Math Illiteracy

Sheldon L. Glashow, Higgins professor of physics at Harvard University, has written an essay titled, "Math Is Greek to Too Many U.S. Students." He writes:

- Recent studies establish beyond doubt the relative mathematical illiteracy of American versus foreign schoolchildren from first grade onward. The Feb. 14 issue of Science magazine reports on a comparison of 2,300 pupils from Taiwan, Japan and Minneapolis. As early as first grade, our students have fallen behind their Asian counterparts, and by fifth grade the difference is unmistakable.

  A more ambitious study, sponsored by the U.S. Department of Education and involving 6,648 American children as well as students from many other nations, shows that the malaise progresses relentlessly with age.

  Our eighth graders ranked 13th among the 17 countries studied. Our very best students, in the senior year at high school, are no better (in math) than average students from Finland and are quite inferior to randomly chosen Japanese.

Gerald Elliott, writing in the September 11, 1986 issue of the *Grand Rapids Press*, says: "A recent federal study that cost $1.8 million revealed that one-third of young adults with degrees from two- or four-year colleges failed to answer correctly this question: If you purchase a sandwich at $1.95 and a bowl of soup for 60 cents, how much change will you get from $3?"

Glashow cites two reasons for this failure in math. He says that parents are at fault because many of them are not able to see that there is a problem in the math curriculum, so they bring no complaints to school boards. Parents who are deficient in math cannot tell that their children are following them down the same path.

Glashow also states that teachers are at fault. Teachers do not understand the math they are supposed to teach. Glashow says that it is evident that teachers do not understand math because if they did understand it, they could, and would, earn more money in industry.

Requiring students to do more homework is what Glashow considers to be one step to remedy the problem. He asks, "Is there an American child who spends as much time on homework as he or she does glued to the boob-tube? Not likely."

It is interesting to note though that religion also finds its way into this problem. Prof. McKown wrote an essay called, "Are American Educational Reforms Doomed to Failure?" He says that the cures given in the 1983 presidential commission report, "A Nation at Risk," really boil down to a call for teaching logic which, in turn, requires better math training. McKown affirms that fundamentalists will never stand for such reform since their children will be able to see that the Bible makes no logical sense.

Clearly, religion has much to do with learning and instruction. We should appreciate the rich blessing that Jehovah has given to us of being able to instruct our children in the Reformed heritage He has graciously given to us.

BULLETIN BOARD

The 1986 Teachers' Convention was held way back last October. But, since this is the first "Perspectives" to come out after that event, here's our first opportunity to give it any coverage in our teachers' journal. In a later issue we'll probably print one of the speeches. For now, we'll content ourselves with a few photographs and with a short article written about the Convention from the perspective of one of those who had to travel long distances to attend. (The picture on the cover is of a size that does not permit much identification of individual subjects, but it does give a good idea of the number *of Conventioneers. The largest ever in our history!) Teachers from Doon and Hull drove up, as they usually do (14 hours driving time, one way); but this year we were pleased to see also the teachers from Loveland, Colorado and Lynden, Washington. They flew in, of course, which adds the matter of expense to a consideration of the advisability of attending. Mr. Ron Koole, principal of our Loveland school, tells why they consider it nevertheless to be well worth the while.*