

Building a Set-list

Every worship leader has asked the question, *What songs should we sing this Sunday?* But before we get into that, there's a more important question: **Why does song choice matter in the first place?**

For me, the answer is simple: truth matters.

Jesus tells us that we are to worship "in spirit and truth" (John 4:24). That means the songs we choose aren't simply there to create a moment or fill thirty minutes of a service. They are a unique opportunity to proclaim the truth of God's Word together as his people.

J.I. Packer famously wrote, "Theology is for the purpose of doxology." In other words, the more we know truth about God through his Word, the more we are moved to worship him. Truth fuels worship. It gives us confidence, deepens our love for God and unites us as we sing.

As worship leaders, this means theology isn't optional. In many churches like ours, after the preacher or meeting leader, the worship leader is one of the primary communicators of theology in the service. The songs we choose help shape how people understand God. That's why knowing Scripture is one of the most important parts of leading worship. The Word of God is the best piece of worship-leading equipment you'll ever have.

Songs Are Teaching Opportunities

Music has a remarkable ability to help us remember things. Most of us can still sing songs we learnt as children—whether it's *Twinkle Twinkle Little Star*, *Happy Birthday*, or a favourite worship chorus from years ago. God has wired us to remember words more easily when they are set to music.

That's why song choice matters so much.

Week after week, our congregations are singing theology. They're learning about God's character, the gospel, his faithfulness, his holiness and his grace. Often people will remember the truths they have sung long after they've forgotten the outline of a sermon.

John Calvin observed that "it is impossible for any man to obtain even the minutest portion of right and sound doctrine without being a disciple of Scripture." If that's true, then worship leaders should be students of the Bible first and musicians second.

It's also worth remembering that our music doesn't save anyone. As Graham Ord writes, "Our music in itself is actually powerless to save anyone." It is the truth of the gospel that sets people free (John 8:32). Our role is to faithfully put that truth on people's lips through the songs we pick.

Songs Speak to the World

The songs we sing don't just shape the church—they also speak to those outside it.

Imagine someone walking into your church for the very first time. Perhaps it's a neighbour you've invited, a work colleague, or someone who has wandered in off the street. What picture of God would they leave with after hearing the songs you've chosen?

Every set-list has an opportunity to make what we believe about God clear to those who engage with it.

Tim Keller described this idea as "evangelistic worship." Our gathered worship should clearly display who God is and what he has done. A biblically rich set-list becomes a declaration to believers and unbelievers alike: *This is the God we worship. This is what he is like.*

Building a Set

There are lots of ways to structure a worship set, and different contexts will call for different approaches. Here's three examples.

Some people use the **Temple Model**, moving from praise and thanksgiving towards reflection on the holiness of God, intimacy and response, echoing the movement through the Old Testament temple.

Others build a **Thematic Model**, where every song centres on a particular aspect of God's character or a biblical theme, such as God as creator, the cross, the Holy Spirit or God's faithfulness. This can work well, although it can sometimes present challenges if the direction of the meeting changes unexpectedly and you're left with a list of songs that only speak of one theme.

The model I find most helpful is **Revelation and Response**. This model asks a simple question: What truth about God do the songs reveal, and what is the natural heart response?

We begin with songs that proclaim who God is and what he has done (songs of revelation). We might choose songs that remind ourselves of his goodness, his faithfulness, his power and his grace expressed through Christ. Then, as those truths take root in our hearts, we move into songs of response—songs that express surrender, trust, obedience, thanksgiving and praise.

An example:

- 1) How Sweet the Name – Simon Brading (Revelation)
- 2) This Is Our God – Phil Wickham (Revelation)
- 3) Holy Forever – Brian Johnson (Response)
- 4) I Worship You – Simon Brading (Revelation)

This pattern reflects the way much of Scripture works. The Psalms often begin in one emotional place and finish somewhere completely different because the writer has journeyed through the truth of who God is. Revelation leads to response.

A carefully planned set list isn't about manipulating emotion. It's about picking songs full of biblical truth that the Holy Spirit will use to reshape our hearts. As we sing, people can move from anxiety to peace, from discouragement to hope, from self-reliance to trust, from pride to humility, and from guilt to gratitude.

Ultimately, every set list tells a story. Our privilege as worship leaders is to ensure that story faithfully points people to God through Scripture. When our songs are saturated with Scripture and centred on the gospel, we help God's people see him more clearly—and as they do, worship becomes the natural heart response.