

DEBATING CHRISTIAN RAP

SCOTT ANIOL

SHAI LINNE

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INTRODUCTION

Original Post

Over the next couple of weeks, Shai Linne ([bio](#)) and I will have a public discussion about Christian rap here on this site. I am grateful that Shai has asked to have this discussion. He and I spoke on the phone Saturday, we got know each other a bit, and we prayed together. I was encouraged by his desire to understand where I am coming from, his humility, and his evident love for Christ, his truth, and his Church. I share his desire to understand more fully his position, to correct where I have misrepresented him and others, and to dialogue about these matters with respect.

The discussion will take the following format: we both will ask each other five questions, beginning with Shai and alternating between us. The questions (or series of questions) will be limited to around 250 words; each answer will be limited to around 500 words. After the ten questions are completed, we will each give a 500-750 word closing statement.

Our desire with this discussion is to fully understand each other's positions. It is not likely that either of us will persuade the other. But we hope to model a grace-filled conversation in which each of us truly listens and responds with respect.



I'd like to start by highlighting where Shai and I agree. During our recent phone conversation, Shai and I marveled at how close we were in many key areas, and I think it is important to reflect on those as we begin a discussion about our disagreements.

First, both Shai and I are wretched sinners saved by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. I am happy to call Shai my brother in Christ. Because of that shared faith, I believe that we enjoy Christian fellowship. Our disagreements in some areas might preclude cooperating on all levels, but this does not mean that we cannot call each other "brother" and rejoice together in the gospel. Likewise, both of us recognize that we are accepted by God fully upon the merits of Christ, and no amount of holy living or "correct music" could earn any favor with God since whatever we do is stained by sin.

Second, both Shai and I believe that the truth of the gospel is what is ultimately most important. In fact, I believe it is that love for the gospel that motivates both of us to have this discussion. Shai is understandably concerned that my position may evidence legalism and may lead to disunity in the Church. I am concerned that particular ways of communicating the gospel demean the gospel. And it is our shared love for the gospel that motivate us to have this discussion with grace and respect.

Third, both Shai and I are committed to making disciples of all nations. Each of us desires to proclaim the gospel boldly to as many people as possible. Each of us desires to take new converts and teach them all that God has commanded us. And both of us have a deep love for Christ's church and a longing to see our churches grow.

Fourth, both Shai and I have a high regard for Scripture and believe it to be our supreme authority. To say that either of us holds our view because we do not believe in the sufficiency of Scripture would be a straw man. We are both striving to actively apply the principles and precepts of the Word of God to our lives and ministries.

Finally, both Shai and I believe that Christians must be holy, must fervently follow God's commands, and must do all for the glory of God. We may disagree on some definitions and how this kind of life will look, but our hearts and motives are in the same place.

Differences between Shai and I will be apparent as we discuss this issue of music, but since we agree in so many essential areas, I look forward to having a discussion that is gracious and respectful.

Here are Shai's opening remarks:



First, I want to thank Scott for his willingness to engage in this discussion, as well as for hosting it on his blog. I'm hopeful that the Lord will use the fallout from the NCFIC panel discussion for His glory and the strengthening of His church. As Scott mentioned, I do think it's important to highlight where we agree. It's easy to come at discussions like this with an adversarial stance. I don't see Scott as my adversary or my enemy. He's my brother in Christ. In fact we have a common adversary- the devil- who would love to use situations like this to sow seeds of discord and disunity. Lord willing, this discussion will be evidence that we're not unaware of Satan's schemes ([2 Cor. 2:11](#)).

I want to "amen" what Scott said about our areas of agreement. I believe this is crucial to setting the proper context for this conversation. Without question, the single most important thing about Scott and I is that we are united to Christ by faith in His life, death and resurrection. Because of God's grace, we are both new creations ([2 Cor. 5:17](#)). Though we have differences in culture and background, we have both been reconciled to God in one body through the cross of Jesus Christ ([Eph. 2:16](#)). What unites us is infinitely more powerful and precious than anything that could divide us. Because of what Christ has accomplished, at a fundamental level, I have more in common with Scott than I do with someone from Hip-hop culture who doesn't know Jesus. Scott is my family in a way that transcends what's even true of my blood relatives who are not Christians. Not only is there a fundamental unity, but we also have strong theological unity, even beyond the essentials of the Christian faith.

I've been very public about my commitments, but for those who are reading who may not be familiar, let me highlight a few.

1. I am committed to the glory of God as seen in the absolute supremacy of Jesus Christ in all things. I believe that this universe and everything in it exists for the singular purpose of ultimately bringing God the maximum amount of glory, according to His infinite wisdom ([Rom. 11:33-36](#)). Scott shares this commitment.
2. I am committed to the proclamation of the gospel as God's appointed means to reconcile sinners to Himself. I don't believe that people are saved by good music, clever speech or

excellent art. The gospel and the gospel alone is the power of God for salvation to all who believe ([Rom. 1:16](#)). Scott shares this commitment.

3. I am committed to the sufficiency of the Scriptures to govern Christians individually and the Church corporately in all areas of faith and practice. In areas of disagreement between Christians, the Bible is our final authority. I resist arguments that are grounded in pragmatism, personal preference or the wisdom of man, if it is in conflict with the plain teaching of Scripture. While I'm thankful for godly traditions, even they must bow to the Sacred Text. So when brothers have a conflict regarding particular practices, it won't be long before you hear me quote [Isaiah 8:20](#) "To the teaching and to the testimony! If they will not speak according to this word, it is because they have no dawn." Scott shares this commitment.

CAN MUSIC BE SINFUL?

[Original Post](#)

QUESTION FROM SHAI

Scott, in your recent post where you explained your comments on the NCFIC panel, you spoke of rap as “a form of music that is inherently denigrating.” My first question to you is this: Are you saying that music, apart from lyrics, can be sinful in and of itself? If so, what is your Scriptural basis for such a claim?

ANSWER FROM SCOTT

This is an excellent question, and I’m glad we’re starting here; it reveals our shared commitment to the authority and sufficiency of the Word of God.

Yes, I believe that music, apart from lyrics, can be sinful in and of itself. Here is my biblical support:

I begin with [1 Timothy 3:16-17](#):

All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.

Scripture governs absolutely every area of our lives; there is nothing the Bible does not address, either by precept, principle, or example, including our music.

The question then becomes, what in Scripture governs our music? To answer this question, we must understand the nature of music itself.

Music is not a thing; music is an action. Specifically, music is an action of moral human agents. While God created the “stuff” of music (sound, pitch, rhythm, timbre, etc.), moral human agents create songs.

Scripture is clear that the actions of moral agents are either good or evil. By the common grace of God, people can do good things ([Luke 6:33](#); [Rom 2:14-15](#)). They can also do sinful things ([1 John 1:8](#)).

Specifically, music is communication. Although Scripture is not intended to be a music textbook and should not be viewed that way, Scripture at least implies that music communicates. Here are just a few examples:

Instrumental music can express victory or defeat (Exod 32:17-18), calm ([1 Sam 16:1-23](#)), mourning, weeping, and wailing ([Job 30:31](#); [Isa 16:11](#); [Jer 48:36](#)), joy ([1 Chr 15:16](#)), and pomp([Isa 14:11](#)). This kind of communication may be common to all people or specific to a

culture, or even specific to a certain person. Again, Scripture doesn't *teach* that music communicates, but it implies what we know by experience.

Scripture says that human communication must be evaluated. Communication can express anger, wrath, malice, and obscenity ([Col 3:8](#)). Communication can be corrupt or edifying ([Eph 4:29](#)). Furthermore, Scripture's principles concerning communication apply to *all* forms of communication like body language or facial expressions (even a "look" can express pride [[Prov 6:17](#)]), not just propositions.

Thus, what Scripture says about communication must be applied to music. In particular, music communicates similarly to tone of voice and body language. Assuming *what we say* is good, if our tone of voice expresses love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, or self-control, it is good; and if our tone of voice expresses impurity, sensuality, enmity, strife, or fits of anger, it is sinful ([Gal 5:19-20, 22](#)). It can express these things even if we don't intend them, such as when I speak harshly to my wife after a long day even though I do not intend to.

Making evaluations about what tones of voice express what emotion is not always easy; it requires wisdom and judgment. But if we long to be conformed to the image of Christ, we'll make those judgments about all of our communications.

REBUTTAL FROM SHAI

[Original Post](#)

Thanks for your answer, Scott. I want to interact with a few of your points. In describing what music is, you said:

"Music is not a thing; music is an action. Specifically, music is an action of moral human agents. While God created the "stuff" of music (sound, pitch, rhythm, timbre, etc.), moral human agents create songs."

I don't want to spend too much time on the distinction you're making here. I agree that the making of music is a human activity. But my question was about the final product, so to speak. By way of analogy, one could speak of the activity of painting, as well as the actual paintings themselves. I'm speaking of the latter. Recorded music, the kind used in Hip-hop, is indeed a "thing", in that sense. We agree that human beings are moral agents accountable to God for our activities. But the *byproducts themselves* are not moral agents. Paintings and chairs and knives and recordings will not have to stand before God on judgment day. But the people who made them will. That's an important distinction that must be made. You said:

"Yes, I believe that music, apart from lyrics, can be sinful in and of itself."

I wholeheartedly disagree and I believe Scripture clearly refutes that notion. A few relevant texts:

“For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, for it is made holy by the word of God and prayer.” (1 Timothy 4:4-5)

*“I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that **nothing** is unclean in itself.”
(Romans 14:14)*

Those are amazing statements coming from the Apostle Paul, a Jewish man who was familiar with the many old covenant dietary restrictions. The key phrase in [Romans 14:14](#)? “In itself”. Paul is saying that food doesn’t have *inherent* moral value. The heart of the one eating it determines how God views the act, not the food itself.

You yourself said, “God created the ‘stuff’ of music (sound, pitch, rhythm, timbre, etc.)”. Agreed. Music is simply the result of human beings arranging that “stuff” that God created. Can it be arranged with evil intent? Sure. And the person who does that will have to give an account for it. But no matter how evil a musician’s intentions, he doesn’t have the power to transform something that God created and called good into something inherently sinful. Finally, here’s my summary of 3 points you made: Scripture at least implies that music communicates. Scripture says that human communication must be evaluated. What Scripture says about communication must be applied to music

Can you clarify what you mean by “music communicates”? If you mean that music is a tool that can aid in the expression of human emotion, I agree. Most of the Scriptures you mentioned indicate that. But I would argue that how people respond to music is culturally conditioned and not universal. This very debate is evidence of that. I look forward to your response.

REPLY FROM SCOTT

Thanks, Shai. A couple responses:

First, saying music is a “thing” is like saying tone of voice is a “thing.” They’re not; they are human communication, and human communication is always moral. I didn’t say that the “byproducts” are moral agents; I said that the communication of moral agents is moral, and since music is communication, music is moral. Sounds are “things.” But once I begin to, as you say, arrange those sounds into words, sentences, thoughts, and tones of voice, I am now communicating, and that is moral.

Second, no, music is not a “tool” of communication; it *is* communication. Again, music’s connection with vocal tone is instructive: tone of voice is not just a tool of communication; it is part of the communication itself. *How* I say something to my children, my wife, my boss, or my God is just as important as *what* I say to them because how I say something is part of the communication. This is why the Bible commands that we speak the truth *in love* ([Eph 4:15](#)); “in love” refers not just to *what* we say, but also *how* we say it. This is why God commands us to worship reverently ([Heb 12:28](#)); reverence refers not just to the words we say in worship or even the object of our worship; it addresses *how* we worship.

Another biblical illustration of Paul’s concern over *how* we communicate is [1 Corinthians 2:1-5](#):

And I, when I came to you, brothers, did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God with lofty speech or wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. And I was with you in weakness and in fear and much trembling, and my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God.

Paul contrasts two different ways of communicating the gospel: with “lofty speech” or “in weakness and in fear and much trembling.” I won’t make any more of this at this point than to say that Paul is indicating that *how* we communicate something is significant and must be evaluated as to its worth and appropriateness.

Third, you are making a very common category error in these discussions. I agree completely, of course, that whatever God creates is good. God created music. God created meat. These things are good.

But God did not create rap. People did. For that matter, God did not create Gregorian chant, German chorales, Appalachian folk tunes, country western, jazz, or rock ‘n’ roll. People did. And because these are all human communication, they are moral.

It is very dangerous to ascribe to God something that he did not make.

Communication is categorically different than something like food, and thus the passages you cited are not directly applicable. They *are* applicable only if someone were to argue that the very act of making music is immoral. If someone said that, I would agree with you that since God created music, music is good, and therefore we must not call something evil that God created.

In the context of the passages you cited, which is Mosaic dietary restrictions, the Law did not restrict those things because they were inherently sinful; that’s Paul’s point. So the categories you are using in your argument are these:

Meat = Rap

That is mistaken, rather, here are more equivalent categories:

Meat = Music

Spoiled meat = Forms of music that communicate in an immoral way

Healthy meat = Forms of music that communicate in a wholesome way

To summarize, *what* we communicate is important, and *how* we communicate it is equally important. Music is the *how* we communicate something.

Now, of course, none of this proves that rap or any other kind of music is immoral; that is not my point. I would simply insist that since music is communication, we must be willing to carefully and critically judge music itself to determine how it communicates, and we must then actively apply what Scripture says about communication to our musical communication.

HOW DOES RAP MUSIC "FLAVOR" ITS CONTENT?

[Original Post](#)

QUESTION FROM SCOTT

Shai, I have heard you talk about the differences between east coast, southern, midwest, and west coast hip hop and the “flavors” they communicate. Would you say that each of these forms has strengths and weaknesses when attempting to communicate different aspects of biblical truth such as lament, exultation, rebuke, or instruction? If so, could you give examples of what each of these do well and what they do poorly? If not, could you explain why not?

ANSWER FROM SHAI

Thanks for your [answer yesterday](#), Scott. I think I’m starting to understand your position more. Before I answer your first question, I want to follow up on something you said yesterday in hopes that you’ll clarify it in your rebuttal. The question I posed to you was, “Are you saying that music, **apart from lyrics**, can be sinful in and of itself?” You said this:

*“Third, you are making a very common category error in these discussions. I agree completely, of course, that whatever God creates is good. **God created music**. God created meat. These things are good. But God did not create rap. People did. For that matter, God did not create Gregorian chant, German chorales, Appalachian folk tunes, country western, jazz, or rock ‘n’ roll. People did. And because these are all human communication, they are moral. It is very dangerous to ascribe to God something that he did not make.”*

Brother, I’m not understanding the distinction you’re making. You said that God created music. But then you went on to say that people created particular genres of music. Every genre you mentioned has lyrics, which you rightly termed “human communication”. But my original question was about music apart from lyrics. Can you explain what you mean when you say “God created music.”? Thanks. And now, to your question:

This is an excellent question, Scott. It’s something that I think Christian Hip-hop artists need to wrestle with more than we do. My answer is yes. Like all genres, different regional forms of Hip-hop have strengths and weaknesses when it comes to expressing different kinds of truth. It’s something I’m conscious of and it guides how I choose the music I rap over. It’s the point I tried to make starting at the 5:50 point of this video:



“One of the issues I struggle with, just in terms of Hip Hop, is often times the medium is, in my opinion, not appropriate to the gravity of the message. It would like if you’re at a funeral and hearing the birthday song or something. Musically that just doesn’t fit with the mood.”

Hip-hop has changed since I made those comments in 2009. The internet and other factors have combined to de-emphasize regional distinctions, though they still exist. But to use those categories, southern Hip-hop is strong when it comes to encouraging excitement and rallying around something. Lecrae brilliantly leveraged this to rally Christians to foreign missions on his song Send Me:



While that style (music and lyrics) is great for inspiring and motivating to action, it wouldn’t be the best style to use if the song were an introspective prayer to God confessing sin. My two caveats would be this: While I would question the propriety of someone using that style for that form of communication, I don’t think it would be universally sinful to do so I speak from a particular cultural context and I don’t make the assumption that every person in every culture who hears that song will respond in the same way.

REBUTTAL FROM SCOTT

[Original Post](#)

Shai, thank for your [explanation of](#) how different kinds of rap are more suited to different subjects. I appreciate the perspective of an expert who understands the nuances of the art form.

This is not so much of a rebuttal to your answer as an observation and a plea that I hope will help us move this discussion on to the next level.

First, I am thankful that you acknowledge that musical forms do communicate, that they shape their lyrical content in particular ways, and that certain forms are more appropriate for specific kinds of truth content than others.

Second, I fully recognize your caveats: You do not believe that inappropriateness is necessarily sinful, and you believe that musical communication is culturally conditioned rather than universal.

Let me just say that I agree with both of those caveats in many, many cases. Often times what music communicates makes it inappropriate for a particular context or content, but that doesn't mean it is sinful. Furthermore, I agree that [much of what music communicates is culturally conditioned](#). I obviously do not believe this is always the case, but I'd like to set this issue aside for a moment for the sake of our discussion.

In the meantime, third, I would simply like to observe that you did not use any Scripture to prove that "southern Hip-hop is strong when it comes to encouraging excitement and rallying around something." You did not use the Bible to argue that "often times the medium is, in my opinion, not appropriate to the gravity of the message." You did not use Scripture when you insisted that southern Hip-hop "wouldn't be the best style to use if the song were an introspective prayer to God confessing sin." You used your own perception and understanding of music to make those assessments, and I believe you were quite justified in doing so.

But here is the point I would like to stress here: often we who argue that certain forms of music are not fitting to communicate God's truth are cut off from any discussion because the Bible doesn't explicitly say that music communicates, how music communicates, or that some kinds of music are inappropriate for holy matters.

I would like to ask that at very least you acknowledge that appealing to silence in Scripture is not a legitimate argument used to end all debate about the appropriateness of particular forms of music for Christian purposes. Rather, it is our responsibility as Christians to actively evaluate what particular music means and determine whether or not it is appropriate for a given subject, whether or not that meaning is culturally conditioned.

Granted, we may disagree on exactly *what* rap communicates and whether it is appropriate to communicate the Word of God. But this is exactly where the debate should occur.

I'm convinced that if we could get past the "[But the Bible doesn't say anything about music!](#)" argument, we could really move this discussion along to actually discuss the merits and demerits of the genre of rap itself.

REPLY FROM SHAI

Thanks for your reply, Scott. You observed that I didn't use Scripture in my last response to you. Of course, this is because the answer to the question you asked isn't found in Scripture. Like you acknowledged, "the Bible doesn't explicitly say that music communicates, how music communicates, or that some kinds of music are inappropriate". By the way, I'm really glad to hear you say that. I think that acknowledgement helps to move the conversation forward.

You said: “I would like to ask that at very least you acknowledge that appealing to silence in Scripture is not a legitimate argument used to end all debate about the appropriateness of particular forms of music for Christian purposes.”

I’m with you on that. I agree with the Westminster Confession of Faith (1.6) when it says

*“..there are some circumstances concerning the worship of God, and government of the Church, common to human actions and societies, which are to be **ordered by the light of nature, and Christian prudence**, according to the general rules of the Word.”*

The question of the appropriateness of different styles/ forms (apart from lyrics) falls under the category of “Christian prudence”. But that doesn’t mean it’s not important or that we shouldn’t discuss it. To give an example, the matter of how we order our corporate worship services (i.e. the number of songs we sing, whether or not we make announcements, how long the sermon should be, etc.) is not explicit in Scripture. These are matters of Christian prudence. The silence of Scripture on those particulars shouldn’t end the discussion about it.

But here’s the thing: While the Bible “doesn’t explicitly say that music communicates, how music communicates, or that some kinds of music are inappropriate”, I think we would agree that Scripture does speak explicitly, directly and repeatedly about the **content** of the church’s music, both descriptively and prescriptively (1 Chron.16:23, [2 Chron. 5:13](#), [Neh. 12:46](#), [Ps. 9:11](#), [30:4](#), [59:16](#), [89:1](#), [96:2](#), [101:1](#), [119:172](#), [138:5](#), [147:1](#), [Is. 12:5](#), [42:10-1](#) [2 Col. 3:16](#), [James 5:13](#), etc.). Between the two (content and form), the Bible says a lot about one and very little about the other. So why would we emphasize style/ form when Scripture de-emphasizes it? When I evaluate a song that claims to be Christian, my primary consideration is the lyrics. Form is of secondary importance. That doesn’t mean we can’t or shouldn’t evaluate form, but it does mean that when we do so, it requires the humility to acknowledge that we’re in the realm of Christian prudence. On top of that, when we attempt to make a cross-cultural evaluation of a form/style, it requires that we familiarize ourselves with the culture enough to make an informed evaluation.

EXAMPLE OF SINFUL MUSIC

Original Post

QUESTION FROM SHAI

Scott, in answering my previous question, you said, “Yes, I believe that music, apart from lyrics, can be sinful in and of itself.” and “the communication of moral agents is moral, and since music is communication, music is moral.”

Can you please provide an example of music apart from lyrics that is inherently sinful/immoral and explain why?

ANSWER FROM SCOTT

While there are many underlying presuppositions that inform my assessment of various musical forms, and thus I’m hesitant to answer this question without laying all those out, I’ll bite for the sake of our discussion!

Let me first reiterate that I believe there are two important questions when evaluating the propriety of a musical form: Is this form appropriate for its context or lyrical content? Does this music express sentiments that are incompatible with Christian living?

As I mentioned in my last rebuttal, I believe there are many cases a musical form fails the first question but not necessarily the second. For example, I believe that circus music is compatible with Christianity, but I don’t believe it is fitting for expressing Christian truth or worship.

However, I do believe that some musical forms would be wrong for a Christian because they express things the Bible condemns.

Here are examples of snippets from one musical form:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MBjWwzemnyE>

I will note that with a couple of these snippets there are “lyrics,” but (a) I can’t understand them (so they don’t factor into my assessment) and (b) the *way* in which the lyrics are sung is part of the music, so it actually contributes to my point.

This music is incompatible with Christianity for a few reasons. First, it expresses impurity, sensuality, enmity, strife, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, orgies, and things like these (Gal 5:19-21). There are musicological ways to explain this, but I don’t even think that is necessary to determine what this music means since at its most basic level, music relates to common human experience. This music sounds like what fits of anger feel like; it sounds like what enmity and strife look like. That is why this musical form was created; it was a natural expression of people who wanted to communicate chaos and rage.

Second, it is not true, honorable, just, pure, lovely, commendable, excellent, or worthy of praise (Phil 4:8), nor does it express love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, or self-control (Gal 5:22-23). This music is purposefully distorted, harsh, ear-splitting, and ugly; it does not conform to the absolute standards of beauty rooted in the character of God and expressed in his Word and creation.

Third, this music is not holy (1 Pet 1:16); it is not conduct worthy of the gospel (Phil 1:27). It not what accords with sound doctrine; it does not express sober-mindedness, dignity, self-control, integrity, or sound speech that cannot be condemned, so that an opponent may be put to shame, having nothing evil to say about us (Titus 2:1-2, 6-8).

Fourth, because of the intended context (Christian) and the lyrical content (God's Word), this form of music disrespects God and demeans his truth, and thus fails both questions stated above. This music is well-suited to themes of death and demons, which reveals its incompatibility with Christianity on both levels.

So my question from this assessment would be this: if a Christian loves what is ugly, impure, chaotic, unholy, and unworthy of the gospel, what is that called? The Bible would call that sin.

REBUTTAL FROM SHAI

[*Original Post*](#)

In my last question for you, I asked you to provide me an example of music (apart from lyrics) that is inherently sinful and to explain why. You then posted a clip with short snippets from a number of different "Christian Death Metal" songs, most of which have lyrics. You dismissed the songs having lyrics by saying you couldn't understand them and that the lyrics are part of the music anyway, so it doesn't matter. Well, it does matter, because you said earlier that "music apart from lyrics can be sinful in itself".

Here's how I interacted with the clips you posted. First, I listened all the way through. Second, I contacted a good friend of mine. He's a godly brother who enjoys Christian Hardcore, which I believe is the proper title for that genre. I sent him the clips to get his opinion. Third, I listened to a few songs from other bands that he mentioned, making sure I read the lyrics as I listened to what they're saying. It's not my cup of tea because of the harsh sound of the vocals, but there are things about it lyrically and musically that I can appreciate. You said:

"This music is incompatible with Christianity for a few reasons." After quoting parts of Galatians 5:19-21, you said "There are musicological ways to explain this, but I don't even think that is necessary."

I absolutely want to hear the musicological way to explain how drums, electric guitars, bass and keys in themselves can express the things in Galatians 5:19-21. Here's the entire passage:

"Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these. I warn

*you, as I warned you before, that those **who do such things** will not inherit the kingdom of God.” (Gal. 5:19-21)*

This text has the particular acts (works) of people in view. And those works spring forth from a heart that is in rebellion against God. Scott, you have not proven that that the music of Christian Hardcore is a work of the flesh. You said:

“Third, this music is not holy (1 Peter 1:16).”

Of course, now I want to hear what a “holy” instrumental sounds like- and what makes it holy. You also said:

“It is not conduct worthy of the gospel (Phil. 1:27.)”

According to the rest of verse 27, a manner of life worthy of the gospel is seen as believers are “standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel”-not the tempo or loudness of drums. As for saying that it doesn’t accord with sound doctrine or sound speech from the Titus 2 passage, how can you make that claim apart from evaluating the words, which you said you couldn’t understand?

Christian Hardcore is not my preference, but I can think of many song topics for which that style might actually fit better than other styles. A song about Rev. 6:16-17, for instance. You have asserted that the music is inherently sinful, but you have yet to demonstrate it, brother.

REPLY FROM SCOTT

Thanks, Shai. I’m really benefiting from this exercise, and I appreciate the challenge to communicate my convictions with clarity and biblical integrity.

First, I recognize how frustrated you must feel with my answers. But let me try to illustrate why the kind of “proof” you are looking for is beyond what even Scripture demands for making wise decisions about our conduct.

This morning I had to have a talk with my daughter because she was rude to some guests we had in our home last evening. She did not say anything inappropriate to them, but her manner itself was rude.

Now suppose my daughter had said to me, “Dad, I did not feel rude. I did not intend to be rude. That’s just the way that I am. Prove to me from Scripture that how I acted was rude.” How would I reply?

Well, I would not be able to cite chapter and verse that proves certain features of her demeanor were rude. I might frustrate her with a lack of “scientific evidence” that proves she was rude, even though the science does exist. I would simply point out that this is what rudeness looks like. Whether or not she meant it, that behavior *is* rude because *that is how rude people behave*.

The same is true with music, especially since it is an extension of vocal intonation and human behavior. The science does exist that explains how music expresses specific emotion, and

ironically the secular musicians themselves acknowledge what their music means. But it is enough “proof” to simply point to examples of what “fits of anger,” for example, look like, and observe that a certain kind of music sounds like that.

Second, I never said that “drums, electric guitars, brass and keys in themselves can express.” I also never said an instrument can be holy. I said that the music expressed those things; drums, guitars, and keys are not music; and I said that music can or cannot be holy since human behavior can or cannot be holy.

Third, you note that Galatians 5 speaks of “particular acts (works) of people.” Exactly. Music is a human act. Furthermore, I agree that evil works “spring forth from a heart that is in rebellion against God,” which is why I do find it at least instructive when certain musical forms are birthed out of the context of, and with the intent toward, rebellion against God. However, I would also insist that it is quite possible for someone with a heart of love for God to unintentionally act immorally.

Fourth, as to what is meant by “conduct worthy of the gospel” (Phil 1:27) and that which “accords with sound doctrine” (Titus 2:1), those passages specifically refer to things like sobriety, dignity, and self-control. It is instructive that Paul does not refer to their motives or the hearts; he is referring to their behavior. These kinds of character qualities do not directly refer to intent or doctrinal content; they refer to dispositions, characteristics, and sentiments, which can easily be expressed (or not) through music.

Fifth, while it is certainly valuable to ask the opinion of someone who likes a particular kind of music, I do firmly reject the belief that only people who like or are part of a kind of music can judge that music. In fact, I think that people outside my own culture often have a more objective perspective to evaluate my cultural preferences. My preference for a kind of music and my familiarity with it may cloud my ability to objectively evaluate it, and I may be desensitized to its actual meaning and effects.

Sixth, I simply want to note that you did not address whether music should reflect God’s beauty.

Finally, Scripture never insists that we “prove” that something is evil; rather, the burden of proof upon a Christian who desires to be holy in his conduct is to “prove” that his behavior is holy, profitable, and appropriate. We are to prove the good and perfect will of God (Rom 12:2), prove things that are excellent (Phil 1:9-11), test everything and hold fast to what is good (1 Thess 5:21), and train our powers of discernment to distinguish good from evil (Heb 5:14).

All of these passages, and more, imply that we must actively evaluate everything to determine whether it is really good.

We’ve been asking, “What makes this sinful?”

I believe we are asking the wrong question; instead, we should be asking, “What makes this good?”

HOW HIP-HOP IS AN APPROPRIATE MEDIUM FOR COMMUNICATING GOD'S TRUTH

[Original Post](#)

QUESTION FROM SCOTT

Shai, we both agree that how we communicate God's holy truth is important. We also agree that some ways of communicating a biblical message are ill-fitting. Without resorting to arguments from silence, please prove, by the light of nature, and Christian prudence, according to the general rules of the Word, that rap is a fitting and appropriate medium for communicating God's holy truth and his worship.

ANSWER FROM SHAI

Great question, Scott. To make a full case, I need more space than I have. For those interested in more of my thoughts on this question, [I've written about it here](#). I'll take your question a step further. Hip-hop's appropriateness can be proven not merely from the light of nature and Christian prudence, but from Scripture itself. One of the most well-known New Testament passages dealing with the church's music is [Colossians 3:16](#):

“Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God.”

In this passage, music is seen as one means of teaching and admonishing one another, according to the word of Christ. Like Luther once said, “Music is the handmaiden of theology”. Understood properly, music in the church should serve a teaching function. So how does Hip-hop do with teaching? The form of rap, which allows for a much higher word count than most other genres, is ideal in terms of communicating a large amount of information in a small amount of musical space. By virtue of its form, it potentially has the most teaching, “pound-for-pound” of any genre. No other genre that I'm familiar with allows for [a detailed overview of the entire Bible in less than four minutes](#). In no other genre would it even make sense to [defend the reformation understanding of the extent of the atonement](#).

Many more examples of Hip-hop's suitability to teaching could be given, but let's look at admonishment. What does it mean to admonish? The dictionary definition is “to warn or reprimand someone firmly” or “to urge earnestly”. Hip-hop is not only good for this, it's actually better at this than other genres. In most of our hymns and contemporary praise songs, there are relatively few examples of admonishment. One example from a hymn would be the following line from “Stricken, Smitten and Afflicted”:

“Ye who think of sin but lightly, nor suppose the evil great
Here may view its nature rightly, here its guilt may estimate”

That's a powerful line that admonishes us to look at the cross and see the evil of sin, lest we think of it in a casual way. As I said, lines of admonishment like this are relatively rare in the church's hymnody. But in Christian Hip-hop, admonishment is everywhere, because the most popular forms of the genre are geared towards admonishment. I'll give one example. Many pastors would say that the biggest pastoral issue today is the issue of pornography. The church could certainly use some gospel-saturated, Christ-centered admonishment about that. However, I doubt that's going to be the topic of a Chris Tomlin or Keith Getty song anytime soon. But check out ["Step Into the Light" by Timothy Brindle](#). Lyrics are [here under "Step Into The Light."](#)

Because the music of Hip-hop pulls from other musical forms, it has a flexibility that other genres simply don't have. This is important because the various literary forms we find in Scripture cover a wide range of human emotional experience. For instance, psalms of lament and imprecatory psalms are part of the same psalter. It's the rare musical genre whose form makes room for both. Hip-hop does this. On the same album I linked to above, you'll find ["The Faithfulness of Christ."](#) Lyrics [hereunder The Faithfulness of Christ](#), a somber, penitential song that is as moving on an experiential level as it is robust in its theology of repentance and sanctification.

My time is up. If I had more time, I could also show the striking similarities between some forms of Hip-hop and the prophetic oracle employed in Scripture. I could talk about the spiritual gift of exhortation ([Romans 12:8](#)) and how many forms of Hip-hop are suited to exhortation. From a purely aesthetic standpoint, I could speak specifically on internal rhyme and how the best lyricists in Christian Hip-hop display a beauty and complexity in the structure of their lyrics that Watts, Toplady and Newton couldn't begin to fathom. But that will have to wait until another time.

REBUTTAL FROM SCOTT

[Original Post](#)

Thanks for your explanation, Shai. A couple thoughts in response.

First, I want to affirm that the propositional content of Christian rap is often much better than most gospel songs, CCM, praise choruses, or other Christian pop songs. People who have read me know that [I object to those kinds of songs](#) just as much (and, really, more often) than I do Christian rap.

Second, I want to point out that you did not "prove" that rap is a fitting and appropriate medium for communicating God's holy truth and his worship in any different a way than I have explained why I believe it is not fitting. We both applied Scripture to our assessment of the form. I think that's important to acknowledge.

Third, you reduced your definition of rap to high word count, internal rhyme, and complex structure. These are qualities of good poetry, to be sure, but with respect, you may as well have been describing a sonnet.

In other words, you really didn't defend what makes rap what it is.

I'd like to use your own example to illustrate this point.



I want to point out a couple things here: First, I enthusiastically applaud what you did in this video. You recited a poem exalting Jesus Christ. (I'm also very thankful for the clear presentation of the gospel you gave in the second part of the video.)

But was that rap? If that *is* rap, then let me go on record that I'm fully in favor of that kind of rap. Many have asked what truly redeeming rap would look like, and I'd say that's it!

But I would submit that what you did in that video is not rap. Would it be rap if you recited that poem while Bach's "Praise be to You, Jesus Christ" was playing in the background?

No, rap is not *just* many words rhythmically strung together with internal rhyme. I certainly don't object to those characteristics, but that's not what makes rap what it is. Rap includes those characteristics, but it also includes particular kinds of musical accompaniment, performance style, vocal tone, etc.

And, from your own words in this video, I think you recognize this. You explain why you stopped your concert to do what you did:

You hear a lot of music, you see a lot of lights and it can get rowdy; And I'm going to be honest with you. Sometimes it's hard, because these things, these lights, and stuff like that, as good as it is, sometimes it can be a distraction. And it can distract us from the most important thing. We do not want to leave here tonight without proclaiming what the Scripture calls of most importance, and it's simply this.

Based on the defense of rap you provided, I wonder why you felt it was necessary to stop rapping and present the gospel in this way. Isn't rap well-suited to that kind of proclamation?

You see, the same kinds of things you cited as distractions are what really set apart rap as distinct from poetic, rhyming proclamation, and they are the same kinds of things I believe are ill-fitted to gospel proclamation.

Finally, you claimed that Watts, Toplady, and Newton "couldn't begin to fathom" the "beauty and complexity in the structure" of Christian Hip-Hop. I would say two things in response:

First, not only could they fathom it, they far exceed it. Great hymn writers of the Christian tradition utilize internal rhyme (like rap) and a wealth of other poetic and structural devices including [consonance](#), [assonance](#), [modulation](#), [alliteration](#), [anadiplosis](#), [anaphora](#), [antanaclasis](#), [antistrophe](#), [epanadiplosis](#), [epizeuxis](#), [mesodiplosis](#), [tautology](#), [chiasmus](#), [climax](#), [antithesis](#), [paradox](#), [allegory](#), [metaphor](#), [metonymy](#), [similie](#), [synecdoche](#), [apostrophe](#), [hyperbole](#), [personification](#), and more (these are just the ones I teach in my hymnology class; any [good hymnology textbook](#) will describe many more devices hymn writers use). Hymn writers use these devices because the purpose of Christian poetry (and music) is not *just* to express truth; their purpose is to grip the imagination and shape the affections with that truth.

Second, you are comparing what you have admitted is not a congregational song form (rap) with hymns intended to be sung by a congregation. Even with the many rich poetic and structural devices they employ, good hymn writers hold back from too much complexity so that people can join in singing.

If you want to compare what you consider a complex poetic presentation of truth with something equivalent in the Christian tradition, try the poetry of [George Herbert \(like this on prayer\)](#), [John Milton \(like this on Christ's birth\)](#), or [John Donne \(like this on God's forgiveness\)](#).

REPLY FROM SHAI

Scott, you said:

"I want to point out that you did not "prove" that rap is a fitting and appropriate medium for communicating God's holy truth and his worship in any different a way than I have explained why I believe it is not fitting."

Brother, the burden of proof is not on me to demonstrate rap's worthiness as a medium. I simply showed that Christian Hip-hop can and does in many cases honor what Scripture explicitly commands and exemplifies concerning the church's music. I can go to Scripture and objectively analyze whether or not a CHH song is giving praise and thanks to God or telling of His salvation, etc. Those are clear, explicit commands. If a song meets that criteria, the burden of proof is on the person who rejects that God-praising, God-thanking, salvation-telling song on the basis of something that is not explicit in Scripture. Let's talk about the video you posted. You said:

"I enthusiastically applaud what you did in this video. You recited a poem exalting Jesus Christ. But I would submit that what you did in that video is not rap. Would it be rap if you recited that poem while Bach's "Praise be to You, Jesus Christ" was playing in the background?"

Scott, I say this with all due respect, brother. You seem very knowledgeable about certain things. Your Ph.D. indicates that you're obviously educated. But when it comes to Hip-hop, you are ignorant. You don't know what you're talking about, brother. There's nothing necessarily wrong with being ignorant. We're all ignorant about many things. It's why schools, textbooks, online classes and cross-cultural friendships exist. But refusal to acknowledge that ignorance and then make statements like the one you made above? That's inexcusable. You (as a cultural outsider and obviously ignorant about Hip-hop) would submit that what I did in the video wasn't rap?

Really?! Well, I, as one who grew up in Hip-hop culture, studied the culture, will soon release my sixth Hip-hop album and write raps for a living- including that one- I would submit that it absolutely is rap. I wrote it as a rap and performed it as a rap. And yes, it would still be a rap with Bach behind it. In Hip-hop culture, we have a term for that kind of thing. It's called a Mash-up. Happens all the time.

But do you see what you did? You came to this conversation with a presupposition (rap is an unworthy vehicle to communicate God's truth). You heard me exalt Jesus in a rap and enthusiastically applauded it. But because of your presupposition, you reasoned that it can't be a rap. Would you accept that kind of reasoning from one of your students? Imagine a freshman student came to you and says "Hymns can't glorify God." You play "And Can It Be" for them and they applaud it, saying "Yeah, that was good, but it wasn't a hymn. It can't be a hymn because hymns can't glorify God." How would you respond to that? You said:

"You explain why you stopped your concert to do what you did: Based on the defense of rap you provided, I wonder why you felt it was necessary to stop rapping and present the gospel in this way. Isn't rap well-suited to that kind of proclamation?"

Anyone who has been to one of my concerts knows that I use the music as a platform for gospel presentation. At some point in each of my concerts, I stop the music and take time to give the gospel. That would be the case regardless of what genre of music I did. I never said that rap should replace gospel proclamation. As good a tool as rap is, it's limited just like every other form. Like all art for the church, it's meant to point to and not distract from or supplant the preaching of Christ. You said:

"Finally, you claimed that Watts, Toplady, and Newton "couldn't begin to fathom" the "beauty and complexity in the structure" of Christian Hip-Hop. I would say two things in response: First, not only could they fathom it, they far exceed it"

I've studied both forms. Newton is one of my historical heroes and I have his complete works with every hymn he ever wrote in it. You have no idea whether his poetry "far exceeds" the best lyricism in Hip-hop because of your ignorance of Hip-hop. So we can't have that debate just yet.

EXAMPLE OF HOLY MUSIC

[Original post](#)

QUESTION FROM SHAI

Scott, you [said that](#) music can or cannot be holy since human behavior can or cannot be holy. Can you please give an example of holy music and explain what makes it holy?

ANSWER FROM SCOTT

This is an outstanding question, because as I've said [previously](#), the burden of proof is always on the Christian to prove the good and perfect will of God ([Rom 12:2](#)), prove things that are excellent ([Phil 1:9-11](#)), test everything and hold fast to what is good ([1 Thess 5:21](#)), and train powers of discernment to distinguish good from evil ([Heb 5:14](#)). I do not simply assume everything people create is good until proven otherwise. Rather, I have a robust enough understanding of human depravity to distrust human expression until I have evaluated whether it is profitable ([1 Cor 10:23](#)), godly ([Titus 2:12](#)), and praiseworthy ([Phil 4:8](#)). That process of evaluation is fallible, and I always welcome correction, but I'm happy to take you through the thought process I employ when evaluating music.

Let me first prepare this by noting that I evaluate two layers with all musical communication:

1. The natural meaning of the music.
2. The meaning derived from "cultural conditioning," conventional associations, or specific contexts.

What I will do below is to consider the first layer, but assessing the second layer is also important, and it is certainly possible that something that is naturally good could be used for evil or otherwise take on sinful associations in a given context.

Second, it is important to define "holy" in this context. There is of course the declaration of God that one who is forgiven in Christ is holy (e.g., [1 Cor 6:11](#)). This state cannot be lost or diminished, no matter what a Christian does. Furthermore, nothing a person does can make him holy in this sense. So I want to be clear that I do not believe that any music can make someone holy or improve or diminish one's standing before God in this use of the word.

But there is also a secondary idea of holiness that involves how we live in response to that declaration, and that is what I'm referring to when I say "holy behavior." That is what Peter refers to, for example, when he says, "be holy *in all your conduct*" ([1 Peter 1:15](#)). This doesn't refer to the standing of a Christian before God, but rather one's actions. A Christian's actions are to be holy, like God is holy. They are to conform to God's righteousness and be a reflection of God's character and attributes.

So what does that look like?

Scripture is filled with lists and examples of qualities of a kind of behavior that is holy, honorable ([1 Thess 4:4](#)), and worthy of God ([1 Thess 2:12](#)). I'll just give a sample: holy behavior manifests the fruit of the Spirit ([Gal 5:22](#)): "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. Holy behavior manifests compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience ([Col 3:12](#)). Holy behavior is worthy of the gospel of Christ ([Phil 1:27](#)). It accords sound doctrine ([Titus 2:1](#)); it is sober, dignified, marked by integrity, and self-controlled. Holy behaviors peaks the truth in love ([Eph 4:15](#)).

Since music is part of our conduct, we should discern what music expresses these things just as we evaluate tone of voice, attitude, body language, etc.

You asked for a specific example, and of course, there are [many, many varieties of examples of music that](#) are holy in this sense. I'll supply just one here as requested; I selected something that is not part of my normal listening, and even something outside my culture, to demonstrate that this kind of evaluation is fairly universal since we all share what I call a "culture of humanity." When evaluating conventional meaning, it is usually necessary to be a part of the particular culture or at least well-studied in it, but natural meaning can be discerned by all.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UTYGBKIFrbs>

This music is not my preference, but it is naturally peaceful, gentle, and self-controlled in some places, modestly vivacious and joyful in others. It exhibits dignity and sobriety; it is honorable, pure, lovely, commendable, excellent, and worthy of praise ([Phil 4:8](#)).¹

REBUTTAL FROM SHAI

[Original post](#)

Hey Scott, thanks for your answer to my last question. I especially appreciated your music recommendations. I enjoy listening to instrumental music while I work, so now I have a few things to add to my collection. I want to address a few problems I saw with your response.

First, there was a problem with how you defined holy. In defining holiness, you described positional sanctification in one sense and practical sanctification in another sense. You went on to speak of how music can be holy in that second sense. While the Bible does speak of holiness in terms of moral purity, the predominant meaning of holiness throughout Scripture is the idea of being set apart for God's purposes. For example, there's nothing particularly holy about bread, incense or utensils in themselves. However, when used in the tabernacle or temple, they became the "holy" bread ([1 Sam. 21:6](#)), the "holy" incense ([Ex. 30:37](#)) and the "holy utensils" ([Ex. 40:10](#)). But it's not like they were suddenly changed intrinsically. The molecular structure of the bread didn't change. What changed? The purpose or usage. The fact that these things were being used specifically for the worship of Yahweh, the infinitely Holy God, is what made them holy, as opposed to common ([Lev. 10:10-11](#)).

¹ Interestingly, this is an eighteenth-century Chinese folk tune that Christians have used in their hymnody since it expresses sentiments quite fitting for worship.

In your secondary idea of holiness, you rightly stated that “a Christian’s actions are to be holy.” I agree, but of the selections you chose as examples of “holy music”, at least a few of them were composed by non-Christians. Biblically, there is no mention of the holy behavior of people who don’t know the Lord. For behavior to truly be holy, it must spring from a heart changed by God. This highlights a category error that you’re making. What you are calling the “holy behavior” of unbelievers, I believe is actually the Imago Dei. Non-Christians are capable of works of great beauty and skill. That is undeniable. This is the outworking of the image of God in them. You said that you have a robust understanding of human depravity. It seems that your view of the image of God in fallen humanity is not quite as robust.

Second, there was a problem with your distinction between the “natural meaning” and “culturally-conditioned” meaning of music. This is an arbitrary distinction, because it is impossible to discern or assess the “natural meaning” of music without lyrics apart from cultural conditioning. This very conversation demonstrates this. What is the “natural meaning” of a Hip-hop instrumental (Or any other kind of music without lyrics)? And how do you prove it? Those questions can’t be answered apart from a person’s experiences, associations and understanding of context, i.e. cultural conditioning. You are also incorrectly presupposing that instrumental music can only mean one thing. How the same piece of instrumental music is understood and processed varies from culture to culture and person to person.

As a final observation, I find it interesting that you are willing to grant the label of “holy” to instrumental music composed by enemies of God, while at the same time withholding that same label from music that explicitly proclaims the gospel, exalts the person and work of Christ, calls sinners to repentance, highlights the character of the Triune God and encourages the listener to fall at the feet of Jesus in worship and adoration.

REPLY FROM SCOTT

Thanks, Shai. A few responses:

First, I already acknowledged in my answer that there are several meanings of “holy” in Scripture, and I specifically articulated which meanings I was and was not applying to music. I am not using it here to refer to positional sanctification (music can’t make someone right with God), nor am I using it as a synonym of “sacred,” as you did above. I explicitly stated that I am using “holy” in the [1 Peter 1:15](#) sense, which refers to conduct that is morally good. The passage (and others) is not talking about positional holiness or setting something apart for sacred use (like bread or utensils); it is talking about actions, and since music is an action (not a thing), music can be either morally good or evil. By the way, I most often use language of morally good or evil rather than “holy” exactly because use of “holy” can be confusing, but I’m comfortable using it in the [1 Peter 1:15](#) sense to mean morally good.

This also answers your question concerning music produced by believers and unbelievers. Of course, by God’s common grace [unbelievers can do things that are morally good \(Luke 6:33, Rom 2:14-15\)](#), although without faith this certainly doesn’t change their standing before God, and believers can do morally evil things. Likewise, an unbeliever can “do” morally good music, and Christians can “do” morally evil music.

Just because a Christian does something does not automatically render it good, no matter how good his intentions, or even if it happens to have Christian words, no more than a Christian bombing an abortion clinic in the name of God is good.

Second, if you want to talk about “*sacred*” music, that is, music set apart for specifically sacred purposes, then I would certainly narrow my criteria. I would insist that sacred music be *both* morally good *and* have a sacred text that “explicitly proclaims the gospel, exalts the person and work of Christ, calls sinners to repentance, highlights the character of the Triune God, and encourages the listener to fall at the feet of Jesus in worship and adoration.” I will readily acknowledge that there is no such thing as “Christian” or “sacred” music without Christian lyrics, but this is not the same thing as denying the reality of morally good or evil music.

So there are three kinds of music: morally good music (with or without lyrics), morally evil music (with or without lyrics), and morally good music that has been set apart for sacred purposes (with explicitly biblical lyrics).

Third, I’m glad you brought up natural vs. conventional meaning, because this is something I’ve wanted to elaborate on but haven’t had the chance yet. It’s important in this discussion to understand how music carries meaning naturally. I highly recommend Stephen Davies’ *Musical Meaning and Expression*, which clearly articulates where the most basic meaning does and does not lie:

1. It is not a system of conventional symbols, like a language.
2. It is not depictive, like representational paintings.
3. It is not based on the feelings or intent of the composer or performer.
4. It is not based on its power to move the listener.

All of these things can be true, but they do not describe the most basic, naturally meaning in music. Instead, Davies explains music’s expressive power with the fact that it resembles “emotion characteristics” in human behavior. He describes what he means by “emotion characteristics in appearance”:

The character of a person’s appearance, bearing, face, or voice sometimes is described by using emotion terms. We might say “He is a sad-looking person” . . . In such cases we do not mean that the person feels sad; neither do we mean that he frequently feels sad, or that we make believe that he feels sad. The reference is not to any emotion, in fact, but to the look of him. (222-223)

He summarizes his position this way:

Music presents emotion characteristics. Just as a willow can be sad-looking, or a person’s face happy-looking, music can present an expressive appearance in its sound (without regard to anyone’s felt emotions). This is because we experience the dynamic character of music as like the actions of a person; movement is heard in music, and that movement is heard as purposive and as rationally organized. (277)

Davies even goes so far as to deny cultural deviation in this level of communication:

I think that the behaviors in question are grounded in our common humanity rather than in arbitrary cultural differences; that is, I believe that Chinese sad-lookingness is much the same as French sad-lookingness. (243)

Because I hold that expressive behaviors owe as much to our common humanity as to our various cultures and that music is expressive in being experienced as like human action, I think that there is a common expressive element found in the musics of different cultures. I know of no culture that consistently expresses sadness with jaunty, fast, sprightly music, nor of any that expresses happiness with slow, dragging music. To take one example, Westerners formerly unacquainted with Japanese music are very unlikely to take the gamelan music that accompanies the weeping of puppet characters in wayang kulit for happy music, or to mistake battle pieces for funeral music. (244)

Davies helpfully explains what I've been articulating all along: music's expressive power is in the music itself, not in any person's interpretation of its meaning. Furthermore, this position strengthens the view that intrinsic meaning in music is universal, actually rooted in the fabric of humanity.

This way of explaining the most fundamental meaning in music is the consensus of other modern philosophers and theorists such as Susan Langer (*Feeling and Form*), John Hospers (*Artistic Expression*), Leonard Meyer (*Emotion and Meaning in Music*), Peter Kivy (*Introduction to a Philosophy of Music*), and Bennett Reimer (*A Philosophy of Music Education*). It is also the consensus of thousands of years of philosophical discourse. Despite their differences in many matters, including some of the specifics of musical value, most of the significant philosophers, musicians, and Christian leaders of the past agreed with this basic understanding of meaning in music, including [Pythagoras](#), [Plato](#), [Aristotle](#), Justin Martyr, [John Chrysostom](#), [Augustine](#), Boethius, Thomas Aquinas, [Martin Luther](#), [John Calvin](#), John Wesley, Asahel Nettleton, and many others.

In summary, because music is human action, particularly "emotion characteristics in appearance," music may be either morally good or evil, not based on the intent of the composer or performer, or on the interpretation of the listener, but based on how the music itself corresponds to universal human experience.

WHAT DEFINES RAP?

[Original post](#)

QUESTION FROM SCOTT

Shai, would you consider either of the following examples rap? If so, how would you distinguish rap from poetry recitation? If you would not consider them rap, what would need to change with these examples in order for them to be rap? In other words, what are the essential elements of rap that distinguish it from other art forms?

<https://www.dropbox.com/s/nt86a13kuzxld07/Rap%20sample.mp3>

<https://www.dropbox.com/s/ovlpo7jjic1aw7d/Rap%20sample%20w%20accomp.mp3>

ANSWER FROM SHAI

Thanks for the question, Scott. I wouldn't consider either of your examples to be rap. The reason why is the structure of the lyrics. Rap, simply put, is rhythmic poetry. One essential element of rap is that it is written in such a way that it coincides rhythmically with a consistent drum pattern. Those patterns may vary, but the consistency should be there. Even in rap that's done a cappella, the trained ear can hear what it would sound like if the beat was actually there. With the example you gave, lines 1 and 2 could fit a particular pattern, but lines 3 and following don't fit that same rhythmic pattern. By way of analogy, it would like writing a hymn where the first stanza was written in Common Meter (8,6,8,6) and the second stanza in 11,11,11,11.

Now, there is some avante-garde Hip-hop out there where artists deviate from conventional structures, but even then, it's done with intentionality and precision. I didn't get the sense that the writer of that poem had a rhythmic backdrop in mind when it was written. The examples you provided would fall more into the category of [Spoken Word](#) in my opinion. Spoken Word artists have more freedom than rap artists in that they aren't restricted to Hip-hop drum patterns. Spoken Word tends to be more loosely structured.

You might then want to know what the difference is between the examples you listed and [did that](#) you linked to [in an earlier post](#). In that video, I did a portion of a song that was originally written & performed over a beat. Taking the beat away doesn't make it cease to be rap. It's just an a cappella rap. That's because there's a particular rhythmic structure in the way I wrote it that makes it Hip-hop and would differentiate it from either Spoken Word or other forms of poetry.

I would also add that within Hip-hop, there's great diversity in terms of how songs are performed vocally (We call it "delivery"). There are some rappers who use aggressive deliveries, others who use laid-back, monotone deliveries, and a whole range in between. But it's all rap. It's a common error to assume that all rap is aggressive and "angry" rather than understanding that aggressive rap, while common, is just one of a plethora of styles within rap. Most people outside of Hip-hop culture (including those sympathetic to it) don't have categories for other kinds of rap. For a few examples, [here's a children's story I did](#). [Here's a \(fantastic\) song of repentance and lament for](#)

[sin by Timothy Brindle](#), and [here's a song encouraging stay at home mothers](#) by Benjamin the Esquire.

All of these are examples of rap. What makes them rap is the rhythmic structure of the lyrics, not the vocal tone, per se.

REBUTTAL FROM SCOTT

[Original post](#)

Thanks, Shai. I think this helps to move the conversation to the central issues and clarifies some things that I think are important to this discussion.

Your answer confirmed my own observation and study over the past several years, namely, that particular kinds of rhythmic accompaniment is a key element of what distinguishes rap from other poetic forms.

Now here's why I wanted to move this direction: In [your answer to my last question](#), you suggested that what made rap well-suited to Christian subjects was its high word count and aesthetic elements like internal rhyme and complex structure.

All of these characteristics are, of course, admirable, but you have now acknowledged the very point I made in [my last rebuttal](#): these characteristics don't define rap. They could just as easily describe a sonnet or my example poem. No one who objects to rap does so on the basis of its high word count and internal rhyme.

Rather, those who question the fittingness of rap to Christian sentiments do so, at least partially, on the basis of the element you identified as the essence of rap: specific kinds of rhythmic accompaniment, which they believe reflect behavior ill-fitted to God's holy truth.

Your explanation and interaction with the examples given reveals the centrality of the beat for rap. The example I gave was deliberately read to deemphasize a regular rhythm in favor of natural syllabic stress. And you're correct, that poem does not have a regular poetic meter or rhythm.

But neither does most of the rap lyrics I've studied. Take this passage for example:

At first we snubbed Him,
Now His vessels of mercy love Him.
Your highest thought is infinitely unworthy of Him.
Beyond vocabulary His actions vary,
His wrath is scary
All His adversaries are imaginary.

There is no regular pattern of meter or rhythm to this passage (it switches freely between iambs and anapaests), as is true of many rap lyrics (and my example). So in order to fit the lyrics to a steady drum beat, you have to adjust your cadence to align the strong and weak syllables. This is

something that takes an impressive amount of skill and memorization, and also one of the reasons that rap isn't a corporate form.

I say all this to emphasize the fact that what makes rap what it is has little to do with the lyrics themselves and more with particular performance characteristics that define rap. Even with a mashup that uses classical music, there's always a hip hop beat added.

Now here's the point: when you remove particular elements that are essential to the form—in this case the beat—the *message changes*.

Back to your performance of “Spread his Fame.” You may have written it as a rap, you may have a hip-hop beat in mind as you perform, and every one listening may assume an underlying hip-hop beat as well, but when you remove the accompaniment and change your vocal tone (because [“it can distract us from the most important thing”](#)), *what you are expressing changes*. In other words, there is a significant difference between what the following two videos communicate in how the performances shape the propositional content of the lyrics:



Same words, same performer, same intent, two very different performances with two different products.

When we're talking about music, we're not talking about words and notes on a page; we're talking about moral human performance.

And that's what I am primarily concerned about: how do particular styles of music and performance shape God's truth? Are they presenting that truth in appropriate ways, or do they trivialize and demean the truth?

And so this brings us back to my previous question: what makes lyrics performed over a hip-hop beat particularly fitting for communicating God's holy truth?

REPLY FROM SHAI

Thanks for your rebuttal, Scott. Let me address a few of your points. After quoting a few lines from my song "Spread His Fame", you said:

"There is no regular pattern of meter of rhythm to this passage. This is something that takes an impressive amount of skill and memorization, and also one of the reasons that rap isn't a corporate form."

In Hip-hop generally speaking, the regular pattern isn't in the words, at least not in the same way as in hymns. The beat is what's constant, and the rapper has freedom for rhythmic variation in the writing. There is much more freedom in Hip-hop than in other poetic forms, which allows for the increased word count that I've argued is one of the things that makes some styles of Hip-hop particularly useful for communicating certain Biblical truths.

As far as it not being a corporate form, I disagree. I've been to many rap concerts where thousands of people knew every single word to the songs. The skill and memorization needed to repeat every lyric of the songs wasn't a barrier at all- at least not for people who spoke the "language" of that cultural context.

You gave examples of my doing the same song in different ways. You followed that by saying: "Same words, same performer, same intent, two very different performances with two different products."

Of course the performances were different. The song was re-contextualized for different settings. One of the settings was cross-cultural, with many in attendance who lacked familiarity with the genre of Hip-hop. There were people in that congregation who were 70-plus years old and had never heard Hip-hop music or interacted with anyone from Hip-hop culture. But they loved the Lord Jesus and could say "Amen" when I referred to Christ as the beautiful and blessed Son and bragged about His supremacy. I sought to serve them by removing any obstacle that would prevent them from engaging with the truth I was communicating and by making the lyrics as understandable as possible. If my cadence or the beat would prevent the crowd from understanding me, I'd make drastic adjustments if necessary. I have no problem doing that for the sake of the gospel. That's simply an application of the principle communicated in [1 Cor. 14:16-17](#). By contrast, in the performance with the beat behind it, it was a Hip-hop crowd. They didn't need me to "translate", as it were. Because they were cultural insiders, I could easily communicate with them in our common understood "dialect".

Scott, we're in agreement that the manner in which music is communicated can both affect how it's received as well as "shape the propositional content of the lyrics", as you say. I have a background in theater. One of the great things about watching different productions of the same play is that you're getting the same script with a completely different take on it. The same words coming out of the mouths of different actors (or even the same actors on a different night) can take on a completely different meaning, depending on how they perform them. This is also true

with music. It's one of the reasons why people write new tunes for traditional hymn texts. Consider the following four versions of the hymn "Come Ye Sinners".

Version 1 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R4Zy01bgLGc>

Version 2 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qfq6rK1h13o>

Version 3 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nRcoxOfKmrk>

Version 4 http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nmo6CAvn_dE

Same lyrics, same author, four very different performances with four different products. I see that as a good thing, because different musical expressions can help bring out nuances in the lyrics that others may not do as well. If I'm reading you correctly, where we differ is that you would ascribe inherent moral value to the music apart from the words and I would not. It seems like you're saying that version 4 above may be holy and version 2 might be unholy, based on the musical elements that accompany the lyrics. I see no biblical warrant for that kind of thinking.

As to your question about why Hip-hop is appropriate, my answer remains the same. As far as music by Christians is concerned, the biblical stress is on content, not style. So the main question to ask of Christian music in any genre is whether or not the lyrics conform to the truth of God's Word. All other considerations are secondary.

MUSICAL ANALYSIS

[Original Post](#)

QUESTION FROM SHAI

Scott, in a previous post, you said “Since music is part of our conduct, we should discern what music expresses [holly behavior] just as we evaluate tone of voice, attitude, body language, etc.” You’ve also spoken of “morally good music (with or without lyrics)” and you have insisted that “since music is communication, music is moral.” I have two pieces of music that I would like you to evaluate. One is a hip-hop instrumental.

<http://lampmode.bandcamp.com/track/judge-of-all-the-earth>

Using your discernment, please tell me what this music is expressing, whether or not it’s morally good, and why. The other is a video of a performance.



Please do the same for the video.

ANSWER FROM SCOTT

Let me review how I (or anyone) can evaluate what music means and thus determine its morality. First, we must distinguish between conventional (culturally-conditioned) meaning and natural meaning. I’ll set aside the conventional meaning for the purposes of this analysis since it is not necessarily universal. What I will assess is the natural meaning.

Second, by natural meaning I mean not what the composer intends or what the listener feels. Rather, music carries meaning naturally based on its resemblance to “[emotion characteristics in appearance](#).” In other words, music sounds like (and feels like) what emotion looks like (and feels like).

Once one has determined the meaning (or meanings) of a piece of music on this natural level, he should ask the question, “Is this good? Does the Bible praise these kinds of expressions or condemn them?” Since a Christian’s behavior should be holy (morally good), he should embrace musical behavior that reflects the morally good and reject the musical behavior that reflects morally bad.

Beyond this, the Christian should also evaluate the conventional meaning, avoiding associations that will harm the gospel or cause a weaker brother to sin. Finally, if a Christian intends to use the music for communicating biblical messages, he must make sure that even what is morally good is also fitting for the truth of God's holy Word.

One more thing: I've made the point several times that I think *anyone* can discern musical meaning at this level without a technical musical analysis (just like we can determine what tone of voice and body language mean without knowing exactly *why*), but I also want to demonstrate the musicological foundation as well. So in my analysis below, I will include a bit of technical jargon, but I don't want to give the impression that knowledge of the technical is necessary to determine meaning.

On to the two examples.²

The foundation of "Judge of All the Earth" is the four note, descending base progression: C-sharp, A, B, and G-sharp, which repeats 36 times with minimal variation or harmonic development. In the context of c-sharp minor, there are no [tendency tones](#) in the chords built upon this [ostinato and](#) thus no clear linear progression. This lack of direction or resolution gives the foundation a feeling of ambiguity and uncertainty, features intensified by the minor mode, which also naturally contributes to a sense of tension. These repeated elements, combined with the low register, synth instrumentation, and descending pattern create a sense of foreboding.

The minimal melodic activity there is, with wide intervallic leaps and lack of direction or resolution, enhances this perception.

Underneath this all is the repetitive rhythmic pattern, emphasizing the off-beats in contrast to the natural metric emphasis, which adds a feeling of agitation. This is particularly potent as the piece progresses. Since there is no harmonic or melodic development, the only real development in the song is a steady intensification of dynamics and density that climaxes in the replacement of all these elements with bursts of rhythmic, off-beat shouting.

Putting this all together, the music expresses a feeling of increasingly agitated, ominous foreboding. For the musically untrained, I would suggest imagining what kind of movie scene this music would fit, such as one in which something dark or sinister is about to happen.

I would say in itself, what this music generally expresses is morally good since expressing these things is not necessarily forbidden in Scripture. I would offer caution, however, that this kind of undeveloped repetition tends to create a numbing effect, similar to how some Eastern music is designed to create a hypnotic trance. This kind of effect, especially as a regular diet, would be inadvisable for Christians, in my opinion. Furthermore, to set this up as art, something used to express thoughtful ideas and values, would be a challenge due to the lack of musical depth and dependence upon rhythm and climax as the only developmental techniques. To be fair, I would similarly criticize something from the Western Classical tradition like [Ravel's Bolero](#), although that work has more musical development than this song.

² I would like to thank Timothy Shafer, a friend who teaches at Penn State, who shared with me his own analysis of "Judge of All the Earth," which I've integrated into my own thoughts here.

To the second example. The tune, [EIN FEST BURG](#), is a fitting vehicle for communicating the lyrics of God's strength and might. The [barform](#) (AAB) allows for enough repetition to make this memorable for congregational singing, yet the *Abgesang* offers contrast and development that appropriately supports the textual ideas. The iambic metric pattern of the poetry, which naturally expresses strong ideas, is also quite appropriate for the truths. The words chosen are vivid, and the rhymes are not forced or unnatural.

In particular, Mr. Green's *a capella* performance allows the theological truths to rise to the surface, without distraction, with only his performance adding to the meaning of the song.

Now a few comments on Green's performance, since how one performs a tune and text is part of the expression. First, his strong vocal production and lack of melodic embellishment further contributes to the strength and power of God expressed in the lyrics. He mostly emphasizes the natural syllabic stresses in the words (with a few exceptions). In my opinion, the modulations up by half step each stanza tend toward emotional manipulation since there is no musical impetus for those modulations, and this borders on drawing attention away from the truths themselves and instead creating an emotional climax through the use of surface-level gimmicks. But overall, I would say this is morally good and mostly appropriate for the truths expressed.

REBUTTAL FROM SHAI

[Original post](#)

Thanks for your musical analysis, Scott. It's interesting to view music through the eyes (and ears) of someone from a different background with the training you have. I was somewhat surprised that you ascribed general moral goodness to a Hip-hop instrumental. I find that encouraging, because it tells me that you were trying to overlook your own biases in order to give it a fair assessment. So thank you for that. However, I can't really rejoice in your assessment because, while you were able to describe what was happening musically, your judgments about what it expressed (ambiguity, uncertainty, tension, agitation, etc.) are completely subjective. If one were to explore why you thought the music expressed those things, the answer could ultimately be traced back to your cultural conditioning and the associative value that you place on the arrangement of certain sounds. We all do this, by the way. Minor keys, strings and rhythmic climaxes are strongly associated with ideas like "ominous" and "foreboding" in our culture. But that meaning is not inherent to the sounds (or arrangement of sounds) themselves. I dispute the notion of a "natural meaning" of music, as though instrumental music can only mean one thing.

As for Steve Green's performance of "A Mighty Fortress", I was surprised by your answer. In previous responses, you have continuously stressed the importance of non-verbal communication. You've said things like

"Scripture's principles concerning communication apply to all forms of communication like body language or facial expressions (even a "look" can express pride [[Prov6:17](#)]), not just propositions"

and

“tone of voice is not just a tool of communication; it is part of the communication itself. How I say something to my children, my wife, my boss, or my God is just as important as what I say to them because how I say something is part of the communication.”

and

“When we’re talking about music, we’re not talking about words and notes on a page; we’re talking about moral human performance. And that’s what I am primarily concerned about: how do particular styles of music and performance shape God’s truth?”

Because of that repeated, consistent emphasis, I would have expected you to spend much more time than you did on Steve Green’s body language during his performance. If one were to re-watch the video from 2:25 on and mute the sound, I’m sure they could make all kinds of assessments about what his facial expressions and gestures were communicating. If, as you say, how he is saying the words is just as important (from a moral standpoint) as what he’s saying, why not spend more time on that in your analysis? For the record, Green’s performance is one of my favorite renditions of that song. I’m just asking you to apply the standards that you have been so adamant about in this discussion to his performance. Since “Scripture’s principles of communication apply to all forms of communication”, what would you say about the morality of his non-verbal communication?

REPLY FROM SCOTT

Thanks, Shai. You insist that my analysis of the music is subjective. If by subjective you mean that the analysis is my interpretation of the music influenced by my knowledge, study, experiences, and observations, then of course you’re right. It is impossible to not be subjective. Even our interpretation of the truths of Scripture is always subjective.

But I suspect you actually mean something more like “relative.” You insist that my analysis of the music is relative and not applicable to anyone else because you believe it to be based upon “cultural conditioning and the associative value that [I] place on the arrangement of certain sounds.”

My musical analysis is not relative for at least two reasons. First, as [I’ve articulated before](#), my analysis was based upon what the music itself naturally means (universal) rather than how it makes me feel (relative). In other words, I analyzed the object (the music) rather than the subject (my feelings). I assure you, I had individual feelings and associations when listening to the music that were particular to me and my experiences that I did not mention in my analysis.

Second, since I based my analysis on what the music naturally does based on its function in the created order and universal human physiology, the analysis had nothing to do with a particular cultural background or conditioning.

For example, things like [tendency tones](#), resolution to a tonal center (or lack thereof), pitch range, tempo, interval relationships, meter, and rhythm do what they do because of their

correspondence within universal acoustic and physiological laws that God “programmed” into his creation. Thus, this level of musical expression transcends time, culture, background, and personal experiences. They are certainly based on associations, but some associations are universal.

So what I said about the minor mode, lack of harmonic resolution, and wide intervallic leaps contributing to a sense of ambiguity and tension is not something cultural conditioned but rather universal since, as Leonard Bernstein explained, these kinds of musical elements are rooted in the naturally-occurring harmonic series, which he calls “an order preordained by nature and ruled by universal physical laws.” What I said about the beat of the music is universal because it corresponds to the rhythms of life, things like human gait, heartbeat, etc.

Contrary to what you (and most evangelicals) may assume, [consensus upon musicologists](#) today is that there are far more naturally occurring universals in musical meaning than culturally-conditioned differences. The only reason some secular philosophers resist acknowledging universals (which they’ve done only since Edward Hanslick’s *On the Beautiful in Music* in 1854) is that if they didn’t, they would have to also acknowledge a created order, universal morality, and by extension, a higher being. They refuse to admit these ideas, and so they must reason themselves out of musical universals.

But in the last 50 years or so, musicologists have recognized that they really can’t get away from admitting universal musical meaning, even on empirical grounds alone, and thus some (Like Bernstein) have to at least acknowledge a “musical monogenesis,” that is, a common origin for the musical principles rooted in the harmonic series. Ironically, because he recognizes universals empirically but has no philosophical basis for it, this agnostic Jew has to admit that universal properties in music may “issue from the mouth of God.”

And I would submit that the reason today Christians resist acknowledging universals in musical expression—when Christians have *always* acknowledged them—is that they do not want to admit that some kinds of music are inappropriate for Christian expression—again, something Christians have *always* believed.

As to my analysis of Steve Green, fair enough; I was already over my word count, so I tried to restrain my analysis!

But I certainly could (and should) also evaluate his body language and facial expressions. At 2:25, for example, Mr. Green’s body language communicates strength and a momentary flicker of anger. The rest of the performance is primarily a mix of strength and wonder. Mostly fitting to the lyrical content, if not a bit dramatic.

Here’s the reason this is all so important. If musical meaning were entirely relative and based only on cultural conditioning, as you insist, then biblical commands like Paul’s in [Philippians 4:8](#) are meaningless. How can we “think on” things that are “lovely,” for example, if what is “lovely” is merely relative? Why would God tell us to worship him “reverently” ([Heb 12:28-29](#)) if that is only culturally conditioned? Trying to determine what behavior is peaceful or a “fit of anger” ([Gal. 5:19-22](#)) is pointless if these expressions are based only on personal background.

If subjectivity always proves relativity, then nothing is absolute.

SUBJECTIVITY

[Original Post](#)

QUESTION FROM SCOTT

Shai, you insist that my interpretation of music is relative since it is “culturally-conditioned” and based on my personal associations. Do you then believe that your own interpretation of the music is likewise relative? Isn’t this true that even our interpretation of Scripture is influenced by our culture and presuppositions? How, then, can you insist that your opinion of the music or of Scripture is superior to anyone else’s and force your interpretation on others?

ANSWER FROM SHAI

The word I used for your music analysis was “subjective”, not “relative”. The dictionary definition of subjective is

“based on or influenced by personal feelings, tastes, or opinions”

For the purpose of our discussion, I would add “preferences, associations and cultural backgrounds” to that list. And yes, my judgment of what music without lyrics is communicating will be subjective as well. You then mentioned Scripture and that our interpretation of it is subjective in the same way. In your question, you’re comparing instrumental music with Scripture, then? I think it goes without saying that there are major differences between those two things. For one, you’re talking about a propositional form of communication (Scripture) vs. anon-propositional form of communication (instrumental music). Surely you see a major difference between “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth” and the Chinese zither music you gave as an example of holy music in a previous post. There is no argument or confusion about what [Genesis 1:1](#) says. Even an atheist would agree about what that text says. They may differ about whether it’s true or even what the author meant, but what it says is crystal clear to any literate person. If I ask 100 people to tell me what [Genesis 1:1](#) says, provided they can read, I’ll get the same answer each time. This is simply not the case with instrumental music— not even close. There is no universal agreement on what instrumental music communicates (or “says”), even among people from the same cultural background, let alone people from different cultures.

It’s easy to go down the rabbit trail of the difference between “subjective” and “relative”, etc. But let’s remember the context of what this conversation is about. You have made the claim that instrumental music can be inherently holy or sinful. I deny that claim. In your post where you explained your comments on the NCFIC panel, you said

“But if a form of music that is inherently denigrating is redeemed, it becomes something different. Simply changing the lyrics, as much of an improvement as that is, is not the kind of change characteristic of ‘new creatures’”

I’ve been asking you all along to demonstrate how music apart from lyrics can be “inherently denigrating”. You still haven’t done that, brother.

REBUTTAL FROM SCOTT

[Original post](#)

Shai, one of the cornerstones of your argument has been that musical interpretation is culturally conditioned and therefore subjective—one may not expect someone else with different cultural conditioning to interpret music the same way. So, the reason I interpret hip-hop as agitated and denigrating is only because I have been culturally conditioned to interpret it as such. You, on the other hand, interpret the same music as something entirely different and perfectly appropriate for Christian purposes.

Now, you acknowledge that your interpretation of the music is also subjective and rooted in your cultural conditioning. But here's the problem: if that's the case, then why do you insist that your interpretation is more valid than mine? Are not our views *equally* valid? If musical meaning is based *only* on cultural conditioning, then everyone's culturally conditioned interpretation is equally valid—musical meaning is entirely relative to an individual's personal interpretation. And, consequently, musical meaning will be agreed upon only within very fractured groups of individuals who have nearly identical cultural backgrounds.

And yet you promote your interpretation of hip-hop with groups that actually have completely different cultural conditioning than you do. Why would you impose your interpretation of that music on them? Furthermore, you insist that my interpretation is *wrong*. To argue that my interpretation is wrong is to imply that there is some sort of hermeneutical standard outside of me upon which I should base my interpretation.

But there is an even deeper problem at work here. While I completely agree that our interpretation of music (as with everything) is conditioned by our experiences and backgrounds, to argue that musical interpretation is thus completely subjective is to deny the category of "human nature." In other words, while it is true that you and I have different backgrounds, we *share* what is perhaps the most fundamental universal: we have the same human nature. We are both members of the human race, sons of Adam, distinct from the rest of God's creation by the fact that we were created in the image of God. As Carl Trueman points out, "these aspects of human uniqueness provide a universal context for all human activity." Trueman is emphasizing human nature as a defense for the validity of creeds written in vastly different times and cultures as valuable and meaningful for today, but it applies equally to other human activity such as music. He goes on to say,

Human nature is something which is more basic than gender, class, culture, location, or time. It cannot be reduced to or contained within a specific context such as to isolate it from all else. . . . Human beings remain essentially the same in terms of their basic nature as those made in God's image and addressed by his word even as we move from place to place and from generation to generation. . . . Modern culture . . . prides itself on difference and on kaleidoscopic variety. Whatever the truth of this may be, it does not affect the essential core of identity that binds me together with human beings

*in modern China and with people in ancient Rome: we are all made in God's image.*³

In other words, I believe your argument on the basis of a very fractured understanding of cultural identity ignores the reality that we all share a culture of humanity. Therefore, while individual background certainly plays a significant role in personal interpretation, sharing a common human nature means that we all experience on at least one level a shared conditioning. And I have made very clear from the beginning of this discussion that the level on which I endeavor to base my assessment of hip hop is within this larger culture of humanity rather than factors unique to particular individuals or sub-cultures.

REPLY FROM SHAI

Thanks for your reply, Scott. I'll address a few of the things that you mentioned. You said:

“Now, you acknowledge that your interpretation of the music is also subjective and rooted in your cultural conditioning. But here's the problem: if that's the case, then why do you insist that your interpretation is more valid than mine? Are not our views equally valid?”

Brother, you're certainly welcome to your opinion. Two people may hear the same piece of instrumental music and arrive at 2 different conclusions on what it's communicating. The same could be said about abstract visual art and many other things. The validity of the view may be dependent on different factors, such as knowledge of the particular medium being discussed, etc. But let's go back to what your view is. You are making the claim that the musical form of Hip-hop apart from its lyrics is inherently sinful. That is a serious claim. To say that something is inherently sinful is to say that it is a transgression of God's law; that it provokes the wrath of God which comes upon the sons of disobedience ([Eph. 5:6](#)); that it is a work of the flesh, the practitioners of which will not inherit the kingdom of God ([Gal. 5:21](#)). In this case, we've moved from the realm of merely like/ dislike or prefer/ nor prefer to the realm of evil/ good or sin/ righteousness. You say the form of Hip-hop is inherently sinful. I say it's not. We can't both be right. Once you make the claim that something is inherently sinful, you now have the responsibility to demonstrate from Scripture how that is the case. You still haven't done that. You said:

“And yet you promote your interpretation of hip-hop with groups that actually have completely different cultural conditioning than you do. Why would you impose your interpretation of that music on them?”

I'm not imposing an interpretation of music on anyone, because I use and emphasize words. I make statements, claims, declarations and arguments in my music. I say things like, “Jesus is Alive” and “On the cross the wrath of God was spent on Jesus/ on behalf of all who repent and believe this” and “The Son of God, 100% divinity/self-existent second person of the Trinity”, etc. If the people who listen to my music can understand English, they can compare what I'm saying with Scripture and determine for themselves whether or not what I'm saying corresponds

³ Trueman, Carl. *The Creedal Imperative*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012, 63.

to what the Lord has revealed in His Word. It's the truth that resonates cross-culturally, even if people don't prefer the style. It works the other way around as well. I can worship the Lord in congregations where I may dislike the musical style, provided the words are Biblical and God-glorifying. Truth is the common denominator. And truth is what Scripture emphasizes, not musical style. You said:

“In other words, I believe your argument on the basis of a very fractured understanding of cultural identity ignores the reality that we all share a culture of humanity.”

I certainly agree that we share humanity and the dignity of being made in God's image. But do you see the irony in your quoting of Carl Trueman? Trueman is making a reference to written creeds, i.e. formal statements of propositional truth. The fundamental “sameness” of human nature is precisely why words of truth are far more important than fleeting musical styles that vary from culture to culture. You said:

“Trueman is emphasizing human nature as a defense for the validity of creeds written in vastly different times and cultures as valuable and meaningful for today, but it applies equally to other human activity such as music.”

I disagree. It does not apply equally to instrumental music. We don't know what the music of ancient Israel sounded like. (If there was a way to preserve a recording of it, part of me would love to hear your analysis!) But we do have the Psalms. The Psalms are valuable and meaningful cross-culturally and cross-generationally because of the truth contained in them. The musical style they were composed in is not meaningful for today. My argument is very simple. When it comes to the music making of Christians, the Biblical emphasis is on the content, not the musical form. You're claiming that the form of Hip-hop is inherently sinful. You still haven't proven it, brother.

ROOTS

[Original Post](#)

QUESTION FROM SHAI

Scott, in your statements on the NCFIC panel, it seems like you made an argument against hip-hop by alluding to its cultural origins. Here are some of your comments:

“Are we allowing the art forms, the way truth is communicated in Scripture to also govern our art forms? When it comes the art form of hip-hop, very few will disagree with the cultural milieu out of which it grew. What it was intended to express by those who created the art form.”

On the panel, there wasn't time to flesh out your arguments. Canyon unpack what you were trying to say?

ANSWER FROM SCOTT

Thanks for this opportunity to address those comments. First, let me clarify what I did *not* mean. I did not mean that the sinful origins, roots, sources, or associations of something automatically and in every case render it sinful. This is certainly not always the case. Because of the common grace of God, even good things can come out of bad. For example, a godless composer can indeed produce music that is honorable, noble, and beautiful. Furthermore, good things can be co-opted by sinful people for sinful purposes, but that doesn't render those things necessarily sinful.

However, the origins of something do present strong indications of what that thing is fitted to do. This is particularly true for a medium of communication. Communicative forms are developed to carry certain kinds of messages well, and by nature they don't do other things well.

Let me give an example: Smoke signaling was created to be able to send short messages over long distances very quickly. The form of communication itself is suited to its purpose. But, because that form does short messages over long distances well, it is incapable of doing other things well, such as theological discourse. On the other hand, written prose is very well suited to theological distance, but it doesn't do quick, long distance messages well. There would be no point in ignoring the origins of smoke signaling and insisting that I can “redeem” the form and make it do theological discourse well for those who prefer smoke signals. In other words, the origins of a form of communication can give us good indications of what kind of communication it is able (and notable) to express, and we cannot somehow change what a form of communication does well, no matter our good intentions.

So, when something is produced out of a sinful value system in order to communicate sinful sentiments, that should *at least* cause us to pause and evaluate that thing before embracing it. If a particular form of communication is originally designed to express sinful messages, there is great reason to assume that the medium will naturally express those values. There are exceptions to

this, but it should at least motivate us to carefully consider the medium before using it to communicate Christian truth.

The second reason that sinful origins should at least raise red flags for Christians is that biblically speaking, associations *do* matter. Associations with sinful activities don't necessarily render something sinful itself, but the Bible is clear that sinful associations may indeed be reason to reject something.

This was certainly true for Paul with meat that had been offered to idols. Paul was clear that the meat itself was good. But did Paul tell the Corinthians to "redeem" the meat that had sinful associations? No, he told them to avoid eating the meat for the sake of the gospel and the weaker brothers.

These factors have influenced my thinking about rap all along. You've focused on my belief that music itself can communicate (even sinfully) with or without lyrics. But that's really beside the point for this discussion. Christian rap *has* lyrics. I've never said that all hip hop music is necessarily inherently sinful. In fact, I presented my opinion that the hip hop instrumental you gave me was itself morally good.

On the contrary, what I have said is that since Christian rap has lyrics, and those lyrics are about God and his truth, the medium of communication must be fitting and appropriate for that lyrical content. And my argument has been that I do not believe hip-hop is a medium of communication fitting for the expression of God's holy truth. Rather, it naturally expresses sentiments that are ill-fitting for biblical values.

Recognizing the origins of hip hop is only part of what leads me to that conclusion, and only because origins do help to give some indication of what a medium of communication is suited to express. After more cultural and musical investigation, other factors that I've explained in this discussion confirm my belief that hip hop music and performance practice are well suited to the expression for which they were originally designed and not suited to communicating the gospel or worshiping the Sovereign of the Universe.