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Horace Bushnell: Advocate of Progressive Orthodoxy and Christian Nurture

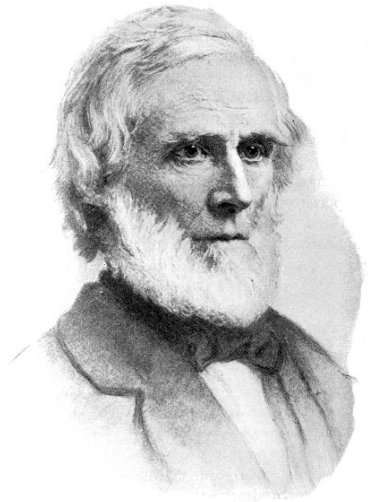
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Horace Bushnell: Advocate of Progressive Orthodoxy and Christian Nurture

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Horace Bushnell (1802-1876)

Disparaged by his critics as a liberal, Calvinist, mystic, and heretic, Horace Bushnell's theology—particularly his model for Christian nurture—has prevailed as a significantly influential model for religious education. His legacy reveals one who attempted to bridge the divides of his time, including the chasm between Orthodox Calvinism and Unitarianism. Though many were confused by his language theory and mediating stance on doctrinal issues, his principles of Christian nurture clearly served as a pilot light that ignited the flame of the twentieth-century religious education movement.

Historical Background

Horace Bushnell was born into a fledgling nation that had been grappling with its identity, not merely as a political entity but also as a moral, ethical, and religious people. In addition to building a distinct government structure, the United States was distinguishing itself from Great Britain with Noah Webster's lexicon, with Benjamin Franklin's practical philosophy, and later with Horace Mann's common school approach to education. Jonathan Edwards' preaching had sparked the First Great Awakening in colonial Massachusetts, laying a foundation

of Puritan and Calvinist principles for the imminent nation, and currents of the Second Great Awakening were well underway. In this New England religious milieu Bushnell was born and reared—one in which clear divisions had emerged among Orthodox Calvinists, Unitarians, and Revivalists.¹

Early Life and Education

Life began for Horace Bushnell on April 14, 1802, in Bantam, Connecticut. His father—a farmer, smalltime manufacturer, and justice of the peace—had been attracted to New Methodism with its appeal to human freedom and rejection of predestination. His mother, on the other hand, was reared in the Episcopal Church with its emphasis on sacraments and ritual. Of the two, Bushnell’s mother made the greater impact on his spiritual sensibilities. It was neither her doctrine nor her religious traditions, however, that he remembered later in life, but it was rather her character and her “loving instinct.”² Despite their different religious upbringings, both parents became members of the Congregational Church of New Preston, Connecticut, the town to which the Bushnells moved when Horace was three years of age. They brought up young Horace in a solidly middle-class home that was by all accounts a stable family setting, with the exception of a few financial setbacks from ups and downs in their farming and wool-carding businesses.³ Religion for them was a way of life, fully integrated into the atmosphere of the home—not artificially or nominally, but organically. Although doctrine was indeed instilled at

¹ Robert Bruce Mullin, *The Puritan as Yankee: A Life of Horace Bushnell* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans), 33.

² *Ibid.*, 23.

³ Catherine L. Albanese, “Horace Bushnell among the Metaphysicians,” *Church History* 79, no. 3 (2010): 616.

home by recitations of the Westminster Catechism, dogma was not the focal point of their religious life.⁴

It was in this setting where Bushnell grew to young adulthood, becoming an ardent outdoorsman and an accomplished angler. His appreciation for nature can be understood more fully in light of his admiration for the poetry and philosophy of Romantic writers such as Samuel Taylor Coleridge, from whom he gained an increased sense of the wholeness and connectedness of nature.⁵ For Bushnell, there was no strict dichotomy between natural and supernatural, but God's presence was revealed in nature itself.⁶ He claimed that it was from nature that he drew his sense of the divine and that the power of nature led him to prayer.⁷

Bushnell's theological proclivities were displayed as early as age seventeen when he wrote a modest discourse to address some of the problems he observed in Calvinism. Discussing Romans 9, he addressed questions of election, predestination, and the sovereignty of God.⁸ At nineteen years of age, he made a profession of faith, joined the Congregational Church of New Preston,⁹ and of this experience wrote, "Lord, here I am a sinner. Take me. Take all that I have and shall have. . . . I am ready to do anything or be anything for thee."¹⁰ After entering Yale College two years later, he began entertaining serious intellectual doubts and seemingly lost his

⁴ Mullin, *The Puritan and the Yankee*, 23.

⁵ Broadman W. Kathan, "Horace Bushnell and the Religious Education Movement," *Religious Education* 108, no. 1 (2013): 43, accessed April 21, 2014, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00344087.2013.747860>.

⁶ Michael Ryan, "'The Puritan's of Today': The Anti-Whig Argument of *The Scarlet Letter*," *Canadian Review of American Studies* 38, no. 2 (2008): 203.

⁷ Mullin, *The Puritan and the Yankee*, 24.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 23.

⁹ Mary A. Cheney, *Life and Letter of Horace Bushnell* (New York, NY: Harper, 1937), 21.

¹⁰ Mullin, *The Puritan and the Yankee*, 26.

newfound faith.¹¹ Coleridge's influence had led him to assume that Christianity was understandable primarily by intuition—that its appeal was not so much to the intellect as it was to ethical and spiritual feelings. He thus became convinced that religion appealed primarily to the emotions for its compelling demonstration.¹²

Adult Life: Pastor and Author

After graduation in 1827, Bushnell tried teaching school in Norwich, Connecticut, but the “petty vexations of a pedagogue” drove him to experiment briefly with journalism in New York City, which he found to be a “terrible life.”¹³ Convinced that neither teaching nor journalism was his calling, he returned to Yale in early 1829 to study law and soon became a tutor in the college. The responsibility of tutors went beyond the academic to include the spiritual development of their students as well, a charge that Bushnell took seriously and carried out with success.¹⁴

Regarding the spring of 1831, Yale Professor Chauncey A. Goodrich wrote, “[It] will long be remembered as one of the most remarkable seasons of refreshing from on high, which has ever been experienced at this college. . . . The whole college stood waiting in solemn expectation, to see the arm of the Lord revealed.”¹⁵ By the end of the semester, it was estimated that as a result of this awakening—eventually known as the “Great Yale Revival of 1831”¹⁶—nearly half the student body had experienced a spiritual conversion.¹⁷ One of those students was Horace Bushnell.

¹¹ Gary Dorrien, *The Making of American Liberal Theology: Imagining Progressive Religion 1805-1900* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 112.

¹² H. Shelton Smith, *Horace Bushnell* (New York, NY: Oxford, 1965), 27.

¹³ Mullin, *The Puritan and the Yankee*, 42.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 43.

¹⁵ Roberta Buckingham Mouheb, *Yale under God: Roots and Fruits* (Maitland, FL: Xulon Press, 2012), 96.

¹⁶ Theodore Dwight Woolsey, “Sketch of the Life of Professor William A. Larned,” *New Englander and Yale Review* 21, no. 2 (1862): 325

¹⁷ Mouheb, *Yale under God*, 97.

Late one evening after an arduous period of study, he had what he would later describe as an out-of-body experience. Feeling that his body was floating in the air and that there was no sensation in his hands, he gripped his bed for stability. As his daughter Mary Cheney explained, “He began to believe that he was dead and that this was his voyage to the world of the spirits.”¹⁸ Following this renewal experience, Bushnell began to sense a deep concern for the spiritual condition of the young men he was tutoring. He frankly declared to them that he had united himself with followers of Christ and that they should do the same. This bold stance spurred a great number of men on campus to seek a spiritual renewal as well.¹⁹

Bushnell’s intellectual doubts had disappeared, and the course of his life changed. That very next semester, he entered Yale Divinity School to prepare for the ministry and, soon after graduating at the top of his class,²⁰ he met Mary Mehitable Apthorp, a student in a Bible class he had been teaching. They fell in love, married, and later had four daughters and one son.²¹ Shortly after their marriage, Bushnell was licensed to preach and the following year was called to pastor the North Congregational Church in Hartford—the only church he was ever to pastor. After twenty-seven years of successful ministry, deteriorating health led to an early retirement in 1859.²² The remaining years until his death in 1876 were spent writing his theological treatises and traveling in search of relief from his tubercular lung disease.²³

Theological Foundations for Christian Education

¹⁸ Mullin, *The Puritan and the Yankee*, 41.

¹⁹ Mouheb, *Yale under God*, 97.

²⁰ Dorrien, *American Liberal Theology*, 112.

²¹ Michiyo Morita, *Horace Bushnell on Women in Nineteenth-Century America* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2004), 3.

²² Albanese, “Bushnell among the Metaphysicians,” 616.

²³ Kathan, “Horace Bushnell,” 43.

It was not until his retirement that Bushnell settled into writing as a primary occupation. Even then, he continued to write as he had been—in a pragmatic voice, as one addressing practical religious problems, not as a theological academician. It was religious praxis that concerned him: the interaction between theory and practice, contemplation and action, thinking and doing, theology and religious life.²⁴ Problems that most preoccupied both his sermons and his writings dealt with how to find God, how to believe, how to be sure of one's belief, and how to make religion real.²⁵ For him, the chief role of theology was to make sense of experience.

Though the field of theology has clearly recognized Bushnell as a “religious genius” who demonstrated “sensitivity as a religious analyst,” there is disagreement regarding his prominence as a theologian.²⁶ It is rare, for example, to find references to Bushnell's works among the writings of contemporary theologians.²⁷ Among those who do acknowledge him are many who recognize an “anti-systematic streak” uncharacteristic of conventional theologians.²⁸ Others, however, consider him to have been “a theologian as Copernicus was an astronomer” or to have shaped eighteenth-century American theology as Jonathan Edwards shaped the nineteenth century.²⁹ This status, they argue, is justified because Bushnell is credited with laying the

²⁴ Lee J. Makowski, *Horace Bushnell on Christian Character Development* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America), 2-5.

²⁵ Mullin, *The Puritan and the Yankee*, 57.

²⁶ James D. Bratt, review of *The Puritan and the Yankee: A Life of Horace Bushnell*, by R. B. Mullin, *Journal of Religion* 83, no. 4 (October 2003): 627.

²⁷ Douglas F. Ottati, review of *Horace Bushnell on Christian Character Development*, by Lee. J. Makowski, *Journal of Religion* 81, no. 3 (July 2001): 480.

²⁸ Bratt, review of *The Puritan and the Yankee*, 673.

²⁹ Mullin, *The Puritan and the Yankee*, 1-3.

foundation for the twentieth-century religious education movement³⁰ and earning the title from some as the “Father of American Liberal Theology.”³¹

Progressive Orthodoxy

It is a fair question to ask whether or not Bushnell warrants such a designation among liberal theologians. To the progressive clergy of his time, he was perceived as a liberator, the one who would set them free from the Puritanical tyranny of John Calvin, and—soon after Bushnell’s death—liberal theologians solidly hailed him as the reigning “Father of American Liberal Theology.”³² Roger E. Olson, however, described Bushnell as a “mediating theologian,” who, on a liberal-conservative continuum, would fall far from the liberal theologians of his time or thereafter.³³ Therefore, Olson, among other scholars of American Christianity and theology, preferred the term “progressive orthodoxy” for Bushnell’s brand of theology, as it reflected more accurately how Bushnell creatively bridged the divide between orthodoxy and progressivism while remaining faithful to the gospel.

Always proud of his Puritan heritage, Bushnell often traced the positive influence Puritans had on early American culture, defending them against what he perceived as unwarranted criticism.³⁴ As a mediating force, though, he was critical both of Calvinist Orthodoxy and of Unitarian Liberalism. He soundly condemned closed-minded attitudes toward doctrine wherever they were found, whether in orthodox or progressive camps. He challenged

³⁰ Kathan, “Horace Bushnell,” 44.

³¹ D. Bruce Lockerbie, *A Passion for Learning: A History of Christian Thought on Education* (Colorado Springs, CO: Purposeful Design, 2007), 296-297.

³² Mullin, *The Puritan and the Yankee*, 253.

³³ Roger E. Olson, “Remembering the ‘Progressive Orthodoxy’ of Horace Bushnell,” *Patheos Blogs*, August 11, 2012, accessed May 4, 2014, <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/rogerolson/2012/08/remembering-the-progressive-orthodoxy-of-horace-bushnell-part-one/>.

³⁴ Mullin, *The Puritan and the Yankee*, 15.

both Orthodox Calvinists and Unitarians for holding their theological views as ends in themselves rather than critically evaluating them in a meaningful way.³⁵ While presenting a blend of orthodox Christianity along with liberal notions of the nineteenth century—he always preached that Jesus Christ was the Son of God. This was a clear departure from Ralph Waldo Emerson, whom he admired but whose denial of Christ’s divinity was a bridge too far for Bushnell.³⁶ By holding to the core tenets of the gospel, Bushnell may be considered orthodox; however, it was his adherence to notions of Romanticism that earned his thinking the label of Progressive Orthodoxy.³⁷

Where, then, is Bushnell best situated in his thinking? He would not be aligned with his contemporaries Lyman Beecher and Nathaniel Taylor, both orthodox protestant theologians who viewed God as “a distant being who oversaw a sin-prone humanity that needed guidance from churches in order to attain salvation.”³⁸ Neither would he be categorized among the Unitarians, whom he criticized for their deism, self-perfectionism, and denial of Christ’s divinity.³⁹ Though influenced by Romantic ideas, he preached doctrines such as the efficacious death and resurrection of Christ for the forgiveness of the sins of all humanity, which clearly was contradictory to the religious views of the likes of Emerson. Though difficult to categorize because of his tendency to bridge divides, Bushnell may be situated between the Orthodox Calvinists, who at one point tried him for heresy, and the Unitarians, whom he rejected. This

³⁵ Makowski, *Bushnell on Christian Character*, 37.

³⁶ Lockerbie, *Passion for Learning*, 296-297.

³⁷ Bratt, review of *The Puritan and the Yankee*, 673.

³⁸ Ryan, “Puritan’s of Today,” 2003.

³⁹ Makowski, *Bushnell on Christian Character*, 13, 135.

difficulty may be attributed to his language theory, which he insisted was key to an understanding of his theological hermeneutic.⁴⁰

Theological Hermeneutic: Bushnell's Language Theory

According to Bushnell, those who refused to understand his language theory would misconstrue all of his other assertions. Building on Coleridge's model, Bushnell made a distinction between literal and figurative language. Literal language conveys scientific facts and sensory information about the physical world. It is an instrument of naming things and is simple enough to be used to some degree even among animals. A weakness of literal language is its inaccuracy insofar as it can only communicate physical sensations. Although it holds the ability to name things, it falls short in offering an exact representation of them. Consequently, literal language is incapable of conveying theological truths.⁴¹

Unlike literal language, figurative language has the capability of conveying thoughts and truths. It requires reflective subjects and, therefore, can only be realized by rational beings. Figurative language expands as thought expands, thus providing limitless possibilities as language and thought interact with signs, images, metaphors, types, forms, and analogies. This dynamic makes figurative language ideal for communicating a sense of the spiritual and is therefore the suitable language of theology.⁴²

A point of contention for conservative theologians was that, if the language of thought is always figurative as Bushnell supposed, theological propositions would thereby remain

⁴⁰ Dorrien, *American Liberal Theology*, 150.

⁴¹ Ibid., 124-144.

⁴² Ibid.

indeterminate. Contemporaries found his talk of spiritual hieroglyphs and *poesis* unsettling, especially as he dared them to embrace the indeterminacy of theological language. By *poesis*, he proposed that theology is a poetic process in the making, that it is not a science, and that there is no one particular interpretation of words used to communicate theological truths. He challenged theologians to practice creativity and imagination, using words as clues to point to concepts beyond the words themselves.⁴³

Theological Evaluation

In 1849, Bushnell issued a work entitled *God in Christ* which, among other things, claimed that the incarnation and the Trinity are truths derived from Christian experience rather than from dogma. He further suggested that religious truths cannot be known through logical propositions or creeds because they are inherently poetic, appealing to human imagination and feelings. This constituted a radical departure from New England theology of the time. Although the Hartford Central Association of Congregational Ministers, of which Bushnell was a member, did not proceed against him, the Fairfield West Association did. The case was considered by successive meetings of the General Association of Connecticut from 1849 to 1854, and despite the fact that few Connecticut ministers were sympathetic to his views, the association did not formally condemn Bushnell.

The central idea of New England Calvinism in Bushnell's day was the transcendence of God. God's sovereignty was magnified almost to the point of obscuring His indwelling presence in men, which was what Bushnell emphasized. Because God is present in man's world, the child can be expected to grow up within the kingdom of God through participation in the organic life of the Christian family. Bushnell sought to modify a rigid supernaturalism, yet was afraid of the

⁴³ Makowski, *Bushnell on Christian Character*, 23-42.

rising tide of naturalistic thought which threatened to undermine Christian faith.⁴⁴ He argued against a literal interpretation of Scriptural statements about God:

If God is to be Himself revealed, He has already thrown out symbols for it, filling the creation full of them, and these will all be played into metaphor [and] . . . we can say nothing of Christ so comprehensively adequate as to call Him the metaphor of God: God's last metaphor. And when we have gotten all the metaphoric meanings of His life and death, all that is expressed and bodied in His person of God's saving help and new-creating, sin-forgiving, reconciling love, the sooner we dismiss all speculations on the literalities of His incarnate miracles, His derivation, the composition of His person, His suffering—plainly transcendent as regards our possible understanding—the wiser shall we be in our discipleship.⁴⁵

In addition to his denial of the transcendence of God and his rejection of creeds, Bushnell's soteriological views—his notions regarding salvation—were considered heretical by many orthodox theologians of his day. He wrote of Christ's work that it “terminates, not in the release of penalties by due compensation, but in the transformation of character, and the rescue in the matter, of guilty men from the retributive causation provoked by his sins.”⁴⁶ The death of Christ was not an atonement for man's sin but a moral example to man. To be restored to God, a man should cease to sin. Thus, man's relationship to God is determined by man's character rather than by an act of God's Son. What are the implications of this doctrine for personal religious faith? Bushnell did not believe it necessary to “embrace . . . Christ as a sacrifice” or to see Christianity as a “vicarious religion.” But he did affirm “that no one ever becomes a true Christian man, who does not rest himself in God, or give himself over to God, in objective faith and devotion, somehow.”⁴⁷ While Bushnell emphasized the subjective character of religious faith, he also recognized the need for an objective religion saying,

⁴⁴ Horace Bushnell, *Nature and the Supernatural* (New York, NY: Scribner, 1858), 20-31.

⁴⁵ Horace Bushnell, “Our Gospel a Gift to the Imagination,” *Literary Varieties* 3: 249.

⁴⁶ Horace Bushnell, *Vicarious Sacrifice* (New York, NY: Scribner, 1877), 449.

⁴⁷ Horace Bushnell, *God in Christ* (Hartford, CT: Hamersby, 1867a), 264.

Therefore, we need, all alike, some objective religion; to come and hang ourselves upon the altar of sacrifice sprinkled by the blood of Jesus, to enter into the holiest set open by His death, to quiet our soul in His peace, clothe it in His righteousness, and trust Him as the Lamb of God that taketh away our sin. In these simple, unselfish, reflective exercises, we shall make our closest approach to God.⁴⁸

Thus, Bushnell vacillated from subjective to objective faith. Perhaps he was concerned about his critics and attempted to invest historic Christian terms and symbols with new meanings and significance.

Bridging Divides

Although a controversial figure, particularly for orthodox theologians, Bushnell came to be known for his many attempts to bridge various divides, not just in theology but also in civic and social issues. For example, a rift existed in his Hartford church between Old Light and New Light theological factions, with his two leading deacons on opposite sides of the argument. Rather than permit the division to split the church, Bushnell used his personal skills to negotiate a truce.⁴⁹ Some efforts were more successful than others, and at times—especially when navigating issues of slavery and race relations—he confused his audience with seemingly contradictory language.

Dichotomies

Despite the apparent dichotomy of his language theory into literal and figurative language, Bushnell was one who attempted to bridge divides by pointing out unnecessary dichotomies. For instance, rejecting the natural-supernatural dichotomy, he believed both nature and supernature share common roots and harmony in God. He called Christianity the “foster-mother of science,” and science the “handmaid of Christianity.” The two operate in tandem, he

⁴⁸ Bushnell, *God in Christ*, 267-268.

⁴⁹ Dorrien, *American Liberal Theology*, 126.

noted, and do not occupy separate spheres.⁵⁰ In the same vein, he explained that the doubt-belief dichotomy is false and that one is not antithetical to the other; both are part of the same process.⁵¹ A few of the other divides he attempted to bridge were the faith-reason, science-religion, sovereignty-freewill, Calvinism-Arminianism, and orthodox-liberal divides. “My ruling endeavor,” Bushnell proclaimed, “has been in all my investigations of truth to find a form of doctrine broad enough to include, as far as possible, the opposing truths or half-truths which Christian believers are contending.”⁵²

Orthodox Calvinism and Unitarianism

In Bushnell’s day, three factions were represented among the New England churches: Orthodox Calvinists, Unitarians, and Revivalists. Though he defended Orthodox Calvinists in *Christian Nurture*, he refused to accept it *in toto*. He believed that both groups misrepresented Christianity and were only “half-seeing.” The major tenets of Orthodox Calvinism included the absolute sovereignty of God; the total depravity of humanity; double predestination, which divided humanity into two groups of the elect and the damned; and a work ethic by which faith may be confirmed.⁵³

Gaining strength in the early nineteenth century, the Unitarian movement was a reaction to the Orthodox Calvinists, generally viewing them as mindless traditionalists. Grounded in Arminian theology, Unitarians emphasized human freewill rather than God’s sovereignty. Their major tenets included the unity of God, which rejected the Trinity as irrational; Jesus Christ as strictly human; and human nature as inherently good. Unitarians were condemned for an

⁵⁰ Makowski, *Bushnell on Christian Character*, 45.

⁵¹ Mullin, *The Puritan and the Yankee*, 60.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 56.

⁵³ Makowski, *Bushnell on Christian Character*, 7-17.

epistemology that held reason in higher regard than revelation, which critics claimed gave preference to human wisdom over God's authority. Bushnell dismissed Unitarianism as having drifted into a natural religion based on the humanism of the English Enlightenment.⁵⁴

Revivalism

The preaching of Jonathan Edwards had fueled the first wave of revivals that spread during New England's colonial era. During the second wave, the United States was a fairly young nation, and Bushnell was a teenager sitting under the ministry of Rev. Charles Boardman, a staunch supporter of revivalism. From the pew, young Bushnell listened as Rev. Boardman preached about how, in the past, God had replenished the church through a gradual process, but now—in this new era of awakening—He was replenishing the church through revivals.⁵⁵ Less than a decade had passed when Bushnell found himself transformed by such a revival. Not only was he spiritually transformed by the Great Yale Revival of 1831 but he was also led to point others toward conversion during the movement.

Ironically, Bushnell later became an outspoken opponent of revivalism. It could have been that he perceived his own experience to have been more organic than the synthetic campaigning that centered attention on the stage rather than on the people.⁵⁶ It was not so much that he opposed revivals to the point that they should be abolished; he valued them as a means by which God might periodically awaken a church that had dried up and lost its fervor. It was more that he questioned the extremism of the revivalist movement that promoted certain methods of evangelism to exact an expected emotional conversion. Describing his reaction to revivalism, he

⁵⁴ Makowski, *Bushnell on Christian Character*, 10-15.

⁵⁵ Mullin, *The Puritan and the Yankee*, 22.

⁵⁶ Mark H. Senter, "Horace Bushnell, Theodore Cuyler, and Francis Clark: A Study of How Youth Ministry Began," *Journal of Youth Ministry* 2, no. 2 (2004): 39.

preached a sermon in 1853 stating, “Things had come to such a pitch in our churches by the intensity of the revival system that the permanent was sacrificed to the casual, the ordinary swallowed up and lost in the extraordinary, and Christian piety itself reduced to a kind of campaigning or stage-affect exercise.”⁵⁷ Even more disconcerting to him was the movement’s neglect of the nurturing role of the family and of the local church congregation. He preferred a more gradual spiritual growth process than was provided by revivalism.⁵⁸

The revivalist mentality presented an expectation that, because individuals were totally depraved anyway, children were born into sin and expected to sow wild oats, particularly through their teen years. The anticipation, however, was that by means of a specific event, the Holy Spirit would place the sinner under such conviction that the misery of the conviction would lead to a specific event of radical conversion. While not disavowing that legitimate conversions occur in this manner, Bushnell was convinced that the overall expectation was wrong and that it neglected the spiritual nurture, especially of children.⁵⁹ He believed that children are “in a sense, included in the faith of their parents, partakers with them in their covenant, and brought into a peculiar relationship to God, in virtue of it They are to grow up as Christians, or spiritually renewed persons. As to the precise time or manner in which they are to receive the germ of holy principle, nothing is affirmed.”⁶⁰ Though unintentional, the revivalist movement had dichotomized the concept of salvation from the family—a divide that Bushnell sought to bridge.

Reacting to this, Bushnell noted that there were two ways of growing the church. The first was through conquest, a coercive means by which the members are amassed rapidly through

⁵⁷ H. Shelton Smith, ed., *Horace Bushnell* (New York, NY: Oxford, 1965), 43.

⁵⁸ Senter, “How Youth Ministry Began,” 39-40.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 41-42.

⁶⁰ Horace Bushnell, “The Kingdom of God as a Grain of Mustard Seed,” *New Englander* 2 (1844): 610.

sudden and emotional conversion. The second alternative, and the one more preferable to Bushnell, was what he called “organic growth,” in which the family played the most vital role. This concept of organic growth foreshadowed the imminent religious education movement and became known more specifically as “Christian nurture.”

Christian Nurture: Bushnell’s Theology of Christian Education

Bushnell held a unique doctrine of the family. He considered it a unity, a body, and that “a power over character is inserted therein, which cannot properly be called influence.”⁶¹ This power is exerted by parents over children “not only when they teach, encourage, persuade, and govern, but without any purposed control whatever.”⁶² Bushnell wrote further that the child “sees the world through his parents’ eyes. Their objects become his. Their life and spirit mold him. If they are carnal, coarse, passionate, profane, sensual, devilish, his little plastic nature takes the poison of course He lives and moves and has his being in them.”⁶³ The parents’ power is absolute before the child learns to reason, and it affects the child throughout his life. Bushnell felt that a long line of godly fathers and mothers might induce a religious temperament in the child, producing a godly consciousness and stemming his tendency to compromise his integrity. Character development begins even in early infancy, for it is never too early for good to be communicated. Infancy and childhood are the ages in which children are most malleable to good. Bushnell baptized infants primarily because of his belief in the unity of the family—illustrated in the New Testament by the baptism of entire families—and he accepted them into church membership:

The propriety of this membership does not lie in what those infants can or cannot believe, or do or do not believe, at some given time, as, for example, on the day of their baptism;

⁶¹ H. Bushnell, *Christian Nurture* (New York, NY: Scribner, 1861), 93.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 94.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 106-107.

but it lies in the covenant of promise, which makes their parents, parents in the Lord; their nurture, a nurture of the Lord; and so constitutes a force of futurity by which they are to grow up, imperceptibly, into “faithfuls among faithfuls,” in Christ Jesus.⁶⁴

This led to Bushnell’s view that the child born in a Christian home is to be nurtured, not converted. Bushnell explained his oft-repeated axiom that

The child is to grow up a Christian and never know himself as being otherwise. In other words, the aim, effort, and expectation should be, not, as is commonly assumed, that the child is to grow up in sin, to be converted after he comes to a mature age; but that he is to open on the world as one that is spiritually renewed, not remembering the time when he went through a technical experience, but seeming rather to have loved what is good from his earliest years. I do not affirm that every child may, in fact and without exception, be so trained that he certainly will grow up a Christian.⁶⁵

Bushnell anticipated orthodox reaction to his view of Christian nurture in a sermon on regeneration. Crucial to his defense was his definition of a Christian:

But my child is a sinner, you will say; and how can I expect him to begin a right life, until God gives him a new heart? This is the common way of speaking, and I state the objection in its own phraseology, that it may recognize itself. Who then has told you that a child cannot have the new heart of which you speak? Whence do you learn that if you live the life of Christ, before him and with him, the law of the Spirit of Life may not be such as to include and quicken him also? And why should it be thought incredible that there should be some really good principle awakened in the mind of a child? For this is all that is implied in a Christian state. The Christian is one who has simply begun to love what is good for its own sake, and why should it be thought impossible for a child to have this love begotten in him?⁶⁶

Bushnell implied that the child achieves right standing before God by living the “good life.” But how can the young child do good when he has no will of his own, or believe when he has no power to comprehend or make rational choices? Bushnell believed that the parents’ faith includes faith on the part of the child, and that the righteous nature of the parents is transmitted to the child. He argued that if evil can be imputed to children, as the Calvinists believed, righteousness can also be imputed to them. He discerned a natural flow of Christian life from the

⁶⁴ Bushnell, *Christian Nurture*, 166-167.

⁶⁵ Horace Bushnell, *Sermons for the New Life* (New York, NY: Scribner, 1867b), 4.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 9.

parent to the child, a flow that continues as the child grows and that finally diminishes as he matures.

This is the very idea of Christian education, that it begins with nurture or cultivation. And the intention is that the Christian life and spirit of the parents, which are in and by the Spirit of God, shall flow into the mind of the child, to blend with his incipient and half-formed exercises; that they shall thus beget their own good within him—their thoughts, opinions, faith, and love, which are to become a little more, and yet a little his own separate exercise, but still the same in character.⁶⁷

Bushnell also anticipated two more possible objections to his views. He did not hold to a liberal, humanistic concept of human nature, nor did he replace the work of the Holy Spirit in the regeneration of children with the work of parents: “The strong language I have used concerning the organic connection of character between the parents and the child . . . is not designed to assert [that there is] a power in the parent to renew the child, or that the child can be renewed by any agency of the Spirit less immediate than that which renews the parent himself.”⁶⁸ Bushnell distinguished between children of Christian parents and those of unbelievers; the former are to be nurtured, the latter converted.

Bushnell’s view of Christian nurture was by no means rejected in all orthodox circles. Charles Hodge a Princetonian Calvinist who was one of the best-known theologians of the day summarized the central truth of *Christian Nurture*: “There is an intimate and divinely established connexion between the faith of parents and the salvation of their children; such a connexion as authorizes them to plead God’s promises, and to expect with confidence, that through his blessing on their faithful efforts, their children will grow up the children of God.”⁶⁹ Hodge considered this “the great truth . . . that gives [Bushnell’s] book its chief value,” although he

⁶⁷ Bushnell, *Sermons for the New Life*, 21.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 22.

⁶⁹ Charles Hodge, “Bushnell on Christian Nurture,” *Biblical Repertory and Princeton Review* 19 (1847): 502.

thought the form in which this truth appeared in *Christian Nurture* to be “strange” and “distorted.”⁷⁰ Arthur Cushman McGiffert credited Bushnell’s *Christian Nurture* with doing “more than any other single factor to break down the extreme individualism of the old Puritanism.”⁷¹ Yet others acknowledge this work as the pilot light that later ignited the twentieth-century religious education movement.

Contribution to Christian Education

Bushnell’s concept of Christian nurture found a voice at a unique time in the nation; individual states were beginning to adopt educational reforms as churches began rethinking how they propagated religious education. As the Second Great Awakening began to subside in the late 1830s, the common school movement was gaining momentum under the leadership of Horace Mann. In his own effort to bridge the divide between Calvinists and Unitarians while also safeguarding the future of tax-supported schools, Mann—a Unitarian himself—proposed that public schools should not teach sectarian religion. Teachers could present Bible readings without doctrinal commentary and could pray generic Christian prayers, but overall, particular denominational doctrines would not be taught.

The Sunday school movement, which was already well underway, stepped up at this point to carry the torch of teaching biblical doctrine. From the 1790s until the common school movement, Sunday schools had primarily offered basic academic skills for children and even some adults who were too busy working in industrial manufacturing plants during the week to attend school and who were too poor to pay for education otherwise. Influenced by revivalism, however, the purpose and curriculum of the Sunday school evolved. As common schools became

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Arthur Cushman McGiffert, *The Rise of Modern Religious Ideals* (New York, NY: Macmillan, 1915), 277.

more prevalent, Sunday schools surrendered to them the task of teaching basic literacy and ciphering skills and shifted their emphasis to preparing children for the future moment in which they would be converted to the Christian faith.⁷² This was antithetical to Bushnell's nurturing model, which called Christian educators to bring up children in the faith and not for some dubious future conversion.

Nature of the Learner

Models of education flow from the basic question of the nature of the learner: Are children inherently good or sinful? Innocent or depraved? Romantic notions of the natural goodness of children were spreading in nineteenth-century America from Europeans such as Rousseau, Pestalozzi, Herbart, and Froebel. This impact was seen in the Unitarian definition of sin as "a neutral state of incompleteness."⁷³ Bushnell rejected this definition of sin. Having himself been influenced by the Romantics through the writings of Coleridge and Emerson, Bushnell also refused to embrace fully the Calvinist doctrine that children are totally depraved. From the Calvinist perspective, children should be educated to develop a sense of their own sinfulness, which was a prerequisite for them to come one day to salvation.⁷⁴ Bushnell, holding to a more moderate concept of limited depravity, argued that "a self-accusing spirit of sin" hinders redemption rather than advancing it."⁷⁵

Bushnell has been credited with reversing the then traditional practice of regarding a child's nature "in precisely the same manner as adults, with no recognition of any differences in their religious characteristics or in their normal religious experiences."⁷⁶ He alleged that learners

⁷² Kathan, "Horace Bushnell," 45.

⁷³ Makowski, *Bushnell on Christian Character*, 48.

⁷⁴ Ryan, "Puritan's of Today," 217.

⁷⁵ Bushnell, *Christian Nurture*, 212-213

⁷⁶ Sanford Fleming, *Children and Puritanism* (New Haven, CT: Yale University), 185.

are living organisms developing through stages—yet another Romantic notion espoused specifically by Rousseau.⁷⁷ The most critical stage in the nurturing process, Bushnell noted, is what he termed the “age of impressions.” This stage occurs even before the child learns to speak and is when parents can have the greatest impact on the child’s character development.⁷⁸

Role of Teachers and Parents

By its very emphasis on organicism, *Christian Nurture* clearly was addressed to an audience of parents who would instruct in the home rather than to teachers in a classroom environment. On the question of the role of churches and schools, Bushnell remained vague. Nevertheless, the principles of which he wrote for parents may be applied by any adult in a nurturing role to children. As Lockerbie commented, “No person presuming to love God and love children can be free from this responsibility [of providing children a Christian upbringing]—just as no Christian educator can afford to ignore the influence of Horace Bushnell’s *Christian Nurture*.”⁷⁹

Bushnell’s model of nurture was not strictly a maternal one. He called for both father-centered and mother-centered nurture,⁸⁰ and although vague about the specific role of churches and schools, he certainly included them in his concept of “organic unity,” which represented naturally-occurring, close relationships. These relationships would involve the family, church, and nation—the family being a microcosm of the church, the church being an enlarged family, and the nation being born out of the church and mirroring its structure. Organic unity was in opposition to the individualism Bushnell found in revivalism. No soul, he felt, acts as an

⁷⁷ Kathan, “Horace Bushnell,” 42.

⁷⁸ Senter, “How Youth Ministry Began,” 40.

⁷⁹ Lockerbie, *Passion for Learning*, 296.

⁸⁰ Morita, *Women in Nineteenth-Century America*, 6.

independent entity, but all entities within an organic unity are interdependent. Therefore, the roles of the family, church, and nation are naturally woven together. It would not be the individualism of personal conversion that would spread Christianity through the nation, but it would be the organic unity of family, church, and nation.⁸¹

Instructional Methods

Bushnell did not propose a specific pedagogical method, but he did develop a model of education for parents to implement in the home. He developed five principles in particular: (1) many things are to be taught “not formally or theologically, but implicitly, in a kind of child’s version”; (2) the child’s times of interest should be watched for, and religion should not be thrust upon him when it is unwelcome; (3) the child’s questions should be carefully listened to and answered; (4) teaching should be centered about Jesus Christ, as Himself the truth incarnate, and the parent should so live as to make his own life an interpreter of Jesus’ life; and (5) the parent should endeavor constantly “to make the subject of religion an open subject, and [to] keep it so.”⁸² In connection with the second principle, Bushnell advised parents to play with their children when they desire play and to teach them when they desire instruction.

Bushnell urged parents to make use of their child’s “instinct of imitation”:

We begin our mortal experience, not with acts grounded in judgment or reason, or with ideas received through language, but by simple imitation, and, under the guidance of this, we lay our foundations. The child looks and listens, and whatsoever tone of feeling or manner of conduct is displayed around him, sinks into his plastic, passive soul, and becomes a mold of his being ever after.⁸³

Parents were warned by Bushnell not to teach their children (1) that they are “regenerated in their baptism”; (2) that they are unregenerate heathens in need of conversion; (3) that they need to be

⁸¹ Ibid., 89-92.

⁸² George A. Coe, *The Religion of the Mature Mind* (Chicago, IL: Revell, 1962), 376-380.

⁸³ Horace Bushnell, “Sermons on Living Subjects,” in J. L. Hurburt, ed., *Sunday Half Hours with Great Preachers* (Philadelphia, PA: Winston, 1907), 363.

regenerated because of their faults or their love of play; (4) that they are “too young to be good; or to be really Christian”; (5) that they “can never pray, or do anything acceptable to God, till after they are converted or regenerated”; nor (6) that they must do good works and to build character for themselves.⁸⁴

Parents should be careful not to discourage true piety in their children by (1) ill-temper, pettishness, and passion; (2) “too much of prohibition”; (3) “hard, unfeeling” government or “over-bearing absolutism”; (4) “an over-exacting manner” or “an extreme difficulty of being pleased”; (5) “holding displeasure too long, and yielding it with too great difficulty”; (6) “hasty and false accusations”; (7) anxiety and over-concern; (8) the application of “tests of character that are inappropriate to their age”; or (9) denying to them “an early recognition of their membership in the church, and an admission to the Lord's table.”⁸⁵ Regarding the issue of family government, which Bushnell explained elsewhere is (1) “to be government, using authority and maintaining laws and rules over the moral nature of the child”; (2) “to be regarded as a vicegerent of authority, set up by God and ruling in His place”; (3) “to bear rule for the same ends that God Himself pursues, in the religious order of the world”; and (4) “to secure . . . a style of obedience in the child that amounts to a real piety.”⁸⁶ The home, indwelled by “a domestic Spirit of grace,” should be “the church of childhood, the table and hearth, a holy rite . . .” In the home, “Christ Himself, by that renewing Spirit who can sanctify from the womb, should be practically infused into the childish mind.”⁸⁷

⁸⁴ Bushnell, *Christian Nurture*, 12.

⁸⁵ Bushnell, *Christian Nurture*, 295-308.

⁸⁶ Bushnell, *Sermons for the New Life*, xviii.

⁸⁷ Bushnell, *Christian Nurture*, 12.

Bushnell's approach to education—exhibiting a greater interest in experiences and imitation than in the transmission of content or in indoctrination—was a forerunner of religious educational practice a century later. He “put himself, perhaps unconsciously, into the central current of the great educational reform of the nineteenth century.”⁸⁸ By directing parents to teach in a manner appropriate to the age of the child, by valuing play, and by addressing the problems of language, Bushnell touched on many issues that developmental psychologists, such as Piaget and Vygotsky, would not introduce into the common pedagogical narrative until the twentieth century.⁸⁹

Religious Education Movement

It was fifty-six years after the first edition of Bushnell's *Christian Nurture* before William Rainey Harper founded the Religious Education Association in 1903. How, then, may it be argued that Bushnell's teachings served as the pilot light to ignite the religious education movement? Harper was exposed to Bushnell's ideas by Henry Clay Trumbull, a pioneer in the U.S. Sunday school movement. Trumbull often echoed Bushnell's sermons refuting the common notion that children were incapable of having a relationship with God through Christ in their childhood years.⁹⁰ According to Trumbull, Bushnell's impression of the Sunday school improved over time.⁹¹ In Bushnell's eyes, the Sunday school deserved much higher regard than did revivals and other attempts to spread Christianity in America.

Delayed acceptance of the Christian nurture model may be attributed to a variety of factors: (1) the prevailing religious traditionalism hindered the acceptance of new ideas; (2)

⁸⁸ Coe, *Mature Mind*, 305.

⁸⁹ Kathan, “Horace Bushnell,” 44.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 41-46.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 46.

common schools in their infancy were themselves narrow, traditional, and repressive; (3) the notion of developmental stages of learning was absent from the dominant discourse on childhood; and (4) radical conversion was valued over an organic spiritual growth model of salvation.⁹² Well into the late nineteenth century, with distinguished preaching from Charles G. Finney and Dwight L. Moody, revivalism continued to be the preferred avenue for church growth. Additionally, with the final edition of *Christian Nurture* released in 1861, the Civil War and Reconstruction may have postponed people from considering new ideas.

By the twentieth century, however, religious teaching had been drastically minimized in the public schools, compelling the church to become more open to new ideas of how to cultivate Christianity among children. Psychologist G. Stanley Hall's work in childhood development was gaining a great deal of attention among educators both in the public schools and in the Christian arena, and—despite the prominence of Billy Sunday and other evangelists—revivals did not intrigue twentieth-century religious seekers as they previously had done. Eventually, these and many other cultural changes paved the way for Bushnell's ideas to hold great sway over the methods used to educate children within the church.⁹³ So much so that George A. Coe, widely considered to be the father of the religious education movement, held him up as one of the most important figures in the history of religious education in America: "If it were necessary to give a date to mark the transition to the modern conception of Christian training, we could not do better than to name the year 1847, which saw the first issue of Horace Bushnell's *Christian Nurture*."⁹⁴

⁹² Ibid., 50-51.

⁹³ Kathan, "Horace Bushnell," 52.

⁹⁴ Coe, *Mature Mind*, 305

Of Bushnell's dictum that "the child is to grow up a Christian and never know himself as being otherwise," Paul H. Vieth wrote that it "is now widely known and accepted."⁹⁵

Conclusion

Horace Bushnell's optimistic view of human nature burst like a rocket into the black night of what many historians, psychologists, and theologians have referred to as the "pessimism of Calvinism" in New England. He reflected the growing American middle-class confidence in the reforming powers of good men—with the help of natural science and the Industrial Revolution—and its shift away from the dogmatic, creedal approach to Christianity to a more scientific one. Bushnell was a member of the growing American cult of education, believing that education can solve any problem, even the religious ones.

Primary Source Sample⁹⁶

The most genuine teaching, or only genuine teaching, will be that which interprets the truth to the child's feeling by living example, and makes him love the truth afterwards for the teacher's sake. It is a great thing for a child, in all the afterlife, to 'know of whom' he learned these things, and to see a godly father, or a faithful mother, in them. No truth is really taught by words, or interpreted by intellectual and logical methods; truth must be lived into meaning, before it can be truly known. Examples are the only sufficient commentaries; living epistles the only fit expounders of written epistles.

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⁹⁵ Paul H. Vieth, *The Church and Christian Education* (St. Louis, MO: Bethany), 20.

⁹⁶ Bushnell, *Christian Nurture*, 370.

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