

Mathematics and the Biblical Christian Worldview: Changing Perspectives

By James D. Nickel

“I hate math.” ... “Math is the one subject that I dread the most.” ... “I’ve never understood math.”...
“Math is the most boring subject of all.”

Is there an Approach?

Wouldn’t it be wonderful if there were an approach to the study of mathematics that could translate these negative appraisals into adulations of delight? I believe there is such an approach *and it starts with a change in perspectives.*

For far too long, we have embraced a “neutrality” approach to the study of mathematics. In this approach, the student acquires math knowledge under the assumption that the Biblical God just does not matter.

Christian educators have tried to do something about this. They believe that Bible is important so they have added “Bible class” to the curriculum. They think that having such a class will add a significant “plus” to the learning atmosphere. This is good, but it can easily lead to a compartmentalization of life, to one degree or another; i.e., the Bible is a sacred subject because it deals with eternal realities, and math is a “secular” subject because it deals with the temporal, time and earth. To fix this “sacred-secular” dichotomy, some Christian educators have sought to “Christianize” mathematics by “tacking on” Bible verses, cheerleading students into “doing math for the glory of God,” or contriving the use of numbers from Scripture. This approach is far too superficial and therefore inadequate. It has neither stood intellectual attacks nor provided the student a substantial base for understanding the nature of knowledge and the nature of truth.

Starting Points

First, the approach that provides this understanding must start with the Biblical God as the foundation for all knowledge (see Proverbs 1:7, 9:10; Psalm 111:10). The Biblical Christian presupposes that we can know *truly* on the basis of the Bible, God’s verbal and written revelation. This knowledge is not exhaustive (e.g., the Bible does not reveal knowledge about quadratic equations), but it is knowledge that brings a true perspective to all aspects of the human endeavor, eternal and temporal. For example, Psalm 36:9 states, “In Thy light, we see light.” This means that no one can see (or understand) anything truly unless he sees it in the perspective of God’s revelation of truth. Colossians 2:3 states, “... in Christ are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.” This means that all aspects of wisdom and knowledge (not just the “spiritual” parts, and including such analytical knowledge as quadratic equations) find integrative meaning, unity, purpose, and perspective in terms in the full and complete revelation of God in Christ.

Every point of view is a view from a point.

Second, God created all things, visible and invisible, by *speaking* (Genesis 1). The Word that created all things is again the Lord Jesus Christ, the second person of the Trinity (John 1:1-3; Colossians 1:15-17). Hence, the wondrous structure of our universe cannot be anything other than Christ-centered. To see Christ in creation is to see the real creation; it is to see what is really there. Mathematics, both in its internal structure and in its description of the patterned order of the physical creation, *bears this linguistic mark*. Hence, the Word, the same Word that made man, *created and currently sustains the subject matter of mathematics*.

A truly Christ-centered approach

Why do we learn math? We learn math in order to catch a glimpse of God’s creational speech in Christ. From the Biblical Christian perspective, we are in a wonderful and worshipful position to see the reflection of God’s perfections in the subject matter of mathematics. As we learn mathematics, we are one step away from discerning the patterned order of creation. As we learn this patterned order, we are one step away from encountering the Living God. The astronomer Johannes Kepler (1572-1630) encountered the Living God as he explored the mathematics of God’s creation. After he developed the elliptical law of the motion of the planets around the Sun, he fell to his knees

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and exclaimed, “My God! I am thinking Thy thoughts after Thee!”

Exposing the student to the realities of a Christ-controlled creation is what Biblical Christian education is all about. Since Christ is the source and sustenance of creation and since Christ is the foundation and the treasure of all wisdom and understanding (John 1:1-3; Colossians 2:3), then we dare not teach any subject, even quadratic equations, without a reverential submission to Him. If the Biblical revelation of Christ is removed from the acquisition of any type of knowledge, then all we will know is surface or pseudo-knowledge. It is the revelation of Christ that brings true meaning, perspective, and purpose to the study of every subject, mathematics included!

For many years, I have been endeavoring to develop a full-orbed mathematics curriculum that reflects this Christ-centered approach to knowledge.¹ In 2008, I completed the first draft of an arithmetic text entitled *Rudiments of Arithmetic* (aimed at Grade 6-7 levels).

... in exploring mathematics one is exploring the nature of God's rule over the universe, i.e., one is exploring the nature of God Himself.

Vern Poythress, “A Biblical View of Mathematics,” in *Foundations of Christian Scholarship*, p. 184.

Why another Arithmetic Textbook?

“Of the making of arithmetic textbooks there are legion ...” (Ecclesiastes 12:12, NAMV).²

Why a new one?

Why *this* one?

Arithmetic is a foundational subject. A thorough mastery of its rudiments and principles is prerequisite for success in and enjoyment of the subjects to follow (algebra, geometry, trigonometry, calculus, etc.). This textbook, designed as a capstone study in arithmetic, delivers a unique thrust.³ What is it?

First, this textbook presents an abundance of thorough explanations and examples, plus interesting side notes (philosophical, historical, and humorous) to maintain the student's interest. Arithmetical operations consist of a finely nuanced set of skills that require “line by line, precept by precept” instruction (Isaiah 28:10-13), and thorough mastery. Arithmetic is not just memorizing rules; it is understanding what is going on in terms of number sense.

Second, but first in order of preeminence, this text presupposes that the person of Christ sustains the laws that undergird arithmetical operations, and that these laws are connected to what is really happening in the creation. Arithmetical processes work because the faithfulness of God sustains every iota of creation. Recognizing this fact generates an ambiance of learning that is *par excellence*.

Finally, the purpose of this text is not primarily to honor the subject matter (although secondarily, it does), nor primarily to honor the people who have developed the subject matter (although secondarily, it does), and not primarily to enable the student to get “good” grades (although secondarily, it does—at least I hope it will do this!). The primary and overarching purpose for writing this textbook is to extol the weighty significance of the Biblical God ... *solī deo gloria* (for the glory of God alone).

¹ As of the school year of 2008-2009, I have completed four courses: Arithmetic, Pre-Algebra, Algebra, and Geometry. Subsequent courses all the way to the Calculus are under construction.

² NAMV: Nickel Annotated Math Version.

³ See www.biblicalchristianworldview.net/Rudiments-of-Arithmetic.html for more detailed analysis.