FOUR SENSES

by Nathan Carr, The Academy of Classical Christian Studies

In teaching a New Testament course to eighth graders every year, I have a single goal in mind. It's not to teach them about genre and classification of books, as different as Gospels and Epistles may be. It's not even to attempt the whole "story" of the New Testament, though we spend an entire quarter in Acts alone. Above all, I want them to know and use the four senses of Scripture as the bedrock of their biblical sensibilities.

The project has largely worked. Earlier in the year, we found ourselves high-centered in Mark 1:12–13, Mark's two-verse description of the temptation of Christ. Following the teaching of the Fathers that St. Matthew's Gospel was written first, we had already worked our way through Matthew 4, a much more detailed description of those forty days in the wilderness.

Mark's account is as follows, "The Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. And he was in the wilderness forty days, being tempted by Satan. And he was with the wild animals, and the angels were ministering to him."

Matthew had not mentioned any wild animals.

So we started over. I wrote the four "senses" on the board, and began asking for answers. "What's the *literal* meaning?" I asked. In monotone unison they answered, "Jesus was tempted in a desert somewhere in Israel." A few non-conformists mentioned other facts in the text that others had overlooked. "Angels ministered!" "Wild animals were out there!"

Little to no argument ensued.

On to the next. "What's the *moral* interpretation of this passage?" Though a harder question, a half-unified class declared, "We should fast just like Jesus fasted." A simple extrapolation, but one that has its own endorsement in the church calendar. With some pushing, they also arrived at deeper truths about fasting—that the highest thoughts and deepest affections for God often come in periods where we deny the flesh. They were pleased, but wanted to press on for the more controversial and imaginative "senses."

The students had figured out early in the year that without the first two, the other two have no basis; but without the last two, the first two have no fulfillment. Inevitably, this makes the *allegorical* and *anagogical* senses the most fun for the eighth grade mind; and in this case, the keys to unlocking this reference to "wild animals."

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"What is the *allegorical* sense?" I asked. A boy in the back row raised his hand, "It shows us how Christ fulfills everything in the Old Testament." "What clues do we have?" I asked. A girl in the front row, "The number forty is important in the Bible. Seems like this passage is one of those." The students then began rattling off every set of forty that they could remember, and decided that above all else, this was a fulfillment of Israel's forty-year wandering in the wilderness at the time of the Exodus. The two seemed to match in many ways. "What's a key difference?" I asked. Kid in the middle row, "Jesus is actually good at fasting."

Not bad.

"What about the animals?" I asked, thinking that the reference was too obscure for the eighth-grade mind. Heck, most eighth graders in this nation are cutting the teeth of their moral imagination on *The Hunger Games* without realizing the obvious allegory involved.

Without so much as batting an eye, a girl in the front row whose background has largely been shaped within a tradition of Messianic Judaism said, "Jesus is both a new Adam and a new Noah. He's offered food from Satan in a garden full of wild animals, which is exactly like the Garden of Eden. He is also with wild animals for forty days, just like Noah was with animals while it rained for forty days and forty nights."

Stunned into a few moments of astonished silence, I pushed further, "What does this show us about Jesus?" The boy in the back row jumped back in, "That he's better than both of them. He's a better Adam because he didn't take the bread, and he's a better Noah because he's the boat." A bit of an import from Matthew, but we'll take it.

Hoping that this moment will last forever, I push into the final question, "What is the *anagogical sense*?" "It points us to the New Heavens and New Earth," someone says. "So how do we interpret the passage from this perspective?" I asked.

Silence.

"I'm not sure," said one student who had yet to speak, "but it seems like you have to deny something before you can inherit it. Maybe this is the beginning of Jesus taking over the universe. Seems like that has something to do with a New Heavens and New Earth."

That normal fourteen-year-olds being taught by an average professor are capable of basic exegesis three months into the semester seems sufficient evidence that a spirit of inquiry and an allegorical imagination are not only possible and teachable, but worth pursuing as the primary purpose of education. The exchange above is par for the course in this class; it is in no way extraordinary. It has become their common "sense" as a class in approaching the Scriptures as a spiritual community. Parents have told me that the discussions are coming home with the students and showing up at their dinner tables. Other teachers have remarked at their increased ability to discern the meaning of books in their other classes. The four senses have captured their moral imaginations.

Perhaps the takeaway here is that a return to the Fathers is always for the good of the church. Or perhaps we could conclude that the proper study of Scriptures inevitably illuminates every other subject and enlightens the mind. I suspect both are very true in this instance, but shared between them is this: the full enculturation of children into the life of our Lord such that they have His common "sense" is essential to the formation of souls. As a mere bridesmaid of the One Church, schools should seek to give students the proper architecture of the soul such that the world is seen only in the light of Christ and His centrality to everything that exists, everything that they could ever think, and everything for which they ultimately long. For the eighth-grader, allegory and eschatology find their foundation in truth and goodness. But the real fun starts when truth and goodness find their ultimate fulfillment in Christ's fulfillment and comprehension of all things—a soaring thought made possible by the allegorical and moral imagination.