

“THE GOOD, THE BAD, AND THE *CAPTIVATING*”: A CRITIQUE
OF THE HERMENEUTICAL METHODS OF
JOHN AND STASI ELDREDGE

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Proclaimed “2006 Book of the Year” by Family Christian Stores and eagerly read by Christian women all over North America and abroad, *Captivating: Unveiling the Mystery of a Woman’s Soul* is the highly anticipated feminine version of the influential best-seller *Wild At Heart* by John Eldredge. Writing this time with his wife Stasi, John uses a similar style of argumentation in *Captivating* that is enhanced by excerpts from Scripture, poetry, books and movies to proclaim the inherent beauty and value of women and the healing, romancing nature of Jesus. While many have hotly debated the theology and perspective of the Eldredge books, this paper focuses more upon their use of Scripture through an examination of their presuppositions, hermeneutical methods and interpretational bent in *Captivating*. It will be shown that, while the Eldredges wrote *Captivating* with commendable motivations and generally remain within orthodox Evangelical theology, their indiscriminate and careless use of scripture displays a serious lack of standard exegetical methodology. A premodern disregard for historical-critical research into original context and authorial intent, along with general carelessness, frequently creates questionable interpretation and application of the Scriptures.

Biographical Information and General Observations

Before directly addressing their hermeneutical method through a careful selection of their abundant references to Scripture, a brief biography of the authors will be given to discern their experiential and theological background. The Eldredges’ purposes for producing *Captivating* and their basic flow of argument will be summarized to give a feel for the book as a whole. Finally, their underlying presuppositions concerning God, humanity, revelation and Scripture will be analyzed to shed further light on their understanding and use of Scripture.

A Brief Biography of the Authors

John Eldredge has a colorful background in theatre, counseling, speaking, writing, and working for some of the most prominent Evangelical ministries in the United States. Though he grew up as an atheist, John was influenced by the writings of the Evangelical philosopher Francis Schaeffer and became a Christian. He worked for the Family Research Council and then Focus on the Family before obtaining a Masters in Counseling under the renowned Larry Crabb at Colorado Christian University. Soon after his amiable departure from Focus on the Family in 1999, he founded Ransomed Heart Ministries¹ and achieved international fame through his best-seller books *The Journey of Desire*, *Waking the Dead*, *The Sacred Romance* and *Wild At Heart*. John's goal is to restore passion to the Gospel, with the premise that the redeemed heart and its desires are ultimately good, and a healing of the heart and unleashing of these desires through Christ will increase one's love and appreciation for God and one's Christian influence upon the world.²

¹ “[Our] message is the treasure of the Christian Gospel – *not* the tired story of church attendance and good manners, but rather the love story of all ages, set in the midst of fierce battle. . . . After all, it is *life* we are after, each one of us. And it is life God offers. . . . We are committed to helping others rediscover its beauty and power. For this message is able to set men and women free to live from the heart as God's intimate allies. As St. Irenaeus said, “The glory of God is man fully alive.” That's what we are devoted to – seeing men and women come fully alive as the image-bearers of a breathtaking God.” Ransomed Heart Ministries Statement of Faith [document on-line]; available from <http://www.ransomedheart.com/>; Internet; accessed 14 April, 2006.

² Douglas LeBlanc, “Wildheart,” *Christianity Today* 4 (August 2004) [journal on-line]; available from <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2004/008/14.30.html>; Internet; accessed 14 April, 2006; Dick Staub, “John Eldredge is Wild at Heart: The author of *Wild at Heart* and *The Sacred Romance* discusses rediscovering the Gospel through a ransomed heart,” *Christianity Today*, 11 Nov. 2003 [document on-line]; available from <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2003/145/21.0.html>; Internet; accessed 14 April, 2006, quoting Eldredge: “We put the entire offer of the Christian life off onto heaven. But Jesus doesn't do that. First off, we have to recognize that we've lost the gospel. . . . Jesus doesn't describe the gospel just as heaven. He says, ‘I have come that you may have life. And have it to the full.’ He says, ‘It is not just later, but there is a Kingdom of God that you can enter into now, there's a life that is available now.’ . . . The new covenant says your heart is good. . . . The restoration of your heart is primarily what God's up to.”

Stasi Eldredge married John in 1983, homeschools their three sons, and now heads the women's ministry of Ransomed Heart Ministries.³ Growing up under an emotionally distant mother and an alcoholic father, Stasi turned to drugs, alcohol and militant feminism to quell her pain, but rape and rejection by men deepened her scars. Finding healing and worth through the love of Christ and her husband, her familiarity with the wounded feminine heart and her desire to bring the healing of Christ to others is found throughout the pages of this, her first book.⁴

A Summary of *Captivating*

In their mutual desire to see Christian women released in emotional healing and passion of the heart, John and Stasi Eldredge draw from their personal experiences, the testimonies of broken women they have counseled, quotes from well-known movies, poetry, books, historical figures, and passages of scripture to convey an attractive message for Christian women:

Your heart matters more than anything else in all creation. The desires you had as a little girl and the longings you still feel as a woman—they are telling you of the life God created you to live. He offers to come now as the Hero of your story, to rescue your heart and release you to live as a fully alive and feminine woman . . . who is truly captivating.⁵

Beginning with the Creation account, the Eldredges describe woman as the “crown of creation,” who reveals the beauty and relational nature of God to the world as his image-bearer. Since the Fall, women have perpetuated Eve's sin of mistrusting God and have fallen into the trap of seeking from others the answer to their deepest question, “Am I lovely?” leading to desolation or a desire to dominate. Wounded by other broken humans and viciously attacked by Satan, women are

³ Mary Darr, “Up Close and Personal: Stasi Eldredge,” *Christianity Today International/MOMSense Magazine* 9:3 (March/April 2006) [journal on-line]; available from <http://christianitytoday.com/momsense/2006/002/3.6.html>; Internet; accessed 14 April, 2006.

⁴ John and Stasi Eldredge, *Captivating: Unveiling the Mystery of a Woman's Soul* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, Inc, 2005), primarily pages 70-107.

⁵ *Ibid.*, dust jacket, back cover.

cursed with heartache and emptiness by the loving purpose of God, in order to compel them back to himself for their help and healing. Those who turn to Christ will find him to be the passionate Romancer of their hearts, and from this understanding their inherent beauty, which is a woman's essence, is free to be unveiled for the awakening of men and the benefit of humankind.

The Eldredges' Theological Presuppositions

John and Stasi Eldredge display an optimistic outlook on the nature of God, humanity, revelation and Scripture. God is primarily immanent, in that he is loving, knowable, and intimately involved in his creation. Along with his better-known masculine characteristics, he also displays what we view as feminine the characteristics of inherent beauty, desire for relationships, and passionate love. Jesus is the Healer of the wounded heart and Romancer of the soul: only he can heal and satisfy the humans he created, and it is his great desire to do so.

Human beings are created to be the image-bearers of God, and as such they reveal attributes of the divine nature even in a fallen world. Therefore, to examine the feminine nature is to gain insight into the heart and person of God.⁶ The sanctified Christian heart is inherently good, with hidden beauty the world is in need of. But the heart of every Christian has suffered internal and external attacks, leaving emotional scars that need the healing of Jesus before one can live a vibrant life and attract the fallen world to God as his image-bearer.

The Eldredges demonstrate amply their belief that revelation comes not just from scripture. God speaks to us and reveals himself through the beauty and power of his creation, attributes of the human nature, personal experiences, and the arts, especially movies that evoke inner longings revealing what we were created for. They accurately display his characteristics or his heart to us

⁶ Eldredge and Eldredge, *Captivating*, 30: "Eve—God's message to the world in feminine form—invites us to romance. Through her, God makes romance a priority of the universe. So God endows Woman with certain qualities that are essential to relationship, qualities that speak of God. She is inviting. She is vulnerable. She is tender. She embodies mercy. She is also fierce and fiercely devoted."

even within a fallen world. Throughout the book, these sources of revelation are referenced to shed light on the human condition, and are given equal, if not proportionally greater, weight than scripture.

Concerning scripture itself, the Eldredges believe it to be the “inspired, only, infallible, inerrant, authoritative Word of God.”⁷ The Bible is historically accurate, and is to be taken at face value by the reader as direct speech from the heart of God. As such, understanding accounts such as the Creation is important to understanding the current situation of the human heart and relationships. The attainment of the meaning of scripture is unquestioned, and is simple to deduce from various English translations. Therefore, further study into context, authorial intent and original languages is not necessary.

The Eldredges’ Hermeneutical Method

Having established the Eldredges’ background in counseling and Evangelical ministries, their purpose for and message in *Captivating*, and the presuppositions that underlie their writings, their premodern hermeneutical approach will be examined before turning to and evaluating specific examples of scriptural use.

An Overview of the Eldredges’ Premodern Approach

The interpretational approach of John and Stasi Eldredge is difficult to categorize, though similar approaches are rampant in popular Christian books and church small group studies. Perhaps the most accurate description is that it is the typical hermeneutic of well-meaning Christians who are untrained in and generally ignorant (if not disdainful) of the tools and

⁷ Ransomed Heart Ministries Statement of Faith [document on-line]; available from <http://www.ransomedheart.com/>; Internet; accessed 14 April, 2006.

boundaries of the historical-critical method. This hermeneutic exhibits strong premodern tendencies, which was the general interpretational approach in the Church for nearly 1500 years, and by that standard it generally falls within the boundaries of acceptable hermeneutics.

The premodern nature of the Eldredges' hermeneutic is evident in their trusting view of scripture as the direct voice of God to the reader, their inference of both literal and spiritual meanings, and their general disregard for original context, purpose or language. God is seen as the ultimate Author of scripture, and the element of human authorship receives little attention.⁸ In every way, *all* scripture is "God-breathed and useful" (2 Tim 3:16). This is especially evident in the fact that approximately 75% of the scriptures John and Stasi reference are from the Old Testament, a canon not easily applicable through modern hermeneutical methods. But whereas premodern exegetes viewed certain Old Testament texts as speaking *of* Christ or the Church, the Eldredges view them as speaking *to* their female readers.⁹ Also, their emphasis is less on the prophetic nature of these texts and more on their revelatory nature, using them as evidence of the heart of God and his ways of dealing with their readers.

Premodern exegetes found allegory to be the key to make obscure and generally inapplicable passages relevant to believers. When a passage could not be understood or applied literally, there was license for one to determine the "spiritual," or figurative, meaning behind it.¹⁰

⁸ Gerald Bray, *Biblical Interpretation, Past and Present* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 100; in contrast, Brian E. Daley, "Is Patristic Exegesis Still Useable? Some Reflections on Early Christian Interpretation of the Psalms," in *The Art of Reading Scripture*, ed. by Ellen F. Davis and Richard B. Hays (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Co, 2003), 72: "modern historical criticism—including the criticism of biblical texts—is *methodologically* atheistic God's providence in history, the divine inspiration of scriptural authors and texts, even the miracles narrated in the Bible are assumed to be private human interpretations of events, interior and nondemonstrable, rather than events or historical forces in themselves."

⁹ Daley, "Is Patristic Exegesis Still Useable?" 70-71. Here the individualistic mindset of our 21st century culture is evident.

¹⁰ Bray, *Biblical Interpretation, Past and Present*, 100; Kevin J. Vanhoozer, ed., "Patristic Biblical Interpretation," *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House Co, 2005), 569.

It is difficult, though, to categorize the Eldredges' interpretation as allegorical, for such a word denotes elaborate parallels conjured from but in complete disregard to the literal sense of the text.¹¹ Typology is also not appropriate, for though it is based on the literal sense, it applies more to the correspondence between the text and a historical event.¹² A figurative interpretation is perhaps more appropriate, for the Eldredges take passages such as Hosea 2:6-19 and, using the literal sense of the text, figuratively apply it as God's dealings with their reader's hearts.

Perhaps the most premodern attribute of the Eldredges' method is their lack of concern for the original context, purpose, or language behind their texts. As the Bible is viewed as a unified whole, masterminded by a single Author, no thought is given to discontinuity between canons or the concept of progressive revelation.¹³ As such, verses may be pulled from either canon, intermixed, and held as equal proof for a theological point. Because meaning is not found only in authorial intention, other meanings are not only possible, but equally valid.¹⁴ In this manner, Ezekial 29 is understood not as Ezekial's hyperbolic condemnation of the king of Tyre, but as descriptive of the nature and fall of Satan. The medieval Latin exegetes viewed the Vulgate as "an infallible text in itself and seldom made any effort to go behind it to the sources."¹⁵ Likewise, the Eldredges assume that standard English translations are sufficient for understanding and referencing Scripture to support their claims. The tool of word studies in original languages is only used once, and even then is set aside in favor of looking at that word's use in verses from an English translation.

¹¹ Vanhoozer, ed. "Allegory," *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible*, 34.

¹² David S. Dockery, *Biblical Interpretation, Then and Now: Contemporary Hermeneutics in the Light of the Early Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1992), 33.

¹³ Daley, "Is Patristic Exegesis Still Useable?" 74, 76.

¹⁴ David C. Steinmetz, "The Superiority of Pre-Critical Exegesis" *Theology Today* 37 (1980), 28.

¹⁵ Vanhoozer, "Medieval Biblical Interpretation," *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible*, 500.

Examples of the Eldredges' Use of Scripture

While John and Stasi Eldredge “pass” according to premodern exegetical standards, one cannot hold them guiltless of error. The following critique of their interpretation and application of scripture will use specific examples to highlight their common tendency to use scripture flippantly to support their hyperbolic claims.

Eclectic Assembly of Verses: The Nature of God

Going beyond the biblical premise that women, as the image-bearers of God, embody aspects of the nature of God, the Eldredges build their theology of God on characteristic feminine traits.¹⁶ While these traits may be true, and many of their scriptural references do offer support for such a view of God, as reviewer Donna Thoennes observes, “They use a bottom-up theology, looking to woman to tell us about God’s nature.”¹⁷

To support God’s “heart for relationship,” they quote John 17:3, Isaiah 49:15, Jeremiah 24:7 and Matthew 23:37 in rapid succession.¹⁸ Questions about progressive revelation aside, these particular verses offer support for God’s relational heart but fall short of the claim, “The most important thing that we ever learn about God—[is] that he yearns for relationship with us.”¹⁹ In

¹⁶ Eldredge and Eldredge, *Captivating*, 28: “The vast desire and capacity a woman has for intimate relationships tells us of God’s vast desire and capacity for intimate relationships. . . . If you have any doubt [that God is tenderhearted and yearns for relationship with us], simply look at the message he sent us in Woman.”

¹⁷ Donna Thoennes, “Who’s Captivating Whom? A Review of John and Stasi Eldredge’s *Captivating: Unveiling the Mystery of a Woman’s Soul*” [document on-line]; available from <http://www.cbmw.org/article.php?id=204>; Internet; accessed 14 April, 2006.

¹⁸ John 17:3: “Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent”; Isaiah 49:15: “Can a mother forget the baby at her breast and have no compassion on the child she has borne? Though she may forget, I will not forget you!”; Jeremiah 24:7: “I will give them a heart to know me, that I am the LORD. They will be my people, and I will be their God, for they will return to me with all their heart”; and Matthew 23:37: “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing”.

¹⁹ Eldredge and Eldredge, *Captivating*, 28.

John 17:3 γινώσκω does convey “interpersonal relationship which is experienced.”²⁰ In Jeremiah 24:7 God says of the exiles from Judah, “I will give them a heart to know me, that I am the LORD,” though a few verses later in 24:9 his words to the survivors in Jerusalem are far more vengeful. Isaiah 49:14-15 mentions the compassion of God upon the remnant of Israel, which is a theme in the prophets.²¹ But such compassion is rescinded for backsliders, according to Jeremiah 15:6. Finally, Jesus’ lament over Jerusalem in Matthew 23:37 conveys the deep desire of God for his people, but specific reference to relationship is lacking.²² God’s heart for relationship with humans is unquestioned, but that it is the “most important thing we ever learn about God” is easily disputed, especially in light of his equal transcendence and holiness.

The Eldredges’ most volatile claim is that God is “vulnerable to us, yearning to be desired.”²³ Theological error acknowledged, their verses for support also add up to the fallacy of *non sequitur*.²⁴ Jeremiah 29:13 says that the LORD will be found by those who seek him, and Mark 12:29-30 commands wholehearted love of God, but these say nothing about a hungering need in God for human love. In Luke 10:42, Jesus’ commendation of Mary for choosing him says nothing about vulnerability in divine love. While it is true that God jealously desires our love and devotion and displays grief at the hardened heart,²⁵ these emotions are solely of his own volition. As A.W. Tozer, whom John references in this section, says, “His interest in His creatures arises

²⁰ Louw and Nida 27.18.

²¹ Isa 54:8; Jer 12:15; Jer 30:18; Jer 33:26; Jer 42:12; Ezek 39:25; Zech 10:6.

²² More appropriate verses for conveying God’s heart for intimate relationship would have been Exodus 33:11 and James 2:23.

²³ Eldredge and Eldredge, *Captivating*, 29: “After years of hearing the heart-cry of women, I am convinced beyond a doubt of this: God wants to be loved. He wants to be a priority to someone.”

²⁴ D.A. Carson, *Exegetical Fallacies*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1996), 117-118.

²⁵ Gen 6:6; Exod 20:5; Deut 4:24; 1 Sam 15:11; Isa 63:10.

from His sovereign good pleasure, not from any need those creatures can supply nor from any completeness they can bring to Him who is complete in Himself.”²⁶ John denied any Open Theism in *Wild At Heart*²⁷ and in this book has toned down the “risk-taking” element of God’s nature, but such emphasis on vulnerability in the love of God has Open Theistic tones.²⁸ It is definitely a *non sequitur*, a nonbiblical assumption that cannot be made from these verses, nor any other.

On a slightly more positive note, the Eldredges reference Isaiah 6:3, Revelation 4:3, 6 and Psalm 27:4 as proof that beauty is essential to God.²⁹ These verses do offer support for God’s inherent beauty, but the Eldredges again wax hyperbolic to say that beauty “is the essence of God.”³⁰ It is certainly *an* essence, but to claim it is *the* essence goes beyond the proof given. In fact, most theologians would probably claim that love is the greatest essence of God.

Minimal Use of Scholarly Tools: Genesis 2:18

Throughout their book, as mentioned above, the Eldredges do not consult or reference scholarly tools such as word studies or authoritative commentaries. The single exception is their discussion on the word *ezer kenegdo* in Genesis 2:18. As any book purporting to be a Christian exposition of femininity should do, the Eldredges examine the purpose for the creation of Woman. John and Stasi’s thesis is that not only is Eve needed to accomplish the mission God gave both

²⁶ A.W. Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy: The Attributes of God and Their Meaning in the Christian Life* (San Francisco, CA: HarperCollins, 1961), 32.

²⁷ John Eldredge, *Wild At Heart* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2001), 32.

²⁸ Rut Etheridge III, “God In Man’s Image: A Critique of John Eldredge’s *Wild At Heart*” [document online]; available from <http://www.churchofthegoodshepherd.info/structuralimages/resourcesimages/WAHCritique.html>; Internet; accessed 14 April, 2006.

²⁹ Isaiah 6:3: “Holy, holy, holy is the LORD Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory”; Revelation 4:3: “And the one who sat there had the appearance of jasper and carnelian. A rainbow, resembling an emerald, encircled the throne”; Psalm 27:4: “One thing I ask of the LORD: that I may . . . gaze upon the beauty of the LORD”.

³⁰ Eldredge and Eldredge, *Captivating*, 34.

Adam and Eve to “be fruitful and conquer and hold sway,” but she is “*desperately* needed.”³¹ The next several pages explore the meaning of *ezer kenegdo*. They note that Hebrew scholar Robert Alter calls this phrase “notoriously difficult to translate.”³² While offering no other source information, it is likely that they are quoting Robert Alter’s commentary *The Five Books of Moses*. Commenting on the various English translations of “helper,” “companion,” or “help meet,” they ask, “Why are these translations so incredibly wimpy, boring, flat . . . disappointing? What is a help meet, anyway? . . . Alter is getting close when he translates it ‘sustainer beside him.’”³³ With the arrogant claim of knowing the meaning of this word better than a life-long Hebrew scholar, the Eldredges perform their own word study with mixed results.

Noting that *ezer* is used twenty other times in the Old Testament, they claim, “In every other instance the person being described is God himself, when you need him to come through for you *desperately*.”³⁴ Actually, the word *ezer* occurs nineteen times in the Old Testament, and only *twelve* times is it used of God, the other seven times referencing human or military assistance.³⁵ They quote Deuteronomy 33:26, 29 and Psalms 121:1-2, 20:1-2, 33:20, and 115:9-11 to conclude, “A better translation therefore of *ezer* would be ‘lifesaver.’” They use this as validation of the desire in women to be essential and give the example of Arwen’s brave rescue of Frodo in the film *The Fellowship of the Ring* to demonstrate what an *ezer kenegdo* is. Piper and Grudem disagree with the practice of assuming that “because a word has certain connotations in some places it must

³¹ Ibid., 31, referencing Alter’s translation.

³² Robert Alter, *The Five Books of Moses* (New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Co, 2004), 22; quoted in Eldredge and Eldredge, *Captivating*, 31.

³³ Eldredge and Eldredge, *Captivating*, 31.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Marsha M. Wilfong, “Genesis 2:18-24” *Interpretation* 42 (1988): 59. As the Eldredges do not source this material, it is impossible to say where these statistics are derived from.

have them in every place.”³⁶ Because in Genesis 2:19-20 Adam first seeks his *ezer* among the animals, they believe the context shows it should not be read as analogous of divine assistance. Wilfong and Wenham believe *ezer kenegdo* signifies a helper equal to man, “a deliverer to relieve the predicament of aloneness.”³⁷ The Eldredges abstain from any insinuation of female superiority, but in their desire to portray the significance women in line with their personal love for adventure, they overstate the biblical evidence by asserting a tenuous meaning for a word that is disputed.³⁸

Personal Application of Poetic/Prophetic Passages: *Canticles and Hosea 2:6-19*

The most common and noticeable characteristic of John and Stasi Eldredge’s hermeneutical method is their direct application of Old Testament poetic and prophetic passages apart from their historical backgrounds. Their entire book is filled with these passages used as the heart of God speaking to their individual readers, an understanding that is considered self-evident.³⁹ Two books in particular are referenced repeatedly and form the basis for the Eldredges’ argument: *Canticles* and *Hosea*.

For the vast majority of Christian history, *Canticles*, or *Song of Songs/Solomon*, has been interpreted as a metaphor of the mutual love between Christ and the Church or the individual

³⁶ John Piper and Wayne Grudem, *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood: A Response to Evangelical Feminism* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1991), 408-409.

³⁷ Marsha M. Wilfong, “Genesis 2:18-24,” 68.

³⁸ While their definition of “lifesaver” is probably accurate for the examples of divine assistance they quoted, their application of this term to Genesis 2:18 falls into the word-study fallacy of semantic anachronism according to Carson’s *Exegetical Fallacies*, 33-34. As the use of *ezer* in the Psalms occurred at least five hundred years after its use in Genesis, and is used of God, rather than humans, assigning similar meaning to Genesis 2:18 is tenuous at best.

³⁹ The following verses are quoted in full in *Captivating*: Ps 45:11; Cant 1:6, 15, 2:10, 4:9, 15; Isa 61:1-3, 62:1-5; Jer 30:16-17; Hos 2:6-7, 14, 16, 19; Zeph 3:17; Hag 2:9; Zech 9:16-17.

soul.⁴⁰ Most modern scholars will also view it as a recorded love song between Solomon and his bride, yet the premodern, spiritual interpretation has always remained popular.⁴¹ Interestingly, John disparages those who tame the theological metaphor to sanctified, divine love without the sensual nature of a literal interpretation (see footnote 49). Yet he also uses Canticles as a theological metaphor. The difference is that he fully attributes to Christ the sensual nature of the love portrayed in Canticles—to the holy consternation of not a few more conservative reviewers.⁴²

God longs to bring [romance] into your life himself. . . . He wants to heal us through his love to become mature women who actually *know* him. He wants us to *experience* verses like . . . ‘You have stolen my heart, my sister, my bride’ (Song 4:9). . . . He longs for *you*. You are the one that overwhelms his heart with just ‘one glance from your eyes’ (Song 4:9b). . . by your beautiful heart that, against all odds, hopes in him.⁴³

The Eldredges apply a similar interpretation to the passage of Hosea 2:6-19, an allegory which forms the basis for the main arguments in *Captivating*. Scholars note the great difficulty of interpreting Hosea, but all agree that Hosea’s tempestuous relationship with the adulterous Gomer forms a prophetic metaphor for God’s relationship with the idolatrous Israel in marital terms.⁴⁴ Hosea 2:1-5 describes the great unfaithfulness of Gomer/Israel; in response, Hosea/God will “block her path” and “wall her in,” hindering her from her adulterous pursuits and causing her to return to the husband she left (2:6-7). At that time, her husband will “allure her . . . lead her into

⁴⁰ Roland E. Murphy, *The Song of Songs*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 15, 34: Early reasons for this allegorical interpretation were the desires of the Church Fathers to “Christianize” Canticles, make it applicable to corporate or individual believers, and avoid the highly sexual nature of a literal interpretation.

⁴¹ Marvin H. Pope, *Song of Songs*, The Anchor Bible (New York: Doubleday, 1977), 89.

⁴² Donna Thoennes, “Who’s Captivating Whom?” vehemently rejects the notion that “our relationship with God [is] intended to be so sensually conceived” and Elaine Pratt, “A Review of *Captivating: Unveiling the Mystery of a Woman’s Soul* by John and Stasi Eldredge,” Council of Biblical Manhood and Womanhood, 13 Dec. 2005 [document on-line]; available from <http://www.cbmw.org/article.php?id=203>; Internet; accessed 14 April, 2006, calls it “not merely literary license but borderline blasphemy”!

⁴³ Eldredge and Eldredge, *Captivating*, 113, 120.

⁴⁴ Douglas Stuart, *Hosea-Jonah*, Word Biblical Commentary (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1987), 9; Francis I. Andersen and David Noel Freedman, *Hosea*, The Anchor Bible (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1980), 58-59.

the desert and speak tenderly to her” (2:14). She will be betrothed to him forever in “love and compassion,” know her spouse as “husband,” not “master,” and she will “sing as in the days of her youth” (2:15, 16, 19). John and Stasi apply this metaphor as descriptive of the state of women after the Fall—their readers. Women seek love and fulfillment from other fallible sources but find them incapable of filling their hearts. God, the faithful husband, purposes this so that they will turn to him, respond to his wooing, and find in him their healing, joy, romance and purpose.

Here especially the conflict between the premodern and modern hermeneutical standards is evident. By premodern standards the Eldredges properly apply the accepted spiritual meanings of these texts for “the knowledge of the love of Christ”—the goal of exposition.⁴⁵ By modern standards, the Eldredges have completely disregarded the historical context of these books to illegitimately apply them to the relationship between God and their readers.⁴⁶ Believing that the Church’s spiritual interpretation of Canticles for nearly two millennia is valid, I argue that the Eldredges’ interpretation and use of these passages are legitimate. First, these passages are historically known as metaphorical in their original contexts. Second, their portrayal of God (perhaps Christ) as a faithful husband and passionate bridegroom is repeatedly emphasized in both canons. Third, the purpose specifically found in Hosea 2, that of God’s loving desire to lead his wayward bride to repentance and a restoration of relationship, is one and the same with the Eldredges’ purpose for and use of this passage. Other poetic and prophetic passages have more questionable applications in *Captivating*, but these two key passages are used in a valid manner.

⁴⁵ Peter Stuhlmacher, *Historical Criticism and Theological Interpretation of Scripture*, trans. by Roy A. Harrisville (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), 31.

⁴⁶ Pratt, “A Review of *Captivating*.”

Prescriptive Use of Narratives: *Ruth*

In a strike against typical Evangelical expectations for women to be discreet, modest and abstain from any flirtatious behavior, John and Stasi encourage the “seduction” of the significant man in their reader’s life. John includes a very lengthy excerpt of his colorful explication of the story of Ruth joining Boaz at the threshing floor from *Wild At Heart*. In it he rejects any Victorian backpedaling from the sexual nature of Ruth’s meeting with Boaz. “There is no possible reading of this passage that is ‘safe’ or ‘nice.’ This is seduction pure and simple—and God holds it up for all women to follow when He not only gives Ruth her own book in the Bible but also names her in the genealogy.”⁴⁷ The validity of this inflammatory statement will be examined in two parts.

In reference to the first half, John is correct. In fact, most commentators interpret this passage as far more sexually explicit than even in John’s descriptive reading. Ruth’s action is similar to the prostitutes who frequented the threshing floors.⁴⁸ It is atypical for an honorable woman in that culture.⁴⁹ It is “risky.”⁵⁰ Yet, Ruth and Boaz remained sexually pure, as the author of Ruth emphasizes the integrity of these characters before and after this action.⁵¹ Commentators believe Ruth’s purpose is to “provide the motivation needed to prompt Boaz to act,” i.e., offer

⁴⁷ Eldredge and Eldredge, *Captivating*, 157.

⁴⁸ Daniel I. Block, *Judges, Ruth*, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1999), 685.

⁴⁹ Eldredge and Eldredge, *Captivating*, 157: “Yes, there are folks that’ll try to tell you that it’s perfectly common for a beautiful single woman ‘in that culture’ to approach a single man . . . and tuck herself under the covers. They’re the same folks who’ll tell you that the Song of Solomon is nothing more than a ‘theological metaphor referring to Christ and his bride.’ Ask ‘em what they do with passages like ‘your breasts are like clusters of fruit . . . I will take hold of its fruit’” (Song 7:7-8). That’s a Bible study, right?”

⁵⁰ K. Lawson Younger Jr., *Judges/Ruth*, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002), 459; Frederic Bush, *Ruth/Esther*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas, TX: Word Books, 1996), 156.

⁵¹ Younger, *Judges/Ruth*, 467; Bush, *Ruth/Esther*, 156.

marriage.⁵² All of this agrees with John’s statements. “Ruth takes a risk—a risk every woman knows—when she makes herself vulnerable and alluring to Boaz. She arouses him to play the man. *She awakens his desire to be the Hero.*”⁵³

As for the second half of John’s statement, there is a mixture of truth and error. John does not advocate single women to seduce their boyfriends in like manner.⁵⁴ Rather, he exhorts women to “invite, arouse, and maintain your personal integrity.”⁵⁵ Women should offer their beauty in a vulnerable yet wise way to encourage sluggish husbands or foot-dragging boyfriends to “play the man,” rather than resorting to nagging or groveling. It is true that the author of Ruth appears to commend this act, but whether he *recommends* it to all women in every age is another matter. It is true that wives should offer their bodies to their husbands (cf. 1 Cor 7:3-5), and perhaps the inclusion of stories like this, and the book of Canticles, is intended to balance hyper-prudishness based on the admonitions for modesty in the New Testament. But to say “God holds it up for all women to follow” is to fall into the fallacy of making descriptive narratives prescriptive. As MacArthur criticized John, “With so much of the Bible being narrative, almost any principle imaginable could be supported by confusing prescriptive and descriptive texts.”⁵⁶ He also rightly condemns John’s emphasis that this supposed principle of seduction is the primary message of Ruth.⁵⁷ While such behavior might be acceptable, even necessary, in some extreme circumstances, there is no evidence in the rest of Scripture that such behavior should be as

⁵² Bush, *Ruth/Esther*, 156.

⁵³ *Captivating*, 158.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 160.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 164.

⁵⁶ John MacArthur, ed., *Fools Gold? Discerning Truth in an Age of Error* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2005), 85.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 86.

standard as John expects it to be. And considering that rampant sexual immorality is a far greater problem than suppressed beauty in our churches, such a message could be safely applied to only a minute minority of female Christians.

Interpretation of Commonly Misinterpreted Passages

A few final, brief notes will be given on the Eldredges' handling of two commonly misinterpreted passages. In a chapter focused on the healing of a wounded heart, after prayers of repentance, they quote Revelation 3:20 as an invitation to allow Christ to work his healing. They acknowledge this verse is primarily known as an invitation to initial salvation, but they correct this widespread fallacy by stating, "The principle of this 'knocking and waiting for permission to come in' remains true well into our Christian life."⁵⁸ They rightly apply it to the hardened heart of a Christian, exhorting their readers to give Jesus permission to access to every area.

When addressing the factors that cause wounds to the feminine heart, they give a lengthy description of the history and nature of Satan, based on Ezekial 28:12-14. While this passage is typically understood as addressing Satan, no astute commentator will support this interpretation.⁵⁹ All commentators hold the context clearly indicates it is a hyperbolic condemnation of the king of Tyre and the Jewish exiles' trust in him.⁶⁰ Following the premodern interpretation of a passage's meaning apart from its historical and literary context, along with basic laziness to not check their facts, the Eldredges here perpetuate a common fallacy.

⁵⁸ Eldredge and Eldredge, *Captivating*, 99.

⁵⁹ Ian M. Duguid, *Ezekial*, The New International Version Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999), 348: "This passage has suffered from imaginative exegesis at the hands of the early church fathers, whose ideas have been given renewed currency in some contemporary expositions. . . . describing literally a heavenly conflict between God and the forces of evil. . . . Such an interpretation ignores the metaphorical context."

⁶⁰ Leslie C. Allen, *Ezekial 20-48*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas, TX: Word Books, 1990), 95-96; Moshe Greenberg, *Ezekial 21-37*, The Anchor Bible Commentary (NY: Doubleday, 1997), 590; Walter Zimmerli, *Ezekial 2*, Hermeneia (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1969), 95.

Final Evaluation

John and Stasi Eldredge's desire for broken, wounded women to turn to God and find healing from his love is commendable. *Captivating* is written from that counseling perspective and naturally portrays God as immanent, tender and loving. Numerous women testify that this book, since its release a year ago, has increased their love for the God who heals hearts and releases women to live as he created them to be. Rather than falling into conservative legalism or liberal feminism, they exquisitely reveal the beauty of male and female interrelations and offer one of the most attractive portrayals of true complementarianism to be found. But do all of these commendable aspects, including many more, justify their use of scripture?

Yes, according to premodern standards. They use it in accordance with Augustine's rule for correct exegesis: "When the expositor is filled with love for God and his neighbor."⁶¹ Like the Patristic exegetes, they are "primarily concerned with pointing out the meaning of scriptural passages for the hearers and for the present life of the church, not just as homiletic 'application' distinct from the text's original meaning, but as what one might call the text's authentic biblical meaning: its meaning as an organic part of the whole received complex of the word of God."⁶²

No, according to modern standards. The sanctity of scripture should never be sacrificed to serve theology, however attractive it may be. Their appalling disregard for literary and historical context and their ad hoc application of scripture shows that they use scripture to try to support their pre-formed theology, and reveals their view of scripture as little more authoritative than the movies and poetry they so frequently reference.

⁶¹ Peter Stuhlmacher, *Historical Criticism and Theological Interpretation of Scripture*, trans. by Roy A. Harrisville (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), 30.

⁶² Daley, "Is Patristic Exegesis Still Useable?" 78.

Both of these evaluations are true, and reveal the mixed nature of the Eldredges' hermeneutic. While their basic arguments remain within orthodox theology and offer a fresh perspective, their typical use of scripture to support their arguments in *Captivating* is unsubstantiated and irresponsible. At best, it sets a bad example for the proper use of Scripture for millions of readers, and at worst, as many of the Reformed tradition are quick to trumpet, it leads to heresy. With simple access to vast libraries of user-friendly books devoted to correct exegesis of these passages, which the premoderns did not have, John and Stasi have little excuse for using passages out of context or ignoring basic exegetical tools such as word studies and good commentaries. I am not willing to condemn the book outright for these problems, believing that much truth and relevant theology can be derived from it. However, the Eldredges should be held to a high standard for biblical hermeneutics because of their vast readership. Their use of scripture less than acceptable. One hopes that John, just as he has corrected some of his more extreme views in *Wild At Heart* in this book, will humbly seek more training in exegesis to handle scripture in his future books with greater responsibility and reverence, which will help them become all the more *captivating*.

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