

OBEDIENCE

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A short article on 'Obedience', written by Monsignor Ronald Knox some years ago, began like this:

'Is obedience a virtue? When we are quite small, we get the impression that it is the only virtue. At school we drift into the attitude of dazed compliance with the regulations. Then we leave school, and from then on obedience seems finished for us. If it is really a virtue, why are only children lectured about it, only people of school age expected to practice it? In the fighting forces it remains a tiresome necessity; everywhere else, what we admire is the love of independence'.

What does obedience mean and why is it at such a discount today? Are we suffering a reaction from the domination of those in authority, and do we so admire independence that we look upon obedience as an anomaly?

Charlotte Mason had a passionate belief in the liberty of the person (and she believed that the child is a person), but she also believed that obedience was essential all through life. She has some very interesting and definite things to say about obedience, so much so that there are many passages in her books worth quoting in full, remembering that most of them were written more than fifty years ago, and still have much to teach us.

This first quotation comes from *Home Education*. The greater part of this book was delivered in the form of lectures in 1885.

'First, and infinitely the most important habit, is the habit of *obedience*. Indeed obedience is the whole duty of the child, and for this reason—every other duty of the child is fulfilled as a matter of obedience to his parents. Not only so: obedience is the whole duty of man; obedience to conscience, to law, to divine direction ...

'Obedience is no accidental duty ... the parent is the appointed agent to train the child up to the intelligent obedience of the self-compelling, law-abiding human being; he will see that he has no right to *forego* the obedience of his child, and every act of disobedience in the child is a direct condemnation of the parent ... he will see that the motive to the child's obedience is not an arbitrary one. ... It is only in proportion as the will of the child is in the act of obedience, and he obeys because his sense of right makes him *desire* to obey in spite of temptations to disobedience—not of constraint but willingly—that the habit has been formed which will, hereafter, enable the child to use the strength of his will against his inclinations when these prompt him to lawless courses.'

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And again: 'It is no difficult task for the mother to train her infant to instant obedience ... the principle of obedience is within him'.

And lastly: 'The children who are trained to perfect obedience may be trusted with a good deal of liberty'.

In Charlotte Mason's *Essay towards a Philosophy of Education*, first published posthumously in 1925, there are two quotations which are worthy of note. 'It is no small element in their (the children's) happiness and ours that obedience is both delightful and reposeful'; and, 'What is said about obedience, to the heads of the house first, to the State, to the Church, and always to the laws of God? Obedience is the test, the sustainer of personality, but it must be the obedience of choice; because choice is laborious, little children must be trained in the obedience of habit; but every gallant boy and girl has learned to *choose* to obey all who are set in authority. Such obedience is the essence of chivalry and chivalry is that temper of mind opposed to self-seeking. The chivalrous person is a person of constant will, for, as we have seen, will cannot be exercised steadily for ends of personal gain'.

In *School Education* we read the following: 'It is an old story that the failures in life are not the people who lack good intentions; they are those whose physical nature has not acquired the habit of prompt and involuntary obedience. The man who can make himself do what he wills has the world before him, and it rests with parents to give their children this self-compelling power as a mere matter of habit. But is it not better and higher, it may be asked, to train children to act always in response to the divine mandate as it makes itself heard through the voice of conscience? The answer is, that in doing this we must not leave the other undone'.

And again, 'The child who is good because he must be so, loses in power of initiative more than he gains in seemly behaviour. Every time a child feels that he chooses to *obey* of his own accord, his power of initiative is strengthened. ... He has liberty, that is, with a sense of must behind it to relieve him of that unrest which comes with the constant effort of decision. He is free to do as he ought, but knows quite well in his secret heart that he is not free to do that which he ought not. The child who, on the contrary, grows up with no strong sense of authority behind all his actions, but who receives many exhortations to be good and obedient and what not, is aware that he may choose either good or evil, he may obey or not obey, he may tell the truth or tell a lie; and, even when he chooses aright, he does so at the cost of a great deal of nervous wear and tear. His parents have removed from him the support of their authority in the difficult choice of right-doing, and he is left alone to make that most trying of all efforts, the effort of decision'.

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Charlotte Mason wanted to see 'authority restored to its ancient place as an ultimate fact, no more to be accounted for than is the principle of gravitation, and as binding and universal in the moral world as is that other principle in the natural. Fitting in to that of authority, as the ball fits the socket to make a working joint, is the other universal and elemental principle of docility, and upon these two hang all possibilities of law and order, government and progress, among men'.

And again she adds, '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. ... 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 authorised; and that he who is authorised 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 authorised, 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 unauthorised sway. The person who is vested with authority, on the contrary, requires no rigours of the law to bolster him up, because authority is behind him; and before him, the corresponding principle of docility'.

But there are limitations to authority, she points out: 'Even the divine authority does not compel. It indicates the way and protects the wayfarer, and strengthens and directs self-compelling power. It permits a man to make free choice of obedience rather than compels him to obey. In the moral training of children arbitrary action almost always produces revolt'.

Obedience is a mystery. I well remember when first I began to teach how impressed I was when my pupils obeyed me. Though disobedience is widespread today it is still customary to obey the policeman, his authority is generally accepted by us when he is on duty, but, as Charlotte Mason has pointed out, authority is vested in the office and whereas Mr. Smith, say, the captain of the football team, will obey Mr. Jones the policeman, Mr. Jones will obey Mr. Smith on the playing field. His authority is then acknowledged by Mr. Jones and the rest of the team. Where authority is *accepted* obedience comes naturally, for authority on the one hand and docility on the other seem to be a universal fact. It is only when authority is abused and the sovereignty of the person violated that disaster follows.

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There is a false kind of obedience which Thomas Bowhey speaks of in his book *The Foundations of Life*: 'The obedience most often inculcated by parents is no obedience at all, it is a mere invention to save themselves trouble in dealing with their children. I hate coming into contact with a child who is obedient in that way'.

In another part of his book he says, 'We can only live while we truly serve and obey'.

This reminds me of some very arresting words in Evelyn Underhill's *Mysticism*, where she says, 'Lover and philosopher, saint, artist and scientist, must alike obey or fail'. There are laws, she points out, which govern all forms of genius. These laws, it seems, whether we like it or not must be obeyed.

It is unfortunate that the word authoritarian has come to be used as almost synonymous with totalitarian. It is misleading and suggests that authority violates the rights of the person. One of Charlotte Mason's greatest contributions to educational thought was her statement that the child is a person. She herself called it a revolutionary idea, and in the quotations from her books which I have given, she shows the relationship that there should be

between authority and the person.

The Bible might be called the Book of Obedience, for the whole of it deals with that very question. The stories which tell of the great disobediences, beginning with Adam and Eve, only tend to throw into relief the great characters who learned to obey the unseen God. Such men as Noah, Abraham and Moses stand out as examples of wonderful obedience, and lead up to the story of Jesus, Who is the perfect example of life-long obedience. In spite of the scanty details of His life to be found in the Gospels, the great moments of obedience are all recorded. Subject to His earthly parents, He knew the moment when He had to be about His Father's business. How often do we as parents fail at the moment when our children have reached the stage of independence and we cease to be the authoritative go-between.

The meeting with the Doctors in the Temple must have been the first crisis in His life. The next was His Baptism when He heard His Father's voice and was impelled to go into the wilderness where He was able to decide in what manner He should carry out His Father's will.

Then on the mount of Transfiguration came another turning point when He learnt that suffering at the hands of the chief priests and elders was inevitable, and so in obedience He steadfastly set His face to go to Jerusalem.

In the last crisis in the Garden of Gethsemane comes the final act, and He accepts death, the death of the Cross, in obedience to His Father's will.
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This is enough to show us the way and we know how His disciples down the centuries have remembered and obeyed the simple words, 'Do this, in remembrance of me'.

Bishop Gore tells us that there is something deep in human nature which calls for an infallible guide, perhaps because we want to escape the agony of decision. We look in all directions, hoping to find this infallibility. The invisible God alone is this supreme authority we seek, and He never compels and is infinitely patient, a fact which is comforting when the world seems in a turmoil. Without Him we can find no peace.

Charlotte Mason said education was the science of relations, and she had much to say about the status of a person. Obedience is a question of relationship between person and person, whether between man and man, or man and God. Perhaps it will only be when we have understood these relationships in their proper perspective, that we shall be able to comprehend the true significance and range of obedience.

'I would fain be to the Eternal Goodness what a man's hand is to a man.'