

# For Heathens by Heathens: Why This Rapper Wants to Change Christian Culture

Gabriel Alberto Azucena, more commonly referred to as Gawvi, wants to change Christian culture. The producer and rapper tells *Charisma* he titled his third studio album *Heathen* as a deliberate statement, after “nerding out” about the word’s biblical origins.

“The word ‘heathen’ is very bold,” Gawvi says. “In Christian culture, it could be [used in] a scary or comical way. The two best examples I can give [are], on the comical side, you might say, ‘Hey, Johnny missed church for two weeks in a row. He’s a heathen, right?’ And you laugh with your friends about it. Then the more serious side is when someone messes up in life, and they have that label attached to them now—they’re becoming a heathen, and they’re not viewed as just a person anymore. Now they’re labeled as whatever sin they have committed.”

But that’s not how the word “heathen” was originally used by believers in the early church.

“The actual meaning of ‘heathen’ is not what church culture has designed it to be,” he explains in a behind-the-scenes YouTube documentary. “If you look back in history, ‘heathen’ actually comes from the Greek words *ethnos*, and *ethnos* is actually meaning ‘ethnicity.’ The only Bible version is King James Version that has the word ‘heathen.’ Nobody’s used the word ‘heathen’ again. And it says ‘heathen’ instead of ‘Gentile’ in the King James Version. [So the Bible’s] message means ‘I came to bring it for the heathen—for everyone.’”

Gawvi believes that in many ways, the church has acted as a cultural gatekeeper—approving some manifestations of Christian faith while rejecting or dismissing others. At other times,

believers judge and reject those who admit to spiritual failings and can adopt a “holier than thou” persona. He believes this, in effect, has prevented many nonbelievers from being able to relate to Christianity. Some may even think the gospel is not intended for them.

Gawvi wants to show them the opposite is true.

“‘Heathen’ is a big, complex word, and I feel like we as humans are complex just like that,” he says. “How do I communicate that in my music? ... I want to impact people who feel like they are sinners and tell them, ‘Hey, you’re not too far from God at all. You’re actually available for this message.’”

He spoke to *Charisma* about how he is trying to model vulnerability and authenticity in his own life, how he resists the lies of the enemy and how he hopes to see Christian culture break the mold moving forward.

## Let's Be Real

Gawvi started his career in 2008 as a music producer, working with artists like Lecrae and Trip Lee at Reach Records. He officially signed to Reach Records as a rapper in 2016 and released his debut album, *We Belong*, the next year. His second album, *Panorama*, debuted in 2018. But Gawvi says he wanted to be more vulnerable on *Heathen*.

“What happens when you become a Christian artist in our Christian culture is, immediately, people look to you as a superhero or like some pastor who has been in Bible school for 20,000 years,” Gawvi says. “And I wanted to kind of pull that veil away. An inspiring story for me is David in the Bible. I love how David writes his story. You see how poetic he is in the book of Psalms, and you see him still be vulnerable and question, ‘God, why have you forsaken me?’ And I thought, *I need to do that. I need to peel the veil back and just show people ‘Hey, I’m a human being just like you.’*”

The opening moments of *Heathen* do exactly that, with a children's choir singing, "If you knew me like I know me/ You would hate me and disown me/ I'm just trying to be different/ For my wife, for my children." He says it's the most personal, vulnerable lyric he's ever publicly recorded.

"I've seen that countless times when somebody in Christian culture has made a mistake," Gawvi says. "Immediately, everybody writes them off, like, 'Oh, we're not going to book them anymore.' But, man, we're all in this. We all fall short. ... I'm a strong believer in being vulnerable, being open and showing people that you're a human being."

He says it's not about flaunting or being proud of sin, but instead letting God be glorified through our testimonies and His strength made perfect through our weaknesses.

"There [have] been a lot of conversations with my team saying, 'Hey, Gawvi, you say you want to make a vulnerable album. How vulnerable do you want to go?'" he says. "I thought about it, and I said, 'If I'm really going to champion this message about *Heathen*, I've got to stand firm and not be scared of it.' I think in Christian culture, people are so scared about being vulnerable, because they're scared of rejection. They're scared of being called a sinner, when it's actually someone opening up and saying, 'Hey, I need help,' or 'Hey, this is my story. This is my testimony. Look what God brought me out of.'"

Some of the album's most poignant moments deal directly with Gawvi's own battles against sin and resisting the lies of the enemy. The song "SIN" deals with the common experience of falling into sin and the devil whispering, "You'll never overcome this pattern." But the song's refrain flips that lie and declares victory in Christ. Contrary to the enemy's lies, Gawvi sings, "We're gonna win."

"I think we all struggle with this, right?" he says. "You may

mess up at a moment in your life, and it can really overwhelm you, whatever the situation may be. It could be small or it could be big. The overwhelming feeling as a human being is to say, 'Ugh, I'm a total [screw-up]! I did it again.' I believe that what the enemy wants to do is continuously remind us of our flaws, our sins. ... That's what the devil thinks—we won't win—but we actually will win. We have victory already called on us when Jesus died on the cross.

"I just try to remind myself consistently all the time, whenever I mess up, whether it's big or small: 'Jesus has already died on the cross for me. This is something He has already known that I was going to do.' Of course I still want to say, 'God, forgive me.' Of course I want to have community around me that's going to help me better myself so I won't do certain things again. But He knows my heart. And when your heart is in the right intentions and when you're so in love with Jesus, even when the devil tries to continuously put things in your mind, he won't win. ... Scripture talks about renewing the mind and fixing it on Jesus. So I just hope people can fix their minds on Jesus, because no sin can hold you down."

## **Change the Culture**

Gawvi says beyond encouraging others to become vulnerable, he hopes to join a movement to expand the limits of what can be considered Christian culture. When he references "culture," he says he's referring to the lived experiences and environments that make individuals unique. For instance, he notes, his own culture differs from the cultural experiences of Christians raised in Lagos, Nigeria, or London, England—and that's beautiful and worth celebrating.

"Growing up as a Latino, especially here in South Florida, you're just infused with so much culture," Gawvi says. "It's a melting pot of culture. All my friends growing up, they're from all around the different countries of the world, so I got

to hear a lot of different sounds growing up. I got to partake in my friends' houses and eat their food. Those different cultures are just rich, and I love that."

But he says Christian culture can often be restrictive, limiting itself to only certain cultural expressions and formats—and potentially alienating large swaths of people who would love Jesus but don't understand that culture. Those limitations, for what it's worth, often have little to do with inherent morality. For example, Gawvi points to the battle over musical genres in prior decades.

"My dad used to tell me the stories of how it was so hard to bring rock music into churches, because rock music was looked down upon," he says. "But now rock music is the leading sound in every single church. Every single church seems like it's trying to be Hillsong. And Hillsong has done a great job at pioneering that sound and making it very famous and amazing to glorify God in."

Gawvi says he wants to do the same thing for Christian hip-hop and EDM music. After all, they're the dominant genres on popular music charts right now. But major Christian radio stations have been resistant to that sound. He remembers being told that several explicitly Christian songs from his last album were "not a fit" for major Christian stations—purely because of their urban sound.

"What I've noticed is there's a very consistent sound in the CCM [contemporary Christian music] world," Gawvi says. "And then [some] Christian radio has a very consistent sound of just gospel music. You know, I get it with different radio stations where it's a country radio station or an EDM radio station or a hip-hop station. I get that. But Christianity [is not] just one genre of music. When you say, 'This is a Christian radio station,' I think you should be open to a lot of different genres. And I feel like what's consistently happened is that Christianity is kept in one bubble. And

because it's kept in one bubble, it's hard for all these different genres, cultures and ways of expression to break through."

But while he hopes to see the means of the message stretch and expand over time—and he's already encouraged by progress in some areas—he says he is glad the gospel is unchanging. The gospel of Christ is more than enough for any culture.

"I think the gospel is very clear, and it's a message that has been consistent for thousands and thousands of years," he says. "... I'm not trying to change that at all. I think Jesus does not need me to do anything for His gospel to continue forth."

Ultimately, Gawvi says the most important thing about him is that he is not perfect—but that he serves a God who is. And he hopes his music will lead others into relationship with Him.

"I'm a human being ... that has desired God so much, but I'm not perfect," Gawvi says. "And I hope my music will show that, because it just heightens God's glory way more than mine: 'Here's somebody who didn't deserve anything, yet God saw him.' I just love how the Bible always takes the underdog, and I think He took the underdog with me." {eo}

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