

Roots of Reformed Worship

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Calvin's Use of the *Sursum Corda*

Although Calvin entitled his 1542 liturgy *The Form of Prayers and Manner of Ministering the Sacraments according to the Usage of the Ancient Church* there is little linguistic connection between Calvin's liturgy and the ancient liturgical forms. Most of the elements that are regarded as classic parts of the ancient liturgies are not in Calvin's *Form of Prayers*. Calvin does not use the Kyrie Eleison, the Agnus Dei, the Te Deum, the Gloria in Excelsis, or the Sanctus. Yet at one point in his liturgy, Calvin chose to keep a piece of ancient liturgical text. This text is commonly called the *Sursum Corda*.

*Let us lift up our hearts.
We lift them up unto the Lord.*

Calvin's version of the *Sursum Corda* follows the communion prayers rather than preceding them as is the case in the case of the ancient liturgies. He has paraphrased it and turned it into monologue prose, but it is still recognizable. This is Calvin's version:

With this in mind, 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.

Why does Calvin keep this little bit of the ancient liturgical text when he abandons almost all other linguistic continuity to the medieval mass, and therefore, to the ancient sources of the medieval mass? Before we explore that question, we need to lay a foundation in the interpretation of the *Sursum Corda* among the ancient Fathers with whom Calvin was acquainted.

The Earliest Sources of the *Sursum Corda*

Our earliest source for the *Sursum Corda* is in Hippolytus' *Apostolic Traditions*, chapter 4, dated about 215. Here we have the entire pre-eucharistic dialogue that will be a part of virtually every liturgy until the Reformation.

*The Lord be with you.
And they shall say: And with your spirit.
Up with your hearts.
We have (them) with the Lord.
Let us give thanks to the Lord.
It is fitting and right.*

Our first Latin witness to the *Sursum Corda*, and our first commentary on it is found in Cyprian, *The Lord's Prayer*, chapter 31. Cyprian was martyred in 258. It is certain, therefore, that the *Sursum Corda* is a very early liturgical text that was already in broad use by the beginning of the third century. Our sources cannot take us back any further, but given the biblical parallels to the *Sursum Corda*, its origins are probably very early. The idea of ascension into God's presence in heaven is of the warp and woof of biblical religion (Col 3:1-2, Eph 2:6, Heb 12:22ff, Phil 3:20-2, Rev 4:1).

Sursum Corda as Summons to Heaven

Beginning with Origen, the *Sursum Corda* was understood as a summons to heaven, as a mental ascent into the presence of God. It called the faithful, not only to concentration in prayer, but to heavenly mindedness. Christ has ascended to heaven. Heaven is the true home of the Christian. Therefore, it makes theological sense for the Christian to lift up his heart to heaven. Cyprian wrote:

Moreover, when we stand for prayer, most beloved brethren, we should be alert and intent on our petitions with a whole heart. Let every carnal and

worldly thought depart, and let the mind dwell on nothing other than that alone for which it prays. Therefore, the priest also before his prayer prepares the minds of the brethren by first uttering a preface, saying: "Lift up your hearts," so that when the people respond: "We lift them up to the Lord," they may be admonished that they should ponder on nothing other than the Lord.

In this passage Cyprian was expounding the Lord's Prayer, and in particular the attitude required in prayer. He cited the *Sursum Corda* as evidencing the need for sincerity and concentration in prayer. Although this was his concern, and not heavenly mindedness, he nonetheless explained the *Sursum Corda* as essentially referring to ascension into heaven. Christians according to Cyprian were to ponder nothing but the Lord who is in heaven.

In a similar way Cyril of Jerusalem wrote in *The Mystagogical Lectures*:

Then the celebrant cries: "Lift up your hearts." For truly it is right in that most awful hour to have one's heart on high with God, not below, occupied with earth and the things of earth. In effect, then, the bishop commands everyone to banish worldly thoughts and workaday cares and to have their hearts in heaven with the good God. Assenting, you answer, "We have them lifted up to the Lord." Let no one present be so disposed that while his lips form the words, "We have them lifted up to the Lord," in his mind his attention is engaged by worldly thoughts.

Cyril in his interpretation of the *Sursum Corda* focused expressly on the idea of heavenly mindedness. Worldly thoughts were to be banished and the heart was to be in heaven where the good God is. This same emphasis is evident in the following quotations from the sermons of Augustine (#s 227, 261 & 3 respectively).

At first, after the prayer, you are admonished to lift up your heart. This befits the members of Christ. For, if you have become members of Christ, where is your Head? Members have a head. If the Head had not preceded, the members would not follow. Where has your Head gone? What did you recite in the Creed? "On the third day He rose again from the dead; He ascended into heaven; He sits at the

right hand of the Father." Therefore, our Head is in heaven. Hence, when the "Lift up your heart" is said, you answer: "We have [them lifted up] to the Lord." Then, because this lifting up of your hearts to God is a gift of God and lest you should attribute to your own strength, your own merits, and your own labors the fact that you have your hearts thus lifted up to the Lord, after the answer, "We have our hearts lifted up to the Lord," the bishop or priest who is officiating also says: "Let us give thanks to the Lord our God, because we have our hearts raised up to Him.

The Resurrection of our Lord is our hope; the Ascension of the Lord is our exaltation. Now, today we are celebrating the feast of the Ascension. If, therefore, we celebrate the feast of the Ascension of the Lord with due ceremony, with faith, devotion, holiness, and reverence, let us ascend with Him and let us have our hearts lifted up to Him. Moreover, though we ascend, let us not be lifted up. Indeed, we ought to have our hearts lifted up, but to the Lord.

For even the saints who dwell on earth, though in their body they tread the earth, in heart dwell in heaven. For it is not in vain that they are reminded to "Lift up their hearts," and when they are so reminded, they answer, "they lift them up;" nor in vain is it said "If ye be risen with Christ . . ."

These quotations illustrate that the *Sursum Corda* had a clear, well-established interpretation. At the beginning of the eucharistic prayers the people were summoned to be heavenly minded. They were called into the Lord's presence in heaven by the officiant. What Calvin saw in the *Sursum Corda* and its interpretation was a witness against the medieval eucharistic doctrine he most abhorred - transubstantiation.

Calvin's Eucharistic Theology

For Calvin transubstantiation was a horrible doctrine that produced a hideous host of idolatrous practices. He ridiculed the adoration of the host, the notion of crunching Christ's body with the teeth, and processions through the streets with the consecrated bread. These were all the necessary fruit of transubstantiation. But at its root transubstantiation involved a corruption of the doctrine of Christ. For if Christ was materially and bodily eaten in the mass, then his human flesh was no longer human. Only if the human flesh of Christ partook of the

divine attribute of ubiquity could it be eaten in many places at the same time, and yet never be consumed. Calvin saw this as a corruption of the ancient consensus of the Council of Chalcedon. In Chalcedonian Christology as Calvin understood it there could be no "mixing" of the properties of the divine and human natures of Christ, but only a hypostatic union of both natures untainted in the person of God the Word. Calvin understood the *communicatio idiomatum* as the communion of the one person in both natures, but not as a sharing of properties between the natures. He wrote (*Institutes* 4:17:12):

For as we do not doubt that Christ's body is limited by the general characteristics common to all human bodies, and is contained in heaven (where it was received once for all) until Christ (sic) return in judgment, so we deem it utterly unlawful to draw it back under these corruptible elements or to imagine it to be present everywhere.

For Calvin it was "unlawful" to understand the bread and wine as transubstantiated into the body and blood of Christ. Christ's body and blood were in heaven, not on earth. If we have a communion with Christ's body and blood, it is not because Christ is brought down to us under the earthly elements of bread and wine, but that we are lifted up to heaven where Christ is. At this point we can see why Calvin would appeal to the *Sursum Corda*.

Though he denied a bodily presence in the supper, Calvin was adamant that the Christian is truly a partaker of Christ's flesh. He rejected the notion that eating Christ's body and blood was merely a metaphor for faith. Rather by faith we become partakers of his body and blood.

The truth of God, therefore, in which I can safely rest, I embrace without controversy. He declares that His flesh is the meat, His blood the drink, of my soul. I give my soul to Him to be fed with such food. In His sacred Supper He bids me take, eat and drink His body and blood under the symbols of bread and wine. I have no doubt that He will truly give, and I receive. (Institutes 4:17:2)

The communion with Christ in his human nature was not merely a part of Calvin's eucharistic doctrine. It is essential to his soteriology. For Calvin, salvation was not only accomplished for us

in the flesh of Christ, it is only communicated to us through the flesh of Christ.

The flesh of Christ gives life, not only because we once obtained salvation by it, but because now, while we are made one with Christ by a sacred union, the same flesh breathes life into us, or to express it more briefly, because ingrafted into the body of Christ by the secret agency of the Spirit we have life in common with Him. (Corpus Reformatorum, 9:30-1)

Calvin believed in real communion, but not in real presence in the sense of bodily presence. Christ is bodily absent from us. But we have communion with his body. We are participants in his flesh and blood. Indeed, without such participation, we could not be saved. For Calvin this is a mystery made possible by the secret power of the Holy Spirit. We cannot understand it, but we must believe it.

Even though it seems unbelievable that Christ's flesh, separated from us by such great distance, penetrates to us, so that it becomes food, let us remember how far the secret power of the Holy Spirit towers above all our senses, and how foolish it is to wish to measure his immeasurableness by our measure. What, then, our mind does not comprehend, let faith conceive: that the Spirit truly unites things separated in space. (Institutes 4:17:10)

So then, for Calvin, there was a deep conviction learned from Scripture and the Fathers that communion with Christ is necessary for salvation. Calvin found in the Fathers both a recognition of this doctrine, and formulations that were too close to the language of transubstantiation for his taste. Thought a student of the Fathers, he also was critical of them at points. He was uncomfortable with the language of conversion of the elements which he regarded as unfortunate language. He was convinced, nonetheless, that transubstantiation is a late doctrine out of accord with the faith of the ancient Church.

Calvin's Appeal to the Sursum Corda

Calvin finds in the *Sursum Corda* a witness to the heavenly nature of the Supper, and against the idea of transubstantiation. He viewed the *Sursum Corda* as defining the proper sphere of action of the sacrament it introduces. The summons to heaven points to the reality of the sacrament as heavenly and not earthly. Twice in his exposition of the Holy

Supper he appealed to it (Institutes, 4:17:18; 4:17:38). In the later reference we read,

For, in order that pious souls may duly apprehend Christ in the Supper, they must be raised up to heaven. But if the function of the Sacrament is to help the otherwise weak mind of man so that it may rise up to look upon the height of spiritual mysteries, then those who are halted at the outward sign wander from the right way of seeking Christ. What then? Shall we deny that this is superstitious worship when men prostrate themselves before bread to worship Christ there? Doubtless the Council of Nicaea meant to forestall this evil when it forbade us to fix our humble attention upon the symbols set before us. And for the same reason it was established of old that before consecration the people should be told in a loud voice to lift up their hearts. Scripture itself also not only carefully recounts to us the ascension of Christ, by which he withdrew the presence of his body from our sight and company, to shake from us all carnal thinking of him, but also, whenever it recalls him, bids our minds be raised up, and seek him in heaven, seated at the right hand of the Father [Col. 3:1-2].

According to this rule, we ought rather to have adored him spiritually in heavenly glory than to have devised some dangerous kind of adoration, replete with a carnal and crass conception of God.

When Calvin used the *Sursum Corda* in his *Form of Prayers*, he uses it as both an argument against transubstantiation and as a summons to heavenly minded faith. It is evident from the *Institutes* that Calvin regarded this as the proper meaning of the *Sursum Corda*. The concluding paragraph of his communion exhortation is as follows:

With this in mind, 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 or wine. Our souls will only then be disposed to be nourished and vivified by his substance, when they are thus raised above all earthly things, and carried as high as heaven, to enter the kingdom of God where he dwells. 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.

Analysis

What then shall we make of Calvin's use of the *Sursum Corda*? Is he justified in seeing it as an ancient witness against transubstantiation? To begin with, Calvin's use of the *Sursum Corda* is not arbitrary. From the earliest commentaries the *Sursum Corda* was understood as a summons to heaven and a call to be heavenly minded. Calvin was not making this up. However, there is no evidence that anyone saw in the *Sursum Corda* a reflection on the mystery of communion prior to Calvin. The ancient Fathers do not seem interested in the question of "how" we have communion with Christ in the way it has been formulated ever since the transubstantiation debate began. They used both the language of symbol and the language of identity. The bread is a symbol of Christ's body in heaven and the bread is the body of Christ. Augustine, however, distinguished clearly between the sacramental sign, and the heavenly reality. Calvin quoted approving of Augustine.

*He who has eaten will not die, meaning, he who attains to the power of the sacrament, not to the visible sacrament; but he who eats inwardly, not outwardly, he who eats with the heart, not he who presses with the teeth. (John's Gospel, xxvi, 15 quoted in *Institutes* 4:14:14)*

In Augustine Calvin found all the core ideas of his own doctrine of the sacraments. He found the distinction between sign and reality; the reality of communion apart from transubstantiation, and the idea of ascension in Augustine's interpretation of the *Sursum Corda*. It was the genius of Calvin to combine these into one using the *Sursum Corda* as the key. Given the theological significance of the *Sursum Corda* for the Reformed understanding of the supper, it would seem wise to restore this liturgical text to our celebration. Whether in a paraphrase said by the pastor, or as a dialogue between pastor and people, the *Sursum Corda* ought to be a part of the liturgies of the Reformed Churches because it is such an important part of our theology. That it also provides a point of continuity with the ancient liturgies is an advantage as well. ✠

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