

Grapho : Concordia Seminary Student Journal

Volume 5
Issue 1 *Lift Up Your Hearts*

Article 2

5-10-2023

Sursum Corda as a Call for Repentance and Faith

Sebastian Grünbaum
Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, grnbaums@csl.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholar.csl.edu/grapho>



Part of the [Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Grünbaum, Sebastian (2023) "Sursum Corda as a Call for Repentance and Faith," *Grapho : Concordia Seminary Student Journal*: Vol. 5: Iss. 1, Article 2.

Available at: <https://scholar.csl.edu/grapho/vol5/iss1/2>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Print Publications at Scholarly Resources from Concordia Seminary. It has been accepted for inclusion in Grapho : Concordia Seminary Student Journal by an authorized editor of Scholarly Resources from Concordia Seminary. For more information, please contact seitzw@csl.edu.

Sebastian Grünbaum is a PhD student at Concordia Seminary St. Louis. He holds an MA in Theology from Åbo Akademi University and has served as a pastor in the Evangelical Lutheran Mission Diocese of Finland for eleven years in Turku, Finland. Sebastian specializes in Systematic and Historical Theology.



Sursum Corda as a Call for Repentance and Faith

Sebastian Grünbaum

On most Sundays in church, we hear and say the words:

P: The Lord be with you.

C: And with thy spirit.

P: Lift up your hearts. (sursum corda)

C: We lift them up unto the Lord. (habemus ad dominum)

P: Let us give thanks to the Lord, our God.

C: It is meet and right so to do.

The admonishment of the Sursum Corda is without doubt the oldest documented part of the liturgy of the Lord's Supper. It can be found in Hippolytus *Apostolic Tradition* which means that this dialogue was common and recognized in the church as early as the third century.¹ It is not clear which passages in Scripture this dialogue is primarily based on. Some patristic authors like Augustine think that it is related to Colossians 3:1-2, "Seek the things which are above." Earlier commentators do not refer to any specific passages but speak more about the weight of the mind and soul being with God before coming to the Lord's supper.²

This article examines Chemnitz's understanding and interpretation of the Sursum Corda in his work the *Lord's Supper*. Chemnitz's theological adversaries had been claiming that the Sursum Corda was evidence that the early church did not believe that the true body and blood were on the altar. They argued that the believer had to *go up* to the Lord (who sits on the right side of the Father) *in faith* and eat mere bread in this faith.³ Chemnitz aimed to correct this understanding by showing that the Fathers did not understand the Sursum Corda in this way but rather as an admonition to faith in Christ who is present when the bread and wine are distributed from the altar.

Important for this examination of Chemnitz's understanding of the Sursum Corda is an examination of his quotations of the Canons of Nicaea and of the

fathers. That is why the second part of this article will analyse how he viewed the ancient understanding of the Sursum Corda in the early church. Finally, the article will discuss how to use and understand the Sursum Corda in a modern Lutheran congregational context and how to apply it in both preaching and teaching.

Chemnitz's Argumentation in the Lord's Supper

In his book on the Lord's Supper (*De Coena Domini*) Chemnitz's main opponents are Reformed theologians. This is clear since the book is focused on the correct understanding of the words of institution (*verba*). Chemnitz explains questions regarding the proper interpretation of the *verba* and the benefits of the Supper. Chemnitz concludes that the Lord's Supper is the true body and blood of Christ.⁴ For his explanation, Chemnitz uses many fathers to convince his adversaries of the correctness of his interpretation. A special role, in this case, is given to John Chrysostom as the main theologian that Chemnitz quotes on this topic.

In commenting on the Sursum Corda Chemnitz refers to the canons of Nicaea: "For the Nicene canon, when it teaches us to raise our minds, says that faith must recognize that on the table has been placed the Lamb of God which takes away the sin of the world."⁵ Chemnitz argues that those who participate in the Lord's Supper should not consider only the things that are apparent to the senses but the things that the Bible teaches are present. Thus, the mind should be elevated in faith to see not only bread and wine on a table but the true body and blood of Christ.⁶ Chemnitz writes quoting John Chrysostom:

"In a long speech, it is interpreted to mean that we should approach our participation in the mysteries by laying aside all earthly thoughts, cares, and preoccupations, set aside our vices, and with a pure mind consider the greatness both of the Giver and the gift". And in the same place he (Chrysostom) not only says to lift up our hearts but also that we ought, "as though we had been made eagles, to soar to heaven itself, 'for where the carcass is, there the eagles are gathered.' He [Jesus] calls the *body of Christ* a 'carcass,' because of His death; for if He had not fallen, we could never rise. And he uses the term 'eagles' to show that he who approaches *this body* ought to be high or lifted up and must have no communion with earthly things, nor cling to the earth or seek it, but always fly to the heights and seek the sun of righteousness."⁷

This supports Chemnitz's argumentation in the sense that Chrysostom is not guiding his audience away from the Lord's Supper which is celebrated on earth, in favor of the heights of heaven. Instead, Chrysostom is stating that when they think about

the Supper, they should consider that now something divine and holy happens on earth in the middle of them. This would imply that the hearer should not fly away somewhere but focus on the divine in the concrete bread and wine. Chemnitz also quotes a sermon of Chrysostom's on First Corinthians where he explicitly states "we celebrate the mysteries so that the earth may be heaven for us because that which is most precious in heaven has now been placed on earth."⁸ This argument fortifies Chemnitz's position in the sense that it reveals that in Chrysostom's theology, heaven can exist on earth, or at least there can be heavenly things on earth when the Lord's Supper is celebrated. The fact that Chrysostom writes about what is most precious in heaven indicates that he is speaking about Christ himself.⁹ This can also be confirmed by other quotes that Chemnitz takes from Chrysostom.¹⁰ Chemnitz has a strong argument for the case that Chrysostom believed Christ to be bodily present in the Lord's Supper. Further, it strengthens Chemnitz's overall argument that the Sursum Corda is about lifting the minds to a heavenly realm that is truly present when the Lord's Supper is celebrated, that is elevating the eyes of faith to see the crucified and risen Lord Jesus in the bread and wine.

The literal translation of *sursum corda* is "upwards hearts." In the explanation of the Lutheran Service book Paul Grime has argued that to better reflect the intention of the Sursum Corda it should be translated as: "Have your hearts up." This is plausible. As Grime translates it, the hearer can better understand that it is not about rising somewhere but recognizing Christ who is present on the altar. Grime, in fact, quotes Chemnitz explicitly on this question.¹¹ Chemnitz summarizes his own argument with the words: "Therefore the Sursum Corda does not lead the minds away from the table which has been spread; but this is to lift the hearts high, when in the celebration of the Supper we consider not only those things which are apparent to the senses but in accordance with the Word hold that Christ Himself with His body and blood is present at the table."¹²

The Fathers and the Sursum Corda

This article now turns to examine the context of the sources that Chemnitz quotes, which in many ways, is very different from Chemnitz's own. Chemnitz appeals to the Council of Nicaea where he states that "faith must recognize that on the table has been placed the Lamb of God."¹³ Chemnitz most likely referring to canon 18 of the first council of Nicaea. This is because it is the only other canon that speaks about the Lord's Supper and it is not related to the altar in any way.¹⁴ The 18th canon of Nicaea reads as follows:

It has come to the knowledge of the holy and great Synod that, in some districts and cities, the deacons administer the Eucharist to the presbyters, whereas neither canon nor custom permits that

they who have no right to offer should give the *Body of Christ* to them that do offer. And this also has been made known, that certain deacons now touch the *Eucharist* even before the bishops. Let all such practices be utterly done away, and let the deacons remain within their own bounds, knowing that they are the ministers of the bishop and the inferiors of the presbyters. Let them receive the *Eucharist* according to their order, after the presbyters, and let either the bishop or the presbyter administer to them. Furthermore, let not the deacons sit among the presbyters, for that is contrary to canon and order. And if, after this decree, anyone shall refuse to obey, let him be deposed from the diaconate.¹⁵

The 18th canon of Nicaea is speaking about church discipline. It instructs the order of how the Lord's Supper or Eucharist should be celebrated. That is, the one who has been consecrating the bread and the wine (i.e., offering) at the altar should administer the Lord's Supper to the deacons and not the other way around. The reason for the canon is simply to preserve good order in the church and, thus, it concludes by admonishing the congregations to hold fast to a certain order where there is a clear difference between clergy and other servants of the church. In this quote, the problem that the council is trying to address is not unbelief in Christ's bodily presence in the Lord's Supper but disorder in the congregations. Even so, the bodily presence of Christ in the Lord's Supper is self-evident in the language of the canon because the canon itself uses the terms Eucharist and the Body of Christ as synonyms, as shown above. The language of the canon strengthens the argument for the bodily presence of Christ further by stating that good order is especially important during the Lord's Supper, thus implying that this is a more holy place than other places.

The same pattern of interpretation as above can be seen in the longer quotes that pertain to the Sursum



Corda. Chemnitz quotes Chrysostom in explaining that to lift up the hearts is done

“by laying aside all earthly thoughts, cares, and preoccupations, setting aside our vices, and with a pure mind considering the greatness both of the Giver and the gift.” And he (Chrysostom) uses the term eagles to show that he who approaches *this body* ought to be high or lifted up (ὑψηλὸν εἶναι) and must have no communion with earthly things, nor cling to the earth or seek it, but always fly to the heights and seek the sun of righteousness.¹⁶

Chrysostom assumes in this passage the bodily presence of Christ in the Lord's Supper. He then uses this to admonish people who approach the Lord's

Supper but are occupied by this world, i.e., do not take Christianity seriously, and those who do not live in repentance but still commune regularly. The purity of the mind does not come primarily from faith but from a life that is characterized by sanctification.

Chemnitz has himself noted the same pattern because, in the place where he explains the Sursum Corda, he refers to Chrysostom's *Homilia de Encoeniis*. Here Chemnitz says that Chrysostom complains about people saying the Sursum Corda before Communion but engaging in idle talk afterwards. The complaint of Chrysostom here is that the congregation is not living a Christian life. One can express this in another way by saying that the congregation is believing that they are receiving the true body and blood of Christ in the Lord's Supper, but they are not

living in a manner that is worthy of the reception of this great gift. In conclusion, it is possible to say that the fathers assume that Christ is bodily present and use the language of Sursum Corda as an argument for sanctification.



Sursum Corda: Two Interpretations

If one compares Chemnitz's reception of the fathers with the fathers themselves then two different kinds of understandings emerge. The first one is Chemnitz's understanding that he presents in the Lord's supper that the Sursum Corda is an admonishment to faith in Christ that is present in the Lord's Supper. The second understanding is that of the fathers which is more holistic, that is the Sursum Corda as an admonishment to holy life and sanctification because Christ is bodily present in the Lord's supper. The aspect of the need for repentance before the Lord's Supper is

not lost in Chemnitz, even though it is not a main theme. The explanation is simply that Chemnitz's major conflicts are not essentially connected to this theme. The fact is that in Chemnitz's writings about the Lord's supper, this plays a minimal role.¹⁷

Even though he addresses it minimally, Chemnitz argues very strongly for repentance before receiving the Lord's Supper. In his *Enchiridion* he explains the unworthy eating of the Lord's Supper with the following words:

They that continue in sins without repentance and have and retain not the intent to lead a better life, but rather continue in sin, as Paul rebukes this very thing in some Corinthians. For such people make a mockery of the very bitter passion of our Lord, as though sin were, as it were, something trivial, and not so great an abomination, for which the Son of God suffered such an ignominious death. In fact, he that comes to that holy table in this spirit regards Christ as a patron of sin, as though in the Supper He supplies fuel for the fires of sin with His body and blood and wants to nourish and strengthen it. And therefore, they eat unworthily.¹⁸

Consequently, the right kind of eating and drinking consists of repentance and grievance over sins and a willingness to improve in the Christian way of life.¹⁹

While Chemnitz does advocate repentance, it is important to note that in Chemnitz's writings one can see also a clear reluctance to make any kind of formal demands of holiness, that is, that people must reach a certain level of sanctification before they can come to the Lord's Supper.²⁰ After all, the Bible teaches that Christ came to save sinners and that the Lord's table is a table for forgiveness.²¹ The natural emphasis is therefore laid on repentance. It is not a table for holy people (*coram mundo*) but for people who want to be holy and strive towards holiness.²² The Lord's Supper is also a means that encourages the believer to repentance and good works.²³ Thus, the Lord's Supper is not limited in the wrong way for sinful people but remains open for Christians who repent from their sins.²⁴

A Holistic Lutheran Interpretation of the Sursum Corda?

This article has shown that Chemnitz emphasized different things regarding the Sursum Corda compared to the fathers. Chemnitz's development consists in arguing that the main thing about the Sursum Corda is that Jesus Christ is coming bodily in the bread and wine. This development is related to controversies about the Lord's Supper. Because it is not an issue in his theology of the Lord's Supper, Chemnitz does not comment on the fathers when they state that the Sursum Corda is primarily an admonishment to repentance and life in holiness. This is with the awareness that the fathers also recognized, like Chemnitz, that on the altar is the body and

blood of Christ even though they did not make a specific argument since it was simply assumed as true. We have also seen that Chemnitz's theology has no problem with the understanding of a need for repentance before the Lord's Supper. Instead, Chemnitz understands this very well and strongly emphasizes repentance from all sins before a person eats and drinks the Lord's Supper.

Likewise, Grime ends his article about the Sursum Corda in the *Lutheran Service Book, Companion to Services* by quoting Chemnitz (and through this making the argument) that the central aspect of the Sursum Corda is that Christ is coming to us bodily in the Lord's Supper. The critical question is: did Chemnitz actually want to change the interpretation of the Sursum Corda or did he merely use it to argue for the bodily presence of Christ in the Lord's Supper in the 16th-century controversy of the Lord's Supper?²⁵

The Fathers dealt with a need to ensure genuine repentance through admonition and interpreted the Sursum Corda accordingly. Chemnitz needed to stress the bodily presence of the risen Lord in the Sacrament and therefore stressed the recognition of the bodily presence in the words of the Sursum Corda. In today's context when we must deal with both issues, a more holistic interpretation of the Sursum Corda may be called for. In the Lutheran tradition, this relates very well to the understanding of law and gospel. Thus, there should not be a problem in thinking about the Sursum Corda both as indicating the bodily presence of Christ, as Chemnitz emphasized, and as an admonishment to repentance, as Chrysostom emphasized. These two interpretations might be combined into one holistic statement: the Sursum Corda is a call for repentance, to turn away from our sins and look to Christ who has been slain and lifted up for us.

Endnotes

- 1 Paul Grime, *Lutheran Service Book: Companion to the Services* (Saint Louis: Concordia, 2022), 564. Some scholars think that this could have been a part of the apostolic practice of worship. See also Luther D. Reed, *The Lutheran Liturgy, A Study of the Common Liturgy of the Lutheran Church in America*, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1947), 324; and Philip Pfatteicher, *Commentary on the Lutheran Book of Worship: Lutheran Liturgy in Its Ecumenical Context* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1990), 158–9.
- 2 Pfatteicher, *Commentary on LBW*, 159. These commentators include Cyprian and Origen.
- 3 Grime, *LSB Companion*, 566. Calvin comments on the Sursum Corda: “Let us raise our hearts and minds on high, where Jesus Christ is, in the glory of his Father and from whence we look for him at our redemption. Let us not be bemused by these earthly and corruptible elements which we see with the eye, and touch with the hand, in order to seek him there as if he were enclosed in the bread and wine.... Let us therefore be content to have the bread and the wine as signs and evidences, spiritually seeking the reality where the word of God promises that we shall find it.”
- 4 Martin Chemnitz, *The Lord’s Supper (De Coena Domini)*, J.A.O. Preus trans. (Saint Louis: Concordia, 1970), 21, 35-36 (hereafter, LS).
- 5 LS, 160.
- 6 LS, 160.
- 7 LS, 160 (emphasis added).
- 8 LS, 161.
- 9 This can also be confirmed by other quotes that Chemnitz takes from Chrysostom. Chemnitz has a strong argument for the case that Chrysostom believed that Christ is bodily present in the Lord’s Supper.
- 10 LS, 162-163, 177, 179.
- 11 Grime, *LSB Companion*, 566.
- 12 LS, 160.
- 13 LS, 160.
- 14 The Canons of the First Council of Nicaea 325, Nicene Canon 13. This canon is speaking about how the dying should have the right to receive communion before they depart this life.
- 15 The First Council of Nicaea 325, Canon 18 (emphasis added).
- 16 LS, 160 (emphasis added).
- 17 Chemnitz has written about 500 pages about the Lord’s Supper of which maybe 20 pages are focused on repentance before the Lord’s Supper. See Martin Chemnitz, *Ministry, Word and Sacraments: An Enchiridion*, Luther Poellot, J.A.O. Preus, J.A.O. and Georg Williams trans. (Saint Louis: Concordia, 1981), 130 (hereafter ENC); Martin Chemnitz, *Examination of Council of Trent, Volume II*, Fred Kramer trans. (Saint Louis: Concordia, 2007), 317–8 (hereafter EX II).
- 18 ENC, 130. See also EX II, 317–8.
- 19 ENC, 131.
- 20 Werner Elert, *Abendmahl und Kirchengemeinschaft in der alten Kirche hauptsächlich des Ostens* (Berlin: Lutherisches Verlagshaus, 1954), 73–4. Chemnitz’s theology is in this sense a correction to the practice of the early church, which had very clear demands of outward holiness before someone could be admitted to the Lord’s table.
- 21 It is interesting to note that Chemnitz does not emphasize the aspect of the forgiveness of sins when he explains the Sursum Corda. This is probably because the discussion is not about the forgiveness of sins but about the presence of the true body and blood of Christ.
- 22 ENC, 130–131.
- 23 “For Christ instituted His Supper for this purpose, that repentance may be kindled and increased in us by the remembrance of His death, in order that faith may be strengthened and invigorated by the giving and sealing of the New Testament in the use of the Supper” (EX II, 320).
- 24 EX II, 320.
- 25 Grime, *LSB Companion*, 5.