

Concordia Seminary - Saint Louis

Scholarly Resources from Concordia Seminary

Bachelor of Divinity

Concordia Seminary Scholarship

6-1-1948

Horace Bushnell's Moral Influence Theory of the Atonement

Arlin A. Holtz

Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, ir_holtza@csl.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholar.csl.edu/bdiv>



Part of the [Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Holtz, Arlin A., "Horace Bushnell's Moral Influence Theory of the Atonement" (1948). *Bachelor of Divinity*. 258.

<https://scholar.csl.edu/bdiv/258>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Concordia Seminary Scholarship at Scholarly Resources from Concordia Seminary. It has been accepted for inclusion in Bachelor of Divinity by an authorized administrator of Scholarly Resources from Concordia Seminary. For more information, please contact seitzw@csl.edu.

HORACE BUSHNELL'S MORAL INFLUENCE
THEORY OF THE ATONEMENT

My interest in the profound beauty of the doctrine
of the atonement was first stimulated by Dr. J. E. Meyer's
clear and informative presentations of the doctrine in his
third year dogmatics lectures at Concordia Seminary. It
was also at his suggestion that I should study the Moral
Influence

A Thesis Presented to
The Faculty of Concordia Seminary
Department of Systematic Theology

with
Dr. Meyer for the preparation of this thesis, and express
into sincerely his patient and understanding what was

It is a joy to compose the thesis. I wish also to acknow-
ledge the help of Dr. J. E. Meyer and carefully examine
the thesis

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Bachelor of Divinity

by

Arlin A. Holtz

June 1948

Approved by: J. E. Meyer
A. Holtz

PREFACE

My interest in the profound beauty of the doctrine of the atonement was first stimulated by Dr. F. E. Mayer's clear and informative presentations of the doctrine in the third year dogmatics lectures at Concordia Seminary. It was also at his suggestion that I came to study the Moral Influence theory of Bushnell.

With pleasure I acknowledge the suggestions made by Dr. Mayer for the preparation of this thesis, and appreciate sincerely his patience and understanding which made it a joy to compose the thesis. I wish also to acknowledge the help of Dr. L. W. Spitz, who carefully examined the thesis before it was given its final form.

HORACE BUSHNELL'S MORAL POWER

Controlling Power: A Study of the Moral Power of Love in the Theology of Horace Bushnell

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Outline iv

I. Introduction 1

II. Bushnell's Theological Development 5

III. The Emphasis on Love 18

IV. Christ and the Moral Power 23

V. Effect of the Moral Power 32

VI. Implications for Modern Theology 39

Bibliography 45

HORACE BUSHNELL'S MORAL INFLUENCE THEORY OF THE ATONEMENT

(Outline)

Controlling Purpose: This thesis is to present a clear analysis of the Moral Influence theory including its development and subsequent implications.

I. Introduction.

- A. There have been many views on the atonement.
 1. The views of Abelard and Ritschl are similar to the Moral Influence theory.
 2. Duns Scotus introduced the Acceptilation theory.
 3. Hugo Grotius formulated the Governmental theory.
- B. Bushnell popularized the Moral Influence theory.
- C. The purpose of our thesis is to examine critically the Moral Influence theory of Bushnell.

II. Bushnell's theory reflects his theological development and system.

- A. His training inculcated certain attitudes.
 1. His home training is significant.
 2. His formal education brought on religious doubts.
- B. The New England theology had an effect.
 1. This system was founded by Edwards.
 2. Its doctrines had become rationalistic.
 3. Bushnell was sceptical of its systematization.
- C. His study of Schleiermacher via Coleridge gave him a new approach to theology.
- D. His profession of preacher reflected itself.
 1. He was primarily a preacher, not a scholar.
 2. There were various detriments to his system.
- E. His early writings indicate his tendencies.
 1. Nature and the Supernatural presented a will free from the laws of nature.
 2. Christian Nurture makes conversion a gradual process.
 3. God in Christ presents a modalistic Trinity.
- F. Certain ideals form the basis for his theory.
 1. He had no respect for creeds.
 2. Experience established truth for him.
 3. His purpose for writing The Vicarious Atonement was only to hint at a doctrine.

III. Love is claimed the basic principle in vicarious sacrifice.

- A. Love defines "vicarious sacrifice."
 1. Real love is vicarious love.
 2. Love implies suffering.

(Outline)

- B. Love and vicarious sacrifice are universal principles.
 - 1. There is nothing superlative in Christ's work.
 - 2. The Father suffers vicariously.
 - 3. The Holy Ghost suffers vicariously.
 - 4. The good angels so suffer.
 - 5. All redeemed souls so suffer.
 - C. Love motivates regeneration.
 - 1. Compare it with Christ's love in healing the sick.
 - 2. God regenerates souls out of sympathy.
- IV. Christ manifests God's moral power.
- A. The relation between Christ and God presents some false doctrines of Bushnell.
 - 1. The Trinity is modalistic.
 - 2. Christ, who is God, possesses moral power.
 - 3. Christ is truly a human.
 - 4. The finite and infinite in Christ are combined.
 - 5. The natures in Christ are not distinguished.
 - B. Christ manifests the moral energy of God.
 - 1. Moral power is distinguished from attribute power.
 - 2. The moral power emphasizes character.
 - 3. The moral power of Christ is cumulative.
 - a. It is the result of Christ's total life history.
 - b. The power depends on its effect in man.
- V. The effects of the moral power are unique.
- A. It dramatizes the relation between God and man.
 - 1. God is humanized by Christ.
 - 2. The moral power shows man's guilt and draws the guilty.
 - 3. Man is changed, not God.
 - B. Man is regenerated in a peculiar way.
 - 1. The moral power restores man's original attitude toward the Law.
 - 2. Imputed righteousness is not forensic justification, but righteousness by derivation.
 - 3. Faith is necessary to give the moral power opportunity to work.
- VI. Bushnell's system has implications for modern theology.
- A. Filling old terms with anti-Scriptural meaning is typical in liberal theology.
 - B. Bushnell operates with experience and in modernism there is also no a priori truth.
 - C. A number of tendencies stem from the writings of Bushnell.
 - D. An attack on one point involves the entire theology.

HORACE BUSHNELL'S MORAL INFLUENCE THEORY OF THE ATONEMENT

I. Introduction

Ever since Christ accomplished the work of atoning for the sins of mankind, there have been many attempts to explain the vicarious atonement of Christ according to logical and rationalistic principles. These explanations, which we call theories of the atonement, follow certain patterns, and fall into various classes according to the points emphasized regarding the purpose of the atonement.¹ Dr. Franz Pieper places the theories into two categories. In the first place there are those theologians who deny the vicarious satisfaction because they deny the deity of Christ. Secondly, there are those who reduce the vicarious satisfaction because they deny the intrinsic value

1. In Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia the theories are arranged according to the conception each entertains of the person or persons on whom the work of Christ terminates. 1) Triumphant theories: "Theories which conceive the work of Christ as terminating upon Satan, so affecting him as to secure the release of the souls held in bondage by him." 2) Mystical theories: "Theories which conceive the work of Christ as terminating physically on man, so affecting him as to bring him by an interior and

of Christ's work.²

In the first group we have such men as Abelard and Ritschl. The view of Abelard is as follows:

The son of God did not come into the flesh to satisfy the righteousness of God, but to give men by His doctrine and example (particularly also by His death) supreme proof of divine love and thus to awaken in them love in return. By this response of love for God men are then reconciled to God and justified.³

It is to be noted that Abelard's view entirely disregarded the doctrine of vicarious satisfaction. In the modern era a similar view was taught by Albrecht Ritschl, also summarized by Dr. Pieper as follows:

In God there is no wrath on account of the sins of men. Accordingly there is no need, either, of a vicarious satisfaction on the part of Christ. Christ's life and suffering rather has the purpose to reveal God's fatherly heart to men and thus convince men that they need not fear God because of their sins. Once men are convinced of this their reconciliation is accomplished.⁴

(1. cont'd) hidden working upon him into participation with the one life of Christ." 3) Moral influence theories: "Theories which conceive the work of Christ as terminating on man, in the way of bringing to bear on him inducements to action; so affecting man as to lead him to a better knowledge of God, or to a more lively sense of his real relation to God, or to a revolutionary change of heart and life with reference to God." 4) Governmental theories: "Theories which conceive the work of Christ as terminating on both man and God, but on man primarily and on God secondarily. 5) Reconciliation theories: "Theories which conceive the work of Christ as terminating primarily on God and secondarily on men." Benjamin B. Warfield, "Atonement," in the New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge, I, 351-354.

2. Franz Pieper, Christian Dogmatics, (tr. by Walter Albrecht) v. 2, p. 205.

3. Ibid.

4. Ibid.

There are principally three theories of the atonement in history which belong to the second class, or those that reduce the vicarious satisfaction because they deny the intrinsic infinite value of Christ's work. They are the Acceptilation theory, the Rectoral or Governmental theory, and the Moral Influence view. The Acceptilation theory holds:

...that Christ's obedience and suffering was not in itself (ex interna sua perfectione) a perfect ransom, equivalent to the sins of men, but was merely accepted as such by God (per liberam Dei acceptationem, per gratuitam Dei acceptationem).⁵

This was the teaching of Duns Scotus. It appears as though Thomas Aquinas prepared the way for the acceptilation theory when he taught that "God since He is supreme could forgive sins without satisfaction."⁶ The Armenians and even Calvin to some extent followed the principles of the acceptilation theory. The Governmental theory as formulated by Hugo Grotius states:

God punished the innocent Christ in the stead of guilty man not to fully satisfy the demands of his holiness, but to set up Christ as an example of His vindictive justice (make him a spectacle of God's hatred of sin), thus to uphold the authority of the Law before men and to frighten men into forsaking sin.⁷

This theory was upheld by the New England Theology in Congregationalism, represented by such men as Jonathon Edwards, Jr., Edwards A. Park, and Nathaniel Taylor.

5. Ibid., p. 206.

6. Ibid.

7. Ibid., p. 207.

The third view is the Moral Influence theory "which sees the essence of the reconciliation solely in the moral influence which Christ's teaching and example exerted on men."⁸ While this theory was first advocated by Abelard it gained its popularity especially in modern times. In Europe this theory was advocated particularly by Ritschl and in America by Horace Bushnell. The theory first gained real popularity in America after Bushnell had set it forth in an appealing literary style. Comparable to Abelard and Ritschl, Bushnell's theory is that of a liberal and rationalistic theologian.

In the present treatise, it will be our purpose to examine Bushnell's Moral Influence theory, and observe how the liberal and rationalistic tendencies are reflected in it. Special attention will be given to those teachings which contain error and are closely connected with the Moral Influence view, for example, his teaching on the Trinity, the person of Christ, imputed righteousness, faith, etc. It is our purpose, therefore, to present a clear analysis of Bushnell's theory including the reason for its development and the subsequent implications for modern theology.

8. Ibid.

II. Bushnell's Theological Development

In order fully to appreciate Bushnell's wrestling with the problem of the atonement, we ought to observe some of the factors which influenced his thinking and the attitudes he had developed toward the solution of theological problems. Bushnell was born on April 14, 1802, in Litchfield County, Conn. His parents were farming people. This made it possible for him to live close to nature and to develop a strong love for it. T. T. Munger, his biographer, feels that to be significant in relation to his later attitudes. He says of Bushnell: "His deepest impressions did not come from books nor from contact with men, but from nature, and nothing was quite real to him until it had been submitted to its tests."⁹ H. C. Howard makes much of the influence brought to bear by Bushnell's mother which moved him to study theology. She was convinced early that he should be a preacher. Though she did not force the issue, yet her certainty in the matter made an impression on Bushnell's conscience.¹⁰

His formal education at the university did not begin until he was 21 years of age. He studied at Yale, and

9. Theodore T. Munger, Horace Bushnell, Preacher and Theologian, p. 6, quoted in E. T. Thompson, Changing Emphasis in American Preaching, p. 11.

10. Harry C. Howard, Princes of the Christian Pulpit and Pastorate, p. 149.

upon graduation took an interest in law. At this time the study of theology did not appeal to him. Consequently, he attended law school at New Haven for six months, after which he was urged to return to Yale as tutor. It was during this period that he changed his plans for the future. At one time he and his pupils attended a revival and remained unmoved. He realized that the pupils were merely following his example. Therefore he felt in duty bound to explain to the pupils how he felt about religion. As he discussed religious problems with his pupils, he found himself lacking in his own spiritual life. Conscience scruples followed, which finally moved him to enter Yale Divinity School.¹¹

At Yale Divinity School he came into contact with the New England Theology. This was a system of theology that had developed within Calvinism since the time of Jonathon Edwards. In Europe the theology of Calvinism thrived quite well and had achieved great results in congregational activity, yet in America this success was not forthcoming. American pioneering demanded initiative, and the Calvinistic theology could not supply that.

F. H. Foster's book dealing with this period states, "It so conceived the sovereignty of God and so obscured human freedom that it exercised, when operating in any locality

11. Ibid., p. 151

undisturbed for a long period, a paralysing effect upon human initiative."¹² This combined with the frontier situation, which demanded progressive action, almost proved fatal to the churches. What need was there to pay attention to the spiritual life as long as a person was one of the elect. The religious leaders made no attempt to explain the reason for a sanctified life. Rather they prescribed certain formulas as to what constituted a holy life. The system had begun to approach Romanism. Through the work of Edwards in America and Wesley in England a new ethical sense was aroused, and the real meaning of virtue and holiness was emphasized. Edwards laid the groundwork for the New England Theology, which was "an attempt to rationalize completely the Calvinistic faith."¹³ In this new theology there appears the Governmental theory of the atonement as set forth by Edwards and before him by Grotius, which held that Christ's death was not a penalty for sin, but a substitute for it, -- an expression of God's abhorrence of sin. This then was an attempt to demonstrate the value and importance of Christ's death. Calvinism laid the stress of man's salvation entirely in the election by God. This would make

12. F. H. Foster, A Genetic History of the New England Theology, p. 554.

13. F. E. Mayer, "Rise of Liberal Theology in Congregationalism," Concordia Theological Monthly, XV (October, 1944), 651.

it appear that Christ's work is, after all, of little value. But now according to the governmental theory, because of Christ's death, a sinner becomes conscious that God abhors sin, as evidenced by the punishment inflicted on Christ for the sins of the world. This in turn fills the sinner with horror to the extent that he forsakes sin. The sinner's reformation enables God to forgive without doing violence to the divine Law. In this way God makes no exceptions to the Law, and his moral government remains intact.¹⁴ Bushnell was opposed to this sort of system as it was taught him by Nathaniel Taylor, his most influential teacher at Yale. Serious controversies developed between the two. Taylor tried to establish Christian theology as an intellectual demonstrable system. The logic, metaphysics, and systematization of this sort of theology seemed unreal and artificial to the mind of Bushnell.¹⁵

In the midst of his theological doubts Bushnell one day happened to read a book by Coleridge entitled Aids to Reflection. This book is based on the religious speculations of Schleiermacher, who is frequently referred to as the father of Modernism. Schleiermacher makes use of the empirical method of theology, that is, gaining a know-

14. Benjamin Warfield, "Atonement," Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia, p. 353, (v. I).

15. E. T. Thompson, Changing Emphasis in American Preaching, p. 15.

ledge of God and religious matters primarily by means of sense experience. True enough, he denies that his is an empirical system and even criticizes such a system, yet his own method, which he prefers to call the "descriptive method", can be best understood when referred to as an empirical method. According to Schleiermacher, religious experience gives us a knowledge of God, not as he really is but of his relation to us. Accordingly, we experience this relationship and on the basis of this experience formulate religious concepts. His idea that theology must change just as religious experience changes is perhaps the keystone of modernism, because it spells the downfall of doctrinal discipline. He states that revelation of Scripture or metaphysical principles are subordinate to religious experience as a basis of interpreting theology. He held that the essence of religion is the feeling of absolute dependence on God. His opinion on God is as follows: "God is defined as the universal, all-controlling reality disclosed in our sense of complete dependence... God becomes for theological method an aspect of man's religious consciousness. The meaning of the term is derived from and validated in present human experience."¹⁶ Schleiermacher's outstanding contribution is his insistence

16. Edwin A. Burt, Types of Religious Philosophy, p. 298. The section on Schleiermacher's theology, pp. 295-303, has been our guide for presenting his religious teachings.

that religion can be defined by the empirical method, and that human experience should be the source of men's religious ideas.

Following in his footsteps though treading somewhat more lightly we have Coleridge, whose book, Aids to Reflection, brought a great change to Bushnell's outlook on theological life. Coleridge made a distinction between Nature and Spirit; the difference being that Nature is subject to the law of cause and effect while Spirit is self-determining. Then he follows with the idea that the will, which is self-determining, does not fit into the category of Nature. Hence it isn't bound by cause and effect. Our ideas, then, as derived from the moral being, who is guided by conscience, cannot be pressed to all logical conclusions. So we cannot always apply laws of nature when dealing with our ideas but must heed the law of conscience. Religious beliefs also come under this law of conscience. Anything repugnant to conscience need not be accepted.¹⁷ This kind of method must certainly have appealed to a Bushnell, who, beset by doubts regarding the accuracy of logic, now had a new avenue of approach which gave plenty of room for speculation. Now we see Bushnell rejecting the penal atonement, because it is repugnant to conscience, or the emotions, and substituting one that appeals to conscience, namely, the moral

17. George Park Fisher, History of Christian Doctrine, p. 447.

influence view.

There is some reason to believe that Bushnell's profession as a preacher had some bearing on the type of theology he developed. There is no doubt among any of the authorities that he was an outstanding preacher, but there is some variance of opinion regarding his theological acumen. G. P. Fisher calls him "an original and gifted preacher, but not a technical scholar."¹⁸ True as this may be, it certainly bears no hindrance to his influence on subsequent modernism. Just the fact that he was a gifted preacher gave him added advantage. He was primarily concerned with developing teachings that had appeal. This becomes all the more significant as we bear in mind that he considered doctrines true when they appeal to conscience. His purpose was to convince people by his preaching.

Bushnell had a number of characteristic tendencies which proved to be serious detriments to his system. He concerned himself only with the problem at hand, and if a new problem would present itself, he would not be able to follow his first problem to its logical conclusions. His lack of historical knowledge was a detriment. From time to time he would discover some points of doctrine as explained in the early church. These would impress him and cause him later to arbitrarily change his positions. Fre-

18. Ibid., p. 437.

quently he published his works before seriously weighing the evidence for his position. He was rather inclined to the method of intuition for establishing theological truth. He felt something to be true, accepted it, but failed to carefully reason it out. This fault really forms the basic principle in his system. Because of it, he was able to develop other errors quite freely since there was no doctrinal discipline to bind him. Opinions which contradicted the dictates of conscience could not invalidate the doctrines based on intuition. Scripture, too, must be secondary. It would be a mistake, however, to say that Bushnell rejects revelation as a basis for truth, but he does make Scripture meet the demands of his intuition, as he twists the interpretation of certain passages to fit his purposes.

Among Bushnell's early writings we shall mention three, Nature and the Supernatural, Christian Nurture, and God in Christ. After these comes his outstanding work, from the view point of its effect on subsequent theology, namely, The Vicarious Sacrifice. In the three books preceeding The Vicarious Sacrifice, we already see his principle of intuition as a source of truth at work.¹⁹

19. Horace Bushnell, Nature and the Supernatural, 1897; Christian Nurture, 1865; Vicarious Sacrifice, 1866. Since his God in Christ was not available, the following secondary sources were consulted: E. T. Thompson, Changing Emphasis, etc., p. 29; and G. P. Fisher, History of Christian Doctrine, p. 439-441.

Nature and the Supernatural was written after Bushnell had gotten a clue from Coleridge's Aids to Reflection. He points out that even the will by virtue of its power to produce action is a supernatural agent. This already shows a tendency of Bushnell to trust in the powers within a man's mind, which is really a supernatural agent.

Christian Nurture is Bushnell's first book of real importance. Much controversy resulted over it. The principle which he proceeded to emphasize was "that the child is to grow up a Christian, and never know himself as being otherwise."²⁰ He denied total depravity and original sin as stated in these words: "For it is not sin which he (the child) derives from his parents; at least not sin in any sense which imports blame, but only some prejudice to the perfect harmony of this mold, some kind of pravity or obliquity which inclines him to evil."²¹ This then would indicate that he denies inherited guilt and corruption. It would seem that he also denies the inherent goodness of human nature by his claiming that it inclines to evil. However, the entire spirit of his book substantiates the view that man is inherently good. He claims further that regeneration of a child by baptism is presumptive, and that everything depends upon development of character by Christian Nurture. Thus this book was an

20. Christian Nurture, p. 10.

21. Ibid., p. 23.

attack on the overemphasis of conscious conversion of adults, and the neglect of the religious life of the children. Most of his teachings expressed in the book were very contrary to prevailing modes of thought in New England theology.

The book, God in Christ, is a treatise dealing with the doctrine of Christ. Bushnell expounds a modalistic Sabelianism on the doctrine of the Trinity. The teachings expounded in this book are reflected in his greatest work, The Vicarious Sacrifice. Since the doctrine of Christ is basic for the vicarious atonement, we shall deal with it in connection with the Moral Influence theory.

We may do well to establish a few starting points for the development of the moral influence theory of the atonement. First of all, we become aware of the fact that Bushnell has very little respect for creeds. He felt that words are merely symbols of expression and do not convey accurately a thought from one mind to another. Therefore stated creeds are of little value. He placed much emphasis on the necessity of recreating truth for one's self, instead of blindly accepting ideas that are handed down. Consequently, he was always sceptical of truths codified and stated in the past. He used them only as suggestions to spur him on to the search for the truth.²² His indif-

22. Foster, op. cit., p. 407.

ference to creeds is indicated in a letter he once wrote in the interests of uniting the various churches in Hartford, Conn., where Bushnell preached. He felt that strict adherence to creeds, which was keeping them apart, was not necessary. In a letter to a neighboring pastor he stated that fellowship should be achieved without such emphasis on creeds. His closing words are characteristic, "This, you know was the Puritan Fathers' method, -- no creed, but a covenant."²³

Another starting point for his system is the principle that experience establishes truth. He does not give much credit to Scripture statements grammatically examined, nor to logical reasoning. The two go hand in hand: grammatical rules must follow certain laws of logic, but Bushnell places religion outside of the field of logic altogether. Religious truth, he feels, must appeal to the emotions and conscience. Hence, we find his opposition to sporadic conversion and the governmental theory of the atonement, neither of which appealed to the emotion but were rather repugnant when all their implications were considered. His reason for rejecting also a penal atonement is very pertinent. He says, "If Christ simply died to even up a score of penalty, if the total import of his cross is that God's wrath is satisfied, and the books

23. Mary Bushnell Cheney, Life and Letters of Horace Bushnell, p. 252.

made square, there is certainly no beauty in that to charm a new feeling into life; on the contrary, there is much to revolt the soul, at least in God's attitude, and even to raise a chill of revulsion."²⁴ In his solution to the problem of the atonement Bushnell appeals to experience for truth, as he himself states: "...it (the moral influence theory) is a kind of truth not likely to be realized without experience. It will seem to be a truth overdrawn, unless it is drawn out of the soul's own consciousness to some degree."²⁵ Bushnell even prescribes an experiment by means of which a person might experience the vicarious sacrifice from the standpoint of a moral influence concept: If you deal with an enemy, what will you do in order to gain him? Stand off in disgust? Be indifferent toward his evils? Pray for him? No, rather --

...take the man upon your love, bear him and his wrong as a mind's burden, undertake for him, study by what means and by what help obtained from God, you can get him out of his evils, and make a friend of him -- God's friend and yours -- do this and see if it does not open to you a very great and wonderful discovery -- the sublime reality and solidly grand significance of vicarious sacrifice.²⁶

It might be well to note Bushnell's stated purpose in writing The Vicarious Sacrifice. He does not wish to establish a creed or any new article. Indeed, he deplored

24. Bushnell, The Vicarious Sacrifice, p. 30.

25. Ibid., p. 54.

26. Ibid.

the formulation of creeds, which, he said, stymied the development of religious truth, and frequently gave wrong conceptions by oversimplifying the gospel message. When Bushnell now writes, he only wants to hint at a conception of the gospel as it appears to him.²⁷ It is to be noted, that, although he had not wished to establish a new article, that is just what he proceeded to do in view of the fact that he so tenaciously defended his view later on. His successors interpreted him in such a way as to make the Moral Influence theory a basic doctrine for Congregationalism.

27. The quotation of his purpose reads as follows: "It will be understood of course, that I do not propose to establish any article whatever in this treatise, but only to exhibit, if possible, the Christ whom so many centuries of discipleship has so visibly been longing after; viz, the loving, helping, transforming, sanctifying Christ, the true soul-bread from heaven, the quickening Life, the Power of God unto Salvation. If for convenience sake I speak of maintaining 'the moral view' of the cross, or, what is more distinct, 'the moral power view,' it will not be understood that I am proposing an article, but only that I hint, in this general way, a conception of the gospel whose reality and staple value are in the facts that embody its power." In Vicarious Sacrifice, pp. 31-32.

III. The Emphasis on Love

In order to prevent too much opposition to his theory Bushnell first conditions his readers by emphasizing that love is the basic principle in vicarious sacrifice. By so doing he reduces the doctrine of Christ's vicarious atonement to the level of man's judgment until it becomes as commonplace as the concept of simple love in a person's everyday life. This is fully in keeping with his whole system of gaining a knowledge of God by human experience, which is limited to human thought and action. Stressing the love principle, he proceeds to define vicarious sacrifice. Real love, he insists, is vicarious love. It must be a condition in which one is willing to substitute himself into the place of another. In this way a person identifies himself with another person, feeling that person's problems as though they were his own, sympathizing with him, and trying in that way to share his burdens. In this manner then Bushnell interprets the vicarious nature of Christ's atonement: "This one thing is clear, that love is a vicarious principle, bound by its own nature itself to take upon its feelings, and care, and sympathy, those who are down under evil and its penalties. Thus it is that Jesus takes our nature upon him, to be made a curse for us and to bear our sin."²⁸ Already we

28. Ibid., p. 53.

may observe that the substitutionary character of Christ's work is limited largely to Christ's feelings and emotions. It is not, as we hold, the actual substitution of Christ for us in making satisfaction for our sins.

He continues to emphasize the love principle in vicarious sacrifice by stating that sacrifice necessarily implies suffering, and that this too is an essential part of love since love is willing to suffer. "It is of the very nature of love vicariously to suffer in helping and in order to help and heal."²⁹ Following this argument, it is stated that suffering becomes a necessary feature of Christ's vicarious sacrifice, since "...Christ, in what is called his vicarious sacrifice, simply engages, at the expense of great suffering and even death itself, to bring us out of our sins themselves and so out of their penalties; being himself identified with us in our fallen state, and burdened in feelings with our evils."³⁰ That is Bushnell's definition of the vicarious sacrifice. On the surface it appears quite orthodox, but when considered from the stand of Bushnell on the atonement, the unscriptural implications of the words become evident.

Since Bushnell presents Christ's vicarious sacrifice as a necessary characteristic of the love principle, it follows that there is nothing superlative in the work of

29. Robert S. Franks, A History of the Doctrine of the Work of Christ, p. 402.

30. Bushnell, Vicarious Sacrifice, p. 41.

Christ. The love of Christ does only what all love will do. Anyone who is able to love is able also to suffer vicariously as Christ did. Bushnell states, quite epigrammatically as is his style, "Given the universality of love, the universality of vicarious sacrifice is given also."³¹ The death of Christ on the cross merely shows the greatness of his love and his willingness to suffer vicariously.

In order to show further that there is nothing superlative in Christ's vicarious sacrifice Bushnell points out that the Father, the Holy Ghost, all good angels, and all Christians also suffer vicariously. In order to realize this fact, Bushnell says, we must keep in mind the nature of Christ's suffering, namely, "the main suffering of Jesus was not, as many coarsely imagine, in the pangs of his body and cross, but in the burdens that came on his mind. In these burdens God, as the eternal Father, suffered before him."³² He uses the example of God's patience with Israel which caused him suffering, as he felt the pain resulting from their murmurings.

The Holy Ghost is able to and does suffer vicariously as he continues the work of Christ as a comforter. He thus also burdens himself with our feelings, our sorrows and pains. Bushnell points to the words of Scripture:

31. Ibid., p. 48.

32. Ibid., p. 60.

"the Spirit itself maketh intercession for us with groanings which can not be uttered." Essentially there is no difference between Christ's sacrifice and that of God as Bushnell says, "Whatever we may say, or hold, or believe, concerning the vicarious sacrifice of Christ, we are to affirm in the same manner of God. The whole deity is in it, in it from eternity and will to eternity be."³³

The good angels also are active in the vicarious sacrifice. In sympathy with Christ's ideals, they too suffer vicariously as they sorrow over man's sin and help him to bear his burdens, cf., "They shall bear thee up in their hands."

All redeemed souls also suffer vicariously as did Christ. Lest there might be some hesitancy in accepting this, Bushnell stresses the point made earlier that in his vicarious sacrifice Christ simply fulfills what belongs universally to love. The vicarious sacrifice belongs not to an office, as redeemer, but to holy character. It has to do with the love that burdens itself with the wants and woes, and losses and wrongs of others. Only that and nothing more. Hence man too suffers vicariously as he is burdened with another's troubles. However, man's suffering has not the value that Christ's suffering had.

Bushnell continues to stress the principle of love also in relation to the regeneration of souls by God. He

33. Ibid., p. 73.

compares regeneration of the soul with the healing of sickness and applies the same principles to each. He observes that it was the great love of Christ which moved him to sympathy for the sick. Thus he burdened himself with men's physical ills and suffered vicariously. He uses as an example Matt. 8, 17: "Himself took our infirmities and bare our sicknesses." Bushnell's commentary is as follows:

How then did he bear our sicknesses, or in what sense? In the sense that he took them on his feeling, had his heart burdened by the sense of them, bore the disgusts of their loathsome decays, felt their pains over again, in the tenderness of his more than human sensibility. Thus manifestly it was that he bare our sickness -- his very love to us put him, so far, in a vicarious relation to them, and made him, so far, a partaker in them.³⁴

As love operated vicariously in healing sicknesses so also it effects the cure for sin. Bushnell compares sin-bearing with sickness-bearing:

...the bearing of our sins does mean, that Christ bore them on his feeling, became inserted into their bad lot by his sympathy as a friend, yielded up himself and his life, even to an effort of restoring mercy; in a word, that he bore our sins in just the same sense that he bore our sicknesses. Understand that love itself is an essentially vicarious principle and the solution is no longer difficult.³⁵

In this way Bushnell has found release from the problem of repugnance to the idea of a penal atonement. "The offense of the cross -- how surely is it ended, when once you have learned the way in which God bears an enemy."³⁶

34. Ibid., p. 44.

35. Ibid., p. 46.

36. Ibid., p. 55.

IV. Christ and the Moral Power

Having seen how Bushnell makes his explanation of vicarious sacrifice one that appeals to the emotions by centering it in the grand principle of love, let us observe how he appeals to the emotions in his explanation of Christ's relation to God in the Moral Influence theory of the atonement. Here, however, his appeal to the emotions is really an appeal to reason. In showing the relationship between Christ and God he presents a doctrine of the Tritity which closely resembles Sabelianism. The Trinity is a Trinity of manifestation which was necessary for God's revelation of himself to man. It did not differ much from the patripassion view of Christ. In spite of the opinions which he advanced, he sought to show that the deity is incomprehensible.³⁷ His views on the Trinity are set forth particularly in his book God in Christ. E. T. Thompson summarizes Bushnell's teachings on the Trinity in these words: "To put it very simply, Bushnell presents God as a personal unity, working and revealing himself in different aspects as Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. The three persons of the Trinity are

37. Fisher, op. cit., p. 439

realized in experience, even if not fully understood by reason.³⁸ In view of the fact that Christ is presented as a manifestation of God, a mode of revelation, we must conclude that a modalistic monarchianism is referred to.³⁹

Before going further, we ought to state briefly what is meant by the moral power of God and its relation to Christ. God's moral power is his ability to change men's character, to make them love him and willingly conform to his law. Obviously man will not love a God who makes demands and rules by force, but he will follow a God who moves the sinner by self-sacrificing love. This love shows a greatness of character in God, and the moral power derived from that greatness of character is the ability to regenerate hearts into conformity with the Law. What then is the role that Christ plays? Since God was unable to reveal that greatness of character without some medium, it became necessary for him to become man. Simply to

38. Thompson, *op. cit.*, p. 29.

39. In a later work, The Christian Trinity a Practical Truth, Bushnell seems to modify his opinions somewhat. He says: "We must have no jealousy of the Three, as if they were to drift us away from the unity or from reason; being perfectly assured of this, that in using the triune formula, in the limberest, least constrained way possible, and allowing the plurality to blend in the freest manner possible, with all our acts of worship, -- preaching, praying, singing and adoring, -- we are only doing with three persons just what we do with one; making no infringement of the unity with the three, more than of the infinity with the one." Quoted in Fisher, *op. cit.*, p. 441. Fisher adds: "It is evident, however, that the Athanasian theology more and more commended itself to Bushnell's mind. The movement of his thought was in this direction." p. 444.

tell the world of his great character by word of mouth would not be effective nor could it ever fully convey his character of self-sacrificing love. Only the incarnate God as he lived with men could freely and fully portray the sublime royalties of his character. So then Christ manifested the moral power of God; during his lifetime he gradually unfolded and built up the moral power. This moral power also now belongs to Christ, because he is also God with full power.

It is not to be understood that Bushnell brings us an impersonal Christ who is only a power. No, it is clear that when he speaks of Christ, he is speaking of him as a human being. Christ is the infinite God who has become finite for the benefit of mankind. However, the fact that God has become man does not mean that he lost any of his power and majesty. Christ is definitely human, but without sin. In this way Christ is presented, but Bushnell does not distinguish between the finite and infinite in Christ. In Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia Bushnell's view is summarized as follows:

The real divinity came into the finite, and was subject to human conditions. There are not two distinct subsistencies in the person of Christ, one infinite and the other finite; but it is the one infinite God who expresses himself in Christ, and brings himself down to the level of our humanity, without any loss of his greatness or reduction of his majesty. At the same time, Bushnell holds to the full yet sinless humanity of Christ.⁴⁰

40. Clarence Augustine Beckwith, "Christology," in Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia, III, p. 59.

A person wonders how Bushnell could conceive of God retaining all his powers while becoming man, and, yet not distinguish between the finite and infinite in Christ. To the logical mind comes a serious problem of trying to maintain the identity of God as God and man as man. If Christ is actually and fully man, how can he have the powers of God, which do not belong to man. The Scriptural solution of the problem is to distinguish between a divine and human nature in Christ, which natures are both present in the theanthropic person. This, however, is not Bushnell's view. He tries to bring the divine and human together in Christ until they are one nature. However, it is not a new nature. Christ's nature is that of a true human, but which retains divinity. Technically it is a completely anthropomorphic view of Christ. He presents Christ as God showing himself under the limitations of human life -- thinking, feeling, suffering with us. This certainly indicates a tendency to humanize God. Therefore, when he presents Christ acting, he is acting as God. "It is all, literally speaking, divine thought, divine emotion, divine action, and even divine suffering."⁴¹ Observe that Bushnell does not draw a sharp line of distinction between God and man, when he speaks of God's feelings and emotions which readily compare with those of man. Since Christ presents a God of human attri-

41. Fisher, op. cit., p. 439.

butes, there is no real need to distinguish between a divine and human nature, since by virtue of their emotions they are essentially one. Although in back of Bushnell's mind there was a recognition of a human nature in Christ, which he took for granted, the fact remains that he did not stress it; nor was there any urgency in stressing it. The burden of Bushnell's message was to present the great character of God, his self-sacrificing love, which Christ manifests in terms of human experience. Since man can understand and appreciate only human actions, it was necessary that God be humanized for us. Other than that, the human side of Christ is insignificant, and Bushnell feels no need to stress Christ's humanity.

Bushnell's tendency to overlook the human nature in Christ would be fully in keeping with his view of the atonement. He denies a propitiatory atonement in which Christ as man's representative, by virtue of his human nature, avails for man before the tribunal of God. Thus the human nature in Christ is essential to the doctrine of a propitiatory atonement. Since Bushnell denies the propitiatory atonement, he is not concerned with the human nature in Christ.

Now we come to the core of Bushnell's teaching, namely, Christ presented as God's moral power. He distinguishes moral power from attribute power. Attribute power is that which God has in himself from the beginning

cally different from the Socinian theory.⁴⁴ Christ's moral power is not the power of example nor the revelation merely of God's love; but, in the words of Bushnell it is --

...the power of all God's moral perfections, in one word, of his greatness. And by greatness we mean greatness of character; for there is no greatness in force, no greatness in quantity, or height, or antiquity of being, no greatness anywhere but in character. In this it is that so great moral power is conceived to be developed, in the self-devoting sacrifice of Christ's life and death.⁴⁵

So then Christ possesses the great moral power of God having by his life and death manifested before our eyes the greatness of God's character. From this point of view Bushnell construes certain Scripture passages which speak of Christ having power, and refers them to his moral power; for example: "...declared to be the Son of God with power." Also the gospel of Christ is seen in such a light: "I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ for it is the power of God unto salvation to everyone that believeth." The working of the moral power in Christ he sees in the words: "And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men unto me."

To support the theory of Christ's moral power over against the propitiatory atonement he advances the argument from the time of incarnation. He holds that if the purpose of Christ's coming was to satisfy God's justice

44. Fisher, op. cit., p. 449.

45. Bushnell, Vicarious Sacrifice, p. 171-172.

and which shows his perfection. It is demonstrated by such absolute powers as omnipotence, omnipresence, holiness, and the like. These powers God possessed before the incarnation, and by means of them he controlled man and the universe. Through the Son in the incarnation he obtains a new kind of power.⁴² Before this time he had been using his attribute power, --

...till finally, in the fullness of time, he is constrained to institute a new movement of the world, in the incarnation of his Son. The undertaking is to obtain, through him, and the facts and processes of his life, a new kind of power; viz., moral power; the same that is obtained by human conduct under human methods. It will be a divine power still, only it will not be attribute power."⁴³

The moral power -- what is it? Bushnell in explaining it emphasizes the point that the stress is to be laid on character. He feels that if there is to be an improvement in human society, it must be brought about by a change in character. Christ, possessing the moral power, effects this change. He came to renovate character by the great moral power of his divine character. "This is the moral view of the atonement, which, in its character-ship principle, was advocated by Abelard. It is not radi-

42. One might think that, since Christ is a manifestation of God, this moral power is merely a manifestation of a power which had existed before; however, Bushnell does not treat it in this way. Cf. Franko, op. cit., p. 403.: "God became incarnate in Him in order to obtain a new kind of power."

43. Bushnell, Vicarious Sacrifice, p. 188.

and be substituted for the release of transgression, there is no reason why he should have delayed it so long. The same effect could be accomplished earlier. But if as a moral power, there had to be some preparation of man's receptivity to such a moral power. The Old Testament with its force principle of violence was not ready for the moral power of Christ.⁴⁶

The moral power of Christ is not exerted in its full force at any given time, but it is cumulative. It must be developed. The moral power is the result of Christ's total life history. During his entire life Christ suffered vicariously, and as it were, built up his reserve of power. As a man now observes the panorama of power in Christ's life history, it makes an impression on his character. "The real gospel is the Incarnate Biography itself, making its impression and working its effect as a biography -- a total life with all its acts, and facts, and words, and feelings, and principles of good, grouped in the light and shade of their own supernatural unfolding."⁴⁷

The moral power is cumulative in also another respect in that it depends on its effect in man. Christ gradually developed his moral power in his dealings with men. "When the Holy Child is born, he has no moral power at all."⁴⁸ His moral power is only seen dimly before his public min-

46. Ibid., p. 183.

47. Ibid., p. 31.

48. Ibid., p. 192.

istry. Bearing in mind that his moral power depends on the effect he has on people, it was only partly developed during his ministry, for most of the people rejected him; only after his resurrection does the power become more evident. The results of the moral power are then seen in the disciples. Peter begins to preach the gospel and thousands of people are changed. Christ's moral power still increases through the centuries. "Not that Christ grows better but that he is more and more competently apprehended, as he becomes more widely incarnated among men, and obtains a fitter representation to thought in the thought, and works of his people."⁴⁹ However, the moral power still has much difficulty today in achieving its goal, since "the world is still too coarse, too deep in sense and the force principle, to feel, in any but a very small degree, the moral power of God."⁵⁰

49. Ibid., p. 211.

50. Ibid., p. 183.

V. Effect of the Moral Power

The effect of the Moral power in Christ is that it dramatizes the relation between God and man. According to Franks there are three aspects of this relationship: 1) Christ humanized God. 2) He both awakens the sense of guilt, and draws the confidence of the guilty. 3) He makes evident by his vicarious sacrifice that God suffers on account of evil, or with and for all created.⁵¹ The moral power humanizes God in that as God becomes man he definitely takes on human attributes, and it appears immediately that God acts very much as man does. This Bushnell shows by pointing out that Christ the human is still divine. His human actions are God's actions. When we look at God in Christ we see him as a human. By humanizing God it becomes possible for man to bridge the gap previously existing between himself and God. Man is able to understand and appreciate a God who acts and thinks like a man. Instead of bringing man up into the kingdom of God and thus into unity with God through Christ, Bushnell has stormed the heavenly throne room and forced God into human categories. Actually, Bushnell presents to us a God who

51. Franks, op. cit., p. 405.

is essentially no different from man.⁵² He does this by pointing to Christ who is God and who exhibits human attributes. The source of Bushnell's problem lies in his failure to distinguish between the divine and human natures in Christ. He identifies the two so that there is then really no difference between them, at the same time pointing out that as a man Christ still has full divine power. In order to solve the contradiction, Bushnell has to maintain one of two points of view: either man is like God or God is like man. Apparently he has leaned toward the latter view and so humanized God. But he is not yet finished with the problem, for he certainly would not say that there is actually no difference between God and man. He is then left with two contradictory statements: God is like man, but God is also not like man. Apparently Bushnell wants to retain the concepts of his youth when he had learned that God is above all, supreme, and that Christ is the Son of God; yet his reason balks at Christ as the Son of God, and so he makes a man out of God.

The second aspect of the relationship between God and

52. Although Bushnell doesn't state the view as forcefully as this, yet such a deduction can readily be made and must be made to remain consistent. Bushnell's successors had no great difficulty in supporting a doctrine of God which makes him equal to man. Dr. James Whiton held that there is no great chasm between man and God as seen from the fact that Christ is human and homoosios with the Father. Christ is so co-equal with God as a human, and not according to a divine nature. Foster, The Modern Movement in American Theology, p. 74.

man which is dramatized by Christ's moral power is that Christ awakens the sense of guilt and draws the confidence of the guilty. As the sinner observes the biography of Christ and sees in it a multitude of sacrifices and sufferings, which portray the painful consequences of sin, he will feel the deadly character of his sinful life. The sinner sees how Christ permitted the Jews to abuse him. This shows the sinner how inhuman we humans really are. He sees the pain and suffering inflicted on the mind of Christ as he felt the burden of the people's sins. Seeing in this way the consequences of sin the sinner has within himself a deep sense of guilt.⁵³ But the sinner also sees how Christ willingly burdened himself with the sins of the people of his time. This shows today's sinner that God today takes on himself the burdens of a sinner, and as he observes this, he then places his confidence in God. That is the way Bushnell sees it. We repeat his epigrammatic statement: "The offense of the cross -- how surely is it ended, when once you have learned the way in which God bears an enemy!"⁵⁴

In this connection we may mention the third aspect of the relationship effected by the moral power, namely, that Christ makes evident by his vicarious sacrifice that God suffers on account of evil, or with and for all created.

53. Franks, op. cit., II, p. 408.

54. Bushnell, Vicarious Sacrifice, p. 55.

This has been alluded to in the above paragraph, in which it is stated that Bushnell makes this point the motivating force behind the sense of guilt and the confidence in God which is experienced by the sinner.

In showing the effect of the moral power in Christ Bushnell repeatedly and emphatically points out that man is changed and not God. Christ is presented as a mediator, not to soften God's judgment, but the medium by which we take hold of God through faith. Christ is an intercessor, not as one who makes a plea with his wounds to soften God toward us, but the stress of the intercession is with us and our hearts' feelings.⁵⁵ This emphasis is placed by Bushnell in opposition to the doctrine of a propitiatory atonement.⁵⁶ He claimed that we metaphorically impute to God the change which takes place in ourselves. But this imaginative exercise of trying to change God is necessary

55. Ibid., p. 71.

56. Though Bushnell had opposed the objective value of the atonement, yet, according to Prof. Herbert T. Andrews, Expositor, London, March, 1924, he seems to have slightly altered his views later in stating "that though in the facts of our Lord's passion, outwardly regarded, there is no sacrifice, or oblation, or atonement, or propitiation, yet if we ask, How shall we come to God by the aid of this martyrdom? the facts must be put into the molds of the altar, and without these forms of the altar we should be utterly at a loss in making any use of practical reconciliation with God. Christ is good, beautiful, wonderful. His disinterested love is a picture by itself. His forgiving patience melts into my feeling. His passion rends my heart. But what is he for? One word -- he is my sacrifice -- opens all to me, and beholding him with all my sin upon him, I count him my offering. I come unto God by him and enter into the Holiest by his blood." Cited in Howard, Princes of the Christian Pulpit and Pastorate, p. 163.

so that repentance and trust is produced in us. He illustrates by the example of prayer. We pray and expect our prayer to have an effect on God; but God isn't changed. The effort to change him produces such a change in our hearts that the obstacle to the exercise of his beneficence toward us is removed.⁵⁷

Bushnell's doctrine of regeneration by means of the moral power of Christ finally resolves itself to work righteousness being based on the law. He presents the view that Christ definitely makes a change in man, but the righteousness comes as a man keeps the precepts of God's Law. The moral power restores man's original attitude toward the Law. Man's original attitude was love for the Law. Simply stated, the moral power of Christ renovates character into conformity with the precepts of Law. In this way he compromises God's attributes of mercy and justice, since God's mercy is manifested in the moral power of Christ. How this compromise is made by Bushnell is explained by Franks as follows:

Mercy does not contradict justice: it honours both law and justice. The vicarious sacrifice restores men to the precept of the Law, bringing them once more into subjection to it. Christ by it reasserts the law, organizing a kingdom for it in the world. He again himself incarnates the precept, and brings it near to men's feelings and convictions by the personal footing he gains for it in humanity. Again he honours it by his obedience. For what is the law but love, and what is love but vicarious sacrifice?⁵⁸

57. Fisher, op. cit., p. 442.

58. Franks, op. cit., p. 407.

Whenever Bushnell speaks of justification he refers to it in a moral sense. God's justice always has moral significance, not retributive, as though payment must be made for man's sin. Justification is indeed imputed righteousness, he admits, however not in the sense that Christ's merits are transferred to us, but that the soul, gained by faith, is gradually brought back to its original, normal relation to God, and thus becomes invested with God's righteousness.⁵⁹ This imputation of righteousness is brought about in a manner that is quite difficult to grasp. Christ by his life and passion was declaring God's righteousness to guilty souls, won their faith, by which then they were connected with God and his righteousness. The soul receives righteousness by derivation. Because of faith, righteousness "flows down upon the soul, into it, and through it."⁶⁰

The importance of faith in justification seemingly is not overlooked. Bushnell feels that faith, or consent, is necessary for the moral power to be of value to the individual. However, he makes certain that faith is not to be construed as a belief that Christ has evened our account with God's justice.⁶¹ "Our sins do not fly away because

59. Ibid., p. 410.

60. Bushnell, Vicarious Sacrifice, p. 435.

61. Bushnell thinks that Luther felt the truth about justification with his heart, but not with his head, and so was unable to express it in words. Vicarious Sacrifice, p. 437.

we believe in a fact of any kind."⁶² Bushnell defines faith as "the trusting of one's self over, sinner to Savior, to be in him, and of him, and new characterized by him; because it is only in that way that the power of Christ gets opportunity to work."⁶³ By virtue of his insistence on faith Bushnell maintains that justification is not by works. There must be a dependence on God's righteousness which flows down into the believer; however, we note that this then is to empower him to abide by the precepts of the Law and to claim righteousness for himself. We must object to Bushnell's teaching regarding faith, because, first of all, it is not the "faith" spoken of in Holy Scripture, namely, trusting in the expiatory merits of Christ's work. Secondly, it does not oppose but reasserts the error of work righteousness, for the faith becomes only a channel through which a renewed character is obtained. It is this renewed character, or sanctified life, which unites man with God. Sanctification then becomes the basis for justification.

62. Ibid., p. 434.

63. Ibid.

VI. Implications for Modern Theology

The moral influence theory did not remain the pet theory of one man but has been taken over into the theology of Modernism. Not only that, but Bushnell's method of dealing with Scripture has become a distinct characteristic of all Liberal theologians, who succeeded him. Modernists generally subscribe to the following assumptions concerning religious authority:

- a. Present experience is the criterion of truth and the standard of value in religion.
- b. The Bible is essentially a record of man's past religious experience, without infallibility or supernatural authority. As the source of our knowledge of Jesus it is of unique value.
- c. All religious concepts, such as revelation, inspiration, grace, salvation, must be reinterpreted in the light of this criterion and standard.⁶⁴

There is ever present the tendency to fill old terms with anti-Scriptural meaning. We have seen how completely different concepts are portrayed in Bushnell's definitions of such terms as "justification," "faith," "imputed righteousness," and "Trinity." Even the title of his greatest book takes on a new meaning. "Vicarious" is not defined in the Scriptural sense of substitutionary atonement in payment for sin. "Sacrifice" is merely the suffering endured as

64. Burt, op. cit., p. 349.

Christ feels the burden of sin and does not include the offering of his life as a propitiation for the sins of the world. Such free interpretations are typical in Liberal theology.

There is another implication for modern theology in this that Bushnell operated with experience. This means of obtaining religious truth has been taught by Liberals to the present day. Bushnell chose the dictates of experience as a basis for truth after coming to the conclusion that language is only a matter of symbols which intend to convey certain ideas from one person to another. Since the meanings of those symbols change from time to time, it is almost impossible to determine the concepts which they intended to convey. For that reason Bushnell also distrusted the written words of Scripture. He decided that religious truth can be more adequately ascertained through experience, and used Scripture merely as a collection of hints and suggestions in the development of his own religious experience by which he would ultimately arrive at religious truth. Bushnell felt that experience was a better guide to truth than Scripture, because every individual's experience would develop along a certain pattern of religious truth; however, history shows that the standard of experience was found wanting and brought about a conglomeration of contradicting doctrines and principles, which have shown themselves in Liberal theology to the present

day. E. T. Thompson makes the following evaluation:

More fundamental, perhaps, is the fact that Bushnell's emphasis on nature, experience, moral intuition, and the Christian sensibilities, though it freed the Gospel from many false dogmatisms and brought theology and the Bible to life, did tend to make man the measure of God, to lead him to seek the divine in the depths of his own being or in the world of nature around him, rather than in the Scriptures of the Christian faith and in Christ in whom the Word has become flesh.⁶⁵

Beside establishing a liberal method of obtaining religious truth, Bushnell contributed certain specific doctrines which were taken over by his successors. At least four tendencies in Modernistic theology stem from the writings of Bushnell, as listed by Dr. F. E. Mayer:

1) In his Nature and the Supernatural Bushnell virtually identifies God and nature. This is but the beginning of the later theory of Divine Immanence, which in Empirical Theism reduces God to a mere "personality-evolving process in society." 2) In his Christian Nurture he defined conversion not as a change in man wrought by divine power, but as a psychologically normal process and a gradual progress. This theory prepared the way for Congregational theologians within a decade of Bushnell's death to accept the Darwinian theory of evolution. 3) Bushnell probably did more than any other single theologian to defend the liberal and radical theory that man is inherently good. It is but a step from Bushnell to the confirmed Liberal who sees in man a potential God. 4) In his Vicarious Sacrifice he makes Jesus as human as we are and places His vicarious sacrifice on the level of a mother's sacrifice for her child. True, Bushnell said that Christ differed from us not in degree, but in kind; nevertheless his denial of the Trinity and the Vicarious Atonement

65. Thompson, op. cit., p. 48.

ment paved the way for the Liberals' view concerning Christ's person and work.⁶⁶

Thus the foundation for Liberal theology in America had been laid so that Bushnell's followers found no difficulty striking out on new paths, arbitrarily distorting clear Scripture doctrines, until there was very little in Congregational theology that had not been liberalized.

A close examination of Bushnell's theology will show that each of his premises rests on another. His basic premise being false it necessarily follows that all of the others will be false. An attack on one point involves the entire theology. His theology rests on the principle that religious experience is the only accurate standard of truth. If this be true, his theology stands. If it be false, it crashes to earth. The variety of contradicting opinions on fundamental doctrines in subsequent Liberal theology indicates clearly that religious experience is a faulty measure of truth. The theologian who accepts the clear statements of Scripture, carefully examined, will not be able to subscribe to Bushnell's teachings. The formal principle of Bushnell's system being false, his entire theology falls. The second or material principle for his theology lies in the doctrine of the Moral Influence theory of the atonement. Again,

66. F. E. Mayer, "Rise of Liberal Theology in Congregationalism," in Concordia Theological Monthly, XV (October, 1944), 655-660.

if this theory were true, all other doctrines connected with it would stand. However, the theory is at variance with Scripture since it denies the propitiatory character of the atonement which is at the center of the Gospel message. An error in his doctrine of the atonement involves errors in his teaching on faith, justification, the natures in Christ, the Trinity, and others.

The sad fact of the matter is that Bushnell's views were not passed off as private theories of a well-meaning theologian, but were accepted and incorporated into the teachings of Liberal Congregationalists. His immediate successors took the cue from him and gave momentum to the Liberal trend. T. T. Munger took this attitude toward Scripture: "For, in the last analysis, revelation -- so far as its acceptance is concerned -- rests on reason, and not reason on revelation. The logical order is, first reason, and then revelation -- the eye before sight."⁶⁷ James Whiton, in his book, The Gospel of the Resurrection presents eschatology in an unbiblical and unorthodox fashion. He uses Scripture statements, though not in the sense in which they were originally intended. Resurrection is a present reality, not to take place in a future time. It is "the entrance into that perfected state of embodied being which is the spiritual result of

67. Foster, Modern Movement..., p. 63.

a Christly life in the present world."⁶⁸ Let it be understood, however, that the change in Congregational theology is gradual. It is an evolution rather than a revolution. The East is noted for its modifications though there are exceptions. Often there was a great divergence in adjacent pulpits.⁶⁹ Yet there was always present the tendency to liberalize theology, which tendency can be traced to the preaching and pen of Horace Bushnell.

69. Williston Walker, "Changes in Theology Among American Congregationalists," in American Journal of Theology, X, 2, (April, 1906), 204.

Bibliography

- Beckwith, Clarence Augustine, "Christology," The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge, New York, Funk and Wagnalls Company, 1908, III, 49-64.
- Burt, Edwin A., Types of Religious Philosophy, New York, Harper and Brothers Publishers, 1939.
- Bushnell, Horace, Christian Nurture, New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1865.
- , Nature and the Supernatural, New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1897.
- , The Vicarious Sacrifice Grounded in Principles of Universal Obligation, New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1866.
- Cheney, Mary Bushnell, Life and Letters of Horace Bushnell, New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1905.
- Fisher, George Park, History of Christian Doctrine, New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1923.
- Foster, Frank Hugh, A Genetic History of the New England Theology, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1907.
- , The Modern Movement in American Theology, New York, Fleming H. Revell Company, 1939.
- Franks, Robert S., A History of the Doctrine of the Work of Christ, 2 vols., London, Hodder and Stoughton, (no date).
- Howard, Harry C., Princes of the Christian Pulpit and Pastorate, Nashville, Tenn., Cokesbury Press, 1927.
- Mayer, Frederick E., "Rise of Liberal Theology in Congregationalism," Concordia Theological Monthly, XV, 10 (October, 1944), 649-666.
- Pieper, Franz, Christian Dogmatics, First edition, translated by Walter Albrecht, 3 vols., Springfield, Ill., 1941;
- Thompson, Ernest Trice, Changing Emphasis in American Preaching, Philadelphia, The Westminster Press, 1943.

Walker, Williston, "Changes in Theology among American Congregationalists," American Journal of Theology, X, 2, (April, 1906), 208-214.

Warfield, Benjamin B., "Atonement," The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge, New York, Funk and Wagnall's Company, 1908, I, 351-354.