

THE AGE OF ACCOUNTABILITY

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Introduction

- A. This is a controversial subject because the Bible **does not specify an age at which one becomes accountable for his sins.**
 - 1. So in one sense, there *is* no specific “age of accountability.” The age of accountability varies from person to person based upon what they have been taught, the development of their consciences, their ability to understand abstract concepts, and their maturity level.
 - 2. Psychologists talk about someone’s “mental age” as different from one’s chronological age, based upon the fact that one’s maturity level is dependent upon one’s life experiences. This explains why a specific age is not provided. The answer to the question of when should a person make the decision to become a Christian is simple: It depends. It is clearly a matter of judgment.
- B. However, I believe there are some **important factors** that need to be considered that will help young people decide **when they are old enough** and also help parents know how better to guide their children when they start asking questions about eternity.
- C. **Thesis:**
 - 1. Theological underpinnings of this question
 - 2. The overall issue of accountability, both in and out of the Bible
 - 3. Factors to consider

I. THEOLOGICAL UNDERPINNINGS

- A. People often think there are **two great classes of people**...the SAVED & the LOST. This is not true...there is a large group of people who are neither saved nor lost...they are **SAFE!**
 - 1. Jonah 4: 11 speaks of 120,000 who don’t know their right hand from their left!!
 - 2. Ezekiel 18:19-20: “The soul that sins it shall die, the son shall not bear the iniquity of the father...nor the father the son...”
 - 3. Jesus uses children as models...one must have the trusting heart of a child to get back into fellowship with God! Childlikeness is part of true conversion...
Illust. As a child I was told God listens to children’s prayers with “half an ear.” What kind of nonsense is that? God listens to his innocent children and accepted from their mouths at the triumphal entry “perfected praise!”
 - 4. John 9:1ff: “Who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” the disciples asked Jesus. They thought malady and handicaps were punishment for inherited sin! Jesus answer? “Neither this man or his parents have sinned...”
- B. **Children are born INNOCENT.** There is no need to baptize a child for the remission of sins because he/she has no sins to be forgiven yet, and besides, the child has no idea what is going on. Doing so turns baptism from the response to the gospel of a soul who understands the good news and is able to believe and repent prior to baptism into a “magical ritual.” John 9:41: “If ye are blind you have no sin!” (Children can’t see or understand yet, so in this sense they are blind!)
 - 1. Look into a child’s innocent eyes...It is a glimpse into paradise before Adam and Eve came to know good from evil.
 - 2. SONG: “Jesus loves the children, all the children of the world, red and yellow black and white they are precious in his sight...” A great and true verse...There is a sense in which verse 2 is not totally correct. **DID JESUS NEED TO DIE FOR ALL THE CHILDREN?**

Children do not need the redemptive blood of Christ until they stop being children and become young adults!

3. The \$64,000 question: When does one transition from a child to a human being accountable before God, whom, if he/she does not obey the gospel, will be lost eternally?
4. Romans 14:12: "Each man must give an account unto God."
5. Colossians 3:25: "For he that does wrong, shall receive again for the wrong that he hath done; there is no respecter of persons."

II. THE OVERALL ISSUE, BOTH "IN AND OUT" OF THE BIBLE

A. Our Society at large

1. How old should a teenager before he/she can drive – 15 or 16?
Illust. My wife Gail – "If you are old enough to take responsibility for your life and the lives of others by getting behind the wheel of a car, then you are old enough to take responsibility for your own soul, and be concerned about the spiritual welfare of others as well."
2. How old should a teenager be before being tried as an adult? The State of KY. Revised Statute 640.040 states: "A youthful offender may be sentenced to capital punishment if he was sixteen (16) years of age at the time of the commission of the offense."
3. How old before being able to drink? 21
4. How old before being granted a right to vote? 18
5. How old before going into combat? 18
6. How old before becoming a Christian? People tell me they heard about Jesus and "asked him into their heart" at age 5, 8, or 10. The youngest I have heard a member of church say they "obeyed" – was 8. (Pretty interesting contrast, don't you think?) However, our society is not the standard; maybe they have it all wrong.

B. Bible examples:

1. How old is old enough to go to war? Numbers 1:20: "Numbered the people from **20 years old and up** as many as were able to go to war."
2. When the generation sinned in the wilderness and God decreed that that generation would have to die there and would not enter the Promised Land, what age did God use as a cut-off point? Numbers 32:11-12: "Surely none of the men that came up out of Egypt, from **twenty years old and upward**, shall see the land which I swear unto Abraham, unto Isaac, and unto Jacob."
3. Early Christian writers thought that the age of accountability began around **puberty, about age 14**, when there develops a sense of shame about nakedness, similar to Adam and Eve feeling a need to cover themselves after sin. (Tertullian 210 A.D.)
4. Jews decided you were a "**son under the law**" and **responsible to it at age 13**.
5. When did Jesus understand His life purpose and felt an awareness and need for Him to be "busy about His father's business?" Jesus went to the temple first at age of 12.
6. Examples in **Acts** (The only NT book where we see the gospel preached to unbelievers!):
 - a. Acts 2:18: First gospel sermon, quoting Joel 2: "EVEN ON MY BONDSLAVES, BOTH **MEN AND WOMEN**, I WILL IN THOSE DAYS POUR FORTH OF MY SPIRIT."
 - b. Acts 5:14-15: "And all the more believers in the Lord, multitudes of **men and women**, were constantly added to their number..."
 - c. Acts 8:12: "But when they believed Philip preaching the good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were being baptized, **men and women** alike."
 - d. Acts 17:12: "Therefore many of them believed, along with a number of prominent **Greek women and men**."
 - e. TRUE: Lydia's and the Philippian Jailor's households were baptized. Acts 16:32-34: "And [the jailor] took them that very hour of the night and washed their wounds, and immediately he was baptized, he and all his household. And he brought them into his house and set food before them, and rejoiced greatly, having believed in God with his **whole household**."

Notice: The household believed, not little children. We have no idea of the ages in their household, and this phrase does not prove infant baptism or the baptism of young children.

Matthew 14:21 shows if children were present they would have been mentioned: “And they that had eaten were about **five thousand men, besides women and children.**”

7. **ONLY MEN AND WOMEN responded to the gospel, never men and women and children. That is impressive to me. The gospel was preached and adults responded, not children!**

III. FACTORS TO CONSIDER AND PREREQUISITES FOR THE NEW BIRTH

A. ARE THEY LOST?

1. Before you can be saved, you **must first BE LOST.**
2. Children are born SAFE until they sin, then they become LOST. Then they need to be SAVED.

B. Parents: An important question: **Do you think your child is emotionally mature enough that he/she is accountable; and that if the Lord were to come right now...he/she would be hell bound?** A child is not a fit subject for baptism for the remission of sins until he/she is convicted of his sins and realizes he/she is lost.

C. CAN THEY UNDERSTAND AND TRULY MAKE THE GOOD CONFESSION??

1. Romans 10:9-10: “If thou shalt confess with thy mouth **Christ as Lord** and believe in thy heart that God hath raised him from the dead...”
2. Acts 8:37: Phillip told the eunuch, “If thou believest thou mayest...and the eunuch said, “I believe **that Jesus is the Christ the son of the living God.**”
 - a. It’s not enough to just be able to memorize and say the five steps of salvation and say the right words. **THEY MUST UNDERSTAND THE FACTS OF LIFE!**
 - b. I had an 8 year old come forward one night...the parents were so pleased...I asked why he had come forward: “I want to be baptized for the remission of my sins.” “Do you believe that Jesus is the son of God?” “Yes.” “If God is His father, who was his mother?” “**Mrs. God?!**”
 - c. Another time I asked, “Who were Jesus parents?” “Mary and Joseph.” “Do you believe Jesus is the Son of God or the son of Joseph?” He shrugged his shoulders; he had no clue! He had **no concept of the virgin birth or of how Jesus was both God and human at the same time.** It was too complex. His parents admitted later that they had not talked with him about the facts of life.

D. IS THIS A TRUE CONVERSION OR JUST “A BAPTISM”?

1. WHO ARE THEY TRYING TO PLEASE?

- a. I have re-baptized countless people over the years...They often tell me that they saw their peers do it, and they wanted to do so, or they wanted to please their parents. **IT WAS NOT BASED UPON A PERSONAL CONVICTION OF SIN.**
- b. God doesn’t have grandchildren, only adopted children who come to possess their own FAITH.

2. ARE ALL THREE ELEMENTS OF CONVERSION ENGAGED?

- a. Essence of Salvation: Three fold:
Intellect (Belief) – Does he/she grasp its significance? Is he/she able to think in abstract terms? God is a spirit, you can’t see Him, but He is real. He sent Jesus to be born of a virgin to die for your sins. A child must UNDERSTAND THAT ON A PERSONAL LEVEL. Psychology tells us that abstract thought and reasoning is normally not developed until about AGE 12.
- b. **Will (Repentance)** – must understand that he/she will stop sinning and start serving God. What practically will change?
 - (1) Salvation experience...People I talk to often have heard, believed, confessed, and then skipped over to baptism. I ask if they have any remembrance or recollection of repentance. They look at me, puzzled.

- (2) One must repent first, and then and only then is he/she ready to be baptized.
- c. **Conscience (Baptism)** – 1 Peter 3:21 calls it an “appeal of a good conscience.”
 - (1) This idea goes back to being convicted of sin...needing forgiveness and realizing that this is the point one contacts God’s blood and gets into Christ, and therefore one’s conscience is cleansed because one’s sins have been purged.
 - (2) He/she must understand this is for the remission of sins and not just to obey Christ or something you do to get into the church.
- 3. Baptism before a person needs to be “saved” can lead to grave doubts later.
 - a. If your child is baptized prematurely and is not yet accountable before God, you have done him/her a great disservice! What if later, when he/she matures and needs to repent and be baptized, what if it never happens because he/she thinks they are already a Christian?
 - b. I have re-baptized countless people over the years, people who are plagued with doubts about their salvation, and who upon reflection, realized they **did not really know what they were doing when they made the decision to be baptized the first time**. There is really no such thing as “rebaptism,” one of the times...**you just got wet**. I think you ought to be better safe than sorry, but sometimes we rush to the baptistery without seriously considering these issues!
- 4. What do you do if your child wants to be baptized and keeps asking about it, and yet you know him/her and realize that he/she is not a young adult yet? How do we avoid discouraging him from making the right decision when he/she is mature enough?
 - a. Commend, compliment, but explain the gospel is for young adults who **are accountable**, not children.
 - b. Let him/her know God hears his prayers, Jesus loves children! They are safe until they so willfully sin that they clearly are lost and their conscience pricks them, so they cry out for relief and forgiveness!

Conclusion

- A. What is the age of accountability? I don’t know, the Bible doesn’t say. However, the above factors must be considered.
 - 1. The weight of evidence in NT suggests the need to be of at least the mental or maturity level of a 12/13 year old, regardless of chronological age.
 - 2. Dr. Flavil Yeakley, University of Tulsa professor: “80 % of those baptized before age 12 became either unfaithful or later requested to be rebaptized. Among people age 12 or older rebaptisms are rare and after 15 virtually non-existent.”
- B. I am reporting what I have found through my own study – you will have to decide what you do what this information.
- C. Consider attached addendum for additional thoughts.

ADDENDUM COMPILED FROM MISC. SOURCES

A gospel preacher requested thoughts from BOL (Brethren On Line) concerning how to determine when a young person is ready to obey the gospel. The observations were wide-ranging, but some patterns did emerge. Below is a compilation of general thoughts in no particular order that I thought you would find helpful.

1. Avoid denominational concept of “commitment”; stress sin/godly/sorrow/repentance/need for Savior and what this means.
2. Challenge them by convicting them of sin, then try to “talk them out of it.” If you can talk them out of it, they’re not ready.
3. Book recommendations: *Am I Ready to Be Baptized?* by Kyle Butt and John Farber; *Am I Ready?* by Mark Roberts.
4. Have the young person in question explain what it means to repent. If they can’t, they’re not ready. Continue to study with them.
5. Engage in discussion, being careful not to ask “leading questions.” Explore meaning of sin, repentance, the role of Christ in salvation, the place of baptism. Discuss their understanding of the commitment they are making.
6. Note differences between maturity rates of boys and girls.
7. In the course of other discussion on the subject ask: “If the Lord came tonight, would He take you to heaven, or would you go to hell? Gauge their answer. True innocence will answer “heaven” without an ounce of concern.
8. Be careful not to discourage if you perceive they are not ready but continue asking.
9. Determine if your child’s fear is more associated with nighttime anxiety rather than clear sense of daytime guilt.
10. Have them write down the sins they feel they have committed (rather than just a generic sense of guilt). Discuss with them how they think God views their behavior.
11. Ask them how their life will be different if they become a Christian.
12. If they say they are afraid they will go to hell, ask them why. Sometimes they just think being baptized is what someone ought to do but are unclear of the deeper reason why.
13. If a child has to ask for parent’s permission to be baptized, they are not ready. If parents still expect the child to ask their permission to be baptized, they are probably not ready.
14. Two opposite concerns were often mentioned: How can we deny a young person who seems to be aware of his/her sins/need for repentance? And, we must be careful not to baptize someone too young and create within them a false sense of security if their understanding was not deep enough.
15. Does the child understand sin vs. simpler question of right/wrong? Do they understand consequences of sin? Do they show ability of self-control, resistance of temptation? Does he/she try to hide real sins (not just disobedience to parents)? Can they reason beyond the present?