SONGWRITING FOR WORSHIP

Created in collaboration with

The Awakening Institute
at Hope College

hope.edu/awakening

Sponsored in part by a grant from the Lilly Endowment,
with additional support provided by Hope College Campus Ministries
and Cardiphonia Music.

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Foreword

"The Lord your God is with you, the Mighty Warrior who saves. He will take delight in you; in his love he will no longer rebuke you, but will rejoice over you with singing." (Zephaniah 3:17)

When my Grandma Jennie was 101, she did not know who I was anymore. Her vision was poor, and dementia had set in. Whenever I visited her, she would be sitting in her afghan-covered chair near the window of her room in the nursing home. She would often be alone, and singing. The songs she repeatedly sang were in Dutch, the language of her childhood, before she immigrated to the USA. My mom told me that Grandma was singing the Psalms that she had learned when she was young. Grandma Jennie had them sealed in her heart, word for word, with spotless intonation. Even though she did not know the people around her, her spirit never forgot the songs of worship she had sung in her youth that had touched her heart. Such is the power of music. The power of scripture. The power of worship.

God's creativity never quits. He left us 66 books with His words. Then, we have daily life with its emotions and its search for truth. Writing and teaching worship songs provides the spiritual arsenal the Holy Spirit uses to feed, calm, lift and center the heart and soul of the believer throughout their lives. Melody gives truth its wings to help our spirit soar above earth to heaven.

God so inspired George Frideric Handel to write the "Messiah" that he penned the entire 3-hour oratorio in just 24 days. At times he wrote through the entire night because the inspiration kept flowing out of him. However, not all composition is like this. It is also hard work. It takes time daily to be alone, meditating on the words, until the tune blossoms from the text that provided the inspiration. Eventually, God will provide a song, with melody and rhythm, sealing the text into the human soul.

May God bless your personal journey along the way. You will find that writing music is as much about your own relationship and spiritual journey with God as it is anything else. You will be all the better because of it.

"May the words of my mouth, and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my strength and my Redeemer." (Psalm 19:14)

James De Boer
Director of Awakening
Adjunct Associate Professor of Music
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"*Sing to Him a new song; Play skillfully with a shout of joy.*" — Psalm 33:3

"*And they sang a new song, saying,*
"*Worthy are you to take the scroll*
and to open its seals,
for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God
from every tribe and language and people and nation,
and you have made them a kingdom and priests to our God,
and they shall reign on the earth." — Revelation 5:9-10

"*Saying that someone, Jesus Christ is both fully God and fully human, is something that rests uneasily within the bounds of ordinary theological prose, but flies naturally when expressed in the expansive language of poetry. When the poets give poetic form to our theology, it is theology that leads to awe and wonder, the bedrock of worship.*" — Lester Ruth, Duke Divinity School

"*As a writer of worship songs, I have a hunger to write deep songs of passionate reverence to God. Yet I'm aware I cannot sing before I have seen. All worship is a response to a revelation--it's only as we breathe in more of the wonders of God that we can breathe out a fuller response to Him....the key to a life of passionate and powerful worship comes from seeing God.*" — Matt Redman

"*Above all, sing spiritually. Have an eye to God in every word you sing. Aim at pleasing Him more than yourself, or any other creature. In order to do this, attend strictly to the sense of what you sing, and see that your heart is not carried away with the sound, but offered to God continually; so shall your singing be such as the Lord will approve here, and reward you when He cometh in the clouds of heaven.*" — John Wesley, founder of Methodism

Introduction

Dear (future) songwriter, we hope that you find in these pages a steady supply of hard earned wisdom, spiritual insight and encouragement! In our humble collection we have asked sixteen songwriters who regularly write for the church to offer some reflections and "helps" as you begin (or continue!) your journey of songwriting. It's exciting to see how diverse the voices are in this collection. Some of the songwriters who have written in this manual are relatively new to the craft and others have been honing their gift for decades. Others write in multicultural contexts (even two languages in the same song!) or have written within the walls of the same church for most of their lives.

In this text you will experience reflections on the nuts and bolts of songwriting as well as profound theological meditations. All of these authors and songwriters are united in their love for the church and the song that the saints sing. They truly are theologically attuned, musically inspired, and pastorally resounding!

Soli Deo gloria,
Bruce Benedict

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SUBMITTING TO THE CALL:

My Story of Songwriting

Liz Vice

I don't have the typical story when it comes to being a songwriter for church. But I hope that my story inspires you to continue (or continue on) in your own journey of songwriting.

In the spring of 2011, I applied for a scholarship to continue my studies in the industry of film. I had submitted a short film I wrote and directed in 2009 and was flown out to Virginia to have my film screened and judged and I won a full-ride to college. When they called my name, one of the students who wanted me to submit my work cried because he was so happy I was going to go to the same school and would bring a little *umph* to the program. But when I heard my name, I knew I would say no. I had wanted to move out of Portland, Oregon so bad and I thought that going back to school in NYC would fulfill my dreams of working in film, but in my gut I knew it was the wrong decision.

After a trip to the UK for the first time, I received an email to work on a low budget tv show, Portlandia (!). My first big break in film but also the gateway to music because I said no to film school and yes to working on set. Staying in Portland also gave me the opportunity to be pulled in to do some background vocals for a worship record through a church I had just started attending. (Josh White, "Wounded Healer")

When I was a kid I'd sing in my room for hours, but when it came to singing in public that was a no go — but there was something special about the music Door of Hope was making. Their music spoke about the ups and downs of being a follower of Jesus, and this tugged at my heart to join in with harmonies and eventually wooed me to take the leap and sing on stage. Then by one simple ask from my friend Joe, I sang a solo on stage and it felt like the room cleared and I was just singing to the LORD. To this day, when I sing, it's not just to connect with the people but it's a way of me entering into a secret place where I get to speak to the LORD in melody and poetry.

I am still in the bend of the learning curve. I have horrible discipline when it comes to sitting down to write. I also know I write better in groups because I can get stuck on one idea and honestly, just someone being there to ask questions can lead me to completing a song in moments. It's like I go into a trance and just connect with the

stories playing in my head. My film degree wasn't for nothing and helps with my ability to connect to a song because I can visually see the story unfold.

I never wanted to do music, not because I didn't think I had the skills, well, honestly, I never thought about whether I was a talented singer or not because it was my thing. Not a secret, but just something I did. I am terrified of the places the LORD will send me, the isolation that comes with being on the road and living in a new city where being present is a must to connect. I also fear looking like a fool for not reading notes or keys or wondering how in the world I'm to lead people who've been playing music most of their lives in front of crowds of people to entertain but also soothe?

My story doesn't sound much different from when Moses was called and he's arguing with a burning bush; Jeremiah tired of being criticized for bringing the words from Yahweh and saying he'd stop if it wasn't for the message of God being like a fire shut up in his bones, or Jesus being called demonic.

It's because of these stories and beyond, the faces that I see, the ability to bring the Church to the people who Jesus said he loved…"while we were still sinners, Christ died for us." I've been in dark venues where men have cried and confessed that they hadn't been to church in years.

If God is calling you to be a songwriter, you might as well give in. You'll either do it now or later and why not do it now while you're still young enough to enjoy it! Below is one of my favorite artists and quotes about pursuing the calling that God gives us.

"St Ignatius proposed that the Giver of Your Existence speaks the loudest about the calling of your life through your desires… . Maybe the Givers desire for your life is hiding out in what you're most afraid of saying yes to… . And then He said to the lame one, "Pick up your mat and walk."

— Scott Erickson, @ScottThePainter

[1] PRACTICAL ‘HELPS’ FOR SONGWRITING

TAKING YOUR FIRST STEPS IN SONGWRITING FOR GOD

Julie Anne Vargas

What is the purpose of songwriting?

Here are three scripture texts that help us to understand why we would write songs for worship.

Read Psalm 96
Songs give us time to spend with God and encounter Him. As creative beings, God has given us the gift of expressing what moves us, what is important to us. When we are growing in God's grace and His love, we begin to find new ways of expressing unchanging truths.

Read Joshua 4:1-7
We not only get to discover and learn more about who God is as we go through the songwriting process but our finished songs are little milestones of what God has done. The hymn *Come Thou Fount* sings this idea with the word *ebenezer*, which in Hebrew literally means "stones of help."

Read Colossians 3:16-17
A benefit of songwriting is that we can share these songs with others and God can use them to encourage people. People don't often leave humming the sermon, but, as Robert Sterling states so well, "Songwriters paint musical pictures using melody and metaphor, rhythm and rhyme - pictures that the listener will remember long after the sermon is over."

How do I know if I'm a songwriter?

Can I write a song? I have never written one before.

As Robert Sterling puts it, "a writer writes." So if you are a songwriter, it would be "a songwriter writes songs." Often we think that we cannot write songs because we are not as experienced, do not receive recognition, haven't written that hit single yet, or because we are not getting paid. But it is as simple as "if you write songs on a regular basis – you are a songwriter."

Just as any other aspect of music, songwriting is a practice that must be practiced. The muscle of songwriting must be worked out daily. The skill of songwriting is something that will grow and expand over time, as long as you put in the work to practice writing!

What do I need in order to get started?

Often times we think songwriting is a complicated process that requires hours of sitting with your instrument in solitude. Really, the only two things you need in order to get started are:

1. A way to write down your thoughts.
2. A small song seed.

It's easiest to get started writing if you ask yourself this question: what is the one thing I want to communicate?

Often times starting with something on this list is very helpful: a scripture verse or a passage, an emotion or a struggle, a sermon series, a life story or testimony, an attribute of God. Of course there are other things to write about but this list will get your wheels turning and will also help you narrow down the scope of your song. The more specific you can get, the better. Remember, there are so many songs that can be written!

The biggest newbie mistake is to try to say too much in one song. If you find yourself having lots of themes in your head, write down each one and then pick one to start with. You will thank yourself in the end!

Just for fun, here is an easy exercise when you feel stuck on what to write about. Set the timer for five minutes and jot down as many song themes as you can think of. These can be one-word ideas, short phrases, or potential song titles.

I know my theme, now what?

The most helpful way to jump into this theme is to write about what you know. Do not pretend to write about something you don't know about because it won't come across as authentic.

At this point in the writing process think through your intention for the song. Do I want this to be a reflective artistic song or do I want this song to be singable for corporate worship? Sometimes it's hard to tell at the beginning how a song will take shape, but having an idea of how you want the song to be used may be helpful. Then ask yourself about the setting of the song. Maybe you'll ask: "If I want to write a worship song, is it for Sunday morning? Youth ministry? Kids ministry, etc?" or "If I want to write an artistic song, is it for me to sing or is it for someone else to sing? These answers will help to shape your writing process.

How do I begin the writing process?

With the questions of theme, intention, and setting answered, you're ready to jump in! There is no right or wrong process. Some people start with lyrics, some start with melody, some start with a chord progression on an instrument. Chances are whatever you feel most comfortable with becomes your process.

This is really important to remember, don't be afraid to throw a line out there or sing a melody. Have courage to allow yourself to write freely without putting pressure on yourself. For every 1 "strong song" there are dozens of song drafts and dozens of mediocre songs. Chris Tomlin often writes 100 songs for a 12 song album.

What if I get stuck and can't seem to get inspired?

Writer's block is a natural thing that happens to everyone. To overcome that, you learn that you shouldn't wait around for inspiration.

Discipline - You have to discipline yourself to write, even if you don't "love" what you're writing. Set a timer for ten minutes and challenge yourself to create something new in that time frame. Chances are that after a few sessions of ten minutes you'll come up with fresh ideas. The more writing habits you establish the less writing blocks you will experience.

New Environments - Another thing that is very helpful is to get into a new environment. Maybe you could try writing in an empty church sanctuary or maybe you could head to the park. Each new setting brings fresh ideas and sparks the imagination.

Co-writing - Writing with another person can also be an incredible way to grow as a songwriter. Writing in groups with others and hearing their ideas can inspire you. You

can learn so much by writing with a more experienced songwriter or someone who has a different style than you! That may be just what you need to get out of your dry spell.

Be a Sponge - Lastly, capture inspiration everywhere. Keep voice memos on your phone, carry a journal, or make notes. You never know what your fragments can turn into so never throw out lines or ideas ever.

Songwriting is an incredible way to connect with God and express your heart. So what are you waiting for? Go write something new!

Exercise:
Find someone who is interested in co-writing a song with you. One of you may write better words and the other tunes, or one of you may want to write words and melody for the verses and the other person the chorus. Come with some ideas to share or start something from scratch.

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SONGWRITING SIMPLY:

Write better songs by paying attention to the things that matter

Noah McLaren

I get distracted a lot. I think a lot of people do. It's been a pretty popular topic of conversation for folks who remember what our lives were like before the advent of the smartphone, the cloud, the Internet of things. Life used to unfold more slowly. We haven't always carried around these little dopamine generators in our pockets.

I truly don't think smartphones are all bad, but I do think it's important for us to know how distracted we are. Some tasks are important enough, or difficult enough, or complex enough, that we need to devote our attention to them fully. Brain surgery, for example. Or a sprinting competition. Or prayer. Or songwriting.

Songwriting Needs Goods Habits

When you go to write a song, what do you do? What objects do you pick up and bring with you? A notebook, perhaps, and something to write with, a bible, a guitar, a metronome, some freshly-brewed tea, a snack, a device with a recording app? Me too, sometimes. Every now and then I even find that one instrument isn't enough, and I sit at the piano bench with my guitar slung around my shoulders, a book or two open, a pencil in my hand… and my phone lights up to remind me that I've been recording for ten or fifteen minutes. It doesn't matter how much stuff I have with me: if I see a Twitter notification on the home screen, I'm gone.

I stand by some of those habits. If you're going to write songs for the church, you should always start with the Bible, and you should always keep one nearby. And I have found that keeping a recording device running while I write prevents me from losing those vague, interesting ideas that show up one moment and disappear the next. It even helps calm my anxiety around losing those great ideas. But what about all of that stuff? When I write a song, do I really need to bring the whole marching band, coffee shop, and recording studio? It's a leading question. Answer: Probably not.

When we pick up an instrument and play it, part of our concentration goes toward maintaining that chord, rhythm, or melody. Even the most accomplished musicians are not immune to this. When we play our instruments, or watch what's going on across the street, or think about what we're going to have for lunch later, all of that attention is like currency that we don't get to spend on the song we are writing. Writing music —

inventing a melody in particular — is a complex, demanding task. It demands all the attention we have to give.

Some of the best songwriting wisdom I ever got came from Wendell Kimbrough, a Christian songwriter whose work is well worth your time. His congregational psalm settings have inspired me and fed my congregation for years—so when he spoke, I listened. The advice he gave was this: **When you start to write a new song, put your instrument away**. **You don't need it**. The initial work of writing a song in which the lyrics begin to be established and the melody is born, is best done simply.

Songs Start as Simple Prayers

Try it, he said. Bring your bible, a scratch pad, and your voice; leave the rest (except for maybe that recording app). Meditate on the scripture you have in front of you, or the lyrics you've written or arranged, and imagine how they should sound when they're sung. Remember that every worship song is, at heart, a prayer to God. As you pray, the song will begin to materialize. Sing through the bad or clichéd ideas until you find the good ones. Once you find those, hold them close and don't let them go.

Eventually, the time will come for you to take your instrument back out, or to bring your song to your musician friends, or however it is that you arrive at your final cut. The time will come to add chords and rhythm and interludes. You might even find that your melody changes again once you reach that stage in the song's development. That's okay. Sometimes those are the best changes to make. Just don't advance to that stage too soon.

Strong Melodies Don't Need Instruments

The best songs have the strongest melodies, and the strongest melodies are the ones you can sing a cappella. Think about the worship songs that everyone in your church knows: "Great Is Thy Faithfulness", "Amazing Grace", "Ten Thousand Reasons", "Living Hope". Even as I list them off, can you start to sing them in your head? If your pastor started singing any of those songs in the middle of their next sermon, I'm sure that the whole room could join in right away. Of course that's partly thanks to the words, which are powerful, enduringly faithful testimonies to God — but the melodies have something to do with it as well. If the tunes themselves were no good, we might have lost the songs.

As songwriters, we should take the time to craft a memorable melody. It's not always easy to do this. If it were, everyone would do it. However, as our most enduring songs attest, is absolutely worth the effort of concentration — or even the sacrifice — that it takes to devote ourselves to the craft of writing a song to and for God.

So, the next time you feel the nudge to write a worship song, do a few things first. Set aside some time, cut out unnecessary distractions, pray, and then just sing.

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APOCALYPTIC COLLISIONS:

Metaphor in Worship Songwriting

Wen Reagan

Introduction

What makes a good song? And what makes a good worship song? It turns out, while the answers to those two questions are not entirely the same, they share a lot. And before we move on to the meat of this article, it's important to dwell on this statement for a moment. Many conversations on contemporary worship songwriting stumble their way into an assertion *that writing songs for worship is completely different than writing other types of songs*. Yet this kind of dualist thinking belies the reality that much of contemporary worship music pulls deeply from the pop/rock/folk traditions that have shaped popular music for the last hundred years (and beyond). It turns out that many of the same techniques for simply writing good songs also applies to writing good worship songs.

Theologically, this should neither upset nor surprise us. We have all been made in the image of God, and we all share our creaturely roles as sub-creators, creating new things from the raw materials of God's creation. This role has been imprinted in all of us, Christian or not. In this "common sense," then, we share deep dispositions, especially when it comes to communication via music and story-telling, and so many of the tools we use to write songs in general can be employed to write worship songs as well.(1) The great Professor of Songwriting, Pat Pattison, basically names one of these core universal tools as "sensorial writing." Pattison argues that when we write songs from our senses—when we use sensorial language—we open up the song so that others can enter into the world we've created.(2) Why does that work? Because we all experience the world via our senses. And why is that? Because we are all embodied, incarnated creatures.

Speaking of the incarnation, this brings us to another important theological assertion: *worship music does not simply fall from on high, as if its pristine perfection has never mingled with worldly practices and ways. Instead, holy words and feelings collide with the messiness of the mundane practices of popular music.* Why? Because Jesus was a collision as well. God the Son took on flesh, spent his first days in a dirty feeding trough, and carried out his ministry amongst the broken messiness of human life and community. Jesus was—and is, and will be—a collision of divinity with humanity. And because of this reality of the incarnation, we can faithfully explore crafting our worship

music from the messiness of human culture rather than waiting for it to be delivered directly from God in an “unworldly fashion” from on high.

So what makes a good song, worship or not? A hundred things. Many of which are idiosyncratic; little glitters of joy sprinkled into often-accidental patterns of sonic beauty. Things captured in the moment, “caught not taught,” or simply “inspired.” These elements are integral parts of good music, and we wouldn’t have our great songs without them.

Yet if we approach songwriting solely as a practice of inspiration, we will come away sorely disappointed. Inspiration is integral to the artform of good worship songwriting, yet it is always paired with poetic and musical disciplines, best practices that are employed to craft good, true, and beautiful songs. In this chapter we’re going to briefly explore one of the most powerful poetic tools for lyric writing: metaphor.

Metaphor

> The Lord is my rock, my fortress and my deliverer;
> my God is my rock, in whom I take refuge,
> my shield and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold.
> – Psalm 18:2
>
> When darkness seems to hide His face, I rest on His unchanging grace
> In every high and stormy gale, My anchor holds within the veil
> On Christ the solid Rock I stand, All other ground is sinking sand
> -My Hope is Built On Nothing Less (1834)

Metaphors are apocalyptic. No, I’m not talking about explosions and earthquakes and the like (though those are possible). Instead, I mean this in the technical sense. “Apocalypse” is an ancient Greek word that simply means “revelation.” Something “apocalyptic” is, in a simple sense, revealing—or perhaps better put—unveiling. In the bible, apocalyptic literature (think the book of Daniel or Revelation) is a genre of writing that focuses on pulling back the veil of everyday reality to expose the hidden, true reality of the world. It is in this sense that we can call metaphors apocalyptic, for they unveil a hidden reality.

And how do they do this? To answer that, we can turn again to Pat Pattison, who delightfully paints metaphors as “collisions between ideas.” When we jam two disparate ideas together, Pattison argues, we put them in conflict with each other, and then we get to watch the fireworks that result. Hope is the thing with feathers. Wait,

what? Those don't go together. Yet watch what new reality appears when poet Emily Dickenson makes them collide:

> Hope is the thing with feathers
> That perches in the soul,
> And sings the tune without the words,
> And never stops at all.

Here Dickenson creates an apocalyptic unveiling: a new true, good, and beautiful reality of what hope is and does, simply by colliding hope with feathers and then documenting the results. Hope is brought to life as a bird, perhaps even pointing us to the biblical witness of the Holy Spirit descending as a dove on Jesus at his baptism. Hope is great. Feathers are great. But you know what's even better? The fireworks that result when you collide them together.

Metaphor enriches your songwriting because it allows others to tap into their senses to connect with the song. Hope is a pretty abstract idea. It's hard to grasp with your senses. But when you give it feathers, that changes. Suddenly you can see it. Hear it. Feel it, perching in your soul. And the magic is that your listeners can feel it, too.

Let's look at another example, this time from the maritime world. Nineteenth century hymnody was steeped in rich maritime metaphors, where Christ (our anchor or pilot) steered us (the boat or sailors) through the hardships of life (the stormy sea, crashing waves, or dangerous shoals). Consider the first verse of Edward Hopper's classic "Jesus, Savior, Pilot Me" from 1871:

> Jesus, Savior, pilot me,
> Over life's tempestuous sea;
> Unknown waves before me roll,
> Hiding rock and treach'rous shoal;
> Chart and compass come from Thee:
> Jesus, Savior, pilot me!

We're immediately thrown—sensorially—onto the stormy high seas. The continual metaphorical world that Hopper creates (life is a stormy sea; I am a vulnerable and lost ship; Jesus is the great ship pilot) provides us with imagery that we can see (an angry ocean), hear (crashing waves and wind), smell and taste (the salty sea air), and even feel (the kinesthetic up-and-down lilt of the ocean waves). Yet Hopper is also pulling from the rich metaphorical world of the bible, where water metaphors—and particularly

the passing through waters—continually appear. Death becomes the Red Sea, and God provides a way through it. The great flood is death as well, and Christ is our ark, piloting us through the ravaged reality of sin and death. And, of course, the stormy Sea of Galilee found in the gospels becomes our life, and Jesus, in his power, speaks but a word to calm our terrors and desperation, echoing Psalm 107:28-30 (ESV):

> Then they cried to the Lord in their trouble,
> and he delivered them from their distress.
> He made the storm be still,
> and the waves of the sea were hushed.
> Then they were glad that the waters were quiet,
> and he brought them to their desired haven.

Even some of the most popular worship music today draws from this rich tradition of sea imagery. Hillsong's "Oceans" (you know, the one with that great line "When oceans rise, my soul will rest in Your embrace"… I would quote more, but due to copyright restrictions, I can't) is a great example of utilizing this kind of water imagery, pulling us into the chaos of the deep, where Jesus both calls us to enter in faith and, at the same time, is the only one who can save us from its dangers.

So metaphors are powerful, and for at least two reasons. First, they are apocalyptic: like the Large Hadron Collider's revealing of the quantum world, metaphors reveal hidden realities by colliding two disparate elements and documenting the resulting literary explosion. Second, metaphors draw us back to our sensorial reality: the collision brings unexpected things to life, making them look, sound, smell, taste, and move differently than before.

As you continue to hone your worship songwriting craft, I encourage you to begin building your metaphorical muscles (see what I did there?). Don't settle for waiting for inspiration "from on high" in your writing. Instead, trust that God has provided powerful writing tools like metaphors that can help you hone your lyric-writing craft. By building a discipline of regularly employing metaphor in your worship lyrics, you provide your congregants with a song world they can more easily enter because they can leverage the universal power of their senses to participate. Your song becomes their song, even "our" song. And then, once in that world, your congregants can delight and participate in the multi-layered apocalyptic reality available for unveiling through metaphor, a reality that gives them a deeper and broader understanding of the limitless goodness, truth, and beauty of our triune God.

Writing Exercises:
Here are two great ways to begin flexing your metaphorical muscles. Both exercises can take two forms: **a forced free-write** or a more methodical **poetic free-write**. In a forced free-write, you force yourself to continuously keep writing for a set duration of time. The result is more of a stream of consciousness rather than anything resembling a final lyrical product. The upside is that this helps you build your sensorial muscles… the more you practice describing things from your senses (which a stream of consciousness free-write forces), the quicker you'll be able to access that part of your imagination when you approach writing lyrics. In a more methodical poetic free-write, you're beginning to draft lyrical poetry that eventually can be sculpted into lyrics once paired with a melody. Either approach works, though if you really want to become a better writer, it's important to practice stream-of-consciousness free-writing, as it will provide sensorial building blocks that will become second nature down the line.

Exercise One:
To begin, you might grab some obvious biblical metaphors (God is a rock; a fortress; the Good Shepherd; a mother hen; the bread of life; the living vine; etc.) and then write about your current reality from that metaphor, reminding God's people how they participate in that metaphor (we stand on our rock; we are protected by our fortress; we are guided by our shepherd; we are gathered by our mother hen; we eat the bread of life; we are branches of the living vine). Grab one of these biblical metaphors and spend five minutes in a forced free-write or a poetic free-write.

Exercise Two:
Once you've begun to inhabit biblical metaphors in your lyric writing, you can then expand to a practice of creating new biblical metaphors. This exercise is rooted in the spirit and tradition of what the early Church Fathers and Mothers understood as the "typological sense" of reading Scripture, where biblical stories could be read allegorically as pointing to our reality with Christ. So take a vignette, proverb, or story from the bible—one full of rich imagery, but one generally taken as an actual account and not as an obvious metaphor—and turn it into a metaphor for our current life. For example, you might take the passage through the Red Sea and apply it to our lives, as we did earlier in the chapter: the Red Sea is death, or even our troubled lives, and God provides a passage through the Sea. In this "typological reading," Christ is "the way" through the Red Sea (thus connecting to another core New Testament metaphor for Christ: "I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life"). Or consider the story of Jonah, the fall of Jericho, or John the Baptist's desert life. The possibilities are nearly endless. Here's my off-the-cuff, unmetered poetic free-write from thinking about David and Goliath:

Lord, my sin is Goliath
Confidently approaching, eager to devour
Give me small stones of faith
Inconsequential to the world,
And slowly shaped by your time
That I might launch them in weakness
And you might direct them in power

I simply began with the idea that "my sin is Goliath," and then followed the subsequent fireworks from that collision. This can be a great way to begin building your metaphorical muscles. Give it a shot and see what happens!

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(1)There is an important minority report here, which is that not all songwriting tools can be employed in worship songwriting. Even in embracing songwriting tools "of the world," we would be wise to pastorally discern what is beneficial and what is not in writing songs for worship, particularly when and where contemporary songwriting is shaped by forces of capitalist consumption and celebrity amplification.

(2) For more on sensorial writing, see chapter one of Pat Pattison's *Writing Better Lyrics: The Essential Guide to Powerful Songwriting* (Writer's Digest Books, 2009).

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IS ONE LANGUAGE OR STYLE ENOUGH?

Josh Davis

I like to say that I am browner on the inside than I am on the outside. My family history goes back to Germany, France and the UK, but we Davises have been living in the United States for at least 100 years. When I talk about my cultural identity, I say that I am White American. Like the cheese. But, I also say that I am Dominican. Because I grew up in the Dominican Republic, I speak Spanish fluently and I would be happy eating rice and beans every day. When I worship God, I am not *either* White American *or* Dominican. I am somehow *both*.

Unfortunately, most worship songs don't allow me to be both Dominican and American at the same time. Sure, there are some old hymns and some recent modern worship songs that have Spanish translations. (*Why is it so much easier to find songs that were written in English and translated into Spanish than to find songs written in Spanish and translated to English? That's another article for another day!*) Sometimes, I am quite happy singing a verse in English and then a verse in Spanish. There is a kind of "separate but equal" vibe that I am ok with for a while. The truth is, however, that the Body of Christ was never meant to be separate but equal. We are called to be together and equal. And Spanish and English are not separate inside of me. They are somehow interwoven. Sometimes I think in English. At other times I think in Spanish. And sometimes I think in concepts and then pick a language to try to describe the concepts with. In some cases, I would need six words in English to communicate what one word in Spanish says quite well. I am most myself when I can just say whatever word comes to my mind without worrying what language it is in.

I grew up hearing that God wants us to bring our whole selves before Him in worship. So, it makes the most sense to me that I would sing worship songs that mix Spanish and English fluidly. But, I didn't know any songs like that until I wrote *With One Heart/Con Un Corazón* (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3pokTaDzSjo) It was the first song I ever heard that has Spanish and English woven together in an interdependent fashion. You can't sing it in *either* Spanish *or* English. One language isn't enough. You have to sing it in both.

With one voice en esta canción, we give you glory. Te damos gloria, Jesús.

In this song, the languages coexist peacefully and even work together. In certain sections, the English is simply a translation of the Spanish. In other places, the Spanish says something different entirely. Sometimes they take turns. And sometimes they occur simultaneously. In another song I wrote, entitled *One Kingdom-Un Reino* (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tRXnPLTEgvs) some of the Spanish lines even rhyme with the English lines. No separate but equal here!

Prompt: *Do you have more than one language inside you? Write a song that incorporates all of your languages.*

Prompt: *Do you feel a tension inside you between two different sides of your personality? Or two different ways of looking at the same thing? Write a song that allows both sides to co-exist peacefully in the same space.*

I believe the Body of Christ needs more what I call "interlingual" songs. Songs that can't be sung in one language or another independently, but have to be sung in two or three or more languages at the same time. The languages are interwoven, interdependent. Sure there are a lot of bicultural, bilingual people like me in the Body of Christ. And it is very meaningful for us to be able to bring both of our cultures, both of our languages to the Lord simultaneously. But, this issue is a lot bigger! The reality is that the Body of Christ is multicultural, multigenerational, and multilingual. And, we are called to worship together and live together in harmony. In order to help us be together well, without one culture or language dominating and others simply assimilating, we need songs that help us express our hearts in our own languages and musical styles to the Lord.

In our worshiping community here in Clarkston, Georgia, people from different cultures come together all the time. Often, when we gather to worship, food is involved. So we were needing a song we could sing as a way of saying grace before our meals together. What would it sound like for a Sudanese man, a Korean woman, an African-American woman, and a Dominican man to come together to sing their thanks to God? Maybe something like this: *Multilingual Grace* —> https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tTT18VsbOJM

Prompt: *What languages and cultures are present in your congregation? Can you imagine writing a song that would give expression to several of those at once?*

Revelation 7:9,10 shows us a picture of people from every tribe, language and nation gathered around the throne of Jesus. Notice that there is no mention of a Korean service at 10am and a Sudanese service at 2pm. This is not separate but equal, but rather together and equal. Notice that Jesus is at the center, as the *unifier* of His people. Even as we catch this glimpse of heaven, can you hear the prayer Jesus taught his disciples to pray in Matthew 6:9,10 — *Your kingdom come. Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.* May we continue to see God's kingdom come here on earth as people from different cultures and languages gather to worship Jesus.

Prompt: *Write a song based on Revelation 7:9-12. Imagine what it would look like, sound like, feel like to be a part of such a gathering. Here's one way I imagine all the languages and cultures weaving together: Psalm 117* —> (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aYqRoyIFzCo&feature=youtu.be&t=503)

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THE FIVE-STAGE JOURNEY OF SONGWRITING

Joel Payne

I'm often asked how I write worship songs.

Where does the inspiration come from?
Do you start with the tune or the words?
How do you if it's going to work with a congregation?

The answer is: it varies. The journey of one song seems to be different to another. I can't be sure how a song will begin, or develop, or end. But while the journeys are different, they seem to pass through the same five locations en route. And it's those locations I'd like to share with you.

(1) The Bus Stop
Songwriting can feel like waiting for a bus. There's nothing, then you write a lot in a flurry, and then dry up for a season, wondering when inspiration will come next. If inspiration is like that, then it's a very frustrating thing. But many creatives will tell you that you shouldn't just stand still hoping. You need to put yourself in the best place to *be* inspired, and that means developing creative habits. You can't force inspiration, but you can be disciplined in activities that mean you're more likely to find it.

Reading the Bible regularly is a great start, as is regular worship and prayer, or frequent exposure to God in creation. Listening to music, visiting art galleries, spending time with inspiring people. They all help. And you can take each one a step further by developing a habit of turning those moments into song fragments - writing a four-line rhyming verse every day after reading the Bible, singing a melody when you pray, composing a song that deliberately mimics the latest thing you heard on the radio. Often it will just be an exercise, you'll do nothing else with it, but every now and again you might just find what Brian Doerksen calls 'seed ideas'. Little pods of heavenly inspiration that grow into something.

Exercise: Writing metaphors, 'God is like a...'
Every day for a week, sit down with a piece of paper and a pen, set a timer for 2 minutes and start writing with the words 'God is like a...'. Don't stop writing, don't let your pen leave the paper, even if it's nonsense, until the timer goes off. At the end of the week look back at what you wrote. You'll probably find some inspiration in there.

(2) The Forest Floor

I once heard Matt Redman cite the REM frontman Michael Stipe as saying "Songwriting is vomiting out what's in your soul." I can't verify this was Stipe, but it's a useful image. If songwriting is to some extent pouring out what's inside you then it makes quite a difference what you take in. If you exist on a limited diet then the songs will always be the same, and if you never really take anything in then all that will come is your raw guts. Nobody wants to sing that. You need to get some good stuff in before good stuff can come out.

I liken it to foraging for food. Instead of cooking with the same basic ingredients, go hunting and see what you can find. Search for new scriptures that reveal truth to you, search a thesaurus for words that expand and inspire your poetry, search for images and sounds that take you new creative places. From this forest floor of resources you are so much more likely to create something new, fresh and original.

Exercise: Forage for words

Choose your song theme and chase down 10 bible verses that relate to it, picking out the key phrases. Now look up some of the words in a thesaurus and pull out other synonyms that have a ring of quality and poetry. Rewrite some of the bible verses using the new words, until you have a page full of phrases with which to build your song.

(3) The Construction Site

With inspiration found and materials gathered you're ready to begin construction. Exactly how do you package all of this into a song? My wife and I built our own house a few years ago, and we learnt the hard way that construction is full of delays and frustrations. It never quite happens in the order you want it to and there are periods of inactivity where nothing seems to be happening. I've learnt that with songs too. You can write a chorus in a hurry and then take months to perfect the second verse.

We all want a house that won't fall down. A good basic structure really helps: a consistent meter (number of syllables in a line), a solid rhyme scheme (where and how often you rhyme), and a strong foundation (a clear basic idea). This allows you some freedom for more aesthetic choices: melodic hooks and harmonic variations.

Exercise: Build with rhymes.
In the previous exercise you gathered a collection of good words. Now look for ones that rhyme, or find other strong words that rhyme with what you have. Put those rhymes at the end of your lines, work backwards building your song from there. You'll have a lyric that always lands in a solid place. Utilize an online rhyming site if you need help!

(4) The Village Square
A popular African proverb says 'it takes a village to raise a child'. I've found it takes a community to raise a song. We might think that when our song is finished it's finished. But the truth is it has only just begun. No parent, when a baby is born, thinks the work is done. Instead they continue to pour energy and love into nurturing that baby until it grows and matures. And all of that is best done in community with the gathered wisdom and experience of those around us.

It has been crucial to me on my songwriting journey to have a community that I share my songs with. People who give me honest, encouraging and – at times – brutal feedback. It's not easy to take, especially if your song is your baby. But over the years I've discovered that when I'm willing to listen to critique from others, my songs improve out of all recognition. As time has gone on, I even begin to anticipate that critique in the initial writing stage: a sign I'm becoming a better writer. I don't always do the things that people suggest, in the way that they suggest, but I do try to always work on any part of a song that they seem to think could be improved, often heading back to the construction site in the process.

Exercise: Start a songclub.
Find some other songwriters and commit to meeting together regularly to share your songs as they're in progress. Insist that everyone tries to sing the songs before they give feedback. Be honest but loving in your comments. And, on a personal level, commit to listen carefully to every suggestion and weigh up how you can respond to it.

(5) The Graduation Ceremony
There is an end to the journey! For some songs it simply means the satisfaction of finishing them. With others, usually fewer, it means a more public airing where your church or the world at large gets to meet your song. When your small group or church does sing your song there's a sense in which you've let it go and released it to the world. A sense of parental pride is matched by the feeling that you can't really take the

credit for what you've produced. God gave you something that you've now given away, and you just hope it goes on to bless many people.

Exercise: Improve through performing

Now that you have finished some songs it's time to play them in front of other people. This is one of the best ways to 'hear' your own songs for the first time. You will notice weak spots both lyrically and melodically when you play your songs in front of other people. This might be a small concert for friends and family, or if you are feeling more bold a local open mic night.

Joel Payne is the coordinator for Resound Worship, a collective of British worship songwriters, established in 2006, seeking to resource the church with songs that engage heart, mind and soul.

9 TIPS FOR WRITING A CHURCH SONG

Paul Zach

1. Quote Scripture in Your Song
Try writing a whole song based on a few verses from a Psalm. Try writing another song based on your pastors most recent sermon. Always be writing down little quotes or phrases that you hear that could turn into a song.

2. Repetition, Repetition, Repetition
Figure out ways to repeat words or melodies. This helps make the song more catchy and memorable.

3. Keep It Simple, Stupid!
A simple song is SO HARD to write. Just start with two or three chords and figure out a way to make those chords, melody, and lyrics beautiful and meaningful. Make sure that your song is only about one simple idea instead of a bunch of different thoughts.

4. Stop That Rhyming and I Mean It (Anybody Want a Peanut?)
Don't worry so much about making sure everything rhymes. It's great when a song has a rhyming scheme but not nearly as important as you think.

5. If You Get Stuck, Start a New Song
Don't get stuck working on the same song for too long. If you hit a wall, just move on and work on a different idea. It's better to write a lot of songs than to just get stuck working on one song for too long. Most great songs that I've written have only taken an hour or so.

6. Most Songs Will Be Really Bad (And That's Ok)
I've written so many bad songs. That's just part of the process. There's no secret formula to writing a good song besides just enjoying the process and continuing to write. Eventually you'll accidentally write something really great!

7. Write a Few Melodies for the Same Lyric and Pick the Best One
I usually write down some sort of chorus lyrics and then I write a bunch of melodies for the same lyrics. Record a few demos on your phone and then listen back to see which melody serves the lyrics best.

8. Always Be Reading Something (or Listening!)
I love audiobooks and podcasts so I'm always listening to something when I am driving or working around my house. The best way to get new ideas is to listen to great authors or speakers and they will inspire you to write something new.

9. Write a Song with a Friend
Co-writing is so much fun. The most successful songwriters always know how to bring out the best ideas from others. Sometimes I'll bring a half finished song to a friend and we'll finish it together or we just start something new together. Don't stress about trying to write the most amazing song ever. Most of the songs that I co-write aren't very good and that's ok! It's about having fun and enjoying the process and eventually you'll write a great one.

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[2] SPIRITUAL ‘HELPS’ FOR SONGWRITING

GATHERED WORSHIP SONGS FOR EVERYDAY LIFE

Sam and Sara Hargreaves

When did you last sing a worship song which mentioned the specifics of how we live in the world? The Bible (and its songbook, the Psalms) has a lot to say about things like work, money, ethics, the environment and life in society. In contrast, our songs today are strangely silent on these issues.

Nick Page wrote a book called *And Now Let's Move Into A Time of Nonsense*. In it he points out that he could find virtually no "modern" images in worship songs, "an image, that say, could only have come from the twentieth century." Instead, we use a strange biblical-sounding code language: we sing of "silver and gold" instead of money, or we hint at our problems evasively using terms such as "storms", or "darkness".

Old Testament scholar David Firth has commented:

> Many contemporary worship services happen without any obvious reference to the daily life of those who participate in it. Even when we move away from the sloppy language that equates worship with singing praise songs, the idea that worship constitutes a set of lifestyle commitments is not often evidenced. How do our singing, our prayers, and our testimony point us to God's continued activity in our lives, activity for which we should worship him?

Additionally, many of our songs imply that we only meet God when we gather and sing: "Come, *now* is the time to worship…", "*Here* I am to worship…" "Your presence in *this place*". We sing with the hope that the "things of earth become strangely dim", and the world outside of church is often portrayed in our songs as a dark, hostile place. Looking at the top 25 CCL lyrics in the UK and USA for our book *Whole Life Worship* we concluded: "In the songs we analysed, there was virtually no language of expectation that the believer will worship, serve or experience God in the world outside the church."

This is evidence of an unbiblical dualism, or what you might call a "sacred/secular divide". Graham Cray has written:

> It is my belief that there is a dualism, a fatal flaw, an unbiblical split, within the basic spirituality of Western white Christianity… If spirituality is undermined by dualism each act of worship can have serious negative consequences on the spiritual life of a

> congregation. Worship becomes spiritualized and ethereal, rather than being rooted in daily experience and circumstances… It encourages the development of a spiritual life that is personal, sincere and perhaps quite intense, without making links with everyday life.

This worldview entered parts of Christianity through those we now call the gnostics. N.T. Wright argues:

> A good many Christian hymns and poems wander off unthinkingly in the direction of gnosticism… [in this flawed view] the created world is at best an irrelevance, at worst a dark, evil, gloomy place, and we immortal souls, who existed originally in a different sphere, are looking forward to returning to it as soon as we're allowed to.

In contrast, the Bible claims that God created the heavens *and* the earth (Gen 1:1), the visible *and* invisible (Col 3:16), and that Jesus is in the process of redeeming *all things* (Col 3:20). The cross, the resurrection and the ultimate purpose of God is to renew and reconcile every aspect of his creation (Eph 1 and 2). If we, the Church, are going to fully play our part in this wonderful plan we need lyrics which remind us of God's heart for the whole world and the whole of life. We need songs and times of gathered worship that create space for God to inspire us, empower us and send us out to continue worshipping him.

Songwriter Stuart Townend (*In Christ Alone*, *How Deep the Father's Love for Us*) has recognized this issue and begun to write songs in response to it:

> We seem to have lots of songs that focus on the experience of worshipping – "Here I am Lord in Your presence" type songs. So in recent years I've tried to create songs that will be relevant to the other 6 days and 22 hours of our week! . . . [His song *Christ be in my Waking* is] a reminder to be 'God-aware' in all the different parts of our lives – from morning to evening and night, in my thought-life, in the things I say, in the good things . . . and in our most desperate moments.

It is worth pointing out that this is a challenging task. We may enthusiastically add "modern" sounding language or everyday life references to our lyrics, only to end up with a clunky sounding song which people don't want to sing! You will need to delve deep into your poetry skills, creative language and liturgical insights in order to craft something which will actually connect with people. It also helps to make connections with biblical phrases or concepts (we have found jumping-off points for songs in Romans 12:1, Colossians 3:16-17 and Hebrews 13:15-16, but you will find other

references), or connect with historic examples of whole-life worship (including Celtic prayers, Brother Lawrence *Practicing The Presence of God* as he did the dishes, the hymns of Charles Wesley, or the example of Afro-American Spirituals). Finally, remember to keep God the centre of these songs, not our own efforts or activities.

This is a challenge, but the potential fruit is enormous. Imagine every church member leaving your services with the sense that their work, home life and community engagement is their mission field. Think about the impact of every person inspired and empowered to live for God in whatever place they find themselves. Get excited about the close of the church service as not being the end, but instead the beginning of a week of worship and service in the world God so loves.

Challenge #1
Write a song that helps the congregation intercede for issues in our world. This could be specific (a focus on the environment, war, poverty, etc), or more general. Try and be explicit about actual problems rather than use metaphors (darkness, storms). For inspiration, listen to:

- *Lord You Hear the Cry* - https://www.resoundworship.org/song/lord_you_hear_the_cry_lord_have_mercy
- *We Call to You* - https://songselect.ccli.com/Songs/7035108/king-of-compassion
- *God Our Father* - https://www.resoundworship.org/song/god_our_father_let_your_kingdom_come

Challenge #2
Write a gathering song for the beginning of your service, which acknowledges the different places people have been coming from in their week. You may want to highlight the positive experiences people have had, rather than giving the impression that the world is a "bad, gloomy place." For inspiration, listen to:

- *As we Gather in Your Presence* - https://www.resoundworship.org/song/as_we_gather_whatever_we_do
- *Come You Thankful People* - https://www.resoundworship.org/song/come_you_thankful_people

Challenge #3

Write a commitment and/or sending song, which could be used at the end of a service. Help people commit their everyday lives to God, and/or be empowered for service in the places they will find themselves. You may want to be specific about places, actions or attitudes which the congregation is committing themselves to. For inspiration, listen to:

- *Christ be in my Waking* - https://www.stuarttownend.co.uk/song/christ-be-in-my-waking/
- *Before you I Kneel* - https://www.gettymusic.com/before-you-i-kneel/
- *We Seek Your Kingdom* - http://www.cinnamonnetwork.co.uk/we-seek-your-kingdom/ (tune "Abide with me")
- *In the Light of Your Mercy* - https://www.resoundworship.org/song/in_the_light_of_your_mercy
- *Send Us Out* - https://www.resoundworship.org/song/send_us_out

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OUR SONG: WRITING A SONG FOR COMMUNITY AS COMMUNITY

Jaewoo Kim

Songs for Community

Ephesians 5:19 says, “Speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. Sing and make music in your heart to the Lord” (NIV). Scripture not only commands us to sing, or sing to the Lord, but also to sing to one another.

Songs in the context of corporate worship are songs for community. They are meant to be sung by the community because worship is a communal response to the Lord. Yes, we come to worship God individually but worship is also ***our*** response to God as ***His people***. Different places in the Bible mention God saying "They shall be My people, and I will be their God.” (Exodus 29:45, Jeremiah 32:38, Ezekiel 37:23)

In every worshipping community, there are shared beliefs and experiences. Songs from a specific community can contain unique stories and confessions from it’s members. When a song is born ***in*** a specific community and is written ***for*** and ***by*** that community, members get to own the song together! It is a reflection of their shared stories, beliefs and confessions. So instead of only singing songs as a community, why not also write songs as a community?

Prompt:
Is it common to find well-known worship songs that are written by more than one songwriter? Can you find worship songs written by more than two songwriters? Are these songwriters part of the same community? If worship songs are for communities, why do you think it’s rare that songs are written by a group?

Songs Born Out of Community

What if we were to write a song for our worshipping community as a community? What if the process of writing a worship song together as a community actually can become a way to cultivate a worshipping community among us?

Prompt:
Have you ever written a song as a community? Do you think it would be an easy process or challenging process? What might be challenging in writing a song together?

Meet Your Group

1. Form a group with at least 3 people in it. Not everyone has to be musically talented or have songwriting experience but everyone must be willing to contribute.
2. Ask and find out: What are the same truths you all believe about God?
3. Ask and find out: What similar or shared experiences do you have in your journey of following God?
4. Ask and find out: What are some favorite worship songs the group shares?
5. What differences can you find in your group? (cultural, theological, personality, experiences)

Let's Write a Song Together

1. Come up with words and phrases that give your group a sense of community.
2. Make sure that no one dominates idea, theme, or process. (Assign facilitator if necessary.)
3. Choose keywords or phrases from which to develop a song.
4. Make sure each person shares why specific words or phrases matter to them with reference to the scripture.
5. Come up with a singable melody together for the verse and the chorus of the song.
6. Explore various structures. When writing from a group it is often better to have a simpler structure for your song. Be content with just a refrain or a few verses and a chorus.
7. Present and share with others once done. Ask for feedback on, "What story and feelings do you think this song captures?"

Prompt:

What did you enjoy the most in the process? What was the most challenging part of the process and why? What was the benefit of writing a song together as a group? Do you think there's an effective way to write as a community including each person's idea without sacrificing artistic excellence?

More suggestions for writing worship songs as a community.

1. Write a song together in a Bible study group.
2. Write a song as a community for a special event. (missions conference, summer camp, Easter, Christmas, etc.)
3. Write a song with your pastor based on the teaching series or a specific sermon.
4. Write a song with culturally or ethnically different and diverse people in your community.
5. Write a song with people who speak different languages than you. Include their language in the song - even simple words like holy, glory, and God.
6. Write a song with different generations.
7. Write a song intended to be sung with voices only and no instruments.
8. Write a song of lament or celebration together when your community goes through a specific event in life. “Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn.”- Romans 12:15 (NIV)

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GOD IS GOOD, WHY SHOULD I CARE?:

Writing to Give Weight to Truth

Nathan Partain

When it comes to writing songs for worship, to say that words matter seems so elementary that we might deem it unworthy of mention. As lyricists, however, writing in such a way that the truths about God that we are trying to express have the proper weight is neither easy nor the default for most writers. Because of this, many songs written for the church today have no shortage of profound truth contained within their verses and yet somehow in parts, they fall flat and risk being shallow. Surprisingly, giving weight to the truths that we sing requires considerable effort, integrity, craft and discipline. We must engage these truths beyond their information, we must convey the human experience of them and set them in the setting of scripture, history and the work of Jesus.

Adorning the Truth of God in Song

If our only job were to restate true things about God, it would be pretty straight forward. "God is holy!" "Jesus is King!" "The Lord is powerful and majestic!" All of these things are true but who cares? Why does it matter? We cannot assume that these truths will have any impact on our dull and insensitive hearts. Many of us have heard these truths so many times that we can rattle them off without engaging our heart or imagination at all. In this way, these truths get emptied of their grandeur. As a writer of sacred songs, this is one of our chief responsibilities. We must ensure when we write something true about God, that we ourselves own it personally. Our aim is then to prove it to the hearts of others so that by the end of singing, the truth is applied so thoroughly that it is heartily believed afresh by the soul that sings it.
To further explain, let us say that a man wants to write his wife a poem on their anniversary to express his love. He may write, “My wife, you are beautiful. Your hair is brown. Your eyes are green. You are kind and you’re always on pitch when you sing.” Though this may all be true, what separates these statements of fact from being an outpouring of genuine love? There is no context or reasoning as to why all these things actually matter to the husband. It is not enough to merely state the attributes. The attributes must be lived in and relished for the words to become poetry or song. For instance, if the husband were to say “Though we have been married for years now, when I see you, I lose my breath. You are beautiful to me.” He has still made the statement of fact about his wife’s beauty but he has given it in the context of his

experience of her beauty. With efficiency, he has implied that her beauty is unfading and striking without adding adjectives like “amazing beauty” or “splendorous beauty”. She immediately knows that if her beauty is so immense that the wind gets knocked out of her husband when he sees her, then he must think that her beauty is “splendorous” and “amazing”.

Songwriting as Verbal Excavation

In the same way, when writing lyrics for other people to sing to God, it requires excavation and forethought. It takes meditating on who Jesus is and what he has done. It takes being saturated with scripture about what God has said about himself and what he has shown throughout history. We cannot just shoot from the hip. We must slow down and take inventory of our experience of Jesus. How does it feel in slow motion when he works in our hearts? What makes us want to surrender our very life to him? Why does it matter what he has done on the cross or how he intercedes right now or how he goes ahead of us each day, inviting us into supernatural lives full of purpose for his kingdom? We must spend the time to think through these questions every time we sit down to write.

The Seeds of Good Songwriting

But before we get too daunted by this task, there are a few categories of thought that can give us direction as we approach this sort of writing. Many times there is a kernel or a phrase or an emotion that our songs are inspired from. This seed is a great place from which a whole song can grow. Focusing on these significant contexts helps us to nurture great soil for our songs to flourish!

Nurturing Narrative:

How does the truth of God that you are presenting blossom as you continue to sing about it? Most of the time it will not be an actual story but it should have a progression where an argument is built to support your main thought or point, to propel the mind forward and the heart deeper into understanding why this truth is so important. That is…start somewhere, go somewhere, end somewhere.

Example:

Chorus/Thesis/Kernel: God is faithful when we are faithless.

Vs 1: God was faithful to Abraham even as Abraham was fumbling and confused about how God was going to give him a son or make him the father of many nations, but he brought it about despite Abraham.

Vs 2: God proved faithful to Israel and did not abandon them even though they abandoned and despised him for generations, killing his messengers and profaning his name among the nations.

Vs 3: God proved faithful in Jesus who, while we were still sinners, He died for us, saying "forgive them, they know not what they do." And "It is for this very reason that I came to this hour."

In this example with each verse, the truth of God's faithfulness set against our faithlessness is expanded, deepened and becomes more appropriately profound through building the progression of thought and proof to the initial kernel "God is faithful when we are faithless."

Nurturing Metaphor:

Like the husband's poem above, we have to think about how to talk about God's holiness, justice, power, grace, etc. in experiential detail. Without detail the truths have no teeth or bite and quickly become mere platitudes. We have the exciting and rigorous job of exploring the depths of God's goodness so that we can bring up unique treasures for our congregations. We have to be so familiar with these truths that their grit is under our fingernails by the time we are done exploring.

In this work, it can be helpful to bind ourselves to rules or restrictions. In the game *Taboo*, you are not allowed to say the word on the card that you draw but must describe it to your teammate in such a sufficient way that they know what it is that you are not saying. This is a great practice, not merely finding other synonyms for "grace" but describing what it's like to discover grace, to be renewed by it, to be forgiven and drawn out by it. Example:

- Instead of God is good we say, "Being in your presence is a feast."
- Instead of God is almighty we say, "Even as I tremble, I know that I am safe."
- Instead of God is righteous we say, "Everywhere you go becomes a garden full of peace."

- Instead of God is gracious we say, “You keep giving so much, it’s hard for me to receive.”

In all of these examples, we are still saying the same truths but they are expressed through the description of the experience of that truth. We don’t write “The wind is strong.” We tell what the trees do, how it feels on our face, whether we are afraid or invigorated. All of this will magnify the strength of the wind.

Nurturing Environment:

When is the truth you are trying to express applicable? When does it matter most? This can be practical discipleship through song (When you are feeling troubled know this…”) but can also be testimony from when the Lord really worked this truth into the fiber of your own soul (“In the terror of my failure, I found Jesus only nearer).” Giving the proper environment for your truth helps to beautify it as well, like the setting of a gem in the proper ring helps it to stand out. On the other hand, if a precious stone is set without such thoughtful intention, its beauty can be overwhelmed with metal work, filigree and details that distract from the glory of the gem. Example:

- The setting for God’s grace: “When I have no good to offer, he sings over me.”
- The setting for God’s steadfast love: “In the midst of my straying, he holds on to me.”
- The setting for God as supreme joy: “On the heights of his blessings, I see only him.”

These examples are indirect in that, like the above category of metaphor, they do not plainly say “God is my supreme joy”. But through the contrast or compliment of the moment in which God’s action takes place, they make his goodness even more rich and deep while still expressing “God is my supreme joy”.

Be encouraged. This type of writing does not happen overnight. It is part of the life-long work of growing in your craft. Even someone who is gifted with words naturally must hone that gift as they mature and gain experience with language and expressing the inexpressible. My hope is that in stirring these initial thoughts, that a new growth of writing may take root in our hearts as we strain to bless the Lord with all of our soul.

Exercise: Starting songwriting with a free write

Start your writing process when you have found the kernel or basic idea for your song with 5 minutes of uninterrupted free-writing. The way to do this is to start writing and not stop writing no matter what comes out. It can be complete nonsense or repeating words or even writing “I don’t know what to write.” The key is that you don’t stop writing and you don’t take time to think about it. You just pour out your mind. This has shown to be great for getting writers warmed up and shaking off inhibitions. Many times, images and emotional spaces come from free writing that generate more writing on an idea.

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PRAYER AND SONGWRITING

Josh Banner

Early Freedom

My first worship song made its way into a Sunday church service by accident. I have always been a limited musician, so writing songs was something I learned to do alone in my bedroom. I had fallen in love with the sound of the guitar my Dad bought me when I was sixteen. I would lay in bed strumming until I fell asleep, and then I'd reach for the guitar first thing in the morning. The sounds of the guitar became more and more a part of my inner world especially as I tried to talk to and be with God. At some point I found a way to sing phrases of Scripture over a chord progression. Later I figured out how to form these bits and pieces into complete songs, but as a musically insecure introvert this was all still private.

The first time anyone noticed my music was on a month-long mission trip in the back of a bus chugging through the mountains of Guatemala. I was singing a prayer I'd put into a song asking God to set me free from pornography.

> *Wash my body in your Word,*
> *and cleanse my conscience.*
> *Can I draw near?*
> *In full assurance?*
> *Make my heart sincere.*
> *Fill me with endurance.*
> *That I may please you*
> *And exalt you.*
> *In my body and my mind.*

When we got back home from our mission trip, the song made its way into our Sunday morning worship and from there onto a recording. Alone in my room singing, I wasn't imagining how some day that song or any of my other songs would help others worship God. Yet, somehow the overflow of my time spent in solitude served a larger community.

This is the foundational lesson I want to offer anyone who would try to write a worship song that might serve the church: invest in your solitude with God through personal

worship and prayer. Let your inner communion with God inspire and form whatever songs might come out of you. There is a vital connection between personal prayer and corporate worship.

No Guarantees

I still don't completely understand what it means to offer my creativity to God's larger purposes. And I don't believe we are supposed to understand these things either. So we can say that there is something accidental not just about my first worship song but there is something accidental about all of the worship arts used by God. We can come to God, offering our bits and pieces, but a fruitful corporate worship song is a work of the Holy Spirit that is accidental to—it begins in and emerges from our private, secret space of worship and prayer. We can make our feeble attempts at putting something beautiful together, but when it comes to making art that draws people to God, there is no guaranteed method.

This lack of guarantee perhaps the most humbling and difficult part of writing worship music, yet it is also the most delightful. Prayer is a freeing, joy-filled practice of surrendering and emptying ourselves so that we can be filled with God. We go into our secret place to hide in God by embracing our weaknesses to become more and more dependent upon God. Writing worship music is all about developing our ability to practice this emptying and filling prayer with and through music. However, it's curious to call this an "ability" as if it's something to accomplish, as if I could ever say that I'm really good at surrendering to God. We were created for this kind of relationship with God, yet tragically we resist and struggle with it *because we cannot control it*.

The difficult learning curve for a worship musician is identifying how to bring our best gifts without getting in God's way. Prayer and worship then are means to humbly cooperate with the Holy Spirit. In practice it is a courage born out of yielding to God. This is an inner knowledge that must be nurtured in your time alone in prayer and worship. Curiously I don't hear worship leaders talk much about the importance of solitude with God. Instead we talk about techniques and technology, about those things we can control, about external things and not the vital things of the heart.

Confession

This has been my own struggle. As my songs began to gain the attention of others, it was easier to become distracted from the deeper, spiritual nature of worship song-craft and more focused on developing my abilities to control a worship service. Of course, I

needed to continue learning more about the technical parts of poetry and music, but I confess that I allowed technique to replace prayer. My relative success allowed me to become self-reliant and distant from the very God my songs were intended to point people to. As my literal and figurative stage became bigger, it became increasingly difficult to let the song-writing process remain a prayerful practice of surrender.

I always assumed I would mature into a confident, assured worship musician. I can say I have more peace today than I could have ever imagined when I first started writing music, yet my peace is in the abiding presence of God. In some ways I'm more insecure than ever about writing a song! My expectations have changed. The stakes seem higher. Here the old adage is true, *to whom much is given, much is required*. I'm describing songwriting so far as a kind of practice done in "fear and trembling," a process of humility and self-surrender. Now I'd like to describe some more practical ways for you to see how to offer your best to God while also moving deeper into trust in God's greater power to work through you.

Getting Practical

Let me summarize here: crafting worship music for God is a kind of prayer-craft. We bring ourselves to this holy, creative process and surrender to it with no guarantees that anything we are making will be fruitful, lasting, or vital. So then, what does this process look like in practice?

The technical nature of prayer and songwriting have a lot in common.

Some beginning in prayer are taught to pray with the help of a form. I recall learning to pray through ACTS: adoration, confession, thanksgiving, and supplication. Later I was taught the Lord's prayer as a kind of form to follow too. Acknowledging "Our Father," is a prayer of recognizing God's heavenly authority. "Hallowed be thy name" allows you to reflect on his holiness. "Thy kingdom come" and "Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven" are movements of surrender, of submitting to God's purposes. You continue through "our daily bread," "lead us not into temptation" and so on.

These forms help us cover some theological ground in prayer. We can learn to be more thorough and to stretch our prayer through the form, yet at each turn, whether in theme or topic of prayer, we are using the language of ACTS or the Lord's prayer to move deeper into the presence of God. We are always beginners in prayer, and many of us need a place to start and a structure to continue along the way, yet we do not get stuck on any word or theological idea. Instead we are invited to open ourselves more and

more to God through the form, to recognize his presence and love in a real and true way so that we can become more and more transformed into the likeness of Jesus.

We can learn to write music by following forms too. Two different forms—two different approaches of coming at songwriting can be described by an apocryphal story about John Lennon and Bob Dylan listening to a record. Lennon would say: *listen to the sound of the song*. While Dylan would differ saying, *no, listen to the lyrics*.

Some songwriters like Bob Dylan begin by working out the text of a song. The first half of the process is identifying the lyrical structure of verses, a chorus, and maybe a bridge. These songs tend to be word and idea heavy. They work within the form and rules of the way language works. Once the form of the text is set, the lyrics inspire the melody, chord voicings, and rhythm of the song.

Other songwriters in the manner of John Lennon are focused on the sound of the song, the vibe, the pocket, or the overall expression of the music of which the text is just one small part. The form of this kind of kind of music depends on setting up musical patterns that are interesting to the ear whether emphasizing melody or rhythm. These songwriters are thinking about how to get a listener inside the emotional space of the musical form of the song. Lyrics that are added later fit and compliment the structure or vibe of the music.

These two schools of songwriting overlap in practice with a variety of different kinds of songwriting techniques on how to develop your song. However, just like with the forms of prayer, what we are learning to do as we approach music through a form is to open ourselves more and more freely and to surrender to the creative process. One of my poet friends calls this deeper journey of the creative process, “finding your white, hot center.” You have your form and techniques, but every good artist is responding to something deeper, even the smallest flicker of creative flame stirring inside of you. You might be playing through a chord progression or jotting down words and phrases in a journal. You are engaging the ‘materials’ of music somehow and you are paying attention to what seems interesting and what seems boring, what you will keep and what you will discard. You listen and watch for a sound or a musical phrase that has a glimmer of heat, of goodness, of substance.

Prayer and songwriting both have forms and techniques, but prayer and songwriting are not merely limited to a form or technique. A worship musician brings these two arenas together, the external, and practical serve to inspire something that is surprisingly better than what we could have imagined possible when we began the

process. Songwriting and prayer then are journeys of discovery. When the prayer and song-craft come together, it's not that we are working to earn God's favor. Instead we are cooperating with the Holy Spirit to respond to God's love with our songs.

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SONGS FOR KINGDOM MOVEMENT

Nate Marialke

A well written song, birthed out of deeply held beliefs, connected to a movement of community is a powerful thing. Think about the songs of the cultural shift of the 1960's and 1970's, the music of the Russian Revolution, even the great composers of the renaissance era. For better or worse, songs were the soundtrack of cultural movement. Songwriters can be prophetic in this way; they take ideas and distill them into simplicity, forge them with the right combination of rhythm and melody, and create a theme that is imprinted emotionally into the human psyche. The result is that groups of people can come into agreement around an idea, thought, or feeling, forged simply by a few minutes of music.

Songwriting in Church History - Music Shapes Movements

So, I'll say it again; A well written song, birthed out of deeply held beliefs, connected to a movement of community is a powerful thing. This holds especially true when it comes to writing songs for the church. The church being a multicultural body bound together by the cords of common belief in the lordship of Jesus Christ is a community of kingdom movement. This movement seems to always have a soundtrack and that is where worshipping songwriters come in.

"*Contemporary worship is not just a style, but a sound track of what God is doing right now in our midst.*" - Craig Rees (Pastor, Central Wesleyan Church)

Throughout the two millennia of the church's existence we have experienced moves of God which tend to result in reclaiming something we've lost. The early church, coming out of the Jewish worship culture, had their psalms and prayers. In the West, the medieval church had chanting monks. Some of the great hymns of the reformation, like *A Mighty Fortress* are still beloved today. This gave way to the great prayer movements of the Moravians and the gospel movements of the American circuit riders spearheaded by Whitfield and the Wesley brothers. Fueled by fervor for the gospel, new songs were born. Among them are *And Can it Be* and *Christ the Lord is Risen Today*. Some songs of that era were reclaimed or perhaps, repurposed. Common folk melodies with the new addition of gospel centered lyrics found their way into Sunday morning worship making church music even more accessible to those seeking salvation. John Newton,

the author of *Amazing Grace*, and John Wesley both used common folk melodies with their new more evangelistic hymn lyrics.

Songwriting Today

The dawn of the 20th century brought another change as a fresh move of God swept through England beginning in Wales with meetings held by Evan Roberts and his worship team of all women called *The Singing Sisters*. Music and songs were at the heart of this Revival. It is reported that spontaneous singing of worship would go on for long periods of time and many people found their way to Christ as a result of the Spirit's power at work. Meanwhile, in America, the son of former African American slaves, William Seymour, begin to hold meetings at an old mission in Los Angeles (Azuza Street Revival). It is not an overstatement to say that this movement changed the world of church worship forever and has impacted almost every segment of Christianity. This modern "Pentecostal" movement saw the coming together of ethnic groups in a racially divided America. The result was a new sound of worship influenced by the diversity of culture and filled with emotion as multitudes encountered God in a fresh way.

The 20th century was bursting with new songs in the church and in the world. Musical style was revolutionized by the advent of Jazz, Rock-N-Roll, and Hip Hop. It is interesting to note that all of these musical styles can be traced back to the marriage of African rhythm and Celtic melody, another influence of ethnic groups coming together. By the time the cultural revolution of the 60's arrived certain segments of the church began to experience another fresh wind of the Spirit of God moving. The moral and spiritual fall-out from the hippy movement began to take their toll on the boomer generation leaving in its wake spiritual emptiness and a hunger for something real. Once again God was there to welcome people to himself and from grateful believers, many former hippies, who found salvation and freedom in Christ the *Jesus People Movement* was born. With it came simple, heartfelt songs that could be sung anywhere at any time with as little instrumentation as an acoustic guitar. These songs breathed new life into those congregations that welcomed them and a new era of songwriting worship leaders came on the scene.

In my opinion, worship songwriting is very much a continuation of the movement we've seen this past century. Worship in the western church continues its journey towards racial and even denominational diversity, congregational participation, and providing a soundtrack for what God is currently doing. My encouragement is that we anchor

ourselves to the Word of God and to the church as we write new songs of our faith and seek to make the name of Jesus known and loved in the nations of the world.

In this very brief snapshot of history we observe that all these seasons were accompanied by new songs - inspired by a fresh revelation, a theological conflict, or conflagration of distinct groups. While it is important that we have songs that faithfully anchor us to the past of what God has done and point us toward the hopeful future of what God will do we also need to write songs about what God *is doing* right now, today.

> *Sing to the LORD a **new song**; sing to the LORD, all the earth.*
> *Sing to the LORD, praise his name; proclaim his salvation day after day.*
> *Declare his glory among the nations, his marvelous deeds among all peoples.*
> *Psalm 96:1-3 (NIV)*

> *And they sang a **new song**, saying:*
> *"You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals,*
> *because you were slain, and with your blood you purchased for God*
> *people from every tribe and language and people and nation.*
> *Revelation 5:9 (NIV)*

Exercise 1 – Research

What are two or three of your favorite songs? Do some research on the story behind those songs. What community(s) is the songwriter embedded in? What does the song say about what is/was happening in his or her world at the time the song was written?

Exercise 2 – Observe

Think about your own community. Are there things you observe that God is doing right now?

Exercise 3 – Listen

Take a moment to quiet your heart. Become aware that the Holy Spirit is in you and with you. Once you have this awareness (by faith) ask the Spirit of God what he is saying to you and about you right now.

*Here are a few things to know about hearing from God:

1. God has a voice, he does speak, and he desires to speak to you through the ministry of the Holy Spirit. (John 10:27)
2. Sometimes it takes time to develop our "spiritual ears", so don't get discouraged.
3. God's voice to his children will always bring affirmation, hope, revelation. Even if we hear him correcting us or speaking to us about something difficult, it is always for our good and brought in a spirit of love. If we think we hear from God and it brings a sense of anxiety, fearfulness, hopelessness, or condemnation we can be sure that it is not the voice of God we are hearing.
4. When God speaks, what you hear from him will always line up with Scripture, it won't contradict scripture.

Exercise 4 – Discern

Now that you have exercised hearing from God about yourself. Quiet yourself again, become aware of His presence and ask Him what he wants to do in your community. Write those things down.

Exercise 5 – Craft

Take some things you wrote down from exercises 3 and 4. Try to find one main idea then begin to craft some lyrical words that encapsulate those big ideas. Try to say them slightly different then you've heard before. Before long, you will have the beginning of lyrics to a brand-new song. Next ask yourself what kind of mood these lyrics emote. Begin to play with different melody and chord structures on your instrument to support these lyrics (or have a musician friend join you).

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[3] THEOLOGICAL ‘HELPS’ FOR SONGWRITING

WRITING SONGS FROM SCRIPTURE

Caroline Cobb

> *"Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God." - Colossians 3:16*
>
> *"The duty of singing praises to God, seems to be appointed wholly to excite and express religious affections. No other reason can be assigned, why we should express ourselves to God in verse, rather than in prose, and do it with music, but only, that such is our nature and frame, that these things have a tendency to move our affections." - Jonathan Edwards*

Jonathan Edwards and Colossians 3 both show us music's unique ability to stir our love for God, to express our worship, and to get the truth and beauty of scripture into our gut. If this is true (and it is!), songwriters in the Church have a great responsibility. As we write songs from scripture, we must engage with all of it (not just the parts we like), and we must communicate it faithfully and with imagination, so that God's Word will dwell *richly* in his people. We must have the diligence of a Bible teacher, the vision of an artist, and the skillfulness of a songwriter.

Like a Bible Teacher
First, we approach the scripture like an **expositor**, or a teacher wanting to understand the true and full meaning of the text. We want to study the Bible inductively, making observations and letting scripture interpret itself, holding ourselves back from personal application until we understand as well as we can what the passage is really about.

Ask yourself, "*What is the context here? What are the main themes and key, repeating words? What do the cross-references say and how does that help me interpret this passage rightly? Are there types of Christ here, or foreshadowing of gospel? Who are these characters? How does this passage relate to the big story of scripture? What do commentaries and my Study Bible say?*" As we do this, we stop using the Bible as a tool to support what we want to say, and become a vehicle for it's message instead.

Even after we finish a song, it's important to continue handling the Word of God with care by asking for feedback. Invite a pastor or mentor to read over your lyrics, checking for blind spots and making sure your words are not only beautiful and authentic, but true. As an example, before I record any album, I invited a group of trusted friends and

mentors to read over every lyric and give both theological and musical feedback. After hearing their thoughts, I'll tweak lyrics or even go back to the drawing board.

Like an Artist

Next, we ask questions like an **artist** would, trying to *feel* and see the story, wanting to approach it imaginatively rather than academically: "*What were the characters feeling? What did it look like, taste like, smell like in this scene? What is the emotion in this passage? What does the story feel like and sound like from different points of view? What if I told this story from God's perspective or stood in the shoes of a particular character?*" These questions are especially helpful when writing from a narrative, but can be used in congregational worship and other styles as well. As songwriters, we can help people not only understand basic truths from scripture, but engage with them imaginatively.

For example, my song "Eve's Lament" tells the story of the Fall in Genesis 3 from Eve's perspective. I used as much snake imagery (tall grass, venom, sliding, wrap, constrict, hypnotize, etc.) as possible to help invoke a feeling of creeping danger, a snake ready to strike. And rather than simply stating the obvious (i.e. "Eve took the fruit, disobeyed God, and fell into sin"), the song says "I took the fruit of my desire… the lie constricts, the curse clamps down." By approaching this passage like an artist, my hope is that the listener would *see* and *feel* this story in their gut, rather than just understand it intellectually.

Like a Songwriter

Finally, we approach a passage like a **songwriter**. It's important to remember that we are not talking about scripture memory songs here. There is creative license to change the text a bit, to use melody that serves the meaning and feeling of the passage, and to have fun with literary devices like metaphor, alliteration, personification, even allegory. So we ask, "*Using all of the tools in a songwriters' belt, how can I tell this story creatively? Does the chord progression and melody capture the emotion or mood of the passage? How will this relate to modern-day listeners? How does this song relate to my own life? If I am writing a congregational worship song, is it singable and catchy?*"

When you think about it, the Bible is a songwriter's dream. It is full of amazing stories and rich metaphors and interesting language to get your creative juices flowing. There is action and truth and hope and drama enough for a lifetime of songwriting. All you have to do is dig in! As you use your gifts in music and songwriting to faithfully exposit God's Word like a teacher, with the imagination of an artist and the skills of a growing

songwriter, your heart will be changed, the Church will be encouraged, and God will be glorified.

Finally, Make a Plan!
Rather than waiting for inspiration to strike, carve out a regular time to write. And consider committing to a specific, measurable goal with an end date. In 2011, I committed to write a song for every book of the Bible in one year, and it changed me and shaped the way I write. Perhaps you could write a song for every Psalm over the next 2 years (that's 1.5 songs a week). Or, you and your friends at church could write a song for every sermon in the current sermon series.

Writing Prompts:

- Pick a favorite story about Jesus in the gospels.
- Before beginning to write a song, spend 15 minutes journaling your observations, using the questions above in the "expositor" paragraph as a guide. What main idea in this passage would you want to communicate in your song?
- Next, journal a bit more imaginatively. What did the scene feel, smell like? Put yourself in each character's shoes. How would you feel and what would you be thinking? Is there an interesting point of view from which you could tell this story?
- With all of this in mind, begin to write your song. Make sure the chord progression and melody fit with the mood and emotion you hope to communicate. Enjoy the process and don't overthink it. Finish the song and don't let your inner critic speak too loudly before you do.
- Record your song, complete or incomplete, into your phone and give it some space. In a few days, re-read the story and listen again to the song. Tweak, edit and keep helping it along and invite others into the process, until it is strong, beautiful, authentic, free of cliche, and true.

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SONGWRITING FROM THE PSALMS

Jonathan Gabhart

Take a look at this quote from contemporary songwriter and worship pastor, Isaac Wardell. Read it a few times if it helps.

"*The Psalms are the starting place and then out of the Psalms you have a criterion from which you can judge how good a praise song is and how good a hymn is. If you start to see a great disconnect between our hymnody and our psalter or praise chorus catalog and our psalter, it should be clear to us where the poverty is.*" (Isaac Wardell, The Porter's Gate Project)

We'll get into that soon, but first a story. As a kid, I would usually be the "first mate" to my Mom, Dad, or Grandpa on whatever project they had going. I learned a phrase that I remember to this day. Maybe you have heard it said in your house or in shop class or something.

> "Measure twice, cut once."

You pull out your tape measure, glide it along your board. You need a 16 and 3/4 inch cut. You make your mark, you cut the board. And as you line it up, sure enough, it doesn't fit. You measure again and, yup, actually 17 inches even.

I think this axiom can be useful for songwriting for the church. We can use "measure twice, cut once" if we view our "measure" as Scripture (particularly the book of Psalms); our "cut" as the songwriting process; and our "board" as our song. The health of our worship songs, the accuracy of our cut will increase when we stay tethered (tied) to the Psalms. When we use the Psalms (and other scripture and scripture songs) to write songs for the church, we can take comfort in the fact that—across many ages, places, and cultures—these words have guided Christians. They have provided language to express adoration, thanksgiving, confession, lament, longing, and all the range of emotions we bring to God in prayer and worship.

Scripture, as Christians have professed for centuries, is the Word of God given to God's people that contains "the will of God completely and that everything one must believe to be saved

is sufficiently taught in it." (Belgic Confession, Article 7). More particularly Scripture contains the story of God's creation of the world, our fall into sin, the covenant made with his people Israel, the sending of his Son Jesus Christ to become human and take away the sins of the world by his death and resurrection, and the gift of the Holy Spirit to guide the body of Christ (the Church) until he comes again to make all things new and all things right.

Not every word of every worship song needs to be a direct quotation of the Bible, but it gives us a language to talk to God in honest and faithful ways. And when it comes to the book of Psalms, we find the most specific and poignant worship language. Athanasius, an early church theologian and pastor, once wrote this about the Psalms,

"Among all the books, the Psalter has certainly a very special grace, a choiceness of quality well worthy to be pondered…that within it are represented and portrayed in all their great variety the movements of the human soul." (Athanasius, died 373) (from Worship in the Joy of the Lord, page 264-265)

The Psalms give us a stunningly complete picture of how to pray, sing, and worship. All the emotions and movements of our lives can be found. The Psalmist sings "O give thanks to the Lord for he is good (Psalm 107); "Bless the Lord, O My Soul (Psalm 103);" "How Long, O Lord, will you forget me forever? (Psalm 13)" Read the Psalter from start to finish and you will see, at least somewhere, familiar language to what you may have felt at some point in your journey of faith. The highs, the lows, the struggles and doubts, the joys and thanksgiving.

But we if we go down a list of songs we sing in church, we will find that not all songs have a tether (a tie) to this language we find in the Psalms. This is what Isaac Wardell was speaking about in the quote at the top. (Read it again if need be).

In this way we can use the songs as our measure. We take our song and measure it against the Psalms for resonance, and before we cut it, before we offer a song to a friend or a pastor or a congregation, we see if this language is consistent with the way that God's people have worshipped throughout the ages. Luckily with songwriting, the "cut" isn't as permanent as cutting a board with a miter saw. We can measure twice, thrice, or more against Scripture and edit accordingly. Maybe you have a great verse of a song that you've written, use the Psalms to measure it against. Maybe you don't know where to start with a worship song. Pull out a Psalm, use it as your measure. And you can riff on it, measure it once, maybe it doesn't quite line up, measure it again. And then make your cut. Write your song and share it. Offer it to the church for the good of

the Body. Perhaps with the words of the Psalmist on your lips “O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; his steadfast love endures forever (Psalm 118:1).”

Exercise:
Like the variety of woods in the world, so the wide variety of ways the church has sung the psalms. They are chanted, worked into metrical texts, inspire simple praise choruses, and are sung in every language under heaven. To begin, pick a few short psalms (Psalm 23, 117, 131, etc) and try writing prayers inspired by their language. After you have done this try writing a song around just a few verses. If this goes well then begin to work through the whole psalm. Repeat!

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WRITING SONGS ABOUT GOD:

Approaching Lyrics from a Trinitarian Perspective

Andy Bast

Christians have, for centuries, believed that God is “three in one.” Although, the word “Trinity” does not exist in scripture, Christians came to understand and affirm this understanding in the 4th century because of how the Old and New Testaments reveal the nature of God. But why would this matter for artists and songwriters creating for worship?*

What is the Trinity?

God is three “persons” that share a single divine essence. The Old Testament insists that there is One God: “Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one” (Deuteronomy 6:4). Christians believe the God of the Old Testament is the same God of the New Testament. However, the New Testament also reveals God subsisting in three “persons,” Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. These “persons” are not persons the same way that you or I are, but are distinct in their relationship to each other and at the same time exist in full divine unity. This is a great paradox of the Christian faith. Throughout the New Testament, we are presented with the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, each presented as God. At the same time, passages such as John 14 articulate the oneness of the persons of God: “Philip said to him, ‘Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied.’ Jesus said to him, ‘Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, ‘Show us the Father’? Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own; but the Father who dwells in me does his works. Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me.” (John 14:8-11).

The God of the Bible

The Trinity guards us from writing about a god not represented in scripture (which would actually be idolatry!). If we are to write songs for worship, we should write in a way consistent with Scripture. The Bible and Christian tradition teaches us that God is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. And so it is appropriate to worship all three. This does not mean, however, that there are three Gods! Jesus, for instance, is not someone separate from the Father. Although Jesus is God’s Son, he is not a created being or a son in the same way that I am the son of my father. He is fully human, but is still fully God (mysterious I know!). God the Father is the one God just as Jesus and the Holy Spirit are

the one God. And so we don't have to be afraid when we write music that addresses the Holy Spirit or any other "person" of God that we might be leaving out one of the other persons. God exists in three persons and all share the same essence. We can write songs to the Father or the Son or the Holy Ghost freely. We should also write songs that help to show how the members of the Trinity interact in our salvation.

Expanding our Worship

The Trinity expands and enlivens our songs to include a more robust understanding of God, offering more options. We don't have to be afraid when we write music that addresses the Holy Spirit or any other "person" of God that we might be leaving out one of the other persons. When we worship the Holy Spirit, we are worshipping the other persons. God exists in three persons and all share the same essence. It also means that the God of the Old Testament is the same as the New Testament. We can see Jesus and the Spirit in the Old Testament (e.g. the Psalms are a great place to look for Jesus). It is totally appropriate to do this and even write Psalm settings with direct references to Christ. Another way to expand our writing is by diversifying our references to God. If we only ever refer to one "person" of the trinity in our songwriting, we miss some of the fullness of who God fully is.

The Mystery of "Three in one"

The Trinity reminds us that we cannot contain or control God. God will never be fully understood, which is itself a reason for further worship.There are some things, although true, that cannot fully conform to our rational understanding of reality. Scripture reveals a God that is one but three. God is 1+1+1=1 We can never fully grasp how this works. But rather than cast doubt, this mystery can lead to further worship! Our understanding of all things is limited. The Trinity reminds us that we cannot contain or control God. Even the simple concept of number eludes us when we consider God. This a good thing. Should not our understanding of the creator of all things also be limited? This can lead us to even deeper and more nuanced worship of the wonders of God that we can explore with song.

Examples of modern Trinity language Songs:

King of Kings - Hillsong Worship
God the Spirit - Matt Boswell
Praise the Invisible - Daniel Bashta
Trinity Song - Sandra McCracken
Holy Spirit - Jesus Culture (one of the few modern worship songs that directly address the Holy Spirit).

Exercise:
Try to write a song inspired by the baptism of Jesus (Matt 3:13-17; Luke 3:21-22) where we see each member of the Holy Trinity in relation to each other.

Questions from Lester Ruth, when we are thinking about songwriting and the Trinity.

1. Do the songs name the Trinity or all three Persons of the Trinity?
2. Do the songs direct our worship toward the Trinity as a whole or toward one of the Persons of the Trinity?
3. Do the songs remember the activity of the Divine Persons among Themselves?
4. Do the songs see Christian worship as participation of believers in inter-Trinitarian dynamics or activity?
5. Do the songs use the character of inter-Trinitarian relationships to explore a desired character for relationship among Christians, for example, unity, love, sacrifice, or humility?

*I owe much to Dr. Han-luen Kanzer Komline and her Systematic Theology I course at Western Theological Seminary. This article is a "riff" on her work in this class (especially her insistence that good theology leads to action: worship and prayer).

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SONGWRITING WITH THE SAINTS

Bruce Benedict

Have you ever felt sad in worship and struggled to sing the songs your church was singing? Have you ever been stuck in a season of depression and just wished that there were some worship songs that captured the depths of your sorrow? The psalms are full of heart wrenching laments (read Psalm 130) but they rarely find a place in the world of modern worship. Then I discovered a group of artists who were trying to do this very thing. Write modern worship songs that were more emotionally honest.

Based out of Belmont College in Nashville, I discovered a collection of songwriters called *Indelible Grace* who had just released an eponymous record that was filled with 12 tracks of what they called "retuned hymns." These were very old hymn texts with brand new melodies and modern production in a folk-rock style. The songs were mostly written by college students who were fed up with the shallow lyrics and emotional pitch of CCM and Contemporary Worship music. These students wanted to sing worship songs that 'felt' more real and authentic to their experiences of faith. They wondered why they couldn't express their doubt through singing, and surprisingly they found the poetic language they yearned for in mostly forgotten hymn texts. Maybe you've heard of some of these hymn writers? Your parents old hymnal is filled with their names. Charles Wesley, who wrote over 5,000 hymns for the methodists. Isaac Watts, who energized the language of the psalms with expressions of Christ. Anne Steele, one of the first significant woman songwriters, who poured out her doubts to God. Fannie Crosby, who wrote thousands of hymns, was blind from birth.

The hymn writer and pastor that worked his way into my soul was John Newton (1725-1807). Most of you will know his most famous hymn Amazing Grace, but he is far better known for the story of his life. He became at one point a slave of an African princess and then worked on a slave ship for many years before he was radically converted to Christ and became a pastor back in England. He went on to publish a collection of hymns called the "Olney Hymns" many which he co-wrote with William Cowper (sounds like Cooper) who was a well-known poet of the time. Most of these hymns were written for his blue collar congregation in Olney, England and inspired by the sermons he was writing. He is also famous for the heartfelt letters he wrote to struggling Christians and collected under the name *Cardiphonia*.

When I began exploring the hymns of these old pastors I was struck with the deep love they had for scripture, for God's people, and God's glory and their ability to capture

struggle and doubt in poetry. The language, though different at times, still spoke of the power of their piety and lent itself easily to new melodies and arrangements. Because the lyrics are now all in public domain it freed me up as a songwriter to experiment with the texts and to discover these old poets as co-writers, even as I struggled to learn how to write songs. For almost five years after first hearing these retuned hymns I wrote only worship songs rooted in old hymns. These holy writers became my guides and tutors in how to song-write for the church. I am so grateful for them.

Writing Prompt

Find an *old hymnal and spend 20-30 minutes just reading through texts and getting a feel for the language. When you find one that moves your heart, try to write a new melody to the text that captures the truth and spirit of it. repeat.

*Hymnary.org is an amazing place to find hymn texts online. It's also helpful to purchase a collection of hymn texts with no music like *Gadsby's Hymnal or* Spurgeon's *Our Own Hymnbook*.

Anne Steele, "Dear Refuge of My Weary Soul"

Dear refuge of my weary soul,

On Thee, when sorrows rise

On Thee, when waves of trouble roll,

My fainting hope relies

To Thee I tell each rising grief,

For Thou alone canst heal

Thy Word can bring a sweet relief,

For every pain I feel

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