

Eric Metaxas, *Bonhoeffer: Pastor, Martyr, Prophet, Spy: A Righteous Gentile vs. the Third Reich* (Thomas Nelson, 2010), 591 pages, ISBN 13: 978-1595551382, cloth \$36.99. Reviewed by F. G. Oosterhoff.

A few years ago I wrote a three-part series on the life of German pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who in April 1945, at age 39, was executed in concentration camp Flossenbergl. His death had been ordered by Adolf Hitler, who was already hiding in his underground bunker in Berlin, and it took place shortly before the American armies reached Flossenbergl. Bonhoeffer was condemned to death because he had taken part in a plot to kill Hitler. A number of his fellow conspirators were killed with him. Others were executed in different camps. Among them were Dietrich's brother Klaus and two of his brothers-in-law.

For my previous articles I made use (in addition to Bonhoeffer's own writings) of the Bonhoeffer biography that his former student and close friend Eberhard Bethge published in the 1950s, with a revised and enlarged edition appearing in 1967. That massive work (of over a thousand pages) is still a primary source of information on the life of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and Metaxas makes a good use of it. He provides additional information as well, however, derived from new sources and from the insights gained from the multitude of Bonhoeffer studies that have appeared during the past forty years. Whereas Bethge wrote for the immediate post-war generation, Metaxas writes for a postmodern public that hardly remembers the war. And if Bethge's was the definitive Bonhoeffer biography for the twentieth century, Metaxas's may well fill that role for the first part of the twenty-first. As such it is very welcome. The story of Bonhoeffer's Christian life still has the power to instruct, encourage, and inspire, and Metaxas succeeds marvelously in making it accessible to present-day readers.

His book is first of all a biography, combined with a description of the political situation in Germany since World War I, rather than a work on theology. It describes Bonhoeffer's family background and education, the rise of Hitler and the horrors of the Hitler regime, Bonhoeffer's work in the church and the ecumenical movement, his leadership in the illegal seminaries of the Confessing Church, his two-year imprisonment, and his death. But his life cannot be separated from his faith, nor can his faith be separated from his theology, and Metaxas makes the connections clear. In describing Bonhoeffer's life, he acquaints us with a modern theologian who took his theological work seriously but refused to be a mere theorist. From first to last he not only described and proclaimed but also *lived* the gospel message and joyfully submitted to God's will, also when the ultimate sacrifice was asked of him. Characteristic of his entire Christian life are his last moments on earth, as observed by the Flossenbergl camp doctor, who wrote:

Through the half-open door in one room of the huts I saw Pastor Bonhoeffer, before taking off the prison garb, kneeling on the floor praying fervently to his God. I was most deeply moved by the way this lovable man prayed, so devout and so certain that God heard his prayer. At the place of execution, he again said a short prayer and then climbed the steps to the gallows, brave and composed. His death ensued after a few seconds. In the almost fifty years that I worked as a doctor, I have hardly ever seen a man die so entirely submissive to the will of God (532).<sup>2</sup>

As we learn from Bonhoeffer's own prison letters and from the testimony of fellow-prisoners, the same cheerfulness and submission to God characterized his life in prison and concentration camp.

## Orthodoxy

Today Bonhoeffer is widely acknowledged as an orthodox theologian. He was not, however, immediately accepted as such. While orthodox Christians have always liked the Bonhoeffer of the 1930s, who was

<sup>1</sup> *Clarion*, v. 55, n. 20 (29 September 2006), pp. 482-85; v. 55, n. 24 (24 November 2006), pp. 583-86; Year-End Issue (2006), pp. 613-16; available online at *Reformed Academic* under "Collected Papers".

<sup>2</sup> Numbers within brackets refer to pages in Metaxas' book.

engaged in the church struggle, taught at the illegal seminaries, and wrote the spiritual classics *The Cost of Discipleship* and *Life Together* (the latter an exploration of living in Christian community), they long believed that he had later departed from his orthodoxy. The suspicion was a result of certain expressions in his prison letters. A similar conclusion was drawn by “death-of-God” theologians of the 1960s, who in fact claimed Bonhoeffer as their prophet. Both sides thought they saw a profound theological difference between the Bonhoeffer of the 1930s and the one of the prison years (1943-45).

As I showed in the earlier series, such an interpretation goes directly against the overall message of Bonhoeffer’s writings. Bethge already objected to the liberals’ abuse of Bonhoeffer’s prison writings, even though he did think that his friend’s prison theology differed from that of the earlier years. Mataxas, however, argues (and provides a good deal of evidence for his argument) that there was no real change in Bonhoeffer’s theology, and that that theology continued to be orthodox. “Nearly all that Bonhoeffer would say and write later in life,” he insists, “marked a deepening and expansion of what he had earlier said and believed, but never any kind of significant theological change” (84). Some of the misunderstandings were caused, he believes, by Bonhoeffer’s frequent use of hyperbole or exaggeration for the sake of effect, which sometimes backfired. Another factor was that he lacked the opportunity to work out his ideas in any detail; his letters were often written in a hurry. He himself described his theological statements in these letters as a mere “thinking aloud,” an attempt to clarify his thoughts and collect ideas for a book that he hoped to write later (465f.).

I have dealt with the controversies in the previous articles and will not repeat here what I wrote, but I do want to make a correction. At the time I stressed Bonhoeffer’s absolute submission to the Word of God but at the same time expressed agreement with his critics that in some of his writings Bible-critical influences were “clearly evident.” Having read the Metaxas biography, and also having reread several of Bonhoeffer’s own writings, I withdraw that statement. It is true, in a few instances questions remain, but the essence of Bonhoeffer’s prison theology is biblical. In his prison letters, as in his earlier writings, he confronts us with truths we do well to take to heart.

### **Christocentrism, this-worldliness, discipleship**

What was the essence of Bonhoeffer’s theology? He had been influenced by the Moravian Brethren and shared with them the quest for a living faith instead of the dull orthodoxy and arid theologizing of the official Church. For Bonhoeffer as for the Moravians, faith was not primarily intellectual assent but a being renewed and transformed and made alive by Christ’s Spirit. It implied an absolute Christocentrism, as well as an unwavering reliance on biblical guidance in all aspects of one’s life. Bonhoeffer was convinced that “every word of Holy Scripture was a quite personal message of God’s love for us” (129) and must be utterly trusted and obeyed.

He also taught the affirmation of the physical world, since it was God’s good creation. Christ’s incarnation convinced him that the Christian was to embrace the good things of the world and accept them as God’s gifts, rather than as something to be transcended, or as temptations to be avoided. Another emphasis was the church’s task with respect to the surrounding society. The Lutheran Church, he believed, displayed too much of a fortress mentality, was too self-centred and inward looking and ignored the world’s needs. In his affirmation of the world and society he parted company not just with fellow Lutherans but also with the Moravians and other pietistic branches of Christianity which, in their otherworldliness, would ask him to turn his back on the world and on non-Christians, a group that included several member of his own family. Another objection to pietism was its stress on moral performance, which tended to lead to reliance on one’s own powers and to spiritual pride. In view of this particular danger he stated (with typical hyperbole) that “the Christian message is basically amoral and irreligious, paradoxical as that may sound” (83).

At the same time he stressed the demand for pious Christian living, and in connection therewith the need for Christians to work, study, meditate, and pray together in community. This was especially necessary for the education of a new generation of theologians and pastors, who had to lead a church that, unlike the official Lutheran one, was close to Christ, dedicated to God's Word, and obedient even to the shedding of blood. None of this was taught in the normal seminaries, and he therefore attempted to realize the ideal in the illegal seminaries. One of the remaining fruits of this work is the booklet *Life Together (Gemeinsames Leben)*, which has lost none of its relevance for those seeking to live the Christian life both individually and communally.

Implied in all the foregoing and central to his theology and life was Bonhoeffer's affirmation of the biblical demand for discipleship, a daily following of Christ. He had taught this ever since the early thirties and described it in his book *The Cost of Discipleship (Nachfolge)*, another fruit of his work at the seminaries, published in 1937. The book was written in the spirit of the Sermon on the Mount and contains the well-known words, "When Christ calls a man he bids him come and die." Dying for the sake of Christ, Bonhoeffer taught (and demonstrated with his life), meant surrendering one's ambitions and desires but also, if Christ demanded it, surrendering life itself.

### Suffering

I read this biography shortly after I had written a review of James K. Smith's *Desiring the Kingdom*,<sup>3</sup> and could not but note the similarities between the two books, or at least between their messages, for the books as such are of course very different. But both warn us that Christianity is not first of all a system of doctrine, of knowing and theorizing, but a matter of doing, of discipleship, of following a Person and of being "in Christ." Both warn us against the danger of the church becoming part of the world, while at the same time stressing its responsibility with respect to that world, and both speak of the church as not a group of individuals but as a community. The main difference, which is probably to be explained in part with reference to the different societies with which the books deal, concerns the inevitability of Christian suffering, the cost of discipleship as taught in the Sermon on the Mount and as exemplified in Bonhoeffer's life. It is not least because of the message of Bonhoeffer's preaching and personally living the "theology of the cross" that his writings and the story of his life continue to be instructive for Christians living today.

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<sup>3</sup> *Reformed Academic*, 19 July 2010; reprinted in *Clarion*, v. 59, n.19 (10 September 2010), pp. 490-92.