Did Augustine Render the Study of Mathematics as a Road to Hell?

By James D. Nickel

A urelius Augustinus (354-430), the Bishop of Hippo, author of the classics *The City of God* and *Confessions*, wrote an equivalent of nearly 5,000,000 pages in his lifetime of kingdom service.

He wrote on just about every relevant topic imaginable as indicative of his des ire to take captive every thought unto the obedience of Christ (II Corinthians 10:5).

And, yes, he even wrote about mathematics. Unfortunately, the only "popular" quote we read from Augustine on mathematics is significantly skewed. Morris Kline (1908-1992), mathematics historian attempted to smear Augustine and the Christian faith he represented. Here is what Kline said Augustine said (in living color):

Augustine (Public Domain)

> "The good Christian should beware the mathematician and all those who make empty prophecies. The danger already exists that the mathematicians have made a covenant with the devil to darken the spirit and to confine man in the bonds of hell."[1]

Of course, in a smear tactic, the source is never mentioned (Kline offers no footnote). Looking up the source (*De Genesi ad Litteram*, II, xvii. 37) reveals that whoever translated the Latin into English simply did not have an adequate command of Latin.[2]

In the paragraph before this misquote, Augustine says (reliably translated from Latin into English), "What therefore is more vain, than that the mathematicus should guess from those constellations, from the very same horoscope, from the very same moon, to say that one of [those twins] is loved by the mother, and the other not loved?"

Note carefully the connection to astrology and Augustine's condemnation of this epistemological foundation. Here are Augustine's words in the next paragraph (translated accurately in context):

> "For this reason, the good Christian should beware not only numerologists, but all those who make impious divinations, above all when they tell truth. Otherwise, they may deceive the soul, and ensnare her in a pact of friendship with demons."

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[1] Morris Kline, *Mathematics in Western Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1953), p. 3.
[2] For an English translation, see John Hammond Taylor, *The Literal Meaning of Genesis* (Westminster, MD: Newman Press, 1982).

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Quite a difference from the Kline rendition, isn't it?

In another book, *On Free Choice of the Will* (translated from *De Libero Arbitrio* by Thomas Williams) and available on Amazon, Augustine takes about 20 pages (in the English translation) to discuss the nature of number. By that, he meant the remarkable structure of number or what modern mathematicians call "number theory" as a *creational given*. He also identifies a truly marvelous connection between number (the numerical scheme or order of things as revealed in creation) with the wisdom of God (he used the Greek Septuagint translation of Ecclesiastes 7:25; cf. Psalm 104:24, Proverbs 3:19, and Proverbs 8).

Hence, there is much to learn from Augustine if one wants to truly honor the Lord by developing a Biblical Christian worldview of creation, mathematics, and knowledge.