

Propaganda: Giving the Puritans a Bad Rap



Ridgecrest will sponsor a Hip-Hop singer from Los Angeles, California, April 12, 2013

His stage name: “Propaganda”

His real name: Jason Petty

Style: Hip Hop / Rap / Spoken Word

**Hip-Hop/Rap Singer
“Propaganda”**

October 25, 2012 By Joel Beeke
(Source: Joel Beeke’s website: “doctrine for life”)

A new rap song by Propaganda has caught the attention of a number of Christians in the blogosphere. It styles itself as a series of questions to a pastor who loves to quote the Puritans, criticizing them for their culpability in the slavery of African-Americans. The rap repeatedly uses the phrase “your precious puritans” in a way that is ironic, to say the least. It is sad that “precious” becomes a piece of sarcasm, for the Lord Himself said to His people that we are “precious in my sight” and “I have loved thee” (Isa. 43:4).

To his credit, Propaganda promotes the gospel of Christ in other raps, and says that he has learned a lot from reading the Puritans. But his rap song forcefully portrays them as deeply flawed men, profoundly guilty for their participation in the Atlantic slave trade and slave economy.

What should we make of this? The subjects of slavery and racism are huge, difficult, and beyond the scope of a single blog post. However, I would like to offer some perspective on Propaganda’s rap song. There are three dimensions to Propaganda’s song: emotional, historical, and theological. While these are intertwined, I think it will help to look at them one at a time.

(1) Emotional Dimension.

You don’t have to read between the lines to see the pain and anger in this song. He raps about “bewilderment,” “heart break,” and an “anger” that “screams.” Furthermore, he is not speaking just for himself, but as the voice behind “our facial expressions,” presumably the African-Americans in the church. White people reading or hearing the rap are also drawn emotionally into the pain in the “shackled, diseased, imprisoned face.” Propaganda’s lines pierce.

The enslavement of African-Americans was a horrific and shameful evil. It remains a stain upon our national history, a sin that only the blood of Christ could cleanse away. To read of the conditions of our fellow human beings in this bondage is painful indeed. Yet,

like the Holocaust and the present international atrocity of abortion, slavery must be faced in order that we may renounce it fully and strive to end all human trafficking that continues today.

His imaginary conversation with a pastor is an important reminder that this has implications for preaching and pastoral care. The moral and relational effects of slavery are multi-generational, and we should not pass lightly over the suffering experienced today by African-American citizens in America and our brothers and sisters in the church.

But Propaganda's song does not set a good example for us. Whatever his personal views may be, his rap portrays the Puritans in a starkly negative light. Some have commented that the song really isn't about the Puritans, but is a clever, artistic work designed to make us question ourselves and to treat no one as inerrant. We will return to this theological point in a moment, for it has value. But making that point does not justify depicting godly Christians in such a manner.

It is naïve to say that the song does not make us recoil in horror away from the picture it paints of the Puritans. Surely many people who hear the song will be moved to anger and disgust towards the Puritans and resentment towards those who quote them, unless they come to know them better. The song could create a false shame in lovers of Puritan literature, and also give ammunition to those who are eager to write off biblical and Reformed Christianity as bigotry.

Perhaps someone might object that Propaganda's song is just historical fact. Is that true? This brings us to the second dimension of his rap.

(2) Historical Dimension.

He characterizes the Puritans as “the chaplains on slave ships”—those who “purchased people” and believed that white men bore God's image in a way that black people don't. He also says, “Their fore-destined salvation contains a contentment in the stage for which they were given.” These words imply that the Puritan doctrine of predestination was a weapon of oppression that taught people to be passive.

In reality, the Puritan's doctrine of unconditional election does not foster arrogance, but instead places people on an equal playing field before God as sinners utterly dependent on unmerited grace. The biblical teaching of God's providence does not make us passive towards wicked men, but inspires courageous activism to resist evil because we believe a sovereign God hears our prayers and is working out His plan through our efforts.

Furthermore, the Puritan view of authority and servitude contained the seeds that ultimately grew into anti-slavery doctrine. They taught that masters could not treat servants and slaves as mere property like a block of wood, but as human beings with rights. Puritans like William Gouge did believe in corporal punishment, but warned strongly against cruelty that would wound or disable people. William Perkins and the

Westminster Larger Catechism also recognized that “man-stealing,” the root of slavery, was a sin condemned in Scripture (Ex. 21:16; 1 Tim. 1:10). Some Puritans opposed the Atlantic slave trade, like Jonathan Edwards. Some Puritans followed this to the logical conclusion and opposed all slavery, such as Richard Baxter and Samuel Sewall. After the Puritan era ended and slavery grew in the magnitude of its evil, heirs of the Puritans such as Jonathan Edwards, Jr., and Alexander McLeod became strong advocates of the abolition of the bondage of African-Americans.

My point is this: if we view the Puritans only through the lens of their slave ownership, then we draw a lop-sided and inaccurate picture of their character and views. Their theological system held the key to unlock the slave’s chains.

We must recognize that because of the sin and darkness that remain in the church, it takes a long time, sometimes generations, for the seeds of truth present in our theology to grow up and bear fruit in our practice. How many things will future generations see in us that will make them exclaim, “How could they tolerate that and still be godly Christians?” So we need to show a lot of grace to each other.

This brings me to the third and final aspect I want to consider in Propaganda’s rap song.

(3) Theological Dimension.

The rapper ends on a surprising note. After reflecting on his own fallibility and blind spots, he says, “So I guess it’s true. God really does use crooked sticks to make straight lines. Just like your precious puritans.” The rap has a theological point, that the sovereign God uses flawed men and women to bring goodness and truth to the world. Amen! If that were not the case I would resign from ministry today. If we did not believe in God’s sovereign grace, we would have to view the Psalms as suspect because David committed adultery and murder, and the writings of Peter as of dubious value because he denied the Lord Jesus three times. I am thankful that Propaganda made this point.

However, I believe that Propaganda’s point needs more balance. It is true that believers in Christ still have much remaining corruption. The best of us have grievous sins, whether we are talking about the seventeenth century or the twenty-first century. But we are more than “crooked sticks.” We are the saints of God. We are not hypocrites, mere pretenders wearing a Christian mask, but sincerely repentant sinners walking in the light of God. Paul thanked God for the exemplary faith, hope, and love in believers (1 Thess. 1:3, 7). He could even say, “Be ye followers of me, even as I also am of Christ” (1 Cor. 11:1).

So while we need to be honest about the sins of our spiritual forefathers, let’s be careful not to view them or portray them as if they were nothing but sinners. Slavery is a big issue, but we should not make it the defining issue in how we view people lest we fall into another kind of idolatry. The examples and teachings of the Puritans, while not flawless, are very valuable to all who would know the living God. This is not putting someone on a pedestal, but following in the footsteps of the faithful (1 Thess. 1:5–6; 2

Tim. 3:10). The Puritans really are “precious,” not just to white people, but to all who love God and the Bible.



(Dr. Joel R. Beeke is president and professor of systematic theology and homiletics at Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary, a pastor of the Heritage Netherlands Reformed Congregation in Grand Rapids, Michigan, editor of *Banner of Sovereign Grace Truth*, editorial director of Reformation Heritage Books, president of Inheritance Publishers, and vice-president of the Dutch Reformed Translation Society. He has written, co-authored, or edited seventy books (most recently, *A Puritan Theology: Doctrine for Life*, *Living Zealously*, *Friends and Lovers: Cultivating Companionship and Intimacy in Marriage*, *Getting Back Into the Race: The Cure for Backsliding*, *Parenting by God’s Promises: How to Raise Children in the Covenant of Grace*, *Living for the Glory of God: An Introduction to Calvinism*, *Meet the Puritans*, *Contagious Christian Living*, *Calvin for Today*, *Developing a Healthy Prayer Life*, and *Taking Hold of God*), and contributed 2,000 articles to Reformed books, journals, periodicals, and encyclopedias. His Ph.D. is in Reformation and Post-Reformation theology from Westminster Theological Seminary (Philadelphia). He is frequently called upon to lecture at seminaries and to speak at Reformed conferences around the world. He and his wife Mary have been blessed with three children: Calvin, Esther, and Lydia.)