

Why this book?

1. **Because it's one of the greatest books ever written.** Period. Accessible, profound, spiritually enriching, concerning one of the deepest mysteries ever contemplated by the human mind.
2. **Because of C.S. Lewis' essay that introduces it,** which itself has become a mini-classic. The essay provides the very rationale for having this group, "The Thinkings," at all. It answers the question, Why should we read these sort of books, old books, old "classics," anyway?

(Read **READING 1** (p. 3).)

- **POINT 1:** We read old classics because they're actually easier to understand than new books!

Lewis goes on to point out how this is nowhere more truly the case than in theology.

(Read **READING 2A** (p. 4).)

- **POINT 2A:** We read old classics because the new books are still untested in the laboratory of history.

Lewis likens reading the modern without the old to coming late to a party.

And he gives a **PRINCIPLE**, which will be the principle for our group. (Read **READING 2B** (p. 4).)

At this point, we might ask the question: But what about *their* errors? True, new books are untested by time; but old books *have* been tested by time, and have been shown to be wrong at various points! For example, Athanasius was Eastern Orthodox and a defender of monasticism. Don't we endanger ourselves by reading things like this, exposing ourselves to these dubious ideas? (Read **READING 2C** (p. 4).)

- **POINT 2B:** We read old classics not only because new books are untested by history, but because we are blind our own errors; by reading the old books, at least *their* errors are more obvious to us, so that we can easily avoid falling into their errors, while at the same time can be greatly enriched their true insights (i.e., by those that have withstood the ruthless test of time).

Lewis writes of that "immensely formidable unity" that is there behind all the divisions of the church, which we are privileged to apprehend when reading because in reading these books we "have now got on to the great level viaduct which crosses the ages." (Read **READING 3** (p. 7)).

- **POINT 3:** We read old classics because when we do so, even as we read voices from different times and continents, we are moved in faith to recognize the awesome unity working through the many voices (e.g., my own experience with Scripture, its unity, as well as its ever-freshness and newness; and the feeling of encountering this same thing in Athanasius, or Augustine, or Luther, or Edwards, or Packer – one faith, my faith: "Here is a brother or sister in the Lord...")

Next, Lewis speaks of the divide between devotional and doctrinal books. (Read **READING 4** (p. 8).)

- **POINT FOUR:** we read old classics because there is an immense value in engaging real theology: because to do so is real devotion. Hey, we're Presbyterians! So let's set our figurative pipes in our teeth and grab our pencils!

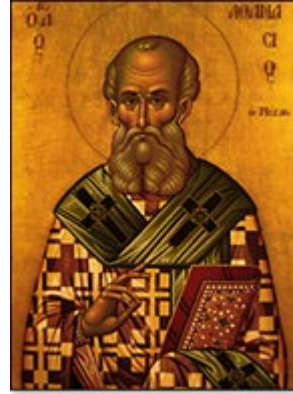
Finally, read **READING 5** (p. 9).

- **POINT FIVE:** we read old classics because they're great, and true, soul affirming, and enriching; because they deepen our appreciation of the faith we confess; and because they give us even greater zeal to defend and take pride in what is in fact a heritage of incalculable worth.

In summary, sola Scriptura doesn't mean that we don't read anything but the Bible. Remember that whatever we read outside the Bible has errors (even Packer!). But if we approach this together in a spirit of humility and community, entering into the rich heritage of our faith, ready to recognize errors where present, but ready also to learn from these time-tested classics, we will be blessed.

Athanasius

Five-time exile for fighting “orthodoxy”



“Those who maintain ‘There was a time when the Son was not’ rob God of his Word, like plunderers.”

“Black Dwarf” was the tag his enemies gave him. And the short, dark-skinned Egyptian bishop had plenty of enemies. He was exiled five times by four Roman emperors, spending 17 of the 45 years he served as bishop of Alexandria in exile. Yet in the end, his theological enemies were “exiled” from the church’s teaching, and it is Athanasius’s writings that shaped the future of the church.

Challenging “Orthodoxy”

Most often the problem was his stubborn insistence that Arianism, the reigning “orthodoxy” of the day, was in fact a heresy.

The dispute began when Athanasius was the chief deacon assistant to Bishop Alexander of Alexandria. While Alexander preached “with perhaps too philosophical minuteness” on the Trinity, Arius, a presbyter (priest) from Libya announced, “If the Father begat the Son, then he who was begotten had a beginning in existence, and from this it follows there was a time when the Son was not.” The argument caught on, but Alexander and Athanasius fought against Arius, arguing that it denied the Trinity. Christ is not of a like substance to God, they argued, but the same substance.

To Athanasius this was no splitting of theological hairs. Salvation was at issue: only one who was fully human could atone for human sin; only one who was fully divine could have the power to save us. To Athanasius, the logic of New Testament doctrine of salvation assumed the dual nature of Christ. “Those who maintain ‘There was a time when the Son was not’ rob God of his Word, like plunderers.”

Alexander’s encyclical letter, signed by Athanasius (and possibly written by him), attacked the consequences of the Arians’ heresy: “The Son [then,] is a creature and a work; neither is he like in essence to the Father; neither is he the true and natural Word of the Father; neither is he his true wisdom; but he is one of the things made and created and is called the Word and Wisdom by an abuse of terms... Wherefore he is by nature subject to change and variation, as are all rational creatures.”

The controversy spread, and all over the empire, Christians could be heard singing a catchy tune that championed the Arian view: “There was a time when the Son was not.” In every city, wrote a historian, “bishop was contending against bishop, and the people were contending against one another, like swarms of gnats fighting in the air.”

Word of the dispute made it to the newly converted Emperor Constantine the Great, who was more concerned with seeing church unity than theological truth. “Division in the church,” he told the bishops, “is worse than war.” To settle the matter, he called a council of bishops.

Of the 1,800 bishops invited to Nicea, about 300 came—and argued, fought, and eventually fleshed out an early version of the Nicene Creed. The council, led by Alexander, condemned Arius as a heretic, exiled him, and made it a capital offense to possess his writings. Constantine was pleased that peace had been restored to the church. Athanasius, whose treatise *On the Incarnation* laid the foundation for the orthodox party at Nicea, was hailed as “the noble champion of Christ.” The diminutive bishop was simply pleased that Arianism had been defeated.

But it hadn’t.

Bishop in Exile

Within a few months, supporters of Arius talked Constantine into ending Arius’s exile. With a few private additions, Arius even signed the Nicene Creed, and the emperor ordered Athanasius, who had recently succeeded Alexander as bishop, to restore the heretic to fellowship.

When Athanasius refused, his enemies spread false charges against him. He was accused of murder, illegal taxation, sorcery, and treason—the last of which led Constantine to exile him to Trier, now a German city near Luxembourg.

Constantine died two years later, and Athanasius returned to Alexandria. But in his absence, Arianism had gained the upper hand. Now church leaders were against him, and they banished him again. Athanasius fled to Pope Julius I in Rome. He returned in 346, but in the mercurial politics of the day, was banished three more times before he came home to stay in 366. By then he was about 70 years old.

While in exile, Athanasius spent most of his time writing, mostly to defend orthodoxy, but he took on pagan and Jewish opposition as well. One of his most lasting contributions is his *Life of St. Antony*, which helped to shape the Christian ideal of monasticism. The book is filled with fantastic tales of Antony’s encounters with the devil, yet Athanasius wrote, “Do not be incredulous about what you hear of him... Consider, rather that from them only a few of his feats have been learned.” In fact, the bishop knew the monk personally, and this saint’s biography is one of the most historically reliable. It became an early “best-seller” and made a deep impression on many people, even helping lead pagans to conversion: Augustine is the most famous example.

During Athanasius’s first year permanently back in Alexandria, he sent his annual letter to the churches in his diocese, called a festal letter. Such letters were used to fix the dates of festivals such as Lent and Easter, and to discuss matters of general interest. In this letter, Athanasius listed what he believed were the books that should constitute the New Testament.

“In these [27 writings] alone the teaching of godliness is proclaimed,” he wrote. “No one may add to them, and nothing may be taken away from them.”

Though other such lists had been and would still be proposed, it is Athanasius’s list that the church eventually adopted, and it is the one we use to this day.

Taken from Christian History Online article, posted 8/8/08:

<http://www.christianitytoday.com/ch/131christians/theologians/athanasius.html?start=2>

DOCETISM

One God; Jesus only “seemed” to be a man
As close as he seemed to be to us, he was not one of us, but God

This view (denying Jesus’ humanity) was strongly rejected in Scripture:
e.g., “The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.” (John 1:14)

From this point, the church has confronted two basic, continually recurring errors:

MYSTICISM (or GNOSTICISM), and
RATIONALISM (or ARIANISM)

MYSTICISM (or GNOSTICISM)

The problem with Docetism is that it didn’t go far enough!
Not just Jesus, but all of us only “seem” to be truly flesh.
Actually, God’s divine spark is in all of us.
In short, Jesus is God, and so in a real sense are we, in that we are united to him.
It’s not so much that Gnostics deny Jesus’ humanity,
as that they affirm that true humanity is divine.

Supposed biblical basis:

“I and the Father are one.” (John 10:30)

Biblical refutation:

“The Word became flesh...” (John 1:14)

RATIONALISM (or ARIANISM)

One God; Jesus the firstborn of all creation
The Word is very great indeed, but created, this side of the great divide; with us
“There was a time when the Word was not.”

Supposed biblical basis:

“The Word became flesh...” (John 1:14)

“He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation.” (Colossians 1:15)

Biblical refutation:

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” (John 1:1)

“I and the Father are one.” (John 10:30)

Here is a rationalization of Christianity, which seems to protect the oneness of God, and to clearly define Jesus as NOT God, and yet more than man. But this rationalization comes at a terrible price:

It undermines the entire doctrine of the atonement
(for Jesus is not true mediator, neither God nor man),
and it leads inexorably to a theology in which there is no fall, no atonement,
but rather to one in which Jesus is exemplary of our moral duty;
it leads in short to Pelagianism (or, in its modified form, Arminianism).

Interesting to note that today, the intellectual descendants of the Epicureans are the evolutionary Darwinists (the self-origination of order, life, and mind); those of the Gnostics are New Agers (pantheistic spirituality), and those of the Arians are Muslims (Islam = a Christian heresy, Arian Pelagianism!)