

A SCHOOL THAT CHANGES LIVES?

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We expect a lot from our schools. Indoctrination or even training is not enough: We want transformation. School brochures are replete with metaphors for such deep change, from the inside out: We ignite the fires of learning, or at least kindle them. We awaken a love of learning.

Private schools are perhaps the boldest to make these claims—parents who are paying thousands of dollars expect schools to open the eyes of the blind and wake the dead.

Such lofty goals have a venerable history. Plato may have started things out with his allegory of the cave, a vision of education-as-enlightenment. But even here, at the beginning, doubts arise about the realism and viability of such an ideal education: Plato's Republic has been called a utopia, a word which means, literally, "nowhere." Is that where we will find the school that changes lives? Nowhere?

What can we expect from our schools? In particular, what can we expect from a school like Trinity, with its classical Christian mission?

I will tell you a true story about the transformation of a young man. His name was Augustine and he lived from A.D. 354-430. His mother was a Christian, but he wandered far from the faith in his youth, first in North Africa, then in Italy. Eventually he came back to the faith of his mother and became one of the most important writers and thinkers in church history. What interests me here is how he traveled back to his faith. How, in other words, his life was changed. And what role education played in this transformation. We have the skinny on this because he left us one of the most amazing accounts ever written, his autobiography, Confessions.

It turns out that Augustine went through two conversions, as he tells it. The first was a conversion to wisdom, to the love of knowledge; the second was a conversion to Christ. The first change (Book III) came when he was 19; the second (Book VIII) when he was 31. The first was a natural conversion; the second was supernatural.

The first came by reading Cicero; the second by reading St. Paul. The first moved him from the mockery and foolish mischief of youth to the serious study of a lawyer; the second moved him from scholarship to piety. The first taught him to study and learn; the second taught him to praise and pray. The first made him a philosopher; the second made him a Christian.

There is no question that both of these conversions changed him. About the first, he reflected, "All my empty dreams suddenly lost their charm and my heart began to throb with a bewildering passion for the wisdom of eternal truth." And of the second: "In an instant, as I came to the end of the sentence, it was as though the

light of confidence flooded into my heart and all the darkness of doubt was dispelled.”

There is also no question—at least in Augustine’s mind and in mine—that the second conversion was infinitely more important than the first. He would have traded a hundred books by Cicero for one word from God himself. Christ was his sun; Cicero his moon. If it comes down to it, we would be wise to trade all our education for redemption, which alone can make us ready to enter the kingdom of God.

But it does not always come down to it. Sometimes, the Spirit moves in patterns. Sometimes the soil of knowledge and virtue, welltilled, are fertile ground for the fruits of faith, hope, and love. Sometimes, but not always. There will be those who scorn both conversions and go on, like the youthful Augustine, stealing pears and living like a lout for the rest of their lives. And—worse—there will be those who follow Augustine through his first conversion but never make it to the second: They are the learned fools who have found everything except the pearl of great price.

What I want for my children is both transformations, both conversions. I want them to come alive to learning, and I want them to love the Lord Christ first. I want both of these. We are not masters of these changes, but only servants. Like the Baptist, we prepare the way. We baptize with water and look for the One who baptizes with Holy Spirit. Whether in first grade, or in high school, or nineteen years later, we wait: Come, Lord Jesus, and teach our children.