The Rationale for and Guide to Using Hip-Hop Music as A Vehicle to Spiritual Formation for Black Male Youth

By

Rodney Alex Mason, Jr.

Date: 12 Apr 2017

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Dr. Lester Ruth, Supervisor

Dr. Joshua Busman, Reader

Dr. J. Warren Smith, D.Min. Director

Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Ministry in the Divinity School of Duke University 2017
ABSTRACT

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Abstract

This thesis provides a hip-hop based curriculum that the black church can use to engage young black men in spiritual formation. Due to the negative lyrics heard in hip-hop music, many churches have rejected this style of music in their church, sometimes even demonizing those who identify with the genre. I argue that there is precedence for the church to utilize hip-hop music because the church has a history of utilizing popular culture, in particular music, to attract and engage young people in church. Moreover, individuals are formed and gain identity from more than just church music, and being aware of popular culture helps the church develop healthy relationships with young people because it tells young people that the church recognizes their music is more than just a fad, but an essential piece of their identity. My thesis expands on the historical moments where the church has used secular music to evangelize young people while offering portraits of two churches, The Tribe in New York City and Sanctuary Covenant Church in Minneapolis, that currently use a genre of popular music as a tool for helping young people gain a closer relationship with God. In addition, this thesis argues for the use of curriculum, a pedagogical approach, for engaging young black males in spiritual formation. In order to create this curriculum, I listened to a large selection of hip-hop music, past and current, and evaluated the lyrics and themes of each song to select the songs I thought would lead to great dialogue amongst the participants. This thesis concludes with the creation of a Christian curriculum that uses hip-hop music as its foundation.
Dedication

I would like to dedicate this dissertation work to my entire village of family and friends. A special feeling of gratitude to my supportive parents, the late Rodney Alex Mason, Sr., and Pauline Grant, whose words of encouragement and push for tenacity all of my life echoed in my ears every day. I am honored to be your son and truly thank God for the both of you. Thank you to my siblings, Kennesha, Rakeem, and Rakeya, who are always in my corner and offer love and support. To my grandfather, Rev. Alex Mason, I thank you for showing me what it meant to be a man of God and to place a relationship with Christ above all.

I dedicate this dissertation to my loving family of grandparents, aunts, uncles, nieces, nephews, and cousins, who have supported me throughout the process. I also dedicate this dissertation to my friends, who have been there with words of wisdom and helpful advice. I will always appreciate all that you have done to support me over the years and your unwavering support is truly appreciated.

I dedicate this to all of the young men I have mentored and have allowed me to play a key role in shaping their future. To WIRED Youth Ministry (2009-2012), this is dedicated to you for allowing me to first see the transformative power of hip-hop music.

With sincere love and appreciation, I dedicate this dissertation to two people who hold a special place in my heart, my wife, Dr. Johnecia L. Mason, and my son, the late Rodney Alex Mason, III. Thank you for the motivation to keep pressing forward and being an inspiration daily.
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Introduction

What reason does the black church have to accept and embrace hip-hop? How can hip-hop contribute to spiritual formation of black male youth? These questions formed in my mind as I entered the youth sanctuary for the first time as Youth Pastor at my current ecclesial setting. It was “Hip-Hop Sunday.” Through the speakers, music was blasting; from the ceiling, strobe lights were flashing; and on top of the chairs, bodies were moving, as four teenagers, three males and one female, stood at the front of the room and effortlessly recited lyrics that sounded more like a theological treatise than what I considered a hip-hop song. This was not church as I imagined and not the church I was going to lead. Flash forward to a few months later to a Tuesday evening, and I am standing in front of a group of students that look completely different from the students I described earlier. There is no dancing or rapping; instead, these young people are comforting each other as they stare at me in disbelief over the death of a well-known black male student who tragically died in a car accident after hitting a tree during school hours. The student was under the influence of marijuana. As I lead them through their grief, one student asked, “Is he going to Heaven? He skipped school and was high, and that is how he died. Will God let him into Heaven?” Seminary had not trained me for this moment and how to handle these types of questions. Where could I find the answers? That week as I struggled with my lack of response to this question, my mind went back to that first Sunday. I had not seen them that

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1 The definition of black church that is being used in this specific paper is that supplied by C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence Mamiya who defines the black church as “churches and clergy that comprise the seven major historic black denominations: the African Methodist Episcopal (A.M.E.) Church; the African Methodist Episcopal Zion (A.M.E.Z.) Church; the Christian Methodist Episcopal (C.M.E.) Church; the National Baptist Convention, U.S.A., Incorporated (NBC); the National Baptist Convention of America, Unincorporated (NBCA); the Progressive National Baptist Convention (PNBC); and the Church of God in Christ (COGIC).” C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African American Experience* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1990), 1.
excited about God or what God had to offer since that week, and then it hit me: the answer was in the music.

That following Sunday I stood before 300 teenagers, many in mourning, and reminded them that rapper Tupac Shakur answered their question: “there's a Heaven for a 'G’.” This answer for me was reminiscent of a scene in the Gospel in which two criminals hang crucified on the right and the left of Jesus Christ, and the conversation went this way, “And he said, ‘Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom’. And he said to him, ‘Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise’” (Luke 23:42-43). I watched calmness and comfort come over their faces as I shared the promise that the Gospel provides, and a light bulb came on in my own head. The music of their culture paired with the scriptures is what can serve as vehicle for spiritual formation.

This experience has led me to consider the idea that hip-hop music is a tool that churches can employ to engage urban youth in spiritual formation, more specifically, black male youth ages 12-18. Hip-hop music is the tool that churches should use because it is a major cultural force and influence among this particular population. Hip-hop lyrics are already helping young black men form an identity and understanding of who they are, regardless of the involvement of the church. Thus, it is important for churches to use hip-hop music an intentional practice that takes black males on a journey of spiritual formation and discipleship.

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3 For the purposes of this paper, spiritual formation will be understood according to the description given by religious scholar and scholar in spiritual formation Henri Nouwen: “Spiritual formation is not about steps or stages on the way to perfection. It’s about the movements from the mind to the heart through prayer in its many forms that reunites us with God, each other, and our truest selves.” Henri Nouwen, Spiritual Formation: Following the Movements of the Spirit (New York: HarperOne, 2010), xvi.
My focus on young black males is not to disregard hip-hop’s influence on other segments of the youth population, for hip-hop music can and does influence young people regardless of race, demographic, or religious background. I am choosing to focus on black males because that is the primary audience I work with on a continual basis and because my passion is mentoring young black males. The youth targeted in this study are those that have professed to be Christian and have committed to being a member of a community of faith, a church. This paper is limited to those particular youths because in order to be a disciple, one must commit to being a student of the teacher, who in this case is Jesus. Secondly, from this research, I will develop a curriculum-based discipleship program utilizing lyrics from hip-hop music that churches can utilize as they work with young African-American males.4

The discipleship program curriculum’s foundation is the lyrical content of hip-hop music because it has the greatest influence on identity formation in black males.5 Professor, minister, and hip-hop scholar Ralph Watkins argues, “central to hip-hop culture is an embrace of hip-hop lyrics,” which is evident as members of the hip-hop community are seen reciting the lyrics at “concerts and on buses, earbuds firmly placed in ears.”6 The lyrics are essential to this study because hip-hop lyrics act in the same way for hip-hoppers as scripture does for the believer:

memorization is a particularly intimate appropriation of a text, and the capacity to quote or recite a text from memory is a spiritual resource that is tapped automatically in every action of reflection, worship, prayer, or moral deliberation, as well as in times of personal and communal decisions or crisis.7

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4 When I speak of the emcee role and lyrical content, the focus will not be on the musicality of hip-hop music because it is not an essential part of the discussion concerning the direction of this project and it is beyond my expertise.

5 I acknowledge and accept that there are four central elements to hip-hop that many scholars have recognized: emcee, break dancing, graffiti, and deejaying. However, for the purposes of this project, I will focus solely on the emcee element of hip-hop and the impact the words or lyrics of the emcee play in the identity formation of youth and how churches can utilize that same approach in forming Christian identity in young people. Ralph Basui Watkins, Hip-Hop Redemption: Finding God in the Rhythm and the Rhyme (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 16.

6 Watkins, Hip-Hop Redemption, 86.

7 Ibid., 87.
As hip-hoppers recite and memorize the lyrics, they begin to take ownership of the lyrics and, in many regards, these lyrics or words become flesh and live within the listener. Moreover, they become “a holy word as it holds them, sustains them, and lives in their whole being.” Thus, this project will focus on the actual content, words, and themes of the song to know what the lyricist sought to address through music. These words, like many of the Old Testament psalms, provide information on the issues, morals, and values of a particular community and give clarity on aspects of the identity form within this community. Having this context will shape the curriculum because through these lyrics will I decide what topics are important to cover in this program.

Churches that utilize this curriculum will be churches that find themselves with a youth ministry that exist in an urban setting and/or have a membership that is at least forty percent black male.

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8 Ibid.
Chapter 1: Hip-Hop and Its Formative Power in Influencing Black Male Identity

1.1 Introduction

Before a framework can be given on how to utilize hip-hop music as a tool for discipleship, this chapter will provide evidence of how hip-hop music currently shapes identity for those who adhere to hip-hop music. More specifically, this chapter will share how hip-hop music has negatively formed identity in black males and offer hope for hip-hop music’s ability to be used for positive identity formation. In order to get to hip-hop music’s impact on black males, hip-hop as a culture will be defined because showing how hip-hop is a culture gives credence to its power to form identity. All cultures produce shared identities for its participants. Moreover, this chapter will explore three negative identities taken on by black males that have been greatly influenced by hip-hop music. In doing so, this chapter will also highlight the redeeming qualities of hip-hop music by sharing how hip-hop critiques itself, making itself useful for the black church.

1.2 Hip-Hop as a Culture

What is Hip-Hop? Is it what you wear?
Is it the brands that you rep or the way you wear you hair?
Is it your attitude, gratitude, identity or fate?
Your history, your future or the problems that you face?
Is it the spirit of the times? The Zeitgeist, believe it
Divinity inside of me, we breathe it cause we need it
The Gospel of Hip-Hop, it really changed my life
KRS relieved the stress – I had to read it twice
When it all falls apart I remember what he said
It’s not about the cheddar, creme, fame, skill or bread
It’s carbon truth in beauty, learning to respect
Learning how to love, put your selfishness in check
What is Hip-Hop? Divine self-discovery
Mastering the elements, defining just what love can be
Testifying truthfully, rhyming with the best
I see the light, it feels so right cause Hip-Hop’s got me blessed.¹

What is hip-hop?² Hip-hop incorporates various elements of sound, movement, language, and other components that have created a culture that numerous people in society have found relatable. In essence, hip-hop is the sound of lyrics recited over the coming together of multiple instruments producing a sound that makes you nod your head, tap your foot, and sway your hips in a way that connects to the rhythmic pulse of notes blaring through a sound system. It is the conscious prophetic voice speaks that against social injustices, white supremacy, and poverty. It is also the creative fusion of colors and hair weaves that leads to a visual masterpiece on top of a young girl’s head. Nonetheless, for the purposes of the argument of this paper, the description of hip-hop that will be used is offered by scholars Derrick Alridge and James Stewart:

Hip-Hop has encompassed not just a musical genre, but also a style of dress, dialect and language, way of looking at the world, and an aesthetic that reflects the sensibilities of a large population of youth born between 1965 and 1984.³

Alridge and Stewart’s definition of hip-hop shows that hip-hop has the power to produces an identity for a population of people. Producing a ‘language’ and ‘way of looking at the world’ fits

² The term “hip-hop,” which came about accidentally, did not appear on the scene until five years after the birth of hip-hop. In making fun of a colleague for joining the army, Keith “Cowboy” Wiggins joked on the way he sounded marching as a soldier which made the sound, “hip. Hop, hop, hop.” Being a part of the crew of one of most popular DJ’s, Grandmaster Flash, of this new music scene, people began to call those in that group “hip-hoppers.” Fiona McDonald, The Popular History of Graffiti: From the Ancient World to the Present (New York: Skyhorse Publishing, 2013), 104.
³ Derrick P. Alridge and James B. Stewart, “Introduction: Hip Hop in History: Past, Present, and Future,” The Journal of African American History 90.3 (2005): 190-95. This definition is still appropriate to use as it relates to youth born in the year 2000 and after, which is the generation of youth I address in this chapter, because Alridge and Stewart’s definition of hip-hop describes the hip-hop music of youth of today. In 2017, younger hip-hop artists such as Lil Wayne and Tyga have launched clothing lines, and newer artists such as Travis Porter have given the world new phrases such as ‘turnt up’. These two examples show how hip-hop has reached beyond the scope of those born in the years that Alridge and Stewart describe, and the significant part of their definition is not the age range but the description of hip-hop as a culture that is more than a music but in many ways a way of life.
the definition of a culture, and sociologists agree that cultures produce identity for people. Culture “usually focuses on shared or collective practices, thus discounting purely individual foci,” so when I speak of ‘culture’ I am discussing the collective identity and shared behavior patterns of a particular group of people. Sociologist Raymond Williams presents culture as a “signifying system that communicates and reproduces a social order through its various practices, practices that include the arts, philosophy, journalism, advertising, fashion, and so on.” Aldrige and Stewart’s portrait of hip-hop aligns with Williams’s definition of culture, and being able to label hip-hop as a culture acknowledges that hip-hop, like any other culture, shapes identity. Hip-hop is a significant cultural force that influences young people regardless of race, demographic, and religious background and hip-hop culture, specifically music, has shaped and continues to shape people.

1.3 Hip-Hop’s Central Elements

Before reviewing hip-hop’s formative power, whether for positive or negative identity formation, it is useful to understand hip-hop’s central elements. In many African-American communities, everything youth identify, learn, understand, value and feel is transmitted through participating in hip-hop. What are the central mechanisms of this music that transcended the combination of beats and lyrics into a system of beliefs, values, morals, and language, and began to form an identity for a generation of people? According to DJ Kool Herc, there are four central elements (emcee, deejay, breakdancing, and graffiti). Emcee is commonly referred to as rappin’

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4 William Branch, Theological Implications of Hip Hop Culture (Dallas: Dallas Theological Seminary Press, 2004), 5.
6 Jeff Chang, Can’t Stop, Won’t Stop: A History of the Hip-Hop Generation (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2005), xi. DJ Kool Herc is seen as the founder/creator of hip-hop for it is in his basement on August 11, 1973, that he spun his first records at a party, which later evolved into a genre of music that defined a generation.
and it is the branch of hip-hop in which a ‘rapper’ directs and moves the crowd through rhythmic spoken word. Breakdancing is an element of hip-hop that involves acrobatic movements of the body in a manner that is more freestyle than choreographed. Deejaying is the production part of hip-hop that refers to the work of the disc jockey who interacts artistically with the emcee by playing tracks and keeping the audience engaged. Graffiti is the drawn art of hip-hop that seeks to tell a story through visuals that are often sprayed or scribbled on organic street canvases. All four elements are essential to the progression of hip-hop culture, yet it is the lyrics of hip-hop music that serves as the catalyst for identity formation. Hip-hop scholar and Pastor Rev. Efrem Smith, argues that the “emcee is the most influential of the four foundational elements of Hip-Hop,” because the “one who holds the microphone has the ultimate influence.”

Moreover, what the emcee is doing in hip-hop culture is an old standard in the religious culture in that “the spoken word of scripture has been overwhelmingly the most important medium through which religious persons or groups throughout history have known and interacted with sacred texts.” Watkins, in conversation with Smith, both see the power in the oral tradition of communicating beliefs because in the hip-hop community truth is not as written, as with the Bible, but it is spoken. In the hip-hop community, “the bible as the only sacred text has been balanced by the sacred words of emcees,” in that just as much as scriptures in the biblical text have power to speak truth and transform lives, so does the truth and story telling that is in the form of hip-hop lyrics. In essence, the fact that hip-hoppers connect to and treat hip-hop emcees in many regards as gods and their lyrics as

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7 Efrem Smith and Phil Jackson, The Hip-Hop Church: Connecting with the Movement Shaping Our Culture (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2005), 154.
9 Ibid.
scripture advances the argument that the conduit for identity formation is the lyrics recited by the emcee.

1.4 The Emcee, Lyrics, and Identity

The initial role of the emcee was to hype parties as well as attract and motivate attendees; however, over time, the role evolved and the emcee gradually transformed into an artist who writes rhymes or poetry and then raps, or says, the words over a beat. The emcee in hip-hop holds a similar position as to that of the “griot” in traditional West Africa cultures. Griots had the responsibility of carrying and revealing the cultural history of a community through oral tradition.10 Similarly, the emcee in hip-hop has the responsibility of relaying to the rest of society the values and messages of this particular culture. Through the emcee, hip-hoppers learn the history, culture, philosophies, and doctrines of hip-hop culture. In addition, the emcee produces a particular language that influences specific moral values for those that ascribe to hip-hop which means rap is not only about what is said, but also about how ideas are communicated.

Rap is the conduit in which the language of hip-hop is transmitted and the language of any culture is directly connected to the concepts that shape identity.11 Colgate University professor of rhetoric Dr. Kermit Campbell highlights this connection well:

The soul of a people is embodied in the language peculiar to them. People throughout history have often stubbornly held on to their native language or dialect because they regarded it as a badge of their authentic identity and because they felt that only through it could they express their inner beings, their attitudes and emotions, and even their own concepts of reality.12

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10 Emmett George Price, Hip Hop Culture (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2006), 22, 35.
11 Of course, the impact of music on social and individual identity is not unique just to hip-hop but is something that is found in multiple genres of music and their accompanying cultures.
For Campbell, language is important to people because it helps individuals maintain an identity that is connected to their culture and histories. When individuals use language, they do so as people with social histories that are distinctive to membership in a particular social group, be it race, gender, or religion. For example, a person born into a household that is Christian, Muslim or another religion assumes an individual identity that is ascribed by their religious affiliation. In essence, identity is not inherent to the individual, on the contrary, it is socially constructed by the environmental, historical, and political contexts of individuals lived experiences. As it relates to hip-hop, this means that the language within hip-hop holds responsibility in forming a group identity that is reflective of the vernacular communicated through the emcee. Thus, the language of hip-hop is transmitted through hip-hop lyrics because lyrics are what emcees use to communicate with the people. And because lyrics in hip-hop music equate to language, then hip-hop lyrics are one of the culprits in creating black male identities by teaching them who they are, which the black church should find alarming.

This is alarming because the lyrics in hip-hop music influence multiple identities for black males and in many cases these identities conflict with one another. One hip-hop song can uplift the black race and call for social change and on the same album another song can degrade women and promote violence. For example, in the song—“Changes”—rapper Tupac Shakur tells his assumed black audience, “I got love for my brother but we can never go nowhere, unless we share with each other,” and in another song, “Hit ‘Em Up,” he tells the same people, when referring to another rapper, “Lil’ Ceasr, go ask ya homie how I leave ya, cut your young a** up, leave you in pieces, now be deceased.” Tupac is often celebrated by one community within hip-hop for his brashness and thuggish nature as a hardcore gangsta rapper, but in other communities he is uplifted as socially conscious progressive rapper. Tupac and other rappers like him show
that within that music there are conflcits of identities, which impacts how black male youth understand themselves. The music’s participation in identity formation can lead black males down paths of destruction and paths of becoming positive members in society. This is determined by how the listener takes in the lyrics and if someone is there to guide them through a critical process of analyzing the lyrics. Nevertheless, for the purposes of this chapter, the next section will show how hip-hop music has negatively formed black male identity and express why it is important for the black church to identify methods to connect to these young men. The following sections will explore three identities and mindsets for black males have taken on and show how they are influenced by hip-hop music: black masculinity, black male treatment of women, and black male engagement in violence against other blacks.

1.5 Hip-Hop Lyrics and the Formation of Black Masculinity

Hip-hop music has contributed to black masculinity being linked to the idea of “downness”—loyal to your crew and ready to embrace any consequence that is a result of your actions. However, being down has created masculinity to be determined by your ability to be tough and hardcore. As someone who works with young black males on a daily basis I have seen this music create generations of black men that are involved in gang activity, sell drugs, rarely smile, or are hesitant to show any form of emotion. Consequently, one of the negative effects of this idea of downness has resulted in black male identity and masculinity being tragically linked to incarceration. As sociologist and political historian Rev. Dr. Michael Eric Dyson notes, “the near ubiquitous presence of prison in the social landscape of black male life means that it increasingly seems natural for black males to go to jail.”13 According to a New York Times

article, “One in fifteen black adults [are behind bars], and one in nine black men between the ages of twenty and thirty-four are in prison.”\textsuperscript{14} Prison has in a sense become an expected part of the black male life as witnessed in the lyrics to Tupac’s song, “Holla If Ya Hear Me,” in which he raps, “Much love to my brothers in the pen/See ya when I free ya if not when they shove me in.” These lyrics highlight what Dyson terms “tragic natural.” In other words, he says that “part of the fascination with prison is a reflection of the sad existential truths of young black male life; as the philosopher Immanuel Kant might say, a necessity is turned into a virtue.”\textsuperscript{15} Sadly, the black male gains honor and prestige if he can share that he served a prison sentence. In other words, prison has become so ingrained in the black male experience that is has become a determinate in black masculinity and authenticity, and in hip-hop music has reinforced prison as a requirement for ‘downness’ as witnessed in the lyrics of a song by rapper Chamillionaire, “No Snitchin’,” in which he reminds a person it is better to go to prison and be a ‘real ni**a’ than to be a snitch:

Your decision was to snitchin' and they was there to listen  
When he told what he know, said they barely was trippin'  
Less time, now da niggas in a better position  
Unless you count the fact that the streets know he was snitchin'.\textsuperscript{16}

Lyrics such as Chamillionaire’s has had an impact on black masculinity, yet there is a history of socio-political factors such as slavery, discrimination, and criminalization of the black male body that has also impacted black masculinity. Forms of media during the enslavement of Africans and after the Civil War often painted black males as brutes, savage beasts, and thugs, and the labeling of such identities can stick with a community of people and after years of internalization can become the identity assumed by the people. Unfortunately, increased notions of black masculinity being linked to sex and violence has affected black male and black female

\textsuperscript{15} Dyson, \textit{Know What I Mean?}, 14.
relations—a topic that will be examined in the next section.

1.6 Hip-Hop Lyrics and the Formation of Black Male Perspectives towards Women

The goal of this section is to discuss the ways in which black men approach and treat women, in particular black women, and how their actions towards women are influenced by hip-hop music. American society was developed and groomed in a system of patriarchy that viewed women as subordinate and subject to the rule of man. Furthermore, sexism and gender inequality are issues that have not gone unnoticed by women in hip-hop. In its power of forming identity, it has cultivated black men that understand women to simply be sexual beings to be used for their pleasure. Dyson explains it in this manner:

“When you survey the landscape, here’s what you get: the extension of the crotch politics of black machismo; the subordination of female desire to male desire; the recolonizing of the black female body by the imperialistic gaze of the black male.”

In some lyrics, black men look to dominate and control the black female body. Rapper 50 Cent has a song entitled, “Magic Stick,” in which he alludes to the fact that his penis is the “magic stick” meaning it has the ability to make females beckon at his every call. It is this idea towards women that lead so many black males in believing that their manhood is defined by how many women they can get to have sex with them. The black female body loses is sacredness and is no longer held as a prize but a right. Moreover, this has led to the thought that most black men

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17 The mistreatment of women is not only a hip-hop thing, for in most genres of music such as rock n’ roll, there exists lyrics that do not always respect the female body. The truth of the matter is that sexism and misogyny are woven into the fabric of American life and it is through the American traditional system of patriarchy did “Hip-Hop derive its understanding of how men and women should behave, and what roles they should play.” However, for clarity, this paper will examine how hip-hop music has shaped black male identity towards women. Dyson, *Know What I Mean?*, 22.

are “baby daddies,” meaning they impregnate these women and then are no longer in contact with them or involved in the life of the child because the child’s mother was simply another notch on his belt. The treatment of women by black men is also paradoxical because these same men that treat women as sex objects hold their mothers on high moral pedestals. This is best seen once again through Tupac who recorded a song, “Dear Mama,” whose lyrics praised his mother:

You always was a black queen, mama
I finally understand
For a woman it ain't easy trying to raise a man
You always was committed
A poor single mother on welfare, tell me how ya did it
There's no way I can pay you back
But the plan is to show you that I understand
You are appreciated. ¹⁹

Yet his lyrics to another song, “F*ck Friendz,” describes his erotic passions for a woman, “I met you and I stuttered in passion/Though slightly blinded by that a**/It was hard to keep my dick in my pants.”²⁰ This same complexity of the thought process of black men is highlighted in the documentary Hip-Hop: Beyond Beats and Rhymes in which an 18 year-old black male, attending BET Spring Bling, name J-Hood is interviewed and he shares with the videographer, “some women is b*tches” and “you got the sisters and you got the b*tches, [pointing to a group of women wearing bikinis] sisters don’t dress like that, those b*tches, look at that ass, I might go over there and smack it.”²¹ This documentary gives a chilling image of how the black male classify black women into different categories, as rapper Tupac does, which impacts how they treat the women they encounter. In addition, this has even impacted how black women view

²⁰ Tupac Shakur, “F*ck Friendz,” in Until the End of Time, recorded 1995-1996, released March 27, 2001, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ou0BeYMwLBs&list=RDou00BeYMwLB.
²¹ BET Spring Bling, hosted by the network Black Entertainment Television (BET), is a time when young adults head to the beach to have fun, and the main draw to the event are the hip-hop artists that will be forming. Byron Hurt, Hip-Hop: Beyond Beats and Rhymes, DVD (Northampton, MA: Media Education Foundation, 2006).
themselves. In order for a woman to gain access to the “circle of influence” they are expected to perform lewd sexual acts for men for the “price of admission in that culture is a surrender of sexual autonomy by the women in order to please the desires of men.”\textsuperscript{22} For example, female rappers often have to rap sexually explicit lyrics in order to gain fame and acceptance, as found in the lyrics to rappers Lil Kim’s song “The Jump Off,” in which she brags “I can make a sprite can disappear in my mouth,” or as seen in lyrics by rapper Nicki Minaj in her song, “Anaconda,” in which she shares a sexual encounter:

This dude named Michael, used to ride motorcycles  
It's bigger than a tower, I ain't talkin' 'bout Eiffel's  
Real country anaconda, let me play with his rifle  
Pussy put his butt to sleep, now he calling me NyQuil.\textsuperscript{23}

Both women are tooted as top rap artists, but unlike men, they have to resort to degrading themselves in order to be noticed.\textsuperscript{24} Women who decide to speak out against male supremacy have their womanhood challenged and are even more marginalized. These sorts of women are understood to be irrational, untamable, and even manly. Women are not supposed to show any signs of aggression or in some cases intelligence because those are seen as characteristics of men. When the women attempt to move outside this system of misogyny men respond by tearing down their character, as seen in a line of the song “U.N.I.T.Y.” In this song, Queen Latifah criticizes men for “trying to make a sister feel low” for refusing sexual advances:

\textsuperscript{22} Dyson, \textit{Know What I Mean?}, 22.  
\textsuperscript{24} To be fair, there are female rappers who have fought off this objectification by serving as a source of encouragement to women while others are attempting to reclaim black womanhood and dismantle gender norms. Female hip-hop artists such as Queen Latifah and Lauryn Hill have offered songs that warn women about the dangers of falling into patriarchal systems and to look at their sexuality and vagina as a “gem,” something that is to be cherished and not shared with just anyone. For these women, “the vagina becomes the second womb, the source of rebirth of [black] female identity as a mirror image of what men are doing. For them, if the man possesses the “magic stick” then the vagina is the thing which devourers the “magic stick.” Consequently, by offering up a new “object of control” and a different “subject of domination” they are expressing an alternative view to womanhood and reshaping the black sexual politics often found in hip-hop music while altering the way women are viewed in hip-hop.
one day I was walking down the block  
I had my cutoff shorts on right cause it was crazy hot  
I walked past these dudes when they passed me  
One of ’em felt my booty, he was nasty  
I turned around red, somebody was catching the wrath  
Then the little one said, “Yeah me, b*tch,” and laughed  
Since he was with his boys, he tried to break fly  
Huh, I punched him dead in his eye  
And said, “Who you calling a b*tch?”

Hip-hop music holds some responsibility in promoting as culture of violence against women, as observed in gangster rapper Eazy E’s verse on the N.W.A rap group song “One Less B*tch,” he boasts, “I tied her to the bed, I was thinking the worst/But yo, I had to let my ni**as f*ck her first/Yeah, loaded up the 44 yo/Then I straight smoked the hoe.” These lyrics shed light on a presumed gangster culture of violence, rape, and crime. Sadly, misogyny is not the only contradiction to the message of peace, love, and unity found within hip-hop.

1.7 Hip-Hop Lyrics and the Formation of Black Male Violence towards Black Males

The purpose of this section is to show hip-hop music’s responsibility concerning violence perpetrated by black men towards the black community. One of the biggest hip-hop hits of 2014 was a track by Bobby Shmurda entitled “Hot Nigga,” which bragged about killing another human being:

And Chewy, I’m some hot nigga  
Like I talk to Shyste when I shot niggas  
Like you seen em’ twirl then he drop nigga  
And we keep them 9 milli’s on my block nigga  
And Monte keep it on him he done drop niggas  
And Trigger he be wilding he some hot nigga  
Tones known to get busy with them

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Glocks nigga try to run down and you can catch a shot nigga.\textsuperscript{27} 

Studies have proven the lifestyle described in these lyrics to accurate. A study conducted by The Violence Policy Center found that in the year 2006 there were 7,425 black homicide victims in the United States, meaning that homicide rates for blacks was 20.27 per 100,000.\textsuperscript{28} Of those deaths, 86 percent were caused by another black male.\textsuperscript{29} In addition, in the years from 2002 to 2007 there was a 31 percent increase in the number of black male juvenile homicide and what is even more alarming that there was a 54 percent increase in the number of deaths of young black males by gun violence.\textsuperscript{30} How does a community that was once extremely close and marched for justice turn on each other? Moreover, what happens in the psyche of an individual in which they no longer see the person who is a part of their community as human?

In his song, “Gangsta Paradise,” rapper Coolio sheds some insight unto this problem while addressing some of the question that was raised above:

\begin{quote}
As I walk through the valley of the shadow of death  
I take a look at my life and realize there's nuttin left  
Cause I've been blastin' and laughin so long that  
Even my ma'ma thinks that my mind is gone  
But ain't never crossed a man that didn't deserve it  
Me, be treated like a punk, you know that's unheard of  
You better watch how you talkin, and where you walkin  
Or you and your homies might be lined in chalk  
I really hate to trip, but I gotta loc'-  
As they croak I see myself in the pistol smoke, fool.\textsuperscript{31}
\end{quote}


\textsuperscript{28} The Violence Policy Center (VPC) is a national non-profit educational organization that conducts research and public education on violence in America and provides information and analysis to policymakers, journalists, advocates, and the general public.


One of the first things that Coolio brings to attention is that maybe the reason a lot of these issues are going on is because individuals have no hope. The environment in which many of this generation lives is so polluted with drugs and crime that they have lost hope for a better tomorrow. Such an attitude leads to one not necessarily caring about the imaginative possibilities of the future because they feel as if their future has already been determined—a life that will lead to prison or death. It is the presence of this outlook on life that breeds individuals who have little regard for their life, let alone the life of someone else. He explains that for most of their lives, young black males are living in what is perceived to be a “gangsta’s paradise.” In this paradise, the most important things are the power and the money/money and the power. In this environment, survival is achieved through money and power, and this may require that you murder in order to maintain that security.

In the documentary previously mentioned, a group of young black rappers were asked to share some rhymes and the lyrics were filled with images of violence towards each other. One of the rappers rhymes, “when it’s time to go to war I come equipped with the gauge/and the tech infect flesh like a syphilis plague/in case a Nicholas Cage wanna take it for granted/try to face off get token off the face of the planet,” while another exclaims, “when the shells hit they body, I show’em who that bastard be/ask my down ass niggas will you blast for me.”

Gun bars, as they are called, are riddled throughout hip-hop songs.

The importance of having a gun and bragging about being able to kill another black male is a dominate message within hip-hop music which is further witnessed in the lyrics of rapper Nas:

Yo, I'm living in this time behind enemy lines
So, I got mine, I hope you (got yourself a gun)
You from the hood, I hope you (got yourself a gun)

32 Hurt, Hip-Hop (DVD).
You want beef, I hope you (got yourself a gun)
And when I see you I'ma take what I want
So you tried to front, hope you (got yourself a gun)
You ain't real, hope you (got yourself a gun).\textsuperscript{33}

Grammy award-winning and well respected progressive rapper Mos Def was interviewed in this same documentary and he shares how the music has generated within him a black male culture of violent aggression towards other men as he states, “I was a nerd, I was a f*ckin’ bookworm around the way, but when sh*t got critical, you know you can’t be no punk,” he goes on to further explain “I know that’s how a lot of young black men is growing up, that’s how I can grew up...you gotta let niggas know I ain’t no pussy, and you will get tested.”\textsuperscript{34} Hip-hop minister Conrad Tillard calls this “playing a role,” one that young black men are taught as early as the age of seven.\textsuperscript{35} However, these same artists also rally against negative treatment of black males from people outside the black community, which once again shows that contradicting identities hip-hop music gives to young black men.

In the same song, Coolio explains that a life of violence is not necessarily the way people in this community want to live, which is seen by a question he asks in the song, “Why are we so blind to see/that the ones we hurt are you and me”? This question lets me know that members of this particular community are aware that their actions are not right, but, they lack the necessary resources that could aid in their liberation. Atlanta based rapper Young Jeezy notes in his song, “Go Crazy,” “it’s kinda hard to be drug free when Georgia power won’t give a nigga lights free.” Young Jeezy is pointing out that it’s not his desire to sell illegal narcotics; however, it is the only way society has afforded him the opportunity to participate in capitalism. Similarly, rap group

\textsuperscript{33} Nas, “Got Yourself a Gun,” in Escape from New York, mix by DJ Whoo Kid, hosted by Nas, released in 2001, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MOZOXUICJHA.
\textsuperscript{34} Hurt, Hip-Hop (DVD).
\textsuperscript{35} Ibid.
N.W.A, known for its violent lyrics and glorification of the gangster lifestyle also created one of the most politically charged statements and songs in hip-hop history that had the country divided in the same manner Beyoncé did with her Superbowl 50 performance. The song, “F*ck tha Police,” criticized unfair policy practices of racial profiling that largely targeted poor minorities. This same critique can be seen in songs by rapper Chamillionaire who shares that the police “get behind me trying to check my tags/look at my rearview and they smiling/ thinkin they’ll catch me on the wrong/ well keep trying, cause they denying its racial profiling”\(^{36}\) and lyrics of rapper turned businessman, CEO Sean Carter that raps about this same racial profiling in the song “99 Problems”:

So I, pull over to the side of the road  
I heard "Son do you know why I'm stoppin' you for?"  
Cause I'm young and I'm black and my hats real low  
Do I look like a mind reader sir, I don't know  
Am I under arrest or should I guess some mo'?\(^{37}\)

Dyson notes that, “the black body is constantly being assaulted by the withering force of injustice that seeks to warehouse black men in the burgeoning prison-industrial complex.”\(^{38}\)

Unfortunately, part of the issues that these rappers and other black men face is a result of the music in hip-hop culture that portrays black men as threatening and violent. However, the lyrics of N.W.A, Jay Z, Young Jezzy, and Chamillionaire point to the fact that hip-hop music still maintains a prophetic voice. Coolio says, “They say I got ta learn, but nobody's here to teach me/If they can't understand it, how can they reach me?/ I guess they can't; I guess they won't/I guess they can't; that's why I know my life is outta luck, fool,” which for me illumes to the fact

\(^{38}\) Dyson, Know What I Mean?, 16.
that that are the some of the major resources missing from this environment is education and
someone pointing black males in the right direction. Most of the violence is a result of poor life
choices; however, if no one is there to teach this generation the cycle will continue. This is why
the black church should utilize hip-hop music as a tool for discipleship because even with its
violent and misogynist lyrics, hip-hop music still has to be a source of power and form positive,
socially conscious black male identities. One of hip-hop's greatest critiques, as seen in some of
the lyrics above, is hip-hop itself.

1.8 Hip-Hop's Internal Critique and the Potential for Positive Formation

This section will show that hip-hop music has the potential to lead to positive formation
because it is not without its own internal critique, a self-evaluation that both acknowledges the
formative power of hip-hop lyrics while also decrying the use of this power of negative ends. For
example, rapper artist Common in his song, "I Used to Love H.E.R.," expresses his frustration
with the change in the messages that hip-hop artist put out:

    I met this girl, when I was ten years old
    And what I loved most she had so much soul
    She was old school, when I was just a shorty
    Never knew throughout my life she would be there for me
    On the regular, not a church girl she was secular
    Not about the money, those studs was mic checking her
    But I respected her, she hit me in the heart.39

At first glance the song appears to be about a female he once met, but then he goes and informs
the listener who the song is actually about:

    She was really the realest, before she got into showbiz
    I did her, not just to say that I did it
    But I'm committed, but so many niggas hit it
    That she's just not the same letting all these groupies do her

39 Common, "I Used To Love H.E.R.," in Resurrection, released October 25, 1994,
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C99iG4HoO1c.
I see niggas slamming her, and taking her to the sewer
But I'mma take her back hoping that the shit stop
Cause who I'm talking bout y'all is hip-hop.\(^{40}\)

For Common, hip-hop has lost its way and needs to be reclaimed and that which was
once soulful and authentic now has a focus on amassing money and fame. In its early
developmental stages, hip-hop culture was a socio-political movement that exposed the horrors
and injustices performed on marginalized communities.\(^{41}\) For example, hip-hop culture pioneers
KRS-One and Boogie Down Productions produced several socially conscious songs that
promoted education and family.\(^{42}\) Along with Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five, these
songs encouraged disenfranchised people to learn how to combat societal ills. In addition, these
artists influenced groups like Public Enemy, who were at the forefront of developing a militant
voice through hip-hop. Holding nothing back when delivering their message, they attacked
everyone from the government to black radio. With the release of songs like “Fight the Power,”
Public Enemy made clear the oppression taking place in black communities, exposing the world
to racial and social injustices committed against poor, urban, minority communities. In the same
vein, these artists also held the black community accountable for its role in damaging its own
people, particularly as it related to violence, drugs, and treatment of women. Even Caucasian
rappers, such as The Beastie Boys, even though raised in privileged white backgrounds, saw the
need to address the wrongs that were taking place within society and hip-hop itself. On the
album, *Ill Communication*, Adam Yauch raps on the song “Sure Shot”:

I want to say a little something that’s long overdue,
the disrespect to women has got to be through,
to all the mothers and sisters and wives and friends,

\(^{40}\) Ibid.


\(^{42}\) Tommy Kylloren, *Unorthodox: Church, Hip-Hop, Culture* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 84.
I want to offer my love and respect to the end.\textsuperscript{43} Hip-hop’s power to critique itself makes it a potential candidate for the church to consider in reaching the generation that is being raised and formed by hip-hop music. Grandmaster Flash put it this way, “Hip-Hop is the only genre of music that allows us to talk about almost anything ... It’s highly controversial, but that’s the way the game is.”\textsuperscript{44} It was the ability of putting pen to paper and words to rhythm that allowed individuals who felt trapped and isolated from the greater society to express themselves in a manner that was unique and reflective of their identity. Even with its hurtful images and lyrics, hip-hop music has and continues to promote an ideology of black as powerful and encourages young black men to rebuild community and take control of their own destinies.

Black male youth are in process of formation on a continual spectrum and the black church has to determine what role it will serve in formation of youth. For Christians, identity formation is rooted in discipleship, and in many ways, hip-hoppers are disciples of hip-hop. Recognizing and working with hip-hop can help churches understand the population of people that embrace this culture and combat some of the negative identities formed through hip-hop songs. This should not be a task that is too difficult because there already exists a relationship between Christian communities and hip-hop and as faith communities evolve and its members are influenced by different mediums, embracing alternative methods of discipleship will help young people in the process of spiritual formation

\textsuperscript{44} Alan Light, \textit{The Vibe History of Hip Hop} (New York: Three Rivers Press, 1999), vii.
Chapter 2: Understanding Black Men’s Relationship with Christianity and the Black Church through the Lens of Hip-Hop Music

2.1 Introduction

The first chapter explored hip-hop’s power to influence identity formation in black males by offering up three examples of black male identity that has been shaped by hip-hop music and this chapter will share three images of black males that the black church has created as result of its rejection of hip-hop music, a consequence that has alienated black men. This second chapter will address the different ways in which black males respond to Christianity, which will be seen through the medium of hip-hop music. This chapter will begin by highlighting how the crux of rap’s ethos has always had an underlying narrative of divine recognition and spirituality since its inception. This section is necessary because it provides a historical look into why certain black males have developed particular outlooks and feelings towards Christianity and the black church. A brief history of the relationship between hip-hop and Christianity helps the reader to understand the three of examples of black male response to the church and ways in which they incorporate Christianity into their music. The second part of this chapter will, by examining hip-hop lyrics, expose differing responses to the black church and Christianity by black males. It will present portraits of black males that have complete disdain for the church and Christianity as well as show black males that have a since of religious conviction but whose lifestyles does not align with the gospel. Lastly, it will show black males who have completely embraced hip-hop music and its usefulness in spreading the gospel. This examination is useful because it will illuminate the common themes, attitudes, and feelings that black males have towards Christianity and it further helps the argument of this thesis that the black church should embrace hip-hop in order to reach black males.
2.2 Hip-Hop and Christianity

The black church's embracing of hip-hop strength as a discipleship tool can be done easily if the church can see the longstanding relationship between hip-hop music and the Christian faith, as this section will highlight. In many regards, it is difficult to grasp the pairing of God and hip-hop music; hip-hop lyrics at times are misogynistic, violent, rebellious, drug filled, and greed focused—characteristics that are the complete opposite of the message found in the four gospels. Christianity has always been a stakeholder in the hip-hop community, and expressions of Christian beliefs are found in hip-hop music from its inception. This is not necessarily surprising since early practitioners and pioneers of hip-hop were Christian or had some religious convictions towards God. It would only make sense that hip-hop, itself being a vehicle that served as an outlet for people to express their lived experience, not only contained lyrics about racism, poverty, and other forms of marginalization's, but writers and graffiti artists also expressed their faith convictions. One of the earliest examples of this is the music of Stephen Wiley, who in the early 1980s even before Run DMC brought hip-hop to the mainstream, was using hip-hop music to rap about God and his Christian beliefs. Often recognized as the original gospel rapper, Stephen Wiley introduced the world to “Bible Break,” the first mainstream Christian hip-hop rap song:

Listen friends, lend an ear
Because faith comes by the words you hear
I'm not talking junk, I'm not talking jive
But I got a message to make you alive.\(^1\)

Wiley, a hip-hop pioneer, was a young minister who sought to expose African-American youth to the gospel message. He, like many others, spoke over hip-hop beats rather than the church's

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traditional organ to introduce Christ. Unfortunately, his approach to spreading the gospel was not always kindly met by pastors and other religious leaders for church congregants still saw this music as sinful and associated it with the ghetto and gangster youth. To the credit of these leaders, their primary fear is that the inclusion of sacred messages within hip-hop music presents an image that Christianity accepts the immoral tenants of traditional hip-hop music. For them, the presentation of such message is not always authentic and can at times come across as another way to simply sell a record. However, this was not the case with Wiley who was minister in the church that grew up in hip-hop and used hip-hop music to express his beliefs in the same manner the rap artists that believed in selling drugs did. Wiley rapped, “It’s not the beat, but it’s the Word that sets the people free. So, give me the Word!” Yet in still, mainline conservative black churches continue to block hip-hop music from entering the sanctuary, something that was evidently seen in 1993 when Rev. Calvin Butts, Pastor of Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem began to label rappers as thugs, and drove a steamroller over numerous rap albums to show the world that the church did not condone hip-hop music. Though the Rev. Butts incident happened in the 1990s, I suspect the mindset he possessed continues to permeate throughout the black church and in many regards is a contributor to why certain black males have a disdain towards the black church and Christianity altogether.

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4 This mindset is seen in a song by gospel artist Tye Tribbet. In Tribbet’s song, “Stand Out,” he states, “How you gonna be the praise leader? But you listen to R & B?/And hip-hop is on your ringtone. I’m trynna tell you God ain’t pleased.” Tye Tribbett, “Stand Out,” in Stand Out, released May 6, 2008, http://www.songlyrics.com/tye-tribbett/stand-out-lyrics/#gm1morKM4h2eJrCB.99. The lyrics of this song represent the mindset of those like Rev. Butts in that it requires Christians to have a clear disconnect from anything that is not Christian, in particular hip-hop and R&B.
2.3 Black Males Discontent with the Black Church and Christianity

This section will show an attitude of disdain and distrust towards Christianity by some black males. Writer Stephanie Mwandishi Gadlin who is known for her commentary on cultural and socio-political issues offers up what she terms as ‘Hip-Hop’s (Unspoken) Ten Commandments,’ which are unspoken because no one will ever come right out and say this is what hip-hop follows, but a study of the hip-hop lyrics put forth messages that agree with the ideas birthed in her list. For the purpose of this section, the sixth commandment she presents will be discussed:

Thou must rarely talk about God and spirituality. You must lyrically condone atheism and a false belief system that negates the existences of a higher being. You must routinely question the existence of a god by lyrically challenging him/her/it to take your life or to grant you three wishes. You are to refer to yourself as a god who gives and takes life. You may lyrically create your own religion (see tenth commandment) based on a ghetto belief system. Thou shalt not talk about life and death as it relates to spirituality or a sense of purpose. You should never speak of scripture or religious texts. You are prohibited from acknowledging any spiritual beliefs that may have been instilled you by family. However, you may identify with a Jesus by wearing a large, diamond encrusted piece whereby you may brag about its costs. Under no circumstance are you to promote prayer, reflection, meditation, atonement, redemption, sacrifice, mercy or grace. The consumer fan base must identify with your lack of spiritual grounding by believing that the only gods are sex and money. By keeping this commandment, you vow to limit your personal spiritual growth and development. You also vow to never been seen publicly in a church, synagogue, mosque, temple or other house of worship and reflection.  

For Gadlin, the ethos of hip-hop music, based on her analysis of its lyrics is one that does not embrace expressions of religious convictions in music. Moreover, what is to be glorified in the music is material wealth and gain paired with sexual conquest. The idea that Gadlin presents is not completely wrong, for there are black men, as articulated through hip-hop music, that voice

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this sentiment. In fact, they use hip-hop music, as Gadlin suggests, to attack the church and Christianity, something as clearly seen in the music of rapper Ice Cube.

In the song “When I Get to Heaven,” Ice Cube offers a negative critique of the black religion:

But my whole neighborhood is comatose
Lookin' for survival
The Devil made you a slave an' he gave you a Bible
400 years of gettin' our ass kicked
By so called Christians an' Catholics
But I'ma watch 'em burn in the fire
See I'm a G, that's why I ain't in your choir
'Cause I see, 'cause I know
The church ain't nuttin' but a fashion show
Get the Devil do a 187
An' they won't call me a nigga when I get to Heaven.6

This distrust of Christianity has been a common thread within the hip-hop community and artist such as Ice Cube have no problem expressing that dissatisfaction with the church. For Ice Cube, Christianity and the black church is a tool that Caucasians used to enforce ideas and practices of white hegemony.7 Moreover, he does not see a connection between Christianity and being black. In addition, in this same verse, you also see the artist struggles with feelings of judgment from Christians and feels that at the times the black church is more of a social club than a place for comfort; however, his mention of not being seen as a racial being when he gets to Heaven also shines light on the fact that his view on Christianity and the black church is also linked to hurt he has experienced as a black man from society and the church. This same since of hurt and distrust is found in lyrics by other rappers as well.

7 Marchant, “Emergence of Religion,” 16.
In “Pearly Gates,” a song by Mobb Deep featuring 50 Cent, Mobb Deep raps, ‘now homie if I go to hell and you make it to the pearly gates, tell the boss man we got beef,’ and these words informs to two things, one the rapper does believe in the promise of the gospel, but because of the things he has experienced in life, he does not like God, in fact he wants to settle a ‘beef’ with God.Tyler the Creator, another rapper, is very clear in his dislike and nonbelief in Jesus. I in the song “Tron Cat” he raps, ‘cause I be too f*cking busy tryna flirt with Jesus’ daughter (f*ck Mary) and in Yonkers, he raps ‘Jesus called, he said he’s sick of the disses, I told him to quit b*tchin and this isn’t a f*ckin hotline.’ His lyrics show a young man that mocks the idea of Jesus as God or sinless man as he makes reference to Jesus having a daughter. His portrayal of Jesus as a myth or fairytale is reminiscent of lyrics found in “F*ck Off,” a song by Kid Rock featuring Eminem, in the song he raps, ‘put faith in lust and in God I trust, I’m not Peter Pan I don’t f*ck with fairies’ in which Kid Rock is basically saying individuals that believe in God are no different than people that believe in fairytales. Lastly, there are some rappers who see Jesus as nothing more than a man, as seen in the lyrics of Jay Z in the song “No Church In the Wild,” in which he raps “Jesus was a carpenter, Yeezy laid beats, Hova flow the Holy Ghost, get the hell up out your seats, preach.” The way in which many of these rappers describe or address the church and Jesus would be seen as blasphemy, but in a larger picture, what these lyrics show are black men that hold anger, frustration, and disappointment in the black and towards the black church and God. Ice Cube and the other black male rappers mentioned present an image of black men who have walked away from the black church because for them, the black

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8 In hip-hop culture, a beef is when two or more people have a disagreement with each other, which often leads to a violent confrontation.
9 Although neither Kid Rock or Eminem are black males, their song was used in this chapter because they are included as members of the hip-hop community; thus their sentiments in some way connect with black men—so much so that Eminem has won numerous Grammy awards for his rapping.
church has yet to address the issues that are face living in poor, urban environments. When they look at pastors driving fancy cars that their church members’ tithes and offerings supported while there was no food or electricity at home, they became disenfranchised with the message of Christianity.

Ice Cube’s lyrical commentary on the black church, although written over two decades ago, is very much reminiscent of the feelings of numerous contemporary youth. The hypocrisy that exists in the religious communities in which blacks subscribe created a vast vacuum and disconnection for many young black urbanites. One black millennial writes,

I stopped going to church about six months after Michael Brown was killed in Ferguson. My church at the time, a Pentecostal black church in South Los Angeles, had made no mention of police brutality or Black Lives Matter, and I couldn’t help but interpret their silence to mean that my life meant didn’t matter much either.\(^\text{10}\)

The black churches continual dismissal of hip-hop music is making them ignorant to the issues and feelings of young black males, which is a contributing factor as to why many young black men are walking away from an institution that once was at the center of black life. Moreover, the black church inability to connect with black males that did not walk completely away from the church has created black males that are Christian but their lifestyle at times does not reflect the gospel message.

2.4 Black Males with One Foot In, One Foot Out of the Black Church

This section will, through an analysis of hip-hop lyrics, present the black male that professes a relationship with Christ, yet lifestyle does not always align with the gospel. This

section is important because it highlights, that unlike the black males depicted earlier, all black men are not against Christianity or the black church; yet when the black church does not embrace hip-hop, it can leave them lacking discipleship and accountability and as a result, their lives look different from than what they profess. In many instances, as seen in the songs, these men do want a relationship with the church and desire God to have a role in their everyday existence. Such a desire is seen in the song “Where Is the Love” by Black Eyed Peas singer will.i.am:

People killin, people dyin’
Children hurt and you hear them cryin’
Can you practice what you preach?
Or would you turn the other cheek?
Father, Father, Father help us
Send some guidance from above
‘Cause people got me, got me questionin’
Where is the love (love).\(^{11}\)

This lyrical verse points to black males’ connectedness to a religious identity and a pleading for the “Father” to send direction from “above.” In many ways, this lyric is reminiscent of words spoken by the Israel King David and later echoed by Jesus on the cross, “About three in the afternoon Jesus cried out in a loud voice, “Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?” which means “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Matthew 27:46). Like the black male that described in the former section, these men to feel as if God is missing in action, yet, they have not completely walked away from God. will.i.am and others like him sheds light on hip-hop’s past and current relationship with Christianity, and this relationship exist even amongst artist who lifestyles may not be as clean or scandal free as will.i.am or Stephen Wiley.

\(^{11}\) Black Eyed Peas, “Where Is The Love,” in Elephunk, released June 16, 2003, http://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/blackeyedpeas/whereisthelove.html. Although the Black Eyed Peas are often cast in the category of pop music, in the majority of his songs he raps his rhyme, which is why he is included in this chapter.
Hip-hop blogger Shaheem Reid argues that pre-2004, a significant number of rap albums had a track that was spiritual in nature, yet these rappers never released these tracks as a single and if you did not purchase the album, you would not know these songs existed. Part of this is because hip-hop stills maintains some harsh feeling towards the church and these rappers want to have “musical respect that is independent of his [their] spiritual beliefs,” which helps them fit into the culture. This is clearly seen as it relates to rapper Mase, who once was one the most lyrically celebrated rapper and his lyrics were extremely misogynistic and violent, the complete antithesis of the gospel, which is evident in the song “24 Hours to Live”:

Yo, I’d turn out all the hoes that’s heterosexual
Smack conceited niggas right off the pedestal
I’d even look for my dad that I never knew
And shoe him how to look in my Beretta too.

He later becomes a Christian minister that left the rap game to return later with more Christ centered message. However, even with a Christ-centered message, he has not completely abandoned his old life, as made evident in his song “Welcome Back.” In this song, Mase first details his conversion and newfound commitment to God:

See I rep the most high, still I'm the most fly
I win so much, they want to know who I'm coached by
Everyday approached by chicks when I was on top
want to give me sosa, but I'm like don't try
I see the hisses and the disses when I go by
But see the misses on my wristses when I float by
Self control, and I can't tell you no lie
Tryin' to find a soulmate, you end up being so tired
I make my money man without the coca
Livin' the vida without the loca.

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12 Marchant, “Emergence of Religion,” 16.
13 Ibid., 22.
14 Ibid., 19.
15 Ibid.
However, as the rap continues, it becomes clear that he has not left his old life behind:

I see the girls in the club, they gettin' wild for me  
And all the pretty chicks all want to smile at me  
These rap cats man they all got they style from me  
And if I ever seen them then they probably bow to me  
I'm just a bad boy gone clean  
I'm the diamond chain choker, always remain sober  
Don't drink liquor and all the games over.\textsuperscript{16}

which shows that even in his converted state, he still enjoys time in the clubs, smoking, and has an ego that suggest because he is great other rappers ‘bow’ to him. Yet on that same album in the song “Breathe, Stretch, Shake,” which went as high as number seven on Billboards Hot Rap Singles Chart, he makes a comparison to him and Moses, ‘I’m back like Moses to bring the law, brand new Saint Mase,’ and reference to his newness in Christ,

\begin{verbatim}
Before '99 I was born again
5 years later and I'm on again
Been a change of plan
Rip your old plan up
Instead of hatin'
Help me lift the big man up.\textsuperscript{17}
\end{verbatim}

Mase represents many black males today that have a relationship with Christ but have not completely walked away from lifestyles that do not match up with Christian standards set forth by the black church. Although Mase has developed a new Christian worldview for addressing society, his “new found religious principles” are supported by “secular values” of material wealth, because he now raps how evidence of God in his life is manifested in the fact that he has a “hot gray drop Maybach.”\textsuperscript{18} Another example of this is rapper DMX.

DMX is known in the rap community for producing great music, but his contributions to hip-hop is often overshadowed by his numerous stints in prison and habitual drug usage and

\textsuperscript{16} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., 21.  
\textsuperscript{18} Ibid.
addiction to cocaine. Nevertheless, many young people relate to DMX’s music because “they see an authenticity, a realness, a story that doesn’t shy away from the contradictions and complexities of life.”

And for the black church, he offers an intimate look into how modern hip-hoppers relate and connect to the divine,

In the name of Jesus, let us pray
Father, please walk with us
Through the bad times as well as the good
May we be heard and understood
From the suburbs to the hood
May You judge us by our hearts
And not by our mistakes
And see that we get a breakthrough
However long that it takes
May You fill that void in our souls
That will lay our fears to rest
’Cause there’s no way we can live for Jesus
When we’re living in the flesh.

The lyrics to this song show that he, along with many other black males, have a deep sense of connection to Christianity and a desire to live a life according to the Gospel but are unable to defeat the issues that plague them. However, as spiritual as this song may be, DMX has other music that details his many sexual tirades with women,

Come on ma, you know I got a wife
and even though that pussy tight I’m not gon’ jeopardize my life (aight?)
So what is it you want from a nigga? (WHAT?)
I gave you, you gave me – B*TCH, I blazed you, you blazed me (c’mon)
Nothin more, nothin less, but you at my door
willin to confess that it's the best you ever tested
Better than all the rest, I'm like, Aight girlfriend, hold up
I gave you, what you gave me Boo, a nut (’Preal).

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In this verse, you see a black man that is married, yet still engages in relationships with other women, and his reference to this these women as ‘b*tches’ shows how even though he has some relationship with God, he is not immune to having an identity of masculinity, as stated in chapter one, that sees women simply as sexual beings. Yet in the song “Lord Give Me a Sign” he raps,

Lord give me a sign!
I really need to talk to you Lord
Since the last time we talked the work has been hard
Now I know you haven’t left me
But I feel like I’m alone
I’m a big boy now but I’m still not grown
And I’m still going through it
Pain and the hurt
Soaking up trouble like rain in the dirt
And I know!
Only I can stop the rain
With just the mention of my saviors name
In the name of Jesus!
Devil I rebuke you for what I go through.  

This song paints a picture of the real and current struggles of black males living in the twenty-first century. Within times of sorrow, such as the death of friend or family or in times of celebration, such as winning an award, rappers often invoke the presence of the divine and even in lyrics not overtly Christian, one can discern themes that echo Christian reflections and

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22 DMX, “Lord Give Me a Sign” in Year of the Dog ... Again, released August 1, 2006,
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5epObO5fTqU.

23 Authenticity and being genuine is necessary in order to gain respect in the hip-hop community. Artists are celebrated and garner a fan base because in their music they speak of their real-life struggles and ways in which they have succumbed or overcame their struggles. Mase and DMX were chosen for this chapter as examples of black men struggling with living what the black church would consider Christian lifestyle while openly professing Christ because of the truth telling they do in their music. When DMX raps about sex with different women, he is not speaking symbolically of all men; he is literally speaking on his own life. In his music, he openly discusses his inability to be faithful to his wife. Mase’s Welcome Back album is more than music; it is his testimony, the truth of his reality. So, when he raps about being born again, but also discloses that as pastor of a church he still goes to clubs and their women are throwing themselves at him, he is not speaking symbolically; he is actually sharing what his life is like currently. Besides depicting sinful behavior in their music, or even condoning such behavior, Mase and DMX are giving their listeners a window into their personal struggles. It is this commitment to transparency and truth that made them useful for this chapter because they represent a population of black men that are navigating their way through conforming to a Christian lifestyle while trying to remain relevant in a hip-hop community that is essential to their identity.
thought. For example, in Biggie Small’s song “Suicidal Thoughts,” he opens with a rather disturbing lyric: “When I die, f*ck it I wanna go to hell. Cause I’m a piece of sh*t, it ain’t hard to f*ckin’ tell” and later follows with: “I swear to God I just want to slit my wrist and end this bullsh*t/ Throw the Magnum to my head, threaten to pull sh*t.” 24 Such lyrics express pain, feelings of worthlessness, and a general loss of interest in living life. In these lyrics, a young black man acknowledges life beyond death, a hell, and believes it’s where he ought to go because of his lifestyle. Biggie Smalls is known in the rap world not only for his amazing lyrical skills but also for his ill treatment of women, glorification of illegal drug selling, and violence towards others. The aforementioned activities are contradictory to the Christian lifestyle and knowing the Sunday morning preachers’ narrative, they result in an eternity in Hell—which the rapper is aware. That brief line in this lyric, as depressing as it may sound, points to an understanding of God and Christianity for many black males. It is lyrics of this nature that help the argument that the black church should use hip-hop as discipleship tool, for these lyrics can point the church in the direction of gaining a deeper understanding of what black males are feeling and thinking.

Watkins explains, “theological reflection in this type of music is more authentic than what we find in music we categorize as religious,” for although hymns and other gospel songs are doctrinally correct, they are not always “reflective of people’s belief and behaviors in the real world.” 25 For Watkins the church has to turn to hip-hop music to know what black men are thinking religiously because within hip-hop, the rappers “raise rich theological questions” and they are authentic examples of the life of black males that confess Christ. 26 However, they are

25 Watkins, Hip-Hop Redemption, 89.
26 Ibid.
not the only image that exist of black men that confess Christ, for because of hip-hop’s music innate attributes of Christianity an entirely new genre of music was birthed from hip-hop known as Holy Hip-Hop, which is full of young black men who are members of the hip-hop community, but are securely connected to their faith and chose to rap only about the gospel. Rappers in this genre represent black men whose lives fully embrace their Christian identity without disowning hip-hop culture.

2.5 Kicking Against the Pricks: Remaining Authentically Christian in Hip-Hop Culture

This section will share images of black men that differ from the images of black men in the first previous two sections as these men are living lives that are reflective of the gospel. Unlike rappers such as Mase and DMX, gospel rappers solely view the world from a Christian perspective and use music as means to expose the world to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Gospel rappers distance themselves from mainstream hip-hop and created a new branch of hip-hop that focused on “uniting a community of Holy Hip Hoppers or Christian Hip Hoppers (for example: T-Bone, Grits, and Cross Movement).”27 This section is important to the focus of this thesis because it will show ways in which those committed to hip-hop music are full participants in Christianity, even living up to Christian value such as purity and moral conviction. Moreover, it will highlight ways in which these black men are often times rejected by the hip-hop community, as understood in the lyrics of gospel rapper Da’ Truth,

> People got questions like-
> How come y’all don’t talk about Martin and Malcolm
> But y’all always talkin’ bout Calvin and Luther
> Cause these are the dudes that introduced us to truth
> And the fruit that’s produced in us is the outcome
> So from now until the day that we die

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27 Emmett George Price, *Hip Hop Culture* (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2006), 53,
We'll occupy with the things of God while our mouths run
That's unique to the saints- you know how roots run deep in the faith.\textsuperscript{28}

As Da Truth points out, some people in the hip-hop community believe these black men are too religious and neglect the issues that plague young black males in the inner cities and ghettos of the South. It is this kind of thinking and push back that black men that are trying to live Christian lives get from the hip-hop community that makes it difficult for them to fully embrace Christian authenticity and leaves them reflecting images of men such as DMX. However, gospel rappers do not shy away from telling the world, through rap music, their previous shortcomings,

\begin{quote}
Ah man you name it bra, I promise I done done it all
So busy doin me that I ain't care at all (I'm changed)
I know I ain't the person that I used to be
I look the same but I promise this a newer me
See what I used to be was selfish and conceited
I was living for myself and telling Jesus he could beat it
At the time I couldn't see it, all I saw was havin fun
Went to church to look for ladies, not to look upon the Son
I was a hedonist, now Jesus is my pleasure
I was a narcissist but now I'm lookin betta.
But I ain't fix myself, ain't turn myself around
I gave it up and told the Lord that he can have it now.\textsuperscript{29}
\end{quote}

These rappers acknowledge that they too once fell victim to the black male narrative, but once they became saved, all that changed. This critique and ostracizing they often received for others within the hip-hop community is misplaced because gospel rappers also see hip-hop as a voice of the collective of impoverished and oppressed people in a society steeped in the continual decline of the ghetto, yet they subscribe to a higher power, which is Jesus Christ and their Christian identity trumps any other identity. For them, a connection to God does not mean a disconnection for social realities, instead, they look to God to empower them to overcome the harshness in the


\textsuperscript{29} Lecrae, “Used to Do It Too” in Rehab, released September 28, 2010, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E7XEOmgvX0c.
world. Unfortunately, these rappers and black man are not always accepted by Christian leaders because of their connection to hip-hop.

Ex-Ministries, a ministry for former hip-hoppers, led by Elder G. Craig Lewis, argues that hip-hop is the tool the spiritual enemy uses to influence youth across racial and ethnic lines, but especially black youth. Elder Lewis, in his sermons and lectures, often speaks of the vision he received from God, in which God informed him that the enemy was not able to reach black youth through heavy metal music, but needed a new avenue. Therefore, the enemy set out to create a genre of music that would not only reach black youth, but would stretch across racial and ethnic barriers, creating mass influence and confusion. According to Lewis, “the music he showed me that would surface is what we now call Hip Hop.”³⁰ For Lewis, his ministry serves as an eye-opener that is essential to protecting the foundation of our churches and our relationship to God and this done through his call to shed light on Hip-Hop culture. Thus, the black males that gospel rappers such as Da Truth and Lecrae represent are black males that find themselves on the margins of the black church and the black hip-hop community, and they express their feelings and critiques of both institutions through their music.

Their critique of the black church is very similar to that of Ice Cubes, for they also sometimes fail to see the relevancy of the black church in the black community, as seen in lyrics by Lecrae,

Church tryna’ rob my paychecks  
Choir members probably having gay sex  
Pastor manipulatin’ hurtin’ women  
I wonder which he’s gon slay next  
Bookstore pimpin’ them hope books  
Like God don’t know how broke looks  
And telling me that I’m gon reap a meal

If I sow into these low crooks  
Plus I know ol’ girl a freak  
And how she singin’ a solo  
I walked in the church wit a snapback  
And they tellin’ me that that’s a “nono”?  
That’s backwards, and I lack words  
For these actors called pastors  
All these folks is hypocrites  
And that’s why I ain’t at church.31

Often times, in my experience, black males that listen to gospel rappers tend to have delusions about the black church and tend to label themselves as spiritual rather than religious. In saying this, they mean they are not connected to any organized religious institution but are more concerned about personal piety. Gospel rappers have critiques for those individuals focused solely on the restoration of black people through social justice for in the same song, Lecrae raps,

Yo R.I.P. to Medgar Evers, R.I.P. to Dr. King  
I ain’t tryna hate on my own kind  
But Al and Jesse don’t speak for me  
I’m probably gon’ catch some flack mayne  
But I’mma swallow this pill like Pacman  
Some of these folks won’t tell the truth  
Too busy tryna’ get them racks mayne.

In this lyric, Lecrae acknowledge the plight of black people, but shares that he does not rely on black leaders to speak for him, but he focuses on the Word of God to guide him and enlighten him on issues of social justice. The black men that are reflected in the work of Lecrae and Da Truth believe that the message that should be preached is Christ and Christ alone, as the writer Apostle Paul would say, “For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified” (I Corinthians 2:2). For them, the necessity for Christ is made a reality.

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31 Lecrae, “Church Clothes” in Church Clothes, released May 10, 2012, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AEsKFn8IEgE.
for the believer and non-believer alike, calling both to a position of repentance of sin and a return to righteousness. In the same manner that the shepherd boy David used music to calm King Saul, and the early church fathers penned hymns and spirituals to experience their religious realities, so do these particular artists. Unfortunately, because of rejection from the black church, as with Stephen Wiley, and from those within the hip-hop community, these rappers, as with black men that are attached to their music have either left organized black churches altogether or created their own churches.

2.6 A Move towards Bridging the Gap between Black Males and the Black Church

The purpose of this section is to offer a way in which reconciliation can take place between the black church and black males. This chapter has shown that whether it’s the black male that has no belief of positive sentiment about God, or it’s the black male that lives what many would call a lukewarm Christian, or the black male that fully embraces hip-hop and Christian doctrine, all three have experienced hurt from the black church and black religious leaders. Religious leaders such as Lewis feel this way about hip-hop music because they look only at the negative lyrics in hip-hop to form their perspective. This is problematic because if individuals in the early first century based their perception of Christianity solely on the actions of a disciple being a former tax collector or another disciple cutting off the ear of a someone in law enforcement there is no telling if Christianity will be where it is today. Critiques of hip-hop tend to be short-sighted and miss the how when hip-hop and Christianity are paired together, more black males can be reached and gain a positive identity through spiritual formation. It has even been argued that hip-hop is becoming more than culture, it is developing and soon may become to some a religion. A recent poll from hiphop.com, showed that 18 percent of those who
participated in the poll felt as if hip-hop should be a new religion, 43 percent said they believed in "hip-hop" as opposed to God, and 78 percent thought there should be a hip-hop revolution.\textsuperscript{32}

Whether you agree with its content or not, hip-hop is a vital part of the identity and lives of some members of the younger generation to the point where churches are no longer competing with each other for members, it is now competing with this present-day culture.

When the church fails to allow the hip-hop generation freedom to express themselves in creative ways, the church stifles hope and encourages a mindset in which they prohibit young people from being themselves and they turn to other venues to receive worth and acceptance.

Religious scholar Evelyn Parker has articulated this tension well:

"Ministry intended to bring about emancipatory hope fosters an integrated spirituality that weaves together both pious and political ideological meanings. Religious belief and social practice are intertwined; they are intertwined. This way of being in the world manifests itself in a variety of ways, including language. Conversely, a fragmented spirituality prohibits the weaving of language, belief, and practice."

If the church wishes to carry out the Great Commission, it must grasp hold of the power and influence of hip-hop, and begin to work with it rather than against it. Parker argues that holy indignation due to injustice within human relationships is expressed through the hip-hop culture as much as it is expressed in the scripture. She further argues that young people should have a sacred place, like the Christian church, to express their holy indignation. The congregation has the responsibility of nurturing their emotions to a place that promotes wholeness.\textsuperscript{34} The same type of acceptance they seek from secular environment is the same type of acceptance they seek from the church. They are not asking the church to change moral values, they only desire for the

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{33} Evelyn L. Parker, \textit{Trouble Don't Last Always: Emancipatory Hope Among African American Adolescents} (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2003), 35.
\textsuperscript{34} Parker, \textit{Trouble Don’t Last Always}, 141.
\end{footnotesize}
church to first accept them, and then nurture them. In the forward to *The Hip-Hop Church*, Dr. Alton B. Pollard asserts, “The time is right for the two to be joined where coexistence is possible and betrayal is not to be had.”35

The union of hip-hop and the black church is possible. The black church is at a place where it must identify a way in which to retain its connection to black males, because there have been too many articles surfacing with the title, “Why are teenagers leaving the church?” It is clear that religion is present in hip-hop but how present is hip-hop in religion? Hip-hop serves as the answer to one of the struggles of the black church to bond with a generation that no one seems to quite get or understand. Hip-hop is the vehicle for discipleship for young black males. In many arenas, including my own church, the relationship between the two has resulted positive identity formation for the church because it has led to many young black males converting to Christianity. Experience has taught me that although the black church and its theology has not always been supportive or receptive of the hip-hop generation, a discipleship curriculum that uses hip-hop lyrics as a point of departure can begin the reconciliation process by offering a medium that attracts these black males but also shares biblical scriptures that address the problems they face in their lived experiences. The church has, throughout history, used forms of popular music to attract and disciple young people, and the next chapter will show how that has happened and continue to help that claim that hip-hop should be used a tool to reach young black males.

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35 Alton B. Pollard, forward to *The Hip-Hop Church: Connecting with the Movement Shaping Our Culture*, by Efrem Smith and Phil Jackson (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2005), 14.
Chapter 3: Popular Culture and the Christian Church

3.1 Introduction

This chapter will give an account of the relationship between the Christian church and popular culture. This chapter will begin by sharing why the issue of hip-hop being used in the black church is important to me. Next, this chapter will outline the argument for and against using popular culture to reach young people. This is important because some of the concerns with this blend of the two institutions are valid and if not done properly, could be harmful to the spiritual development of Christian youth. Furthermore, the issues raised by those that are cautious of incorporating popular culture into the church is what lead to the creation of the curriculum I propose, which is a system approach to spiritual formation. Next, this chapter will trace the history of the Christian church utilizing popular culture to attract young people and share proof of its benefits. More specifically, this chapter will share ways in which the black church has in the past accepted popular music into its plan for attracting young people. This chapter will also offer two examples of churches, The Tribe and Sanctuary Church, that have been successful in incorporating popular music into their ministry with young people. Lastly, this chapter will offer recommendations for how the black church and African-American males can reconcile. This section of the paper sets up chapter four and the discipleship curriculum. This chapter is important to the overall work of this thesis because it shows how popular music and the church working together is not new, and the ways that it has been done in that past and in some present areas have formed spiritually mature believers and hip-hop music can do the same.
3.2 No Rap Allowed in the Church: A Personal Account

In 1997 the hottest contemporary gospel song was “Stomp” by Kirk Franklin. The song combined lyrics about Jesus, weekend hip-hop, nightclub music, and also featured a rap verse by legendary hip-hop artist Salt of Salt-N-Pepa. At the age of 13 I felt the excitement in presenting this song to the music ministry at New Salem Missionary Baptist Church in Syracuse, New York, for the youth choir to sing on Youth Sunday. To our dismay, the response we received was an emphatic “no.” With broken spirits and crushed hearts, many of us decided to leave the choir that day and give up on the idea that we would ever be able to express ourselves in the Christian world. Twenty years later, I have been able to ask my grandfather (who was the founder/pastor of that church) why we were told “no,” and his response was “I didn’t understand rap music and wasn’t ready for that type of change.” It was this experience as a teenager that influenced my desire to prove that hip-hop, an entity of popular culture, could be used as a vehicle to disciple young people. I have concluded that popular culture has been utilized by the Church for centuries and has proven to be beneficial in mediating spiritual formation for believers; thus, many historical black churches’ refusal to incorporate hip-hop within the worship space has proven misguided.

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1 Hip-hop music is not the only form of popular music that has not been embraced by churches, this chapter will show the church’s, both black and white, hesitation in incorporating various genres of music within the church worship experience. Nevertheless, hip-hop music’s story and relationship with the church is interesting in that, like most music developed from the African-American experience, such as blues and Negro spirituals, it came from a place of pain and oppression, and yet its difficulty in being accepted within the black church, an institution that came into existence for very similar reasons, is ironic.

2 Popular culture, or “pop culture” as it most commonly referred, as defined by pioneer in cultural studies Russel Nye, “describes a cultural condition that could not have appeared in Western Civilization before the late eighteenth century.” For Nye, pop culture requires a “mass audience created by urbanization and democratization along with technologies of mass distribution, in other words, mass media of all forms.” Pop culture displays the ideologies, values, perspectives, and attitudes in mainstream society. Craig Detweiler and Barry Taylor, *A Matrix of Meanings: Finding God in Pop Culture* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 18.

3 One of the earliest recorded instances in which a religious leader used a facet of popular culture to reach people was sailor and later pastor John Newton, who is most notably know for writing “Amazing Grace.” Between the years 1783 and 1784, Newton utilized Handel’s Messiah, a very popular oratorio during that time period, as the foundation of a sermon series that was later published in 1786. He is quoted as saying, “Conversation in almost
3.3 Thomas Bergler: Juvenilization and Adolescent Christianity

This section will engage religious historian, Thomas Bergler, to trace the timeline of the utilization of popular culture by the church in the twentieth century beginning with the 1920s and how the church’s incorporation of pop culture has impacted youth spirituality. Bergler calls this period, beginning with the 1920s as the “juvenilization of American Christianity.” For Bergler, juvenilization, if unchecked can cause harm to the Christian church. He asserts this claim because of often times churches seek to adapt youth culture, but in doing so, the gospel message is compromised and faith is authentically transported to young people. He has coined the concept, “adolescent Christianity,” which is “understanding, experiencing, or practicing the Christian faith that conforms to the patterns of adolescence in American culture.” For Bergler, adolescent spirituality cannot be ignored by the church because it is what shapes future generations of church goers. Bergler is used because his assessment on the church and popular culture are aligned with my approach to ministry and basis for using hip-hop music and creating a curriculum. Both Bergler and I agree that a watered-down faith does not produce mature Christians, and that incorporating too much popular culture can lead to that. One the other hand,

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4 Although we know that the utilization of popular culture to reach believers was not new to the 20th century, the 20th century differs from other time periods because in the 20th century is when you begin to see the church focus on youth, and using popular culture as a tool to attract young people. Moreover, with the increase in media and technology, the 20th century sees young people in multiple regions of the world being shaped by the same medium, because music traveled further around the globe than it had in previous years.

5 “Juvenilization is the process by which the religious beliefs, practices, and developmental characteristics of adolescents become accepted as use for Christians of all ages.” Thomas Bergler, The Juvenilization of American Christianity (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 4.

6 Bergler, Juvenilization of American Christianity, 8.
we both agree that popular culture has its benefits to the church. For, as Bergler states, “without youth ministries and their adaptive appeals to youth, the churches would not have many of the loyal and productive members that they have today,” meaning that churches in the twentieth century that utilized popular culture as a means to reach young people actually led to the continuation of the church in America because it produced young people that later became adults that were connected to not only church but religious life. This is the same attempt I seek to make with urging black churches to use hip-hop music as a vehicle for spiritual formation, and Bergler’s account of how the church began to use popular culture in ministry is important to note as I seek to argue for the inclusion of hip-hop music.

3.4 A Historical Look: Popular Music in American Christianity

This section will offer an explanation of the utilization of popular culture by the church and the consequences, positive and negative, of this endeavor. Bergler states that “youth ministry as we know it today, with its power to shape the future of American Christianity, was born in an hour of world crisis,” and he attributes the rise of this adaptation of American Christianity to the social circumstances Americans were facing between the 1930s and 1950s. It was the fears of religious leaders and parents that paved the way for youth ministers and youth focused organizations to bring about much needed change in how church in America was done. In the wake of the Great Depression and World War II, American adults were worried about being able to preserve their culture and way of life, and for them, the way to ensure that this preservation happened was through the youth. This idea was supported by a report published by the American

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7 Ibid., 6.
8 Ibid., 19.
9 Ibid., 5.
Council on Education established by the American Youth Commission in 1935, an organization that researched the youth problem in light of the current world crisis.\textsuperscript{10} This report produced a claim that supported the work of youth leaders and their eagerness to attract more young people to the church, "a program for strengthening the nation that looks to youth and to the future will in itself be a source of vitality and of spiritual strength even though physical accomplishments are still to come."\textsuperscript{11} Youth leaders took this to mean that youth organizations and programs could instill in young people morals, values, truths, and faith, although, the issues that plagued that world we still unsolved. This thinking, adopting by white churches is the same mindset black churches in the twenty-first century should adapt.

In the 1930s, the issue for white churches was economic, and in the 2017, the issue for black churches remains the fight for equal rights and protection under law. Youth leaders in white churches saw that a remedy to fix their problem began with preparing and equipping youth for the future, which black churches must do with black youth in order to carry on the legacy of fight social inequalities; however, this is tough to do if black churches do not find a means of keeping black youth connected to the church. White churches in the early twentieth century was able to do this by using popular culture, which is the same thing I am suggesting black churches do in the present.

3.5 Utilization of Popular Music by the Christian Church

The goal of the section is to introduce the beginning of American churches incorporating popular music in how they addressed teenagers. The 1940s were a significant era for youth culture for it was the first time in American history that the majority of fourteen to eighteen-year-

\textsuperscript{10} Ibid., 24.
\textsuperscript{11} Ibid.
olds attended high school together. In previous years, young people spent more time around their parents and other adults, but the increase in the number of young people in school at one time led to the creation of subcultures in which youth began to share the same love of music, fashion, and other experiences. This was most true with music, as it became a major influence on the lives of American teens, and the church quickly saw this, and once again, in an attempt to keep its young people pure, youth ministries and youth-focused organizations began to create ways to tap into the power of popular music.

However, popular music and the church saw their first major clash over crooner Frank Sinatra and his relationship with the Catholic Church. Sinatra, a self-proclaimed Catholic, in 1942 became the first “teen idol” and attracted numerous young people to his music.\(^\text{12}\) For some Catholic youth he was a role model and for others, such as catholic leaders, he was criticized for not living out his Catholic faith in the mainstream media. Nevertheless, Catholics leaders could not deny his massive influence over their young parishioners, and his persona, along with other famous catholic movie stars, led to the creation of alternative catholic youth cultures that embraced popular music, forming a way for young people to still be Catholic while listening to worldly music. But Catholics were not the only Christian group to have to address such concerns related to music.

Rock n’ Roll, since its inception in the 1940s, has remained one of the most influential genres of music for the American teen. Its use of electric guitars, double bass, and sexually charged lyrics grasped the hearts and minds of teenagers across the nation; however, it also was seen as a major threat to the mission of the evangelical church that sought to save its youth from the immoral behavior found in rock’s lyrics and even in performers’ lives. They feared rock

\(^{12}\) Ibid., 45.
music because they linked it to sex, violence, drugs, and a loss of control over the body. Radio preacher William Ward Ayer argued it led to “sex-crazed, irrational, irresponsible actions,” as well as increased juvenile crime, often referring to rock n’ rollers as savages.\textsuperscript{13} Rock artists such as Elvis Presley were shunned by the church and publicly criticized, and church leaders urged parents to ban such music from their homes.\textsuperscript{14} Moreover, racism was an underlying issue in which evangelicals’ denouncement of rock n’ roll music. Leader in the Youth For Christ movement Marg Jones loathed rock n’ roll music because “watching gals’ moon over a picture of his swinging body [Elvis] reminds me of their lost condition and my mind compares the picture with heathen dances of darkest Africa.”\textsuperscript{15} Part of the attempt to save white youth from immorality also meant keeping them away from the savagery influence of black America. Even within the church, racism was alive and present, which continues to be a critique of white evangelical churches in the present day, black Christians in America criticize their inability to stand with the oppressed and failure to acknowledge that there is a race problem in America. Nevertheless, racism did not stop this genre from entering white churches. It was hard to deny the magnetism this music had on youth, and youth ministers owned the fact that demonizing young people for listening to this music would only push them further away from the church; instead, they argued, the church must find a way to utilize this style of music in worship settings. In essence, what was once black music was becoming and became white sacred music.

Elements of rock music began to be infused in youth Christian worship experiences. Although this was controversial amongst adults, evangelical teens quickly embraced popular music that had religious themes. In the 1950s secular artists began releasing “juke box hymns,”

\textsuperscript{13} Ibid., 165.
\textsuperscript{14} Elvis Presley was never afraid to speak of his personal religious convictions and released two gospel albums, \textit{Peace in the Valley} (1957) and \textit{He Touched Me} (1972), the latter earning him a Grammy award.
\textsuperscript{15} Bergler, \textit{Juvenilization of American Christianity}, 165.
which were songs that told of their relationship with God or offered worship and praise towards God. An example of this was Dinah Shore’s song, “Church Twice on Sunday,” whose lyrics, “how I love to go to church twice on Sunday, it makes me feel so good, I’d like to mend my ways and go back to the days of my childhood,” speak of an artist that may not be a gospel artist but who does maintain a relationship with Christ. It was this sort of song that made young people, during the 1950s, feel there was nothing wrong with listening to contemporary music and being a Christian, a sentiment not shared by the once extremely supportive YFC organization.

YFC evangelist Carl Bihl argued, “the god of the juke box evidently is not the God of the Bible,” instead, this music espoused incorrect theology and often times left out the name of Jesus, which is central to the Christian message. Yet during the mid-1900s, youth and their leaders held on to the notion that these hymns had the power to convert teens into believers and strengthen the faith of those already following Jesus. They believed that the artists helped them convince their friends that the Christian life is not dull, but vibrant and filled with thrills and excitement. The popularity of juke box hymns paved the way for the emergence of Christian rock.

In 1966, a Southern California rock band, The Crusaders, released the album, “Make a Joyful Noise with Drums and Guitars,” which is considered to be the first Christian rock album. Recording artist Larry Norman, whose 1969 album, “Upon This Rock,” became “the first commercially released Jesus rock album, sought to disprove conservative narrative that rock music was anti-Christian. This view is best understood in Norman’s song, “Why Should the Devil Have All the Good Music?”:

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17 Begler, Juvenilization of American Christianity, 161.
I want the people to know that He saved my soul
But I still like to listen to the radio,
They say that “Rock 'n roll is wrong, give you one more chance”
I said “I Feel so good, I gotta get up and dance”
I know what’s right, I know what’s wrong, I don’t confuse it
Well, all I’m really tryin’ to say is
Why should the devil have all the good music?
Yeah, I feel good everyday
’Cause Jesus is the rock and He rolled my blues away.19

Norman, like many other rock music consumers, did not see rock music as a draw away from
Christ, but as a vehicle that could be used by Christians for self-expression and religious
conversion. The relentlessness of Norman and others like him led to the creation of the genre
Christian rock, which is still popular amongst white evangelical and now mainline Protestant
congregations. Current Contemporary Christian rock artists such as Chris Tomlin, David
Crowder Band, Third Day and Jars of Clay sell out concerts worldwide and their music is
consistently played on radios and during church worship services.

3.6 Music, Spiritual Formation, and Identity in the Black Church

Before the history of the black church and popular culture is addressed, this section
discusses the role of music in identity and spiritual formation in the black church, which assists
my argument that utilizing hip-hop music should not be an issue for the black church because
music as a means to spiritual formation and identity have always been a significant part of the
African-American religious life, going back to the days of enslaved Africans working on
plantations in the South. Spirituals such as “Goin’ to Shout All over God’s Heaven” offer
significant insight to the Christian identity that began to develop in enslaved Africans:

I’ve got shoes, you’ve got shoes
All of God’s children got shoes

19 Larry Norman, “Why Should the Devil Have All the Good Music?,” in Only Visiting This Planet,
released 1972, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z-x_WyBjO6Y.
When I get to Heaven goin’ to put on my shoes
Goin’ to walk all over God’s Heaven

Heav’n, Heav’n
Ev’rybody talkin’ ‘bout Heav’n ain’t goin’ there
Heav’n, Heav’n
Goin’ to shout all over God’s Heaven. \(^{20}\)

The lyrics highlight that enslaved Africans understood their plight as oppressed people but also understood themselves as children of God. Moreover, they had an understanding of equality that, if not now, would take place in an afterlife. The enslaved Africans also had a sense of ethics and morality in noting that not everyone who claimed to be Christian, refereeing to slave masters, were going to make it Heaven. This spiritual and a slew of others that were prominent in the life of the enslaved African have carried on throughout the history of the African-American religious experience in North America. In various African-American freedom struggles, such as the Civil Rights movement, these songs were song to remind the oppressed that their hope was in the Lord as well as keep them grounded in their religious convictions. In this same manner, hip-hop music, for black youth, addresses their plight in society and offers a way for them to express her relationship with God in way that is innate in them, which is what enslaved Africans sought to do on plantations.

In efforts to worship in a way that meaningful for them, enslaved Africans would find spaces that allowed them to be their true and authentic selves. On the plantation, these spaces existed as clandestine institutions commonly termed as hush or brush harbors, “At nights dey would slip off and git in ditches and sing and pray.” \(^{21}\) These hush harbors were established

\(^{20}\) “Goin’ to Shout All over God’s Heaven,” https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-0aq67rcm1w.

\(^{21}\) J. D. Cornelius, Slave Missions and the Black Church in the Antebellum South (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1999), 9. This quote is taken from the diary of slave woman on a Southern plantation in North America who was writing about the religious gatherings of those on the plantation who were enslaved.
because blacks yearned for an outlet free from white control where they could express their spiritual reality in a fashion closer to the African worldview.22 Although the enslaved Africans were allowed to attend church services, they wanted to have services where they could remember African lore and culture such as the “ring shout” and drumming. Emily Dixon, an enslaved slave, was quoted to have said, “Us could go to the white fol’s church, but us wanter go whar us could sing all the way through, an ‘hum ‘long, an’---y’all know, jist turn loose lack.”23 Dixon just wanted to be free to express her relationship with God in a way that was innate in her. In no way and I am comparing the treatment of an enslaved African by whites to that of black youth by black church leaders, but what I am arguing that the desire to have a space within religious community to freely express religious convictions is part of the DNA of African Americans. Music as means of expression is an essential part of black culture, and the way in which enslaved Africans found space called hush harbors, black churches should be willing to create spaces with the walls of the church in which black youth could have authentic experiences with God. Because, it was during these clandestine meetings did Negro spirituals arise and began to give Christian identity to those that once followed various religious beliefs systems and in the same manner, using hip-hop music as tool for discipleship can also produce Christian identity in black youth. While hip-hop music is not all spiritual music, it does keep with the African-American tradition of creating music that is rooted in the black experience.

3.7 Utilization of Popular Music by the Black Church

This section is significant to this study because it details the black church’s previous experience with integrating popular music, which lends itself to the focus of this paper. During

22 Cornelius, Slave Missions, 8.
23 Ibid., 9.
the 1940s while white churches were creating youth groups and developing a separate youth
culture, black churches were focused on activities and worship services that united adults and
teens. For the black church, the social climate was marred by racism, classism, and
discrimination, which left little time for concerning itself with rescuing youth from bodily
impurities. This is not to say that black ministers weren’t concerned with the moral behavior of
black teens, they just didn’t blame society—they focused more on the Church as the culprit. In
the 1930s, the beginning of popular music finding itself into the black church, Rev. R. C.
Barbour is quoted having said, “our Pharisaic religion has driven our young people to the
debauching dance hall and degenerating moving picture show.”24 Moreover, he believed that,
“this new generation is going to give us a new world – a world free from war and all the other
scourges that [afflict] our generation.”25 The elder leaders in the black church preached a
collective identity for blacks that focused on educating young blacks on social issues and
preparing them for the opportunities that would soon arise once the fight for justice was won.
Nevertheless, it was this insistence on social activism that led to the battle between black teens
and adults concerning music, and eventually led to the church infusing “worldly” music into the
worship experience.

One of the most poignant songs of the black freedom movement was “Strange Fruit”:

Southern trees bear strange fruit
Blood on the leaves and blood at the root
Black bodies swinging in the southern breeze
Strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees
Pastoral scene of the gallant south
The bulging eyes and the twisted mouth
Scent of magnolias, sweet and fresh
Then the sudden smell of burning flesh.26

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25 Ibid.
This song detailed the horrors of lynched black bodies hanging from trees in the South particularly. This song, by jazz singer Billie Holiday, caught the attention of individuals both young old whom become disillusioned with a promise of an “American dream” and a gospel that seemed to promote complacency and waiting on heaven to find freedom. Jazz music soon became the voice of younger blacks and greatly influenced how they behaved in the world, as Rev. Barbour noted in the early 1930s, “the average Negro youth is at home in a jazz dive,” showing that the church was aware of the relationship between jazz music and its younger congregants.27 However, because jazz was often performed in nightclubs, which did not align with conservative Christian standards, it was quickly rejected from some churches. The black church’s debate over worldliness and social activism climaxed with the introduction of new forms of gospel music. This new form of music introduced instruments typically found in jazz bands and at blues concerts, which became the “invasion of jazz into many of our churches.”28 It was jazz that led black church leaders to feel the same concerns about their youth’s spirituality as their white counterparts had about their youth in the early 1930s.

Religious educator Jesse Jai McNeil’s argument that “any church which must yield to methods and devices of the world to perpetuate itself is doing a futile thing because it is already dead,” was indicative of the black churches’ response to jazz music.29 The idea of “jazz band evangelism” was purely an emotional response and not one of reverence towards God; the music itself only lead to “snake hipping and buck dancing,” which corrupted the church and the young people. However, not all leaders felt this way about the music and what helped young people with a better transition of their music into the church was that, unlike their white youth

27 Bergler, Juvenilization of American Christianity, 63.
28 Ibid.
29 Ibid.
counterparts, black adults enjoyed jazz music as well. As a result of social issues and the black church dedication to fostering a collective identity amongst black youth and adults, this resulted in families spending more time together and bonding over religion and music.

Black church leaders, such as Lucie Campbell, saw the appeal this music had with young people and found ways to discipline the music rather than to completely shut it out.\textsuperscript{30} Campbell helped artists such as Mahalia Jackson gain exposure within Baptist circles, but her most notable association was with Thomas Dorsey. Dorsey, who is considered the “father of black gospel music,” began to infuse sounds of blues and jazz into church music, moving away from the traditional singing of hymns. Dorsey’s style influenced Campbell, who was known as an old-school Baptist, to write “Jesus Gave Me Water,” which was a deviation from her usual songs because it contained elements of this new style of music. Dorsey’s music is what helped quench the thirst of a younger generation. Participating in choirs was one way in which black youth engaged in the black church and this new form of gospel music cultivated their devotion to the church and fostered new religious experiences and expressions of commitment to Christian ideals.

Although Dorsey and Campbell helped the black church in the early half of the twentieth century acculturate popular culture, artists in the second half of this same century faced resistance in doing the same thing as it related to new sounds of R&B and hip-hop. The black church once again rejected any music that appeared too worldly or was seen as more amusement than spiritual uplift. This is ironic because the church leaders that were resistant to this new genre of music were of the generation that forty years were fighting for the inclusion of jazz.

\textsuperscript{30} Lucie Campbell served as music director for the National Sunday School and Baptist Training Union College and was very instrumental in helping bridge the gap between young black Baptists and adults. Bergler, \textit{Juvenilization of American Christianity}, 64.
music into the church worship space. Nevertheless, traditional gospel artists such the Hawkins family introduced the song “Oh Happy Day,” which would help bridge that gap. One of the sisters of the group, Tremaine Hawkins, partnered with rapper MC Hammer to produce music that they believed would reach a younger audience and draw them back to the church. MC Hammer, one of the earliest rap superstars, had a song, “Pray,” released in the 90s that was one of first songs to have a music video that featured a full gospel choir. The lyrics to the song,

Children dying, oh, so fast from this or that
(That’s word, we pray)
Needing that money
Smoking that dope and doing that crack
(That’s word, we pray)
Ten years old stand outside
Better look out
(That’s word, we pray)
Dead and gone, never had a chance
What’s it all about?

That’s word, we pray (pray) ah, yeah, pray
We need to pray,
Just to make it today
I need to pray (pray), ah, yeah, pray
We need to pray
Just to make it today
That’s word, we pray.\(^{31}\)

spoke for a generation of young people that saw a world full of corruption and sadness and whose relationship with God was what they believed would get them through life. It wasn’t until the twenty-first century, when older black church leaders began to retire or die, that artists such as Kirk Franklin, Mary Mary, and Tonex, were fully able to take over the gospel stage with these new sounds. Currently, it is extremely hard to turn on a gospel radio station or purchase a gospel album without hearing certain forms of hip-hop and R&B. Music has always played a role in the

spiritual lives of African Americans, from Negro spirituals, to blues, jazz, and contemporary gospel music.

History has shown that within African-American culture, music and its lyrics works in the spiritual formation process by helping those within the community develop an individual and collective identity. Nevertheless, there is backlash to hip-hop music and its place in the church, which is why this project exists: to show how the church can use hip-hop music, as it has in the past with rock n’ roll, jazz, and R&B to produce spiritually mature teens.

3.8 Popular Music and the Tribe Church

This section will share a case study conducted by ethnographer and religious scholar Stella Sai-Chun Lau of how one church has successfully created an entire church culture around a form of popular music, which is important for this project because it shows that in the twenty-first century, popular music can be used as a tool to inspire spiritual growth without compromising the gospel message. For black and white churches, “music became a fearful frontier because it stood at the intersection of evangelical spirituality and the teenage bodily purity.”32 However, there are examples of Christian communities and churches that were primarily focused around popular music such as Electronic Dance Music, a genre of popular music whose primary mode of communicating music was through a DJ, an essential element in hip-hop culture. Electronic Dance Music (EDM) was one of the first popular music genres to lead to the creation of an entire worship community that centered itself on its style and formulations.33 Musicians and church leaders felt that music was a tool that could evoke

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32 Bergler, *juvenilization of American Christianity*, 163.
33 Electronic Dance Music gained its popularity in the United Kingdom as disco began to fade. It is commonly associated with nightclubs and raves of the younger generation.
particular emotions in people and move into a space of openness and transformation. They believed music was a universal language and had a way of connecting with non-Christians, and once Christian lyrics were placed over the sound, it could lead to conversion. EDM was commonly used in worship spaces to reinforce “Christian devotion” by encouraging participants in their worship communities to experience “passionate feelings and prayers.”

In 1998 Pastor Kenny Mitchell, who was also an EDM DJ, worked with Christian friends from Revelation Church in Chichester, England, to set up Tribe, an EDM church in New York City. Mitchell pioneered the idea of having an entire youth congregation that was within a Christian context using EDM. Pastor Mitchell stated he visited Revelation Church to see how they merged DJ’s into worship and what a “youth/clubby culture congregation would look like,” and this led to Tribe Church in the United States. Tribe began meeting in clubs, bars, and lounges and eventually moved to a traditional church building. To combat the myth that popular music could not yield mature Christians, Tribe held bi-weekly meetings, ‘Big Hugs,’ weekly cell groups, and retreats. At the church gatherings the Bible would be read and prayer would be emphasized. The music was a tool to gather people and evoke emotion; however, it did not replace spiritual practices that the Biblical text suggested as ways to grow spiritually as a believer.

EDM music was critical to the life of this worship community. Religious educators Clive Marsh and Vaughn Roberts argue “spirituality is not an idea in the brain but rather a disciplined bodily experience that grows deeper with practice.” They argued, “if we are going to grasp why

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34 Stella Sai-Chun Lau, Popular Music in Evangelical Youth Culture (New York: Routledge, 2012), 149.
36 “Big Hugs” were open public meetings that served as night of mediation focused on prayer. Lau, Popular Music, 152.
and how true spirituality takes root in human beings, we must attend to the power of sound and its impact on us as sensual, sensuous, sensitive beings." Experience has taught me that any piece of literature, fable, myth, or story set to music has the ability to touch a person’s heart, evoke emotions, and grab their ears. Moreover, throughout Christian history, the story of the Christian church and its message of Jesus has been shared and transmitted through music. Christian hymns and songs often times articulate and explain church doctrine as well as biblical truths. Professor of Bible and Music, Kenneth Osbeck, states,

The church hymnal is one of the finest collections of man’s thoughts and feelings about God. When these choice responses are further enhanced with appropriate melodies, harmonies, and rhythms, there exists a reservoir of unusual spiritual strength and engagement.  

Osbeck helps strengthen my claim that music is a powerful tool in helping people connect with God. For Marsh and Roberts, popular music and theology/religion is moving towards a place of respectability, in which both are “respecting what goes on between the receiver and the text.” EDM church communities show that spiritual growth is as much personal as it is communal. How a person grows and matures into a disciple of Christ is based on how he or she hears and responds to the text, or in this case, music; it is the responsibility of the church be able to do what Luci Campbell did and ‘tame’ the music that is popular to young people in order to bring them into the church and body of Christ. EDM was played by the DJ at times of worship as noted by a DJ in The Tribe:

Dj-ing is worship. If there is no lyrics, it’s very releasing. You can just tell people to sing their own words ... DJs can change the mood and change the environment, taking people to a place. If DJs can tune into the Holy Spirit, that’s very powerful! You can direct people to God.

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38 Ibid.
40 Marsh and Roberts, Personal Jesus, 137.
41 Lau, Popular Music, 118.
The DJ character played a major role in the EDM church for they were the individuals that provided the ambient music that moved its members into worship mode. One Tribe member claimed that DJs set the mood for worship and devotion time, and the music “lends itself to be more meditative” than traditional worship music.\textsuperscript{42} I make special mention of the DJ because it is one of the four elements of hip-hop culture and has proven to be a pivotal aspect of the EDM worship experience. Can it do the same for the black church? Following the example of Mitchell and EDM churches, how would a church look that used hip-hop music as a means of communicating and connecting with young people?

3.9 Portrait of Hip-Hop Being Used in a Black Church: The Sanctuary Covenant Church

This section will introduce a portrait of a black church that prioritizes aspects of hip-hop culture into its worship service. Rev. Efrem Smith, senior pastor of The Sanctuary Covenant Church in Minneapolis, Minnesota, provides an example of how the church can begin to prepare for the arrival of this particular generation through the emcee, more specifically, the lyrical element.\textsuperscript{43} In his brief autobiographical journey with hip-hop, Rev. Smith recalls being in college and being able to relate to the struggles that were being shared in the music of Public Enemy, X-Clan, and Last Asiatic Disciples.\textsuperscript{44} As someone who was raised in a black church during the tail end of the Civil Rights Movement, and attended integrated schools, he felt that hip-hop served as his connecter, constantly reminding him of his heritage and culture.\textsuperscript{45} Hip-hop created a community for Smith and in his generation that often spoke to historical realities that were faced.

\textsuperscript{42} Ibid., 154
\textsuperscript{43} Ephrem Smith and Phil Jackson, \textit{The Hip-Hop Church: Connecting with the Movement Shaping Our Culture} (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2005), 19.
\textsuperscript{44} Ibid., 20.
\textsuperscript{45} Ibid.
on a daily basis. Therefore, Smith recognized the important need to use hip-hop as a tool to invite the current generation into the church, rather than use it as a divisive mechanism to keep them out. He notes that in his own experience, “Sometimes my Hip-Hop life and my church life have intersected one another, other times they’ve seemed like two totally different worlds, and sometimes they seemed like bitter enemies.”46 As someone who experienced this music as a youth, and now is a leader in religious institution, he has become increasingly aware of the number of people from this younger generation that are being lost due to this great divide. For Smith, responsibility for the loss of this generation needs to be placed on the shoulders of the church; therefore, it is the church’s job to create space in which members of the hip-hop generation can connect and hopefully intertwine their religious and cultural lives, for “in the end [it] is really not about music but a generation of young people.”47

One way in which Smith incorporates elements of hip-hop into his worship services is through adapting the musical style of hip-hop—specifically, rap—artists that members of this younger generation are used to.48 Smith does this in his ministry by exposing his youth and congregation to artists who attempt to make the Word of God relevant to this younger generation by creating hip-hop versions of certain scripture passages, such as John 1:1-5:

In the beginning was the Word, the manifest logic of heard—unblurred shining from the inner sanctum of the Third.
Unbroken catastrophic spoken from the essence of eternity's original notion.49

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46 Ibid., 21.
47 Ibid., 22.
48 Smith incorporates elements of rap in the form of Holy Hip-Hop, “a form of rap music created to specifically glorify Jesus Christ” and spread the Gospel to those influenced by hip-hop culture.
This opens up avenues for youth in the church in which they can bring in parts of their culture and connect them with sacred elements of the church, thus creating an environment in which they can worship freely.

Another way in which Smith accomplishes the goal of using elements of hip-hop is through the emcee. Ministers and pastors need to adopt the emcee structure. The emcee espouses the beliefs, language, and values of a culture, and in a similar structure, pastors and ministers serve in similar capacities; they just need to be able to adopt some parts of the language and rhythm of the emcee that this younger generation gravitates to. Smith does not always agree with most of the content that is propagated by some hip-hop emcees, but he does recognize the style they use as a tool to do effective ministry with youth. Christian rap lyrics are theological treatises that use percussion and rhythmic expressions to spread the teachings of Christ. What is more interesting is that rhythmic poetry is not something that is necessarily foreign to the Christian tradition as can be seen in biblical books like the Psalms or Song of Solomon or in historical examples like the sung sermons of Romanos the Melodist in sixth-century Constantinople. Many of the Psalms and especially the Song of Solomon are full of poetry and imagery that rivals some of the best contemporary hip-hop artists on the Top 100 Billboard. Smith serves as an example of a leader whose church has successfully used hip-hop music, and especially its lyrics, to educate young people about Christ and help them mature as believers. The church needs to adopt a new medium when it comes to the hip-hop generation, and just because the medium has changed, that does not mean the message has.

3.10 Moving Forward: Discipleship through Hip-Hop Music
Young people are constantly trying to determine how to live authentic Christian lives while not alienating themselves from their peers. Youth leaders in the early twentieth century understood that the landscape of America was changing and the younger generation had a new set of ideals and values; they may not have always been the church’s ideals, but if the church did not find ways to welcome young people, then it would lose the opportunity to shape them with a set of Christian values. Through youth groups, youth ministers were able to create spaces that resembled Dr. King’s beloved community, in that individuals of difference races and social economic statuses were able to commune together. Youth at this time were not committed to upholding the status quo but were looking for change, and that is very much true for the youth of today. I believe black pastors and ministers already possess the necessary tools to reach the current generation, they just have to be willing to use them. For this reason, a hip-hop discipleship-based curriculum is needed. This curriculum will serve as means for black church leaders to foster a real spirituality in young people because it will be biblically based and steeped in scripture. On the other hand, it will be framed by hip-hop lyrics to attract and speak to young black teens.
Chapter 4: A Curriculum for Spiritual Formation Using Hip-Hop Music

4.1 Introduction

In this chapter, before I lay out the format and design of the curriculum that came forth as a result of my research, I will address the following: What were my motivations in developing a curriculum? Why do I believe such a curriculum will aid in spiritual formation? And what role will hip-hop music play in the process? Moreover, because spiritual formation through hip-hop is my focus, this chapter will also define spiritual formation and how religious communities can effectively engage in the process. I will conclude with an outline of a possible curriculum.

4.2 Motivating Factors for a Curriculum

When I consider the challenges that African-American adolescents face today, the first thing that comes to mind is identity—defining and knowing who they are and who they seek to become. Due to the number and variety of outside influences—media, peers, society—African-American adolescents are constantly bombarded with images that influence the ways in which they view themselves. Scholar W.E.B. Dubois introduced a concept called “double consciousness” and argued that African Americans in particular struggle with what it means to be black and American. Dubois used this term to describe the mental anguish that he and other blacks experienced in always having to view one’s self through the eyes of a Eurocentric society. For him, blacks struggle with reconciling the multiple cultures that make up their identity. The more I understood this idea, I began to employ it in my work as a religious educator; however, I extended the idea of “double consciousness” to one of “multiple consciousness,” for within the context of black church, my experience and research has taught me that young black males not
only struggle with racism, but also with what it means to male, American, and Christian. Many
of the young black males I have encountered, their identity is linked to hip-hop music. According
to social historian Michael Hamilton, musical styles have often been a significant factor in how
individuals realize their social and group identity.\footnote{Michael S. Hamilton, "A Generation Changes North American Hymnody," \textit{The Hymn} 52.3 (2001): 11-21.} Hamilton explains how in the second half of
the twentieth century, baby boomers’ values were linked to their musical choice which impacted
and still affects congregational singing in many churches.\footnote{Ibid.} The interaction with churches and
baby boomers has shown that “music is not a luxury, it is a necessity, for it is the primary marker
for group identity.”\footnote{Ibid.} And for young black males in the twenty-first century, how they understand
themselves as racial beings and in many regards as spiritual beings is intricately link to hip-hop
music and as they seek to be their true authentic selves in a world where multiple mediums are
telling them what to be, they find themselves conflicted because the thing in which they identify
with, hip-hop, is taught by their faith communities to be anti-Christian. Sadly, what the black
church has failed to understand is that, “we would expect a generation that locates itself in music
to search for its religious identity through music.”\footnote{Ibid.} Hip-hop music is an integral part of how
young black men connect to the “eternal truth of life in God,” for music is the “mediator of
emotions, the carrier of dreams, and the marker of social location.”\footnote{Ibid.} Thus, taking Hamilton into
account, the curriculum I developed will consist of hip-hop music as its departure point and
focus on young black males gaining a sense of their racial and Christian identity, helping them
reclaim and define an identity in Christ rather than in crisis. Moreover, incorporating hip-hop
into a Christian based curriculum will assist black religious leaders in welcoming hip-hop into
the church because it is packaged into a format that could easily be used in a Sunday School
classroom or youth group meeting. Nevertheless, in order for this to work, religious educators
inside churches must be willing to change their approach to teaching and transform religious
spaces to be welcoming to young black men.

4.3 Critical Spirituality and the Role of the Educator in the Spiritual Formation Process

This section will explain the role that church leadership and teachers play in the process
of utilizing hip-hop as source for spiritual formation for, creative pedagogy in religious education
becomes increasingly important for the spiritual development of adolescents. Educational
theorist Dr. Michael Dantley provides a useful framework for this process—“critical
spirituality”—which not only focuses on merging education with theology, but champions the
role of teacher as one that has the responsibility of fostering environments that care for those
who feel marginalized in their communities, and in the black church context it is often youth that
feel the most marginalized. Dantley is used because the crux of his outlook on education rest on
the teacher, and in engaging in discipleship, which is a spiritual practice, the key figure is not the
student but the teacher. In manner in which Jesus serves as teacher to his disciples, in a hip-hop
based curriculum the teacher is essential because it is will be their intentional caring for black
males and transmission of knowledge that will produce within black males an identity and
ideology that is consistent with the gospel.

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6 Although Dantley’s audience is in a traditional educational setting and not necessarily a religious
institution’s classroom, his approach to the ways a dominant group, which in this case would be elder black church
leaders, has used improper educational techniques to teach marginalized youth is helpful in sharing why a
curriculum of the nature I am proposing is useful. Michael Dantley, “Transformative Instructional Leadership: A
Critical and Spiritual Engagement,” in Transformative Leadership: A Reader, ed. Carolyn M. Shields (New York:
Peter Lang, 2011), 155-64.
For Dantley, the educator serves as prophetic voice and must see education through spiritual lenses in order that they might do the work of teaching young people in a way that is loving. This offers theological meaning because it places responsibility on the teacher and makes the office of educator one that is not to be taken likely. When teachers engage in critical spirituality students become activists themselves, whose goal is the radical transformation of the community as well as the society. Nevertheless, in order to understand how critical spirituality fits into the argument of thesis, its four distinctive elements that work together to create a holistic approach to formation through education must be explained: critical self-reflection, deconstructive interpretation, performative creativity, and transformative action. 

Critical self-reflection requires individuals and communities to evaluate how they have may have engaged in pedagogical practices that have hindered others from learning. For the black church, this is taking responsibility for the fact that many of the curricula that have been used to instruct black youth have essentially been ineffective. As a youth pastor, I tried several curricula such as Orange, XP3, and LIVE, to teach the students I served and none have been too helpful because they are written by Caucasian American Christians that have very limited experiences working with black youth. As a result, my engagement in critical self-reflection pushed me to begin to write my own lessons that were more reflective of the youth I encountered.

Second, deconstructive interpretation requires leaders to address how their attitudes towards those who do not fit into their picture of what is right have impacted the way in which

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7 Ibid. 157.
8 Ibid., 159.
9 Ibid., 158.
10 Ibid.
they interact with such people in the educational process. In a black church context this requires church leaders to examine how their particular social location has formed biases within them towards what is different, creating an outdated approach to how spirituality is cultivated. These particular biases play a role in how pedagogy and critical engagement with black youth take place. I was raised in hip-hop but never became fluent in hip-hop culture because of my particular upbringing, yet my work with black youth in the church forced risk-taking in my approach to sharing biblical information with my students. In order to effectively engage with members of the community, I needed to employ performative creativity.

Third, performative creativity urges educators to envision learning spaces that value shared responsibility and engagement in the process of education. This means accepting that those whom you are educating have something to bring to the table. In a black church setting this form of teaching translates into pushing black youth to be active participants and owners in the spiritual formation process, and hip-hop is a way to secure their engagement. One of the leading innovators of religious education of black youth, Dr. Anne Wimberly, asserts,

Black youth want to be seen, heard, understood, and given opportunity to contribute to worship, church life, and the wider community. They are searching for and need worship to be a very present, real, and vital communal space and experience where they are assured of God’s future with hope for them and develop resilience and hope sufficient to act on God’s hope for them.

Experience has taught me that young black males are yearning for opportunities to discover who they are and ways to navigate through this world. Thus, creating relevant material that allows

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11 Ibid.
12 Ibid.
black youth to explore their spirituality leads to self-awareness and a personal relationship with God.

Lastly, transformative action is restructuring educational approaches whereas students become agents of change not only in their community but in society as a whole.\textsuperscript{14} In the context of this thesis, transformative action is having serious critical engagement with hip-hop music in church spaces. For example, I once preached a set of sermons titled “Before the Bedrock” and “After Bedrock,” a play on Lil Wayne’s song “Bedrock” that talk about sexual activity, in which I used the song as a point of departure and correlated it with the story of David and Bathsheba to engage the youth in a discussion of what actions lead up to sex outside of the confines of marriage and what are the consequences of such actions. This sermon series was preached in February 2010, and the students who were teenagers then but are now in their early twenties still discuss the sermon and how it transformed their thinking about premarital sex and empowered them to be able to educate their peers on the potential consequences of such activity.

Transforming my approach to teaching young people yielded a population of young people that were able to communicate biblical principles to their friends in a language that they understood. This outcome showed that when transformative action is accepted and employed by teachers, youth develop a high level of spiritual resiliency and “spiritual resilience builds through youths’ formation of beliefs, attitudes, and values that make possible their ability to imagine and act on positive ways of living that are guided by the Christian faith.”\textsuperscript{15} In other words, the black church has a unique opportunity to form black males who are not only spiritually mature, but also able to overcome obstacles they may face due to issues of their race, social status, or gender. Hip-hop has proven itself to be an effective communicator in spaces that are familiar and comfortable to

\textsuperscript{14} Dantley, “Transformative Instructional Leadership,” 159.
black youth and using it in religious spaces serves only as a means of journeying with black youth on the road to spiritual discovery.

4.4 Spiritual Formation

This section will offer a definition for spiritual formation as well as layout the process in spiritual formation happens. Spiritual formation, as defined in the introduction of this thesis, is the process by which individuals become Christ-like, which is exhibiting characteristics of Christ such as humility, kindness, gentleness, and sacrifice. Moreover, spiritual formation is the process of persons’ learning from exemplars, faith community life, and learning the practices of entering into relationship with God, reflecting on what is learned, pattern life after what is learned, and continually learning from life. It is a life-time process—a pilgrimage with God, others, scripture and writings, and the action of God through which persons learn about spirituality and practice it. One does not simply accept Christ’s or God’s invitation into covenant and cease to grow, on the contrary, the Christian journey is just that—a journey. It is a journey that involves individuals taking the initiative to engage in spiritual practices, such as worship, prayer, and studying scripture. This process involves the taking in of information that cultivates formation and eventually produces transformation in individuals which leads to them being disciples of Christ. Furthermore, spiritual formation does not occur in a vacuum but includes pivotal roles modeled by the faithful community, the individual, and God to create disciples. Religious educator Sondra Matthaedi encourages churches to enter into the “pilgrimage of making disciples” as a community.16 And churches journeying with young black males means churches

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are responsible for ensuring congregants are given the tools, space, and encouragement to engage in this life-long process of spiritual formation and disciple-making.\textsuperscript{17}

Discipleship, a central aim of Christianity, involves a community of faithful individuals extending to others the invitation to engage in spiritual practices that lead to transformation. Thus, community is essential to individuals truly experiencing the transformative work of Christ. Dallas Willard, an American philosopher, argues that vision, intention, and means are important for spiritual formation in the Christian tradition. For Willard, the absence of these three elements "is the explanation of the widespread failure to attain Christian maturity among both leaders and followers."\textsuperscript{18} What this means is that spiritual formation has to be an intentional practice of the church, which is done in the form of Christian education. Engaging in Christian education realizes that spiritual formation does not happen without thought and strategy, and in this case, a curriculum that emphasizes the study of scripture in a culturally relevant way.

4.5 Spiritual Formation through Christian Education

Christian education as a means for spiritual formation is creating activities that form persons through an institution’s explicit curriculum and through rules, relationships, and environment comprising an implicit curriculum. Through building relationships with the faithful community, the hearts and mind of students are formed and their sense of self and relation to the world is shaped. Additionally, Christian education prioritizes formation through gaining wisdom. Hence, formation and transformation centers on persons’ ongoing search for wisdom and the journey of wisdom is one of imagining, gaining insights, and deciding how to live as faithful and responsible Christians amidst life’s realities. Those that sojourn on this journey of formation

\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., 19.
\textsuperscript{18} Dallas Willard, \textit{Renovation of the Heart} (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2002), 85.
through wisdom engage in activities such as individual and group scripture study, praying, journaling, attending worship services, and most importantly having probing conversations with spiritual guides and partners, and for the black church, this is done through Christian education in the form of a curriculum. Knowing this, the curriculum proposed in this thesis will be guiding by three principles: sharing information, cultivating intentional community, and promoting transformation through action.

4.5.1 Shared Information

From the early beginnings of childhood education, individuals are exposed to different types of literature as a means of learning specific information and acquiring knowledge. In preparing this curriculum we must ask: What information must individuals grapple with in order to begin the process of spiritual formation, and the answer is scripture.

For this curriculum, this means that scripture relating to godly character and actions will be used throughout. Hip-hop will be the tool that hooks the students’ interest, but is it scripture that serves the role of maturing the individual because, faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word about Christ” (Rom. 10:17). On the other hand, the process of disciples-making challenges individuals to approach the biblical text in a manner that is intentional and meaningful. Thus, the use of scripture will be for more than just scripture memorization, but will be coupled with lyrics that are familiar to the students in that the biblical text will be better understood, enabling the meaning of the text permeate their inner being.
4.5.2 Intentional Community

Formation is constantly occurring whether individuals and communities are aware of it or not, and occurs regardless of the presence of the Christian church or any form of positive influence. Yet Christians are commissioned to form and nurture disciples and one of the methods to carry out this task is through formative religious education experiences. It is the role of the faith community to create within itself space and opportunity for discussions and reflections to occur so that individuals can learn from their formative experiences. In this curriculum, community engagement happens in the formal group setting, which provides accountability for youth as they encourage one another to complete tasks and fully participate in the group. In addition, spiritual formation in a group mirrors how Jesus taught his disciples, He appointed twelve that they might be with him and that he might send them out to preach” (Mark 3:14).

4.5.3 Transformation through Action

The end goal of this curriculum is for young people to have their life and way of thinking mimic characteristics of Christ for true transformation not only changes or alters the path of life a person is on, it also makes a person more aware of actions that he or she performs that are contrary to the Will of God. Religious educator Craig Dykstra presents a helpful outlook on transformation and the action that occurs after it. In his book, *Growing in the Life of Faith*, Dykstra presents transformation as an interruption of life that liberates individuals from patterns and forces them to engage in new practices which is the aim of this curriculum: to liberate young black males from unhealthy habits that do not reflect Christ. A black male that reflects Christ will be one that has ‘put to death’ the practices such as, ‘sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil

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desires and greed,’ as outlined in Colossians 3:5. However, it is important to note that transformation does not happen overnight or in one instance; it happens on a continuum and is a result of the process of constantly having experiences that change or alter the ways in which individuals interact and behave in society.

Experience is not the same as education and transformation goes beyond simply having experiences: formation occurs when individuals reflect on previous encounters and allow the knowledge and experience gained to permeate the skin and reach the heart. In the black church, this is done through what Dr. Wimberly terms as “story linking,” which involves helping an individual link their story with Christian scriptures. In the context of this thesis, this means young black males must be engaged in a narrative model of teaching that forces them to critically reflect on their life stories in conjunction with the Christian faith story. By doing this, they are able to be inspired by the stories of individuals in the scripture that faced life circumstances with which they can relate. Story linking is a process that affects the heart of an individual and in reaching the heart, it forces individuals to take an honest inventory of the moral qualities they may find to be missing and begin to develop them and weave them into their personality, creating a transformed identity. To have a transformed identity means, as Matthaei puts it, “coming to know oneself as a Christian, having assimilated the values, beliefs, and lifestyle of one who professes to be a follower of Jesus Christ.” Transformative moments are not easy to predict or pinpoint simply because of the mystery surrounding the divine; however, engaging in a strategic formative process places a person in position for transformation.

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4.6 Lesson and Lyrics: The Design of a Hip-Hop Curriculum

The discipleship curriculum will follow in the same format as the Masterlife Discipleship program designed by Avery T. Willis. It is a program that I am very familiar with as over 1,000 adults have participated in this program at Berean Christian Church. In 2013, I attempted to lead a group of high school students through Masterlife and it did not go well because the students felt as if the curriculum was outdated and did not have example or language that were germane to them. Yet I felt there were some great things about the structure of Masterlife that I believed led to Berean members becoming spiritually mature and disciple makers. Thus, I took the format of Masterlife into consideration as I began to design Lessons and Lyrics. Similar to Masterlife, the curriculum I have designed is intended to be a 24-week program of self-discovery for young black males. It is meant to provide a holistic approach to forming black youth, which means the lessons will instruct participants in matters pertaining to spiritual, academic, career, and racial health. Each lesson will be titled by a hip-hop song but undergirded with scripture. The classes will meet weekly, and each will last 90 minutes. The full layout of this discipleship program can be found as Appendix B. The components of each lesson are explained below, which will be followed by sample lessons of the actual curriculum.

4.7 Components of the Curriculum

The curriculum lessons will be divided into five sections, and four of the five will be framed after one the central elements of hip-hop (emcee, deejay, breakdancing, graffiti). Each

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22 MasterLife is a systematic approach to Christian discipleship which focuses on teaching participants spiritual disciplines: spending time with the Master, living in the Word, praying in faith, fellowshipping with believers, witnessing to the world, and ministering to others. The disciplines are designed to help them mature as believers. The program last 24 weeks, and classes meet weekly in small groups, consisting of no more than twelve students.
weekly lesson will include a teacher script, in which each facilitator is to use as a guide to help them conduct the small group. In addition to a teacher script, a student handout will be distributed to each student. The handout is meant for students to study at home once they finish and eventually share with someone else.

4.7.1 Albums and Tracks

The curriculum is divided into four albums: God First, Others Second I’m Third, Man Up: Who Does God Say I Am, You Are My Brothers and Sisters, and Career and Education. Each album consists of six lessons, or in this case a track that correlates to the theme of that album. In hip-hop, each song on an album is called a track and each track has its own theme that fits into the theme of the album. Thus, for this program, every lesson is called a track because they fit into the overall theme of the album which is the topic for those six weeks.

4.7.2 DJ: Prelude

For this part of the lesson, the students are played the hip-hop song that corresponds with that week and begin to dissect the lyrics to that song and how it applies to their life. In the hip-hop community, the deejay was responsible for spinning records and playing the music that entertained the crowd. In later years, the deejay became the person who set the atmosphere and prepared the crowd for the emcee, and this is the same purpose this section serves in this curriculum design. It is called “DJ: Prelude” because the song serves as a setup to lead into a biblical discussion pertaining to the weeks’ topic.

4.7.3 Chorus

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For this part of the lesson, the facilitator will introduce the theme to the students, being sure to drive home the “Keepin it 100” point. For many hip-hop songs, the chorus is the part that gets repeated over and over, and in many ways, sums up the entire song, it is often the part of the song that everyone learns first and is the catchiest part. Thus, this section is called “Chorus” because it gives the main idea of the weeks’ lesson and it what the students should take away from the lesson.

4.7.4 Rap Session

For this part of the lesson, the facilitator will begin to engage students in the two discussion questions that are found on their sheet. This serves as an opportunity to gain an understanding of where the students are in their walk with Christ. In hip-hop, a rap session is understood to be a time when individuals literally sit around and talk to each other, typically about important topics. Thus, the part of the curriculum that focused on group discussion is called a “Rap Session.”

4.7.5 Emcee: Verse 1

For this part of the lesson, the facilitator will tie in the hip-hop song and group discussion with a biblical story. In hip-hop, the emcee had the responsibility of not only moving the crowd, but of communicating truths and ideals that resulted in some form of change. Arguably, the emcee has the most critical role in hip-hop because the lyrics they share shape identity. This section is entitled “Emcee: Verse 1,” because it is the heart of the lesson, it shares the biblical truth.
4.7.6 Graffiti: Personal Time

For this part of the lesson, the students will engage in a spiritual practice that will give them the tools to begin to model Christ-like behaviors on Earth. In hip-hop, graffiti is a form of self-expression; it is an avenue individuals use to share parts of themselves with the world. Graffiti in hip-hop culture is personal, and those that are graffiti artists take seriously their engagement in the art. In the same regard, spiritual practices are personal because they build a persons' individual relationship with God, which is why this section is called, “Graffiti: Personal Time,” it focuses on building a student’s personal relationship with God.

4.7.7 Breakdancing: Bust a Move

For this part of the lesson, students are asked to apply what they have learned in class in the world. They are asked to go into the world and exemplify Christ in their daily actions. In hip-hop, breakdancing is an extremely active element. It involves movement of the body, and in most instances, it is done as a team sport. Although each dancer’s moves may be different, as a team the dancers work together to defeat a common opponent. This part is accurately called “Breakdancing: Bust A Move” because it is focused on the movements of the student and the students’ ability to take what they learned in the classroom and share it with others. Moreover, each student is asked to do this, because the class operates as a team.
Conclusion

In order to reach new generations of believers, the church must be willing to shift its mode of operation and how it communicates the gospel message and the black church must take seriously an engagement with hip-hop music as means to connect with young black males. Articles have been written in popular Christian sites such as Christianitytoday.com and surveys have been conducted by organizations like the Barna Group that show that youth and young adults are leaving the church in high numbers because the church has failed to meet many of their needs, and at times appears to be irrelevant. Three time Grammy award winner artist, Chance the Rapper, who is vocal about his Christian faith has a song title, All We Got, in which he raps, ‘music is all we got/so we might as well give it all we got,’ which points towards music as a lifestyle for young black males and a source of identity. Research and experience has proven that current methods of reaching young people are ineffective, and a new method must be adapted. In order to reach young black males, the method is through hip-hop music.

I have used hip-hop as an instrument for discipleship for eight years, beginning in the early stages of my ministry with young people and my research and experience has informed me that young black males have a positive reaction to incorporating elements of hip-hop, especially the lyrics, into their Christian education. Hip-hop attracts them, but many times, they do not critically analyze the lyrics to gain a deeper understanding of what the artists were saying and by having, students discuss song lyrics they will be able to dissect the message and correlate it to biblical truths. Because of this curriculum, I expect to see the young men more engaged with lessons and open to discussion because the point of departure is something relevant to them. Moreover, for the facilitators, they are able to gain insight on what young black men are dealing with and how they interpret life. Nevertheless, there were some concerns that were raised by
church leaders and scholars that needed to be addressed in the creation of this hip-hop discipleship curriculum.

From my research, I have learned that religious leaders have been hesitant to accept popular music because they believe it water down the message of Christ. Moreover, they believed that by incorporating popular music into the church it would cultivate worldly Christians who lacked reverence for God. This was an important concern to take into account, because any new thing you bring into church should lead people closer to God, and not further away. As valid as these concerns were, they were not enough to hinder myself and those before me in finding ways to use popular music to capture the hearts and minds of young people for Jesus. For on the other hand, research has also shown that when a church is unwilling to embrace the culture of younger generations, young people will choose to walk away from the church. In my experience as a young man, I had many of my male friends leave the church and turn to other entities to receive acceptance, which why this work is important.

The final command that Jesus offers his disciples is to go into the world and make disciples, by teaching them what Christ taught the disciples, yet the church and its sometimes-antiquated ways are missing large segments of the population. My research is important because it illuminates that fact the hip-hop music is already forming an identity in young black males and often times that identity has a negative impact. The body of work becomes important to the church because after it highlights those issues, it offers a tool that churches can use to begin to reach and disciple the hip-hop generation. The curriculum developed, although it uses hip-hop, it does not compromise scripture, which is very important for many church leaders. The limitations to this research were that the focus was on young black males, which has driven me to begin to develop a similar curriculum for young black girls. Hip-hop has more than just an impact on
young black males, but on people of multiple races, cultures, and genders, which is why more
studies on hip-hop and identity formation, can be conducted. In the end, this project shows why
it is important for churches to take seriously the impact hip-hop music has on people and to
figure out a way to use hip-hop for the mission of the church.
Appendix A
Sample Lessons

God First, Others Second, I'm Third | Meeting Five | Words With Friends | Same Drugs | Teacher Script

Keepin' It 100:
Share with others how Jesus has changed your life.

Scripture:
II Corinthians 5:17
Matthew 9:9

DJ: Prelude
Play “Same Drugs” by Chance the Rapper

1. Pass out verse 1 and chorus, and ask students to highlight words/phrases that have meaning for them.

[Verse 1:]
When did you change?
Wendy you’ve aged
I thought you’d never grow up
I thought you’d never.
Window closed, Wendy got old
I was too late, I was too late
A shadow of what I once was

[Chorus 2:]
Cause we don’t do the same drugs no more
We don’t do the, we don’t do the same drugs, do the same drugs no more
She don’t laugh the same way no more
We don’t do the, we don’t do the same drugs, do the same drugs no more

2. Ask students to explain why they highlighted specific words.

3. Engage students in conversation by asking the following questions:
   a. What is the artist trying to say?
   b. What do the lyrics mean to you in your life?
   c. Do the lyrics seem true to your experience?
   d. Do you agree with the message of this song?
   e. Is this message something young people should follow?
Chorus

Read scriptures below:

2 Corinthians 5:17 New International Version (NIV)
Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!

Matthew 9:9 New International Version (NIV)
As Jesus went on from there, he saw a man named Matthew sitting at the tax collector’s booth. “Follow me,” he told him, and Matthew got up and followed him.

Part of being a Christian requires believers to begin to look like exemplify Christ like qualities. For many of us, this means we begin to change our attitude, actions, and attractions. Sometimes this change can be not only difficult for us, but also for our friends. Your new walk with Christ will open your mind to conscious thinking about right & wrong decisions which may cause your friends to feel differently about you. Nevertheless, you do not have to be ashamed to be a Christian and living a life according to Biblical standards. In fact, share your testimony with your friends and family. Tell them about your experience with Christ and how Christ has impacted you. This may be weird; however, reiterate that you are not here to judge but to love unconditionally and be better as a person, and this can result in them becoming a believer.

Rap Session
Listed below are discussion questions for students to discuss:

1. What are the ways Jesus has changed you?
2. What makes it difficult for you to share your testimony with your friends?

Emcee: Verse 1

Read the story of the call of Matthew, found in Matthew chapter 9 together, then share with the youth, what can be learned about the idea of change in the Christian life.

Share with students, what the Bible teaches about change, be sure to hit on the bullets below each answer.

Change happens when you to have an ENCOUNTER with Jesus
Verses 9a As Jesus went on from there, he saw a man named Matthew sitting at the tax collector’s booth.

- As a tax collector, Matthew was looked down upon by other Jews, and was seen as sinful
- Matthew's encounter with Jesus was not one that Matthew planned, Jesus approached him
- Christ desires to have a relationship with each and every one of else, no matter where you are in life

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Change happens when you **FOLLOW** after Jesus

Verses 9b “Follow me,” he told him, and Matthew got up and followed him.

- Matthew did not hesitate, he simply did as Jesus asked and followed him.
- Matthew left behind his job, and probably other things to follow Jesus; following Jesus wholeheartedly will require you to leave things and people behind
- Jesus never asked Matthew change who he was, just to follow him, you do not have to be perfect to follow Jesus, just follow him and that will lead to change

Change happens when you **COMMUNE** with Jesus

Verse 10 While Jesus was having dinner at Matthew’s house, many tax collectors and sinners came and ate with him and his disciples.

- Matthew immediately invited Jesus into his home and made Jesus a significant part of his life
- Matthew was so excited about Jesus that he shared Jesus with his friends, even those that were sinful as well
- Everyone will not be excited about your change, but remember that Christ is happy to be in your life.

**Graffiti: Personal God Time**

Graffiti Prayer: Have a large sheet of paper hanging on the wall of room. Have students select a marker, and on the wall, begin to write the name(s) of who they wish to pray for, and explain to them that as they are writing to pray either quietly or verbally for the names they are writing.

**Breakdancing: Bust a Move**

Discuss with you “Putting the Bible into Practice.” Share the importance of living a life that reflects the gospel, and that you will discuss the outcomes of their biblical application during next week’s meeting.
Words with Friends

Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!
II Corinthians 5:17 (NIV)

Objective
- Discuss with students what it means to be a new creation in Christ
- Help students identify their story
- Teach students how to share their testimony

Part of being a Christian requires believers to begin to look like exemplify Christ like qualities. For many of us, this means we begin to change our attitude, actions, and attractions. Sometimes this change can be not only difficult for us, but also for our friends. Your new walk with Christ will open your mind to conscious thinking about right & wrong decisions which may cause your friends to feel differently about you. Share your testimony with your friends and family. Tell them about your experience with Christ and how Christ has impacted you. This may be weird, however, reiterate that you are not here to judge but to love unconditionally and be better as a person, and this can result in them becoming a believer.

How does the song, Same Drugs, relate to the messages found in the Bible?

What makes it difficult to share your testimony with friends?

Matthew 9:9-11 New International Version

Change happens when you have a change with Jesus.

Verses 9a As Jesus went on from there, he saw a man named Matthew sitting at the tax collector’s booth.

Change happens when you change after Jesus.

Verses 9b “Follow me,” he told him, and Matthew got up and followed him.

Change happens when you change with Jesus.

Verse 10 While Jesus was having dinner at Matthew’s house, many tax collectors and sinners came and ate with him and his disciples.

Putting the Bible into Practice

Within the next seven days:

1. Share your testimony with a friend.
2. Identify what areas where you can exemplify Christ better, and begin to change?

[Memory verse] Psalm 51:10 Create in me a clean heart, O God, And renew a steadfast spirit within me.
DJ: Prelude

Play “D.R.A.M Sings Special”

1. Pass out song lyrics, and ask students to highlight words/phrases that have meaning for them.

   [Verse - D.R.A.M.]
   You are very special
   You're special too
   Everyone is special
   This I know is true
   When I look at you
   You are very special
   You're special too
   Everyone is special
   This I know is true
   When I look at you

2. Ask students to explain why they highlighted specific words.

3. Engage students in conversation by asking the following questions:
   a. What is the artist trying to say?
   b. What do the lyrics mean to you in your life?
   c. Do the lyrics seem true to your experience?
   d. Do you agree with the message of this song?
   e. Is this message something young people should follow?

Chorus

Read scriptures below:
Mark 10:45 New International Version (NIV)
For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

John 13:16 New International Version (NIV)
Very truly I tell you, no servant is greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him.

Serving others is not an easy task. God can call us do things that seem impossible. For instance, God commissioned Moses to set his people free from the hands of the Egyptians. However, we are never called to do anything that Jesus wasn’t willing to do. More importantly, God will never call you to do something he has not already equipped you to do. Jesus shows that serving others is a requirement for anyone who claims to love God. We all must be prepared to inconvenience ourselves and step out of our comfort zones to serve God’s people. So, trust the Lord, serve others wholeheartedly, and always remember that God is right by your side.

Rap Session
Listed below are discussion questions for students to discuss:

1. How do you serve God in your personal life?
2. What are characteristics of a person with a heart of a servant? Which do you hold?

Emcee: Verse 1

Read the story of Jesus watching the feet of the disciples in John 13 together, then share with the youth what can be learned about the idea of serving others.

Share with students, what the Bible teaches about change, be sure to hit on the bullets below each answer.

Serve WHERE THERE IS A NEED
Verse 5 When Jesus looked up and saw a great crowd coming toward him; he said to Philip, “Where shall we buy bread for these people to eat?”

- Thousands of people spent the day following Jesus, and at this point of the evening they had a need for food
- The people who were in front of them had an immediate need that could have impacted their ability to focus on Jesus. Some people have difficulty focusing on God—because sometimes a lack of need makes them think God is not present.
- As young people, the first place to serve is where you see people in need. You do not have to travel to another city or country—I am sure there are people in need right in your school, neighborhood, and community.
Serve **WITH WHAT YOU HAVE**

Verse 9 “Here is a boy with five small barley loaves and two small fish, but how far will they go among so many?”

- The disciples were quick to mention all the things they were lacking and how that hindered them from being able to meet someone’s need.
- There is no need to small that God sees as insignificant and no need to large that God sees as impossible to meet—thus, as people of God we have to approach serving others with the same mentality.
- Everything obstacle that you are confronted with, God has equipped you to overcome it. Focus on the needs of others that you can do something about and where you are gifted and skilled to help—whatever you have, offer it to God as a living sacrifice and he will be sure to multiply it to help others.

Serve **WHEN GOD IS PRESENT**

Verses 10-11 Jesus said, “Have the people sit down.” There was plenty of grass in that place, and they sat down (about five thousand men were there). 11 Jesus then took the loaves, gave thanks, and distributed to those who were seated as much as they wanted. He did the same with the fish.

- The young man in this passage stood before Jesus, and presented Jesus with what he had.
- Because God is always present, we should always serve others.
- As a young person, when you serve others, look at it as if you are serving God and He is standing right before you.

**Graffiti: Personal Time**

Serve: Have the students clean the room in which you are hosting this class, once they finish, talk to them about what was the value in them cleaning the room back up and how did that reflect service.

**Breakdancing: Bust A Move**

Discuss with you “Putting the Bible Into Practice.” Share the importance of living a life that reflects the gospel, and that you will discuss the outcomes of their biblical application during next week’s meeting.
**U.N.I.T.Y**

For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."  
(Mark 10:45 NIV)

**Objective**
- Teach students how to serve God and love his people.
- Display a biblical example of Jesus' passion and loving heart to serve.
- Help students understand what it means to have a heart of a servant.

Serving others is not an easy task. God can call us to do things that seem impossible. For instance, God commissioned Moses to set his people free from the hands of the Egyptians. However, we are never called to do anything that Jesus wasn’t willing to do. More importantly, God will never call you to do something he has not already equipped you to do. Jesus shows that serving others is a requirement for anyone who claims to love God. We all must be prepared to inconvenience ourselves and step out of our comfort zones to serve God’s people. So, trust the Lord, serve others wholeheartedly, and always remember that God is right by your side.

**What Does the Bible Teach about Servanthood?**

**John 6:1-14 New International Version**

**Serve**

**Verse 5** When Jesus looked up and saw a great crowd coming toward him; he said to Philip, “Where shall we buy bread for these people to eat?”

**Verse 9** “Here is a boy with five small barley loaves and two small fish, but how far will they go among so many?”

**Verse 10, 11** Jesus said, “Have the people sit down.” There was plenty of grass in that place, and they sat down (about five thousand men were there). 11 Jesus then took the loaves, gave thanks, and distributed to those who were seated as much as they wanted. He did the same with the fish.

**Putting the Bible into Practice**

**Within the next seven days:**

1. **Do something kind for someone this week and encourage them to pay it forward**

2. **Find a way to serve in your local church**

[Memory verse] Luke 22: 27 For who is greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one who is at the table? But I am among you as one who serves.
Appendix B
Lyrics and Lessons: A Hip-Hop Curriculum for Youth Discipleship

I. Who do we serve?
Discipleship program will serve male students grades 6\textsuperscript{th} – 12\textsuperscript{th}.

II. How will the program be provided?
Gathering will take place monthly in group setting. The group is designed to give support, educate, improve the students understanding of society and God’s plan for their life, as well as build positive relationships.

III. Design and Lessons for 24-Week Discipleship Program
The program is designed to last 24-weeks and will be divided into four tracks, which consist of 6 themes that will be addressed in each weekly meeting. It is designed to take place in a small group setting, consisting of no more than 10-12 students, and two adult facilitators.

The sessions are as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Album One</th>
<th>God First, Others Second, I’m Third</th>
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<td>Man Up: Who Does God Say I Am</td>
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<td>Career and Education</td>
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Format

1. DJ: Prelude   (15 mins) Introduction of Hip-Hop Song
2. Verse I       (5 mins) Introduction of Theme
3. Rap Session   (20 mins) Group discussion
4. Emcee: Chorus (20 mins) Explanation of Passage
5. Graffiti: Personal Time (15 mins) Spiritual practice or exercise
6. Breakdancing: Bust A Move (15 mins) Life Application

Album One

God First, Others Second, I’m Third
Introduction to Program

Track 1 –
In the Beginning (“How Great” Chance the Rapper ft. Jay Electonica & Nicole)
Explore with students the role of God in the history of humanity

Track 2 –
Son of a Carpenter (“All We Got” – Chance the Rapper ft. Kanye West and Chicago Children’s Choir)
Help students find commonalities between them and the person of Jesus
Track 3 – All for Me (“Angels” – Chance the Rapper ft. Saba)
Inform students on the work of Jesus and what the crucifixion and resurrection should mean for them

Track 4 – All Grown Up! (“Blessings” – Chance the Rapper)
Developing with students’ personal spiritual practices that help them grow in their relationship with God

Track 5 – Words with Friends (“Same Drugs” – Chance the Rapper)
Teach students how to share their faith and testimony with others

Track 6 – Work it Out (“D.R.A.M Sings Special – Chance the Rapper)
Challenge students to become active and engage in community

Album Two

Track 7 – Man Up: Who Does God Say I Am
A Man After God’s Own Heart (“Golden Salvation” – Wale)
Students will learn God’s definition of manhood and compare that to society’s depiction of a man

Track 8 – No Turning Back (“Man Up!” – Layze Bone and Noble)
Students will dive into what it means to be a black male in society

Track 9 – I Like Me (“Crooked Smile” – J. Cole)
Challenge students to identify traits and characteristics that they like about themselves

Track 10 – Self-image/Self-esteem (“All Falls Down” – Kanye West)
Help students learn to distinguish between self-esteem and self-image

Track 11 – My Values (“Law” – Yo Gotti)
Students will examine what is important to them and how their value systems affect their choices

Track 12 – Changing from the inside out. (“Light” – Big Sean ft. Jeremih)
Participants will face everyday situations that have the potential to become problems and discover how a person may behave responsibly in these circumstances

Album Three

Track 13 – You Are My Brothers and Sisters
One Family (“The Whole World” – Outkast)
Help students understand what it means to be a part of the family of God

Track 14 – No Cuffin’ (“Don’t Believe the Hype” – Public Enemy)
Students discuss how media impacts and influences the perception and treatment of black women

Track 15 –
Am I My Brothers’ Keeper? (“Man Men” – 50 Cent)
Students will discuss issues of violence against other black males and strategies to deal with anger and rage

Track 16 –
Friend Request (“When We Were Kids” – Ludacris)
Inform students on how to form healthy relationships with others

Track 17 –
Family First (“Dear Mama” – 2Pac)
Students will articulate positive attributes of their family while exploring the dynamics of family and their personal feelings

Track 18 –
One Family (“The Whole World” – Outkast)
Discuss with students what it means to be a part of the family of God

**Album Four**

**Career and Education**

Track 19 –
Stimulus Plan (“Politics As Usual” – Jay Z)
Share with students the economic dynamics of modern society and how those dynamics have an impact on our everyday lives

Track 20 –
Career ABC’s (“Paid in Full” – Eric B. & Rakim)
Challenge students to consider the various potential and vocational choices open to them

Track 21 –
Investigate and Discover (“I Know I Can” – Jaheim)
Students research and learn about the career they are interested in pursuing

Track 22 –
S.M.A.R.T Goals (“Successful” – Drake)
Students learn what it means to have goals and how to set them

Track 23 –
This Is My Life! (“Last Call” – Kanye West)
Work with students to create a plan to achieve their goals

Track 24 –
A Day in Life (“Good Day” – Ice Cube)
Students are given the option of taking a tour of a large corporation or visiting a college/university
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Biography

Rodney Alex Mason, Jr., was born January 7, 1984, and is a native of Syracuse, New York. He currently serves as Pastor of Christian Education, after serving two years as Youth Pastor, at Berean Christian Church in Stone Mountain, Georgia, under the leadership of Dr. Kerwin B. Lee. In this position, his role is to provide discipleship opportunities for individuals through small groups, workshops, classes, and seminars. Rodney’s strongest gifts are mentoring young black men and writing curriculum.

He is a 2006 graduate of Colgate University where he received his Bachelors of Arts in the concentrations of Religious and Africana Studies. Upon completion of his undergraduate degree, Rodney matriculated at Emory University Candler School of Theology and earned his Master of Divinity degree in 2008, with certificates in Religious Education, Baptist Studies, and Black Church Studies.

In 2017, he will receive his Doctorate of Ministry from Duke Divinity School where his dissertation, "The Rationale for and Guide to Using Hip-Hop Culture As A Vehicle to Spiritual Formation for Urban Youth," focuses on incorporating pop culture into the discipleship process for youth and young adults. Rodney has a sincere passion to see young people live out the purpose God has ordained for their lives by serving as a mentor and spiritual guide.

He lives in Covington, GA with his lovely wife, Dr. Johnecia L. Mason. They are the proud parents of the late Rodney Alex Mason, III. He lives by the scripture, "Imitate me as I imitate Christ" 1 Corinthians 11:1.