

“AS I BREAK BREAD FOR YOU”

St. Augustine’s Method in Preaching

∴ Thomas F. Stransky, C.S.P. ∴

It is impossible to appreciate St. Augustine’s technique of planning and delivering a sermon without alluding to the saint’s use of his primary sourcebook—the Bible. The Bible, from which Augustine once recoiled because of its supposedly barbaric style and unintelligible meanings, became his most precious book. As he came to see it, the Bible was filled with words of “marvelous sublimity joined to the most wholesome simplicity,”¹ written for our salvation, entrusted to the Church for its support and guidance, and given to authorized preachers to provide old things and new for the spiritual needs of the flock.²

Augustine judges the intellectual effectiveness of a sermon on its correct utilization of sacred Scripture. “A man speaks more or less wisely in proportion

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- 1 Joseph Christopher’s translation of the paranomastic “*altitudinis salbueririma*” (*De Catechizandis Rudibus, Liber Unus*, trans. Joseph Patrick Christopher [Washington, DC: Catholic University of America, 1926]. See Augustine, *On the Catechizing of the Uninstructed*, chap. 8, 12, in *Patrologiae Cursus Completus: Series Latina*, ed. J. P. Migne, 221 vols. (Paris: Garnier and J. P. Migne, 1844–1864), 40:319. Hereafter abbreviated PL. Also in *A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, 1st series, 14 vols., ed. Philip Schaff (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994 [reprint]), 3:290. Hereafter abbreviated NPNF1. Augustine put away his early distaste for the Bible. See his *Confessions*, bk. 3, chap. 5, 9 (PL 32:686; NPNF1 1:62); bk. 6, chap. 5, 8 (PL 32:709; NPNF1 1:93); bk. 7, chap. 20, 26 (PL 32:747; NPNF1 1:114); bk. 7, chap. 21, 27 (PL 32:747; NPNF1 1:133); bk. 9, chap. 5, 13 (PL 32:769; NPF, 1:93, 114, 133). He became convinced that the Bible is “a sound and substantial study; it does not allure the mind with embellished language, nor strike a flat or wavering note by means of any deceit of the tongue.” *Epistle* 132:1 (PL 33:508; NPNF1 1:470). Scripture conquered Augustine as it conquered many others, “not by violence and warfare, but by the resistless force of truth,” and he who attacks that truth injures none but himself. *Against Faustus the Manichee*, bk. 22, 60 (PL 42:438; NPNF1 4:295); 22, 83 (455); Augustine, *Epistle* 138, 4 (PL 33:526; NPNF1 1:482).
 - 2 The Scriptures are lamps lit in the night of this world for our guidance to the next world where they will be needed no longer. See Augustine, *Sermon* 23, 3 (PL 38:156); *Tractates on the Gospel of John*, Tract. 35, 9 (PL 35:1662; NPNF1 7:207). Maurice Pontet remarks that Augustine “always extolled the Bible as a book written to save men. He sees in it not so much a beautiful text as a powerful remedy, and he assures us that before charming us, it will heal us.” *L’Exégèse de S. Augustin, Prédicateur* [The Exegesis of St. Augustine, Preacher] (Paris: Aubier, 1946), 112. The Church, like a mother, feeds her children from her two breasts—the two Testaments. See Augustine, *Homilies on the First Epistle of John*, hom. 3, 1 (PL 35:1998; NPNF1 7:476); Augustine, *On the Morals of the Catholic Church*, chap. 30, 62–63 (PL 32:1335–1336; NPNF1 4:58); *The True Religion*, chap. 7, 12 (PL 34:128). The Church is the custodian and interpreter of Scripture. See *Confessions*, bk. 7, chap. 7, 11 (PL 32:739; NPNF1 1:106); bk. 13, chap. 29, 44 (PL 32:864; NPNF1 1:205). For Augustine, “I would not believe the Gospel unless the authority of the Church moved (*commoverit*) me thereto.” *Against the Epistle of Manichaeus*, chap. 5, 6 (PL 42:176; NPNF1 4:131).

as he makes more or less progress in holy Scripture.”³ He was so convinced of this that shortly after his ordination, when Valerius insisted on making him preach, he writes to the bishop:

I ought to study carefully the remedies God has provided in his Scriptures. By prayer and reading I must gain the proper strength for my soul, that it may be prepared for this perilous task. For I was ordained just at the vacation time when I was planning how I could best learn the sacred Scriptures. I was planning on some leisure to do this. Indeed, to tell the truth, I knew not at that time how ill-prepared I was for this present task which now fills me with anxiety and threatens to crush me.⁴

Augustine then begs the bishop to grant him a little time to study the Bible for the profit of those committed to his care. After his episcopal consecration, he bargained with his flock to give him some time so he could study the Bible. The compact was soon violated, as he acknowledged: “I am not permitted to have the leisure for the work I wish to do.”⁵

Even after long, toilsome years of study, he still felt that he had learned so little from the Bible that he wanted a co-adjutor bishop in his diocese to lighten his burden. In 426 he begs the flock, “Let me now, if God grants me a little longer time to live, devote that little space, not to sloth or idleness, but to his holy Scriptures wherein, as far as he allows and strengthens me, I may exercise myself.”⁶ From beginning to end, Augustine saw the need of feeding upon the Bible, this “daily bread of my soul,” in order to feed his hungering flock.⁷

As Bishop of Hippo, Augustine outlined his approach to preaching in the opening words of a sermon commenting on the multiplication of the loaves:

In explaining the Holy Scriptures to you, I, as it were, break bread for you [*Scripturas sacras vobis, quasi panes frangimus vobis*]. As hungering, receive it. . . . And you who are rich in your banquet, be not meager in good works and deeds. What I deal out is not my own. What you eat, I eat. What you live upon, I

3 Augustine, *Christian Doctrine*, bk. 4, chap. 5, 7 (PL 34:92; NPNF1 2:576). He adds, “I do not mean in the extensive reading and memorizing of them, but in a thorough understanding and the careful searching into their meanings.”

4 Augustine, *Epistle* 21, 3–4 (PL 33:88–89; NPNF1 1:238).

5 Augustine, *Epistle* 213, 5 (PL 33:968; NPNF1 1:570).

6 Augustine, *Epistle* 213, 6 (PL 969; NPNF1 1:570).

7 He often refers to the daily bread of the Our Father prayer as the bread of the Scriptures. See also *Sermon* 56, 6, 10 (PL 38:381); 57, 7 (PL 38:389).

live upon. We have in heaven a common storehouse; from there comes the Word of God.⁸

Italicized scriptural references sprinkle throughout almost every page of Jacques-Paul Migne's edition of Augustine's sermons.⁹ The language of the Bible is habitual with him. Its peculiar turns and favorite expressions are constantly on his lips.¹⁰ Here is how he considers his duty:

In expounding the Word of God and more especially, the holy Gospel, we must, brethren, as much as we can, dwell fully on every part of the sacred text, *not leaving one single passage unnoticed*. In addition, we ourselves must be nourished according to our capacity. I must minister to you whence I am nourished.¹¹

Sowing Trouble in Order to Instruct

His type of biblical preaching centered on glossing the Bible. This was an adoption of the classical Roman teacher of literature and language, the *grammaticus* who explained Virgil and Homer by breaking the text into fragments and analyzing each word under the microscope of encyclopedic learning. Augustine's process was identical; only the text had been changed.¹²

Scrupulous to explain every passage, he encountered many difficulties. Of course, he would rather read the Gospel to the people than discuss in his own words the questions he finds in it,¹³ but he understands that these questionings have been willed by God: "The Teacher has given trouble in order to instruct, has sown a difficulty in order to excite earnest attention."¹⁴ "For there are in holy

8 Augustine, *Sermon* 95, 1 (PL 38:581).

9 See PL 38–39.

10 Besides his ingenious adaptations and unconscious allusions, there are 13,276 formal citations from the Old Testament and 29,540 from the New Testament, according to Maurist editions, the eleven-volume edition of Augustine's complete works published by the Benedictine community at St. Maur, 1679–1700, and reprinted in the Migne edition, PL 32–47. See also Henri Iréné Marrou, *Saint Augustin et l'Augustinisme* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1956), 57; Eng.: *St. Augustine and His Influence through the Ages*, trans. Patrick Hepburne-Scott (New York: Harper, 1956). Célestin Douais affirms that from Augustine's works, two-thirds of the Bible can be constructed. "Augustin," *Dictionnaire de la Bible, Supplément*, ed. Louis Pirot, André Robert, Jacques Briend, and Édouard Cochenet (Paris: Létouzey et Ané, 1926), 1:1240.

11 Augustine, *Gospel of John*, Tract. 2, 1 (PL 35:1388; NPNF1 7:13).

12 See Fredrik Van de Meer, *Saint Augustin, Pasteur d'âmes*, 2 vols. (Paris: Editions Alsatia, 1955), 2:246; Eng.: *Augustine the Bishop*, trans. Brian Battershaw and G. R. Lamb (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1962).

13 Augustine, *Sermon*, 356, 1 (PL 39:1574).

14 Augustine, *Sermon*, 126, 8, 10 (PL 38:703).

Scripture deep mysteries which are hidden lest they should be held cheap; sought, that they may employ us; opened, that they may feed us."¹⁵ As he wrote Volusian:

The very language in which the holy Scripture is expressed is accessible to all, but penetrable by few. In its easily understood parts, it speaks to the heart of the learned and unlearned like a familiar friend who uses no subterfuge. Even those truths which it veils in mystery, it does not set forth with such lofty eloquence that the slow and unskilled mind dares not approach—like a poor man fearing to draw near to a rich one; rather, in simple speech holy Scripture invites all. It not only feeds them with evident truths but even exercises them with the hidden ones, for truth exists in both what is clear and what is hidden. But lest the obvious truths should cause disgust, the hidden ones arouse longings; longings bring on certain renewals; renewals bring sweet inner knowledge. By these means depraved minds are set straight, small ones are nourished, great ones are filled with delight.¹⁶

The preacher searches for Scriptural difficulties and solutions and presents them to his audience, thereby gaining attention and provoking thought. Augustine, I think, is certain of the effectiveness of this technique. Almost every sermon contains a scriptural problem; some sermons, in fact, center around one problem and its solution. Psychologically, the technique is sound. Curiosity springs from a love of the known rather than the unknown. We are conscious of the knowledge we already possess but we cannot know the limitations of that knowledge unless we know that other things exist, that our knowledge can unfold and flower. An explicit problem awakens this consciousness of ignorance or deficiency and this in turn becomes an impetus to sound reflective thinking and hard reasoning, whereas thinking without the perception of an actual problem is often barren.¹⁷

The role of the preacher as teacher is to prod the mind: "The reason why you question another is no other than to teach the one you question," writes Augustine in his early work, *The Teacher*.¹⁸ The teacher suggests that the student's present knowledge has a privation. He then guides the mind to march from the known to the unknown in order to conquer new ground. Every word in the Bible is true.

15 Augustine, *Expositions of the Psalms*, 140, 1 (PL 37:1815; NPNF1 8:641).

16 Augustine, *Epistle* 137, 18 (PL 33:524; NPNF1 1:480).

17 Augustine, *On the Trinity*, bk. 10, chap. 1–2 (PL 42:971–975).

18 Augustine, *The Teacher*, chap. 1, 1 (PL 32:1194), also in *The Fathers of the Church: A New Translation* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America, 1947–), 59:7. Hereafter abbreviated FC.

Contradictions that appear in the text cannot be true contradictions.¹⁹ Present a contradiction and curiosity is aroused, for the mind wishes to rest in a resolution of the problem.

Sermon 71 is a good example. In Matthew's gospel, Christ emphatically declared: "Whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come."²⁰ For Augustine this was the most difficult problem in Scripture, and also the most important. He shows the difficulty: "What will become of those whom the Church desires to gain? When they have come into the Church from whatsoever error, is the hope in the remission of sins a false hope?" He then elaborates on the problem. Non-believers who blaspheme believers' sanctification blaspheme the Holy Spirit. Some of the Jewish leaders believed that Christ cast out devils through the prince of devils, not through the Holy Spirit. Heretics deny that the Holy Spirit is in the Catholic Church; some even deny his existence. Apostates, having received the Holy Spirit through baptism, leave the Church, apparently ungrateful of the gift. Are all these people forever without hope of forgiveness? Moreover, every doctrine contrary to truth is against the Holy Spirit, "and yet the Church does not cease to reform and gather out of every error those who shall receive the remission of sins and the Holy Spirit himself."

Thus having set up the problem, Augustine preaches that God wills "to exercise us by the difficulty of the question and not to deceive us by a false decision." He has taken an apparently uninteresting text, presented a practical difficulty, thereby creating interest. He then proposes the solution.

Proposing Problems in Scripture and their Solutions

Augustine develops sermon after sermon in this way. Space permits but a few examples of the Scriptural problems he poses and proceeds to propose solutions for:

"For the flesh lusts against the spirit, and the spirit against the flesh; for these are opposed to each other, so that you do not what you would." Does this mean that we can use as an excuse for our sins, "I am forced, I am overcome by evil"?²¹

19 Inerrancy is intimately connected with inspiration; see Augustine, *On the Literal Meaning of Genesis*, bk. 4, chap. 34, 53 (PL 34:319), also in *Ancient Christian Writers: The Works of the Fathers in Translation* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 1946–), 41:143. Hereafter abbreviated ACW. See also *The City of God*, bk. 21, chap. 7, 1 (PL 41:719; NPNF 2:458). It is the duty of the interpreter to see that in his explanations he does not leave the impression that Scripture is contradicting itself, a thing which is impossible. Augustine, *Our Lord's Sermon on the Mount according to Matthew*, bk. 1, chap. 22, 76 (PL 34:1267; NPNF 6:31).

20 Matt. 12:32.

21 Augustine, *Sermon* 128, 5, 7 (PL 38:716); see also Gal. 5:17.

God saw the world, that it was good. But is not the Creator overlooking all the evil in the world?²²

How can the dead bury the dead?²³

More often Augustine combines two scriptural passages that appear to be contradictory or at least create confusion:

“God tempts no man” (James 1:13). But: “The Lord our God tempts you” (Deut. 13:3); furthermore, Christ “tempts him [Philip]” (John 6:5).²⁴

Christ apparently contradicts himself in the same sentence: “In praying, do not multiply words . . . for your Father knows what you need before you ask him” (Matt. 6:7–8). But: If the Father knows, why ask at all? And what of this declaration of Christ: “Ask, and it shall be given you” (Matt. 7:7).²⁵

“Thou art beautiful above the sons of men” (Ps. 45:2). But: “There is no beauty in him, nor comeliness” (Isa. 53:2).²⁶

“I am not sent, but unto the lost sheep of Israel” (Matt. 15:24). But: “Other sheep I have which are not of this fold” (John 10:16).²⁷

“Let your light shine before men, in order that they may see your good works” (Matt. 5:16). But: “Take heed not to do your good before men, in order to be seen by men” (Matt. 6:1).²⁸

A man wants to bury his father: “Honor thy father and thy mother.” But: “Let the dead bury their dead” (Luke 9:60).²⁹

The constant use of this pedagogical method gives both preacher and audience a “cautious attitude of mind”³⁰—a realization that not every line of Scripture can be

22 Augustine, *Sermon* 96, 4 (PL 38:586–588); see also Gen. 1:31.

23 Augustine, *Sermon* 100, 1, 2 (PL 38:603); see also Luke 9:60.

24 Augustine, *Sermon* 71, 10, 15 (PL 38:452–453).

25 Augustine, *Sermon* 80, 2 (PL 38:494).

26 Augustine, *Sermon* 95, 4 (PL 38:582).

27 Augustine, *Sermon* 77 (PL 38:483–490).

28 Augustine, *Sermon* 54 (PL 38:372–377).

29 Augustine, *Sermon* 100, 1, 2 (PL 38:603).

30 Augustine, *Teacher*, chap. 10, 31 (PL 32:1213; FC 59:45).

understood at first glance.³¹ Buried beneath the lines are treasures which cannot but enrich the soul. The cautious and zealous investigator digs deep, finds, and shares—aware all the while that it is "hazardous to consider as known what is not known." In preaching the Bible this caution is far superior to rash assertions.³² Augustine preaches:

Remember this: not to be disturbed by the Scriptures which you do not yet understand, nor be puffed up by what you do. What you do not understand, wait for with submission; and what you do understand, hold fast with charity.³³

In addition to this submission of the soul (*animi subjectio*),³⁴ Augustine asks for prayers to enlighten both himself and his flock. For example, in putting forth the problem, the apparent contradiction between Jesus's admonition, "Tell him his fault, between you and him alone," and the advice of St. Paul: "Rebuke them in the presence of all"—Augustine says:

Are we listening to this controversy as judges? That be far from us! Yes, rather as those whose place it is to be under the Judge. Let us knock that we may obtain, that it may be opened to us. Let us fly beneath the wings of the Lord God.³⁵

The searching in common, under the action of the Holy Spirit, for an understanding of the text, follows from the delicate balance of Augustine's sermons, carefully planned, yet delivered extemporaneously. As one student of Augustine's method has noted: "There is not the slightest reason to believe that Augustine ever wrote or dictated a sermon and then read it or delivered it from memory."³⁶

31 "For such is the depth of the Christian Scriptures, that even if I were attempting to study them and nothing else from early boyhood to decrepit old age, with the utmost leisure, the most unwearied zeal, and talents greater than I have, I would be still daily making progress in discovering their treasures; not that there is so great difficulty in coming through them to know the things necessary to salvation, but when any one has accepted these truths with the faith that is indispensable as the foundation of a life of piety and uprightness, so many things which are veiled under the manifold shadows of mystery remain to be inquired into by those who are advancing in the study, and so great is the depth of wisdom not only in the words in which these things have been expressed, but also in the things themselves, that even the most advanced in years, the most penetrating of mind, the most ardent zealous one in learning, might find himself described by what Scripture says, 'When a man hath finished, then he shall begin.'" *Epistle 137*, 3 (PL 33:516–517; NPNF1 1:474); see also Sir. 18:7.

32 Augustine, *Epistle 95*, 4 (PL 33:353; NPNF1 1:402).

33 Augustine, *Sermon 51*, 14, 35 (PL 38:354).

34 Augustine, *Sermon 145*, 1 (PL 38:791).

35 Augustine, *Sermon 82*, 5, 8 (PL 38:510); see also Matt. 18:15; 1 Tim. 5:20.

36 Roy J. Deferrari, "St. Augustine's Method of Composing and Delivering Sermons," *The American Journal of Philology* 43 (1922): 119. According to Deferrari, stenographers (*notarii*) took down

This *ex tempore* preaching necessitates vast remote preparation: an awareness of the Church's teaching, the careful reading and memorizing of the Bible, acute observations of daily life in order to draw ready examples, development of sensitivity to the immediate needs and capacities of the people, rapid adaptability, and a quick mind coupled with a sure flow of words. True, when we read Augustine, we are listening to a master who had triumphantly carried off the prize for rhetoric against brilliant Roman competitors. Nevertheless, a master can teach underlings.

Augustine wants the preacher to have a working knowledge of biblical languages, plus natural history, music, history, logic, and philosophy.³⁷ He should not only read extensively and memorize accurately the Bible, but thoroughly understand it and carefully search into its meaning.³⁸ He should develop Augustine's habit of pinning down ideas in writing—the ideas that arise while meditating “during brief moments on the Law of God.”³⁹ If he does possess a well-stored mind, he will look to the works of others as well, especially to Scripture commentaries and printed sermons.

But above all Augustine would have the preacher develop a devout attitude toward his use of Scripture. It is the Lord who will give him the proper understanding of the text, and it is the Lord who will enlighten the hearts of his hearers. Even in his sermons, Augustine remained ever the Doctor of Grace:

All that I have said has been said only to make the difficulty of the question increase. You yourselves see how valid it is and almost insoluble. May the Lord help me to solve it. May he who deigned to put it before us deign also to explain it. Pray with me

in shorthand the sermons as they were being delivered. Van de Meer suggests the *notarii* may have been recruited from the clerics of Augustine's community. *Saint Augustin*, 2:208. Certainly this position helps explain the vigorous, controversial tone, and many irregularities found in the discourses. Apparently the bishop sometimes delivered even impromptu talks, as when he prepared a short psalm (138) to expound, but saw that the flustered lector had sung a different one at the last moment: “So I prefer to follow God's will in the lector's mistake rather than my own in my original purpose” (PL 37:1784).

37 Augustine, *Christian Doctrine*, bk. 2, chap. 11, 16 (PL 34:42–43; NPNF1 2:540); bk. 2, chap. 16, 24 (PL 47; NPNF1 2:543); bk. 2, chap. 29, 45 (PL 34:56–57; NPNF1 2:549–550); bk. 2, chap. 28, 42 (PL 34:55–56; NPNF1 2:549); bk. 2, chap. 31, 48 (PL 34:58; NPNF1 2:550); bk. 2, chap. 40, 60 (PL 34:63; NPNF1 2:554). Augustine does not think it pedantic to trace a word back to its original Greek for the simple people. For example in his commentaries on St. John, see Tract. 3, 8 (PL 35:1399; NPNF1 7:21); 82:1 (PL 35:843; NPNF1 7:346); 83:2 (PL 35:1845; NPNF1 7:348); 100:1 (PL 35:1891; NPNF1 7:385); 104:3 (PL 35:1903; NPNF1 7:395).

38 Augustine, *Christian Doctrine*, bk. 4, chap. 5, 7 (PL 34:92; NPNF1 2:576).

39 Hugh Pope, *Saint Augustine of Hippo* (London: Sands, 1937), 167. Because of frequent repetition of phrases and thoughts, Joseph Christopher thinks Augustine probably kept a commonplace book wherein he noted down turns of expressions and metaphors that particularly appealed to him. See *De Catechizandis Rudibus*, 217.

for some issue. Give me your ears; give him your heart. What he wishes to suggest to me, I will communicate to you.⁴⁰

40 Augustine, *Sermon* 244, 2 (PL 38:1149).