

# **A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF SENSUS PLENIOR**

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Since the turn of the century there has been a new interest in biblical interpretation. Within the Roman Catholic Church, exegetes have come up with a new sense of Scripture called **Sensus Plenior**. In other words, the text of Scripture is said to have a fuller sense which was intended by the divine author. According to this view, the human authors were ignorant of the fuller sense or **Sensus Plenior**. It is the work of an exegete to find out what the **Sensus Plenior** of a text is and then pass that knowledge on to others. The preaching and teaching ministries of the Christian Church are affected in one way or another by the issue in question. Therefore, every serious student of the Bible here in Africa and beyond must grapple with this important hermeneutical question of **Sensus Plenior**.

The aim of this paper is to give a critical analysis of **Sensus Plenior**. Of special importance will be to define **Sensus Plenior**, show the relationship of **Sensus Plenior** to the human author, the literal sense, and the criteria upon which the validity of **Sensus Plenior** is argued. Finally, the validity of **Sensus Plenior** will be evaluated and a critique offered which will result in the conclusion of the whole matter.

## **Definition of Sensus Plenior**

As it will be demonstrated in the following pages, one

of the most heated debates in hermeneutics has been the issue of whether Scripture has a fuller sense than that intended by the human author. As early as 1931, H. Simon and J. Prado defined **Sensus Plenior** as that additional meaning which God intended to express in the words of the text, unknown to the human author.[1] However, God does not intend a meaning objectively different from that conveyed by the human author; the difference is subjective or of a development of the human author's idea.[2]

According to Raymond E. Brown, **Sensus Plenior** of a text is a deeper meaning intended by God, but not clearly intended by the human author. In his later work, Brown seems to have given more detail with regard to modifying the earlier definition of **Sensus Plenior** as he writes:

Let us apply the term **sensus plenior** to that meaning of his text which by the normal rules of exegesis would not have been within his awareness or intention but which by other criteria we can determine as having been intended by God. . . . We insist that a vague consciousness of this richer meaning may or may not have been present, and that such vague consciousness has no integral place in the definition of the **Sensus Plenior**, either as necessary or as inadmissible.[3]

Brown argues that the deeper/fuller meaning of Scriptures becomes evident when they are studied in the light of further revelation or development in the understanding of Revelation.

A more recent definition of **Sensus Plenior** is given by Donald A. Hagner as is clear in the following:

To be aware of **Sensus Plenior** is to realize that there is the possibility of more significance to an Old Testament passage than was consciously apparent to the original author, and more than can be gained by strict

grammatic or historical exegesis. Such is the nature of divine inspiration that the authors of Scripture were themselves often not conscious of the fullest significance and final application of what they wrote. This fuller sense of the Old Testament can be seen only in retrospect and in the light of the New Testament fulfillment.[4]

It seems clear from the foregoing definitions of **Sensus Plenior** that it is a sense other than the literal or natural meaning of the text of Scripture. Having defined what **Sensus Plenior** is, we will now proceed to deal with the discussion of its claimed validity and application in hermeneutics.

### **Proponents of Sensus Plenior**

A close examination of the literature available with regard to **Sensus Plenior** reveals that there are basic questions which need further investigation. Some of the basic issues to be dealt with in this section are: (1) the question of human instrumentality; (2) relation between **Sensus Plenior** and the literal sense of the author; (3) criteria of **Sensus Plenior**.

### **Sensus Plenior and Human Instrumentality**

It seems that even those who hold to **Sensus Plenior** are divided in the matter of whether the human author had awareness of what he wrote or not. Some claim that human authors of Scripture had no consciousness of the **Sensus Plenior**. Others insist that human authors must have had a vague awareness of **Sensus Plenior**, as John O'rourke argues:

In finding such meaning we are not bound by an overly strict interpretation of what is contained in the logician's definition of the implicit. That the fuller meaning exists there is required nothing more than some very vague knowledge of it on the part of human author.[5]

Some proponents of **Sensus Plenior** further argue that if the human author was not conscious of the **Sensus Plenior**, it cannot be a true sense of Scripture. The reason given for such an assertion is that human instrumentality would be unnecessary.[6] It is argued further that if the **Sensus Plenior** is true, then the human author is reduced to a mere scribe writing under dictation. Challenging the possibility of awareness of **Sensus Plenior** on the part of the human author, Brown writes:

The language of the Bible is employed to express under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, many things which are beyond the power and scope of the reason. There are in such passages a fullness and a hidden depth of meaning which the letters hardly express and which the laws of interpretation hardly warrant.[7]

#### **Relation Between Sensus Plenior and the Literal Sense**

Most proponents of **Sensus Plenior** argue that there is an enormous difference between **Sensus Plenior** and the literal sense. O'Rourke, on the other hand, says that there is a fuller sense which is not different from what the human author clearly intends. This fuller meaning is formally implicit in the author's statement.[8]

On the other hand, those who see the difference between **Sensus Plenior** and the literal sense would argue as follows:

In this connection we can say that the literal sense answers the question about what the text means according to the intention of that author as he was inspired to compose the message at that particular stage in the history of God's drama of salvation.[9]

The **Sensus Plenior** deals with the question of the

meaning of the text within the context of God's overall plan. This is the meaning which God Himself intended as He is the only one who knew the total picture of His revelation.

### **Criteria of Sensus Plenior**

The basic question to be considered is about the basis on which to determine a Sensus Plenior. First it is said by those who hold to the Sensus Plenior theory that one of the criteria is that Sensus Plenior is based on the development of God's further revelation. A good example is the use of the New Testament in order to unlock the Old Testament. The church fathers as well as church tradition are other keys to unlock the meaning of Scripture.[10]

The second criterion is that a text must be homogeneous with the literal sense. According to those who hold to the view in question, the text must be a development of what the human author wanted to say. Brown points out that it is for the magisterium of the church to determine the fuller sense and pass it on to the faithful.[11] He offers the following summary:

The fuller sense must be a development of the literal sense. Any distortion or contradiction of the obvious literal sense of the text is not a fuller sense. Besides resemblance of the fuller sense with the obvious literal, it must be ascertained as much as possible that it is a sense of Scripture willed by God to be contained in the literal sense.[12]

### **Conclusion**

The foregoing discussion has demonstrated that the issue of Sensus Plenior is far from being dead. Although there are a few diversities of opinion within the camp of those who hold to the view in question, it is clear that most of them agree on the basic issue. Such issue is that the interpretation of Scripture

should be based on God's intention rather than that of the human author.

Scholars who hold to Sensus Plenior argue that such sense was there since the composition of the text. They are, however, divided as to whether the human author was aware of the Sensus Plenior or not. Robert Krumholtz profoundly argues:

God's authorship of the Bible is the action of divine principal cause. Although the first and prevailing action was from God, this divine motion was so clearly united to the proper action of His human instrument that together they were a single principle of one effect - the written word of God. The human author in exercising his faculties acted dispositively to God's action and modified its effects to such an extent that various human authors can be distinguished and recognized in the composition of the different books by reason of their vocabulary, literary style, time and place of his writing.[13]

It should be pointed out that since the view in question seems to be faced with numerous problems, it is important to offer a critique. The following section will be devoted to pointing out some of the crucial objections of Sensus Plenior, its problem areas and contribution to the science of hermeneutics (if any).

### **Critique of Sensus Plenior**

Some scholars point out that the Sensus Plenior does not seem to be different from the literal sense. It is argued that if the fuller sense was implicit in the text of Scripture, how will such a conclusion be different from Origen's allegorism?

One of the objections of Sensus Plenior is that if we accept the view of the so called fuller sense, we are faced with the problem of reducing human authors to mere scribes writing under dictation. Moreover, the

result of this kind of argument will be that the text of Scripture will have two senses, i.e., one intended by God and the other by the human author.[14] On the other hand, the question of inspiration of Scripture will be greatly affected as Bierberg argues:

Direct or immediate revelations contained in sacred Scripture, therefore, can have no objective *Sensus Plenior*; for they are intended in the fullest sense by their sole author and are quoted as such by the inspired authors.[15]

Another strong argument against the *Sensus Plenior* theory is that if the deeper meaning of the text is recognized on the basis of further revelation, the meaning is not contained in the text itself, but it is acquired at the moment of further revelation. In other words, one should speak of a fuller understanding on the part of the exegete rather than of a fuller sense of the text.[16]

It is argued by exponents of *Sensus Plenior* that the theory is based on eisegesis and not proper exegesis of Scripture. In the case of prophecy, for example I Peter 1:10-12, those who hold to *Sensus Plenior* assert that the prophets were ignorant of what they predicted. To answer such allegations, the passage in question makes clear that the prophets knew what they were talking about. Their ignorance was only with regard to "the time of the fulfillment" of their predictions, but not the meaning of their predictions.[17]

To this end Kaiser convincingly argues:

This passage does not teach that these men were curious and often ignorant of the exact meaning of what they wrote and predicted. Theirs was not a search for the meaning of what they wrote; it was an inquiry into the temporal aspects of the subject, which went beyond what they wrote. Let it be noted then that the subject is invariably larger than the verbal meaning communicated

on any subject; nevertheless, one can know adequately and truly even if he does not know comprehensively and totally all the parts of a subject.[18]

Another passage often used as evidence for **Sensus Plenior** is John 11:49-52. It is argued that Caiaphas' prophetic pronouncement regarding Jesus' death is a clear example for the double-author theory of hermeneutics. On the other hand, it should be observed that although Caiaphas uttered a true statement, his perspective was that of political expediency: "It is better to let one man be a sacrificial lamb to save the Jewish cause than to have everyone implicated with Rome's wrath falling on the whole nation."

Attention should be given to the significance of Caiaphas' prediction rather than to the method in which he spoke.[19] It may correctly be asserted that in Caiaphas, we do not have the words of a true prophet coming with authority from God. Instead we see an erring priest giving wicked counsel. However, the significance of Caiaphas' statement accorded with God's sovereign plan, in which the wrath of men and their evil intentions were turned into God's glory.[20]

Thus the passage in question cannot be used to support the **Sensus Plenior** viewpoint. Furthermore, Caiaphas never belonged to the line of apostles and prophets who were the recipients of God's revelation.[21]

### Conclusion

It has been demonstrated that the theory of **Sensus Plenior** is quite an issue in contemporary biblical interpretation. Although **Sensus Plenior** has had its grips upon Roman Catholic exegetes for decades, it is far from being confined to the Roman Catholic Church. In Protestantism, **Sensus Plenior** is receiving much more attention today than ever before.

One important thing to note is that the majority of



exegetes are willing to accept *Sensus Plenior* as a theory. Even those who are strong proponents of the theory of *Sensus Plenior* are divided in certain matters. Some do recognize the need for the human author's awareness of the fuller sense. Others see no need for such an awareness, since God is the ultimate author of Scripture, while the human author was merely an instrument.

Finally, it should be borne in mind that the problems found in the theory of *Sensus Plenior* suggest that it is only a partial solution to a much wider problem. This should be a great challenge to the evangelicals who are committed to the authority of Scriptures, to give diligence to their study. Of special importance is looking for the author's meaning rather than imposing one's own meaning upon the text.

#### Notes

- 1 H. Simon and J. Prado, "Praelectiones Biblicae ad Usum Scholarum" (Vol 1, *Propaedeutica Biblica*, Turin: Marietti, 1931) 207-210. For an elaborate discussion see Raymond E. Brown, "The History and Development of the Theory of a *Sensus Plenior*," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 15 (1953) 143.
- 2 H. Simon and J. Prado
- 3 Raymond E. Brown, "The *Sensus Plenior* in the Last Ten Years," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 25 (1963) 268-269.
- 4 Donald A. Hagner, "The Old Testament in the New Testament," in *Interpreting the Word of God*, Ed. by Samuel Schultz and Morris Inch, (Chicago: Moody Press, 1976) 92. Quoted from Henry A. Virkler, *Principles and Processes of Biblical Interpretation*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1981) 25-26.
- 5 John J. O'Rourke, "Marginal Notes on the *Sensus Plenior*," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 21 (1959) 64.
- 6 Brown, p. 265.
- 7 Raymond E. Brown, "The Decision of the Biblical Commission," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 17 (1955) 455.
- 8 O'Rourke, p. 64.
- 9 G. N. Bergado, "The *Sensus Plenior* as a New Testament Hermeneutical Principle," Master's Thesis, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School (1969) 22.
- 10 R. Bierbers, "Hermeneutics", *Jerome Biblical Commentary*, Ed. by Raymond Brown, Joseph Fitzmyer, Roland Murphy (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1968) 616.
- 11 Bergado, p. 27.
- 12 Bergado, p. 27.
- 13 Robert H. Krumholtz, "Instrumentality and the *Sensus Plenior*

ior," **Catholic Biblical Quarterly** 20 (1958) 200-205.

14 O'Rourke, **Marginal Notes** p. 65.

15 Rudold Bierberg, "Does Sacred Scripture Have a **Sensus Plenior?**" **Catholic Biblical Quarterly** 10 (1948) 191.

16 Bierberg, "Hermeneutics", p. 617.

17 Virkler, **Principles and Processes of Biblical Interpretation**, p. 26

18 Walter C. Kaiser, "The Single Intent of Scripture," in **Evangelical Roots**, Ed. by Kenneth S. Kantzer, (New York: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1978) 126.

19 Kaiser, p. 130.

20 Kaiser, p. 131.

21 Kaiser, p. 131.