



CHAPTER ONE

You are Not a Princess

A few years ago I read a popular Christian book written for women. It was highly recommended by a friend who told me it had changed her life. I thought it'd be worth a read. I liked the book in many ways. I think I understood what the authors were trying to say, but, to be honest, it really bothered me at the same time.

It troubled me because it contained every possible feminine cliché known to humanity. It bothered me because it assumed that a woman's longing for a man to complete her was gospel truth instead of an enemy lie. It smothered me in gooey princess talk that made me think I'd been invited to a pyjama party hosted by the Spice Girls.

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Its premise was that every little girl longs to be a princess. Now, I know that tons of little girls do long to be princesses. All the more, I'm sure, because we help them along with excessive cultural clues. But it concerned me because I didn't fit with that norm. I didn't match the recipe. I couldn't relate.

I called my mother to ask if I had actually once longed to be a princess but then stuffed my feelings down and repressed them because of something terrible and tragic that had happened that distorted my feminine state. I was starting to think that I might never have had what it takes to be a true woman. After all, in this book my wholeness and salvation were rooted in the fact that I should have a female need to be a princess.

My mother laughed out loud. She said that I had never once even hinted that I had a longing or a need or a desire to be a princess. She was still laughing when she reminded me of the number of times she offered me money to wear a dress and I couldn't be convinced. She laughed because now, years later, as a wife and mother in full-time ministry, emotionally healthy and strongly independent, I was letting a popular Christian book bother me so much. But it did.

The popular Christian concept of a "good woman" is someone extremely feminine, sensitive, good-looking, and submissive to a handsome husband who keeps his promises. Lovely – if you live in Disneyland. Or, actually, if you live in this male-dominated, externally obsessed Western world.

I think that's the thing that concerns me the most: the Christian woman looks just like the Oprah one. Glossy magazines, enhanced body parts, and Botox for everyone.

So – teeth whitening and skinny jeans make for a satisfied Christian life?

Where is that in the Bible?

And is God's plan for me really about squeezing myself into a worldly mode where I'm judged by my external self before my internal self has a chance to breathe? I mean, I've even heard of female Christian worship leaders being critiqued on their size and appearance. Whatever happened to talent and gifting and anointing?

N. T. Wright wrote about this stereotyping: “When you look at strip cartoons, B grade movies, and Z grade novels and poems, you pick up a standard view of how ‘everyone imagines’ men and women behave. Men are macho, loud-mouthed, arrogant thugs, always fighting and wanting their own way. Women are simpering, empty-headed creatures with nothing to think about except clothes and jewellery. There are Christian versions of this, too: the men must make the decisions, run the show, always be in the lead, tell everyone what to do; women must stay at home and bring up the children.”¹

In my real world – God's intended one – it doesn't line up that every female has the same feelings or desires or hopes or dreams.

We aren't prototypes.

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We are people.

We're all different. Unique. We have a plethora of dreams and hopes and desires, all rooted in God's great plan for the world to be changed.

Each of us is invited to be part of this global agenda. We all have a role.

Gender-based restrictions are simply old-fashioned and unhelpful tools that do much more harm than good. They need to be done away with, not simply because they contribute to the dissatisfaction of both men and women, but also because they limit the people of God. In the fullness of God's kingdom, real relationships should be based on dignity and equality, not on gender and difference.

This isn't limited to women, of course. The enemy's strategy of gender-based restrictions also extends to men and to marriage.

One of my most difficult moments as a church leader came when I had to ask a visiting teaching group to leave after their first presentation at a marriage seminar weekend. I simply couldn't let them continue. Their whole concept of a good marriage was based on gender-specific roles. In other words, women, because they are more inclined towards service, ought to take care of the house; and men, because they are more inclined towards economics, should take care of the finances... This went on for a while. I looked around at the couples who filled the hall in our small town. Even a quick overview of the crowd completely smashed their theory. Across the hall

from me was a bloke who was a clean freak; his wife was an accountant.

I know of couples who strive after the “perfect marriage” where the woman does specific things because she’s the woman and the man does certain things because he’s the man – and everyone is so busy and so desperate to fit the grid of a perfect life that they miss the real one. They miss God’s celebration of diversity – the lovely, colour-filled spectrum of people of all shapes and sizes and conditions. Some single, some married, some divorced; some tall, others round; some broken and some not so much. Some are independent and fierce and others are sensitive and caring – and all of them are invited to change the world.

All of them. Yes, even the skinny, perfect-looking, happily married, smiley ones with extra-white teeth!

So this book is a celebration of the diversity of God’s calling to all people. What I know for sure is that nothing is locked in – the invitation is wide open. He wants you to contribute any way you can. You are *not* limited to gender-based work or children’s work, or emotionally sensitive pastoral work. You are invited to any work you feel called to do and are equipped to undertake. You are invited into a kingdom that knows no distinction between Greek or Jew or black or white or male or female... we are all one in Christ Jesus (Galatians 3:28).

The differences, the divides, the restraints have been removed. We can move forward, in abandoned surrender,

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in order to bring God's kingdom to earth as it is in heaven.

I have a hunch that heaven is full of fat, skinny, tall, short, black, brown, white and maybe even blue folks – our perfection comes in our surrender to God and his purposes for us, not in the sameness of identikit lives.

You are not a princess. You are a person. And that is good news.