

Review

Rory Noland. *Transforming Worship: Planning and Leading Sunday Services as If Spiritual Formation Mattered*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2022.

By Herbert H. Tsang, PEng, PhD, DWS

Most Christians who plan and lead worship tend to focus on the expressive dimension, inevitably leading to a narcissistic view of Christian worship. This approach to leading worship neglects the formative dimension of the liturgy. In *Transforming Worship*, Noland attempts to address the spiritual formation dimension within corporate worship liturgy. He defines transforming worship as “a communal experience that combines classical spiritual practices with a formative encounter with God in Christ through the Holy Spirit” (11). Thus, Noland argues that transforming worship is both experiential and corporate in nature.

The book is divided into two parts: the first establishes the foundations of transforming worship through biblical, historical, and theological lenses, while the second half delves into practical applications of these principles in various elements of worship services (prayer, Scripture reading, confession, the Lord’s Supper, and baptism), emphasizing their significance in spiritual formation.

Noland's approach to the liturgical framework is based on Robert Webber’s four-fold pattern (Gathering, Word, Table, and Sending), extensively discussed by many of Webber’s students, notably in works by Constance Cherry, which Noland used extensively. He then proposes a five-part transforming worship order (Call to Worship, Worship Set, Sermon, Table, and Sending). While he bases his argument on the Emmaus narrative (Luke 24), Noland argues that Sunday morning is the Church’s primary formative event. Since God is encountered in worship, lives are transformed. Noland also argues that by employing the lectionary and the church year, congregations will be given a framework for transforming worship that is formative in nature (67).

Overall, the book is lacking in convincingly demonstrating the superiority of Noland's approach (the five-part transforming worship order) over existing practices (four-fold). It is not clear how distinctive the five-part order is when compared with the well-studied historical four-fold pattern. The *Call to Worship* and *Worship Set* elements in the five-part order can easily be included in the Gathering element within the four-fold pattern. Even with the examples in the two *Worship Set*

implementation possibilities (worship-themed and outer to inner court), the *Call to Worship* and *Worship Set* divisions seem to be arbitrary and underdeveloped.

However, in the second half of the book, Noland explores several liturgical elements in depth. This exploration of elements is worthwhile for readers to pay attention to. He discusses five elements and their impoverished practice in most evangelical churches: prayer, the preached and unpreached Word of God, corporate confession, the Lord's Supper, and baptism. Especially, the section on corporate confession is a poignant reminder for worship planners and pastoral staff.

Regarding prayer, Noland suggests leaders should take a more inclusive and holistic approach to prayer within congregational settings. Some suggestions regarding prayer include the following.

1. Letting the people pray: Encouraging the congregation to actively participate in prayer by providing various opportunities (group prayers, silent prayers, or individual prayer).
2. Including intercession and Thanksgiving prayers: Prayers should encompass a wide range of concerns, from personal growth to societal issues, and should regularly express gratitude to God.
3. Being open to scripted and spontaneous prayers: Balancing between these two approaches to prayer is necessary, while most churches are currently lacking this balance.

When engaging with the Word of God, Noland emphasizes the transformative power of both preached and unpreached Word. Particularly, he emphasizes the importance of the public reading of scripture as a foundational practice in spiritual formation. The public reading of scripture is not only a means of conveying information. It also is a catalyst for spiritual formation and communal engagement with God's living Word.

Noland notes that corporate confession does not play a big part in evangelical churches. He provides some examples and resources that guide the reader to know the biblical and theological basis for this practice, and practical examples for putting corporate confession into practice.

Then, Noland explores the multifaceted nature of the Lord's Table. Particularly, he explores biblically based ways to celebrate the Table, namely the Lord's Supper, Eucharist (or Thanksgiving Meal), Communion (or Family Meal), and Heavenly

Feast. These approaches offer distinct approaches to the experience, with unique emphases and tones.

1. **Lord's Supper:** Emphasizes the solemn remembrance of Christ's suffering and death. It is a somber, reflective observance focused on themes like surrender, obedience, and dying to self.
2. **Eucharist (or Thanksgiving Meal):** Derived from the Greek word meaning "to give thanks," the Eucharist celebrates Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, emphasizing gratitude for his victory over sin and death. It is a joyous and upbeat occasion focused on Christ's triumph.
3. **Communion (or Family Meal):** Highlights fellowship with God and one another, Communion underscores the communal nature of the Table. It celebrates our inclusion in God's family and emphasizes themes like love, unity, and service. The tone is warm and mellow, akin to a family gathering.
4. **Heavenly Feast:** Based on the vision of the marriage supper of the Lamb in Revelation and Jesus' promise of his return, the Heavenly Feast looks forward to Christ's second coming while celebrating his death and resurrection. It fosters joyful anticipation, with a celebratory and triumphant tone.

These approaches offer a variety of meaningful encounters with Christ at the Table, allowing churches to vary their observance while remaining rooted in Scripture. Churches can maintain continuity through consistent liturgy while shaping each celebration based on the chosen theme for that particular occasion. By exploring these various aspects of the Lord's Table, it can have the potential to be "a multivalent spiritual event with a wide variety of applications for personal piety" (160).

Lastly, Noland reminds that baptism is not a single event in the past. Rather, it continues to play a relevant role in the life of the Christian. Baptism is not only the entry point into the body of Christ but also the initiation of a lifelong journey toward spiritual formation into the image of Christ. Nolan suggests a broader and deeper understanding of its role in Christian life and practice.

Overall, "Transforming Worship" is accessible and serves as an invaluable resource for worship leaders and committees alike. It offers a comprehensive method for designing worship that is both spiritually enriching and practically applicable.

Herbert H. Tsang, PEng, PhD, DWS, is Professor of Computing Science and Mathematics at Trinity Western University, Langley, BC, and President of Church Music Ministry Canada.

Author Copyright.

Herbert H. Tsang, review of *Transforming Worship: Planning and Leading Sunday Services as If Spiritual Formation Mattered*, Rory Noland, Northwest Institute for Ministry Education Research, www.nimwer.ca (May 15, 2024).