

Who's Captivating Whom? A Review of John and Staci Eldredge's Captivating: Unveiling the Mystery of a Woman's Soul

Donna Thoennes, PhD

John and Staci Eldredge recently wrote *Captivating: Unveiling the Mystery of a Woman's Soul*, and already the female counterpart to John's best-selling *Wild at Heart* promises to be as popular as the version targeting men. The high school and college women in my life are carrying it with them. Just what is it about this book that quickly captivates young women?

Three potential reasons come to mind. Perhaps it is the clear message that God is accessible and knowable. They emphasize the immanence of God who is personal and involved in the daily lives of his people. Surely this is comforting to the reader.

Perhaps readers are also refreshed by the authors' emphasis on the wonderful, unique creation that is woman. There is no hint in this work of blurring the differences between the genders. On the contrary, women are special, beautiful, and responsible to reflect certain aspects of God's character. In an age when distinction between the genders is unpopular and the idea that the Creator may have intended these distinctions is antiquated, this book bucks the cultural trends.

Further still, readers may feel a measure of camaraderie with Staci as she reveals examples from her life of disappointments, struggles, and sins. She provides hope for those who have struggled with the issues that, sadly, are common among women, affirming that God can and will heal relationships and emotional pain. Many women will surely find an emotional connection with her as she speaks of their experience while sharing her own.

While these positive points draw readers in, some caution is necessary before recommending it to the women in your life. When compared with the Biblical view of God and humanity, the work offers a low view of God and a heightened view of women. For instance, instead of beginning with an understanding of God that comes from His Word, they observe the women in their lives and claim that they want to be romanced, play an irreplaceable role in a great adventure, and unveil beauty. While these tendencies may be true of women, the authors' conclusion proves problematic. They conclude that these desires are true of God as well. Their theological method begins with human experience rather than God's revelation of himself. This "theology from below" invariably leads to distorted, human-centered conclusions.

One of the central points of the book is represented by this statement: "This may be the most important thing we ever learn about God – that he yearns for relationship with us .

.. He yearns for us. He cares. He has a tender heart.” (28) They claim that the prevailing view of God fails in its breadth. They aim to remedy what they deem an incorrect view of God “as strong and powerful, but not as needing us, vulnerable to us, yearning to be desired” (29). They believe a proper view of God includes all of these. As a means of defense against those who do not agree that God yearns to be desired, the authors claim “if you have any doubt about that, simply look at the message he sent us in *Woman*” (28). It appears that rather than turning to Scripture or the synthetic work of theologians, the Eldredges want to begin with woman to understand the complexities of God’s nature. This becomes more clear in the statement “After years of hearing the heart-cry of women, I am convinced beyond a doubt of this: God wants to be loved” (29). One would expect the sentence to say that after counseling women, the authors are convinced that women want to be loved. Somehow the needs of women become the needs of God in their worldview.

The authors have flipped the process of understanding who God is and who we are. Because women are made in God’s image, they are like him and represent him. Therefore, they can look to God to infer things about themselves, but they should not assume that conclusions can be drawn in the opposite direction. Just because we have certain tendencies or desires does not necessitate that God shares those. God is high and lifted up, he is transcendent as well as immanent. In Psalm 50:21 God corrects man with a strong accusation “you thought that I was one like yourself, but now I rebuke you and lay the charge before you.” We must look to God to learn who we are, not the other way around.

This method of drawing theological conclusions is flawed and therefore results in flawed views of both God and woman. We must guard against any view of God that is unworthy of Him. While an idea of God may subtly veer from truth and may appeal to our emotions, we must discern the flawed method which surely has profound ramifications. Not only does our view of God determine the priorities and trajectory of our lives, but our very purpose is to know Him. To know him, we must seek him where he has most clearly revealed himself.

As the authors’ starting point is faulty, it proves difficult to salvage the rest of their message. Surely, God is a relational being. We do not have to look any further than the Trinity and its perfect fellowship to know this about Him. At the same time, one of His attributes that has most powerfully provided peace and courage for believers, has been God’s independence and self-sufficiency. This doctrine implies that God has no unmet needs, is independent from his creation, provides for it, and has authority and control over it. Further, in his omnipotence he cannot be harmed by outside forces. In his omniscience he is not vulnerable from something outside himself over which he has no control or of which he has not foreseen. In the Bible, God is often praised for being different from his creation in this way – he is not needy as we are and that is reason for

our trust and our worship. In Psalm 50 God asserts his independence by declaring, "I have no need of a bull from your stall or of goats from your pens, for every animal of the forest is mine, and the cattle on a thousand hills. I know every bird in the mountains, and the creatures of the field are mine. If I were hungry I would not tell you, for the world is mine, and all that is in it (Ps 50:9-12). He is saying, I have no needs that you can meet! Paul distinguishes the true God from pagan gods in Acts 17:24-25; "The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by hands. And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything, because he himself gives all men life and breath and everything else." He is wonderfully different from us in his self-sufficiency.

Another unworthy conception of God is revealed in the Eldredges' assertion that a woman's need to be romanced is an indication of God's desire to be romanced. Speaking of God's heart, the authors posit, "What would it be like to experience for yourself that the truest thing about his heart toward yours is not disappointment or disapproval but deep, fiery, passionate love?" (113) What the Eldredges mean when they speak of the loving relationship between God and a believer, is a romantic one. They instruct the reader, "We must choose to open our hearts again so that we might hear his whispers, receive his kisses"(116) which come in the form of sunsets and swaying trees. They encourage the reader to not worry they might be rejected, for "He knows what takes your breath away, knows what makes your heart beat faster"(116). God, as our Lover, "Wants to be known as only lovers can know each other" (120) . . . "you are the one who takes his breath away" (121). They write that each woman is "made for romance, and the only one who can offer it to you consistently and deeply is Jesus" (125). They suggest imagining yourself in a romantic scene with Jesus. They offer five romantic movie scenes and then suggest that you "put yourself in the scene as the Beauty, and Jesus as the Lover." (114). They base this conclusion on the passage in Matthew 9:15 when Jesus calls himself the Bridegroom, "the most intimate of all the metaphors Jesus chose to describe his love and longing for us, and the kind of relationship he invites us into" (114). Is our relationship with God intended to be so sensually conceived? Scripture tells us that "God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Rom 5:8). Creator and creature demonstrate love in necessarily different ways. His sacrifice on our behalf communicates His love for us and our obedience most clearly communicates our love for Him. This is radically different from the romantic love between a beauty and a smitten lover!

Beyond the low view of God, another major misconception of the work is its inflated view of women. The Eldredges point to women as the pinnacle of God's creation. "She is the crescendo, the final, astonishing work of God" (25). To aid the reader in personalizing this, the authors suggest taking in a beautiful vista and declaring "The whole, vast world is incomplete without me. Creation reached its zenith in me" (25). It may be tempting to empathize with this attempt to build a woman's self-esteem, but

the sins of pride and self-centeredness are only encouraged with this declaration. A more appropriate response would be to praise God rather than self after gazing upon his handiwork. Such instances should humble us as we realize God's goodness in choosing us and bestowing his grace upon us, not because his creation was lacking, but because he is good.

Throughout the book the Eldredges' look to movies that attract women as evidence of her deepest desires. This is further confirmation of their inflated view of women. When they raise a new issue, they suggest "think of the movies you love . . ." (9), as proof of what the reader really values. Unfortunately, many of us are intrigued by movies that are blatantly contrary to Christian values. The simple fact that a romantic movie scene resonates with our hearts does not suggest that the scene is worthy of our desire. Rather, because we are fallen, we need to exercise caution when we find our hearts piqued with interest at something inconsistent with what is true or right. While there is truth to be found in general revelation, we must always measure that against the special revelation of Scripture.

The authors suggest that the central question that steers a woman's life is *am I lovely?* They answer, "Our God finds you lovely. . . The King is enthralled by your beauty. He finds you captivating" (146). Further, they state that beauty indwells every woman. It is her essence: "The essence of a woman is Beauty. She is meant to be the incarnation – our experience in human form – of a Captivating God." This beauty is "a soulish beauty" with physical implications. What woman doesn't want to read that her very essence is beauty? The idea may appear encouraging at first glance, but a woman's essence is not really beauty. Rather, her essence, or the central core of her being which gives her immense worth, the very image of God in her.

The Eldredges may desire to encourage women by identifying their beauty, but even more they want to inspire women to *unveil their beauty*. One explanation they offer is that unveiling beauty "just means unveiling our feminine hearts" (147) which is a woman's greatest expression of faith, hope, and love. Again, the authors demonstrate their inflated their view of human nature. The act of unveiling our beauty, or revealing our heart, may not bless the world and express faith, hope, and love. Rather it might, on occasion, horrify us and our loved ones by the sin that we still seek to overcome through our sanctification. It is foolishness to conceive of everything in a woman's heart as good and beautiful. That perfection of the heart is the draw of heaven and every godly woman longs for it, rather than longing to have her self-centered question answered this side of heaven.

Thankfully, God loves us out of his own loving character, not because we are lovely and incite that love. This should be a relief to us; his image is imparted to us and when he chooses us we are his children to be loved forever because of the mediating work of

Christ and regardless of anything in ourselves. Women may think that they want to be lovely in and of themselves, but true security lies in the truth that we are loved in Christ whether we look or act lovely or choose to unveil our beauty. The truth is that we are loved and we need not ask God if we are lovely. God sets his affection on us through Christ; He is the Initiator not the Responder in our loving relationship.

It is easy to see how the Eldredges' conceptions of God and women could develop. Out of a desire to be loved and known and appreciated for who we are, we can create a god who appreciates us and responds to us and yearns for us. But is this the God of the Bible, or the God of our felt needs? Our God is relational, the Bible says he has emotions and he responds to our moral status. Certainly his relational nature is evident in Jesus. But he does not need us! The Eldredges seem to assume that if God doesn't need us, he doesn't really love us. But God's love is more secure and provides more hope and stirs more obedience when it grows from his eternal, unchanging, loving character.

Isaiah 57:15 answers the cry of a woman's heart for intimacy with God: "For this is what the high and lofty One says-- he who lives forever, whose name is holy: 'I live in a high and holy place, but also with him who is contrite and lowly in spirit, to revive the spirit of the lowly and to revive the heart of the contrite.'" God tells his people that intimacy will result when their estimation of him increases. When God is high and lifted up, women are humbled as a result, and then he draws near and revives the heart of the contrite. The Eldredges' effort to lift women high and lower God does not result in a contrite heart or intimacy with him. The reader must, instead, keep God lifted high and herself humble if she is going to know her Creator deeply.

Let us wisely alter our inquiry and devote our efforts toward knowing God and answering the question: "*Isn't God lovely?*" May this pursuit captivate us and may the answer cause us to praise him. Surely, then, we will be less concerned with being captivating ourselves.