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Augustine's Wise Preaching of the Psalms

Benjamin T. Quinn

Trinity College Bristol

These virtues are granted to us now in a valley of weeping, but from them we progress to a single virtue. And what will that be? The virtue of contemplating God alone. . . . We shall pass, then, from these many virtues of action to that one virtue of contemplation, by which we are empowered to contemplate God, according to the scriptural word, In the morning I will stand before you, and contemplate you (Ps 5:5 (3)). . . . And what does “contemplating” imply? The God of gods will be seen in Zion. By the God of gods we should understand the Christ of Christians. . . . But when all the neediness of our mortality is over and done with, he who is God with God, the Word with the Father, the Word through whom all things were made, will show himself to the pure-hearted. Blessed are the clean of heart, for they shall see God (Mt. 5:8). The God of gods will be seen in Zion.¹

The passage cited above from Augustine's “Exposition of Psalm 83” is, to say the least, a type of preaching foreign to the eyes and ears of 21st century Christians. This excerpt suggests that theological preaching—more specifically, wise preaching—properly describes Augustine's sermon method in the Psalms. But why is his preaching theological, what makes it wise, and what is the relationship between them? This study seeks to demonstrate how Augustine's doctrine of wisdom affects both the content and style of his preaching in the Psalms with the bulk of attention attending to the content.

The underlying assumption of this article is that Augustine's doctrine of wisdom is readily at work in his exegetical and theological method. The case could be made that from his reading of Hortensius to his death, Augustine's pursuit of wisdom fundamentally drove his life and work. Assuming this sapiential approach, it will provide the lens through which we will read Augustine's preaching of the Psalms and evaluate how wisdom affects his sermons. This will be accomplished by considering Augustine as preacher, Augustine's doctrine of wisdom, his exegetical

1. Exp. Ps. 83, 11. All *Expositions of the Psalms* and *Sermons* quotations taken from *The Works of Saint Augustine, A Translation for the 21st Century*, ed. John E. Rotelle (Hyde Park, New York: New City Press, 2000).

method, key sermons from the Psalms, and finally a concluding critique of and appreciation for Augustine's wise preaching. Augustine's preaching of the Psalms is both expository and profoundly theological, and, as will be seen, is full of wisdom to be gleaned by preachers today.

Augustine as Preacher

When considering the influence of Augustine upon the Church, one might remember the profundity of *City of God* or the contemporary relevance of *Confessions*. Rarely does one first recall, however, that despite his voluminous writings on theology, philosophy, scripture, personal letters, Augustine was above all a "pastor of souls and the defender of truth." Drobner comments that "All of Augustine's actions, including his writings, controversies, and theology, were in the service of pastoral care."² Typical pastoral responsibilities filled Augustine's long days, and chief among them was preaching. Due to demand, it is believed that Augustine preached multiple times each week and sometimes every day of the week.³ The former professor of rhetoric typically chose a text a short time before he was to preach, delivered it extemporaneously to an often packed house who stood while the Bishop sat and spoke for, give or take, an hour, and stenographers quickly jotted down his message for Christians to enjoy even 1600 years later.⁴

Augustine's scripture saturated preaching style, while not altogether unique, was in keeping with wisdom being his foremost hermeneutical and homiletical principle. Scripture is without question the highest authority for Augustine. He considers the Bible to be the Spirit inspired word of God, coherent in its message and without contradiction.⁵ H. Oliphant Old notes the primacy of the expository preaching method in Augustine.

In his homiletical work, Augustine gave first importance to expository preaching. This was quite consistent with his whole theological system. Augustine had a strong theology of grace, and a strong theology of grace leads to a strong emphasis on revelation. Sermon after sermon we find our preacher intent on nothing so much as explaining the Holy Scriptures, for there it was that God revealed himself.⁶

2. Hubertus R. Drobner, *The Fathers of the Church* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2007), 398.

3. Hughes Oliphant Old, *The Reading and Preaching of the Scriptures in the Worship of the Christian Church; The Patristic Age*, Vol. 2 (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 345.

4. William Harmless, *Augustine In His Own Words* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University Press, 2010), 122–24. And, Eric Rebillard, "Sermones" in *Augustine through the Ages* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 773–92.

5. See Karla Pollmann, "Hermeneutical Presuppositions" *Augustine Through the Ages* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 426. Pollman lists the following as sources to confirm Augustine's views on the inspiration and inerrancy of scripture cons. Ev. 1.35.54; cat. rud. 4:8; util. cred. 9.

6. Old, *The Reading and Preaching of the Scriptures in the Worship of the Christian Church*, 345–46.

In his sermons, Augustine sought, above all, biblical fidelity, instruction in truth, emotional engagement, and appropriate response; in summary, he sought wisdom and eloquence.⁷ In book IV of *De Doctrina Christiana*, Augustine explains how wisdom and eloquence are the principle parts of preaching.

But since some performances are unintelligent, awkward, and boring, whereas others are clever, elegant, and exciting, the person required for the task under consideration is someone who can argue or speak wisely, if not eloquently. . . . This point did not escape even those who believed in teaching the art of rhetoric; they declared that wisdom without eloquence was of little value to society but that eloquence without wisdom was generally speaking a great nuisance, and never beneficial.⁸

In book I of *De Doctrina* and in other writings we learn that Augustine's understanding of wisdom is not limited to the content of a sermon but includes the very way in which one preaches. Wisdom and eloquence are the main ingredients of good preaching, but Augustine also acknowledges that the pursuit of these things is, itself, wise.⁹ Thus, one should expect to find evidence of this wise pursuit in Augustine's own preaching—both in content and style.

Wisdom in Augustine

In his excellent article, "Wisdom" in Augustine Through the Ages, Ronald Nash states, "Efforts to understand Augustine's notion of wisdom (*sapientia*) must include at least two necessary steps: (1) seeing wisdom in the context of Augustine's hierarchical structures of ontology and epistemology; and (2) seeing the contrast Augustine drew between wisdom and knowledge."¹⁰ Heeding Nash's advice, then, this section will give attention to Augustine's ontology and briefly his epistemology, and also to his division between *scientia* and *sapientia*.

Hierarchical Ontology and Epistemology

In his writings, Augustine is unabashedly partial to the philosophy of the Neo-Platonists. Concerning Plato he writes, "If, then, Plato defined a philosopher as one who knows, loves and imitates the God in whom he finds his happiness, there

7. "It has been said by a man of eloquence, and quite rightly, that the eloquent should speak in such a way as to instruct, delight, and move their listeners." IV:25-27? (Oxford Classic translation, 117).

8. Augustine, *De Doctrina Christiana*, Book IV:IV6-V7 (Oxford Classic, 104).

9. Examples of this thinking: *De Doctrina*, "A doctor treating a physical wound applies some medications that are contrary . . . and also some that are similar . . . and he does not apply the same dressing to all wounds, but matches like with like. So for the treatment of human beings God's wisdom—in itself both doctor and medicine—offered itself in a similar way." Augustine sees God's wisdom as both doctor and medicine; it is the perfect form of Wisdom manifested in Christ and the way of wisdom to be carried out by Christ followers.

10. Ronald H. Nash, "Wisdom" in *Augustine Through the Ages* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 885.

is little need to examine further. For, none of the other philosophers has come so close to us as the Platonists have, and, therefore, we may neglect the others."¹¹ It is no surprise, then, to find in Augustine a three-story ontology with form-like ideas at the top. Augustine understands reality in three vertical parts that he refers to as the levels of the bodies, the souls, and God.¹²

The lowest level is that of the bodies which are mutable in both place and time.¹³ This is the place where bodies move (or are moved) and where action takes place. Augustine speaks of the *rationes seminales* as seed-like principles from nature that exist at this level.¹⁴ Furthermore, this is the level where knowledge exists and is attained. The second level is that of souls as well as created spirits and angels which are immutable in place but mutable in time.¹⁵ It is on this level that Augustine speaks of the *ratio hominis*, the rational soul of man, where he distinguishes between higher and lower reasoning.¹⁶ The highest level is the realm of the eternal, God, who is absolutely immutable. It is at this level where the eternal ideas exist in God's mind and where contemplation takes place. Nash notes that "the divine forms are the exemplary cause and thus the basic foundation of all created reality. Moreover, because the judgments humans make must accord with the eternal forms, they are an indispensable element in human knowledge."¹⁷ Additionally, Bourke comments that as God is always supreme, He creates and moves both spiritual and corporeal creatures, and thus God moves the soul of man while the soul of man moves and regulates bodies.¹⁸

Augustine's epistemology corresponds to his ontology containing a lower, middle and highest level of vision. The lower level concerns seeing bodily creatures through the senses. The second level Augustine refers to as spiritual vision or cogitation which relates the powers of the mind "to the images of sensible things."¹⁹ The highest level is the intellectual vision which allows humans to attain knowledge of God, the human soul, virtues, and universals. It is this level of vision that can see wisdom.²⁰ Nash points out, "The upward path of knowledge for Augustine

11. Augustine, *The City of God*, Book VIII, Ch. 5. Transl. Henry Bettenson (London: Penguin Books, 1972).

12. For further study on the significance of Platonic/Neoplatonic thought in Augustine see O'Connell, *St. Augustine's Early Theory of Man*, 1968, Armstrong, *Augustine and Christian Platonism*, Villanova, 1967, Carol Harrison, *Beauty and Revelation in the Thought of Saint Augustine*, Oxford, 1992; A. Nygren, *Agape and Eros*, London, 1939.

13. Vernon J. Bourke, *Wisdom from St. Augustine* (Houston, TX: Center for Thomistic Studies, 1984), 54.

14. Nash, "Wisdom," 885.

15. Bourke, *Wisdom from St. Augustine*, 53.

16. Nash, "Wisdom," 885-86.

17. *Ibid.*

18. Bourke, *Wisdom from St. Augustine*, 54.

19. Nash, "Wisdom," 886.

20. *Ibid.*

involves the passage from sensation to the rational cognizance of temporal things (*scientia*) to the intellectual cognizance of eternal reality (*sapientia*).²¹

Accompanying this upward path of knowledge is the ratio, the gaze of the mind (or soul) situated between the realm of bodies and the realm of God. As noted above, humans can either reason downward toward the level of the bodies (*ratio inferior*) or upward toward God and divine things (*ratio superior*).²² Augustine writes in *On the Trinity*,

But it is the part of the higher reason to judge of these corporeal things according to incorporeal and eternal reasons; which, unless they were above the human mind, would certainly not be unchangeable; and yet, unless something of our own were subjoined to them, we should not be able to employ them as our measures by which to judge of corporeal things. But we judge of corporeal things from the rule of dimensions and figures, which the mind knows to remain unchangeably.²³

Since wisdom is found with God, Augustine believes gazing upward to be the superior option. Indeed, there is knowledge to be gained by looking below, but if divine wisdom comes from above, one's gaze should not remain at an inferior level.

Scientia and Sapientia

Augustine makes a sharp distinction between knowledge (*scientia*) and wisdom (*sapientia*). In accord with his tri-tiered ontology and epistemology, Augustine locates knowledge in the lowest level, the bodily realm, and wisdom in the highest level, the eternal realm. He makes much of Paul's distinction between knowledge and wisdom in 1 Corinthians 12:8 where Paul writes, "For to one is given the word of wisdom through the Spirit, and to another the word of knowledge according to the same Spirit. . . ."²⁴ In Augustine's view, knowledge, while abiding in the lowest realm, is reckoned to action, and wisdom, on the highest realm, is reckoned to contemplation. "In thus distinguishing, it must be understood that wisdom belongs to contemplation, knowledge to action."²⁵ Additionally, Nash says, "Science knows true things while wisdom is a knowledge of Truth. Error is possible in *scientia* but not in *sapientia*."²⁶

To be sure, knowledge proper is not a bad thing to Augustine.²⁷ This gift of knowledge that Paul speaks of, however, is not any and all knowledge that can be attained, for in this is much emptiness and vanity. Rather, this knowledge is

21. Ibid.

22. Bourke, *Wisdom from St. Augustine*, 54.

23. Augustine, *On the Trinity*, Book 12.2.

24. All scripture references taken from the New American Standard Bible, 1995 update (LaHabra, CA: The Lockman Foundation, 1995), unless otherwise noted.

25. Augustine, *On the Trinity*, Book 12.22.

26. Nash, "Wisdom," 886.

27. Augustine was, however, increasingly disdainful toward the physical and temporal world throughout his life. Nevertheless, as it relates to knowledge, his disdain was especially for that knowledge that is rightly called foolishness.

of “those things by which are that most wholesome faith, which leads to true blessedness, is begotten, nourished, defended, strengthened. . . .”²⁸ Moreover, Augustine acknowledges that wisdom is related to knowledge, but it is of the eternal and divine sort and therefore must be called wisdom. Lewis Ayres, in his recent and important work *Augustine and the Trinity*, writes, “Whereas, in us, a verbum is born from our scientia, the Father’s knowledge is his Word and Wisdom and essence (because there to be and to be wise are identical).”²⁹ Thomas Aquinas agrees with Augustine on this point when he writes, “Therefore he who considers absolutely the highest cause of the whole universe, namely God, is most of all called wise. Hence wisdom is said to be the knowledge of divine things, as Augustine says.”³⁰

The temporal distinction between wisdom and knowledge cannot be understated in grasping Augustine’s notion of wisdom. Knowledge is located in the lowest realm, the realm of bodies and action, the realm of time. Wisdom is located in the highest realm, the realm of God and contemplation, the realm of eternity (i.e., no time). Though knowledge is good it is not the proper end. Knowledge should spur on the lover of wisdom not to remain at the lower level, but rather to pursue the higher realm of contemplation where wisdom resides. This distinction greatly affects the way in which Augustine reads the scriptures, and therefore the way we read Augustine.

The relationship between knowledge, wisdom and Christ in Augustine’s theology is also important. Augustine understands Christ to be both our knowledge and our wisdom. Ayres notes that “. . . Augustine’s early account of the Son as Wisdom is developed and incorporated into his account of the Son as Word. . . .”³¹ This is a fascinating junction in Augustine’s doctrine of wisdom as in his Christology, the eternal intersects with the temporal—the eternal Word wraps himself in temporal flesh. Jason Byassee in his *Praise Seeking Understanding: Reading the Psalms with Augustine* writes, “The incarnation provides scientia of God on the way to eschatological sapientia . . . that is, ‘knowledge’ appropriate to our current place

28. Augustine, *On the Trinity*, Book 14.3.

29. Lewis Ayres, *Augustine and the Trinity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), Kindle Electronic Edition, 9261–79. See Parts II–IV of Ayres’ book for excellent and insightful work on Augustine’s understanding of the Trinity, the relationships therein, *scientia* and *sapientia*, and Christ and Wisdom to name a few.

30. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa of the Summa*, ed. Peter Kreeft (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press), 43. It is worth noting the irony of this statement that Aquinas agrees with Augustine’s notion that wisdom is “knowledge of divine things,” yet Augustine draws a bold line between knowledge and wisdom. Aquinas, on the other hand, makes this statement in the section concerning doctrine as science (knowledge). Augustine and Aquinas agree that wisdom is knowledge of divine things, but Aquinas is not necessarily drawing sharp distinctions between *scientia* and *sapientia* like Augustine. Rather, he sees the study of doctrine as a science, indeed, the noblest of sciences.

31. Ayres, *Augustine and the Trinity*, Kindle Electronic Edition, 9232–46.

in the divine economy, on the way to “wisdom” for which we hold out faith, but cannot possess yet.”³²

Recognizing that knowledge is temporal and wisdom is eternal, Colossians 2:3 fits beautifully with Augustine’s doctrine of wisdom as Paul writes, speaking of Christ “in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” (emphasis mine). Believing Christ to be the Son of God and God, Himself, Augustine asserts that Christ is associated with both time and eternity. Therefore, as the God-man, the fullness of knowledge (temporal) and wisdom (eternal) are found in Him. Augustine writes, “But that the same is Himself the Only-begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth—this took place, in order that He Himself in things done for us in time should be the same for whom we are cleansed by the same faith, that we may contemplate Him steadfastly in things eternal.”³³ In light of Augustine’s emphasis on “totus Christus” (the whole Christ) in his *Expositions on the Psalms*, a firm understanding of this relationship between knowledge, wisdom and Christ is essential.

Wisdom in Augustine’s preaching and exegesis

Hughes Oliphant Old situates Augustine in a tradition he calls “Wisdom doxology,” and argues that “Quite obviously Augustine’s theology of preaching is thoroughly based on biblical Wisdom theology. . . .”³⁴ So, where exactly does wisdom show up in Augustine’s preaching? Due to his heavy distinction between corporeal and incorporeal, temporal and eternal, with priority on the latter, Augustine’s preaching inherits a strong spiritual flavor with a vertical trajectory. Augustine addresses his socially diverse audience with a rhetorically rich delivery, heavy on allegory though not without some literal analysis, and sensitive to matters of greatest eternal significance. J. Patout Barns suggests that Ambrose’s influence led Augustine to recognize the value of Scripture for both the educated and uneducated. “Unlike the pagan mythology, the literal reading of the Christian Scripture promoted a salutary way of life among the unlearned and its allegorical interpretation led the more adept deeper into Truth.”³⁵ This mix of literal and spiritual exegesis blended with low and lofty rhetoric beckoning its hearers to ascend to

32. Jason Byassee, *Praise Seeking Understanding* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007), Kindle Electronic Ed., Location 866–75.

33. St. Augustine, *On the Trinity*, Book 13.19. Note again the temporal distinctions in this quote. Augustine makes much of things in time versus things eternal. When he speaks of grace, here, he is referring to something done in time, and truth as eternal. Thus grace corresponds to knowledge and truth to wisdom.

34. Old, *The Reading and Preaching of the Scriptures in the Worship of the Christian Church*, 388. For a full development of Old’s “Wisdom Doxology” see his *Themes & Variations for a Christian Doxology*.

35. J. Patout Barns, “Ambrose Preaching to Augustine” in *Collectaene Augustinea; Augustine Second Founder of the Faith* (New York: Peter Lang, 1990), 375.

the eternal, triune God is, in Augustine's view, wise preaching. The following quote from Van der Meer's *Augustine the Bishop* is particularly telling,

Many of his sermons on some verse of the Psalms seem to have a bearing on that neo-Platonist practice of inward contemplation that was peculiar to him: the tenor of Augustine's thought is that he who seeks to rise to a knowledge of God should make his own soul his starting-point, for this is a reflection and an image of God. Time and again he stresses the transitoriness and unreliability of sense experience in order to tear the soul away from the deceptive impressions of earthly reality and make it more receptive for what God's illumination, the only agens of true knowledge, permits the "heart" of man to contemplate. And although upon the cathedra he does not explicitly mention either the light of knowledge or the world of intelligible ideas, and only speaks of the workings of divine grace, his representation of those workings remains unmistakably confined to the concepts of light, seeing and contemplation, and to that of the ascent from the lower to the higher, and so to the true reality behind all images.³⁶

Augustine's high regard for the scriptures led him into serious consideration of exactly how they should be handled. So important is this to Augustine that he dedicated the better part of his *De Doctrina Christiana* to the task of how to interpret the Bible. Excavating the core components of Augustine's exegetical method reveal further the pervasiveness of his doctrine of eternal wisdom and his preference therefore.

Christological / Canonical

The Patristic period is generally characterized as holding to a Christological interpretation of scripture. As Bray points out, "Apart from Christ, the Scriptures were incomprehensible, and so it was permissible to find reference to him in any way possible."³⁷ Of this period, Bray rightly points out that it is wrong to assume that figurative exegesis is the basis of their hermeneutic. Rather, it is the fundamental belief that Christ is the center of the Bible that motivates early interpreters to move beyond the plain reading of the text.³⁸

Augustine follows suit believing that the scriptures testify to Christ, and thus his trajectory in exegesis is one in search of the Son. In fact, "totus Christus" was the "exegetical center" of Augustine's exegesis of the Psalms.³⁹ Concerning Augustine's Christological doctrine, Johannes Quasten writes,

His doctrine is distinguished from traditional teaching only by the clarity of its language, by the recurrence of the ever more insistent and clearly developed example of the union between the body and the soul, by the

36. F. Van der Meer, *Augustine the Bishop*, translated by Brian Battershaw and G. R. Lamb (London and New York: Sheed and Ward, 1961), 435–36.

37. Bray, *Biblical Interpretation*, 97.

38. Ibid.

39. Harmless, *Augustine In His Own Words*, 158.

defense against all heresies which denied or obscured the perfect human and divine nature of Christ and by the presentation of the Christ-man as the shining example of the gratuity of grace.⁴⁰

In addition to his Christocentric focus on scripture, it is important to point out his canonical focus. Augustine uses the language of “canonical” at times referring to those writings considered by the church to be inspired and thus canonical.⁴¹ There is, however, another sense of the term canonical in Augustine’s hermeneutics. Augustine’s assumption that all scripture by virtue of being God’s Word is inspired and inerrant leads him to a healthy practice of considering the whole of the canon when constructing theology or finding meaning in a particular text. He writes, “Even if the writer’s meaning is obscure, there is no danger here, provided that it can be shown from other passages of the holy scriptures that each of these interpretations is consistent with the truth.”⁴² Describing Augustine’s approach, Karla Pollman reiterates the language of “normative horizon” to describe the clear propositions that form the core of scripture’s message which clarifies more obscure places in the scriptures.⁴³

Things and Signs

Augustine’s discussion of things and signs in his *De Doctrina Christiana* is fundamental to the overall message of the book; indeed, it is fundamental to Augustine’s way of reading the text of scripture. Things he understands to be of the eternal sort and that which is the end of our pursuit. A sign is “a thing which of itself makes some other thing come to mind, besides the impression that it presents to the senses.”⁴⁴ Words, in Augustine’s view, hold the dominant role as signs for other things. Thus, Scripture is full of signs pointing us to eternal things that supersede the text of the Bible urging the reader upward toward wisdom, love, God, and every eternal thing.

Literal and Allegorical Interpretation

While it is broadly believed that those in the Patristic era fall into either the Alexandrian camp leaning toward allegorical interpretation or an Antiochene camp with more literal interpretation, Augustine is not particularly at home with either side. Augustine seeks to keep his options open, per se, as it pertains to interpretation. Bray offers a third camp of Western (Latin) exegetes that includes Tyconius and his Rules.⁴⁵ This is worth mentioning as Augustine found Tyconius’ rules rather helpful though he modified them to fit his own views.

40. Johannes Quasten, *Patrology*, Vol. IV, transl. Rev. Placid Solari (Allen, TX: Christian Classics), 430. Also, see Quasten’s chapter on Augustine for insights into his theological method and Trinitarian theology.

41. See *De Doctrina Christiana*, Book 2.8.12.

42. Augustine, *De Doctrina Christiana*, Book 3.37.

43. Pollman, “Hermeneutical Presuppositions,” 427.

44. *Ibid.*, Book 2.1–2.

45. Bray, *Biblical Interpretation*, 108.

Augustine's exegetical practices employ many techniques including both the literal and allegorical methods as well as a meticulous reading of the text, an early form of textual criticism, and the liberal arts.⁴⁶ Concerning the literal versus the allegorical interpretation of Scripture, Augustine writes, "The greatest care must therefore be taken to determine whether the expression that we are trying to understand is literal or figurative."⁴⁷ This is a burdensome task for Augustine as he believes that a passage interpreted metaphorically that is intended literally, and vice versa, is a matter of spiritual life and death. Recognizing the connection between the allegorical method and Augustine's desire for ascent, Van der Meer writes, "As to the allegorical interpretation of Scripture, this was, in the natural order of things, the best method of freeing the classical manner of exposition from the slavery of the letter and of assisting it to rise to greater heights than the pedestrian analysis of a sequence of words."⁴⁸

Double Love

Just as fundamental as things and signs for understanding Augustine's hermeneutical method is his talk of double love. Near the end of book one in *De Doctrina Christiana*, Augustine writes,

The chief purpose of all that we have been saying in our discussion of things is to make it understood that the fulfillment and end of the law and all the divine scriptures is to love the thing which must be enjoyed and the thing which together with us can enjoy that thing. . . . So anyone who thinks he has understood the divine scriptures or any part of them, but cannot by his understanding build up this double love of God and neighbor, has not yet succeeded in understanding them.⁴⁹

The "thing" to be enjoyed, according to Augustine, in general, is that which is eternal, and in particular, God himself. Augustine recognizes the commandments to love God and love neighbor as, indeed, the first and second greatest commandments in the bible. As a result, one's interpretation of scripture should always promote such love for God and man, for love, unlike faith and hope, is of the eternal sort.

Dialogue of Disciplines

Less germane to preaching proper, but useful for understanding Augustine's theological thought as a whole, and wisdom in particular, is his dialogue of disciplines. Augustine's theological method feels more like a conversation between philosophy, theology and hermeneutics than a systematic formula simply requiring the input of data in order to calculate the doctrine. Bourke writes that "it is admittedly difficult to maintain a distinction between philosophic and religious

46. Pollman, "Hermeneutical Presuppositions," 427.

47. Augustine, *De Doctrina Christiana*, Book 3, 23–25.

48. Van der Meer, *Augustine the Bishop*, 442.

49. *Ibid.*, Book 1, 39, 84–86.

thought in Augustine. He is a theocentric thinker. . . ."⁵⁰ TeSelle writing on Augustine's method says,

In order to catch Augustine the theologian at work we shall approach his thought not as a finished product, a "system" or at least a single complex of ideas, but as a process of reflection and discovery. And such a method is suited to the subject matter, for Augustine's thought proceeds by way of ceaseless inquiry; he often refrains from making final judgments, and even when he makes them he is prepared to modify them in light of fresh examination. . . . There will be a continuity in his thought, but it will be the continuity of a process of becoming; there will be coherence, but it will be a coherence that is always changing. The method of study, then, must be "cinematic." . . .—Augustine's thought must be seen as a constantly changing whole.⁵¹

Indeed, describing Augustine's method as a "changing whole" is accurate. Like a chef who consistently uses the same ingredients, but rarely mixes the recipe the same way, so is Augustine's unpredictable, yet artistic method of theology. Pertaining to the doctrine of wisdom, some evolution in Augustine's thought throughout his life is of no surprise. One scholar suggests that Augustine determined some 31 meanings of *sapientia* while another found at least 13 usages of the term.⁵² Nevertheless, his core understanding of wisdom is that described above. Additionally, Augustine's commitment to the truth remains unwavering, and it is his passion for truth and his pursuit of wisdom that employs his method bouncing between Neoplatonic philosophy and things and signs, between double love of God and neighbor to introspective inquiry about his own selfishness and desires.⁵³

Examples of Augustine's *Sapiential* Preaching of the Psalms

Following the summary of Augustine's wise exegetical and theological method, and the wisdom ingredients that make up his ever-evolving approach, we now return to Augustine's sermons on the Psalms in search of these wisdom ingredients

50. Bourke, *Wisdom from St. Augustine*, 34.

51. Eugene TeSelle, *Augustine The Theologian*, 20. Also, TeSelle cites Olivier du Roy, *L'Intelligence de la foi en la Trinité selon saint Augustin. Gene'se de sa théologie trinitaire jusqu'en 391* (Paris, 1966), p. 19, as "one of the most successful achievements" along the lines of describing Augustine's method.

52. Bourke, *Wisdom from St. Augustine*. 60, footnote 7.

53. A noteworthy source relative to Augustine's theological method is Mark Ellingsen, *The Richness of Augustine; His Contextual & Pastoral Theology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2005). Ellingsen's second chapter on "Bible and Theological Method" considers several of the same parts of Augustine's theology and exegesis as the sections found in this paper, though this source was not discovered until after these sections complete. Nevertheless, though Ellingsen's early comments about the historical interpretations of Augustine are a bit "broad brush" his thesis that Augustine's theology is contextual and pastoral is one worth considering.

and their affects. We will consider sections of four sermons from Augustine's *Enarrationes in Psalmos* and one from *Sermones* on Psalm 17 (18). J. Clinton McCann, Jr. in the introduction to his commentary on Psalms identifies several psalms as "wisdom/torah" psalms which serve as a "stimulus to interpret the psalms theologically as well as historically." Tremper Longman and W.D. Tucker, Jr. building upon Gunkel's work also recognize wisdom psalms in the Psalter, thus four of the five sermons considered are wisdom psalms as recognized by these scholars.⁵⁴ One exception will be "Exposition of Psalm 83" from *Enarrationes* as explained below.

Exposition of Psalm 1

Blessed is the person who has not gone astray in the council of the ungodly. This statement should be understood as referring to our Lord Jesus Christ, that is, the Lord-Man. Blessed is the person who has not gone astray in the council of the ungodly, as did the earthly man who conspired with his wife, already beguiled by the serpent, to disregard God's commandments.⁵⁵

He will be like a tree planted alongside the running waters. This may refer to Wisdom itself, who deigned to assume humanity for our salvation, so that it is the human Christ who is planted like a tree by the running waters; for what is said in another psalm, the river of God is brimming with water (Ps 64:10 (65:9)), can also be taken in this sense. . . . That tree, therefore, is our Lord, who draws those who are in the way from the running waters, that is, from the peoples who sin.⁵⁶

Psalm 1 is uniformly recognized as a wisdom psalm among the scholars listed above due to its beatitude qualities and contrast of the two ways. Augustine's doctrine of wisdom makes an immediate appearance in his exegesis. The opening sentence of the Psalter Augustine understands to refer to Christ, the "Lord-man" unstained by sin. Christ is the Wisdom of God according to Paul in 1 Corinthians 1, a fact never far from Augustine's mind, and thus an exegesis that is Christological is wise both because it harmonizes with Jesus' teaching in Luke 24, and it urges the Christian toward the triune God who is the font of all wisdom. Furthermore, Augustine's "earthly" language describing the ungodly is indicative of his preference for the eternal over the temporal (i.e., the spiritual over the physical).

The next section takes Augustine's Christological interpretation further to an explicit sapiential interpretation. Here, Augustine does not suggest, as he did in the opening section, that the passage refers to "Christ," but rather that it refers to "Wisdom itself," namely Christ. Clearly, Augustine's exegetical preference is toward Christ, Wisdom itself. Furthermore, Augustine sprinkles in another wisdom ingredient with his constant canonical consideration. No less than 16

54. See Longman's *How To Read The Psalms* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1988), and Tucker's "Book of Psalms 1" in *Dictionary of the Old Testament Wisdom Poetry & Writings*, eds. Tremper Longman III and Peter Enns (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2008).

55. Exp. Ps. 1, 1.

56. Exp. Ps. 1, 3.

references are made to other passages of scripture in this relatively short sermon. Indeed, a hermeneutic that seeks to synthesize the whole of scripture with its parts is in keeping with Augustine's wisdom as he believes scripture to be truly the Word of God, and the psalms as an expression of Wisdom, the "totus Christus."

Exposition of Psalm 110

It is true, of course, that God gave to the carnal Israelites the earthly Jerusalem, which is in slavery, together with her children (Gal 4:25); but that was part of the Old Covenant, appropriate to the old humanity. Those who understood that the earthly Jerusalem was no more than a symbol were accounted heirs to the New Covenant, for the Jerusalem on high is free, and she is our mother (Gal 4:26), eternal in heaven.⁵⁷

Instead of all the pleasures of this world, whether those you have experienced already or those you can increase and multiply for yourself in your imagination, set your desire on wisdom, the mother of delights that never die; but the beginning of wisdom is the fear of the Lord. Wisdom will be your joy; she will infallibly lead you to the chaste, eternal embrace of truth, in a delight beyond description.⁵⁸

The first wisdom component to note in these latter sections of Augustine's "Exposition of Psalm 110" (111) is, again, the contrast between the temporal and the eternal. In the final third of this sermon, Augustine focuses intently on the "trustworthy promises attached to the new covenant" with particular emphasis on the eternity of the New. Given the eternal nature of the New Covenant over the temporal nature of the Old, it is fitting for any preacher to highlight this difference. But for Augustine, this is a distinction he is anxious to point out as is seen time and again in his writings, and one that he ties closely to the wisdom in the next section.

Augustine opens his commentary on verse 9 (10) connecting the thought of eternity from verse 8 (9) with "the mother of delights that never die," which is wisdom (*immortalium deliciarum matrem concupisce sapientiam*). Furthermore, Augustine personalizes wisdom as the "mother of all delights," a metaphor reminiscent of another, perhaps, equally essential goal for Augustine, happiness. The relationship between Augustine's doctrines of wisdom and happiness is fascinating, though complex. Maria Boulding suggests that wisdom is "the intermediary between holy fear and eternal blessedness,"⁵⁹ but the whole of Augustine's work seems to suggest that wisdom is not merely a means, but an end in itself, like happiness. Bussanich writes, "The notion of the highest good (*summum bonum*) is connected in Augustine's thinking to his views on reason, wisdom, and truth and his commitment to the Platonic concept of eternal being." Then, quoting Augustine, he notes "no one

57. Exp. Ps. 110, 8.

58. Exp. Ps. 110, 9.

59. Maria Boulding, trans., *The Works of Saint Augustine, A Translation for the 21st Century: Expositions of the Psalms*, vol III/19 (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2003), 290, footnote 30.

is happy unless through the highest good, which is seen and grasped in that truth which we call wisdom" (lib. Arb. 2.13.35).⁶⁰ Who is truly happy, if not wise? And, who is wise who is not happy? Precision about the relationship between wisdom and happiness remains, but the reminiscent language of eternal "joy" and "delight" serves as another cue to the ubiquitous wisdom ingredients found in Augustine's preaching.

Exposition of Psalm 146

If God 'humbles sinners right down to the ground,' what must we do if we do not want to be humbled right down to the ground? It is a great thing to advance to intelligible realities, a great thing to advance to what is spiritual, and it is a great thing for the heart to reach the point where it knows that something exists that is neither extended in space nor subject to variations with time. After all, what does wisdom look like? Who can think about it? Is it long? Or square? Or round? Is it now here, now there?⁶¹

Exposition of Psalm 146 is essentially an exhortation for one's life to sing as a Psalm to God despite temporal sufferings. The section cited above offers fascinating insights related to Augustine's understanding of wisdom. Notice the temporal, eternal dichotomy in the second sentence with preference for the eternal. Augustine writes that it is a great thing to advance to "intelligible realities," which he describes parenthetically as "what is spiritual," and for the heart to know something that is beyond temporal (i.e., "that is neither extended in space nor subject to variations with time"). Notice next the jump from that which is not temporal to the question, "After all, what does wisdom look like?" This is a notable insight into Augustine's thinking, for he strictly equates that which is eternal with wisdom. In responding to verse 7, "Let your first song to the Lord be one of confession," after equating eternity with wisdom, Augustine suggests that if one wishes to "be led from the way of faith to the possession of God in vision, begin with confession." Why would a believer desire to be led from the way of faith? Because faith is a temporal need, while the vision of God attained by ascending to contemplation is eternal. When one 'sees' God, one no longer needs faith, for this perfect vision of God lasts forever.

Sermon 14A; Discourse on Psalm 17 (18)

In Sermon 14A, an incomplete discourse on Psalm 17 (18) and especially verse 35, Augustine focuses his attention on the end to which people are directed. Augustine reads verse 35 as, "Your discipline has directed me toward the end, and your

60. John Bussanich, "Happiness, Eudaimonism" in *Augustine Through the Ages*, 414.

61. Exp. Ps. 146, 14. Psalm 146, while not traditionally recognized as a wisdom psalm, is accepted as such by McCann in light of John Kselman's work. McCann is not convinced of Kselman's division between v. 8b and v. 8c, but "the words "righteous" and "wicked" in v. 9c form a conceptual envelope that lends support to Kselman's analysis" (McCann, *The Book of Psalms in NIB*, p. 1263).

discipline itself will teach me.” Consider the wisdom-loaded language from this sermon.

We are inquiring, you see, toward what end we are being directed, and what the discipline is that is directing us, and in what sort of way this matter is to be taught. . . . When eating food comes to an end, the food is no more; when weaving a garment comes to an end, the garment is perfected. So it is toward that sort of end that we undoubtedly seek to be directed, one which means our being perfected, not our being consumed.⁶²

So what is this end, and what is this discipline? The end is Christ, the discipline is the law. Listen to the apostle: The end of the law is Christ, for the sake of justice for everyone who believes (Rom 10:4). So this then—to state it more clearly and to explain what we have sung—this then is your discipline has directed me toward the end: what your law is has directed me toward the end; your law has directed me toward Christ.⁶³

Being directed toward the end means coming toward Christ, that is, believing in Christ.⁶⁴

Philip thought that the Father alone was such an end, and so he said, Lord, show us the Father, and it is enough for us (Jn 14:8); but the Lord showed him that God is the end, God the Trinity. Accordingly, when you say, “Christ is the end,” you should not be excluding God the Father; and when you say “God the Father is the end,” you should not be excluding Christ. Philip apparently wished to exclude him, supposing that Christ was only what he could see with his eyes, so he cheerfully said, Show us the Father, and it is enough for us. . . . That’s where our desire ends; we won’t be seeking any further; that’s where we shall find total satisfaction, where we shall say, “It’s enough, I don’t want anything more.”⁶⁵

. . . so [the Lord] said to Philip, Have I been with you all this time, and you have not recognized me? When you are looking at the end, and do not see what you see, well that of course is why you are looking for the end, because you can’t see the end standing in front of you.⁶⁶

You were looking for the end; are you looking for something more than eternal life? This is the will of the Father, that whoever sees the Son and believes in him should have eternal life. And I will raise him up on the last day. What am I to say, my brothers and sisters? What eyes do we need for obtaining this sight?⁶⁷

At least four wisdom themes are found in the brief excerpts above. First is the directional, or trajectory language. Without stretching the point too far, it is worth

62. Sermon 14A, 1.

63. *Ibid.*, 2.

64. *Ibid.*, 3.

65. *Ibid.*, 4.

66. *Ibid.*

67. *Ibid.*, 5. Also, note Psalm 130A where Augustine also teaches about the difference between “believing” and “believing in.”

noting the teleological language and interpretation by Augustine of Psalm 18 is in keeping with the thesis that wisdom is heavily influencing, if not driving, Augustine's method. Though difficult to find in this sermon, Augustine's language is often directed north, that is upward in ascension toward God the Trinity.

Secondly, Augustine's position that Christ is the end corresponds with his wisdom method. As in *De Trinitate* and *On the Sermon on the Mount*, Augustine understands Christ as the very Wisdom of God—a part of, while at the same time the fullness of, that Wisdom who is Trinity.

Thirdly, Augustine does not use the language of “signs” or “things” in his sermon, but one hears the echo of *De Doctrina Christiana* when he says, “. . . this then is your discipline has directed me toward the end: what your law is has directed me toward the end; your law has directed me toward Christ.” The law is the sign directing one toward the thing, Christ. The wisdom element is found in the temporal nature of a sign and the eternal nature of a thing. If Augustine's overriding goal is to ascend to Wisdom which is eternal, then it is fitting to find a temporal/eternal distinction with priority given to the eternal.

Lastly, Augustine's emphasis on “seeing” and “eyes” are significant. These are technical terms for Augustine closely associated with faith. Augustine believes the “eye of the mind” either gazes downward upon the temporal or upward toward the eternal, and the latter is to be preferred for in the eternal realm is where Wisdom, God the Trinity, resides. Prior to a wise ascent, however, one must believe and thereby receive “eyes to see.” In other words, faith precedes the ascent for there can be no eternal gaze without believing eyes.

Exposition of Psalm 83

While not recognized as a wisdom Psalm, Augustine's “Exposition of Psalm 83” is particularly laden with wisdom language, and thus worthy of our attention. In this sermon Augustine begins with a discussion of the wine presses and the children of Korah, and ends with God as the ultimate good. In between is a fascinating blend of canonical, Christological, and theological interpretation and method dealing largely with the twin themes of suffering and desire.⁶⁸ Sections 9–11 are particularly rich with wisdom-weighted content. In section nine, Augustine opens the discussion about how one gets to the place where he yearns to praise God eternally. In answering this question, Augustine cites Wisdom 9:15, “The corruptible body weighs down the soul, and this earthly dwelling oppresses a mind that considers many things,” then comments, “The spirit calls him upwards, but the weight of the flesh calls him down again; the tension between these two—the upward pull and the dragging weight—is a struggle, and struggle is characteristic

68. In section 2, Augustine argues for a Christological interpretation of 2 Kings 2:23–24 connecting the Latin word “calvus” (bald) with “Calvaria” (“Calvary,” “the place of the skull”). He writes, “You will already have understood from the gospel, beloved, why a bald man was a figure of Christ. You remember that Christ was crucified at a place called Calvary.” See footnote 2 in *The Works of Saint Augustine; Expositions of the Psalms*, III/18, “Exposition of Psalm 83,” ed. John E. Rotelle (New York, NY: New City Press, 2002).

of the pressing-out process.”⁶⁹ Augustine continues this thread of thought and soon thereafter writes, “But who will ascend to that place? What am I to do about this heavy flesh? . . . But what am I to do? How shall I fly there? How reach it?”⁷⁰ Answering in section 10 that it is God’s grace which helps one get to this place of yearning, Augustine argues that in His grace, “God arranges ascents in [a person’s] heart. God sets up steps for him to climb. Where? In the person’s heart. It follows then, that the more you love, the higher you will climb. God arranges ascents in his heart.” The remainder of section ten is strategically sprinkled with “ascend” language as well as mountain and valley illustrations representative of blessing and suffering respectively.

Finally, in section 11, Augustine lists the four cardinal virtues as important for the “valley of weeping,”

but from them we progress to a single virtue. And what will that be? The virtue of contemplating God alone. . . . We shall pass, then, from these many virtues of action to that one virtue of contemplation, by which we are empowered to contemplate God, according to the scriptural word, In the morning I will stand before you, and contemplate you (Ps 5:5 (3)). . . . And what does “contemplating” imply? The God of gods will be seen in Zion. By the God of gods we should understand the Christ of Christians. . . . But when all the neediness of our mortality is over and done with, he who is God with God, the Word with the Father, the Word through whom all things were made, will show himself to the pure-hearted. Blessed are the clean of heart, for they shall see God (Mt. 5:8). The God of gods will be seen in Zion.⁷¹

Three distinct wisdom ingredients are found in this passage; dualism between body and soul that corresponds to Augustine’s temporal and eternal distinction, vertical trajectory as expressed in the “ascend” language, and the emphasis on contemplation. Having dealt sufficiently with the temporal and eternal distinction above, we must now connect the dots between ascent, contemplation and wisdom.⁷²

In concert with his three types of vision, “. . . Augustine thus sees a direct link between accepting that contemplation of Father, Son and Spirit is the goal of Christian life. . . .”⁷³ Indeed, contemplation is, for Augustine, the aim of every Christian, and the direction a wise man takes in contemplation is one that ascends. And, with such a life goal coupled with a Neo-Platonic ontology, a vertical, heavenly-minded trajectory is to be expected. The relationship, then, between ascent,

69. Exp. Ps. 83, 9.

70. Ibid.

71. Exp. Ps. 83, 11.

72. “Trinitarian faith, then, requires a constant negotiation between the language of temporality, materiality and division intrinsic to Scripture and our ability to grasp the character of the final vision.” Ayres, *Augustine and the Trinity*, Kindle Electronic Edition, 4476–91.

73. Ibid., 4474–89.

contemplation, and wisdom is that wisdom is the aim of contemplation. Contemplation for its own sake is not Augustine's ultimate aim, but rather the desired and necessary path to wisdom. It is this path toward wisdom that Augustine traveled time and again during his preaching, leading his flock to travel with him in hopes that they, too, would be counted in the pure of heart and thus see God.

Conclusion

Augustine's example of wise preaching is but one more item added to the list of practices to appreciate and learn from the great Bishop of Hippo. His intense Biblicalism, Christocentrism, pastoral and contextual sensitivity, and consistent diet of weighty theological content served to a socially and academically diverse laity are just a few appreciable aspects of Augustine's preaching. Nevertheless, appreciation should be tempered with constructive and informed critique. Augustine's periodic recklessness with allegory, occasionally forced Christological reading, heavy dualism, and mid-sermon tangents are less than desirable. The dualism between *scientia* and *sapientia* is a particularly dangerous aspect of Augustine's thought as it drives a deep and unnecessary wedge between God and God's good world. The merging of the temporal and eternal in his Christology brings some balance, but a duality remains that is difficult to reconcile with Scripture and detrimental to a proper Christian view of creation.

Critiques notwithstanding, today's pulpits would do well to be filled with preachers who are tethered to scripture, connecting all of scripture to Christ, considerate of their cultural context and the *Sitz im Leben* of their flock, and faithful to preserve and pass along the Faith with all its richness and depth. This study scarcely skims the richness of Augustine's preaching, doctrine of wisdom, methodology, and the relationships in between, but will hopefully serve to spawn more conversations and study of the implications of Augustine's doctrine of wisdom.