

Is Contemporary Music Defensible?

A review of CONTEMPORARY WORSHIP MUSIC -- A Biblical Defence by John M. Frame. Presbyterian & Reformed Publishing, 1997, 212 pages.

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Although written by an American with his own scene in mind, this book is proving influential beyond the bounds of the USA. John Frame is the professor of Apologetics and Systematic Theology at Westminster Theological Seminary, California campus. An earlier book by him, *Apologetics to the Glory of God: An Introduction*, was favourably reviewed in our magazine in 1996 (No.387). Given Professor Frame's background, we might think it unusual that something defending Contemporary Worship Music (from now on, CWM) should come from his pen.

However, this is the point. Here is a book, not by a composer of charismatic-type songs or by someone with a financial interest in these, but by a theological teacher and member of a Reformed Presbyterian church. The result is a scholarly, well-documented, and persuasively-written case for adding to our worship the kinds of songs we in the UK would find in *Mission Praise*, *Songs of Fellowship*, or worse.

CWM

What is CWM, as Frame calls it? It means a worship-style consisting of songs that are contemporary, simple, repetitive and memorable. They can be words from the Psalms set to catchy tunes, or original songs like "Father, I adore you," "The Servant King" and "Shine, Jesus, Shine." The output from growing numbers of writers and musicians (not to mention publishing companies) seems endless. These have burgeoned since the 1960s. Frame describes the tunes and musical arrangements as reflecting "a popular style somewhat like the 'soft rock' of the early 1970s.¹ Here is an example of a CWM song:

Father God, I wonder how I managed to exist
Without the knowledge of Your parenthood and Your loving care.
But now I am Your son, I am adopted in your family,
And I can never be alone,
'Cause, Father God, You're there beside me.

I will sing your praises,
I will sing your praises,
I will sing your praises forever more [repeat]²

Debate

The appearance of this book (which follows the author's earlier one)³ is another stage in the debate about how we should worship God in our churches. As noted in my article last time (Modernise or Perish!) this is a burning issue now. Twenty years ago, only the Charismatic Movement seemed to represent the demand for modern patterns of worship and its songs. These days, such calls are reverberating within evangelical and reformed congregations. This book supplies its advocates with a case for it from a similar constituency to their own.

Landmark

As such, this may prove a landmark book. Those who clamour for modern worship styles have a writer to champion their cause. We cannot lightly dismiss the arguments in this book. Here, an evangelical and reformed theologian has written a popular book on the “biblical justification” for modern worship songs in our services. Many will greet this book with satisfaction and pleasure; others, with disappointment and dismay.

Case

What is the author’s case? It is that we should be prepared to use these contemporary songs along with traditional hymns and psalms. “Certainly it would not be right to abandon traditional hymnody entirely in favour of CWM. But CWM may, and should, in my judgment, play a significant role in the worship of the church.”⁴ That “CWM (be) used together with tradition hymns in a fruitful interrelation.”⁵ “What I advocate,” he says, “is not either-or, but both-and.”⁶ This, of course, is exactly what many in our circles are calling for today. In many churches this is already being done, and it has altered the character of the worship (and the church) completely. Until this book, no one has made the case for change so ably.

Reply

The book, a paperback of 212 pages, 12 chapters and 2 appendices, needs a reply from someone as competent as Professor Frame. A book review, whoever writes it, cannot possibly accomplish this. Nevertheless, within our limitations we can make some points that may help our readers assess this book’s thesis, and enable them to help others troubled by this controversy.

The author

The book is partly autobiographical. The author candidly shares with us his background, experience and current church affiliation. Concerning the latter he says,

“After worshipping for most of forty years in highly traditional Presbyterian churches, I moved to Escondido, California, and found myself as director of worship in the recently planted New Life Presbyterian Church. There I was dragged kicking and screaming into the world of CWM.”⁷

That final sentence is significant. It implies a change of attitude toward this phenomenon in later life. Elsewhere, Frame enlarges upon this: “Until 1980, I worshipped exclusively in churches that were very traditional in their liturgical orientation. My serious exposure to CWM did not begin until age 41; I am now 58.”⁸ Frame’s openness to these things comes out again when he says,

“I once attended a conference for worship leaders in which we sang ‘I love you, Lord’ over and over again for maybe twenty minutes. It was an unforgettable experience. The worship leader asked us to sing while meditating on different themes, while praying about various matters. We sang some stanzas on our knees, some standing, some with arms raised. Sometimes we listened while the pianist improvised on the theme. In other words, there was a lot going on. We didn’t just sing, but we did many other things as well. My own testimony was that it was a challenging spiritual exercise.”⁹

These statements are revealing. In their light, can we *really* believe that Frame has been as objective as he claims, when for instance, he says,

“...we must go back again and again to the Scriptures themselves so that we may please God in worship rather than merely acting on our own intuitions”?¹⁰

I am not questioning the author’s sincerity. However, I am suggesting that people can easily come to CWM by capitulation rather than as the result of sober, scriptural assessment. In other words, the new way is embraced, and *afterwards* a biblical case has to be made for it. When this is so (and if it is here), the approach to CWM is always going to be coloured by the assumption that it is of God and is desirable. Professor Frame’s book does read very much like eloquent special pleading.

Origin

Another worrying feature is the origin of CWM. Frame tells us it “came from a particular movement in Christian music, which originated in California in the late 1960s.”¹¹ Elsewhere he calls this “revival in the 1960s”¹² He specifically identifies this as “the Jesus people”¹³ Then he mentions “those converted in the 1970s revival” in California.¹⁴ Eventually he concedes that “...it emerged in a background of charismatic theology, though for the most part it does not urge charismatic distinctive upon the worshipper.”¹⁵

Now, with a pedigree like this, must we not seriously question the validity of CWM? We must. It is the product of converted “hippies” from thirty years ago, who used their kind of music to express their kind of worship. Surely this is a very dubious source for the worship of God.

Furthermore, how Frame can speak of “revival in the 1960s” and “the 1970s revival” concerning CWM is mystifying. *What* 1960s and 1970s revivals? We have never seen evidence of any in the USA or Great Britain during those decades. If by these he means the upsurge of the Charismatic Movement, then this is an entirely different thing.¹⁶

While not denying that the charismatic constituency includes true believers, we maintain that the Charismatic Movement, and all that it spawns, is at best of the flesh, and at worst, of the devil. Its degeneracy into the obscene “Toronto Blessing” phenomena should be evidence enough of what it really is (Matthew 7:15-20).

Significantly, some CWM songs Frame recommends are published by “Worship Songs of the *Vineyard*”¹⁷ (italics mine).

Given these facts, has Professor Frame any justification for urging us to “thank God for CWM”?¹⁸ CWM loses credibility completely for historical reasons, apart from other arguments. Frame is aware of opposition from this angle when he complains,

“In my opinion, the critics have frequently condemned CWM, not on the basis of biblical principle, but because they judge it to be part of a historical development of which they disapprove.”¹⁹

Yet we cannot discount this “historical development”. If a comparatively new thing comes from a movement full of error and delusion, have not God’s people the right to reject it? And is it not a valid supposition that if CWM has come from the Jesus People/charismatic stable, including it in one’s worship is going to lead people to that same stable?

Ecumenical

Frame suggests that CWM can unite the Lord’s people:

“CWM is potentially a major ecumenical force. It does unite believers of many denominations and traditions. It focuses on common, core beliefs, rather than on what divides.”²⁰

But on page 147, in a list of suggested sources for CWM songs, he includes “...volumes (which) *were produced by Roman Catholics for use in their worship*. Although I am firmly Protestant, *I find many of these songs useful*” (italics mine). This is worrying. How can anyone who loves the truth and (therefore) detests the Roman system, feel comfortable about offering anything from antichrist as worship to God? Yet, if CWM is charismatic, then this is being consistent. For charismatic groups have always sat comfortably with Roman Catholics, many of the latter claiming to be charismatic themselves. This suggests that these “core beliefs” are quite minimal and can be the lowest common denominator. The phrase “A major ecumenical force” may have in it sinister overtones not intended by the author.

We find more evidence for this in other CWM songs Frame recommends. The names of Jimmy and Carol Owens appear as the authors of some of these.²¹ Readers may remember that in the 1970s this couple composed the musicals *Come Together and If my people*. These were very popular in their day, and provided many catchy songs for guitar-strumming young Christians. However, they also were an “ecumenical force.” They were staged in places and supported by people who had no interest in the rugged truths of the biblical gospel. These musicals provided the platform for liberals, Catholics, charismatics and (sadly) many evangelicals to “witness” together. CWM seems of this ilk, and churches thinking about using it must seriously ponder where this will lead them.

Culture

The author’s openness discussed above, in my view, leads him to take too much notice of modern culture. So much so, that he admits CWM is both a product of it, and a necessary means of witnessing to it. He quotes approvingly from someone who states,

“If we would practice faithfulness in worship, we must understand the twin horizons of God’s unchanging word and the rapidly changing culture in which we live.”²²

Frame himself says: “CWM is youth music,”²³ and “it is obvious that CWM is part of modern culture.”²⁴ This, of course, raises the question whether the prevailing culture should influence the way people worship God. Frame says it should, hence CWM for our day. He even goes as far as to suggest that one day our worship might include songs and music of a heavy metal nature:

“Some musical groups ... have set Christian words to heavy metal music. That may be a good evangelistic tool; it remains to be seen what God’s Spirit will do with it.”²⁵

He even quotes Paul’s words in 1 Corinthians 9:22 in justification: “I am made all things to all men, that I might by all means save some.” However, is Paul referring to cultural accommodation in divine worship? He is not. His context is reaching people with the gospel, not the worship of the sanctuary (see verse 19). To rightly understand verse 22 we must compare it with chapter 10:32,33:

“Give none offence, neither to the Jews, nor to the Gentiles, nor to the church of God: Even as I please all men in all things, not seeking mine own profit, but the profit of many, that they may be saved.”

Paul means he was willing to yield to the scruples of others in gaining a positive hearing of the gospel, when no principle was involved. For instance, in Acts 16:3 he circumcised Timothy for the Jews' sake, because they knew his father was a Greek, and this would prejudice their hearing the gospel from his lips. A more recent example was Hudson Taylor's preparedness to adopt Chinese dress and customs to move freely among them with the gospel. The application is not to worship: God's unchanging Word governs this, not the shifting forms of prevailing culture.

Even if Frame's point is valid, why have worship styles not altered with the changing culture in times gone by? Why did God's people not worship after the manner of the music halls of the 1890s? Why not after the songs of World War I? Why not after the dance bands of the 1930s and 40s? Why not after the skiffle groups of the 1950s? Worship was sober and “traditional” throughout those times, apart from certain exceptions. Could it be that God's people back then were not out of touch with their culture when it came to worship, but rather eschewed it *because they took their cue from the Word of God alone*? And remember, those were better times, both in the church and in the nation. In our decadent and degenerate day, are we *really* to listen to its culture to learn better ways of worshipping God?

Old Covenant

CWM requires more than the church organ to be used effectively with the modern songs for which it is written. In several places Frame appeals to Old Testament verses to support instrumentalists and specialist singers in the worship of God. Those cited include 1 Chronicles 15:22; 28:21; 2 Chronicles 34:12.²⁶ This is usual with writers seeking biblical justification for multiple musical instruments, choirs, dancing, clapping, etc. in Christian worship.

However, this appeal ignores the Bible's inbuilt distinction between the Old Covenant and the New. While the Old Testament Moral Law, and ordinances like the singing of psalms, continue under the Christian dispensation (Matthew 5:17-19; James 5:13), the temporary, Jewish aspects do not (John 4:21-24; Galatians 4:9-11). These include ceremonial laws governing worship centred in the Jerusalem Temple. Frame reminds us that the veil of the Temple was torn in two at our Lord's crucifixion,²⁷ yet does not follow the implication of this: that Temple worship now gives way to the simpler, more spiritual worship under the Gospel.

Christian worship is not derived from the Temple. That structure and its appurtenances are all fulfilled in Christ, the building itself being providentially destroyed in AD 70. The worship of the Christian Church is derived from the simpler forms found in the Jewish synagogue. Space prevents enlargement here, but comparison of the Christian assembly with the synagogue would confirm this. See, for instance, Nehemiah 8:1-8; Luke 4:16-22; James 2:2 where “assembly” is in the Greek *sunagoge*, or synagogue.²⁸ If we are to countenance charismatic paraphernalia in Christ's Church, arguing back to the Temple, then we must insist we have altars, animal sacrifices, human priests, the ark of the covenant, etc. I cannot imagine even the most ardent promoter of CWM wanting these.

Divisive

Our author complains that much reaction to CWM has been hostile, and evaluation of it “divisive.”²⁹ However, has Frame considered the possibility that he himself is being divisive in writing a book like this? Worship is in the melting pot these days in many

UK churches. Office-bearers and members are agitating for the very changes skilfully promoted in these pages. As if there were not enough issues threatening the peace and unity of God's church, faithful pastors have now to face this headache. What help to them is this book? It provides ammunition for the charismatically-inclined, or the unspiritual and disaffected in congregation, to throw at God's hard-pressed servants. Ironically, it is this book that will prove divisive.

Better

We could wish for something better than this from Westminster Theological Seminary, an institution connected with the names of J. Gresham Machen, E.J. Young, and Professor John Murray. And from an author who is "an enthusiastic subscriber to the Westminster Confession of Faith and Larger and Shorter Catechisms."³⁰ As an antidote to this book, we could not do better than ponder the implications of what that Confession states about worship:

"But the acceptable way of worshipping the true God is instituted by Himself, and so limited by His own revealed will, that He may not be worshipped according to the imaginations and devices of men, or the suggestions of Satan, under any visible representation, or any other way not prescribed in the Holy Scripture." (Deuteronomy 12:32; Matthew 15:9; Acts 17:25; Matthew 4:9,10; [Deuteronomy 4:15-20]; Exodus 20:4,5,6; Colossians 2:23).³¹

If we do that, we will come to the same conclusion as the great John Knox a century earlier: "Anything in the religion of God that proceeds from the brains of man is idolatry."

1. Contemporary Worship Music: A Biblical Defence, page 7.
2. Ibid., page 103.
3. Worship in Spirit and Truth, Presbyterian & Reformed, 1996, paperback, 171 pages.
4. Contemporary Worship Music: A Biblical Defence, page 2.
5. Ibid., page 84.
6. Ibid., page 39.
7. Ibid., page 143.
8. Ibid., page 4.
9. Ibid., page 121.
10. Ibid., page 14.
11. Ibid., page 5.
12. Ibid., page 70.
13. Ibid., page 10, footnote 6.
14. Ibid., page 10, footnote 6.
15. Ibid., page 139.
16. Curiously, Frame holds the cessationist position regarding the charismata: AIn my opinion, these supernatural gifts were given to the church only for the period of its founding, to attest the ministry of the apostles (Hebrews 2:1-4; 2 Corinthians 12:12; Ephesians 2:20). That ministry is available to us in the Scriptures, and so we should not expect God to give these gifts today@ (Worship in Spirit and Truth, page 31). With this we heartily agree. However, the corollary of this is that the Charismatic Movement is not of God and not for the Church today. Why, then, does Frame pay such deference to the songs and worship-styles it has brought forth?
17. Ibid., page147.
18. Ibid., page 35.
19. Ibid., page 175.

20. Ibid., page 140.
21. Ibid., pages 148, 150, 153.
22. Ibid., page 29, quoting Ralph Gore, Faith and Practice 2:1 "Warming Up the Frozen Chosen."
23. Ibid., page 32.
24. Ibid., page 55.
25. Ibid., page 58.
26. Ibid., pages 60,107.
27. Ibid., page 80.
28. The standard work on this subject is Campegius Vitringa=s De Synagoga Veteri,1696 (English translation The Synagogue and the Church, 1842).
29. Ibid., page 115.
30. Ibid., page 2.
31. Chapter 21:1.