

## WHAT DOES THE GOSPEL OF CHRIST LOOK LIKE IN STREET CONTEXTS?

### Introduction

Over the past several decades, the traditional urban church<sup>1</sup> has had an increasingly rough go of it trying to bridge the widening generational and cultural gaps that exist between its own culture (of which it is usually unaware) and the dominant youth and young adult culture of our day – the free-form, total-life expression cultural entity known as hip-hop.<sup>2</sup> This is not to say that bridge-building attempts have not been made. Many extraordinarily gifted young people and young adults in the Christian hip-hop movement have done a tremendous service to the Body of Christ, finding resonant ways to reverently and faithfully contextualize the Gospel into hip-hop culture (making it vitally relevant for a new generation), and have seen the Lord do a redemptive work in a surprising number of those in the culture through their efforts. But is it enough? What are the outcomes of coming to faith in Christ for a street / hip-hop-oriented youth or young adult? Is it just struggling to try to stay faithful and true to the One Who redeemed them, while (hopefully) growing into some sort of dissipated culturally-relevant ministry? Perhaps a redeemed hip-hop cultural expression of some sort? The question needs to be asked: is it also *just as important* to try to find a way to stay faithful and true to the culture in which they comfortably live, move, and have their being? Many of them grew up in and around hip-hop culture's wide-ranging influence – so much so that theirs has been called “the hip-hop generation.”<sup>3</sup>

What does the Gospel of Christ look like when it is faithfully represented in an urban hip-hop context? As the body of Christ, what kinds of paradigm shifts do we need to look at as we go about the process of seeing a faithful contextualization realized? Are there any ways in which hip-hop culture can help us see exciting new facets, meanings and applications of the Biblical text – of which we were previously unaware?<sup>4</sup> Even more sobering is the probability that the body of Christ is missing an incredible missional opportunity in the present impasse between itself and street culture: those whose lives are not just mildly influenced or governed by the street, but are dominated and consumed by it. Although it appears to be a world far removed from most Americans, it is nevertheless a world that is all too close to home to those living in hard-hit urban areas. It is the hidden real world<sup>5</sup> inhabited by the likes of those portrayed through *The Wire*'s Wallaces, “Stringer” Bells, Avon Barksdales, Omar Littles, Marlo Stanfields, Proposition Joes, Chris Partlows, Snoop Pearsons, Brodie Broaduses, Kenards, Michael Lees, *et al*<sup>6</sup> – or, The Roots' Redford Stephenses<sup>7</sup> – or, the very real, very personable, sharp-eyed see'r, Jermaine G.<sup>8</sup> – or, the very real, easy-goin', sad-eyed see'r, Edwin S.<sup>9</sup> What does Christ's incarnational ministry have to do (if anything!) with such hard-to-reach individuals? Everything! What kind of re-tooled apologetic approaches and considerations do we need to look at and how can those involved in street / hip-hop culture help us see them? Or “Is it nothing to you, all you who pass by?” Lam 1:12a (ESV) Hold up. Look, and see.

The stand-off between the church and street culture is complicated by several factors. There is a general wariness of the church toward street-oriented types (a perception that works in the opposite direction as well!), along with a perceived unwillingness (true or not) to validate their street-oriented gifts and calling as authentic ministers of the Gospel and, in turn, incorporate them into the church. Street-oriented Christians are understandably reluctant about “dropping” their culture (which the church tends to view as a secular-inspired expression of rebelliousness) so they can be assimilated into the mainstream established institution's culture. They see their culture as an integral part of their

identity. In their view, doing so is a matter of compromising their cultural authenticity – a highly-prized commodity in urban youth / young adults / street / hip-hop contexts.

Most members of today's hip-hop generation aren't really "feelin'" what goes on in the typical Sunday morning church service. Those Christian hip-hoppers who have been carving out their unique ministries have carefully assessed the costs and compromises needed for obtaining ministry training and have strong reservations about denying "who they are." It is a very serious matter which threatens their authenticity and hinders their efficacy in reaching fellow hip-hoppers at street levels. And so, each camp essentially maintains its respective territory; each a gatekeeper and shareholder in its respective sphere – each holding critical keys to the advancement of God's Kingdom on the earth. The church holds the keys to enabling future generations to do ministry through identifying and developing its leaders. Street-oriented, hip-hop-inflected believers hold the keys to unlocking the code of the streets. Members of each camp have gotten better over the past decade venturing over to the other side to meet those in the other camp, but still tend to spar over Biblical standards, the problem of worldliness, or perhaps methodologies or authority issues. Both sides have met to do some relatively inconsequential reconciliation, but eventually retreat to the safety of their respective corners – perhaps a bit humbled and perhaps a bit hurt. "Do two walk together, unless they have agreed to meet?" Amos 3:3 (ESV) How can the church and street-oriented / hip-hop-influenced saints go forward together?

### **Major Question: Church 'n' Street: Can the Twain – Ever Meet?**

The major question to be addressed by this research is, how can urban church leaders and street-oriented / street-vetted believers come together for reciprocal Biblical, theological, socio-cultural and ministerial edification and training in such a way that both can make significant contributions to each other in a way that they will be empowered as one to take the Gospel to the street, for the sake of building up the body of Christ? Put another way, how can the baton of faithful and relevant Gospel ministry be more effectively passed back and forth from one generation to the other – the two growing mutually deeper in the wondrous grace and knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ (2 Pet 3:18) – which then seeks to extend the borders of the Kingdom of God to places and place generally written off and ignored by the rest of the world? To the lost, brothers! To the least, saints! To the lowly, believers! To the lonely, beloved – that they all may be set in God's forever family!

### **Biblical / Theological Starting Point**

We start with Ephesians 2:10, that we (the redeemed community) are God's *poiema* (literally, His *poem*: i.e., His masterpiece,<sup>10</sup> or, His doing, or, His workmanship), created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God has prepared beforehand that we should walk about in them; this section of the book involves an in-depth examination of the use of poetry / spoken word / elevated prose in the following Biblical passages: Gen 1:27, 2:23-24, 3:14-19 and 4:23-24, Judg 13-16, Job 32-40, Eccl 12:8-14, selected passages in Isaiah: e.g., chapters 1, 28, 42 and 49, Dan 1-7, the book of Jonah, the content and style of Jesus' elevated prose and poetic lyricism in the Gospels (based on John 12:49-50), Acts 17:16-34, Eph 2:10, Phil 2:5-11, 1 Tim 3:16, Philemon and the praise poetics that pop up throughout the book of Revelation. Paul's description of believers as a *poiema* (a singular term [poem] encompassing a community of believers) is one of two literary terms he uses – the other being the more familiar and prosaic "epistle of Christ," through which Paul again uses a singular term encompassing a community of believers. "You yourselves are our letter of recommendation, written on our hearts, to be known and read by all." (2 Cor 3:1-3 ESV)

## The Bible, Theology, Rap and Hip-Hop: Finding the Connectivities

Does rap music or hip-hop culture have any Biblical and theological antecedents? Do we find any support for it in Scripture? The question is critical as there are some who maintain that hip-hop culture has absolutely nothing representative of God at all within it – that it is a purely demonic entity, under divine condemnation – and every last vestige of it must therefore be utterly exorcized from the church.<sup>11</sup> In this view, youth and young adults under hip-hop's influence need some form of a demonstrative deliverance (usually under the specially-anointed deliverance ministry of a particular individual).<sup>12</sup> But is that the Biblical view of hip-hop culture and rap music? And is exorcism the prescribed remedy we should pursue? Of course, there are those who go in the opposite direction, seeking to accommodate rappers and hip-hoppers into the church's ministry. But we need to ask, to what degree? And how far is too far? At what point are we compromising?

Human culture – whether it's Rio de Janeiro, Brazil's favela culture, Grand Rapids, MI Christian Reformed Church culture, Tanzanian hip-hop culture, Japanese auto manufacturing corporate culture, Lancaster County, PA Amish culture, New York City's underground rave culture, the University of Pennsylvania's academic research culture, or Berlin, Germany's vibrant graffiti culture – is essentially the extended, cumulative human response to divine revelation (whether positive or negative).<sup>13</sup> Culture is both personally and socially developed, codified, communicated, modified and enforced through human interaction in groups. Every latest element that comprises human culture ultimately finds its source in the cultural mandate given by the LORD in Genesis 1:28: “subdue [the earth] and have dominion over fish, birds and every living, moving earth creature.” It is preceded by a social mandate: “be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth,” and in chapter two we find an implicit spiritual mandate: be faithful in obedience to the Creator, by obeying His command not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Human beings are made in God's image, and, in a very direct sense, human cultural pursuits reflect something of how people in community have responded to God's revelation – again, whether positively (covenant-keepers) or negatively (covenant-breakers). As human beings constitute the theological term, the *imago Dei* (the image of God), even so we could consider culture as a secondary, somewhat reflective image – the *imago hominis* – the “image of man” (as human beings have responded to God's revelation). A 2010 television advertisement for the 2011 Jeep Grand Cherokee television expresses quite well the symbiotic relationship between human beings and their cultural products (in this case, an automotive vehicle line): “The things we make, make us.”<sup>14</sup> As inescapable as it is to be made in God's image, even so the duty, exercise and outcomes of fulfilling the cultural mandate are likewise inescapable. Culture is integral to what it is to be human, and that would most certainly include hip-hop.

### Who's This For?

It is the glory of God to conceal things,  
but the glory of kings is to search things out.<sup>15</sup> – Prov 25:2

**First and foremost, this is for the street (specifically, those whose culture is hip-hop).** They will likely never read this; nevertheless, we place those acclimated to being last, first: youth and young adults whose lives are either influenced, governed or even consumed by rap and/or hip-hop culture. The intent is for them to see their history's deeper roots (the past), the current social situation (the present), and the bigger picture / grander story (the future) which involves and incorporates their culture. We hope to have 'em look to the One in Whom they'll find their true self and place in that future grander story – one that'll both redeem them and what they do even now.

They're among the "other sheep" Jesus said He had, and He must bring them also (John 10:16). But how are they to hear and know without someone bringing such information to them?

**Second, this is for the saints (God's people / His church)** – to go deeper into street contexts and the issues and discovering God's astounding handiwork in a part of the created order that veils itself in distressing disguises, located oft-times in difficult places and situations. Why? To prompt proper worship and wonder in those involved in the interaction. Surprise indeed awaits those who work in fields written off by most as unprofitable – even as Jeremiah was told to buy a field in Anathoth in the land of Benjamin at a time when matters were going hard south [Jer 32]). Would that more saints would avail themselves of this reversed economy investment opportunity.

**Third, this is for the scholar (the academy)** – to see street contexts for the complex systems they are and then similarly discover and engage the astounding handiwork of God out there, discovering God's hidden treasures of darkness and hoards found in secret places (Isa 45:3). "God grant we may get out into the larger horizons of God's Book," wrote Oswald Chambers.<sup>16</sup> "All truth is God's truth; it has its origin in and gets its meaning from God. ... The meaning of all creation is part and parcel of the Meaning [the *Logos* of John 1:1-4, 14] of God. Thus, scholarship is an act of worship, for it is an unveiling of meaning – an illuminating of what is near and dear to God Himself."<sup>17</sup> For the secular academy to discount, dismiss or even deny the possibility of this kind of academic approach is to discount, dismiss or deny the open-mindedness it holds sacrosanct.

**Ultimately, this is for the Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ** – in humble gratitude for enabling us all to see the incredible connectivity of all things and to pursue the plethora of rich possibilities posited in the promise presented in Proverbs 25:2.

### **What's It S'posed to Do?**

Four apologetic goals were kept in mind while writing:

- 1) **Prepare the Apologist** – provisioning the Christian (notably front-line rappers already in the fray for lost souls) with street-wise Biblical-theological perspectives on what's goin' on in street settings. But like Paul rolling through Athens before reaching the Areopagus, we too need to process – and be processed *by* – the truly deep things facing folks – particularly the street-oriented young urban Black male.
- 2) **Provide an Apologia** (the message itself) – broadening the perception of the saints to see the grander and more glorious horizons of God's work in considering the Scriptures from an oral culture perspective, utilizing the dynamics of oral culture found in Biblical historical contexts in street settings and situations.
- 3) **Present an Apologetic** – providing Christ's church with a richer, more robust, "youth-friendly" apologetic method geared for the street: contextualized receptor-oriented content, undertaken with Spirit-led stylistic considerations (*i.e.*, what to say and how to say it: John 12:49-50).
- 4) **Persuade the Apologé(e)** – presupposing the apologist has properly and personally pressed through to successfully engage, present and challenge street-oriented youth and young adults to perceive, understand and respect the Biblical and theological roots of rap music and hip-hop culture, and be awakened by God's Holy Spirit to the ultimate reality and ultimate redemption presented in

the Person and work of Christ, the Lord of all lyricism (Eph 2:10) and lyricists themselves (John 17:2) – who do well to come to Him and learn from Him (Matt 11:28-30).

### Research Questions: Historical Precedents and Current Cultural Conditions

What are the origins of rap music and hip-hop culture? From whence do they come? What was (and still is) the nature of the socio-economic and cultural matrix that birthed them? What's going on out there in the streets? How does that larger matrix inform how we do ministry in rap / hip-hop / street culture? How can effective ministry be accomplished through Christian hip-hop? Is it an effective or large enough “container” to carry the Gospel into street contexts, or do some things need to be changed? Are there other approaches we should look at? How do we expand the borders of what a Biblical hip-hop ministry looks like? How would Jesus minister in a hip-hop context?

### Hip-Hop Culture: A Wide-Open Window of Opportunity

What if, in the future, we were to discover that urban, suburban, rural and global youth's and young adults' penchant for rap music and hip-hop culture turned out to be a kind “backdoor” undercover preparation by the Spirit of God to gear up this generation to reach the world for Christ? Why do so many of the saints distance themselves from it, choosing to focus more its negatives (making it a cultural scapegoat) and unwilling and unable to see how it might be something of a Roman road that has made its way around the globe – and that God was able to work inside of it (despite all its many negatives). He has well-obscured hip-hop's potential, for sure (encrypted it!) – yet nevertheless He's able to accomplish His perfect will through it. Could it be we are missing an incredible opportunity? Major question! Does the word “*is/b*”<sup>18</sup> in current hip-hop contexts have roots in ancient texts? (And would you go back and read that last sentence with a street-inflected flow?) Brought forward into the New Testament era, does Jesus ever “drop” any lyrics? What Would Jesus Rap? This is not just a “hip” or “clever” question; Jesus' speaking content and style<sup>19</sup> are germane to the issue of what it is (and what it means) to rap. What does a biblical theology of the concept of the *imago Dei* as divine *poiema* / poem / rap look like? (Eph 2:10).<sup>20</sup>

We need to look at the double-edged sword called apologetics. We need to get past the idea of seeing the defense of the Christian faith as an *outwardly*-directed endeavor only, to seeing it as one that is *inwardly*-directed as well. Are there other dimensions to an apologetic ministry other than just rational, informational proclamation? Yes, there are! What place do things like the arts, culture and entertainment have in doing apologetics? And the fact we're even considering that notion raises the issue of generational differences and how do they impact our understanding of and how we conduct ministry in the church?

### Models for Engaging the Street

After taking the course,<sup>21</sup> there needs to be an application of what was learned. The TGTS course essentially exists because the writer went out into youth / young adult / street contexts in Paterson, Newark and Camden, NJ, Harlem, NY, Philadelphia and Pittsburgh, PA, Baltimore, MD, Boston, MA, Denver, CO, Pasadena, CA, Washington, D.C., Chicago, IL, Grand Rapids and Detroit, MI, Miami, FL and Albuquerque, NM. What were the foundational models of engagement? There are at least four (4) levels of engagement to look at: **1) a Personal Preparation Level** (between you and the Lord),<sup>22</sup> **2) a Ministry Venue Level** (see below), **3) a Ministry Gift Mix / Serving Capacity Level**, and **4) a Disciple Replication Level** (using Jesus' model of engaging His disciples from

initial encounters through to deploying them in building His kingdom). What does / will that look like? Occasionally being willing to move out of (and more often be unwillingly moved out of!) my comfort zone. Bridging generational gaps to engage youth and young adults already in my church (African American congregations), as well as through camp, retreat and conference ministries. Locating and encouraging aspiring rappers and lyricists within each of these groups, but not limiting myself only to that set. Engaging and encouraging those with creative abilities: musical arts (vocal & instrumental), visual arts (all sorts of media: from origami to floral arrangement to videography and beyond), kinesthetic arts (praise dancing, drama, mime, signing), academic arts (tutoring, P/SAT assistance), technical arts (sound system, media production, mixing, computer skills, website development and maintenance, video editing, etc.), speaking arts (teaching, emceeing events, dramatic readings, poetry slams, etc.), entrepreneurial skills (this one's wide open!), leadership / interpersonal skills (mentoring, motivational ability, counseling, etc.), intra-personal skills (writing [essayist], journalist, publishing, blogging), athletic skills, etc. Attending and / or sponsoring Christian open mic nights / rap / hip-hop spoken word events / concerts. Organizing a Christian coffee-house ministry. Attending a youth / young adult-oriented hip-hop-oriented / street-flava'd church service (Tha House in Chicago, IL [Pastor Phil Jackson], Epiphany Fellowship in Philadelphia, PA [Pastor Eric Mason] – or Epiphany Fellowship in Camden, NJ [Pastor Doug Logan], Crossover Church in Tampa, FL [Pastor Tommy Kyllonen a/k/a Urban D], Sanctuary Covenant Church in Minneapolis, MN [Pastor Efrem Smith], etc.). Tagging along with a group to the recording studio. Getting in on the recording session!? Branching out into the community through each young person's relationship network (to update the adage, "love people [i.e., develop and maintain good and healthy relationships] / use things" – don't "use" people [or your relationships with them]). Using social networks (e.g., "Reformed Rappers" on Facebook), and being online (where most up-and-coming rap artists have now moved their craft). Other starting points: follow a young person through their school day, volunteer at that school, contribute one's time and talent at a church youth ministry or community youth organization, bring your skill set to an already established youth ministry. Who has ever felt adequate in doing these things? Not me, that's for sure. But one thing I've found is that **my greatest blessings – time and again – been invariably preceded by my greatest reluctances.**

The course material has been developed from extensive field experience through four decades of ministry, and stays "fresh" through constant contact with the streets, those on the street (a set of "street trend early-adopters" and "hip-hop headz"), as well as reading, the media and the Internet.

### **Ministry Model: The Gospel / The Street (TGTS) 2.0**

TGTS 2.0 is essentially a completely customizable curriculum that can be presented in a wide variety of formats – from a 45-minute presentation, to a morning seminar, to a full-day workshop – all the way up to a full semester 3-credit graduate level course. A full-semester course version now exists at the undergraduate level at the Center for Urban Theological Studies in Philadelphia, PA, where it has been offered as an elective every semester since the Fall of 2009 as a 3-credit weekend intensive course (HUM 304C).<sup>23</sup> The course is titled, "The Gospel / The Street: Bridging the Gap between the Church and Street Culture 2.0." Early on it met on five (5) full Saturdays each semester from 9:00 am to 5:00 pm for a total of approximately 42 hours of class instruction. The response from the students was overwhelmingly positive, and inquiries have been made by other theological training institutions seeking to develop a similar course. Plans are in the works to present the material in workshops to be offered at churches, as well as in other academic venues. Much of the material has been brought into other two similar-themed Masters level courses I teach at Eastern University

(“Apologetics for the Urban Youth Context” “Urban Youth Culture,” Christ and the City,” etc.). In the future, I hope to bring it to other schools as well. The course material has long had its own life outside the academic setting in seminar format and has been available to churches, conferences, community groups, etc. for some 35 years or so.<sup>24</sup>

Students who take the class are generally asked to fill out a pre-course assessment form to ascertain their knowledge of hip-hop, what kind of ministry they are involved with, what they would like to see covered in the course, etc. They also were asked for feedback mid-way through the semester and will be doing a post-course assessment. Plans are in place in contact former students in the class to assess the impact of the course in their ministries and to suggest what could be done to improve the course. The final assignment in each iteration of the class has been a paper laying out a vision for what the student plans to do in applying what they learned in class – hopefully resulting in some sort of ministry development, or deep-seated change in ministry approach. Most of the students in the class are already involved in urban youth ministry and / or are parents of young people / young adults who are influenced to various degrees by hip-hop culture and its most visible (um, *audible!*) component: rap music.

### What Are the Pedagogical Outcomes of Doing TGTS 2.0?

Create a breaking of, a burning within and a burden of the heart for those who live, move and have their being (to varying degrees) in hip-hop culture. At the end of the class the student should:

- understand the Biblical and theological foundations that undergird culture – specifically hip-hop / urban youth / street culture
- understand the importance of being a student of culture – locally, nationally and globally – and to understand both the subtle and not-so-subtle roles social systems and structures have in the lives of urban youth
- understand and appreciate the ever-changing and complex social dynamics of urban adolescence, and to more effectively minister to those who lives are either influenced, governed or dominated by hip-hop / urban youth / street culture (be they young people in the church or not) – and being cognizant of how generational differences factor in
- be able to access, assess and address the worldview / belief system / value system of hip-hop / urban youth / street culture
- have sharpened their exegetical and critical skills as interpreters of the messages and values communicated through the mediums of music, mass media – as well as other technological innovations
- be equipped and launched out with practical skills, strategies, ideas and insights for better understanding and effectively invading, ministering, surviving and enjoying (!) ministry to those whose lives are impacted by hip-hop / urban youth / street culture

## Why Philadelphia, PA?

The primary field for this book was the city of Philadelphia, PA but also encompassed the Delaware Valley, including other cities in the Middle Atlantic region as well (from New York City down to Washington, D.C.). In many ways Philadelphia was the national “center” for Christian hip-hop cultural and ministry activity, due largely in part to the presence of one of the pioneer Christian rap groups, The Cross Movement. As there are many theological training institutions in the area, these two factors make Philadelphia an ideal research location for this book.

This research will benefit the church by training its present leadership but also by fostering new leadership within local congregations (leaders equipped for ministering to 3<sup>rd</sup> Millennial post-hip-hop post-moderns and even *post*-post-moderns!) as well as leadership for the global church (hip-hop has been exported throughout most of the world). The research will also benefit theological training institutions by acting as a catalyst for changing training paradigms and modalities for 21<sup>st</sup> century Biblical ministry. It could also create positive opportunities for those institutions to interface with gifted prospective students who are usually overlooked. It will benefit urban street-level believers who, already capably handling the rigorous challenges of doing ministry in places most churches and training institutions have difficulty reaching, are asking for more “tools” (and troops!) as they minister on the front lines. Prayerfully, this book will heal, open and lift the eyes of Christian believers to see a “hip-hop-readied” harvest – one that He’s prepared with the most unlikely ingredients (!), and to see it in a whole new way.

## Hip-Hop Culture: A 21<sup>st</sup> Century “Roman Road” System

Broadly speaking, hip-hop culture is akin to a “Roman road”-like system in our day (as also the English language<sup>25</sup>); it is maximally accessible, and, as we will look at in the next chapter, has some surprisingly deep Biblical roots. We need to avail ourselves of the dynamic insights and contributions of those Eldad and Medad-types the Lord has raised (and is yet raising) up. Although they are still confined to the outskirts of the camp, the Spirit of the LORD is on them and the church and its training institutions need to come alongside them in the work of the Harvest. C.T. Studd put the challenge this way:

Too long have we been waiting for one another to begin! The time of waiting is past! The hour of God has struck! War is declared! In God’s Holy Name let us arise and build! ‘The God of Heaven, He will fight for us’, as we for Him. We will not build on the sand, but on the bedrock of the sayings of Christ, and the gates and minions of hell shall not prevail against us. Should such men as we fear? Before the world, aye, before the sleepy, lukewarm, faithless, namby-pamby Christian world, we will dare to trust our God, we will venture our all for Him, we will live and we will die for Him, and we will do it with His joy unspeakable singing aloud in our hearts. We will a thousand times sooner die trusting only our God, than live trusting in man. And when we come to this position the battle is already won, and the end of the glorious campaign in sight. We will have the real Holiness of God, not the sickly stuff of talk and dainty words and pretty thoughts; we will have a Masculine Holiness, one of daring faith and works for Jesus Christ.<sup>26</sup>



## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> The focus here is primarily on the African American church, with an emphasis on reaching the street-oriented young urban Black male (YUBM), a demographic generally considered by the church as being “hard to reach.” Over the past few decades, many in this group have sensed themselves increasingly feared, shunned, marginalized, vilified and abandoned by both their own communities and the larger society as a whole – admittedly, justifiably so in some cases, but more so due to stereotypical and socially-reinforced perceptions of some purported “propensity” for criminal behavior. Human beings are still inclined to look on the outward appearance and take their measure of a person from that perspective. 2 Cor 5:14-17 takes on a radically distinct perspective when the focus is put on seeing the individual’s potential in Christ rather than the individual left to his or her own – or a surrounding society’s “best” – resources.

<sup>2</sup> Hip-hop culture properly understood is more than just rap music. It is a highly diverse and inclusive total life expression – one that transcends even the dominant popular African American forms it is usually associated with.

<sup>3</sup> See Bakari Kitwana, *The Hip-Hop Generation: Young Blacks and the Crisis in African American Culture* (New York: Basic Civitas, 2003), indicates such. Kitwana contrasts the “Hip-Hop Generation” with its predecessor, the “Civil Rights Generation.”

<sup>4</sup> J. Richard Middleton and Brian Walsh, *Truth Is Stranger than It Used to Be* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1995), 5.

<sup>5</sup> Eliphaz the Temanite could easily be painting a picture of such a world in Job 15:17-35, evocatively describing the dynamics of an impoverished drug-decimated community: the threat of violence, the street’s aspirational but ultimately precarious dreams of wealth, its siege mentality and attendant armor system and its ultimately nihilistic worldview – summarized succinctly in *The Wire* – David Simon’s dystopian take on Baltimore, MD (and, by extension, the American Dream / Empire).

<sup>6</sup> David Simon, *The Wire* (cable television drama), originally aired from June 2, 2002 to March 9, 2008 on HBO. The above-named fictionalized drug dealer characters who appear in Simon’s critically-acclaimed, street-realistic, über-bleak, Melville-esque series, were based on real people living in Baltimore, MD – whom Simon (and other writers for the show) either know or knew.

<sup>7</sup> The Roots, *undun* (Def Jam, 2011. ASIN: B005VR9328, CD, 2011). “*undun* is an existential re-telling of the short life of one Redford Stephens (1974-1999),” a fictionalized 25-year old composite character. Redford’s story is told in reverse on this critically acclaimed concept album and makes for a most unusual Christ-mas album, revealing part of the reason Christ came to earth.

<sup>8</sup> Jermaine G. (known on the street as “J-Knots”), 28, was a South Camden, NJ drug lord who came to faith in Christ in the mid-1990s. He was brutally murdered on January 3, 2001; his shocking death leaving us all reeling. Friends and family asked another ministry leader and I to lead the memorial service at a small funeral home in the Centerville section of the city. The place was packed, and outside scores of young people gathered – standing stock-still or sitting silently on the front porch stoops of an adjacent housing development.

<sup>9</sup> Edwin S., 25, was involved in the same South Camden ministry where I had met Jermaine. Edwin (Eddie) was gunned down on the steps of an abandoned building at the corner of Ferry Avenue and Fillmore Street on September 1, 2004. Only a few have been named here – but there are, sadly, many others. *The Wire* and *undun* may be fictional media dramas, but the world they portray is all-too real.

<sup>10</sup> D. Edmond Hiebert, 1994. “God’s Creative Masterpiece,” *Direction* 23, no. 1: 116-124, accessed August 28, 2011, ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials, EBSCOhost.

<sup>11</sup> While this may well be an extreme view (one that has a lot of traction in many urban churches and certain denominations [the “Christ against culture” perspective in H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper & Row, 1956), 45ff.]), its underlying concerns are legitimate. I am not convinced substituting the experience-oriented elements of church culture for the experience-oriented elements of hip-hop culture is the Biblical-theological (redemptive-historical) solution.

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<sup>12</sup> For example, G. Craig Lewis's "Web site boasts 1 million hip-hop CDs destroyed worldwide." Allison Batdorff, "Dallas minister tells Pacific bases hip-hop is Satanic." *Stars and Stripes*, April 12, 2006, accessed August 27, 2011, <http://www.stripes.com/news/dallas-minister-tells-pacific-bases-hip-hop-is-satanic-1.47572>.

<sup>13</sup> Building off of Carl F. Ellis, Jr.'s definition of "culture" found in *Free at Last? The Gospel in the African-American Experience*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1996), 218.

<sup>14</sup> "2011 Jeep Grand Cherokee: The Things We Make, Make Us," 2010 TV advertisement, accessed September 21, 2011, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G1Ci2UGrv1M>.

<sup>15</sup> Be they street-oriented, saints, academicians – or (ideally), a combination of all three. May that tribe increase!

<sup>16</sup> Oswald Chambers, *Still Higher for His Highest* (Grand Rapids, MI: Daybreak / Zondervan, 1970), p 37.

<sup>17</sup> James W. Sire, *Discipleship of the Mind* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1990), 93-94.

<sup>18</sup> The definition of this Hebrew transliteration stands in sharp contrast to the one at <http://www.urbandictionary.com>.

<sup>19</sup> N.B. John 12:49-50

<sup>20</sup> D. Edmond Hiebert, "God's Creative Masterpiece," *Direction* 23, no. 1 (1994): 116-124, accessed August 28, 2011, ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials, <http://EBSCOhost>.

<sup>21</sup> See Appendices for the syllabus and materials used in the course.

<sup>22</sup> See J. Robert Clinton, *The Making of a Leader* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2012), and Appendix H.

<sup>23</sup> See Appendix A for the LBC@CUTS Spring 2014 syllabus for "The Gospel / The Street." At the time of this writing, the course has been offered about six or 7 times at either Lancaster Bible College (or formerly Geneva College) at the Center for Urban Theological Studies in Philadelphia, PA.

<sup>24</sup> A descriptive brochure for "The Gospel / The Street 2.0" ("TGTS 2.0") is at [https://www.dropbox.com/s/9pzs6wjd6mqbxnv/TGTS\\_Brochure\\_v\\_2\\_PDF.pdf?dl=0](https://www.dropbox.com/s/9pzs6wjd6mqbxnv/TGTS_Brochure_v_2_PDF.pdf?dl=0).

<sup>25</sup> See, for example, Leslie Dunton-Downer's revelatory *The English Is Coming! How One Language Is Sweeping the World* (New York: Touchstone / Simon & Schuster, 2011).

<sup>26</sup> C.T. Studd, accessed December 12, 2011, <http://www.rescuepoint.org/SayingsofCTStudd.html>.