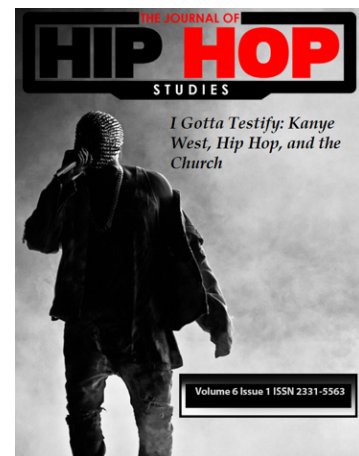


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## Meditation from Rev. Nathaniel Yates, Metropolitan Youth Pastor

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*Nathaniel Yates*

As I consider the influence of Hip Hop and rappers on the spiritual lives and mental health of millennials, I find it interesting to note the overt rejection of the genre of Hip Hop as a whole by most of the Christian community. In large part, the church culture seems to explicitly reject the notion that such a musical style should grace its doors. Many churches do not consider the positive effects of Hip Hop and rap when the message is uplifting and in some cases explicitly faith-based. The issue here is that the preference has become the priority, not necessarily the connection. The idea of rap and Hip Hop in some circles is immediately rejected, regardless of the message within the material. The genre is not the true issue that should be considered; instead the message should be the priority; as should be the case in all music. The connection between Hip Hop and rappers, like Kanye West, Jay Z, and Kendrick Lamar, with millennials is largely tied to the authentic flaws that are both on display and accepted by those who follow them. Artists like these, in many ways, exemplify the internal conflict that many millennials face within themselves. It is the tale of the flawed, and yet those still seeking to achieve freedom from those flaws; even as we struggle with the reality that however much one desires to change, they enjoy the state in which they remain.

It is this group that the church needs; the group of the flawed who are honest enough to declare such and hope for more. The dilemma for the church is that these individuals do not find the same authenticity within the church walls. It is the perceived absence of an honest answer that many millennials reject. While some church members contend that certain music is inherently sinful, they do not seek to understand the reality, that while distasteful at times, these same lyrics portray a perceived reality for those we desire to reach. There is no argument here to include distasteful, offensive, or non-biblical music into the church; however, the nature of a single song or artist's lyric is not indicative of a style or genre of music in its entirety.

The greater question is what is the impact on the spiritual lives of millennials by these artists and their lyrics? The influence is very significant. While I contend that the genre of music is not the issue, the reality that the music impacts the listener, to me, is without question. Consider a millennial who seeks to model after a rapper; seeking to live out what they hear. This millennial may completely overlook the nature and character of the artist in pursuit of the connection. This failure to factor in the nature and

character of the artist when seeking to model after them causes a deeper issue in spiritual matters. When we overlook the character of an individual in order to find a connection, we also run the risk of lessening the importance of such character; thus diminishing our need to change in order to walk according to the word of God. Do I blame the artist for this? The answer is unequivocally no. The rappers speak to the realities of their lives or the perceptions that they desire to convey. The greater issue within the church community for these millennials is the inability of previous generations to form real, relevant, relational connections with a generation that is often criticized and harshly judged; often leaving them a singular path right out of the church. We tend to forget that rappers in many cases are millennials that, in some cases, grew up in the church and still need spiritual growth and development themselves; not just criticism.

Some may argue otherwise, but what is evident is that the same numbers of those leaving the church, are found buying and singing the lyrics of those that the church has sought to expel in many cases. The very rejection that millennials feel is reflected in the lyrics of the same artist that impact their thinking. These artists speak to spirituality in terms of believing in a higher power; just not the one they believe they see displayed in churches. The problem is that the very experience that the rappers are speaking to, is the one that millennials feel; “How do I connect to a church that no longer feels like family, condemns the things that attract me (forgetting that they [those that condemn] have their own attractions or temptations), does not include me, and in many cases does not reflect me?” Thus we find ourselves with the true question: “Are millennials rejecting the ‘culture of the church’ or the ‘character of Christ?’” Some may argue that these are one in the same; however, some millennials may contend that the church culture, with its traditions, does not always reflect Christ. In conversations with some millennials, they have even gone as far as to say that the church looks more like the Pharisees that Jesus confronted in the scriptures. In this, they convey that it is not Christ they reject, but the church. In leaving the church, many lose the avenues to spiritual growth, development, and health.

So how do we answer the question on the influence of Hip Hop and rappers on spirituality? The answer is that I view the influence as one that, depending on the message, can be counterproductive to spiritual development in many ways, and yet these rappers achieve something that “spiritual authorities” do not always accomplish; they connect with a generation that longs for a connection. The issue with this is that one cannot lead someone to a place they do not go; specifically, a non-believer is not in a position to lead a believer in matters of Christian faith. Some may question how such a statement (referring to some of these artists as unbelievers) can be made about an artist that is not personally known. It is displayed in the lives they live, and the lyrics of their lips; for from the abundance of the heart, the mouth speaks. Consider this: if a believer (better yet a disciple of Christ) never opened their mouth, the ideal situation would be that you would notice their beliefs in their actions; thus the idea that we act on what we believe. This does not always occur, which is a problem in of itself; however, the same holds true for everyone, as one's actions often are a great representation of the values they

hold, and their beliefs. "We act on what it is we truly believe" is a reality in everyday life. Therefore, each person is recognizable by their life choices and their hearts are known by what they say and do. This reality is, likewise, true within the church itself. One cannot claim to believe on Sunday and then live contrary to those very beliefs for the remainder of the week.

As it relates to their impact on mental health, I would contend that the mental state of those that I hope to bring into the church is impacted by far more than a rapper's description of things in the "bars" they write. The situations that they describe resonate because they are viewable, even in the communities that millennials live. It is this common picture that draws millennials to their music; the common questions being, "who am I, why is my life what it is, and how do I become more?" Lyrics like "We Gone Be Alright" called on a group of people who felt the harsh reality of feeling like there is no answer to their suffering, even in the church. In previous generations, hopes were nurtured by leaders who spoke out and took action to improve the situation of those in their community. Even rappers addressed their circumstances while looking to improve them. This use of lyrics to elevate a community, seems contrary to some of the lyrics of today which glorify the very failures of society. Today there are communities with several churches within blocks of each other, that may be thriving, and yet the community lacks the presence of hope. The perception of hypocrisy, however false the logic, sends millennials running either from the church, or in the direction of a church that will accept them, speak to relevant issues in a relevant manner, and when necessary, do more than just speak; instead, putting actions behind their words.

I view the influence of Hip Hop and rappers to be the same as other forms of music that affected previous generations. The material, while more overtly vulgar at times, speaks to the same topics as in the past; money, sex, drugs, love, success, realities of life, and material possession. The issue with the content beyond its language and vulgarity, at times, is that while they highlight certain circumstances of life, in many cases no actual hope is garnered within the lyrics.

Youth and young adults fill themselves with content that speaks in some cases to lives that they have not lived but is easily viewable as a way of escape. The impact of virtual living, through such lyrics, is that this generation finds itself caught up in a fad, misdirection, and hopelessness wrapped in a beat. They look to these artists, as though they offer some semblance of hope, yet find either grievances or fantasies. While some artists highlight issues, they do not provide the answer, do not offer salvation, and dilute what it means to have faith that changes one's behavior. Some artist will quickly seek to thank God for awards, but not live their lives according to God's will. This is reflected in the generations of believers who are not truly disciples of Jesus; the impact resulting in a generation of bi-lingual believers, who seek to speak in both belief and non-belief. They live counter to the Bible and yet claim Christ, failing to recognize that while there is sin in our lives, there is a distinction between one who sins while trying to live upright, and one who lives a life-style of sin. On the other end of the spectrum, some go further, and

instead of living in two worlds, simply turn to some form of spirituality that is external, and contrary to Christianity.

Is this on the music, rappers, or Hip Hop? I say no. The situation we face as we seek to bring millennials into the church is in the reality that some function as though the church is simply the walls, a place you go, and not something that you are. Those who say to millennials, “you need to come to church,” are not always representative of the church (disciples of Christ) except for their display on Sunday mornings; and only when they are inside the sanctuaries. Failure to authentically represent Christ in our daily lives is as detrimental to millennial faith as much as any musical form. The Kanye Wests of the world are perceived to be authentically themselves every day, even as the cameras are rolling and judgment is thrown their way. The lyrics of the song, “Legacy” by Jay-Z speaks to his reality and perspective on Christianity. He speaks directly saying,

*You see my father... son of a preacher man, whose daughter couldn't escape the reach of the preacher's hand... that charge of energy set all of the Carters back... it took all of these years to get to zero in fact... I hated religion cause, here was this Christian, he was preaching on Sunday versus, how he was living Monday, someday I'll forgive him..."*

Lyrical content like this directly addresses what some call “church hurt.” His perspective on Christianity is not based on those who are “Christ-like,” but the actions of those who claim to be Christian. This perspective results in a rejection of religion and the church, forgetting that the purpose is about a relationship with Christ. Is the artist detrimental to the mental or spiritual health of the millennial? I would contend no more detrimental to the mental or spiritual health of the millennial than others and in some cases even the “church.” However, the influence held by the artists, and the lack of connection that some millennials have with the church may leave an opening for the listener to adopt the perceptions of the voice they hear and relate to the most.

I believe that there is a place for any genre of music so long as the message aligns with the word of God. The issue here is that the message being conveyed is not received and therefore not heard, and no change seems to occur within the church. In some ways, our own traditions may have more of a negative impact on the millennial and their beliefs than those that they run to after they feel they have been rejected. The spiritual and mental health of this generation is impacted by the thing they need most but cannot reach because we, the church folk, may be in the way. Instead of seeing Christ, they see us, and then the church appears to seek to push the blame toward others. Amazingly, those who abandon the church seek authenticity, in some cases, are simply missing the reality that even those in the church are authentically flawed and seeking the remedy to their flaws in Christ.

Yes, there is influence in Hip Hop and rappers, the question is “should spiritual and mental health be left in the hands of artists? And is such an expectation realistic?” Where is the church in the lives of millennials? Consider that the danger is truly in the

inconsistency of those who profess Christ. This inconsistency is also on display in the music industry. Consider artists like Kanye and Chance the Rapper, whose music danced between the “secular” and that of the church. Should those who are inconsistent be marked and condemned for being such? That is not left to me; instead, we should show them and those who follow them the love of Christ, not just the culture of the church; and seek to walk alongside them as we point them to the Cross, even as we ourselves strive toward it.