

The Uniqueness of the Christian Scriptures: The Scriptures in the Context of History

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Introduction

A singular uniqueness of the Christian Bible is that it is anchored in history. On the surface, this assertion may fly right over our heads. After all, are not the scriptures of other religions similarly unique? Does not a course in world religions demonstrate that ancient Hindu Vedas from the East and the Book of Mormon in the West exemplify writings also anchored in history? Is not the claim for the uniqueness of the Christian Scriptures just another case of Christian *chutzpah* instilled from its Judeo-Christian past?

The questions are valid. They do not merely focus our attention on the task of comparative religions. They are especially important for the conduct of the Christian mission. The apostle Paul demonstrated as much on his visit to Athens. He turned the religious curiosity of the Greek nation into an opportunity to inform these cultured people about ‘an unknown god’ by taking the historical tack. (Ac 17:16-33; cp. Peter and Stephen to the Jews, Ac 2 & 7).

This presentation does not intend to compare the Christian Scriptures to those of other world religions. In this symposium, that exercise is reserved for others. Our humble task is to gain a perspective for a fruitful discussion by showing how the Christian Scriptures relate to the course of human history. By drawing from the Scriptures’ own self-understanding, we aim to sharpen our awareness of the marvelous uniqueness of the Christian Scriptures in one respect: their understanding and use of history.

This goal demands that we know how the Christian Scriptures understand history. Only then are we able to turn this insight around and use history as a tool to understand the Scripture text. In the interrelation of the understanding and use of history lies the secret of the Christian faith and its testimony to the world. Why? Because all Christian understanding and study of history is anchored in God himself.

Christian Understanding of History

In Christian belief, God created history “in the beginning” when he created “the heavens and the earth” and all that they contain (Ge. 1). In the widest sense, all history is set in God’s time and space. Time and space are two basic divine dimensions in which “we live and move and have our being” (Ac 17:28). They are, as it were, the box which God made for mankind, the crown of his creation, to live in. When time began, God created the universe in its length and breadth and depth. He made its “woodlands, fields and meadows” (LH 554), its sights and sounds and smells.

As elementary as it may sound, people and events operate on the stage of history at certain times and in certain places. In the annals of history we keep track of nations and circumstances through the medium of chronology and geography. They contextualize life, not as happenstances, but as part of God’s good earth, his creative order. Pegging things chronologically and geographically helps us to sort out happenings from one another and to tell their story.

It is important to know “timing” and “placement.” Abraham did not live at the time of Moses. Abraham was a nomad in Palestine before the great Lawgiver led the nation of Israel back to it. Consequently, the Hebrew patriarch did not live under the restrictions of the Mosaic Law-code given some 430 years later. He lived by faith in God’s universal Promise made to him. And St. Paul explains the historical significance of the difference in Galatians 3. As in any human testament, Paul writes, the law cannot change the prior promise. So Moses’ Law served as a necessary codicil to the Abrahamic Promise until Christ came.

Similarly, it is historically important to know Mohammed did not live before Christ (BC) but in Arabia some 600 years after Christ (AD). The difference in time and place helps to contextualize an understanding of the two religions, both of which claim Abraham as their own. In this way, time and space rescue our understanding from pure abstraction; when we tell the story, they give present reality to what happened in the past. Time and space help us to store and retrieve the story from the memory bank of history for our learning and edification.

The Lord of History

Now all this which is history and life - because history is life - will not make sense to us unless we understand that God controls history. And God's lordship over life only makes sense when we face the secret of history itself.

Mastering History

To our human eye, history is non-sense. As Henry Ford unabashedly stated on the witness stand, "History is bunk." History perplexes us because it is inexact, illogical, irrational, and disturbs our innate sense of perfection - the way things ought to be. As a result, we grow frustrated precisely because we can neither master nor control history. Time just appears to keep flowing on endlessly on this spaceship Earth. In frustration we ask ourselves: What is it all about? What is the meaning of life and the significance of history?

Left alone to judge from experience, we necessarily conclude that chance or random govern life. "Good luck!" is our wish for life. There is no fixed point to which we are attached. The moment we imagine that we can control life, the means by which we hoped to master it turns on us and increases our fear and frustration. Whether we rely on moral codes, atomic fission, probability printouts, or stun guns, the forces of destruction are crouched, like a lion, under cover.

How can we judge otherwise when wickedness flourishes and the righteous suffer? Confucius sadly observed that "the wicked often prosper and the efforts of the good sometimes come to naught." [Eastman, p.154] Martin Luther noted how "proverbs and that parent of proverbs, experience, testify that "the bigger the scoundrel, the greater his luck" (Job 12:6; Psalm 73:12). In assessing the story of individuals and nations, even the greatest minds crash on the question of history's meaning. So in our philosophies we end up "denying the existence of God and imagining that all things are moved at random or by blind Chance or Fortune." (LW 33:291)

God's in control

But thank God, there is another way! It is the way of faith in history's Lord. The uniqueness of the Christian Scriptures is that they testify to Scripture's Lord in the context of history itself. In the Scriptures, God is not an abstraction, a force which exists outside the realities of history. Nor is he caught within history's bounds. The omnipotent God who created all things is not an unknown god, a make-believe being known only by a set of truths and wonders, or a mythological creature whose image needs to be fashioned in wood or stone or metal to be real. All such gods are gods of our own making. (Is 44: 9-20) They are powerless idols and only reflect the desired power of our impotence.

The Lord of history is history's lord. He is a God who acts. In his omnipotence, he frees our world from the closed systems of causal relations that plague our understanding of life. Mankind the producer of things as a creative artisan (*homo faber*) may indeed extend the boundaries of the possible by trying to master space or by controlling the conscious or even the subconscious. A single dominant person may undeniably alter world affairs in a brief period of time.

But as observable as these historical facts may be in the human record, there still remains no creaturely activity from which God is detached. The Lord of history is in and over all human decisions and historical events. What makes God to be God is his omnipotent will. In a perceptive passage, Martin Luther countered the historical vision of every humanist by asserting

God is He for Whose will no cause or reason may be laid down as a rule and standard; for nothing is on a level with it or above it, but [his will] itself is the rule for all things. If any rule or standard, or cause or reason, existed for it, it could no longer be the will of God. What God wills is not right because He ought, or was bound, so to will. On the contrary, what takes place must be right because He so wills it. Causes and reasons are laid down for the creature, but not for the will of the Creator - unless you set another Creator over him!

Scary? Not really. All this word says is that 'He's got the whole world in his hands. He's got you and me, brother and sister, in his hands.' In all historical happenings therefore, God is the essential doer. It means that nothing happens without history's Lord, as many a Psalm testifies. (See Psalm 139)

"What an atom does, what an electron does, what a seed does when it germinates, what the body of a mother does when it bears a child, what a farmer accomplishes when he sows his field, what a merchant does when he closes a business transaction, what a young man does when he decides on a specific profession, when a man and a woman marry, when a nation establishes for itself a peculiar system of government, when people revolt, when armies fight a war all these activities are ... only the facade of an occurrence whose inner side is God Himself, present in this event with His effective power." (Brunner, p. 16)

The living presence of God in all history puts us in a special relationship with the creator, a relationship that can never be neutral. What is created is always in the hands of its creator. "Where does a person who hopes in God end up except in his own nothingness?" Luther observes. "But when a person goes into nothingness, does he not merely return to that from which he came? Since he comes from God and his own non-being, it is to God that he returns when he returns to nothingness. For even though a person falls out of himself and out of all creation, it is impossible for him to fall out of God's hand, because all creation is surrounded by God's hand. So, run through the world; but where are you running? Always into God's hand and lap." (WA 5,168)

The Lord of history is history's LORD

In the Christian view of history (*Weltanschauung*), God's sole activity is a great comfort. It is joyous and certain because the Scriptures reveal a point of view that transcends our present history of time and space. "We should transfer ourselves outside time and space," Luther advised, "and look at our life with the eyes of God." (In Elert, p. 491)

Why is that? Because God views all history from the perspective of eternity (*sub specie aeternitatis*). The end toward which all life is pressing is not chaotic, 'Like Satan's attacks on God's good creative order. In God's will, St. Paul informs us, history's goal is 'to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ.' This is the "mystery of God's will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, to be put into effect when the times will have reached their fulfillment (Eph 1:9f)."

The LORD uniquely revealed

Does God's sole activity, then, make puppets of us all? If God conceals his will in a mystery (1 Co 2:7), are we merely play-acting while God pulls the strings? Not at all. Even though we act in history and act responsibly, we cannot determine God's will merely by observing what happens historically. On the surface, historical facts only reveal the things we do and what happens around us. We cannot deduce God's intentions from them. Why is that? Simply because the Scriptures reveal that God works, as it were, behind a mask. History is his cocoon behind which he operates in loving concern for his creation which lives in bondage to sin, death, and Satan.

Moses once tried to unmask God. On Sinai's mount, he asked to see God face to face in his bare and unveiled glory. But God turned him down flat. "Nobody can see God and live," the LORD told him. But God did permit Moses to see him from the backside. "I will put you in a cleft in the rock," God said, "and cover you with

my hand until I have passed by. Then I will remove my hand and you will see my back, but my face must not be seen.” (Ex 33:18-23)

There from the backside, the LORD of history uniquely reveals himself contrary to appearances. God’s backside - as he passes by historically - is not what we expect God to be like. The backside does not attract us as does the glory of the face. The backside reveals God’s shame (Is 53: 2-5). It masks his saving acts among men in the reverse of normal appearances. God revealed his glory by hiding it. He covered his majesty by cloaking it. In the incarnation, he put on the mantle of a creature and covered himself with our shameful wickedness. God’s Son entered our time and space as one of us, in a place called Bethlehem, at a time when Quirinius was governor of Syria (Lk 2:2), to redeem the time.

As unbelievable as it may seem, God’s Son really and truly exchanged places with us - the Prince with the pauper. (Gal 4:4f) Contrary to all expectation and appearances, God’s Son clothed himself in flesh and blood so he could historically effect a great exchange. He traded the white robe of his righteousness for our filthy rags (Isa 64:6), washed our clothes in his blood, and then covered us with the garment of salvation (Isa 61:10). We will never understand this joyous exchange of his death for our life. Only the Spirit of the living God takes the mystery of the cross (1 Co 2:10ff) out of the realm of unbelievable history.

Scripture’s self-understanding

But it matters for Scripture’s understanding of history that we hear the story. History is his-story. It is God’s Word to the world. Both Old and New Testaments proclaim his mighty acts in our time and in our space. The Christian God revealed in the Scriptures is not an abstraction; he is personal and real. His activities reveal God’s love for the world (Jn 3:16) and his judgments on all unbelief (Mt 24 & 25). The same all-powerful Word that called time and space into being is strong to save. In creative love, the LORD of history personally changed the course of history by becoming our Savior and our LORD.

In a survey of the Scripture, Martin Franzmann testified that ‘nowhere, in any aspect of it, does this word lose its character as history.’ He then, in a grand summation, clarifies in what sense God’s Word is historical:

It has a history, being the crown and fulfillment of God’s previous actions and promises; it is history - the recital of the mighty works of God which culminates in that epochal history when God dealt decisively with the sin of man in His Servant Jesus of Nazareth; and it makes a history - it is the word of the Lord, and the Spirit of the Lord moves creatively in it. It calls upon men to turn, and turns them, and thus catches men into God’s last great movement in history toward God’s last goal (Franzmann, p. 19).

The desired outcome of God’s acts of love in our time and space is to have us live with God always - in time and in eternity. (2 Ti 1:9b-10)

The Use of History in the Christian Scripture

The Christian understanding of this awesome sweep and scope of history makes the study of history an indispensable tool for understanding life and the Scriptures which unveil life. Because the Lord of history is simultaneously the LORD in history, the study of history helps us to interpret the Scripture text. Time and space put life in context; they serve no less a purpose in interpreting the Scriptures.

The task requires modesty. If the Christian understanding of history teaches us one thing, it is that we cannot sit in judgment over the Scripture text. God not only crafts history, he also crafted the Bible record. (2 Ti 3:16). This means two things with regard to reading Scripture. First and foremost, Scripture is a seamless whole and will be its own interpreter. But equally important, comprehending its view of history (*Weltanschauung*) requires the spirit of its creator. Without the Spirit of God the marvelous uniqueness of the Scriptures will bypass us. (LW 33:28)

To approach the Scriptures in modesty requires that we use a number of tools. History is an important tool, though not the only one at our disposal. The use of history in interpretation is inherently interconnected to the text itself and to its specific terms.

The circles of interpretation

For understanding the Scriptures, these three - terms, text, and historical context work in harmony to convey the Scriptural meaning. There is nothing particularly unique in this approach. The skill of exegesis is common to all reading and communication. E.C. Hirsch's bestseller *Cultural Literacy* recently highlighted how closely history and language interrelate for reading a text. He calls the combination of language and culture "a nation's dictionaries (Hirsch, p. 91)."

Knowledge of both history and language are important for the learning process, Hirsch concludes, because they provide core information stored in the memory. (Ibid. p.29f) Without a knowledge of explicit words and the historical background, the text often just hangs there. The story is out of focus. We cannot integrate what is written because the words fly past us as does the setting. Our understanding becomes fragmentary. We end up processing information, but not really comprehending. The facts are disconnected from the sense. And we grow bored. Here history comes to our rescue; it integrates what we read or hear by providing a real life setting.

In historical context

In God's own way, one of the major purposes of history is to provide a lifelike context for communicating his Word. Without the context, reading the text could become a mere straining at words. The text loses its simple historical sense, and, unless otherwise indicated by the words themselves, takes on a foreign meaning. Luther chastises the rabbis for getting so hung up on words in the Talmud that the Old Testament became a code book, little different from its Roman Catholic counterpart in the Book of Canon Law. (WTR V, 5670)

But neither does the historian become the guru of interpretation. The skill of reading the .text historically must never isolate itself from the specific words and from the flow of the text itself. Historicists overevaluate history as a determinant of events. Like their rabbinical counterparts, they can get so hung up on the time-place contexts that the LORD of history revealed in the cross recedes into the background. (Elert p. 480f) For the grammarian and the historian, the cross must remain the touchstone of interpretation. The text remains out of focus unless the cross (the Gospel) intersects and enlightens it.

In writing to the Romans, St. Paul complains about his people, not because they lack zeal for God, but because "their zeal is not based on knowledge" (Ro 10:2) The knowledge they lacked was not Scripture words or Scripture history. The Torah and the Ancient Scriptures were sacred to Jews. They were as schooled in looking for outward signs as the Greeks were in great systems of thought. But both Jews and Greeks stumbled when it came to the wisdom of the cross. (1 Co 1:22)

Why was that so? Paul explains the problem simply: "Since they did not know the righteousness that comes from God and sought to establish their own, they did not submit to God's righteousness (Ro 10:3)." Their moral and ethical life had taken on a life of its own instead of life "in Christ." (Eph. 1:3-14) Both philosophies of life failed to understand that the Lord of history is history's LORD.

History in the service of theology

The modest role for which God created time and place in our history can best be seen by reading the Scriptures themselves. There the great deeds and promises of God are laid in the cradle of the historical. People and places serve God's will. Nature and nations bow to his ways. Time does not just tick by like the second-hand of a clock. God waits for the ripe time when things are readied, like grain for the harvest, to carry out his good and gracious will.

In the ancient world

Thus the promised world's Savior from Abraham's lineage is not immediately shazamed into being. Abraham, the father of believers, must himself first father a line and secure the land before the time of fulfillment. He does beget the son of promise in old age in a way beyond all human comprehension. But the land must wait four generations to be secured for a reason: "The sin of the Amorites has not yet reached its full measure (Ge 15:16)."

Subsequently, one nation waits and is tested in Egypt, the other is plunged into its own undoing. Thus the history of nations unfolds and we can follow them in their extant literature and records. Divine mercy accompanies the sweatboxes of the former nation's slavery in the high civilization of Egypt. Divine judgment stands over the Baal altars and Asherah poles of the other. In God's good time -some 400 years later - Abraham's children seize the promised land from the native Canaanites.

The lesson of history is clear from, Scripture. God guides the destiny of the world in such a way that nations and peoples, advanced civilizations and creative cultures, serve the ongoing course of his Gospel. We read their history and hear their story in all its graphic detail and learn to know-. History is the handmaiden of God's Word.

The history of the prophets does not differ from former times. It also is not abstract mythology, detached from time and place and from humanity. It smells of the earth and is earthy. It moves within the framework of datable kings and datable events. God's people, Israel and Judah, are caught in the power politics of Babylon and Assyria and Egypt. We are led by history's habits of the mind to study the maps and the chronology of events to put the prophets' message in context. We read the literature and chronicles of the nations to understand what's happening. In the records, many thoughts, places and events are concretely spelled out.

But the times and the geography and the people do not dictate the course of history. In all that happens, God is in control and he says as much through the mouth of his prophets in graphic earthy terms. "This is what the Sovereign LORD showed me: a basket of ripe fruit," the prophet Amos reports. And then his people get the message, "The LORD said to me, 'The time is ripe for my people Israel; I will spare them no longer' (Am 8: 1f)."

Within two generations God's people go into captivity. Ten tribes are 'lost'; a remnant of Judah returns to Jerusalem. But the captors themselves are led captive in sequence: Assyria, Babylon, Persia. So even the most distant and mighty nation must bend to the LORD's will and its civilization must vanish from the pages of recordable history.

History's focal point

When called upon as the apostle to the heathen to spell out the Christian view of history in simple terms, the Apostle Paul unveils the double point of history. All history, he explains, is encompassed in two people: Adam the earthling, the created progenitor of mankind, is the one. "Sin entered into the world through [this] one man and death through sin, and in this way death came to all men, because all sinned (Ro 5:12)."

Jesus Christ, the incarnate Son of God the Father, is the other man. He was the right man, the One appointed by God to bring the gift of life with God. God made mankind the focal point of his love in and through. Christ. The glorious Good News is that Jesus Christ is history's real focal point.

What does this mean? St. Paul explains: "For if the many died by the trespass of the one man, how much more did God's grace and the gift that came by the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ, overflow to the many! ... how much more will those who receive God's abundant provision of grace and of the gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man, Jesus Christ (Ro 5:15 & 17)."

This Christian gospel was first preached in a world that had grown old by stages. The ancient empires of Egypt, Babylonia, Persia and Greece were gone from the scene. At Christ's time, Rome stood at the height of her power. The life of Christ and his apostles are set within the context of those times. Life in Judea in Jesus' day and the spread of the Gospel in the Apostolic age reflect those times. In reading the testament, we need to gain a "cultural literacy" of the Roman world. Its language and culture are 'dictionaries' of the times to help our textual understanding.

Such an isagogical preparation for reading the text is history's modest offering. It sets us into that particular day and age and thereby enlivens every Bible study with real-life contexts. By using the tool of history, we are given the vital context within which the greater understanding of history takes place, namely: the Lord of history is history's LORD.

That insight puts all history into focus. The mystery of history's LORD revealed on the pages of the Christian Scriptures is the sole foundation of our comfort, life, and salvation. In Christ Jesus, our LORD, we learn to sing the Easter resurrection song: Celebrate life! And that, in the final analysis, is what history is all about. (Jn 3:16) It is the Christian Scripture's unique message.

Text References

Special abbreviations:

- LH* *The Lutheran Hymnal.*
 St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1941.
- LW* *Luther's Works. Vol. 33.*
 Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1972.
- WA* *Weimarer Ausgabe, D. Martin Luthers Werke*
 Weimar. Hermann Boehlau, 1883ff.
- WTR* *Weimarer Ausgabe, D. Martin Luthers Werke (Tischreden)*
 Weimar. Hermann Boehlau, 1883ff.

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Addenda 1: Scripture in Historical Context

Nowhere in all of Scripture is a journey like this recorded. There were two of them: a loving father and a beloved son. The father led the way, determined to obey God's will and ritually to sacrifice his son on the mountaintop. The son followed, unaware of what was about to happen. On the way they talk. "Father," the son says in a way that went to his father's heart. "Father, we have wood and fire, but where is the sacrificial lamb?"

The father should have answered, "You are the lamb, my son." But he did not. Instead he pointed to God's command and said, "God will provide the lamb." And the two marched on. The father did not want to torment his son with thoughts of death. He kept his mouth shut and waited for the moment he would put the knife to his son's throat.

Now the time had come. "And when they came to the place which God had told him, Abraham built an altar there and laid the wood in order." In the manner of a priest, Abraham was ready for ritual sacrifice. The altar was built, the butcher knife ready, the fire set.

What transpired next we will never know. Luther says that Moses was too moved to give us the details. But undoubtedly the 25 year old son and his father talked. "You are my loving son. God gave you to your

mother and me in a way beyond all human comprehension. She was past child-bearing age, you know, and I was old. But now you have been appointed to die and to be the offering.”

What the son answered is not on record. He evidently did not run away from the father. In obedience, he may have reminded his father of the promise: ‘But I am your offspring from whom your descendents will come, and through whom the blessing of nations, the Savior, has been promised. If I die, how will all this come to be?’”

All this is not recorded here. But whether in thought or in speech, the dilemma was there. God had promised that Isaac would be the father of kings and nations. Yet God commanded that Isaac die before this came about. No human wisdom, no rationalization, can solve the dilemma Abraham and Isaac faced.

But God’s Word reconciles what passes all human comprehension. It tells us that it is not death to die, that by dying we live. In the whole scene, one thing looms larger than death. Abraham and Isaac believed that what God promises he is able also to perform, that God is able to keep his Word even if Isaac is reduced to ashes. For there is a life after this life. The ‘how’ and ‘why’ of the present circumstances are pushed aside. Faith clings to God’s promise and obeys his Word.

So Abraham binds his son, as a butcher binds an animal. He places him on top of the wood like a sheep for slaughter. He places the butcher knife at his son’s throat, as a priest would slay a sacrificial lamb. The son is obedient and follows his father’s will.

There on Mt. Moriah, a father out of love - not out of fear or hate - sets his son for death. There on the place where Solomon’s Temple was later built, there where today a Muslim Mosque stands on the Temple Mount, there where Abraham stood away from all human eyes, Abraham was led to follow the voice of God: “Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love ... and offer him there as a burnt offering.”

No wonder Abraham left the servants behind. They would not have understood. Nor would I for the weakness of my faith. But the faith that wins understands God’s ways.

Isaac died that day. And Abraham killed his son. In the heart of both, the deed was done. Death was not a barrier because of God’s promise. Obedience to God’s Word demonstrated that the faith that wins clings to that very promise which saved Isaac from death and Abraham from disobedience. And what is that promise? “God himself so loved the world that he gave his only-begotten Son that whoever believes in him should never die but have eternal life.”

Think about this, children of God. God, not Abraham, led his one and only Son to the altar of sacrifice! There were two on that journey: a loving Father and a beloved Son. The Father bound his Son over to death, even death on the wood. And though the Son asked his Father whether this was the way, yet he followed his Father’s will.

In two ways the scene of Calvary, just down the hill from Moriah, was different. The one who died on Calvary was not merely Abraham’s decendent, but Abraham’s Lord. He was God’s own Son who died that we might never die, who died that Abraham and Isaac might live.

But the second difference was equally as important. It cost God his Son. God did not stop his Son from dying as he stopped Abraham from sacrificing his son on Moriah. God let the deed be done. And the Son of God cried out in agony, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

Why the difference? Because on the altar of the cross, the holy and innocent Son of God died to take away all sin and death and hell. Because on the altar of the cross, God’s Son died that we should never fear death again, not really. Christ died that we could face our temporal death with the calm contentment of faith that says:

My Savior, be Thou near me When death is at my door;
Then let thy presence cheer me; forsake me nevermore;
When soul and body languish, Oh, leave me not alone.
But take away my anguish By virtue of Thine own!

Such is the cost of God’s grace for us! For this, our thanks! Amen.

Prayer: LORD GOD, our heavenly Father, thank you for giving your one and only Son to rescue us from sin and death. LORD JESUS CHRIST, thank you for enduring the pain of separation and the horror of hell to take away the fright of death. SPIRIT OF THE LIVING GOD, hold the image of our Savior before our eyes now and in our last hours so that we learn to cling to you, the Triune God, and live. Help us each day to offer our bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to you, which is our spiritual act of worship. Amen

Addenda 2: Preparation for reading the text

In the first letter to Corinth, Paul brings the wisdom of the cross to a congregation of Jews and Gentiles. Each had been conditioned to a different way of life. The Jews, as descendants of Abraham, had been trained by the tradition, by the Law and the Promise, to look for miraculous signs of the coming Messiah. They were “sign seekers.” The Greeks, as pagan people given to their own philosophies, sought wisdom by integrating life with nature. They were “wisdom seekers.” Some sought meaning in life by personalizing the forces of nature and making them into gods; others sought wisdom by mastering themselves and their life in nature and society.

Our goal is to read the letter with the same load as the Jew and Gentile Christians in Corinth who did not yet grasp the meaning of the wisdom of the cross and showed their lack by leading a sectarian and unfree life. Congregation members became either legalistic or libertine.

A. “GREEKS LOOK FOR WISDOM” (1 Cor 1:22)

1. The Stoics: their wisdom
2. The Epicureans: their wisdom
3. Orpheus & the Dionysian Ritual
4. The Mysteries of Eleusis: redemption
5. Athens: Lyceum & Academy (the schools)
6. Athens: Garden & Porch (the schools)

B. “JEWS DEMAND MIRACULOUS SIGNS” (1 Cor 1:22)

7. The Judaizers & Cephas
8. The Jewish Messiah
9. The Apollos party

C. “TO THE CHURCH OF GOD IN CORINTH” (1 Cor 1:2)

10. The city of Corinth: past history
11. Corinth in Paul’s time: a travelogue
12. The Temple of Aphrodite: sacred prostitution
13. The Isthmian (Corinthian) games
14. Paul’s stay in Corinth: an overview
15. The congregation at Corinth: a social mix (16)
16. The report of Chloe’s people
17. Governor Gallio at the Bema
18. The agape meal (Chapter 11:17-34)
19. Glossalalia or xenolalia? (Chapters 12 & 14)
20. Immortality/ resurrection (Chapter 15)
21. A portrait of Timothy

1. Review Paul's third missionary journey (Acts 18:23 - 21), using the map (trace the third journey in color, noting the stop-over places).
 2. What three basic conflicts marked Paul's work in Ephesus? F-75-77
 3. Where did each of the following evangelize while Paul was in Ephesus: Epaphras, Timothy and Erastus, Apollos? F-78f
 4. Characterize the four groups which made up the Corinthian congregation. F-79-82
 5. What sort of problems accompanied the false 'rationalism' of the Corinthian congregation? F-83
 6. How did the liberal attitudes (super-spirituality) among the Corinthians affect their views of marriage, the tender conscience / worship-life / the Lord's Supper / and the resurrection? F-84-86
 7. How did Paul get information on the conditions in the Corinthian congregation? F-87
 8. How does Paul counter the super-spirituality of the liberals (the Hellenizers)? F-87-88
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1. What kind of spirit had invaded the Corinthian congregation? What were its manifestations?
 2. How does the wisdom of the world compare with the preaching of the cross?
 3. Interpret 3:10-15 in the light of the Corinthian problem.