

## WHY WE NEED MORE BONHOEFFER

Every Christian needs to read a biography of Dietrich Bonhoeffer sooner or later. Even better, a couple of them. Pastors no less need to interact with his example and his ideas because he has become one of the most celebrated Christian leaders of the twentieth century, with his image engraved above the door of Westminster Abbey and in the stonework surrounding the altar of St John's Cathedral in New York City. A recent documentary, available on DVD and produced by Martin Doblmeier, is a remarkable compilation of scenes from the Third Reich, interviews with friends and family surviving until recently, and a reconstruction of the events of Bonhoeffer's dramatic life. Eric Metaxas's biography of Bonhoeffer, published in 2010, is the latest English book to trace his story and summarise his ideas. It has been received with great fanfare, perhaps not least because it contains an introduction by Tim Keller, and reached #23 on the New York Times Bestseller list. It sounds like I am not the only person to be intrigued by Bonhoeffer's life and untimely death.

His story may not be familiar to all. Growing up in a family of academics, diplomats, Prussian military elite, clergy and scientists, Bonhoeffer was destined for greatness. He was born in 1906 and was shaped by the tumultuous events of WWI, the humiliation of Germany and the collapse of the German monarchy, democratic instability in the Weimar Republic, and the rise of the National Socialist German Workers' Party, better known as the Nazis. Theologically, he was greatly influenced by Karl Barth, with whom he had a long correspondence, and by the ecumenical movement of the early twentieth century. His own doctorate was on the theology of the church.

Having spent time in pastoral work in London and Barcelona, and further study in New York at Union Seminary, he decided that his place during WWII was not to be found in the safety of America, but amidst the dangers and risks of ministry in Germany, resisting the anti-Semitism of the regime and training a new generation of pastors for service in a threatening world. He was

later employed as an intelligence officer in the military secret service, and, despite his pacifism, was prepared to involve himself in plots to overthrow the government, in particular to assassinate Hitler. A remarkable step to take for a Lutheran pastor. For his connections to the conspirators, he was killed in the last few weeks of the war in a concentration camp in Bavaria. Some of his last words to a fellow inmate were: "This is the end. For me, the beginning of life."

Metaxas's biography traces this story with extraordinary pathos and is written in a most readable style. He does well to include material published for the first time in the 1990s, namely letters between Bonhoeffer and his fiancée, Maria von Wedemeyer, and recognises that the resistance to Hitler, once thought to include just a few lone military officers, was actually a broader movement. The biography is long (542 pages), but often includes substantial quotations from letters, sermons, speeches and treatises, which is a useful gift to those who have not met Bonhoeffer before. This is a great place to start to understand the Nazi dictatorship and Bonhoeffer's Christian discipleship.

The twentieth century has so many examples of Christians living through great evil. I find it purging to read accounts of Christians who persevered in their faith under totalitarian regimes, whether that was in Germany, the Soviet Union, Rumania, or China. There is something bracing about peeling back the layers to get to the core of obedience: listening to the voice of Christ alone and blocking out the screeches of propaganda officers or the seductive words of collaborators, who pervert what is true and real and lasting. I read a biography like this one and ask myself if I would have found it within my power to stand up against horrific crimes, and I pray again that God would spare me from the time of trial.

Unfortunately, after reading this biography, I still have to say that I am waiting for a modern biography of Bonhoeffer that is really fair and doesn't try to force him into an evangelical box. I fear this is what this book has attempted to do, wittingly or not. It appears to me to be written to make Bonhoeffer appear to be a conservative evangelical, who read his Bible every day, who

hated preaching which was divorced from the Scriptural text, and who had a conversion experience in a Baptist Church in Harlem. Actually, he confessed to his closest friend that there were times when he found it too difficult to read the Bible and pray, he was no inerrantist, and had multiple turning-points on an erratic pathway to sanctification.

This book contains almost no interaction with the treatises of Bonhoeffer, the philosophical reasons for his high regard for Gandhi, nor theological reasons for his involvement in the ecumenical movement. I was left wondering if this was a Bonhoeffer deliberately shaped for right-wing Christian conservatives in the US, who would value the Bible-reading Bonhoeffer, but may be less appreciative of the Bonhoeffer who criticises Christians too closely aligned with power. There appears to be no interaction with recent scholarly debate, either in America or in the German-speaking world. Apart from these substantial concerns, my confidence was undermined through dozens of careless mistakes in the spelling of German words, the assertion that a text from Matthew 10 is part of the Sermon on the Mount (p536), and turns of phrase which were glib and jocular at moments in the story where nothing but searing honesty and sober writing was called for. It was surely an error to have Barth say that the theological community led by Bonhoeffer on the Baltic Coast had a “monastic *eros* and *pathos*” (p269). Certainly “ethos” was Barth’s phrasing!

We need more Bonhoeffer. The tragedy of his life, and of German history in the first half of the twentieth century, needs frequent retelling, to set before us the example of a man who was not scared to confess Christ before human opposition, and to warn us of the base potential of human evil. On a recent visit to Berlin, I was most moved when I sat in the chair at his writing desk from which he was led away by the Gestapo for his two years in jail. The great and the grotesque met there on that day in April 1943. Read this book by Metaxas by all means and give it to others to read too. But find other books on Bonhoeffer to read to fill out the story. We must be generous to recognise that he was

indeed a hero of the faith, even when he doesn't share all the assumptions and priorities of evangelical conviction.