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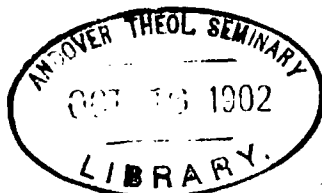
ARTICLE I.

HORACE BUSHNELL AS A THEOLOGIAN.<sup>1</sup>

BY THE REVEREND FRANK HUGH FOSTER, PH.D., D.D.

THE theological labors of Bushnell will never be understood and appreciated till his distinctive position is clearly conceived and carefully kept in mind. He was preëminently a preacher, and his work as a theologian was such as a preacher is qualified and naturally led to perform. He never held academic position after his life-work was fairly begun, and never engaged in the instruction of candidates for the ministry. There were great advantages in this position, and decisive influences proceeding from it to determine the lines and character of his work. The academic teacher is to a degree imprisoned in routine. He must pay attention to every department of his subject, for he has to teach them all. He may be thus diverted at important moments from studies which might otherwise prove largely fruitful. He gains in comprehensiveness and critical quality, for he must know and judge many opinions, and must be a man of books; but he loses in originality, spontaneity, and freshness. The preacher, on the contrary, need pay no

<sup>1</sup> An address at the celebration of the one hundredth anniversary of Bushnell's birth, held April 8, 1902, by Pacific Seminary, in connection with Commencement.



attention to routine. He will best serve his people when he is most fully himself. He is regularly engaged in work which is largely creative, and thus his originality is receiving constant stimulus and training. And, above all, he is constantly brought into direct contact with men, with life, with the pressing problems of the living present, with the needs which the day and hour have created, and which the theology of the day needs to meet. Hence if the preacher becomes a theologian, the theology is likely to become one of life and of power. This effect Bushnell amply illustrates.

At the same time there are disadvantages in this position, from which have flowed most of Bushnell's defects. As we are to be occupied with the positive estimate of his services, we shall best prepare ourselves, as well as relieve the discussion of a certain burden, if we briefly note some of these disadvantages at this preliminary stage of our theme.

His lack of historical knowledge was one disadvantage. After he had written his chief contribution to the discussion of the doctrine of the Trinity, he reviewed the matter in another work, in which he wrote: "On a careful study of the creed prepared by this [the Nicene] council, as interpreted by the writings of Athanasius in defense of it, I feel obliged to confess that I had not sufficiently conceived its import, or the title it has to respect as a Christian document."<sup>1</sup> He might have gone further and said that he had not *even then* "sufficiently conceived the import" of that creed, or of the New England divines whose writings he was criticising with a vigor which sometimes bordered on acerbity, and demanded some "charity" of his readers, as Dr. Munger suggests.<sup>2</sup> If he has himself not received a due share of that comprehension which a more historical study of his writings would have produced, he has certainly failed in comprehending the full scope of those forms of stating Christian doctrine against which he protests.

<sup>1</sup> *Christ in Theology*, p. 177.

<sup>2</sup> *Bushnell*, p. 190.

Then the preaching habit led him into another error, which for a constructive theologian, such as Bushnell aspired to be, was a very serious one,—that of premature publication. “He not only wrote, but published first, and read later.”<sup>1</sup> The three discourses which form his first principal work, “God in Christ,” were all prepared and delivered in one half-year, and published almost immediately. Thus his thought was not only not finished,—which he would esteem no great reproach,—but it was not even matured,—which every reader has a right to demand of a writer who aspires to large and permanent influence.

I mention but one more of these preliminary and cautionary criticisms, before plunging into the main work before us,—that as a preacher he was naturally inclined to the method which he employed, the method of intuition. He *saw* truth; he did not laboriously reason it out. It was the precipitate in his mind resulting from long processes of solution and digestion. It finally was its own chief evidence. Hence he neither carefully criticised the positions of his opponents, scrupulously refuted them, nor elaborately defended his own. He thus brought life into the discussion of great themes,—and this was an advantage; he forged his way into new regions and made “discoveries,” which can scarcely ever come except as the inexplicable findings of great and independent minds; but he failed to do what is specially incumbent on those who have the faculty of “insight,” and which the methods of natural science have increasingly emphasized as essential,—he failed to treat his discoveries as mere hypotheses and to subject them to verification before he announced them as truths. In no other respect, possibly, has he had more influence on later thinkers than in promoting the intuitive habit of thought; but his imitators have generally been more able to follow him in his neglect of the sober and

<sup>1</sup>Munger, Bushnell, p. 155.

prosaic labors of necessary verification and self-criticism than in his brilliant and often profound intuitions.

But let us not forget in these preliminary remarks that our real theme is still before us. I hasten on, therefore, to remark that *Bushnell's first and greatest contribution to the world of thought was himself.*

When he began his theological life, he found New England theology somewhat sharply formulated under the direct influence of a controversy which had been going on for nearly a century but was just about coming to a close. It began with Edwards' books against Arminianism and closed with Stuart's against Unitarianism. Bushnell found great difficulty in adjusting himself to prevailing forms of statement among orthodox teachers and preachers. The many controversies with their subtle and often mutually contradictory distinctions and definitions seemed to him more like an impassable jungle than a well-ordered garden. He felt himself compelled to reconsider every doctrine from its foundation,—and it is his title to enduring fame, and the condition of his highest service, that he followed this inward compulsion. He thought his way through the difficulties for himself, and the result was that he had something to say which was often vivifying and permanently instructive.

The gain made by this history of struggle in the department of theological method was gathered up in the essay on Language. "Words," he says, "are the *signs* of thought to be expressed. They do not literally convey or pass over a thought out of one mind into another, as we commonly speak of doing. They are only hints or images held up before the mind of another, to put *him* on generating or reproducing the same thought; which he can only do as he has the same personal contents, or the generative power out of which to bring the thought required."<sup>1</sup> In

<sup>1</sup>God in Christ, p. 46.

other words, there can be no thinking in theology but what is *original thinking*, the production of the thought by the student's own mind, assisted by others, but not receiving doctrine in a state of passivity. If it is *supposed* to be thus received, there is and must be even then individual thinking,—only in this case it is hasty, careless, and mostly worthless. Hence the true method of theological teaching is that of suggestion. It seeks to kindle thought, to provoke to originality. It employs the indirect path to its end, if this is more suggestive; it brings up diverse forms of statement. "Thus, as form battles form, and one form neutralizes another, all the insufficiencies of words are filled out, the contrarities liquidated, and the mind settles into a full and just apprehension of the pure spiritual truth. Accordingly, we never come so near to a truly well-rounded view of any truth as when it is offered *paradoxically*, that is, under contradictions, that is, under two or more dictions, which, taken as dictions, are contrary, one to the other."<sup>1</sup>

How profound and important is the principle embodied in this emphasis of the necessity of recreating truth for one's self by the originative processes of the mind, every one of us who has watched the growth of his own knowledge of truth or engaged in the education of others will appreciate. It is so easy to accept doctrines from others without understanding either their grounds or their meaning, and so easy to settle down upon beliefs which gradually acquire the seeming character of self-evident truths, when we have even forgotten the reasons originally urged for them and are totally incapable of defending them from any earnest attack! New England was, no doubt, as free from this paralysis of the faculties of theological discussion and digestion in Bushnell's day as any portion of the Christian world; but some trace of it will be found wherever

<sup>1</sup> God in Christ, p. 55.

the indolence which is a part of humanity's inheritance of original sin is to be found. His services in banishing it and awakening the unparalleled activity of Congregationalism in leading the efforts of these days to discover and appropriate the new thoughts of the age, can scarcely be too highly appraised.

Bushnell had also discovered, and he now opposed with biting severity, some of the perennial fallacies of theologians. Nothing is more common among orthodox theologians, and among their heterodox critics, than the fallacy of merely verbal reasoning,—the using, I mean, of words as counters of a logical process forgetful of their meaning,—as we employ the symbols a, b, c, in algebra, and carry them through long operations without ever pausing to question what they may mean. Nothing, also, is more fatal than this. He employed his own methods of "suggestion" and "paradox" with great effectiveness to expose this error. "A writer without either truth or genius, *a mere estimating, inferring machine*, is just the man to live in definitions."<sup>1</sup> "That deductive, proving, *spinning* method of practical investigation, commonly denoted by the term *logical*," was held up to pitiless derision. He pushed his affirmations to the extreme, as when he suggested "the very great difficulty, if not the impossibility" of theology and of psychology as well. "Poets," he says, "are the true metaphysicians, and if there be any complete science of man to come, they must bring it." The impression which most sympathetic readers would carry away from these pages would be that of the worthlessness of systematic theology. It has become the fashion in certain quarters to sneer at the very effort to obtain exact conceptions of great religious truths and to put them in accurate form, and this tendency has derived a powerful impulse from Bushnell's pages. He has thus assisted the tendency to loose thinking, and to the

<sup>1</sup> God in Christ, p. 57.

abandonment of *all* thinking, and has helped in the process of emasculating the church and bringing it into contempt with earnest men, trained and exercised in the strenuous methods by which truth is advanced in our day. But this has been, after all, a *misuse* of Bushnell. It has been because men have not used *his* words suggestively and themselves burrowed down by original thinking into his true meaning. No man was ever more anxious to promote correct thinking and clear views than Bushnell. It was *because* he was so earnest for the *substance* of thought that he exposed and ridiculed the abuse of its *form* as though that were substance. Listen then with discriminating attention to his summary of this whole question in the words: "Considering the infirmities of language, therefore, all formulas of doctrine should be held in a certain spirit of accommodation. They cannot be pressed to the letter, for the very sufficient reason that the letter is never true. They can never be regarded as *proximate* representations, and should therefore be accepted not as *laws over belief* or opinion, but more as badges of consent and good understanding. The moment we begin to speak of them as guards and tests of purity, we confess that we have lost the sense of purity, and, with about equal certainty, the virtue itself."<sup>1</sup>

But, while Bushnell did not justify the excesses of some of his followers in abuse of creeds and systems, it is undoubtedly true that he failed to give them their true place. We are never to forget Bushnell's great idea, that systems are to be revived and in a sense *re-made* by every generation for itself. But it is not true that there are no such things as best forms of stating truths and best methods of their presentation and defense. Bushnell did not see this because he did not study the past sympathetically. He did not let it work "suggestively" on his own mind. He was

<sup>1</sup> God in Christ, p. 81.

too eager in discovery, he had too much of the independence of a strong spirit, and perhaps something of its conceit. The great dogmatic systems of the past have actually done just what he says they cannot, they have conveyed the *same* system of thought to countless minds, and been sources of instruction and of strength to religious opinion and life without which the church would have been impoverished indeed; and they have done this for two reasons, because they worked "suggestively," originating recreative processes in multitudes of minds, and because they were admirable formulations of the truth as their authors conceived it. Theological progress will never be gained except by building on their foundations, correcting their errors, and supplying their defects. The original genius who begins everything from the foundation and presents a system of doctrine of which the church has never heard before, erects a castle of mist on a rock of cloud. And Bushnell would have been the last man to attempt such a chimerical task.

The preacher appeared again in *Bushnell's second contribution to the world of thought*, in his quite original and characteristic emphasis on *the religious life* as the source and guiding principle in theology. As a preacher he was daily engaged in the task of developing the religious life of his people. He needed truth for this work, and needed to find those elements in it, and those forms of expressing it, which were best adapted to promote the religious life, and therefore he was compelled in his thinking to approach theology on the experiential side. He seems to have gone a step further and to have said to himself not only that truth must contribute to life, but also that nothing was truth which did not thus contribute,—a step leading easily to the further and quite false position that the theologian's personal view of the religious life, limited though it may be by his defects of temperament and character, is to be



made the measure of universal truth. Thus this movement of Bushnell's mind had elements of danger in it from the beginning; but also contained the promise of fresh and valuable results.

The theological situation in New England, where there had been a division among the churches, and where Unitarians were an exceedingly influential portion of the religious community, comprising the chief personages of influence socially and politically in the greatest of the New England states, and holding the control in the oldest and greatest of our universities, led Bushnell naturally to reflection on the doctrine of the Trinity; and here the application of his new principle began. His thought moved between two poles,—the incomprehensibility of the Absolute, and the necessary accommodation of any revelation of God to our human capacities. Hence he found a trinity of *revelation*, an "*instrumental trinity*," as he called it, by which "we are elevated to proximity and virtual converse with him who is above our finite conditions" and by which "the Absolute Jehovah, whose nature we before could nowise comprehend, but dimly know and yet more dimly feel, has waked up within us all living images of his love and power and presence, and set the whole world in a glow."<sup>1</sup> This was, of course, a "modal" trinity; but Bushnell would not affirm that it was "modal only." "I will only say," he puts it, "that the trinity, or the three persons, are given to me *for the sake of their external expression, not for the internal investigation of their contents*. If I use them rationally or wisely, then, I shall use them according to their object. *I must not intrude upon their interior nature, either by assertion or denial.*"<sup>2</sup> He is equally reticent as to the nature of the divinity in Christ. He affirms his true divinity, and puts the personific element of his nature in the divine,—and this with abundant

<sup>1</sup> *God in Christ*, pp. 173, 174.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 175.

citation of Scripture proof. But the Nestorianizing forms of statement about the two natures common to all Reformed theology, and never more offensive than in some expressions current then in New England, he repudiates. "This theory of two distinct subsistences, *still maintaining their several kinds of action in Christ*,—one growing, learning, obeying, suffering; the other infinite and impassible, —only creates difficulties a hundred-fold greater than any that it solves. It virtually denies any real unity between the human and the divine, and substitutes collocation<sup>1</sup> or copartnership for unity. If the divine part were residing in Saturn, he would be as truly united with the human race [under this theory] as now."<sup>2</sup> It was, thus, not the human soul of Christ, and not the two natures, but the "*distinct subsistence [of the soul] so as to live, think, learn, worship, suffer by itself,*"<sup>3</sup> that he denied. Thus it was Bushnell's purpose in his discussions of this theme to secure a real revelation of God to man in Christ, a real condescension of God to our estate, a real entrance of divinity into humanity, so that God could sympathetically know our lot, suffer like us, "be tempted in all points as we are," "learn obedience," and bring to us the help and consolation which only a true incarnation of God can procure. He saved for orthodoxy, which in reaction from Unitarian humanitarianism was about to believe nothing but the deity of Christ and so lose his humanity and lose Christ, Christ's true, *consubstantial* humanity; and this was an immense and priceless service. We need the divine Christ to bear our sins and uphold us by his almighty power; but we need fully as much the condescension, pitying sympathy, and fraternal love of our Elder Brother, the human Christ. We owe our present realization of this side of Christ very largely to Horace Bushnell.

<sup>1</sup> Note the likeness of this term to the Nestorian *συνάφεια*.

<sup>2</sup> God in Christ, p. 154.      <sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 163.

But Bushnell did not by any means state the whole truth as to the trinity,—he did something, indeed, to obscure it. He was so impressed with the danger of tritheism, that he could not do the Scripture representations as to the relations of Father, Son, and Spirit justice, nor appreciate the great current of church expression on this theme in creed, psalm, and system. The distinction of the three personific factors in God is undeniably emphasized in these representations and expressions. The many prayers of Christ all emphasize it, and none more so than his last, in the seventeenth of John. The *Te Deum* rings with the worship of “the Father, of an infinite majesty; Thine adorable, true, and only Son; also the Holy Ghost, the Comforter.” It is strange that Bushnell, with his doctrine of expression through paradox, did not value more highly these individualizing, anthropomorphic forms of speech. Why should not he, of all men, have said what Professor Park, in the large-minded comprehensiveness of his truly catholic intellect said, that “one might either lay the emphasis in the trinity upon the *unity* of God, and find the mystery in the threeness, or lay it on the *threeness* and find the mystery in the oneness.” Professor Park, like Bushnell, occupied for himself the former position; but he defended the legitimacy of the latter position.

In truth, Bushnell was at this point a substantial rationalist. To apply his own remark about New England in general to himself,—“without being at all aware of the fact as it would seem, *his* theologic method was essentially rationalistic; though not exactly in the German sense.”<sup>1</sup> He never gives evidence of careful exegetical study of the Bible,—had, in fact, never had any competent training in its methods. He *saw*; but his vision was not always produced by the light that streams from the pages of the Bible. And hence, in the left wing of his followers (if I

<sup>1</sup> God in Christ, p. 92.

may import a German designation into American theology), there has been a neglect of Scripture in theorizing which has wrought sad results, some of which, as we shall later see, were anticipated in Bushnell's own labors.

Those who are acquainted with the writings of Albrecht Ritschl have already been struck, no doubt, with the resemblance, both in point of departure and in detailed results, between this great German leader, now so prominent in the world of English and American thought, and Bushnell.<sup>1</sup> The resemblance is indeed striking, and it is not merely superficial likeness, but fundamentally the product of like histories. While Ritschl was a purely academic character, and proceeded by the methods of the scholar, and Bushnell was a pastor whose vital atmosphere was that of the poet, both had been trained in an orthodoxy which was uncongenial to their minds, both had been taught by gifted professors of that orthodoxy who only repelled them, both in deep personal throes of intellectual and spiritual labor had given birth to a new theology, which started with the Christian life as source and norm, both hated metaphysics (except their own), both concentrated their chief attention on the atonement of Christ, both arrived at substantially the results above sketched as to the trinity and the person of Christ, both had their long period of suffering under suspicion and ostracism, and both lived long enough to emerge from this and to begin to see the fruits of their labors, but neither of them long enough to know on earth the full power of the influence that they were to exert. Of the two, Bushnell was the greater man,—greater in vivacity (*Geist*, in German phrase), in prophetic vision, in range of thought and depth of religious experience, and greater in his appreciation and retention of most of the

<sup>1</sup> A considerable number of the similarities have been recently drawn out by Professor George B. Stevens, in an article on Bushnell and Ritschl, in the *American Journal of Theology* for January, 1902.

chief elements of the historic theology. It is a sad commentary on the superficiality of much of what styles itself "thought," that in Bushnell's own land, he should be so ignored and the inferior Ritschl so much quoted,—and that often by men who owe, historically, every valuable thought they have to the great American. But *omne remotum (et novum) pro mirifico!*

Bushnell's deeper religious life led him into one practical discussion, which demands a brief notice as we prosecute our theme, that upon "Christian Nurture." Ritschl could never have undertaken this because of his lack of pastoral experience; and still more for the reason that he had no adequate doctrine of the new birth. Bushnell had. He lived in a time when certain forms of religious conversion were greatly emphasized, and when the conscious conversion of adults was aimed at with an intensity of purpose which obscured other forms of entrance on the religious life which he felt were even more normal and worthy of direct effort. Hence he brought out his new idea with great power,—which was "*that the child is to grow up a Christian and never know himself as being otherwise.*"

The work was received with much sharp criticism, most of which arose from misunderstanding. New England had never wholly forgotten the duty of Christian nurture or denied the possibility of child piety. But the over-emphasis of covenant relations and of the importance of baptism in the period before Edwards had led him and his followers to correct certain disastrous results by a corresponding over-emphasis on conversion as an epoch in the conscious experience of the believer. And the development of the theory of the Will at New Haven had led to a great revival epoch in which the elder Beecher, Taylor, Nettleton, and others were the chief leaders. At times it seemed as if "nurture" had been forgotten. Yet many a church, like the First of Springfield, had always been receiving

children into full membership. Bushnell's book was a protest against the excesses of revivals and an arraignment of a system which depended on them well-nigh exclusively as the times of conquest and victorious advance upon a hostile world. As we review it now, it seems an exceedingly well-balanced and careful statement of the truth. Bushnell did not neglect the doctrine of innate depravity, —which, indeed, he knew how to set forth with unsurpassed power,—nor deny the necessity of regeneration and conversion. He did not even depreciate revivals as such. He said: "We have been expecting to thrive too much by conquest and too little by growth. I desire to speak with all caution of what are very unfortunately called revivals of religion; for, apart from the name, which is modern, and from certain crudities and excesses that go with it—*which name, crudities, and excesses are wholly adventitious as regards the substantial merits of such scenes,*—apart from them, I say, there is abundant reason to believe that God's spiritual economy includes varieties of exercise, answering in all important respects to these visitations of mercy, so much coveted in our churches. *They are needed.* A perfectly uniform demonstration in religion is not possible or desirable. *Nothing is thus uniform but death.*" Nor did he teach baptismal regeneration, nor any other departure from a sound evangelical theology. He simply emphasized anew the possibility of child piety, the organic character of the family, the normal results of Christian training, the duty of expecting early conversion and of laboring directly for it. And if he had done nothing else, the one scorching epithet by which he designated parental neglect of the religious life of children as "ostrich nurture," would have been worth all the labor expended.

Hence, though sharp controversy arose, Bushnell's book plus the wholesome tendencies which were both latent and active in the churches, brought back a better balance of

the methods of nurture and of conscious conversion in the churches. The last thirty years have been the period of the greatest revivals, and of the development of the greatest society for nurture, the Christian Endeavor, and its daughter societies in various denominations. If certain extremists have hailed the "passing" of the revival and have credited Bushnell with the "honor" of destroying it, they have ascribed to him a work which he repudiated, and have run into the danger of having prophesied according to their own limited acquaintance and sympathy with evangelical history and principles.

Of Bushnell as an apologist of the Christian religion there could be said very much. His principal work in this department is "Nature and the Supernatural." He distinguishes Nature as the realm of *force*, and the supernatural world as the realm of *free-will*. He has made here a profound distinction which has prepared the way for the modern apologetics, in which the teachings of natural science as to evolution and law,—which Bushnell lived too early to appropriate—are gradually approaching an adjustment with the Christian ideas of personality and freedom. He also put the defense of Christianity upon its modern ground, upon its own distinctive religious character, as he had sought to place the whole edifice of doctrine upon its true foundation in the Christian life. The proof of miracles he rested on the specific Christian truths. Here again is a point of contact with Ritschl, but here also a point of superiority, for he never occupies the ambiguous and evasive attitude as to the reality of biblical miracles which Ritschl never abandoned. But all this work was only preparatory. The new epoch of apologetics could not come in until evolution was cordially accepted by Christian theologians and the task of adjustment to it sympathetically undertaken. Bushnell had not time enough to undertake this task before he was called away from

earth. He anticipated it at many points, as in the new emphasis he lays on heredity. A fully modern atmosphere breathes through his pages. We fail to realize it, possibly, if we have not been compelled by professional study, to go back and live for a time in some theologian who calls himself modern, and writes the date eighteen hundred and something on his title-page, but does nothing except reproduce Turretin and the English theologians of the seventeenth century. But Bushnell's work will be so modified by his successors even in order to gain the full force of what he actually did, that it will be his no more. To save his life, he, like many another, will have to lose it.

I mention as a third, and last, contribution made by Bushnell to theology, the *enrichment bestowed by him upon the doctrine of the Atonement*. I am aware that some will say that he *impoverished* the doctrine,—and so, in a sense, he did. But, I believe, when thought has finally adjusted itself again in respect to this theme, and the defects of Bushnell's theory have been supplied by the restoration of elements which he neglected or denied, it will be found that the church is richer in thought and in experience for the labors of the great Hartford preacher.

When Bushnell began his career, the doctrine of the atonement was still encumbered with many artificial and erroneous elements. The prevailing theology was still forensic, artificial, external. Ethical relations were feebly perceived and little emphasized. True, the "New England Theology," technically so called, had introduced a revolutionary theory of virtue which was eventually to remodel the entire system in the direction of ethical demands. But as yet, it had accomplished little. The old theology still reigned among the people and in a majority of the pulpits, the new belonging, as a kind of privileged private possession, to a comparatively few "Edwardeans," of whom Professor Park, then just beginning his labors at



Andover (1836), was easily chief, and was destined to give it a passing supremacy in Congregationalism. Bushnell did not fully understand this new school, and in his arguments attacked chiefly the old. Perhaps he was not so culpable for his failure to understand it, for its new theory of the atonement was professedly only a better form of stating the old, and was couched like that in forensic formulas, and expounded in the terms of human law and government, with little reference to the ideal basis of the whole in the nature of virtue, and with the retention of many of the forms which had been employed in stating the older ideas now to be abandoned. Hence, as a general average of the New England situation, Bushnell's conception that the prevailing theory of the atonement involved immoral ideas, was derogatory of the justice and goodness of God, and needed to be replaced by something *real* and true, was correct.

His earlier objections, as expressed in the Cambridge address,<sup>1</sup> did not lack piquancy of expression. He objects to the lack of "real economy" in the older view, its "double ignominy, first of letting the guilty go, and, secondly, of accepting the sufferings of innocence." And of the later view, he says that "no governmental reasons can justify even the admission of innocence into a participation of frowns and penal distributions. If consenting innocence says, 'Let the blow fall on me,' precisely then is it for a government to prove its justice, even to the point of sublimity; to reveal the essential, eternal, unmitigable distinction it holds between innocence and sin by declaring that, as under law and its distributions, it is even impossible to suffer any commutation, any the least confusion of places." In the later volume on "The Vicarious Sacrifice"<sup>2</sup> he dismisses the later view as having "no base of reality even to those who resort to it, save as it reverts

<sup>1</sup>God in Christ, p. 194 ff.      <sup>2</sup>Page 364 ff.

to the older scheme, and resumes all the methods of that scheme." He therefore concentrates his attack on the earlier view, and his objection in a word is that while professedly satisfying justice, it really travesties and offends justice.

Bushnell here fell into two of those errors incidental to his method to which reference has already been made. He failed to do justice to the biblical statements as to the atonement because he had no sufficient and correct methods of exegesis; and he rejected the "later," or New England, view because he did not study it carefully enough to understand it. I make this charge of failure to understand because Bushnell himself presents, as an integral element of his own theory, the precise idea which underlay the New England view. That view was much obscured by poor forms of statement, and he might well claim that if he misunderstood, the friends of the theory and not he must bear the blame; but misunderstand he did. For, as just remarked, he affirms the same things. He says, "It is even a fundamental condition, as regards moral effect upon our character, that, while courage and hope are given us, we should be made at the same time to feel the intensest possible sense of the sanctity of the law and the inflexible righteousness of God. What we need, in this view, is some new expression of God, which, taken as addressed *to us*, will keep alive the impression in us that God suffers no laxity. In a word, we must be made to feel, *in the very article of forgiveness*, when it is offered, *the essential and eternal sanctity of God's law*—his own immovable adherence to it, as the only basis of order and well-being in the universe." "In order *to make men penitent*, and so to want forgiveness,—that is, to keep the world alive to the eternal integrity, verity, and sanctity of God's law,—that is, to keep us apprised of sin, and deny us any power of rest while we continue under sin, it was

needful that Christ, in his life and sufferings, should consecrate or reconsecrate the desecrated law of God, and give it more exact and imminent authority than it had before."<sup>1</sup> Could Bushnell have united these ideas with the biblical statements as to the death of Christ, under the influence of the new and correct discriminations which he introduced, he would now be known not as the antagonist of the "governmental theory" but as its chief advocate, as the one who had converted it into a truly "ethico-juridical" theory.

For what he positively *did* was to put the divine relation to the work of atonement in a truly ethical light, and emphasize with new power the fundamental doctrine of the Edwardean school, that God in all his activities, and especially in his work of atonement, was actuated by the great motive of *love*. Man was lost and miserable in his sin. God went forth in Christ to effect his salvation. He performed, as one of Bushnell's followers phrases it, the *direct* work of saving men. He came into the world to lead men to repentance and thus to reconcile them to God. They needed to know God, and God himself needed to gain a new moral power over them whereby he could lead them to turn away from sin and to him. Hence God came and did on the earth, out of the supreme motive of love, in obedience to its inner obligation in his own heart, just what every man has to do when he tries to save his fellow-men. He entered sympathetically as well as actually into the lot of men, bore with them, suffered under their opposition and sin, served them in every way, healing their bodies as well as their souls, subjecting himself to the same law which laid its commands on them, and finally made perfectly clear what God was, in all his holiness and suffering love, and broke their opposition thereby. He preëngaged their feelings so that they "liked the friend

<sup>1</sup> There are many such passages, of which see *God in Christ*, pp. 234, 272; *Vicarious Sacrifice*, p. 298.

before they loved the Saviour," he awakened their conscience, he stood the exemplar of God's perfections and holiness; and thus he *gained* them. This was the atonement.

This was all good, because all true. It opened to the apprehension of the theological world a new view of one side of Christ's work, and greatly enriched the humanity of Christ, which Bushnell had already done so much to save to the apprehension of the times. This enrichment of the doctrine will never be lost. Particularly was it valuable as bringing out the fact that the ethical principles underlying Christ's action and that of all good men in doing good, are the same. The work of Christ is imitable and *demand*s imitation. To see this is well. But it is also *inimitable* and surpasses,—defies imitation. This Bushnell did not see so clearly and rather obscured than set forth. Could he have seen that the law of God which Christ honored included the penal law, and that the obedience which he rendered included obedience "unto death," and that there was a real sense in which God "laid on him the iniquities of us all," then he would not have run in danger of being charged with impoverishing the biblical doctrine of atonement.

To a degree, he did see all these things. While consistently maintaining that his "subjective" view of the atonement was the whole of the doctrine, he was constantly endeavoring to gain an "objective" view. His first effort was by laying emphasis on the "altar form," by which he supposed certain correct impressions to be conveyed to the minds of Israel and the Church which were really indispensable. The trouble with these explanations was that they did not go far enough to accomplish their object. They sought to make *objective* what was to be unswervingly maintained as *solely subjective*. It was to be objective and not objective in the same breath! Surely, this was a free use of the principle of paradox! But this ear-

lier attempt did not satisfy Bushnell. He increasingly felt that he had not done justice to such terms as "propitiation" found in Scripture. Hence, on the "arrival of fresh light," he finally propounded the astonishing principle that *neither God nor man can forgive a sinner* until he has sought to do him good and suffered under his repulses and thus so identified himself with him as *to have burned up in this flame of suffering sympathy all his "disgusts."* This is a true propitiation,—a self-propitiation, which God laid upon himself and performed ere he was able to forgive men! Bushnell did not see that he had thus made God inferior to what good men are commanded to be and *are*.

We accept, then, with gratitude from Bushnell's hands the enlargement and clarification of our views of the atonement which he has given us, regretting his failure more perfectly to adjust himself to the best thinking of his own time. The failure is the more regrettable because the influence of this theory of the atonement has actually been to lower the plane of thought among us and to lead to denials of the positive statements of the Bible. Everybody, it is sometimes said, now teaches the moral view of the atonement; and that is generally interpreted as this, that Christ makes so complete and affecting a display of the love of God for sinners by his death, that he wins men to God. Even his sanctifying the law by his obedience is let drop out of sight, and as for future punishment—upon which Bushnell depended to maintain the authority of God's law—he is a bold man who is willing to be known as believing in it. The profound view of Bushnell that God himself gained moral power over men by the humiliation of Christ, is too strong meat for many of his professed followers.

To this theological decline, Bushnell undoubtedly contributed and for it he is to be held in part responsible.

But it is to be hoped that his deeper meaning will yet have a new influence, that the passionate devotion to truth which kept him ever alert and pressing forward, and the great loyalty to the personal Christ which inspired him, and to the Bible in the atmosphere of which he lived however defective his methods of its study may have been, will yet produce under the original and creative action of the awakened mind of the age, a broader, deeper, and more ethical understanding first of law and penalty, and then of the relation of the sacrifice of Calvary to both. For, the preaching of the gospel still is what Paul called it, the preaching of the *cross*; and "foolishness" as it is to the reasonings of many, it is in proved fact the "power of God."

The work upon the atonement closed Bushnell's theological labors, and here our review of his theological career must close. As a man amid the practical affairs of life too much cannot be said in praise of him. But we are too apt to overlook the element of heroic manliness disclosed in the story of his theological work,—the heroism of the lonely and retired student. For twenty-six years he was a pastor, in the full light of publicity and the glamour of evident success. Then came seventeen years of retirement and comparative obscurity. A lesser man would have consumed this time in self-indulgence under the plea of ill-health. This man girded his loins for the hardest and most persistent labor of his life. He gathered together all he had seen and thought and put it forth for the benefit of the world. He regarded himself responsible to God for the full use of his remaining powers and the delivery of his message. For this self-neglecting and constant loyalty to opportunity, to his vision of truth, and to his Master, all, of whatever school, should join in honoring Bushnell, theologian and hero, man of insight and man of faith.