

The Apologist Currently Known As Prince

Plato once wrote, “*When the mode of the music changes, the walls of the city shake.*” If you want to understand the moral climate of a nation, look at its songs, movies, books, and art. Pop culture is the purveyor of big ideas. I once heard Ravi Zacharias refer to rock musicians as mid-level philosophers, a label that seems generous at times (“Rack City”? Really?) but is often accurate (“Pumped Up Kicks” is a depressing but true reflection of the shallowness and cruelty of much of our world. Hello, Nietzsche).

The church historically has worked itself into quite a few knots over what to do with culture. There’s Jerusalem, and there’s Athens: should they intersect or not? To update Tertullian, what does Hogwarts have to do with Narnia, or LMFAO with Third Day?

The Apostle Paul dove right in to Greek and Roman culture, plundering the works of their own mid-level philosophers and using them to represent truth about the Kingdom of God. While at the Acropolis (Acts 17), Paul quotes from a Hymn to Zeus written by the Hellenist poet Aratus (“For we are indeed His offspring”); he also references Epimenides (“In him we live, and move, and have our being”), who is credited with building the altar to the unknown God.

Cultural may be fallen, but cultural expressions of belief and faith can be redeemed. We need the wisdom to “understand the times, and know what to do” (1 Chronicles 12:32). Acts 17 also shows that while cultural apologetics will not take away the offense of the cross for everybody, it can clear roadblocks on the way there for some.

As a practical example of plundering today’s music, I offer two examples. The Band of Heathens sings the following song:

*I’ve been smokin’ a lot of cigarettes, I’ve been shufflin’ my feet,
Makin’ payments on some long past dues; this slice of life ain’t cheap.
I’ve been doin’ a little drinkin’ – it don’t tickle my bones.
What’s a man to do with these ol’ walkin’ shoes if they never get you home?*

Somebody tell the truth: What's a man to do?

Pickin' up rocks in this old river bed, I'm just tryin' to forget.

Some days you take from it what you want; some days you take what you get.

I have seen the whites of your knuckles, I've seen the blood in your spit.

You can give up, You can give in, but you can never quit. You can never quit.

Pop music often does a good job of pointing out what's wrong with the world. It's hard to overlook that something about our lives is broken; you don't have to be a follower of Christ to get that. In some ways this song sounds like Ecclesiastes: "I've tried smoking, dancing, spending too much money, drinking, and 'steppin' out.' Now, honestly, what am I supposed to do? I want to move on, but I can't. I'm going down swinging, but I'm still going down." Is that not a contact point? Probably all of us have been there at some point - we've tried to find pleasure and fulfillment in life in ways that destroyed us, but we found the solution in Christ.

Occasionally, you find a song that identifies the problem and sees the solution. This is where Prince comes in. Seriously. Yes, the same Prince who penned the semi-pornographic "Pink Cadillac" along with the poignant and insightful "Times." He also heard a dove cry (which is unusual to say the least) and composed the inexplicably good soundtrack to Batman, but I digress.

Apparently the years have mellowed him a bit. In a recent CD, he uses a computer software analogy to weigh in on the state of the world (my apologies for making the lyrics look less poetic than they are):

Upload: the evolution principle. You see a rock on the shore and say, "It's always been there."

Download: no responsibility. Do what you want - nobody cares.

Upload: the master race idea, genetically disposed too rule the world.

Download: a future full of isolated boys and girls.

Upload: a two-party system. The lesser of two dangers; illusion of choice.

Download: a veiled form of fascism. Nothing really ever changes; you never had a voice.

Upload: a child with no father;

Download: no respect for authority.

Upload: a child with no mother;

Download: a hard time showing love.

If you look, you're sure gonna find throughout mankind's history

A colonized mind.

The one in power makes law under which the colonized fall,

But without God it's just the blind leading the blind.

I wonder if Paul would quote The Band of Heathens and Prince? I hope so, because I do in my sermons and casual conversations. I figure if those who do not know Christ expose the pitfalls of their own lives or manage to promote the true and good in the midst of a chaotic world, I will let them do the heavy lifting for me.

After all, if an entire band of heathens sees a problem with a life without God, can we all agree that it's a problem? And if Prince thinks love and respect begin with solid parents, and evolution begets meaninglessness, and the government needs God, that's sure something on which to build. (I'm thinking of a shorter version of the Prince Apologetic here: "Prince thinks we are blind without God. Your argument is invalid.")

In terms of apologetic tools, there are plenty of excellent resources from Christian theologians and philosophers. But in a world full of people who often don't care what God or Christians have to say about anything, I am more than happy to let their own worldview undermine itself. And when I have an opportunity to speak into their lives, by the grace of God I will be ready to give an answer for the hope within me.