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AUGUSTINE'S THEOLOGY OF PREACHING

Peter T. Sanlon

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In an age when many Christians are suggesting that the sermon is an outmoded means of communication, it is good to read this refreshing account of Augustine's ministry as a preacher of the gospel. The author rightly begins with historical background and the debt which Augustine owed to pagan oratory. This is particularly instructive with reference to the delivery of a sermon. In the main, pagan orators like Cicero never read from a manuscript. They would memorize the content of what they wanted to say and then speak 'ex tempore.' Augustine followed this practice. Indeed, he would often change his approach in the light of what he discerned in the reactions of his listeners. There are lessons here what he discerned in the reactions of his listeners. There are lessons here for contemporary preachers. It is much more difficult to apply a sermon effectively if you are tied to a manuscript, because of the lack of personal interaction between preacher and hearer.

Notwithstanding the need for delivery skills, Augustine argued that it is more important to teach the truth than to be eloquent. This leads our author to the use of scripture in preaching. The Augustinian approach is to soak oneself in the word of God, since every sermon should be an exposition of Scripture. In this regard Sanlon uses two hermeneutical tools in order to analyze Augustine's sermons—what he calls, 'temporality' and 'interiority.' 'Temporality' is defined as 'the successive flow and teleological development of God's plan for creation from beginning to consummation.' Scripture is a temporal narrative, and Augustine made great use of the liturgical calendar so that listeners could be drawn into the space-time story of the people of God. 'Interiority' is 'the inner realm of desirous longing, evaluation and prayer.' And so it is the task of the preacher not just to rehearse the great facts of salvation history, but to apply the truths of the Bible to the heart and the conscience of the hearer. For Augustine 'the heart' was paramount. The preacher should therefore search his own heart, as well as expose the heart of the listeners. Of course ultimately only God can search the heart, which necessitates a humble dependence on the Holy Spirit.

In the second half of the book, the author demonstrates how these two key principles are worked out in Augustine's sermons, with many case studies on the themes of money, relationships, death, and resurrection. Again, here are lessons for preachers. Many sermons today from so-called 'evangelical pulpits' are not much more than historical lectures. They singularly lack what the Puritans called 'heart work,' addressed to the interior man.

Peter Sanlon has done us a great service in highlighting these important aspects of Augustine's preaching ministry.

JOHN CHEESEMAN