

## Augustan Virtue

by Annie Bullock, Regents School of Austin

I came to classical Christian education from the world of higher education and a dissertation on the Roman Empire. It has been just one year and the transition has been relatively smooth, thanks in large part to the support provided by my school. Deep content knowledge is an essential tool for any teacher and my knowledge has served me well. Too much background knowledge is also the thing that most interfered with my ability to teach well at the high school level. There's a process of translation between what I know and what's helpful to convey to students at this level. It takes some practice to get it right.

That being said, when the translation works, the results can be stunning. I saw this in a conversation I facilitated for my tenth grade class about the emperor Augustus. Augustus is a complex figure. He presented himself as restorer of the Republic while at the same time shifting Rome away from its Republican values and toward something new—the Empire that eventually stood in its place. He's a study in political savvy. Because Roman religion and morality had everything to do with the state, he's also a study in using the language of virtue to achieve his ends.

I wanted my students to understand something about Augustus's use of power first because it became a model for later Roman emperors. It's historically significant for that reason. It's additionally important for them to understand that rhetoric and reality do not always coincide, particularly in the realm of politics. But we're also a Christian school. I wanted them to see

that while Augustus's virtues overlap with Christian virtue, they are not identical. Augustus was a great man in some sense but he is not a man Christians should model uncritically.

As originally composed, the unit was too complicated and yet something about it worked. Winnowing away the superfluous information, the core activity was a textual one. Near the end of his life, Augustus composed an account of his own deeds, the *Res Gestae*, which was carved in stone and erected at his mausoleum after his death. The text records the things he did and his motivation for doing them. To modern ears it is almost unbearably self-congratulatory. What's interesting about it historically is that he refers near the end to a shield that was awarded to him by the Senate after his victory over Marc Antony at Actium. On it are inscribed four key terms: *virtus*, *clementia*, *iustitia*, and *pietas*. In English, they are virtue (or manliness), mercy, justice, and piety. Augustus presents himself in the *Res Gestae* as the embodiment of these virtues—a fact noted by contemporary Roman historians like Karl Galinsky, whose work was central to my graduate education.

My students were given the task of working out definitions of these terms using a Latin dictionary. Their next task was to look for examples and illustrations of these virtues in the text of the *Res Gestae* itself. This gave them an opportunity to work through an entire, primary source text without getting overwhelmed. It also prepared them to answer the question I gave them for discussion:

Was Augustus virtuous?

They agreed that he was virtuous by the standard he set for himself. The nature of some of his deeds and the self-important tone made them uneasy. This led quite naturally to a discussion about what constitutes virtue—not as a culturally specific concept subject to many definitions but as an absolute category.

The conversation they had that day engaged with the classical tradition even as it pressed and stretched. Put another way, it illustrated the living character of classical Christian education. They learned something about Augustus but they also thought through some critical questions about life. In the classroom that day, **Roman history wasn't a museum piece. It was a living tradition engaged energetically in the desire to know what is true, good, and beautiful.**

My graduate training helped me create the exercise and with the current crisis in higher education, secondary schools have an incredible opportunity at present to recruit people with deep background knowledge in their subject areas. Not all of those candidates are appropriate for classical Christian schools but some of them are and they have immense potential to contribute positively to the movement. At the same time, the exercise was only successful where it got down to the real business of classical Christian education: bringing students into conversation with the insights of the classical tradition. It takes more than content knowledge to make that happen. It takes practice and a rock solid commitment to the craft of teaching in a classical Christian school. But when it all comes together, there's no arguing that it works.

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