

**Horace Bushnell
and
Christian Nurture of Children**

by

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Horace Bushnell has been described as the greatest theologian of his generation and one of the most significant thinkers in American Protestantism. His views, preserved in a variety of publications, developed into a movement called “theological modernism.”¹ Christian Nurture, his first and one of his most provocative areas of publication, pertained to the nurture and education of children. To Bushnell, the best and truest idea of Christian education is that children should grow up as Christians and never know themselves to be anything else, or as he worded it in the masculine singular, “to love what is good from his earliest years.”²

The purpose of this paper is to examine the doctrine of Christian Nurture in light of Bushnell’s personal background and the social and religious issues that influenced his thinking.

Background

Horace Bushnell was born April 14, 1802 in Litchfield, Connecticut on the shores of Lake Bantam. When he was three his family moved to New Preston where he remained until he was twenty-one. There he learned farming, as well as wool carding and cloth dressing by machine.³ Horace was warmly devoted to his mother, whose love, energy, and nurturing spirit inspired his later concept of the Christian life and appropriate

¹Gardiner H. Shattuck, “Horace Bushnell,” *Encyclopedia of American Religious History* (Boston: Proseworks, 1997), p. 92.

² Horace Bushnell, *Christian Nurture* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1916) p. 4. All quotes of Bushnell are from this edition.

³ Theodore T. Munger. *Horace Bushnell: Preacher and Theologian* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Co., 1900), p. 5.

methods of rearing children.⁴ His younger brother George described Horace's upbringing as a model for all that he came to believe about the nurture of children:

He was born in a household where religion was no occasional and nominal thing, no irksome restraint, no unwelcome visitor, but a constant atmosphere, a commanding but genial presence. In our father it was characterized by eminent evenness, fairness and conscientiousness; in our mother it was felt as an intense love of life, utterly unselfish and untiring in its devotion, yet thoughtful, sagacious, and wise, always stimulating and ennobling, and in special crises leaping out in tender and almost awful fire.⁵

Growing up, the Bushnell children were fortunate not to experience the harsh Calvinism suffered by many of their peers. The childhood experiences of Horace Mann, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and Henry Ward Beecher have been termed “emotional horror stories,”⁶ and there must have been countless others from the same era whose painful experiences were never told or recorded. Bushnell undoubtedly saw it afar, and the contrast with his own home life disturbed him deeply. This awareness would provide part of the impetus for his prolific writing and powerful preaching on nurturing children.

Theological Climate

A major factor in the shaping of his thinking was the constant struggle and debate between Calvinism and Arminianism. In the strict Calvinism of New England there was no place for children in the church. The doctrine of hereditary depravity made all children alien to God, and their best hope was someday to receive God's grace among the predestinated elect. The Abrahamic and Jewish covenants were dragged forward into

⁴ Barbara Cross, *Horace Bushnell: Minister to a Changing America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), p. 3.

⁵ Munger, p. 8.

⁶ Robert L. Edwards, *Of Singular Genius: Of Singular Grace* (Cleveland: Pilgrim, 1992), p. 84.

Christianity in various forms, which sounded good to the ear but offered little of substance for the spirit. The baptism of an infant gave it a form of church membership, and then training was expected to perfect its relationship with God as far as it could, considering the limitations of theology. But it was presumed that the child would become an alien sinner because of his or her depraved and fallen nature, and the only hope of membership in the church depended upon predestination. Personal choice had nothing to do with anyone's relationship with God. Therefore, children could only become half members of the church by means of parental faith and the rite of baptism.

Revivalism in the American frontier, or "the Great Awakening," attacked Calvinism by offering both adults and children a choice concerning their spiritual condition. This clearly suggested that the election was not fixed, but it still presupposed that a child would become an alien sinner before he or she could choose to return to God. And in Bushnell's view such a notion was counterproductive to the meaning and interest of the church.

College and Professional Studies

After his graduation from Yale College, Bushnell experienced further uneasiness about the changes and mobility of society, and he struggled to find a fulfilling career path. He failed as a schoolteacher and found journalism distasteful. His religious anxiety increased as revival swept through Yale, and he remained aloof. His time at Law School was short. Yet he continued to wrestle with the hard points of Calvinism. What prompted his conversion during this period is unclear, although Munger says it was one of duty

rather than faith.⁷ Nonetheless, Bushnell followed his heart and eventually turned toward the ministry.

At Yale Divinity School he learned to think for himself under the leadership of Nathaniel Taylor, but found no theology that matched his own experience. The Unitarians harped on Calvinism's damnation of depraved and sinful human beings. In contrast Taylor had a gentle theology that exonerated God and insisted on the possibility of human righteousness. Essentially, he said that man was neither good nor evil, but had the right of choice.

James Marsh's *Aids to Reflection* offered Bushnell a coherent interpretation of religion based on Kantian epistemology.⁸ Kant differentiated between reason, the logical means of coming to faith, and understanding, which is empirical in nature. For Kant, understanding is spiritually blind and unreliable as an instrument of knowledge. It depends on the senses and may be used to construct theological systems, but it knows nothing of spiritual experience. Reason, on the other hand, does not depend on sensations, space, or time, but permits transcendent knowledge of moral law and spiritual existence.⁹ Out of this Bushnell found a means of expressing his own theology where reason rejected the doctrines of Calvinism, and he was able to formulate logical alternatives rooted in his own experience. The theological rationale for Bushnell's practical advice was that "the Gospel is more than a creed, rite or moral code. It is Spirit

⁷ Munger, p. 27

⁸ Cross, p. 20.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 23.

and Life— a vital power that brings about a personal experience of God’s love and a personal character conformed to that of the Savior.”¹⁰

Ministry and Message

In 1833 Bushnell accepted a ministry at the North Church in Hartford and moved his wife and two children there. He was now thirty-one. The ministry itself was ordinary but provided a base for the formulation and expression of thoughts deeper than his Sunday sermons. His success sprang from what he knew best and could speak about with authority. Perhaps ahead of his time in many respects, Bushnell observed that society in his day and its claims to piety were sadly deficient: “A flower of autumn, colored as highly as it needs to be to the eye, but destitute of fragrance.”¹¹ He lamented the change in American society where the individual superseded the family, the church, and the nation so that the whole was merely a collection of units. And he recognized the contribution that traditional religion had made to the whole unpleasant situation.

Barbara Cross notes that “as cities multiplied at the expense of the country, parents fearfully watched their sons depart for the many temptations of the city.”¹² One can imagine that stories came to Bushnell’s ears about young men and women whose survival of evil surroundings depended on their solid upbringing and memories of a good home, while others, whose religious and family background presumed their total hereditary depravity, went the inevitable path of damnation. Bushnell felt a calling to right a great wrong, or at least to offer the tools to do so. In the words of Shattuck, he

¹⁰ James O. Duke. “Re-Review: Horace Bushnell’s Christian Nurture,” *Modern Churchman*, Vol. XXVI, No. 3 (1984), pp. 40-44.

¹¹ Cross, p. 7.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 58.

sought to meet the religious challenges of his era by “projecting the optimistic spirit of American democracy into the theological sphere” where much was lacking.¹³

Asked to address his local ministerial association, Bushnell’s opportunity began as a small seed planted in a small garden. He delivered two sermons on his concept of educating children to be Christians from their earliest years. His message was well received and he was urged to publish. The Massachusetts Sabbath School undertook the project, but after stunning protests from Calvinists it was removed from circulation. A tour of Europe during these events gave him further time to reflect. Refusing to succumb to such narrow-mindedness, Bushnell reissued his work in 1847 as *Discourses on Christian Nurture*, and then published a fuller edition in 1861. By this time his doctrine had become, in Edwards’ terms, “a kernel of an American classic.”¹⁴

Bushnell’s reaction to Calvinism lay first in the system itself, then in the form it had assumed, and lastly in the methods to which it gave rise.¹⁵ In his era ministers had dismissed any positive impressionability of the mind of children, leaving them to be polluted by the world. In contrast with Calvinism, Bushnell produced a theology with a solid foundation in child psychology. Calvinism expected the world to have a negative impact on all young souls, first by birth and later by temptation and yielding to their own fallen nature. Here Bushnell saw two worlds in juxtaposition. The world that leads to temptation and defilement stands in contrast with the home, where purity, morality, and love potentially reign supreme. The latter is the child’s earliest experience of the church and God’s heavenly kingdom.

¹³ Shattuck, p. 92.

¹⁴ Edwards, p. 84.

Essence of the Doctrine

Ephesians 6:4, which teaches that children should be brought up “in the nurture and admonition of the Lord,” became a springboard for Bushnell’s argument. He asserted that there must be a way and a method that is the “Lord’s way,” and therefore the right way, to raise children so as to avoid the experience that traditional Christians come to expect. If Jesus allowed little children to come to him, indicating a spiritual relationship at the start, why should that not be true in the church. To Bushnell, one of the most repugnant thoughts is that before a child can be a Christian he or she must first experience a fall and then be converted. There must be within God’s scheme an alternative method of entering grace through nurture, so that the individual never knows decadence.¹⁶ That method was to be found in the careful nurturing of children by godly Christian parents.

As he saw it, a major failure in many parents of his day was the lack of noble expectations for their children. Bushnell said that if you do not aim your children toward God you definitely aim them at something else.¹⁷ However, by expecting children to fall into sin before they can find God, both parents and the church enforce the practical rejection of all the positive lessons taught them. “Which is better,” he asks, “to be piously brought up in sin, or to be allowed quietly to vegetate in it?”¹⁸ The essence of his doctrine of Christian Nurture is this:

That Christ Himself, by that renewing Spirit who can sanctify from the womb, should be practically infused into the childish mind; in other words, that the house, having a domestic spirit of grace dwelling in it, should become the church of children, the table and hearth a holy rite, and life an element of saving power.

¹⁵ Munger, p. 73.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 63.

¹⁷ Bushnell, p. 9.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 11.

Something is wanted that is better than teaching, something that transcends mere effort and will— the loveliness of a good life, the repose of faith, the confidence of righteous expectations, the sacred and cheerful liberty of the Spirit— all glowing about the young soul, as a warm and genial nurture, and forming in it, by methods that are silent and imperceptible, a spirit of duty and religious obedience to God.¹⁹

One of his strongest analogies is that of the ostrich, which devotes much time and effort to caring for its eggs but offers no parental guidance to chicks once they hatch. He speaks with disdain of those parents who think that any child left to its own choices, with no guidance or restraint, will grow to become a “large-minded, liberal, original and beautiful soul.”²⁰ It was the mindset of the day that parents wait for a religious revival, what he calls a “gale of the spirit,” to convert their children instead of teaching them the way to live from the start.²¹

Bushnell was highly critical of the hypocrisy of homes where tempers flare, harsh words are thrown like daggers, parents go on violent tirades, and children hear more criticism than encouragement. In this environment, he believed, fathers choke on prayer while mothers hide their faces in embarrassment at family duplicity. He was equally critical of those families that teach manners and certain standards of behavior just because of what people might think. This form of upbringing turns children away from the truths parents hope they might live by someday.

Organic Unity of Family

Bushnell defended infant sprinkling on the basis of household conversions in the New Testament, where, as he saw it, children were admitted by means of the vicarious faith of the parents. He also argued convincingly from Justin Martyr and Irenaeus that

¹⁹ Bushnell, pp. 12-13.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 54.

many early Christians were disciples from childhood, simply by means of the unity of the family.²²

Among the forces at work in Christian Nurture is what Bushnell called “a law of organic solidarity,” which links children to their parents and families to the church.²³ Christian Nurture is a process whereby the parent exercises himself in the child, directing the child’s emotions and sentiments by virtue of organic power.”²⁴ But it is also in sharp contrast with the notion that good must be chosen by the individual. During the formative stages of childhood, he believed, there is a different principle at work whereby good is taught and nurtured without the choice of the child.

Bushnell saw the family as a living organic form. Organic unity means that parents exert power over their children, not just when they teach, persuade or govern, “but without any purposed control whatever.”²⁵ The bond is strong and intimate, and control is exerted unconsciously. Such control is strong enough that if later the child experiences contrary influences by church, state, school, or society, he or she might be moved to change, but never wholly. Children will always remain under the influence of the family nurture. Although there are many unanswered questions concerning family of origin issues, these elements of Bushnell’s thinking were very much in line with mainstream modern psychology. He was in that sense ahead of his time.²⁶

To support his case, Bushnell pointed to the organic unity that pervades many nations and cultures. It is not uncommon for a nation to hate another nation for hundreds of years after an issue that caused enmity between them has been consciously forgotten.

²¹ Bushnell, p. 63.

²² Ibid., p. 34.

²³ Duke, p. 42.

²⁴ Bushnell, p. 20.

The conflict, he argued, becomes innate. This is illustrated also by an intense patriotism in a nation, or the *esprit de corps* of an army that assumes elements of commonality and passes it on as unspoken tradition.

The difference is that in organic unity, according to Bushnell, these traits become hereditary. Hunting dogs are an example. In its early generations of breeding a dog is taught hunting techniques, but eventually after several generations of hunting by those trained techniques much of what was learned by ancestors remains within the breed. Therefore, the traits are passed on in the psyche and no longer require instruction. Like this, Bushnell argued, the talents, disposition, propensity, and patterns of behavior in children are the result of generations of family nurture. When desirable patterns and traits are repeated often enough they remain without the need for instruction.

Bushnell may have suspected a weakness in this element of his doctrine, because he suggested also that it is possible for negative influences to override the spirit of the family, and conversely a child of a thievish family might be nurtured by the church or a pious family with positive results. He further suggested that if parents recognize their spirit to be less than desirable, the children can be afforded assistance by sending them to church, or by encouraging them to spend time with more pious families.²⁷

The Out-Populating Power of the Christian Stock

Bushnell saw no hope that the world could be won to Christ by taking the gospel to every country and converting people. In his experience, adults seldom changed their habits, views, or character, regardless of their claimed religious convictions. But he did

²⁵ Ibid., p. 78.

²⁶ Elizabeth B. Hurlock, *Developmental Psychology* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1959), pp. 1-163.

see the possibility that a global reign of God might be accomplished by a different method. Drawing words from Jeremiah 31:34, “For all shall know me from the least to the greatest,” Bushnell called for a new vision of adding souls to the kingdom by a means other than conversion from a sinful past. Such could only be realized by the nurture of children.²⁸ This doctrine of a gradual development of a society into a dominant stock has been called “social Darwinism.”²⁹

Bushnell postulated that the qualities of education, such as domestic virtue, industry, order, law, intellectual culture, character, habit, and feeling, tend to become thoroughly embedded in the stock over time and will supplant inferior stock. The inferior can only survive by assimilation. To support this he contrasted Christian history with the history of Islam, in which the former propagated itself by moral and religious influence and the latter by military force.³⁰ In his view, the superiority of the Christian society is obvious. He added that Christians should continue to convert the nations, but in the long run this is not the method that will make a pious world. The character and values of such converts tend to remain the same as before.

Bushnell found biblical support for his argument. He said that in the beginning God created a single pair, rather than thousands, to declare His economy in the family situation. The purpose was to maintain godly seed.³¹ God included such laws into His scheme so that “piety itself shall finally overpopulate the world.”³² Therefore, the concept of population by godly parents was ordained by God, and if global salvation is to be attained it can only occur by this scheme. In Bushnell’s words:

²⁷ Bushnell, pp. 100-101.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

²⁹ Cross, pp. 70-72.

³⁰ Bushnell, p. 176.

We expect that in that day all flesh shall see the salvation of God, that everything human will be regenerated by it, that the glory of God cover the earth like a baptism of water— even as the waters cover the sea.³³

The Process of Nurture

Christian Nurture is a complex process that begins in the character of the parents. They cannot and must not delay instruction until children are old enough to speak. It must begin during the “impression” stage of life, before intelligent words are exchanged. If parents live in the spirit they will shape children in spirit. Thus, Bushnell extolled motherhood for its role in “shaping a soul’s immortality.”³⁴

His advice concerning strong willed children is supported by modern psychology. He believed that a parent should not attempt to break the child’s will, but rather outlast a child when being stubborn. The parent should sternly place a stubborn child in the right place and not yield or reward unacceptable behavior.³⁵ When a child is three, he said, the parents have done more than half of all they can do to nurture his or her character.³⁶ Bushnell saw great value in teaching religion to children, citing Paul’s reminder to Timothy to remain in the good teaching of his mother.³⁷ Bushnell saw value in teaching older children to quote scripture and, for example, the Apostles’ Creed, for in it the child expresses nurtured faith. Moreover, what is learned later will be associated with the teachings of the parents.

However, he wrote that a child should not be taught harmful doctrines like regenerative baptism, but rather that baptism signifies renewed life in God. From this,

³¹ Malachi 2:15.

³² Bushnell, p. 165.

³³ Ibid., p. 170.

³⁴ Ibid., p. 202.

³⁵ Ibid., p. 209.

³⁶ Ibid., p. 212.

he believed, small children might sense during their impressionable years that they are unregenerate, unacceptable to God, and unworthy to pray until they are baptized. Rather they should be taught that Jesus loves little children and during his earthly ministry permitted them to come to him. They should be taught that children are near to the heart of God.³⁸ Bushnell wrote: “The spirit of God is nowhere so dove-like as he is in his gentle visitation and hoverings of mercy over little children.”³⁹ His description of the appropriate nurture is poetic:

What is wanted is . . . a most tender and wise attention, watching always for them, and, at every turn or stage of advance, contributing to what is wanted; enjoying their bright and happy times of goodness and peace with them, helping their weak times, drawing them out of their discouragements, and smoothing away their moods of recoil and bitterness; contriving always to supply the kind of power that is wanted, at the time when it is wanted.⁴⁰

Parental Mistakes

Bushnell could see numerous traits in parents that would result in poor nurturing, and comments to this effect are scattered throughout his work. Parents should take care not to force doctrine on children or drill them in scripture. Instead let them play when they want. “Untimely intrusions of religion will only make it odious.”⁴¹ If handled “fretfully, scolded, jerked, or simply laid aside unaffectionately,” a child will feel the sting of the treatment and will be angered by anger, irritated by irritation, fretted by fretfulness.⁴²

³⁷ II Timothy 3:14.

³⁸ Bushnell, p. 324.

³⁹ Ibid., p. 330.

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 330.

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 325.

⁴² Ibid., p. 208.

He devoted an entire chapter to qualifications of parenting, acknowledging that there is no appropriate training or preparation.⁴³ But most of his treatment pertains to errors made by parents and the lasting negative effects. He denounced in very specific terms a host of actions and practices in rearing children: cruelty, sanctimonious attitude, bigotry, judging and condemning, harsh censorship, indifference, excessive prohibition, thundering commands of “thou shalt not,” overbearing absolutism, holding displeasure too long, hasty and false accusations, excessive protection, tests of character that are inappropriate for the child’s age, and so on. These mistakes were common to parents in his day, as they are today, and there were probably few examples of ideal parenthood. His own parents were possibly the best Bushnell ever saw.

Residual Calvinism

Despite his arguments against Calvinism, some of Bushnell’s views seem solidly Calvinistic. He rejected the idea that good parenting simply draws out the good already in a child. He seems to have believed in natural depravity, which is not sin or blame but an inclination to do evil that is inherited from parents. He taught that this is both the declaration of scripture and the laws of physiology.⁴⁴ He suggested that when a child comes to do something good simply because it is good and right, this is the dawn of a new life. Bushnell also acknowledged divine sovereignty and the provision of the Holy Spirit to enable a parent to accomplish his or her purpose, unless it conflicts with some

⁴³ Ibid., pp. 216-231.

⁴⁴ Bushnell, p. 19.

other element of divine purpose. This idea is not consistent with the bulk of Bushnell's doctrine.⁴⁵

Conclusions

Bushnell is commonly lauded today, essentially because many of his insights have been confirmed, or affirmed, by scientific studies of child development and parenting. However, Bushnell also stressed Reformation themes that were often neglected by his contemporaries and questioned in some modern and post-modern circles, such as biblical authority, the uniqueness of Christ, universal sin, the necessity of regenerative grace, and the church as an ark of salvation. Although he opposed certain tenets of Calvinism, other elements of Calvinism seem to remain within his doctrine, although often hazy.

However, Duke points out that Bushnell's "ideal of domestic life is less original and more questionable than hitherto suspected."⁴⁶ His description of gender roles remained quite traditional and his mediating theology is at times ambivalent. He may have sought to bridge the gap between Calvinism and Revivalism, since he stressed the interrelation between divine grace and the responsibility of the individual. But Duke comments that because he refused to equate or combine these two actions he limited the permission granted to the church to develop a program for innovative education, which would be essential to post-liberal (narrative) theology.

Nevertheless, there can be no doubt about Bushnell's concept of how the faith of the church is to be renewed from generation to generation, or how the gospel might

⁴⁵ Bushnell, pp. 24ff.

⁴⁶ Duke, p. 43.

ultimately find a place in the hearts of all, from the least to the greatest. His general doctrine of nurture is profoundly insightful, considering the social and religious climate of his day. His child psychology, while imperfect, is ahead of its time. By 1902, Charles McKinley expressed wonder that the concept of Christian nurture had ever been debated.⁴⁷ Edwards says that of all Bushnell's writings, *Christian Nurture* "remains the most easily read and closest to our day."⁴⁸ In a 1979 poll of Christian educators as to which writings they considered indispensable in their field, *Christian Nurture* was top of the list.⁴⁹ Concerning the educational challenges in America during the 1980s, the era of Alvin Tofler's *Future Shock*, Jerry McCant proposed, among other things, a prompt return to the principles of Christian nurture as enunciated by Horace Bushnell.⁵⁰

Many Christian denominations continue to debate theological issues relevant to children. It is not uncommon to find churches in various traditions where children are not permitted to share in Communion (Eucharist or Lord's Supper) because of a latent sense that they are not active and accountable members of the church until baptized or confirmed. The irony in that is that in American schools and many churches from an early age children are taught the pledge of allegiance to the national flag, despite their inability to grasp the meaning of its concepts and terminology. The theory behind that, undoubtedly, is that they should grow up devoutly American and never know any different. This is what Bushnell believed should occur in nurturing Christian faith and values in children.

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 42.

⁴⁸ Edwards, p. 294.

⁴⁹ Winthrop S. Hudson, *Religion In America, 1965* (New York: Scribners, 1981), p. 177.

⁵⁰ Jerry McCant, "Onward to the '80s," *Journal of Christian Education* (US), Vol. 2, No. 2 (1982), p. 25-28.

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