

## Since When is “Wild” a Fruit of the Spirit? Reflections on John Eldredge’s *Wild at Heart*

Fads in the Evangelical Christian community seem to come every year or two, usually accompanied by a tremendous marketing blast. In recent years, we have seen Blackaby’s *Experiencing God*, followed by Wilkinson’s *Prayer of Jabez*, followed by Eldredge’s *Wild at Heart*, followed by Warren’s *Purpose Driven Life*. In each case, Christians have latched onto these publications, proclaimed them “the best book I’ve ever read,” and talked it up until they forgot it when the next big thing came along.

*Wild at Heart*<sup>1</sup> (hereafter to be referred to as *WAH*) has been something of an exception to this pattern, however, in that its popularity seems to be continuing even after the next big thing, Rick Warren’s book about purpose, has grown to its own level of superstardom. Certainly this is due in part to publication of related materials: the *WAH Field Guide*, *Leader’s Guide*, videos, DVDs, and who knows what else. It appears that only Warren has outdone Eldredge, with books about purpose-driven wives, families, children, dogs, and goldfish. Rumors of the upcoming *Purpose Driven Compost Pile* have not yet been confirmed by the publisher. But back to Eldredge. Certainly, the production of additional materials – and the writing of additional books – has helped to perpetuate his popularity. So have the *WAH* seminars he and his disciples (formal and otherwise) conduct. But this alone is insufficient to account for his popularity and his *passionate* adherents.

I for one am not a fan. In fact, in my copy of *WAH*, I have inscribed, “One of the worst Christian books I’ve ever read.” That’s right before the page on which Charles Swindoll’s endorsement appears: “the best, most insightful book I have read in at least the last five years” (p. i). Clearly, we have a divergence of opinion. Most of the men I know would vote with Swindoll rather than with me. Aside from the fact that Swindoll is a better speaker and a more accomplished author than I, why is this?

Others have written their own critiques, some of them quite good. I have made no attempt at a comprehensive survey of such critiques and therefore acknowledge that I may not be making any new arguments nor treading any new ground. Nor is this paper intended to be a comprehensive treatment of *WAH*. Rather, it should be taken as one man’s perspective, a series of reflections rather than an academic dissertation.

In the pages that follow, I shall attempt to explain what I think is the legitimate attraction of *WAH*. I will then discuss why I think Eldredge’s approach is defective, derailing, and damaging. And I will suggest an alternate construct that I believe is more helpful for men, more Biblical, and for me at least, more motivational.

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2001.

## **Why is *Wild at Heart* So Attractive to Men?**

Without a doubt, *WAH* is speaking to American men. It is meeting a strongly felt need, in a way that nothing else does.

Some of my thoughts about *WAH*'s popularity will only make sense after I have discussed the book's shortcomings. Therefore, I will return later to this issue of attractiveness.

For now, let us say that Eldredge has accurately diagnosed a problem. American men today are emasculated. Many of us grew up in families that were dysfunctional (a trendy word nowadays). Because our parents were humans rather than gods, they injured us with their imperfect parenting.<sup>2</sup> They were not always the best role models, either. Meanwhile, the women's movement has grown and established itself in society. Women are in the workplace, and feminists have found their place in academe. As a result of this, and perhaps other things, husbands don't lead, and wives don't follow.<sup>3</sup>

Eldredge identifies the hurt, which he calls "the wound." He identifies the aimlessness and shallowness of American males. Truly, we are wounded, disappointed, desperate people. Our view of ourselves is largely shaped by our past, and we rarely can share ourselves openly with other men. We have few friends. Our measly aspirations in life fail to inspire ourselves or others.

Men want to live for something greater than themselves, and Eldredge gives support to that desire with his call to arms. He wants men to be men – not boys, and not women. This is an attractive proposition and echoes the creation mandate to fill the earth and subdue it as well as the New Testament instruction that the husband is the head of the wife.<sup>4</sup> It also taps into the cultural appeal of movies such as *Braveheart* and *Gladiator*, which show the noble(?) man fighting against injustice and for his honor (and revenge). Better psychologists than I will have to flesh out the details as to *why* these movies are so enormously popular among evangelical males, but it is undeniable that they are tapping into something that tells men, "This is how you should be. You can be more."

## **So What's Wrong With *Wild at Heart*?**

"For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,' declares the Lord" (Isaiah 55.8). I won't presume to speak for God, but it seems to me that Eldredge has taken the counsel of man and given short shrift to the counsel of God. He has written a book of Freudian Romanticism and self-centered, self-actualizing narcissism. Ultimately, it is a silly book and a little book – little not in quantity of words, but in the weight of its thoughts. Allow me to explain.

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<sup>2</sup> Actually, in Greek and Roman mythology, the gods were imperfect, too, but we'll overlook that.

<sup>3</sup> For a thought-provoking treatment of this subject, see James Walker's *Husbands Who Won't Lead and Wives Who Won't Follow*, Bethany House Publishers, 1989.

<sup>4</sup> Ephesians 5.23

### **Style Over Substance**

First, there are the stylistic issues. Eldredge writes with broad assertions and hyperbole: Phrases such as, “you must,” “we never,” “you never,” and “everyone” run rampant throughout. These assertions are seldom supported by Scripture, reasoned argument, or research. Rather, they are taken as self-evident truths, even when they are not. This book seriously lacks Scriptural basis; for an evangelical, that is unconscionable.

Further, Eldredge writes with a presentism that suggests he is the first person - except for Robert Bly, which would still leave Eldredge the first *Christian* - ever to think about these issues. One gets the impression that although he watches lots of movies, he hasn't read many books (except *Iron John*), and given his lack of historical perspective, what he has read apparently wasn't very old. There's no bibliography. There are no footnotes. Citations are usually absent and incomplete when present.

### **Repackaging Robert Bly**

Eldredge's uncritical parroting of Robert Bly is troubling to me. In fact, Eldredge seems to have ripped off *Iron John* and rewritten it for a Christian audience; the parallels are so uncanny that they can only be intentional.<sup>5</sup> Beyond the parallels, there are numerous direct quotations.

Even if Bly may have said something worthwhile in *Iron John*, he is not, to the best of my knowledge, a Christian, nor does he espouse a Biblical world view. He is perhaps best known for spawning groups of men beating drums in the forest. Certainly, “all truth is God's truth,” and even an ass may speak a message from God (Numbers 22.28-33, KJV), but Eldredge fails to make the connection between Bly and Scripture. There's not even much sign of trying to do so.

### **The Whiny Wounded**

Eldredge discusses “the wound” early in his book. I do not dispute that everyone is wounded. We are born in sin and we are raised by sinners. But Eldredge universalizes his particular family experience and concludes that everyone shares his particular wound and that everyone needs to respond to it as he did to his. Where does Scripture talk about the need to “enter our wound” in order to be healed? For that matter, where does Scripture talk about the wound at all? To build a theology and a way of life on this premise, Eldredge should have risen to the challenge of testing his thoughts against Scripture. Instead, he merely broadly asserts and assumes his beliefs (and their implications) are self-evident and therefore without need of proof.

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<sup>5</sup> Published in 1990, written by American poet Robert Bly, *Iron John* uses a character from a Grimm's fairy tale to argue that men should be wild (though not necessarily savage). He suggests an eight-stage path of initiation and growth, which includes (among others): remembering one's psychic wounds; communion with a mentor or “inner King”; becoming a lover; reviving one's inner warriors; and receiving a “second heart.” According to a blurb by Reed Business Information on the amazon.com web site, “Bly avoids cant as he ransacks Jung, Freud and Reich; referents include Greek, Egyptian and Celtic myths, the Parsifal legend, Blake and Amerindian ritual.”

## Whose Masculinity?

What about masculinity? Despite occasional protestations to the contrary, Eldredge seems to equate manliness with fishing, hunting, rock climbing, kayaking, and similar pursuits. I do not notice him ever praising the life of the mind. In attacking a warped view of masculinity, he creates his own warped view. "Nice," "kind," "tender," and similar traits are referred to almost exclusively in derision, not praise. *Real* men are those who go around starting battles, asserting their rights, insisting on their way, taking no prisoners. They are self-defining and, in practice if not intent, self-seeking. Masculinity equals aggression, power, and force. How, I ask, can a society or community prosper when its members think that way? Eldredge's philosophy is, "Let people feel the weight of who you are, and let them deal with it" (p. 149); and again, "The world's screwed up. Let people feel the weight of who you are and let them deal with it" (p. 151). In other words, be an a\*\*hole, and if people don't like it, it's *their* problem. Contrast this with Philippians 2.3,4: "Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others." Which approach is the right one?

Starting on page 6, and repeating at times throughout, Eldredge denigrates the working world. He speaks disparagingly of the office environment, with the singular exception being a man who's found his calling as a leader/executive type. In Eldredge's view, cubicles, schedules, and hierarchies suck the life out of a man. But in my experience, there's a richness to working for a corporation, as well. The office is a crucible, a great place for the testing and formation of character. In my working career, I have had to grow in diligence and perseverance at doing things I don't always want to do. I have struggled with integrity. I have had to learn how to lead. I have had to grow in my ability to follow. I have worked for a boss who was the closest thing to a truly evil person that I have ever had to know, and from that experience, I deepened my understanding about my intrinsic value and my identity in Christ. I have had other bosses whom I have had to respect, even though their competence level was sorely lacking. I have been challenged by others to rise to a higher level. In other words, cubicles, schedules, and hierarchies have been a major contributor to the development of Christlikeness in my life. And at times, work has been a place of ministry, too. Yes, work can even be a mission field.

But back to masculinity. Eldredge wants men, but apparently not gentlemen. He wants risk, but apparently not prudence. For example, in raising children – boys, anyway – where does discipline come in? When do you say "No"? When do you teach manners? According to Eldredge, perhaps never:

"With three boys at the table (and one man, but with a boyish heart), things get pretty wild at times. Chairs, for the most part, are an option. The boys use them more like gymnastic equipment than restraints. Just the other night, I look over to see Blaine balancing across his chair on his stomach, like an acrobat. At the same moment Luke, our youngest, is nowhere to be seen. Or rather, in the place at the table where his head should be, we can only see a pair of socks, pointing straight up. My wife rolls her eyes" (p. 81).

So, who wants to be first to invite the Eldredge family over for dinner? Shouldn't Eldredge be embarrassed to include this vignette in his book? Yet he presents it as a model. Of men, but certainly not of gentlemen. Gentlemen are sissies. Real men do what they want. And the women? They're reduced to rolling their eyes. And making the dinner that the kids aren't eating, I suppose.

As mentioned earlier, Eldredge gets more theology from cinema than he does from Scripture: "My answer came through several movies" (p. 126). Well sure, God can speak through a variety of agents. But does he *ever* speak to Eldredge through Scripture? On pages 134-136, Eldredge urges us to pray and ask God to reveal to us, "the *real* you, the true you, the man he had in mind when he made you." Yet the examples he then gives are from *Gladiator*, *Henry V*, and sitting alone in a park waiting to see what God would say. On page 137, "God began to speak to me"<sup>6</sup> about a painting he was looking at. Why are *none* of the words being heard words from Scripture, which should be in our hearts, anyway? Eldredge says, "we always rest on propositional truth. We stand on what Scripture says about us." Sounds good, so why doesn't he tell us what *Scripture* says about who God made us to be? Maybe because Scripture doesn't support his concept of masculinity and wildness?

### **Whose Heart?**

Nor is it clear that Scripture supports Eldredge's assertion that we all receive "good hearts" when we receive Christ. To my knowledge, the term never appears anywhere in the Bible. Fundamentally, Good Heart Theology seems to depend on a single verse, Ezekiel 36.26: "I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh." This is a wonderful promise, but are we sure a *new* heart is the same thing as a *good* heart?

We must also consider that Ezekiel 36.26 is not the whole counsel of God on the subject of the heart. Some of that counsel, he dismisses as referring only to pre-conversion man, verses such as Genesis 6.5<sup>7</sup> and Jeremiah 17.9<sup>8</sup>. In his estimation, these verses don't apply to Christians.<sup>9</sup> Greater theological minds than my own have wrestled with the

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<sup>6</sup> How do we know he wasn't just speaking to himself? By asserting that "God said to me," Eldredge gives his statement divine Imprimatur and makes it undiscussable. Who dares to question God?

<sup>7</sup> "The LORD saw how great man's wickedness on the earth had become, and that every inclination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil all the time."

<sup>8</sup> "The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?"

<sup>9</sup> Pages 133-134: "Too many Christians today are living back in the old covenant. They've had Jeremiah 17:9 drilled into them and they walk around believing *my heart is deceitfully wicked*. Not anymore it's not. Read the rest of the book. In Jeremiah 31.33, God announces the cure for all that: 'I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God and they will be my people.' . . . You have a new heart. Did you hear me? Your heart is *good*."

scope and role of the sin nature after conversion.<sup>10</sup> But it is hard to read Psalm 51 and see it merely as outdated Old Testament theology: "The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise" (v. 9). The heart is not something to be left running wild, but something to be tamed, then pointed in the right direction.<sup>11</sup> At a minimum, Eldredge should acknowledge some ambiguity on this issue. Regardless of whether we think we have good hearts or hearts that are "prone to wander," a healthy dose of self-skepticism is always in order. Eldredge wants us to trust our hearts, but the man who takes no counsel and never questions his motives is a man who will end up in a spiritual ditch.

Eldredge's approach to the heart and sin strikes me as Gnostic. Sin is something that happens to us, but, "Your flesh is *not you*. . . . Your flesh is not the real you. . . . I also know that *my sin is not me*" (p. 144). We have good hearts, not sinful ones, he says, which if true, raises the question as to what my degree of responsibility is if I choose sin. Or am *I* not choosing it, and am *I* therefore not responsible? If it's not me sinning, then who is it? If it's not me sinning, then how do I stop? Whom do I rely on for victory – the Holy Spirit, myself, my good heart, or what?

### **Theology as Pliable as Play-Doh**

Eldredge's theology gets even more speculative. Ruth is idiotically tagged as a seductress (p. 191). More about that later. There's a stunningly bizarre endorsement of dream therapy – sham counseling at best (p. 148). And a man should "allow his strength to arrive"; we should "let our strength show up" (p. 148). Contrast this view with that of the apostle Paul in 2 Corinthians 1.8-10<sup>12</sup> and 2 Corinthians 12.9-10<sup>13</sup>. Paul

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<sup>10</sup> In my estimation, John Donne (c.1572-1631), in his Holy Sonnet xiv, has masterfully portrayed how our hearts are at once captive yet rebellious, autonomous yet yearning for submission:

Batter my heart, three person'd God; for, you  
As yet but knocke, breathe, shine, and seeke to mend;  
That I may rise, and stand, o'erthrow mee, and bend  
Your force, to breake, blowe, burn and make me new.  
I, like an usurpt towne, to another due,  
Labour to admit you, but Oh, to no end,  
Reason your viceroy in mee, mee should defend,  
But is captiv'd, and proves weake or untrue,  
Yet dearly I love you, and would be lov'd faine,  
But am betroth'd unto your enemye,  
Divorce mee, untie, or breake that knot againe,  
Take mee to you, imprison mee, for I  
Except you enthrall mee, never shall be free,  
Nor ever chaste, except you ravish mee.

<sup>11</sup> See also Psalm 119.32: "I run in the path of your commands, for you have set my heart free."

<sup>12</sup> "We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about the hardships we suffered in the province of Asia. We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired even of life. Indeed, in our hearts we felt the sentence of death. But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead. He has delivered us from such a deadly peril, and he will deliver us. On him we have set our hope that he will continue to deliver us."

saw weakness as something that drove him to God, something that showed him his own inadequacy and forced him to rely on God's adequacy, graciously poured out. *God's* grace was sufficient; Paul's strength was not. According to Eldredge's definitions, apparently Paul wasn't a real man. If he didn't "allow his strength to arrive," what could he be except an emasculated sissy? Oh, right, Paul wasn't even married, so maybe he *was* a wuss.

Eldredge's view of God is troubling. Some comments make God out to be less than He is. For example, on p. 31, God is taking "a staggering risk" in granting free will to man. Really? Again, on p. 203, God took "that enormous risk" in creating us. Is this supposed to be the same God who proclaims in Isaiah 55.10 that he knows the end from the beginning? The same God who adds, "My purpose will stand and I will do all that I please"? Eldredge's God is too small.

The most blatant mistreatment of Scripture may be found – indeed, cannot be avoided – on pages 78-79, where Eldredge tells the story of his son and the bully who humiliated him at school. Eldredge's advice? "The next time that bully pushes you down, . . . I want you to get up . . . and I want you to hit him . . . as hard as you possibly can." Then comes the Eldredge hermeneutic: "Yes, I know that Jesus told us to turn the other cheek. But we have really misused that verse. You cannot teach a boy to use his strength *by stripping him of it*. Jesus was able to retaliate, believe me. But he chose not to. And yet we suggest that a boy who is mocked, shamed before his fellows, stripped of all power and dignity should stay in that beaten place because Jesus wants him there?" And so on. With one wave (or should we say slap?) of his hand, Eldredge dismisses a common interpretation of Jesus' teaching without having enough integrity to tell us what he thinks Jesus *was* calling us to do when he told us to turn the other cheek. Even if Eldredge is right, his failure to treat the text with respect and to show us the "true" interpretation is indefensible. Therefore, Eldredge's shabby theology comes across something like, "I know Jesus said this, but he couldn't actually have meant it." He couldn't have meant it, because it doesn't fit the paradigm Eldredge is creating. Why then didn't Jesus say what he meant? We'll never know.

Eldredge's word choice is fascinating in justifying the response to the bully: "You cannot teach a boy to use his strength *by stripping him of it*. . . . And yet we suggest that a boy who is mocked, shamed before his fellows, stripped of all power and dignity should stay in that beaten place because Jesus wants him there?" Does Eldredge not see the irony in saying that we should never allow ourselves to be mocked, shamed, or stripped of power and dignity, when in fact our Savior underwent those very things? Did Jesus not leave us "an example, that we should follow in his steps" (1 Peter 2.21)? Did not this same Jesus say that we'd be blessed to be persecuted and mocked for His name (Matthew 5.10-12)? When the Bible calls Christians to fight, it's for righteousness, not rights. It's for the defenseless, not for reputation.

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<sup>13</sup> "But he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.' Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecution, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong."

### **Me Tarzan, You Jane**

I'll leave it to others to analyze Eldredge's view of marriage in depth. Suffice it for now to say that Eldredge's view seems rather one-sided. What does the woman offer the man, besides receptiveness? What is she, besides something to be conquered, won, and protected? Does she bring anything to the table – besides dinner?

### **But You Missed the Whole Core of the Book!**

I have made it this far without referring to the primary structure, or skeleton, of the book. Eldredge says that there are three universal desires written so indelibly on men's hearts that to deny them is to forfeit our soul (p. 9). They are that we must have a battle to fight, an adventure to live, and a beauty to rescue. Though Eldredge never says it, this framework strikes an interesting parallel with a statement by Joseph Addison<sup>14</sup> 300 years ago: "Three grand essentials to happiness in this life are something to do, something to love, and something to hope for."

Though the similarities are obvious, Addison's formulation is at once more general and more meaty. Using Addison as our starting point, we could argue that the man who loves God receives in turn from his Master something to do and something to hope for. The Eldredge formulation, by contrast, conjures images of cinema: saving damsels in distress while riding horses across the plains and slaying the evil guys with English accents (recognizable because they always wear black).

I agree with Eldredge that we long to live for something greater than ourselves. I suspect this has to do with having been created in God's image and being intended for something greater than this world in which we live. To be born a man and die a grocer is a tragic thing.

But Eldredge's formulation draws from the wrong place. It seems based on what I need, what I want, what will make me feel good. On the scale from chivalry to barbarism, it is closer to the latter.

A side point, though not an insignificant one, is what a single man is to do with the need to "rescue a beauty." Addison would let the bachelor love something else; Eldredge apparently would not. One can only conclude from Eldredge that a man is not a man unless he has "his woman" – or at least is pursuing her through courtship to rescue her from . . . her parents? Those who have made themselves eunuchs for the Kingdom (Matthew 19.11), whether lifelong or simply because they just haven't gotten married yet, aren't really men. They are some undefined other.

### **Why, Then, Is The Book So Popular, So Attractive?**

We return now to a discussion started much earlier in this paper. Why is the book so popular?

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<sup>14</sup> English essayist, poet, and politician, 1672-1719.

On the positive side, we've seen that *WAH* does point to real problems in American manhood. It reveals inadequacies we've felt and not always been able to name. We are truly wounded people who seek intimacy and healing (though it's not clear to me how acting like William Wallace will accomplish that). And *WAH* calls us to live for something greater than an endless cycle of eat, sleep, work.

I see two other reasons for the popularity of the book, however, and these reasons are less encouraging.

First, we like things that appeal to our selfishness while being cloaked in Christian legitimacy. *WAH* fits this bill wonderfully.<sup>15</sup> It allows us to be ourselves without challenging us to deny ourselves and take up our cross daily and follow Jesus.

Second, fighting Eldredge's battles allows us to avoid the battles that matter for eternity, while still thinking we're accomplishing great things. Your mission is in your name, says Eldredge (pp. 141-142). Baloney. God has summoned us by name to be His (Isaiah 43.1), but our mission is in Scripture, not in our name. What is that mission? It starts with Jesus in Matthew 28.18-20: "All authority in heaven and earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them . . . and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you." The mission continues with Paul's instruction to Timothy in 2 Timothy 2.2: "And the things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable men who will also be qualified to teach others." Our mission, as given by Jesus and lived out by Paul, is to submit to the Lordship of Christ and to spread the Kingdom of God through one-to-one contact, throughout the entire earth. This is hard work, even when limited to the neighborhood or one's workplace. How much easier it is to go off on Eldredge's journey of self-indulgent romanticism. Instead of fighting the battles that matter for eternity, we can fight the battles that seem really cool to us at the time.

If *WAH* is as bad as I contend, what then do I recommend in its place?

For one, I recommend Robert Hicks's book, *The Masculine Journey*.<sup>16</sup> Hicks presents what to me seems a more realistic, holistic, and healthy view of the stages of manhood and the growth to which we can aspire. No doubt, there are many other valuable books on Christian manhood besides Hicks.

Second, I suggest an alternate paradigm, and to that I dedicate the next section.

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<sup>15</sup> One could argue that Wilkinson's *Prayer of Jabez* fits this description, too. Though Wilkinson's intent was probably better than his execution, the book is easy to take as an endorsement of the attitude, "OK, God, here I am. Bless me. And I'll tell you how."

<sup>16</sup> NavPress, 1993.

## Noble at Heart

If we knew only one thing, it would be enough to call *WAH* into question. That one thing is that the word “wild” is never used positively in Scripture. In 98 occurrences,<sup>17</sup> it is sometimes neutral or merely descriptive,<sup>18</sup> often negative, but *never* presented as a good thing, *never* something to emulate or promote.

Let’s look at all of the “wild” people in the Bible.

First, Ishmael. The angel of the Lord tells Hagar that her son “will be a wild donkey of a man; his hand will be against everyone and everyone’s hand against him, and he will live in hostility toward all his brothers” (Genesis 16.12). Wild is not good.

Then there are the Israelites at Mount Sinai. As Moses came down off the mountain, he “saw that the people were running wild and that Aaron had let them get out of control and so become a laughingstock to their enemies” (Exodus 32.25). Wild is not good.

The man we call the Prodigal Son “squandered his wealth in wild living” (Luke 15.13). Wild is not good.

What about the qualifications for an elder, a spiritual leader? Among other things, he must be “a man whose children believe and are not open to the charge of being wild and disobedient” (Titus 1.6). Wild is not good.

Finally, Jude writes of apostate, licentious, damned men who have snuck in among believers to lead them astray. “These men are blemishes at your love feasts, . . . shepherds who feed only themselves, . . . clouds without rain, . . . autumn trees, without fruit and uprooted – twice dead. They are wild waves of the sea, foaming up their shame; wandering stars, for whom the blackest darkness has been reserved forever” (Jude 12-13). Wild is not good.

*Never* in Scripture is a man praised for being wild. *Never* in Scripture is God called wild. Why, then, does Eldredge create and perpetuate a theology and a men’s movement based on such a *counter*-Scriptural concept? What possible justification can there be?

Contrast wildness with Paul’s picture of the Spirit-filled life in Galatians 5.22: “But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.” How many of these are synonymous with “wild”? How many antonymous? No man in his right mind would equate *any* of these traits with wildness. *Not one* of the items in Paul’s list is enhanced by wildness. In fact, wildness *prevents* most, perhaps all, of them.

God did not create men to be “Wild.”

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<sup>17</sup> 86 Old Testament, 12 New Testament.

<sup>18</sup> E.g., “They have the strength of a wild ox” (Numbers 24.8), or “Isaac had a taste for wild game” (Genesis 25,28).

What then should we be, if not “Wild”? I suggest we should be “Noble.”

Twenty times,<sup>19</sup> “noble” appears in Scripture,<sup>20</sup> half of those times in the New Testament. The word is always used positively or neutrally (“noble birth”), but never negatively. It is used of both men and women.

Before looking at some of these Biblical uses, let’s define “noble.” Webster’s New World Dictionary says it is: 1) *Having renown, fame; illustrious.* 2) *Having or showing high moral qualities or ideals, or greatness of character; lofty.* 3) *Having excellent qualities; superior.* 4) *Grand, stately, splendid, magnificent.* 5) *Of high hereditary rank or title; aristocratic.* The Oxford Reference Dictionary adds, as one of its definitions: *of excellent character, free from pettiness or meanness, magnanimous.* From these definitions, we see that some are born noble (in name), but that anyone can be noble (in fact).

Who is singled out in Scripture as being noble? Solomon’s warriors, Ruth, an official of King Xerxes, the Proverbs 31 wife, the Bereans, and Jesus. Other noble people are referred to without being named.

In Scripture, *what* can be noble? Well, people, obviously, but also plans, actions, deeds, a task, a name, a theme, an article or instrument, a heart, one’s character, and one’s purposes.

Nobility is a choice. It is something to pursue. It goes deeper than actions, all the way through character to the heart.

Now, let’s look at some of the Scriptural uses in more detail.

Nobleness starts at salvation. In Luke 8.15, Jesus’s parable of the sower identifies the seed on good soil as “those with a noble and good heart, who hear the word, retain it, and by persevering produce a crop.”

Nobleness does not require spiritual maturity, just spiritually mature actions, as illustrated by the Bereans in Acts 17.11: “Now the Bereans were of more noble character than the Thessalonians, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true.”

God can use us as noble instruments or vessels for noble purposes, as shown in Romans 9.21 and 2 Timothy 2.20,21: “If a man cleanses himself . . . , he will be an instrument for noble purposes, made holy, useful to the Master and prepared to do any good work.”

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<sup>19</sup> Song of Solomon 3.7; Ruth 3.11; Esther 6.9; Psalm 45.1; Proverbs 12.4, 31.10, 31.29; Ecclesiastes 10.17; Isaiah 32.5,8; Luke 8.15, 19.12; Acts 17.11; Romans 9.21; 1 Corinthians 1.26; Philippians 4.8; 1 Timothy 3.1; 2 Timothy 2.20,21; James 2.7.

<sup>20</sup> “Nobles,” referring to a particular class of people, is used four more times, but “nobles” doesn’t seem relevant to this discussion.

What could be a higher calling than to be useful to our Master, able to do whatever He calls us to do?

What we think can be noble. The writer of Psalm 45.1 sings, "My heart is stirred by a noble theme as I recite my verses for the king." And Paul urges us in Philippians 4.8, "Brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable - if anything is excellent or praiseworthy - think about such things."

Women are allowed to be noble, too. As mentioned earlier, Ruth is called "a woman of noble character" by her husband-to-be. Eldredge's term, "seductress"<sup>21</sup> does not appear in this passage. Further, it was not only Boaz who considered Ruth to be noble. "All my fellow townsmen know that you are a woman of noble character," he tells her (Ruth 3.11). Ruth was noble in reputation and in reality. So is the unnamed wife in Proverbs 31. Proverbs 12.4 tells us, "A wife of noble character is her husband's crown," and we see that in action in Proverbs 31. According to verse 9, a wife of noble character is difficult to find and of great value ("far more than rubies"), but the man portrayed in this passage has found such a woman: "Many women do noble things, but you surpass them all" (v. 29).

Finally, nobleness is found in our Savior, the Lord of the universe, the creator, the Alpha and Omega - the one who should be our hero above all heroes. According to James, those who mistreat the poor are "the ones who are slandering the noble name of him to whom you belong" (James 2.7). The implication is that Jesus' name is noble because it is associated with giving, with sacrifice - not with grabbing everything He can get by using power that overwhelms "lesser" beings.

"Wild" may be a catchy way to sell books. It may tap into popular celluloid presentations of heroic acts. But "noble," unlike "wild," is a Biblical concept, compatible with spiritual maturity, consistent with the fruit of the Spirit. It is easy to imagine Noble doing great exploits for God. It's possible to imagine Wild doing great exploits, too. But while Noble is focused on God's glory, Wild is focused on self-actualization. Would you rather be Noble's friend, or Wild's? Would you rather be married to Noble, or to Wild? Would you rather see your children grow up to be Noble, or to be Wild?

### **My Blind Spot**

Since reading *WAH* two years ago, I have wrestled repeatedly with the book and with my thoughts as I see seemingly-reasonable Christian men embracing it. How can they support a book that, aside from its stylistic inadequacies, is so clearly unbiblical? Are they really that ignorant?

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<sup>21</sup> Actually, he does not use the term "seductress." But he does say "seduce" three times and "seduction" once (pp. 191-192).

Perhaps it's instructive that some men of my acquaintance who see great value in the book nevertheless see many of its inadequacies, too. A few times, I've heard the comment, "Oh, I just ignore that teaching, story, or point, and focus on the parts that *are* right." Maybe they're better than I at separating wheat from chaff. I tend to believe that "a little yeast works through the whole batch of dough" (1 Corinthians 5.6).

I have asked myself over and over whether in fact the problem I have with *WAH* is with me, whether there is a big blind spot that prevents me from seeing the value of this book. If so, then asking the question is unproductive; the person with a blind spot can't see it, no matter how hard he tries. Only someone else can point it out, only someone who can see it.

I'm willing for someone to restore my sight, but it will have to be through more than personal endorsement. As even Eldredge has said, "we rest on propositional truth," so it is on propositional truth that the book stands or falls.

In the meantime, while others are running wild, I prefer to seek nobleness.

*But the noble man makes noble plans,  
and by noble deeds he stands.*

*-- Isaiah 32.8*