

# Showing the Truth

BY LAURA K. SIMMONS

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**A**nyone who's been a care-giver for another person—a small child, an ailing spouse, or an elderly parent—understands the difficulty of free will. Steadfastly refusing to coerce his creation, God made women and men with the power to make decisions for themselves—decisions for ill or good. For God as a parent, it must be painful to watch the poor choices we make, but that pain is part of the creative process.

Dorothy L. Sayers—novelist, poet, playwright, essayist, and translator—understood very well that humans made in God's image are inherently creative beings. Indeed, our primary vocation is to create. In a 1955 series on sacred plays, she wrote that playwrights, of all artists, are best acquainted with God's creative process, because after a playwright creates a story and characters, she must entrust them into the hands of other people to enact. When writing about her mysteries, Sayers once mentioned that Lord Peter Wimsey arrived, already in character, to apply for the position of detective in her novels. When she moved from writing novels to plays, not only did she have to contend with characters intruding on their own stories, but also with the actors who would incarnate those characters!

Yet Sayers loved her work in the theater. She was very involved in the production of her plays for radio and stage: haggling over getting just the right director, helping create costumes and scenic design elements, and attending rehearsals. She even wrote a short spoof of one of her plays, *The*

*Zeal of Thy House*, to invite the cast to dinner, calling it “A Meal in My House.”

Sayers saw in the theatrical community a picture of what the church could be: a group of people dedicated to a common cause, each member working out of his or her gifts, coming together to shape a story into something it could only become through their combined efforts—and thoroughly loving the process. Sayers enjoyed watching actors interpret her characters in ways she never imagined. It delighted her when readers found elements she had not consciously put in a story but which, on closer perusal, made perfect sense to what she was communicating.

N. T. Wright echoes this vision of our life of discipleship together, as analogous to actors faithfully yet creatively responding to characters in a script. “When Jesus announced the kingdom, the stories he told functioned like dramatic plays in search of actors,” Wright suggests. “His hearers were invited to audition for parts in the kingdom. They had been eager for God’s drama to be staged and were waiting to find out what they would have to do when he did so. Now they were to discover. They were to become kingdom-people themselves.”†

#### **ORTHODOXY AND CLARITY**

Sayers recognized the power of drama, and other arts, to incarnate truth and the gospel. Theater critics, expecting to be bored by the theological bent of Sayers’s *The Emperor Constantine*, for example, marveled at how exciting she made the scene of the Council of Nicaea. Sayers noted that many theatergoers returned to see the play again, just for that scene. The complex theology over which the Church had battled for centuries came alive for people who would never attend a scholarly lecture on the subject.

Similarly, BBC listeners commended Sayers for the way her radio play-cycle *The Man Born to Be King* embodied for them Christ in his full humanity and divinity. Sayers wrote to C. S. Lewis about her concern that people in New Zealand were getting baptized after hearing the plays on the radio; she found it a bit unnerving to have such a powerful influence on people’s lives. Still, she fought hard for the privilege of bringing these plays to the public and of drawing Christ’s life in a way that made him real for people. She considered her play *The Just Vengeance*, a wartime story about atonement, the best work she had done.

Sayers wrote many of her theological essays, plays, and letters at mid-century when people were becoming less and less familiar with the facts of Christianity. She noted that probably only one percent of the British people really understood the Christian faith. Others remembered bits and pieces of it, but mingled these with misunderstandings and strange interpretations and sheer mythology to create a powerful misrepresentation of what Christians actually believe. Sayers, therefore, insisted on orthodoxy and clarity of communication when doing theology. One or both of these often

was missing in congregations in her day. Too many preachers lacked precision and fluency in their use of the English language, so that what they said was confusing to parishioners. Sayers was grateful that her plays, essays, and translations could bring people to a better understanding of the gospel, though she did not create them primarily for that purpose.

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Many reviewers called Sayers a preacher, evangelist, or theologian. Despite the obvious evidence of her gifts in these areas, Sayers often (but not always) protested these labels. She believed that, as a writer, her first task was to *show*, not *tell*, the stories God had given her. Creative writing gave her an opportunity, as she wrote in one essay, to put the truth of Christianity on the stage and let it speak for itself. Sayers was firmly convinced that

if people could see and understand Christianity correctly, with no possibility for misinterpretation, many more would choose to follow Christ. Non-believers in her day, as well as ours, too often chose from a place of ignorance, misunderstanding, or misdirected hostility.

Like C. S. Lewis, Sayers was gifted in using analogies to make theology easier to understand. Her work in the theater provided opportunities for this clarifying work, as actors and crew members discussed her themes and characters with her. During the production of *The Zeal of Thy House*, a play about a craftsman commissioned to rebuild part of a cathedral, Sayers talked with actors about human creativity and the role of Jesus Christ in the creation of the world. Some who had never read "He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being" (John 1:2-3) or did not understand it when they read it, delved with her into creation theology and its implications for human "subcreators."

## **CONCLUSION**

Peter Jackson's film version of Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy is a contemporary example of the power of dramatic artists to *show*, rather than *tell*, truth. People who would not be caught dead in a church see these films, return to the books, recommend them to their friends and families,

and embrace many of Tolkien's themes.

Sayers's plays had a similar effect on audiences in their day. *The Man Born to Be King* continues to be produced by performers and read by church study groups, especially during Lent. With her other religious plays, it introduces us to the gospel by showing rather than telling its truth.

#### **SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING**

Dorothy Sayers's masterpiece play-cycle about the life of Christ is *The Man Born to Be King* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1943; reprinted Fort Collins, CO: Ignatius Press, 1990). I recommend her other religious plays, which are available from used book sellers, including *The Devil to Pay* and *He That Should Come* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1939; reprinted as *Two Plays About God and Man*, Sandwich, MA: Chapman Billies, 1998); *The Emperor Constantine* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1951; reprinted Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1976); *The Just Vengeance* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1946); and *The Zeal of Thy House*. (London: Victor Gollancz, 1937).

I explore Sayers's theological writings in a forthcoming book, *Creed Without Chaos: The Theological Contributions of Dorothy L. Sayers* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005).

#### **NOTE**

†N. T. Wright, *The Challenge of Jesus: Rediscovering Who Jesus Was and Is* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 43.



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