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## A Review of *Wild at Heart* by John Eldredge

Reviewing popular Christian books can be tricky. For one thing, many people have found them helpful so you can easily incur a fair bit of personal attack. One's motives or character may be questioned. Unfortunately, there isn't always a desire to discuss the merits of the book's theology. Theology is popularly seen as impractical and therefore not worth discussing.

We Americans tend to take things personally when a belief of ours is challenged. Os Guinness says that Americans are very different from the British in this regard. Just watch the proceedings of Parliament on C-Span! There are vigorous debates laced with sardonic humor. When it is all over, the disputants will go out to the local pub and have a cold one together. I don't think sarcasm per se is appropriate (though there are Christians who do!), but I do think we Americans could be a little more thick skinned when discussing our differences. I mean thick skinned without the rudeness and arrogance.

*Wild at Heart* is the third Eldredge book that I have read. The first two, *Sacred Romance* and *Journey of Desire*, I found quite good. It has been awhile, but I remember thinking that *Journey of Desire* seemed like it could have been written by John Piper. Coming from this reviewer, that is high praise.

I can see why *Wild at Heart* resonates so deeply with many men. Too many feel beat down by others' expectations and truly desire to live more authentically. Men are tired of being scripted and told what to do. Understandably, they want to break out of the silly social *and* religious conventions that others have set for them. Whether it is a domineering father who pressured his son to be an engineer when he wanted to be a forest ranger or a pastor who pesters a man to get involved in a particular ministry that he is less than enthused about, the result is the same. Men are sick and tired of the man-made pressure and therefore bogus expectations.

In describing this problem, Eldredge touches the raw nerve of a large problem. His description of the problem has some merit. His prescriptions (what one ought to do in light of this problem) are what give me concern. I will mention a few areas and offer some brief commentary.

⚔ **False dichotomies.** Throughout the book, there is this choice: either be nice or be "wild at heart." Given this option, it would be foolish to not want to be "wild at heart." But Jesus was "full of grace and truth." Jesus certainly was not a "nice guy" in the way that Eldredge derisively defines it, but He did model tenderness on numerous occasions. Eldredge should have spent more time clarifying this point. As it stands, *Wild at Heart* seems to pose a dichotomy that the Bible doesn't.

Eldredge rightly extols men who are “tender” (p. 38) and exhibit kindness (p. 114). These are very important things that the “wildest” of us need to remember. I only wish Eldredge had mentioned them as frequently as the “wild at heart virtues.”

☞ **Universalizing one’s own experience.** Throughout the book there is the working assumption that every guy (if they are being honest!) has “woundedness” of a fairly similar variety (p. 72). Hurt that comes via negligent or abusive parents is especially underscored.

It is undeniably true that we all suffer because of living in a fallen world, but there truly are parents who consistently model enthusiasm and find joy in their children. Sure, they are sinners like all of us, but the effects of a loving family can hardly be compared with the brutal consequences of severe parental neglect or abuse.

Eldredge’s own abandonment (p. 70,71) seems to cloud his judgment. The neglect Eldredge tragically experienced as a boy seems to cause him to conclude that abandonment is a universal problem. I know guys who have been called superficial or are criticized for denying reality if they don’t have a gut-wrenching story of their own abandonment. We ought to praise God for healthy (not perfect!) marriages and healthy parenting. To paint with such a broad brush, as Eldredge does, diminishes these wonderful blessings.

It is ironic given Eldredge’s penchant for universalizing his own experience that Oswald Chambers is quoted approvingly, “Never make a principle out of your experience; let God be as original with other people as he is with you.” (p. 210). I only wish Eldredge’s book reflected the wisdom here.

☞ **Dismissive attitude toward theology.** Eldredge pejoratively speaks of “doctrine police” (p. 24) and includes the arresting juxtaposition of “doctrinal Nazism.” (p. 27) This is a most unfortunate way to characterize doctrine. Christian doctrine is the teaching we build our lives around. Without it, there is no longer a Christian faith.

There is no doubt that there are problems with the way theology is sometimes taught. I have heard about this quite a bit over the past twenty years, both as a student and now as a teacher of theology myself. It is unfortunate however that Eldredge has only critical things to say about those who try to be careful with doctrine, especially when many Christian men desperately need greater discernment. Deeper thinking about God (which is theology!) would transform our churches, the very thing that Eldredge desires. In other words, Eldredge’s dismissive attitude toward theology undermines his own personal goal for the church.

Given the derogatory comments about doctrine, it is not surprising to find that references to theologians in this book are almost non-existent. There is one insight from St. Augustine (p. 130), but Eldredge’s citation leaves out the crucial detail that this fourth century Christian was wrestling with his own sin.

In contrast to the paucity of references to theologians, we find an enormous amount of acknowledgement to Robert Bly, the secular writer/poet. It is certainly the case that “all truth is God’s truth,” so writers like Bly may have some important things to tell us. However, in a book that is widely read, including by many men who are in need better grounding biblically, it would be much better to at least mention that Bly’s worldview is antithetical to the Christian one. Lavish citation of a non-Christian writer with no attendant *caveat lector* is unwise. This may not seem terribly important, but various polls and twenty years of ministry convince me that nothing should be taken for granted.

☞ **Downplaying sin.** Some have asked me whether “woundedness” is a valid concept biblically. I answer with the following illustration. Imagine that you are in a fierce battle. You have been “wounded.” You are airlifted to a nearby hospital for the proper attention. Everything is totally accurate about what I just described, but it is hardly a complete picture. Yes, you are wounded, but you were also eager to wound others!

Woundedness is certainly an *effect* of sin, but it hardly describes the totality of sin. It conveys an image of people sinning against us, but not one of us sinning against others. Eldredge speaks of everyone being wounded, but leaves one wondering who is ultimately culpable for all the grief and pain (p. 132).

I find little of our own personal responsibility or role for sin in this book. One could say that the teaching of personal sin does not exist in *Wild at Heart*, but that would not accurately convey what is in Eldredge’s book. I do think it would be accurate to say that Eldredge is not clear how believers continue to battle with personal sin.

☞ **Failure to utilize biblical categories and concepts.** Instead of using “wild at heart,” why not talk about the need that men have to find and then use their spiritual gifts? There are large and very practical sections of Scripture on this topic.

The focus on being “wild at heart” also has the reoccurring theme of getting back to nature. Nothing wrong with loving the great outdoors, but it is not nearly big enough of a picture. There is so much more to being truly “wild at heart.” We are to give our lives away to others in loving service. *Wild at Heart* tragically traffics in self-gratification, certainly a popular message even within the church, but one that is hardly able to effect true transformation. Again, Eldredge undermines the very thing he desires for the church.

When I think of someone who is “wild at heart,” I think of Jim Elliot. He was a college wrestler (so no pansy), a top student at Wheaton, but gave it all up to minister to the Auca Indians. He gave the ultimate sacrifice--his own life. More of these models of manhood are what our bored executives need today!

☞ **Psychological categories trump biblical ones.** I was shocked when I read the following passage. Eldredge starts with a point that is dubious indeed, “Even Jesus needed to hear those words of affirmation from his Father. After he is baptized in the Jordan, before the brutal attack on his identity in the wilderness, his Father speaks: ‘You

are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.” (Luke 3:22) And now this incredible commentary on the passage by Eldredge, “In other words, ‘Jesus, I am deeply proud of you; you have what it takes.’” The Father is cast as a self-affirming therapist to a rather needy and insecure Jesus! Not only is this blasphemous, but this portrait of Jesus is hardly the sort you want to follow or emulate.

Eldredge also imports psychological terminology and concepts from post-Enlightenment thinking. If some readers don’t have the historical background to appreciate this problem, let me cut to the chase. Ideas like the “masculine soul” (p. 82), “real you” (p. 134), and “false self” (p. 145) are the products of modern psychological thinking, not ones that the apostle Paul would recognize.

☞ **An appeal to our fleshly lust for “secrets.”** The subtitle of Eldredge’s book is *Discovering the Secret of a Man’s Soul*. Using the word “secret” is mighty popular among Christian writers today. Bruce Wilkinson calls one of his books, *Secrets of the Vine* and Brian McLaren has a recently released book entitled, *The Secret Message of Jesus*.

Appeals to hidden knowledge appeal to our fleshly desire to “be in the know.” Modern-day writers are building a whole cottage industry on introducing people to “secrets.” And let no one doubt that secrets sell!

Scripture paints a much different picture. Prov. 1:20-23 clearly conveys a truth that desperately needs to be recovered today, “Wisdom shouts in the street, she lifts her voice in the square; at the head of the noisy streets she cries out; at the entrance of the gates in the city, she utters her sayings: ‘How long, O naïve ones, will you love simplicity? And scoffers delight themselves in scoffing, and fools hate knowledge? Turn to my reproof. Behold, I will pour out my spirit on you; I will make my words know to you.’” Note well that wisdom is *available to all*. Wisdom is not in some lofty tower. It is accessible amid the hustle and bustle of everyday life.

Most importantly, Christ embodies wisdom (Col. 2:1-3) and *He comes to us*. He is always near with the wisdom we need. The wisdom from God is not some esoteric secret. That is why some very uneducated people are full of godly wisdom and regularly sought out for their counsel.



Eldredge says that he has never attended a church where anyone spoke with deep conviction (p. 34,35). That surely colors his perspective throughout *Wild at Heart*.

I am glad to say that I have attended several churches where the “thus saith the Lord” was clear, consistent, and compelling. At the very least, Eldredge can listen to messages by pastors like John Piper that are readily available on the Internet. Maybe this would

convince Eldredge that the church, though always in need of more, still has faithful, courageous, and joyful ministers.