



Educating Persons

An Introduction to
Charlotte Mason's
Twenty Principles

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All quotations from Charlotte Mason are taken from her six published volumes which are in the public domain.

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Introduction

I discovered Charlotte Mason's ideas through an internet rabbit trail. While scrolling on Pinterest, I clicked through to a blog post about home education. My mind started to whirl, realizing for the first time that sending my children to school was only an option, not a requirement. I immediately had more questions. As the mother of a six-month-old, I wondered when I needed to start home educating, if my husband and I wanted to. A Google search told me it would depend on my educational philosophy. My M.A. in Education hadn't included a discussion on educational philosophy, so I googled that, too. Another blog post detailed several styles and approaches to homeschooling and when I came to the section about Charlotte Mason, living books, and time in nature, I knew I was onto something exciting.

While that first exposure to Charlotte Mason was pretty superficial, I loved what I learned about her and her ideas. Narration made complete sense to me. I could imagine reading, singing, and nature journaling with my children. Education could be so much more than what I knew as a child in school.

But while narration, living books, and nature journals are invaluable tools for the Charlotte Mason educator, I soon found that it was her educational principles that made her method so potent. "Education is a method, not a system," she wrote. She was too wise and

honest to promise specific results. Instead, she gave a framework for understanding both children and education that can guide the practice of the educator as she seeks to see the children in her care thrive as persons.

When we first read over her twenty principles, however, we find challenges. Her ideas are cloaked in an older language. We find references to people and cultural trends that we have forgotten 120 years later. We need to do some digging in order to understand her meaning. In this short book, I offer you some of my own digging. I piece together some context, elaborate where Charlotte Mason is brief, and highlight where to learn more. This book is for anyone who wants an overview of Charlotte Mason's philosophy, a reminder of her essential ideas, or another perspective on her method.

Before I begin, let me point out a few things to keep in mind as you study Charlotte Mason's principles..

First, not all of her principles are created equal. Charlotte Mason herself writes that there are just a few essential principles of education, and that everything else in her method hangs upon these. The leading ideas of her philosophy are that "Children are born persons" and that "Education is the science of relations". Karen Glass writes about this eloquently in her book, *In Vital Harmony*.

Second, it's helpful to note that there is some overlap within the principles. This makes writing about the twenty principles, one principle at a time, an interesting challenge. In fact, when Charlotte Mason wrote her last book, *Towards a Philosophy of Education*, she wanted to present her ideas to people encountering her philosophy for the first time. This is the only place in her published work that she discusses her principles as a cohesive group of ideas. However, as you read you will notice two things: not all her principles appear, and they are not all in order. Even in her most logical, structured writing on

her ideas, Charlotte Mason herself didn't write about her principles sequentially, or even in totality! I take this as a reminder that while we can reflect on each of the twenty principles individually, they are meant to be understood as a whole.

In this book, I discuss the principles in the order they appear at the beginning of each of her published volumes; however, I have divided them into five chapters: Personhood, Tools, Mind, Method, and Purpose. These are my own divisions, and I find them helpful for spotting the relationships between the principles. These divisions also bring our attention to the questions Charlotte Mason answers in her twenty principles. What is a person? What is a mind? What does a mind need? How can we educate a person? And to what end?

Of course, my brief words are only a jumping off point for learning about Charlotte Mason's educational philosophy. With this in mind, I have included recommended resources at the end of each chapter. I include suggestions to read what Charlotte Mason has to say "In Her Own Words". These suggestions will take you to Charlotte Mason's six published volumes. "Commentary" includes books, articles, and podcasts in which people discuss Charlotte Mason's ideas. Finally, I have included "In the Wild" recommendations. These are modern publications that discuss ideas found within the Charlotte Mason method without mentioning her directly. I hope these resources are of value to you and help you to do some digging for yourself.

I hope you enjoy this journey through Charlotte Mason's ideas. Thank you so much for joining me!

Recommended Resources

In Her Own Words

Chapters 1-9, *Towards a Philosophy of Education*

Commentary

In Vital Harmony by Karen Glass

“The Spirit and the Letter of a Charlotte Mason Education” by Karen Glass

“Persons not Products” by Amy Fischer

Chapter One



Personhood

In many ways, our world has never been more confused about what it means to be a human being. With our obsession with data and life hacks, we seem to be walking computers. In the face of abundant advertising, we are consumers. From the way many of us were educated, we are clay to be molded into whatever shape suits the system.

When we consider the consequences of these ideas, we see that we need a better answer to the question of what makes a person a person. After all, what is the role of a parent if humans are essentially computers? To program our children into responsible adults? If they are consumers in a free market, is it to give them as much money and assets as possible? If they are clay, what do we mold them into? Whatever is in vogue in educational circles?

Charlotte Mason shuddered at similar thinking that dominated educational settings and parental relationships over a hundred years ago. She saw these philosophies as ignorant of natural law and Scripture, and therefore foolish and counterproductive. But in order to address these issues at their roots, she saw she must begin by defining her terms. She had to establish what a child *is* and the relationship of a parent to that child. This is what we find in Charlotte Mason's first

four principles, and when we consider our modern confusion over what a human being is, it is exactly where *we* need to start, too.



Principle One

Children are born *persons*.

Children are born persons. Children don't grow into personhood, don't earn personhood, don't attain personhood. There is something special that makes humans human, and we can find that something in every single individual, regardless of age, knowledge, or maturity.

What makes any human a person? We have physical bodies, minds, and souls. Andy Crouch, in his book *The Life We're Looking For*, summarizes what it means to be a person: a person is “a heart-mind-soul-strength-complex designed for love.”¹

That children have bodies and an immature-yet-growing strength is obvious. As Christians, we can agree they have souls. But what about the mind?

To show that children are born with minds, Charlotte Mason points out that from birth, babies are learning. Their lessons are basic: how a shadow falls on the wall beside them, the voices of parents

1. Crouch, A. (2022). *The life we're looking for : reclaiming relationship in a technological world*. London: Hodder & Stoughton. p. 33

and siblings, the sound of their name. These little experiences gather, intertwine, and grow into broader, life-shaping ideas: light and dark, safety, speech.

This is how any human learns. We make an observation, encounter a new idea, word, phenomena, and we integrate that new experience into what we already know. To borrow an example from Dickens's *Hard Times*, we don't learn what a horse is by someone telling us "Quadruped. Graminivorous. Forty teeth, namely twenty-four grinders, four eye-teeth, and twelve incisive. Sheds coat in the spring; in marshy countries, sheds hoofs, too. Hoofs hard, but requiring to be shod with iron. Age known by marks in mouth."²

Instead, we see horses, many times over, and build up an understanding of what a horse *is*. We see spotted ones and plain ones, tall ones and short ponies, horses that are sweet and mild and others that scare us. It's the gathering together of these individual impressions that gives us a general knowledge of horses.

To put it another way, to be human means having minds designed to draw general principles from specific examples. God meant our minds for abstract, rational thinking. This is not Charlotte Mason's particular observation. I've seen this idea in Aristotle, Thomas Aquinas, Martin Luther, and others. They agree. To be a human person means to have a mind designed to work in this way.

Charlotte Mason's first principle doesn't make a novel claim about what it makes to be human. Instead, her point is that children are born with minds that in the same way as an adult's mind, moving from

2. Dickens, C. (1991). *Hard times for these times*. Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press.

specific experiences toward general understanding. We don't begin using our minds this way once we hit maturity. Children don't need adults to give us the general principles and supporting examples in order to learn. They don't need to have aristocratic, rich parents. They don't need an academic preschool or a college diploma. Children are *born* persons.

It's here that we see why Charlotte Mason began her educational philosophy with such a simple statement. If we understand that children intuitively know how to learn and, in fact, can't keep themselves from learning, our perspective shifts at once from the teacher to the student. It's no longer about the teacher doing things the right way, it's "How can I even keep up with a born learner?" It is humbling, and it is exciting to consider the way forward from here.



Principle Two

[Children] are not born either good or bad, but with possibilities for good and for evil.

Charlotte Mason's second principle of education appears odd on the first reading. We see 'good' and 'evil' and wonder if it's a denial of original sin. However, Charlotte Mason was a practicing Anglican and a devout Christian, so this is not the case. She is bringing *educational* ideas to the forefront, not theological ones.

Many people of Charlotte Mason's time believed that a child inherited his character from his parents. If you had a certain type of parent-