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The catechetical function of Reformed hymnody

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Abstract

Has Reformed hymnody played a catechetical role in propagating characteristically Reformed theological emphases? While early Reformed 'hymnody' focused on the Psalms, the eighteenth century saw a great proliferation of Reformed hymns employing non-scriptural language. For example, the hymnody of English Congregationalist Isaac Watts shows both the traditional use of psalms and the innovative creation of hymns of praise, thanksgiving and theological narration. This paper considers how Reformed hymnody has served that tradition's catechetical purposes, taking as a test case the ways in which its hymnody may have helped inculcate the characteristically Reformed emphasis on the threefold office of Christ.

In an age when even many congregants are ill-informed about the Christian faith, how might the Church teach them again? Much has been written recently – from a sociological as well as an ecclesiological perspective – about the North American context passing into a 'post-Christian' age, and about the many members of mainline churches who are often as eclectic and nominally Christian in their beliefs as those outside the churches. Several denominations have grown concerned over this change, and taken measures to counteract it.[1] I share this concern, and given my training as a historical theologian working predominantly in the Reformed tradition, I am motivated to ask what resources that tradition may provide to address the problem. I start with the recognition that the Reformed tradition has always had a high regard for a learned faith. Historically, this regard has shown itself in several ways, such as the Reformed impulse to found educational institutions and to author catechisms and confessions. And this regard has also shown itself in worship, as Hughes Oliphant Old so aptly describes:

> From the very beginning Reformed theologians have been fond of speaking of worship as being edifying. Martin Bucer in particular liked to use this word to describe Christian worship. He had in mind that passage where the Apostle Paul tells us that everything in the service of worship should edify the church (1 Cor. 14:1–6), that is, should teach or build up the church. Worship which puts first the praise of God's

[1] Consider, for example, the new catechism of the Presbyterian Church (USA).

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> glory, worship which is according to God's Word, worship which serves God and God alone does in fact edify the church.[2]

The order evident in Old's concluding formulation is significant: the primary end of worship is always the praise of God – but if properly done (i.e. 'according to God's word'), such worship will inevitably produce as a corollary the edification of the Church.

With this understanding in mind, let me introduce my specific thesis questions, which relate to one another like concentric circles: has Reformed hymnody been motivated by a catechetical impulse? Has this impulse sought to instill identifiably Reformed understandings of the faith? And has one such understanding been its distinguishing practice[3] of interpreting Christ's work under the framework of the 'threefold office'?

Before addressing these questions, let me first define 'catechesis' more precisely and then briefly place my project in historical perspective. So, to the first: what does 'catechesis' mean? In an ecclesial setting, it typically refers to instruction in the faith, most commonly associated with a question-and-answer format. When the Church became established, catechetical students were most often children or youth. But adult catechesis has a long, indeed older, history, as the instruction required before baptism.[4] Catechesis is an aspect of the 'edification' of the Church, although the latter is the broader term, insofar as it may connote mutual encouragement and support in the faith, and not just teaching or instruction narrowly understood. Still, catechesis itself may be understood in a broader as well as a narrower sense. I would argue that it is not limited to first-time instruction or a question-and-answer format. It should also refer to any 'teaching' that deepens, broadens or makes more precise one's already basic understanding of the faith, a matter perhaps especially needed in adulthood. Moreover, such teaching may take both direct and indirect form. Indeed, indirect means may actually be the more effective way to plant knowledge deeply and securely. I would ask that these observations be kept in mind, for these distinctions will help clarify the elements of my argument.

Now for some historical context. While many frequently assume that

[2] Hughes Oliphant Old, *Worship: That is Reformed According to Scripture*, Guides to the Reformed Tradition, ed. John H. Leith and John W. Kuykendall (Atlanta, GA: John Knox Press, 1984), p. 8.

[3] Reformed theologians who employ this framework include Calvin, Turretin, Barth, Brunner, and W. A. Visser 't Hooft. Consider also Calvin's Genevan Catechism of 1545 (Qq. 34–36), the Heidelberg Catechism (Q. 31), the Westminster Confession (ch. 8), and the Westminster Shorter and Longer Catechisms (Qq. 23–28 and 42–56).

[4] Consider, for example, the story of Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch, recounted in Acts 8.

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Reformed singing was from its inception – and for a century and a half following – limited to metrical versions of the Psalter, this is only partly accurate. On the one hand, even the singing of psalms was not universally advocated among early Reformed leaders. Zwingli eliminated singing in the Zürich church, and his example influenced other German-speaking cantons such as Bern.[5] On the other hand, some of the earliest Reformed leaders produced and used their own hymns. For example, the principals of the Reformed Church in the Swiss city of Constance wrote a number of diverse hymns for morning and evening prayer, for various Church festivals, and for catechesis. Johannes Zwick (1496–1542) in particular dedicated himself to the Christian education of children, and wrote hymnic versions of the Ten Commandments, the Lord's Prayer, the Beatitudes and the Creed.[6] More specifically, he 'wrote these catechetical hymns for the Sunday afternoon children's services in order that praise and prayer might be an integral part of catechetical instruction'.[7] In a similar manner, Calvin included items that could serve the Church's catechetical needs in his first short French-language psalter (1539). In addition to its 18 metrical psalms, it also contained the Apostles' Creed, which was likewise set to music.[8] Additionally, it contained a versified rendition of the Ten Commandments.[9]

However, while Calvin did not object to hymns on principle, he nevertheless emphasized the singing of Psalms, which he viewed as compositions of the Holy Spirit – and 'one cannot sing anything more worthy of God than that which we have received from him'.[10] Clearly, the Psalms were understood as the best texts to use in the Church's singing, but there was also an often unspoken assumption that they were perhaps the only legitimate texts to be used. In line with Calvin's practical preference for the Psalms, the overwhelming emphasis of Reformed custom during its first century and a half remained weighted toward psalmody rather than hymnody.[11]

So when the prevailing emphasis on psalmody alone finally gave way to psalmody and hymnody combined, it may have seemed like the advent of a

[5] Louis F. Benson, *The Hymnody of the Christian Church* (New York: George H. Doran Company, 1927; repr. Richmond, VA: John Knox Press, 1956), p. 180.

[6] Old, *Worship*, p. 50.

[7] *Ibid*.

[8] John T. MacNeill, *The History and Character of Calvinism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1954), p. 148.

[9] Benson, *Hymnody*, p. 81.

[10] Quoted in Old, *Worship*, p. 52. It should be noted that here Calvin was himself echoing Augustine.

[11] Consider the proliferation of psalters published, including the *Strasbourg* (1537) and Calvin's *Genevan* (1542) psalters, as well as the English *Sternhold and Hopkins Psalter* (1562), the *Scottish Psalter* (1635), and the *Bay Psalm Book* (1640), to name but a few.

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new thing. It was not. But even though it was in fact a return to an older, if minor, tradition – one which in its own way could be justified on solid Reformed grounds – circumstances dictated that precisely such a justification be made explicit. And this Isaac Watts (1674–1748) did. Watts stands – in the English-speaking world at least – as the most influential early proponent and author of this 'new' tradition. So let me turn to him to set the stage, and then to a detailed consideration of the purposes of Reformed hymnody as evidenced in several other selected authors and hymnals.

Watts was the English Congregationalist who challenged the exclusive use of psalms in the Church's singing, as well as the implicit theological rationales that had undergirded this exclusivity. He accomplished the first by offering an alternative, namely, his *Hymns and Spiritual Songs* published in 1707 and his Christianized *Psalms of David Imitated*, published in 1719. He accomplished the second by writing 'A Short Essay toward the Improvement of Psalmody: Or, An Enquiry how the Psalms of David ought to be Translated into Christian Songs, and how Lawful and Necessary it is to Compose other Hymns according to the clearer Revelations of the Gospel, for the Use of the Christian Church'.[12] Watts presented five arguments and a 'postscript' as to why the Church should embrace the singing of hymns.

For my purposes, the most important are his second and fifth – so let me consider only them. In his second argument, he contends that singing in worship is to allow us to respond to God, to give voice to our experience of God, to utter our praise, thanksgiving and joy. Yet if this is the case, Watts reasoned, why should Christians confine themselves to using the words of psalms? Christians have more of the nature and purpose of God revealed to them than David had, and this 'more' should be given voice in our own words. We should note the dual reference Watts included in this phrase, 'our own words': in one respect, these words derive from the subjective faith experience of Christians, but in another more foundational and logically prior sense the 'more' of our words should grow out of scripture and doctrine. Let me quote his lengthy rhetorical appeal:

> Is not the mystery of the ever-blessed Trinity brought out of darkness into open light? Where can you find a Psalm that speaks the miracles of wisdom and power as they are discovered in the crucified Christ? . . . Is not the ascent of Christ into heaven, and his triumph over principalities and powers of darkness, a nobler entertainment for our tuneful meditations, than the removing of the ark up to the city of David, to the hill of

[12] As noted by Benson, *Hymnody*, p. 88. The entire essay is found in Edward Parsons, ed., *The Works of Dr. Isaac Watts in Seven Volumes*, vol. VII (Leeds: Edward Baines, n.d. [1800?]), p. 1. Hereafter referred to as Watts, 'Short Essay'.

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> God, which is high as the hill of Bashan? . . . The heaven and the hell that we are acquainted with by the discovery of God our Saviour, give us a more distinct knowledge of the future and eternal state, than all the former revelations of God to men: Life and immortality is brought to light by the gospel; we are taught to look far into the invisible world, and take a prospect of the last awful scene of things: We see the graves opening, and the dead arising at the voice of the archangel, and the sounding of the trump of God: We behold the Judge on his tribunal, and we hear the dreadful and the delightful sentences of decision that shall pass on all the sons and daughters of Adam: we are assured, that the saints shall 'arise to meet the Lord in the air, and so shall we be ever with the Lord:' The apostle bids us, 'Exhort or comfort one another with these words;' 1 *Thess.* iv. 17,18. Now when the same apostle requires that 'the word of Christ must dwell richly in us in all wisdom, teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and spiritual songs;' can we think he restrains us only to the Psalms of David, which speak very little of all these glories or terrors, and that in very obscure terms and dark hints of prophecy? Or shall it be supposed, that we must admonish one another of the old Jewish affairs and ceremonies in verse, and make melody with those weak and beggarly elements, and the yoke of bondage, and yet never dare to speak of the wonders of the new discovery except in the plain and simple language of prose?[13]

In other words, if God has revealed more to Christians than he did to David, then this revelation should determine the primary content of our singing.

In his fifth argument, Watts recognizes that the new songs of the early Church resulted from the extraordinary inspiration of the Holy Spirit.[14] Yet even then – as the example of Timothy makes clear[15] – ministers were charged to cultivate their gifts, to attend to reading, exhortation and doctrine, and to meditate upon these things in an 'ordinary' fashion. But if this admonition was necessary then, in an age when the Spirit was obviously active, how much more must it be necessary now when the Spirit is typically active only through ordinary means. In fact, regarding a minister's knowledge of the Christian faith and preparation for prayer and preaching, it is universally granted that these should be acquired and improved through study and practice, 'together with earnest requests to God for the ordinary assistance of his Spirit'.[16] But if these other elements

[13] *Ibid.*, pp. 11–12.
[14] See 1 Cor 14:15, 26.
[15] 1 Tim 4:14–15.
[16] *Ibid.*

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pertaining to worship are now primarily the product of human effort guided by 'ordinary' grace, on what basis could one object to spiritual songs being composed in the same manner?

These arguments indicate that Watts clearly believed our singing should entail our explicitly Christian response to God and his manifold blessings. However, this does not mean merely a subjective, immediate or emotional response. Pious feeling does play a part, but Watts's second and fifth arguments indicate that a proper response must be an informed and studied response, i.e. one derived from an immersion in the bible and the primary teachings of the faith. Christian singing can indeed bring comfort, consolation and pious edification, but only if that singing is derived from true Christian faith. In other words, Watts's hymnody seeks to serve two purposes simultaneously: it offers the faithful an appropriate form for a heartfelt and personal response to God even while it provides the subject matter that keeps that response appropriately faithful. In contrast to the Psalms, its content is explicitly Christian, so that it inculcates the faith in a way the Psalms simply cannot. This leads to my next questions: while Watts clearly sought his hymns to be edifying, even catechetical in this way, is the subject matter of the lessons he sought to teach identifiably Reformed? And more specifically, does he in fact teach the 'threefold office of Christ'?

I respond by noting how Watts divides his *Hymns and Spiritual Songs* into three 'books' and by considering his explanation for doing so. The first book contains 150 hymns 'Collected from Holy Scriptures'. Book Two includes 170 hymns 'Composed on Divine Subjects', and Watts explains that these consist 'of hymns, whose form is of mere human composure; but I hope the sense and materials will always appear divine'.[17] The third book contains 45 hymns 'Prepared for the Holy Ordnance of the Lord's Supper'.[18] In other words, a large part of his effort consists in the hymnic paraphrase of scriptural passages, while another part consists of hymnic expositions that are, in his view, materially if not formally derived from the bible. So apparently his method at least is consistent with typical Reformed practice. Does this imply that inevitably some of the content of his hymns will be as well?

On this question, Watts's own statements suggest that they will *not* be so particular in content. Regarding his composition of these hymns, he says: 'The contentions and distinguishing words of sects and parties are secluded,

[17] Edward Parsons (ed.), *The Works of Dr. Isaac Watts in Seven Volumes*, vol. VII (Leeds: Edward Baines, n.d. [1800?]), 'Preface to the ''Hymns'' ', p. 123. Hereafter referred to as Watts, 'Hymns Preface'.

[18] *Ibid*.

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that whole assemblies might assist at the harmonies, and different churches join in the same worship without offence.'[19] To put a modern cast on it, he is apparently trying to produce a consciously ecumenical book. This desire to produce a 'non-partisan' work is echoed in his preface for another, expressly catechetical, book, his *Divine and Moral Songs for Children*. Watts notes that he composed these songs

> at the request of a friend who has been long engaged in the work of catechising a very great number of children of all kinds. . .. So that you will find here nothing that savours of party: the children of high and low degree, of the Church of England or Dissenters, baptized in infancy or not, may all join together in these songs. And as I have endeavoured to sink the language to the level of a child's understanding, and yet to keep it, if possible, above contempt, so I have designed to profit all, if possible, and offend none. I hope the more general the sense is, these composures may be of the more universal use and service.[20]

In other words, his express intention seems to undercut my Reformed focus. Yet should we take his words at strictly face value? Surveying the content of these explicitly catechetical songs, one may note some very specific emphases. They focus on the praise of God, God's sovereignty (especially in providence), God's grace (in both providence and redemption), our sinfulness, substitutionary atonement, and the importance of the bible and the importance of reading it. Surveying the content of Watts's *Hymns and Spiritual Songs* shows a similar emphasis on praising God and glorifying his work in Christ, on divine grace in both providence and redemption, and on human sinfulness. There is less overt reference to the importance of the bible – but perhaps that is due to the fact that so many of the hymns are essentially expositions of scripture. Hence, while many of his hymns do display a generic piety, it also appears his claim to non-partisanship reflects a certain failure to recognize the extent to which his compositions retain an 'evangelical', if not actually Reformed, character. Furthermore, his claim to non-partisanship may also represent a certain 'marketing ploy' of a Congregationalist seeking a broader audience – although that may be a reading more telling of our age than his. In any case, while the evidence of his hymnody overall remains ambiguous, in two particular examples it is not – which returns me to my final question: did Watts use his hymnody to teach the threefold office?

[19] *Ibid.*, p. 122.

[20] Isaac Watts, *Divine and Moral Songs for Children* (New York: Hurd and Houghton, 1866), p. 9.

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The answer is at least partly yes. Consider the following selections, taken from his *Hymns and Spiritual Songs*. The first is Hymn 132, from Book Two:

1 We bless the prophet of the Lord,
  That comes with truth and grace;
Jesus, thy Spirit and thy word
  Shall lead us in thy ways.

2 We reverence our High-Priest above,
  Who offered up his blood;
And lives to carry on his love,
  By pleading with our God.

3 We honour our exalted King;
  How sweet are his commands!
He guards our souls from hell and sin,
  By his almighty hands.

4 Hosanna to his glorious name,
  Who saves by different ways;
His mercies lay a sovereign claim
  to our immortal praise.[21]

Now consider Hymn 149, taken from Book One:

1 Join all the names of love and power,
  That ever men or angels bore;
All are too mean to speak his worth;
  Or set *Emmanuel's* glory forth.

2 But O what condescending ways
  He takes to teach his heavenly grace!
My eyes, with joy and wonder, see
  What forms of love he bears to me.

3 The *Angel of the Cov'nant* stands,
  With his commission in his hands;
Sent from his Father's milder throne,
  To make the great salvation known.

4 Great *Prophet*! let me bless thy name;
  By thee the joyful tidings came,

[21] Samuel Worcester (ed.), *The Psalms, Hymns and Spiritual Songs of the Rev. Isaac Watts*, new edn (Boston: Croker & Brewster, 1855), Hymn 132, p. 452.

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Of wrath appeased, of sins forgiven,
Of hell subdued, and peace with heaven.

5 My bright *Example*, and my *Guide*,
I would be walking near thy side;
O let me never run astray,
Nor follow the forbidden way.

6 I love my *Shepherd*; he shall keep
My wandering soul among his sheep;
He feeds his flocks, he calls their names,
And in his bosom bears the lambs.

7 My *Surety* undertakes my cause,
Answering his Father's broken laws;
Behold my soul at freedom set!
My surety paid the dreadful debt.

8 Jesus, my great *High Priest*, has died;
I seek no sacrifice beside.
His blood did once for all atone;
And now it pleads, before the throne.

9 My *Advocate* appears on high,
The Father lays his thunder by;
Not all that earth, or hell, can say,
Shall turn my Father's heart away.

10 My *Lord*, my *Conqu'ror*, and my *King*;
Thy sceptre, and thy sword I sing.
Thine is the victory, and I sit
A joyful subject at thy feet.

11 Aspire, my soul, to glorious deeds,
The *Captain of Salvation* leads:
March on, nor fear to win the day,
Though death or hell obstruct the way.

12 Should death, and hell, and powers unknown,
Put all their forms of mischief on,
I shall be safe; for Christ displays
Salvation in more sovereign ways.[22]

[22] *Ibid.*, Hymn 149, pp. 371–2. Italics in the original.

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Watts also wrote a variation on this last hymn, set to a different meter, which stands as Hymn 150 in Book One. So, regarding my final question: did Watts use his hymnody to teach the threefold office? Yes, he did – but in only two (or three) hymns out of 365, which includes one that effectively dilutes the framework by including ten other titles besides prophet, priest and king. Thus, while this particular Reformed content is present, I would be hard pressed to say it constitutes a major theme in his hymnody.

What, then, of other Reformed hymn writers or hymnals? I will briefly consider three more examples. The first is the work of the English Calvinists William Cowper (1731–1800) and John Newton (1725–1807), namely, their influential *Olney Hymns*, published in 1779. *Olney Hymns* is primarily the work of Newton – best known as the author of 'Amazing Grace' – and like Watts before him, he divided his hymnal into three 'books'. The first one is the longest, with 141 hymns, 'formed upon select passages of Scripture, and placed them in the order of the books of the Old and New Testament'.[23] Eighty hymns are based on the OT, while 61 are based on the NT. The second book contains 100 hymns, 'suited to particular seasons, or suggested by particular events or objects'.[24] The third contains 107 hymns, 'comprising a variety of subjects relative to a life of faith in the son of God'.[25] It should be noted that his ordering of the hymns according to the bible's own order in the first book complements the Reformed habit of preaching from scripture in a sequential, expository manner, or *lectio continua*.

Regarding the second book, Newton divides it into four sections, under the headings 'Seasons', 'Ordinances', 'Providence', and 'Creation'. I would draw particular attention to the last two of these. The 'Providence' section includes hymns occasioned by, and in response to, historical events, natural occurrences and commonplace personal milestones.[26] The fourth and final section, 'Creation', begins with one hymn on the old and new creation and another on the limits of natural theology. Interestingly enough, however, these are followed by hymns considering and gleaning spiritual lessons from rainbows, thunder, moonlight, the sea, the loadstone, spiders and bees, sheep, gardens, and even dreaming. Yet lest the Christian become too enamoured of the things of this world, this section concludes with two

[23] John Newton and William Cowper, *Olney Hymns* (London: W. Oliver, 1779), p. xi.

[24] *Ibid.*

[25] *Ibid.*

[26] Among these are a hymn 'On the commencement of hostilities in America,' on an earthquake that shook Britain on 8 September 1775, a hymn on the night-time fire that broke out in the parish of Olney in 1777, and numerous funeral hymns.

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hymns pointing to the ephemeral and finally empty pleasures of the world compared to what Christ offers us.

The third book contains hymns 'on the Rise, Progress, Changes and Comforts of the Spiritual Life'. More particularly, Newton divides these hymns under eight different headings: 'Solemn Address to Sinners', 'Seeking, Pleading, Hoping', 'Conflict', 'Comfort', 'Dedication and Surrender', 'Cautions', 'Praise', and 'Short Hymns'. The hymns of the first seven sections in particular are clearly intended to help convert persons to Christianity and then teach and encourage them in their new life of faith.

So what should we make of these hymns and their particular arrangement? Do they reflect a desire on the part of Newton and Cowper to edify their parish in a particularly Reformed manner? Initially, it seems that Newton desires to follow Watts's expressly non-partisan intention: 'I hope most of these hymns, being the fruit and expression of my own experience, will coincide with the views of real christians [*sic*] of all denominations.'[27] Indeed, he says he is not conscious of having written anything with the intention of flattering or offending any person or party. Nevertheless, these preliminary observations build up to a fuller and somewhat different statement of his actual position:

> I am a friend of peace, and being deeply convinced that no one can profitably understand the great truths and doctrines of the gospel, any farther than he is taught by GOD, I have not a wish to obtrude my own tenets upon others, in a way of controversy: yet I do not think myself bound to conceal them. Many gracious persons (for many such I am persuaded there are) who differ from me, more or less, in those points which are called Calvinistic, appear desirous that the Calvinists should, for their sakes, studiously avoid every expression which they cannot approve. Yet few of them, I believe, impose a like restraint upon themselves, but think the importance of what they deem to be truth, justifies them in speaking their sentiments plainly, and strongly. May I not plead for an equal liberty?[28]

Pre-eminent among these 'Calvinistic points' are, in Newton's words, 'the doctrines of grace', which are 'friendly to holiness' and 'have a direct influence in producing and maintaining a gospel conversation'.[29] He does not explain what these statements mean in detail, but his emphasis on grace reappears in the concluding thoughts of his preface, as he dedicates his

[27] *Ibid.*, p. ix.
[28] *Ibid.*, pp. ix–x.
[29] *Ibid.*, p. x.

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hymns to the people of his parish. He expresses the hope and commitment that, however much time remains to him, 'it will be the business and the pleasure of my life, to aim at promoting their growth and establishment in the grace of our GOD and Saviour'.[30] The cumulative import of these comments – especially when understood in connection with what could be called his 'exegetical' hymns, his hymns on divine providence, and his hymns calling sinners to account and nurturing the Christian life – all points to the conclusion that Newton *did* intend his hymnody to serve the purpose of edification, indeed, catechesis broadly understood, and that he was self-consciously Reformed in the key aspects of it.

What, then, does this suggest in regard to hymns teaching the threefold office? Newton did compose one such hymn – but only one, and the three titles are buried among seven others. It is Hymn 57, in his first book:

1 How sweet the name of JESUS sounds
In a believer's ear!
It soothes his sorrows, heals his wounds,
And drives away his fear.

2 It makes the wounded spirit whole,
and calms the troubled breast;
'Tis Manna to the hungry soul,
And to the weary rest.

3 Dear name! the rock on which I build,
my shield and hiding place;
My never-failing treas'ry fill'd
with boundless stores of grace.

4 By thee my pray'rs acceptance gain,
Altho' with sin defil'd;
Satan accuses me in vain,
And I am own'd a child.

5 JESUS! my Shepherd, Husband, Friend,
My Prophet, Priest, and King;
My Lord, my Life, my Way, my End,
Accept the praise I bring.

6 Weak is the effort of my heart,
And cold my warmest thought;

[30] *Ibid.*, p. xiii.

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But when I see thee as thou art,
I'll praise thee as I ought.

7 'Til then I would thy love proclaim
With ev'ry fleeting breath;
And may the music of thy name
Refresh my soul in death.[31]

What final conclusions may I draw from *Olney Hymns* regarding my thesis? Is this hymnal 'catechetical'? Strictly speaking, it is not structured around any historical catechism, and it does not follow or echo the form typically associated with such writings. But in the broader sense I described above, *Olney Hymns* is very clearly and intentionally catechetical. That is, both in the content of many of its hymns as well as their organization, it seeks to evoke one's embrace of the Christian life, and then to support and guide that life faithfully. And it does so with clearly 'Calvinistic' assumptions. It even includes a hymn referring to Christ as prophet, priest and king, although as I noted with Watts's hymnody above, there is certainly no particular emphasis on Christ's *munus triplex*.

So let me move on to another two examples by crossing the Atlantic, moving forward to the mid-nineteenth century and considering one hymnal initiated by a denomination and another compiled by three theology professors in New England. The first of these is the Reformed Dutch Church of North America's *Psalms and Hymns*, published in 1840. This hymnal is explicitly catechetical in design. While the psalter comes first and stands on its own according to the predominant Reformed tradition, the first segment of hymns that follow are 'arranged and numbered agreeably to the sections of the [Heidelberg] Catechism'.[32] Specifically, just as the Catechism organizes its 129 questions and answers into 52 groupings, to lend itself to a one-year course of instruction, so too does this Reformed Dutch work gather the hymns in this section into 52 corresponding 'hymns' that serve as a kind of sung exposition of the Catechism. To be sure, most of these 52 have three, four, or five parts, with each part being, in fact, a discrete hymn, so that the total number of hymns contained in this section numbers far more than 52. Nevertheless, the 52-hymn framework remains explicit, to reflect the catechetical organization and purpose of the whole and to enable easy cross-referencing to the Heidelberg Catechism

[31] *Ibid.*, pp. 72–3.

[32] John H. Livingston, *The Psalms and Hymns with the Catechism, Confession of Faith, and Liturgy, of the Reformed Dutch Church in North America* (Philadelphia, PA: G. W. Mentz & Son, 1840), p. 259.

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itself, which is included in the rear of the book. In other words, with regard to my first questions, the answer is obvious: this hymnal is explicitly catechetical and Reformed.

More particularly, 'responding' to Question 31 of the Heidelberg Catechism for the Lord's Day, this hymnal includes two hymns (No. 12, First Part and Second Part) that sing the praises of Jesus' work understood according to the threefold office. True, neither is original; they are in fact the hymns of Isaac Watts cited above. However, the one referring to Jesus' many names has been altered precisely to make it better fit the framework used by the Catechism. Instead of praising 13 different 'names', as Watts's original does, it praises only four: prophet, high priest, and king (in keeping with Question 31) and saviour (perhaps as a nod to the Catechism's famous opening question reference to 'my faithful Saviour, Jesus Christ' or to the preceding question). In any event, this alteration focuses particular attention upon the threefold office:

1 Join all the glorious names
Of wisdom, love, and power,
That ever mortals knew,
That angels ever bore;
All are too mean to speak his worth;
Too mean to set my Saviour forth.

2 Great *Prophet* of my God,
My tongue would bless thy name:
By thee the joyful news
Of our salvation came;
The joyful news of sins forgiv'n,
Of hell subdued, and peace with heav'n.

3 Jesus, my great *High Priest*,
Offer'd his blood, and died;
My guilty conscience seeks
No sacrifice beside.
His pow'rful blood did once atone;
And now it pleads before the throne.

4 My dear and mighty Lord,
My conqu'ror, and my *King*;
Thy sceptre and thy sword,
Thy reigning grace I sing.
Thine is the pow'r; behold! I sit
In willing bonds beneath thy feet.

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5 Now let my soul arise,
  And tread the tempter down:
  My *Saviour* leads me forth
  To conquest and a crown.
A feeble saint shall win the day,
Tho' death and hell obstruct the way.

6 Should all the hosts of hell,
  and pow'rs of death unknown,
  Put their most dreadful forms,
  Of death and mischief, on:
I shall be safe, for Christ displays
Superior pow'r and guardian grace.[33]

All in all, this North American Reformed Dutch hymnal is an intriguing work that seems custom-made to confirm my thesis. I am only left to wonder if it was ever actually used according to its intended purpose.

The final example I will consider is *The Sabbath Hymn Book*, published in 1858 by Edward A. Park, Austin Phelps and Lowell Mason, all professors at Andover Seminary in Massachusetts. The work was intended for the use of orthodox Congregational churches in New England.[34] But what perceived need, or apparent shortcomings in the other hymnals, motivated the editors to compile this book? The Preface states that the 'first aim of all has been, to select hymns of a truly devotional character'.[35] To clarify, the editors note that it 'is not meant to be a Book of Theology in rhyme', but it is called 'The Sabbath *Hymn* Book, for the service of *Song* in the house of the Lord'.[36] They reinforce this point by quoting with approval 'a German author' critiquing modern hymns as 'not lyrical, but didactic. They only preach in rhyme; and thus they reach the head, but not the heart. If, now, the sermon preaches, and the singing preaches, and the prayer preaches, the monotony of the service will occasion weariness; but if the sermon preaches, and the hymn sings, and the prayer prays, there will be a beautiful variety to exercise and interest all the faculties of the soul.'[37] All these sentiments taken together might suggest that *The Sabbath Hymn Book* could not possibly be employed for catechetical purposes. If the editors sought to avoid the didactic in their hymns, how could it be otherwise? Yet we should not jump to hasty

[33] *Ibid.*, Hymn 12, Second Part, pp. 295–6. Italics in original.
[34] Dr Glenn T. Miller, in personal consultation.
[35] Edward A. Park, Austin Phelps, and Lowell Mason (eds), *The Sabbath Hymn Book* (New York: Mason Brothers, 1858), p. iii.
[36] *Ibid.*, p. iv.
[37] *Ibid.*

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conclusions, for in describing their desire that hymns speak to the heart *and* the head, these introductory comments in fact echo the attitude and intentions of John Calvin.[38]

Viewed another way, these three editors were also intent upon balancing the 'objective' and the 'subjective' in their hymns, assigning the former to the first division of their hymn book and the latter to the second. What do they mean by using these terms and assigning these divisions? The first division is explained as containing hymns predominantly suited to 'the worship of God; and the being, attributes and works of God'.[39] The second division contains hymns predominantly suited to 'the character, state, and destination of man'.[40] Again, anyone familiar with the opening chapter of Calvin's *Institutes* will recognize in this juxtaposition an echo of his fundamental insistence that neither true knowledge of God nor true knowledge of self is possible in isolation or the abstract, but only in the proper and personal relation of God and self.[41] Like Watts before them, the compilers of this *Hymn Book* take for granted that true and proper hymnody is rooted in the truth of God, as revealed in scripture.

The editors give a framework to this revealed truth in the various headings and subheadings that organize the hymns of the First Division. These include, in Book One, 'General Hymns Pertaining to the Worship of God', and in Book Two, 'Hymns Pertaining to the Being, Attributes, and Works of God'. The third book contains 'Hymns Pertaining to the God-Man', which includes 203 hymns organized under the following subheadings: 'General Adoration of Christ as God', 'Origin of the Mission of Christ', 'Advent of Christ', 'Life of Christ on Earth', 'Atoning Pains and Death of Christ', 'Praise for Atoning Love', 'Character of God Illustrated in the Atonement', 'Reward of Christ for His Atonement', 'Resurrection of Christ', 'Ascension of Christ', 'The Living Saviour in Heaven', 'Christ Our Intercessor and Advocate', 'Mediatorial Reign of Christ', 'Christ Our Guardian and Refuge', 'Christ the Light of the World', and finally 'Preciousness of Christ and His Offices'. The final three 'Books' of this First Division contain 'Hymns Pertaining to God, the Holy Spirit', 'Hymns Pertaining to the

[38] As he notes in his 1537 'Articles concerning the Organization of the Church and of Worship', J. K. S. Reid (ed.), *Calvin: Theological Treatises* (The Library of Christian Classics: Icthus Edition; Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1954), p. 54, and as he describes the ideal for piety generally in the *Institutes*, I.v.9.

[39] Park, Phelps, and Mason, *Hymn Book*, p. 813.

[40] *Ibid.*, p. 817.

[41] See John T. McNeill (ed.), *Calvin: Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Library of Christian Classics vol. XX; Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), pp. 35ff.

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Trinity', and 'Hymns Pertaining to the Holy Scriptures'. Taken together, these various headings and subheadings make it seem as if the editors were creating a work of systematic theology! Yet they had stated explicitly that they were not seeking to create 'a Book of Theology in rhyme', and that they were trying to avoid 'didacticism'. So what should one conclude?

I contend that the editors were not rejecting 'edification' or catechesis *per se*, but that they were rejecting *ineffective* edification or catechesis. In typical Reformed fashion, their primary concern was to foster and enable the proper praise of God through their hymnody. But in keeping with the other examples I have considered, they knew that such proper praise of God both presupposes, and results in, edification. That is, the content of praise must be grounded in the true knowledge of God if it is to be properly faithful; yet the form in which this content is expressed will determine how effectively hymnody will strengthen and deepen believers' faith. The editors reject 'didactic' hymnody not because it teaches but because it teaches so ineffectively, i.e. it does not use the medium of song to its best advantage. What they say in praise of biblical psalmody is true of all good hymnody: 'It *expresses* the true sentiment, in its accurate proportions, and it always *suggests* even more than it expresses.'[42] I believe the editors recognized that insofar as hymns teach, they teach best when they are primarily indirect, imagistic or narrative, rather than direct and plain. Hymns should not lecture, they should evoke. When they do this, they truly serve an edifying, indeed catechetical, purpose.

Now I have already pointed to several ways in which this *Hymn Book* reflects a general Reformed orientation. As for hymns dealing specifically with the threefold office, *The Sabbath Hymn Book* contains four (three of which are grouped under the heading 'Preciousness of Christ and His Offices'): one is Watts's 'Join all the glorious names' (Hymn 440) in the edited version found in the Dutch Reformed hymnal. Another is Newton's 'How sweet the name of Jesus sounds' (Hymn 441). Two more are ones encountered here for the first time in my research. Hymn 439 is as follows:

1 I've found the pearl of greatest price;
  My heart doth sing for joy;
And sing I must, for Christ is mine –
  Christ shall my song employ.

2 Christ is my Prophet, Priest, and King:
  My prophet full of light;

[42] *Ibid.*

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My great High Priest before the throne;
My King of heavenly might.

3 For he indeed is Lord of lords,
And he the King of kings;
He is the Sun of Righteousness,
With healing in his wings.

4 Christ is my Peace: he died for me,
For me he gave his blood;
And as my wondrous sacrifice,
Offered himself to God.

5 Christ Jesus is my All in All,
My comfort and my love;
My life below, and he shall be
My joy and crown above.

The editors locate the other hymn, no. 269, under their 'Advent of Christ' section:

1 Hark! what mean those holy voices,
Sweetly sounding through the skies?
Lo! th' angelic host rejoices;
Heavenly hallelujahs rise.

2 Hear them tell the wondrous story,
Hear them chant in hymns of joy:
'Glory in the highest, glory!
Glory be to God most high!

3 'Peace on earth, good-will from heaven,
Reaching far as man is found;
Souls redeemed, and sins forgiven!
Loud our golden harps shall sound.

4 'Christ is born the great Anointed;
Heaven and earth his praises sing!
Oh, receive whom God appointed
For your Prophet, Priest, and King!

5 'Haste, ye mortals, to adore him;
Learn his name, and taste his joy:
Till in heaven ye sing before him,
''Glory be to God most high!'' '

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Another hymn mentions the 'Almighty Son! incarnate Word! / Our Prophet, Priest, Redeemer, Lord!' [43] Yet another hymn speaks explicitly of Jesus as 'our atoning Priest, our eternal King' but fails to add any reference to 'Prophet'.[44] All of these taken together indicate that *The Sabbath Hymn Book*, in both its content and its organization, represents a remarkable tool for serving the purposes of worship and clearly Reformed edification, including a noteworthy emphasis on the threefold office of Christ.

So, how should I summarize my investigations overall? How should I answer my most particular question with reference to the four examples I have considered in depth? And are they representative of Reformed hymnody generally? As you recall, my most particular question may be summarized as follows: has Reformed hymnody been motivated by a catechetical impulse to instill its distinctive interpretation of Christ's work under the framework of the 'threefold office'? Based on the hymnals I have been able to investigate, I have to conclude that such an emphasis has *not* been a characteristic concern of Reformed hymnologists. It appears in some hymnals, to a greater or lesser degree, but not at all in others. Two of the hymnals discussed here have both 'threefold office' hymns and a structure that links those hymns in ways that reinforce this typically Reformed framework: the 1840 American Dutch Reformed hymnal and *The Sabbath Hymn Book*. Others have 'threefold office' hymns, but these hymns 'stand on their own'. Recall the examples of Isaac Watts and *Olney Hymns*. The same mixed results are evident in other hymnals I have examined but not discussed in this paper. *The Hymnal of the Reformed Church* of 1920 includes three of the five hymns considered here, yet does not link them in any way.[45] *The Presbyterian Book of Praise*, published for the Presbyterian Church in Canada in 1897, includes two;[46] however, it does not use them in any larger structural way to reinforce this particular understanding of Christ's status and work.

But other hymnals from Reformed denominations that one might expect to use this schema, or at least include the 'threefold office' hymnody that

[43] Hymn 471, 'Holy, holy, holy Lord', in the 'Trinity' section.

[44] Hymn 325, 'Now to the Lord who makes us know', in the 'Praise for Atoning Love' section.

[45] *The Reformed Church Hymnal* (New York: The Board of Publication and Bible-School Work, 1920), includes Hymn 209, 'Join All the Names of Love and Power' (Watts), 282, 'How Sweet the Name of Jesus Sounds' (Newton and Cowper), and 123, 'Hark! What Mean Those Holy Voices' (in Parks, Phelps, and Mason).

[46] Newton's 'How Sweet the Name of Jesus Sounds' and an edited version of Watts's 'Join All the Glorious Names'. See *The Presbyterian Book of Praise* (London: Oxford University Press, 1897), Hymns 94 and 178.

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does exist, in fact employ neither. For example, *The Hymnbook*, a 1955 joint publication of the Presbyterian Church in the United States, the United Presbyterian Church in the USA and the Reformed Church in America undertaken as a self-consciously Reformed project, includes many of Watts's hymns but none of those describing Christ's work in this threefold form.[47] The same holds true for *The Presbyterian Hymnal* published in 1990.[48] The *Pilgrim Hymnal* of 1958, a book of Congregational lineage and hence a direct descendant of Isaac Watts, includes his 'Join All the Glorious Names', but actually deletes the reference to Christ as Priest.[49] *The Hymnal of the United Church of Christ*, published as a successor to the *Pilgrim Hymnal*, contains none of the five hymns.[50] The same holds true for *The New Century Hymnal*, the most recent hymnal produced by the United Church of Christ.[51] Moreover, none of these hymnals has a topical index that includes all three of the titles. So even if one considers that many hymns have as their theological focus one and sometimes two of the 'offices', these examples typically do not make any kind of overt or systematic connection to the threefold office framework. In sum, I have discovered only three hymns that use and develop the framework of the *munus triplex*, plus two more that refer to 'Prophet, Priest, and King' in passing but do not develop the reference. These meager results may only reflect the particular selection of hymnals available to me for research, although given the size of that selection I do not think this likely. All of these examples combined suggest that my thesis went 'a question too far'.

Having acknowledged this, what of my more general questions, namely, the ones asking: has Reformed hymnody been motivated by a catechetical impulse, and has this impulse sought to instill identifiably Reformed understandings of the faith? To these, I would have to answer a yes. While the primary purpose of Reformed hymnody has always been the worship of God, it has also had as one of its corollary and essential purposes the 'edification' of the congregation.[52] If you recall my earlier definition, such edification has always included some element of catechesis, more narrowly or more broadly defined. Reformed hymnody has been employed for such general catechetical purposes, as the arguments of Isaac Watts and John Newton, and the general organization of hymnals such as that of the North American Dutch Reformed Church and *The Sabbath Hymn Book*, demonstrate.

[47] *The Hymnbook* (Richmond, VA: 1955).
[48] *The Presbyterian Hymnal* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1990).
[49] *Pilgrim Hymnal* (Boston: The Pilgrim Press, 1958), Hymn 229.
[50] *The Hymnal of the United Church of Christ* (Philadelphia, PA: United Church Press, 1974).
[51] *The New Century Hymnal* (Cleveland, OH: The Pilgrim Press, 1995).
[52] See the quote from Hughes Oliphant Old at the beginning of this paper.

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As I noted in my discussion of *The Sabbath Hymn Book*, hymnody is particularly suited to catechize indirectly, evocatively or narratively, and this, I would conclude, is the way the Reformed tradition has most typically employed it. Thus, for example, rather than teaching by means of song a doctrine of scripture *per se*, Reformed hymns abound that 'exegete' scripture, that are, in essence, sung commentaries. Similarly, rather than teaching by means of song the doctrine of God's sovereignty *per* se, Reformed hymns abound that evoke a sense of God's power and reign in concrete and even personal examples drawn from nature or history. Rather than teaching by means of song a doctrine of Providence *per se*, Reformed hymns abound that describe a multitude of different and particular circumstances with an assurance of God's presence, care, and guidance. Rather than teaching by means of song a doctrine of grace *per se*, Reformed hymns abound that speak deeply and personally about God's life-changing work in Christ. Perhaps one would counter that hymns 'exegeting' scripture, and evoking awe at God's sovereignty, providence, and grace, are hardly the exclusive domain of *Reformed* hymnody. Fair enough. Yet I cannot help but recall an anecdote related by Brian Gerrish, which seems an appropriate concluding response:

> Some years ago, I found myself travelling on a train from Lancaster to London in the company of a young scholar I had just met at a conference. A recent convert to Roman Catholicism, he was amazed to learn that I actually do read the *Institutes*, and he asked me what I could possibly find worth reading in Calvin. Though a little disconcerted I tried valiantly to answer as best I could, and when I was done he commented disdainfully: 'There's nothing peculiar to Calvin about that; it's just plain Christianity.' And I said: 'I know.'[53]

Reformed hymnody has always sought simply to serve the needs of what it understood as 'plain Christianity'. I hope I have made a convincing case that historically a crucial aspect of that service was the edification, indeed, the catechesis, of Christians, that their faith might be more truly, deeply and coherently *i*nformed and *R*eformed, grounded especially in scripture, and a matter of both the head and the heart, to the glory of God. And as a theologian, I also hope that the Church might reclaim this heritage and this service more explicitly and conscientiously in our current era when so many churchgoers seem ill-informed in the Christian faith.

[53] B. A. Gerrish, *Grace and Gratitude: The Eucharistic Theology of John Calvin* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), pp. ix–x.

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