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Scholarship and Ministry in the Life and Thought of Augustine

Abstract

Augustine is frequently recognized as one of the greatest Christian theologians in all of church history. His influence extends to both Protestant and Catholic circles, and his numerous theological works are still referenced by today's students of theology. The context of his theological writings are often overlooked. While he did, on occasion, seek to write weighty and intricate theological works, his primary focus was upon better equipping himself to minister to the believers he served as the bishop of Hippo. This is clearly evidenced in his sermons and his letters, which provide an important window into his historical context.

Keywords

Augustine, Scholarship, Ministry

Cover Page Footnote

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INTRODUCTION

Augustine of Hippo is frequently recognized for his intellectual aptitude and immense collection of written works on various topics of philosophy, theology, and Christian doctrine. While Augustine was one of the most prolific and influential writers of the early church, his influence took place within an important context. Augustine spent most of his adult life occupying a role as an ordained clergyman in the North African church. While his theological works are still of great value today, it is important to remember that his concern for sound doctrine arose from his experiences as a minister and shepherd of his flock. This essay will seek to demonstrate that although Augustine was a capable scholar and an immeasurably influential theologian, his studies after his ordination were primarily ministry-oriented: motivated by the real needs of the church.

AUGUSTINE AND THE MINISTRY

The trajectory of Augustine's life changed dramatically after his conversion as he dedicated himself completely to the service of God. Just a few years after his baptism in 387 CE, Augustine was ordained as a priest in Hippo. Shortly after his ordination, he began preaching at the request of his bishop, Valerius,¹ and he was eventually appointed as the successive bishop of Hippo in 395/396. His prior training in rhetoric, intellectual ability, and renunciation of the world made him an excellent candidate to become an ordained clergyman in the turbulent matrix of the North African church, though this was something that he was admittedly avoiding. Augustine recalled in a sermon to his congregation:

So much, though, did I dread the episcopate . . . I wouldn't go near a place where I knew there was no bishop. I avoided this job, and I did everything I could to assure my salvation in a lowly position . . . I was caught, I was made a priest, and by this grade I eventually came to the episcopate.²

Though Augustine states that his ordination occurred against his will, he came to see this as the enactment of God's will rather than as mistreatment on the part of the congregants at Hippo.³ Augustine viewed his ministry as a heavy burden that had been laid upon him, being not only accountable to God for his own actions, but also for the actions of his congregation.⁴ Though the opportunity was present for him to enjoy a peaceful life of intellectual contemplation, Augustine's calling was "to

¹ Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo: A Biography* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2000), 132.

² Augustine, "Sermon 355.2," in *Essential Sermons*, ed. Boniface Ramsey (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2007), 407.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid., "Sermon 339.1," 390.

preach, to refute, to rebuke, to build up, to manage for everybody”⁵ and these responsibilities were a “great burden, a great weight, [and] a great labor.”⁶ While he is often recognized for the contributions he made to Christian theology, Augustine was first and foremost, as Eno states, “consumed by his calling” to be a “good shepherd . . . who puts the ideal of *prodesse* (being of service to others) ahead of *praeesee* (being in a position of authority).”⁷

Lienhard notes that Augustine considered the primary emphasis of his ministry as that of preaching,⁸ and Brown concurs in stating, “Augustine was certain of his basic role. It was not to stir up emotion: it was to distribute food . . . by expounding the Bible.”⁹ More precisely, it can be said that Augustine considered the role of the ministers of the church as involving the delivery of both the Scriptures and the sacraments to the congregation.¹⁰ Though his position required him to participate in certain civil and social roles (such as deciding civil suits),¹¹ Augustine viewed his pastoral responsibilities as his primary obligation in the See of Hippo. According to Lawless, Augustine described the pastor’s role as requiring interpretation and teaching, defense of the faith, teaching what is good, ‘unteaching’ what is evil, winning over those hostile to the truth, affecting the careless, impressing the truth upon the ignorant, and teaching the people about what to expect in everyday life.¹² Ellingsen notes that Augustine viewed his responsibility as a shepherd-teacher “like a hen covering her brood . . . willing to descend to the people’s level of understanding.”¹³ In his ecclesial roles, Augustine was careful to support his preaching with his holy lifestyle. Clark notes, “Augustine’s own spiritual life comprised union with God, communion with his neighbors, and ministry to those in need of spiritual and material assistance.”¹⁴ Thus as bishop, Augustine sought to feed his sheep from the Scriptures, minister to their needs, and provide them with an example to follow as he sought to live a life of service to God.

⁵ Ibid., “Sermon 339.4,” 392.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Robert B. Eno, “New Light on Augustine the Pastor,” in *Studies in Catholic History: In Honor of John Tracy Ellis*, ed. Nelson H. Minnich, Robert B. Eno and Robert F. Trisco (Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier, 1985), 502.

⁸ Joseph T. Lienhard, “Ministry,” in *Augustine Through the Ages*, ed. Allan D. Fitzgerald (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999), 568.

⁹ Brown, *Augustine of Hippo: A Biography*, 249.

¹⁰ Lienhard, “Ministry,” 568; Mark Ellingsen, *The Richness of Augustine: His Contextual and Pastoral Theology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 117.

¹¹ Ibid, 569.

¹² George Lawless, “Preaching,” in *Augustine Through the Ages*, ed. Allan D. Fitzgerald (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999), 675.

¹³ Ellingsen, *The Richness of Augustine: His Contextual and Pastoral Theology*, 117.

¹⁴ Mary T. Clark, “Spirituality,” in *Augustine Through the Ages*, ed. Allan D. Fitzgerald (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999), 815.

THE ROLE OF SCHOLARSHIP

Augustine was undoubtedly a man who valued the benefits of concentrated study and careful reflection. In a letter to Aurelius in 401, Augustine stated that when preparing monks for ministerial roles, he expected them to have received a certain level of instruction in the Scriptures before being considered for the position.¹⁵ In another letter written in 408 to Paulinus and Therasia, Augustine asserted that the Scriptures “are lightly touched rather than grasped and handled by us, seeing that in by far the greater part of them we do not already possess opinions definite and ascertained, but are rather inquiring what our opinion ought to be.”¹⁶ Thus, for Augustine, the study of Scriptures was a never-ending task and the process of openness and education was “much better than the rashness of dogmatic assertion.”¹⁷ The seriousness with which Augustine approached the study of the Scriptures is also evidenced in an exchange of letters with Jerome in 405. In a reply to a previously received letter, Augustine retorted,

You ask, or rather you give a command with the confiding boldness of charity, that we should amuse ourselves in the field of the Scriptures without wounding each other. For my part, I am by all means disposed to exercise myself in earnest much rather than in mere amusement on such themes.¹⁸

Smither notes that this exchange “reveals the seriousness with which he regarded the Scriptures but also his task to interpret and apply them in the context of his ministry in Hippo, far from the leisurely and contemplative situation Jerome enjoyed in Bethlehem.”¹⁹ It is clear then that Augustine highly valued the role of learning and study, but primarily as a means of better fulfilling his role as bishop of Hippo.

In a letter written to his bishop, Valerius, in 391, Augustine requested a period of focused study prior to beginning the duties to which he was recently assigned following his ordination. One can see that, even at the beginning of his ministry, Augustine desired to study the Scriptures in a careful manner so that he might know how to minister the truth of salvation to others. His purpose for this request was in order to seek “what is profitable not for myself alone, but for many, that they may be saved.”²⁰ Thus clearly the preparation for, and enrichment of, his ministry was his primary concern for this contemplative hiatus.

¹⁵ Augustine, “Letter 60.1,” in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers: Volume 1*, ed. Philip Schaff, (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2004), 318.

¹⁶ Ibid., “Letter 95.4,” 402.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid., “Letter 82.1.2,” 350.

¹⁹ Edward L. Smither, *Augustine as Mentor: A Model for Preparing Spiritual Leaders* (Nashville, TN: Broadman and Holman Publishing Group, 2008), 164.

²⁰ Augustine, “Letter 21.3-4,” in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers: Volume 1*, 238.

In another exchange of letters in 410, on this occasion with Dioscorus, Augustine demonstrates his strong belief that the priorities of his ministry came first, and that his studies were undertaken in order to feed his sheep and not for the acquisition of knowledge alone. In response to Dioscorus' letter, in which he posed numerous philosophical questions to the bishop, Augustine replied,

For when I consider how a bishop is distracted and overwrought by the cares of his office clam[oring] on every side, it does not seem to me proper for him suddenly, as if deaf, to withdraw himself from all these, and devote himself to the work of expounding to a single student some unimportant questions in the Dialogues of Cicero.²¹

Later in the letter, Augustine told Dioscorus that it is absurd to think that devoting time to the study of useless things could prepare someone for the only task that is truly important and necessary, which is to teach the truths of Christianity which are "supremely necessary" for eternal salvation.²² Moreover, Augustine challenged Dioscorus that the works of Cicero and the philosophers were not even profitable in apologetic endeavors, for the Arians, Donatists, Manichaeans, and other heretical sects (with whom Augustine spent considerable time and energy debating), did not bring forward arguments from these fruitless philosophical works.²³

Augustine also exchanged a number of letters with Evodius in 414/415 in which he again admitted his inability to focus on deep philosophical and theological questions because of his numerous ministry-oriented duties. In reply to Evodius' inquiry concerning some theologically oriented questions, Augustine stated that a satisfactory answer to the issues required "a mind absolutely at leisure,"²⁴ which Augustine was unable to provide because of the duties that consumed his time. Though his time was limited, Augustine was far more patient with his friend Evodius' questions concerning the nature of man and the soul, than with the philosophical questions of Dioscorus concerning Cicero, which, according to Augustine, did not have any relevance to Christian theology. While Augustine seemed hesitant in his response to the more philosophical questions of Evodius, he did respond in depth to some difficult questions posed to him by Evodius in another letter concerning the interpretation of 1 Peter 3.²⁵ In a third letter to Evodius, Augustine discussed his work on the *City of God*, and mentioned that his writing of the books *On the Trinity* had been delayed. The reason for his procrastination on this work was that its books were "of a nature to be understood only by few; on which account they claim my attention less urgently than writings which may, I hope, be useful to very many."²⁶ Elsewhere in the letter, Augustine instructed

²¹ Ibid., "Letter 118.1.2," 438.

²² Ibid., "Letter 118.1.11," 442.

²³ Ibid., "Letter 118.1.12," 442.

²⁴ Ibid., "Letter 159.1.1," 513.

²⁵ Ibid., "Letter 164," 515-521.

²⁶ Ibid., "Letter 169.1.1," 539.

Evodius not to think that only those with an astute intellect were able to comprehend the truths of Christ, for if this were the case their ministries were in vain.²⁷ As he concluded his remarks, Augustine resourced Evodius with some suggestions by which he could further pursue his questions and requested that he be left “free from distraction in studying and dictating to my clerks those things which, being urgently required by many, claim in my opinion precedence over your questions, which are of interest to very few.”²⁸

Augustine was clearly quite accustomed to answering numerous letters requesting him to share his wisdom. As Eno notes, “Much of Augustine’s valuable time was taken up answering the questions sent to him. Some concerned liturgical or rubrical questions or, more accurately, theological questions posed by liturgical practices.”²⁹ Augustine was also quick to answer “the questions and objections of curious pagans, which he deemed well worth his best efforts.”³⁰ The harsh tone of his replies to Jerome and Dioscorus suggests that there was a particular aspect of these correspondences that was troublesome to Augustine. Likely, the tension existed because, as Brown notes, Augustine “could never be a ‘disinterested’ Biblical scholar.”³¹ This is evidenced by another statement in his correspondence with Jerome,

Whatever abilities I may have for such study [of Scripture], I devote entirely to the instruction of the people whom God has entrusted to me; and I am wholly precluded by my ecclesiastical occupations from having leisure for any further prosecution of my studies than is necessary for my duty in public teaching.³²

Much unlike Jerome and Dioscorus, Augustine had little time for leisurely contemplation. As previously noted, his duties as bishop consumed his time, and he was often able to focus on his study and writing only at night since his days were busy with ecclesial and administrative affairs.³³ Thus, he studied in order to feed his sheep, and not merely to satisfy his own curiosities.

Torchia recognizes an important distinction in this sphere of Augustine’s life and thought. For Augustine, “While the love of truth (*caritas veritatis*) seeks the ‘sanctified leisure’ (*otium sanctum*) of contemplation, the necessity of love (*necessitas caritatis*) demands a willing acceptance of our social and ecclesiastical obligations.”³⁴ Augustine’s desire for knowledge was tempered by his duty to love his neighbor. Those things that did not make ample use of his time and did not

²⁷ Ibid., “Letter 169.1.4,” 540.

²⁸ Ibid., “Letter 169.4.13,” 543.

²⁹ Eno, “New Light on Augustine the Pastor,” 506.

³⁰ Ibid., 507.

³¹ Brown, *Augustine of Hippo: A Biography*, 249.

³² Augustine, “Letter 123.2.5,” in *Nicence and Post-Nicene Fathers: Volume 1*, 331.

³³ See Letter 139.3, 224.2.

³⁴ N. Joseph Torchia, “Contemplation and Action,” in *Augustine Through the Ages*, ed. Allan D. Fitzgerald (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999), 233.

exhibit love towards others were deemed as less important. As a young man, Augustine embarked on a feverish quest for truth. Following his ordination, however, Augustine seems to have measured his efforts in study by how effective they would be in ministering to the people of God. This is illustrated by his frustration with questions that seemed to him superfluous, and his giving priority to the writings that he deemed would have the widest influence, assigning his efforts on more intellectual works, such as his *On the Trinity*, a lower level of priority.

It should not be thought, however, that Augustine no longer valued intellectual activity or did not admire those who excelled in the exercise of their mind. For Augustine, scholarship and ministry were truly not seen as antithetical forces, but rather were to be deeply intertwined. His views of this subject arose out of his personal growth as he assumed the role of ordained clergyman in the North African church and sought to balance these two aspects of his life. Torchia summarizes, “From Augustine’s most mature theological perspective, then, no one has a right to lead a life of contemplation to the neglect of temporal responsibilities, but no one should be so immersed in active service as to relinquish the delight of truth.”³⁵ His duties to the church were his true calling, and he pursued them with the utmost seriousness, which included diligent study of the Scriptures and defense against heresies. Augustine’s opportunity to lead a life of leisure ended with his ordination, and as Smither notes “his burden for the ministry and ‘active life’ (*uita actiua*) took precedent over the ‘contemplative life’ (*uita comtemplatiua*) of the monastery.”³⁶ Thus for Augustine, scholarship and ministry were not incompatible, but it was necessary to put them in their proper place in order to appropriately integrate them. Following his ordination, it seems clear that his typical habit became participating in study in order to better cultivate his ministry and meet the needs of the church.

CONCLUSION

Augustine’s ministry as the bishop of Hippo sets his later works in an important context. Though Augustine was, without question, a bright and influential theologian and apologist, providing a much-needed service to the North African church, he frequently identified his primary obligation as his ministry to the church. After his ordination, he was mentored by his bishop Valerius and allowed a period to commit himself to the study of the Scriptures as preparation for his ministry. While he viewed preaching as his primary responsibility as bishop, Augustine was involved in a number of tasks related to his office, including apologetic endeavors, participation in church councils, oversight of the monastery at Hippo, administering the sacraments, training clergymen, and writing numerous books and letters to equip the church in North Africa and abroad.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Smither, *Augustine as Mentor: A Model for Preparing Spiritual Leaders*, 148.

Though he was a diligent scholar in his own right, a number of his letters reveal that after his ordination Augustine viewed studying as a task to support his ministry rather than an end in itself. On several occasions, and most notably to Jerome and Dioscorus, Augustine rebuked a life of intellectual leisure that had no concern for the needs of the church or lacked a proper respect for the authority of the Scriptures and the church. As Torchia notes, his studies were performed with a “growing sense of responsibility to the temporal needs of his congregation... [which] contributed to a balancing of contemplation and action in Augustine’s writings and life.”³⁷ Augustine rebuked Dioscorus for his request to respond to questions regarding the Dialogues of Cicero, chastised Jerome for his relaxed approach to handling the Scriptures, and was hesitant to respond in depth to Evodius’ questions that were more philosophical in nature. In both his own personal studies and his resourcing of others, it is clear that Augustine gave a heavy priority to those matters that were most germane to the needs of the church. His main concern was to write and speak on matters that were relevant and beneficial to the broadest segment of society, and not only to participate in contemplation with the intellectually elite. This was not due to any deficiency in his ability, but rather a clear sense of intentional priority in Augustine’s mind that his scholarship was to be practically focused on those real needs of the church that most urgently required addressing. Though he did find time to write more theologically weighty treatises, such as his *On the Trinity*, Augustine prioritized those matters which were necessary for the many rather than the issues which were of interest to only a few.

³⁷ N. Joseph Torchia, “Contemplation and Action,” 235.

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