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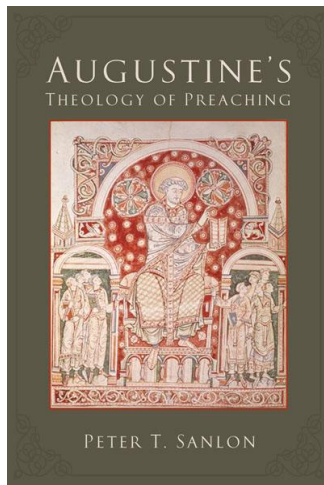
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Peter T. Sanlon
Augustine's Theology of Preaching

Fortress Press, 2014

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\$24.00 [Paperback]. [Purchase](#)

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On the cover of the book is a picture of Augustine, sitting on his *cathedra*, Bible in one hand, the other hand raised as he teaches his congregation. It is a picture that would have honored Augustine who saw himself primarily as a preacher. Yet, for all the untold thousands (or millions!) of books, articles, dissertations, and essays that have been written on Augustine since his death, very little work has been dedicated to Augustine's preaching, a surprising oversight to say the least. *Augustine's Theology of Preaching* is a needful step towards correcting this lacuna.

Peter Sanlon, vicar of St. Mark's Church in Royal Tunbridge Wells, has entered this void. This book had its origin as a thesis at Cambridge University. What makes him uniquely qualified to writing this book, besides his credentials in theology and his experience as a pastor, is the time he has spent as a speechwriter to a peer in the House of Lords.

Sanlon studies Augustine as a fellow rhetorician, making him perfectly suited for the task, and this comes across in his writing.

According to Sanlon, the door to understanding Augustine's hermeneutic in preaching opens on two hinges—interiority and temporality. As Sanlon states, “[Augustine’s] hermeneutic of interiority and temporality is the grammar of his preaching and this is due to his use of Scripture” (p.139). Augustine was a man of the Book. In fact, “the reason Augustine was concerned with interiority and temporality in his preaching was that he used Scripture in an attempt to change people” (p.87). And again, “Augustine preached with a particular regard to interiority and temporality because he wished to use Scripture to change listeners” (p.98). Sanlon repeatedly connects Augustine's themes of interiority and temporality to Scripture, the fount from which all knowledge and change flows.

The book unfolds in this way. Chapter 1 places Augustine in his historical context, rehashing the familiar ground of Augustine's upbringing and conversion. Sanlon also uses this chapter to compare Augustine to other preachers of his time, namely Ambrose, Cyprian, and Tertullian. In chapter 2 Sanlon traces five important Greek and Latin orators whose lives and writings shaped Augustine's own rhetoric—Gorgias (483–375 BC), Plato (424–348 BC), Cicero (106–43 BC), Quintilian (AD 35–98), and Apuleius (AD 123–180). Sanlon notes, though later in the book, “In Augustine's case, the Platonic architecture of his mindset alerted him to issues of importance, but the doctrinal building erected was definitely Christian and Scriptural” (p.61). Augustine may have been greatly influenced by his first-rate classical education, but that he was fundamentally Christian in his teaching. Chapter 3 examines Augustine's work *De Doctrina Christiana*, which details his hermeneutics and homiletics. For Augustine,

Scripture is paramount, and every interpretation should lead a person to greater love for God and neighbor.

Chapter 4 forms the heart of the book. It is in this chapter that Sanlon defines and fills out Augustine's themes of interiority and temporality. Interiority is "self-reflection" promulgated by Christ the "Inner Teacher" in the hearts of people (p.80); temporality is bound up with created matter and the idea that life is a "journey travelled by the affections" (p.84). Those who have studied Augustine know that time plays an important role in his thinking. To state these motifs in a different way, Augustine sought to touch the inner man with his preaching, and this is possible both because of the temporality of biblical events and because they will be lived out in the course of the individual believer's life. For me, the most important page of the entire book for understanding this book is page 62. Here Sanlon gets at the essence of Augustine's understanding of interiority and temporality, which is grounded in the incarnation. "Christ who enlightens the inner eyes is the wisdom who became incarnate at a particular point in time" (p.62). The incarnation illustrates Augustine's use of interiority and temporality perfectly—Christ's incarnation happened in time and space (temporality), and Christ is the Inner Teacher who changes the hearts of people (interiority).

The final three chapters are case studies that test Sanlon's thesis, touching on the topics of riches and money, death and resurrection, and relationships. In each chapter, Sanlon demonstrates how Augustine weaves together his concept of interiority and temporality. For instance, preaching on death and the resurrection should transform the listener's "interior desires and temporal destinations" (p.126). These chapters are critical for helping the reader see Augustine's homiletical hermeneutic in action.

Sanlon is ambitious in his efforts to summarize the preaching of the great Augustine. Anytime a scholar attempts to reduce a theologian's practice to two words, let alone arguably the most influential preacher in history—outside of the Bible, it is a tall task. Making the matter more complicated is the fact that Augustine never claims that interiority and temporality are his aims in preaching. In giving a grammar to his homiletics, the reader is persuaded that Augustine's aim in preaching can in fact be articulated by interiority and temporality. The real test will come as other scholars interested in Augustine's preaching subject this thesis beyond the *Sermones ad Populum*. Sanlon does interact with the works of three others who have also attempted to pin down Augustine's theology of preaching and demonstrates that interiority and temporality have "validity and value" above these previous efforts (p.91). Scholars need this corrective to probe deeper into Augustine's preaching. Here is the church's most gifted tongue and brightest intellect—his preaching begs more exploration. Sanlon has done a great service to scholarship not only by helping us understand the inimitable Augustine, but also by providing this study in a way that is accessible to many. Though it reads like a dissertation at times, it is not so esoteric that the average seminary students could not read it and benefit.

A few minor critiques might be suggested. First, I was puzzled about the ordering of the book. We are promised a prolonged discussion on interiority and temporality, and there are flashes of it throughout, but it is not until page 71 that we begin to have these terms defined and exegeted. Clearly, Sanlon thinks the entire foundation must be poured before constructing the walls. It would have been preferred to have the argument stated with greater clarity up front before taking us on the tour of the necessary background.

Second, in the introduction to the work, Sanlon offers five important areas of homiletics that this book could touch upon—the role of secular insights to communication, the role of doctrine, freedom and order, relationship to pastoral ministry, and training preachers. Regrettably, these topics are only glanced off of throughout the book. The book would have been much stronger had Sanlon continuously drawn a line from the past to the present. At one point he even mentions Tim Keller’s eulogy of John Stott’s preaching legacy as a way to talk about the modern state of preaching (p.xxv). I was anxious to see how the Bishop from Hippo, separated by land, culture, and time, could help preachers this Sunday. To be fair, in parsing Augustine’s homiletical hermeneutic, the modern preacher does get an idea of the importance of the interior and temporal in preaching, and so the preacher is not left without dividends. Of course, it is easy to take shots at a book for all the things that are not there. It is a very fine study for what Sanlon sets out to accomplish. However, having raised these issues himself, it would have been nice to have seen them fleshed out.

Sanlon is baffled, as we should be, that so little attention has been paid to Augustine’s preaching. Augustine expounded Scripture to his congregation multiple times a week for decades. The man who set the course of theology for the next millennium (and beyond) saw his chief purpose as a preacher of God’s word. Sanlon offers one of the first sustained looks into his sermons. Hopefully more will follow to help color in more of the picture so that we might once more sit under the preaching of Augustine.

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