
THE AGE OF ACCOUNTABILITY

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***To marry** the state requires a person to be of an accountable age.*

If someone less than 18 wants to get married – they can, but their parents have to sign for them.

Why? The state wants to make sure that minor knows what he's doing!

***When a young person commits a crime**, a Grand Jury debates whether the minor should be tried as an adult.*

Why? Because the state doesn't consider a child responsible for his own actions.

*Likewise, **before we baptize someone**, they must be an accountable person – as we shall notice shortly.*

The age of accountability is a subject which concerns all of us – especially parents and leaders of the church.

- At what age does a child become accountable before God?
- When are they old enough to obey the gospel?
- When should we begin either telling them they need to get baptized or reassuring them that they're okay?

AN INNOCENT AGE

I did a Google search for "*age of accountability*." Many articles appeared – most were arguing against the idea that there is an "*age of accountability*" – because they were written by Calvinists who believe children are born in sin.

To begin, let it first be noted that the Bible **does** recognize an age of innocence when a child is not responsible before God.

Jonah 4:11

11 And should I not pity Nineveh, that great city, in which are more than one hundred and twenty thousand persons who **cannot discern between their right hand and their left** – and much livestock?"

"persons who cannot discern" – innocent children who are not mentally responsible; innocent.

Deuteronomy 1:39

39 'Moreover **your little ones and your children**, who you say will be victims, **who today have no knowledge of good and evil**, they shall go in there; to them I will give it, and they shall possess it.

"no knowledge of good and evil" – innocent souls who are not accountable.

Isalah 7:16

16 For before the Child shall know to refuse the evil and choose the good, the land that you dread will be forsaken by both her kings.

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Again, this passage envisions a time in childhood when the child is not accountable.

Ezekiel 28:15

15 You were perfect in your ways from the day you were created, *Till iniquity was found in you.*

↵

Here God is speaking to the King of Tyre. He, like everyone else, was born innocent, but eventually reached an age when God held him accountable for his actions.

Matthew 18:2-3

2 Then Jesus called a little child to Him, set him in the midst of them,
3 and said, "Assuredly, I say to you, unless you are converted and **become as little children**, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven.

"a little child" – not sure how *"little"* this child was, but the point is, he was innocent and not corrupt with sin all ready.

Matthew 19:13-14

13 Then little children were brought to Him that He might put His hands on them and pray, but the disciples rebuked them.
14 But Jesus said, "Let the little children come to Me, and do not forbid them; for **of such is the kingdom of heaven.**"

"of such is the kingdom of heaven" – the society of heaven is composed of people like little children. Jesus could not have said this if children were depraved and corrupt with sin.

Romans 9:11

11 (for the children not yet being born, **nor having done any good or evil**, that the purpose of God according to election might stand, not of works but of Him who calls),
↵

This describes Esau and Jacob. One was chosen and one rejected as the father of the Jewish nation before either reached an accountable age.

These type of passages are saying: ***There is an age of innocence.***

FOOLISHNESS IN THE HEART

Although little children are innocent, they have foolishness in their hearts:

Proverbs 22:15

15 Foolishness is bound up in the heart of a child;
The rod of correction will drive it far from him.



"Foolishness" – *not sin* – an important difference. A rod can drive out the foolishness, but a rod cannot drive out sin.

Children learn foolish things that will eventually lead to sin, but they are not held responsible before God yet.

Parents are urged to use a "*rod of correction*" to drive out the foolishness while the child is still "*teachable*."

I drove a school bus for insurance. I can assure you of two things:

#1: Foolishness permeates elementary school children.

#2: Evil begins in middle-school.

UNIQUENESS OF NT

The NT is unique from the OT in that it is composed of citizens who have **all** passed the age of innocence.

Hebrews 8:8-12

8 Because finding fault with them, He says: "Behold, the days are coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah —

9 not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers in the day when I took them by the hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt; because they did not continue in My covenant, and I disregarded them, says the LORD.

10 For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put My laws in their mind and write them on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people.

11 **None of them shall teach his neighbor, and none his brother, saying, 'Know the LORD,' for all shall know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them.**

12 For I will be merciful to their unrighteousness, and their sins and their lawless deeds I will remember no more."

Under OT:

- Innocent children were born under the terms of the covenant. They had no choice – circumcised on 8th day.
- Thus the covenant had members who did not "know the Lord" – infants, small children.
- These were citizens, but the citizens had to be taught to "know the Lord."

Under NT things would be different:

- Everyone here is present because they voluntarily chose to be (cf. Ps 110:3).
- Only those who "know the Lord" are allowed.
- Infants and small children would be excluded because they do not "know the Lord."

NOTE: This does not mean little children are in danger of going to hell. They are still innocent and will not be lost if they die.

Matthew 18:10

10 "Take heed that you do not despise one of these little ones, for I say to you that in heaven their angels always see the face of My Father who is in heaven.

This passage does not used teach "*guardian angels.*" The word "*angel*" here means the spirit of a child:

Acts 12:15

15 But they said to her, "You are beside yourself!" Yet she kept insisting that it was so. So they said, "**It is his angel.**"

"his angel" – i.e. "*his spirit*"

Putting this together with Mt 18:10 means that when little children die, their "*angels*" (i.e. "*spirits*") go immediately to heaven and "*behold the face of the Father.*"

The point is: Children are innocent and fit subjects to enter into heaven.

This is why we reject "*infant baptism.*"

Infant baptism attempts to place people who don't know the Lord into a covenant relationship with God.

ACCOUNTABLE

Eventually a child becomes old enough to be accountable. When he is accountable he becomes a sinner.

Romans 7:9

9 I was alive once without the law, but when the commandment came, sin revived and I died.

↙

Paul is here speaking of himself. Early in life (as a child) he was alive without the law – i.e. he was unaccountable to the law.

"when the commandment came" – Paul reached an age when he became accountable to the law. The law now applied to him personally.

"sin revived" – "*sin sprang to life*" – **not** "*revived*" as though sin were present all along (Calvinism).

So, Paul was innocent, but he reached an *"accountable age."*

PREREQUISITES

Once a person is accountable to the law, he is a sinner and in need of the gospel. The gospel includes baptism (Mk 16:15-16).

Because an infant is not accountable, infant baptism is unscriptural – it is sinful to baptize an infant.

- One must be old enough to have sin – baptism is for the remission of sins (Acts 2:38).
- One must be old enough to believe (Mk 16:16).
- One must be old enough to repent (Acts 2:38).
- One must be old enough to confess verbally (Rom 10:10).

An infant cannot meet any of these prerequisites – therefore is not a fit subject for baptism.

ARE WE GUILTY?

Are we guilty, though, of *"infant baptism"*?

On some occasions perhaps we are:

- *When kids who are too young come asking for baptism – we are guilty if we go ahead and baptize them.*
- *When we **encourage** children who are too young – we are guilty.*

This catches us off guard and we need to think this thru carefully and be ready when it occurs.

THREE COURSES OF ACTION

When a young child comes inquiring about baptism, there are three courses of action to take:

- Try to convince the child that **he is old enough** and he better get baptized before night-fall lest he die during the night and lands in a burning hell for all eternity.
- Try to convince the child that **he is safe** and God does not expect him to be baptized until he's older.
- We could **allow the child to decide for himself**.

Our children look to us for guidance and we must provide this for them and not sit back and let them "*decide for themselves*."

Q: What makes a person accountable?

IRRELEVANT POINTS

Let's begin by noticing 5 things which do not make a child accountable:

1) Not accountable just because he's done wrong.

A 5 yr. old child does things that are wrong.

- They know how to tell lies.
- They are selfish.
- They throw tantrums.

When they do these things, they've done wrong and they probably know it. But no one would argue that they need to be baptized.

2) **Not accountable just because they know the plan of salvation.**

You can teach a parrot to say the plan of salvation.

- Nathan & Jodie have known the plan of salvation since they were 3.

This doesn't mean their souls were stained with sin and they were bound for hell.

NOTE: The issue is not: *What do they know.*

The issue is: *Are they legally accountable to the law of God?*

Even after preaching this, I have people come to me saying: "I was 10 when I was baptized and I knew what I was doing." This is not the issue.

REPEAT: The issue is: *Are they legally accountable to the law of God?* not how much do they know.

3) **Not accountable just because they know where sinners will go.**

Again, you can teach a parrot that sinners will go to hell.

- Nathan & Jodie have known from the time they could talk there was a devil & a hell.

I know of no scripture which indicates this is the criterion for the age of accountability.

4) **Not accountable just because they are afraid that they might go to hell if they died.**

- Suppose every night I bore down on a small child and told him night after night he was going to go to hell if he didn't get baptized.
- Suppose I convinced him and had him crying. Does this mean he's accountable and ready for baptism?

Young children don't need baptism – they need reassurance ⇒ strong reassurance without hesitation or doubt.

EXAMPLE: If parents have to *"think things over,"* it sends a message of doubt to the child. If the parents immediately respond without hesitation, it sends a strong message.

At the dinner table: *"Son, God isn't going to send a 10 year old to hell. Now pass the salt and pepper."*

5) **Not accountable because of a combination of these things.**

- Might know they've done wrong.
- Might know plan of salvation.
- Might know baptism washes away sins.
- Might know that lost people go to hell.
- Might be convinced they would go to hell if they died.

Knowing and thinking all of these things does not necessarily mean a child is ready to be baptized. It may only mean they need reassurance.

20 YEARS OLD

Many people take the position that anyone under 20 years old is not accountable and should not be baptized. This is based on two passages:

- Ex 30:11-16 – Israelites had to be 20 years old to pay the half-shekel offering to the tabernacle.
- Num 14:29-32 – all Israelites above 20 years old were to die in the wilderness for refusing to enter the promised land.

But these passages seem to fail in proving the proposition that 20 years old is the *"age of accountability"* for the following reasons:

1) Only MEN were included in these passages.

Exodus 30:12

12 "When you take the census of the children of Israel for their number, then **every man** shall give a ransom for himself to the LORD, when you number them, that there may be no plague among them when you number them.

Numbers 1:20-21

20 Now the children of Reuben, Israel's oldest son, their genealogies by their families, by their fathers' house, according to the number of names, **every male** individually, **from twenty years old and above, all who were able to go to war**:

21 *those who were numbered of the tribe of Reuben were forty-six thousand five hundred.*

As you read thru Num 1, every tribe is mentioned and each passage specifically mentions it was the males being numbered as soldiers.

It seems to be the custom in Bible days to number the men, but not the women:

Matthew 14:21

21 Now those who had eaten were about five thousand men, **besides women and children.**

Females were not counted on these occasions, but they are certainly considered accountable to the gospel.

2) Only men who were "able to go to war" were counted.

Some men were not able to go and were not considered liable when punishment was dealt out later.

It was the able-bodied-soldiers (who refused to enter the promised land) who were being punished – because it was their job to lead the people.

This is a leadership issue.

This is not an "*age of accountability*" issue.

3) Only eleven tribes were counted – Levi was excluded.

Numbers 1:49

49 "Only the tribe of Levi you shall not number, nor take a census of them among the children of Israel;

They were not numbered with the other tribes, but they were certainly accountable to God for their actions.

So the two passages about men 20 years old and above seems to fail in establishing an "*age of accountability.*"

REQUIREMENT #1

To be ready for baptism a child must have *five qualities*:

1) He must be about 12 years old.

I believe every story told in Bible about Jesus was put there for a purpose. I don't believe there is any information given that is spurious.

Luke 2:41-51

41 His parents went to Jerusalem every year at the Feast of the Passover.

42 And **when He was twelve years old**, they went up to Jerusalem according to the custom of the feast.

43 When they had finished the days, as they returned, the Boy Jesus lingered behind in Jerusalem. And Joseph and His mother did not know it;

44 but supposing Him to have been in the company, they went a day's journey, and sought Him among their relatives and acquaintances.

45 So when they did not find Him, they returned to Jerusalem, seeking Him.

46 Now so it was that after three days they found Him in the temple, sitting in the midst of the teachers, both listening to them and asking them questions.

47 And all who heard Him were astonished at His understanding and answers.

48 So when they saw Him, they were amazed; and His mother said to Him, "Son, why have You done this to us? Look, Your father and I have sought You anxiously."

49 And He said to them, "Why did you seek Me? **Did you not know that I must be about My Father's business?**"

50 But they did not understand the statement which He spoke to them.

51 Then He went down with them and came to Nazareth, and was subject to them, but His mother kept all these things in her heart.

This is not in Bible by accident. ***It's not an accident that we are told Jesus was 12 yrs. old*** when He began to *"be about the Father's business."*

- **I believe this was given so we would have a reference point to work from.**
- **Jesus was our example to follow.**

NOTE: In the creation God implanted a mechanism within children which signals a change in life – a change from childhood to adulthood. This change is called ***puberty***.

Puberty begins about 12 years of age.

This is the Creator's way of saying to parents: Now you need to view your children differently.

When children reach age 12, it's time for them to consider seriously about *"being about the Father's business."*

ILL: The Jews have a feast called Bar Mitzva (Bat Mitzva – for girls). Listen to the following description of this feast:

Bar Mitzvah, in Judaism, a child who has reached the age of legal maturity and thereby becomes obligated to observe all the commandments; also the name of the ceremony celebrating the occasion. When a boy reaches the age of 13, he begins to participate in religious life as an adult by donning *tefillin*, religious symbols worn on the left arm and forehead. He is also called up in synagogue to read from the Torah and, on the sabbath, from the Prophets. Girls usually celebrate *bat mitzvah* at the age of 12. (Encarta)

2 Kings 21:1-2

- 1 Manasseh was **twelve years old** when he became king, and he reigned fifty-five years in Jerusalem. His mother's name was Hephzibah.
- 2 And **he did evil in the sight of the LORD**, according to the abominations of the nations whom the LORD had cast out before the children of Israel.

Here Manasseh seems to be held responsible for his actions at twelve years of age.

- King Joash was 7 years old and did what was right in God's sight (2 Ch 24:1-2) but specific mention is made that Jehoiada the priest was actually running the country.
- King Josiah was 8 years old and did what was right in God's sight, but specific mention is given to the 8th year of his reign:

2 Chronicles 34:1-3

- 1 Josiah was **eight years old** when he became king, and he reigned thirty-one years in Jerusalem.
- 2 And **he did what was right in the sight of the LORD**, and walked in the ways of his father David; he did not turn aside to the right hand or to the left.
- 3 **For in the eighth year of his reign, while he was still young, he began to seek the God of his father David**; and in the twelfth year he began to purge Judah and Jerusalem of the high places, the wooden images, the carved images, and the molded images.

8 years old when began reigning
8 years later he began to seek the Lord
16 years old when he was seeking the Lord.

The point I'm trying to make is that here is someone less than 20 years old seeking the Lord.

2 Kings 2:23-24

- 23 Then [Elisha] went up from there to Bethel; and as he was going up the road, **some youths** came from the city and mocked him, and said to him, "Go up, you baldhead! Go up, you baldhead!"
- 24 So he turned around and looked at them, and pronounced a curse on them in the name of the LORD. And two female bears came out of the woods and mauled forty-two of the youths.

Here are some "youths" who were held accountable for their actions. The KJV has "little children."

Pulpit Commentary:

"Little children" is an unfortunate translation, raising quite a wrong idea of the tender age of the persons spoken of. ... [The Hebrew words being translated in this passage] would be best translated (as by our Revisers in the margin) "young lads" – **boys**, that is, **from twelve to fifteen**. (Book of Second Kings, p. 23)

Amplified Version footnote:

This incident has long been misunderstood because the Hebrew word "naar," used here, was translated "little boys." That these characteristic juvenile delinquents were old enough to be fully accountable is obvious from the use of the word elsewhere. For example, it was used by David of his son Solomon and translated "young and inexperienced," when Solomon was a father (1 Ch 22:5; cp. 2 Ch 9:30 and 1 Kings 14:21). It was used of Joseph when he was seventeen (Gen 37:2). In fact, not less than seventy times in the Authorized Version this word "naar" is translated "young man" or "young men." (The Comparative Study Bible, p. 894)

So ... it seems that young people below 20, but above 12 are considered accountable in various scriptures.

Twelve is not a magic number. Not everyone is necessarily mature enough at this age, but ***this is a reference point for parents*** to keep in mind.

When children are much younger – they are not accountable (period). I have never met a 10 year old child who was accountable.

- Foolish – yes.
- Accountable – no.

REQUIREMENT #2

2) He must have a guilty conscience.

1 Peter 3:21

21 There is also an antitype which now saves us — **baptism** (not the removal of the filth of the flesh, but **the answer of a good conscience toward God**), ...

Baptism is to give a clear conscience to a sinner that has a guilty conscience.

Before age 12, kids have spurts of guilt overcome them. Their conscience begins to operate.

ILL: Like spark plug that is fouled out – ignites sometimes, but not continuously because it's just beginning to operate.

Not until they feel guilt continuously are they ready for baptism.

Ask yourself:

- Does your child feel guilty for wrong-doing?
- Does he feel guilty only when he's caught, or even when he doesn't get caught?
- Does he come to you confessing wrongs even when he would never get caught? Or does he confess only when cornered?
- Does he demonstrate continued penitence and grief over wrong-doing, or is it fleeting and shallow grief?

If I'm not mistaken: Psychological studies have demonstrated that deep-seated grief and guilt in children below 12 yrs. of age is abnormal.

REQUIREMENT #3

3) He must have the ability to reason abstractly.

1 Corinthians 13:11

11 When I was a child, I spoke as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child; but when I became a man, I put away childish things.

Abstract reasoning is necessary to understand:

- How a man living 2000 yrs. ago, dying on cross, can benefit me and save me, requires ability to reason abstractly.
- That when I'm baptized in the water, it's not the water taking my sins away – it's the blood of Jesus in heaven taking my sins away!

Other things requiring abstract reasoning:

- Lord's supper – *bread* (body), *fruit of the vine* (blood), *cup* (NT)
- Duties of worship and service.

The ability to reason abstractly is rare in children under 12.

REQUIREMENT #4

4) He must show signs of being responsible (mature).

- Does he generally take life seriously or is everything a big game?
- Does he finish things he begins? (If not, might he begin Christian life and not finish?)

Luke 14:28-30

28 For which of you, intending to build a tower, does not sit down first and count the cost, whether he has enough to finish it —

29 lest, after he has laid the foundation, and is not able to finish, all who see it begin to mock him,

30 saying, 'This man began to build and was not able to finish.'

Here is the principle of "*counting the cost.*" If a child is not old enough to do this, he is not old enough to be baptized.

REQUIREMENT #5

5) He must show interest in spiritual matters on his own.

Romans 8:6

6 For to be carnally minded is death, but to be spiritually minded is life and peace.

- Does he read Bible on his own?
- Does he go around singing church songs?
- If he has a choice of sitting in a circle of adults to hear Scripture discussed, or playing chase with kids outside, where would he be? (Remember Jesus at age 12)
- When he suffers injustice at the hands of his brothers and sisters, does he respond in an adult way, or childish way?

DANGERS IN EARLY BAPTISM

We should be very concerned about baptizing children too early as well as too late.

Here are some things to think about:

1) If they're too young, it doesn't do any good.

Later when they are old enough, they think they've obeyed when really they haven't!

ILL: We have argued thru the years that someone baptized as an infant is not really baptized. They did not meet the prerequisites.

The same is true in the present case of children who are not truly accountable to the law.

Romans 6:17-18

17 But God be thanked that though you were slaves of sin, yet **you obeyed from the heart** that form of doctrine to which you were delivered.

18 And having been set free from sin, you became slaves of righteousness.

"obey from the heart" – the Bible "*heart*" is the mind which can reason abstractly (Mk 2:6). A young child cannot do this because his mind has not fully developed.

2) We could be encouraging sacrilege.

Sacrilege is mentioned in Rom 2:22 (KJV). It is taking something that ought to be very holy and revered and reducing it to something common.

I believe we encourage sacrilege when we encourage children who are too young to begin eating the Lord's supper and making a game out of it.

We're all concerned about this, and this is a danger in early baptism.

3) There may always be some doubt in the child's mind.

This may not happen to all children, but I know several who were baptized at early ages and they were not satisfied later in life.

I was not.

- 1968 I was 8 yrs. old.
- Dorothy was 9.

We were both "*re-baptized*" – but that is not an accurate term. Really I was simply baptized when I was 15.

CONCLUSION

Let's not argue that we must hurry and baptize all our children now lest they never do it some day in the future.

(This is not good reasoning.)

If they won't have interest in the future, they won't have what it takes to stick with it now. It would actually be worse for them if they are baptized and then fall away (2 Pet 2:21).

- Let's not be guilty of "infant baptism"
- Let's encourage our children to view themselves as safe rather than heaping upon them a guilty conscience that is **artificially imposed**.

(The guilty conscience must come from within, not because they've been brainwashed and scared by overly zealous parents.)

THE AGE OF ACCOUNTABILITY

QUESTIONS:

- 1) What is meant by people who could not "*discern between their right hand and their left*"?
- 2) What does the rod drive out of children according to Prov 22:15?
- 3) What makes the NT unique from the OT according to Heb 8:8-12?
- 4) What is meant by the word "*angel*" in Acts 12:15?
- 5) When baptizing young people, is the child's knowledge about baptism the main issue involved?
- 6) What is Bar Mitzvah and what is Bat Mitzvah?
- 7) How does a child's reasoning change at the age of 12?
- 8) How can sacrilege become a problem if a child is baptized at too early of an age?