Book Review

Eric Metaxas, *Letter to the American Church* (New York: Salem Books, 2022), xiv +139 pp. $22.99

Reviewed by Nils I. Borquist

The list of substantial issues plaguing America today appears quite extensive, with problems ranging from extraordinary inner-city violence, pharmaceutical substance overdoses, plummeting academic performance, political strife and division, absolute reliance on digital devices, and personal and national financial stress, which together constitute a significant portion of the concerns. With such an array of plaguing conditions, attempting to locate both causes and possible explanations may be desirable, though with the roots buried deeply within our history and traditions, preventing further toxic spread may be beyond our collective grasp.

However, certain institutions could seemingly provide relief in some capacity, offering answers and commiseration, community, and hope. Writer Eric Metaxas believes that the Church, specifically the Christian Church, is one such entity, yet his book *Letter to the American Church* presents a perspective in which American churches (and their leaders), citizens, and the national government parallel the German Christian churches of the 1930s during the rise of the Nazi regime under Hitler. Recalling the resistance of voices pursuing morality, particularly that of Dietrich Bonhoeffer who bravely stood his ground against the swelling violence toward innocence and targeted scapegoats, Metaxas cajoles American Christians today to unite behind the Word of God to defend their neighbors from the attacks of the unethical, the depraved, and the cruel, which are proliferating through evil ideas and acts in society and poisoning children, adults, and the elderly alike.

Metaxas asks several questions early in the text: how does the United States avoid making the same mistakes as Germany, which endured similar political turmoil? Regarding the Church, what does the institution represent, how can Christian influence positively impact citizens, and how do we produce trustworthy leaders with moral fortitude and the willingness to speak up against harmful practices? As part of the answer to the latter set of questions, Metaxas proclaims that Christians

who "actually live out their faith in all the spheres of their lives so that all of society is blessed," rather than simply attending to services (and their supposed faith) on Sunday mornings, pursue the fulfillment of God's desire for His followers (3). However, regarding the question of staying quiet in the face of damaging actions, Metaxas points to leaders such as Bonhoeffer, William Wilberforce, and Billy Graham, who all defied the acceptability of the notion that protecting those seeking to persecute the innocent, the Christian faithful, and societal ethical absolutes was justified. Essentially, these men represent the voice of the moral right, those defending the Word of God and the liberty of humankind to live by His laws and expectations. Christians should be inspired to continue such models of standing with and by biblical truths.

Another question naturally arises when Metaxas considers America's history: how did we get to this point? He provides a brief chronology of events that have led to the deterioration of proper faith, including the misreading of the idea of separation of Church and State (which Metaxas labels the "wall of separation"), the removal of prayer in schools, deviations in the institution of marriage, and the rising numbers of people defending the right to have an abortion (7). As such cornerstones of America's foundation, a structure largely built upon Christianity, crumbled, Christian leaders primarily stood aside quietly and motionless. Why, Metaxas asks, did they actively avoid responding? One major reason, especially noticeable in the social media age, is a fear of being canceled, or removed from the public spotlight, a charge often linked with social ostracization, outrage, and exclusion. For pastors leading churches, alienating the congregation, many of whom are unable to exercise free will and instead rely on following "woke" trends for guidance, can sound the death knell for the business of the church. Additionally, the common belief in Christ's passivity has become ubiquitous, so submission to the looming voice of the political left appears, for them, to be truly the way of the Savior. As Metaxas continues, he exclaims that these misreadings, these outright weak and cowardly premises, will undoubtedly lead to further issues and societal division.

Returning to the downfall of Germany in the 1930s and the role of the Church in that decline, Metaxas declares that an inability to exercise foresight led to rapid damage. The Church proved complicit in the Nazi movement due to complacency, the sense that the Church was basically untouchable, a powerful force that no political or military regime could overwhelm. However, history repeatedly proves otherwise. That complacency, then as now, usually aligns with ignoring ominous foreshadowing of turmoil, war, and the destruction of communities, traditions, and cohesion.

Metaxas leans heavily on Bonhoeffer's works and ideas, which is to be expected given his prior book devoted to Bonhoeffer's message and heroism. The parallels between the German Church nearly one hundred years ago and the American

Church today are, however, quite notable, making Bonhoeffer's perceptions seem apt. Much as Søren Kierkegaard described mid-19th-century Denmark, Bonhoeffer described the German Church of his day as "Christianity without Christ," devoid of true faith and wholly reliant on rudimentary religious practice (24). As this laziness coincided with the rise of National Socialism, Bonhoeffer began to realize the likelihood of a terrible future for the country's citizens. Unfortunately, however, Bonhoeffer's warnings went unheeded, even those addressed to the Lutheran Church, still a revered and powerful institution, calling for intervention. With a lack of any action, Metaxas poses a pertinent question: "What did the Lutheran Church of Bonhoeffer's day fear? Losing their respectable positions in society? Did they fear anything at all?"(29). Here, Metaxas raises an interesting point—were Church leaders afraid of being ousted and thus losing possibly cushy positions, or were they so jaded that they never even considered the possibility of the Church's elimination? In either case, they, as a collective group, chose to wash their hands of the eventual bloodshed.

In America today, churches have been forced to reconcile with the dominant presence of social media, so to reach out to active and potential congregants, church leaders resort to building Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter pages, posting pictures of services, clips of songs, and promoting bake sales and recent baptisms. An alignment between the Church and social acceptance has emerged, and this connection feeds directly into another union, that of the Church with the government, though not the government with the ideals of the Church. When the Nazi Party took control of Germany, its leaders sought to subtly ingrain themselves in the Church, certainly because of their awareness of the Church's influence on citizens. Hardly anyone foresaw the carnage to come. Metaxas provides four primary reasons why Church leaders and citizens alike failed to act: "their inability to see things clearly," their insistence on clinging to what they felt "was safe," a departure "from leaning on God," and a loss of trusting God "with what lay ahead" (35). The domino effect from the first problem to the fourth brought submission to Nazi authority, the imprisonment of dissenters, then of those in leadership positions who could be a nuisance, and, finally, executions. As Bonhoeffer witnessed the changes, he implored the Church to stand against the Nazis and gave three reasons for the Church's specific involvement. He believed the "Church was the conscience of the state and must call [the state] to account" or object to governmental wrongdoing. His second point centered on the need and obligation of the Christian Church to "help any victims of the state" (39). Lastly, he looked to the individual Christian as a representative of the Church to act ethically, even against the actions of the Church. Unfortunately, church leaders turned away from Bonhoeffer's ideas, and the parishioners followed along. Metaxas provides a description of the Barmen Declaration, a document written to oppose the German government's takeover of the Church; sadly, the declaration went largely

unsigned by clergy, thus allowing the state to takeover freely. Seventy years later, Charles Colson in the United States drafted the Manhattan Declaration for the same purpose, and, dishearteningly, it, too, was overwhelmingly dismissed. Metaxas, like the drafters of both documents, asked a resounding "Why?"

An interesting perspective on voting or voicing an opinion concerns silence. Again, Metaxas looks to Bonhoeffer for guidance, and the former notes that the latter believed that complacency equates complicity and avoiding speech against wickedness amounts to "participation in their wicked cause" (51). Interestingly, Metaxas writes about the contagious quality of speech. Once someone builds the courage to publicly denounce evildoing, others more easily join the efforts to counter the evil as well. The "price" of speaking out may not decrease, but the willingness to participate in righting a wrong becomes easier within a group. What Metaxas correlates with speaking out is true faith, and exercising such faith on a public stage can be easier to accomplish by following the courageous acts of others. In other words, seeing others defend right may not have anything outright to do with one's possession of faith, but one's willingness to proclaim that faith publicly can be lifted by witnessing the strength of another. This allows the faithful who may be hesitant to outwardly profess their faith to live the lives they desire to live.

What we must avoid is what the German Lutherans achieved, as referred to by Bonhoeffer, namely "cheap grace." Cheap grace, also considered "counterfeit grace," may be best described as the belief in that grace is earned by attending church regularly, proclaiming one's belief in God, and dressing the part, in a sense. With cheap grace, the idea is that one may sin at will, but God will forgive simply because the individual claims to be a devout Christian. Looking at the outcome of German society throughout the period of World War II, the consequences of faith in cheap grace prove foolish, but, almost worse yet, Metaxas boldly states that the very condition of German Lutherans and Church leaders exactly matches the condition of the American Church and American churchgoers today.

The rise of evangelicalism has produced an idolatry of the state of Christianity, or a love of the idea of Christianity and of what it means to be a Christian as defined by the social elite. Being part of this assembly requires silence to a large extent. Speaking out is considered an act of negative judgment, so keeping one's views private is the norm. What becomes acceptable is conformity, yet in amalgamating with the larger group, the individual loses his individuality, his ability to think for himself, and his ability to engage faithfully with the Word of God. Additionally, being an evangelically-minded Christian means avoiding confronting people with uncomfortable truths that need to be addressed; neglecting such conversations makes a person feel as if he is doing the right thing by not upsetting the other person, yet Metaxas claims the opposite, that such an act harms the other person.

Everything Metaxas writes, up to the final few chapters, centers on Americans' submission to social acceptance and avoidance of personal criticism. He writes that "we in the American Church swallowed" the same lies as the German citizenry in the 1930s, and that we have been "similarly silenced from speaking and acting boldly against what we see happening in our own time" (99). Quite bluntly, this is wrong. Metaxas states that Americans should recognize Bonhoeffer's heroism and line up to mimic him. He acted out of true concern, realizing that "truth is truth" (104). Instead, we too often play life as safely as possible, avoiding confrontation and discomfort because we "have drifted from the pure and utter freedom that it means to live out our faith fearlessly" (125). Ultimately, we must learn to return to a deeper level of Christianity, one in which we live our lives wholly and absolutely faithfully and with devotion. We must push back against evil and have the courage to act heroically, selflessly and with pride in our Christianity. Otherwise, we will suffer the fate of those before us who preferred a silent death to a life of love and morality.

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