

HEAD LINES

A message from Chip Denton, Head of School



April 2023

Dear Trinity Community,

This is the third in a series of *Head Lines* exploring distinctives of Trinity's mission, especially some of the tensions that are built into our identity as a school. Like a guitar with several strings tuned together, all with a tension that is just right, Trinity's missional tensions are intentional and essential. They go back, most of them, to the founding of the school and the codification of the mission. Tensions can be stressful, and we may feel the urge to resolve them, to move further to one end or the other to release the pressure. But to do so would be to untune the harmonious mission of Trinity School. This month we do a little more tuning of the Trinity mission as we explore what it means to be a school that holds the Scriptures to be our reliable and sufficient authority and also welcomes all truth as God's truth.



Mission Tension 3: The Bible as Our Authority and All Truth Is God's Truth

Any institution needs a way of knowing what is true. The technical term here is *epistemology*: How do we know what we know? If you think that this is an egghead conversation with no practical value, I refer you to the last seven years of craziness and conflict, what Bonnie Kristian (in her book *Untrustworthy*) calls an "epistemological crisis." At the height of the Covid controversy, as a leader of this school, I was keenly aware that the decisions we were making about masks, in-person learning, and social distancing laid bare the questions, **"Whom do you trust?"** and **"How do you know what you know?"** The prevailing mantra in our culture was "Follow the science." Trinity worked hard to do just that, and however mistaken or shortsighted some of our decisions may have been, we never abandoned a commitment to good science: the idea that experiments which observe carefully and repeatedly how things behave can quantify that behavior so as to describe and predict the changes in our environment and in our bodies; and that this project of experimentation and prediction can ameliorate our human condition through a mastery of nature. Vaccinations are Exhibit A here. This is what we mean when we say we believe that all truth is God's truth.

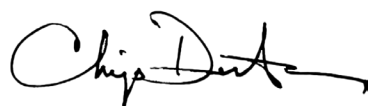
At the same time, I knew deep in my bones that there was more going on in this pandemic and that science alone was not sufficient to grasp all the truth of the traumatic experience we were going through together. The scientific way of knowing is the juggernaut of modernity, but it is not the only way of understanding the world and our place in it. **Trinity's classical Christian mission is devoted to reviving and restoring another way of understanding the world.** Without abandoning the value of science, as far as it goes, we are committed to the way of wisdom as laid out in the Scriptures: to seek to discover the truth about the world and our place in it, and to know how we are to live well in it. For such questions, science is sometimes

speechless and sometimes mistaken. Science can tell us whether and how well vaccinations work; it has absolutely nothing to say about whether we ought to require or simply recommend them to attend school. No matter how hard it tries, the scientific perspective cannot generate a moral imperative. Why we *should* live one way and not another is simply not a question about which science has anything to say. Further, the way of science, the awe-inspired wonder at the universe, is quite different from the biblical path laid out from Genesis through Revelation. As Leon Kass has aptly said, **“The path to wisdom and happiness lies not through wondrous sights seen by the eye but through the awesome command heard by the ear”** (*The Beginning of Wisdom*). In particular, any tendency to *worship* the natural world (or the science that explores it) is proclaimed as one of the greatest errors human persons can make.

Trinity is a school that holds firmly to the “unique divine inspiration, entire trustworthiness, and authority of the Bible” (see Trinity’s Doctrinal Commitments). We carefully crafted this statement—originally from InterVarsity Christian Fellowship, which generously permitted us to adopt their statement of faith—to avoid two extremes. On the one hand, it steers clear of any view that would suggest that the Bible is outdated, irrelevant, or mistaken in its truth claims (the “Paul had a bad day” view that one of my professors espoused). On the other, it leaves room for a breadth of what I would call orthodox views on inspiration. What does it mean to say that the Bible is the Word of God? We did not adopt a statement of faith that binds our faculty, staff, and Board to the view that goes by the name of “inerrancy.” We have inerrantists at Trinity, and we have others who understand the trustworthiness and authority of the Bible differently. What all of our faculty, staff, and Board share is a conviction that the Bible is trustworthy and reliable in all that it affirms. This we teach our students with a confidence that is as strong as our confidence in the second law of thermodynamics.

It would be possible to hold these two confidences in parallel, with no intersection—a sort of compartmentalization of our convictions, one scientific and one religious. But this is not Trinity’s way. From the beginning **we have aspired to “integrate all subjects in a unified perspective that is distinctively and thoroughly Christian”** and to “understand and adopt God’s interpretation of all of life, as found in the Scriptures and centered in Jesus Christ, Lord of all creation” (see Trinity’s Foundational Commitments, in our bylaws). This project of integration is no small feat, and it has an ancient ancestry. Augustine laid out a vision for this in his treatise *On Christian Teaching*, and more recently the founding headmaster of The Stony Brook School, Frank Gaebelein, proposed this same vision for Christian schooling in his book *The Pattern of God’s Truth*. Trinity stands in this tradition and takes up this work gladly. The key to success in such an endeavor is faculty who are able to think about the deep and profound connections between what theologians call general revelation (“All truth is God’s truth”) and special revelation (“Your Word is truth”). The commitment of our current strategic plan to support, retain, and attract teachers who can do this invaluable work of integration is a sign of our ongoing faithfulness to the mission of the school.

Non Nobis,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Chip Denton", with a stylized flourish at the end.

Chip Denton
Head of School