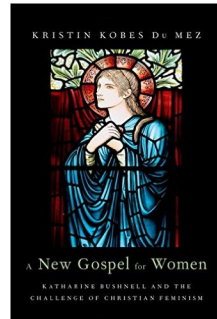


A New Gospel for Women: Katharine Bushnell and the Challenge of Christian Feminism, by
Kristin Kobes Du Mez

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In today's religious marketplace, Christianity and feminism seem to be close allies in academic circles. With books like *Jesus Feminist*, *Rescuing Jesus*, and *Jesus Was a Feminist*, as well as numerous feminist biblical commentaries, journals, and societies, it is sometimes hard to picture a time without the two standing side by side in one way or another. Yet Kristin Kobes Du Mez's *A New Gospel for Women* takes readers back to a time when it was possible that the two could be irreconcilable, if not in complete contradiction to one another. Given that feminism was the radical movement set to turn traditional gender norms upside down, and Christianity was the ancient patriarchal establishment set on



maintaining male dominance, it is not difficult to see why these two would have had an uneasy relationship. In studying this relationship, Du Mez tells the story of Katharine Bushnell (1855–1946), a Holiness Methodist missionary doctor who spent a lifetime challenging the status of women within Victorian Christianity and wider society, and also reinterpreting the role of women within the Bible. In short, Bushnell sought to provide feminism with Christian spirituality, and Christianity with gender equality.

Bushnell was born in 1855, in Peru, Illinois, and later attended Northwestern University followed by the Chicago Women's Medical College, specializing in nerve disorders. Soon after graduating from medical school she arrived in China to serve as a Methodist missionary. Despite establishing a pediatric hospital in Shanghai, Bushnell viewed her time spent as a missionary as a failure. Yet her time living in China proved to be a turning point in her life, particularly after studying a Chinese translation of the Bible. Bushnell noted that the apostle Paul's female co-workers mentioned in Phil 4:2–3, Euodia and Syntyche, had been turned into men. Looking at English translations of the Bible, she saw similar sexist translations and interpretations. Upon returning to the United States, Bushnell began working on a Bible designed for women. Drawing on her knowledge of ancient languages and personal study, in 1908, Bushnell published her most famous work, *God's Word to Women: One Hundred Bible Studies on Women's Place in the Divine Economy*.

Du Mez's *A New Gospel for Women* weaves Bushnell's biography, thought, and theology to provide a historical study of an overlooked and undervalued figure within feminist and American religious history, and also to provide a challenge to modern readers to consider "what shape . . . freedom might take for the twenty-first century." Du Mez's construction of Bushnell is complex and fascinating, compelling and engaging. After learning about her efforts to expose forced prostitution in Wisconsin lumber camps, then in India where the British government had established brothels to service soldiers, it is hard not to be inspired by her passion for sexual and social justice.

Some of her ideas about biblical stories make for fascinating reading. For example, her understanding of the Fall in the Garden places the main burden of sin onto Adam, not Eve. According to Bushnell, only Adam is expelled from the Garden of Eden, and it is Eve's choice to follow him that leads to her fall. Yet her opposition to contraception, abortion, and homosexuality as sin and "crimes against reproduction" clearly isolates her from modern feminist thought. Due to her radical readings of the Bible, Bushnell fell out of favor

with conservative Christian groups, but because of her conservative values, she was not liberal enough for the new form of sex-positive feminism that was emerging.

For historians, particularly those of biblical reception and interpretation, one of the most helpful elements of Du Mez's work is how well she situates Bushnell within nineteenth-century American Bible culture. Because the late nineteenth century gave birth to a range of new Bible translations and commentaries, Bushnell's role in pointing out the sexism of older translations, her study of Greek and Hebrew, and her own biblical commentary make for fascinating reflection. As Du Mez points out, while much of Bushnell's thought was quite radical, she remained committed to conservative theology, thus producing a bitter opposition to Darwinism and Higher Criticism. It is this seeming contradiction that makes Bushnell so complex. Despite what can be seen as a fundamentalist allegiance to the authority of Scripture, her exegesis promoted the emancipation of women and radical change within church and society. With these juxtapositions in mind, Du Mez highlights the ways our ideas about liberalism and conservatism, fundamentalism and modernism, fail to understand figures like Bushnell in all their complexity.

Du Mez makes a compelling case to rethink the way conservative Christian women are viewed within many mainline Protestant churches. Rather than being a product of patriarchal norms, they might be partaking in a different form of Christian feminism, one pioneered by and rooted in the work of Bushnell. Additionally, by using Bushnell as a model, Du Mez challenges these conservative churches to think outside traditional hermeneutics in the pursuit of gender equality and liberation for women. Perhaps the best reminder for this is the reception of Bushnell's *God's Word for Women*, which was praised by the Moody Bible Institute, *The Baptist*, *The Christian*, and other conservative voices. Du Mez's work should give us pause about how people like Bushnell do not easily fit into our preconceived notions and categories of "liberal" and "conservative."

According to Du Mez, Bushnell and figures like her provide an alternative to rigid forms of "secular feminism" and "family values" evangelicalism. This, however, might be granting Bushnell too much. Given the heated debates over women's leadership, contraception, and same-sex marriage, it is difficult to imagine how Bushnell's theological positions would stand in churches like the Episcopal Church, United Church, and Disciples of Christ. It is more likely that Bushnell would still have a wider reception among conservative Christians, promoting the "different but equal" approach to gender within

church and society. Yet one might hope that studying a figure like Bushnell might stir more dialogue between Christian and secular feminists. Regardless of their differences, their shared history is important and Bushnell's role in the struggle for gender equality within nineteenth-century America should not be forgotten.

With the surge of interest in gender politics and feminism, Du Mez's *A New Gospel for Women* is a welcome and unique contribution about a woman who deserves more attention. Du Mez provides a powerful challenge for people to reconsider the history and relationship between conservative forms of Christianity and modern American feminism. *A New Gospel for Women* is both a thought-provoking work of history and a necessary read for anyone interested in the reception of feminism and biblical reception.

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