

Wild at Heart: Essential Reading or “Junk Food of the Soul”?

by John Eldredge (Nelson Books 2001)

Reviewed by BRYNN CAMERY-HOGGATT & NEALSON MUNN

It seems a discussion of masculinity can scarcely commence at Gordon College without mention of John Eldredge’s *Wild at Heart*, a book enthusiastically endorsed by Christians nationwide. Many would agree with writer Charles Swindoll, who calls *Wild at Heart* “the best, most insightful book I have read in at least the last five years” (Eldredge, i). Eldredge’s immense popularity, however, must not be allowed to disguise the fact that his suggestions are often incongruent with the teachings of Jesus. Although the author’s premise may be valid (men are bored with contemporary church life; change must be made in an effort to address this problem), his corollary ideas are both untrue and harmful. Thus, *Wild at Heart* is an essentially unhelpful contribution to the thought life of both Gordon College and the church as a whole.

The thesis of *Wild at Heart* is two-fold. First, God has placed within the heart of every man an overpowering desire for three things—“a battle to fight, an adventure to live, and a beauty to rescue” (9). Second, the church is not fulfilling these desires because it fails to discern the true nature of masculinity and defines the ideal Christian man as merely “a Nice Guy” (7). As a result, men are alienated from church life and dismissive of their wives’ religiosity: “The church wags its head and wonders why it can’t get more men to sign up for its programs,” observes Eldredge. “The answer is simply this: We have not invited a man to know and live from his deep heart” (8). The author presents his book as an invitation.

We would be remiss to ignore the many young Christians whom *Wild at Heart* has inspired to abandon an anemic faith in favor of an adventurous relationship with Jesus. Eldredge urges passion and courage instead of complacency—a message that men in

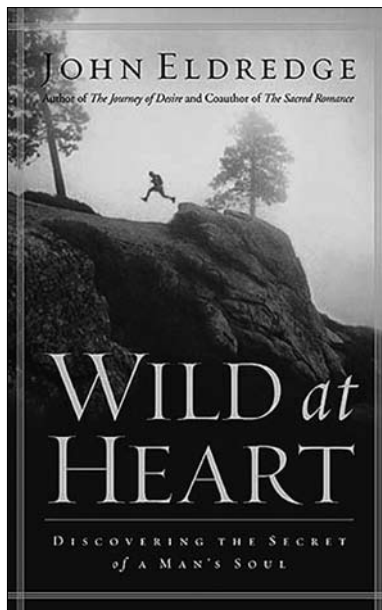
today’s church desperately need to hear. Numerous readers testify that Eldredge has challenged them to “fan the flame” of the natural masculinity God intended with the creation of Adam.

But, while Eldredge is right to decry the alienation of men from contemporary church life, his solution to this problem seems to be flawed. Indeed, *Wild at Heart* is a book that the integrated Christian ought to object to, for its vision of Godly manhood and womanhood is a specious one at best.

Eldredge’s gender stereotypes present masculinity and femininity in a way that is incomplete, culturally dictated, and old-fashioned. He exalts clichéd Hollywood portrayals of masculinity. He categorically insists that male Christians should be pursuers while failing to mention that men are themselves the object of Christ’s pursuit, that they too are “the Bride of Christ.” Gordon College Junior Brian Heiss found *Wild at Heart* difficult to read because of Eldredge’s narrow characterization of men: “He writes that men should fit a certain manly image and puts them in a box. He can’t say ‘man is this’ or ‘man should be this.’ All men are different. All people are different. These emotionally charged stereotypes don’t reflect the unique diversity of humankind.” Additionally, Eldredge’s limited view of manhood ignores

the tender aspects of the psyche modeled by every member of the Trinity (e.g., Father: Isa. 6:13, 42:13–14, 49:14–15; Son: Matt. 23:37, Luke 13:34; Holy Spirit: Gen. 1:2, Deut. 32:11).

Eldredge claims that the domineering male ego was God’s original design, and that “the core of a man’s heart is undomesticated *and that is good*” (4). He writes, “The whole crisis in masculinity today has come because we no longer live in a warrior culture, a place for men to learn to fight like men” (175).



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It is a wonder, then, that God did not choose muscle-bound Goliath to rule Israel instead of the psalmist David. According to Eldredge's logic, Jesus himself would have struggled with masculinity. *He* did not "fight like a man" when the Roman soldiers attacked him—instead, he tells us, "If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also" (Matt. 5:38). Eldredge, meanwhile, suggests children retaliate against bullies, because "you cannot teach a boy to use his strength by stripping him of it" (79). Such instructions flagrantly contradict Christ's commands—e.g., "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you" (Matt. 5:44).

What, according to John Eldredge, does a fulfilled man of God look like? Consider part one of the writer's triumvirate of masculine core desires: every man needs "a battle to fight." Furthermore, we are told, "Every man wants to play the hero. Every man *needs* to know that he is powerful" (11). This latter notion effectively divorces Eldredge's thinking from the Christian tradition and places him in the company of Friedrich Nietzsche, who proclaimed, "A living thing seeks above all to *discharge* its strength—life itself is *Will to Power*." (Jesus commanded—in place of power—such virtues as humility, meekness, mercy, and peacemaking.) To understand Eldredge's defective prototype of masculinity, one need look no further than the pop culture icons he mines for inspiration—e.g., singers such as George Thorogood ("I Drink Alone") and a host of blockbuster films, including *Top Gun*, *Braveheart*, *Saving Private Ryan*, and *Gladiator*. After pointing out that predominantly male audiences make these violent movies successful, Eldredge trenchantly observes, "Like it or not, there is something fierce in the heart of every man" (11). Perhaps—but is it wise or correct to equate that something with Russell Crowe's unceremonious disembowelment of a helpless adversary in *Gladiator*?

There are, of course, stories in which Jesus uses force to prove a point. John 2:12–25, for instance, has Christ fashion a whip in order to drive thieves and merchants from the temple courts. However, it is critical to differentiate between defending a cause and seeking retribution. And while Scripture does assure Christians that God grants a "spirit of power" and not a "spirit of timidity," we must be mindful that this comes through the Holy Ghost rather than from the self. Spiritual power is to be moderated by "love and of self-discipline" (2 Tim. 1:7). Hence, "wildness" is conspicuously absent from Paul's list of fruits of the Spirit, while self-control and gentleness are included (Gal. 5:21–22). Has Eldredge minimized the cost of discipleship by inviting men to embrace their instincts?

The second of Eldredge's essential masculine needs, "an adventure to live," is perhaps the most useful of the three. The author argues for a lifestyle characterized by risk-taking: "I want to love with much more abandon and stop waiting for others to love me first," he writes, "I want to hurl myself into a creative work worthy of God" (199). While Eldredge goes awry in confining his exhortations to an exclusively male audience (Cannot women be "wild at heart" too? Or is their lot in life merely to be "wild at

home"?), he succeeds in issuing a genuinely inspiring call for a rediscovery of adventure within the church. Unhappily, however, the author's credibility is once again marred by selecting poor role models. Although he gamely quotes Augustine, Oswald Chambers, C.S. Lewis, and Dallas Willard (among others), it is apparent that Eldredge is most enthused by violent fictional characters such as Indiana Jones—"a swashbuckling hero who can handle ancient history, beautiful women, and a forty-five with ease" (210).

The final component of the author's troika—every man desires "a beauty to rescue"—is both false and degrading. True to his own ideals, Eldredge writes with boldness: the first chapter of *Wild at Heart* seeks to explain in just four paragraphs the subtle mysteries of "The Feminine Heart." Such passages lend verisimilitude to Bertrand Russell's assertion that women have been the subject of more "intellectual rubbish" than any other topic; it is here, also, that the moral vision of *Wild at Heart* is most grievously skewed. Eldredge's characterization of true femininity appears to be influenced more by Middle English heroic sagas than by the teachings of the New Testament. Of womankind the author proclaims, "Her childhood dreams of a knight in shining armor coming to rescue her are not girlish fantasies; they are the core of the feminine heart and the life she knows she was made for" (16). Moreover, "Every woman...wants an adventure to *share*. A woman doesn't want to be the adventure; she wants to be caught up into something greater than herself" (16).

Eldredge used similarly broad strokes to paint his image of manhood (*every* man wants this; this is *every* man's desire). When applied to womanhood, however, such generalizations seem patently fallacious. This may result from the fact that Eldredge is not a woman, or it may be due to the disempowerment implied in the stereotypes themselves, "a beauty to rescue," Eldredge's term for the kind of woman every man supposedly desires. This woman's only qualifications, it seems, are her good looks and her helplessness—athleticism, artistic ability, erudition, and moral virtue are not taken into consideration. "I don't think that women feel they need to be rescued," suggests Gordon sophomore Laura Fyfe. "Maybe 'rescued' is just the wrong word. The word 'rescue' has the connotation that the girl is passive."

In fact, this passivity could be exactly what Eldredge has in mind when he declares, "The world kills a woman's heart when it tells her to be tough, efficient, and independent" (17). The only area of endeavor in which the model *Wild at Heart* woman is granted proactivity, apparently, is sex; even Christ-like Servanthood is deemed unfit for a lady. "I'm telling you that the church has really crippled women when it tells them that their beauty is vain and they are at their feminine best when they are 'serving others,'" writes Eldredge. "A woman is at her best when she is being a woman" (192). Never mind that the notions of beauty being vain and service being preeminent are entirely scriptural (see Prov. 31:30 and Mark 10:44–45, respectively)—beyond this, the author's conception of "being a woman" is almost criminally unjust. Whereas the *Wild at Heart* man is encouraged to pursue private

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adventures (his erstwhile damsel-in-distress, now a conjugal prop, is only along for the ride), a woman's capabilities are evaluated strictly according to their effect upon her mate. What can a Christian female do? "She can arouse, inspire, energize... seduce him," suggests John Eldredge (192).

What paucity of imagination to define God's vision for male-female relationships so starkly and archetypically, in roles as simplified as "rescuer" and "seducer." Should not Christian marriages be modeled on Christ's marriage to the church? And did Christ not empower his bride to do even greater things than he? Eldredge's prescription is so faulty as to be immoral. In the *Wild at Heart* ethic, personal fulfillment takes precedence over humility and self-sacrifice. "Remember," he advises, "don't ask yourself what the world needs..." (220). Is this the same Gospel as that taught by Jesus Christ? And have we, in our yearning for "a battle to fight," forgotten whom we fight for?

Scripture commands the disciple: "Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature...as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience" (Col. 3:5, 9-12). While Eldredge implores men to return to the barbarism of their wild human hearts, the Bible has higher expectations. Yes, some men would rather be Nordic invaders than familial role models. Yes, there is a spiritual battle to fight. Yes, Jesus celebrates victory and invites every man and woman to partake of it. However, in the Christian view personal dignity and strength are not innate—and certainly are not offered solely to men. They come only in communion with Christ, through his holiness, and only when his disciples deny and humble themselves in order to follow him.

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