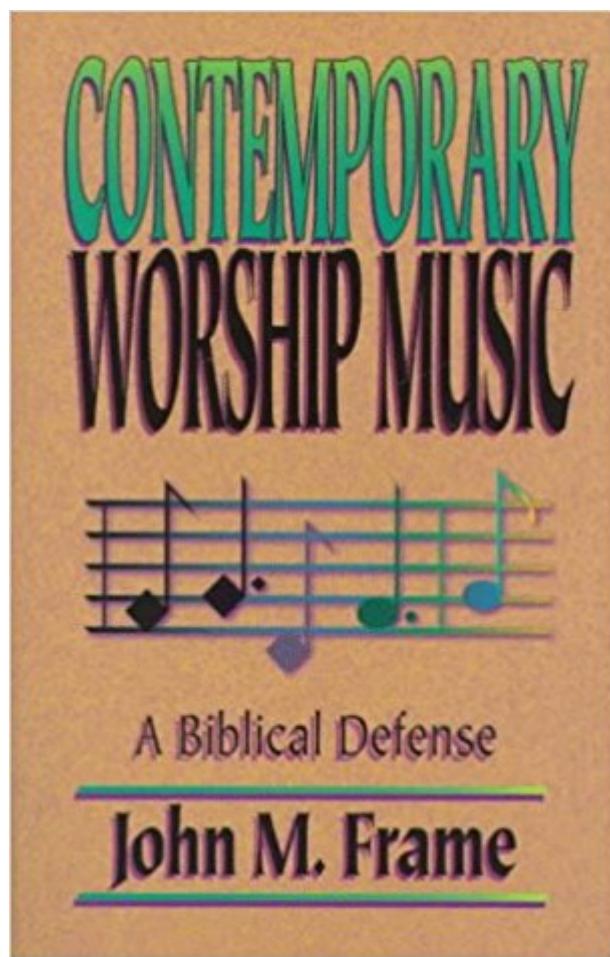


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Contemporary Worship Music: A Biblical Defense



Synopsis

Contemporary Christian music has an increasing yet controversial influence on church worship today. This book discusses the topic from a biblical viewpoint and makes a case for using contemporary music in worship -- with theological integrity.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Very thorough examination of the use of contemporary worship music, written by a theologian and musician who prefers traditional worship music, but recognizes the need for contemporary styles to meet the needs of younger worshippers. He approaches it from a theological and biblical perspective, providing justification for CWM and CW. I use those acronyms on purpose, as the only complaint I have is his constant use of acronyms throughout. I found myself having to thumb back through the book looking for an infrequently used acronym. I highly recommend the book, but hope that a future edition would use "find and replace" to get rid of the acronyms and spell them out! Then I would give it five stars!

Frame writes as a classically-trained musician and theologically sophisticated Presbyterian/Reformed seminary professor in his 50's who adopted praise music late in life and with much initial resistance. He provides an extensive musical and scriptural evaluation--and eventually qualified affirmation--of praise music. He has read and understood his opponents (especially Marva Dawn) and he interacts with them in detail. He is especially good at providing detailed evaluation of

actual hymns and praise songs and coming to reasoned conclusions about them. (So much of the debate over praise music involves more strong feelings on both sides than considered evaluation by either.) Along the way he gives the lie to stereotypes like, "praise songs are narcissistic." Frame concludes that praise music is indeed still uneven and incomplete, but that--especially at its best--it is a spiritually, musically, and lyrically worthy genre of music for worship. His parting words are, "What we must not do is to lash out at one another with false pretensions to knowledge, sophistication and rationality, and with intellectual arguments that are little more than masks for underlying anger." Amen!

Frame's work is both a relic and a roadmap in the debate on worship that still smolders in certain circles of Christendom to this day. Frame's work is a relic in the sense that it views the scene of the worship wars from the perspective of the mid 90's. Although the span of time that separates this review from the writing is relatively short, the strides that have been made in contemporary worship have been great. Frame looked out at the burgeoning contemporary worship of his day with some weaknesses and challenges, and pronounces that it is worthy for the worship of God. At times the writer struggles with the evidence as to the repetitiveness or shallowness of the music, and finds creative answers to these critiques. The author struggles with the connection of contemporary worship to the burgeoning "church growth" movement of his day by attempting to find a balance on the issues at hand (e.g. pragmatism). Arguments such as these have, thankfully, faded into the past as contemporary worship has moved from its infancy into maturity. Frame's work also serves as a roadmap. One of his most insightful contributions in the work is his critique of contemporary worship. His valuable points made at the end of chapter 10 (126-127) have, whether wittingly or unwittingly, served as a roadmap for contemporary worship over the last decade. It has become more "thoughtful" with better texts and melodies (e.g. Townend and Getty). It has broadened and deepened its doctrinal content. It is being used less as entertainment and more as worship. Its defenders are fairer to those who still retain traditional worship. In these and many other ways, contemporary worship has thankfully reached a much more mature state in the manners laid out in this work. The work begins in chapter 1 by offering the reader a helpful glimpse into the life of the writer. As Frame summarizes, "although I am not a professional musician, I don't think I can be regarded as a musical ignoramus or a cultural Philistine" (4). Most traditionalists will likely find much in the life of the writer that resonates with their own background. What becomes most clear in this introduction is that Frame is not a radical. He is not an anti-traditionalist, *per se*. He respects and values traditional worship for some rather objective reasons, but definitely not simply for

traditionalism's sake. In turn, his support for contemporary worship also appears to spring from objective biblical concerns. And it is to these concerns to which Frame turns after defining his terms. Chapter 2 lays the foundation upon which the remainder of the work is laid. These principles will be expounded and expanded upon in various specific arguments throughout the book, but if the reader grasps these principles and the arguments in the following two chapters, he or she need not wrestle much with the remainder of the work. The principles in this chapter are (cf. 28): worship must not focus on God's transcendence to the exclusion of His nearness; worship is God-centered but must not exclude the worshipper; worship should not be anti-traditional, but should evaluate traditions by Scripture; worship music is not limited directly by Scripture, so creativity is fine "within the limits of general biblical standards;" intelligible music is critical in worship and to be intelligible it must communicate to a contemporary worshipper; worship is not designed for the unbeliever, but should communicate in a way in which the believer can understand the message; worship must be done in recognition of the unity of the church around the Gospel, but the diversity of the worshippers; worship must be done in a manner in which believers are edified. Chapter 3 points out the qualities of the contemporary worship which was popular in 1997. Frame argues that it is God-Centered, Scriptural, and fresh. Chapter 4 summarizes the critiques of contemporary worship music; however, prior to listing these points, Frame gives the reader an explanation of the history and current milieu from which these arguments spring. In the author's mind, most of these arguments spring from critiques of the now aging "church growth" movement. The arguments that Frame notes are "subjectivism, humanism, anti-intellectualism, 'psychologism,' professionalism, consumerism, pragmatism, and temporal chauvinism" (46). These arguments certainly encapsulate a number of the concerns of the traditionalists, but others exist and have evolved over the last decade. Some of these arguments are dealt with in the following chapters, but several others aren't (e.g. the morality of music). In spite of this omission, the author deserves much credit for attempting to fairly portray the (mostly properly motivated) concerns of his opponents. Chapter 5 tackles the sticky issue of culture. Frame argues that the statement that some contemporary worship sounds like some pop music mistakes the biblical idea of "likeness." In fact, the worship music of today is actually unlike pop music in the most important manners. This supposed likeness is not to be interpreted as caving to the culture, but as uniquely counter-cultural (58). He also rejects the notion that just because one may be saved from the pop music of culture that Christians must reject any similarity to it in their worship by arguing that churches do not adopt the same standard for those saved out of high class culture or Roman Catholic culture. But have the churches using contemporary worship forms caved to culture by turning worship into entertainment? The writer

answers by reminding his readers that traditional churches are just as quick to entertain the congregants with high and lofty choral virtuosity as contemporary churches which often can focus too much on lead singers and praise bands. The true challenge is that neither must allow their style to become the idol, but should turn all affection to God alone. Chapter 6 responds to the attack that contemporary worship is just about bringing in lots of money and people. In this chapter, Frame suggests that the "church growth" movement is not all wrong, but seriously questions a number of the more pragmatic elements of the approach. Chapter 7 responds to attacks related to the authenticity and reverence of contemporary worship. The writer responds well here and essentially calls out some of the traditionalists as being very unfair in their criticisms in this area. Chapter 8 deals with the claim that contemporary worship does not edify, but simply evangelizes. Chapter 9 confronts the idea that contemporary worship "dumbs down" worship. Frame responds that the critics have elevated the role of the intellect over the emotions and the will. Chapter 10 is an excellent (pun intended) counterpoint to the argument that contemporary worship does not meet the standard of excellence to be worthy of worshipping God. The author makes two excellent points that this reviewer had not seen to this point. First, if aesthetic excellence is what God expects in worship, then should Christians all be singing Bach chorales in German? Clearly, excellence is not simply a matter of aesthetic quality, but of communication and intelligibility to the worshipper. Second, if aesthetic excellence is what God expects, then one should only offer the very best. With this paradigm in mind, all worship music should be analyzed in terms of bad, worse, worst, good, better, and best. By all music, Frame expects not just genres in general, but specific songs and hymns. Once this paradigm is constructed, one song must necessarily be the "best" (e.g. "A Mighty Fortress is Our God"). Once this is established, then singing anything else would be offering God less than ones' best! In regard to challenges about the doctrinal depth of contemporary worship music, Frame points out by using several examples that traditional worship music is perceived to be much deeper theologically because it presents numerous theological truths in rapid-fire succession (e.g. "Arise My Soul, Arise" presents 15 different aspects), while contemporary worship music tends to just focus on three or four truths. Moving from this point to the argument regarding repetition, the writer explains the biblical and didactic importance of repetition. He then closes the chapter with his critiques of contemporary worship. Chapter 11 approaches the argument that contemporary worship is an implicit rejection of tradition and denominational distinctives. Frame points out that the Reformers stressed that traditions were only to be held as they upheld *sola Scriptura*. He then moves on to present some suggestions for helpful contemporary worship in chapter 12. Two appendices are also included that primarily deal with works that deal with the contemporary worship

debate (appendix 1) and the "church growth" movement (appendix 2). Below are several great quotations that the reviewer found significant: "Luther and Calvin...were respectful of tradition, as all Christians should be. But they were not bound to it, only to the God of Scripture" (4). "There is no contradiction between the vertical and the horizontal, between the God-centeredness of worship and the benefits available to the worshipers" (15). "We do not glorify God in worship if we fail to communicate on the human level" (18). "Sometimes it is hard to draw the line between a legitimate concern for appropriateness and...aesthetic snobbery" (20). "The New Testament...does encourage the church (1 Cor. 14:24-25) to plan its worship with the unbelieving visitor in mind" (21). "When sophisticated members of the church insist that worship employ only the most sophisticated music of their culture, what happened to their love for those who are poorly educated or of a different cultural stream? Or, from the opposite side of our musical wars: when advocates of contemporaneity want to set the traditions of the church completely aside and replace them with something largely meaningless to the older generation, are they acting in love?" (24-25) "Music is an area in which we have little explicit scriptural direction, and in which, therefore, human creativity should be encouraged, within the limits of general biblical standards" (28). "Both sides, then, need to learn from one another, to gain a better grasp of the application of Scripture to the difficult situations of the present day. The dialogue will demand more, not less, intellectual effort. It will require us to make some distinctions that we have overlooked in the past. And it will require a greater determination to live and worship according to biblical principle rather than by either the human traditions of the past or the innovations of the present" (52-53). "When one listens to the God-centered content of [contemporary worship] songs, the counter-cultural thrust of them is obvious" (58). "Antiquarians who love Gregorian chants and attend churches that use such music need to ask God to guard their hearts, lest they get so absorbed in the aesthetic qualities of the music that they lose grip on the higher purpose of the worship" (60-61). "It is wrong to govern worship either by the criterion of popularity or by the tastes of those who love high art and tradition" (112). The work is not without its flaws. As noted in the introduction, the most glaring deficiency is the age of the work. Frame ends up fighting fires for page after page because of the deficiencies of the infantile contemporary worship of yesteryear. His terms are at times too nuanced and his perspective on the history of the debate seems a little skewed at times (e.g. he argues that his opponents are making these points because they are hyper-intellectual, but describes all fundamentalists, who are some of the most ardent adherents to traditional worship, as anti-intellectual). Finally, and related to the prior point, the work is primarily focused on the challenges being dealt with amongst the Presbyterian denominations at the time of the writing.

Readers outside the spectrum will have no difficulty with the majority of the work, but there are occasions where the discussion lapses into areas in which the outsider will have little familiarity. But for these minor flaws, the book still serves as a helpful and fair analysis of the "worship wars" from the less-prolific contemporary side of the spectrum. Frame's arguments and groundwork serves as a foundation for those who would discuss the topic in the years going forward. The contribution of this work to others more modern works is abundantly obvious. This reviewer would note specifically Bryan Chappell's *Christ-Centered Worship: Letting the Gospel Shape Our Practice*, which takes Frame's methodology and demonstrates how it can be done with the Gospel at the center and with the use of some of the excellent new contemporary literature. Any believer who is willing to wrestle with the debate should certainly read this work in order to gain a measure of clarity and fairness in the discussion.

This book make me think about worship, music, and how they relate. It's well written. For that it deserves at least three stars. However, it has a big problem. Far too often in answering criticism, Frame points to his Maranatha song book. This does not answer at all how such music is usually used in churches. I think he's defending the best use of CWM, and doesn't see that this is not what many critics are objecting to. The critics are rejecting the way such music is usually used in churches. As an example, Frame points to a few examples of 'deep' CWM songs. However, far too many churches I've attended don't use the deep ones, they use the 'fluff.' They sing the same three line chorus ten times. They only sing songs about 'how I feel,' not 'how great God is.' Thus, although this book is thought provoking and well written, I remain unconvinced that Frame has actually justified the usual way CWM is used in our churches.

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