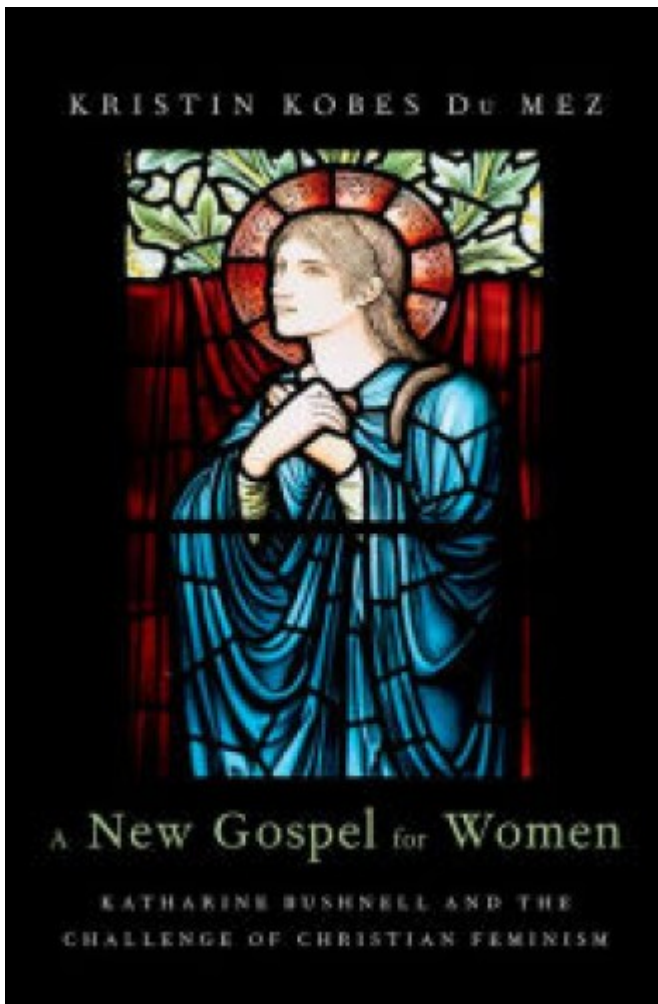


The feminist Bushnell

by [Anne Blue Wills](#) in the [March 30, 2016](#) issue

In Review



A New Gospel for Women

By Kristin Kobes Du Mez
Oxford University Press

Conventional wisdom chalks up the estrangement between Christianity and feminism to historical inevitability. But a century ago, Katharine Bushnell, a Holiness Methodist missionary doctor, addressed the “challenge of Christian feminism” by

attacking mistranslations of the biblical texts that were used to justify women's submission to men. She worked to hold feminism and Victorian Christianity together, joining the former's claim for women's full humanity to the latter's message of Christ's salvation for all people.

Kristin Kobes Du Mez's book includes biographical information about Bushnell—a distant relative of Horace Bushnell, one of liberal Christianity's primary early exponents—but also provides extensive glosses on her retranslations and exegeses of biblical texts. Despite some resulting unevenness, the book offers a compelling portrait of a reforming whirlwind who left the mission field to campaign for temperance and against the sex trade and the sexual double standard.

Bushnell's relatively brief time as a missionary doctor in China, from 1879 to 1882, convinced her that a misshapen Christianity harmed not only women abroad but also women in the United States by subjecting them to unbiblical male authority. Soon after arriving in the Yangtze River port city of Kiukiang, Bushnell discovered in a Chinese translation of the Bible what appeared to be a concerted effort to hide women's equal participation in the early church, as described in Philippians 4. This discovery set her on a lifelong study of Greek and Hebrew biblical texts.

Woman's Christian Temperance Union founder Frances Willard later called on Bushnell to lead the WCTU's crusade for "social purity," which battled the sexual double standard and the social inequities that grew from it, especially the lopsided ignominy foisted on women working in prostitution. The double standard protected the myths of both absolute male sexual prerogative and middle-class white women's sexual passionlessness. Rather than aiming to end all constraints on female sexual expression—as did her later secular feminist detractors—Bushnell aimed to make those same constraints apply to men.

Du Mez recounts Bushnell's intrepid field investigations of prostitution and her willingness to go toe-to-toe with defenders of the double standard. The story makes good reading. Bushnell wrote an investigative report on Wisconsin lumber camps that received wide coverage across the United States. She was primarily critical of the regulatory machinery that viewed prostitution as a safety valve guaranteeing "respectable" women's sexual virtue. Women caught in prostitution were at the mercy of state authorities, who could test them for disease and then incarcerate rather than treat them, and who could all but consign them permanently to pariah status as "fallen women." Women in prostitution surrendered their autonomy and

humanity so other women could play their appointed role in a patriarchal system sanctioned by distorted religious understanding. Such regulation preserved prostitution rather than challenging or ending it. Antiregulationists like Bushnell—and initially Willard—opposed regulatory laws, objecting that they made prostitution a “social necessity” at the expense of public health, women’s rights, and Christian moral uplift.

Commissioned by Willard as the WCTU’s first world evangelist, Bushnell spent the years 1891–1893 investigating conditions in India. By this time, the antiregulationists had won their case, and Great Britain had repealed its laws regulating prostitution, but Bushnell learned that British colonial authorities were inscribing similar regulations in the military code governing India. Bushnell worked quietly and without official cooperation, preaching the gospel in military brothels and soliciting women’s stories, and eventually published a report detailing the consequences of regulation. Bushnell’s report, published in 1899 as *The Queen’s Daughters in India*, met initially with vehement denials in England, but eventually gained traction and helped extend the repeal of regulation to India.

Before the release of *The Queen’s Daughters*, Bushnell separated from the WCTU because of Willard’s increasing support of prostitution regulation. Her resignation allowed more time for her to focus on her translation work. She grappled with Old and New Testament texts that had customarily been employed to subjugate women in private and to minimize women’s place in public. Returning to India for the years 1899–1901, she embraced a new determination to undo the bad readings of Genesis and other biblical texts that undergirded misogynist theology. Crimes such as the so-called Rangoon Horror—a daytime roadside rape of a Burmese woman by a group of British soldiers—were, Bushnell wrote, “the fruit of the theology” that made all women guilty of Eve’s fall.

In 1910 Bushnell published her “Woman’s Catechism,” which was often reprinted. Six years later, the first full edition of *God’s Word to Women*—a compilation of her retranslations and exegeses of Bible passages focused on women—appeared. The book received a lukewarm reception. In Du Mez’s view this was because U.S. Protestantism was engulfed in all-consuming debates about Christianity’s proper stance toward modernity. As a progressive biblicist, Bushnell appealed neither to antimodernists nor to those seeking to make Christianity responsive to new scientific ideas and methods of biblical study. Furthermore, while she was making her arguments a new emphasis on “manly Christianity” was gaining momentum. If

Bushnell held anyone's attention in the early- and mid-20th century, it was women who shared her Holiness heritage. Unlike secular feminists, these evangelical women sought a new Christian gender ethic that avoided throwing God's intention of full humanity for women, and the power of Christ's redemptive work for them, out with the patriarchal bathwater.

Du Mez digs into the nitty-gritty of Bushnell's biblical retranslations and unearths fascinating, provocative material. Bushnell not only used her expertise in ancient languages to amend accepted translations, but also examined apocryphal and other early Christian writings in order to strengthen her case that male bias infected Christianity from the beginning and made the church peremptorily hostile to women. Regarding Bushnell's revision of Genesis 1-3, Du Mez highlights her claim that God created the males and females of the human species to be mutual helpmeets. Bushnell's canny reading and her determination to come at the creation and fall with a fresh eye anticipate works like those of later feminist biblical scholar Phyllis Trible. For Bushnell, reading Genesis 3 as a curse vitiated Christ's power to atone for women as well as men. Moreover, such a reading contributed to some women's complete rejection of Christianity. Misreading here also imputed to women an uncontrolled sexual impulse that was thought to justify their domination by men. Eve's mistake, in Bushnell's retranslation, came in turning from God to Adam, submitting to him, and leaving the Garden. She and Adam both should have remained focused on God for direction.

In *God's Word to Women* Bushnell also took aim at biblical texts that were read as exhortations to female sexual purity. She argued that these misreadings arose from gendered cultural expectations that were infused uncritically into the Bible by male translators and church leaders. Patriarchy did not represent God's will but reflected the results of human, and especially male, rebellion against that will.

The early 20th-century women's movement increasingly stepped away from social purity and reform of male sexual behavior as an organizing project and began to champion female sexual expression and female contraception as tokens of and routes to women's equality. Bushnell opposed birth control as yet another way that men could evade responsibility for their sexual activity. Progressives who had formerly been allied with Bushnell also began promoting eugenics and "social hygiene," a renamed incarnation of the examination-and-confinement regime for regulating prostitution that Bushnell had battled in India. Moreover, Bushnell worried that a renovated feminist sexual morality that emphasized pleasure over restraint

would leave patriarchy in place by normalizing heterosexual intimacy and rendering female community suspect.

Bushnell's key insights should resonate with present-day promoters of feminist consciousness. She resisted arrangements in the mission field and at home that set white, Western women over non-Western women, envisioning a sisterhood rather than a hierarchy. Most incisively, she understood that women in the West would never enjoy full human rights as long as the claims of subjugated women elsewhere were dismissed. Nor would the human race flourish as long as half its members suffered dehumanizing abuse. By recovering Bushnell's story and her work for a 21st-century audience, Du Mez has made available a resource for developing a modern, feminist, and Christian sexual ethic based on gospel freedom.