

Faith and Culture: An Interview with FLAME

Missiology regularly deals with abstract ideas about communicating the Gospel and the reaction to that Gospel in cross-cultural settings. A highly influential cross-cultural setting in the contemporary world is the musical genre of hip-hop. The Christian rap artist FLAME recently spoke with an editor of *Lutheran Mission Matters*, James Marriott, to describe in his own words his personal spiritual journey and the contribution rap music makes to the communication of the Christian faith. *LMM* thanks him for his contribution. What follows is an edited transcription of the interview, which took place on July 13, 2023.

James Marriott: The prompt for our conversation today is the interaction of faith and culture, acknowledging that there is a significant relationship between Gospel and culture. As we at *Lutheran Mission Matters* were talking about different contributors, you came to my mind as someone who'd have a unique voice on that relationship. Could you start by telling us a little bit about yourself?

FLAME: Absolutely. My name is FLAME. Well, that's my artist name. My given name is Marcus Gray. I am a Christian rap artist from St. Louis, Missouri. What I enjoy doing is taking biblical theology, systematic theology, and sort of connecting the dots with our practical, mundane, everyday lives, showing the connectivity between these weighty truths, and how they impact what we do on the regular. Then I like to try to make it rhyme and make it cool and fun and accessible through punch lines, similes, metaphors, cultural references, things of that sort—so people can kind of get a better sense of who we are as humans. Maybe what God was up to with creating us, and how we drop the ball after that. But then He comes to rescue us by His Son, Jesus.

James Marriott: Yeah, that's cool. Do you have a quick example that comes to mind? The reader would appreciate hearing the turn of phrase that you would use that would create that cultural resonance with a theological connection.

FLAME: Yeah, let me see. I'm flipping through my database of songs. So in the hip-hop culture cars are celebrated. You get a regular car and you put rims on it. Often a new paint job, too. In one of my songs, I make reference to a certain type of rim, like you put this rim on your car and it spins when you drive. It just gives this cool effect. I said, "just like your rims still spin even after your car stops, then where will you spend eternity after your heart stops?" So it's kind of a play on words, a play on that cultural reference that's readily available on people's minds in terms of hip-hop culture.

James Marriott: I want to ask you more about your engagement with hip-hop culture, but let's start with a bit more on your theological journey from Calvinism to Lutheranism.

FLAME: As I grew up, I was primarily taught Christianity by my grandmother and my mom. So I remember just as a kid, they sort of catechized me. I remember learning about the Trinity, the nature of Christ, the resurrection. And then I got plugged into a local church. It was a charismatic church with some prosperity leanings, but nothing over the top. It was fairly balanced in terms of that world.

But, later on, the message was a lot more extreme and didn't sound like the stuff my grandmother had taught me, or that my mom had taught me. At that point, I remember sort of questioning it and being confused by this new emphasis on God wanting to make you rich, or God promising us healing and sort of this easy life. That didn't really reflect my experience, nor the things I was taught. So in that moment I was introduced to Calvinistic thought.

I was on the tour with another Christian rap group, and they sort of introduced the Reformation to us young guys, and we had no idea about the Reformation. They asked us whether we were Calvinists or Armenians. And I was like, I don't know anything about those games. You know. I'm neutral. I just work for Jesus. And that's when they started to inform us about, you know, this whole portion of church history that just got lost on us in a hood context. So I realized pretty quickly that the guys on tour were mostly Calvinistic, and I figured that was the right thing to, you know, believe. So for about eighteen years I gave myself to Calvinism, pushing it through my music, teaching it in practical ways.

I think it felt helpful because of this emphasis on God's sovereignty. From my background growing up in the inner city, asking the big questions about culture and society and politics, this thing about God's sovereignty sounded like a cure: God's in control. He knows what's best for you. Just accept it. That sort of thing. And I was like, okay, I think I can find some comfort here, and I think I'm tracking it down in Scripture based on the way they were teaching it.

I lived in that space for about eighteen years, until certain ideas started to become soul-crushing and haunting. For instance, they will argue that Jesus did not die for everyone. They argue that God, in fact, created some people just for judgment, because He wants to show off His wrath. God thinks it's cool to demonstrate how wrathful He is. So He creates humans just for that expression. And over time that became crushing. How do I know if I'm one of the ones Jesus died for? How do I know if I'm created for judgment?

There's this concept in Reformed theology that you can be a deceived convert, so to speak. You can think you're a Christian but not really be one. So you really get busy trying to prove to yourself and to God and to others that you really want to be elect. So you're doing your best to be a pious person, not only externally, but internally. You're trying to get your thoughts right, your affections, your mood, your mentality. You're always examining yourself, making sure that you're on par with all

things consistent with what it means in that construct to be a Christian. Yeah. That put me in sort of a funk over time.

James Marriott: Talk about the turn then to Lutheranism. The readers will be pretty steeped in Lutheran theology, but maybe give us a few of the anchors that really became compelling and that have been integrated into your artistry.

FLAME: Yeah, for sure. I was exposed to Concordia Seminary through a close friend of mine, who recommended it because it was recommended to him by a Reformed Baptist professor and pastor. So that's pretty ironic. He told my friend, "Hey, man, if you're going back to St. Louis, make sure you check out Concordia Seminary." So I end up checking it out. But I was still just super lit about John Calvin. I remember Dr. [Gerhard] Bode giving me a tour of campus, and I'm talking his head off about how John Calvin saved Christianity, and, you know, that kind of thing. Eventually he looked at me and said, "You know this is a Lutheran University. There are some distinctives there."

But I still didn't really get it, you know. My first class in the program was "Lutheran Mind," and that's where, they sort of broke up the fallow ground. It was kind of like, "Oh, wow! There are some major differences here." I had moments of panic in all of this. I felt like maybe I was being deceived and joining a cult or something like that. I had nerves. There was this sense of betrayal I had to wrestle with, because I felt like I was being unfaithful to the men and women who had invested in my maturity and spiritual growth by attending this school.

But I also felt confidence in the fact that they did teach the doctrine of justification by faith alone. So I decided to hear them out. I was really drawn by the emphasis [of justification by faith alone] taught clearly there. That was very familiar to things I had already agreed with in terms of Calvinism. But then they introduced the sacraments into the story, and that's where things got to be interesting, because there was still this deep-rooted nature of justification by faith alone. But it was also undergirded by these other elements of assurance and hope and good news, which was, you know, the Lord using Baptism, Word and water, to deliver His gifts of salvation and forgiveness. Or the Lord's Supper, another one, where Jesus just bodily visits us in some mystical union through bread and wine. Those things were off-putting at first.

But, over time, I heard a bit of hope and flickers of light flashed into this dark place that I was sinking into. So I was like, "Man, I think this is a good thing, but I want to see it in Scripture." So, over the course of two years, I just sort of gave myself to listening to the lectures from all the professors, taking notes, profoundly revisiting

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all the lectures and notes immediately after class when I got home, going through them all over again in the same day, and that was my practice religiously.

And once I graduated in 2018, I took that entire year off, you know, to just work through everything outside of the academic environment. And I was like, “Man, I can’t unsee this. I think this stuff is right here in the text.” Then I committed myself to Lutheran thought in 2019. And the story continues.

James Marriott: Tell me about hip-hop, then, as a genre, because you aren’t unique in this intersection of faith and culture. You’re not the only one doing this kind of artistry, but it is unique, especially in some Lutheran circles. And many of the people reading this won’t necessarily see hip-hop as a cultural mechanism for proclaiming the Gospel. So talk a little bit about your engagement with hip-hop, the cultural affiliations of hip-hop, and its instrumental use for the Gospel.

FLAME: Absolutely. Great question. It’s interesting, too. I have to tip my hat again to my grandmother. As a kid, I was always listening to rap music. The worst kind. Lyrics that were vile, full of murder, drugs, glorifying those things as if they were cool. I remember a song in particular where this guy is rapping about taking a life, and it was very dark, but poetically it was brilliant. And the music itself was just so good. Heavy on the strings, the piano, the drums. But it was a dark song.

And my grandmother, she just did not like me listening to that stuff, but she knew it was the soundtrack of this generation. So, rather than crushing my dream, in a genius way she suggested, “I see you like this rap music. Why don’t you study your schoolwork and things that interest you, and write songs about them? And in that way, when you go to school, you can take all your tests and have all the answers you want committed to memory and life. You can have songs about it and recall it just like that.” And when she said that, it was just this light bulb, mind blowing moment. I really credit her for sort of what I call now, edutainment. You know what I’m saying—taking education and entertainment and blending them together. That turned into my style of music today.

So hip-hop culture in general is really just a way of life. It includes music, dance, fashion—those kinds of things. But rap music is the soundtrack of this subculture within the American culture. Rap just stands for “rhythm and poetry.” When I became, I guess, around sixteen, when I took my faith more seriously, I realized that I shouldn’t probably rap about the same things that I was normally rapping about because it conflicts with a Christian worldview. I wanted to make sure anything I put out there represented who I was as a Christian.

So I thought about that. I thought about Christian rap, something that I had been exposed to as a kid when some church sent out a cassette to our church, and it was, like, Christian rap, but it was, like, not good. But I was able to refer to it, you know, and remember that it existed. So I checked to see if that Christian rap thing was still around. And it was, and I felt like I had found my home. Now, in short, I’m giving myself to using the same artistic expression, which is being very black and white in

your face: This is what I believe. Take it or leave it, which is something hip-hop listeners expect and come to appreciate. They typically value that bold honesty and transparency. But they also respect good art.

So I try to keep those two in balance: good art with an honest, transparent message. Even non-Christian listeners will at least give you an ear. So that's what I aim to do—be up front and honest about my Christianity. This is what I think, this is what I believe. Here it is, over music and rhyme and cadence. And, yeah, that's carried me to this point. And people mostly find it to be useful even outside of Christianity. But inside the faith, I think the Church has come around to seeing it as a tool to reach new Christians and rap listeners.

James Marriott: That's fantastic. I love the “edutainment” term, and it strikes me that your work and artistry is right in line with Luther's work writing hymns in the Reformation. They're all very didactic, intended to teach the faith. And I think Luther would resonate with the idea of edutainment, utilizing musical idioms of the day and teaching the faith through them.

FLAME: Yeah, the cool thing about rap is that the format does lend itself to cadence and repetition. So you can really get it down to memory. Most often, a song is about two and a half to three minutes. So especially in a culture where education may not have been overwhelmingly highlighted, where a person has, you know, eighth grade or high school level understanding, you can hit them with things in music that they may not have had the opportunity to learn. I think that in the ancient world, most people weren't educated. They didn't have a Bible, and they probably didn't even know how to read. But it was music that helped them learn.

James Marriott: Well, and that even gets to the cultural assumptions of what an education is, you know. Education itself has been formalized and normalized with a particular cultural bent to it. Just because someone can't read doesn't mean that they aren't educated in some way, you know. It frames our different perspectives.

FLAME: For sure. That's a helpful, helpful distinction. I love it. Yeah.

James Marriott: Tell me then, what do you do when you encounter people who say that hip-hop doesn't really belong with the Gospel? This kind of thing has happened in every generation—opera doesn't really belong with the Gospel. Rock and Roll doesn't really belong with the Gospel. And organ music, actually, wasn't native to the church. What's your reaction when you encounter the argument that hip-hop and the Gospel, as an intersection of faith and culture, just doesn't fit?

FLAME: There is definitely a negative expression in some rap music. So, it makes sense, if you see a thing wreaking havoc in the community and society, it is sort of frightening. It makes me think about Saul's conversion. Before he was Paul, as we know him now, he was a frightening guy. And when he comes around and is now proclaiming the Christian message, it is confusing and puts people in this

juxtaposition. So I think that's a natural reflex, and I always try to give space for that natural reflex, because I know it's coming, you know.

But then, after people at least give you an ear to hear you out, then you can explain to them those distinctions. Help them understand that music is just this cool thing God created where sounds collide and makes sense together. Words blend together and communicate clear thought. It's a gift from God that's inherently innocent because He gave it to us that way. Now you can take it and stuff it with all kinds of bad things, and make it poisonous to a community or to society, but rap is no different. It's a neutral genre of music that could either go left or right, good or bad.

So once people sort of relax that reflex and hear that, and they know that it stems from God's creation in terms of music and sound and rhyming words and cohesive thought, and then Scripture Gospel theology, then they say, "Man, I've never considered it being packaged this way." And that helps them typically relax that resistance. So I ask people to remember that God is the origin of music and sound, and if we take it and use it as a teaching tool, then it could be a friend of the Gospel as opposed to competing with the Gospel.

James Marriott: Yeah, that's cool. And, actually, I've tried to wrestle through this with Christian music in worship, with different musical genres being used in different churches. And you just reframed something for me. You acknowledged that rap isn't neutral, you know, that it does have cultural affiliations that people project on it. So it's not neutral in that sense. It has cultural assumptions that go with it from different people in different times, but your point is that music itself *does* have a kind of neutrality in that it doesn't inherently espouse any of those assumptions, even if those assumptions are projected on it.

And so, when we know that a particular genre of music is used for Gospel work, it can be affiliated very successfully with Gospel proclamation, because the assumptions that are made about it are then reframed and redeemed. I never quite thought about it in that way. Thanks for that!

FLAME: Yeah, for sure. I love that because I think what we do over time, too, even as Christians, is we esteem a certain thing, like a certain style of music, as being the heavenly one or the Christianly one, as if God handed down a genre and says, "This is the one that I'm used to my angel singing. Now I'm gifting you with it." Instead, we all just have our different ways of assigning some genre to that concept, you know, whether it's hymns, rap, gospel, contemporary Christian music. We all have our favorite thing. But in many ways, they all have the same origin story as you mentioned. I mean, I think the Blues has some influence on gospel music. I think I heard somewhere along the way that Luther was influenced by some cultural sounds and made him kind of morph out of that.

So I think all of our genres have natural touch points with society. Language is like this, too. I mean, if I would use this terminology from the surrounding culture, words that we might think are, like, sacred and dropped out of heaven. But they are

really terms and ideas that the surrounding culture normally thought in or talked in. So I think it is important to remember that inherently God says that His creation is good. There is an innocence to everything until it's sort of taken in one direction or the other, you know?

James Marriott: Is there anything else you want to say about your other artistic or academic contributions? You're a writer. You present, you speak at conferences, you're teaching and leading people in various ways. How does the confluence of faith and culture inform not just your musical artistry, but also your teaching and writing?

FLAME: Yeah, it's so fun to see all the different elements play their individual role. Like, for example, now that I'm an author (that's so funny to say now). But the cool thing is it provides a bit more freedom than the music. The music has natural barriers in terms of there's a time restraint. The sound palette restricts the mood and the emotion. So I'm very constrained to either a happy song or a sad song. And you don't want to skip moods because the song won't feel right, you know, in a pragmatic way.

So I think now in being an author, there's a lot more freedom. I can write a lot more and sort of be more nuanced. You don't get my St. Louis Hood accent, so you can just read a word plainly without those kind of regional barriers for me. Man, I love it. When I perform in a place like Africa, they will be like, "what is that word you said," and I have to explain the word in its context. In writing, some of that is removed, and there is a freedom there.

But I think, overall, the way I look at this sort of intersection between, you know, theology and these different ways of getting it out there—I heard an analogy that I think is helpful. Let's just say there is an outbreak of pestilence, or a pandemic if you will. There's a virus and, you know, there's a panic to help people. Let's just help people, because people are coughing and they can't breathe, and they have headaches and dizziness and fevers. It is necessary to be on the ground helping.

But you also need the scientists in a lab who are very technical and meticulous with chemicals and mixing them together and making sure this amount is just right, helping to make an antidote or vaccine. You need both people on deck. You need the scientists in the lab, carefully working through all the chemistry so that they can provide the best combination of elements to help the people in the way that they do. Then you need people to take those vaccines and apply the shots to the people on the ground.

I see my role as sort of being in a lab in many ways. I need to be in a lab. I need to care about church history. I need to care about doctrine and nuance, because when you go and minister this vaccine to the public, if they don't understand that Jesus is both fully man and fully God, and they just think He was a prophet, they're not putting their faith in a person that's going to help them. That's not going to save them. He has nothing for them because he's just a cool guy with some cool ideas that can make you feel better for a few days. But eternally you'll just say, "Oh, sorry."

So I like to think caring for theology is important because I'm in the lab doing that work. And then the cool thing is I get to sort of step out of that character and then

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apply the medicine myself when I write the songs and perform them in this palatable way. I get to kind of play both roles, and I think they're all important.

James Marriott: I think it's great. The way that you articulate the different roles and perspective of that is really helpful, and it affirms that both are theology. Both are doing theology! Your artistry of performing is just as theological as your artistry of being in the lab studying the history and nuancing the text. Both are the contribution that you make to the Church and the world.

That's something that I always try to advocate for with artists is that the art itself is theology. We're making a Gospel expression, a theological expression, through and in art itself. We are all theologians.

FLAME: Right, we are always gathering information that relates to the things that the theologian cares about. They may just gather from a popular movie, or just a common sort of stream of thought flowing through society. But everybody's thinking about debt. Everybody's thinking about God, or some type of divine essence. Everybody's thinking about guilt. Everybody's thinking about shame. They care about those issues. So it's a conversation that never ends in a human psyche. We're always doing a sort of theology, even bad theology, if you don't have it rightly oriented. But every second of everyday people are doing it.

James Marriott: What is your hope for the Church's engagement of your work? You're making all these different contributions in different ways. What do you hope the Church does with that?

FLAME: Yeah. One, I want people in the Church in general to see the relevance of what's taking place. Because most people don't. Most people don't think deeply about things. We're all busy. We all have lives and families, and we're trying to make it through the day in a simple way. So intellectually, people may put barriers up as it relates to thinking about God and Christianity and forgiveness of sin.

But most people will allow time for entertainment and using their imagination. They'll go to a movie. They'll listen to a song. They'll go check out a concert. They'll make room for that amongst their busy schedules. What I want the Church to understand is this is a way to enter people's lives, the busyness of it and the mundane experience of it. We enter their lives with the things that are most important, as it relates to Scripture, theology, and faith. We can find a way to meet people. Where they naturally camp out, we could show up with hope and good news and Gospel.

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So that's why I would like to think that eventually, even in a Lutheran space, we would say, "Oh, my goodness, this is a great contribution. How can we even help start this up in our local churches, where we develop more Christian rap artists, more Christian rap, or people that make film and dance?" Let's make this a designated space and give attention and budget to it so that we can infiltrate mainstream society with good ideas, beautiful ideas that reflect the Christian worldview, and then, even more potently, ones that bring up the Gospel conversation.

People will get caught up by it and say, "Oh, wow! I didn't even know I was thinking deeply about matters of faith and Christianity. Just because it was done so well, it sounded so good." And now I'm engaging my emotions and my mind at the same time with the beautiful reality that God loves us. He cares for us, and He demonstrated that through His Son Jesus Christ, and delivers it, the Word and Sacrament. So that's why I want people to see the relevance in it and start to mobilize people—to be Lutheran out loud in the arts.

James Marriott: Oh, that's fantastic! I love that. Thanks so much for taking the time with us here today and for sharing your insight on the intersection of faith and culture in your life and artistry.

Editor's note: For more about FLAME, I encourage you to read his new book Extra Nos: Discovering Grace Outside Myself (Concordia Publishing House, 2023).