



Letters to a Diminished Church: Passionate Arguments for the Relevance of Christian Doctrine

Dorothy L. Sayers

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What must a person believe to be a Christian? Dorothy Sayers lays out age-old doctrines without prettying-up or watering-down. She brings them vividly to life by showing how the Bible, history, literature, and modern science fit together to make religion not only possible but necessary in our time.

So whether you are reading the great works of Western literature, thinking about your place in God's universe, or simply dealing with the thousand-and-one problems of daily living, this powerful book has words of both challenge and comfort for you.

Excerpt:

Somehow or other, and with the best intentions, we have shown the world the typical Christian in the likeness of a crashing and rather ill-natured bore--and this in the Name of One who assuredly never bored a soul in those thirty-three years during which He passed through this world like a flame.

Let us, in Heaven's name, drag out the Divine Drama from under the dreadful accumulation of slipshod thinking and trashy sentiment heaped upon it, and set it on an open stage to startle the world into some sort of vigorous reaction.

Letters to a Diminished Church: Passionate Arguments for the Relevance of Christian Doctrine Details

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Joan says

First, understand that when Sayers says "Church", she is referring to the Anglican communion, with an occasional nod towards Rome. Here is her basic tenet: that Christian dogma matters. It not only matters, but it is a thundering good story. This may seem obvious, but her point is that the modern (mid-twentieth century) church has, as she puts it, "run away from theology", and that, as a result, many, if not most, nominal Christians have very little idea about what it is that the Church really teaches.

This book is a collection of essays and talks written over a period of time (one very annoying thing about this edition is that it nowhere gives the dates of the essays). Sayers' writes about *The Other Six Deadly Sins* ("Perhaps the bitterest commentary on the way in which Christian doctrine has been taught in the last few centuries is the fact that to the majority of people the word immorality has come to mean one thing and one thing only."), *The Faust Legend and the Idea of the Devil* ("It is notorious that one of the great difficulties about writing a book or play about the Devil is to prevent that character from stealing the show"), and the relationship between work and religion.

Readers of Sayers' *Lord Peter Wimsey* will recognize in these essays many of the concerns that are raised in those mysteries, and will be reminded particularly of the philosophical discussions in *Gaudy Night*.

One word of warning: this book was very poorly edited, to the point where it at times affects readability. It's too bad.

sharon says

An intelligent and incisive set of essays from one of the great minds of the 20th century. As the subtitle for this edition says, this volume is a passionate argument for the continuing relevance of Christian doctrine and, as such, is just as important now as it was 50 years ago. I particularly appreciated Sayers' thoughts on vocation and her critique of late capitalism, and find C.S. Lewis's praise of his own late wife to be the best way to describe Sayers: "[she] was a splendid thing; a soul straight, bright, and tempered like a sword." It is both a pleasure and a challenge to read thoughts from a mind so keen.

eta: The final essay, "Problem Picture," contains an especially fine examination of the limitations of the detective genre (taking *Gaudy Night* as its test case). It really made clear to me why the later Wimsey mysteries had such a powerful and profound effect on me; Sayers was interested not primarily in "whodunnit" but rather "whydunnit" -- the souls of the detective and the murderer were far more interesting to her than the crimes or the solutions themselves.

Chad says

Dorothy Sayers, detective novelist.

I was absolutely ecstatic when Goodreads pulled this recommendation out of its hat! Dorothy Sayers is

another close acquaintance of C. S. Lewis. I first became familiar with her from the letters of C. S. Lewis in which he writes to her and about her quite frequently. I first tried to find some of her works right after finishing Lewis's letters, but my search must not have been thorough, because I quickly gave up. A quick Goodreads search though shows that many of her works are still around, read, and available. Sayers is a first and foremost a writer of detective stories. But, like Chesterton's own twist in the Father Brown series, they have a clear Christian influence and purpose. This series of essays includes one entitled Problem Picture that discusses the weaknesses when we fall into a detective novel approach to life: all problems have clear-cut solutions, once solved can be forgotten, and don't change our approach on life and we struggle through them. All in all, Sayers is an author worth rediscovery.

A diminished church

I loved the title and what it captures. We constantly hear nowadays that Christianity is on the decline. Some Christians have gotten themselves in a tizzy fit about a "war on Christianity." But what I liked about Sayers' essays is that they don't look outward for the source of the problem, but inward. We, as a church, as church-goers, as Christians, need to re-find and re-discover the heart of our faith. The opening paragraph of her book reads:

Official Christianity, of late years, has been having what is known as a bad press. We are constantly assured that the churches are empty because preachers insist too much upon doctrine—dull dogma as people call it. The fact is the precise opposite. It is the neglect of dogma that makes for dullness. The Christian faith is the most exciting drama that ever staggered the imagination of man—and the dogma is the drama.

Christian doctrine is exciting and full of life! It reminded me of a car ride with a church member back when I was in Germany on my mission. He said, "Every day is an adventure when you are a Mormon." And just this next week, I will be performing in Rob Gardener's Lamb of God that brings the story in all its splendour to life. Christian doctrine is just as relevant as it was then, and just as needed!

Why we need to re-evaluate our work

The topics that Sayers picks aren't likely to be the subjects of Sunday. There's an essay on Faust and the idea of the Devil and another on the lost art of allegory. But there are some beautiful insights that can help you begin thinking about how Christianity is to be lived everyday. One particular essay that I read last week became the seed for a Sunday School lesson I was teaching. In *Why Work*, Sayers challenges the prevalent attitude towards work: that work is mainly thought of as a source of income and a way to support oneself. She believes that is not its primary purpose, but should be a craft to which we can dedicate ourselves and through which we can praise God:

The first, stated quite briefly, is that work is not, primarily, a thing one does to live, but the thing one lives to do. It is, or it should be, the full expression of the worker's faculties, the thing in which he finds spiritual, mental, and bodily satisfaction, and the medium in which he offers himself to God.

The essay was a reminder to me of how our work can aid us in coming closer to God rather than being a distraction. In fact, it should just be another activity that helps us see God's hand. In a similar vein, she develops the centrality of creating in Christian doctrine, that God was the Maker and we as makers imitate Him in the creative act. Another beautiful way of thinking about our work.

This series of essays has aged well, and perhaps find even more relevance today than they did when first published. We need to find ways to connect with God in an increasingly busybody world. A great read!

Ellen says

There were certainly sections of this book that I disagreed with (and a few places where I'm sure it was just my own intellectual feebleness, but I had no idea what she was talking about), but wow -- what a thought-provoking book. This one is definitely going to get a re-read. My favorite sections were the chapters called "The Dogma is the Drama", "Creed or Chaos?", and "Why Work?" (that last one especially clearing up a great deal of confusion that I've been trying to sort out lately). I loved Dorothy Sayers already for her fantastic Lord Peter Wimsey stories, but I love her more now after reading this vibrant, spirited, and very witty application of [mostly] solid doctrine to real life.

Sometime when I have time, I'll need to sort out my thoughts and write a real review.

"The only Christian work is good work well done. Let the Church see to it that the workers are Christian people and do their work well, as to God: then all the work will be Christian work, whether it is church embroidery, or sewage farming."

"What we in fact believe is not necessarily the theory we most desire or admire. It is the thing that, consciously or unconsciously, we take for granted and act on."

Kay Mckean says

Reading "Letters To A Diminished Church" was an intense exercise for my brain cells! I had a startling realization of my feeble grasp on classic literature, sadly forgotten since my college humanities classes. But the purpose of this book is not just an intellectual one. The author explains basic Christian doctrines in a way that are both simple and profound. I was amazed that she was writing over 70 years ago in the middle of a war. Her insights seem so contemporary to me. It was an effort to get through this book but I'm so glad I did! I'd recommend this only to those who are willing to put the work into it....it's not an easy read.

Also, Dorothy Sayers was a friend and colleague of C. S. Lewis, and you can tell. Phrases and styles of writing were quite similar.

Kellen O'Grady says

This book is life-changing. Sayers is as relevant today as she was when this was written and is in many ways prophetic. She has changed how I view Christianity and how I aim to progress in the spiritual life. She has a unique and fresh voice which ought to be heard well.

Barry Davis says

subtitled "passionate arguments for the relevance of christian doctrine", this is collection of WWII essays on the waning influence of the church. Sayers contends that the reason for this is the dearth of real doctrine, not the result of too much! she argues very persuasively that "the dogma is the drama" (one of her essays). this collection is very challenging and insightful, focusing on what she believes most people believe are the christian tenets, as well as discussing the devil in literature, the importance of allegory, christian esthetics

and the problem with problems. i particularly enjoyed these essays - the dogma is the drama, creed or chaos, strong meat, the faust legend and the idea of the devil and a vote of thanks to cyrus.

to quote sayers herself, "somehow or other, and with the best intentions, we have shown to the world the typical christian in the likeness of a crashing and rather ill-natured bore -- and this in the name of the one who assuredly never bored a soul in those thirty-three years during which he passed through this world like a flame.

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Amanda says

Great collection of essays. There is a lot of discussion on God as Creator and how we are creators which is a fundamental part of how we bear God's image.

Philip Tadros says

This was my intro to Dorothy Sayers. I was not disappointed. A great collection of her writings on subjects ranging from doctrine, culture, church, vocation, economics, and the arts.

John says

This is truly a magnificent collection of essays. I fully expect to return to this book time and again as the years go by. The essays cover all manner of subjects, though their themes often tie the works together into a cohesive whole. Sayers cares deeply for the dogma of the Christian church, and makes significant and well-reasoned arguments for its essential presence in any church that claims to be Christian.

Beyond that though, her essays "Why Work?" and "Toward a Christian Esthetic" offer a vision of day to day life and of the arts that many need to hear today. In the former, Sayers argues for the sacramental character of our work, that it is not to be considered a mindless drudgery, but instead a pursuit that offers spiritual, mental, and physical development. We don't work to live. We live to work. In the latter, she argues that the artist is engaged in a profoundly Christian task, one that seeks to incarnate ideas into artistic forms, such as music, poetry, and painting. Her vision of the arts within the church is one in which they are redeemed and where they transform, rather than where they are banished.

Sayers writes with elegance and insistence. This collection of essays does what I hope for any book: it stimulates the mind and forces the reader to reckon with the ideas it presents.

J. Alfred says

You may be familiar with Dorothy Sayers as the author of some unexcellent detective novels. You may have

heard of her as an orbital figure in CS Lewis's circles. You may be aware that she wrote "The Lost Tools of Learning," an essay which, by its cleverness, got a bunch of Classical Christian schools stuck in what she herself calls the 'poll parrot stage' of development.

You probably have not read her essays. But they are worth reading.

She is a snappy strong writer and she makes unexpected connections that can make you go Ah! like Lewis himself at his best. I particularly recommend the essays "The Other Six Deadly Sins" and "The Triumph of Easter." The book itself, as distinct from the writing, is less than ideal: there are no publication dates, let alone introductory material or the like.

JInpeacock Peacock says

One would think Dorothy Sayers was writing to the American church of 2011. Excellent material written in an engaging and thought provoking manner. More Christians should be reading and thinking about the things she presents.

Ruth says

Really just so fantastic. Sayers lays all would-be equivocation bare with the sheer clarity and force of her explanations, leaving readers no place to hide from Truth. Very highly recommended, especially for Christians who are both analytical and creative.

Amy says

I love C.S. Lewis and appreciate the increased emphasis on his writings displayed by many Christian writers and academics. But if I may be so bold, **Christians really need to start paying more attention to Dorothy L. Sayers.** She often gets swept under the rug as "that woman who wrote detective novels" and it is such a shame. Her writings about creativity and Christianity compliment and expand the writings of Lewis and enlarge on many of the themes that draw creative souls to him. I suppose, in a sense, she touches on fewer "subjects" than Lewis, which might explain the lack of enthusiasm. Sayers, you see, has one, great passion that shines through all her work: the Christian's call to creativity.

The subheading of *Letters to a Diminished Church* reads, "Passionate Arguments for the Relevance of Christian Doctrine." True, at least initially. But the essays in this volume center on a more specific theme even than that. Namely, "Passionate Arguments for the Relevance of Christian Doctrine *As It Pertains to the Description of God As Creator.*" What does it mean that God created the universe? And how does the description connect to man's purpose and calling?

Or, to take a very different but no less accurate angle, take the quote: "Fairy tales are more than true: not because they tell us that dragons exist, but because they tell us that dragons can be beaten." *Letters to a Diminished Church* explains the Christian theology for why that quote rings so true.

Sayers writes with biting wit and clear truths that reveal profound ideas. She touches on ancient history, Medieval allegory, and modern psychology. She unhesitatingly jumps from author to author in fleshing out her ideas, including references to C.S. Lewis's Space Trilogy.

And she is just so, so *good!*

This collection is far easier to read and understand than *The Mind of the Maker*. At the same time, it does come with several difficulties. For example, some quotes are left untranslated, making me wish I didn't give up on my 8th grade German. And the essays themselves - why topically related - do not always fit together

nicely. Some seem more on point to the subject than others. Exactly when, or to what purpose, she wrote the essays remains unclear. Most seem to come from the WW2 era, but at least one referenced the 1970s. (Unless I read it wrong.) Further, I could not tell if she wrote all the essays for this one volume, or later compiled and edited essays that touched on a subject she felt passionate about. Despite these weaknesses, I think the book firmly places Sayers in her rightful position as a theological equal of C.S. Lewis whose writings seriously need to be further explored.

Shaela Woody says

"Somehow or other, and with the best intentions, we have shown the world the typical Christian in the likeness of a crashing and rather ill-natured bore--and this in the Name of One who assuredly never bored a soul in those thirty-three years during which He passed through this world like a flame.

Let us, in Heaven's name, drag out the Divine Drama from under the dreadful accumulation of slipshod thinking and trashy sentiment heaped upon it, and set it on an open stage to startle the world into some sort of vigorous reaction." - Dorothy Sayers "Letters to a Diminished Church"

I'm kind of on a Dorothy Sayers kick right now, and this volume has only solidified my appreciation of her contributions to Christian thought. Sayers was a friend of C.S Lewis and her work here reminds me somewhat of his "Mere Christianity".

She thoughtfully and fervently argues for the foundational importance and beauty of Christian theology. She does a great job demonstrating why seemingly abstract doctrines should matter to the average Christian. Beginning with an energetic treatment of the basics of orthodoxy such as the Apostle's Creed, she later deals with broader issues, laying out her views on topics ranging from the Christian view of art and vocation to history and creation.

I don't agree with all her points. It is clear, for example, that she has not fully thought through the economic implications of her idea of work as a vocational calling (as she admits), though her view still has merit. I really appreciated her treatment of how the Trinity should inform our approach to the arts.

As with her literary cousins Lewis and Chesterton, Sayers' work is incisive and provocative, and fun to interact with even when you disagree with her arguments.
