

“It’s Not the Beat, but It’s the Word that Sets the People Free”: Race, Technology, and Theology in the Emergence of Christian Rap Music

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Abstract

In an effort to address lacunae in the literature on hip hop, as well as to explore the role of new music and media in Pentecostal traditions, this essay examines rap music within the narratives of American religious history. Specifically, through an engagement with the life, ministry, and music of Stephen Wiley — who recorded the first commercially-released Christian rap song in 1985 — this essay offers an account of hip hop as a window into the intersections of religion, race, and media near the end of the twentieth century. It shows that the cultural and theological traditions of Pentecostalism were central to Wiley’s understanding of the significance of racial ideology and technology in his rap ministry. Additionally, Wiley’s story helps to identify a theological, cultural, and technological terrain that is shared, if contested, by mainline Protestant, neo-Pentecostal, and Word of Faith Christians during a historical moment that has been described as post-denominational.

Keywords

Christian hip hop, Stephen Wiley, Word of Faith, racial ideology

Over the past two decades a growing body of research on hip hop music and culture has taken shape. More often than not, the inquiries in this emerging literature have located hip hop (or rap) in the traditions of African American cultural (literary and musical) expression.¹ Within this corpus, little attention

¹ The two seminal works in the field of hip hop studies are Tricia Rose’s *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan Press, 1993); Houston Baker’s *Black Studies, Rap, and the Academy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993).

has focused on religion.² The few works that have directed their attention to rap music's spiritual dimensions have often opted to explore representations of religion in so-called "secular" hip hop.³ As an effort to address lacunae in the literature on hip hop, as well as to explore the role of new music and media in Pentecostal traditions, this essay reexamines rap music within the narratives of American religious history. Specifically, through an engagement with the life, ministry, and music of Stephen Wiley — who recorded the first commercially-released Christian rap song in 1985 — this essay offers an account of hip hop as a window into the intersections of religion, race, and media near the end of the twentieth century. It shows that the cultural and theological traditions of Pentecostalism were central to Wiley's understanding of the significance of racial ideology and technology in his rap ministry. Additionally, Wiley's story helps to identify a theological, cultural, and technological terrain that is shared, if contested, by mainline Protestant, neo-Pentecostal, and Word of Faith Christians (black and white alike) during a historical moment that has been described as post-denominational.⁴

Since its inception more than twenty-five years ago, Christian rap has often "mirrored the stars and styles of its secular counterpart."⁵ In fact, a number of Christian rappers have seemed to deliberately model themselves after mainstream hip hop artists. For instance, in the late 1980s, Michael Peace's raw vocals were comparable to that of a young LL Cool J. The trio PID (Preachers in Disguise) donned all black, like the much more popular group, RUN-DMC, several years before the latter released their religious record, *Down with the*

² Felicia Miyakawa's *Five Percenter Rap: God Hop's Music, Message and Black Muslim Mission* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2005) is the only academic monograph focused solely on hip hop and religion. Perhaps indicative of this trend, Murray Forman and Mark Anthony Neal's definitive anthology, *That's the Joint: The Hip Hop Studies Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2004), brilliantly maps out the contours of the field but neglects to include even one entry on religion.

³ Anthony Pinn edited the first book-length project on religion and hip hop, *Noise and Spirit: The Religious and Spiritual Sensibilities of Rap Music* (New York: New York University Press, 2003). He has also coedited, with Monica Miller, a special edition of *Culture and Religion: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 10, no. 1 (March 2009) on the subject. Of the fourteen essays in these two volumes, only one — Garth Kasimu Baker-Fletcher's "African American Christian Rap: Facing 'Truth' and Resisting It" — examines the genre of Gospel Hip Hop.

⁴ Robert Wuthnow, *The Restructuring of American Religion* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988). Wuthnow argues that after the culture wars of the 1960s the political/cultural divide between "right" and "left" is a more salient marker of religious identity than allegiance to any particular denominational affiliation.

⁵ Josef Sorett, "Beats, Rhymes and Bibles: An Introduction to Gospel Hip Hop," *The African American Pulpit* (Winter 2006-2007): 14.

King.⁶ Entering the 1990s, Gospel Gangstas became a mainstay in Christian rap shortly after NWA (Niggas with Attitudes) captured national attention and made “Gangsta Rap” the most prominent genre within hip hop.⁷ Finally, the smooth baritone voice of Stephen Wiley, Christian rap’s original act, might be compared to Kurtis Blow, who in 1980 recorded the first rap song to sell over 500,000 records.⁸ Ironically, in two rare instances in which “secular” artists followed the trajectory of their “sacred” foils, both Joseph Simmons (Run of RUN-DMC) and Kurtis Blow entered the Christian ministry after the end of their careers as rappers. The latter now pastors The Hip Hop Church in New York City, while the former is a member of Master Prophet Bishop Bernard Jordan’s Zoe Ministries. In contrast, each of the above Christian rappers was simultaneously a youth minister, confirming that the lines between the sacred (churches) and the secular (hip hop) are much more fluid than is commonly assumed.

More pertinent to the aims of this essay, this list of early Christian MCs calls attention to the continued role that new media and technology play in the (re)shaping and (re)imagining of religious practice. In the case of Christian rap, one thinks not only of the efforts of youth ministers to adopt novel music to spread “The Word,” but also of the very ways in which the different races/cultures (black and white) and technologies (radio, recording studios, compact discs) associated with hip hop were fuel for their theological imaginations. A close analysis of Christian rap helps to illumine the ways in which the messages and the media involved in religious practice are often coconstitutive of one another.

In its present forms, Gospel (or Holy) Hip Hop, as it is now most commonly called, is as diverse and complex as the broader phenomenon from which it takes aesthetic cues.⁹ There are regional sounds, underground purists, crossover sensations, socially conscious backpackers, Caribbean-inflected Reggae and Reggaeton artists, street storytellers, and others who simply prefer to tell “the old, old story” to a new soundtrack. In addition to the eclectic repertoire that is Gospel Hip Hop’s current scene, the story of Christian rap’s emergence provides a compelling portrait of what’s at stake at the intersections of race, technology, and theology in contemporary America. Novel musical forms

⁶ RUN-DMC, *Down with the King* (Profile, 1993).

⁷ Sorett, “Beats, Rhymes and Bibles,” 14.

⁸ Kurtis Blow, “The Breaks,” *Kurtis Blow* (Mercury, 1980).

⁹ Even the evolution of the genre’s name — from Christian rap to Gospel Hip Hop — mirrors the trajectory of the broader phenomenon, which has evolved over time from being named as “rap” to being called “hip hop.”

have long been at the center of struggles within Christian churches in the United States. African Americans are certainly no exception to this fact. Rather, black sacred music has long been a site where religion and race, as well as class and gender, were simultaneously contested with great vigor. This history is one helpful trajectory in which to locate the story of Christian rap.¹⁰ The Gospel-Blues was forged in Chicago during the 1920s and 1930s by such pioneers as Thomas Dorsey. In the 1960s and 1970s, several singers in the Bay area of northern California — most prominently, the Edwin Hawkins Singers — helped to define a new sacred sound, which was later termed Contemporary Gospel music. And six years after Sugar Hill Records released “Rapper’s Delight,” Gospel Hip Hop made history when Stephen Wiley recorded his debut single, *Bible Break* (1985), the first commercially distributed Christian rap song.¹¹

A far cry from the South Bronx, the site of hip hop’s most familiar creation myth, Stephen L. Wiley was born in 1956 in the small southwestern town of Haskell, Oklahoma.¹² When he was a toddler, his parents moved the family to the county seat in order to secure a better education for their children. Wiley fondly recounts, “I started out a rascal from Haskell and I ended up an Okee from Muskogee.”¹³ Like most children in Muskogee, church attendance was a part of the regular routine during Wiley’s youth. His family belonged to the local African Methodist Episcopal (AME) church.¹⁴ Beginning with his early years in this historic black denomination, Wiley describes a gradual process of religious maturation that would culminate with his rap ministry and later pastoral responsibilities:

I grew up going to church; but it was a denominational church. It wasn’t until, I guess it was my experience with this one pastor that I seriously began to look at spirituality,

¹⁰ For an introduction to debates about musical innovation within African American churches, and American culture more broadly, see Jerma Jackson, *Singing in My Soul: Black Gospel Music in a Secular Age* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004).

¹¹ The Sugarhill Gang, “Rapper’s Delight” (Sugar Hill Records, 1979). “Rapper’s Delight” is credited as being the first commercially released rap song. For a discussion of the song’s significance in hip hop history, see Jeff Chang, *Can’t Stop, Won’t Stop: A History of the Hip-Hop Generation* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2005). Stephen Wiley, *Bible Break* (Brentwood Music, 1985).

¹² Chang, *Can’t Stop, Won’t Stop*, 7-88.

¹³ Stephen Wiley: Interview, August 9, 2006. Unless otherwise indicated, all Wiley quotations are taken from my interview with him on this date.

¹⁴ Susan Sawyers, “Gospel Rapper Uses Music to Reach Young Converts,” source unknown (Winston-Salem, NC, 1988). Wiley provided me with a photocopy of this article. Unfortunately, the copy does not indicate the name of the publication.

the reality of it all in my life. And I grew up in church. That's what you do; you get up, you go to church; but as far as making Jesus the Lord of my life and focusing in on the spiritual side, it wasn't until I was 13 that I really began to consider it.

While some might question the historical veracity of Wiley's childhood memories, his account of coming of age in Muskogee is nonetheless a telling entrée into the religious landscape of a region of the United States often referred to as "the buckle of the bible belt." On one hand, Oklahoma has a long-standing tradition of mainline and liberal Protestantism; and it boasts one of the largest Unitarian congregations in the country, Tulsa's All Souls Unitarian Church. On the other hand, the state is home to a critical mass of conservative churches and para-church ministries connected to Pentecostal and Charismatic renewal movements that flourished during the latter half of the twentieth century.¹⁵ Much scholarship has documented the recent turn away from institutional religion to the more open rubric of spirituality. However, this latter group calls attention to a network of churchgoers who, while critical of the former group, opted to forge their own tradition of nondenominational Christianity.¹⁶

Significantly, these two terrains — liberal and conservative Protestantisms — are not mutually exclusive. A most obvious example of the fluidity between the two is another Oklahoma native: Oral Roberts. One of the most popular televangelists of the twentieth century, Roberts is known for his "seed-faith" theology, for a television ministry that emphasized the miraculous, and for founding a university that bears his name.¹⁷ For close to fifty years Oral Roberts University (ORU), located in Tulsa, has been a breeding ground for prominent evangelical, Charismatic, and Pentecostal preachers, including the likes of Ted Haggard and Carlton Pearson. Moreover, the college's chapel has hosted such figures as Claudette Copeland, T.D. Jakes, Marilyn Hickey, Benny Hinn, Paul Morton, and Harold Ray. A less familiar story line is the fact that Roberts was an ordained elder in the Methodist church, and that he remained a member of Tulsa's Boston Avenue United Methodist Church until his death in 2009.¹⁸ Alongside of popular religious broadcasters like Pearson and Jakes, Dr. James Buskirk, Roberts' friend and the pastor of Tulsa's First United

¹⁵ For an introduction to charismatic renewal movements, see Vinson Synan, *The Century of the Holy Spirit: 100 Years of Pentecostal and Charismatic Renewal, 1901-2001* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2001); Scott Billingley, *It's A New Day: Race and Gender in the Modern Charismatic Movement* (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 2008).

¹⁶ Robert Wuthnow, *After Heaven: Spirituality in American since the 1950s* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).

¹⁷ Oral Roberts, *The Miracle of Seed Faith* (Grand Rapids: Fleming Revell Co., 1977).

¹⁸ Bill Sherman, "Oral Roberts Dies," *Tulsa World* (December 15, 2009).

Methodist Church, was a recurring speaker at ORU's chapel services.¹⁹ Illustrative of Roberts' mainline connections, Buskirk was also the founding dean of ORU's school of theology. Stephen Wiley, without nearly as much media fanfare, was a product of the same rich, religious milieu of Oklahoma that produced Oral Roberts. Now pastor of a nondenominational church, Wiley continues to balance the worlds of the historic black denominations in which he was raised and his associations with the contemporary Word of Faith movement.²⁰ He privileges the latter in his spiritual narrative, to be sure. Yet, Wiley nonetheless acknowledges the formative role of more traditional black churches in his development.²¹

Something of a musical prodigy on drums, during middle school Wiley began to perform in local nightclubs. At roughly the same time, a local Baptist preacher recruited him for the Muskogee City Wide Youth Choir. From the time he was thirteen until he entered college, Wiley maintained a close relationship with this pastor. He played drums for the choir and served as its president. At the age of nineteen this pastor licensed Wiley as a Baptist minister. Yet, it was not until his senior year of college that he "got born-again, spirit-filled, committed my life to the Lord." Wiley decided to attend college in his home state and matriculated at the University of Oklahoma (OU) in Norman, just a three-hour drive from Muskogee. At OU, he had a great time. He immersed himself in black Greek life and pledged Alpha Phi Alpha, the oldest African American fraternity. He found moderate success in a local band that opened up for big-name acts that visited the region. And he made a name for himself on campus as a disc jockey on OU's radio station. Known on air simply as "Dr. DJ," Wiley would begin each show with a poetic prelude:

¹⁹ Buskirk is discussed in detail in David E. Harrell's biography of Roberts, *Oral Roberts: An American Life* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1985).

²⁰ For an account of the place of black churches within the Word of Faith movement, see Milmon Harrison, *Righteous Riches: The Word of Faith Movement in Contemporary African American Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005). Wiley's church, Praise Center Family Church is an affiliate of Fred Price's Fellowship of Inner-City Word of Faith Ministries.

²¹ C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African American Experience* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991). Lincoln and Mamiya use the term *the Black Church* to refer to seven historically black denominations: the African Methodist Episcopal Church; the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church; the Christian Methodist Episcopal Church; the National Baptist Convention, USA, Incorporated; the National Baptist Convention of America, Unincorporated; The Progressive National Baptist Convention; and the Church of God in Christ.

I'm the wicked doctor of soul, jester of jive, clown of sound, professor of poetic profound statements. I am a poet and I know it, not ashamed to show it. I can't lose with the stuff I use. Sugar pie guy, that's the reason why I can dim the rainbow's glow with my DJ show.

Just as rap music was gaining recognition as a distinct genre of popular music, Wiley's introduction revealed his indebtedness to black vernacular cultures. During the 1970s a number of black poets — including the likes of Gil Scott-Heron, Nikki Giovanni, and the Last Poets — experimented with music and gained national attention. Wiley's verse displayed both hyperbole and hyperbraggadocio, as well as it paired rhythm and rhyme; all characteristics of the African American tradition of signifying, a set of cultural practices commonly considered an antecedent of rap music.²²

Despite the signs of a budding career in music and radio, Wiley quickly changed course. Recalling this transition, he explained, "It was my senior year. The Spirit of God spoke to me and said, 'Seek ye first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things will be added unto you' . . . I left the band and I just began to pray." After graduating with a degree in broadcast journalism, Wiley took a position at a local Christian radio station owned by the Assemblies of God pastor, gospel artist, and televangelist Jimmy Swaggart. By the end of the 1980s Swaggart's name was synonymous with a sex scandal that captured headlines in 1988.²³ Earlier in the decade, however, Swaggart was at the height of his popularity after starting a television broadcast in 1975 that grew to reach an international audience. Additionally, between 1976 and 1980 he was twice nominated for a Grammy award for his work as a gospel musician. Despite Swaggart's background in southern Gospel music, the shift from fraternity life and playing in a band that featured a repertoire of jazz, R&B and funk to working alongside few other African Americans proved to be a dramatic transition for Wiley. That the radio station's rotation primarily featured preachers like Kenneth Copeland, Jerry Savelle and R.W. Shambach — all white men and then prominent figures in the Word of Faith movement — only made matters more difficult. While working at the station Wiley was sorting through the tensions between Swaggart's media-savvy Pentecostalism, the prosperity theology of Word of Faith

²² For an introduction to "signifying," see Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988); Geneva Smitherman, *Talking that Talk: Language, Culture and Education in African America* (New York: Routledge, 2000).

²³ "Swaggart is Barred from Pulpit for One Year," *Associated Press* (March 30, 1988).

preachers, and his own roots in black churches. He marked this moment as the starting point in a process of “renewing” his mind. Sorting through the cultural dissonance caused by these new surroundings, Wiley happened upon strategic support.

Although licensed to preach at the age of nineteen, Stephen Wiley had begun to sense a call to ministry more acutely during his senior year of college. Prompted by this possibility, he began listening to sermon tapes and perusing periodicals that were lying around the apartment he shared with a college friend. These spiritual commodities were gifts sent by his roommate’s girlfriend, who was a student at Rhema Bible Training Center in Broken Arrow, OK. While only a couple of hours from Norman, Wiley had not heard of Rhema prior to these care packages. Nor was he familiar with its founder, Kenneth Hagin, Sr. and the Word of Faith movement, of which Rhema was then the epicenter.²⁴ Initially Hagin’s race was a turn-off for Wiley, he recalled:

He [my roommate] would play Kenneth Hagin tapes and had *Word of Faith* magazine come in the mail and at the time I had a radical mind. I felt, here’s a white guy. He can’t teach me anything. I’m looking at *Word of Faith* magazine and seeing white faces. Radical mind — he can’t teach me anything about preaching. I know what preaching is. They’re not even preaching. They’re just talking, just lecturing. Until I got a book from Fred Price. I said, “I’ve never heard a black man talk like this.”

Although he would not meet Price in person for several years, Wiley’s entrance into the Word of Faith community was mediated by the teachings of a man who was then the movement’s most prominent black preacher. Price was ordained by Kenneth Hagin in 1975, just two years after founding Ever Increasing Faith Ministries in Los Angeles. Beginning in 1955 Price had held several ministerial appointments, in AME, Baptist, and Presbyterian churches. During the 1970s, however, he became one of the first African American pastors within the growing Word of Faith community. He was also one of the first black ministers to be on national television. In this prominent role, Price added an air of racial authenticity to the Word of Faith movement, helping it make inroads into thousands of black homes across the country. Wiley was but one of many African Americans for whom Price’s race made the new religious

²⁴ For a discussion of the Word of Faith movement, see: D.R. McConnell, *A Different Gospel: A Historical and Biblical Analysis of the Modern Faith Movement* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1988); and Harrison, *Righteous Riches*.

ideas of the faith message more accessible.²⁵ Still, in other ways, Stephen Wiley's story was unique.

More than ten years later Fred Price recruited Wiley and his wife to serve as youth pastors at his Los Angeles megachurch, Crenshaw Christian Center, known more popularly as "the Faith Dome." But it was this initial encounter with Price's books and sermons, and their frequent references to Kenneth Hagin, that started Wiley on a new journey. Shortly after first hearing Price he applied and enrolled at Hagin's Rhema Bible Training Center. According to Wiley:

From that my mind began to get renewed, not to black and white, but to the Word of God. But it still took a black man to get my attention. So I've always looked at it from the perspective that it's not a black thing or a white thing, it's all about the blood of Jesus... Even when I did my music I didn't try to make the music a black thing or white thing, but I always tried to put the Word in the forefront.

It is through the language of "renewal" (renew, renewing, renewed, and so forth), an appeal to a verse in the New Testament book of Romans, that Wiley frames his transition from "the Black Church" to the Word of Faith movement.²⁶ For him, this renewal required a shift in perspective from prioritizing racial identity to privileging religious commitment. Now, his aim in ministry is not to make it a "black thing or white thing," but "to put *the Word* in the forefront" (*italics mine*). As Milmon Harrison has noted, treating the Bible as a "contract between the born-again believe and God" is a fundamental precept in Word of Faith theology. In this regard, "the Faith message" proved to be a perfect match for a budding preacher who rapped, as his songs provided a space to practice "positive confession" of Bible verse over trendy bass lines. Equally significant, the dominant ideology of race in Word of Faith circles is one of "racial reconciliation," wherein the word is presented as a panacea for America's painful racial history. *Vis-à-vis* Word of Faith theology, for Wiley this contractual understanding of the Christian Bible superseded his prior perspective's dependence upon a black/white binary, a product of the logic of

²⁵ Lee, *T.D. Jakes*, 101-4; Walton, *Watch This*, 98-99.

²⁶ Romans 12:2a (KJV). "And be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind..." Harrison, *Righteous Riches*, 8-9. In addition to an understanding of the Bible as contract, Harrison identifies Word of Faith's "three core beliefs and practices": "the principle of knowing who you are in Christ; the practice of positive confession, and a worldview that emphasizes material prosperity and physical health as the divine right of every Christian." Walton also points out that Word of Faith teachings allow for racial identity to be subsumed under one's "spiritual identity as a 'child of God'" (*Watch This*, 176).

white supremacy that Charles Mills has identified as *The Racial Contract* embedded in modernity.

In 1980 Stephen Wiley began a formal relationship with Kenneth Hagin Ministries, as a student at the Rhema Bible Training Center and member of Hagin's Crusade Team, which lasted until 1995. Moreover, his career as a Christian rapper was launched on resources and relationships made available by immediate access to what were three of the most influential ministries shaping contemporary Pentecostal and Charismatic communities: (1) Oral Roberts University (and Oral Roberts Ministries); (2) Rhema Bible Training Center (and Kenneth Hagin Ministries); and (3) the former Higher Dimensions Evangelistic Center (and the AZUSA conference and fellowship) led by Carlton Pearson. As has already been stated, Roberts was among the most popular, if a controversial, Protestant clergyman of the twentieth century. Hagin and Rhema provided a key institutional home for what would become known as the prosperity gospel.²⁷ And Carlton Pearson, whom Jonathan Walton has dubbed "the Pied Piper of Neo-Pentecostals," was the "spiritual powerbroker" who almost singlehandedly brought black Pentecostalism to the center of American religious broadcasting.²⁸ All three of these institutions were located within the borders of Tulsa County. Along with countless other like-minded ministries, they helped make the region a veritable ground zero for the Charismatic Christian world. It was in this context that Wiley began to "renew" his mind as well as to incubate his ministry as a Christian rap artist.

According to Stephen Wiley, his first recorded rap song, "Bible Break," began as part of a Rhema Crusade Team song that sought to infuse cultural diversity into an otherwise lily-white ministry. Remembering those earliest performances, Wiley explained:

We did a song with the Rhema band — "Jesus Loves the Little Children" — And when it would get to "red and yellow, black and white . . .," when it would get to the red part we'd do a little Indian thing, put on a headdress and dance. When it got to yellow, we put on a Chinese hat. And when it got to the black, one of the guys would do a little *Soul Train* dance. So I just wrote a few phrases of rap, "Red and yellow, black and white. Everybody is a star in Jesus sight. He loves you so, He came into this world, to give his life for every boy and girl." That's where it started.

²⁷ For a recent popular treatment of the prosperity gospel, see Hanna Rosin, "Did Christianity Cause the Crash," *The Atlantic* (December 2009).

²⁸ Harrell, *Oral Roberts*; McConnell, *A Different Gospel*, 55-74; Walton, *Watch This*, 83-87.

Although the song's content elevated familiar racial caricatures, or perhaps for this very reason, it caught on quickly. Wiley's verse became a regular routine and, with a growing repertoire of songs, he secured a place as a regular performer at Hagin's annual Campmeeting in Broken Arrow. Over the next couple of years he recorded *Bible Break* with the help of his friend Mike Barnes, an in-demand producer of Christian music who lived in Tulsa and served on the staff of Carlton Pearson's Higher Dimensions Evangelistic Center. The two took advantage of access to the recording studios at Kenneth Hagin Ministries and converted the short verse into Wiley's first full-length Christian rap song.²⁹ Through his relationship with Hagin, Wiley was also able to broker a relationship with a local tape duplication business that used his single to drum up business at an annual meeting of the Christian Booksellers Association (CBA). From that one event, according to Wiley, several Christian music labels approached him with contract offers. At this point he began to believe he was on to something. As a musician, Wiley could not help but be excited by the prospect of signing a recording contract. As a minister in training, especially within the overlapping circles of Charismatic Christianity and religious broadcasting, he could sense that more was at stake theologically. Significantly, the religious worlds that Wiley now called home actively cultivated "a faith in redeeming power of communications technologies."³⁰ As a former DJ he had a good sense of the listening tastes of the American public. Now, with his renewed mind taking form, more records sales also meant more souls saved.

A dramatically different experience helped clarify for Wiley that God was indeed calling him to a rap ministry. During the 1980s he served as youth minister at Love Center Church, an African American Pentecostal congregation on Tulsa's North Side. At the same time, he and his wife, Pamela, were volunteer chaplains at the Lloyd Rader Juvenile Detention Center, just outside of city limits in Sand Springs. Faced with the daunting task of managing one of the few times that young men and women were allowed to co-mingle — in the chapel — Wiley prayed for divine intervention. Accompanied by his classic "Jam-Box," with two new songs and a still developing lead single, he felt led

²⁹ Wiley shared that he recorded *Bible Break* in Hagin's studio when it wasn't being used by the ministry. In his 1988 interview with *Spin*, however, he claimed to have borrowed money to record *Bible Break*. What these stories agree upon is that it was access to Rhema's recording equipment (whether free or paid for), and its ties to the community of religious broadcasting, that gave Wiley access to such opportunity.

³⁰ Quentin Schultze, "Defining the Electronic Church," in Robert Abelman and Stewart M. Hoover, eds., *Religious Television: Controversies and Conclusions* (Norwood, NJ: Ablex Publishing Corporation, 1990), 46.

to draw on his growing musical inventory. “A lot of the teenagers there had hard hearts, and I couldn’t get to them with my message alone,” Wiley told a reporter, “so I would do a rap song to get their attention.”³¹ The results proved providential. “So literally,” he recalled, “before my eyes, I couldn’t speak to the children unless I rapped.” Wiley continued:

So I’m writing these rap songs and the chapel service would pack out. Literally, it was standing room only. They would tell their friends, “The chaplain’s rapping, you got to come hear it.” So I would do a couple of rap songs and then I would preach. And that’s when I noticed the power of the music and it began to evolve for me. Black, white, Hispanic, Indian kids; everybody loved it.

To Wiley, that his songs reached young people, irrespective of race, was further confirmation that Christian rap was his calling. Following the national distribution of *Bible Break* in 1985, Wiley began to receive invitations to perform beyond the familiar settings of Lloyd Rader and Rhema. His earliest invitations came from white Word of Faith churches associated with Hagin’s network. Gradually, some black mainline and Pentecostal churches, as well as public and parochial schools, opened their doors to him as well. As Gangsta Rap captured national attention in the late 1980s, institutions competing for the souls and minds of young people seemed to sense that Wiley’s positive lyrics might be a resource that served their varying missions well.³² His core audience, no doubt, remained churches; especially Word of Faith congregations. However, Wiley garnered wider attention from the mainstream music press, including a feature in the November 1988 issue of *Spin* magazine, which dubbed him the “Grandmaster of God.”³³

Stephen Wiley steadily moved more fully into his ministry as a Word of Faith preacher and Christian rapper. Like Fred Price, his was another African American face that helped spread the faith message within black communities. Yet, Wiley’s presence — as an African American and as a rapper — addressed several needs across the color line. Just as his initial verse with the Rhema

³¹ Cathy Spaulding, “Gospel Put to Rap Beat,” *Tulsa Tribune* (date not available). Wiley shared this newspaper clipping with me during the interview. The story indicates that Wiley was on the staff of Love Center Church, where he served from 1987 to 1991. As such, the story can be dated within this time period.

³² Wiley claims to have toured with the “Just Say No” drug prevention program made popular by Nancy Reagan, and he recorded a song with that title on his 1989 album *Get Real* (Brentwood Music).

³³ Bill Francis, “Rappin’ For Jesus: Steven Wiley, Grandmaster of God,” *Spin* (November 1988): 22.

Crusade Team provided an image of cultural diversity, his blackness offered largely white congregations confirmation of the program of racial reconciliation to which many of them aspired.³⁴ Still, though many whites accepted his performance as a representation of racial authenticity in the pursuit of their multi-racial commitments, they kept his body at arm's length. As white Word of Faith churches welcomed Wiley into their pulpits, racial boundaries emerged more clearly when it came to his accommodations. "I stayed in more pastors' homes," Wiley recalled, "because the pastors were pretty much the only ones open enough to let the black guy stay with them." White congregations embraced his music in public, but they rejected him as their social and intimate equal. A group of youth pastors in Louisiana stood out in Wiley's memories of the ways race constrained his interactions during this time:

They realized they needed me to reach their kids . . . I got a call and went to Shreveport and I met with the youth pastors. White guys, Presbyterians, Episcopalians, Methodists, Baptist . . . every group you could imagine. They are having outreaches and their bringing in a lot of gang members. . . . They say . . . "You're a gang specialist!" I'm not a gang specialist. I'm from L.A. I'm a black guy. [They assumed that] I must be a gang specialist. Plus I can do rap music. I must know something about gangs. . . . Now the music is what they knew to bring me in, but once I got in I was able to help them. With what? *The Word* of God. [italics mine]

Wiley's perceived resemblance to certain stereotypes (for example, the black male as gangster) facilitated many of these invitations, even as it created expectations that he was ill-fitted to meet (such as the rapper as "gang specialist"). At least in retrospect, Wiley was aware of the irony in the racial logic attendant to his identity as an African American in largely white religious worlds. On the one hand, it was his racial difference that made him desirable. And Wiley embraced the opportunities this afforded him. Yet, on the other hand, that his body was read through familiar racial tropes colored the contours of these exchanges. Here race largely limited these encounters to public spaces (churches) and particular practices (rap), reinscribing the very fact of his otherness. Still, what mattered most for Wiley was that he was able to deliver "the word."

Indeed, Stephen Wiley's appearance as the "authentic" racial other opened doors for him in white churches. Conversely, many black churches rejected the very thing that whites appreciated: the "street sound" that rap music represented. According to Wiley, black churches were at times noticeably hostile to

³⁴ Harrison, *Righteous Riches*, 104-5.

his music. Occasionally, church mothers spoke out — or as Wiley put it, “prophesied” — against his ministry. Such experiences of rejection by African Americans stood out in his memory. Once, a disagreement among the leadership of a Gary, Indiana congregation shut down his show. “I didn’t get the chance to do a full concert,” he explained. “I may have done two songs, because the deacons and the trustees got into a fist fight over the concept of Gospel Hip Hop.” Wiley elaborated:

Half of them believed, “We’re not bringing the world into the church. The kids are going to be breakdancing and spinning on their heads on the pulpit and the altar.” The other half believed, “This is what’s going to reach our young people. This is going to bring them in the church. We need this. This is youth evangelism.” And they literally got into a fist-fight because of that spirit of resistance.

For Wiley, the novel aesthetics and technologies associated with hip hop were welcome resources for spreading the Gospel to the next generation. So he interpreted any antagonism in theological terms. His critics, in short, were swayed by a “spirit of resistance.” Clearly, part of these conflicts can be credited to media coverage that connected rap music to drugs, sex, and violence. For obvious reasons this made parents, perhaps churchgoers especially, anxious. However, the opposition he encountered from many black churches is also part of a longer history of class tensions. As far back as the late nineteenth century, black sacred music has been a site of contestation for both racial and religious identities. During the 1920s, churches in northern cities attended by the black middle class were reluctant to embrace the blues- inflected sounds that working-class blacks brought with them from the South. Thus, it was largely in storefront and spiritualist congregations, as well as mainline churches willing to experiment with “Sanctified” culture, that the Gospel-Blues took hold.³⁵ Moreover, these same churches were able to compete with the black Protestant establishment by employing the novel technologies of radio and race records.³⁶ Similarly, during the 1980s Word of Faith churches were quick to capitalize on the burgeoning business of televangelism. Just as Spiritualist congregations and storefronts put pressure on mainlines in the 1920s, black

³⁵ Jackson, *Singing in My Soul*, 8-26.

³⁶ David Wills, “An Enduring Distance: Black Americans and the Establishment,” in William R. Hutchison, ed., *Between the Times: The Travail of the Protestant Establishment in America, 1900-1960* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 168-92; Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, “Rethinking Vernacular Culture: Black Religion and Race Records in the 1920s and 1930s,” in Wahneema Lubiano, ed., *The House that Race Built* (New York: Vintage Books, 1998), 157-77.

Word of Faith congregations created a complex of churches that competed with traditional black denominations as the twentieth century approached its end.³⁷ This religious network, which valorized new media and valued cultural relevance, created a space for Stephen Wiley's ministry to emerge.

Significantly, Wiley seems to have preferred the subtle insults of white congregations to the open "spirit of resistance" in black mainline churches. Surely, his spiritual analysis — that white's churches temporarily suspended their prejudices because he made the word relevant to young people — was magnified by the disparity in material resources between these two camps. While black denominational churches provided him with love offerings, at best, and "Pentecostal handshakes"³⁸ at worst, honorariums were the norm with white Word of Faith churches. Rather than simply rejecting one for the other, according to Wiley, the latter made it financially feasible for him to maintain relationships with the former. After all, he still felt more at home, culturally, in black churches; even as he was growing increasingly theologically estranged from them. Additionally, in Word of Faith theology, the honoraria he received confirmed that he was indeed doing God's will.³⁹ Reflecting on his first year as a full-time Christian rapper, Wiley shared:

I had more income in one month from being on the road full-time than I had the entire year before. So that was [clearly], "God is in this" . . . I learned, "If it was God's will, it was God's bill." . . . and it became the easiest thing and I haven't looked back.

By the time his rap ministry was taking off, Wiley was a Rhema graduate and was well versed in the prosperity gospel. Between the late 1980s and early 1990s Wiley claimed to earn an average of \$12,000 per week, with a single largest check of \$10,000 coming from Fred Price's Crenshaw Christian Center. As Shayne Lee has noted, prosperity teachings provided believer's license to "enjoy their wealth and consumerism as their rightful inheritance as God's faithful children."⁴⁰ It is of little surprise, then, that Wiley was persuaded to join the staff of Price's Los Angeles congregation. At the time Price was pastor of the most prestigious church in the worlds of black Word of Faith adherents. For that matter, because of his television broadcast Fred Price was

³⁷ Wallace D. Best, *Passionately Human, No Less Divine: Religion and Culture in Black Chicago, 1915-1952* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 71-93; Walton, *Watch This*, 92-101.

³⁸ "Pentecostal Handshakes" refers to a practice of rewarding a preacher by shaking his hand while at the same time exchanging a cash gift.

³⁹ Harrison, *Righteous Riches*, 9.

⁴⁰ Lee, *T.D. Jakes*, 100.

one of the most visibly prominent ministers in the Word of Faith movement, without the racial qualifier. Clearly, Wiley's rap ministry had received the seal of God's blessing!

Given Wiley's affiliation with the Word of Faith movement, which views Scripture as an antidote to apply literally to all earthly problems, his emphasis on the word carried added theological significance. For Wiley, most obviously, "the word" refers to the Christian Bible. For sure, his songs' lyrics included Scripture. But here, "the word" also signals a particular hermeneutic inherent to the faith message, wherein words, more generally, are indicative of identity, destiny, and purpose. And it is through words — namely, "positive confession" — that such things are affirmed.⁴¹ In this view, reciting positive lyrics over hip hop beats presented the possibility of redeeming both the generation who grew up on hip hop and the genre itself. And putting biblical lyrics on a portable recording (audiocassettes) only magnified their spiritual value. Wiley, first, as a "secular" and then as a "saved" musician, understood all of this uniquely well. In his view, the "word," in the form of Gospel Hip Hop, mediated between two radically opposed worlds; sacred and secular, good and evil, God and the Devil. And Wiley drew a wealth of meaning from the very media that facilitated such mediations. That is, media technologies (recording studios, compact discs, and so forth) created both the needs that required, and raw materials that facilitated, theological ingenuity. Specifically, the words of his songs not only carried a religious message, but they were also indicative of a larger spiritual reality at work. According to Wiley, consumers of "secular" hip hop were subject to the spirits of MCs and producers who are "full of the devil, popping pills, smoking dope, [and had] groupies all over the place." In contrast, Christian rap albums carried the spirit of musicians who were "full of the Holy Ghost, speaking in tongues, [and] love the Lord." The recording studio was thus conceived as a sacred space wherein "the spirit of the anointing" forever altered the substance of a compact disc and influenced the destiny of its consumers. Much like prayer cloths sent home by healing evangelists, Wiley imagined his CDs as physical repositories of "the word" that allowed young Christians to "take the anointing home" in the form of songs suited to their cultural tastes.

In a plastic cassette case adorned by a cartoon image of Stephen Wiley holding a boom-box on his shoulder and a Bible at this waist, *Bible Break* arrived in Christian bookstores across the country in 1985. Wiley's music entailed an extended effort to make Christianity relevant to the so-called Hip Hop

⁴¹ Ibid., 10-11.

Generation. *Bible Break* began this task by teaching children to recite the books of the Bible; but Wiley's lyrics evolved beyond strategies for memorizing Scripture. During a recording career that produced six albums over a period of roughly ten years, he addressed such issues as gang violence, drug abuse, and racism. For each problem, Wiley posed the same solution: "the word." On his fourth album, *Get Real*, he explicitly articulated his hermeneutic, which might be read as much as Christian apologetics as an apology for subpar musical production. That his tracks were inferior to most mainstream hip hop was justifiable because, Wiley rapped, "It's not the beat, but it's the Word that sets the people free. So, gimme' the Word!"⁴² And, in music and in life, it was his ability to simply put "the word" first that enabled him to succeed. His faith in the power of "the word" led him into unfamiliar and unwelcoming territory for a black man. "I'd go to all white cities," he explained, "and 100, 500 kids show up. I would rap to them. Literally, I was the only black person in town. I went there and was well received and rapped, gave an altar call and blessed the kids." Conversely, he attributed declines in royalties on later albums to the fact that he had developed more complicated business arrangements. Wiley implied that rather than relying on "the word," he had become more concerned with contracts and the money they could secure.

To be sure, Wiley's reflections on the trajectory of his ministry as a Christian rapper say as much about the politics (and pitfalls) of memory as they do as a measure of the historical record. Still, his story helps shed light on the relationship between history and theory in the study of religion. It serves as an example of how religious practitioners theorize (or theologize) race and technology as well as their own personal histories. To borrow from Emerson, "All history becomes subjective; there is properly no history, only biography."⁴³ Accordingly, Wiley's recollections of the intersection of racial ideologies and media technologies in his own rap ministry (and his broader spiritual evolution) reveal much about the cultural and theological traditions of the modern Word of Faith movement. Twenty-five years after the release of *Bible Break* Stephen Wiley continues to call this religious community home. As a pastor of congregations in Tulsa and Muskogee, Oklahoma, he is a member of both Fred Price's Inner-City Word of Faith Ministries and Rhema Ministerial Alliance International. His memories, as much as these affiliations, evince a deep commitment to the faith message.

⁴² Stephen Wiley, "Gimme' Da' Word," on *Get Real* (Brentwood Music, 1989).

⁴³ Ralph Waldo Emerson, "History," in *Essays and Lectures* (Digireads.com, 2009), 123.

Moreover, Stephen Wiley's story captures the critical contributions of American Pentecostalism in reimagining new media technologies as novel methods for (and means of) Christian ministry. As an ardent advocate of the ability of "the word" to overcome racial and cultural differences, his language mirrors the story of racial transcendence in the emergence of Pentecostalism on Azusa Street at the dawn of the twentieth century. It was there that the spirit descended on an interracial crowd of believers, borrowing from the New Testament story in Acts and providing a creation myth for future racial reconciliation movements. In recent years, Wiley's role in the formation of Christian rap has been publicly celebrated within Christian music circles, where he is affectionately referred to as the "godfather" of Gospel Hip Hop. In 2009 he was inducted into the Oklahoma Jazz Hall of Fame for his contributions.⁴⁴ Such occasions have provided him with a platform to share his message about the means and meaning of the music. For him it is simple: "Don't put the music first. Don't put the style first. Don't put race first. Keep the Word of God first," Wiley shares. "Because the Bible says, 'The Word will never pass away.' The style will change and we see even the name has changed from rap to hip hop. But if you put the Word first..." In this regard, "the Word" is imagined as the ultimate litmus test: a measure of the appropriate alignment of race, music, and technology with theology. That is to say, for Wiley, race, music, and technology must be submitted to the authority of "the word." After all, he explained, "The Word is the difference... whether you teach it, sing it, rap it, have it with ice cream, with whip cream and a cherry on top."

⁴⁴ James D. Watts, Sr., "Jazz Hall Honors Tisdale, Five Others," *Tulsa World* (October 22, 2009).