

## REVIEWS

**James P. Byrd.** *Jonathan Edwards for Armchair Theologians.* Illustrations by Ron Hill. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008 (xiv + 195 pp.) [ISBN 978-0-664-23199-6.]

**Justo L. González and Catherine Gunsalus González.** *Heretics for Armchair Theologians.* Illustrations by Ron Hill. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008 (viii + 166 pp.) [ISBN 978-0-664-23205-4.]

Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758) is regarded as America's best theologian, one of its more significant philosophers, one of its most influential preachers, and one of the key figures in America's relatively brief history. He is also regarded as an austere, clinical, and perhaps even heartless Puritan who's Calvinism could only sponsor such theology as is found in his (in)famous sermon 'Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God.' It may come as something of a surprise then to learn that the theology of Jonathan Edwards is currently undergoing something of a renaissance in contemporary American Christianity, especially amongst young adults. Through the medium of several high profile pastor-scholars his life has received renewed interest and his works are being reedited and published in a definitive, multi-volume project, the twenty-six volume Yale edition of *The Works of Jonathan Edwards* (1957-2008). In addition several intellectual biographies on Edwards have recently appeared and academic journals of theology teem with studies on this or that aspect of his theology. How do we account for this renewed interest in an eighteenth century Puritan from Massachusetts? James Byrd provides the answers in this addition to the *Armchair Theologians* series.

As with other volumes in this very helpful and creative series, Byrd's prose is lively and witty, and yet the historical details are reliable and the theological portrait accurate in this guide for laymen through the life and works of Jonathan Edwards. Throughout Byrd manages to present Edwards's thinking but also the motivations behind it and the cultural and contextual factors that help make sense of not only what

Edwards said but perhaps why he said it and, importantly, how it would have been received in his own day. Only then does Byrd allow the reader to judge Edwards and his impact. The illustrations from Ron Hill are, as usual, helpful, often funny, and a great addition to the volume.

Over seven short chapters Byrd works through the major periods and themes of Edwards' life and work and separates the man from the myths. Readers will find difficult themes like the freedom of the will, original sin, and true virtue explained in simple but reliable ways, along with detailed summaries of how Edwards analysed the religious affections. Most of Edwards' major works are covered in this little volume as are the main contours of his life and influence. One can think of no better basic introduction to Edwards than this and one of the best routes into his creative and complicated theology. From here one may easily progress to the critical monographs on Edwards' life and thought (by Marsden, etc) and, hopefully, into reading some of Edwards works for themselves (Byrd provides a short appendix on further reading to aid in this task, pp. 183-184). As Byrd concludes this slim volume: 'Certainly Edwards's image as a hellfire preacher remains, though it hardly has the last word. Edwards will always reward those who read deeper in his works, keeping in mind the "lively affections" that empowered his ideas' (p. 173).

*Heretics for Armchair Theologians* is one of the best volumes in the series to date. It was an inspired choice of topic and contributors. Justo González is one of the most respected historians of church history working today and his wife, Catherine Gunsalus González, is herself an emeritus Professor at Columbia Theological Seminary. This team effort works and it works well. In one of the best introductions to the aims and scope of the *Armchair* series of books we read, in the Preface:

This is not 'couch' theology, written for 'couch potatoes' who are curious about theological issues and who, if their curiosity is not quickly and easily satisfied, will simply push the remote control and go on to something else. In our minds, an armchair is the place where one relaxes after a long day of work; it is the place where one sits across from friends and others and exchanges experiences and opinions about life and about the walk ahead...In a word, it is a place of rest, refreshment, and evaluation along the trek of life. So an armchair theology is for believers taking a respite along the march of faith and obedience. To turn a common phrase around, it is the place where we 'talk the walk.'...What we have written is 'laptop,' rather than 'desktop,' theology...It is on a laptop that this book for armchair

theologians has been written...It is therefore something like a 'laptop theology' for 'armchair theologians' – or a theology on the march for fellow marchers (pp. vii-viii).

What a lovely and accurate description of this series of books and this volume in particular.

The González' take a very generous approach to heretics, defining them as faithful followers of Jesus Christ who had sincere beliefs and convictions and sought to act on these, however, judged by the standards of the church as a whole, were found out of step with scripture and thus were deemed heretics. Heretics are not mad-men bent on destroying the church or deliberately seditious characters seeking to undermine the faith of other believers. They are, rather, courageous individuals who spoke their minds against prevailing views of the time and were judged to be wrong in their beliefs. But in the process of the church evaluating and formulating orthodox responses to heretics, they must be seen as figures who helped the church clarify its doctrinal standards and theological explanations, and for that they are worthy of considerable sympathy. This may not be the prevailing view of heretics in the church today but it is the view the González' defend.

*Heretics* contains ten chapters and limits its focus based on two criteria; chronological and theological. Chronologically the study is limited to those heretics who lived up to the Chalcedonian Council in 451 AD. Theologically, only those whose views threatened the very core of Christian faith are considered. The specific heretics and heresies considered include: the Ebionites, Gnosticism, Marcion, the Montanists, the various anti-Trinitarian heretics (Arius, etc), the Donatists, Pelagius, and the various Christological heresies (Apollinaris, Nestorius, Eutychies). Each of these chapters covers social, political, and theological contexts and presents an overview of the issues, the main players, and the developing orthodoxy of the church in response to such heresies. Thus the Apostles Creed, the Nicene Creeds (325 and 381), the Councils of Orange, and the Formula of Chalcedon are all covered.

This is one of those rare little books that lecturers will be recommending to their students time and time again as it provides such a pithy, lucid, and candid survey of the first five centuries of doctrinal development, introduces many of the key figures and debates, and accentuates the utter exhilaration which can come from studying the history of Christian thought. In addition the illustrations by Ron Hill are a fantastic accomplishment to the text as the cartoons are creative and, unlike some of the other volumes (for instance the Edwards volume) the

illustrations enhance the text in significant ways. Ron Hill has outdone himself in this volume.

While the González' stick to historical survey for most of the volume they do conclude the work with a chapter entitled 'What Now?' In this chapter they offer a concise summary of doctrinal development in light of the survey just completed. They settle for a view of doctrinal 'evolution' that is somewhere in-between that of Reformed Protestantism and Roman Catholicism. Evangelicals will most likely think they have struck something like the correct balance, but many others will not. What appear to be disparaging comments on God's providence (p. 150) will disappoint many Protestants, and the rejection of an authoritative Church tradition will equally disappoint Roman Catholics. It is unclear why the González' felt they needed to move from historical critique to a more constructive evaluation of doctrinal development in the first place. It tended to detract from the work as a whole and may necessitate a note of explanation and/or caution from lecturers to their students about the final chapter.

*Heretics for Armchair Theologians* ranks as one of the best in this series to date and will certainly ensure the well-founded reputation the series has for informative, lively, creative, and fun introductions to church history and thought. Bravo the González's and WJK Press – well done!

### Myk Habets

**Richard A. Muller.** *Christ and the Decree: Christology and Predestination in Reformed Theology from Calvin to Perkins.* Grand Rapids: Baker, 1986, 2008 (xiv + 240 pp.) [ISBN 978-0-8010-3610-1.]

Originally published in 1986, Muller's *Christ and the Decree* was released again in 1988 and again in 2008 highlighting the ongoing interest in this field of study and the importance of Muller's work. Muller's basic thesis is that there is continuity between the Reformers theology and what he terms Reformed scholasticism/orthodoxy; the codification of that theology in late sixteenth and seventeenth century Reformed theology. *Christ and the Decree* is divided into two sections; the first surveys 'Reformed theology in its first codification', the second part considers 'the formulation of orthodox system.'