

SPECIAL REPORT

HOW DID JESUS STUDY ALGEBRA?

DISPELLING THE FEAR, DISLIKE, AND
SECULARIZATION OF ALGEBRA AND
ADVANCED MATHEMATICS

This special report reveals 3 keys and 10 mysteries of Christian mathematics which, when understood and practiced, help dispel the fear and dislike of algebra and advanced mathematics. Ten practical student action steps are included to initiate Christian thinking at home and in the math class.

BY

JAMES BARTLETT

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INTRODUCTION

And Jesus increased in wisdom and stature, and in favour with God and man. Luke 2:52

Because history is the manifestation of the sovereign plans and will of God, the learning of history, even the history of mathematics in Biblical context, becomes a source of wisdom and examples which apply to daily life. As Reverend Paul Michael Raymond summarizes, "A proper, God fearing study of history is actually a safety feature for the well being of mankind."

When the incarnate Jesus was young, He was apprenticed by his step-father Joseph into the trade of carpentry. During this time, Jesus learned and used mathematics and algebra because they were necessary to accomplish His various carpentry projects. Calculating board volume, estimating materials and costs, spacing stair steps, and ensuring structurally sound roofs all required the use of simple algebraic thought.

FIRST CENTURY ALGEBRA

We know that Algebra has been under development since the time of Jacob (c. 1660 BC), from evidence written in the Rhind Papyrus presently housed in the British Museum of London, England. The algebra of Jesus' time included the "method of false position," because the modern symbolic notation had not been invented. To use the method of false position, two or more people would rhetorically (verbally) talk through the problem toward the solution. No pencils or paper needed!

To imagine the method of false position in action, think of a few Jewish people from Jesus' family gathered in Joseph's workshop arguing constructively with one another, using many forceful hand expressions, and focused on determining how many boards were needed to finish the steps of a neighbor's house, with the minimum waste. This emphasis on the verbal solving of mathematics problems, though not as quick or accurate as modern methods, embodied three keys to helping young people learn algebra: (1) Building relationships through verbal communication, (2) Working through to the complete understanding of a problem, thereby providing a sense of accomplishment, and (3) Keeping the problem connected to creation and service to others.

Secular educators have dominated the development of mathematics and the writing of textbooks. As a result, there is not even one Christian math curriculum that fully embodies Jesus' example in learning algebra. With a little priority adjustment, and perhaps some mentoring, anyone can experience the joy and excitement of learning algebra the way Jesus did, and praise God throughout their lifelong application of mathematics. Beyond these three outwardly observed keys to helping people learn algebra, there are 10 mysteries of Christian mathematics.

THE TEN MYSTERIES OF CHRISTIAN MATHEMATICS

To understand, appreciate, and practice Jesus' example in the learning of mathematics and algebra, we need to ponder the following ten mysteries of Christian mathematics, contrast them with the well known practice of secular mathematics, and see these mysteries operating in Jesus life. Once we understand these mysteries, we can creatively teach ourselves and our children to learn algebra, just as Jesus learned algebra.

1. EXPECT TO BE TRANSFORMED

As Christians, we are called to think differently than the world, even be transformed by the renewing of our minds (Romans 12:2). A student of mathematics spends considerable time thinking; time which has the potential to transform. Secular thinking [i.e., thinking without acknowledging God in any way] transforms the student into the image of the world. Contrariwise, by acknowledging God in mathematics, the student progresses in his or her Christian faith and is further transformed into the image of God's son (Proverbs 3:6).

Jesus was being transformed during His formative years and this transformation was favorable to both God and man (Luke 2:52). There was no dichotomy (separation) between pleasing man with his algebra and pleasing God with his faith. No, Jesus grew in favor with God and man because God, by the Holy Spirit, was leading Him in His learning and using of algebra...This is why Jesus could later state with authority...

... The Son can do nothing of himself, but what he seeth the Father do: for what things soever he doeth, these also doeth the Son likewise... John 5:19

This depth of relationship with God is both our example and the expectation for Christian living, which applies to both young (1 Timothy 4:12) and old, as demonstrated in John 15:5.

... for without me ye can do nothing. John 15:5

Therefore, the student of Christian mathematics is encouraged to develop his dependence upon God, even being the priority during the study and use of algebra.

STUDENT ACTION

Become dependent upon God for wisdom and direction in accomplishing each algebra lesson.

2. THE LEARNING CONTEXT

Mathematics is a language for Christians to think God's thoughts after Him, understand real life situations, formulate wise and godly solutions to serve mankind (Mark 10:45), and take dominion of creation (Psalm 8). The secular approach to learning math focuses on the technical manipulations and ignores the interesting and motivating histories, philosophies, and connections to the Christian

faith. It should not be any surprise to find connections to the Christian faith in the study of mathematics, since it was God through Christ that created mathematics (Ephesians 3:9; Colossians 1:16; Revelation 4:11).

Jesus' learning of algebra exemplifies learning in the context of family (Ephesians 6:4); private enterprise (1 Corinthians 7:21), serving others (Mark 10:45), productivity (Proverbs 10:4-5), working with His hands (1 Thessalonians 4:11), and, as a carpenter, taking dominion of wood and stone. He didn't sit at a desk doing abstract math problems alone. His learning of mathematics was in a useful and relational context.

Incorporating all of these aspects of Jesus learning, or just turning the hands-on aspect into a student learning experience will have positive effects, because each aspect puts another Scripture into practice (James 1:22).

STUDENT ACTION

Pray for practical ways to use your algebra knowledge to serve others.

3. EXIT TIME

Secular mathematics encourages the common dislike for mathematics because it teaches mathematics as a sterile, separated, neutral subject, void of morality, disconnected from Scripture, possible without God, and useful without serving others. Christian mathematics not only elaborates on the connections to the Christian faith, historical contexts, and exposes the philosophical traps, but encourages the student to become dependent on the Holy Spirit as mathematics tutor (John 14:26) and be led (Romans 8:14) to use this knowledge in productive ways in serving others.

We know that Jesus enjoyed algebra from both spiritual and contextual rationale. Since Jesus walked in the kingdom of God which is righteousness, peace, and joy (Romans 14:17), He experienced joy even in algebra. The carpentry activity in which Jesus learned algebra did not promote the separation of faith from learning or living or moral considerations. If His calculations were not correct (Hebrews 4:15), He experienced the consequences of an unsafe circumstance or delivering a work product of less value than promised.

Christian parents can place the priority on the Kingdom (righteousness, peace, and joy) versus... say ...chapter 6 in algebra II... to further encourage the godly learning of mathematics.

STUDENT ACTION

Stop aiming to complete the lesson in a certain time period, begin enjoying the leadership of the Holy Spirit while doing mathematics.

4. DAD'S INFLUENCE

The work of mathematics also disciplines the mind, which translates into increased personal discipline in all other areas of life. Patience, accuracy, precision, thoroughness, neatness, and creativeness are also manifestations of the image of God, which benefit man as they are diligently developed (Proverbs 10:4-5) in young or old people. However, developing these traits without Christ at the center can lead students to find their secular life, and essentially proclaim "I can do all things without Christ." In contrast, Christ desires that we find His life in us. *He that findeth his life shall lose it: and he that loseth his life for my sake shall find it.* Matthew 10:39

Jesus learned algebra in dependence upon God, His Father. Besides encouraging students into relationship with God, this is a hint for fathers to seek God on how to be involved with their children's learning of mathematics. After all, we fathers can expect a change of heart, based on Malachi 4:6

And he shall turn the heart of the fathers to the children, and the heart of the children to their fathers Malachi 4:6

STUDENT ACTION

Ask your dad to work through the algebra problems with you and provide you with linkages to faith and creation.

5. REPENT

In centuries past, Christians dominated the setting of the public agenda which built the United States. They founded and developed universities, hospitals, and charitable organizations, and became great statesmen. Today, Christians are no longer leading the dialog in the public square, but the secular forces are setting the agendas...because...

...Christians have found their life in reading, writing, and arithmetic without Christ...

Jesus wasn't drawn into the secular direction for a career, but was launched into ministry as He grew in favor with God and man. This is another valuable point for young people to grasp while learning algebra. Learning algebra isn't only for making money; it is for growing in favor with God and man and taking dominion and captive new areas of knowledge, wisdom, and understanding. Even mathematics itself is not fully developed, and needs Christians to push back its boundaries (Proverbs 23:23). When a person thoroughly understands a subject, he is ready to push beyond the known boundaries of the subject. If a student learns algebra just because his "parents say so," or "colleges require," the motivation is less than to fully understand the subject matter and less than bringing glory to God.

Casting down humanistic reasons for studying leads to experiencing the joy and freedom in learning algebra (2 Corinthians 10:5). For young people learning algebra, the reasons for studying algebra are usually "caught" from their parents.

STUDENT ACTION

Confess and repent from any secular mindset that had been previously motivating your algebra studies.

6. THE USEFULNESS MOTIVE

The majority of Christian young people now view the church and Christian faith as not relevant to society, which is the very essence of the secular worldview. It is well known that secular humanism is a religion; the only religion permitted full access to our public school systems. What is less known is that the teachers and parents who were trained by the public school system pass on a secular view of the world...and algebra to their children.

Jesus didn't learn secular algebra in the government school system but in a family business context. Parents can involve their young people more in their own business use of algebra towards demonstrating its usefulness. This often further motivates young people to excel in mathematics.

STUDENT ACTION

Use your newly learned algebra talents to further develop your own business ideas.

7. CONTINUOUS PRAYER

We must recover a thoroughly Biblical worldview of the home, church, and society to bless our children with a Christian family heritage. Practicing Christian thought in mathematics is as influential as mathematics itself. As mathematics permeates every subject, discipline and career, so does one's view of mathematics become mapped into these other areas of life. In other words, just as reading, writing, and arithmetic are foundational to every endeavor, so is the need to seed these areas of study with Christian presuppositional thought such that our young people can bring Christian thought into all of their future studies, career, and influence in society.

The Holy Spirit gave Jesus the priority of letting God direct Him through His algebra and... growing up years. Young people today can also ask God for His Holy Spirit (Luke 11:13) to help motivate their algebra and other studies as He would, toward walking in His plan for their lives (Ephesians 2:10).

This type of prayer is more than, "Lord help me get the right answer on these test questions," but the expression of earnest desire to let God direct one's entire life.

STUDENT ACTION

As an exciting adventure, keep your Bible open as you do algebra, occasionally reading a paragraph and asking God to lead you through the little steps.

8. TAKE DOMINION

Mathematics gives humans special insights into the beauty and intelligence of creation. Patterns in creation such as honeycombs, snowflakes, planetary orbits, gravitational fields, combustion processes, weather, fractals and everything else can be mathematically modeled. This modeling of creation exposes the anatomy of creation for further study and harnessing to benefit mankind. When Christians, by default, have a secular view of life and mathematics, it leaves the explanation and exploration of creation in secular hands and forms the minds of subsequent generations.

Jesus Christ created the universe and also lives in His people. Therefore, Christians have an infinite reserve of creativity and resources to draw upon as they explore, develop, and take dominion of creation through the development of new family ministries. Besides this unfathomable resource of creativity, Christ in Christians by the Holy Spirit provides the wisdom to apply this creativity in God acknowledging and glorifying ways. For example, a Christian view of mathematics can even be seen to extend from algebra to the development of private space programs. Rather than the current spending of billions of dollars in legal plunder (taxes) to search for life beyond earth, private Christian space programs could explore the outer reaches of space toward praising God for His greatness and serving mankind with family friendly technology.

Jesus' use of algebra in the family business built his family enterprise both economically and spiritually. Students of algebra can be further motivated to learn if challenged to develop small businesses or service enterprises in parallel with their growing knowledge of algebra and advanced mathematics. There are an unlimited number of unique business opportunities available to Christians who will acknowledge God in all their ways.

STUDENT ACTION

Look for new insights toward taking dominion of creation as you prayerfully accomplish each algebra problem.

9. FAMILY INVOLVEMENT

Students become like their parents and teachers, for better or worse. Jesus phrased this truth when He spoke...

The disciple is not above his master: but every one that is perfect shall be as his master. Luke 6:40

Secular education is unconcerned with the moral, ethical, social, and religious life of the teacher, just as long as they can convey the mechanical techniques. The Christian thinker and parent, however, is concerned about and even responsible to ensure that God's perspectives are conveyed through themselves and teachers to their children (Jeremiah 10:2). Christian mathematics is, therefore, further distinguished from secular mathematics in its fulfillment of parental and teacher responsibilities.

Jesus learned mathematics from His godly step-father in the family business. This discipleship and home educating context enabled Joseph to share the Scripture and his life example with Jesus throughout the day and night as a scriptural lifestyle (Deuteronomy 6:7). Families can therefore

extend their devotional reading and talking “by the way” to include Biblical perspectives in mathematics to further convey truth and motivate interest in the study of algebra.

STUDENT INVOLVEMENT

Lead family devotions based on ideas developed during your study of algebra.

10. EXPOSE THE ENEMY

In secular mathematics, the usefulness of math for developing and using technology overshadows any possibility of a godly learning context, and motivates students by fear of failure and or future monetary rewards. Christian mathematics is overshadowed by - and motivated by - Christ and the doing of His will in the little things (Luke 19:17), being led by His Spirit as a pattern for life and work.

This secularization of mathematics can also be seen where the pragmatist philosophy is promoted such that the end justifies the means. Students and parents can easily think they have accomplished mathematical knowledge when they have successfully completed chapters and tests. However, the Scriptures demonstrate that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge (Proverbs 1:7). Remembering the role of the Holy Spirit in teaching, there is therefore no true knowledge conveyed if God’s thoughts have not been integrated and conveyed with the technical content. God is as concerned with the means as the ends (Romans 8:14; Romans 12:2; 1 Thessalonians 5:18).

Jesus was also aware of the worldly philosophies and satanic religions of His day. Exposing the influences of the worldly philosophies and anti-Christ religions of our day through family study is another way to further illuminate the value of learning mathematics in Christ, resulting in the motivation of young people to both serve God and learn algebra.

STUDENT ACTION

Pick a philosophy or religion of this world and compare its influence on mathematical thought to the influence of Biblical thought.

SUMMARY

Once a person begins to realize that God’s Word and Spirit can even motivate and teach us valuable truths as we study algebra, we begin to see, as expected, the innumerable facets of God’s nature illumined in creation.

... the invisible things of him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even his eternal power and Godhead; so that they are without excuse: Romans 1:20

Examples of things to notice are: the logic of nature, how every idea has an opposing idea, the fallacy of neutrality, the existence of absolute truth, how diligence is rewarded, and the joy of understanding, just to name a few.

When algebra is studied alone, without Christ or connections to faith and creation, the student experiences the darker side of God's laws. The spiritual barrenness might be felt in terms of boredom, lack of motivation, or lack of interest. Algebra without Christ leads to the secularization of the Christian mind which exposes the young person to the adversary (1 Peter 5:8).

Jesus' example in learning and using algebra, therefore, can be implemented, in whole or in part for improving anyone's view of mathematics, learning, and life.

Dr. James Bartlett is the Executive Director of the North Dakota Home School Association & the Biblical Concourse of Home Universities. The Biblical Concourse provides kits, books, newsletters, workshops, courses, and community for Christian families home educating through college. Dr. Bartlett and his wife Lynn homeschool four boys in the Turtle Mountains of North Dakota and can be reached at 701-263-4574 or by visiting biblicalconcourse.com.