



(A)TYPICAL WOMAN

FREE,
WHOLE, AND
CALLED IN
CHRIST



ABIGAIL
DODDS



“God is calling Christian women not to be typical, but to be faithful, joyful, and fruitful—in a hundred significant good works prepared before the universe existed. Abigail Dodds is a proven voice for truth among today’s cacophony of counsel for women. Her passion is that women love being God-centered, Christ-exalting, Bible-saturated women. This is not the portrait of womanhood painted by the world. Therefore, she is calling not for something easy, but for something courageous. I hope you consider her challenge.”

John Piper, Founder and Teacher, desiringGod.org; Chancellor, Bethlehem College & Seminary; author, *Desiring God*

“(A)Typical Woman reminds readers to break the mold of Christian stereotypes while resisting the untrue, pliable ideas of the world. This is a deep, thought-provoking read that challenges us to find our identity in Christ alone.”

Emily Jensen and **Laura Wifler**, Cofounders, Risen Motherhood

“Abigail Dodds presents a gospel-centered and gospel-saturated approach to the topic of womanhood. She points women to our identity in Christ and encourages, challenges, and exhorts us to live in light of our union with Christ. This book is for any woman in any season.”

Kristin Schmucker, Founder and CEO, The Daily Grace Co.; Bible study author

“Every Christian woman will benefit from reading (A)Typical Woman. In it, Abigail Dodds gently corrects false beliefs about womanhood, encouraging us to embrace God’s true design for Christian women by centering our entire person around Christ. Dodds’s words refreshed and encouraged me not only to embrace but to actually enjoy my design as a woman of God.”

Hunter Beless, Host, *Journeywomen* podcast

“Our generation suffers from amnesia. We don’t remember who we are or why we were created, and that is why, sadly, we have settled for a distorted reality. This book is an elixir against the terrible disease that causes us to forget who we are as women and what our womanhood is really about. I invite you to read it to discover the truth or to remember it. This book is a timely reminder of truth to women living in a forgetful generation. In (A)Typical Woman, Abigail Dodds’s words are filled with truth, grace, and great insight.”

Betsy Gómez, Blogger, Revive Our Hearts Hispanic Outreach

(A) Typical Woman

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Free, Whole, and Called in Christ

Abigail Dodds

 **CROSSWAY**[®]
WHEATON, ILLINOIS

(A)Typical Woman: Free, Whole, and Called in Christ

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Published by Crossway

1300 Crescent Street
Wheaton, Illinois 60187

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Cover design: Tyler Deeb, Misc. Goods Co.

First printing 2019

Printed in the United States of America

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Trade paperback ISBN: 978-1-4335-6269-3

ePub ISBN: 978-1-4335-978-1-4335-6272-3

PDF ISBN: 978-1-4335-6270-9

Mobipocket ISBN: 978-1-4335-6271-6

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Dodds, Abigail, 1981- author.

Title: (A)Typical woman : free, whole, and called in Christ / Abigail Dodds.

Other titles: Typical woman

Description: Wheaton, Illinois : Crossway, [2019] | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2018023820 (print) | LCCN 2018039649 (ebook) | ISBN 9781433562709 (pdf) | ISBN 9781433562716 (mobi) | ISBN 9781433562723 (epub) | ISBN 9781433562693 |

ISBN 9781433562693 (trade paperback : alk. paper) | ISBN 9781433562723 (ePub) | ISBN

9781433562709 (PDF) | ISBN 9781433562716 (Mobipocket)

Subjects: LCSH: Women—Religious aspects—Christianity. | Christian women—Religious life.

Classification: LCC BT704 (ebook) | LCC BT704 .D58 2019 (print) | DDC 248.8/43—dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2018023820>

Crossway is a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers.

LB	29	28	27	26	25	24	23	22	21	20	19			
15	14	13	12	11	10	9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1

For you have died,
and your life is hidden with Christ in God.
When Christ who is your life appears,
then you also will appear with him in glory.

Colossians 3:3-4

For my children, my joy, may Christ be your life.
And for Tom, our anchor and our wind.

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Introduction

See that you fulfill the ministry that you have received
in the Lord. *Colossians 4:17*

My name is Abigail, a name my dad gave me. I'm the youngest of four kids, born and raised in southeastern Iowa. My parents brought us up in a small North American Baptist church where I heard the gospel (repeatedly over the years), repented, and believed around the age of twelve or so. I was baptized and discipled. I never knew that there was such a thing as life apart from serving God. What I mean by that is that while my parents have never been employed by a church, they've also never not served the Lord in whatever they do, inside the church and outside.

I tell you this so that you can understand why I would endeavor to write a book on Christian womanhood. After all, any woman who sets out to write about being a Christian woman must have everything figured out (ha) or be a glutton for punishment. I do recall when I first had an inkling to write a book and the thought flashed through my mind, "As long as it isn't on womanhood! That's something I never want to write on!" Has ever a topic been so fixated on, maligned, idolized, marginalized, criticized, and generally made a mess of? Well, yes, other topics are as fraught. But still, it ranks.

Introduction

And what right do I have to wade into such waters? I have no right. I, like my parents before me and my children after me, have simply been given gifts. They aren't gifts I chose, and they aren't gifts I earned. First, I was given the gift of belonging to God through Jesus and then the gift of ministry that he gives to all believers in his varied forms. One form it has taken in my life is writing and teaching other women. This book is part of my service, my calling, my joy, and the outworking of my life in Christ.

This is a simple book written by a simple woman who is writing with skin in the game during the middle of the second quarter. The chapters you are about to read were written in real time as I faced real questions about what it means to be a Christian woman, with occasional angst and tense moments and frustrations, with my head in God's Book while my hands served my family and tried to live out things I didn't fully understand. It was drafted with near constant interruptions and the recurring deletion of social media apps from my phone. It was typed with dough under my fingernails and revised amidst conflict, repentance, and forgiveness. It's a book not of abstract ideas but of sweaty eye-balled real life.

But it was also written with deepening thankfulness and overwhelming peace and awestruck worship at what God has done in making us women and claiming us for his own. It was written amid the laughter that comes from knowing God really is in control—whether I fully understand his ways or not. I did not write a manifesto but, rather, meditations on a theme. My aim is to understand Christian womanhood as both God's word and God's world have revealed it to us—that is, to understand it as created through Jesus and for him. So each chapter stands alone as it narrows in on one aspect of things, and all the chapters come together to help give shape to our understanding of Christian women who are women through and through (part 1) and in all they do (part 2), and who are fearless and free in Christ (part 3).

I have not mastered the content of this book. No, but I am in the process of being mastered by it, insomuch as it expresses the reality and truth that must eventually master us all. I wrote the book I need—which is why it may occasionally make your toes curl. I've found that grace isn't something I can't give to myself by going easy on myself or by asking others to go easy on me. I'm not the one I should be going to for grace at all. But administering the grace of God found *in Christ* is a vast deal better than going easy on myself. With Christ, toe-curling hard truths become life-giving tonics.

Parts of this book were inspired both positively and negatively by past and current teaching in Christian circles on the topic—some that glorified womanhood for its own sake, some that belittled it, and much of which compartmentalized it. I found the compartmentalizing of womanhood (where being a woman is understood merely as certain feminine ideals) to be the catalyst for both its inappropriate glorification (*Let's make femininity our entire life!*) and its belittling (*Let's rise above womanhood as important humans, not silly women!*). But when we can understand being a woman as a full reality that is in our fingers and toes as much as in our wombs and breasts, we begin to see that we must read our womanhood, both in the text of Scripture and the text of our lives, through the cross—through Christ himself. I want women to be at peace as women, to be grateful for being made women, and to see it all as an essential part of Christ's mission and work.

I also hope that this book will be a tool in discipleship and growth in the Lord for young women and old women and whoever picks it up. Even as I seek to be a help, I can't replace your flesh-and-blood brothers and sisters in Christ. It is in that context—the context of relationship, accountability, authority, and community—that tools like this book find a happy, useful home.

Yet author to reader and reader to author, we are entering into a sort of relationship with trust. It's a limited trust, to be sure, precisely because many of you don't know me and I don't know you,

and because all human trust is limited. We have only one fully trustworthy person in our lives: our triune God. Yet human trust is necessary and ought to be present in our relationships as we imitate our Savior and seek to walk in the light together. So as I enter this trust with you, reader, I want to be upfront about what I'm asking from you. I'm asking for more than passive engagement. I ask for biblical discernment alongside a willingness to put your pet horses in the stall for the next seventeen chapters. I confess to you that I've got plenty of pet ponies and preferences that I've tried to make the template for godliness, but it just won't do. It leads only to a reshaping of God in my image, something that is more frightening than anything God asks of me.

So many are searching for a novel approach, a new way to think about something, a uniqueness or niche. But if you live long enough, you realize that novelty isn't a virtue. Novelty causes cancer: mutating cells doing what they shouldn't. Novelty causes gene abnormalities and disability—a reality with which I'm quite familiar. In the world of ideas, it's often just dressed-up ignorance of all the bad ideas that have already been tried. Novelty leads to heresy and false teaching. Novelty leads to trying to look cool and be unique, which happens to be exactly what everyone else is doing and has always done. I'm looking for something fixed and dependable. I find it in God and his Word, the only way you can be made new by an unchanging God and his ancient Book.

I don't intend for this book to be a novelty. But I have noticed that in our distraction and obsession with what's trending, often the ancient truth is forgotten. When we resurrect it, it seems new to us. If this book seems like new information to you, it isn't because I came up with something novel; it's because we've forgotten the basics, or we were never taught them. When we receive the reality of God and the gospel, the realities of life in Christ as a woman start to take shape. That's what I want to explore with you. I'm hoping that we would, with poet George Herbert, learn to live here on earth

with one eye to heaven and with the realization that our lives are hid there in Christ (Col. 3:3). Look to find yourself there.

MY words and thoughts do both express this notion,
That LIFE hath with the sun a double motion.
The first IS straight, and our diurnal friend:
The other HID, and doth obliquely bend.
One life is wrapt IN flesh, and tends to earth;
The other winds t'wards HIM whose happy birth
Taught me to live here so THAT still one eye
Should aim and shoot at that which IS on high—
Quitting with daily labour all MY pleasure,
To gain at harvest an eternal TREASURE.¹

PART 1

WOMEN THROUGH AND THROUGH—IN CHRIST

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made.

John 1:1-3

The Meaning of Words: *Christian and Woman*

Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation.
The old has passed away; behold, the new has come.
2 Corinthians 5:17

So God created man in his own image,
in the image of God he created him;
male and female he created them. *Genesis 1:27*

Language has this tendency to morph and change over time. It's not necessarily a bad thing; new words are created and others become outdated, so a woman saying "I pray thee" in the eighteenth century now would simply say "please." The meaning isn't lost in the change. But not all language can or should morph. There are some words that God has given us to hold onto. They're his words for things. *Christian* and *woman* are two of those words. No doubt both of them have fallen on hard times.

Someone could choose to write about a number of other words that God has given us, so why pick those two? I suppose because of

how relevant they are for me and how far I've had to come in my understanding of them, even as I live them—and how far I still have to go. When God names something, he imbues it with his created and assigned meaning, and it's a fearful thing to go around changing the name or the meaning of something authored by God. It just so happens that he's called me "Christian" and "woman." And if you're reading this, it's likely what he has called you too.

I increasingly encounter Christian women who are unacquainted with the breadth and depth of the terms and how they relate, settling for caricatures, shadows, and distortions. And as I grow in my understanding of the two terms, I find that while it is possible to be a woman and not a Christian, it is not possible, for me, to be a Christian as anything other than a woman. That may be ridiculously obvious, but we live in an age where the obvious is obscure.

Even those who call themselves "Christian" can be confusing in their messages about these words' meanings, from articles to books to women's talks to sermons. Some agree with each other; some strongly disagree. How do we sort out these competing messages among Christians? How do we hold on to what's true and let the chaff blow away? I know of only one way: the wisdom given by God's Holy Spirit through the potent dosing of God's Word in the midst of God's people. If our convictions and our very lives are not breathed out by God's Spirit, rooted in his Word, we will be confused by the mass of articulate, funny, and appealing messages that come at us. We will likely gravitate toward the ones that most resonate with our personal preferences. Or our sin bent.

Bravery with the World or the Word?

I'm partly distressed over the state of Christian women. I see women who have abandoned their reason, their moral agency, and their God-fearing courage to follow people who tell them just what

they want to hear (messages that are strikingly similar to the trends of our time), attending online churchy clubs and plastering half-true platitudes all over social media. I see women's conferences filled with relatable personalities, side-splitting monologues, and new false doctrines that are actually as old as the garden of Eden and Eve herself.

They revere a self-styled bravery that is anything but brave, "courageously" calling sin beautiful in agreement with the world, rather than standing firm in the minority of Bible-believing people who must set themselves stable and steadfast in each era's cultural tornado. Empathy is their idol; feelings the new Baal. They imagine that the sorrow and distancing of fellow Christians from them is proof of their solidarity with Jesus, when really it's the fruit of a desperate and impossible friendship with the world that God's children are forbidden to take part in. And we can't be surprised by it. Not only because all of us are sinful, but because in some places the church has become a bastion of the perfect rather than the gathering of the needy. This has sounded a dissonant note in the hearts of many women, causing them to search out new interpretations on truth. Let's beckon them home. Not to the hollow, culturally Christian tombs called "church"—polished on the outside but dead where it counts—but to the incomparable, uncompromising Jesus, the true Shepherd of the sheep.

I'm also encouraged. I'm encouraged by the women who show up to study God's Word week in and week out, young women who are sick to death of the fluff, who know that a half-truth is more dangerous than a full-out lie and refuse to remain infants in their thinking. I'm encouraged by women who, rather than follow their feelings, lead those feelings around by the sound of God's voice in the Bible. This book is for them. And it's for the rest of us who need a refresher course that blows gospel air into our stale hearts, reminding us what life in Christ as a woman looks like.

To some, *Christian* means nothing more than being born south of the Mason-Dixon Line to folks who used to go to church, and there's a plaque on a pew somewhere to prove it. Where I'm from in Minnesota, being a Christian means being nice and indirect, never disagreeing with people except in the cloak of passive-aggressiveness. Many of us opt for adjectives to help give clarity to the word *Christian*, such as *serious*, *Bible-believing*, *born-again*, *evangelical*, *Reformed*, and so on. Some toss it in the dust bin and try to think up a cool-sounding synonym.

Erasing Women

The word *woman* is equally distressing, if not more. In our society, being a woman is increasingly based on our sense of ourselves rather than on what God has assigned us to be, so it's hard to know what is meant by the term. Among some feminists, a woman is someone with few, if any, meaningful differences from man—except that she likely views women as a victim of “gendered society.”² Her biology is of little to no significance; her mind is everything—as if our female minds can overcome gender, which even secular science reminds us is not the case.³ This echo of Gnosticism makes bodies irrelevant and embraces a mind-over-matter dictum.⁴

What we have left is a woman whose intellect is detached from her body, who tries to ignore biological and physical reality. This can account for women vying for a spot on men's sports teams, with an absolutized belief that they can be whatever they put their mind to. It also accounts for those, perhaps few, eager for a place in military combat. And it even accounts for bright women who try to detach from their bodies to use them for sex, money, and power.

The transgender thinking goes farther, not ignoring reality but actively redefining it. For some people who consider themselves

transgender, most famously showcased by Bruce Jenner's change to Caitlyn, becoming a woman may mean wearing feminine clothes, having plastic surgeries to construct womanly anatomy, taking hormones and drugs to suppress other hormones, and speaking in a womanly voice, with a hyper-feminine affect. In other words, and with no sense of irony, being a woman is often the opposite of what it means to modern feminists.

It is alarming to some older feminists that their labor to bring forth a better world for women ended up giving birth to a movement that seeks the annihilation of women altogether. The younger generation doesn't seem to mind, however, and are quickly working to bridge the gap between feminism and transgenderism, so that Bruce Jenner's expression of transgenderism (a man becoming super feminine in mostly superficial ways) is less in vogue than the logical next step of genderlessness, or genderqueer identity.⁵ One detail that we should observe is that the movement toward gender fluidity in all its forms harms women and children. It harms men too. But it is insidious in how it removes protection and creates added vulnerability for women and children. The attempt to abolish or blur the sexes will fail, as nature—that is, our Father's world—has a way of being intractable. But in the trying, many women are being and will be damaged by themselves or others.

Recycled Sin, Repeated History, Unchanging Christ

These cultural winds should not shock us, nor should they produce in us knee-jerk reactions as though sin, especially sexual sin, were a new or foreign idea. It's been around from the beginning. My own sinfulness, my own proclivities toward evil, ensure my compassion for those who have not received Christ as Lord and are walking in darkness (Eph. 2:1–3). And the pain and confusion men and women experience as they spend their lives feeling shackled by their sex, or

defined by sexual orientation or an unwanted fixation on an internal sense of gender, should secure our action to bring the gospel to them. The pain and confusion we all experience before coming to Christ is inextricably linked with our hatred and rejection of God, which is also a type of hatred of ourselves. We hate what God has done—he has made us a particular way, and we want to be self-makers (Rom. 1:24–25). The gospel is the only hope of peace for all of us.

Within Christianity, we also see some moving toward defining femaleness as a role that we inhabit rather than as an ontological, whole-person category.⁶ It is as though we relegate our sex to our uterus and uniquely female parts, the same way we relegate our womanhood to the passages of Scripture that directly address women rather than understanding that the XX chromosomes span head, shoulders, knees, and toes—and that we are always addressed as women, whether directly or indirectly, in a broad sense, by all of Scripture.

Thankfully God’s spoken Word, the Bible, and his spoken word in creation give substance to these words—*Christian* and *woman*—with all the precision and clarity that the world, which has closed its eyes to “the things that have been made” (Rom. 1:20), needs. And both have done so through the ages, undeterred as new waves of so-called enlightenment crash against their unchanging shoreline.

If the roots of our ideals for Christian women can be traced to an imaginary 1950s suburban utopia or the pride of the antebellum era or Jane Austen’s clever Lizzy Bennett or reactionary feminism or career-driven urban centers or any place other than in the one man, Jesus Christ, the fruit on our tree will be rotten. There is only one seed out of which Christian women grow, and that seed isn’t an American ideal; it is the imperishable seed of Christ, and it is able to grow in every place and people in the world.

Our Christianity and our womanhood are two things that aren’t going away. Don’t you think it’s worth our time to try to understand them the way God does?

Discussion Questions

1. What is your understanding of the word *Christian*? Who and what define it for you?
2. What is your understanding of the word *woman*? Who and what define it for you?
3. How does the culture around you define these words? Do those definitions match with God's definitions?



A WOMAN THROUGH AND THROUGH

In a culture that can belittle womanhood on the one hand—making it irrelevant—and glorify it on the other—making it everything—it’s hard to know what it really means to be a woman. But when we understand womanhood through the lens of Scripture, we see that we need a bigger category for what God has called “woman.”

This book breathes fresh air into our womanhood, reminding us what life in Christ—as a woman—looks like. When we see that we are women in all we do, we can be at peace with how God has created us, recognizing womanhood as an essential part of Christ’s mission and work.

“This is not the portrait of womanhood painted by the world. Dodds is not calling for something easy, but something courageous. I hope you consider her challenge.”

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ABIGAIL DODDS

(BA, Bethel University) is a wife and mother of five children. She has written and taught Bible studies for the women at Bethlehem Baptist Church, where her husband, Tom, serves as an elder. She contributes to desiringGod.org and blogs at her personal site, hopeandstay.com.

WOMEN'S ISSUES