

***Contemporary Worship Music: A Biblical Defense*, by John M. Frame** (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed Publishing, 1997).

—Reviewed by Brad Gsell

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Contemporary Worship Music: A Biblical Defense, by John M. Frame, is a thought-provoking study of this often-controversial subject. Although wide polarization usually marks discussions on this topic, it would do those of us who are very concerned at the declension in modern-day worship to give Frame a fair reading and make sure that our position on the matter is an honest, reasoned Biblical approach, and not one of reaction (colored more than we might care to admit) by personal preferences.

To be sure, this topic is largely a side theme on the central issue of what constitutes true Biblical worship. Frame's earlier volume, *Worship in Spirit and Truth: A Refreshing Study of the Principles and Practice of Biblical Worship*,¹ deals with this. He gives a fairly balanced approach in showing the inherent inconsistencies of those who hold to a very strict understanding of the regulative principle of worship and those who place very few restrictions on their worship.

Early-on, Frame makes a distinction between "contemporary Christian music" (CCM) ("celebrity driven") and "Contemporary worship music" (CWM) ("song-driven") (p. 65). He recognizes freely that many CWM songs are poorly constructed and shallow theologically, but cautions against painting all pieces in this genre with the same brush. He makes the fair assertion that all musical styles throughout history have had many poor quality examples, but time winnows out the bad, and hopefully the few gems remain. CWM has not had the luxury of time to discard the many poor examples.

In several places in both of these books, Frame thankfully recognizes that some styles of music *are intrinsically* unsuitable for worship, due to their associations. He states: "A particular kind of music may be inappropriate for worship, or even associated with worldliness" (p. 20). He states also that some music is "understood by all reasonable Christians as irreverent (or joyless) in a particular context."² Later, he states: "And we know that there are some styles of music (e.g., 'heavy metal' rock) that are so deeply associated with the most degenerate elements of our society that for most of us they could hardly be anything other than counterproductive to worship."³ These statements place Frame clearly on the other side of the divide from those who make the implausible argument that music is amoral.

Frame does however, make some unfortunate concessions on this regard. On page 58 he states: "But in my judgment, the heavy metal style, even with Christian words, at the present time still conveys to most of us the worst in the modern rock concert scene. I cannot hear this style of music, even performed by Christians, without being harassed by emotions of anger,

contempt for others, justification for drugs, violence, perverted sex, and other forms of rebellion against God. Musically, it draws attention to the artists, as audiences marvel at the increasing outrageousness of each performance. This atmosphere may be acceptable as entertainment, but it is not easily reconcilable with the purposes of worship.” One must question if Frame truly feels as he says he does why this would be acceptable in any area of life even entertainment. He also mentions supposedly Christian groups such as Stryper, and identifies them as using this same “heavy metal” style. Instead of condemning this, he states that it might be a “good evangelistic tool,” and “it remains to be seen what God’s Spirit will do with it.” John Makujina, a Westminster Seminary doctoral candidate, has recently written *Measuring the Music: Another Look at the Contemporary Christian Music Debate*.⁴ He is much more decisive than Frame in condemning the kind of music which has just been described.

As one who has usually been considered very conservative in my acceptance of worship music styles, I must say that Frame has fairly and kindly given credible rebuttals (as well as acknowledgment) to some of the common objections to CCM. On pages 49 and 50 he succinctly states the case argued by many against CWM: (1) Subjectivism — emphasis on the worshipper rather than on God; (2) Humanism — praising a god made to the specifications of human beings; (3) Anti-intellectualism — dumbing-down of worship; (4) Psychologism — emphasis on emotions and therapeutic overtones; (5) Professionalism — a manipulative technique, rather than a servant to true worship; (6) Consumerism — church standards lowered to the level of pop culture, “for that is where the church’s product can find a market”; (7) Pragmatism — it works for church growth so it must be good; (8) Temporal Chauvinism—the highest virtue is being “up-to-date.” Throughout the rest of the book, Frame tends to acknowledge these eight points as being legitimate concerns, but thinks critics are wrong for automatically heaping these objections on all CWM. He points out that many of these same arguments were used against other forms and styles in earlier generations which are now cherished by most conservative worshippers today.

Frame is perhaps remiss in failing to point out the differences in the present use of contemporary and even pop styles and that done in previous decades and centuries. John Makujina, previously mentioned, produces credible evidence that Luther and Wesley’s use of contemporary folk styles was far different than what we see today.⁵ Dr. Donald Hustad, professor of music at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, also does a much better job in this regard in his book *True Worship: Reclaiming the Wonder & Majesty*.⁶ In fairness to Frame, it must be remembered that he is approaching the subject as an answer to those he feels have gone *too far* in their condemnation, whereas others are approaching it as a critique of CCM’s excesses and shortcomings.

All Bible-believing Christians should be concerned at the extent to which many worship services have degenerated into “seeker-friendly” entertainment shows. Frame points out that this is a natural result of what we often see in even the most traditional of churches. He states that most Christians today bring “into worship the attitudes we bring into entertainment. So we focus on the talents of the leaders, their cleverness, skill, literary polish, pleasant personalities — anything but the presence of the Lord himself” (p. 59). Who reading this article has never heard

well-meaning church members discuss the sermon or choir anthem in this light, rather than focusing on the presence of the Lord?

Frame does caution against the commercialism and competition of much of CCM. He quotes Jim Long, reporter for CCM magazine: “Christian music is now virtually owned by the secular entertainment industry.”⁷

Frame makes it very clear that it is God who builds His church, not human ingenuity. He also is a critic of entertainment “worship.” However, he rightly states that it is not honest to condemn all music of a certain style just because some of it is obviously driven by improper motives. He points out correctly that ALL musical styles can provide entertainment, so it is invalid to say we shouldn’t use CWM for this reason alone.

Another criticism which he puts to rest in this regard is that many contemporary worship songs are long on the use of the first person pronoun (“I,” “we”), indicating an overemphasis on the worshipper rather than God. He states correctly that the Psalms are full of the first person pronoun, as are numerous hymns which are used by the most conservative. If the Psalms are our ultimate example, where lies the problem?

While condemning entertainment, he looks at the other extreme. “Should we have *ugliness* in worship?” he asks (p. 61). The Psalms tell us frequently that we are to delight in God (Psalm 37:4; 40:8; 119:16, 24, 47). Is music which is inaccessible or unintelligible a proper vehicle for singing praises to God?

Another criticism Frame challenges is that CWM is simplistic and does not carry the theological weight of our older hymns. He acknowledges CWM’s general tendency to be simple in form, but urges that carefully-chosen CWM be used *along with* our traditional hymns. He also points to hallmarks of traditional church music such as the Doxology, Gloria Patri, Sanctus, etc., which are short, one-verse songs with a long and rich history of use in Protestant worship.

In addition, he gives many examples of CWM which are verbatim quotations from Scripture. CWM often uses direct Scripture passages even more than does our traditional hymnody! Although it is important that we do not wrest Scriptural “snippets” out of context in our singing, we should not fail to see that even in the Psalms we have very simple—as well as more complex—texts (see Psalms 23, 100, 131, 133 for less complex texts; Psalms 68 and 119 for more complex). [This writer includes such CWM songs as “Thou Art Worthy” (Mills), “O Magnify the Lord” (Tunney) and “Be Exalted, O Lord” (Chambers) in our worship repertoire. These are examples of simple — but well-written tunes — combined with verbatim Psalm texts. These have proved to have the added benefit of firmly planting these Scriptures in the hearts and minds of the choir and many in the congregation].

Frame further asks the question as to whether it is wrong to have smaller, more focused doctrinal elements imbedded in the hearts of the congregation (as is done in most CWM), when the longer, more complex group of doctrines found in many traditional hymns, often are not as easily or readily comprehended in the singing of a longer hymn. He suggests that both have their place.

Frame also states that all aspects of worship are to be intelligible to the worshippers. Few would deny that preaching should be clear, logical and exegetically sound. He deduces that therefore all of worship should be so. He uses I Corinthians 14 and other passages to show this.

He cautions against attitudes which can hinder the choosing of the best music for a particular congregation. The “comfort zone” of church leaders is often the decisive factor, rather than which music best communicates the message. He shows that our own sin, our cultural and educational differences and failure to move past what we are used to are all factors which influence our musical choices. There are also aesthetic considerations which must be examined. There are those who are well educated in the arts who have developed an aesthetic snobbery, which only allows the use of high art music. There are also those with no less snobbery who *disdain* art music. Whether simple or complex, the music we use should be well crafted and accessible to the people (not as a human means to bring results, but as a proper vehicle to enable true worship [and indeed to keep from hindering it!]).

To his credit, Frame is clear in condemning the division of congregations into various services centered around differing worship styles. This greatly compromises the Scriptural teaching that the church is a body (I Corinthians 12, Ephesians 4), rather than just a collection of autonomous individuals.

Paul’s teaching in I Corinthians 9:22 that he has “become all things to all men, that [he] might by all means save some,” is used by Frame. He is careful to point out that we should not use music and other items in worship that are Biblically wrong, but we must be careful that our personal preferences are not proudly clung to when we should humbly use music which is Scripturally sound, but is perhaps outside our “comfort zone.”

In general, I found much of Frame’s logic to be biblically sound, although I doubt that most churches make such a fine distinction between CCM and CWM. The eight points Frame gives to summarize the critics’ objections to CWM are indeed an accurate picture of where the evangelical church at large is increasingly heading. It shows a serious declension in true Biblical worship. The church has become “seeker” [translated: the whims and desires of the unregenerate] driven. Churches are splintering and polarizing their congregations by offering various worship services based on worship style.

Consecrated Christian musicians who seek to produce music conducive to worship are being replaced by praise bands who are entertainers. A desire to feed on the Word of God is replaced by bagels and latté, strong doctrinal exegetical messages are being shelved for film clips from Hollywood movies and drama teams, and much of the most shallow and trite of the CCM (both musically and spiritually) is replacing well-crafted hymns of various styles. Hustad and Makujina have a stronger message for the church at large.

The value of Frame’s book to those of us who find ourselves alarmed at these eight points is to help us resist mindless stereotyping of all CWM, and to prayerfully and carefully choose worship music which best facilitates true worship. We must not mindlessly settle for music which is stale and unintelligible just because that is how we have always done it. If we

are to be taken seriously, we must be prepared to offer a Biblical response to these eight points which is both fair and accurate, but also uncompromising.

¹ Frame, *Worship in Spirit and Truth: A Refreshing Study of the Principles and Practice of Biblical Worship* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed Publishing, 1996).

² Ibid., 120.

³ Ibid., 141.

⁴ John Makujina, *Measuring the Music: Another Look at the Contemporary Christian Music Debate* (Salem, OH: Schmul Publishing Co., 2000).

⁵ Ibid., Chapter 7 - "On the History of Ecclesiastical Music and CCM."

⁶ Donald P. Hustad, *True Worship: Reclaiming the Wonder & Majesty* (Wheaton, IL: Harold Shaw Publishers, 1998).

⁷ Jim Long, "Can't Buy Me Ministry," *Christianity Today* (May, 20, 1996), 20.