

Introduction

RESOURCING AUGUSTINIAN PREACHING TODAY

Preachers often ponder the state of preaching. The influence, methods and reception of mentors are weighed. When this is done, there is frequently fearfulness about the future of preaching. So Tim Keller spoke at the American memorial to John Stott, saying, “John Stott reinvented expository preaching. I’m still worried that younger evangelical leaders are increasingly thinking that they need to get beyond expository preaching.”¹

Since preaching has been central to the Church from its inception, it is surprising that what revival of the expository ministry there has been in the modern church has been nurtured with a notable lack of historical awareness. Hughes Oliphant Old commented on this: “Some of these contemporary preachers may have been aware that Augustine or Origen or Calvin [practiced expository preaching], as indeed they did, but they did not argue for it for that reason. It was mostly because it seemed to be a good way of preaching. It seemed appropriate.”² A form of preaching embraced on the basis of pragmatism will, of course, be neglected when it is ‘out of season’ (2 Tim 4:2). The same goes for a model of ministry followed due to the influence of a charismatic leader. Even the claim that one’s approach to preaching is biblical will, in time, be eroded by the apparently equal weight of claims made by other methods upon that title.

Learning through and from preachers in church history develops a deeper self-awareness about the practice and possibilities of preaching. Getting beyond a superficial imitation of past preachers to the timeless convictions and debates bequeaths tools and confidence for the task today. In that spirit, we consider the possibilities Augustine’s preaching opens for the contemporary preacher. Augustine’s ministry resources contemporary preachers as they reflect upon at least five important areas of homiletics.

1. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n3WkR0LPCxM> (Accessed 19.12.13)

2. Hughes Oliphant Old, *The Reading and Preaching of the Scriptures in the Worship of the Christian Church: The Patristic Age*, vol. 7 (Grand Rapids; Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2010), 172.

THE ROLE OF SECULAR INSIGHTS TO COMMUNICATION

Augustine was the first figure in church history to write a guide on preaching. Since he had been a tutor of pagan rhetoric, he was able to reflect in a self-aware manner upon both the value and danger of secular insights. Augustine's book *De Doctrina Christiana* was "really the first Manual for Preachers that was written in the Christian Church. As such it deserves careful reading."³

Cicero had, in Augustine's view, much to teach Christian preachers. The idea of fitting one's manner of speech to the setting was one of several areas in which Augustine's advice was dependent upon the ancient world's most famous pagan orator. Augustine gave considerable time to encouraging preachers in the task of learning how language functions—the study of what we would today know as hermeneutics. Secular knowledge about science, mathematics and history all aid the faithful interpreter of Scripture.⁴

However, in seeking to assess Augustine's views on the value of secular studies for preaching, we must take care not to accept—and then impose upon Augustine—the assumptions of contemporary secularity. While most would today assume that a subject such as mathematics is a secular discipline, it was not straightforwardly so for Augustine. The church father recognized that mathematics stood at some remove from strictly biblical disciplines; nevertheless, he did not perceive as neat a division between pagan and divine endeavors as many today do. Augustine wrote, "It must be clear to the dullest of wits that the discipline of arithmetic has not been instituted by human beings, but rather discovered and explored."⁵ Regardless of what the pagan scholars themselves believed, the useful insights of secular culture were in the final analysis not established apart from God:

Their teachings contain liberal disciplines which are more suited to the service of the truth, as well as a number of most useful ethical principles, and some true things are to be found among them about worshipping only the one God. All this is like their gold and silver, and not something they instituted themselves, but something which they mined, so to say, from the ore of divine providence, veins of which are everywhere to be found. As they for their part make perverse and unjust misuse of it in the service of demons, so Christians ought, when they separate themselves in spirit from their

3. John Ker, *History of Preaching* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1887), 105.

4. *doctr. Chr.* 2.27.41.

5. *doctr. Chr.* 2.38.56.

hapless company, to take these things away from them for the proper use of preaching the gospel.⁶

Such nuanced reflections on the relationship between God and secular knowledge enabled Augustine to both commend the value of secular studies for preaching, and to warn against thinking pagan knowledge could lead to happiness or divine wisdom. A preacher with the time, skill and option to do so, could benefit from studying the writings of pagan orators such as Cicero. However of greater importance was prayer:

If Queen Esther prayed, when she was going to speak in the king's presence for the temporal salvation of her people, that God might put suitable words into her mouth, how much more should you pray to receive such a favor, when you are toiling in word and teaching for the people's eternal salvation?⁷

THE ROLE OF DOCTRINE

How doctrine relates to preaching is a contested area. For some, doctrine is seen as a threat to the integrity of preaching. For others, doctrinal explication provides the normal form of the sermon. How can a preacher embody a faithful handling of the Scriptural text (with its narrative, poetry and redemptive historical form) alongside doctrinal fidelity and comprehensiveness? Is there such a thing as a doctrine of preaching? Engaging with such questions is essential for any who wish to transcend pragmatic or shallow preaching.

Augustine provides rich resources in his teaching and example for those who seek to explore the role of doctrine in preaching. In his observation that Scripture's aim is to cultivate love of God and neighbor,⁸ Augustine made a doctrinal claim which was shaped by the contours of redemption history and the words of Jesus. Holding forth love as the goal of Scripture gave Augustine a doctrinal standard by which to measure the faithfulness of his preaching. If a sermon did not in some way help listeners love God and each other, the preaching must in some way be sub-biblical.

As he preached through books of the Bible, Augustine gave attention to the particularities of whatever passage was before him—its position in salvation history, its imagery, and its tone. Having an overarching doctrinal aim for his preaching helped give some self-critical control. The question of what

6. *doctr. Chr.* 2.40.60.

7. *doctr. Chr.* 4.30.63.

8. *doctr. Chr.* 1.35.39.

hermeneutical controls ought to inform all our preaching of Scripture still exercises preachers and those who train them. Augustine's focus on the cultivation of love is a doctrinal claim about the Bible which commends itself on substantial exegetical, pastoral and theological grounds. Doctrinal insights about the Bible had a leading role in shaping Augustine's expositions.

While Augustine usually preached through books of the Bible consecutively—afterwards writing up his sermons as commentaries—on occasion, he preached a straightforwardly doctrinal sermon. These were often prompted by a saint's day, festival, a false teaching or pedagogical concern. In the latter category, his two sermons on the resurrection are striking. *Sermones* 361 and 362 are by far the longest sermons from Augustine we have records of. They are a doctrinal study on the nature of the resurrection, aiming to reassure and educate believers who have doubts. They are evidence that Augustine could, for pastoral reasons, deviate from his normal routine of preaching through a Bible book in its entirety. As he taught doctrine to his congregation, Augustine was aware that some listeners were tempted to align themselves with heretical sects; others were not yet believers. His pastoral heart is on display through his awareness of different perceptions of the doctrine and various stumbling blocks to orthodoxy, and the importance of doctrinal preaching for educating a church.

The relationship doctrine ought to have to preaching through the Bible is a matter which should concern all preachers. One needs a doctrine of Scripture and preaching in order to critically assess the act of preaching. One also needs to form a view on the role of preaching which sets aside the more expository method for a doctrinal approach. There are pastoral needs and spiritual dangers on all sides of these debates. Augustine was one of the first people to write about the relationship between doctrine and preaching. He did so as a practitioner and theologian whose works still repay study today.

FREEDOM AND ORDER

One of the reasons that Augustine is thought by many to be a highpoint is patristic preaching is that he embodied a compelling vision of both freedom and order. His style of preaching was to meditate on a passage in advance, and then to speak without notes on the issues he felt were important or potentially confusing to his congregation. Augustine was happy to keep speaking till he felt listeners understood what was being said. Questions and demurrals from the gathered congregation helped him judge the response. These are recorded for us in his *Sermones* since the transcribers preserved them.

Presumably, Augustine would have edited these out as he did for his sermon series on the Psalms when he turned preaching into a commentary. He intended to edit his *Sermones* after his *Epistulae*, but died after completing the task for only his correspondence. From the perspective of the modern reader, the lack of editing makes the *Sermones* all the more engaging and valuable. If Augustine felt his congregation was tiring due to length of time standing, or the heat, he was willing to pause his exposition abruptly. He would after all resume where he left off when he next sat in the teacher's chair.

The passage of Scripture then provided Augustine with an ordered control for preaching. He was determined to explain the text's meaning, set it in the context of salvation history and use it to promote orthodox doctrine. However the way he went about this gave considerable room for the passage to be refracted through his own personality, experiences and reflections. The actual presentation of the sermon, without notes or script, gave space for interaction with the listeners and a deeply relational engagement with preacher. The high value Augustine placed on prayer surrounding preaching meant that he was open spiritually in the moment of delivery to God's prompting and sovereign leading.

Subsequent generations of African preachers became more rigid and formulaic in their preaching, limiting their length of time speaking and letting themselves be bound more firmly to a lectionary. Augustine's *Sermones* maintain a vivid sense of exploration and personal exploration. The listeners join in the preacher's search for God's message. Augustine's life was one of self-critical theological reflection. He dove deep into the waters of scripture, and when he emerged for breath he had treasure to share with all who listened. As one scholar observed:

Since theological reflection has great potential for formation, Augustine envisioned communities of people, not simply church leaders, engaged in reflection. His style of preaching, for example, encouraged listeners to develop a theologically reflective approach to life. Just imagine, with Augustine, entire communities of believers engaged in theologically reflective living. Imagine a God who has already given us the biblical words with which to do our reflection. Imagine believers, soaking in the marinade of those words, attentively, inquisitively, prayerfully spurring each other on to testimonies of praise. Just imagine.⁹

9. David Rylaarsdam, "Theological Reflection and Augustine's Confessions," in *For God So Loved the World*, ed. Arie Leder (Belleville: Essence, 2006), 99–100.

Augustine's approach to preaching, with its remarkable combination of freedom and order, modeled for people a way of viewing not only the Bible, but God's world. To look at life through the Scriptures, and feel one's heart warmed by God's love there revealed: these were theologically-reflective arts modeled by Augustine when he preached.

RELATIONSHIP TO PASTORAL MINISTRY

One of the most beautiful aspects of preaching is that it is a message conveyed through a preacher who knows his flock. Augustine felt keenly the weight of responsibility towards the people in his church. He was in huge demand as a counselor, confessor, and arbiter of disputes. He frequently complained about the incessant burden of administration, but doubtless it served as a means of drawing him closer into the minutiae of people's daily lives.

In the modern information-technology age, it is tempting to focus on the aspect of preaching which involves communicating information. Without a doubt, preaching does involve that, but Augustine's painstaking care over the personal lives of his listeners reminds us that real teaching necessarily involves personal relationship and encounter. The attitude of the preacher to his people, and to his own progress in the faith, both shape the ability of listeners to learn. And so, Augustine counseled:

Let us not be too proud to learn what has to be learned with the help of other people, and let those of us from whom others are taught hand on what we have been given without pride or envy.¹⁰

The ability to teach others well requires the humility to learn. People must get to know the preacher well enough to be reassured that the one teaching them is himself humble enough to learn. The virtues essential for communication are practiced and observed in relationship. There is no better forum for them to be encountered than the pastoral ministry of a church.

One of the reasons the *Sermones* of Augustine have been relatively neglected in scholarship is that they appear to be less academic and significant than his more philosophical texts. This is surely a view of Augustine—and learning itself—that is overly influenced by an Enlightenment favoring of rationality over relationality. Augustine's life of preaching, in a context where he offered sacrificial pastoral care, challenges not only those modern preachers who wish to teach while avoiding engagement with people; it calls into

10. *doctr. Chr.* prooem. 5.

question the validity of the academic outlook which prizes detached rational inquiry apart from personal relational encounter. If we really are people with restless hearts, created to dwell together in God's eternal city, it may be that Augustine's preaching in the context of pastoral ministry provides deeper insights about how we learn and flourish than his more famous academic writings.

TRAINING PREACHERS

The issue of how to grow and train preachers was one Augustine gave much thought and prayer to. His manual for training preachers, *De Doctrina*, is significant not least for being the first such book. It is also instructive in the way Augustine held off writing the concluding chapter till he had nearly completed his lifetime of preaching. Augustine seemed to feel keenly the need to be a practitioner if he was to train others. His mind was quick and his memory prodigious, but that did not in and of itself qualify him to train preachers. There is something gained through time, experience, and relationships which enables one to speak in a way that is heard, understood, and loved. Embodying both the humility and honor of preaching is no easy task for a sinful human. It takes time to embrace the existential conflicts that arise from being a sinful human, bringing a message from God's word to other sinners.

Many of the other areas where Augustine's preaching resource contemporary practice contribute to his vision for training. For example, if Augustine's views on the value of secular learning are accepted, that impacts how one trains preachers. The same goes for his teaching on freedom, order and so forth. Today there is a renewed interest in Britain, America and worldwide, in how we can best train preachers. In Britain, the 'Cornhill Training Course' has done much to equip people for the task of preaching.¹¹ Founded in 1991 by Rev. David Jackman and Preb. R. C. Lucas, the Cornhill Training Course has trained several hundreds of students in the art of preaching. This training course was able to devote exclusive time and attention to the training of preachers in a way that seminaries were unable to. Focused on constructive feedback for practical preaching exercises which are done in relational community, many of the strengths of the training given there stand in traditions which Augustine would have been happy to be a part of.

Much of the best preaching and training for preaching in the contemporary church has been developed without any explicit engagement

11. <http://www.proctrust.org.uk/cornhill>. A similar training work is done in America by the Simeon Trust <http://www.simeontrust.org>.

with Augustine. Where we have best practices, we have often stumbled into them by following gifted leaders or intuition. My own experience has been that engagement with the preaching of Augustine over a number of years has deepened my core convictions about God speaking to his people through Scripture being preached. It has also alerted me to areas of reflection and practice where I have been weak. We all have much to learn; the humility to admit as much was, for Augustine, the first step towards becoming a competent teacher.