

Chapter Four The Teacher and The Atmosphere

Authority, vested in the Office.—It is by these countercurrents, so to speak, of mind forces that we have been taught to rectify our notion of authority. Easily within living memory we were upon dangerous ground. We believed that authority was vested in persons, that arbitrary action became such persons, that slavish obedience was good for the others. This theory of government we derived from our religion; we believed in the 'divine right' of kings and of parents because we believed that the very will of God was an arbitrary will. But we have been taught better; we know now that authority is vested in the office and not in the person; that the moment it is treated as a personal attribute it is forfeited. We know that a person in authority is a person authorized; and that he who is authorized is *under* authority. The person under authority holds and fulfills a trust; in so far as he asserts himself; governs upon the impulse of his own will, he ceases to be authoritative and authorized, and becomes arbitrary and autocratic. It is autocracy and arbitrary rule, which must be enforced, at all points, by a penal code; hence the confusion of thought which exists as to the connection between authority and punishment. The despot rules by terror; he punishes right and left to uphold his unauthorized sway. The person who is vested with authority, on the contrary, requires no rigors of the law to bolster him up, because authority is behind him; and, before him, the corresponding principle of docility.

...Autocracy is defined as independent or self-derived power. Authority, on the other hand, may qualify as not being self-derived and not independent. The centurion in the Gospels says: "I also am a man set under authority, having under me soldiers, and I say unto one, 'Go,' and he goeth; another, 'Come,' and he cometh; and to my servant, 'Do this,' and he doeth it." Here we have the powers and the limitations of authority. The centurion is set under authority, or, as we say, authorized, and, for that reason, he is able to say to one, 'go,' to another, 'come,' and to a third, 'do this,' in the calm certainty that all will be done as he says, because he holds his position for this very purpose—to secure that such and such things shall be accomplished. He

himself is a servant with definite tasks, though they are the tasks of authority. This, too, is the position that our Lord assumes; He says: "I came not to do mine own will, but the will of Him that sent me." That is His commission and the standing order of His life, and for this reason He spake as one having authority, knowing Himself to be commissioned and supported.

Behaviour of Autocracy.—Authority is not uneasy; captious, harsh and indulgent by turns. This is the action of autocracy, which is self-sustained as it is self-derived, and is impatient and resentful, on the watch for transgressions, and swift to take offence. Autocracy has ever a drastic penal code, whether in the kingdom, the school, or the family. It has, too, many commandments. 'Thou shalt' and 'thou shalt not,' are entanglements about the would-be awful majesty of the autocrat. The tendency to assume self-derived power is common to us all, even the meekest of us, and calls for special watchfulness; the more so, because it shows itself fully as often in remitting duties and in granting indulgences as in inflicting punishments. It is flattering when a child comes up in the winning, coaxing way the monkeys know how to assume, and says, '*Please* let me stay at home this morning, only this once!' The next stage is, 'I don't want to go out,' and the next, 'I won't!' and the home or school ruler, who has no principle behind his own will, soon learns that a child can be autocratic too—autocratic and belligerent to an alarming extent.

Behavior of Authority.—Authority is neither harsh nor indulgent. She is gentle and easy to be entreated in all matters immaterial, just because she is immovable in matters of real importance; for these, there is always a fixed principle. It does not, for example, rest with parents and teachers to dally with questions affecting either the health or the duty of their children. They have no authority to allow to children in indulgences—in too many sweetmeats, for example—or in habits which are prejudicial to health; nor to let them off from any plain duty of obedience, courtesy, reverence, or work. Authority is alert; she knows all that is going on and is aware of tendencies. She fulfills the apostolic precept—"He that ruleth

(let him do it), with diligence." But she is strong enough to fulfill that other precept also, "He that showeth mercy (let him do it), with cheerfulness"; timely clemency, timely yielding, is a great secret of strong government. It sometimes happens that children, and not their parents, have right on their side: a claim may be made or an injunction resisted, and the children are in opposition to parent or teacher. It is well for the latter to get the habit of swiftly and imperceptibly reviewing the situation; possibly, the children may be in the right, and the parent may gather up his wits in time to yield the point graciously and send the little rebels away in a glow of love and loyalty.⁶

Questions and Thoughts to Consider

1. What and how does our culture communicate about authority?
2. Describe what authority is like when it is invested in persons rather than the office? What are its consequences for the governed?
3. Describe what authority is like when it is invested in the office? What are its consequences for the governed?
4. Explain the terms authorized and autocracy using the example of the centurion.
5. When is it most likely as parents and teachers that we become arbitrary or autocratic?
6. Contrast the behavior of authority and the behavior of the autocrat?
7. What does it look like to be authorized when a child wants his way? In the course of daily life?

⁶ Charlotte Mason, *School Education*