



The contested legacy of singing God's inspired songs in the Reformed Churches in South Africa: The regulating role of the Word from Dordrecht to Totius and into the present



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This article is a historical–theological inquiry into the Reformed Churches in South Africa (RCSA) and the doctrine behind her historic practice of essentially singing only God's inspired songs. The catalyst for this investigation is the 2012 RCSA Synod decision to revise Article 69 of the church order – an order based on the one formulated at the 1618–1619 Synod of Dordrecht – to allow for the singing of free hymns. Such a decision marked a significant break with the early Reformed and confessional tradition of singing only God's inspired songs, as well as a driving reason for the formation of the RCSA in 1859. This article challenges the 2012 revision of the Dort-modelled Article 69 on historical and theological grounds. In addition to failing to reckon adequately with her pre-formation history, the RCSA did not give appropriate attention to her rich legacy of singing predominantly Psalms only. More specifically, this article contends that within her own history the RCSA has a confessional and theological category that can help re-establish continuity with the best of her Reformed liturgical past. This category is the scriptural or regulative principle of worship (S/RPW) – a doctrine that has encouraged the reformation of public worship across the globe and one at least latent in the historical RCSA theological discourse. This essay commends its recovery for the future reformation of worship for the glory of God.

Keywords: Regulative principle of worship; Psalms; Hymns; Church Order Article 69; Worship; Synod of Dordrecht.

Introduction

The question of driving concern in this article is whether there are historical–theological reasons to critique the 2012 Reformed Churches in South Africa (RCSA) Synod decision to revise Article 69 of the church order to read as follows (RCSA 2012):

[I]n the churches only the 150 Psalms and the rhymed versions of the Ten Commandments, the Lord's Prayer, the Apostolic Confession, and the Hymns of praise of Mary, Zacharias and Simeon shall be sung. The use of other rhymed versions of Bible verses and Scriptural faithful hymns which have been approved by the Synod, is left over to the jurisdiction of the churches. (p. 379)

Did the RCSA in her landmark decision marshal sufficient evidence from within her tradition to overturn such a thick catholic and early Reformed theology of singing only those songs found in God's Word?¹

The scope of this article is focused on an investigation of song in worship in the period leading up to and including the 150-year history of the RCSA. It focuses on the period from the dissenting 'Doppers' to the adoption of the Dordrecht church order in 1859 and thereafter from Totius and into the present. And yet, it assumes and builds upon a body of historic Reformed scholarship congruent with the main argument of this essay: that is, what fundamentally lies behind the historic Reformed practice of singing only God's inspired songs in worship – pre- and post-1859 in South Africa – is the scriptural or regulative principle of worship (S/RPW).²

1. Astute readers will notice a certain 'narrowing' in the authors' understanding of what is to be sung in Christ's church. Where initially the authors understood the S/RPW to limit the church song to 'Scripture only' (cf. Jooste & Potgieter 2020), the authors now contend it should be narrowed further to 'God's inspired songs only'.

2. Jordaan (2008) prefers the term 'Scriptural principle of worship'. For an explanation and defence of the S/RPW in relation to the Reformed confessions, see, for example, Bredenhof (1997), Engelsma (2000a, 2000b) Williamson (2001) and Archbald (2008). With regard to applying the S/RPW to church singing, see, for example, Clark (2008:226–291) and Jooste and Potgieter (2020).

Note: Special Collection: Impact of Reformed Theology.

This article begins its parochial retrieval of the S/RPW by briefly tracing applicable social, political and religious forces leading up to the establishment and shaping of the formative convictions of the RCSA in the two young South African republics and the Cape Colony. Our attention then turns to a sketch of key figures and synodical decisions around the evolution of singing in worship, as set forth in the original version of Article 69 of the RCSA church order. Finally, and in light of the findings, this article argues for the value of reforming worship today according to the historical and confessional theological category known as the S/RPW, especially in light of the introduction of free hymns at Synod 2012.³

Calvinist successors to Dort: The Dutch settlers and the dissenting Doppers

Inheritors of a contested Calvinist legacy

The Dutch Reformed Synod of Dort (1618–1619) is a highlight in the history of the early continental Reformed tradition. The Church Order Article 69 that it birthed essentially perpetuated the catholic (Bushell 1999:154–167; Maxwell 1936; Oliphant Old 1975; Oliphant Old 2002:47) and Calvinist (Clark 2008, 2010:266–269) *practice* of singing only the songs found in God's Word.⁴ More contested, and yet assumed, is the claim that what motivated this practice was a Calvinist and confessional *theology* otherwise known as the S/RPW (Clark 2008:227–229; Clark 2010; Gordon 2003; Manetsch 2015:34–35; Oliphant Old 1975:231). Thus, when Reformed immigrants from the Lowlands anchored in Table Bay in 1652, they brought with them a tradition of singing predominantly Psalms, rooted in an understanding of *sola Scriptura* as summarised in the *Three Forms of Unity*.⁵ That confession is: what is permissible in corporate worship – including what is sung – must be commanded by God in his authoritative and sufficient Word, and nothing besides (BC 1983:art. 2–5, 7, 32; HC 1983:LD 35; Inst. 4.10.23–26; cf. 4.10.30; 3.11.1; Ursinus 1992:506–549; Voetius 1891:783, 797).⁶

3. For the purposes of this essay, a free hymn is understood as a song that is true to the message of Scripture without being based on a particular passage of Scripture. This was the definition advocated by the 2006 doctrinal deputies in their report (RCSA 2009:742). In accordance with the 2012 liturgical deputies report, we understand that the term 'scriptural faithful hymns' fits the preceding definition of 'free hymns' and is a distinct additional category to Psalms, Scripture versification ('rhymed versions of Bible verses') and confessional songs.

4. When it comes to Dutch Reformed Synods leading up to 1618, except for the Remonstrant Provincial Synod of Utrecht (1612), all the church orders set forth at the Convent of Wesel (1568), Dort (1574 and 1578), Middelburg (1581) and Gravenhage (1586) are worded unambiguously to the effect that *only* the Psalms of David are to be sung in the church (and hymns should be omitted because they are not found in Scripture) (De Ridder 1987).

5. For evidence that the S/RPW is also a continental Reformed conviction and not only an English Puritan and Presbyterian phenomenon, see, for example, Bredenhof (1997), Engelsma (2000a, 2000b) and Jordaan (2008).

6. This does not mean that everything commanded by our Lord is recorded in Scripture in the form of a direct commandment. But by good and necessary inference drawn from Scripture we can be certain as to what does – or, conversely, does not – have divine authorization' (Williamson 2001). For further warrants for the assumptions in this paragraph, including primary and secondary Reformed sources in support of the S/RPW, see Jooste and Potgieter (2020).

The early Dutch imports stationed at the Cape of Good Hope sought to further a Calvinist and confessional legacy with an inherited church order that bore the marks of ecclesiastical and political ferment. More specifically, and not unlike the reforming attempts of Calvin in 16th-century Geneva (Clark 2010:258–269), Article 69 of Dort (1619) gives evidence of a liturgical renewal effort that was compromised and ultimately cut short by a meddling civil magistrate (Clark 2008:253–254).⁷ How then would Article 69 of Dort – an article that made a contested provision for the singing of two uninspired hymns⁸ – fare in the new religious and political landscape of Southern Africa? Would this new outpost of Cape-Dutch Reformed churches reform according to the catholic and Calvinist *practice* of singing God's inspired songs only or not? And on what *theological* basis would their decisions be made?

The Dutch reformed in the early South African context

The practice of song in public worship that was brought to the shores of Southern Africa by the Dutch settler Jan van Riebeeck on 06 April 1652 was Psalm singing. Although primarily tasked with establishing a supply post for the Dutch East India Company [*Vereenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie*] (VOC), he and his fellow settlers were nonetheless eager to establish the continental Reformed tradition at the Cape of Good Hope.⁹ These pious Old-World immigrants brought with them their 1637 *Statenvertaling* (the first official Dutch Bible)¹⁰ and their psalter, *The Psalms of Datheen* (1566),¹¹ for both public and private worship (Mathlener 1979:60). The aforementioned psalter, which included the Heidelberg Catechism, some church order notes and ecclesiastical formularies, resonated strongly with the French Genevan psalter of the French Huguenots, who joined the Cape Colony in 1688–1689. Datheen's psalter formed a central part of early settler piety until its updated replacement in 1775 (Cillie 1983:34–5). This update included the introduction of a few free hymns, most likely for home use only (Louw 1999:589).

As a result of frequent interaction with trading vessels and a slow but steady increase in new settlers, the Cape Colony was not isolated from or immune to events happening in Europe. For one, there were the significant influences of the Enlightenment and the later 1789 French Revolution. And

7. In addition to the desire to remove non-canonical hymns, other liturgical developments that were stunted as a result of political or cultural factors include the doing away with public evening prayer services and the abolishment of a liturgical calendar along with feast days (De Ridder 1987:144–145, 159, 217, 219, 280–281, 358–359, 554–555).

8. In the churches only the 150 Psalms of David, the Ten Commandments, the Lord's Prayer, the 12 *Articles of Faith*, the Songs of Mary, Zacharias, and Simeon shall be sung. It is left to the option of the churches whether to use or omit the song, "O God, who art our Father" (De Ridder 1987:555; emphasis ours).

9. 'We are here to maintain the law, and, if possible, to propagate and reveal the reformed Christian faith amongst these wild and uncivilized people, to the glory of your holy Name'; see Jan Van Riebeeck in Vorster (1956:12).

10. Of interest to this essay are the comments on Ephesians 5:19 in the marginalia of the *Statenvertaling* to the effect that the three kinds of spiritual hymns cited refer to the Psalms only, as a result of them having been taken from the LXX superscriptions to the Psalms of David.

11. In addition to the Psalms, this psalter included the 'Ten Commandments', the 'Song of Mary', the 'Song of Zechariah', the 'Song of Simeon', the 'Lord's Prayer', the 'Apostles' Creed' and a prayer before the sermon.

at the same time, like other places in Europe, there was the control of the Dutch state over the Reformed churches (Louw 1999:589). Adding fuel to these fires was the 17th-century entrenchment of pietism both on the continent and in the British Isles.

The Reformed churches at the Cape of Good Hope, though having freedom to govern themselves in keeping with the presbyterial system of their church order, were still responsible to Classis Amsterdam and under the ecclesiastical reign of the VOC. The VOC paid the salaries of the ministers, sat in on church council meetings and had to approve new office bearers before they could be ordained. This arrangement meant that developments in the Netherlands in particular also had a significant impact on the churches in Southern Africa (Coertzen 2018:5–7).

De Mist, pietism and the introduction of free hymns

Towards the end of the 17th century, there developed within the Netherlands a strong desire for spiritual renewal that focused on finding new songs for the churches to sing (Viljoen 1990:50–51). In 1773, a special commission was given this task. Their first completed collection of songs was produced in 1803 and in 1806 were made available for use (Viljoen 1990:52). In fact, it was mandated by the state (without any Synod decision because there had been none since 1618–1619) that an evangelical hymn be sung every Sunday (Louw 1999:589–590). The speed with which these songs were introduced into the Reformed churches in Holland was in stark contrast to the introduction of hymns in Germany, where it was a much slower and more gradual process.¹² Despite the fact that the *Hymns of the Covenant* were produced by Joachim Neander as early as 1679,¹³ they were not accepted for use in the German churches until 1738. This is because they were initially opposed on the grounds that God's Word and not man's words was to be sung in the churches. However, because they were increasingly being used at private meetings and other gatherings, they became so popular that they won their way into churches and could not be refused (Good 1894:403–404).

After the *Evangelische Gezangen* [Evangelical Hymns] were approved for use in the Netherlands, it was not long before they were introduced to churches in South Africa. In 1812, the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) in Stellenbosch ordered 2000 of these new songbooks and began singing from them on Sunday, 20 February 1814.¹⁴ For more than 150 years, no great change in singing had occurred in

12. Though the *Constance Hymnal* of 1540 included numerous free hymns, 'the preference of Geneva for exclusive psalmody prevailed in the Reformed churches for the next two hundred years' (Old 2002:53).

13. According to McKim (1992:189), Neander intended his hymns for private devotions, prayer meetings and home worship.

14. According to Jooste, Cape Town made use of the hymns on Sunday, 09 January, and Stellenbosch on Sunday, 20 February (1959:20). The introduction to the 2001 *Liedboek van die Kerk* [Songbook of the Church] comments on this event as follows, 'On Sunday 9 January 1814 the first hymn was sung on the South African soil – Rijnvis Feith's "Zingt, Zingt blij te moe." On Sunday 28 October 2001 a wonderful group of new hymns will be heard in South Africa'.

South Africa (Gerstner 1991:43). However, now, without any formal debate,¹⁵ free hymns were introduced into several churches (Spoelstra 1989a:64).

These extra-biblical song imports contained many of the hallmarks of pietism, rationalism, humanism and Arminianism (Cillie 1983:31). According to Spoelstra (1984:3), they exhibited the 'spirit of the classical Greek worldview with an emphasis on an autonomous man who, through reason, can be his own god and master'. Not only were these ideas brought to South Africa through new hymns, but they also came in the form of a new church order.

In 1804, J.A. De Mist, the commissioner-general of the interim government of the Batavian Republic in the Cape Colony (1802–1806), drew up a constitution for the church according to the new ideas of the Enlightenment and the French Revolution. Based upon the humanist philosophy of the 18th century (such as J. J. Rousseau's *Le Contract Social*), the autonomous individual enjoys the freedom of religious association and constitutes by means of delegation and agreement with others a church to his liking (Spoelstra 1989a:62). Although the articles of the De Mist church order set forth in seed form a charter for religious freedom, they were out of place in a document intended to govern the *spiritual* polity of Christ's church (cf. BC 1983:art. 30). In addition to mixing civic policy with spiritual governance and encouraging collegialism,¹⁶ the colonial government of the time overstepped its authority by acting like a synod when consenting on behalf of the churches to the introduction of free hymns (Louw 1999:590). Furthermore, the indirect effect of the patronage and ordering of the state at the time was a sidelining of the Dort church order.

Not to be underestimated relative to the reception of evangelical hymns in the early 18th-century South African context is the role that pietism played. Finding its roots in medieval mysticism (Clark 2008:75–76), 16th- and 17th-century German, Dutch and English pietism found its way to the tip of Africa through various channels. An element of pietism was felt in the spirituality of the founding Dutch settlers, especially after 1752 (Elphick & Davenport 1997: 22, 31–34; 2012:40–41), through European missionaries and the subsequent commissioning of Scottish Presbyterian ministers into the ranks of the Dutch Reformed clergy (Elphick & Davenport 1997:9, 21–25; Theron 2008:230–231). Although notoriously difficult to define, pietism of the Dutch and English varieties is a posture of ecclesiastical critique (for her collusion with the state and otherwise) that seeks reformation and renewal outside of the official forms, offices, creeds and worship of the established church.

15. Formal objections to the free hymns were made in the Netherlands around the time of the 'Afscheiding'. Jacobus Klok published his objections in 'The Evangelical Hymns Tested, Weighed and Found To Be Too Light' (1834) and Hendrik de Cock in 'The so-called evangelical hymns the darling of the enraptured and misled multitude in the synodical Reformed Church and even by some of God's children from blindness, because they were drunk with the wine of her fornication, further tested, weighed and found wanting, yes, in conflict with all our Forms of Unity and the Word of God' (1835). De Cock argues that the free hymns are contrary to the Reformed faith and God's Word.

16. For an explanation of how the De Mist church order contributed to collegialism in South Africa, see Smit (2018).

True and vital spirituality for the pietist is located in a free flow of heartfelt devotion to God that evidences itself in private devotion, moral living and social transformation (Hart 2013:72–181). Although beyond the scope of this essay to explore further and defend, it seems plausible to suggest that an updated pietism – in the form of revivalism – played a role within the DRC in the objectivity of Article 69 of Dort (1619) being replaced with the subjective novelty of evangelical hymns (Elphick 2012:40–41; Louw 1999:591; Moodie 1975:58–59).

The dissenting Doppers and a return to early Calvinism

Although the De Mist church order was accepted by the first Synod of the DRC of the Cape Colony in 1824 (Louw 1999:593), and despite the inroads of pietism and its daughters revivalism and later evangelicalism, there was by no means a unanimous acceptance of this turn away from the piety and practice of Dordrecht. Farmers living on the north-eastern border of the Cape Colony, bearing the nickname of 'Dopper', were not willing to accommodate the new worldly philosophy. They objected in particular to the 'evangelical hymns'. And despite pressure from church authorities,¹⁷ they were unwilling to simply go along with the spirit of the age (Louw 1999; Spoelstra 1989a:63–64).

A circular issued by the Presbytery of Graaff-Reinet in 1841 sheds some light on the objections that these individuals raised. It seems as if the Doppers claimed that evangelical hymns contained a new gospel (Jooste 1959:38–39). In their objections to singing these hymns, they also appealed to Article 7 of the Belgic Confession and Article 69 of the Church Order of the 1618–1619 Synod of Dort (Kruger 1956:44; Spoelstra 1989a:64). Accordingly, it was contended that the Word of God was sufficient and complete. It needs no human additions because it contains everything we need to worship God.¹⁸ Furthermore, God had not ordained the use of free hymns. Therefore, by introducing them into the churches, Article 7 was effectively ignored (Kruger 1956:109). At other times, the Doppers were known to treat the extra-canonical hymns as a violation of the Second Commandment: idolatry.¹⁹ Recourse was also made to other classic texts in support of the S/RPW, namely, the likes of Deuteronomy 4:2, 1 Samuel 15:23 and Matthew 15:9 (Louw 1999:594). In short, the Doppers resisted the imposition of free hymns because they believed that such a requirement was out of keeping with God's Word (Louw 1999:592). This position would feature more formally by a contingency of dissenters at the 1847 Synod of the DRC (Van Der Vyver 1958:206).

17. In 1833 in Cradock voices of protest were heard against the hymns. The Ring of Graaff-Reinet drew first blood when in a so-called 'Pastor's Letter' they accused the pro-Psalms believers of 'heresy': that they 'pierce the body of Christ', and were guilty of 'church schism', because they did not want to sing the free hymns (d'Assonville 1990:102–103).

18. An excellent study explaining the relationship between Article 7 of the Belgic Confession, public worship and the S/RPW can be found in Bredenhof (1997).

19. While the Doppers did not write much, they were known to endorse the work of Wilhelmus a Brakel (Beets 1909:23; Spoelstra 1963:26). Resonances with the S/RPW in Brakel's (1992) corpus include, for example, his commentary on the second commandment (1992:3.114) and his insistence that the early Dutch Synods were correct in their ruling that only the Psalms of David be sung (1992:4.33–35).

Eventually, opposition to the evangelical hymns by the Doppers and other like-minded Christians resulted in the (re-)establishment of a Vrye Gereformeerde Kerk (VGK; later renamed as the GKSA/RCSA)²⁰ on 11 February 1859 (Pont 1979:71). Now at last, after a long struggle, which dated back to the 1830s, after years of resistance against false doctrine which had been tolerated in the churches, after years of sighing 'because the church wants to force the people's consciences to accept human ordinances and teachings contrary to the Word', relief had finally come (Van der Vyver 1958:294).

The founding vision and evolution of the Reformed Churches in South Africa

Undisputed is the fact that the Doppers desired and realised a return to the 1619 Church Order of Dort (Louw 1999:597). Scholars are in agreement that the secession of the VGK from the Nederduitsch Hervormde Kerk (NHK) had much to do with what was sung in worship (Louw 1999:599). What is more contested, however (Van Wyk 1984:6), are the reasons why Article 69 and its provision for essentially singing God's inspired songs was upheld without the provision for free hymns. While the Doppers tended to verbalise their objectives rather than write them down (Van der Vyver 1958:203), the evidence provided above suggests that the Doppers resisted evangelical hymns on principled theological grounds. While not necessarily using the phrases 'principle of worship' or 'regulative principle', they nevertheless contended that fundamentally churches should only sing the songs found in God's Word.

Rev. Dirk Postma and formative convictions around free hymns in the Vrye Gereformeerde Kerk

Rev. Dirk Postma, a recent Dutch import and the first minister to serve in the new breakaway VGK (Jooste 1959:57), was asked for his opinion on the matter of free hymns at the General Council Meeting of the NHK in Pretoria on 10 January 1859. There he stated that although he would not condemn a church that sings orthodox free hymns, he nevertheless considered it safest for the church to sing only hymns for which the text was found in the Bible (Jooste 1959:53). He also contended that where church members were unwilling to sing free hymns, their consciences must not be bound; and in keeping with Romans 14, only Psalms should be sung. If disagreement remained, Rev. Postma advised that the General Council leave the matter to the wisdom and conscience of each minister, so as not to overlook church member sentiment and encourage unnecessary division (Jooste 1959:53–54). Arguments by the new VGK minister

20. Gereformeerde Kerke in Suid Afrika (GKSA). The original name of this church federation included the term 'vrye' (free) in order to emphasise freedom from state control.

seem to resonate with some of those made by delegates to the 1847 Synod of the DRC (Van der Vyver 1958:206).

A couple of factors should, however, be kept in mind when evaluating the weight of Rev. Postma's comments. For one, he was a recent immigrant lacking the first-hand insights of the historical Doppers into the events leading up to the introduction of free hymns. Second, Rev. Postma was likely trying to be as cautious and conciliatory as possible as he found his feet as a newcomer in the ecclesiastical scene of the Transvaal Republic.

At the 1876 RCSA Synod, an important decision was made regarding the application of the historic Article 69 of Dort, namely, that only the 150 Psalms of David (found in the 1773 psalter) and limited hymns (like the 'Ten Commandments' and the 'Lord's Prayer') expressly derived from the text of Scripture may be sung in corporate worship.²¹ This decision seems to be not only a reformation back to the 1619 Dort Church Order, but even beyond, to the earlier Dort Synods and Calvin himself.

Subsequent decisions made by early synods of the RCSA further reinforced the animus of 1876. Of particular importance is the decision made by the Synod of 1888 where, following a request to sing a versification of the Apostles' Creed, they agreed that only the psalms and songs for which the text is found in the Bible are to be sung during church worship services (GKSA 1888:54). This suggests that unlike Calvin and other theologians from the Reformation, they did not consider the Apostles' Creed to possess apostolic (and thus God's) authority. Also, worthy of attention is the response of Synod 1907 to a request to sing Kinderharp and Sankey songs. In this instance the highest assembly encouraged church councils to promote Psalm singing in order to counterbalance the rise in the use of Methodist songs (GKSA 1907:31). However, they recognised that the composition and selection of songs for singing in the home and school was left to the individual (GKSA 1918:53). During these early years, the RCSA considered Church Order Article 69 to be the golden rule in determining what should be sung during communal worship. Accordingly, they only made use of the 1773 Dutch psalter and other songs for which the text is found in the Bible and that had been approved for use by the 1618–1619 Synod of Dordrecht (Basson 2016:149).

At the 1913 Synod, deputies responsible for doing a thorough study of the history and principles governing Reformed church songs concluded that the inclusion of a single free hymn is a failure of Reformed conviction (GKSA 1913:48).²² Furthermore, at this point the inclusion of texts

21. 'The Synod of the Reformed Church in South Africa establishes, in accordance with art. 69 of her church order: that in public worship only the 150 Psalms of David and hymns of which the text is found expressed in God's Word (are to be sung): specifically the versification of the Ten Commandments up to the Lord's Prayer. The 1773 Psalter of the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands is approved for use' (GKSA 1876:26).

22. Given this understanding, we do not know why the Synod decided to revise Article 69 by making provision once again for the Apostles' Creed.

found in God's Word were still limited to those expressly listed in Article 69 of Dort.²³

Up until Synod 1927, the *status quo* remained, insofar as the RCSA resisted both the introduction of free hymns and the expansion of singing metrical versions of other Bible passages (GKSA 1927:155). However, by 1930 a marked shift had taken place, which coincided with the sentiments of J. D. du Toit (Totius), as described in the next section.

In short, the initial objection of the RCSA to the use of free hymns seems to have been a combination of an attempt to stave off false doctrine and the principle that free hymns as a liturgical element and form are not found in the Bible and therefore not suitable for use in God's churches.

Enter Totius: The expansion of singing Scripture

Around 1920, a desire for Afrikaans (not Dutch) songs began to be raised within the RCSA. As a result, J. D. du Toit (Totius) was commissioned with the task of creating the first Afrikaans psalter, which appeared in 1937 (Viljoen 1990:54). He was the ideal candidate. A strong intellectual, Totius completed his PhD at the Free University in Amsterdam on the topic of 'Methodism'. Moreover, he followed in the footsteps of his father, S. J. du Toit,²⁴ by eagerly promoting Afrikaans literature. Notable among Totius' accomplishments was the Afrikaans Bible translation (completed in 1933) and, later, the first Afrikaans psalter (completed in 1937). He was especially suited for the latter role not only because of his knowledge of the Hebrew language, but also because of his poetic and musical abilities.²⁵

Throughout his life, Totius wrote extensively on the topic of church singing. For example, from 1906 to 1912, he wrote a number of articles in *Het Kerkblad* in which a hypothetical discussion takes place between an elder and a church member. Significant for a window into Totius' early views is an essay from 1906 where he affirms the practice set forth in Church Order Article 69 of Dort (1619) – that is, to essentially sing God's inspired songs. And, yet, with qualification. His preference at this point was for the Psalms, a conviction he believed was in keeping with the tradition of Calvin and the Dutch churches at the time of Dort (1618–1619). At the same time, however, he could still entertain the metrical versifications of a narrow range of Bible passages. When it came to the historical inclusion of free hymns, at Dort (1619) and prior, he considered this a concession by way of exception in light of the tenuous religious and political circumstances of the time. For the early Totius, the danger of

23. 'In the Reformed Churches (Congregations) of South Africa, during public worship, only the 150 Psalms of David, the 12 Articles of Faith and the songs of which the text is found expressed in God's Word shall be sung, namely: The Ten Commandments, The Lord's Prayer, the Song of Mary, Zechariah and Simeon. The 1773 metrical Psalter, currently being used is recommended for the churches until the Reformer Churches meeting in a Synod have chosen a better versification' (GKSA 1913:Article 143).

24. Totius' father played a significant role in promoting and developing the Afrikaans language and literature.

25. Totius was the first winner of the Hertzog Prize, the most prestigious prize in Afrikaans literature, for his 1915 poetry collection *Trekkerswee* [Trekkers' Grief].

introducing free hymns and expanding the range of metrical versifications of Scripture outside of the Psalms was that the 'pearls' of the Psalms would be sidelined (Du Toit 1977:3.5–3.8, 370–389).²⁶

From 1918 onwards it seems that Totius began to revise his earlier position relative to song in worship in general and Article 69 of Dort (1619) in particular. For one, in 1918 he clearly stated that metrical versifications of the New Testament were in principle permissible and entirely in keeping with both Calvin and Article 69 of Dort (1619) – the latter supposedly making a start in encouraging the practice, a practice that Totius thought should be expanded to include as many metrical versions of Scripture as possible (Du Toit 1977:3.425–438, 438–439; cf. Venter 1977:18). In 1931, Totius listed a number of texts outside of the Psalms that he deemed suitable for worship, including a comment to the effect that the Book of Revelation – because of its poetic form – was to the New Testament what the Psalms were to the Old (Du Toit 1977:3.381–3.385, 439–444). In the same year, he made another significant shift away from his earlier convictions with the argument that neither Calvin nor the early Dutch Reformed disagreed in principle with free hymns²⁷ (Du Toit 1977:3.365–3.373, 381–385). Furthermore, at this juncture Totius believed that both metrical Psalms and free hymns were essentially human compositions, albeit that metrical Psalms were safer because they were closer to the biblical text and therefore permanent (unlike the *ad hoc* nature of corporate prayers, which supposedly formed part of the basis for permitting – in theory – free hymns) (Du Toit 1977:3.373–3.381).

Although Totius' position on the 'what' of song in worship seemed to develop over time, including his attitude towards the Psalms, one reason for the 'why' of singing Scripture only seems to have remained constant. For the RCSA pastor and poet, although the singing of free hymns may not have been fundamentally unbiblical, the practice nevertheless increased the likelihood of introducing theological error into the church and should therefore be avoided (Du Toit 1977:3.370–3.389). Lying behind Totius's sentiments here is perhaps in part the position of Gisbertus Voetius famously articulated in his *Politica ecclesiasticae*. Here, he stated that although free hymns were not contrary to the Reformed principle, they nevertheless risked the introduction of heterodoxy if left unchecked (Du Toit 1977:3.369–3.370). In this regard, Totius displayed more resonance with Postma than the earlier Calvinist tradition, including the Doppers.

26. Among Totius' references are the famous words of Augustine repeated by John Calvin: 'Now what Saint Augustine says is true, that no one is able to sing things worthy of God unless he has received them from him. Wherefore, when we have looked thoroughly everywhere and searched high and low, we shall find no better songs nor more appropriate for the purpose than the Psalms of David, which the Holy Spirit made and spoke through him. And furthermore, when we sing them, we are certain that God puts the words in our mouths, as if he himself were singing in us to exalt his glory' (Calvin 1543b).

27. Totius defends this statement with reference to the preface of Marnix of St. Aldegonde's 1591 Psalter (Du Toit 1977:3.367). In this preface, Marnix argues that the decision to exclude free hymns was a result of historical precedent and a desire to avoid heresy. In the preface to his 1580 psalter, however, he makes use of the well-known Augustine quote (see previous footnote). Suffice to say, the words of Marnix appear to show that objections to free hymns were a result of a combination of avoiding false doctrine and a conviction that the best songs for the churches to sing were those that God had given in his Word.

The Reformed Churches in South Africa and her 2012 revision of Article 69 of the Church Order of Dort

The expansion of metrical Bible songs and the sidelining of the Psalms: 1930–1961

By 1930 the tide appears to have begun to change within the RCSA relative to song in corporate worship. That this shift coincided with a similar change in the convictions of Totius (as described above) should not go unnoticed. Between 1930 and 1942, the convening of RCSA general synods culminated in a 1942 revision of the 1913 reading of Article 69 to make provision for rhymed versions of the Bible (GKSA 1942):

[I]n the Churches only the 150 Psalms and the rhymed versions of the Ten Commandments, the Lord's Prayer, the Apostolic Confession, and the Hymns of praise of Mary, Zacharias and Simeon shall be sung. The use of other rhymed versions of Bible verses which have been approved by the synod, is left to the jurisdiction of each church council. (p. 134)

This revision was based on a number of important synodical decisions made during the aforementioned years. These included, for one, the decision by RCSA deputies, assigned to versify an Afrikaans psalter, to recommend six additional Bible songs for the back of the new hymnal (GKSA 1930:50), despite having no mandate to do so (Van Wyk 1979:64). Subsequently, at Synod 1933 consideration was given to investigating the possibility of expanding the number of metrical versifications of Scripture to be sung in worship (GKSA 1933:134) – yet without any gravamen (per Church Order Article 31) having been submitted against the standing Synod decision of 1913 to limit the number of Bible songs beyond the Psalms. In 1936, alongside the gravamen submitted against the decision of 1933, the deputies for producing a new Afrikaans psalter hymnal gave no insight into the scriptural or historical Reformed basis for their recommending of six new Bible songs (GKSA 1936:78–85). Further gravamina against the 1933 decision were received in 1939. Common to these complaints were the following: the founding principle of Article 69 was being challenged; the decision was at odds with previous Synod rulings and historical RCSA practice; the primary place of the Psalms was being endangered; and the unity of the church was challenged insofar as some would have objections on the grounds of conscience (GKSA 1939:90–100; Van Wyk 1979:67).

The decision in 1942 (GKSA 132–135) to revise Article 69 of the church order arguably represented an unprecedented move to amend the practice of singing predominantly Psalms. This move was made without any principled theological reasons given for why a change was necessary or advice given on what passages of Scripture were suitable for singing (Van Wyk 1979:72).

Song in worship deemed non-essential and the introduction of free hymns: 1961–2012

By 1961 the RCSA's shift away from her confessional Reformed roots and founding vision became even more

pronounced with the Synod decision that what was sung in churches was a non-essential matter (GKSA 1961:452–453). Taken together, the landmark Synod decisions of 1942 and 1961 provided fertile ground for the most dramatic revision of Article 69 to date: the 2012 decision to allow for free hymns. A brief consideration of select intervening synods provides further light on the emergence of such an oddity in the historically orthodox corner of the South African Reformed landscape.

At the 1997 RCSA Synod, a motion was submitted requesting that Article 69 be changed to make provision for singing free hymns. Part of the reasoning behind this motion was the supposed ‘fact’ that although the RCSA had historically sung Scripture only, this practice had not been on the principled grounds that free hymns were biblically unwarranted, but rather because they were potentially an invitation to error. However, the synod adjudicated that this motion failed, with the motivation that the songs the Lord had given his church in his Word were sufficient and best (GKSA 1997:797–799) – a motivation which resonates with the S/RPW (cf. Van Der Linde 1983:174–175). Yet, although the aforementioned theology may echo an earlier catholic and Reformed tradition, the fissure between confessional Reformed theology and practice within the RCSA opened her up to a successful year 2000 gravamen against the above 1997 decision. The essence of said gravamen was that it was inconsistent to claim the theological principle that only songs found in the Bible may be sung in corporate worship when the Apostles’ Creed and non-poetic Scripture versifications (SB 6, 26:11) were at the same time permissible per an updated Article 69 (GKSA 2000:459–462). In short, this gravamen demonstrated that the wording of Article 69 was neither in keeping with practice in the RCSA nor their alleged doctrinal principle (singing inspired songs only).

By 2006 further momentum had been generated in the direction of giving allowance to free hymns. Notable from the liturgical deputies’ report are the following arguments: that free hymns were used from the 2nd through the 4th centuries; historical proponents for singing Scripture, including Calvin, were motivated primarily by avoiding error; and differences around church song were not a reason for division. In short, it was argued that there could be no principled objection to the expansion of Article 69 to include free hymns (GKSA 2006:616–626). Also in support of the same conclusion was the report of the doctrinal deputies. Their arguments included the following: the idea that if instruction in the church can be given with free words, then the same liberty should be extended to song; Calvin made a selective use of church history and spurious use of Scripture to arrive at his position on song; the free hymn had been used since the earliest time in church history; the historical exclusion of free hymns was based on human tradition and not Scripture (reference was made to Belgic Confession Article 7); and additional songs were needed to aid churches in the celebration of the liturgical calendar. In short, the free hymn was supposedly both permissible and necessary

(GKSA 2006:557–571). Because of a lack of time, further debate was delayed to 2009.

At Synod 2009, the RCSA decided that Article 69 might be amended to allow for free hymns, pending the production of a comprehensive framework for evaluating them. The basis for this decision hinged upon the claim that the fundamental principle behind Article 69 was to avoid heresy from entering the church through song. If hymns could be deemed scripturally faithful, then they were permissible to be sung and might not be refused. To arrive at this conclusion, recourse was made, among others, to Totius’s endorsement of the historic decisions of Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland (GKN) Arnhem (RCSA 2009:752–755).

In 2012, the RCSA Synod held in Potchefstroom made a landmark decision. It represented the culmination of previous decisions and a shifting animus around church song dating back to 1930, which had gained significant momentum with the decisions of 1942, 1961, 2000 and 2009. Article 69 was finally amended to allow for free hymns. This decision was essentially based on arguments presented in 2006 and 2009, as well as motivated by a desire to accommodate the differing liturgical practices in an increasingly multicultural RCSA (RCSA 2012:374).²⁸ In doing so, the RCSA made substantial changes to Article 69 and reverted to a practice that they had vehemently objected to when they broke away from the NHK in 1859.

A cursory critique of the 1942 and 2012 Reformed Churches in South Africa Synod revisions of Article 69

It is our opinion that the 1942 RCSA revision of Article 69 was based on a church historical hermeneutic that set the stage for her more radical revision in 2012. As described above, the decision of the 2012 Synod turned on the assumption that the original Article 69 of Dort (1619) had built into it an expansive vision for singing rhymed versions of all biblical texts. And this despite the formidable catholic and Calvinist history of singing predominantly Psalms and only a select number of God-given (inspired) songs.

In addition to a flawed appraisal of this historical practice, there has been close to no engagement of a theology that underlies Article 69 of 1619 Dort, namely, Calvin’s principle of worship and the confessional category otherwise known as the S/RPW. These historical and theological tensions were picked up in the successful year 2000 gravamen against the Synod 1997 decision to exclude free hymns. The notion that only songs given by God in his Word may be sung (in keeping with the S/RPW; Van der Linde 1983:174–175; Visser 1999:192),²⁹ while also allowing for non-poetic

28. Van Rooy (2017:167) considers the 2012 decision to also be a concession to explicit Lutheran liturgical practice in some quarters of the RCSA.

29. It is worth mentioning that Spoelstra (1989b:325–328) and Vorster (1999:123–126) disagree with Van der Linde and Visser. Spoelstra is of the opinion that ‘the character and content of the church song in communal worship services must be in agreement with the Christian faith and not contrary to what Scripture and the Three Forms of Unity (which is the expression of church unity) teaches’.

versifications of Scripture (like the ‘Ten Commandments’) and non-canonical hymns (see the ‘Apostles’ Creed’), cannot be logically housed in Article 69 at the same time (cf. Viljoen 1990:55). Instead of resolution to this dilemma being found in historical Calvinist theology and practice, our churches embarked in a new direction of promoting the use of free hymns. In short, 20th-century RCSA deliberations around song in worship, which came to a head with the 2012 decision, evidence little investigation into the relationship between our confessional standards and our church order (the former being the basis for the latter). Practice in this instance, it seems, has been divorced from doctrine (read: confessional theology).

Historical–theological amnesia seems to have increased in the years following 1942, culminating with the latest revision of Article 69. This phenomenon appears to have been aided and abetted by the commentary of the RCSA luminary Totius – not only in terms of his later approval of an expanded list of Bible songs, but also his openness to the possibility of free hymns. Joining the conciliatory Postma and later Totius, other historic synodical commentary would fail to appreciate the catholic and Calvinist practice of singing predominantly Psalms. And furthermore, one would continue to search in vain for any substantive engagement of the S/RPW as set forth by Calvin, indirectly by the Doppers and explicitly in the *Three Forms of Unity*. To be sure, the historical RCSA conviction that singing Scripture is the safest way, because it limits the church’s exposure to heresy, has resonance with the S/RPW. Yet, evidently the RCSA’s understanding of this driving principle has evolved to welcome free hymns. Such a move is at stark odds with early Calvinist theology and practice, both on the continent and in Southern Africa. It threatens our confessional Reformed identity.

Concluding remarks: *Semper reformanda* and worship in the Reformed Churches in South Africa

Recovering continuity with a catholic and Calvinist tradition

The RCSA is a confessional federation with a laudable track record in many respects. And yet she has not been immune to the temptations facing all post-Apostolic churches: to compromise on account of cultural pressures. The Apostolic practice of Psalm-singing by the church fathers was almost erased by a worldly medieval Roman Catholic Church. Calvin’s reform back to the early church was stunted by Genevan authorities. And Dort (1619) failed to realise her Calvinist renewal efforts due to a meddling civil government. Similarly, the Reformed experiment on the southern tip of Africa has not been without marked religious and political turmoil. From the days of the VOC through the rise and demise of Afrikaner nationalism to the equalising impulses of a liberal post-Apartheid constitution, the Reformed family of churches has struggled to keep a clear liturgical vision. Add to this the political and pietist

(and updated revivalist and evangelical) attraction towards social justice and subjective spiritual experience (cf. Campbell 2013; Clark 2008:1–116; Hart 2013:160–304; 2003:179–239; 2002:xv–28), and the heirs to the continental Reformed tradition have wavered in maintaining continuity with the best of their creedal past. The RCSA has been no exception. Aside from her decades-long vacillation over women in office, the 2012 revision of Article 69 – to give free hymns equal footing with inspired texts – is perhaps most telling. It is a decision that surely cannot be disconnected from a broader church atmosphere reflective of an egalitarian, activist and therapeutic culture.³⁰

Can the RCSA find a way back to her roots when it comes to her highest calling, worship? Could the road back be found in her confessions? And more specifically in the recovery of the S/RPW?

Recovering what we believe and confess: The scriptural or regulative principle of worship

As far as we can tell, the language of the S/RPW has not featured positively in any significant way in the history of the RCSA.³¹ And yet, substantive Reformed scholarship supports the claim that our church standards set forth this principle – in contrast to the (Anglican and Lutheran) normative principle of worship³² – as undergirding our theology and practice of worship.³³ Beyond the element of prayers sung, we practise, for example, preaching and not drama (cf. BC 1983:art. 29; HC 1983:Q/A 65). Furthermore, we believe that representations of Christ run contrary to the second commandment (HC 1983:LD 35). In short, the confessional Reformed tradition rejects man-made pomp and ceremony in favour of the simplicity of the ministry of Word, sacrament and prayer that Christ ordained, and with reverence and awe (cf. BC 1983:art. 27–35).

While it is beyond the scope of this essay to wade into debates around its application in other areas of church liturgy, we nevertheless point out that the S/RPW has been invoked in historical debates around the appropriateness of the likes of festival days (i.e. observance of a liturgical calendar), the

30. Assuming that the South African church context follows the tendency towards cultural assimilation reflected in the West generally and North America specifically, see, for example, Hart (2002, 2003) and Clark (2008).

31. One example of where the S/RPW has been misunderstood within the RCSA and conflated with Biblicism is in the 2008 study ‘Male and female in the church - gender in the ordained ministries’ (Archbald 2008:550-554). The aforementioned study is also an instance of an outright rejection of the principle (Breed 2008: 47, 182, 189). This probably helps to explain why there seems to be a general fear within the RCSA of the S/RPW, especially that it encourages legalism (we base this observation on anecdotal evidence). In addition to the case made in this article to the contrary, we refer readers to Jooste and Potgieter (2020).

32. Van Rooy (2017:168–170) reads the RCSA 2012 revision to Article 69 as an allowance for ‘hymns composed in the Lutheran tradition’. She considers this a positive development, as if Calvin, Dort and the Reformed confessions can comfortably ‘house’ the normative principle of worship. Such commentary is a poignant example of the need for renewed and robust debate around a confessional Reformed theology of worship within the RCSA.

33. In addition to the evidence provided in this essay (see especially Footnotes 2 and 5) and beyond the Scots-Irish Presbyterian tradition and her Westminster Standards (Clark 2008:249–52, 262–264), examples of denominations in more recent history that have made use of the S/RPW in arriving at a practice (at times) of singing God’s inspired songs include: the Christian Reformed Church North America (CRCNA), the Reformed Presbyterian Church in North America and the Canadian Reformed Church (Clark 2008:254, 286, 288; cf. CRCNA 1928:XXXIV).

inclusion of the Apostles' Creed³⁴ in the liturgy, musical accompaniment in worship and infrequent observance of the Lord's Supper (Clark 2008:253; Clark 2010; De Ridder 1987:144–145, 149, 217, 219, 280–281, 358–359, 554–555; Williamson 2001). In the more recent past, the historical conception of the S/RPW has been substantively revised almost beyond recognition in certain Presbyterian and Reformed circles within North America. Perhaps most influential in calling for change has been the well-known Presbyterian minister John Frame – a source that was used, in part, to implicitly dismiss the traditional reading of the S/RPW in the 2006 RCSA Synod doctrinal deputies report (GKSA 2006:565).³⁵

The RCSA should be commended for her continuity with the early Calvinist and Reformed traditions' rendering of the S/RPW in many liturgical respects. This essay has focused on the legacy of her contested attempt to sing God's inspired songs, especially the Psalms, and on the basis of divine mandate. Has the RCSA been at least historically unfaithful in introducing free hymns without engaging the S/RPW in any significant way? Can she reasonably dismiss such a prominent historic confessional Reformed doctrine just because it has not featured explicitly in her own history?

The original Article 69 of the Church Order of Dort (1619) is no golden standard for judging what is most biblically sound relative to church song. The 1618–1619 Synod of Dort represented a compromise for churches experiencing internal discord and external civil duress. What is required for *semper reformanda* today is a retrieval of the biblical theology driving the catholic and Calvinist practice of singing God's inscripturated songs, especially the Psalms. And one need not look any further than the *Three Forms of Unity* to find it. For those open to revisiting the RCSA decisions of 1942 and 2012, the S/RPW promises to be an indispensable part of ongoing discourse around liturgical renewal.

34. We are not aware of any significant historical commentary around the singing of the non-canonical Apostles' Creed as being consistent with the S/RPW. It is clear that the likes of Calvin in the early Reformed tradition deemed it to be both quasi-canonical and pedagogical in nature (Clark 2010:265). Beyond this, certain early Dutch synods either did not consider it suitable for singing or were forced to allow for its use, primarily because of political pressure (see especially Article 22 of the 1583 'Ecclesiastical Laws Prepared by Order of the Magistrates of Holland' as well as Article 23 of the 1591 'Church Order Designed by Certain Political and Ecclesiastical Persons at the Hague' in De Ridder 1987:320, 433). As to early RCSA history, it has been noted above that Synod 1888 excluded the singing of the Apostles' Creed on the grounds of its non-canonical status. All this to say, the matter remains something of a thorn in the flesh of those who hold to a narrow reading of the S/RPW, and therefore it invites further scholarly attention.

35. Frame has taken the liberty to reconfigure the S/RPW in such a way that it now supposedly applies to every area of life, not just ecclesiology in general and corporate worship in particular, as if all of life is worship without distinction. Furthermore, divine commands that bind the conscience are not just those found expressly in the Word or by good and necessary inference, but constitute 'applications' of the general principles of Scripture to all spheres of life. For example, drama and non-canonical hymns are considered part of the S/RPW because they are so-called applications of the elemental principles of preaching and prayers sung respectively. For Frame, the same process of application applies to the civil realm as well. For instance, because the Bible commands general submission to God in all things, a possible application, which becomes a binding regulative principle in this scheme, is Christian versions of bioethics and politics (Frame 1996:40–4, 92–94). In Frame's reconception, ecclesiastical power knows no limits – an idea foreign to the *Three Forms of Unity*. For critical engagement of Frame – see, for example, Clark (2008:233–244), Engelsma (1998; 2000a) and Smith and Lachman (2005:116–134).

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