

Module : Praise and Worship**Session** : Producing New Songs For Every Season Part 2**Focus** : Practical Songwriting PrinciplesWord to the World
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GUIDING PRINCIPLES FOR WRITING PRAISE AND WORSHIP SONGS FOR CONGREGATIONAL USE AND PARTICIPATION

The guiding principles set forth below apply primarily to the writing of songs for **congregational use and participation**. Some of the principles could apply to or be adapted for writing songs for choirs and/or soloists. In this issue I share the first six of twelve principles. The remaining six will be shared next week.

1. INSPIRATION / MOTIVATION

‘Inspiration’ is the most vital principle of songwriting for the Christian songwriter. Inspiration is that factor which stimulates or provokes your creative potential to write the song. As sons of God, we walk and live in the Spirit, and hence all we do, even songwriting, must be inspired by **the indwelling, overflowing Spirit and the indwelling, rich Word** (Eph 5:18,19; Col.3:16).



The Greek word translated ‘**inspiration**’ is **pneustostheo**, which means ‘**to breathe or blow**’. The song you write must, like the Scriptures were, be **in-breathed by God** (2 Tim.3:16); they must be prompted by God or divinely inspired. A song produced from a source other than the indwelling Spirit and Word, will not have the desired enduring ‘spiritual’ effect intended. Whether you are writing from the context of great trial or great triumph, allow God to literally write the song through you. **The desire to function as songwriter is a serious one, with a tremendous sense of accountability. Music and song have powerful effects upon the minds and ultimately the destiny of people. Hence a Christian songwriter must not take this task lightly.**

The issue of ‘Inspiration’ i.e. what inspired the writing of the song, also highlights the issue of ‘**motivation**’, i.e. why did you write the song, or what is the reason(s) for you writing the song. We should not be writing to bring glory to ourselves; remain humble and in ‘whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do all to the glory of God the Father’.

2. BIBLICAL TRUTH

Colossians 3:16 indicates that songs are also meant to ‘**teach**’. Some songs definitely have a didactic or instructive element to it. If this is so, then our songs must be completely **aligned with and echo the truth of the Scriptures**. If, for example, you are led to write a song about ‘God’s love’, you should study all scriptures that speak on the love of God. A good practise is to meditate upon these scriptures for a few days, even weeks or sometimes months before you start writing the song. This will provide a solid scriptural foundation upon which you can build the song and **prevent error** being weaved into the song.

The song should be aligned to current present truth being released through apostles and prophets – as I have demonstrated in the past two previous articles.

3. SIMPLICITY

Do not make the melody line too complex. Remember you are writing for the purpose of activating the Body of Christ generally to praise and worship God, specifically accentuating the message the songs contains. The average person, who is musically challenged, should be able to sing your song. Keep the musical or vocal arrangements as basic as possible. Congregations generally have difficulty learning intricate arrangements. By all means, be creative within reason, but be simple.

4. COLOUR

While keeping the song as simple as possible, do not over-simplify it to the point of boredom, where it becomes dull. Simplicity does not necessarily imply, for example, only using a basic three chord structure in the first, third and fifth degrees (eg. G – C – D). Relative minors, diminished chords, major sevenths, elevenths, thirteenth, etc. could be added in the right places to add a degree of character to the song. On the other hand, do not use these chords simply to embellish the song with difficult chords. At times they may detract from the message and beauty of the song; and yet when used correctly they could greatly enhance the song. Too many musical ideas for one single song should generally be avoided.

5. RHYTHM AND TEMPO

The rhythm should be catchy and have something attractive about it. Generally the rhythm and tempo is largely determined by the message or lyrics of the song. Praise songs are generally faster and may have a range of rhythms. Worship songs are usually slower. Line up the words with the meter of the song. At times the tenor of the lyrics – i.e. the overall nature, mood or pattern of the words, could dictate the tempo and rhythm and even the musical style.

Try also to vary the musical style within which you write the song. Do not become stuck on a particular style, tempo or rhythm. A word of caution : never sacrifice ‘substance’ for ‘style’. Upbeat and catchy tunes are effective for some songs, yet ineffective for others. Do not seek to be ‘contemporary’ to the point where ‘beat’ or ‘rhythm’ becomes the core element around which your song is built. The ‘message’ and not the ‘mood’ of the song still remains priority. But yet still, do not make the song dull and unappealing. Within reason, the rhythm and tempo, must serve the purpose of the song, and not be an end in itself. Also realise that worship is a function of the spirit and not the soul. The spirit must inform the soul and not the other way around. If one worships only when one is stirred in the soul with riveting and pulsating rhythms, then this is not true worship. Energetic or rhythmic expressions are valid, only if the spur or activation comes from the spirit of the man.

6. THEME

The song's theme or message should be abundantly evident in the lyrics. You should be able to summarise the message of your song in one sentence. Try avoid writing on more than one theme in a single song. A single concept could be emphasised in the 'verse' and 'chorus' parts of the song through different lyrics. Your song could emphasise one particular idea in different ways lyrically and musically.

Psalm 119:54 Your decrees have been the theme of my songs wherever I have lived (NLT).

7. LYRICS

Lyrics are probably the most important aspect of a song. Use simple, yet effective words, terms and phrases that ignite vivid mental pictures in the mind of the singer. Bear in mind also, that the quality of your lyrics should match the style or quality of the musical arrangement. Excellent lyrics set to an inappropriate melody line, is ineffective. Try to marry the mood of the lyrics with the mood or 'feel' of the music. If you are writing a song directly from a verse in Scripture, consult various versions of the Bible for alternative ways of wording the verse. As a rule, never alter the words of Scripture yourself to the point where you change the essence or meaning of the verse.

Also broaden your vocabulary or your ability to express yourself in different words or images. This capacity can be developed with practise. Use 'word pictures', images from everyday life, etc.

The general rule for matching lyrics with melody is 'Sing it as you would say it.'

8. THE HOOK

The 'hook' refers to a word or a short lyrical or musical phrase that catches the listeners attention, around which the entire song is built. Usually the 'hook' is the first idea that comes to the songwriter; after this has been determined, the rest of the song simply adds body in support of the message of the 'hook'. Generally, repetition of the 'hook' lyrically or musically can be extremely effective in enhancing the song's message.

9. KEY

Do not pitch the song too high or too low. Upbeat and energetic songs should be pitched just slightly higher than the average person's range. This will allow people to sing the song more loudly with gusto and enthusiasm. Prayerful and contemplative songs should be pitched lower than normal to encourage a sense of reverence. Congregational singing generally should not move beyond or out of one octave.

10. VOCAL AND MUSICAL ARRANGEMENT

A good song may be spoiled because the vocal or musical arrangements were poorly done. Some elements to consider would be ...

a) Introduction :

This must not be too long. It should set the 'tone' for the rest of the song. It should make it easy for the vocalists to start the singing.

b) Ending :

This will largely be determined by the type of song, the message of the song, the instruments used in the song, etc. For example, an intimate worship song might simply flow into free and spontaneous worship without a definitive ending. Loud abrupt endings are effective in some songs, yet detract from others.

c) Key Changes :

Changing the key in which the song is written at a particular point in the song is a very effective tool for enhancing and accentuating the message of the song – this is called 'modulation'. Also explore a variety of musical ideas or avenues to get to the new key. Example: if you are singing in the key of G and want to go to A, the leading chord (called the pivot chord) to play would be E, E⁷, or E¹³. There are some creative ways to get to the leading chord to introduce a key change, eg. to get to A from G, using the E leading chord, you could play (B^{m7} – E) or (G – G⁷/F – E) or (G – G⁷/F– D/E – E – F^{#m}/E – E). The particular way you change the key depends on the flow and general mood of the song. Be creative – create a flow musically that stimulates worship.

11. COLLABORATION

Trust God for a good spiritual collaborator, someone who knows your heart particularly in reference to praise and worship singing. Collaborators are excellent helps, especially if your get stuck lyrically or musically. They can also provide finishing touches to the song and refine it further. Be prepared to adjust your ideas if needs be.

12. TEST THE SONG

Teach the song to a few people e.g. the music team. Ask for their opinions. Do not be offended by valid and justifiable criticisms – they will only serve to make you a more effective songwriter. If the song goes off well with the small group, teach it to the congregation. After this you can make further adjustments if necessary.

Hebrews 5:13-14 teaches the principle that 'by reason of USE' we train our senses to discern between good and evil. Similarly, the more songs you write, the better and more skillful you become at it. Not every song you write will be a hit. Do not be discouraged by your initial attempts that seem not to take off. Be diligent, be patient, wait upon your 'song writing' gift. With repetition, spiritual maturity, greater musical proficiency, more enrichment through the Word and being always filled with the Holy Spirit, God will bless and honour your efforts to facilitate praise and worship within His Body.

THE SIMPLE CHORUS FORM

Do not succumb to the pressure to write songs which contains all elements of basic songs, like verses + pre-chorus + chorus + bridge. The purpose of the song, and the leading of the Spirit – both of both have very clear specific objective objectives for the song – should dictate the form of the song. The Short Chorus form, with no verse or bridge, is a simple and very effective form. It is usually short and easily memorable.

An example in Scripture, **GIVE THANKS TO THE LORD, FOR HIS LOVINGKINDNESS IS EVERLASTING**

2 Chron. 20:20-23

- 20 They rose early in the morning and went out to the wilderness of Tekoa; and when they went out, Jehoshaphat stood and said, "Listen to me, O Judah and inhabitants of Jerusalem, put your trust in the LORD your God and you will be established. Put your trust in His prophets and succeed."
- 21 When he had consulted with the people, he appointed those who sang to the LORD and those who praised Him in holy attire, as they went out before the army and said, "Give thanks to the LORD, for His lovingkindness is everlasting."
- 22 When they began singing and praising, the LORD set ambushes against the sons of Ammon, Moab and Mount Seir, who had come against Judah; so they were routed.
- 23 For the sons of Ammon and Moab rose up against the inhabitants of Mount Seir destroying them completely; and when they had finished with the inhabitants of Seir, they helped to destroy one another.

This short chorus brought very powerful results for Israel. What makes a song a good song. You may employ many natural criteria to judge the effectiveness of a god song. But at the end of the day, if the song bears no impact in the spiritual, it is really meaningless or 'just another song'.

AS A PRAISE AND WORSHIP SONGWRITER, SEEK TO BECOME A 'SWEET PSALMIST'

2 Sam 23:1 Now these are the last words of David. Thus says David the son of Jesse; Thus says the man **raised up on high**, The **anointed** of the God of Jacob, And the **sweet psalmist** of Israel:

David was not simply 'raised up' from a shepherd boy to become a king, but he was raised up to God. The Hebrew word used for 'high' is 'al' which means the Highest (i.e. God). David was raised up to God Himself and he expressed this intimacy through songs.

David is also described as 'anointed' and 'sweet'. The Hebrew word for 'sweet' is '**naiym**' which means '**delightful or pleasant**'. The root word, **na'em**, means "**to be agreeable, to be a delight, to be pleasant**". Other uses of the word sweet in the Old Testament always indicate some scent or aroma. David's life of worship produced an aroma pleasing to the Lord. In our bid to become effective psalmists and songwriters in the Kingdom of God, let us remember that it is not primarily the new songs that ultimately impress God, but a 'sweet' fragrance from a life completely dedicated to Him and one that brings Him pleasure. This state of being and calibre of Christ-like character will be the greatest factor that will cause you to produce new songs that affect your entire generation and even for those still to come.

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