

## **Captivating: Unveiling the Mystery of a Woman's Soul**

John and Stasi Eldridge (Nelson Books, 2005)

What does it mean to be a woman? According to the authors of this book, 'every little girl has dreams of being rescued by her hero, of being swept away into a great adventure, of being the beautiful princess'. Every woman is waiting for a knight on a white charger to come and rescue her.

And the cover of this book says it all: an ethereal figure of a woman, like one of the women in *Lord of the Rings*, with a magical castle in the background. John Eldridge is also the author of *Wild at Heart*, a book for men which, like this book, has been a runaway best-seller. And the theme of *Wild at Heart* is complementary: 'in the heart of every man is a desperate desire for a battle to fight, an adventure to live, and a beauty to rescue'.

There are some good emphases in the book: the stress on commitment to Christ, the danger of expecting your spouse to meet all your primary needs, when 'only God can tell you who you are'. The authors are right in perceiving that many women never find their heart's desire, their role, the life God is calling them to live. The question is, does this book send women in the right direction to find what they are looking for?

I have to admit that the attraction of these books is a mystery to me. I did not find *Captivating* particularly well written. And the co-authorship means it is not always clear who is writing. There is little theology explored (but much assumed), and the book uses a variety of often strange quotations and sources: songs, literature and films. To substantiate his statement about men, John Eldridge writes: 'I want you to think of the films men love, the things they do with their free time, and especially the aspirations of little boys, and see if I am not right on this.'

In chapter 3, 'Haunted by a question', the authors argue that little boys and little girls ask one fundamental question. But they are different questions: 'Little boys want to know, *Do I have what it takes?*... Little girls want to know, *Am I lovely?*' (p 46). But is such gender essentialism Scriptural? And is it true that 'the essence of a man is Strength' and 'the essence of a woman is Beauty'?

For me the book harked back to the days when some middle-class women had the luxury of being stay at home housewives, occupied with ministry to other women, and supporting their husband who did the real work. Arranging flowers, applying more lipstick, being beautiful – and being 'romanced' by Jesus and their husband: is this really the life of a woman?

At one point Stasi refers to a time when she felt under spiritual attack. 'As women we long for someone strong to stand between us and the vicious assaults of our Enemy... John began to take his authority over me as my husband and forcefully commanded the minions of Satan to release me...' (p129). Stasi thus puts her husband between herself and God. But nowhere in Scripture are women encouraged to abandon their personal responsibility in this way, and ironically, the chapter opens with a

quotation from Isaiah 63:1 as an illustration of 'our Warrior God, a God who comes through for us.' If Stasi knows this God, why does she need her husband to command Satan on her behalf?

The theology behind such assumptions is largely unexamined, but comes to the fore in several places in the book. The authors use stories and references to biblical women: Deborah, Mary and Martha, the women at the resurrection and others; but while their role in the biblical story is affirmed, this takes second place to the notion that men are active and women are passive.

Towards the end of the book, the 'role of women' is discussed, and one of the authors writes: 'Many of the Scriptures on the *Role* [sic] of women in the church are a reflection of God's concern for a woman's protection and spiritual covering...Issues of headship and authority are intended for the *benefit* of women, not their suppression' (p211). But the Bible contains no such concept of the 'role' of either women or men; neither does the Bible use the word 'headship', while the word 'authority' presumably alludes to 1 Timothy 2:12, where according to Tom Wright and others, Paul's primary point is that women should learn – in order to be teachers of others.

There must be something better than this for women to aspire to. And there is! For both men and women, surely the fundamental question is this: 'What does God want me to do with my life?' And many little boys and little girls dream of great adventures, of making a difference for God.

We live in the real world, away from talk of Cinderella and Harrison Ford. We don't need to regress to this medieval romanticism of knights and princesses. We are *all* called to recognize who we are in Christ, and to use our gifts to serve him. Reading the Bible and discovering who he wants us to be is much more exciting than watching a movie; God has a higher purpose for us as men and women than emulating James Bond or Éowyn.

I would recommend reading this book with your theological antennae up! Is its attractiveness, and the mystique of gender essentialism, scriptural or cultural? How does its emphasis on romance, roles and outer beauty measure up to what the New Testament teaches about abundant life in Christ?

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