

Charlotte Mason: A Different Perspective

by Elaine Cooper; edited by Patch Blakey

Charlotte Mason's Victorian prose is not the most accessible style for the modern reader on either side of the Atlantic, and has led some to misunderstand her position. However, the style is subtle and in keeping with the educated of her day. Her frequent use of the term, "others of us," or "those of us" in her writings denotes in fact, not what *she* herself believes, but is a way of introducing the "devil's advocate" into her arguments. This was in order to answer the skeptics or critics representative of particular mind sets or theories prevalent in her day. It is important to keep in mind her style when reading her work.

Miss Mason was a devout and practicing Christian who wrote a six volume opus entitled, *The Saviour of the World*. As an Anglican, she was steeped in the Book of Common Prayer which, for believing Christians of her time, taught the biblical understanding of original sin. Thus, when Miss Mason asserts her second educational principle (*not* creed), "They (children) are not born either good or bad, but with possibilities for good and evil," she is not offering a systematic theology or doctrinal dogma, but is, at this point, presenting a working educational principle, informed by real life observation and interaction with many children. Christian teachers today do not anticipate that their students are entirely warped and uneducable as a logical consequence of adhering to a doctrine of original sin, and neither did Miss Mason.

The moral truths that Miss Mason would have taken for granted in her times have been eroded and need to be spelled out explicitly in our times. When children came to Miss Mason's school, there was a sound, loving realism and hope for the child (as opposed to the rather fatalistic, secular Victorian view of "bad blood"). She viewed children as having a special estate in the eyes of our Lord, in that He partook of their nature and took them in His arms and blessed them.

Miss Mason's view of the child is that they are ignorant and inexperienced in life, and hence, the vital role of teaching young children properly.¹ She was influenced by the thinking of, among others, Jan Amos Comenius (1592-1652), the fine Protestant educational reformer of 17th century European education. His educational principle was such:

It will at once be obvious why children are of inestimable value in the sight of God, and ought to be so to their parents; in the first place, they are valuable to God, because, being innocent, with the sole exception of original sin, they are not yet the defaced image of God, by having polluted themselves with actual guilt and are unable to discern between good and evil, between the right hand and the left."²

The prevailing intellectual climate at the turn of the 19th century Europe was one in which a deterministic understanding of heredity was following in the wake of evolution. Parallel with this view was another, flowing out of Enlightenment and Romantic thinking, which was producing very progressive, utopian ideas in education (e.g. Rousseau).³ Charlotte Mason is thus precisely dealing with this tension of a rigid physical/social determinism on the one hand, and an insupportable view of moral "freedom" on the other. Her point is that the child is more complex than the sum of his parts (she refers to the "mystery of the person")

¹ Proverbs 22:6-"Train a child in the way he should go" (NIV).

² The School of Infancy by Comenius. Edited by Will S. Monroe. D.C. Heath & Co., Publishers USA 1893.

³ "Let us assume an incontestable maxim that the first movements of nature are always right; that there is no original perversity in the human heart"-Emile Book 1 by J.J. Rousseau.

– he is made in God's image and thus transcends his physical/temperamental inheritance, *and* his social environment, but these are, nevertheless, two crucial variables which have to be taken into account in education. Mason's point about the well-off and well-educated having advantage is only common sense, and she was in fact, most concerned for the disadvantaged. Her teaching in Bradford, a great industrial city in the North of England, was particularly concerned for them. It was in this city, too, that she founded the Parent's National Educational Union (P.N.E.U.) because of her commitment to the God-given role of parents in raising and educating their children. Miss Mason had a profound understanding and sensitivity to the primary role of the work of the Holy Spirit, not only in the individual, but in the realm of knowledge and the flow of history. God's work alone could mitigate the disabling effect of a class conscious society. In fact, she had to be dissuaded by close friends from calling her College of Education, "The House of the Holy Spirit." She thus named it, "The House of Education."

Comenius also promulgated the deep conviction that a liberal education⁴ should be available for everyone-"the best for all." Charlotte Mason too, was inspired by this belief and worked untiringly for its practical advancement in her era. She writes,

But what if all were for all, if the great hope of Comenius-"All knowledge for all men"-were in process of taking shape? This is what we have established in many thousands of cases, even in those of dull and backward children, that any person can understand any book of the right caliber (a question to be determined mainly by the age of the young reader).⁵

Some have incorrectly concluded that Miss Mason had an incorrect understanding of the doctrine of salvation because of her emphasis on the outworking of education in the life of the child, especially regarding the place and role of *habit*. Miss Mason did enjoy an enthusiastic study of brain research by the physiologists of her day. However, to quote her out of context in this regard is to misunderstand her and to misquote her. Miss Mason did write, "All hail to the good news. The latest presentation of the theory of evolution." However, this quote is in the midst of a hundred qualifying other quotes in a long discussion about the role of the physical structure of our brain and its complex ability to respond to new ideas and opportunities. (Modern researchers a hundred years later affirm this, describing its remarkable "plasticity.") She is arguing for the understanding that habits are a tool to godly living and quotes Thomas a'Kempis, "'One custom overcometh another'-a natural preparation for salvation." Is there no resonance with the biblical imperative, "Work out your salvation with fear and trembling?"⁶ Many of the ideas of Charlotte Mason are being applied to *all* areas of life and human activity, not just grades in a classroom. She is echoed again by contemporary brain researchers and many counselors who, hungry to find ways of helping people change destructive or harmful behavior patterns (addictive syndromes of one sort or another), suggest the structure of thoughtful habits to help hold and steady the individual life. Many such researchers do not work within a biblical world view, but do we therefore disparage and rubbish their research or success, or claim more from their findings than appropriate? And no one is simplistic in saying this is just a physical matter of habit, but rather a complex function of personality, of spirit, of physical conditions and the support of those around.

⁴ Liberal education was understood by them both to mean a bountiful, generous, and abundant education-not a doctrinal position!

⁵ An Essay Towards A Philosophy of Education by C. Mason. Page 291. Published by Keagan Paul, Trench, Trubner & CO. Ltd., England 1925.

⁶ Philippians 2:12 (NIV).

On the same subject of her presumed misunderstanding of the doctrine of salvation, Miss Mason has been quoted out of context in her comments on General Booth's formation of the Salvation Army, "Ye must be born again, we are told; and we say, with a sense of superior knowledge of the laws of Nature, How can a man be born again?," etc., to the end of the quoted paragraph. Here again is a case of misperceiving who is saying what. Enter devil's advocate-the statement of the materialist, rationalist or one committed entirely to natural law. Miss Mason is endeavoring to address such a skeptic, that even here, in the very physical make-up of man, God has provided a way forward for spiritual change and renewal. She writes,

This is hardly the place to consider them, but think for a moment of the fitness of the ideas which are summed up in the thought of Christ to be presented to the poor degraded soul: divine aid and compassion for his neglected body; divine love for his loneliness; divine forgiveness in lieu of the shame of his sin; divine esteem for his self-contempt; divine goodness and beauty to call forth the passion of love and loyalty that is in him; the Story of the Cross, lifting up, which perhaps no human soul is able to resist if it be fitly done.

She goes on,

The divine idea (God's love and salvation in Christ) once received, the divine life is imparted also, grows, is fostered and cherished by the Holy Ghost. The man is a new creature, with other aims, and other thoughts, and a life out of himself. The old things have passed away, and all things have become new-the physical body embodying, so to speak, the new life of the spirit.⁷

It must be made clear that Charlotte Mason was in no way suggesting that spiritual regeneration was not necessary, but rather, trying to show that the findings of science were confirming and consistent with a Christian's understanding of salvation and sanctification. She goes on to add what she feels will be necessary for General Booth's great social effort also to consider if it were to really help turn people around in ongoing, godly living –

The man converted the work is not done. These sinners exceedingly are not only sinful but diseased; morbid conditions of brain have been set up, and every one of them needs individual treatment like any other sick man, for disease slow of cure. For a month, three months, six months, it will not do to let one of them alone. Curative treatment is an absolute condition of success, and here is where human cooperation is invited in what is primarily and ultimately the work of God.⁸

As can be seen, Miss Mason is not a theological liberal, and therefore unhelpful to Christian parents and children. Space limitations preclude an adequate representation of Miss Mason and her work. To adequately appreciate Miss Mason, one must read her writings, continually aware of her style, on narration and the "hundreds of pages" read by the child, or the role of incentives and motivation. There is a fresh joyfulness and thankfulness which careful reading and practice of Charlotte Mason's teachings has brought; to the kind, gentle and human structures suggested for the routines and disciplines of children, and the love of goodness, life, and ideas which her approach has quietly nourished over the last one hundred years. I trust that many others will enter into this more fully as they read Charlotte Mason for themselves.

⁷ *Parents and Children* by C. Mason. pp. 163-164. The Original Homeschooling Series, published by Tyndale, USA 1989.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 164.

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