

What Is The Age Of Accountability

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INTRODUCTION:

- A. While it is a great advantage to grow up in a Christian home and to have all the opportunities of growing up “in the church” there are also some challenges presented in this:
1. One challenge you may face is the danger of taking for granted the spiritual blessings that you have. Another challenge is figuring out when you are ready to obey the gospel.
 2. For a person who is “un-churched” and hears the gospel in the adulthood, there is no question whether or not they are “mature enough” to become a Christian. For a child who is raised with a strong spiritual background they may face a hard to struggle to know if they are ready
- B. We speak of a point when child becomes of age to respond to the gospel as “The Age Of Accountability” – It’s easy to throw that term around, but how does one really know if they are ready?

UNDERSTANDING BETTER THE AGE OF ACCOUNTABILITY

- A. First, are children born carrying the guilt of sin or are they born innocent, free from the guilt of sin?
1. As many of you are already aware there is a set of doctrinal ideas known as “Calvinism” which has permeated, in varying degrees, the thinking and doctrines of many religious groups today:
 - a. The T.U.L.I.P. theory summarizes Calvinism’s 5 main “tenants” – Total Inherited Depravity, Unconditional Election, Limited Atonement, Irresistible Grace, & the Perseverance Of The Saints – These concepts have greatly impacted the religious scene of our society
 - b. The first tenant “T.I.D.” impacts our study today – Basically it teaches we are all born in sin, we inherit the guilt of the sin of Adam, & we’re born wholly spiritually depraved
 - c. It holds that our nature is naturally corrupted, we who desperately evil & deceitful, that we have no capacity in ourselves to choose between right and wrong, we are incapable of doing anything good, that the whole of man – heart, body, & soul – is corrupted
 - d. It condemns infants who die to Hell! Any age of accountability is birth or even conception
What about children who die? Their grappling for answers shows Calvinism’s error!
 2. I would turn first to the teaching of Jesus to show that children are innocent of the guilt of sin... that children are not accountable to God for the salvation of their souls: **(Matt 18:2-5; 19:13-15)**
 - a. If they are born in sin, wholly depraved of anything good, why would Jesus call for these children & use them as an example of what you must become to enter the kingdom?
 - b. T.S. Brents, in speaking of the Calvinist’s misuse of this passage writes, “If Jesus had said, ‘Suffer little children to come, and forbid them not, that the total depravity and corruption of their little defiled hearts may be removed by the Spirit, for of such as they will then be is the kingdom of God,’ then the text would be appropriate.”
 - c. Because people failed to see the innocence of children infant baptism became a practice
 3. When Ezekiel prophesied to Israel he spoke clearly and pointedly about the lack of connection between the guilt of the parent and the guilt of the child as a result of sin: **(Ezekiel 18:2, 20)**
 - a. Ezekiel was amazed that people were going around repeating this concept way back then... We should be just as amazed today! This saying boils down to inherited sinfulness
 - b. He spells it out plainly – The soul who sins shall die! Notice what he is referring to... He’s not talking about the physical consequences of sin (like a gambler’s family suffering hardship) but the spiritual consequences – That of righteousness and wickedness!

- c. Do we suffer consequences due to our parents' sins? Certainly! Do we suffer as a result of Adam's sin? Certainly! But this is far from saying we're born guilty because of either
- 4. Now let's see some passages in short which clearly show that children are born free from the guilt of sin, but later on become guilty and in need of salvation:
 - a. **Romans 5:12** – Paul in discussing the spiritual ramifications of Adam's sin and Christ's gift of eternal life says how spiritual death spread to all men... Because ALL sinned!
 - b. **Romans 9:11** – Again Paul is writing and he talks about God's plan to bring Christ into the world through Jacob instead of Esau. The decision was made prior to their birth – "The children not yet being born, nor having done any good or evil" – Innocent!
 - c. **Deut 1:39; Isa 7:16** – Moses spoke of children in a state of not knowing good from evil and being innocent while Isaiah speaks of a time when they would know the difference
 - d. **I Jn 3:4; Jas 2:9** – Sin is always something you commit... It is missing the mark... It is lawlessness... the breaking of God's laws. It's not the act of being conceived or born!

B. Because children are born innocent, free from the guilt of sin, there does come a time in which we become responsible to the Lord for our actions and obeying His gospel:

- 1. Now neither the phrase "the age of accountability" or anything like it appears in the Bible; but, the principle is observable by implication throughout the word of God. In fact, you might say that it is a "necessary inference" or a "forced conclusion" based on what the Bible does teach
- 2. While a person is born innocent and free from the guilt of sin, there comes a point in their life where they sin and are separated from God because of their sins (**Isa 59:1-2; Rom 3:9-10, 23**)
 - a. There is a difference between a 6 month old baby who knocks his food off his high chair when his mom said no and a 21 year old who gets drunk and commits fornication
 - b. If a person who is mentally disabled screams out vulgarities, is it sinful? An elderly person who has lost their mind beats up a nurse tending to them, is it sinful? Why?
 - c. What makes it sinful in one and not sinful in the other is the ability to understand the nature of the decisions, ability to reason, & the thoughts & intents behind the action
 - d. At some point a child matures and reaches a point at which they sin and as a result they become separated from God. At this moment they become lost for the first time
- 3. When this time comes God holds us responsible for whether we choose to serve Him or whether we choose to serve ourselves, this world, and the devil (**Phil 2:12-13**)
- 4. As a person comes to understand their state of being lost they have a responsibility in responding to the gospel in order to be saved. This gives us more insight into this "coming to age"
 - a. Hearing the Gospel (**Rom 10:17**) – One has to hear the gospel of Christ. Certainly this involves more than just hearing words, but listening to & understanding the gospel
 - b. Belief (**Mark 16:15-16**) – Having heard, it must be accepted in faith, believing it to be true
 - c. Repentance (**Acts 2:38**) – One has to make the conscious decision to turn away from their sins, to turn away from living for themselves & this world, and to turn to Christ
 - d. Confession (**Rom 10:9-10**) – Must confess Jesus as Lord & Christ. Confession must come from the heart so one must understand & believe in the identity & mission of Jesus
 - e. Baptism (**Rom 6:1-4; Col 2:11-12**) – One obeys in faith by being baptized. This too takes an understanding of what it is about – Dying with Christ, God removing the guilt of sins
 - f. Living For Christ (**Romans 6:11-13**) – When a person obeys the gospel there must be a decision to strive to live for the Lord from that point on, to strive to obey Christ

C. So what is this elusive “age of accountability” and how do we know one is ready to obey the gospel?

1. Some have attempted to use some of the ages in the Bible to establish a fixed point at which a person is held accountable to God, but a child’s maturation and understanding is not static:
 - a. Some have suggested the age of 20 because this is the age God used as a cut off line for those who were not allowed to enter the promised land because of unbelief. But this was about an age for battle not an age of spiritual accountability (**Num 32:11**)
 - b. Others have suggested the age of 12 because this is the age at which Jesus’ parents took Him to the temple, He was discussing the scriptures with the elders, & the first time Jesus speaks of needing to be about fulfilling His mission on earth (**Luke 2:42-49**)
 - c. A less static, but similar line that is sometimes drawn is that of puberty – While using this as the time at which a person becomes accountable to God is likely closer to being accurate, puberty is a process and it is hard to say when it starts and stops!
 - d. The various backgrounds, times of maturing, and natural abilities all go into bringing children into an age of accountability at different times. We must be careful not to push just because they reach a certain age or deny because they aren’t a certain age
2. From the things we saw a moment ago we can safely say that a person has reached this age of accountability when he can respond to the gospel of Christ (**Romans 6:16-18**)
 - a. **Illustration:** Camp Joy in TN where kindergarteners chose to “accept Jesus into their hearts as their personal Savior.” – Did they understand what they were doing?
 - b. Faith is a process and our knowledge is ever increasing – So just because a person’s faith or knowledge is not perfect this does not mean they are not ready to obey the gospel
 - c. But a person still has to be old enough to obey what God says... This tells us much of the age of accountability. Anyone who is too young to really do them is not accountable!
 - d. Go through each step in the process of becoming a Christian – Do you understand these, do you feel your need to do these things, why do you want to obey the gospel?
3. Part of reaching the age of accountability is the ability to understand the nature of our actions and decisions... Seeing the difference between good and evil (**Deuteronomy 1:39; Isaiah 7:15-16**)
4. One of the best passages that deal with the age of accountability is Paul’s description of his own relationship to the law and his awareness of his sinfulness (**Romans 7:5, 7-9**)
 - a. He’s describing his life before becoming a Christian, his life while he was as a Jew. He talks about how he sought righteousness under the law keeping of Judaism but all he found was condemnation. Why? No grace & mercy because Jesus had not died yet!
 - b. Notice during his life before Christ there was a time when Paul says he was “alive once without the law” – A time when sin had not come alive in him. This is that time in his life before he reached this age of accountability. But when that time came, he died!
 - c. He says that sin “revived” – This word doesn’t mean that it was there and then died and came to life again, but it “spring into existence in his life” & “sin came much alive”
 - d. When did this time come for Paul? It’s clear it came at a point where he understood the nature of his actions, an age at which he saw his own sinfulness, & an age at which he could identify which desires were evil and which were good
5. There are some helpful things to think about and ask yourself if you are young and are trying to figure out if you are ready. They are also helpful for parents to discuss with their children:
 - a. You might ask, “If Jesus came back right now, would I go to Heaven or to Hell?” - If the answer is “I don’t think I’d go to Heaven” or “I don’t know” then you are probably close; but, even a small child can be scared of Hell due to unbalanced preaching!

- b. Another question, "Are you thinking about being baptized because you know that's what you're supposed to do or are realizing you need baptism to wash away your sins?"
- c. Do your thoughts, or do the discussions with your child, center around simply being afraid of Hell at night or is there a concern that is there during the daylight as well?
- d. Are you, or is your child, exhibiting feelings and decision making that are more adult like than child like? This doesn't mean you are completely an adult, but that you have experienced a change in the way you think and make your decisions.