



## The Songs of a Worship Leader

Competency: Plan a biblically faithful and contextually relevant worship set that moves the hearts of worshippers closer to the heart of God.

### Assignments

1. Read Psalm 96 and answer the questions that follow.
2. Read the Articles: *Eight Questions Every Worship Leader Must Ask* and *Do You Make These 5 Mistakes When Choosing Songs?* by David Santistevan and answer the questions that follow.
3. Read the Article: *Verticality* by Josh Via and answer the questions that follow.
4. Work with your worship mentor to plan the next worship set.
5. Plan out a worship set by yourself and have your mentor evaluate it.
6. Observe a worship service and discuss with the worship leader your observations about the structure of the set.

### Psalm 96

1. Underline all of the active verbs in the passage. What do these descriptions inform you about worship?
2. What stood out to you the most from the passage?
3. Why do you think the Psalmist tells us to “sing to the Lord a new song?”
4. Why are people sometimes resistant to new songs?



5. What response does the Psalmist seem to be trying to elicit from the worshippers in this passage?
  
6. What are you trying to accomplish when you create a worship set?

## 8 QUESTIONS EVERY WORSHIP LEADER MUST ASK WHEN CHOOSING SONGS

by David Santistevan

I'm often asked how I choose songs. Let's face it. There are thousands upon thousands of worship songs. Even with all of us combined, we could never sing them all. There are many worship songs I like that I never lead. There's also a lot of worship songs others lead that I don't like.

I have a specific criteria for how I choose them. These 8 questions give me a framework for choosing songs. I hope they'll help you too.

### 8 Song Choice Questions

Before we begin, it's important to remember that song choice isn't about you – your voice, your preferences, your creativity. It's more about who you're serving, who you're leading, and what will engage them in worship.

Think about your church. Do you lead for:

- A group of wild and crazy Middle Schoolers?
- Children with a very short attention span?
- A multi-generational service?
- An edgy, young adult experience?
- Senior citizens?

Be sure to keep that in mind.

With that being said, here is the list of questions you can apply to your next song list:

1. **Is Jesus at the center?** – Now, every song I lead isn't solely about Jesus. But I find this



to be the most helpful question. If a song isn't directly about Christ and His character, I need to know why. Because Christ-centered songs are the best songs, in my opinion. I desire the majority of my worship sets to be filled with these kinds of songs. This is what I want my church to be mindful of.

**2. Is it engaging?** – I want the songs I lead to be interesting, catchy, and fun to experience. There's not enough time to lead poorly written songs. I'm looking for songs that capture a room.

**3. Is it singable?** – Just recently I had my two summer interns suggest some new songs we should do for July & August. I found myself saying "no" to most of them. The main reason? They weren't singable for our congregation. They didn't possess an "easily digestible" melody for our people.

Sure, they were popular songs. Sure, they would work in certain contexts. But I'm always thinking – "what will work for Allison Park Church?" You should ask the same. Remember, most of the people in your church are not musicians looking for something creative and challenging. They simply want Jesus.

**4. Does it teach an important truth?** – The best songs are songs that speak directly to what your congregation is experiencing. Of course, that's different themes at different times. I remember back when "You Never Let Go" by Matt Redman was released. Such an important song for our church at that time.

A well chosen song can unite a church in a special way. Ask – "What is my church going through right now?"

**5. Can my band play it?** – Want to know why Chris Tomlin and Hillsong songs find their way into so many setlists? They create methodical, simple, easily-understood arrangements. When I'm listening for songs, I'm thinking – "Can my band pull this off? Is it challenging, yet accessible?"

**6. Is it declarative?** – The songs I like to do most are songs that declare truth. They call people to rise up. They inspire people to sing at the top of their lungs. So I'm looking for songs with powerful choruses. I envision my church singing them acapella. How would it sound? Every aspect of a song is important, but a soaring bridge and chorus really does the trick for me.

**7. Is it popular?** – Now, I never start with this question, but it is something I consider. If a song is making its way around the world, I want to know why. If other churches are using a song, oftentimes it can mean there's something special about it and I'll give it a try. But never lead songs simply because someone else does. Consider it, but be sure to factor in the other questions.



8. Does it flow? – I like songs I can “land” on and flow with. These are the kind of songs I can lead with a full band arrangement but also work in a simple, acoustic guitar context. A great song possesses a simplicity, sing-ability, and arrangement that makes it hard to stop singing. The more you sing it, the more it stirs your heart.

## DO YOU MAKE THESE 5 MISTAKES WHEN YOU CHOOSE SONGS?

By David Santistevan

Choosing songs for worship is hard. It's an acquired skill, akin to riding a bike in that you can eventually learn to do it well every time. Over the years I have made some mistakes in choosing a setlist and I hope to spare you the pain.

### 1. Your songs are in a bad range

This is the peril of many modern worship songs: In the verse, they are too low for people to sing, and in the chorus they are too high. I'm not saying to abandon songs with an octave jump, but be aware of what is comfortable for people to sing. The goal is engagement and if they are struggling to sing your songs, it will be a frustrating experience for them.

### 2. Your songs are unfamiliar

New songs are great and can breathe fresh life into a church, but if too many songs are unfamiliar, people will be lost. Good worship leaders have learned to marry the new with the old. They skillfully blend hymns and older songs that people know and love with new songs that are good for them. New songs need to be skillfully placed between the familiar so people can “ease” into them. This can be difficult for a young worship leader (like myself) who gets tired of the same songs over and over. It takes discipline to understand where people are and to minister to them successfully.

### 3. Your songs don't flow together

Beyond key and familiarity, your songs need to flow together. Doing “I Love You Lord” into “One Way” into “How Great Thou Art” into “Let it Rain” reflects poor planning. Work to reinforce theological themes with your songs. Take your people on a journey. That's not to say you can't change direction in the moment if the Holy Spirit is moving. Just don't throw together a random assortment of top worship hits. Connect your songs by KEY, by THEME, and STYLE.

### 4. Your songs don't connect with your congregation



Imagine you planned to lead your congregation this weekend...in Korean. But nobody spoke Korean. You will fail miserably. No matter how great the songs were, how impressive the band was, how great the keys were for singing, no one would connect. Connecting with your congregation starts with asking the question, "What is the predominant person in my congregation?" Are they senior citizens, youth, young adults, children? Each of those age groups will certainly gravitate to a certain song and style. That doesn't mean you can't lead youth in hymns or introduce seniors to modern music, particularly if you lead worship in a multi-generation church. Just be intentional about connecting with your congregation through your song choice.

### 5. Your songs are too rushed

This is more of a focus on "how" you lead your songs. Don't just rush through your setlist. Be sensitive to the Holy Spirit within your songs and between your songs. Getting through your song list without major mistakes is only a small measure of success. Engaging the hearts and minds of your congregation with God is what we desire. That doesn't mean each song needs to be 15 minutes, preceded by a mini-sermon. Just be sure you are truly worshiping and not simply rushing through the songs.

Questions from the Articles:

1. From your perspective, what is the purpose of a worship set?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
2. How would you describe your song preference? How is that similar or different than those in the congregation?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
3. Which of the eight questions do you feel you are good at? Why?



4. Which of the eight do you feel you need to grow in?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
5. What are the strengths of our worship sets? What are growth areas you see based on what you read?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
6. Which of the 5 mistakes have you witnessed before in a worship service? What was the impact on the overall worship experience?

## VERTICALITY

By Josh Via

1. God is Able (Hillsong)
2. Made to Worship (Chris Tomlin)
3. Holy, Holy, Holy (public domain)
4. How Great is Our God (Chris Tomlin)

The selected songs above serve as a generalized setlist you might expect to see in a typical North American evangelical church on any given Sunday morning. Now, amuse me for a moment. What if I told you the above setlist was tragically and fundamentally flawed? Not because of bad theology, or shallow doctrine, or a failure to incorporate both old and new songs. But because the above setlist lacks a key element—verticality. Simply put, verticality is worship directed *to* God, not simply *about* God. In the above example, every song is horizontal—*about* God. In fact, in *Made to Worship*, worshipers actually sing to each other—a testimony song. A lack of verticality in much of the worship song selection of our day has created a tragic loss of perspective and focus.

In his book, *Vertical Church*, pastor James MacDonald presents the following scenario to encourage worship leaders to carefully consider verticality in their preparation. He says,



When you or I stand in a circle speaking about someone who suddenly enters the room, we intuitively stop talking or immediately welcome the person into the center of what we are saying. What you would never do is continue talking *about* the person when you know he or she can hear you. Instead we either stop speaking or we speak directly to the person. If we believe God is present in our worship as He promises to be, then we must frame all language of worship as *to Him* and not merely *about* Him. Otherwise our worship effectively ignores and potentially offends Him by talking about Him as though He is not present.<sup>1</sup>

The last thing any worship leader desires is to be offensive to the God we seek to honor. But we must honestly ask the question, how often do we offend God by our failure to address Him directly? Whether it's from a lack of preparation or just thoughtless inconsideration, we often treat the Lord as if He's not in the room. In considering verticality in our setlists, I offer three important reasons worship leaders must make this a priority.

## 1. Verticality addresses an audience of One

Worship leaders often quip, "We sing to an audience of One," but do we functionally practice that reality? Do we intentionally evaluate every song in this musical journey we call a worship set, to discover whether or not we are truly addressing the One whose presence matters most. If God is our audience of One, a ludicrous result of our worship would be to gather in His name, sing lofty songs about Him, but fail to ever speak *to* Him.

"Oh sing to the Lord a new song; sing to the Lord, all the earth" (Psalm 96:1).

"Sing to the Lord a new song, his praise from the end of the earth" (Psalm 42:10).

## 2. Verticality opposes and resists a deistic view of God

What do I mean by that? Deism says that God is like a clockmaker who winds up the world and then leaves it to its own devices—that He has removed Himself from the intimate details of human beings' lives. Deism could not possibly be more antithetical to the gospel message that says, "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us" (John 1:1). Intimacy between God and man was purchased through the incarnation. Philippians 2:7–8 says, "(Jesus) made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross."

Failure to direct our worship to God can foster a clock maker theology in which worshipers, knowingly or unknowingly, view God as hands-off, uncaring, and untouchable.

---

<sup>1</sup> James MacDonald, *Vertical Church: What Every Heart Longs For. What Every Church Can Be* (Colorado Springs, CO: David C. Cook, 2012), 175. Kindle.



I'm certainly not suggesting *Holy, Holy, Holy* does not have a place in a worship set. Songs like *Holy, Holy, Holy* and *How Deep the Father's Love For Us* help us develop grand thoughts of God, and as A. W. Tozer rightly said, "What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us."<sup>2</sup> Instructional songs can certainly assist in developing a robust theology; however, the overwhelming majority of our songs should facilitate communication to God as though we truly believe He is in the room and beckoning us to draw near to His heart.

"Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you" (James 4:8).

### 3. Verticality fosters confidence to enter the throne room of God

Hebrews 4:16 says, "Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need." On any given Sunday, we have people enter our churches feeling condemned, judged, dirty, and discarded. The farthest thought from their mind is the notion they can approach God's presence with boldness and confidence. And God forbid we would send the message that access to God is limited and constrained by our absence of verticality. Verticality places the emphasis not only on personal access to God, but also forgiveness of sins, intimacy with the Savior, and grace to help in time of need.

Because grace is a "gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one can boast," God has inserted a protective boundary marker to help prevent us from veering into his presence irreverently (Eph 2:8–9). Bob Kauflin cautions worship leaders to examine songs carefully for distortions of true intimacy. He says, "Sometimes a song refers to God or Jesus as our friend in a way that makes God sound like our buddy or a sensual lover. That misses or distorts the biblical perspective."<sup>3</sup> A biblical understanding of our desperate condition and God's redemptive grace serves two purposes: 1) to provide confidence as we enter His presence, and 2) to hinder us from entering with irreverence, "for our God is a consuming fire" (Heb 12:29). The very reason we can draw near "with a true heart in full assurance of faith," is because we have had "our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water" (Heb 10:22).

As you prepare to lead your people this weekend, consider the audience you are addressing. Is God your audience? If so, don't forget to speak to Him. Consider the picture of God you are painting in the minds and hearts of your people. Is it one of intimacy? Or is it one of indifference or alienation? Consider the reasons you can approach Him with confidence. Have you been forgiven? Have you been redeemed? If so, worship Him with a reverent confidence and demonstrate to your people they can too.

---

<sup>2</sup> A. W. Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1961), 4.

<sup>3</sup> Bob Kauflin, *Worship Matters: Leading Others to Encounter the Greatness of God* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008), 161.





Questions from the Article:

1. Do you agree or disagree that verticality is an important consideration when crafting a worship set? Why or why not?
2. Which of the three reasons for incorporating verticality challenged you the most? Why?
3. When you get up to lead, how often do you think about the extent of God's radical grace toward you?
4. Explain in your own words what it means to approach God with a reverent confidence.