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Redeeming Rhetoric: Augustine's Use of Rhetoric in His Preaching Ministry

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Redeeming Rhetoric: Augustine's Use of Rhetoric in His Preaching Ministry

Abstract

The art and practice of rhetoric occupied a fundamental place in the ancient Roman world. It is thus not surprising that Augustine (354-430 AD) was deeply committed to the art of speaking well. He spent his youth mastering the theory of rhetoric, putting into practice what he had learned during a preaching career of almost forty years. This essay examines elements of rhetoric in Augustine's preaching, arguing that he purposely appropriated common rhetorical elements in his preaching for the purpose of making Scripture both plain and compelling to his audience. Augustine's training in rhetoric is summarized, followed by an overview of the context, Scriptural basis, and style of his preaching. His thoughts on the use of rhetoric in preaching are discussed, primarily by summarizing his arguments from Book Four of his treatise *On Christian Doctrine*. The essay concludes by offering several examples of rhetorical devices used by Augustine in his preaching.

Keywords

Augustine, Rhetoric, Preaching

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INTRODUCTION

Augustine is in many ways a product of his culture. “If late antique culture was defined by anything,” says Carol Harrison, “it was the art of rhetoric, the art of public speaking, of teaching, moving and persuading an audience.”¹ Rhetoric occupied a fundamental place in the Roman world, so it is no surprise that Augustine was deeply committed to the art of speaking well. In his discussion of Augustine’s use of rhetoric, Richard Lischer succinctly defines rhetoric as “the theory and practice of persuasive discourse.”² Augustine, as will be discussed below, spent his younger years mastering the theory of rhetoric, and then spent the rest of his life putting into practice what he had learned.

This essay will examine elements of rhetoric in Augustine’s preaching, arguing that he purposely appropriated common rhetorical elements in his preaching for the purpose of making Scripture both plain and compelling to his audience. A brief summary of Augustine’s training and career in rhetoric will be given, followed by an overview of the context, Scriptural basis, and style of his preaching. Augustine’s thoughts on rhetoric in preaching will then be outlined, primarily by summarizing his arguments from Book Four of his treatise *On Christian Doctrine*. This essay will close by citing several examples of rhetorical devices used by Augustine in his preaching. Augustine’s training and early career in rhetoric will now be summarized.

AUGUSTINE’S TRAINING AND CAREER IN RHETORIC

The power of spoken words fascinated Augustine throughout his life. “When we speak truly,” he said in his treatise *On Faith and the Creed*, “we act with our words...” and, “What other objective do we have but to introduce our very mind into the mind of our hearer.”³ This fascination with words began at a young age for Augustine. In Madauros, a town just to the south of his hometown of Thagaste, Augustine began “in a serious and systematic way to experience the educational training of the day.”⁴ This education would consist of training in language, literature, and oratory. These three components made up the trivium of classical Roman education at that time. Augustine completed the first stage of training in Thagaste, which involved reading, writing, and arithmetic. He began the second stage, the study of grammar, in Madauros (366-69 A. D.). The third stage, the study of rhetoric, he would begin in Madauros but complete in Carthage.

The second stage (grammar) focused on the poets and on the right method of writing and speaking. This stage was essentially a study of literature. Augustine, says O’Meara, grew up in the “Golden Age of the grammarians.” The grammarians were committed to definitions of words and preciseness in communication, traits that would mark Augustine’s literary and preaching ministry for the rest of his life. The second stage of training overlapped some with the

¹Carol Harrison, “The Rhetoric of Scripture and Preaching: Classical Decadence or Christian Aesthetic?,” in *Augustine and His Critics: Essays in Honour of Gerald Bonner*, eds. Robert Dodaro and George Lawless (London: Routledge, 2000), 215.

²Richard Lischer, ed., *The Company of Preachers: Wisdom in Preaching, Augustine to the Present* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 277.

³*On Faith and the Creed* 3.3-3.4, in William Harmless, ed., *Augustine in His Own Words* (Washington D. C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2010), 282.

⁴John J. O’Meara, *The Young Augustine: The Growth of St. Augustine’s Mind Up to His Conversion*, rev. ed. (New York: Alba House, 2001), 22.

third stage, so Augustine began to study rhetoric while he was still in Madauros. This means that his first academic exposure to rhetoric came as a twelve to fifteen-year-old boy.

The discipline of rhetoric was less exact than grammar, “for the appeal was no longer to reason but to emotion and imagination.”⁵ This portion of his education left an even larger mark on Augustine’s life. Cipriani says that Augustine cultivated the “rhetorical ideal” until he was eighteen years old. The ideal was “to learn to speak eloquently.”⁶ As mentioned above, late antique culture was defined by the art of rhetoric. “All education – the liberal disciplines or arts – were simply a preparation for this, the highest achievement, the most desirable and influential profession of late antique culture.”⁷ Augustine’s education and interest in rhetoric was not, therefore, out of the ordinary in the culture that he lived.

After a year off so that his father could save up money for his school expenses, Augustine moved to Carthage to finish the third and final stage of his educational training. Carthage was the capital of Roman Africa, and was thus a much larger and more pagan city. O’Meara says that “Africa led Italy and every other country in lust, and Carthage led the rest of Africa.”⁸ In Carthage, Augustine witnessed the rampant idolatry and debauchery that accompanied paganism. Though his moral life may have taken a turn downward (it was in Carthage that he took a concubine), his academic life continued to progress. He diligently pursued his studies and finished out the third stage of his educational program. Augustine was now trained and ready for a career in rhetoric, a career that was highly esteemed and sought after in the Roman Empire of late antiquity.

After completing his education, Augustine taught in Thagaste for a year (373-374), before going back to Carthage in order to teach rhetoric. He ended up teaching in Carthage for nine years (374-383), taking “every possible step to distinguish himself above his colleagues.”⁹ He wrote his first book, *On the Beautiful and Fitting*, during this time, while also scoring an important victory in a rhetorical competition. The competition was presided over by Vindicianus, who was the Proconsul of Africa at that time (377). After Augustine was declared the winner of the competition, Vindicianus himself crowned him with a crown of garland in front of the large crowd.¹⁰

Augustine’s rhetorical proficiency gained him a friendship with the Proconsul, thus allowing him to move in the highest circles of Roman Africa. He was only twenty-three. In 383, he sailed for Rome, deceiving his mother and his friend and patron Romanianus in the process. It is unclear exactly why he went to Rome, but the suddenness of the move seems to point to the inward tensions that Augustine was dealing with regarding his commitment to Manicheism. Whatever the reason, Augustine was not deterred from advancing his career in rhetoric.

In 384, he applied and was accepted as the Professor of Rhetoric in Milan. His skill as a professional rhetor, along with the right connections, led him to one of the highest posts of his profession in the Empire. It was in Milan, however, that his career would take an unexpected turn. It was during his time there that he converted to Christianity, which led him to resign from his post as Professor of Rhetoric. His career as a public speaker, however, was just beginning.

⁵Ibid., 23.

⁶Nello Cipriani, “Rhetoric,” trans. Matthew O’Connell, in *Augustine Through the Ages: An Encyclopedia*, ed. Alan Fitzgerald (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 724.

⁷Harrison, 215.

⁸O’Meara, 37.

⁹Ibid., 82.

¹⁰Ibid., 85.

AUGUSTINE'S PREACHING

Augustine's conversion slowly changed the entire direction of his life. His academic interests and pursuits did not immediately change, but he did begin to approach things from new angles and with new motivations. For example, his conversion did not extinguish his love for philosophy, but it did alter the way he approached the philosophical task. In the same way, Augustine's commitment to rhetoric did not disappear when he was converted.¹¹ Rhetoric, as will be explored more fully below, became a tool in the service of Augustine's new Master. This was most evident, of course, in Augustine's preaching ministry – an overview of which will now be given.

Context

Most of Augustine's preaching was done in Hippo, where he was Bishop, but he frequently preached in Carthage, as well in other smaller towns across Roman North Africa. His preaching ministry probably began in 391, the year that he was ordained a presbyter in Hippo, and he probably preached until 426 – the year of his resignation. Of the approximately 6,000-10,000 sermons that he preached in his lifetime, only about 500 of them have been preserved.¹²

In his prime, Augustine preached two or three times a week during a normal week and every day of the week before and after Easter.¹³ In that day and time, sermons were expected to last an hour – an expectation that Augustine usually met and exceeded. Some sermons, however, were shorter than an hour. The audience would stand throughout the service, men on one side, women on the other, with Augustine usually seated in the *cathedra*, although he did stand occasionally, on the apse in the front of the basilica. The Basilica Major (also called the *Basilica Pacis*, or “Basilica of Peace”) was the main church in Hippo, and was thus where Augustine did the majority of his preaching. Harmless says that the dimensions of this Basilica – 41 yards long, 20 yards wide, make it one of the largest churches in North Africa.¹⁴ The floor would have been covered with beautiful, bright-colored mosaics, and the interior would have been lit using small oil lamps. Muller says that, because the basilicas in North Africa were usually of considerable size, the preacher would need to be in good health and have “high rhetorical powers” in order to preach effectively to the large audiences. Augustine's training and natural giftedness meant that he was well equipped for this task, as his long preaching ministry in Hippo and beyond make clear.

Augustine's sermons were routinely transcribed by a stenographer and sent out to bishops in other North African cities, being of great use for preachers of lesser ability.¹⁵ The

¹¹Cipriani says that Augustine “did not cease to value the positive value of rhetoric” after his conversion. “Rhetoric,” 724.

¹²Hildegund Muller says that approximately 800 sermons have been preserved. See her “Preacher: Augustine and His Congregation,” in *A Companion to Augustine*, ed. Mark Vessey (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell Publishing, 2012), 301. Cf. Edward L. Smither, *Augustine as Mentor: A Model for Preparing Spiritual Leaders* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 2008), 129; Harmless, 124-5, n. 8.

¹³Muller, 301.

¹⁴Harmless, 122.

¹⁵Smither, 129.

preservation of many of his sermons by transcription reveals determination and infrastructure on Augustine's part. Wherever he went to preach, scribes and materials had to be available and ready for use. Augustine said that the enterprise of transcribing his sermons was not his own doing, but that of his fellow bishops: "since our brethren have decided not only to take in what we say with their ears and hearts, but also commit it to writing."¹⁶

In the transcriptions of Augustine's sermons, one becomes aware of the nature of the audiences that he regularly preached to in Hippo. People in the audience would often shout and express emotion during the sermon,¹⁷ clapping to indicate agreement with what was being said, and crying when moved to conviction over sin. Here is an example of this phenomenon from *Sermon 96*: "Alluring is the world, but more alluring is the One by whom the world was made. [*The congregation here 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."¹⁸ The transcription of his sermons not only aided Augustine's fellow bishops, but also gives modern readers insight into the dynamics of the audiences that he preached to.

Scripture

Augustine's eloquence and skill in preaching moved audiences all across North Africa, but it was ultimately his commitment to the authority and centrality of Scripture that made his preaching effective and timeless. His primary task as a Bishop was to interpret and teach the Word of God. Peter Brown says, "The understanding and exposition of the Scriptures was the heart of a bishop's life."¹⁹ For Augustine, the Bible was literally the Word of God. He regarded it as "a single communication, a single message in an intricate code, and not as an exceedingly heterogeneous collection of separate books."²⁰ He believed in the implicit power of the Word of God. "My powers are limited," he said, "but the power of the word of God is great!"²¹ Scripture, then, for Augustine, was from God, and was therefore innately powerful and needed no human help to be seen as such. As will be shown, however, this does not mean that Augustine saw no place for rhetoric. In fact, rhetoric was also from God and useful in the task of applying the Word of God to men's hearts.

Augustine valued speaking the Word of God (i.e. preaching) more than his writing ministry: "My pen serves me as a tongue, but when will it find eloquence enough to recount all those exhortations and threats, all that encouragement and guidance, by which you led me to this position where I must preach the word and administer the sacrament to your people?"²² The words that must be spoken were God's Words, not Augustine's: "We are ministers of the Word, not ours, but God's, certainly, and our Lord's."²³

Augustine understood the basic role of a preacher as one who distributes food, not one who stirs up emotion. The Scriptural idea of "breaking bread" was central to Augustine's

¹⁶*Ep.* 22.2, quoted in Muller, 300.

¹⁷Smither, 129.

¹⁸*Sermon* 96.4, quoted in Harmless, 133.

¹⁹Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo: A Biography*, rev. ed. (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2000), 155.

²⁰*Ibid.*, 249.

²¹Michael Pellegrino, *The True Priest: The Priesthood as Preached and Practiced by Saint Augustine*, trans. Arthur Gibson (Langley, UK: St. Paul, 1998), 90.

²²*Confessions* 11.2.2, quoted in Smither, 128.

²³George Lawless, "Preaching," in *Augustine Through the Ages: An Encyclopedia*, 675.

understanding of preaching.²⁴ “I feed you on what I am fed myself,” he would say, “I set food before you from the pantry which I too live on.”²⁵ In *Sermon 95*, he expanded the analogy further:

When I set out the Holy Scriptures for you, it's as though I were breaking open bread for you. You the hungry, come, get it. Belch forth praises from your well-fed hearts... What you eat, I eat. What you live on, I live on. We have in heaven a common storehouse, for from it comes the Word of God.²⁶

He believed that the better the preparation of the preacher, the “more solid and more delicious will be the bread he can proffer to the faithful.”²⁷ Ambrose exemplified this principle for Augustine: “The Bishop Ambrose, famed the world over as one of the best, and your devoted servant. In those days his eloquence tirelessly distributed to your people the choicest of wheat...”²⁸ The preacher's studied preparation in the Scriptures would always yield a good “meal” for the congregation, as the Bread of Life was eaten, digested, and then shared with those who hungered for it. Thus, for Augustine, Scripture, not rhetoric, was the indispensable element in the preparation and delivery of the sermon.

Style

Scripture was the controlling element in Augustine's preaching, but how did he communicate the words of Scripture to the masses in Hippo and beyond? Did he simply read them and then sit down? Did he give dense and lengthy theological lectures about them? Augustine's style in preaching was much different from his style in writing. It may be said that he wrote primarily for educated men. His preaching, however, was for the uneducated, common man on the street. A brief look at his preaching style will make this clear.

Peter Brown says that the “secret of Augustine's enormous power as a preacher” was that he would “place himself in the midst of his congregation.”²⁹ Augustine preached from an elevated platform in the front of the basilica, but his style enabled him to move down into the midst of the audience, meeting them where they were at instead of expecting them to come where he was. Even though he was a Bishop in a large and important city, a position that carried much power and prestige, his sermons were more like “dialogues with the crowd,” rather than speeches from a ruler.³⁰ This is surely what gave him such high appeal among the common people of Hippo.

One of the primary tools that he used to reach the less-educated audiences of Hippo was illustrations that they could understand.³¹ Several examples of this will be given in the last section of this essay. Another aspect of his preaching that contributed to his popular appeal was

²⁴Brown, 249.

²⁵*Sermon* 339.3.3, quoted in Smither, 128.

²⁶*Sermon* 95.1, quoted in Harmless, 127.

²⁷Pellegrino, 95.

²⁸*Confessions* 5.13.23, quoted in Pellegrino, 95.

²⁹Brown, 248.

³⁰*Ibid.*, 446.

³¹Smither, 96-7.

his use of common language, as opposed to the language of the elite.³² Frederick van der Meer says, "In the pulpit (Augustine) never used language that was above his hearers' heads, but always chose his words in such a fashion that everyone would understand him."³³ His sermons make clear that, in his preaching, he preferred colloquial language as opposed to the language of the schools. "He spoke not for the educated but for ordinary people."³⁴ On one occasion, he explained why he used a certain word in a non-formal way: "What business is this of any schoolmaster? It is better that we should use these barbarisms and be understood by you than be artists in speech and talk past you. I prefer that the schoolmasters should have a ground of complaint against us rather than that you should fail to understand what we are trying to say."³⁵

Augustine seems to do two things at once in his sermons: he deliberately makes them artless, while also showing his creative genius by using a plenitude of words.³⁶ Perhaps the latter tendency is something that he carried over from his training in grammar as a teenager, with its emphasis on preciseness. On the manner of Augustine's preaching, van der Meer notes, "His unpretentious manner seems almost to suggest downright carelessness."³⁷ But his conversational style should not be confused with a failure to prepare.

Augustine did not preach from a manuscript or a rigid outline. The only thing he had with him as he preached was perhaps a copy of the Gospel from which he was preaching.³⁸ The primary way that Augustine prepared to preach was by praying for himself and his hearers during the week. He assumed that preachers would have a good grasp of the content of Scripture, so he advised them to be "a person of prayer before...a speaker of words."³⁹ He continues:

For on any subject that needs to be discussed with regard to faith and love, there are many things to be said and many ways in which they may be said by those who know about them. But who knows what is appropriate for us to say or for our audience to hear at the present moment except the One who sees "the hearts of all" (Acts 1:14)?⁴⁰

Thus, Augustine did not prepare for sermons by setting aside large blocks of time to study. His life consisted of constant reading and study of Scripture, which allowed him to focus on prayer in his sermon preparation. Van der Meer concludes, "Because he spoke *ex pectore*, that is, from the fullness of his heart, and because he was in living contact with his audience, Augustine

³²Augustine would adjust his use of language, or rhetoric, "according to the education of his congregation, using a much more elaborate style, for example, when preaching to the more sophisticated crowds attending the liturgy in Carthage." Daniel E. Doyle, "Introduction to Augustine's Preaching," in *The Works of Saint Augustine: Essential Sermons* (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2007), 19.

³³Frederick van der Meer, *Augustine the Bishop*, trans. B. Battershaw and G. R. Lamb (London: Sheed & Ward, 1961), 258, quoted in Smither, 97.

³⁴Van der Meer, 417.

³⁵*Enarrationes in Psalmos* 36.3.6, quoted in van der Meer, 421.

³⁶Van der Meer, 418-9.

³⁷Ibid., 418.

³⁸Harmless, 124.

³⁹*On Christian Doctrine* 4.15.32, quoted in Harmless, 126.

⁴⁰Ibid.

disregarded any need for logical construction and observed only that order which was dictated by circumstances and by his own heart.”⁴¹

This section has demonstrated that Augustine's preaching was centered on Scripture and conversational in style. His training in rhetoric did influence his preaching, as the next two sections of this essay will explain, but substance was never sacrificed for performance.

“Although he followed the rules of rhetoric in speaking,” says Smither, “he was more concerned with the substance of a message than its form of delivery. Like Ambrose, he communicated eloquently but not at the expense of nourishing content.”⁴² Augustine was aware of the danger of speaking eloquently with no substantive content. As Smither points out, “His personal journey as a rhetor who spent nine years among the Manicheans made him extra sensitive to eloquent words that lacked the substance of spiritual truth.”⁴³

As Bishop of Hippo, he was committed to teaching the Word of God in a way that his audiences could understand. He believed that teaching the truth was the primary aim for the preacher. He did not believe, however, that all forms and uses of rhetoric were unnecessary or irrelevant for the preacher. The next section will make it clear that, though Augustine believed that teaching truth was the primary objective for the preacher, he also believed that “eloquence forms its junior partner.”⁴⁴

AUGUSTINE ON RHETORIC IN PREACHING

Augustine's background in rhetoric is noticeable in and behind the task that occupied much of his adult life, namely, preaching. After he became a Christian, and then a priest and bishop, he “found himself still having much to do with words, both as an interpreter and as a preacher.”⁴⁵ Preachers deal in words, and Augustine loved words and had a great interest in the phenomenon of human language.⁴⁶ He may have given up his career as a professional rhetorician when he was converted, but the rest of his life was devoted to finding ways to use words, either spoken or written, to move audiences. Thus, in many ways Augustine was a career rhetorician.

His sermons contain several obvious elements of rhetorical skill and the application of specific rhetorical devices, as the next section of this essay will demonstrate, but Augustine did not address the topic of rhetoric at length in written form until he was in his seventies. He began writing a treatise entitled *On Christian Doctrine* (or “On Christian Teaching”) in 396-397, when he first became Bishop of Hippo. He wrote the first three books of this treatise in order to discuss the rules for interpreting Scripture, specifically focusing on its mystical and allegorical meanings.⁴⁷

⁴¹Van der Meer, 419-20.

⁴²Smither, 129, cf. 191.

⁴³Ibid., 240.

⁴⁴Lawless, 677.

⁴⁵Matthew Levering, *The Theology of Augustine: An Introductory Guide to His Most Important Works* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2013), 1.

⁴⁶See Christopher Kirwan, “Augustine's Philosophy of Language,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Augustine*, eds. Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzmann (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 186-204.

⁴⁷Van der Meer, 405.

It could be said that the first three books of *On Christian Doctrine* were like a modern textbook on hermeneutics or exegesis. Book Four, however, was not written until 426-427, at the end of Augustine's long preaching career. Augustine wrote Book Four with preachers in mind, as it essentially serves as a manual for delivering sermons.⁴⁸ Van der Meer says that this book "does little more than describe the manner in which those giving sermons or addresses should express and deliver what they have found in the Bible."⁴⁹

Other scholars think that Augustine was doing something much deeper and more profound in Book Four. John Cavadini says that Book Four contains a theory of conversion. He says that Augustine is arguing that the truth is not normally enough to move a listener to respond to it. Therefore, one must understand something of "the science of human motivation" if they want to move people to savor, or delight in, the truth.⁵⁰ He goes on to say that, because of Augustine's belief that people "are in a position of needing to be persuaded to transfer willingly (their) affections' goal," they need more than a teacher, they need a persuasive and delightful speaker.⁵¹

Book Four certainly addresses sermons and sermon delivery, but Cavadini seems to be right to conclude that Augustine was doing much more than merely providing practical tips on how to become a better preacher. He seems to be offering an analysis of how God designed human beings to give and receive truth. In order to provide the reader with some of the fruits of Augustine's work in Book Four, an overview and summary of the Book will now be given.

On Christian Doctrine

In Book Four, Augustine has much to say about rhetoric as it applies to the task of communicating God's Word, but he says at the outset that he does not intend to restate the formal rules of rhetoric. He says that the rules are good and useful, but they are not indispensable for the preacher. Van der Meer says that this observation by Augustine "brings about a minor educational revolution" because the rules of rhetoric, based primarily on Quintilian, were part of the normal school curriculum for youth.⁵² Augustine was not saying that the rules should not be studied in one's youth, but he was saying that when one is older the rules are of little value. He says that if a preacher relies on his Bible, reads the writings of great authors like Cyprian or Ambrose, and listens to good speakers, he will learn how to become a good preacher. This is the learning by osmosis approach, and Augustine argues that this informal approach, especially for older men, will accomplish the same end as any formal study of rhetoric.

Preaching, he says, is both teaching and explaining, and is not terribly difficult when one is speaking to an audience (i.e. the Church) that is already acquainted with the material. The real difficulty, he says, is teaching on something that is already known, a theme in which one's hearers are already familiar, in such a way that it grips their hearts. This is where rhetorical elements can be profitable for the preacher. They are not an end in themselves, but they can be

⁴⁸Smither, 129, n. 21.

⁴⁹Van der Meer, 405.

⁵⁰John C. Cavadini, "The Sweetness of the Word: Salvation and Rhetoric in Augustine's *De doctrina christiana*," in *De doctrina christiana: A Classic of Western Culture*, eds. Duane W. H. Arnold and Pamela Bright (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995), 164-5.

⁵¹Ibid., 166.

⁵²Van der Meer, 406.

useful for communicating old truths in new ways. Augustine reiterates that, in the pulpit (or *cathedra*), it is better to focus on the soundness of one's matter than to speak in an overly emotional manner. This is the fundamental point that Augustine seems to be making in Book Four, namely, that rhetoric is never an end in itself, but always a means to a greater end. Rhetoric is secondary; truth is primary. Rhetoric should be redeemed in order that the truth of God's Word can be understood and cherished by those who hear.

Augustine uses the apostle Paul and the prophet Amos as examples of eloquence from Scripture. The biblical writers were sometimes obscure, but those who teach the Bible should seek to be clear, not obscure. He says that the preacher should pay close attention to his audience, only moving on to the next point after he has observed that the audience has grasped what he is saying. He argues that the preacher has not really spoken until the audience has heard the truth and understood it.

Augustine uses Cicero's famous dictum to point out that there are different ways of communicating truth: "an eloquent man must speak so as to teach, to delight, and to persuade."⁵³ He points out that the first part of Cicero's dictum has to do with what one says; the other two with how one says it.⁵⁴ The style of one's speaking is important because unless what one teaches is understood by those who hear, he has not truly taught. A moving sermon about something that has not been learned by the audience accomplishes nothing. This is why instruction is primary: "they must of course be instructed before they can be moved."⁵⁵

Augustine says that the best preaching will have elements of eloquence in it. It will teach, delight, and move the audience. A preacher should speak in such a way that the audience loves what he loves and hates what he hates. Instruction is always primary in preaching, but being able to move an audience should not be despised. The goal of preaching, after all, is that the audience's hearts would be changed.⁵⁶

Following Cicero, Augustine points out that minor matters should be taught in a subdued way and grand matters in a grand way.⁵⁷ Augustine gives examples of the subdued, moderate, and grand rhetorical style from Scripture and from Cyprian and Ambrose. He cautions one to not use the grand style too much because an audience can grow tired of it. The styles should be used interchangeably, as each has its own strengths and weaknesses.⁵⁸ He closes Book Four by noting that the preacher's life will have a greater impact on his listeners than will his eloquence. "Let his (the preacher's) life be such as shall not only secure a reward for himself, but afford an example to others; and let his manner of living be an eloquent sermon in itself."⁵⁹

REDEEMED RHETORIC

In Book Four of *On Christian Doctrine*, Augustine, according to Carol Harrison, "moves rapidly between acceptance, rejection, and modification of classical eloquence."⁶⁰ She says that "this probably has more to do with the unresolved tensions – even at this late stage, near the end

⁵³*On Christian Doctrine* 4.12.27.

⁵⁴*Ibid.*, 4.12.27

⁵⁵*Ibid.*, 4.12.28.

⁵⁶*Ibid.*, 4.12.27

⁵⁷*Ibid.*, 4.17.34

⁵⁸*Ibid.*, 4.22.51

⁵⁹*Ibid.*, 4.29.62.

⁶⁰Harrison, 217.

of his life – within Augustine's own person and mind, between his past, but still enduring, educational and intellectual formation, and his present identity as a Christian bishop."⁶¹ Harrison's conclusion is that what Augustine is trying to say in Book Four of *On Christian Doctrine* is that "Christian literature *is* rhetorical, in a way that takes up the best of classical practice but is not subject to its failings."⁶² In other words, according to Harrison, Augustine is seeking to redeem what is good and useful in rhetoric and use it in the service of the gospel, while ignoring the elements that lead to "a technical display of virtuosity performed to please and, thus, to sway its hearers, whatever its relation to truth or the good."⁶³

Charles Baldwin notes that the primary difference between Augustine and his contemporaries (i.e. the Second Sophists) was "the value Augustine placed on teaching biblical wisdom versus pleasing the audience." "Pleasing the audience," Baldwin says of Augustine, "was viewed as secondary to teaching and persuading the audience of divine truths."⁶⁴ The conclusions of Harrison and Baldwin do not negate the noticeable tension in Book Four between the usefulness and irrelevance of rhetoric for Christian preaching.⁶⁵ This is perhaps why Augustine had certain misgivings about preaching throughout his life. The art of communication both fascinated and disappointed him at the same time. "For my own way of expressing myself," he said, "almost always disappoints me. I am anxious for the best possible, as I feel it in me before I start bringing it into the open in plain words: and when I see that it is less impressive than I had felt it to be, I am saddened that my tongue cannot live up to my heart."⁶⁶

By the end of his preaching career, Augustine had realized that the "elaborate scaffolding of...rhetoric" did nothing more than polish the "end-product, the speech itself, according to elaborate and highly self-conscious rules."⁶⁷ He realized that rhetoric, for all its benefits, did not help a man with the immediate problem of needing to get a message across to his hearers. In other words, rhetoric does not create the intrinsic passion and joy needed in order for a speaker to speak in such a way to move an audience. Form and content must be welded together, as Brown says, "in the heat of the message."⁶⁸ Augustine puts it this way, "It is a waste of time to tell someone what to admire, if he does not himself sense it."⁶⁹ In other words, form and content in a sermon, without an inherent zeal and love for the content in the heart of the preacher, will not help in the instruction or transformation of the audience.

Augustine, however, still believed that rhetoric was useful and beneficial. He would tell Firmus in a letter that his son should remember that "eloquence combined with wisdom has proved to be of the greatest benefit to states."⁷⁰ Augustine says in Book 2 of *On Christian Doctrine* that rhetoric is not invented by humans but rather is part of the nature of things. "It was not instituted by human beings that an expression of charity should win over a listener...or that

⁶¹Ibid.

⁶²Ibid., 220.

⁶³Ibid.

⁶⁴Charles Sears Baldwin, "St. Augustine on Preaching (*De Doctrina Christiana*, IV)," in *The Rhetoric of St. Augustine of Hippo: De Doctrina Christiana and the Search for a Distinctly Christian Rhetoric*, eds. Richard Leo Enos and Roger Thompson, et al. (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2008), 187.

⁶⁵Harrison, 217.

⁶⁶*On Catechizing Beginners* 2.3, quoted in Brown, 253.

⁶⁷Brown, 253.

⁶⁸Ibid.

⁶⁹*On Christian Doctrine* 4.7.20, quoted in Brown, 253.

⁷⁰*Ep. 1A*, 12.371.90, quoted in Brown, 472.

the variety of discourse should keep listeners attentive without annoyance...That which moves minds to long for or to avoid something is not invented but discovered."⁷¹ Rhetoric is therefore beneficial because it is essentially a study of human motivation.

Augustine was not unaware of the potential pitfalls of rhetoric in preaching. He realized "that by a proper use of speech, we can move others to love what we love, but we can also fall into pride on account of our learning or on account of our rhetorical eloquence."⁷² He encouraged Firmus to instruct his son that "eloquence without wisdom (is) harmful and of no good to anyone."⁷³ He continued, "The ancients knew what they were saying when they said that when the rules of eloquence are taught to fools, orators are not being produced, but armaments placed in the hands of lunatics."⁷⁴

Despite the potential dangers, Augustine believed that those who interpreted and proclaimed the Bible should be "rhetorically skilled."⁷⁵ In Book Four of *On Christian Doctrine*, he seems to expect that bishops and presbyters would be trained for preaching.⁷⁶ He never prohibits preachers from using elements of rhetoric in their preaching. In fact, he encourages it as illustrated by the following passages from *On Christian Doctrine*:

Since, then, the faculty of eloquence is available for both sides, and is of very great service in the enforcing of either wrong or right, why do not good men study to engage it on the side of truth, when bad men use it to obtain the triumph of wicked and worthless causes, and to further injustice and error?⁷⁷

If...the hearers require to be roused rather than instructed, in order that they may be diligent to do what they already know, and to bring their feelings into harmony with the truths they admit, greater vigour of speech is needed. Here entreaties and reproaches, exhortations and upbraidings, and all the other means of rousing the emotions, are necessary.⁷⁸

The eloquent divine, then, when he is urging a practical truth, must not only teach so as to give instruction, and please so as to keep up the attention, but he must also sway the mind so as to subdue the will. For if a man be not moved by the force of truth, though it is demonstrated to his own confession, and clothed in beauty of style, nothing remains but to subdue him by the power of eloquence.⁷⁹

Augustine was committed to the communication of truth in a way that was clear and compelling, or to use Cicero's dictum, in a way that instructed, delighted, and persuaded. He knew that there were inherent dangers in the use of rhetoric by preachers of God's Word, but he also believed that the potential dangers did not outweigh the benefits that can come when

⁷¹ *On Christian Doctrine* 2.36.54, quoted in Cavadini, 164.

⁷² Levering, 2.

⁷³ *Ep. 1A*, 12.371.90, quoted in Brown, 472.

⁷⁴ *Ep. 1A*, 12.379.90, quoted in Brown, 472.

⁷⁵ Levering, 2.

⁷⁶ *On Christian Doctrine* 4.4.6; cf. Smither, 238.

⁷⁷ *On Christian Doctrine* 4.2.3, quoted in Smither, 191.

⁷⁸ *On Christian Doctrine* 4.4.6.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 4.13.29.

rhetoric is redeemed and used to instruct and move an audience to trust and delight in God. Some examples of his use of rhetorical devices in his preaching will now be given.

EXAMPLES OF RHETORIC IN AUGUSTINE'S PREACHING

From his teenage years, Augustine was fascinated with words and how they fit together and how they could be used to communicate ideas. Words were for him “vehicle(s) of versatile expression in the highly performative art of pleasurable persuasion.”⁸⁰ He had a remarkable ability to illustrate a passage he was teaching on using words as “vehicles of versatile expression” even before he was converted. “One day,” he says in the *Confessions*, “I was sitting in my accustomed place with my students before me...It so happened that I had a passage in hand and, while I was interpreting it, a simile occurred to me taken from the gladiatorial games. It struck me as relevant to make more pleasant and plain the point I wanted to convey...”⁸¹

Augustine's ability to use words in provocative and evocative ways was carried over into his preaching ministry. He employed a variety of rhetorical devices in his preaching, using analogies, word pictures, similes, and metaphors in his explaining and application of the Scriptures. His use of these devices was for the purpose of, following Cicero's dictum, instructing, delighting, and persuading his audience. It is not always apparent which function Augustine has in mind when he uses these devices, and sometimes they fulfill all three purposes. Nonetheless, his use of these devices made his preaching easy to understand and enjoyable to listen to. An examination of several of his uses of these rhetorical devices will now be made.

Analogy/Word Picture/Simile/Metaphor

Augustine used analogies, word pictures, similes, and metaphors throughout his preaching ministry. Many of the similes that he used came right off the streets of Hippo. For example, he once said that rich people who have detached themselves from their wealth are spiritually like full sacks, while those who are proud are like empty sacks that have been inflated. “If you look at them,” he says, “you are misled, but if you weigh them, you soon find out the truth. The filled sacks can only be lifted with difficulty, the empty ones require no effort at all.”⁸² He compared the addiction to circus games to being disproportionately attached to God:

You have a favorite charioteer; you urge all the people you love to watch him with you, to love him with you, to go crazy about him with you. If they don't love him, you revile them, you call them idiots...The dotting fans of a charioteer are totally absorbed in the spectacle; they don't exist except in the fellow they are gazing at. Such a fan is utterly unaware of himself, has no idea where he is. Accordingly, someone less interested in that sport who is standing next to him and sees him so excited will say, ‘He's miles away.’ You too, if possible, (will) be miles away from yourself when you are in God.⁸³

Augustine uses several images to describe preachers and preaching. Here he likens preaching to giving birth: “When it (his soul) has conceived some joy from divine Scripture,

⁸⁰Lawless, 677.

⁸¹*Confessions* 6.7.12, quoted in Muller, 297.

⁸²*Sermones* 36.2, quoted in van der Meer, 426.

⁸³*Sermones* 90A.8, quoted in Muller, 298.

carries it to term within and endeavors to bring it to birth in your ears and in your soul.”⁸⁴ One of his favorite images to use in his preaching is that of a doctor and patient. He usually compares Christ to a doctor who is ready to heal the wounds of those who are sick and hurt. While discussing the futility of the Pelagian position, he says, “The Doctor is calling out for men to come to Him, and the sick man is wrapped up in his arguments.”⁸⁵

Augustine used a diversity of images to communicate the truths of God's Word. In *Sermon 9*, he says that life is like a road on which everybody travels, and that the Word of God is “your adversary...because it commands things against the grain which you don't do.”⁸⁶ In the same sermon, he compares the Ten Commandments to a “ten-stringed harp” and he says that he is like a “pop singer” who is going to play for his congregation. In *Sermon 53A*, he says that the cross was for Christ his “judicial bench,” from which he delivers judgment.⁸⁷ In *Sermon 61*, he uses a provocative word picture to describe the danger of pride for those who are wealthy: “Every fruit, every grain, every kind of corn, every tree, has its own proper worm. There's one worm for apples, another for pears, another for beans, another for wheat. The worm in riches is pride.”⁸⁸

Repetition

Augustine used other rhetorical devices in his preaching that made his preaching memorable and compelling. When he wanted to really drive home a point, he would use a very simple and common rhetorical device: repetition. This device is useful for not only instructing, but also delighting one's hearers, as Augustine was surely aware. For example, in *Sermon 96*, while talking about one's need to take up their cross and deny the world, he says, “The world is great, but greater is the one who made the world. The world is beautiful, but more beautiful still the one who made the world. The world is alluring, but much more pleasing is the one who made the world. The world is bad, and the one who made the world is good.”⁸⁹

In *Sermon 132*, he repeats the phrase “he sees you” in order to emphasize his point that God sees what adulterous men are doing in private: “You go out, he sees you; you come in, he sees you. The lamp's lit, he sees you; the lamp's put out, he sees you. You go into your bedroom, he sees you; you turn things over in your mind, he sees you. Fear him, him whose whole concern is to see you, and at least out of fear, be chaste.”⁹⁰ He then says very sarcastically (which can also be a useful rhetorical device), “If you want to sin...find somewhere he can't see you, and then do what you like.”⁹¹ Examples could be multiplied here, but these two should illustrate his skill at making a point using repetition.

Antithesis

⁸⁴*Sermones* 37.1.4, quoted in Pellegrino, 104.

⁸⁵*Sermones* 30.8, quoted in Brown, 369. See Harmless, 140-5 for several more examples of Augustine's use of the “Christ as doctor” image.

⁸⁶*Sermon 9*, in *Essential Sermons*, 27.

⁸⁷*Sermon 53A*, in *Essential Sermons*, 83.

⁸⁸*Sermon 61*, in *Essential Sermons*, 100.

⁸⁹*Sermon 96*, in *Essential Sermons*, 143.

⁹⁰*Sermon 132*, in *Essential Sermons*, 205.

⁹¹*Ibid.*

William Harmless says that antithesis was Augustine's favorite theological method. This rhetorical device is used in his preaching, not as much as analogies and repletion, but enough to indicate that Augustine could use this device when he needed to drive home a point. In *The City of God*, Augustine himself says, "The antithesis is the most elegant of rhetoric's ornaments."⁹² Perhaps this is why he primarily uses antithesis when discussing the most elegant of theological topics, the condescension and incarnation of Christ. For example, he describes the beauty and mystery of the "Word made flesh" using sharp antithesis:

(Christ is) producer of heaven and earth, appearing on earth under heaven; unspeakably wise, wisely speechless as an infant; filling the world, lying in a manger; directing the course of the stars, sucking his mother's breasts; so great in the form of God, so small in the form of a servant, in such a way that neither the greatness was diminished by the smallness, nor the smallness overwhelmed by the greatness.⁹³

Another example comes from *Sermon 207*. Augustine asks what greater mercy could there be:

than that which pulled the creator down from heaven, and clothed the founder of the earth in an earthly body...imposing the form of a servant on the Lord of the world; so that bread itself would be hungry, fullness be thirsty, strength become weak, health would be wounded, life would die? And all this to feed our hunger, water our drought, comfort our infirmity, extinguish our iniquity, kindle our charity. What greater mercy, than for the creator to be created...the one who exalts to be humbled, the one who raises up to be slain?⁹⁴

And from *Sermon 239*: "He lay there, and reigned; he was in the manger, and held the universe together; he was nursed by his mother, and worshipped by the nations; nursed by his mother, and announced by angels; nursed by his mother, and proclaimed as a shining star. Such his wealth, such his poverty; wealth, to get you created; poverty, to get you restored."⁹⁵

Augustine was able to move his audience to tears and shouts of joy through his implementation of these rhetorical devices. He was a master of communicating the riches of the Word of God in clear and compelling ways, so that his audience would be able to understand and delight in the richness of divine truth.

CONCLUSION

This paper has examined elements of rhetoric in Augustine's preaching, arguing that he purposefully appropriated common rhetorical elements in his preaching for the purpose of making Scripture both plain and compelling to his audience. A brief summary of Augustine's training and career in rhetoric was given, followed by an overview of the context, Scriptural basis, and style of his preaching. Augustine's thoughts on rhetoric in preaching were outlined, primarily by summarizing his arguments in Book Four of his treatise *On Christian Doctrine*.

⁹² *The City of God* 11.18, quoted in Harmless, 318-9.

⁹³ *Sermon 187*, in *Essential Sermons*, 245.

⁹⁴ *Sermon 207*, in *Essential Sermons*, 259.

⁹⁵ *Sermon 239*, in *Essential Sermons*, 297-8.

Several examples of rhetorical devices used by Augustine in his preaching were cited in order to illustrate how Augustine appropriated rhetorical elements into his sermons.

In *On Christian Doctrine*, Augustine said that preachers can speak wisely even if they lack eloquence, because if they speak the words of Scripture, the Word of God has the innate power to make people pay attention and listen. However, Augustine does not hesitate to affirm that “one who tries to speak not only wisely but eloquently will be more useful if he can do both.”⁹⁶ Augustine was clearly one who could do both, as Possidius’ often quoted observation reveals: “Those who read what he has written in his works on theological matters profit greatly, but I believe that the ones who really profited were those who actually heard him and saw him speak in church.”⁹⁷ Augustine’s rhetorical abilities were always on full display for those who heard him preach.

At Augustine’s prompting, modern preachers should remember that eloquence is not acquired through human ingenuity, but given by God as a gift. Preachers who remember that everything they have is a gift are able to understand that it is only God who takes the words of Scripture and applies them to the hearts of men. This sort of preacher will thus spend more focused time in prayer for themselves and their hearers. Augustine said that a preacher is effective “more by piety in prayer than by gifts of oratory.”⁹⁸ Therefore, “when the hour is come that he (the preacher) must speak, he ought, before he opens his mouth, to lift up his thirsty soul to God, to drink in what he is about to pour forth, and to be himself filled with what he is about to distribute.”⁹⁹

⁹⁶ *On Christian Doctrine* 4.5.8.

⁹⁷ Possidius of Calama, *Life of St. Augustine*, 31, quoted in Harmless, 439-40.

⁹⁸ *On Christian Doctrine* 4.15.32, quoted in Harrison, 219.

⁹⁹ *On Christian Doctrine* 4.15.32.

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