

Advance Praise for *The Gospel according to Twilight*

“Suspicious of institutionalism, yet open to the spiritual; seeking peace and reconciliation, yet insensitive to the abuse many women face; valuing self-giving love, yet celebrating materialism; the paradoxical nature of the Twilight saga is helpfully explored in Elaine Heath’s winsome addition to the best-selling Gospel according To series. Here is a good read for fans and inquirers alike.”

Robert K. Johnston, author of *Reel Spirituality: Theology and Film in Dialogue* and Professor of Theology and Culture, Fuller Theological Seminary

“Eager to understand the Twilight phenomenon? Elaine Heath offers a generous appreciation of its vision of a peaceable kingdom where vampires, werewolves, and humans cooperate. For Twi-hard fans, Heath also offers a constructive critique of the gender roles and violence looming beneath Twilight’s shimmering surfaces. *The Gospel according to Twilight* is smart, accessible, and insightful.”

Craig Detweiler, Center for Entertainment, Media, and Culture, Pepperdine University

“Anyone interested in the power of popular culture to shape the hearts and minds of the next generation ought to read Elaine Heath’s *The Gospel according to Twilight: Women, Sex, and God*. Her critical reading of the Twilight series through a Christian, feminist lens makes its positive impact clear and accessible for readers of Twilight, pastors, preachers, teachers, and parents. It also makes its negative impact clear and accessible. Heath, a theologian, evangelism professor, pastor, and self-described “lover of good stories,” does the Twilight saga justice at the same time that she critiques its glamorization of gender stereotypes with their potential for violence and abuse. She portrays the positive themes of the book, the ways in which sacrifice, redemption, social critique, justice, and compassion shine through its plot and characters. At the same time she shines a critical light into what lurks in the shadows of Twilight: a glorification of female submission and a seductive portrayal of sexual violence. To top it all off, Heath writes with an elegance and edge that make her book as much of a page-turner as the series on which it is based.”

Alyce M. McKenzie, Professor of Homiletics,
Perkins School of Theology

“In this captivating work, Elaine Heath writes a sustained, theological reflection on the Twilight novels. Not content to merely celebrate or condemn Stephenie Meyer’s stories in a simplistic manner, Heath understands the characters and the stories on their own terms before putting them in conversation with the gospel. Clearly, Heath has done her homework. On the critical side, Heath writes about the difficult portrayal women receive in Twilight and how these characters’ actions are not consistent with the Christian life. But through compelling portraits of Bella, Edward, and the Cullens, she reveals what Twilight might positively reveal about family, desire, love, and self-sacrifice. Delving deeper into theological themes, she reflects on the Trinity, the kingdom of God, salvation, and finally eschatology, all within the world of Twilight. Her weaving of gospel themes within the Twilight story itself is inspiring and gives further insight both to the books and to a contemporary understanding of the gospel itself. This is an engaging, creative read that is timely for those looking to connect their faith to popular culture.”

Ryan Bolger, Associate Professor of Church in
Contemporary Culture, Fuller Theological Seminary,
and coauthor of *Emerging Churches: Creating Christian
Community in Postmodern Cultures*

The Gospel according
to Twilight

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Women, Sex, and God

Elaine A. Heath

SPCK

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For Holly

Contents

Introduction	ix
Part One: An Eclipse of Women: Family, Sex, Gender, and Power in Twilight	1
1. The Good Family	3
2. I'm Only Half of Me: The Dread of Being Single in Twilight	18
3. Is Twilight Bad News for Girls?	36
Part Two: The Gospel according to Twilight: God, Spirituality, and Faith	51
4. Thirst: Forbidden Fruit in Forks	53
5. Born Again	69
6. Golden Eyes and Granite Flesh: The Meaning of Salvation	89
7. Those Who Must Be Obeyed: The Volturi and the Corruption of Power	106
8. Engaging the Powers: The Reconciliation of All Things	121
Guide for Reflection and Discussion	134
Acknowledgments	140
Notes	141
Index	147

Introduction

My daughter, an engineering graduate student, had scarcely gotten into the car with her suitcase when she thrust a book into my hands. *Twilight*.

“Mom, you should read this,” she said.

“Vampires?” I asked. Really? I had better things to do over Christmas break, and I was tired.

“Seriously, you will love it,” she insisted. I noticed the Eve motif in the cover art, with a young woman’s hands emerging from the darkness, holding an apple.

“Tell me more,” I said. I hadn’t paid much attention to this book, although I had heard it was number one on the *New York Times* best-seller list. A movie had just come out, too. I flipped it over and skimmed the back cover. Maybe she was right. I was going to be teaching a course on the gospel and popular culture after Christmas break. Should I include something about *Twilight*?

When my other daughter arrived home for the holidays, a similar conversation took place. Over the next few days, their trips to the bookstore yielded the remaining three installments of the *Twilight* saga, which both daughters consumed eagerly. The books grew into a dark tower on the coffee table, generating comments from friends who came to visit. Everyone, it seemed, was reading these novels. My daughters are as different as can be, one an engineer and one a musician. Both are strong young women with feminist sensibilities. They aren’t into romance novels, but like millions of other intelligent young adults, they devoured the Harry Potter books. Was the *Twilight* series like Harry Potter? Was it like our family favorites, *The Hobbit* and *Lord of the Rings*?

Finally I couldn't take it any more. Early one morning while everyone else slept in, I snuck off with *Twilight* and a pot of coffee. Hours later I emerged, enlightened. I now understood why my daughter had said I would want to read it. Tucked into the pages of these thick, vampiric novels were most of the basic questions of systematic theology; all the issues involved in evangelism in postmodern culture; and many dynamics involving gender, power, and the church. I am a theologian. I teach evangelism. I love great stories. I was hooked.

What Is Twilight?

By the time I finished the last volume, I could hardly wait to prepare a lecture on the gospel according to *Twilight*. Heck, I could do a whole series of lectures! No wonder girls everywhere adore this story—it engages all the emotional, physical, and spiritual awakenings that are common to young women. Stephenie Meyer gets it. Bella is, in so many ways, Everygirl.

The story goes like this: Edward Cullen and his family are “vegetarian” vampires who practice self-control (drinking animal blood rather than human) out of a sense of obligation to the greater good of the world. Although he appears to be about seventeen, Edward is actually decades older, his countenance having been frozen in time when he was made a vampire in 1918. Edward's adoptive vampire father, Carlisle, is a physician in the small town of Forks, Washington. When Isabella (“Bella”) Swan, the seventeen-year-old daughter of the divorced sheriff of Forks, comes to live with her father, she meets the Cullen family. Soon Edward and Bella fall in love. Through many harrowing adventures, Bella, Edward, and other characters wrestle with their deepest questions about God, the meaning of life, and the redeeming power of love. (Spoiler alert: if you read beyond this page you're going to get some of the most exciting plot twists from the books.)

Like J. K. Rowling, author of the Harry Potter series, Stephenie Meyer was a new, unknown author when she attempted to publish her unusual vampire romance. After rejections from fourteen

publishers (who are now likely kicking themselves), her manuscript for *Twilight* was accepted by Little, Brown, and Company. Four years later the saga had sold over 53 million copies worldwide, with translation rights sold in forty-three countries; to date over a hundred million copies of the series have been sold. The final volume, *Breaking Dawn*, broke publishing records when it sold 1.3 million copies the first day it was released in 2008.¹ The first three *Twilight* movies grossed \$1.75 billion in global box office receipts.²

Stephenie Meyer is a Mormon, a fact that amazes many commentators who like to refer to her as “a Mormon housewife.” Neither Mormons nor housewives should be capable of publishing wonders, it would seem. But Meyer’s theological formation and her work as a mother and homemaker are part of the reason she captures so brilliantly the imaginations of girls everywhere. Because she has so much influence with young women, I wanted to explore in depth just what is going on theologically in these books. Is the gospel according to *Twilight* good news for girls and women? Is it consistent with Christian faith?

The Gospel according to *Twilight*

As the day drew near for me to present my first lecture on the gospel according to *Twilight*, I gathered a few extra goodies to help. A short film segment would be important since I imagined students probably had not read the book. We would watch the famed “meadow scene,” a watershed romantic moment in the book and the film. At the grocery store check-out line I found heart-shaped candies that said, “I Heart Edward” and “Bite Me.” A bowl of juicy apples? Definitely.

I began class by asking how many people had read *Twilight*. The women looked around sheepishly, slowly raising their hands. I had seminary students whose book bags were filled with Augustine, Wesley, Tillich, and *Twilight*. I realized I’d been wrong in thinking that my students wouldn’t already be familiar with the series—some of them were already diehard fans or were

surrounded by others who were. One of the men admitted his daughters were crazy about the series. A youth pastor nodded. The girls in his youth group were fanatical, too, he reported. They told him, “Edward is hot,” or “I’m on Team Jacob.”

There wouldn’t be time in one class to cover all the themes of the series, so I gave a brief overview, then narrowed the focus to the Adam and Eve subtext in the love story between Edward and Bella. The creation and fall narratives of Genesis are found everywhere in popular culture, something our class had examined the previous week. A woman enticing a man with an apple is one of the most common motifs. We had seen this image in fine art, television programs, and advertisements for everything from plumbing to perfume.

As we watched the meadow scene, I noticed how engrossed the students were in the story. When Edward told Bella she was his own brand of heroin, the class roared with laughter. Someone shouted, “Great pick up line!” A lively discussion followed as we looked at images of gender, power, and seduction in *Twilight* that deliberately play on the Genesis narrative.

I highlighted the good news and bad news of this part of the story, especially for women. The undisputable good news is that life is sacred for Bella, for the vampires who choose not to drink her blood, and for several other characters. This is true whether one reads the story through Catholic, Orthodox, Protestant, or Mormon lenses.

Then things get tricky. When read through a traditional, patriarchal Christian lens, which is true for a vast number of readers, Bella and Edward look just like Adam and Eve in misogynist readings of Genesis. The beautiful and seductive Eve/Bella entices a perfect but vulnerable Adam/Edward with forbidden fruit—in this case, her own body and blood. Viewed in this way, *Twilight* becomes indistinguishable from many other pop culture examples such as plumbing ads.

The morally superior Adam/Edward resists her for a long time but finally caves. Who can blame him? He may be a vampire, but he is a man. But first they must get married, even though Bella, eighteen by this point in the saga, doesn’t want to. *Eighteen!*

What century is this? In fact, elements of the relationship between Edward and Bella make the hair stand up on feminist Christian necks, especially when you add in the bit where Bella scarcely survives the violence of her wedding night. Though broken and bruised the next morning, she begs for more. This part of the story is terrible news for girls and women—unless you read it through another lens, such as Stephenie Meyer’s. The Eve story has an entirely different meaning in LDS theology, with Eve as a moral heroine who sacrifices her life so that others can live—a theme we’ll explore in more detail in chapter 4.

What is going on here? Is Bella a Christ figure, offering her body and blood for others’ salvation? Or is she a sex-hungry temptress who’s willing to go to hell if she can just have her guy? Is Bella fallen or redemptive or both?

The Genesis subtext can be read in several ways, all quite different—which is exactly why youth pastors, parents, and readers themselves need to pay attention. Like Harry Potter, the *Twilight* series has the potential to help readers bend toward the Light, especially if they are helped to think theologically about what they are reading. What is the meaning of salvation? Are we saved by being good and doing good works, or is salvation about grace? Is heaven only in the hereafter, or do we begin to live in heaven while we’re still on earth? What about hell? Is it real, is it a place, and if so, who goes there?

And speaking of religion, even though Edward insists that they get married for moral reasons and out of concern for Bella’s soul, Bella doesn’t care about God or heaven. Edward is her heaven. That’s what she tells Carlisle, who strongly believes in God. The vampires are far more religious than the humans in this story. They are, as indicated by the playful title of Beth Felker Jones’s book *Touched by a Vampire*, almost angelic. The vampires believe God exists, and they make moral choices based partly on their hope for a good reward in eternity. While the characters do not claim to be religious and in many ways are critical of organized religion, they are spiritual, and they think and talk about theological themes.

For that reason evangelism is also at the heart of the saga. In many ways the *Twilight* saga gives voice to the questions and

frustrations of millions of “spiritual but not religious” young adults today. Anyone who cares about evangelism should take note. Within these pages we find wonderful social critiques, especially in regard to racial reconciliation, religious exclusivism, and political and religious oppression. While most of the applause for *Twilight* from interested religious folk has been directed toward the sexual abstinence theme (and Lord knows we need help in this department), I think the strongest Christian messages in the story have to do with justice and peace. The books also delve into the role of desire in spirituality. Despite significant problems with gender and abuse themes, which we will discuss in part 1 of this book, the *Twilight* narrative is a captivating story in which theology plays an important role.

I Listened to Every Word

About a month after my class on the gospel according to *Twilight* I had the privilege of preaching at our seminary chapel service for graduating seniors. While praying about the topic of my sermon, I thought about the central role that desire plays in how we live our lives and whether we are faithful to our call. I wanted to preach a sermon that would help graduates think about desire and vocation. How should I talk about desire, I wondered? Should I use a sermon illustration from Plato about reason, appetite, and will?

Suddenly I remembered the cover for *Twilight* and the vigorous discussion in my class. I would talk about Edward and Bella. A few days later I stood in the pulpit surveying the packed chapel. I noticed the dean and some other faculty close to the front. What would they think of my vampire plans? Scattered throughout the pews were young women, some of them students, some graduates, and some there to celebrate the graduation of a loved one. It was time to begin.

“Vampires don’t really have scary fangs,” I began. “That is an old wives’ tale. According to Edward, who ought to know.” Some of the young women snapped to attention. “Edward is a vampire,” I continued, “the main squeeze in the huge pop culture

phenomenon, *Twilight*. Edward says that everything about vampires is designed to entice their victims through *desire*. So *real* vampires are beautiful, handsome, athletic, exotic, fragrant, delicious . . . irresistible. What is this force called desire?" I asked. The young women leaned forward, waiting.

I paused, noticing that one of the older people in the audience looked alarmed. Why was the seminary professor preaching about vampires? What kind of school was this? Glancing at the dean I noticed the corners of his mouth hinting at a smile. I continued through the rest of the sermon. Desire for the Lord will take us through thick and thin, I preached. Love will empower us to do things that duty and fear cannot. If our desire for God is cultivated, everything else will follow as it should.

At the close of the service a group of young women rushed up, grinning from ear to ear. "I listened to every word of your sermon," one said. All her friends nodded. "I usually don't like sermons," she added, "but as soon as you mentioned Edward I knew it was going to be great!"

Whether it was great I do not know. What has become very clear to me, however, is the power of popular culture to shape our imaginations and our hearts. A great story, even one about vampires, can open us to the influence of the Holy Spirit in ways that a theological statement cannot.

In this book I offer a critical exploration of the major theological themes found in the *Twilight* saga.³ I am reading the texts as a feminist theologian, a pastor, and a lover of good stories. I am also reading as someone who cares deeply about the spiritual formation and well-being of girls and women. While I have taken into account some of the things others are saying about *Twilight*, and I have surveyed nearly two hundred young women and girls who have read the series, this book is my own set of ruminations. It is my hope that this volume might help youth pastors, campus ministers, students of religion and popular culture, and especially the readers of *Twilight* to critically engage the gospel the saga presents. Although some aspects of the series ought to alarm all of us, there is much in these hefty novels that is delicious.

Part One

An Eclipse of Women

Family, Sex, Gender, and Power in Twilight
