

“Excellentia et Humilitas: Excellence and Humility in the Christian Intellectual Quest”

Fall 2005 Augustine School Convocation Address

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As we begin this school year, the fifth year in Augustine School’s history, we have much for which to be thankful. Our student body is growing, we continue to enjoy our new physical space, and we have the opportunity to see our students grow in wisdom, knowledge, and understanding.

As we begin the year it is appropriate to gather to formally usher in the new school year. We do this with prayer, with song, and with a few minutes of attention to a theme related to Christ-centered education—at least as this is understood here at Augustine School.

For this morning, we turn our attention to the quest for excellence at Augustine School. From its founding Augustine School has sought to offer an education that is biblically-based, gospel-centered, and classically informed. And Augustine School has sought to provide an education that is second to none in terms of its academic quality and standard. This aim—to offer an education of the highest academic quality—can be articulated well and humbly, or it can be articulated poorly and in a haughty manner. But the aim—to offer a certain kind of education, an education that seeks to lift the bar for our students—must, and should be articulated.

But articulating this kind of goal can lead to misunderstanding. Just try the following, next time you are with a circle of friends, start speaking of the importance of excellence. Most likely, at some point in the conversation, someone will say something like the following: “Well, I suppose excellence is okay, but I don’t want to be elitist.” The exact phrasing may differ, but it is probably fair to say that there is a strange uneasiness in the Christian community about the quest for excellence. Suggesting *why* this might be the case would be another talk altogether.

And there are perhaps some *good* reasons why Christians have a certain reticence about excellence. Paul, for example, can warn that “knowledge makes arrogant.” (1 Cor. 8:1). Or Paul can seemingly diminish the importance of well-crafted words when he says in his first letter to the Corinthians that “I did *not* come with high-sounding words.” (1 Cor. 2:1). So perhaps there is some kind of biblical defense of mediocrity. But this is probably not the best understanding of either of these passages from Paul.

Rather, I want to suggest that, ultimately, there are many other good reasons to support the quest for excellence at Augustine School. So, let’s first define our key term, “excellence.” For our purposes in this address, I am simply using excellence to denote a school where students are challenged to read, think, reason, ponder, and figure, and where students are challenged to wrestle with the great ideas and issues of human existence, and where students are encouraged and challenged to work, and in so working, to rise above the mediocrity which is such a central part of the dominant culture of our day. But if this is a part of Augustine School’s mission, are we indeed headed toward an arrogant elitism?

And this brings us to the heart of today’s address: the relationship between excellence and humility. And this is a crucial issue upon which to reflect, because it brings us to the heart of a Christian approach to knowledge.

My thesis is as follows: *In a Christian approach to knowledge, excellence and humility are mutually reinforcing realities, and true excellence cannot exist without true humility.*

And here is why I think this is the case:

While the Christian may share something in some sort of vague way with the non-Christian as to what “knowledge” is, there is a startling difference between a Christian and non-Christian approach to knowledge. The non-Christian generally sees human knowing as an autonomous activity, an activity during which the knower is ultimately “in charge.” The Christian approach is quite different. For the Christian, the world is held in being by the Triune God of the universe. The world is a created reality, governed by a good, gracious, and powerful God. Besides God, all reality has its existence from God—human language is a good and created reality, math is a good and created reality, the created order itself—normally the subject of what we call “science,” is a good and created thing. Thus, what is known is to be understood on *God’s* terms, since He is the creator and sustainer of all that is. Now, just as there is a Christian approach to God and His world, so there is a Christian approach to the knowing process itself. And here is the point: all knowledge, at the end of the day, is a gift from God. That is, when our brain fires up, and the synapses are connecting, and understanding is taking place, that very process itself is a gift of God. When we breathe—God is allowing that to take place; and when we learn—God is allowing learning to take place. Learning itself is a gift of God.

Well that leads very quickly to the importance of *humility* in the Christian school. If indeed learning, or the acquisition of knowledge, is a *gift*, then it is something received. It is something that God, in his grace, *gives* or *allows*. Thus, when a student excels, achieves, succeeds, and truly accomplishes something, that is truly a gift of God. God, in his goodness and grace, has chosen to allow that learning, the accomplishment, that success to take place. It truly is a *gift*.

Now, I can hear the students thinking: that must mean I do not have to work! If it is a gift, perhaps I should just sit in my desk, and wait for some knowledge simply to pop into my head! Not at all. And here we come to a theological mystery that God in his grace has chosen to reveal partially to us. And it is this: God can require work, effort, and diligence from *us*, yet still claim that all of our achievements are rooted in, and flow from, and are dependent upon, his grace *towards* us.

Let me give a scriptural example, from Philippians 2:12-13. Paul writes,

“¹²Therefore, my beloved, ^fas you have always ^gobeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, ¹³for ^hit is God who works in you, both to will and to work for ⁱhis good pleasure.”¹”

This text gets at the very heart of a biblical understanding of the Christian life—or of what is sometimes called sanctification, and it has a wonderful application to a significant component of the Christian life—the intellectual endeavor, or education.

Because, as is so often the case, Paul holds two things together that might strike us at first as incompatible:

- (1) *We* are to “work out our salvation”
- (2) *God* works in us moving us toward willing and acting

Thus, the student *should* study, he *should* strive, he *should* work. But when we actually believe what Paul is saying, we say that it is “God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.”

f [ch. 1:5; 4:15]

g Heb. 5:9; [2 Cor. 10:5; 1 Pet. 1:2]

h 1 Cor. 12:6; [Heb. 13:21]; See 1 Cor. 15:10

i [1 Tim. 2:4]

¹*The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*. 2001. Standard Bible Society: Wheaton, IL.

We work, and mysteriously and sovereignly, it is God *who at the very same moment, in the very same instance*, is working in us.

And so to our theme: truly *Christian* students should *simultaneously* be excellent *and* humble students. For the Christian student recognizes that all achievement is—at the end of the day—rooted in, and dependent on, the grace of God.

If Augustine School students make the highest scores, get into the best colleges, and can translate Latin sentences in a single bound, but are arrogant and puffed up in their knowledge, we will have failed. We will have helped form students who have failed to see that all of their success is a gift of God.

But at the same time, if we were to form students who “love God,” but who do not apply themselves, who “love God,” but have not learned to “work as for the Lord” (Colossians 3:23), who use their appeal to spiritual things as a subterfuge for rejecting the call to excellence, we *also* will have failed. For we will have failed to form students who see all of their lives—including their education, or intellectual development, as something to be laid before the Lord, as something that is *offered* to God. And if it is offered to God, certainly it should be the best we can offer.

And indeed, the stakes are too high to do anything else. Our students will leave us to face the wasteland of modernity. They will travel through the ruins of a culture that long ago lost its way, and if we are not diligent, our children will lose theirs. They will not always be under our care. It is our mandate to prepare students who can stand and be counted. There is no reason to have started a school if all we expect is to further the *status quo*. Rather, we should hope to form and send out the best students in our region, and *best* on Christian terms will mean both excellent *and* humble students. May God be pleased to bring it about.

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