboard charts. A growing number of them make their living from rap. There's basically no area of evangelical life today not touched by gospel hip-hop: major conferences, Forewords to books by leading authors, John Piper's Twitter account. Christian rap is large, it's Christ-driven, and it's glorious.

I say this as one who came to rap in the 1990s. Like many basketball-playing white boys, rap attached itself to me and never let go. Unlike many basketball-playing white boys, I cut a rap CD. I couldn't help it. Rap spoke my language. It connected to my romantic side, with its larger-than-life stories, its tragedy, its beauty, its raw, tough breed of manhood, and its relentless, driving

poetry. As I matured spiritually, I saw what Curt argues for so succinctly and potently in *Does God Listen to Rap?*, namely, that the Lord delights in the use of our gifts for his glory. He loves to redeem fallen things and make them his own. He's that big; he wants it all. He's that glorious; he deserves it all.

If he doesn't redeem fallenness, after all, we're in trouble. Right? If engaging or using a sin-tainted practice or cultural form that sinners pioneered is problematic, then we probably a) shouldn't speak any language, because sinful Adam and Eve spoke first, b) shouldn't eat food (the whole forbidden fruit thing) and c) should avoid architecture altogether (working off of Curt's discussion of the Tower of Babel). Alongside Curt's case, these are just three examples of many we could cite.

In sum, I think the Bible's call to dominion and comprehensive glorification is a better one than our restrictive evangelical jeremiads (see Genesis 1:26-27; 1 Corinthians 10:31). Let's give praise to our Savior Jesus Christ by any means available to us, not limit ourselves in ways that compromise our God-given freedom to do so (Galatians 5:1).

This extends, I think, to the very manner in which Christian rappers approach their craft. Back in the early 2000s, before gospel hip-hop hit the tipping point and went global, the movement was largely underground—or rather online. I frequented message boards like Sphere of Hip Hop, where fans and artists like myself debated *ad infinitum* over whether there was just one way to honor the Lord through rap. Should you only “preach rap” or could you do “accessible rap”? Then and now I savor

artists who fit into both camps. We surely give glory to God when we rap the gospel message. That should be our lodestar as believers regardless of our daily vocation.

But we honor our creator and Lord, I think, when we write a song—or nod our head to a song—that captures the beauty and the struggle of work, or faith, or marriage. I agree completely with Curt’s discussion of our often-polarized movement. So long as we live Christ-honoring lives, speak of Christ to the lost, recognize the world-defying power of gospel witness in any form, and make music that does not compromise biblical teaching, we’re free—joyfully, exuberantly free—to rap as we see fit.

This book makes the case better than I can. You should dig into it. You’ll learn much historically, you’ll be blessed by Curt’s scriptural and theological reflections, and you’ll have fun doing it. Almost as much fun, in fact, as I did way back when, on that fateful day when my battling career ended (at 0-1, for those scoring at home). Almost as much fun as I’m having watching the Lord use my brother as he speaks a prophetic word and blesses God’s church through the use of his artistic and literary gifts.

Owen Strachan (aka Crosswords) is Assistant Professor of Christian Theology and Church History at Boyce College, and teaches for The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, both in Louisville, KY. He serves as Executive Director of the Council on Biblical Manhood & Womanhood and is most recently the author of *Risky Gospel: Abandon Fear and Build Something Awesome* (Thomas Nelson, 2013).

One **REFORMED RAP?**

The Story Behind This Book

This was sure to be an interesting day. Although I'd lived most of my life on some of the rougher streets of Washington, DC, and made my living for years as a drug dealer and gang member, I was about to step onto a stage in Minneapolis and become the first person to perform a rap song at Bethlehem Baptist Church. I was already in town to do a concert at the church, and to my surprise I'd also been asked to rap at this, the Saturday night worship service at Bethlehem's main campus. It was October 21, 2006. That night, John Piper preached and I rapped, and what happened afterwards was crazy.

How did I end up in that spot? How did a black guy who had never even imagined being in Minnesota end up rapping before this very large, very influential, and overwhelmingly white congregation? Let me briefly trace that out.

Two years earlier I had rapped at a worship conference in Maryland. I was just days away from being married and actually had to take a break from moving furniture into my new apartment to go do the song. It was a remix of a

popular song from Sovereign Grace Music, mashed up with a demo song I had written called “I Was There.”

About a year later my first album under the moniker Voice came out. It was called *Progression*. Because of the church I was in at the time, *Progression* wasn’t even close to being a hardcore rap album. I just wanted it to be a bridge, a way of introducing my middle-class white Christian friends to the art form. It never occurred to me that I might end up performing again, but after the album appeared I started getting requests, so DJ Mike Wazowski (Jacob Campbell) and I began doing shows at various churches around the country. This was rap music from a Reformed theological perspective, and in most of the churches where we performed that was almost a completely new concept—in fact, at the time the only other Reformed rappers I knew of were two groups called The Cross Movement and ChristCentric. The shows we did were fun and seemed to open people’s eyes to the constructive potential of redeemed rap.

Around that time I heard that Chuck Steddom, worship leader at Bethlehem Baptist, had some interest in what I was doing. He had heard me rap at that worship conference and apparently liked my *Progression* CD. A few months later he contacted me, and next thing I knew we were planning the Minneapolis trip.

By that time, Wazowski and I had been traveling quite a bit. We added my buddy DJ Essence (Josh Wann) of Lamp Mode to the show. He was a different kind of DJ. He handled the cutting and scratching while Wazowski did the programming, controlling the music tempos, tran-

sitions, and levels. I controlled the crowd. We were a good team. We had a lot of fun and were honored to be the first people asked to do a full rap concert at John Piper’s church. And now here we were on the verge of doing that show. None of us imagined the hailstorm of criticism that would come just days later.

We did a sound check around 5 p.m. that Saturday evening and Pastor John came out and greeted us. He and I had met a year earlier at a pastors’ conference where he spoke and I rapped. So this wouldn’t be the first time he had seen me rap—just the first time at his church. I introduced him to Josh and Jake and he gave me a few details about how the evening would go. He was optimistic about how he thought Bethlehem would receive a rap song during worship, but it was still pretty clear that this might ruffle a few feathers. We were excited but a little nervous. I looked at Josh and Jake and asked, “You boys ready to be Rosa Parks?”

When the church meeting began I was there on the front row as Chuck Steddom led his worship team and the congregation in song. I was doing my best to worship but honestly, it was difficult to get my thoughts off what I knew was coming. In the middle of the singing, Pastor John made some announcements, mentioning that I would be rapping in a few minutes and then doing a concert after the meeting. As the singing ended, that was my cue, so I stood up and headed for the stage. In the few seconds it took for me to climb the stairs a gazillion thoughts ran through my mind. *What if I forget the words? What if people don’t like it? Pastor John doesn’t smile too much...*

what if he goes all stone-faced? Do I look fat in this shirt? Man, I hope my pants aren't too loose and drop down to my ankles. Oh... I gotta say something to them before I rap! I can't just jump up there and rap. These white people don't know nothing about no rap. I gotta prepare 'em!

For this one song, to keep it simple I was just rapping to a CD of the music. As soon as I stepped onto the stage the soundman started the music. I put my index finger up, asking him to pause. When he did, I said a few things to the church to try to prepare them. When I told them the music was probably going to thump a little more than they were used to, they laughed. And I said, "I know this may be somewhat of a trial for you to listen to this, but I trust that you may be able to follow some of the words."

I signaled the soundman to start over and performed a song called "Unstoppable" (from *Progression*) that seemed to go over well. When I was finished, Pastor John got up and used the hook of my song, which he had never heard before, as the basis of his prayer to thank the Lord. Maybe I shouldn't have been stunned that he was able to follow my words closely enough to use them exactly in his prayer, but I was. After the meeting, we did the full concert and then flew back home. It was a great time.

As I always did in those days I had recorded the performance on video. At home in Maryland I edited the "Unstoppable" footage to show my introduction from Pastor John as well as the song. I uploaded the edited video to my YouTube account and sent the link to my friend Justin Taylor. We had talked prior to my going to Minneapolis so I wanted him to see the "historic event."

(You should be able to find the video on YouTube by searching for “Unstoppable Live @ Bethlehem Baptist.”) Justin put the video on his *Between Two Worlds* blog and then it happened. BAM! Thousands of people began weighing in on whether rap is glorifying to God. And just like that I was at the center of a small but growing debate.

On one blog popular among fundamentalists I was getting torn up. These people cut up every line of my song. On some other blogs I was being defended. My buddy Shai Linne texted me and told me about the some of the posts and comments he had read, and I was grateful to have him among those who jumped in to defend both me and rap as legitimate and God-glorifying.

During that time I made the mistake of focusing on the most negative blogs. I wanted to see what the critics had to say, and I thought I could handle it. I was wrong. Here were people smashing both John Piper and me. “How could John Piper have a rapper at his church? That is despicable,” one person commented. “I’ve lost all respect for John Piper,” wrote another.

Some of the comments were just confusing. “I’ve read Curtis’ lyrics on his website and it’s clear he is a Finneyist.” *Really? I am?* I busted out laughing because I had no idea what a Finneyist was. But then it got personal. People began doubting my salvation. Others said rap was “rape” music. Some wrote that they would rather die than have rap played or performed in their church. After reading about 3,000 comments on various blogs, I couldn’t handle any more. Eventually, the count would reach more than 30,000, but I had read enough. And I had to respond.

What angered me the most were people questioning my conversion. They attacked the sincerity of my song, responding just as if I had rapped about sex, money, and drugs. Based entirely on the style of the music—and apparently ignoring the lyrics—folks decided that I was using a “lower form” of musical expression mainly to promote myself. I was angry.

Part of the reason for my anger is that I know a little something about self-promotion. Eight years before that evening at Bethlehem Baptist, I was sitting in the office of a former congressman on Connecticut Avenue in Washington, DC. In the room was a powerful entertainment lawyer, a photographer who had done album covers for Michael Jackson, an A & R exec from a major record label, and a writer for the *Washington Post*. They had all just listened to my demo and said I was going to be the next big star in rap music. At that time, no one from DC had broken into the national rap scene, and they wanted to see that change. So did I. They said my ideas were ahead of their time, and we were planning a photo shoot to start getting my face out there. In those days I was hanging out on the regular at the house of one of BET’s marketing VPs, and she was getting me invited to all kinds of industry events. I was on my way. All I wanted was fame, money, weed, and pretty girls.

One month later I was almost murdered when a dude who disagreed with me over a drug deal shot at me at point-blank range with a .45. Somehow he missed. Two months after that I was in a shootout with a rival gang. My friend got shot. He dropped my gun and the police

found it. They connected it to me, and I ended up facing a possible 43 years in prison.

The record labels vanished. All talk of deals and fame dissolved. My fancy connections went up in smoke. The only thing that had my attention was the prospect of spending decades in a world of concrete, steel bars, and razor wire.

So when I read those blogs, I knew what it felt like to do music for selfish reasons. I knew what it meant to promote myself, which for me meant chasing all the sin opportunities I could get my hands on. Fame had both consumed me and eluded me. As a result I came to know the consequences of self-worship really well. And I hated it.

Believing the lies of the streets had brought me pain, anguish, and hopelessness. Now that Jesus had freed me from it all, here were people who had never met me and knew almost nothing about me, but were painting a picture of me as an unbeliever, pulling some kind of elaborate scam on John Piper, in a cynical effort to promote myself through an “inferior” and “ungodly” form of music. I was livid.

I visited the blog with the most negative comments, primed to do battle. I was ready to let loose with some righteous threatening, when by God’s grace I realized there probably is no such thing—and if there is I was in no state of mind to pull it off. In an instant the Spirit showed me that my sin against the Lord had been way more serious than anyone’s sin against me. An article from the *Journal of Biblical Counseling* by Alfred Poirier called “The Cross and Criticism” came to my mind, and I sat

quietly for a few minutes, asking the Lord to forgive me for my bitter heart. Then I wrote in the comments section that, while I disagreed with many of the perspectives people had expressed, I appreciated the fact that they were trying to honor the Lord. I said that I hoped I would take the same posture in the future if I came across something that I thought was genuinely dishonoring to God.

The responses were amazing. People began to thank me for displaying humility, and they started pushing back against the critics. Some said that the negative commenters, including the guy who ran the blog, were being less humble than this supposedly non-Christian rapper. Some of the critics reached out to me and asked for forgiveness. Some even said they were going to buy my album.

I ended up writing my response to the criticism for Focus on the Family's *Boundless* webzine. The article was called "An Emcee's Gentle Word." Once that came out, radio interview requests came pouring in. People wanted to know about Reformed rap and how all of this had come about. *World* magazine did a feature article on the story. In a short period of time I became the spokesperson for Reformed rap and how it glorifies God. I didn't plan on it. It just happened. That same year Collin Hansen, then a journalist for *Christianity Today*, asked to interview me about Reformed rap in preparation for writing his book *Young, Restless, and Reformed*. I took Shai with me to the interview because he was my friend, a fellow rap artist, and a very articulate brother who actually brought a broader perspective to the subject.

For a while, I served as something of an apologist for Reformed rap. Whenever I got shows or did interviews, I would recommend Shai Linne and ChristCentric to the people who brought me out to their churches because I wanted Reformed rap to get out there. Over time, Shai and others like Lecrae, Flame, and Trip Lee would put out some amazing music, breaking through to new levels of acceptance and becoming the true face of Reformed rap.

And then one day almost out of nowhere, Reformed rap became cool to the white boys. Actually cool. And not just to the skinny teenage dudes slouching in the back pew. Big-name preachers and teachers started going public with their appreciation of Reformed rap, endorsing it as legitimate and valuable. Sound bites from some of their sermons started showing up in songs too. These preachers could see how rappers can bring together theology, poetry, music, and energy to help make doctrine come alive. They appreciated how a good rapper can take a difficult theological topic and rhythmically explain it over a thumping beat for four minutes. The music was on the rise, but more importantly, God was being glorified through rap—something that at one time had seemed unthinkable.

During that time, I continued to do many interviews trying to explain how rap can glorify God. People who already liked the music seemed okay with what I was saying, but that wasn't very comforting to me. I always felt like my answer was missing something. Was there a more biblical response? What if I was wrong? Rap music still had a lot of critics who claimed God was absolutely

not okay with it. What if they were right? How could I respond effectively to them? Is there actually any biblical evidence for or against the position I was taking?

Eventually, I had offered my perspective on rap so many times that it started to feel shallow to me. I realized I needed something a little deeper to hold onto. I could relate to what the critics were saying. I understood how you could take the position that rap can't glorify God. On my first album, I even had a song called "All Rap Is," which criticizes secular rap basically on the grounds of morals and motivations. I understood where rap came from and why so much secular rap is what it is. I knew all about rap's entanglements with sin and rebellion. I'm from that. I get it. But I really wanted to know how rap—or any music, for that matter—can glorify God. Realizing my position was actually biblificial (biblically superficial), I decided to start from scratch.

Can rap actually glorify God? Does God even listen to rap? I needed to go back, to history and to Scripture. I needed to revisit where rap had come from so I could understand where it is now. And I needed to see from the Bible where God comes down on a whole set of subjects related to art, creativity, and the way sin always works itself into human expression. Rap's critics make a strong case that most of its cultural origins and connections are far from godly, and I needed to see what those criticisms really mean for this art form I love so much.

It was time to start over. With God's help and for his glory, I had to try to figure it all out. This book reflects that journey.