



De Gruchy, John W.

The End is not yet: Standing firm in apocalyptic times

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Reviewed by Jonathan Huggins

John de Gruchy has given us a theological treatise for our times. In this *Kairos* moment of political and social upheaval, he asks, “Is this the end?” And if not, what do we need to do? Drawing on his own long experience as a politically-involved theologian in South Africa and his expert knowledge of the works of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, De Gruchy is able to persuasively assess the nature of the times in which we live, and to offer insights on how we (the church) should now live.

De Gruchy is Professor Emeritus at the University of Cape Town, and Extraordinary Professor at Stellenbosch University. As one of South Africa’s most prominent theologians, he has written broadly on various topics such as the church struggle, politics, racial reconciliation, Christian humanism, aesthetics, and Dietrich Bonhoeffer. He has lived through the collapse of apartheid and the birth of South Africa’s democracy. From the vantage point of his long career, combined with his own experience and deep faith, De Gruchy has a unique credibility and authority to comment on the times in which we live.

This book is part of a larger series titled *Dispatches on the End Times*, the aim of which is to “illuminate and explore, creatively and concisely, the implications and relevance of theology for the global crises of late-modernity.” De Gruchy succeeds in providing just that. He divides the work into two main sections: Part I: “The Times in Which We Live”, and Part II: “The People We Need To Become”. Much of the work focuses on what to make of current populist movements, which have revealed a renewed right-wing nationalism, such as the Brexit vote, and the election of Donald Trump as the US President. These have been alarming to many,

Christians and otherwise. The political situation leaves many wondering if the social-political gains of the last half-century are being undercut. Will the result be renewed wars among nations and injustice within societies? What's a Christian to do?

To address these questions, challenges, and fears, De Gruchy reflects on them in theological terms, and offers counsel to help the church to persevere and act responsibly. For De Gruchy, as for Bonhoeffer, politics is a penultimate activity. Nevertheless, it is an important one that must be engaged with a proper *telos* in view. That is, present work is done in light of the fulfilment to come – the revelation of God's grace for all. Several prescient essays explore the nature of the current political situation (especially in the US, Western Europe, and South Africa) and how we got here, how God acts in a world bent toward violence and oppression, what sorts of nations we should seek to build, and what kind of leaders we need to realize this vision.

Along the way readers will encounter remarkable theological insights. For instance, when considering what God is like, and the witness of the Old Testament, De Gruchy writes, “The Bible is documenting contending images of God, not trying to iron out their differences. There is a theological struggle going on in the text between conceptions of God as an all-powerful ruler who justifies all-powerful rulers and their surrogates, and the God who identifies with those who are oppressed and poor” (64). And when addressing the problem of evil and suffering, he writes, “for Christians, the Trinitarian understanding of God provides the way to respond to the problem of theodicy, for within God the free creative power that brings the world into being and sustains it in being is united with the suffering love of God, which is God's power operative in redemptive solidarity with the world” (68).

In describing the kinds of “servant leaders” needed to address the present challenges, De Gruchy argues that we do not need the likes of Donald Trump. Rather, he highlights Chief Albert Luthuli, Nelson Mandela, Beyers Naudé, and most of all, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, as examples worthy of emulation. The circumstances that Bonhoeffer faced in Germany are similar in some respects to those currently in the US (and the potential is there for even greater/worse similarity). Today's courageous leaders will need to think deeply, theologically, and ethically about their responses to political

challenges. Bonhoeffer wrote about the “ethics of free responsibility.” This meant that he had to oppose Hitler by unusual means. He understood this to be true patriotism, and true fidelity, in his particular case. De Gruchy does not necessarily think that Christians today must take the same course of action as Bonhoeffer. For he says, hope-fully, “In a democracy that is seeking to be just there should never be the need to resort to extreme measures such as Bonhoeffer and Mandela were finally forced to take. That is why there is always the need for civic vigilance, and prophets who speak truth to power before it is too late” (157). De Gruchy hopes that it is not too late. “The end is not yet.” But Christians must heed the call to action and become again people who will dare to be peacemakers in a world of safety-seekers.

This book is an insightful and inspirational read for all Christians, but especially for those who lead congregations. The work is short and accessible for any learned reader. It will also benefit other academics, but the message is necessary for all believers to hear and apply. Church leaders are uniquely positioned to provide preaching, teaching, and calls to action with regard to these matters. Churches have the power to provide a prophetic witness and voice. These are the communities that can speak and model hope for the present and future. These are the communities of grace that can anticipate the coming kingdom. But these communities must be involved in the political process, locally and nationally. Bonhoeffer demonstrated that. Democracies desperately need it.