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## Bonhoeffer: Pastor, Martyr, Prophet, Spy

**Eric Metaxas**
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“There is no way to peace along the way of safety. For peace must be dared, it is itself the great venture and can never be safe.” These haunting words of pastor, theologian, and murdered anti-Nazi spy Dietrich Bonhoeffer resonate in this captivating biography by Eric Metaxas. In *Bonhoeffer: Pastor, Martyr, Prophet, Spy*, Metaxas examines the life of a man caught in a heart-rending dilemma: stand up to the Nazis and Hitler himself, necessitating deceit and complicity in an assassination; or remain silent, allowing the murder of millions. This is the true story of a pastor whose life influenced great leaders such as Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and Desmond Tutu, and whose teachings have been embraced by conservative and liberal theologians alike. But this book suggests that the choices of his life may provide his greatest lesson, as they raised powerful questions about ethics and theology that challenge us today.

*Bonhoeffer* explores the murky shadows that sometimes exist when one stands firmly on one’s beliefs. Right actions come easily when they require little sacrifice and avoid moral gray areas. But what happens when none of the available options appear wholly pure? Metaxas leads readers through such questions, revealing the depth of conviction and theological grounding supporting Bonhoeffer’s life choices and causing readers to grapple with their own sense of right and wrong.

Bonhoeffer’s journey, physically, intellectually, and theologically, serves as the heart of Metaxas’ book. He reveals that for Bonhoeffer, the path to conspiracy rose directly out of righteous conviction, deep theological thought, and an unparalleled family background. The author details Bonhoeffer’s early life in an elite family that was highly respected in German social, political, and academic spheres. His family valued independent thought and carefully delineated convictions. So when their trusted positions allowed them to see the Nazi atrocities the moment they occurred, many in the family stood against Hitler’s regime.

As a pastor, Bonhoeffer further believed godly people must stand for those who can not protect themselves, especially the Jewish people. His deep faith and desire to follow God’s will, which he shared with his theology students and congregants, meant he could not be silent. But when conferences, letters, and calls to action brought few results, he knew further action must be taken. One of his closest allies in the fight said, “We now realized that mere confession, no matter how courageous, inescapably meant complicity with the murders.”

Eventually, through his powerful connections in the church and government, Bonhoeffer became a spy and joined a group that attempted to assassinate Hitler and many of his leaders. Bonhoeffer’s leadership influenced others, from pastors to generals close to Hitler, to take bold stands as well. After several unsuccessful attempts on Hitler’s life, however, Bonhoeffer’s role was eventually uncovered. After a lengthy imprisonment, he was killed by the Nazi regime just three weeks before the end of the war.

Metaxas masterfully weaves a tantalizing story even as he explores the biblical justification behind Bonhoeffer’s philosophy and the events that shaped it. Christians interested in Bonhoeffer’s theology will find it illuminated in the fuller context of his life. Believers seeking inspiration for living a bold life of faith will receive it in abundance. Readers fascinated with this era in history will discover revealing glimpses behind the scenes of the anti-Hitler movement.

Yet historians will find this a solid academic work. Metaxas uses primary sources such as personal letters, speeches, government documents, firsthand accounts, and documentary footage for his research. Although at times one feels the book seems at bit too glowing, lacking any alternative opinions, the author’s experience with historical

material shines. A Yale graduate, Metaxas authored the *New York Times* bestseller *Amazing Grace: William Wilberforce and the Heroic Campaign to End Slavery*. He has served as a cultural commentator for Fox News and CNN and hosts the Manhattan speakers' series *Socrates in the City*.

Metaxas strives to help readers comprehend a complicated man with complicated views that are often misunderstood. Bonhoeffer's story quietly provokes readers to radically live out their convictions and to wrestle with how those beliefs would impact their lives should they be lived to their fullest extent. One of Bonhoeffer's students said he "was a person about whom one had a feeling that he was completely whole, a man who believes in what he thinks and does what he believes in." This book inspires the reader to be that kind of person, too. And one can't help but delight in a story of someone doing what at first glance appears to be wrong, just to do right. After all, as the author says, Bonhoeffer "was not a 'worldly' or 'compromised' pastor, but a pastor whose very devotion to God depended on his deceiving the evil powers ranged against him. He was serving God by taking them all for a long ride."
DIANE GARDNER (July / August 2010)

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