

Bonhoeffer: Pastor, Martyr, Prophet, Spy | Eric Metaxas

Reviewed by Warren Coe

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A Book worth Reading

I confess a hagiographic spirit—I am fascinated by and adore the great men and women of faith. Reading their biographies is like enjoying a fine steak dinner—you read slowly and enjoy every bite.

This past fall my study group chose Eric Metaxas's *Bonhoeffer: Pastor, Martyr, Prophet, Spy* for our discussions. Each Saturday was pure delight as we walked with Dietrich Bonhoeffer through the dangerous times in which he lived. I've concluded that Mr. Bonhoeffer would be welcomed in our group. In fact, he would love the perspicacious spirit we enjoy.

In reading Metaxas' *Bonhoeffer*, I discovered a brother and friend who saw the decline of God and His gospel in a relativistic culture; a culture that would soon be devoid of a moral center. It was this culture that gave the world the final solution and World War II. It is this prophetic spirit that makes Bonhoeffer a prophet for our time.

A Man of His Times

Metaxas shows the sweeping vistas that make Bonhoeffer a great historical figure. "As Adolf Hitler and the Nazis seduced a nation, bullied a continent, and attempted to exterminate the Jews of Europe, a small number of dissidents and saboteurs worked to dismantle the Third Reich from the inside. One of these was Dietrich Bonhoeffer—a pastor and author, known as much for such spiritual classics as *The Cost of Discipleship* and *Life Together*, as for his 1945 execution in a concentration camp for his part in the plot to assassinate Adolf Hitler."

No period in modern history was more disruptive to the human experience than WWII. No political power wore the face of evil as Hitler and the Nazis. This was Dietrich's world. Because he was German he lived at the epicenter of unmasked hate. To make matters worse he witnessed a supine and pusillanimous church that laid down, without a whimper, to Hitler's thuggery. God became weightless. The radical gospel was un-preached. Christ was a mere historic figure and no more.

A Disturbing Discovery in America

In 1930 Bonhoeffer visited America. He attended Union Theological Seminary in New York and experienced the American Church seen. Harry Emerson Fosdick was the preaching pastor at Park Avenue Baptist Church where John D. Rockefeller attended. Bonhoeffer was surprised by the liberal bent of the church and their anti-intellectual approach. In the words of Eric Metaxas, "They had jettisoned serious scholarship altogether." p.103

Bonhoeffer observed, "In theology and the church they [students at Union Seminary] do not see the radical claim of truth on the shaping of their lives. Community is therefore founded less on truth than on the spirit of 'fairness.' One says nothing against another member of the dormitory as long as he is a 'good fellow.' There is little intellectual competition and little intellectual ambition. This gives work in seminar lecture or discussion a very innocuous character. It cripples any radical, pertinent criticism. It is more a friendly exchange of opinion than a study in comprehension." p.104

Bonhoeffer would continue his critique of the America church in the early 1930's as being more a social organization than the supernatural body of Christ. Her pastors were more concerned with "practical out-workings" of Christianity than deep theological understanding. You can almost hear them say, "Doctrine divides so let's talk only about the practical application of

Christianity and social justice.” Bonhoeffer added, “That the lack of seriousness with which the students here speak of God and the world is, to say the least, extremely surprising...” pg105. Bonhoeffer concluded that the anti-supernatural and anti-intellectual nature of the American church would “accelerate the process of the secularization of Christianity in America.” p105

The Great Decision

Perhaps no matter occupied Bonhoeffer’s mind than whether to return to Germany. Hitler’s troops were burning down Europe. The German church was obsequiously compliant to the Fuhrer’s demands. The only voice of opposition was the Confessing Church in which Bonhoeffer was a founding member.

In 1939, Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote to Reinhold Niebuhr. “I have had the time to think and to pray about my situation and that of my nation and to have God’s will for me clarified. I have come to the conclusion that I have made a mistake in coming to America. I must live through this difficult period of our national history with the Christian people of Germany. I shall have no right to participate in the reconstruction of Christian life in Germany after the war if I do not share the trial of this time with my people. p.321

Dietrich returned to Germany and joined the plot to assassinate Adolf Hitler. He carefully stated his decision to join the resistance movement. “Thus we were approaching the borderline between confession and resistance; and if we did not cross this border, our confession was going to be no better than cooperation with the criminals. And so it became clear where the problem lay for the Confessing Church: we were resisting by way of confession, but we were not confessing by way of resistance.” p.361

Failed Plot and a Criminal’s Death

History records that the assassination attempt against Adolf Hitler failed. The saboteurs were rounded up and killed—even Dietrich Bonhoeffer. One of his last stops was Buchenwald. In Metaxas words, “‘Buchenwald was one of the Nazi centers of death.’ But it was not merely a place where people died; it was a place where death was celebrated and worshipped...Buchenwald and its equivalents throughout the Third Reich were living embodiments of the satanic worldview of the SS, where weakness was preyed upon and crushed. Human beings were sometimes murdered for their skin, which was used to make souvenir items such as wallets and knife cases for members of the SS. The heads of some prisoners were shrunken and given as gifts.” p.504

With time running out for Hitler, guards transferred Bonhoeffer to Flossenburg. It was here that the Nazi’s executed Dietrich Bonhoeffer just hours before the allied troops liberated the prisoners. Providence decreed an early home-going for one of the few prophets in Germany during World War II.

His Source of Strength—the Word of God

Without a doubt, the source of Bonhoeffer’s strength resided in God’s Word, the Bible. Somehow through the morass of German school of higher criticism of the 19th century and neo-orthodoxy in the 1920s and 1930s, Dietrich managed to discover the Bible as God’s Word. He accepted the Bible as God’s Word. He believed the truths it taught. It was the Bible that held his conscience captive.

Bonhoeffer, in writing to his brother-in-law Rudiger Schleicher said, “First of all I will confess quite simply—I believe that the Bible alone is the answer to all our questions and that we need only to ask repeatedly and a little humbly, in order to receive this answer...that is because in the Bible God speaks to us. Only if we will venture to enter into the words of the Bible, as

though in them this God were speaking to us who loves us and does not will to leave us alone with our questions, only so shall we learn to rejoice in the Bible.

“And I would like to tell you now quite personally: since I have learnt to read the Bible in this way—and this has not been for so very long—it becomes every day more wonderful to me. I read it in the morning and the evening, often during the day as well, and every day I consider a text which I have chosen for the whole week, and try to sink deeply into it, so as really to hear what it is saying. I know that without this I could not live properly any longer.” Pg136, 137

Note: Good Christians may differ in their conclusions about whether or not it was godly wisdom for Bonhoeffer to be involved in the plot to assassinate Hitler. However, regardless, Bonhoeffer’s story is worth reading and understanding in the times in which we live.