

# Preface

The aim of our study is to suggest a meaningful hermeneutical key for interpreting Augustine's *Sermones ad Populum*. It is hoped that suggesting such a guide through the *Sermones* will illuminate the undergirding theological convictions which shaped Augustine's approach to the task of preaching.

There is a vast amount of scholarly literature about Augustine. However, his *Sermones* and his preaching generally, are not adequately represented in publications. The actual distribution of academic writing is disproportionate. Augustine's corpus comprises over five million Latin words, yet 15 percent of modern publications on Augustine focus on only two of his writings: *Confessiones* and *De Civitate Dei*.<sup>1</sup>

When the *Sermones ad Populum* are mentioned in academic studies, it is often in a surprisingly dismissive manner. The *Cambridge Companion* series is a benchmark publication, generally accepted across many fields as representative of the current state of scholarship. Yet the *Cambridge Companion to Augustine* describes the *Sermones* as having a "short and scrappy focus on issues of pastoral urgency."<sup>2</sup> An academic lecture complains that "much of what Augustine says in his preaching is unexceptional, even banal."<sup>3</sup>

When Augustine's preaching is overlooked, an imbalanced portrait of Augustine is given. Arguably, this is present wherever people imagine him as merely a philosophical theologian, associate him solely with the refutation of heresies, or link him only with controversial doctrines like original sin. Augustine distinguished himself from other bishops by devoting himself to the ministry of preaching. Many others made only a cursory effort at the task, or held back altogether for fear of Donatist reprisals. We may assume that preaching to the congregation at Hippo demanded of Augustine less knowledge and ability than writing the treatises for which he is famous. However, he himself thought that preaching would require of him an intimidating depth of Scriptural knowledge.<sup>4</sup>

1. Hubertus R. Drobner, "Studying Augustine, an Overview of Recent Research," in *Augustine and His Critics*, ed. Robert Dodaro and George Lawless (London: Routledge, 2000), 23.

2. James O' Donnell, "Augustine: His Time and Lives," in *The Cambridge Companion to Augustine*, ed. Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzmann (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 11.

3. David G. Hunter, "Sex, Sin and Salvation: What Augustine Really Said" (Washington Theological Union, 2002).

When academics marginalise the *Sermones*, the real Augustine is not represented accurately. It may appear at first glance that these deal mainly with matters of pastoral urgency but at the same time, for example, they provide an essential resource for understanding how Augustine articulated his doctrine of the trinity<sup>5</sup> or the resurrection.<sup>6</sup> One of many reasons that Augustine was so influential arose from the shift he made from secular life to Christian ministry. Understanding precisely how he developed from a pagan orator into a Christian preacher is essential for the sake of historical fidelity.

Studying Augustine's preaching will not only yield us a truer understanding of his life and concerns, but may also help us explore areas which today are of considerable importance. We need to articulate methods of persuasion which do not succumb to manipulation and abuse of power. This is a concern in many areas of human endeavour. In the church, there is also the added pressure that many assume preaching is a hopelessly outmoded ministry which ought to be replaced by more visual or interactive experiences. The church needs to reflect on how to communicate the message of God's salvation in Christ to a secular society which assumes God is at best an irrelevance, and at worst, a dangerous idea. Those who engage in Christian ministry often wonder how, or to what extent, they may benefit from utilizing secular learning and means of communication. In addressing all these issues, a study of Augustine's preaching may be valuable.

Classical scholars and historians have begun to notice the immense historical and cultural significance of the Christian sermon. *The Edinburgh Companion to Ancient Greece and Rome* argues that the sermon was Christianity's foremost contribution to ancient culture, representing "nothing less than a revolution in the politics of literary production, a democratisation theorised, in fact, by Augustine himself."<sup>7</sup>

Preaching was a distinctive form of communication which had long term ramifications for secular society. It also was the main way in which the church interacted with Scripture: "Dans la tradition chrétienne, tout au long de la période patristique, c'est l'homélie liturgique actualisante qui constitue la part de loin la plus importante de la littérature exégétique."<sup>8</sup> There is significant value

4. *Ep.* 21.3–4 (CSEL 34,1).

5. s. 52 (RB 74, 15).

6. s. 361 (PL 39, 1599); 362. (PL 39, 1611).

7. Clifford Ando, "Christian Literature," in *The Edinburgh Companion to Ancient Greece and Rome*, ed., Edward Bispham, Thomas Harrison, and Brian A. Sparkes (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006), 405.

to be gained from exploring more carefully what Augustine believed he was doing when he preached.

As stated above, Augustine's preaching has not received the attention it merits. Our book seeks to make an original contribution in a number of ways. We aim to suggest two hermeneutical keys in our discussion, and test them for their explanatory power in three areas of Augustine's preaching. The case studies which form these test cases are extensive engagements with the Latin texts of Augustine's *Sermones*. Since the corpus is so vast, these chapters offer a reader the opportunity to read through large amounts of the material, with our hermeneutical terms providing a guide. The majority of what work has been published on the *Sermones* focuses on textual and reception matters. Very little is concerned with what we are studying—the theological convictions which shaped Augustine's preaching.

There are a small number of doctorates which speak on aspects of the issue, which will be discussed in our book. Robert Dowler's thesis is related to the subject matter of ours, though it is on the *Ennarationes*.<sup>9</sup> Gowans' (published) thesis<sup>10</sup> on the *Sermones* is discussed in Chapter Four. An (unpublished) dissertation from Boyd-MacMillan<sup>11</sup> is considered in our conclusion. None of these pieces of work aim to offer hermeneutical guides such as we attempt—ones which are general enough to help make sense of the entire preaching project of Augustine, but distinctive enough to genuinely highlight that which is so characteristic of his contribution. The small number of other writings in our subject area remind us that our project can neither claim to offer an exhaustive reading of Augustine's *Sermones*, nor provide the only valid interpretation of his preaching. Nevertheless, it is hoped that the project is found to be a coherent, meaningful and valid reading which helps make sense of the act of preaching Augustine valued so highly.

Our book accepts Augustine's judgement that his *Sermones* formed a distinct body of literature, which had he lived longer, he intended to edit.<sup>12</sup>

8. "In Christian tradition, throughout the patristic period the liturgical homily constituted by far the most important form of exegetical literature." François Dreyfus, "Du Texte À La Vie," *Revue Biblique* (1979), 23.

9. Robert Dowler, "Songs of Love: A Pastoral Reading of St Augustine of Hippo's Enarrationes in Psalmos", PhD diss., Durham University, 2006.

10. Coleen Hoffman Gowans, *The Identity of the True Believer in the Sermons of Augustine of Hippo, a Dimension of His Christian Anthropology* (New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 1998).

11. Ronald Boyd-MacMillan, "The Transforming Sermon: A Study of the Preaching of St. Augustine, with Special Reference to the Sermones Ad Populum, and the Transformation Theory of James Loder", PhD. diss., University of Aberdeen, 2009.

Our research is not a historical or text-critical study; rather, it is an exercise in theological interpretation, aiming to elucidate the doctrinal convictions which guided Augustine in his development from pagan orator to Christian preacher.

We recognise that doctrine is formed in historical settings, and so we will give some treatment of contextual influences in Chapter One. Chapter Two also contains some background context, but its real focus is on the beliefs and concerns which animated the pagan orators who influenced Augustine. From that point on, we read the *Sermones* as they have been read for the majority of history—a delineated section of the Augustinian corpus.

Our hermeneutical keys, which will shape our study, are interiority and temporality. These are explicated in Chapter Four, though they develop out of our preceding study of *De Doctrina Christiana* in Chapter Three. We aim to “give increased attention to the existential attitudes underlying the dogmatic edifices we encounter.”<sup>13</sup> In this way, our two hermeneutical keys help expose the undergirding beliefs and attitudes Augustine held to concerning preaching. Scripture was central to Augustine’s preaching; our reading of *De Doctrina Christiana* orientates us to his self-conscious, overarching approach to Scripture. The hermeneutical keys give coherence to our selections and interpretations in subsequent case studies.

The *Sermones ad Populum* contains all the preserved *Sermones* from Augustine which were not gathered and edited into a continuous commentary on Scripture. They total about 590 sermons, ranging in length from a paragraph to a short treatise. Though our two hermeneutical terms are introduced before the inductive case study chapters, they arose from extensive reading through the source material.

The two hermeneutical keys are then tested in Chapters 5, 6, and 7. There we provide case studies on three areas which feature prominently in Augustine’s preaching – Riches, Death and Relationships. These sections offer an opportunity to test the validity of our terms as interpretive keys, and at the same time serve to illumine further their potential significance. Throughout, the paramount importance of Scripture is highlighted.

Thus there is a logical development through our book. The first three chapters give various contexts to Augustine’s preaching, such as their historical setting, pagan rhetoric and his own views as expressed in *De Doctrina Christiana*. Out of this, we develop our hermeneutical keys in Chapter Four. These are then utilized in the three subsequent case study chapters. Our conclusion will

12. *Retr.* 2.67 (CCL 57, 142).

13. Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), 104.

explore whether the keys of interiority and temporality are valid and useful; consideration will be given to their possible refinement and implications for matters of contemporary importance.

It is hoped that readers who follow this process through will find themselves exposed to Augustine's preaching in a way which is sufficiently structured to overcome some of the challenges posed by such a large corpus of writings. It is our aspiration that readers will desire to read the *Sermones* for themselves, and integrate the insights they glean from them into their appreciation of Augustine. If our thesis has the desired impact on scholarship, it will encourage others to include increased consideration of Augustine's preaching in presentations of Augustine's significance and doctrinal legacy.