

Book Review

Eric Metaxas, *Bonhoeffer: Pastor, Martyr, Prophet, Spy* (Thomas Nelson, 2010): 591 pp.

Like many, I first encountered Bonhoeffer while in college by reading his classic study of the Sermon on the Mount, *The Cost of Discipleship*. I later read *Life Together*, his book on Christian community, and *Letters and Papers from Prison*, his collected and edited writings composed while he was imprisoned for his role in plotting against Hitler. Though there is much to appreciate in Bonhoeffer, particularly his prophetic stand against Nazi atrocities, I recall that while reading him I also sensed that his commitments were certainly not those of a conservative, evangelical believer. I particularly remember being puzzled by his celebrated musings on the future of Christianity in the modern world and “religionless Christianity.”

I found Metaxas’ biography to be an engaging and gripping read. From an evangelical perspective, there were points along the way when I was both puzzled and pleasantly surprised by what I read. These included Metaxas’ description of Bonhoeffer’s disappointment with the liberal Protestantism of Harry Emerson Fosdick’s Riverside Church during his stint at Union Seminary in New York. Metaxas’ also describes something like an evangelical conversion after Bonhoeffer’s return from America (see the section “The Great Change” pp. 121-124), as evidenced in personal Bible study and heightened churchmanship.

Metaxas defends some of Bonhoeffer’s more controversial writings, calling him perhaps “the most misunderstood theologian who ever lived” (p. 365). He especially defends Bonhoeffer’s coining of the concept of “religionless Christianity” as “inchoate thoughts in his letters” that have “tangled his legacy” (p. 465). Metaxas even attacks “death of God” theologians and other liberals who embraced these ideas:

The strange theological climate after World War II and the interest in the martyred Bonhoeffer were such that the few bone fragments in these private letters were set upon by famished kites and less noble birds, many of whose descendents gnaw them still. All of which has led to a terrific misunderstanding of Bonhoeffer’s theology and which lamentably washed backward over his earlier thinking and writing (p. 466).

For Metaxas, Bonhoeffer has been misunderstood and misinterpreted by liberals who have embraced and distorted his theology. Indeed, Metaxas makes Bonhoeffer over into an evangelical, even leaving the impression that Bonhoeffer took a pro-life stand against abortion (p. 472, though the quotations cited, as with many things in Bonhoeffer, are not quite so clear).

There were a few other minor things I took notice of in the book. These include what appears to be a strange “dynamic equivalent” translation of the German poem *Octoberlied* (p. 459) and a citation of Matthew 10:17-42 as part of “the Sermon on the Mount” which is, in fact, found in Matthew 5—7 (p. 536). Not much to quibble at.

Later, however, I ran across an interesting post by uber-blogger Tim Challies on Metaxas' book (challies.com). Though he had originally praised the book on his blog, Challies posted a follow up review on January 18, 2011 titled "Counterfeit Bonhoeffer." In that post, Challies noted that many of the most respected Bonhoeffer scholars have panned Metaxas' book as factually, historically, and intellectually flawed. Most significantly, it makes Bonhoeffer, a classical European Protestant liberal, into an evangelical. Indeed, it seems there are many evangelicals, perhaps especially those with an interest in social and cultural engagement, who would like to make Bonhoeffer into one of their own. Bonhoeffer has become neo-evangelical Calvinist "cool." The forward to Metaxas' book is written by Redeemer Presbyterian (PCA) mega-church pastor Tim Keller. Carl Trueman has written in a blog article that "these days quoting Bonhoeffer is like quoting Bono: you have to do it if you want the soul-patched thirty-somethings to take you seriously."

The question is whether or not this evangelical revisioning of Bonhoeffer is truthful. One of the best comments on this brewing controversy came from Carl Trueman in a follow up to Challies' post titled "Bonhoeffer and Anonymous Evangelicals" (January 18, 2011 reformation21.org/blog): "Sometimes the problem derives from us asking a fundamentally wrong-headed question. Of more value than 'Was he an evangelical?' is surely 'How can I learn from him how better to be a Christian?'"

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