

# WHY LEARN MATH?

BY JAMES D. NICKEL

**B**iblical Christians have always believed strongly in education because it is essential for redeemed man to read, write, and count. Thus, in history, Biblical Christians have always been at the forefront of literacy and education.

The Biblical Christian presupposes that we can know truly by Jesus Christ, the revelation of the Father through Spirit-breathed Scripture (II Timothy 3:16-17). This knowledge is not exhaustive, i.e., we don't find out anything about quadratic equations by that revelation, but it is knowledge that brings a real perspective on all aspects of the human endeavor, eternal and temporal. For example, Psalm 36:9 states:

In Thy light, we see light.

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.

All aspects of wisdom and knowledge, not just the spiritual parts, and including such analytical knowledge as quadratic equations, find integrative meaning, purpose, and perspective regarding the full and complete revelation of God in Christ.

Scripture repeatedly states that we can acquire true knowledge only by a reverent submission to the Living God.

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction. (Proverbs 1:7)

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is understanding. (Proverbs 9:10)

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom; a good understanding have all those who do His commandments; His praise endures forever. (Psalm 111:10)

If the Biblical Christian knows the Triune God in and through Christ (Matthew 11:25-28), then it is imperative that the Biblical Christian know how to read, write, and cipher. The Biblical Christian must know how to read to understand in truth God's revelation of Himself in Jesus through Scripture and creation. The Biblical Christian must know how to write to communicate the truth of God to others. Mathematics is the key to the ordering of the facts of nature; it is a medium through which the correlation of the facts of nature can be expressed. If Biblical Christian wants to understand and develop the rationality of the created order, he or she must know how to count.

Why learn math? Since the ground of all knowledge is the Triune God and since the ability to count, like reading and writing, is God's gift to man, then it is imperative that we, as parents and teachers, seek to develop these gifts in our children and our students. There are many realms of mathematics that include the theory of number, the practice of arithmetic, and the description of the patterned order of creation, where quadratic equations come into pre-eminent focus. Since mathematics reflects the patterns of God's created order, then the language of that pattern is mathematics. Just like any other language, we must understand the grammar of mathematics if we want to obey God's command to take dominion over what He has made (Genesis 1:26-27; 2:19-20). In the words of veteran high school mathematics teacher Larry Zimmerman:

God commands His children to subdue and replenish the earth and take dominion over it .... mathematics is essential in subduing and replenishing tasks .... Without a working knowledge of the patterns of God's speech used in the creation, humans are powerless to replenish the earth and are in danger of being themselves subdued by it.<sup>1</sup>

Because of these dominion imperatives, Christian educators, whether they be parents who are homeschooling or teachers in a day school, are required to develop math skills and understanding in their students. If we can show

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<sup>1</sup> Larry Zimmerman, *Truth and the Transcendent* (Florence, Kentucky: Answers in Genesis, 2000), p. 65.

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students that their math work is part of gaining a working knowledge of the way God has ordered His creation, then we have overcome a major motivational obstacle that sometimes is phrased as a question: “Why do we have to learn math?”

We learn math to catch a glimpse of God’s creational speech, the word of the Father who is Jesus Christ (John 1:1-3). As we learn mathematics, we are one step away from discerning the patterned order of creation. As we learn this patterned order, then we are one step away from encountering the Living God. The astronomer Johannes Kepler (1572-1630) experienced the presence of the Living God as he explored the mathematics of God’s creation. After he had developed the elliptical law of the motion of the planets around the Sun, he fell to his knees and exclaimed:

“My God! I am thinking Thy thoughts after Thee!”<sup>2</sup>

The goal of teaching mathematics is to instill in the student this response of praise to God. Not praise to themselves because of their ability to do math, but praise to the Living and Triune God, who has granted them the gift of logical reasoning whereby they can worshipfully discern the faithfulness of God revealed in the rationality of the created order.

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<sup>2</sup> Cited in Roy E. Peacock, *A Brief History of Eternity: A Considered Response to Stephen Hawking’s ‘A Brief History of Time’* (London: Monarch Publications, 1989), p. 22, 38. Also cited in Colin Humphreys, “Can Science and Christianity Both Be True?” in R. J. Berry, ed., *Real Science, Real Faith* (London: Monarch Publications, 1991), p. 116.