



**González, Justo L. and Catherine Gunsalus González.**

***Heretics for Armchair Theologians***

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Rightly Dividing the Word of Truth

New Jersey

Students of church history are no doubt familiar with Justo L. González and his many contributions to the field (e.g., *The Story of Christianity*, 2 vols.; *History of Christian Thought*, 3 vols.) but they might not be as familiar with his wife Catherine Gunsalus González who is professor emerita at Columbia Theological Seminary where she has been teaching church history for over thirty years. In *Heretics for Armchair Theologians* this couple teams up to do what they do best, i.e., teach church history in a way that makes sense.

Don't let the pictures fool you, this book is not *Heretics for Dummies!* While the authors have taken care to avoid the esoteric language that shrouds early church history in a veil of mystery, the information presented is far from being dumbed down. In the introduction they state that this is a book for "armchair theologians," not "couch theologians," the difference being that the armchair is a place to read, reflect, study, and discuss with friends, while the couch is a place to lounge around and be lazy. They're not interested in addressing the person who just wants to grab the remote and change the channel so to speak, and for this they should be commended because this motive has resulted in witty and thoughtful little book on my favorite period in church history, from the late first century to the Council of Chalcedon.

Throughout the book the authors weave a vivid tapestry of (mainly) various heretics, orthodox theologians, and the controversies that joined them together in debate and ultimately divided them, all the time careful to maintain that these heretics were devout believers who were seeking to answer serious questions and concerns. This is a welcome reminder as it's easy to picture these guys with horns and pitchforks. The reader is introduced to groups such as the Ebionites (ch. 1), the Montanists (ch. 5), and the Donatists (ch. 6). Individuals such as Pelagius<sup>1</sup> (ch. 8) and Marcion (ch. 3) are given distinct treatments as well. And my personal favorite sections of the book were the chapters on the Trinity (ch. 6) and Christology (ch. 9) in which the authors outline the

major arguments and participants (e.g., Praxeas, Sabellius, Arius, Apollinarius, Nestorius, et al.).

While the various chapters are succinct in their presentations they are not general or vague. González & González are very focused and deliberate in the pictures that they paint (although Ron Hill is a bit more relaxed in the pictures that he draws). This is a book about heretics and heresy, plain and simple, so extended discussions of the politics in the Constantinian and post-Constantinian Roman Empire are not present. Orthodox theologians such as Athanasius, Ambrose, Gregory of Nazianzen, Augustine (who receives much more ink than the others) and Cyprian are mentioned, but only briefly and in reference to their contributions to the debates they were involved in. And as I stated above, the time frame is limited to late first to mid-fifth centuries because let's face facts, everything to happen after this time period is relatively insignificant in the grand scheme of things (my opinion, not theirs!). And they only address those heresies that "*from the perspective of the vast majority of Christian leaders then and throughout the ages, threatened the very core of the Christian faith.*" (3) So I'm sorry to inform my Calvinist audience that there is no mention of Arminianism in this work.

The book is light reading that encourages heavy thinking and coming in at a mere 166 pages shouldn't take you more than a day or three to read. There's no footnotes or endnotes but there is a two page recommended reading list (161-62) and a fairly comprehensive four page index (163-66). The pictures are pretty funny, satirical I'd say, and the writing is fun. As an introduction to heresiology I think that this would be a great start because it will lead the reader into much deeper waters, but this will also serve as a nice and quick review for those familiar with the field. For what this book set out to do I can't imagine that it could have done it better. Any time you can have a good time reading, the work is a success.

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<sup>1</sup> It was a pleasure to see Pelagius fairly represented for a change. G&G don't describe his soteriology as saying that we can "work for our salvation" as so many other authors do, but rather they acknowledge that Pelagius "*never said that he himself or any other that he knew was sinless—except for Jesus*" (113) And also that:

Pelagius believed that though we were born with a clean slate in terms of sin, we are so surrounded by bad examples and have been ever since the fall that it is very difficult to lead a sinless life. In fact, by the time we really want to try to be sinless, most of us have already committed sins. Pelagius believed that there was forgiveness for such past wrongdoings, and that Jesus gave us the perfect model in his own life so that we could choose to follow this own model rather than the society around us. Pelagius also believed that there was forgiveness at the end of life but that it was somewhat dependent upon our really trying to be sinless now. (115-16)

I wouldn't agree with Pelagius on this point, but I wouldn't go to Augustine's extremes either. Another thing I appreciated was G&G's quip that "semi-Pelagians" could just as easily be called "semi-Augustinians;" touché!