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Battling the Humanists of Mathematics

Constantly at war, the church militant fights distinct battles here and there. The fiercest combat is along the doctrinal front, truth vs. heresy, and on the science front, creation vs. evolutionary theory. These are the fiercest and most public battles, but they are not the only ones. To assume that these are the only battles is akin to taking off one's armor. There is dangerous enmity also in the field of mathematics.

The claim that mathematics is completely man-made is humanistic. While Christians attribute glory to God, humanists deny Him that honor. They credit the genius and reason of the "enlightened" human mind.

> "Nature's laws are man's creation. We, not God, are the lawgivers of the universe."[1]
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> "In mathematics, God's revelation is silent."[2]
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> "There are no mathematical laws without mind."[3]

These are brilliant men. They understand the inner workings of the physical world as inherently mathematical. But they are at a loss to explain how mankind has been able to invent a body of mathematical truths that is both complex and consistent, and abstract yet uniquely applicable.

> "There is an intimate connection between experimental phenomena and mathematical structures [which] seems to be fully confirmed in the most unexpected manner… But we are completely ignorant as to the underlying reasons for this fact."[4]

Even the famous Albert Einstein was perplexed that mathematics fit so well with the patterns of our physical world. "How can it be that mathematics being after all a product of human thought… is so admirably appropriate to the objects of reality?"[5]

These humanists fall under the descriptions of II Timothy 3:7, "Ever learning, and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth," and Romans 1:21, 22, "They glorified him not as God, neither were thankful; but became vain in their own imaginations… Professing themselves to be wise, they became fools."

For the Christian, the most fundamental aspect is found in Holy Scripture. God created mathematical truths.

> "For by him were all things created, that are in heaven,
> and that are in earth, visible and invisible…
> All things were created by him, and for him.
> And he is before all things, and by him all things consist." (Colossians 1:16, 17)

Mathematics is inextricably linked to the physical world which God formed in six, 24-hour days. The glory of mathematics, which involves patterns of time, motion, and space, should be ascribed to God alone.

> "Beauty, power, order, symmetry, infinitude… the
> Christian sees them in their proper light as reflections
> of God's attributes… They are beholding beams of
> God's glory."[6]

The renowned French mathematician Blaise Pascal highlights these divinely created mathematical ideas such as *infinite* smallness, *infinite* greatness, *equality*, the fact that *numbers* exist, and even that the *idea of number* exists.

> "All these truths cannot be proved. However, since the
> quality which makes them incapable of proof is not their
> obscurity, but rather their extreme obviousness, that lack
> of proof is not a defect, but rather a mark of excellence."[7]

This is not to say that man has had no part in mathematics. For thousands of years now, God has allowed man to make tremendous developments in mathematics. Our textbooks today are continually expanding treasure chests of mathematical proofs and theorems, concepts and algorithms, symbols and notation.

We face some difficult questions: How do we study these mathematical developments? Is our way any different than the world's way? What is a distinctively Reformed view of mathematics?

The difference is not in what we study. There is no Christian mathematics that is different in content than other mathematics. Sprinkling textbooks with word problems that sound religious is not the answer. Fabricating tenuous analogies to biblical truths is no solution either.

The difference is in how we view what we study and why we study it. We view mathematics as something woven into the fabric of the created world. Mathematics reveals the

Creator. In the Reformed tradition, we confess that God's world is not separate from God's Word. These are two aspects of a single, unified revelation. It is important to remember that "the worlds were framed by the word of God" (Hebrews 11:3). The *worlds* by the *Word*. Therefore, mathematics ought to be viewed and studied by the light of Holy Scripture.

> "… God is made known to us…
> by the creation, preservation and government
> of the universe; which is before our eyes as a
> most elegant book… Secondly, he makes
> himself more clearly and fully known to us
> by his holy and divine Word."
> (Belgic Confession, Article 2)

A sound, Reformed perspective also addresses three reasons for studying mathematics. The primary goal is covenantal—that friend-servants in the covenant may come to a better knowledge and appreciation of Jehovah's wisdom and beauty. In his book *Truth and the Transcendent: The Origin, Nature, and Purpose of Mathematics*, Larry L. Zimmerman is fond of pointing out a three-fold character of mathematics. It is fascinatingly beautiful, universally true, and unexpectedly useful. Such an analysis helps students to appreciate God's perfect wisdom.

When the character of mathematics is polished to reveal the shine of God's glory, then there is hope for even more than learning and appreciation. A student can *enjoy* mathematics. This is an element of the spiritual goal that deserves special mention. True knowledge of God leads one to appreciate and *enjoy* mathematics. It is exciting; it is exhilarating; it is enchanting. Mathematics makes the study of God's handiwork enjoyable.

An important but lesser reason for studying mathematics is to prepare for life and work here on earth—at home or out on the job. This is not shutting ourselves off from the world to study "Christian mathematics" in a corner. Nor is it using a Christianized view of mathematics to improve society for society's sake and win the world for Christ. Reformed Christian parents and students see the need to study mathematics because it is a part of this world where God has placed us. We are not "of the world" but we are certainly "in it." Therefore, mathematics can be helpful for servanthood here and now. Whereas the primary, spiritual goal of mathematics education prepares us for life in heaven, this secondary goal no less prepares us for life and work in the world.

The third goal of mathematics education is to enhance accuracy, neatness, and communication skills. Calculations demand attention to detail; they sharpen a student's ability to

be precise and accurate. Multi-step solutions must be carefully and clearly presented. These academic skills are useful in mathematics and in other disciplines. They are also commendable life-long skills to have. This may be the least important of the three goals, but its purpose is the same—developing a well-educated Christian.

Such a Christian is a Reformed Christian and a good lesson in mathematics is a weapon in the battle against humanism's man-god.

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[1] Morris Kline, *Mathematics: The Loss of Certainty* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 97.
[2] Dr. David Neu, as cited in Larry L. Zimmerman, *Truth and the Transcendent* (Florence, KY: Answers in Genesis, 2000), 1.
[3] David Darling, *Equations of Eternity* (New York: MJF Books, 1993), 115.
[4] Bourbaki, as cited in Zimmerman, 27.
[5] Albert Einstein, as cited in Zimmerman, 35.
[6] Zimmerman, 55.
[7] Blaise Pascal, as cited in Frank Gaebelein, *The Pattern of God's Truth* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1954), 58.