

The Prayer of Rhetoric: Augustine as Christian Rhetorician in *De Doctrina Christiana*

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Dedicated to William Frank

My speech and my proclamation were not with plausible words of wisdom, but with the demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that faith might rest not on human wisdom but on the power of God.¹

[S]peakers must pray that God will place a good sermon on their lips.²

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¹ Paul, 1 Corinthians 2:4. All citations from the Bible are from the NRSV. Hereafter, cited internally.

² All citations from *De Doctrina Christiana* are from Peter Green's ed. and trans. (Oxford: Clarendon P, 1995). Hereafter, cited internally as DDC.

I. INTRODUCTION

After his conversion to Christianity, Augustine appeared to reject the very rhetorical tradition he studied and taught. Sometimes, Augustine's rejection is ferocious, as when he rehearses in 397 the apparently Platonic anti-rhetorical case in the *Confessions*:³

Throughout that nine-year period . . . I was astray myself and led others astray, was deceived and deceived others in various forms of self-assertion, publicly by the teaching of what are called liberal arts. . . . In those years I taught the art of rhetoric. (4.1.1–2)

Sometimes the rejection is a matter only of neglect. Thirty years after the *Confessions* in 426/7, when he completes *On Christian Teaching*,⁴ he makes an Aristotelian case that the misuse of a thing does not establish the thing itself as bad:⁵

There are also certain rules of the more flamboyant discipline now called eloquence, which are valid in spite of the fact that they can be used to commend falsehood. Since they can also be used to commend the truth, it is not the subject itself that is reprehensible, but the perversity of those who abuse it. (2.132)

Here Augustine defends rhetoric as at least value-neutral, maybe even good, its ethical character defined by that of the rhetor and his distinct ends: the abuse of a good thing is perverse; the good thing is not. There is

³ Trans. F.J. Sheed. Ed. Michael P. Foley. (Indiana and Cambridge: Hackett Publishing, 2006). Hereafter, cited internally. For the case that Plato is only apparently opposed to rhetoric, see my "An Art of Gathering Scattered Humanity: Ciceronian Civic Humanism and the Defense of Responsible Rhetoric in *De Oratore*." *Ramify 2* (2011): 67–92. There I examine, as well, the defenses of rhetoric by both Aristotle and Cicero.

⁴ See Green on dating (xi–xiii). I will treat the whole as a late work since he may have revised earlier material before incorporating later; he at least allowed the earlier material to stand.

⁵ See the comparable passage in Aristotle's *Rhetoric*, 1.1.11–14, during which he explains that what distinguishes rhetoric and sophistry is not the faculty (*dunamis*) of persuasion and its art, but the ethical deliberation and choice involved in its exercise (1.1.14). The *prohairesis* of the rhetor would involve both rhetorical end and ethical character. The rhetorical and the sophistic power may be shared, but the rhetor is, for Aristotle (and Cicero), concerned with virtue and good ends. Augustine repeats the argument in both the earlier portions of DDC and the later ones (4.4–5, for example).

throughout *De Doctrina Christiana* a general defense of putting classical rhetoric to Christian purpose. Charles Sears Baldwin may have it right that the treatise “begins rhetoric anew,”⁶ but Augustine’s defense of rhetoric is largely the one inherited from Plato, Aristotle, and Cicero. He points out that “[e]loquent speakers give pleasure, wise ones salvation” (4.23), but follows quickly by indicating that there are plenty who can give both: “So there are men of the church who have interpreted God’s eloquent utterances not only with wisdom but [also] with eloquence as well” (23). He might well have had Cicero’s *De Inventione* open before him: “[W]isdom without eloquence does too little good for states, but . . . eloquence without wisdom is generally highly disadvantageous and is never helpful.”⁷ But before one assumes that pagan rhetoric is no longer a problem at all in the Christian culture Augustine is inventing,⁸ one ought to remember that in the very same book of the treatise and not much further on, when he is listing those branches of learning to be stolen from pagan culture like so much Egyptian gold in the new hands of the chosen people, he leaves out rhetoric (2.140). This even while he is trying to establish a distinctly Christian rhetoric.

One way to explain this transition from ferocious rejection to benign neglect is this: Augustine goes from thinking of the art of eloquence as sophisticated to thinking of it as rhetorical. That is, he rejects his education in the pedagogy of the Second Sophistic, which thought of rhetoric as a mere instrument of persuasion with no thought to virtuous ends, and tries to establish rhetoric in accord with the Ciceronian ideal, which thought of rhetoric as eloquent wisdom in the service of the highest ends of human life. Those virtuous ends are now recast in distinctly Christian terms.⁹ The idea that Cicero is important to Augustine is hardly

⁶ *Medieval Rhetoric and Poetics (to 1400): Interpreted from Representative Works* (Gloucester, Mass.: Peter Smith, 1959), 51.

⁷ Trans. H.M. Hubbell (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1949), I.1.

⁸ For a treatment of the general question of the merit of pagan culture (esp. the art of rhetoric) for Christian purpose, see James J. Murphy’s “St. Augustine and the Debate About a Christian Rhetoric.” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 46 (1960): 400–410. He argues that Augustine was more favorably inclined than his contemporaries to put classical rhetoric to Christian purpose.

⁹ See Calvin L. Troup’s discussion of the topic in *Temporality, Eternity, and Wisdom: The Rhetoric of Augustine’s Confessions* (Columbia: U of South Carolina P, 1999), esp. 11–35. On the Second Sophistic, see George Kennedy’s *Classical Rhetoric and Its Christian and Secular Tradition from Ancient to Modern Times* (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1980), esp. 37–40. On Cicero and the union of wisdom and eloquence, see Raymond D. DiLorenzo’s “The Critique of Socrates

new: as Harald Hagendahl observed long ago in *Augustine and the Latin Classics*, "Among the profane Latin authors in Augustine's works Cicero takes first place."¹⁰ Hagendahl points out that Augustine makes twelve references to *De Oratore* (554), in which dialogue Cicero gives his privileged speaker Crassus the vision of the harmony of rhetoric and philosophy Augustine finds so attractive: "'If someone prefers to give the title of philosopher to this orator who . . . unites wisdom and eloquence, I shall not hinder him.'"¹¹ Even as Augustine qualifies his earlier rejection of rhetoric, though, the art still remains a problem for him. Though he is clearly influenced by the Ciceronian defense of rhetoric, he remains troubled by it. Why? How is it that *the* Christian rhetorician in the Latin West, the one writer and speaker after Paul who could be credited with re-founding Christendom, remains throughout *De Doctrina Christiana* suspicious of his own greatest gift? And what solution to the problem of rhetoric's suspicious character does he finally propose? To answer these questions, we will need to examine Augustine's definition of Christian rhetoric, identify his specific anxiety over it, and evaluate his response to that anxiety, a response which includes the one thing nowhere found in the pagan rhetorical tradition: the orator's need for prayer.

II. AN AUGUSTINIAN RHETORIC

There will not be sufficient space here to outline in a complete form the inheritance of rhetoric Augustine received, in either its Second Sophistic or Ciceronian forms, nor to enumerate all of his contributions to the art as practitioner and theorist. Instead, allow me to define his distinct appropriation and transformation of the Ciceronian union of eloquence and wisdom. Augustine structures the work along just such a union: Book 1 concerns the things of the world to be used to achieve the only good of human life, the enjoyment of the God who made them all; Books 2–3 concern the Biblical representations or signs (unknown or ambiguous) of those things and the measure of love needed to interpret the signs; and Book 4 concerns the presentation of those signs to understand, delight in, and be moved by the things and signs in order to be persuaded to use the

in Cicero's *De Oratore*: Ornatus and the Nature of Wisdom." *Philosophy & Rhetoric* 11 (1978): 247–61.

¹⁰ (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1967), 567.

¹¹ Trans. James M. May and Jakob Wisse (New York and Oxford: Oxford UP, 2001), 3.142.

world to enjoy God. The theology of Book 1 and the hermeneutics of Books 2–3 constitute the work’s argument over wisdom; the rhetoric of Book 4 constitutes the argument over eloquence.¹² Augustine’s Christian Ciceronianism is evident throughout, but in Book 4 he isolates this very union of wisdom and philosophy as the essence of Christian rhetoric, all the while discussing it in a way very differently than Cicero does.¹³

The wisdom of the preacher is doctrinal and Biblical. For the Augustine of *De Doctrina Christiana*, there is only one truth, both in the world and in its Biblical account: the double law of love, which grounds his extended discussion of “use” and “enjoyment” in the first book and his hermeneutic in the next two. It is hard to think of another Biblical passage Augustine relies on more than Matthew 22:37–39, Jesus’ response to the question concerning the greatest commandment: “‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and the first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.” He cites the passage in part or whole in five places in *De Doctrina Christiana*. It constitutes his first principle of Christian wisdom, with respect to both Christian doctrine and Biblical interpretation. His first citation (1.42) comes in defense of his argument over use and enjoyment: “[I]t is only the eternal and the

¹² For a defense of DDC as a unified whole (and not simply a later treatise on style stitched to an earlier one on invention), see David W. Tracy’s “Charity, Obscurity, Clarity: Augustine’s Search for a True Rhetoric” in *The Rhetoric of St. Augustine of Hippo: De Doctrina Christiana and the Search for a Distinctly Christian Rhetoric*, ed. Richard Leo Enos, et al (Waco, Texas: Baylor UP, 2008), 267–286. As well, see Gerald A. Press’ “The Subject and the Structure of Augustine’s *De Doctrina Christiana*” in *Augustinian Studies* 11 (1980): 99–124.

¹³ On the topic of Augustine’s Christian Ciceronianism with respect to rhetoric in DDC, see John C. Cavadini’s “The Sweetness of the Word: Salvation and Rhetoric in Augustine’s *De doctrina christiana*” in *De doctrina christiana: A Classic of Western Culture*, ed. Duane W.H. Arnold and Pamela Bright (Notre Dame and London: U of Notre Dame P, 1995), 164–81; Matthew Walz’s “Augustine’s Modification of Liberal Education: Reflections on *De doctrina Christiana*” in *The Arts of Liberty* 1:1 (Summer 2013): 51–97, esp. 87–94; and Paul R. Kolbet’s *Augustine and the Cure of Souls: Revising a Classical Ideal* (Notre Dame, Indiana: U of Notre Dame P, 2010). I am broadly indebted to Kolbet throughout. Hereafter, cited internally. (If curious, see my review in *The Sixteenth-Century Journal* XLII.2 [Spring 2011]: 615–617.) See also Baldwin, Murphy and Tracy.

unchangeable things . . . that are to be enjoyed; other things are to be used so that we may attain the full enjoyment of those things" (1.39). Augustine interprets the two commandments as distinct: Enjoy God; use other people to enjoy God. Wisdom requires loving only God as a good in and of Himself, all other things, including people, as means to that end. If love governs things, it also governs signs. When a sign in the representation of the Lord is ambiguous and all other avenues have been tried to determine whether one ought to read a passage literally or figuratively, the one true standard is love:

We must first explain the way to discover whether an expression is literal or figurative. Generally speaking, it is this: anything that is in the divine discourse that cannot be related to good morals or to the true father should be taken as figurative. Good morals have to do with our love of God and our neighbor, the true faith with our understanding of God and our neighbor. (3.33–34)

The wisdom of the Christian orator is that the double law of love governs things and signs, a love that is theological doctrine and scriptural interpretation.

The eloquence with which that wisdom is to be presented is Ciceronian. One should not think of wisdom and eloquence as separate: For Cicero, the union arises from the interrelatedness of philosophy and rhetoric; for Augustine, it arises from the incarnational character of speech which indicates that the degree of truth in words is measured by the Word. Augustine borrows the three ends of oratory from Cicero and relates them to the Roman's three styles. (I will not be discussing style.) We know he is borrowing from Cicero since he actually quotes him, the only instance I have found of a pagan cited in the work:

It has been said by a man of eloquence, and quite rightly, that the eloquent should speak in such a way to instruct, delight, and move their listeners. He then added: 'instructing is a matter of necessity, delighting a matter of charm, and moving them a matter of conquest.' The first of these three, the need to instruct, relates to the subject-matter of our discourse, the other two to the style we use. (4.74)¹⁴

¹⁴ The citation comes from Cicero's *Orator* (69), according to Green (228).

Ernest L. Fortin argues that we need to be careful about conflating Augustine and Cicero here, for Augustine emphasizes the teaching function of oratory more heavily than Cicero does.¹⁵ Be that as it may, Augustine's conception of the three ends provides him with a three-fold model of presenting the things of Christian reality and their signs in scripture that is indebted to Cicero: "[W]hen advocating something to be acted on the Christian orator should not only teach his listeners so as to impart instruction, and delight them so as to hold their attention, but also move them so as to conquer their minds" (4.79). Their wills must be moved to act on what they know. Instruction is necessary, but not sufficient.

There is a more fundamental difference than Fortin points out, probably because he thought it so obvious. Where Cicero believes that the wisdom and the eloquence belong to the ideal orator, Augustine believes that they belong only to God. Discussing the authors of scripture, Augustine explains that "not only can I conceive of nothing wiser; I can conceive of nothing more eloquent" (4.25). Scripture is the union of wisdom and eloquence, but they are not that union's true source: God is. "[T]here is a kind of eloquence appropriate to writers who enjoy the highest authority and a *full measure of divine authority*" (26, my emphasis). Perhaps Augustine's favorite scriptural author and the orator he most clearly imitates is Paul, "the paragon of Christian eloquence" (4.46), and, while his formulation concerning him is Ciceronian—"his wisdom was attended by eloquence" (33)—it is never in doubt Who Augustine thinks the one true Author of Paul's letters is: "For such things were not produced by human labour, but poured from the divine mind with both wisdom and eloquence" (59). The Ciceronian philosopher-orator's union of wisdom and eloquence results from his natural talents and his self-sufficient virtue, all cultivated by himself, his family, and culture in the pedagogy of Roman oratory, from the very life, that is, Augustine himself lived prior to his conversion. As a result, the thinking-speaking subject of Ciceronian humanism poses a problem for Augustine. That problem is the fallen human will, which obscures, distorts, even vitiates Biblical wisdom

¹⁵ "Augustine and the Problem of Christian Rhetoric." *Augustinian Studies* 5 (1974): 85–100. Fortin's case is persuasive, but he over-argues the difference between the two rhetorics because he believes that Augustinian rhetoric is founded on greater certainty than Ciceronian. As we will see later, that is a question.

and Ciceronian eloquence—not only in the Christian orator’s audience, but also in the Christian orator himself.

III. ELOQUENCE AND THE PROBLEM OF THE HUMAN WILL

Augustine does not spend a great deal of time on the problem of the will in the treatise; even so, his concern with the life of the orator indicates that he will have to solve a problem in the Ciceronian vision of the ideal orator, one obscured in Quintilian’s famous formulation of the orator as “the good man skilled in speaking.” What if the orator is not a good man; that is, what if the art of oratory is not accompanied by virtue in the orator? Even if the orator is not a positively bad man, Christianity’s moral perfectionism makes Christian persuasion a complicated affair. After all, it was the Ciceronian ideal of self-sufficient excellence Augustine abandoned when he rejected his oratorical education and his profession as teacher of oratory. Because he is discreet in *De Doctrina Christiana*, perhaps not wishing to demean his audience of fellow-preachers, he is subtle in pointing out the limitations of the orator himself.

Sin is clearly a problem for both the Christian orator and his audience. After all, it is their illness he hopes to help cure with scriptural medicine, but *he* is not the medicine. He only provides it. Augustine is extremely fond of the orator as physician-of-souls analogy:¹⁶

Just as physical medicines, applied by human beings to other human beings, only benefit those in whom the restoration is effected by God, who can heal without them . . . and if this is done conscientiously, it is reckoned as a work of mercy or kindness; so too the benefits of teaching, applied to the soul through human agency, are only beneficial when the benefit is effected by God. (4.95)

There is here more than the pagan realization that, no matter how talented the orator is, he did not invent the language itself. Augustine is suggesting something more disturbing: the human will of the Christian orator has agency with respect to the human souls of his audience, but *his* influence will only be his own if it harms the audience. Christian oratory is “only beneficial when the benefit is effected by God.” If one suggested with Cicero that the virtue of the Christian orator might make him an agent of

¹⁶ As Kolbet points out, this conception of oratory-as-therapy is pagan (19–61).

good in the world—i.e., its source—Augustine would no doubt say of him what he says of Pelagius in *Nature and Grace*:

I am astonished at the disposition of his heart that allows him to think that not sinning is up to us, even without the help of the medicine of our savior, and to maintain that the ability not to sin comes from our nature. And yet it is so obvious that *our nature has been corrupted* that the failure to see this is a mark of a still greater corruption.¹⁷

The Christian orator has need of the very medicine he administers to his audience since “our” nature is sinful—orator and audience alike. (Even granting the unity of the treatise, one might note that Book 4’s concerns are darker with respect to human possibility than Books 1–3’s, that the last book comes out of the same moment as his late writings on sin and grace.) If the Christian orator is sinful—and he is—then what guarantee can anyone have that he will not mislead rather than properly lead his audience?

The answer to that question is the guarantee of grace. Although Augustine does not make grace a central concern in the treatise, he presumes it throughout as a corrective to the very pride which is a moral hazard for the Christian orator. As he explains, “There is hardly a page in the Bible which does not proclaim the message: ‘God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble’” (3.33). The question then arises: How does the Christian orator resist pride and prepare himself for the grace that guarantees that he is delivering truly, not the sin of his own vain words, but the medicine of the healing Word?

IV. THE SOLUTION OF PRAYER

The answer to that question is simple, but not, to the best of my knowledge, discussed enough in study of Augustine’s Christian rhetoric: the orator’s need for prayer.¹⁸ Augustine is clear:

¹⁷ Trans. Roland Teske, S.J. in *Selected Writings on Grace and Pelagianism*, ed. Boniface Ramsey (Hyde Park, NY: New City P, 2011), 319–379, 356 (56), my emphasis.

¹⁸ I am anticipated in my interest in prayer by John D. Schaeffer’s “The Dialectic of Orality and Literacy: The Case of Book 4 of Augustine’s *De Doctrina Christiana*” in Enos et al., *The Rhetoric of St. Augustine* (289–307, esp. 301–4), but he does not anticipate my thesis that prayer is Augustine’s solution to the problem of the Christian orator’s inevitable sin.

The aim of our orator, then, when speaking of things that are just and holy and good—and he should not speak of anything else—the aim, as I say, that he pursues to the best of his ability when he speaks of these things, is to be listened to with understanding, with pleasure, and with obedience. He should be in no doubt that any ability he has and however much he has derives more from his devotion to prayer than his dedication to oratory; and so, by praying for himself and for those he is about to address, he must become a man of prayer before becoming a man of words. As the hour of his address approaches, before he opens his thrusting lips he should lift his thirsting soul to God so that he may utter what he has drunk in and pour out what has filled him. (4.87)

The wise eloquence or eloquent wisdom of his sermon does *not* come from the speaker's art: Augustine is quite clear about that. One might assume that the better a speaker is prepared by the art, the better he might be as a medium of the message that is not his, but Augustine nowhere says that. To the Ciceronian tradition of invention, disposition, style, memory, and delivery, Augustine adds a canon: prayer. "He must become a man of prayer before becoming a man of words."¹⁹ And that activity—the life of prayer—is prior, in sequence and in importance, to any artistic activity. The grace received from prayer is the guarantee that the grace of style will be incarnational, not vain. Grace above is thought of, appropriately enough, as water. He cannot pour the Word into his audience's soul unless God has first poured it into his. The Christian orator's recognition that his own soul is thirsty will protect him from the presumption that he is the healthy physician ministering to ill patients. All are ill, doctor and patients alike, so the physician-orator must pray for his own cure in order to give that cure to his patients.

And, just as those canons can be thought of as stages of composing, retaining, and giving speeches, so too is praying. Prayer comes right before delivery during "the hour" his "address approaches." One presumes that one ought to pray during invention, as well, since that invention will entail the scriptural interpretation discussed in Books 2–3, but it is not difficult to imagine prayer at any moment in the process of preparing and delivering sermons. Of course, the physician of souls will, at some point, actually have to stop praying and do his work. Even so,

¹⁹ Green points out that there is a "contrived pun" here: "the Latin word *orator* (normally 'orator') is used for 'man of prayer'" (234).

Augustine is adamant: without the humility of prayer, the Christian orator will yield to the pride of artistry.

He does not show us in *De Doctrina Christiana* what prayer actually looks like, but surely the audience allows him to presume it. The priestly audience addressed is presumably a prayerful group—or ought to have been. Allow me to augment his discussion of the Christian orator's need for prayer with his own discussion of prayer in his explication of Psalm 3:4's "With my voice I have cried to the Lord": "That is, not with the voice of my body, which is produced with the noise of the reverberating air, but with the voice of the heart, which is unheard by other people but makes a noise which to God is like shouting."²⁰ Prior to addressing his audience, the Christian orator must address God "with the voice of his heart," which, though silent to everyone else, is "like shouting" to the orator's deity, provided the orator's intention is focused. What is fascinating here is this: the orator must address God with the voice of his heart before addressing his human audience with the voice of his body. The grace that guarantees that the sermon will be informed by, and cure the audience with, the law of love comes only with the silent shout of the orator's first addressing the one audience that ultimately matters: God, the Audience of audiences. The warrant for human persuasion is divine presence.

V. CONCLUSION

To the eye of Christian faith, Augustine's argument for the prayer of rhetoric is very strong; to the eye of reason, though, that argument raises a significant question. How does one know when a sermon is governed by divine love and when by human will? The capacity for human beings to corrupt even good things is not small, and the proof of prayer might only be the last hope of the corrupt for something—anything—pure. And here, I believe, Fortin's confidence that pagan probability has yielded to Christian certainty is rather too confident. One cannot know that God will answer the priest's prayer. I have myself heard many sermons without a trace of Ambrose's inspiration, a few with a fair portion of the corruption of hatred. (Forgive them, Father, for they know not what they do.)

Augustine is aware of this danger, I suspect, and we begin to see why Augustine spends so much time on "the life of the speaker" (4.151–

²⁰ Trans. Maria Boulding, O.S.B. (Hyde Park, NY: New City P, 2000), 78.

9). The Christian orator's "way of life becomes, in a sense, an abundant source of eloquence" (159), not only because his audience members will have seen his life of virtue, especially the virtue of love, but also because such a life, made possible by prayer, makes it more likely that the intention of his silent shout will, if not guarantee, then at least make probable that God will hear him, answer his prayer, and pour into him the eloquent wisdom of the Word he will then pour into his audience. Augustine is not simply saying that the Christian orator must have a reputation for loving God and neighbor; he is also saying that he must actually love both, even if never free from sin, lovingly enjoying the One and lovingly using the other through a good sermon on his lips, given by the One for the others to the Christian orator during the prayer of rhetoric, a prayer which, if answered, leads him to speak and live lovingly. Augustine does, indeed, believe that rhetoric has a prayer in writing and speaking the distinctly Christian union of wisdom and eloquence.

This invention of the prayer of rhetoric raises a new question about the rhetoric of prayer: What are the rhetorical properties of prayer as a genre of its own? That question takes one beyond the scope of *De Doctrina Christiana* to the *Confessions*, but I would agree with Tracy that "Augustine needed both [works] to express his full rhetorical theology" (271). It is worth reminding ourselves that the whole of Augustine's *Confessions* is a prayer, defined by its own distinct rhetoric of prayer: "GREAT ART THOU, O Lord, and greatly to be praised; great is thy power, and of Thy wisdom there is no number" (I.I.1). One's understanding of Augustine as rhetorician must be supplemented by one's understanding of him as orator, not only in his own sermons, but also in his autobiography, wherein he prays that his reader will understand how he became a man of prayer, and—by being instructed, pleased, and moved—join him.

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