

BOOK REVIEW

*Bonhoeffer: Pastor, Martyr, Prophet, Spy.* By Eric Metaxas. Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2010. 608 pp. \$29.99. ISBN 978-1595551382.

Numerous books have been written by or about the German Lutheran pastor and theologian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer. In 1967, Bonhoeffer's confidant and brother-in-law, Eberhard Bethge published an extensive biography. Nevertheless, this latest contribution by Eric Metaxas is a welcome addition to the collection detailing the thoughts and life of this extraordinary Christian.

The book is lengthy, but very readable in both scholarly and popular settings. The dramatic events recorded in this biography rivet the attention of the reader. The work is particularly notable for its compelling use of selections from Bonhoeffer's own letters and writings, as well as passages from the letters or reminiscences of his contemporaries. Many of the source documents employed by Metaxas have only become available in the years since the publication of the Bethge book. It becomes possible, in the course of this book, to "hear" the voice of the great pastor.

Born to an illustrious family, steeped in science and the arts, Dietrich Bonhoeffer made the unusual choice to pursue the study of theology. For him, this was never a merely intellectual exercise as he lost himself in the depths of a profoundly biblical and ecclesial faith. In ordinary times, Bonhoeffer might have lived a conventional life as an academic and part-time pastor. But he lived in the worst of times, and his faith gave him the capacity to endure and thrive. In an environment when most were frightened into submission, Bonhoeffer resisted the rise of the Nazis and their perfidious creed. He denounced their persecution of the Jews and fought Nazi attempts to silence and distort the Christian faith.

The work is primarily concerned with the years of his education and career as pastor and theologian. The story concludes with the murder of Bonhoeffer by the SS on April 9, 1945. It is a valuable work of history, theology, and Christian discipleship.

It is a work of great historical interest as it provides an intimate look at life under Nazi rule from those who experienced its crushing weight. Like the extraordinary diary of Victor Klemperer (*I Will Bear Witness*), the Bonhoeffer story reveals the slow strangulation of truth, compassion, and beauty that so afflicted Germany and its occupied lands. Often in Bonhoeffer's own words, we witness the increasingly impossible choices and reduced freedom of those who resisted the nightmare.

Because Bonhoeffer is such a skilled and insightful theologian, the book provides a unique perspective on the times. Bonhoeffer was a theologian of note

long before the Nazis took center stage, but their depredations forced him to explore the challenge of theology in a time of crisis. His convictions about the nature of the Church, the call of discipleship, and obedience to the will of God took on a new urgency and reality. He strove to help fellow Christians understand the radical demands of their faith and the call to obey God's commands when ruled by those who rejected every tenet of biblical faith.

In this, Bonhoeffer moved beyond merely intellectual theology to the call of discipleship. Metaxas offers a compelling portrait of a man who became an exemplary disciple of Jesus. In Bonhoeffer's own words and actions, the reader glimpses the living out of the words in the garden: "not my will, but yours be done." We hear the thoughts of a man who faced fury with compassion and suffering with trust. We see a man who found liberation while imprisoned and ministered to others up to the day of his death.

Discussing his decision to write this book, the author acknowledged the power and beauty of this witness and spoke of his desire to share this profoundly moving story with others. While this is his primary objective in offering a new biography, he also expressed his desire to clarify the source of Bonhoeffer's capacity for witness, his faith in the Living God.

In Bonhoeffer's struggle against the Nazis, he found himself scandalized by the willingness of some Christians to accommodate their faith to Nazi lies. Even among those who did not embrace Nazi creeds, Bonhoeffer suffered frustration at the timidity of Christian opposition. He knew that the moment of crisis demanded a clear rejection of the Nazis, but failed to convince leaders in the German churches or in the ecumenical movement beyond Germany to speak with unified and unambiguous conviction regarding the evil in their midst. This experience caused Bonhoeffer to think and pray about the nature of the Church and to become critical of a species of Christianity that had become formalistic observation rather than true discipleship. He wanted Christians to bear the consequences of their creed and was disappointed by those who could not do so. In his thinking, the term "religion" became synonymous with such an empty shell of faith and Bonhoeffer suggested that there was need for a "religionless" Christianity.

Metaxas wishes the reader to understand that Bonhoeffer's frustration with his contemporaries was not a rejection of Christian faith or the purpose and power of the Church. It was rather Bonhoeffer's deep biblical faith and his search for an authentic ecclesial life that gave him the capacity for resistance. Far from being a proponent of a merely social gospel or some sort of secular patron saint of individualism, Metaxas introduces us to Dietrich Bonhoeffer who is a latter day biblical prophet. Like the prophets of old, he admonishes, teaches, consoles, and uplifts. He speaks not his own message, but the truth that he

receives from the Lord. He upholds a human dignity that finds its fullness in submission to Divine Will. He lives and acts not by his own lights but by the grace given to him by the Living God.

I strongly recommend this book to any and all who wish to witness that grace and its transforming power. I have long admired Bonhoeffer, and this book has given me new insight into the beauty of his thought and witness. It is a glimpse of the beauty that will save the world.

Rev. Msgr. Richard G. Henning  
Professor of Sacred Scripture  
Seminary of the Immaculate Conception  
Huntington, NY