

Wild at Heart – A Critique

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The worthy intent of Eldredge to encourage biblical manhood needs to be corrected with Scripture.

PCANews – Wild at Heart: A Critique

"He who trusts in his own heart is a fool." Proverbs 28:26

John Eldredge's book, *Wild at Heart*, has become a popular read for those searching for the essence of biblical manhood or, as the book's cover puts it, those looking for "the secret of a man's soul." As with any book that has taken the evangelical world by storm, it is good to hold it up to the light of Scripture and biblical wisdom to see if the work is indeed helpful for building up the saints, both existentially and theologically. The following is a summary of what we have discovered regarding the claims contained in *Wild at Heart*.

Good point: Eldredge, in part, is reacting to the general trend that today's males, including those in evangelical circles, are overly passive with regard to relationships, vocation and spiritual maturation. He encourages men to wake up from their spiritual slumber, stop living sluggishly as a means for easy control, and find masculine fulfillment in patterning their lives after their passionate and adventurous God, in whose image they are made. For this, Eldredge should be commended.

The manner in which Eldredge attempts to prove his thesis, however, is founded upon bad theology, an erroneous use of Scripture, an undermining of the biblical notion of vocation, and a distortion of biblical femininity—all of which potentially misguide readers into living unbiblical and unwise lives.

A faulty and unbiblical premise: According to Eldredge, the discontent and confusion in the hearts of men regarding their manhood find their origin in creation. He writes,

Eve was created within the lush beauty of Eden's garden. But Adam, if you'll remember, was created outside the Garden, in the wilderness. In the record of our beginnings, the second chapter of Genesis makes it clear: Man was born in the outback, from the untamed part of creation. Only afterward is he brought to Eden. And ever since then...men have had an insatiable longing to explore. We long to return; it's when most men come alive...The core of a man's heart is undomesticated and that is good (pp. 3-4).

The entirety of *Wild at Heart* flows from this faulty understanding of Eden. A proper reading of Genesis 2 turns Eldredge's thesis on its head by revealing the true nature and purpose of Eden—thus helping to ensure a biblical view of manhood. Eden not only pictures the perfect fellowship between God and man before sin entered the world, it is

also typological throughout redemptive history. The rest and fulfillment depicted by Eden are seen in three stages: a) the land of Canaan divinely promised to Abram (Gen. 12:1-3); b) the abundant land promised to the Israelites (Ex. 3:7-8, Eze. 36:24-28); and c) the rest in the New Heaven and New Earth promised to all believers (Heb. 4:1-10).

In other words, Eden is not merely a fruitful garden for Adam and Eve, but a sign of the fulfillment of the gospel, when all the people of God will finally receive the crown of glory (1 Pet. 5:4). Contrary to Wild at Heart, Eden offers us a glimpse of what will be a better destination for believers—the consummation of God's created order in the New Heavens and New Earth. Until that end arrives, the Bible makes clear that all believers are "sojourners and exiles" (1 Pet. 2:11) who are never at home in any part of this world, including the outdoors, because their "citizenship is in heaven" (Phil. 3:20).

Eldredge's statement that a man's heart "can only be found through the help of wilderness" (p. 3), is confusing at best and unbiblical at worst. While the outdoors can be enjoyed by many, the "wilderness" praised by Eldredge is certainly not where man is truly free according to the Bible. To the contrary, the Bible explicitly refers to the wilderness as a place of sin, darkness and chaos. The wilderness is a forsaken (Is. 27:10) and perilous (Lam. 4:19) place where the Israelites feared death (Ex. 14:12, 16:3), where the sacrificial goat bearing the sins of the people was cast (Lev. 16:20-22), where Elijah begged to die (1 Kings 19:4), and where Jesus was tempted by Satan (Matt. 4:1).

We believers, like the men and women of faith in the Scriptures, "desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one" (Heb. 11:16)—a country foreshadowed by the unstained perfection of Eden, which was lost due to the sin of Adam. Contrary to Wild at Heart, true spiritual fulfillment for Christian men does not lie in the mountains of Colorado, on a motorcycle, or through the self-delusion of Maximus-like heroics, but in Christ and his gospel, either indoors or outdoors.

Undermining of all vocations as legitimate: By painting Jesus as William Wallace (p. 29), telling anecdotes about enjoying getting lost in Grizzly territory (p. 30) or canoeing the Snake River "against all sound judgment" (p. 14), while designating "adventure, with all its requisite danger and wildness" (p. 5) as the spiritual longing of every man's soul, Eldredge holds up a singular personality type and lifestyle as the only acceptable "life worth living" (p. 18).

The Bible's teaching of the priesthood of all believers, however, gives every legitimate calling significance in the eyes of God. We are commanded, "[W]hatever you do, do all to the glory of God" (1 Cor. 10:31), because "[t]he earth is the Lord's, and all it contains" (Ps. 24:1). Therefore, a man is able to glorify God not only on a mountain, but also in an office, trudging through the daily routine to meet the needs of his family. Wild at Heart seems to minimize the fact that the body of Christ consists of people with a variety of personalities, tastes, and abilities. Not all men desire "to rush the fields at Banockburn, to go west, to leap from the falls..." and that is good. To those that may be tempted to look down upon those who do not fit Eldredge's outdoorsman mold, let us remember that "the

parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and on those parts of the body that we think less honorable we bestow the greater honor" (1 Cor. 12:22-23).

A distortion of biblical femininity: Eldredge quotes that "a woman who is living out her true design will be 'valiant, vulnerable, and scandalous'" (p. 190). He goes on to assert that the primary lesson in the book of Ruth is that a "good woman help[s] her man play the man" (p. 191) by seducing him. Pointing to Ruth, who used seduction to get "what she really needs—a ring" (p. 191), Eldredge promotes the female ability to arouse as a means for encouraging true manhood in a male. Is this really the picture of womanhood painted throughout Scripture? Proverbs 31:30 exalts holiness over the emptiness of human-centered qualities when it states, "Charm is deceitful, and beauty is vain, but a woman who fears the Lord is to be praised." The woman's "fear of the Lord" works itself out as her relationship with a man patterns the church's relationship with her Husband, Jesus Christ. Paul explains that a woman truly helps her man play the man by being devoted to him, cherishing him, and submitting to him "as the church submits to Christ" (Eph. 5:24). In turn, a husband will be his wife's covenant leader as he loves her "as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her" (Eph. 5:25). According to this gospel-model, does the church seduce Christ to get "what she really needs?" Of course not. Eldredge's suggestion to the woman that she "[a]sk [her] man what he'd prefer" (p. 192) leads to a man-centered reasoning that is fallible and potentially destructive.

Eldredge rightly points out that women want to be loved and honored, but the manner in which he suggests they pursue that love is unwise and devoid of holiness. The physical beauty and power of femininity is not to be viewed as the means for energizing a broken marriage or getting a man's attention. Rather, it is to be enjoyed within the context of a marriage centered upon Christ and his marriage to the church. Only then will a man genuinely be encouraged to "love his wife as himself" (Eph. 5:33).

Conclusion: The notion that man is at home outside the perfect creational order of Eden (and that he still longs to return to the wilderness) weaves its error into many areas of life, undermining the biblical notion of vocation and truncating the broad implications of men made in the image of God (i.e., accountants = bad, hunter/fisherman/kayaker = good). The worthy intent of Eldredge to encourage biblical manhood needs to be nuanced and corrected with Scripture to such a degree that Wild at Heart becomes an unbalanced pep-talk for the outdoor personality type. Unfortunately, the overriding effect of the book thus far seems to be a straying of believers from biblical truth in favor of superficial and reckless acts of stereotypical masculinity.

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