

Horace Bushnell—A Theologian as a Champion of the Children of the Nineteenth Century—

MORITA, Michiyo

- I. Introduction
- II. The Life of Horace Bushnell
- III. Theological and Social Atmospheres during the Time of Horace Bushnell
 1. Calvinism
 2. Revivalism/Great Awakening
 3. Social Situation
- IV. Christian Nurture
 1. The Children's condition in the Nineteenth Century
 2. Horace Bushnell's Interests in Children
 3. Christian Nurture
- V. Conclusion

I. Introduction

The purpose of this paper lies with the following two points. The first point is to discuss the characteristics of Horace Bushnell's work, that is, his integration of educational ministry with theology. William R. Adamson clearly states the above in the following way:

Horace Bushnell was acutely aware of the interrelationship between theology and Christian education. He knew that Chris-

tian education without a strong and dynamic theology lacks direction and power, and that conversely, Christian theology without a dynamic educational outreach suitable to the contemporary scene soon becomes sterile and obsolete. Part of the greatness of his lasting contribution can be seen in his surprising integration of educational practice with theology.¹

The second point is, although it is closely related to the first one, to clarify why and how Horace Bushnell was interested and involved in the problem of children in Christian education.

To do so, I would like to take a glance at his life, describe the theological and social atmospheres of his time, examine Christian Nurture which is his main work, and lastly, consider applications of his thought to the contemporary Japanese situation, as a conclusion.

II. The Life of Horace Bushnell

Horace Bushnell was born in Bantam, Connecticut, on the fourteenth of April in 1802. His father was a Methodist, and his mother was an Episcopalian. They were members of the Congregational Church of New Preston, Connecticut.² Bushnell made his profession of the Christian faith in 1821.³ In 1823, he entered Yale College, and graduated in 1827. During his college days, one of the works which most influenced him was that of the English poet-philosopher, Samuel Taylor Coleridge.⁴ He became convinced that religion appeals primarily to the heart and to the feeling for its compelling demonstration.⁵ In 1831, he enrolled in the Yale Divinity School, and studied there until 1833. One has to remember two points here. First, Bushnell didn't favor "New Haven theology" whose representative was Nathaniel W. Taylor of the Yale Divinity School. The second point is that a revival swept Yale in the winter of 1831.⁶ Practically everyone was touched by it, although Bushnell wasn't.⁷ After graduation, he was called to the North Congregational Church in Hartford, Connecticut, in February of 1833.⁸ In those days, "the prevalent theology in many of the New England churches was,

in temper and spirit, a heritage from the Great Awakening of 1740-42, under the powerful preaching of Jonathan Edwards.”⁹ Bushnell had to be confronted with this influence of the Great Awakening, as a pastor, as soon as he began his ministry. In 1861, he published one of his main books, Christian Nurture for which he has been called the “father” of the Christian education movement in America.¹⁰ His death was in Hartford, Connecticut, on the seventeenth of February in 1876.

III. Theological and Social Atmospheres of the Time of Horace Bushnell

1. Calvinism

One of the theological philosophies prevalent at the time of Horace Bushnell was Calvinism. A central doctrine of Calvin’s system of theology was God’s sovereignty.¹¹ William R. Adamson depicts God’s sovereignty, according to Calvin’s thinking, as follows:

God was thought of as an absolute and irresistible sovereign, his government and control extending over all things. God had mercy on some and hardened his heart against others. The doctrine had implications for what were called “decrees”—decrees of election and reprobation. Since everything must happen according to God’s will, God had predetermined that some would be saved to eternal salvation and others sent to eternal damnation and punishment.¹²

Although one can accept the idea of God’s sovereignty, it seems that the problem is that there is no room for “means of grace” at all, in Calvin’s system of theology. This point was a problem to Bushnell, too. He had to seek a theology which would grant both God’s sovereignty and a means of grace. It seems to me that Bushnell nursed the idea of “nurture,” as a means of grace, which bore fruit of the work, Christian Nurture.

2. Revivalism/Great Awakening

According to the Encyclopedia Americana, religious revivalism and the Great Awakening are respectively explained in the following way:

In America a revival known as the Great Awakening swept the colonies in the 1730's and 1740's. A similar movement, usually called the Second Great Awakening, occurred after 1795. In frontier America, the setting for religious revival was often a camp meeting marked by fervid preaching, in an emotional atmosphere, and public conversions.¹³

The beginnings of the Great Awakening are traditionally associated with the preaching of Jonathan Edwards, a... Congregationalist minister...in 1734.... In highly emotional language, many revivalists emphasized the sense of the importance of man before the omnipotence of God and reasserted the Calvinist view of man's inability to ascertain his own salvation.¹⁴

Since the above explanation about revivalism and the Great Awakening overlaps, I would like to regard them as synonymous, in this paper.

In addition, inferred from the above explanation, one can see that Calvinism and revivalism were not contradictory, but were compatible, although the emphasis was on different aspects: God's sovereignty in Calvinism and conversions in an emotional atmosphere in revivalism.

Although Bushnell didn't completely object to revivalism, he opposed revivalism as the only way of having a conversion experience. He considered revivalism to be one of the means of the conversion experience. "While God is unchangeable, he is infinitely various-unchangeable in his purposes, various in his means."¹⁵ Furthermore, one can understand that Bushnell valued, much more, a natural, gradual nurturing in everyday life, than an unnatural, extreme conversion in an emotional atmosphere.

One can say that revivalism, as one of the theological realities of

those days, caused him to cherish the idea of "nurture," and motivated him to work on Christian Nurture.

3. Social Situation

William R. Adamson presents an interesting and persuasive observation in the following citation:

In the past, Puritan practices and Calvinistic theologies have been indiscriminately compared with Bushnell's doctrine of Christian nurture. This was an incomplete and inaccurate picture. The research of recent years has given a much more realistic picture of the flux and tension in the social situation in which Bushnell did his creative work.¹⁶

I completely agree with Adamson's observation and conclusion. By pushing one's way through the social situation during Bushnell's time, one can much more concretely and vividly visualize his contour.

The social atmosphere during Horace Bushnell's life was one of a changing society. Merchants and professional men were gaining power. "To such persons...the strict doctrines of Calvinism became increasingly repugnant; they were not easily convinced that they were helpless pawns in the hands of Calvin's arbitrary God."¹⁷ In addition, in inverse relation to the social mobility, people of the time of Horace Bushnell psychologically idealized the home as the symbol of security, religion, and moral strength.¹⁸ They were in need of a fresh perspective which would integrate their psychological feeling with a realistic theology different from the rigid Calvinistic theology.¹⁹ Horace Bushnell was the man who tried to integrate these two points.

IV. Christian Nurture

1. Children's Condition

How were the children considered, in the day of Bushnell? One can say that the children were, generally speaking, regarded as "miniatures"

of adults in those days, and were regarded with no distinction from adults.

Therefore, there were two ways for the children to become Christians. One of them was to become a Christian in childhood, in the same manner as an adult, that is, the result of a conversion experience. One can also point out that this method is from the view of children as "miniature adults"; that this method is an application of Calvinistic theology; and that it would have accelerated revivalism among children. The other method was to wait until an age of maturity when children could know and understand a conversion experience.²⁰ One can observe that to wait until the age of maturity was important for the children. In reality, the latter method was much more common in the early nineteenth century. Either way was equally difficult for the children. "It was...urgent that someone come to the rescue and dignify the position of children in the Christian religion in America."²¹

Next, I would like to describe how the children were actually taught in the church, in particular, in Sunday school, in the time of Horace Bushnell. One can mention two points, in particular. One of them is that the children were taught that a human being could not do anything acceptable to God, and were even taught to grow up in sin.²² The children were discouraged by this teaching. This seems to be influenced by Calvinistic theology. The other one is that "the mechanical use of the theological catechism and the equally mechanical rote memorization of passages of scripture"²³ were employed in Sunday School. "The drill in catechism and the memorization of scripture verses had long been the central method of religious education in New England."²⁴ In short, from the above two points, one can sum up that the objective of the teaching was to have the children grow up in sin; that the contents of the teaching were catechism and the Scripture; and that the method of the teaching was memorization, in Sunday school.

It is clear that Bushnell was not in favor of the above teaching objective, content, and method. He never believed that the children

should grow up in sin. Moreover, "he favored the use of the Lord's Prayer, the Ten Commandments, the Apostles' Creed or the Nicene Creed, hymns, and facts of the gospel."²⁵ In addition, he was in favor of the natural, implicit, and life-related method of teaching. Besides, he graded materials and methods to suit the various age-groups of the children.²⁶

From the above description, one can summarize that the children's condition in their religious life in the nineteenth century was not a satisfactory one, but a pitiful one.

2. Horace Bushnell's Interests in Children

By Horace Bushnell's interests in children, I mean, "Why was he interested in and involved in the problems of children so much?" and "Why did he write Christian Nurture?" It seems to me that there are three reasons for his interests in children. One of them is that he was a father of five children, three of whom survived. Adamson says that "his own experience as a father sharpened his perception of the growth of children."²⁷ The second reason is that he had many opportunities for observing "what was really going on within the homes of the parishioners he visited"²⁸ as a pastor. He was an able observer of what took place between the parents and the children in the homes, as a pastor. The third reason is that he, as a pastor, had to settle up the views on the children; and why, what and how to teach the children in Sunday school as well as in the home. If he had only been a theologian or a divinity school professor, and if he had not been a pastor, then he would not have been interested in nor involved in children. If he had not been interested in children, he would not have written the work, Christian Nurture. If he had not written Christian Nurture, he would not have been called a champion of the children.

3. Christian Nurture

First, I would like to take a glance at the formation of Christian

Nurture. According to Adamson, the article, "The Kingdom of Heaven as a Grain of Mustard Seed" published in 1844 "was of major significance. It contained his fundamental principles of Christian nurturing. His later works were an elaboration and expansion of these germinal ideas."²⁹ The kingdom of heaven "is first like a grain of mustard seed, which as it continues to flourish advances toward the statue of a tree."³⁰ One can see here the idea of "growth" or "nurture."

This article, however, raised some dissent in the local ministerial association.³¹ As a result of this, he wrote a treatise, "Discourses on Christian Nurture." To this treatise, Bennet Tyler objected, and claimed that this treatise "was full of dangerous tendencies," in the pamphlet, "Letter to Dr. Bushnell." Charles Hodge also made a charge against Bushnell's naturalism, in the "Princeton Review" in 1847. After this, Bushnell published the article, "Views of Christian Nurture and of Subjects Adjacent Thereto" in 1847.

Christian Nurture, the final exposition of his doctrine was published in 1861.³² Thus, through many years, he gradually formulated and crystallized his doctrine of nurture.³⁴

Second, I would like to comment on the basic premises of Bushnell's theory of the Christian nurturing of children.³⁵ Adamson enumerates five premises which are enlightening and convincing. They are the omnipresence of God, regeneration, capacity for response, human sinfulness, and no place for commitment.

According to Adamson, Bushnell's first basic premise is the omnipresence of God.³⁶ That is, God's presence is everywhere.³⁷ This premise is expressed in Christian Nurture in the manner in which "God can work in the lives of children just as well as in the lives of adults..."³⁸ The second premise is regeneration, or the restoration to God.³⁹ Bushnell viewed this regeneration as a growing and developing relationship with God.⁴⁰ He thought that both adults and children could and should enter into the continuous renewal of relationship with God, which is different from a single, climatic conversion experience.⁴¹ Bushnell's third basic premise is

the capacity for response to God. According to his view, children can make an enthusiastic response to God, and do not have wait, perhaps for years, for such an emotional experience.⁴²

The fourth basic premise of Bushnell's theory of the Christian nurturing of children is human sinfulness, in other words, depravity. Since he was a realistic person, "he could... see human potentialities and recommend ways of developing them,"⁴³ although he recognized human sinfulness. The fifth basic premise is that there is no room for commitment and personal decision in his theory of Christian nurturing. Adamson points out that "one misinterpretation is that his whole system of Christian education is purely a naturalistic growth, or educational process, and that he has no place for evangelism, commitment, and personal decision."⁴⁴ On the other hand, Bushnell believed that children could make a commitment to God, even though the commitment might be small, from the adult's standpoint. In addition, he believed that the commitment could be a preparation for mature decision.⁴⁵ Moreover, according to Bushnell's idea, "after the child has grown up with Christian nurture and is a member of the church, he must himself assume his responsibilities in the covenant relationship, making an ultimate declaration of faith that confirms all his parents have previously done in his behalf."⁴⁶

Third, I would like to examine Christian Nurture itself. I consider the thesis of Christian Nurture to be expressed in the following expression:

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 experi-

ence, but seeming rather to have loved what is good from his earliest years.⁴⁷

It seems to me that Luther A. Weigle's analysis of the above thesis is persuasive. According to him, this thesis consists of two propositions: a psychological one and a theological one. By his psychological proposition, he means that "the nature of the family as a social group is such that the spirit and character of the parents inevitably influence the life and character of the children."⁴⁸ He indicates his theological proposition in the manner that "the life of the family may thus be a means of grace, in that it affords an instrument which God may use for the fulfillment of His promises and constitutes a natural channel for the power of the Holy Spirit."⁴⁹

In short, one can say that Christian Nurture is a unified work which discusses aspects of nurturing children in their development as Christians, from both psychological and theological aspects.

Fourth, I would like to mention Bushnell's idea of "infant baptism." Since he agreed with infant baptism, he baptized children and accepted them as church members. One can find the reason why he was in favor of infant baptism in the following explanation:

...a rite which supposes the fact of an organic connection of character between the parent and the child; a seal of faith in the parent, applied over to the child on the ground of presumption that his faith is wrapped up in the parent's faith; so that he is accounted a believer from the beginning.... Thus it is that infant baptism becomes an appropriate rite. It sees the child in the parent, counts him presumptively a believer and a Christian, and, with the parent, baptizes him also.⁵⁰

Fifth, I would like to comment on aspects of Bushnell's theory which I consider to be weaknesses in Christian Nurture. One of them is that as I described above, there is no room for commitment and personal decision, in Christian Nurture. It is important to "nurture" children, based on Christianity. At the same time, it is necessary to encourage

children to "determine commitment to God." The second weakness is Christology. Adamson points out that "if Bushnell had revised his educational theory toward the end of his life, when his theology about Christ had matured, he might have given greater emphasis to the place of Jesus Christ in the Christian education of children and adults."⁵¹ The third weakness is Bushnell's unrealistic expectation of parents. Luther A. Weigle relates that "he (Bushnell) expected too much of parents, who, in those days at least, didn't have the intellectual competence nor the religious devotion nor the available time to carry out the program he proposed."⁵²

V. Conclusion

I would like to consider applications of Bushnell's thought to the contemporary Japanese situation, as a conclusion.

First, Bushnell's effort to integrate theology with Christian education or theology with children's growth could and should be the Japanese church's current effort. Bushnell's idea of unification between the above two raises an important task for the Japanese church.

Second, since Bushnell's idea of "nurture" is not extreme but is sound and moderate, this concept of "nurture" could be favored by the Japanese Christians, and could be a workable idea, in ministry and Christian education in Japan.

Third, Bushnell's idea of "infant baptism" could be beneficial to the Japanese church. Since the Japanese Christian population is only one percent of the total population, and as most of the churches belong to the United Church of Christ in Japan, since World War II, the difference of denomination is not given considerable attention. Therefore, the need to baptize infants and children and to nurture them is realistic and reasonable in the Japanese church.

ENDNOTES:

1. Adamson, William R., Bushnell Rediscovered, (Philadelphia.

Horace Bushnell—A Theologian as a Champion
of the Children of the Nineteenth Century—

- Boston: United Church Press, 1966), p.10.
2. Walker, Williston, "Horace Bushnell" Christian Nurture, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1960), p.xxiii.
 3. Ibid., p.xxiii.
 4. Ibid., p.xxiii.
 5. Ibid., p.xxiv.
 6. Bushnell Rediscovered, p.19.
 7. Ibid., p.19.
 8. Ibid., P.19.
 9. Weigle, Luther A., "Introduction" Christian Nurture, p.xxxii.
 10. Bushnell Rediscovered, p.7.
 11. Ibid., p.44.
 12. Ibid., p.44
 13. The Encyclopedia Americana Vol. 23, p.455.
 14. Ibid. Vol. 27, p.553.
 15. Cheney, Mary Bushnell, Life and Letters of Horace Bushnell, (New York: Harper & Brothers, Publishers, 1880), p.82.
 16. Bushnell Rediscovered, p.53.
 17. Ibid., p.53.
 18. Ibid., p.53
 19. Ibid., p.54.
 20. Ibid., p.43.
 21. Ibid., p.43.
 22. Ibid., pp.59-60.
 23. Bowen, C.A., Child and Church, (New York. Nashville: Abingdon Press,1960), p.59.
 24. Bushnell Rediscovered, p.107.
 25. Ibid., p.41.
 26. Ibid., p.42.
 27. Ibid., p.23.
 28. Ibid., p.23.
 29. Ibid., p.57.

Horace Bushnell—A Theologian as a Champion
of the Children of the Nineteenth Century—

30. Ibid., p.61.
31. Ibid., p.61.
32. Ibid., p.61.
33. Ibid., p.63.
34. Ibid., p.63.
35. Ibid., p.70.
36. Ibid., p.70.
37. Ibid., p.70.
38. Ibid., p.71.
39. Ibid., p.71.
40. Ibid., p.71.
41. Ibid., p.71.
42. Ibid., pp.71—72.
43. Ibid., p.73.
44. Ibid., p.73.
45. Ibid., p.73.
46. Ibid., p.73. Here, Adamson is using the idea in Christian Nurture. My quotation is from Adamson's Bushnell Rediscovered.
47. Christian Nurture, p.4.
48. "Introduction" Christian Nurture, p.xxxiv.
49. Ibid., p.xxxiv.
50. Christian Nurture, p.30.
51. Bushnell Rediscovered, p.102.
52. "Introduction" Christian Nurture, p.xxxviii.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

1. Adamson, William R.. Bushnell Rediscovered. Philadelphia: United Church Press, 1966.
2. Bowen, C.A.. Child and Church. New York. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1960.
3. Bushnell, Horace. Christian Nurture. New Haven: Yale University

Horace Bushnell – A Theologian as a Champion
of the Children of the Nineteenth Century –

Press, 1960.

4. Cheney, Mary Bushnell. Life and Letters of Horace Bushnell. New York: Harper & Brothers, Publishers, 1880.

5. Walker, Williston. "Horace Bushnell" Christian Nurture. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1960.

6. Weigle, Luther A.. "Introduction" Christian Nurture. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1960.

7. The Encyclopedia Americana Vol. 23.

8. The Encyclopedia Americana Vol. 27.

(1990. 12. 6)