



TYNDALE
UNIVERSITY

3377 Bayview Avenue
Toronto, ON
M2M 3S4

TEL:
416.226.6620
www.tyndale.ca

Note: This Work has been made available by the authority of the copyright owner solely for the purpose of private study and research and may not be copied or reproduced except as permitted by the copyright laws of Canada without the written authority from the copyright owner.

Chapman, Mark D. Review of *Bonhoeffer: Pastor, Martyr, Prophet, Spy: A Righteous Gentile vs. The Third Reich*, by Eric Metaxas. *The Conrad Grebel Review* 30, no. 1 (Winter 2012): 98-100.

Eric Metaxas. *Bonhoeffer: Pastor, Martyr, Prophet, Spy: A Righteous Gentile vs. The Third Reich*. Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2010.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer has become something of a contemporary saint – claimed by individuals of liberal and conservative persuasions. He is lauded as an exemplar of grace in the face of suffering and of dedicated friendship, and as a martyr for the Christian faith. His life is well documented, but he has been little discussed of late. Eric Metaxas’s *Bonhoeffer: Pastor, Martyr, Prophet, Spy* promises to improve our understanding of Bonhoeffer as good man and as anti-Nazi conspirator.

There is little documentation of the first few years or last few months of Bonhoeffer’s life. However, we know much about his adult life from his own writings and those of friends and family. Metaxas brings these different sources together to tell the story. Bonhoeffer was born into a German aristocratic family in Breslau. His father was a well-known academic, and other members of his family played prominent roles in German society. He was raised in a home that trained him academically and culturally. Emphasis on spirituality was limited but he soon made up for that deficit himself.

Bonhoeffer excelled in school and in 1927 at age 21 graduated from Berlin University with a doctorate. He was an accomplished academic but chose to put his energies into the pastorate, excelling in work as diverse as youth ministry and seminary teaching. Wanting to broaden his horizons and connect ecumenically, he accepted positions in Spain, the United States, and Britain. These connections influenced his involvement in the conspiracy to kill Hitler. International connections would also have allowed him to escape

the war, but after a brief visit to the US he determined that his calling was to Germany.

Bonhoeffer was outspoken about problems with the Nazi government but had little success convincing the larger church to respond to the encroaching evil. Thus, he put his efforts into mentoring others and serving as a sort of itinerant pastor/spy under the protection of a government agency run by his uncle. He had a much different vantage point from that of the average German for considering how one should respond to social evil.

Bonhoeffer's concern for ethics manifested itself early, in his dissertation and in his subsequent volume entitled *Ethics*. While he found a theological justification for the conspiracy to assassinate Hitler, his ethics, according to Metaxas, were rooted in an understanding of the radical call of Christian discipleship. The plot failed, and records that ultimately implicated Bonhoeffer made their way into Nazi hands. He was hanged just three weeks short of the end of World War II.

At 542 pages, this is a long book, with a level of detail that weakens it. Much of the extra detail is interesting but not clearly related to the core narrative (e.g., the near drowning of a nanny, details of Nazi atrocities). Letters and sermons are quoted in long passages that do not add to the summary Metaxas provides.

A more serious problem is that the book gives us less of a sense of Bonhoeffer the man than it could have. He is depicted, for instance, as being born with upstanding morals, as seeing the dangers of evil before others, as having a consistent and clear theological vision, and as keeping his composure in all situations. I am not calling for debunking the "myth" of Bonhoeffer but for taking his struggles more seriously. Not to attend to his weaknesses and complexities makes him into an unattainable example, a figure who somehow sees the world more clearly than the rest of us. This often makes the actions of others in the narrative hard to understand. Indeed, the book provides little clue as to why the evils of the Nazi regime, so obvious to Bonhoeffer, were initially not noticed by many of those around him and never noticed by some in the church.

Nonetheless, Metaxas works hard both to draw out the evangelical side of the theological motivations that drove Bonhoeffer and to connect Bonhoeffer's experience and theology with his actions. He also provides a

strong impression of Bonhoeffer as a man of character. This text, with its valuable index, will be a helpful supplementary introduction to Bonhoeffer for both general readers and introductory classes on his life and theology.

Mark D. Chapman, Assistant Professor of Research Methods, Tyndale Seminary, Toronto, Ontario

·
·
·