“Favored as We Are”: Early Protestant Missions, Cultural Imperialism, and the Liberating Power of the Bible

Hannah Nation

Two Assumptions in America’s Historic Concern for Women

When the first American missionaries prepared to leave the shores of New England in 1812, Jonathan Allen, a respected minister of the gospel, delivered an exhortation to the women of the company. Speaking to them directly, he reminded the women that they were "now engaged in the best of causes," specifically, the delivery of women in foreign lands from oppression. Allen proclaimed the call for American women to "enlighten" the minds of their foreign sisters and to "raise their character." The American women were to "bring them from their cloisters" so that these subjugated foreign women might "enjoy the privileges of the children of God." Ultimately, the work of American women in missions would teach women in the non-Western world that "they are not an inferior race of creatures; but stand upon a par with men."1

To readers of Priscilla Papers concerned about gender-based violence, these words may sound encouraging. We may find ourselves delighting in the knowledge that stopping violence against women has long been integral to the work of Christian missions; after all, the welfare of women has been a central concern from the inception of Protestant Christian missions in the West. This concern has motivated both women and men to participate in the spread of the Christian gospel, the development and institutionalization of education for women, and the public condemnation of and campaign against a wide variety of injustices. The needs and plights of women have been a primary motivating factor and recruitment tool to rally Christians in the West to engage the needs of the world, and herein is an example of this cause at the very inception of American Protestant missions.

However, while we celebrate what is good in this history, it is important to recognize and consider two basic assumptions at the heart of it. First, nineteenth-century American evangelicals believed deeply that American women enjoyed an elevated position in society which needed to be replicated throughout the world. Second, it was assumed that American women enjoyed this elevated position as a result of moral and social progress. The realities of life for women in America were viewed as the results of evangelical Protestant Christianity’s progressively positive influence on society; missions and Christian service became a matter of sharing with the world the blessings Western women enjoyed. These two basic ideas were crucial to the development of American missionary concern for foreign women.

This article aims to remind us of this legacy and to encourage Western women toward self-examination as we engage the important topic of gender-based violence. From the earliest days of missional engagement, Western women have leaned towards relegating issues of violence and oppression to the "other," holding up their own Western progress, rather than scripture, as the catalyst for social change elsewhere. Twenty-first-century Western Christians working to combat gender-based violence must hold themselves accountable to reexamine any lurking imperialistic motivations and arguments in their teaching and actions concerning women in foreign contexts.

Have we moved beyond a paradigm and language that elevates liberated Western womanhood in contrast to oppressed womanhood in the majority world as the reason for combatting violence? Or are we still tempted to view our work confronting gender-based violence through the lens of Western progress and non-Western ignorance? In response to the legacy we have inherited, this article offers Phillip Jenkins’s studies of women in world Christianity as examples of the power of God’s Word to speak to the fullness of global womanhood. Jenkins argues that the Bible in the hands of women is the most important tool to initiate change because it enables such change under the guidance of local women and interpreted according to their local context. Though there is not enough space to look at Jenkins’s case studies in full, this paper argues that remembering his basic argument concerning the power of the Word in the hands of women is the right and necessary antidote to the tendency of women in the West to view the issues women face globally through their own Western lenses.

The Plight of Women as Early Motivation for Mission

The impulse among the first American women to participate in missions was intimately connected to their views of themselves and of women outside the Western context. The nascent years of evangelical missions in America coincided with a period of much pride for women. The early nineteenth century witnessed a dramatic increase of education for American women, and in New England the literacy gap between men and women was finally closed.2 Female education was no longer viewed primarily as "ornamental," creating women who adored their husbands; rather, under the influence of Hannah Moore the primary focus of female education during this time became one of "usefulness."3 Simultaneously, the realms in which women could apply such usefulness were undergoing reinterpretation. The domestic sphere grew in importance for women, expanding to include a host of new activities including teaching and benevolence. Such ideals as companionate marriage, moral motherhood, and religious revival further redefined women’s work.4 As the home lost its economic position in society, it grew in sentimental, moral, and religious importance.

Because American women believed themselves to be experiencing immense privilege compared to their predecessors, they were horrified to discover the lives of women in various other cultures did not share similar characteristics. Particularly
significant for nineteenth-century American women were reports of female subjugation in “heathen” cultures. Perhaps because newfound access to education was a significant source of pride for American women, the comparative lack of female education within the non-Western world proved particularly distressing. More distressing than even this lack of educational opportunities for foreign women were practices such as self-immolation, infanticide, and physical confinement. Alarmed by reports of such treatment, American women became deeply concerned for foreign, especially Asian, women. Within missions circles it was quickly understood that all people needed the gospel, but non-Western women also needed social elevation.5

This mode of thought is consistently found throughout the many writings of early missionaries and missiologists, but it is particularly succinct in Ann Judson’s 1822 “Address to Females in America Relative to the Situation of Heathen Females in the East.” As one of the first three American women to serve in overseas missions, and as the only one of the three to endure beyond two years,6 Judson held incredible sway over the imaginations of the American public.7 Her correspondence was read enthusiastically, and she was lauded not only in America, but in Britain as well.8

In her essay, Judson writes to rally a new wave of women to take up the concern of missions, and specifically of subjected women in the East. She starts by reminding her readers of their privileges as American women, and her opening has provided the title of this article:

Favored as we are, from infancy, with instruction of every kind; used as we are to view the female mind in its proper state; and accustomed as we are to feel the happy effects of female influence, our thoughts would fain turn away from the melancholy subject of female degradation, of female wretchedness. But will our feelings of pity and compassion . . . allow us to turn away—to dismiss the subject altogether, without making an effort to rescue—to save? No!9

Judson stresses the advantages American women enjoy to motivate their involvement in missions. She then contrasts these privileges with the grievances of Hindu women: They are excluded from the society of men and confined; they are not educated, but left in “listless idleness.” They are married at two or three years of age; marriage is not companionate; and women are considered the servants of their husbands. She concludes that it is no wonder female existence among the Hindus is considered an unbearable curse, leading women to “destroy their female offspring, and to burn themselves with the bodies of their deceased husbands.”10

Judson carefully differentiates this abject subjection of women in India and Bengal with the comparatively moderate oppression of women in Burma. Here her primary concerns are that husbands do not love the Burmese women as companions and women are subject to corporal punishment at the hands of their husbands and fathers. She writes, “to be born female, is universally considered a peculiar misfortune.”11 In Judson’s mind, perhaps the underlying evil undergirding the wrongs committed against women in Burma is the neglect of their education.12 Judson closes her essay with a cry to American women, which is worth quoting at length:

Shall we, my beloved friends, suffer minds like these to lie dormant, to wither in ignorance and delusion, to grope their way to eternal ruin, without an effort, on our part, to raise, to refine, to elevate, and to point to that Saviour who has died equally for them as for us? Shall we sit down in indolence and ease, indulge in all the luxuries with which we are surrounded, and which our country so bountifully affords, and leave beings like these, flesh and blood, intellect and feeling, like ourselves, and our own sex, to perish, to sink into eternal misery? No! By all the tender feelings of which

---

**LEAVE A LEGACY**

*Remember CBE in your will*

For more information, visit cbe.today/legacy.
the female mind is susceptible; by all the privileges and blessings resulting from the cultivation and expansion of the human mind; by our duty to God and our fellow-creatures, and by the blood and groans of Him who died on Calvary, let us make a united effort; let us call on all, old and young, in the circle of our acquaintance, to join us in attempting to meliorate the situation, to instruct, to enlighten, and save females in the Eastern world; and though time and circumstances should prove that our untired exertions have been ineffectual, we shall escape at death that bitter thought, that Burman females have been lost, without an effort of ours to prevent their ruin.13

Judson’s call to American women was an incredibly important and well-remembered linking of Western female privilege with the plight of non-Western women, and it would set the tone for much of missiological thought concerning women. In fact, this general line of thought could be said to define the frame of women's missiology for well over the next century. As Dana Robert has shown in her American Women in Mission: A Social History of Their Thought and Practice, the social elevation of women has been integral to the work of women in mission in the entirety of Western missions. She writes, "Women's mission theory was holistic, with emphasis on both evangelism and meeting human needs. Even in proclamation-oriented evangelical mission agencies, women were the ones to undertake ministries of compassion."14 At times even taking on the label “Woman’s Work for Women,” women missionaries tackled some of the most complex issues facing women, such as sati,15 foot binding, and prostitution, with education always at the heart of the endeavor.16

At the beginning of American missions, violence against women in the non-Western world was linked not only to religion, but also to the lack of the social progress of which American women believed themselves to be the beneficiaries. Prepared for usefulness by their education, American women believed that their sphere for moral and social influence included the world. American women were motivated to become involved in missions primarily by their own sense of privilege, and the Christian call was to use that privilege for the good and service of others less fortunate.

Gender and Empire

Looking back on Western women's global engagement, some historians are asking the question, what makes an empire? As this question becomes increasingly important with the rise of postcolonial studies, it must also be asked by Christians. We need to consider when and where our engagement with gender-based violence has, perhaps, looked more like a re-creation of the global community in the Western image, and when and where it has instead enabled women to engage issues according to their own contexts.

One scholar, Ian Tyrrell, defines imperialism as "a set of transnational networks of cultural communication, exchange, and power."17 With this broad definition in mind, Tyrrell has argued that much of women's work in missions should be understood as empire building. As Western, and in particular American, women left their own shores to intentionally influence the status, social situation, and education of women, they not only tacitly contributed to the cultural dominance of the West, but Western views on gender became intrinsically entwined with the soft power America exercised across the globe.

Tyrrell is careful to hedge his argument, and he takes note of the conflicting allegiances within American missionary structures. After all, Americans have always been distasteful of formal colonialism, and missionaries were often the staunchest public anti-imperialists.18 Nevertheless, the need to accurately dissect America's imperialistic influence on the world leads us unavoidably to the role of Western women missionaries. Tyrrell argues that the work of American women is best understood as one of "competing kingdoms," as they strove for religious and cultural hegemony but were nonetheless against the more overt actions of colonial and imperial power.19

By the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the greatest source of American influence on the world was through the expansive work of its missionaries.20 Considered the zenith of American missionary output, this period also saw an increased focus on moral and social reform. In fact, moral reform became the locus of America's sense of its own exceptionalism.21 Tyrrell writes, "The morality issue was closely connected with the way Americans needed to distance themselves from European empires—there was a felt need to assimilate American empire to exceptionalism."22 Furthermore, this notion of moral exceptionalism was intrinsically tied to views on women and gender. Again from Tyrrell,

The issue of morality was closely connected with the role of women and missions, and the role of women, in turn, was one of the distinctive elements that contributed to notions of American exceptionalism. Women’s role in cultural expansion brought Protestant evangelism, imperialism, and American exceptionalism together via transnational moral reform.23

Central to these ideas was the notion that America was the most progressed expression of evangelical Protestant faith, which in turn resulted in the best situation for its women.24 American evangelicalism was the apex of the Christian faith, behind which descended other Protestants, Orthodox and Catholic Christians, and finally, Muslims and the “heathens.”25 In parallel descending order, American women were considered the most liberated and heathen women the most subjugated. The level of a culture’s moral and social progress was determined by its perceived treatment of women. As Catherine Beecher declared, “The democratic institutions of this Country . . . have secured to American women a lofty and fortunate position which, as yet, has been attained by the women of no other nation.”26 With the elevated status of its women in mind, America sent forth hundreds of women to
work in foreign contexts hoping to bring progress and reform for women in the rest of the world. As historian Lisa Joy Pruitt states, American Protestant women held up images of “Oriental” women intending their American sisters to see themselves in positive contrast—educated and holding a privileged position in the home and in society at large. Protestant missionaries (both men and women) believed that evangelizing the women of the “Orient” would completely renovate those societies, releasing the women from cultural bondage while simultaneously bringing eternal salvation to all of the people.27

At this point we must ask ourselves what makes missions different today? American women seeking to engage the world on issues of gender-based violence must consider how the imperialistic history on this topic continues to shape missions. Rather than repeat the errors of their mothers, they must avoid requiring the non-Western world to be remade in the image of the West. The majority world is not a looking glass by which to admire Western standards of social progress. We must learn from the past and find a way to hold ourselves accountable.

**Women Reading the Bible**

To avoid imperialistic patterns concerning gender-based violence which make Western women the standard for change in other cultural contexts, we must remain committed to scripture and to its local and contextualized interpretation. Even in confronting the vitally important topic of gender-based violence, those in the West must be slow to interpret what change should look like for women in other contexts. Violence against women is abhorrent and ought to be universally recognized and fought as such; the basis on which situations of violence are judged must not come from Western conceptions of womanhood, but from the Word of God in the hands of local communities.

Philip Jenkins caused a stir in academia some years ago when he published *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity*, recounting the changing demographics of Christianity.28 In his follow-up work, *The New Faces of Christianity: Believing the Bible in the Global South*, Jenkins devotes a chapter to understanding how the new demographics of Christianity are impacting women. His observations focus on the role the Bible has played for women in the majority world and are helpful for Western women seeking to engage across cultural differences.

In his chapter on women and Christianity in the majority world, Jenkins demonstrates how women’s ability to read scripture for themselves and apply it according to their local circumstances can change the shape of their lives. As we seek to learn from our past, he makes an important observation that, in many cases, the portions of scripture that hold power for women in the majority world are different from what many women in the West find helpful. For example, Jenkins highlights the account of Jairus’s daughter in Luke 8. For many Western women, the namelessness of the daughter has served as a symbol of oppressive patriarchal systems; however, Jenkins recounts that in many African contexts, her clearly defined position within a family gives her honor and status as a community member.29 Though this portion of scripture has caused consternation for many Western women, it empowers many African women when interpreted by them locally.

Regardless of such differences in perspective, what Jenkins most importantly highlights is the broad impact scripture has on women when they are able to contextualize it according to their own group needs. By reading the Bible, African and Asian women are finding new ways to participate in ministry, as well as address other important (and often untouched) matters such as exorcism, healing, sexuality, widowhood, and the inclusion of the outsider. In short, scripture contextualized by women seems to challenge their social situations and the roles they play, but always according to local and specific interpretations. Women who engage scripture for themselves are able to translate and embody the gospel for the feminine aspects of their own cultures, applying scripture to their immediate situations, and converting what is already there towards Christ.

Just as examining the past displays many of the West’s failings in this area, we can also examine the history of this topic for examples to hold ourselves accountable. Jenkins provides a beautifully specific example in his story of one Kenyan tribe’s self-examination of the practice of female circumcision. Jenkins notes that often the most important catalyst scripture provides for social change is not how the Bible treats a subject, but rather that it discusses the subject at all, thus enabling the matter to be discussed openly, often for the first time in a society. This happened in Kenya when the Bible appeared in the vernacular for the first time in the 1920s. Tribal women who had been taught to read started intensely examining scripture for themselves and discovered that circumcision had only been commanded for men, not for women as well. The Gikuyu women determined that it was not acceptable to circumcise women and formed a guild for the protection of their daughters. Jenkins writes, “To understand the radical nature of this step, we have to recall the central importance of circumcision for defining femininity, sexual morality, and adulthood. This was in short a biblically fuelled social revolution.”30 With this story, Jenkins illustrates what it looks like when women start to contextualize the gospel for themselves.

As Jenkins accurately observes, the power for contextualizing scripture among women for their needs lies not in outside forces, but in their ability to engage scripture for themselves. He writes, “Beyond any single text, the Bible as a whole offers ample ammunition for the use of [social] outsiders, and for the dismay of the established and comfortable.”31 And also, leaving women to pursue domestic piety through Bible reading is like forbidding a restive population to carry weapons, while giving them unrestricted access to gasoline and matches. Pursuing biblical passages relevant to women often produces innovative readings, sometimes by taking the simple step of placing a scriptural text in context, rather than simply reciting an isolated verse.32
Jenkins’s examples of contextualization among women in the majority world suggest that for true change to take place, women’s abilities to read and apply scripture will be a central, perhaps the central, factor.

**Conclusion: Avoiding a New Gender-Based Imperialism**

In conclusion, the argument of this article is not that gender-based violence is a relative topic or that all past efforts to combat it were imperialistic. True injustice is carried out against women globally on a daily basis, and this has been recognized in the West from the inception of Protestant missions. Rather, this article hopes to raise awareness and remind ourselves of our past failing. Unless women in the Western church are to fall into the same errors of imperialistic, culturally hegemonic views concerning women in the majority world, we must accept that scripture in the hands of local women, rather than our own definition of social progress, is the starting place for combating gender-based violence. Western women will not always accurately understand localized situations, nor can they understand how best to speak truth in the world’s many cultural contexts. But where American women are limited in their understanding, the Word of God is not. It is fully able to engage each woman, speaking to her suffering and calling for change.

Gender-based violence is an atrocity before God’s eyes and one which the global community of Christians must work to combat. In order to participate, Christians in the West must first remember their history of combating this problem in ways that have focused on themselves as progressed exemplars. Enthusiasm to combat global gender-based violence must not come from a sense of moral or social superiority. American womanhood is not the standard by which to judge the situations of sisters across the globe. The Word of God is the standard, and thankfully, it is powerful enough to be translated, understood, and embodied in a host of ways by the women who encounter it within each cultural context.

**Notes**

1. Jonathan Allen, “A Sermon. Delivered at Haverhill, February 5, 1812, on the occasion of the young ladies being about to embark as the wives of Rev. Messieurs Judson and Newell, going Missionaries to India,” in *Pioneers in Mission: The Early Missionary Ordination Sermons, Charges, and Instructions. A Source Book on the Rise of American Missions to the Heathen*, ed. R. Pierce Beaver (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1966), 276–77. Please note that the terms “foreign” and “American” (rather than United States) are used here to represent the nineteenth-century terminology and mindset of Allen and many others like him. The concept of “foreignness” was directly linked with Western notions of progress.


15. The custom of sati involved a widow committing suicide upon the death of her husband by throwing herself onto his funeral pyre. Whether this ritual was forced upon women by the community or whether women willing volunteered has been a matter of significant debate from the earliest days of British involvement in India.

16. Robert’s *American Women in Mission* excellently examines the history of many of these causes, as well as the factors contributing to the label “Women’s Work for Women.”


23. Tyrrell, “Woman, Missions, and Empire,” 47.


26. As quoted by Tyrrell in “Woman, Missions, and Empire,” 48.


**HANNAH NATION** is a student of church history at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary and is finishing a thesis on the literary themes used in memoirs of the first generation of American missionary wives. Hannah has worked in international campus ministry and plans to pursue doctoral studies in women’s history. This article won the student paper competition at CBE’s 2016 conference in Johannesburg, South Africa.