

Five Important Differences
between
Charlotte Mason
and contemporary
Christian Classical Education (CCE)
... in their own words

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Charlotte Mason and Christian Classical Education (CCE): Five Important Differences

1. Source of guidance for method
2. Purpose of education
3. Curriculum
4. Nature of the child
5. Role of the teacher

1. Source of Method:

Christian Classical Educational Theorists look to the classical tradition to guide the development of their theory

“When people first become interested in Christian classical education, it is common for them to pore over the writings of the great pedagogues of the classical era to see how they arranged their curricula.”

“We also hope that discussion of these categories will motivate others to search deeper into the tradition themselves in order to find more treasures therein.”

“This paradigm values the profundity of tradition”

1. Source of Method:

Christian Classical Educational Theorists seek to recover ancient ideas, methods, and practices and apply them to the present era

“Seeking to recover a lost art or craft is a difficult endeavor... Those of us who have been trying to recover the art of classical education have been in that awkward position of trying to craft a curriculum and pedagogy without training and only a few tools.”

“... there have been many who have been building bridges — actually implementing a recovered classical Christian education in our schools... finding ourselves walking more confidently on the old paths and finding the old way very much suited to our own new times.”

“Continuing in this trajectory of recovering the tradition and applying it to contemporary contexts, we seek to enlarge upon our predecessors’ visions for a classical liberal arts education.”

1. Source of Method:

Christian Classical Educational Theorists
cite the ancients as authoritative

“The truth is that mathematics has been a key subject of the Western curriculum since the time of Plato... Both mathematics and natural science can **thus** be authentically situated within Christian classical education.”

“For the ancients, the proper ordering of loves was the crucial edifice that all moral and intellectual education hung upon. **Therefore**, as part of its mission, the school culture must incarnate piety, virtue, and grace.”

“As the **Muses Clio** and **Urania** suggest, history, geography, and even astronomy **are** ‘musical’ subjects as well.”

“The seven liberal arts are the established paths that tutor the reason and train the mind in virtue. Our schools **would do well to hearken to them.**”

1. Source of Method:

Christian Classical Educational Theorists
begin with Greece and Rome

“The teaching of Socrates as embodied in Plato’s Dialogues marks the **beginning** of dialectic in the **classical tradition**”

“Pythagoras or his disciples grouped the studies of arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, and music together as the central disciplines for his most qualified students... These, as well as the witness of other ancient authors, offer a glimpse into the earliest stages of the **original classical vision** for the Quadrivium.”

“The traditional seven liberal arts are part of the wealth we have inherited from the **classical world.**”

1. Source of Method:

Christian Classical Educational Theorists continue with the Medieval Church

“The ancients and **medievales** had clear distinctions between imitation, art, and science.”

“The **Christian classical** liberal arts model is as complex and harmonious as the great **medieval synthesis** that gave birth to it.”

“**Aquinas** gives us the answer: the liberal arts are used to produce the works of reason... Aquinas describes how logic, rhetoric, arithmetic, and geometry are all a kind of work that is used to compile and justify the speculative sciences.”

1. Source of Method:

Charlotte Mason looked to the Gospels, science, and her observations of children to guide the development of their theory

Mason first unveiled her theory of education in a series of lectures in 1885.

The first lecture began with an exposition of specific teachings of Christ.

These lectures are captured in volume 1 of the Home Education series.

Pages 12–20 contain her exposition of the key Gospel passages that are foundational to her entire theory of education.

She “discover[ed] ... a code of education in the Gospels, expressly laid down by Christ.”

1. Source of Method:

Charlotte Mason **looked to the Gospels**, science, and her observations of children to guide the development of their theory

“Take heed that ye OFFEND not — DESPISE not — HINDER not — one of these little ones.”

“As far as I know Mason was the **first Christian educator** to highlight these set of teachings of Christ as a code of law setting the boundaries for the education of children — shedding light upon the role of Mason’s Christian commitment in the formation and proper understanding of her key concepts.”

1. Source of Method:

Charlotte Mason **looked to the Gospels**, science, and her observations of children to guide the development of their theory

“[Mason] has herself told us that she has drawn her philosophy **from the Gospels**, where we may study and note ‘the development of that consummate philosophy which meets every occasion of our lives, all demands of the intellect, every uneasiness of the soul.’”

“The Saviour of the World ... a work which ... goes to the **root** of that which we commonly describe as ‘P.N.E.U. thought’”

1. Source of Method:

Charlotte Mason looked to the Gospels, **science**, and her observations of children to guide the development of their theory

“Within our own time the science of Education has been absolutely **revolutionised**, not by educationalists, but by **Physiologists**, who have made the brain their specialty. Any real education depends upon the possibility of setting up good records, obliterating evil records, in the physical substance of the brain.”

“The extraordinary leverage which some knowledge of the principles of **physiological–psychology** gives to those who have the bringing–up of children, had already been brought home to the writer in giving lectures on education to ladies preparing to teach in elementary schools.”

“... from the beginning, Nature was prepared with her response to the demand of Grace. Is conversion possible? we ask; and the answer is, that it is, so to speak, a function for which there is latent provision in our physical constitution, to be called forth by the touch of a potent idea. Truly His commandment is exceeding broad, and grows broader day by day with each **new revelation of Science.**”

1. Source of Method:

Charlotte Mason looked to the Gospels, science, and **her observations of children** to guide the development of their theory

“Emphasising the mind’s hunger for knowledge and the sacredness of personality, Miss Mason revealed for the first time her life–changing **engagement** with the home education of Miss Brandreth’s **insatiably curious** young Anglo–Indian niece and nephews...” (in pages 9–17 of volume 6)

“Let me trace as far as I can recall them the steps **by which I arrived** at some of the conclusions upon which we are acting...”

1. Source of Method:

Charlotte Mason looked to the Gospels, science, and **her observations of children** to guide the development of their theory

“Is it possible that a relatively obscure British educator could have used **her observations** to construct a philosophy of education? A philosophy which might be as comprehensive and as true – as anyone else’s? Even more comprehensive?”

“Charlotte Mason did not have laboratories and assistants and the contemporary scientific impedimenta, but from **her own observations of children** going about their business in everyday life...” “... Mason found the **key to an educational philosophy**”

“Charlotte Mason had none of the ‘impedimenta’ of modern research; she had only her **intuition**, her genius of **objective observation**, and the backing of a small group of dedicated parents.”

1. Source of Method:

Charlotte Mason **did not** look to the **classical tradition to guide the development of their theory**

“Charlotte Mason herself, though she was undoubtedly aware of the **classical and medieval educationists**, as far as I can see **never** specifically says that she is basing her ideas on theirs.”

“... what has failed us is philosophy, and that applied philosophy which is called education. Philosophy, all the philosophies, **old** and new, land us on the horns of a dilemma... we want a **new** scale of values... The beautiful little gowns that have come down as heirlooms would not fit the ‘divinely tall’ daughters of many a house where they are treasured... Now, all our exigent demands are met by words written in a **Book**, and by the manifestations of a **Person**; and we are waiting for a **Christianity** such as the world has **not yet known**.”

1. Source of Method:

Charlotte Mason **did not** look to the **classical tradition to guide the development of their theory**

“Those parents who deliberately choose to educate their children by the **insufficient light of tradition** and instinct, refusing to study and profit by the **fuller light** given to the **present generation** of parents, do so at their own and their children’s peril.”

“We of the P.N.E.U., if we be minded to advance in our thousands with one heart and one purpose, are strong enough to bring about a Twentieth Century Renaissance, more **glorious** and **permanent** than that of the **Middle Age**, because its ultimate source shall be a **profound Christianity**, in lieu of the **poisoned springs of Paganism**. We have the one thing to offer which the whole world wants, an absolutely effective system of education covering the whole nature of a child, the whole life of man.”

1. Source of Method:

Charlotte Mason **claimed originality**

“Life is more intense, more difficult, more exhausting for us than it was for our fathers; it will probably be more difficult still for our children than for ourselves. How timely, then, and how truly, as we say, **providential**, that, **just at this juncture** of difficult living, certain simple, definite clues to the art of living should have been **put into our hands!** Is it presumptuous to hope that **new light** has been vouchsafed to us in these days, in response to our more earnest endeavours, our more passionate cravings for **‘more light and fuller.’**”

“As a speaker remarked at the Annual Conference of Educational Associations in January, 1920: ‘Miss Mason’s method is a **revolution** of our attitude towards children and **education in general**. For this reason it has come to stay.’”

“... the physiological culture of Habit, the potency of the Idea which initiates the evolution of every habit, these are the factors of **education** we have to deal with, and this is the **new wine** which cannot be put into **old bottles**... This teaching, be it remembered, is no mere **patch** on an **old garment**; it covers the **whole scope of Education in every respect.**”

“When there have not been a dozen original thinkers upon education in the world; when England has hardly had 3 or 4 — how can the P.N.E.U. believe that one of these has fallen to its share?

Indeed I can hardly believe it myself and am continually comparing and enquiring to see if I am after all offering anything worth while. The answer always seems to be ‘yes’ but I am truly willing to leave the question to the ‘modesty of time.’

At the same time, it will be a joyful and delightful thing to see the P.N.E.U. such an educational society as the world has never known; and there really is, I think, something to be said in favor of a person of even average intelligence who has given about 40 years of incessant consecutive, progressive, thought to the one subject of Education and who has tested every point laid down by many experiments and much investigation of principles.”

2. Purpose of Education:

Christian Classical Educational Theorists
identify *virtue* as the goal of education



CiRCE INSTITUTE
CULTIVATING WISDOM & VIRTUE

“Grounded in piety, Christian classical education cultivates the *virtue* of the student in body, heart, and mind, while nurturing a love for wisdom under the lordship of Christ.”

2. Purpose of Education:

Christian Classical Educational Theorists
identify *virtue* as the goal of education

“arete (Greek: ἀρετή), in its basic sense, means ‘excellence of any kind’”

“The whole vision for education in the classical tradition can be summarized in the proposition that education is directed at perfecting inherent human abilities.”

“Religion naturally in theory falls into two departments, the Hebrew–Christian department, and the Hellenic–Buddhist department. The former looks chiefly to the worship, attributes and work of the Almighty, subsidiarily to the action and scope of the soul. The latter to the soul, subsidiarily towards Almighty God.”

2. Purpose of Education:

Charlotte Mason

identifies *the knowledge of God* as the goal of education

“. . . the culmination of all education . . . is that personal knowledge of and intimacy with God in which our being finds its fullest perfection”

“It is well that he should know that being [virtuous] is not his whole duty to God, although it is so much of it; that the relationship of love and personal service, which he owes as a child to his Father, as a subject to his King, is even more than the ‘being [virtuous]’ which gives our Almighty Father such pleasure in His children.”

“Let teachers believe that knowledge is the sole concern of education, that knowledge is life, and that knowledge of God is eternal life, and education will advance by leaps and bounds, personality will develop, and the children we bring up will be, as we would have them, greater and better than ourselves.”

2. Purpose of Education:

Two Views

CULTIVATING WISDOM & VIRTUE

CULTIVATING RELATIONSHIP & LIFE

3. Curriculum:

Christian Classical Educational Theorists
favor **depth over breadth**, based on the seven liberal arts

“Classical Christian education deals **deeply** with **few** subjects, rather than hastily with many.”

“The exponential growth of information today overwhelms the student. The liberal arts, on the other hand, offered a **particular** canon of seven studies which provided the **essential** tools for all subsequent learning.”

“The liberal arts then **winnow** the infinity of available arts and sciences to a **canonical** set of seven crucial liberal arts that provide the tools of learning needed in the three branches of philosophy or science.”

3. Curriculum:

Charlotte Mason favored breadth,
based on the nature of the child

“We labour under the mistake of supposing that there is no natural law or inherent principle according to which a child’s course of studies should be regulated; ... But what if in the very nature of things we find a **complete curriculum** suggested? ... the answer depends on a survey of the composite whole we sum up as ‘**human nature,**’ a whole whose possibilities are infinite and various... It is a wide programme founded on the **educational rights of man**; ... We may not even make choice between science and the ‘humanities.’ Our part it seems to me is to give a child a vital hold upon as many as possible of those wide **relationships** proper to him.”

3. Curriculum:

Christian Classical Educational Theorists
desire students to read the classics in the original language

“the long-term goal, even if it is unattainable in the short term, is that of the northern Renaissance humanists of the sixteenth century — *ad fontes*, reading texts in their original languages.”

“the return to these sources of our tradition — *ad fontes* — must be a long-term goal of the movement”

3. Curriculum:

Charlotte Mason saw the classical language of Latin as a way to learn grammar

Latin Grammar.—To afford intellectual drill, it would be well that all children, even those for whom a classical education is not proposed, should learn the Latin grammar with this object, which, perhaps, no other study promotes as well.

Update, February 2021

The above statement appeared in a document authorized by Charlotte Mason some time between 1896 and 1915. It seems to suggest that Latin was included in the PNEU programmes merely as a means to support English grammar instruction. This interpretation is supported by Mason's statements in *Home Education* on p. 295. However, in Mason's final work, *Towards a Philosophy of Education* (published posthumously in 1925), she indicated that "we are in a fair way to produce noticeable results in Latin" in "the House of Education and the Practising School." Through the use of narration-based Latin instruction, it was said that "children learn ... that [Latin] is a language and not a mere grammar."

This appreciation of Latin as a literary language is reflected in the Form V and VI PNEU programmes, which were intended for students in the age range of 15–18 years. The only such programmes in the digital collection are from 1929–1933; however, even though they were published after Mason's death, there is good reason to believe they closely follow the programmes from Mason's lifetime. We see actual Latin literature assigned, including Virgil's *Aeneid* and Livy's *History of Rome*. The examination section frequently required students to narrate their Latin readings in Latin.

It is not surprising to see Mason lean towards Latin as a means to access living ideas from original authors as opposed to merely a tool to elucidate grammatical concepts. Mason consistently favored knowledge for its inherent reward rather than for its utilitarian benefits. So while the evidence reveals that Mason would in fact "desire students to read the classics in the original language," her method of teaching Latin differed from the classical approach. Eschewing rote learning and memorization in favor of the emerging progressive methods of her day, she trusted in the enormous innate capacity of the child as person to deal directly with knowledge and assimilate it rapidly in self-education.

For more information on the PNEU approach to Latin instruction, see ["The Teaching of Latin."](#)

4. Nature of the Child:

Christian Classical Educational Theorists
identify mandatory stages of learning

What is the order of learning?

By its nature, learning begins with poetic knowledge. It then lays its foundation in the seven liberal arts, after which it ascends in order through the natural sciences, the humane sciences, and the philosophical sciences, until it reaches its fullness in the theological sciences. **It is not possible to ascend this ladder in any other order.** Therefore, while a curriculum can be ordered in any order the leadership of a school desires, **the student can only learn in the order prescribed by nature.** We heartily recommend, therefore, that the school curriculum align with the curriculum prescribed by nature and nature's God.

4. Nature of the Child:

Charlotte Mason said that children are born persons

“Children no more come into the world without provision for dealing with knowledge than without provision for dealing with food. They bring with them not only that intellectual appetite, the desire of knowledge, but also an enormous, an unlimited power of attention to which the power of retention (memory) seems to be attached, as one digestive process succeeds another, until the final assimilation.”

“the ‘Child a Person’ will be the very crux for our Crusade.”

5. Role of the Teacher:

Classical Christian Educational Theorists emphasize the Didactic mode and the Socratic mode of the classical tradition

“Two modes of instruction were developed to optimize the power in these movements: the Didactic mode and the Socratic mode, each of which incorporates elements of both induction and deduction. The classical Christian teacher will strive to master both of these modes of teaching, fitting his own individual strengths and tastes into their parameters.”

5. Role of the Teacher:

Classical Christian Educational Theorists emphasize the Didactic mode and the Socratic mode of the classical tradition

“When the teacher practices Mimetic (Didactic) instruction, she naturally progresses through five stages:

- Preparation (raising to the students awareness what he already knows about the lesson)
- Presentation of types
- Comparison of types
- Understanding and expression of the idea
- Application of the idea

Mimetic (Didactic) instruction is rooted in the idea that humans can only learn by moving from the particular (specific, concrete things) to the universal (general, abstract ideas)."

5. Role of the Teacher:

Classical Christian Educational Theorists emphasize the Didactic mode and **the Socratic mode** of the classical tradition

“Socratic instruction is... reflective discussion... accomplished through the use of penetrating **questions** by the **teacher**...

The **teacher**... would guide the student to reflect on his assumptions by asking him **questions**...

... the **teacher** can continue to ask **questions**, guiding the student to see the truth he thought he knew earlier.”

“It turns out that the classical primary teachers are the exalted ‘wonder-workers’ of the school.”

5. Role of the Teacher:

Charlotte Mason encourages the teacher to get out of the way

“[Children] weary of talk, and questions bore them, so that they should be allowed to use their books for themselves; they will ask for such help as they wish for”

“Our deadly error is to suppose that we are [the child’s] showman to the universe; and, not only so, but that there is no community at all between child and universe unless such as we choose to set up.”

“Charlotte Mason’s quest for a teacher-proof curriculum”

5. Role of the Teacher:

Charlotte Mason **emphasizes self-education**

“Here we get the mind forces which must act continuously in education, — attention, assimilation, narration, retention, reproduction. But what of reason, judgment, imagination, discrimination...? These **take care of themselves** and play as naturally and involuntarily upon the knowledge we receive with attention and fix by narration as do the digestive organs upon duly masticated food-stuff for the body. We must feed the mind as the body fitly and freely; and **the less we meddle** with the digestive processes in the one as in the other **the more healthy the life** we shall sustain”

5. Role of the Teacher:

Charlotte Mason's emphasis on self-education has been confirmed by later research

“Kamii and DeVries say that it is useless to ‘organise content’ for children, because their method of assimilation is different from that of the adult, but the young tend to organize for themselves. The children will put their own questions, which are of more import, being their own.”

5. Role of the Teacher:

Charlotte Mason identifies the Supreme Educator of mankind

“We do not mean that spiritual virtues may be exhibited by the teacher, and encouraged in the child in the course of a grammar lesson; ... the immediate point is that the teaching of grammar by its guiding ideas and simple principles, the true, direct, and humble teaching of grammar; without pedantry and without verbiage, is, we may venture to believe, accompanied by the illuminating power of the Holy Spirit, of whom is all knowledge.”

Why does this matter?

- ▣ The important thing is not **classification!**
- ▣ The important things are **interpretation** and **application**

Why This Matters:

Interpretation

“If recovering classical education is like recovering a lost art, it might also be like trying to remember a hazy dream. In the reading of dozens of books on classical education, I often experience the exercise in a kind of dream state. I find myself catching glimpses of things that I know are part of a great whole, as if I once knew that whole but can’t quite remember it. When another book restores some part of that whole, I put that part into place with a flash of recognition — as it fits into place I recognize that I once knew it. Who will restore to me the whole?”

Why This Matters: Interpretation

If one believes that Charlotte Mason is classical, then one is likely to establish an interpretive paradigm when reading her writings.

The result is likely to be a truncation of her theory of education.

Why This Matters:

Application

“Those who do not regard education as a vital whole, but as a sort of conglomerate of good ideas, good plans, **traditions**, and experiences, do well to adopt and adapt any good idea they come across. But our conception of education is of a vital **whole, harmonious, living, and effective.**”

“If you regard the Charlotte Mason method as a **bag of tricks** of which you can select **one or two** for adoption, leaving the rest, you will have nothing but disappointment. It is the outcome of a philosophy of education, and you must take **all or none**. You cannot use her methods and books for teaching literature and developing Composition, and use other methods and other books for teaching, say History and Geography. You cannot encourage the boy to get knowledge from the book for himself in one lesson, and insist on pumping textbook stuff into him the next; you cannot rely upon interest, a single reading, concentration and narration to-day, and upon slow wearisome preparation of dry facts followed by questions . . . to-morrow. The programme **hangs together as a whole.**”

*Charlotte Mason, L'Umile Pianta, May, 2014, p. 63;
H.W. Household, A Short Exhibition of Miss Mason's Teaching Methods*

Why This Matters:

Application

If one believes that Charlotte Mason is classical, then one is likely to combine her methods with other CCE methods.

The result is likely to be a different outcome of the educational process than Charlotte Mason intended.