A Beginner's Guide To Song Selection

BY LARRY LEVY



One of the most basic questions we ask as worship leaders is "What songs should I do?" Whether you are preparing for leading worship at a home group of nine people for the first time or leading 500 people in a conference setting, or at your Sunday morning service for the tenth week in a row, the question doesn't go away. I believe song selection is to the worship event what Scripture is to preaching and teaching. It's not everything, but it is the main "substance" from which we build other elements.

Worship leading is often like driving a car. When you first start, everything seems mechanical: Adjust your mirrors...turn the key...put your foot on the brake as you put it in drive...try not to run over your mother...keep your hands at 10 and 2 o'clock...use your signal lights.... After a few years of driving you do these things without thinking about them. In the same way, experienced worship leaders are processing many different things quickly as they are preparing for worship and actually leading worship.

Hopefully this article will help many of you who are beginning to lead worship, as well as encourage those of you who have been leading for a while, to think on the song selection process.

Here are some questions to ask of yourself:

What Is The Nature Of The Worship Event?

Is it a small group who is going to worship for the first time? A group of worship "animals" where you have to beg them to stop? An evangelistic event outdoors? A conference celebration time? A regular Sunday morning with the theme of repentance? Is it for children, youth, adult or mixed?

The event will be one factor in your song selection. When we did community barbecue and worship parties on our land one summer we used some familiar secular songs that went over really well and gave the people, many who were unchurched, something to identify with. One was a Great Big Sea song entitled "Ordinary Day." The song went over big, and it may have been our most anointed song. It fit the context well.

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Some songs are better suited for small groups, and some for larger groups (I bet you've all found that out, at times painfully). You never knew that song was so high until you did it with a group of seven: five who could not sing, and the other two who just left to go to the washroom. When I led worship in jail, the guys loved the hymns, which gave them a connection to their childhood and a longing for the God they had once encountered.

What Is God Doing In The Group?

Congregations go through different seasons, and it's wonderful when the worship experience reflects that. What is the pastor speaking on? What's been happening in the lives of the people? What is the emphasis in your church right now? Right now in our church we are emphasizing fellowship and friendship with one another, and how transparency before God and one another is key to that being rich. In the midst of having communion last Sunday the worship leader did a song he had written about coming and dining at the Lord's table and not letting our "stuff" keep us away. It was powerful!

What Songs Have Really Touched Me?

Let's face it, it's hard to do songs that don't move you, excite you, inspire you or break you. You've heard a song and you know "I've got to do that song." It doesn't have to have the same effect on you every time you do it, but somewhere along the road it has grabbed your heart.

I'm not leading worship as often as I once did, but giving myself to helping and mentoring other worship leaders. Because of that, I get lots of opportunity to just worship and observe people worshiping in many different contexts. I encourage all regular worship leaders to do this. You learn and observe some things along the way. Along with asking yourself these questions, let me offer some suggestions in choosing songs:



LARRY LEVY

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Some Quick Tips For Song Selection:

1. Choose some songs that declare the great themes of the Christian faith: The Glory, Love and Holiness of God. The Cross of Jesus. The Free Grace of God. The Kingdom of God Among Us. Intimacy in worship grows as we truly understand what kind of God we are expressing our love to.

2. Select primarily songs that are familiar to the people. If for example, you are doing six songs, you may have three that are really well-known, two that are fairly well-known and one that is new. There have never been so many worship songs around! There's a thick collection of old and new Vineyard songs. The British invasion of new worship songs continues. There are songs that come from writers in our congregations. I believe there's a rich reservoir of hymns that can be adapted to our style, that provide a needed connection to the historic church. Sadly, we won't be able to do them all!

3. Have some songs that are simple in lyrics and melody. Everything is constantly evolving, often moving from the simple to the complex, and then back to the simple. It's true in all music, and it's true in worship writing. People really need some simple songs where they don't have to be straining to read the next line from the overhead or lyric sheet, and their left brain can take a break. They are overloaded with information all week, and oh, the sweetness of a simple truth, in simple words, with a simple melody line.

4. Arrange your songs to "flow" together. Too many themes become confusing. Ascending key changes can help (i.e. C to D to G). Try going from one song to another at times without a musical break. Don't be afraid either of having a time of quiet and reflection before going on to the next song.

5. Choose a song that allows you do some spontaneous worship at the end. Some songs lend themselves to singing in tongues, having one of the singers singing over the congregation, leading the people in singing a short prophetic song back to the Father, etc. This becomes too "old hat" when you do it after every song, but at the right time it reinforces what we are doing. The goal is not to get through the songs. The goal is to lead the people in worship so that the Bride (the Church) and Groom (Jesus) kiss and embrace one another.

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