

Sensus Plenior: Whose “Fuller Sense”?

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***Sensus Plenior*: Whose “Fuller Sense”?**

In order to accurately understand the author’s intended meaning of Scripture, the Bible student and scholar must be committed to applying a literal (historical, grammatical, contextual) hermeneutic throughout the exegetical process. However, if this assertion is valid, one would also expect to find the application of this literal method within Scripture, utilized by the authors themselves. But do we? We must consider whether or not the human authors of Scripture also utilized this “plain-sense” hermeneutic for understanding previously written Scripture. Specifically, how did the New Testament authors interpret the original meaning of the Old Testament authors and their writings? Did they consistently apply a literal method of interpretation to Old Testament texts – discovering only one intended meaning? Or in isolated situations, did they revert to allegorizing certain passages – discovering multiple *deeper* meanings unintended by the Old Testament author? How does this affect the interpretive process of the modern exegete if the plain sense of the Old Testament text is not literally understood or conveyed by the New Testament author in part or at all? More specifically according to this author’s theological convictions, the biblical text’s singular meaning is a hallmark of Free Grace Theology (not to mention Dispensational Theology). If the authors of Scripture themselves understood a single passage to contain multiple interpretations, does this not undermine the very hermeneutical fabric upon which the Free Grace framework is built? The solution to this potential contradiction can be explained by a biblical understanding and application of *sensus plenior* within a sound hermeneutical framework. This paper will examine the definition, controversy and proper application of *sensus plenior* within the practice of Biblical hermeneutics.

Defining *Sensus Plenior*

The Latin term *sensus plenior* was first coined by Roman Catholic scholars and refers to the idea that a text of Scripture has a “fuller sense”, or deeper meaning than the author intended. Many Protestants have also adopted this same basic usage of the term. In his book, *Hermeneutics, Authority, and Canon*, Douglas J. Moo describes *sensus plenior* as “the idea that there is in many Scriptural texts a ‘fuller sense’ than that consciously intended by the author – a sense intended by God, the ultimate author of Scripture.”¹ Moo continues by stating, “It is this meaning, an integral part of the text, that is discerned and used by later interpreters who appear to find ‘new’ meaning in Old Testament texts. This ‘new’ meaning is, then, part of the author’s intention – the divine author and not necessarily the human author.”² In other words, at various times, New Testament authors appear to understand a “new” and different meaning concerning an Old Testament text. When this takes place, there is sometimes little, if any, connection between the Old and New Testament meanings. Because of this, in his chapter “The Problem of *Sensus Plenior*”, Moo points out that “*Sensus plenior* is used to refer to a meaning that cannot be demonstrated by means of traditional grammatical-historical exegesis.”³ The result: the possibility of multiple meanings within a text. For example, when Matthew writes that young Jesus’ protection from King Herod’s murderous plans fulfills Hosea’s words, “Out of Egypt I

¹D.J. Moo, *Hermeneutics, Authority, and Canon*, eds. D.A. Carson and J.D. Woodbridge (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986) 201.

²Ibid., 201.

³Ibid., 201.

called my son” (Hos. 11:1), did Hosea have more than one meaning in mind? After all, within the context, Hosea was not even referring to a future event. In fact, he was speaking of the past event when God delivered the Israelites from Pharaoh’s tyranny in Egypt. Concerning the possibility of multiple meanings within a text, Klein, Blomberg and Hubbard ask some pertinent questions about these two passages, “Did Matthew think that Hosea was speaking of Christ or did he just ‘make up’ a new meaning he wanted to find in Hosea’s text? Did Matthew convey or perhaps uncover a meaning the Holy Spirit intended even though Hosea was not aware of this meaning? How did Matthew arrive at his interpretation?”⁴ *Sensus plenior* allows for both a single meaning intended by the original Old Testament author and the “fuller sense” of that meaning, discovered by the later New Testament writer.

As we define *sensus plenior*, there is also a key distinction that must be made from the related subject of *typology*. Whereas *sensus plenior* considers the fuller sense of words and their many applications within various scriptural contexts, *typology* focuses on corresponding patterns and principles between the Old and New Testaments, intentionally determined by God’s progressive work⁵. Moo sights this example, “The bronze serpent in the wilderness may be considered a ‘type’ of Christ on the cross, but the application to Christ of Psalm 2:7 (‘you are my son’) involves a ‘deeper sense’ of the words themselves.”⁶ Thus, when considering the text of Scripture, a biblical type (bronze serpent) and its antitype (Christ and the eternal life He offers) focus more on the *extended* meaning of a symbol, partially revealed to the Old Testament author and audience, but fully comprehended within the context of the New. Whereas *sensus plenior* deals with a completely *hidden* meaning in the Old Testament account, thereby allowing for a diverse and dynamic New Testament application that is understood apart from its original context. In other words, the meaning of a biblical type was partially revealed and perceived by the Old Testament author and audience, whereas *sensus plenior* was completely unrevealed in the Old Testament scripture itself but was utilized in the New to bring greater clarity for newly disclosed truth. Therefore, these Old Testament references in the New serve as visual aids or teaching tools in order for the early Christian hearers to embrace this previously hidden revelation about Jesus Christ – His identity and ministry (e.g. the epistle to the Hebrews contains a few explicit types, such as animal sacrifices and many uses of *sensus plenior*, as in the visual aid for Jesus’ High Priestly ministry exemplified by the king-priest Melchizedek of Genesis 14).

However, Klein, Blomberg, and Hubbard’s previous question must be answered, “How did Matthew arrive at his interpretation” of Hosea’s original text?⁷ A serious consideration of this question, reveals an apparent contradiction inherent within the concept of *sensus plenior*. Thus, the honest Bible student must also confront the challenges surrounding this theological idea.

⁴W.W. Klein, C.L. Blomberg, R.L. Hubbard Jr., *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*, (Nashville: Nelson, 2004) 173.

⁵R.T. France, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, TNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985) 40, quoting G. Lampe.

⁶Moo, *Hermeneutics, Authority, and Canon*, 202.

⁷Klein, Blomberg, Hubbard, *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*, 173.

Controversy over *Sensus Plenior*

As we examine the controversy, we must understand that, at its very core, *sensus plenior* requires multiple meanings within a given text. Also, these *hidden* meanings cannot be uncovered through a historical-grammatical hermeneutic. Does the very possibility of *sensus plenior* undermine a literal method of interpretation within our study of the Scriptures? Does *sensus plenior* validate the New Testament authors' use of an allegorical method for interpreting Old Testament revelation, in place of a historical-contextual principle? If so, how are modern Biblical exegetes impacted by this principle? Some legitimate objections must be examined and adequately responded to, before we validate the use of *sensus plenior* in our own Biblical exegesis.

As was mentioned previously, Catholic scholars are credited with the conceptualization and specific implementation of *sensus plenior*. For this reason, considerable objections have been raised against *sensus plenior* due to its association with the Roman Catholic Church and its traditions. One such implementation by the Catholic Church is found within the concept of “accommodation.” In short, this teaching requires the Biblical text to *accommodate* a specific Church application or tradition never intended by the original authors of Scripture. In other words, the Roman Catholic version of “accommodation” is simply another name for allegorizing Scripture. Reading multiple meanings into the text, thus, *validates* a specific application by forcing *tradition* into Scripture itself. As a result, the basis for this “accommodation” is portrayed as being divine authority, rather than human preference. Even the Roman Catholic scholar, Raymond Brown refutes this association between *sensus plenior* and Roman Catholic “accommodation” when he writes, “[The New Testament writers] certainly give no evidence that they are using the Scriptures in a sense not intended by God (accommodation); on the contrary, they make it clear that their spiritual meaning is precisely that meaning intended by God, but not realized by the Jews.”⁸

Secondly, others object to how Roman Catholic scholars define the “revelation” on which *sensus plenior* must be based. This authoritative “revelation” becomes the supposed control against excessive allegorizing within the model of *sensus plenior*. However, as responsible as this defense mechanism might appear, we must ask, “What is actually included within this idea of ‘revelation?’” Concerning the Roman Catholic idea of “authority”, necessary for *sensus plenior*, Douglas Moo comments, “For Brown and other Roman Catholics, this authority includes the church (the ‘magisterium’) and the New Testament. The *sensus plenior* becomes very important, then, for Roman Catholics, in that it provides a way to justify through Scripture the development of Mariology and other such otherwise poorly supported theological concepts.”⁹ In response to this objection, Moo continues by saying, “the *sensus plenior* approach is also very popular among Protestants – who, naturally, confine the ‘further revelation’ on which a fuller sense can authoritatively be based on the New Testament.”¹⁰ Therefore, it is very reasonable to accept *sensus plenior* as an accurate approach to understanding the New Testament author’s hermeneutic when based solely on the text of Scripture, rather than on the tradition of a church.

⁸Raymond E. Brown, *The ‘Sensus Plenior’ of Sacred Scripture* (Baltimore: St. Mary’s University, 1955) 92.

⁹Moo, *Hermeneutics, Authority, and Canon*, 202.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, 202.

A third objection to *sensus plenior* has been raised by those who believe that the New Testament was primarily an apologetic *tool* for the Jews to accept the claims of the newly formed church. Concerning this issue, Moo also says that some believe the New Testament authors would not have accepted a *hidden* meaning behind certain Old Testament texts because doing so would undermine any apologetic value within New Testament revelation. Would skeptical Jews of that day be open to accept this alleged “New revelation” if it was based on a re-defined understanding of their own sacred Scriptures?¹¹ In reference to Hagner, Moo goes on to explain how this objection is refuted by one consideration. He believes that many uses of the Old Testament in the New are designed for the purpose of assuring the newly formed church and not primarily for creating an effective apologetic for the Jewish people. In fact, the relevance of the Old Testament was already assumed by early Christians.¹² Though one *aspect* of the New Testament is *apologetic* in focus, it is significant *primarily* as the product of God’s *new* revelation.

Finally, the most significant point for accepting or rejecting *sensus plenior* is whether or not it is complimentary and coherent to the doctrine of *inspiration*. In their classic work, *A General Introduction to the Bible*, Norman Geisler and William Nix give a good working definition of *inspiration*. They write, “Inspiration is that mysterious process by which the divine causality [God] worked through the human prophets without destroying their individual personalities and styles to produce divinely authoritative and inerrant writings.”¹³ The conflict between *sensus plenior* and *inspiration* is based on the assertion that God, the divine author, “caused” His word to be communicated through the instrumentality of the human author, in order to bring about the divine product of Scripture. It is assumed, then, that these two separate entities (both divine and human authors) must have worked together in order for *inspiration* to have truly taken place. If this is so, it is argued, then the possibility that God embedded within Scripture a meaning unknown to the human author would be in contradiction to *inspiration*. To be sure, this “fuller sense” cannot be a part of the original text, they say, since the meaning of a text is determined exclusively by both the divine agent and human instrument, working in perfect unison towards the *inspired* product.

In response to this reasonable objection, we must keep in mind that even though God intentionally used the human authors of Scripture to communicate His intended meaning, in a specific and special way, they were still “instruments” useful only in the hand of the ultimate Author of Scripture. Raymond Brown supports this conclusion when he quotes Manuel de Tuya: “From the fact that God is using an instrument which is *capable of knowledge*, it does not follow that God can use this intelligent instrument only in as much as he [the human author] actually knows all that God wanted to express.”¹⁴ The human author, as significant as he was by God’s design for *inspiration*, could in no way limit God’s “fuller sense” of meaning that would unfold throughout His progressive revelation. Unlike the human authors, God’s intended meaning is timeless.

¹¹Ibid., 203.

¹²Moo, *Hermeneutic, Authority, and Canon*, 203, referring to Hagner, *Old Testament in the New*, 103.

¹³Norman L. Geisler and William E. Nix, *A General Introduction to the Bible*, rev. ed. (Chicago: Moody, 1986) 39.

¹⁴Brown, *Sensus Plenior*, 133.

From these examples it is clear that the usual objections brought against *sensus plenior*, as reasonable as they may be, cannot be substantiated by sufficient biblical or rational evidence. Having examined the major controversies surrounding *sensus plenior*, we must consider whether or not the application of *sensus plenior* could bring greater accuracy and clarity in understanding problematic Old Testament texts in the New.

Application of *Sensus Plenior*

As we have already noted, many examples in Scripture exist in which the later author appears to discover a “fuller sense” of meaning beyond what we can reasonably prove the original author fully intended or even partially understood. However, we have also concluded that a given text has only one intended sense perceived by its human author. How then does *sensus plenior* help resolve this apparent contradiction?

Klein, Blomberg and Hubbard explain the interpretive implication of *sensus plenior* in the following way: “Along with the literal sense intended by the human author, the Holy Spirit may encode a hidden meaning not known or devised at all by the human author.”¹⁵ LaSor also comments, “Is it not possible for God to present to the author a revelation which by its very nature contains a deeper significance?”. He opines, “But at a later date, in the light of further revelation, the fuller meaning becomes clear to readers under the influence of the Spirit who inspired the original author.”¹⁶ Thus, whether this “hidden” meaning was *encoded* within the text itself or “in the light of further revelation”, does this model of Holy Spirit influence upon certain New Testament authors not account for the fuller sense of an Old Testament text? In order to validate this conclusion, it must be applied to a text that is better understood by this principle of *sensus plenior*.

One of these problematic Old Testament passages, uniquely applied by a New Testament author is found in Isaiah 7:14, “Therefore the Lord Himself will give you a sign: Behold, a virgin will be with child and bear a son, and she will call His name Immanuel.” To many, this is one of the most well know texts predicting the virgin birth and incarnation of Jesus Christ, the Messiah. And yet, when the student of Scripture comes to this interpretive conclusion, one must recognize that the reader is looking exclusively through Matthew’s interpretive lenses (Matt. 1:23) instead of Isaiah’s. Concerning the historical context of Isaiah’s Messianic prophecy, Dwight Pentecost writes,

The kingdom of Judah was being threatened by a coalition of Israel and Syria. God sent Isaiah to bring King Ahaz of Judah a message of comfort. Isaiah promised that this coalition would fail and Judah would survive. The message was so important that God offered to confirm this promise to Ahaz...It was a sign of the virgin birth. This prophecy had a double reference. The word “virgin” in Isaiah 7:14 is a broad word that refers to any young woman of marriageable age. The prophecy was intended to convey to Ahaz the promise that before a young woman of marriageable age could be married, conceive, bear a son, and wean that son, Judah would be rid of her enemies. Thus, within about

¹⁵Klein, Blomberg, and Hubbard, *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*, 178.

¹⁶LaSor, “Interpretation,” 108.

three years Ahaz would see the fulfillment of God's promise to him that the powers allied against Judah would fail.¹⁷

When we consider the original context of Isaiah's words, did he truly understand the "fuller sense" interpreted by Matthew, hundreds of years later in Matthew 1:23? Did Isaiah actually perceive that this prophecy was intended for more than just King Ahaz? Again, we must ask, "How did Matthew come to his understanding of Isaiah's original prophecy?" It is obvious, then, that based on the immediate context of Isaiah's Messianic prophecy, we can in no way conclusively verify that Isaiah knew to what extent his prediction would be fulfilled. And yet, to Matthew it was abundantly clear what God's divine intention was for these original words – the announcement of Messiah. A viable way that this author would explain this phenomenon is through the proper application of *sensus plenior*.

However, we must be clear. To whom does this "fuller sense" belong? Was it only the later human author's perceived meaning of a text? Or was it actually by the Divine Author, through the Holy Spirit's superintending work, that the human author arrived at his new application of the original interpretation? I believe the burden of proof within the context rests with the latter. Concerning the existence of *sensus plenior*, Klein, Blomberg and Hubbard comment,

Only inspired NT writers, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, could find a fuller sense. This position must still verify the existence of a deeper level of meaning in the Bible, even when it admits our inability to replicate what the NT writers did with the OT texts. In other words, that interpretive option is not available to us who are not inspired (in the technical sense) interpreters of the Bible."¹⁸ Included in their footnotes is a pertinent point wherein R.N. Longenecker "argues that we can reproduce the exegesis of the NT authors only where they employ historico-grammatical methods to understand the OT. We cannot replicate their methods since the NT writers' use of the OT depended upon the Holy Spirit's inspired analysis."¹⁹

In conclusion, this author believes the essence of *sensus plenior*, its controversy and proper application was relevant to the author, Peter, when he wrote, "But know this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture is *a matter* of one's own interpretation, for no prophecy was ever made by an act of human will, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God." (2 Pet. 1:20-21). Peter concurs, then, that for the human interpreter only God's intended meaning can truly be received from the text of Scripture, by means of a literal hermeneutic. In terms of a contemporary application, a consistent hermeneutic is significant to a Free Grace framework of Scripture because of its robust theological distinctives, built on a strong hermeneutical foundation of authorial intent. Such interpretive and theological Free Grace distinctives include the Church and Israel, the heavenly and earthly aspects of the Kingdom, a primarily doxological rather than a soteriological focus of biblical history and the essential difference between justification and sanctification – the free gift of salvation and the sacrificial reward of discipleship, just to name a few. However, it is also true that as the Divine Revealer of His Word,

¹⁷J. Dwight Pentecost, *The Words and Works of Jesus Christ*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981), 54-55.

¹⁸Klein, Blomberg, and Hubbard, *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*, 178-179.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, 179.

God alone had the prerogative to “move” His chosen authors in both the Old and New Testaments, in order to communicate the “fullest sense” that He intended, and this without bringing disruption or contradiction to the use of a literal method of understanding the intended meaning of any given Bible text. Therefore, we can conclude that the Biblical use of *sensus plenior* is not a function of mere human interpretation, but of divine application through progressive revelation. Thus, only available through and sourced in the Divine Author Himself. *Sensus plenior* belongs, not to the interpreter, but to the Revealer.

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