

## **John Piper (endorsed by David Slayton) and “Holy Hip-Hop”**

John Piper’s role in legitimizing and promoting hip-hop culture in the Church is an important aspect of his ministry that is sometimes overlooked. To really understand John Piper’s ministry we must examine his association with holy hip hop culture that is sweeping through the young, restless and reformed New Calvinist movement. The purpose of this article is to provide information on Piper’s involvement and support for holy hip-hop.

In October 2006, John Piper invited rap artist Curtis, ‘the Voice’, Allen to perform in Bethlehem Baptist Church. The significance of this event is that it legitimized the so-called holy hip-hop movement among New Calvinists. The fact that a leading theologian of New Calvinism had publicly given his blessing to rap music in the Church was a symbolic event that opened the floodgates. If Piper was in favor of rap artists performing in the Church, who could be against it?

In January 2008, Desiring God published a series of three videos that endorsed the ministry of rap artist Lecrae. In the videos Lecrae talks about his life growing up in the inner city, his conversion to Christ, and his unconventional ministry. <http://youtu.be/c5L4on0AHik>

### **Desiring God and Reach Life Ministries in partnership**

The close relationship between John Piper and rap artist Lecrae is illustrated by the fact that their respective organizations, Desiring God Ministries and Reach Records,



Rap artist Lecrae

have been collaborating for a number of years. Associated with Reach Records is a group of rap artists known as '116 Clique' (pronounced one-one-six click). The Clique is a hip-hop group that takes its name from the Bible verse Romans 1.16. 'For I am not ashamed of the gospel: for it is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believes.' Members of 116 Clique include Lecrae, Trip Lee, J'Son, Sho Baraka, Tedashii, Pro, KB and non Reach members Shai Linne, FLAME and Cam. A number of the Clique have 116 tattoos. Lecrae has a 116 tattoo on his upper arm.

In June 2008, rap artist Trip Lee, a protégé of Lecrae, explained what God is doing through the partnership with Desiring God.

<http://www.desiringgod.org/blog/posts/living-unashamed/print>

Unfortunately, many today believe the hip-hop culture is unredeemable, better left to itself. Hip-hop is rarely thought of as a culture that ought to be invaded with the truth of Jesus Christ. Truth is, there's a desperate need of Christians who are willing to spend their

lives in order to reach it and say with Paul, “I am not ashamed of the gospel” (Romans 1:16).



Lecrae's tattooed arm

Reach Records and Reach Life Ministries are devoted to doing just that; reaching the hip-hop culture for the glory of God... Reach Records creates music that is relevant to the culture and is packed full of biblical truth. This platform has proven to be an incredible tool, both to introduce people to Jesus Christ, as well as help others go deeper in their faith. Through our music, we have the opportunity to reach a culture that otherwise would have no interest in what we have to say... We created Reach Life Ministries, a non-profit organization that produces Christ-centered tools and resources for urban churches and ministries to provide what music is not designed to do, disciple.

This summer, we are very excited about the opportunity to travel the country for our first official concert tour. The “Unashamed Tour” will hit around 25 cities in the US and the UK. It will be an incredible opportunity to encourage young believers all over the globe to not waste their lives and to be unashamed of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Each of us at Reach Life has been deeply impacted by the ministry of Desiring

God and we are excited about the recent partnership with them. They have agreed to donate 10,000 copies of the book *Don't Waste Your Life*, which will be distributed free at our concerts this summer. These books will be placed in the hands of urban youth across the country that has never been exposed to Desiring God or the teachings of John Piper. I cannot express the excitement I feel when I see young hip-hoppers not only hearing about the glory of Christ through our concert, but also leaving with resources that will help them to continue in that excitement.

## **Unashamed Concerts**

According to Lee Trip, the rap artists of Reach Records have been deeply impacted by the ministry of Desiring God and John Piper. The 'Unashamed' tour is acknowledged as an opportunity to promote the teachings of John Piper. As the 'Unashamed' Tour is largely based on hip hop imaginary, we need to actually see some of the performances to understand how the Tour is being used to promote the teachings of John Piper.

## **Hip hop – a God honoring culture?**

In January 2009 a video message on the Desiring God website by Pastor Thabiti Anyabwile, Senior Pastor – First Baptist Church Grand Cayman – extolled the virtues of holy hip hop music. The thing about holy hip-hop that Pastor Thabiti finds exciting is that Curtis 'the Voice' and Lecrae are such gifted rappers. He says that:

'they are giving people, in the message, in the music, in the lyrics, deep God honoring, culture piercing and worldview shaping information. I mean its preaching, its lyrical theology, as one of the brothers has coined the term, and it ministers to the soul in the opposite way and more profound way than does secular hip hop minister to the flesh.

'I love that the Lord has raised up a generation of hip hop artists who love Him, are committed to Him, and are sowing to the Spirit for people who listen to that word, who are challenging us to crucify self, who are challenging us to live gospel centered lives, challenging us to build our lives in and around the local church, the body of Christ. So I think every revival of sorts has often been accompanied by musical revivals – the

writings the lyrics the songs that have grown out of the Wesley's and others. For an urban hip hop generation, with the birth of robust Reformed theology, and the entrance of that theology into that community, I think the Lord seems pleased to accompany that revival of theological truth with a musical revival of sorts – I think its taken the form of holy hip hop, the kind of lyrics and music that speak to that generation and speaks to it powerfully from a gospel and Christ centered perspective.'

View video of Pastor Thabiti Anyabwile on Holy hip hop: <http://youtu.be/Sp-8-C9954Q>

### **Don't Waste Your Life**

In April 2009, Reach Records and Desiring God worked together in partnership to spread *Don't Waste Your Life* in urban centers around the country.

'We would encourage you to check out the upcoming DWYL Tour 09 for details and to see seven satirical promotional videos we produced for them. Desiring God also produced the music video for Lecrae's single, 'Don't Waste Your Life', from his latest album, Rebel.'

In June 2009, Lecrae performed 'Don't Waste Your Life' at Bethlehem Baptist Church in Minneapolis, MN during morning service. Lecrae's performance received a standing ovation from the eager congregation. View Lecrae performance in Piper's Church <http://youtu.be/2jkHZPOUPrY>

In July 2009, Desiring God advertised the Legacy Conference in Chicago.

'For those who don't know, The Legacy Conference is a theologically driven, discipleship oriented conference for urban youth. Lecrae, Shai Linne, Trip Lee, Flame, and others will be there teaching and performing.'

### **Hip-hop for Haiti**

In January 2010, Desiring God advertised "Hip Hop for Haiti".

'Don't Waste Your Life is partnering with Reach Records, Lamp Mode Records, and Club 3 Degrees to host a benefit concert to help the churches in Haiti rebuild and reach out again. Christian hip hop artists Lecrae, DJ Official, Flame, Json, and DJ Essence will be performing. This concert will take place at Club 3 Degrees (Downtown Minneapolis, MN) on February 5 at 8pm. Ticket price is \$10, and we recommend buying them in advance since it will likely be a sell-out show.'

In February 2010, Desiring God advertised Lecrae's new hit.

'Chart-topping hip-hop artist Lecrae recorded a new single to benefit relief efforts in Haiti. He'll be performing this song live for the first time at Hip Hop for Haiti in downtown Minneapolis tomorrow night. Come join us! We will be filming the music video during this live performance.' Desiring God announced that it produced the music video for Lecrae's new song, "Far Away," over the weekend. It is now available for purchase, along with the mp3, for only \$4.99. If you want to buy just the mp3, it is available in iTunes for \$.99. It is ranked 46 in Hip Hop as of now. Let's try to move it into the top 10!

<http://www.desiringgod.org/blog/posts/download-far-away-and-benefit-haiti>

In March 2010, Desiring God provided a full video of the concert for Haiti. 'Here is the full video of the "Hip Hop for Haiti" concert (featuring Lecrae, Flame, Json, DJ Essence, and DJ Official) that took place in Minneapolis last month.'

<http://www.desiringgod.org/blog/posts/full-video-of-hip-hop-for-haiti-concert#oid=c3ZGQ4MTqC8CMQroxaActhtzLGIND3WK>

### **Release of Rehab announced by Desiring God**

In October 2010, Desiring God, under the title, 'The Christian life is an entrance into rehab', announced the release of Lecrae's new album *Rehab*.

'This amazing album ranked very high on several iTunes charts, including #2 in Hip Hop/Rap albums and #3 in all music genres. The debut week sales for *Rehab* were 25,864 units. This is a huge jump from

the first week sales (about 10,000 units) of his previous album, *Rebel*. No other Christian Hip Hop album has ever sold so well in its first week.'

In November 2010, Desiring God announced:

'Hip-hop artist Swoope released a single today—"Actions Speak Louder" (featuring Tedashi, Lecrae, and Jai)—to raise awareness and support for what His Voice Global is doing in Sudan. You can read the lyrics at Rapzilla. At the end of the song they splice in a portion from a John Piper sermon about the loudness of God's love in sending his Son to die for us.'

<http://www.desiringgod.org/blog/posts/dont-waste-your-life-tour-09#ooid=cwbzNo0nbJZbAxfz15U7-M6PUhb1Y9X>

### **Piper prays for Lecrae**

In January 2011, John Piper interviewed rap artist Lecrae at the Passion Conference. Piper asks Lecrae to explain what he and his friends at Reach Records want to see God do through their music. Piper then publicly prays for Lecrae's rap ministry.

<http://youtu.be/Mu00Fi5pScE>

Christian blogger Tim Challies, a keen Piper supporter, has compiled a list of 12 songs (10 of which are hip-hop) that either feature John Piper preaching or have been directly influenced by him or one of his books. The list consists of:

"Don't Waste Your Life" by Lecrae; "Make War" and "This Song's for You" by Tedashii; "All-Consuming Fire" and "My Portion" by Shai Linne; "Who He Is" by Json; "Unstoppable" and "Desiring God" by Voice; "Sanctification" by Timothy Brindle; "Actions Speak Louder" by Swoope; "The Glory of God" by Matt Papa; "The Best Is Yet to Come" by The Joy Eternal

### **Redeeming hip-hop culture?**

John Piper undoubtedly stands at the center of the holy hip-hop movement. The aim of the movement is to redeem hip-hop culture for Christ. But this is wrong thinking, for Christ died to redeem a people for



God, not to redeem the sinful culture of this world. Scripture is clear that the culture of the world, with its focus on the lusts and desires of the flesh, is passing away (1 John 2.17).

We are asked to believe that holy hip-hop is packed full of sound theology and biblical truth. We are told that through its lyrics and music, it speaks to a generation powerfully from a gospel and Christ centered perspective. But these are false claims, for everything about holy hip-hop is contrary to the character of the God of Scripture, and the gospel of Jesus Christ.

### **The revellings of the flesh**

**Hip-hop culture is the epitome of the culture of the world. It is a culture that is grounded in the lusts of the flesh and the pride of life. The imagery of hip-hop culture is sensual, aggressive, arrogant and sinful.** There is barely a difference between secular hip-hop and so-called 'holy' hip-hop. Most of the rapped lyrics hardly make sense, and simply contain a sprinkling of biblical phrases and an occasional use of Jesus name. It is difficult to actually hear the words above the noise of a hip-hop performance. Our Lord's warning is pertinent to the idle, meaningless words of Christian rap: 'But I say unto you, That every idle word that men shall speak, they shall give account thereof in the day of judgment' (Matthew 12:36).

Hip-hop gatherings set out to engage the flesh by arousing the audience to a state of ecstatic excitement. They produce carnal behavior and revellings that are a manifestation of the works of the flesh, as described in Galatians 5. 'Envy, murders, drunkenness, revelries, and the like; of which I tell you beforehand, just as I also told you in time past, that those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God' (Galatians 5.21).

The Greek word komos in Galatians 5:21, is translated 'revellings' (KJV) or 'wild partying' (International Standard Version). Galatians 5 provides a list of the sins that are described as the 'works of the flesh', and warns that those who 'practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God'. This warning should cause Christian believers to avoid any conduct that could be construed as revelling or wild partying.



Galatians 5:16-24 draws a sharp distinction between ‘the Spirit’ and ‘the flesh’. The flesh is at war against the Spirit. The two are ‘contrary the one to the other’ (v17). Those who are ‘of Christ Jesus’ are led by the Spirit and ‘those who are Christ’s have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires’ (v24). The ecstatic performances of hip hop concerts, so beloved by Desiring God Ministries, are of the flesh and not of the Spirit. They do not edify the body of Christ, but rather lead young people into the ways of the flesh and away from the Cross of Christ.

The apostle Peter warns that believers should not live in the flesh to the lusts of men, as do pagan unbelievers. ‘For we have spent enough of our past lifetime in doing the will of the Gentiles—when we walked in lewdness, lusts, drunkenness, revelries, drinking parties, and abominable idolatries. In regard to these, they think it strange that you do not run with them in the same flood of dissipation...’ (1 Peter 4:3-4)

## **Conclusion**

John Piper, in his enthusiastic promotion of holy hip-hop, is doing a great disservice to the Church. The claim that the lyrics of holy hip-hop are deeply theological does not stand up to scrutiny. The idea that such gatherings can be used to teach God’s word is patently untrue. How sad that a church leader of John Piper’s standing, with his vast knowledge of Scripture, cannot see the evil of hip hop culture and its harmful effect on young people.

You can learn more about Dr Tim Keller, Pastor Mark Driscoll’s and Pastor John Piper in the book, *The New Calvinists* (2014), published by The Wakeman Trust and Belmont House Publishing. The book is available from [belmonthousebooks.com/](http://belmonthousebooks.com/)