

AUGUSTINE AND PREACHING PIETY

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Augustine's Bible was a Latin translation. In Augustine's time, there were several old Latin translations, commonly referred to as *Vetus Latina*.¹ When compared to the polished prose of writers like Cicero, none of them were particularly elegant. This quality contributed to some educated converts, such as Augustine, perceiving the scriptures as "clumsy, clunky Latin"² Even though the Scriptures struck Augustine as literarily unattractive, "he came not only to love the broader biblical message and the epic biblical narratives; he even came to savor the *Vetus Latina*'s often odd and ungainly turns-of-phrase"³ Using these Scriptures Augustine prayed, thought, and studied Scripture in order to understand the truths of Christianity and how best to apply them to the questions and issues of daily life. As he studied the Scriptures and contemplated the meaning of piety, he came to these conclusions: "'Piety,' again, is commonly understood as the proper designation of the worship of God."⁴ Concerning his understanding of piety as worship, Augustine also wrote:

The common people, too, use it of works of charity" (same) "we, on the other hand, cannot express either of these ideas by one word. This worship, then, which in Latin "servitus", but the service due to God only." We cannot express these things in one word, but call it the worship of God – this, we say, belongs only to that God who is the true God.⁵

¹William S. Harmless, ed, *Augustine in His Own Words* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2010), 157.

²Harmless, ed, *Augustine in His Own Words*, 157.

³Harmless, ed, *Augustine in His Own Words*, 157.

⁴Saint Augustine, *The City of God*, Translated by Marcus Dods (New York: Barnes and Noble, Inc. 2006), 366.

⁵Saint Augustine, *The City of God*, 366-7.

Augustine's piety is ultimately about worshiping the one true God – both in the gathered assembly and through the words and actions of everyday life. One of the main congregational benefits of corporate worship is gaining Christian formation through instruction and the most basic mode of this instruction came through preaching. For Augustine, preaching and piety are forever linked.

Thesis And Methodology

Augustine was uniquely gifted, shaped, and called to a special task at a crucial time in the early history of the church. The two most formidable factors in his person and mission involved his giftedness and training as a rhetorician and his calling to apply that rhetorical skill toward building up the church – developing its piety. As a rhetorician, the most obvious application of his knowledge and skill for the church was in the area of preaching. Though rhetoric and preaching may use similar skills, Augustine believed there were significant differences in the reasons *why* they were practiced. Augustine's thoughts concerning both of these areas were foundational to the way he taught and trained disciples. An examination of how he applied his rhetorical skill toward teaching Christianity will provide a significant understanding of the relationship between Augustine's piety and his preaching.

Augustine The Rhetorician

While modern education is preoccupied with mastery of STEM subjects (science, technology, engineering, and math), the core education of Augustine's Roman world focused on language, literature, and oratory. Augustine spent his youth mastering the knowledge and skill of rhetoric, and then spent the rest of his life putting into practice what he learned.⁶ Augustine's education was completed in three parts. The first part of his schooling, reading, writing, and

⁶John Syper, "Redeeming Rhetoric: Augustine's Use of Rhetoric in His Preaching Ministry," *Eleutheria* Vol. 4: Iss. 1, Article 3 (2015), 18, accessed May 10, 2018, <http://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/elevol4/iss1/3>.

arithmetic, came in his hometown of Thagaste. The second and third parts of his education took place just south of his hometown in Madauros and finally in Carthage, where he focused on writing, speaking, and literary studies. Augustine's first exposure to rhetoric was between the ages of twelve and fifteen.⁷ He was an extremely bright and capable student. Immediately following his schooling, he began teaching. First in Thagaste (only one year) and then back to Carthage. He taught in Carthage for nine years (374 – 383) and “took every possible step to distinguish himself above his colleagues.”⁸

When, Where, And How Augustine Taught

F. Van Der Meer in his book *Augustine the Bishop: Church and Society at the Dawn of the Middle Ages* writes that all of Augustine's sermons have starting points in Scripture from the liturgy or from extracts he personally chose.⁹ Augustine did not usually write out his sermons. Possidius, his first biographer, wrote that he relied on a “group of capable stenographers.”¹⁰ As a master of rhetoric, Augustine's sermons were meant to be heard and not read. His intonation, gestures, and cadence are lost on the reader but would have had a major impact on the gathered assembly.¹¹ In one stark contrast to modern preachers, Augustine usually remained seated while he preached. When preaching, he normally held a copy of the Scriptures in his hand and his sermons usually lasted about an hour.¹² These qualities are made even more interesting to

⁷Sypert, “Redeeming Rhetoric,” 19.

⁸Sypert, “Redeeming Rhetoric,” 19.

⁹Van Der Meer, *Augustine the Bishop: Religion and Society at the Dawn of the Middle Ages*. Translated by Brian Battershaw and G. R. Lamb (New York: Sheed and Ward Ltd., 1961), 405.

¹⁰Saint Augustine, *Essential Sermons*, Translated by Edmund Hill, O.P. (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2007), 10.

¹¹Saint Augustine, *Essential Sermons*, 11.

¹²Harmless, ed, *Augustine in His Own Words*, 124.

modern believers when considering he would have been the only one who sat. The congregation would have stood for the duration of the liturgy – there were no pews.¹³

William Harmless points out that Augustine assumed preachers had a thorough command of both the scriptures and “oratorical aptitude.”¹⁴ With this assumption, Augustine advised preachers to imitate his preparation process. Rather than spending lots of time reviewing texts or practicing their speaking, they should spend lots of time in prayer. In Book IV of *De Doctrina Christiana*, Augustine instructs:

It is more the piety of prayer than the ready facility of orators that enables him to do so; by praying then both for himself and for those he is about to address, let him be a pray-er before being a speaker. At the very moment he steps up to speak, before he even opens his mouth and says a word, let him lift up his thirsty soul to God, begging that it may belch forth what it has quaffed, or pour out what he has filled it with.¹⁵

Augustine instructs the technique of three types of preaching. He attributes these basic types of oration to Cicero.¹⁶ “He distinguishes three kinds, the simple, the flowery and the pathetic, which are, respectively, designed to instruct, to hold the attention and to convince; or, to use the language of the Church, to explain, to edify, and to convert.”¹⁷ Cicero also linked three distinct styles of speaking that Augustine appropriated for preaching: subdued, moderate, and grand.¹⁸

Relying on his extensive rhetorical training, Augustine also employed other, more colorful techniques in his preaching. Though he was trained in elegant high Latin, he was most

¹³Harmless, ed, *Augustine in His Own Words*, 122.

¹⁴Harmless, ed, *Augustine in His Own Words*, 126.

¹⁵Saint Augustine, *Teaching Christianity (De Doctrina Christiana)*. Translated by Edmund Hill, O.P. (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 1996), 225-6.

¹⁶Van Der Meer, *Augustine the Bishop*, 409.

¹⁷Van Der Meer, *Augustine the Bishop*, 409.

¹⁸Harmless, ed, *Augustine in His Own Words*, 138.

concerned with clarity. Augustine would not hesitate to “violate the canons of proper Latinity to get his point across.”¹⁹ William Harmless describes this as “spicy speech.”²⁰ Harmless provides an example of this from *On Christian Teaching*, book 4: “Of what use is a golden key if it is unable to open what we desire? Or what objection is there to a wooden one if it can? We are asking only that what is closed be opened.”²¹ Harmless lists several other colorful rhetorical techniques employed by Augustine in his preaching. “Rap Latin” is what Harmless calls extemporaneous rhyming in order to enthrall his audience with verbal music; tongue twisters are word play to heighten audience attention. Augustine also interacted verbally with his audience. He provides an example from sermon 96: [The congregation begins cheering.] “What did I say? What is there to start cheering about? Look, the problem [in the biblical text] has only just been laid out, and you’ve already started cheering.”²² After discovering descriptions of Augustine’s superlative rhetorically-shaped Gospel preaching, it is obvious that reading the transcripts of his sermons is as far from the congregation’s experience as is comparing the reading of a Shakespearian script and seeing it performed by master actors.

What Augustine Preached

“Tell him little, but tell him everything that is important, and that in the form of a story, narration, of which the principal theme should be the love of God.”²³ The content of Augustine’s sermons was most often focused on Christ, his work, and his person. While Augustine taught the truth of Christ he battled with the Manichees, the Pelagians, and a number of others who

¹⁹Harmless, ed, *Augustine in His Own Words*, 131.

²⁰Harmless, ed, *Augustine in His Own Words*, 131.

²¹Harmless, ed, *Augustine in His Own Words*, 131.

²²Harmless, ed, *Augustine in His Own Words*, 131.

²³Van Der Meer, *Augustine the Bishop*, 458.

assaulted the nature and veracity of the Gospel. His method for combating these evils was preaching. His favorite tools for this work were the books of Genesis, the Psalms, John's Gospel, and the letters of Paul.²⁴ An example of this can be found in the corpus of Augustine's surviving sermons where he references the Gospel of John's prologue one thousand times.²⁵ John's high Christology and willingness to embrace mystery suited Augustine well because "Augustine, unlike his contemporaries in the Greek East, did not generally embark on 'technical speculation on the unity and inner constitution of Jesus' person'; Augustine preferred 'to speak of the mystery of Christ in concrete, rhetorically challenging phrases that let the believer savor the inherent paradox of preaching an incarnate God.'"²⁶ As an example, William Harmless examines sermon 188 in detail. The following are some selected quotes from Harmless' translation:

It is no wonder, I say, we cannot find words that we might speak about the one Word [of God] who spoke us into being and about whom we seek to say something. For our minds may form words like these, pondered over and uttered forth, but our minds were themselves formed by the Word.²⁷

"He loved us so much that He was created from a mother whom He had created, was carried in hands He had made, was nourished at breasts He had filled; that He, the Word without whom all human eloquence is mute, wailed in a manger in mute infancy."²⁸

Many more of Augustine's sermons have been preserved and translated. These sermons cover a variety of subjects and themes Augustine considered crucial to the Christian formation of his hearers, the catechumens. The following examples demonstrate some of the themes and language used in their preaching:

²⁴Harmless, ed, *Augustine in His Own Words*, 157-161.

²⁵Saint Augustine, *Essential Sermons*, 13.

²⁶Harmless, ed, *Augustine in His Own Words*, 128.

²⁷Harmless, ed, *Augustine in His Own Words*, 128.

²⁸Harmless, ed, *Augustine in His Own Words*, 129.

You therefore, he says, must say, *Our Father who art in heaven* (Mt. 6:9). With these words, you, as you can see, have begun to have God as your Father...Remember that you have a Father in heaven. Remember that you were born from your father Adam for death, that you are to be reborn from your Father God for life. When you say this, make sure that you also say it from the heart. Affection from the one who prays will bring action from the one who listens.²⁹

Every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire (Mt. 3:10, Lk 3:9). Master, leave it this year too, I shall dig around it and add a basketful of dung. If it produces fruit, fine; if not, you will come and grub it up (Lk 13:7-9). So then, because there's not the slightest possibility of his not coming, let us make sure he finds us bearing fruit. Digging round the tree means the humility, the self-abasement of the penitent; every hold dug low down, a kind of abasement. The basket of dung is the dirt of repentance. After all, what could be dirtier than dung? And yet, if you use it well, what could be more productive?³⁰

Augustine Preaches for Piety

“For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart.”³¹

“There are two things that the whole treatment of Scripture depends on: a method of discovering what we need to understand and a method of presenting what we have understood.”³² In worship, Augustine took the details very seriously. “He presumed that every gesture, every sign, every word mattered. Each held some import for how one believed, how one felt, and how one acted.”³³ For Augustine, piety and worship were synonymous, he believed that rhetorical skill is a tool for use in communicating the Gospel but that in themselves, these skills

²⁹Saint Augustine, *Essential Sermons*, 86.

³⁰Saint Augustine, *Essential Sermons*, 108.

³¹Heb 4:12 ESV.

³²Saint Augustine, *Teaching Christianity (De Doctrina Christiana)*, 109.

³³William S. Harmless, *Augustine and the Catechumenate* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1995, 2014) cap. 8 loc 8779 of 9404, Kindle.

are unable to save people – that is the work of the Holy Spirit. Not only for the lost but also for the believer, Augustine believed that a continual diet of the Word was necessary for life. “From what I feast on, from that I feed you. I am a table servant, not the master of the house.”³⁴ Once saved, the believer is responsible for pursuing a life of worship or piety: “Can it at any time or place be wrong to love God with all your heart and all your soul and all your mind and love your neighbor?”³⁵ For Augustine, living a life of piety (worship) in response to the gift of salvation, is the Christian’s primary pursuit. To aid this process his sermons were filled with Scripture. “Every page, every paragraph, is threaded with biblical quotations, biblical allusions, biblical images. Augustine did more than comment on the Bible: he *spoke* Bible, making its words his words.”³⁶

Conclusion

Augustine studied, taught, and preached so that others would benefit from same grace that saved him. His instructions remind his students, both ancient and modern, that cognition of our indebtedness to Christ’s saving grace is the main contributor toward our own piety and worship. “Let not the proud speak evil of me, because I am aware of the price of my redemption, and I eat and drink and share it out, and poor as I am I seek to be sated by Him among those who eat and are sated, and they shall praise the Lord who seek Him.”³⁷ Using his rhetorical skills through the lens of preaching, Augustine exemplified how one can fill God’s irresistible call to ministry – teaching and encouraging others to advance their own piety and lives of worship.

³⁴Harmless, ed, *Augustine in His Own Words*, 156.

³⁵Saint Augustine, *Confessions: A New Translation*, Book 3, Translated by Peter Constantine (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2018), 8.15.

³⁶Harmless, ed, *Augustine in His Own Words*, 156.

³⁷Saint Augustine, *Confessions*, Book X, 237.

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