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Andrew DeCort

Christian Faith and Public Responsibility: An Interview with Eskinder Nega

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"The promise of the heavenly kingdom doesn't mean that we have to give up on the present world. It's up to the church to be engaged in both our spiritual wellbeing and our earthly wellbeing. This is what the times demand. This is what Jesus taught. He spoke out against injustice… There is hope in the Orthodox Church. There is hope in the Protestant Church. There is hope in the Catholic Church… We should be defined by how we handle our differences. We should not be defined by our differences." Eskinder Nega

Introduction

On April 11, I sat down to talk with Eskinder Nega, one of Ethiopia's most prominent critical voices, who spent the last 6.5 years in prison on dropped charges of inciting violent revolution. The interview, which last 95 minutes and is transcribed below, focused on his journey of faith in prison and his vision of Christian public responsibility. It also included related topics like his experience in prison, a roadmap for Ethiopia's democratization, the Ethiopian Constitution, and vexed national symbols like Emperor Menelik in the quest for Ethiopian unity.

Before I visited him at the jailhouse in the Kera police station on March 31, I had no idea that Eskinder was a religious person, much less a passionate Christian. I had only heard him described as a controversial journalist and political activist, and I myself had only read his New York Times op-ed "Letter from Ethiopia's Gulag" (July 25, 2013).

But as he answered my questions about forgiveness across the bars in Kera, his face shined with joy, and he spoke so beautifully about Christ's command to forgive others, including his oppressors. I was deeply moved. Suddenly, a dilapidated jail felt more like a liberating church. There was an immense sense of freedom and hope. I wanted to hear more.

As we began our conversation at New York Café, the location Eskinder chose, I was touched by his kind words. Somehow he had found my CV online and carefully read it. I was also impressed by his humility. An hour into this very rich conversation, he protested, "I'm on milk, not on bread." He insisted, "I have thousands of questions."

But as I said then and as I see again now, after having transcribed our interview, I was impressed by the meatiness of his principles and perspectives as a Christian citizen of Ethiopia. Indeed, he articulated the most practical, accessible Public Theology I have heard from an Ethiopian thinker, combining a profound sense of conviction to care for suffering neighbors like Jesus, with an equally profound embrace of tolerance for a diversity of opinions.

Eskinder's words made me think of one of America's greatest public theologians, Abraham Lincoln in his Second Inaugural Address: "With malice toward none; with charity for all; with firmness in the right, as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in; to bind up the nation's wounds."

The Public Theology of Eskinder Nega: Nine Points

Before turning to the 7600-word interview below, let me summarize what I see as the Public Theology of Eskinder Nega.

First, faith in Jesus is a gift from Jesus. It cannot be fabricated or forced upon anyone. The deepest understanding comes through the gift of faith more than the grasping of the mind, and it is always a *gift*. Eskinder emphasized this over and over again.

Second, Jesus calls us to love our neighbors as his highest command and thus to embrace a practical life of truth, justice, equality, forgiveness, and peace – what Eskinder called democratic values. He sees Christian faith and democratic culture as mutually implicative.

Thus, third, we should challenge our churches to exercise greater moral leadership and to be more actively involved in society and its current events. We ourselves should visit prisoners, feed the hungry, give water to the thirsty, and clothe the naked. These are direct orders from Jesus. The kingdom of heaven should not make us care any less about the earth and its concerns.

But, fourth, we are all sinful people, and thus we must embrace an acute awareness of our imperfection and make repentance and forgiveness repeated practices in all of our activities. We will not create a perfect world, and Eskinder rejected demonizing the failures of his church and government. This awareness of fallibility leads to a radical humility toward ourselves and profound charity toward others. We should never see ourselves as superior to prisoners, because we are all prisoners of sin.

Even so, fifth, we must strive for a more perfect society like Jesus did, a society characterized by freedom, justice, and love for all people, which respects a diversity of perspectives under the basic principle, "Do no harm" and fights vices of privilege, partiality, and oppression. To confess, "Jesus is Lord" requires that we challenge the "little lords" who follow the universal authoritarian habits of the misrepresentation and oppression of innocent people. It is Jesus that must unify Christians across their valid differences. In wider society, leaders should organize an inclusive negotiation in which all parties are able to participate in deciding the future as representatives of public opinions. What matters most is not a particular result but a legitimate process.

Sixth, we should not expect this path to be easy. Jesus suffered, and we will suffer too. Jesus never opted out from life, and he doesn't give us this option either. Jesus was murdered for disrupting the status

quo, and he set us an example to follow. Like Jesus and the Apostles, we must be willing to unsettle problematic conventions. The Christian life and suffering go together.

Seventh, when we suffer, Jesus will never forget us. Even in prison and indescribable torture, Jesus remembers us. Indeed, he surprises us with the most precious gifts that make the suffering of prison seem like rubbish. With Jesus, we shall overcome.

Thus, eighth, we shouldn't care if human beings persecute or forget us. We should not make our decisions based on our expectations of how humans will respond to us. Being forgotten by people is nothing. What matters is that Jesus remembers us and how God will judge us. God will vindicate those who have stood up for freedom, justice, and love like Jesus did. The standard of God's judgment is found in Matthew 25:31-46 where Jesus gives direct orders to feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, clothe the naked, welcome outsiders, care for the sick, and visit prisoners. These instructions are obligatory for all Christians.

Overall, ninth, we can live lives of deep joy, even as we make sacrifices and are prepared to suffer – to the point of separation from loved ones, prison, torture, and death – for our Christian responsibility as imperfect people with imperfect churches in an imperfect society. When we follow Jesus, we walk the path to everlasting life, and we have nothing to fear or lose. Jesus is a generous gift-giver, and he will make all things right in the end.

The Interview: April 11, 2018

I have edited the transcript of our interview for clarity and repetition. Otherwise, the words below are exact quotations from Eskinder Nega, which I recorded and publish with his permission.

My hope is that this interview will stimulate expanded perspectives and practices of Public Theology in Ethiopia and beyond. Public Theology is God's will, a beautiful way of being human, and a source

of great hope for our societies.

Public Theology is a practical discipline that reflects on the meaning of faith and public responsibility across boundaries through shared values for the common good. I found Eskinder's perspective an exemplary expression of Public Theology.

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AD: Did you grow up Christian?

EN: I grew in a very religious family, but this is not unusual for Ethiopia. My grandparents came from a very traditional society. This was before urbanization. They were from Gondar and Gojjam. They were very Orthodox. My grandmother took me to church almost every day before I joined school, and there was a section for children. In Sidist Kilo, there is a church called Medhane Alem [Healer of the World], a very modern church unusual for Ethiopia. The tabot [replica of the ark of the covenant] came from Jerusalem, and the Emperor had a modern building constructed for it. There is a section where children play with the older people outside. The environment deeply influenced me.

To be honest, until the last imprisonment – I was imprisoned eight or nine time, the last imprisonment being 6.5 years – I was more a Christian by culture than by faith. Christianity was something I took for granted. I did not know Jesus. I fasted because we fasted; everyone fasted in our family. There was no exception. We came from a very homogeneous environment. So fasting wasn't really a religious practice but our culture, and the cultural aspect predominated. I was more a Christian by culture than a Christian by faith.

But then I went to prison, and then I read the Bible. And that changed me. I know, of course, ultimately that change was not because of my understanding. I did not discover Jesus through reading the Bible. I discovered Jesus because it was a gift from Jesus. That was his grace; it had nothing to do with me. Faith is a gift from Jesus. So what faith I

have now has nothing to do with me or my understanding of the Bible. It has nothing to do with my suffering or my imprisonment. It's simply a gift from Jesus.

But prison was the ideal environment to read the Bible, to read his message and his work while he was on earth. He created the environment. One of the reasons I am not bitter about the imprisonment – I spent 6.5 years in prison on false charges – is because I discovered Jesus. That gift has been given to me by him, of course. What more could I ask for? This is everlasting life. There is this incredible peace that comes from knowing Jesus. So how could I complain about this 6.5 years? That's not lost. That's not lost. I think, even if I had to spend eighteen years in prison, the simple fact that I was able to discover Jesus – that means nothing. It's like Paul said, "I consider everything as rubbish [compared to knowing Christ]" – everything he lost. The 6.5 years I lost is rubbish compared to what I gained. I gained Jesus. Like I said, it was not through my works, not because of who I am, but simply as a gift – a free gift – from him. I find that incredible. I feel blessed.

I wish the same thing would happen to my family. I wish the same thing would happen to everyone. Because of my attachment to my wife and child, I have this passion that they too would have the gift to believe – that Jesus would give them the gift to believe, the gift of faith. That's what I pray for now.

AD: Did this happen gradually or dramatically in prison? What was the process?

EN: I think it was gradual. It wasn't a sudden transformation. It's not like I got up one early morning and thought, "There's Jesus after all." It wasn't like that.

I read the New Testament so many times. At some point, I said I should go back to the Old Testament, because it's a connected story. I requested that my family should buy the Old Testament and bring me a standard text, the New International Version. The English is simple

and straightforward, and I love that Bible. I read the English version of the Bible, because I'm familiar with modern Amharic, and the Amharic version that I had was not clear to me. My literary language is English, and I preferred the English version for clarity.

So I had the NIV brought to prison by my family, but the guards refused. And for three years – can you believe it? – they wouldn't allow me to get the Bible. We argued about it for three years. But I was denied access to the Old Testament. The prison guards were so angry at me, because I refused to stop writing. I was writing in prison, and they insisted that I stop, and I insisted that this is my right and I'm not going to give it up. They were so angry at me, and they penalized me by refusing to give me the Old Testament.

So I only had the New Testament, and I read the New Testament so many times. In those three years, I had the chance to read the New Testament over and over and over again – except the last part, which is John's Revelation. That I found very difficult, so I always stopped at Jude and returned to Matthew.

For three years, I read the Bible for half an hour in the morning and for half an hour in the evening, so altogether for an hour every day. For three years, I read the New Testament over and over and over again.

But like I said, I didn't become a Christian through reading the Bible. You could read and not understand, unless you have been given the gift – the gift of faith. I think I have been blessed by the gift of faith, and, reading the Bible after the gift, I was able to understand what Jesus teaches and how much sacrifice he paid – how much he loved us. It's so evident in the Bible.

But now the opportunity has finally come for me to read the Old Testament at my leisure. But even so, the main text is the New Testament, and I'll continue to read the Old Testament and New Testament side by side.

AD: Did you have a favorite passage or story in the Bible? What was gripping for you?

EN: Everything! To be honest with you – everything.

But the teachings of Jesus, especially Matthew 5-8 – the Sermon on the Mount. Each Gospel has its own unique merit. In Matthew, after chapter 11, there are the parables, and they are very well written. Matthew connects Jesus with the prophecies of the Old Testament. Mark is a very good storyteller. Luke was a physician and very educated; you can see that in his writing. The Gospel according to Luke has been researched very carefully. John is incredible; that's where you find faith. John's main theme is not the miracles of Jesus; it's about faith. There's a reason to read the Gospels. Each one has its own strength and merit.

And plus, there's Paul, of course (laughs). Paul's in a league by himself! He would have been the perfect journalist (laughs). He was very persuasive.

Of course, ultimately, these people aren't working – it's the Holy Spirit within them that's working. They had the gift of the Holy Spirit, and the Holy Spirit was doing the work.

AD: What do you find as the most convincing part of the Christian faith as someone who has lived in your society, worked for free expression, and experienced prison for many years of your life?

EN: It's like Jesus said: It's the truth. Maybe I have this journalistic perspective when I read. The Apostles – Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John – reported what they saw. It's like John said: he was writing about something he saw with his eyes, he heard with his ears, and he touched with his hands. As a journalist, I could understand that.

The testimony they left behind is very compelling, persuasive. It's beyond doubt. You can see that in the writing. Perhaps you need a journalist's or editor's perspective to understand that. But like I said,

this had nothing to do with me. Ultimately, I had the gift, and maybe that's why I understood. I find their testimony very compelling.

AD: So Jesus died, he was killed –

EN: He was murdered –

AD: Yes, Jesus was arrested, tortured, and murdered. Paul was murdered. Peter was murdered. John was exiled on an island. So what was it about their writings and way of life that was so threatening to the state? Why do you think they were so dangerous, having read the New Testament so many times in prison?

EN: They threatened the status quo. There was a status quo, and they threatened the status quo. And the same thing is happening here: we threaten the status quo; we threaten the convention. It was the same thing with Christianity.

I think the Roman Empire was corrupt to the core at that time. And here comes a message that went contrary to the time. Here was a message of discipline. Here was a message of selflessness. Here was a message of love and justice. And the Roman court was threatened by these ideas. The same thing is happening here – in all authoritarian countries, it's the same story, the same theme.

The principles of Jesus – love, justice, and peace – resonate throughout the world. It's relevant to all societies. It's relevant to all humans. And it goes against privilege. It goes against oppression. It goes against partiality. I think that was the problem at that time – for the status quo. And we have the same message.

Essentially, democracy impresses many of the principles taught by Jesus, which is tolerance, which is love, which is peace. This is it.

AD: I teach Christian Ethics classes, and I ask my students, "What are the public implications of our Christian faith?" They sometimes say similar things to what you said, but then when I ask further, "How do

we live and implement these things in society?" they quickly express their worry that they could end up like you: in jail, maybe forgotten, with wasted lives. What would you say to students who are studying the Bible and are trying to understand what it means to be a faithful follower of Jesus but who feel intimidated, who feel like if you go to imprison, you'll be forgotten?

EN: Forgotten by whom? Forgotten by whom? That's the big question. Are you forgotten by people? Or are you forgotten by Jesus? Being forgotten by people is nothing. Being forgotten by Jesus – if that's possible; that's not possible – that's the ultimate damnation. Forgotten by whom? That's the question that they should consider. As long as you're not forgotten by Jesus, it doesn't matter if you're forgotten by people. You won't be forgotten by Jesus, if you stand up for truth, if you stand up for justice, if you stand up for love, if you stand up for nonviolence.

As long as you're not forgotten by Jesus, everything else is irrelevant. He's watching constantly. He never forgets. He reads your heart. And as long as you firmly believe in that, you'll have the strength to withstand what difficulties the government could bring. You'll ignore it. Whatever happens to you on earth – whatever happens to you by earthlings – will be irrelevant. It's temporary. It will pass. Then will come the final judgment. Then will come that day when you have to stand up and account for your actions. And what you did – maybe forsaken by people, forgotten by people – will matter on that day. It will matter to the boss. It will matter to Jesus. And that's what counts in the final analysis. It's how you stand on that day – what Paul calls "that day" – that matters. How you fair in this world, in the present time, is irrelevant. It's temporary and will pass away as quickly as the blink of your eye.

So be aware that your final Judge will come. Be aware that the final Judge will watch and follow all your activities, even if humans will not do the same thing – even if your *fellow* humans will not do the same thing. So being forgotten by people is nothing. Don't worry about people; worry about God. Worry about Jesus. Don't worry about

pleasing people. Worry about pleasing Jesus. He's the only one that matters.

AD: You're communicating a counter-cultural theology here, because a lot of people think if God is with you, then you'll be healthy, wealthy, victorious, and happy all the time. Many would say, "Well, the fact that you were in prison is proof that he forgot you!" But you're saying, "No, Jesus remembered me *in* prison." So how do you have this perspective that, even if you're suffering in so many ways, Jesus remembers you?

EN: What's suffering in the first place? It's a test. I think if you're a Christian, you're not guaranteed to opt out from life. You're obligated to live life as it is, with its ups and downs, with its happy and tragic phases. Being Christian and being in the full grace of Jesus doesn't mean that you will be immune from life. You'll be part of life. But it's your relationship with Jesus that will determine how you react to the events that you encounter. That's the difference.

Jesus did not opt out from life. He suffered. *He suffered*. He was denied by people in his time. So he was part of life. He embraced life. There were times when he cried – for example, when he went to Lazarus's tomb. There were times when he was happy. I remember the time when a person asked him a question about the greatest commandment, and Jesus replied to love God and love your neighbor. That person replied, "You're right; these are the two greatest commandment. You replied wisely." Jesus was happy that person was satisfied with his answer, and he said, "I see that you are not far from the kingdom of heaven."

There were times when Jesus was happy and times when he was unhappy. He was part of life. And we are obligated to be part of life with its ups and downs, with its victories and defeats. So being a Christian doesn't mean that you will not suffer. You have to accept suffering because Jesus too suffered. "He has set you an example" [quoting Peter].

So the fact that I suffered does not mean that Jesus did not care about me. And plus, he let me suffer because he knew that this was a test I had the strength to overcome, of course, through his grace. He did not test me beyond my means. Had I not suffered, I don't think I would have ever discovered Jesus. He set the environment. It was necessary for me to go to prison to be endowed with his gift and then for it to be reinforced through reading the Bible. So there was reason for my suffering – for my good. He wanted to give me a gift. And he wanted to give me that gift in prison. That's what he did.

AD: Many Christians say, "Jesus is Lord" or "Yesus geta new." In the time of the New Testament, "Lord" was one of the titles of Caesar. So calling Jesus "the Lord" was a surprising, critical, and subversive statement that there is a different Lord who rules with a different law. What do you think it means for us to say, "Jesus is Lord" today? "Yesus geta new" – what does that mean in your Ethiopia?

EN: It's "Lord" with a capital L. For example, there's a "lord" of this café. He's the owner of this café, and he can do anything he likes. But he's a "lord" with a small letter. There's the "lord" of Ethiopia, and he too is a lord with a small letter. There's the lord of the most powerful country in the world, which is the U.S. Trump too is a "lord" with a small "l." There's only one Lord with a capital "L," and that's Jesus.

AD: What does it mean to be a capital "L" Lord?

EN: He's everything. He's the alpha and omega, as written in the Revelation of John. He's the beginning and the end. He's everything.

AD: So if the little lords recognized the one true Lord, what would change? What would be the social and ethical implications?

EN: Well, it would not be perfection, because we are imperfect. We all carry original sin. There is only perfection in heaven. As long as we live on this earth, we have to embrace our imperfection. We will never create the perfect world on this earth. That's not the point. We will never attain perfection. Original sin is part of our nature. We have

been contaminated at the outset. We shall be absolved from this sin on "that day."

So even if everyone – if the small "lords" – were to acknowledge the big Lord, the true Lord, we would not create the perfect world. But we would create a world striving for perfection. We would create a world in which we are aware of our sinful nature, of our imperfection. In the present world, most people strive for perfection without realizing that it's not in our nature. It's not for us to be perfect.

If we acknowledged the true Lord and if we acknowledged the true faith, we would be aware of our sinful nature, and we would always be repenting and always be striving and always trying. And that would change so many things. It would change the world dramatically. We would not create the perfect world, but we would create a dramatically changed world – a world in which repentance of our sins would be at the core of our activities. A true Christian is one who understands his imperfection. It's a constant battle as long as you live on this earth to overcome evil, our sinful nature. It's never ending. As long as we live on this earth, we have to fight our sinful nature and try to overcome it.

So it would be a much-improved world. There would be less oppression. There would be less partiality. There would be less inequality. There would be less injustice. And there would be less hate. And there would be less moral corruption. So we would still have an imperfect world but one that is aware of its imperfection and that keeps on trying to create a better world.

AD: How do you think the Ethiopian churches are doing at striving for this kind of decent society that recognizes Jesus as Lord? Do you hear silence or voices? Do you see responsible action or passivity, whether in the Orthodox Church or Protestant Church?

EN: There's two parts of the church. First, there's the church itself, the body of Christ, which is us, the believers who believe that Jesus is the Son of God. There's another part – the hierarchy – that oversees this

church. For the most part, the body of the church – the mass of Christianity – is okay. This doesn't mean they have the perfect faith or a true understanding of the faith, but they're instinctively Christian. They have hope.

But the hierarchy is a different story, whether the Orthodox or Protestant or Catholic Church. There's more imperfection there. And this has been true not only now but throughout history, in all churches, without exception. We should expect this. The people who manage the church are themselves humans. They're not perfect. They're sinners just like we are. So we expect them to be perfect or free from sin or not to do wrong. Imperfection is our nature. It's part of us.

What varies from time to time is the degree. There are good times, when moral corruption – though always with us – is not as pronounced. And there are times when it overtakes the church and its hierarchy – when it dominates the times.

So I think within this historical context, there is more the church hierarchy could do, whether Orthodox or Protestant or Catholic. They could, for example, do more to provide moral leadership to the society, not only by speaking out against injustice but by speaking out against hate, against ethnic hate. They haven't done as much as they could do. So there's much that lacks.

But still this doesn't mean that these three Christian churches are hopeless or that they're not doing any good. They do good. They shepherd the believers. But they could do more. And it's up to us, the believers, to insist that they should do more. It's not only their obligation. It's also our obligation.

We should insist that they should lead us morally, that they should be concerned not only by the heavenly kingdom – the ultimate goal – but that they should be concerned about what's happening on the ground now. We should not forsake current events. The promise of the heavenly kingdom doesn't mean that we have to give up on the

present world. It's up to the church to be engaged in both our spiritual wellbeing and our earthly wellbeing. This is what the times demand. This is what Jesus taught. He spoke out against injustice.

Take the example of the woman accused of adultery. Jesus was involved. He didn't push her away. He taught her the correct path. It's the same with the church: they should not push away the problems of this earth. They should teach us the correct path. And I think it's possible to do that. But they should do more. There is hope in the Orthodox Church. There is hope in the Protestant Church. There is hope in the Catholic Church.

AD: While you were in prison, there was a time when many people were being killed, and there was a sense of social instability and fear. A prominent pastor in Addis told thousands of people, "Don't read the news. Just speak positive things. God is going to do something great." I felt like the pastor was telling his people to look away from the sufferings of their neighbors and fellow citizens, and to ignore the realities of earthly life, what you called "current events." What would you say to that pastor as someone who was in prison at that time?

EN: Aren't there different interpretation of the Bible? Ever since Christianity became Christianity, I think there have been different interpretations of the Bible. Some people choose to look away from the affairs of this world completely. Even though I myself do not agree with this version, I respect those who choose to turn away from this world and devote themselves 100% to the promise of the heavenly kingdom. I do not subscribe to this view. But I respect those who choose to turn away completely from earthly matters.

I think we should understand and realize that there will never be one interpretation of the Bible. As long as we have one Jesus who unites us, this diversity of opinion should be part of our faith. I would have nothing contrary to say against this view. This is one version. I understand them. If someone was to say, "I don't care about this world. I don't care about justice and this world's suffering" – after all, everything about this world is petty, in the grand perspective of things

– “This is it for me: I want to devote myself to Jesus completely, irrespective of everything else,” I would respect that person. That is one perspective.

I don’t agree with this version. I think we should stay involved and engaged in the affairs of this world. We should be concerned about the sufferings and injustice of this world, because Jesus was. The example he set was for us to be engaged in the affairs of this world. He taught us to love our neighbors. He taught us that this is the Golden Rule. When your neighbor suffers, you have to be concerned and engaged with him. But if someone else says, “My choice is to love God with all my heart and soul and life and only that,” I would respect that person. “And I would do no harm to my neighbor” – that’s a crucial statement. [They must say,] “I would do no harm to my neighbor, but I want to devote my life completely to God.” I would have nothing to say against that person.

But I would be concerned about my neighbor. Seeing the example of Jesus, I would be concerned about the suffering of my neighbor. And I would like to help my neighbor. It’s like Jesus said: there’s no greater way to express one’s life than by giving one’s life to one’s friends. That’s the ultimate expression of love. This message has resonated and had meaning in my life. This passage clicks for me. But maybe it doesn’t click for someone else. That doesn’t mean that he hasn’t accepted Jesus Christ as the one and only true Son of God.

AD: As you were talking, I was thinking about the line from Abraham Lincoln’s Second Inaugural Address, “With malice toward none; with charity for all; with firmness in the right, as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in; to bind up the nation's wounds.” Lincoln had this extremely generous and capacious vision of living together and trying to make peace in a conflicted world. And that was in the midst of the American Civil War. You’ve been accused of being an extremist, a radical –

EN: A terrorist –

AD: A terrorist –

EN: A hate-monger –

AD: A hate-monger –

EN: And everything else.

AD: But I hear you expressing a great charity for a plurality of perspectives, even within Christianity itself. So where did your vision of accepting a plurality of perspectives come from and why has your perspective been so twisted by public messaging?

EN: I was in the U.S. during my formative years, and I rarely watched TV. I was reading. I read relentlessly. I always did. I read plenty of books – I read everything. If you have a passion for reading, go to the U.S. You can read everything, and it's very cheap. I went to second-hand bookstores, and there were plenty of them in D.C. And I read. I read for years.

And I think I've come to embrace the principles on which America was founded – the principles that all people are created equal, the self-evident truth that everyone is entitled to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. I have internalized these values from my long years in the U.S. This tolerance of diversity should range from the secular world to Christianity. I think there should be diversity in the secular world. I think there should be diversity of opinion in the Christian world too.

How was this misunderstood by my people and by the government? I don't think it was misunderstood by the people. I think people recognize that all the accusations against me are false. And I don't think there is misunderstanding of my convictions by the government. They have to misrepresent their opponents – not just me but everyone else too. And this is not true only of the Ethiopian government. It's true of all authoritarian governments. If you don't like your opponents and activists, you brand them as terrorists or communists or agents of

the CIA and everything else.

This is not unique to the Ethiopian government. It's not because the Ethiopian government is uniquely devilish that I've been called so many names. This is in the nature of all authoritarian regimes.

AD: At the end of the Letter to the Hebrews, the author describes the heroes of the faith –

EN: Daniel.

AD: Yes. Then he tells us to fix our eyes on Jesus and, "Remember prisoners as if you yourselves were in prison." What is it like to be in prison, and how could Christians better remember prisoners like Hebrews 13 says we should?

EN: Jesus tells a parable about the coming of the King – with a capital "K" not the small "k" – and the judgment of nations in Matthew 25. He separates his flock into the sheep and the goats on his right and left. To those on the right, among other questions, he asks, "Where were you when I was in prison?" They ask him, "When did we visit you?" He said, "Be blessed, you're going to heaven, because you came and visited me when I was in prison." They ask, "When did we visit you?" The response he gave was, "What you did to the least of these, you did to me." This means, "What you did to others, you did to me."

So I think that prisoners have a place in Jesus's heart, even though they have committed crimes and deviated from the path – most prisoners, not all prisoners. They still have a place in the heart of Jesus. He wants them and everyone to repent.

He has instructed us to go and visit them. This is his message, his order, his instruction. So we have an obligation to go and visit prisoners. The difference between those in prison and those on the outside is very small. We are just as sinful as we are. The fact that we are not in prison does not mean that we are better people than they are. And Jesus knows this, because he reads everyone's heart. So we

should realize that the people in prison are not worse than we are – they are not bad people. We are all sinful.

By going and visiting them, I think it's a reminder that we too are prisoners of sin. We are *all* prisoners of sin – those of us on the inside and those of us on the outside. By going and visiting them in prison, we acknowledge that we are all prisoners of sin. So I think it is very important for Christians to go and visit people in prison, because it's an order from the Lord. It's a *direct* order from the Lord.

But it's not only visiting those in prison. It's also to visit those who are sick, to give water to those who are thirsty, to give food to those who are hungry. These are direct orders and instructions from the Lord himself. Should we do them, on the last day, we will be able to hold our heads up in his presence and say that we have tried, at least, to live up to his words.

Still, we never practice it! We just never learn. It's just incredible. I read the Bible, like I said, twice a day. And in between those times, I commit so many sins in my mind. I just find myself incredible. I'm amazed with myself. I am amazed at my weakness. We are hopeless without Jesus – completely hopeless. We are totally dependent on him.

AD: Can you take me inside the prison and tell me what daily life was like there for you?

EN: For the first two years, I was in the general population, and that was hectic. In many ways, it was similar to the situation we were in while we were in the police station. There was over-crowding. The sanitation was terrible. It was a typical third-world prison, a prison that you would find anywhere in Africa. It was very sub-standard, something that an American could not imagine.

But in the remaining 4.5 years, I was classified as a troublemaker, because I refused to stop writing – nothing else, nothing else. I'm not a violent person. I don't fight with people. In the 6.5 years in prison, I

did not fight with a single person. But even though I'm a nonviolent person, I was classified as a troublemaker and separated from the general population. I was put in an isolation cell, with four and then five other men. For 4.5 years, I spent time with only four persons; I was the fifth person. And that's very difficult.

We were denied access to books. We weren't allowed to write, even though we smuggled paper in. I was denied the Old Testament. Living with the same people for 4.5 years is not easy. But, fortunately, Ethiopians are very mild mannered people; our culture is unique. I have lived with so many nationalities and states, and I have come to understand that we are very well behaved. So, we managed. There was civility. Civility did not collapse, even though it was very difficult to spend day in and day out with the same people for 4.5 years.

And there was no compound. Our compound was three meters in length and width – nine meters square. As soon as we opened the door, we faced the fence. They built the fence with corrugated sheets of metal – one and a half sheets high. We could only see the sky. As soon as we opened the door, it came into our face. There was no space to walk. The same people for 4.5 years. It was very difficulty – very difficult. Fortunately, I had the Bible. And with the Bible I persevered.

AD: No exercise?

EN: We exercised in that compound. We ran forward ten steps and then back ten steps.

AD: What would you talk about?

EN: After some time, we'd repeat the same thing again and again. That happened. Like I said, Ethiopians are very mild mannered. Our traditional culture is to keep quiet and internalize problems. It's not to speak out.

AD: Would you talk with one another about personal problems?

EN: It was bottled up for the most part, because this is also our culture. You have read *Wax and Gold*. I've seen Levine's book, and you wrote the Foreword. You know about keeping everything bottled up. This is the norm.

AD: Even in isolation?

EN: Even in isolation. It's only because we're Ethiopians that we're able to manage each other. Civility did not collapse completely, because ever since you're a child, you're taught to bottle up things – never to come out with your emotions. It's the very opposite for an American.

AD: Would you or the other men ever cry in prison?

EN: Never (laughs). We're still a traditional society. I guess we have to be urbanized and be middleclass. Even in the States, the working class wouldn't cry. It's a big taboo to cry in working-class America. It's the middleclass and especially the upper middle class that have been liberated to cry. I think a certain amount of liberation is necessary for a man with traditional norms to come out and cry.

AD: Were you tortured?

EN: Not this time. But like I said, I think this was my ninth imprisonment. Before I was tortured once. I was tortured on the soles of my feet. They turned me over, holding me on the ground and my feet – I can't find the words to describe what they did to me. There are no words; I would have to show you, but I can't do it here. People were holding me down, and my feet got exposed. They were hitting me with something, but I was blindfolded so I didn't know what they were using.

I was working as a journalist – nothing else. They wanted me to leave and go back to the States. That was the great contention. In prison, it was, "Stop writing," and I refused to. When I was on the outside, it was, "Stop writing and return to the States." I refused to do that. I love

the States and have nothing against it, but I wanted to stay here.

AD: Tell me if I'm crossing a line. After you were tortured, were you just left to recover by yourself?

EN: I think it took about three weeks for me to recover. They also kicked me here [pointing to his chest]. Deliberately. I couldn't stand up straight. I was stooped for about three weeks. And I was in solitary confinement in Maekelawi for three weeks to recover, and then I was mixed into the general population. It was reported by Amnesty International.

AD: Did you have nightmares after that?

EN: No, none whatsoever. I have never had nightmares, or rarely. If someone is tortured who has nothing to be tortured for, I think that person would have nightmares. But I had something to be tortured for, and that's democracy – democracy as envisioned by the framers of the U.S. Constitution. I believed in that, and I believed that it was possible we could achieve it in Ethiopia, not just in the States. And so it did not bother me that I was tortured; I had reason to be tortured. If you have these reasons, torture would not lead to nightmares.

This was before my last imprisonment, when my dominant theme was only politics. This was before I discovered Jesus and became a born-again Christian, to use that American phrase.

AD: What is your vision for Ethiopia now and for yourself?

EN: I don't think I will join a political party. The principle is [to do] whatever is necessary for me to bring about democracy. But my choice is to work as a journalist, but not only as a print journalist now, although I love writing and reading. For now, to be relevant, you have to buy airtime on satellite television, and that's what I want to do now. I'll continue to live in Ethiopia, while visiting my wife and child in the States. Unless we have democracy, nothing is certain. I could return to prison, and that would be terrible for my child. The great

beauty of America is that it assimilates everyone easily. If something was to happen to me, Nafkot [his son] would suffer, and we want to protect him from that. But if we can bring about democracy, they would return. Nafkot was born in prison and is twelve now. [See Eskinder's 2014 "Letter to My Son."]

AD: What is the roadmap for Ethiopians to have a more reconciled society and to move toward democracy given the level of fear, resentment, and frustration? What is the way forward into a democratic future?

EN: Like I told you when you visited me in prison, I think we have the perfect example in South Africa and also in Rwanda. In Rwanda, there was reconciliation after genocide – that's an incredible feat, an incredible accomplishment. Kagame deserves all the credit, because a terrible crime was committed in Rwanda, and we could not have expected things to turn back to normal the next morning. He has maintained civility, he has maintained peace, he has prevented retaliation, and he has issued stability. He's an incredible person and blessed man. I hope he believes in Jesus. But I think he has been blessed by Jesus whether he believes in Jesus or not.

But we have a far better in South Africa, where after the trauma of apartheid, a multi-party democracy was possible. I think we should follow that path. It's not only about us. Many other countries have followed South Africa, not only in Africa, but also in Latin America and Asia. South Africa has been a model for everyone, and we should follow that example, both in terms of transitioning to democracy and what should happen after the transition to democracy – what kind of constitution we should have after the transition. This is not calculus or nuclear physics. I think there's a simple, tested way, and this could be copied and implemented in Ethiopia, to a large extent.

AD: So a new constitution is needed in Ethiopia?

EN: I think we need a constitution that comes about through the participation of all political parties. The constitution that we have was

instituted only by the EPRDF, which was the only party that mattered for this constitution. We need to bring everyone into the process. It's not only the content that maters but the process. Constitutions derive their legitimacy not only from their content but also from the process through which they came about. The content is very important, but the process is no less important.

How do you bring about legitimacy through the process? By including all political parties to be part of that process, because political parties represent public opinion. They represent the attitudes and sentiments of the population. So you involve the people in the constitution through political parties.

We need a constitution that has involved the participation of at least the major political parties – but, ideally, of all political parties. That's why we need a new constitution – because most political parties were not part of the process, and they want to be part of the process. If this is what it takes to bring about peace, that's what we should do. Nothing should be outside the bounds of peace. If what it takes to bring peace and stability and democracy is a new constitution, then a new constitution is what we should have.

But this should be left to negotiation. I'm not prescribing specific goals. What should come is negotiation that involves all political parties. And we should leave the result to the negotiation. If at the end of the negotiation process what is needed is a transitional government and a new constitution, so be it. If at the end of the negotiation, what we have is a continuation of present circumstances, so be it. If what comes after the negotiation is just a free election, so be it. We should leave the result to the negotiators and the negotiation.

But what we need for peace is negotiation with all political parties, both with those inside the country and with those outside the country, those that are legal parties and those that have been branded as terrorists. It should include all political parties. That's the way of democracy. It's not about the result. It's about the process that we should speak about. What comes after the participation of those

parties, we don't know. We should leave it to the negotiating parties.

AD: When you were released from prison, I saw a picture of someone giving you a painting of Emperor Menelik. The person who posted the picture, I believe, was an Oromo and they said something like, "See, the cooperation between Amharas and Oromos is superficial and can never last." There are deeply ingrained grievances and injustices. The symbols of Ethiopia are so charged and divisive. What are your hopes for a unified Ethiopia in which there can be participation, peaceful process, dialogue, cooperation? How do you see Ethiopia moving in that direction, when even symbols like you receiving a painting can be perceived as so explosive and zero sum?

EN: The symbols of nations are controversial everywhere. Take the U.S. and George Washington, for example. Washington was impeccable in so many ways. He was the embodiment of courage and truthfulness. But now people are challenging these images. They're saying that he was a slaveholder and that he shouldn't be a role model for American kids. The same for Jefferson. And yet if you look at the writings of Jefferson, they are mesmerizing – there's no other words. He had a beautiful mind! It inspires me across the ocean. Jefferson's writing is not only inspirational for you; it inspires me on the other side of the world. And yet he too was a slaveholder. People are challenging those symbols.

So I guess, go to each country, even the homogenous ones. The symbols are being challenged. I don't think we're an exception in this case. We have our debates of who should be the symbol of our nation and who should not be. We have some who worship our symbols and some who vilify them. I'm not worried about these differences opinion.

It's how we handle these differences that should worry us. People who like Menelik gave me a gift. There's no way that I could have rejected them, because I respect their perspective. But ultimately, this is an issue about tolerance. We should accept the fact that there will be people who love Menelik and people who don't like him or even hate

him. This should not frighten us. We should not all love Menelik, and we should not all hate Menelik. We could live in peace with our diversity of opinion in our diversity. There's no reason why we should tear each other up on this matter.

We should be defined by how we handle our differences. We should not be defined by our differences. I'm not worried about this. We could teach the public that when there's tolerance and democracy, it's about respecting other people's opinions, even though you may not agree with them.

Again, I would go back to the example of South Africa. There were extremes from one end to the other. There were whites who hated black people and blacks who hated white people. But the South Africans have been able build a democracy that accommodates both opinions without crushing – without needing to crush – one side. And I think that we can build a system that will accommodate our differences.

It's the same with America. You have the nation of Islam and the KKK – two extremes, living in peace. That's our model. That's the beauty of America, and that's what we should emulate.

AD: I love it!

EN: Very nice talking to you! Next time, I won't be doing the talking; you'll be doing the talking. I'll be asking the questions.

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Papiyo Zenebeche
Fuck you Mr Andrew DeCort !

You are announcing this freedom pice fighter Sound , by wrong way !
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Fiseha Haile replied · 2 replies

Zerihun Bunaye
Thank you Andrew for sharing this Extra extra amazing story!
The clarity of Eskinder Nega's Christianity belief & his truely exemplery life is super duper exceptional for me!! He is for sure enlightened from heaven!!
I myself is Much enlightened just by reading this interview! I need to re-read it! I hope to use this article to reorient myself where I stand as a Christian in relation to my current surrounding, Ethiopian public & the world in general. Eskinder's life is as close as the apostles for me!! He preaches the gospel way louder and way more than the current church for me and for sure with practice! Thanks Andrew once again!
May God bless and protect ours precious Ethiopian brother & freedom fighter, Eskinder Nega!!!
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Andrew DeCort replied · 1 reply

Mehari Yohannes
Great understanding of the complexities of diversity, and the teachings of Jesus.
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Dawit Fekadu
What an incredible story. Thanks for sharing these profound insight. I've witnessed the amazing work of the holy spirt in EN's life. He dispelled the cultural wall of religion, faith, traditions and politics.
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Dawit Fekadu
I also learned lots of things on how we understand and respond to others believe. There is a tendency from the evangelical circle that we mostly find ourselves judging those who are not like-minded. I think we need to emulate EN's understanding of the Jesus. It is a gift of faith and nothing more!
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Garedew Assefa
Simply, Amazing
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