

What Should You Look for in a Christian School?

Good evening. Some of you are here tonight because you saw a billboard or a yard sign last spring asking, “What should you look for in a Christian school?” My assignment tonight is to answer that question. Others of you have been here for awhile and may even have volunteered to put one of those signs in your yard last spring, so you think you know the answer. Even if you do know the answer, remember that we serve a God of reminders. He is merciful and gracious to remind us constantly, so reminders are a good thing. Consider this a reminder.

I want to start with the other Trinitas sign that was floating around out there last spring that really got at the heart of the matter—it sort of answered the question posed by the first sign. It said simply, “Distinctly different.” And that’s what we’re all looking for isn’t it? The government schools, and in many cases even the Christian schools, have been weighed and found wanting, and so we are all looking for something distinctly different for the education of our Christian children. My intention tonight is to guide us through a brief look at three main areas where Trinitas differs sharply from government schools and even other Christian schools and then explore the reasons why we *should* be different in these ways—in some cases, that part will be self-explanatory.

First, Trinitas is classical in its pedagogy. When I say “pedagogy,” I mean methodology. We embrace and employ a 2,000 year old method of teaching that was perfected in the middle ages and later used to educate the learned men who founded our nation. This method, known as the *Trivium*, was the standard of education for the west until the late nineteenth century. More than teaching children reading, writing, and arithmetic, the *Trivium* trains students *how to learn*. In the *Trivium*, we are equipping students with the “tools of learning” through the three stages, grammar, logic, and rhetoric.

In the grammar stage, from kindergarten until about the sixth grade, children gain knowledge by memorizing facts. They learn the books of the Bible along with the precepts, commands, characters, and stories found in Scripture. They memorize such things as sums and measurements so that they do not have

to pause or use their fingers to determine that eight plus nine makes seventeen or that there are four quarts in a gallon. They learn names and dates and facts from history; in fact, they memorize a historical timeline, from Adam to Obama that creates for them a chronological framework in which to place all future knowledge. And why all this memorizing, the post-modern educator would most certainly ask? Because these are the years when children are naturally inclined to memorizing and learning by chanting and singing and rhyming. So it is in these years that we dedicate ourselves earnestly to learning the Latin grammar. Again the post-modern educator would be puzzled and ask, “Why teach a dead language?” The benefits are more numerous than I have time to expound here, but I urge you to see me or any of our other Latin teachers for an impassioned explanation. Suffice it for now to say that no other subject material teaches organized and precise thought as does the study of this inflected language that is frozen in time. Remember, our goal here is much bigger than just teaching our students to order a meal in a foreign language. We are teaching them how to learn and think. We are equipping them with the tools of learning.

In the logic stage, from grades seven through nine, students learn formal logic. Children at this age are naturally inclined to question and argue, so we teach them how to do it properly. Anyone doubting the need for training in logic needs only turn on the television or read the newspaper to be convinced. We continue, of course, to teach math and Bible and history as well as other subjects in the logic stage. But now students want more than facts, and they begin to discover that the facts they’ve learned have ordered relationships. They begin to see that sums can become parts of equations and can be represented on a plane. They begin to see the Bible as God’s true story in which He has been preparing His people for redemption for all of time. And they begin to understand how an event such as the Reformation could have led to the colonizing of America. In this logic stage, then, knowledge gained in the grammar years gives birth to understanding.

In the rhetoric stage, from tenth to twelfth grade, students become poetic and desire to express themselves. Few things are harder to endure than a seventeen year old given to self-expression who has no idea how to go about it. So in this stage we teach formal rhetoric. Here students learn to craft persuasive

arguments that are not only effective but also beautiful. The knowledge and understanding gained in the grammar and logic stages becomes wisdom in the heart of a student who is taught to evaluate sources from literature and history; discern truth, beauty, and goodness from error; and then express conclusions persuasively and beautifully.

This method of teaching, this *Trivium*, goes with the grain of children rather than against it, going along with their natural bents and inclinations at given ages to take advantage of how God has created them. The *Trivium* equips children with the basic tools of learning that will allow them to learn any subject later. They become life-long learners. Students begin to find, as they tackle new subjects, that every subject has its own grammar, logic, and rhetoric—that is, each subject they face in life, from history to lawn mowing, has a basic language for talking about the subject, ordered relationships of particulars within the subject, and a way of discoursing in the subject that expresses discovered truth beautifully. Our own Mr. Butcher once compared the *Trivium* to a tool chest. In the grammar stage, students memorize the names of different tools and their uses. In the logic stage, they learn how to use each tool effectively and in combination with other tools. In the rhetoric stage, students begin to use all of the tools to construct beautiful projects.

By contrast, students in the government schools often find themselves stuck in what we would call the grammar stage well into their college years, being asked only to learn the basic facts in subjects. Or, to the other extreme, seven and eight year olds are sometimes asked to analyze a piece of literature and then express their feelings about it—a task better suited for college students. Sadly enough, most Christian schools simply adopt these same government school methods of teaching and slap a Bible verse on them. Our classical method of teaching, then, our *Trivium*, makes Trinitas not just different, but distinctly different.

The next thing that makes Trinitas different is *what* we teach. It is our aim at Trinitas to indoctrinate students in their western heritage by teaching them classical content rooted in the western tradition. For example, we begin with Bible before moving to Greece, then Rome, the modern European

age, the industrial revolution, the founding of America, and finally to contemporary American history. We complete this cycle in the grammar stage then over again in the logic and rhetoric stages, going deeper each time into primary sources. We read the positive *and* the negative, the Christian *and* the secular; we read *both* Augustine *and* Hitler. This study of our western heritage, *both* the beautiful *and* the blighted side, prepares students to live in and understand the world. Because post-modern government education clings to the theory of evolution as fact, they have spurned history in general, and western culture in particular, as a valid means of understanding themselves and the world they live in. Consequently, graduates of the government schools sometimes find themselves having to reinvent the wheel, so to speak, each time they encounter a crisis in life because they have no grounding in absolute truth and insufficient experience with the history of their culture. Again, most Christian schools simply adopt the government curriculum, replacing the study of evolution with a Bible class. Because we teach the classical content of the west at Trinitas, our graduates will have a firm understanding of their own culture that will allow them to better understand the whole world. Trinitas is different, then, not only in *how* we teach, but also in *what* we teach; and the difference, again, is distinct.

Finally, Trinitas is different in the culture of the school. We say that a Trinitas education is not only classical, but also Christ-centered. What we mean by Christ-centered is that we teach all subjects as an integrated whole with the Scriptures at the center. We do this because we aim to help students develop a biblical worldview. We teach that there is no knowledge or understanding or wisdom apart from God. Education founded on humanism or relativism or anything apart from the God of the universe is like a house built on sand—it simply cannot stand. Because we teach all subjects as an integrated whole with the Scriptures at the center, we have a standard by which we can measure all things. Because we believe in the absolute truth of Scripture, we can discern between truth, beauty, and goodness on the one hand and the counterfeit offered by the world on the other. Not only does this way of thinking give us the freedom and the filter to read men such as Rousseau and Hitler, but it spills over into our every action and causes us to desire a culture of truth, beauty, and goodness around us. This is exactly the culture we seek to create at

Trinitas, a culture based on grace and charity toward one another as we live in community together, breathing each other's air and bearing each other's burdens. It plays out everyday in these classrooms and in these halls. It spills out onto the playground and the athletic fields. You see it in students encouraging one another to lift their voices in song during morning meeting; in spontaneous Psalm-singing in the halls between classes; in a boy helping his classmate pick up her spilled Latin card box; in a sixth grade girl helping a kindergartner microwave his lunch; and in the captain of the volleyball team telling a player not to worry about a shot she missed. Now you, yourselves, know how these scenes I've just mentioned might have been different in a government school, but I dare not draw a direct comparison—this is the part that should be self-explanatory. So when you consider what happens here as compared to what might happen elsewhere, it becomes obvious that the culture at Trinitas is distinctly different, distinctly Christ-centered. And this difference comes not from any good in us, but by the grace of God as we seek to honor Him in what we are doing here.

So there you have it: Trinitas is distinctly different in our classical pedagogy, in our classical content, and in our Christ-centered instruction; and all of these things contribute to our distinctly different Christ-centered culture. But we don't set out to be different so that we can have something to say on our billboards and yard signs. Nor do we set out to be different just so that we can maintain peace in this building or order in the classroom; though, those things are valuable too. We set out to be different because as Christians God has called us to something different. And we cultivate that very Christian, that very different culture here, not so that we can keep it all locked up in this building, but so that we can release it into the world like salt and light or, as Mr. Trotter says, like flowers that, though they may be hidden, bring a sweet aroma wherever they are placed. Our hope is that this place would turn inside out at the end of every school day, and that this distinctly different, distinctly Christian culture would spill out into the world, making it a sweeter place to be. What should *you* look for in a Christian school? Pedagogy, content, and culture that don't just win the *school* for Christ, but win the *world* for Christ.