

Book Review

A New Gospel for Women: Katharine Bushnell and the Challenge of Christian Feminism

By Kristin Kobes Du Mez (Oxford University Press, 2015)

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At last we have a historical analysis worthy of its subject—Katharine Bushnell, who began her career as a missionary doctor in China and went on to become a theologian, missionary and perhaps the most significant gender reformer of her day. Through eight page-turning chapters, Kobes Du Mez introduces Bushnell within the context of American Protestantism where she rises to a “household word” (1). What distinguished Bushnell was her commitment to women’s emancipation as integral to Christian faith. From her work as a medical missionary, to her activism with prostitutes, to her biblical scholarship, Kobes Du Mez shows how Bushnell’s vocation was motivated by the cruelty of Christian men toward females.

Chapter 1 immerses readers in the Methodist context of Evanston, Illinois—a burgeoning paradise for women’s emancipation with its emphasis on the Holy Spirit equipping all believers regardless of skin color or gender (15). A rejection of social hierarchies embodied the mission of the Women’s Christian Temperance Union (WCTU). Headquartered in Evanston, the WCTU created new frontiers for women globally. In this milieu, the young Bushnell had two key mentors: her neighbor Frances Willard, president of the WCTU, and Dr. James Stewart Jewell, a professor of medicine who prepped Katharine for admittance to the Chicago Women’s Medical College in 1876.

Chapter 2 expertly demonstrates how popular Christian movements (temperance, women’s missions, and abolition) pressed for a more Christian world that was also more feminist. Gender activism united a global sisterhood, blurring divisions of race and nation. Bushnell emerged on center stage, sensitized to patriarchy’s power to devalue and enslave women, and to distort the Bible for these purposes—challenges she witnessed as a missionary in China. Returning to the US, Bushnell joined forces with the WCTU to expose female sex slavery in Wisconsin and Michigan and to prosecute perpetrators. Her popularity soared and helped turn the country against prostitution.

Chapter 3 explores the partnership of leading women working around the globe “in the name of temperance and purity” (63). Alongside activists like Josephine Butler, Bushnell traveled internationally, documenting Christian complicity in the abuse of women and exposing high-level leaders. Miracles accompanied their work as their prayers challenged powers and principalities. Ultimately, they came to see how perpetrators slandered those they abused and how distorted translations of scripture fueled gender injustice. Their work abroad brought them wisdom and capacity to expose ethnic prejudice and its complicity in the sexual abuse of females in the US. One “theme remained constant: the culpability of Christian men” (80).

Chapter 4 traces Bushnell’s abrupt shift from purity work to biblical theology. Kobes Du Mez points to a pivotal event—an article by Josephine Butler that recounts a brutal rape by British soldiers in India, in broad daylight, while witnesses stood idle. The woman died, yet not one soldier was convicted. Women seemed insignificant compared to gratifying the sexual desires of men, because, according to Bushnell, Christians believe “that

God ordained woman to be a scapegoat of her husband’s self-indulgence, as a permanently adjusted penalty for Eve’s sin” (91). From the “sex-biased’ Chinese translations of Scripture” (94) to “her encounters with women in Indian and East Asia” (94), Bushnell realized that laws protecting women were impotent when coexisting beside a flawed theology of women.

For gender reform to succeed, biblical reform was needed. And women must lead the way by mastering the biblical languages: for “no class nor sex should have an exclusive right to set forth the meaning of the original text” (105). Hence, in 1887 the “WCTU began offering New Testament Greek” (97). Bushnell soon afterwards published *God’s Word to Women*—an entirely new reading “from Genesis through Revelation” (101). As Kobes Du Mez notes, *God’s Word to Women* exposed and redressed sexist translations aligned more with Satan than God.

Chapter 5 explores Bushnell’s capacity to challenge theological sexism by correcting caricatures of women, beginning with Eve. Though Christians believed God cursed Eve for her disobedience and for seducing Adam to sin, Bushnell reframed the conversation. She argued that it was “false exegesis” and men’s fallibility that condemned Eve, not scripture (109). Kobes Du Mez details patterns of distortions Bushnell uncovered in translation choices that scrutinized women’s moral character. Consider the Hebrew word *chayil*: when used of men it is translated as “force, strength, or ability” (123), but when referring to women it is rendered “virtue”—i.e. chastity” (123). Bushnell found similar challenges in the NT, admitting that these may be straws, “yet they all point in the same direction” (125). In contrast, however, the woman caught in adultery (John 7:53-8:11), challenges the sexual double standard. Here “Christ insisted that man must first show himself to be chaste before dealing with woman’s unchastity” (125).

Chapter 6 features Bushnell’s genius in interpreting texts used to subordinate women. For example, Bushnell exposes “male-kinship,” not as a moral ideal, but as part of our fallen world. Hence, God intended a man to leave his family and cleave to his wife, just as women throughout scripture resist the confines of their patriarchal culture. Bushnell insists that, while Adam was banished from Eden, Eve—in turning away from God—chose to follow her husband out of paradise. In “choosing to follow her husband out of Eden, Eve had reversed the fundamental law of marriage” (131). Patriarchy is also noted by the inclusion of Joseph in Christ’s lineage, “one in no way related to Jesus Christ by ties of blood” (134).

Kobes Du Mez displays Bushnell’s skill in interpreting concepts such as “headship.” Asking larger theological questions, Bushnell queries: who is the head of humanity, men or Christ? Can women serve two masters—God and men? Bushnell insists that Eph 5:21-24 is primarily a call to imitate Christ. “It is only as man imitates Christ in his conduct that he can remain in the Body of which Christ is Head” (141). All Christians are to submit to one another (Eph 5:21), and this entails “the Christian grace of yielding one’s preferences to another” (141).

Bushnell's capacity in Greek is prominent in her assessment of 1 Cor 11:1-16, insisting that *exousia* is wrongly "interpreted in verse 10 to mean 'veil' and to signify man's authority over woman [when it] had never before in Scripture or classical literature been found to have that meaning" (137). For Bushnell, this error represents "the most audacious handling of the sacred text on record" (137). Concerning 1 Cor 14:31-40, Bushnell observes that reinforcing women's subservience to men ignores how women prophets throughout scripture were guided by God rather than men. Moreover, there is no OT law that calls women to obey their husbands. For Bushnell, the "sentiments expressed in verses 34 and 35 ought to be attributed not to Paul, but rather to another person" (146) who elevated Jewish legal traditions over women's freedom in Christ. Finally, in assessing 1 Tim 2:11-15, Bushnell reminds readers that, unlike Paul's letter to the church at Ephesus which was read to the entire church, Paul's epistle to Timothy was private.

Chapter 7 shows how *God's Word to Women* positioned itself between radical and conservative Christians. It was "at once progressive and traditional, radical and conservative" (152). Refusing higher criticism, Bushnell was nonetheless prepared to challenge flawed translations. Yet, she was clear about one issue: "the Bible contained within it the true source of women's liberation" (157), but only when read accurately in its historical and cultural contexts. Kobes Du Mez demonstrates Bushnell's commitment to the fundamental moral principles of scripture, and her work was read and reviewed by popular and academic critics alike.

Chapter 8 considers how her influence waned. As feminists favored sexual freedom, purity work was marginalized and eclipsed by "social hygienists" who devalued prostitutes as immoral and feeble-minded. Rejecting the "stupid assumption that prostitution proves feeble-mindedness," Bushnell asserted "that any deficiencies likely resulted from their 'abuse in sexual matters by men,' rather than from any 'inherited condition'" (170). Continually challenging promiscuity with its double standard for men, Bushnell insisted that "sexual freedom could not undo the systemic oppression of women that persisted in American society" (177). Shallow is the assertion that female sexuality "could erase deeply rooted male supremacy in the culture and in the economy" (177).

Kobes Du Mez considers Bushnell's impact by noting that Bushnell believed that, important as her purity efforts were, her truest vocation was biblical studies. Hence, during the years before she died, *God's Word to Women* was available in "England, Australia, New Zealand, India, China, Korea, and Germany" (181). Her work remains in print today and continues to empower women's emancipation across geographic and denominational lines, particularly given the escalation of sex slavery coupled with the ongoing reality of religious and cultural patriarchy.

Strengths and Weaknesses

A New Gospel for Women contributes significantly to the history of women in missions, social justice, and biblical scholarship. By assessing Bushnell's achievements in context, Kobes Du Mez empowers readers to better understand their own challenges and opportunities as activists, scholars, and as those (like Bushnell) working to dismantle patriarchy as a biblical ideal. After all, many issues Bushnell challenged persist, like a wooden or "staunch commitment to biblical inerrancy, dispensational theology, and

antimodernism" (159) that fuels a masculinist Christianity with its "blatantly misogynistic, rhetoric and practices" (159).

Further, Christians have for centuries depicted women as "weak—and vulnerable to doctrinal error [whereas] assigned truth [is considered] a masculine quality" (159). Given the "associations of right doctrine with masculine virility" (160), "it was not long before women's rights and the evils of modernism became firmly linked in the minds of many conservatives" (160). Consider Grudem's *Evangelical Feminism: A New Path to Liberalism?* and *Evangelical Feminism and Biblical Truth*. History does indeed repeat itself, which is why the careful historical analysis of Kobes Du Mez is crucial. *A New Gospel for Women* challenges the assumption that biblical feminism is a post-1960s construct and that egalitarians today are driven by secular feminism. Finally, Kobes Du Mez displays Bushnell's capacity to lead in many fields (medicine, theology, social justice, international diplomacy), achievements that both united women globally while also casting vision and confidence for women's vocational pursuits then and now.

Regarding weaknesses, Kobes Du Mez might have done more to consider Bushnell's spirituality—her prayer life and study of scripture as these guided her activism and evangelism and as they reflect prominent qualities of early evangelicals (noted in Bebbington's quadrilateral¹). Finally, a more thorough review of Bushnell's treatment of 1 Tim 2:11-15 would have been useful, given how mishandling this passage has stifled women's service. Here Bushnell has much to offer. She shows how Paul affirmed women teaching men when the church was not under persecution, provided they teach the gospel accurately and learnedly (1 Tim 2:11-12) and they are not disruptive either in their chatter or clothing (1 Cor 11:5, 12:34).²

Perhaps Bushnell's highest theological achievement is to identify women not through Eve's failures, but as united to Christ's victories. Bushnell shows that a correct interpretation of scripture as it relates to "women's social, ecclesiastical and spiritual status"³ should be ascribed in the same manner as "man's social, ecclesiastical and spiritual status, [based] on the atonement of Jesus Christ. [We] cannot, for women, put the 'new wine' of the Gospel into the old wine-skins of 'condemnation.'"⁴ Redemption, for Bushnell, provides women with a new being (*ontos*) for a new purpose (*telos*) that challenges gender prejudice and interpretative bias that, throughout history, condemned women as ontologically inferior in their association with Eve rather than through their union with Christ. Bushnell establishes a theological foundation for women's ontological and functional equality that constitutes an entirely new worldview that supports and grows egalitarian theology to this day.

Bushnell is to egalitarians what Luther was to the Reformation, and Kobes Du Mez has added significantly to our understanding of a great Christian reformer.

Notes

- 1 David W. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s-1980s* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979).
- 2 Katharine Bushnell, *God's Word to Women* (Minneapolis: Christians for Biblical Equality, 2003), 154-65.
- 3 Bushnell, *God's Word to Women*, 169.
- 4 Bushnell, *God's Word to Women*, 169.