

A Classical Education with Christine Miller

Kate Kessler

Sometimes as a homeschool mom, you know immediately when you have discovered a gem, and other times it takes some investigation. I felt this way when I discovered Christine Miller. A longtime homeschool mother, she is also a classical homeschooling author and advocate with much wisdom to share. At first she was "just" a history curriculum author to me. Her books looked marvelous and history is my favorite subject. What could be better than well written and fascinating history curriculum?

However, after spending much time on her beautiful website, Classical Christian Homeschooling, and reading her books, I began to see her in quite a different light! She began to sparkle to me. Her dedication to sharing what she knew, what she had learned by trial, error, and a lot of hard work, spoke of a woman well shaped by the Maker and full of that willingness to be a servant to those around her. I have been blessed by our time spent over email and many times wished we were sitting in a café enjoying a pot of tea and discussing Western civilization. May you be as blessed as you share in our conversation below.

TOS: Welcome, Christine! Please tell us a little about yourself and your family.

Christine: I have been married for 22 years to my wonderful husband, and we have three children, ages 21, 19, and 18, and one son-in-law and grandson, who is less than one year old. We live in Colorado in the foothills of the Rockies with our dog and two cats. We love each other's company, and gardening, camping, needlework, and of course reading!

TOS: Why did you make the switch to a classical education, and who or what inspired this change?

Christine: When we began homeschooling 16 years ago, we did institutional school at home with a canned, prepackaged curriculum. The kids quickly lost their natural love of learning, and I began doing research on educational methods. We made the switch to Charlotte Mason and a "living books" education, and their love of learning returned, but as they got older, I noticed the children lacked the challenging academics that would maintain their love of learning. I discovered the classical method quite by accident in an online discussion about the great books of Western civilization, and from then on I learned all I could about it.

Classical education is not too far from Charlotte Mason: both advocate a "living books" education, for example. But classical education takes a living books education into the teen years, changing the way the subject matter is taught and learned as the child changes to adulthood. Classical education matures as the child matures, and so remains challenging for them from K through 12. This was the main reason I switched to classical education, at the time, in our homeschool.

TOS: What were the specific changes you made and why?

Christine: The specific changes I made were gradual. Many families don't have the luxury of changing curriculum mid-year, and neither did we. I immediately emphasized learning and memorizing the facts presented in our current curriculum. English grammar study became more focused and earnest for us-many curricula put off intensive grammar study until the teen years. We added Latin as soon as we could. As I learned more about classical education, I was constantly adjusting our long-term lesson plans to bring our curriculum more in line with a true classical education.

TOS: For those out there who question the viability of classically schooling through high school, what are your thoughts on this? What would you say are the strengths and weaknesses of this path?

Christine: It takes dedication to educate classically through high school; there is no question about it. If the parents are dedicated, then the rewards are great. Of the strengths of homeschooling through high school, first and most important is remaining your child's closest mentor through the teen years, when children are stretched and pulled in many competing directions. Keeping your child's heart knitted to yours is worth every sacrifice for the few years that your children need your wisdom and guidance as they make the transition from child to adult. The mandate for parents to teach their children, and the mandate for children to learn attentively from their parents, doesn't stop when a child turns 14 or 15, but when he reaches adulthood.

The disadvantage is that parents are usually not subject specialists, and that they will need to continue to educate themselves and read the books their children are studying so that they can have intelligent discussions with them about it, and this takes time. Some parents will not set aside the time for this dedicated approach.

The advantage to continuing schooling classically is that the child, who has had the foundation laid in the earlier stages, will have their education completed, instead of stunted. The reason to learn grammar and logic in the earlier grades is so that children can then learn to communicate effectively and eloquently (rhetoric in high school) as witnesses for Jesus. The point of grammar and logic is rhetoric, which is rarely taught in other methods. The reason to learn history and civics in the earlier grades is so that children can then learn to apply the biblical understanding of history to economics, law, and politics (high school).

TOS: Your website has been invaluable to me. It is unequalled for quality and content on the classical method. What inspired such an undertaking?

Christine: I began Classical Christian Homeschooling because there was so little information in those days for parents who wanted to homeschool classically. The only book out on the subject was Douglas Wilson's Restoring the Lost Tools of Learning, and in that book homeschooling using the classical method was presented as too difficult for average parents. I felt those of us obeying God by homeschooling using the classical method needed encouragement, and a single place to go to begin learning what classical education is and how to do it, something which was very difficult to learn in those days. The advice and trial-and-error of those of us who were doing it, I felt, would be helpful to any homeschooling parents out there who wanted to do it.

TOS: In light of the current upsurge of interest in the classical method of schooling, what would you say is your distinctive?

Christine: At CCH, as in our homeschool, we always tried to find what worked. The best-laid plans are useless if you or your child are burning out on it or [if your child is] not learning what he is supposed to be learning. So practicality is a primary consideration with CCH. I also studied extensively the history of Western education, and that taught me why classical education was the way it was. This knowledge has been indispensable in adapting the method to modern times and state regulations without sacrificing what produces a truly educated individual. Of equal importance is the biblical mandate to not only teach our children but to develop in them the biblical worldview. Every subject has its truths at its foundation, and those truths do not contradict each other or He who is Truth. Uncovering those essential truths, showing how they relate to each other and how they honor and bring glory to He who is Truth, is a primary goal of CCH. This imperative developed over time, and we will continue to update the website as we learn more and more in this area, even though we have finished homeschooling our children. Finally, the method of classical education used in private or charter schools is often unsuitable for the home, and home education carries its own set of challenges not addressed in many how-to manuals. All of these factors: practicality, the historical understanding, the biblical worldview, and an intimate knowledge of the unique challenges of homeschooling combine to make CCH distinctive.

TOS: Who is H.A. Guerber, and why republish her histories through Nothing New Press? What is their value to today's families?

Christine: H.A. Guerber was an American teacher at the turn of the twentieth century who, like Charlotte Mason, sought to take the drudgery out of learning, while still providing excellent content. She wrote a series of historical readers for elementary children which presented history in a different way. They were not history textbooks at all. They told the story of history, the stories of the people who made the history. Her narratives provide much more detail and facts about the history of Western civilization than most modern histories for children, but they read almost like a novel—very entertaining and exciting.

Because we used Guerber's books in our own homeschool, history was our children's favorite subject. But copies from the nineteenth century, when the books were first published, are extremely difficult to find. We decided to reprint them to make these excellent histories available for today's families.

Their value to today's families is that they provide historical information in a way which excites children about learning; they provide the background information and context on culture and so on which makes the events of a historical era make sense; and since they were written over 100 years ago, before the dumbing down of modern education, they speak to children without talking down to them. The resulting narrative is rich in vocabulary and sentence constructions which make the history interesting to a wide range of ages, so children of different grades can learn history together. Also, the narratives were produced at a time when knowledge of God and the biblical worldview was taken as normal in school, and references to God and Christian standards are common throughout the books.

TOS: Your work, *All Through the Ages, History Through Literature*, surprised me by its detailed content on varied subjects. It is much more than history lists! What motivated you to complete this volume?

Christine: This was the first book we published at Nothing New Press, even before the *Guerber* histories. I spent every summer and every semester compiling living books to use in our homeschool history studies from various catalogs and recommended children's literature books, which took hours of time. I started book lists for my own use to make this process less time-consuming. As friends found out I had them, they began asking for them, and when word of mouth spread and I began getting requests for the book lists from strangers, I decided to put the lists in a publishable form.

TOS: What have been the greatest lessons you have learned while teaching your children?

Christine: The greatest lesson I learned while teaching my children is that learning virtue and wisdom is more important than learning subject matter. I used to stress when I had to take time out of my day and depart from my carefully crafted lesson plans to deal with one child's discipline problem or emotional issues, but I have learned that these moments are not so much interruptions of my job as mother/homeschool teacher, but the fulfillment of my job as mother and homeschool teacher. Homeschooling enabled me to be there when my child needed me, at the moment when they were struggling. The school lessons gave us something to do in the in-between times of the really important aspects of parenting.

A second lesson is how important dads are to their children's maturing to adulthood. Dads, even if you can't be there during the day when your children are being schooled, be involved in the curriculum direction, in discussing the great issues of Christianity and Western civilization with your wife and kids, and in reading the Bible with your family at night. I would encourage dads to NOT delegate Bible reading with the kids to their wives. Children seem to receive a respect and appreciation for the Bible and the Christian life when their dads, as the primary spiritual authority of the family, devote time to it with them, rather than deeming it unworthy of their time and attention as they tend to communicate when it is delegated to the wife.

A third lesson is that less is more. A few important subjects learned well are better than trying but failing to teach six, eight, or ten subjects with your children. Any subject matter you can think of can be learned at college, so kids will not be irreparably harmed if the homeschool parent concentrates on the three or four core subjects that she can teach well, concentrating on using them to teach the tools of learning, so that the children can easily teach themselves anything else they choose to learn later in life.

TOS: What words would you offer to a brand new homeschooler?

Christine: I would say trust God who appointed you as your child's best teacher. It is intimidating to begin homeschooling, because we understand that we have not been through college as education majors, or English or math majors, or what have you. But God knows this and still has appointed you as your child's best teacher. He knows what He is doing! So don't let the education "professionals" discourage you, and don't let pressure from family or friends discourage you.

Good curriculum teaches the subject matter, so parents can learn it with their kids. And if you ask God for help day to day, He will help you, even when you can't see the math mistake or the biblical application of the history lesson. I can't begin to tell the number of times I was stuck by my child's question, shot up a quick plea for help from the Lord (who is great at math and English, by the way), and shortly, the light bulb went on in my head. Get in the habit of making the Lord your co-teacher every day. So don't be afraid to go with your instinct when the "experts" are telling you something else.

TOS: Thank you, Christine, for sharing your wisdom and insight with our readers. It has truly been a blessing!

Biographical Information

Copyright, 2009. All rights reserved by author below. Content provided by [The Old Schoolhouse® Magazine, LLC](#).

Christine and her husband make their home in the foothills of the Colorado Rockies near Fort Collins. They homeschooled their three children through high school, using classical education methodology, and established the Classical Christian Homeschooling website (www.classical-homeschooling.org) to help other families seeking to use classical education in their homeschools. Christine used quality curriculum from the past century in her classical homeschool with great success, and since these materials have been long out of print and difficult to find, she began Nothing New Press (www.nothingnewpress.com) to reprint these excellent materials and make them available for a new generation of homeschoolers.