

The Age of Accountability

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Introduction and Definition of Terms

The term "age of accountability" is not a biblical expression. The closest biblical reference to express the idea of accountability might well be Romans 14:12—"So then every one of us shall give account of himself to God." It is important to note that the Bible word used for account in this passage is *logos*. It is that same word used by John 1:1 to describe Jesus as God's Word—his account, or expression of himself to man.

As Baptists and some other Christians have used the term, "age of accountability" means a time or period of life when one is aware enough of God to respond to him. This response is inevitably rejection of God on the part of all men (Rom. 3:23). The relationship of one who consciously rejects God is estrangement—awareness of sin and limitation. The problem of "the age of accountability" is particularly significant to Baptists because: (1) they stress the necessity of conversion before church membership; (2) they formerly, in some instances, set arbitrary ages at which children were accountable; (3) and they are facing today the dilemmas posed by "child evangelism."

It is not possible to answer the question, "What is the age of accountability?" until other, related questions are seen. These questions are: In what sense are all men responsible to God? What about the group and the individual in biblical teaching? How have succeeding ages brought changes from Bible times? What does the Bible specifically teach about the religious status of children? What are the minimal requirements for belief in God? We must also survey our contemporary Baptist practices in child evangelism and evaluate them carefully. These considerations will compose the bulk of this chapter. At the conclusion guidelines and suggestions will be made about dealing with children and assessing the "age of accountability."

In What Sense Are All Men Responsible to God?

Children are for real. They are people. C. S. Lewis in his remarkable books, *The Chronicles of Narnia*, has the white witch ask a child: "Are you human?" The answer, of course, is yes. Since children participate in humanness, in what sense are they responsible? The larger question should be approached first. In what way are all men responsible to God?

Genesis 1:26 indicates that man was made in the image of God. In Christian history there have been many diverse views as to what "image of God" implies. To this author the image of God means that man is capable of response to God. This response may be acceptance or rejection. The ability to respond to God is dependent on God's revelation of himself and God's help for every individual who responds to him positively.

The revelation of God to man is most clearly seen in Jesus Christ. Revelation comes into our world in Jesus Christ. The world, as we now experience it, exists in a lower key than God created it. We speak of this as "the fall." Sin as pride, rebellion, and desire are characteristics of all men. As pride, sin manifests itself primarily in man's refusal to accept God as God. Pride causes man to rely wholly on his accomplishments and to measure all things by his own discernment. Rebellion is manifested in rejecting the claim of God for ultimate allegiance to himself. Rebellion is more than the infraction of rules. It goes against the grain of what human nature itself really ought to be. Sin as desire is characterized by drawing all things into oneself for selfish purposes.

In these dimensions sin affects the entire structure of man's existence. Man raises himself to ultimacy—pride. He resists the just and ultimate claim of God on his life—rebellion. And he distorts all relationships of life by seeking them for selfish purposes—desire. It is to a world, less than ideal, and to men, distorted by sin, that the revelation comes.

Since the clearest revelation of God is Christ, man is fully responsible when confronted by Christ. Since responsibility is obtained in using the ability to respond, the action of a man facing Christ and deliberately relating to him or refusing to relate to him brings the full status or responsibility. The Gospel of John states expressly that one is accepted or rejected by his belief or unbelief "on the Son" (16:8-11). It is furthermore stated that Jesus is "the way, the truth, and the life" (14:6). The clearest expression of the Christian faith is that men face God in the claims of Jesus Christ. In this confrontation full responsibility is attained.

But this clear expression is hedged in by pressing questions. Do we see God only in Christ? What of those who are never confronted by Christ in the proclamation of the gospel? When are children confronted by Christ?

Do Men see God only in Christ?—Christ expresses the fulness of what God is and what God desires to do for men. However, there is within man himself a "desire for God." This void in man is a preliminary preparation for the confrontation of God in Christ. This inherent religious bent is man's destiny. It is the crater or void which God fills with his love. Ironically enough, man seeks to fill this void of life with other things. This is tragic, because only God can fill that place.

In addition to the religious void in man's life, there is an awareness of both the grandeur and wretchedness of the world, that things are both greater than man could invent and worse than he can endure. This awareness points man to God; but again, only in a preliminary way.

It must also be seen that the line of special events in Israel leading up to the coming of Christ has much to say about God. The record of these events is the Old Testament. The Christian faith must retain the Old Testament because: (1) it acknowledges that he who created the world is involved in redeeming it; (2) it asserts that he selects certain men and events to express his wider purpose; (3) it claims the promise of a fuller and complete revelation of God is yet to come. In relation to this faith men of Old Testament times were redemptively related to God by faith in hope.

What of those who are never confronted by Christ in the proclamation of the gospel?— Full redemptive relation with God is unknown outside of Christ. This is the scandalously particular claim of the Christian faith (cf. Matt. 11:27). Men who are unopposed by Christ find no adequate fulfillment of life's religious void. They likewise make wrong conclusions about what the world means and what life and destiny are about. They relate to God negatively by giving only human answers to the complexities of man and his destiny. This is a "lost" kind of existence. If they should learn of Christ and reject him, they are brought to full responsibility and full condemnation. This is the danger inherent in the Christian mission enterprise.

Christian teaching and compassion is motivated toward those who have not heard by three insights: (1) It is the specific intention of God that those who know him in Christ are under obligation to share him (cf. Matt. 28:19-20). (2) Judgment, or final status in life—here and hereafter—has degrees. Tyre and Sidon will be

better off, in the last analysis, than the Pharisees who faced Christ and rejected him (cf. Matt. 11:22 and parallels). (3) Ultimately the fate of all men is in the hand of God, whose wisdom and justice is greater than that of men (cf. Isa. 40; Job 38-41; Rom. 14:12; John 5:22; 1 Cor. 1:18).

When are children confronted by Christ?—Full answer to this question can be given only after the larger considerations of this chapter have been explored. At this point several suggestions may be given: (1) Children are confronted by Christ when they receive Christly actions and attitudes from those about them. (2) Children are likewise confronted with Christ when they are taught and nurtured by the proclamation of the gospel of Christ. (3) They are confronted by Christ when the values and shape of their environment are formed by Christian insight. However, these confrontations are preliminary and preparatory. In the sense of full responsibility Christ confronts any individual in the proclamation of the gospel, by the power of the Spirit, at the time when the individual is aware of the message and meaning of the Christian gospel.

Two Biblical Insights

Biblical faith is always related to the individual and to the community of faith. These emphases form two poles of God's ways with men. In the Bible both are emphasized. For example, Moses, the psalmist, and Paul are illustrative of God's concern for the individual. The covenant agreement with Abraham and Israel, the corporate concern for the kingdom, and the New Testament concept of the church as Christ's body are illustrative of God's way of using the community of faith as an instrument of service and a witness of grace.

The individual and the corporate are well illustrated by the biblical expressions about Adam. Adam is an individual man, but he also inevitably a picture of all men. His transgression is his; it was first. At the same time, it is a picture of what all men do. In him, as typical of what all do, men die and sin. All men do crystalize their own rebellion against God. No one is good when he is judged by what he ought to be. The Christian affirms that what man ought to be is seen truly only in Christ.

One of the most persistent errors about original sin has been the attempt to establish how we and Adam are connected. Historical theories of original sin have run the gamut. Some suppose sin is passed on by heredity like the color of the

eyes. Others indicate that children have an inherent bent to sin.

Still others decry any liability to a child from his forebears. In this view men are neutral until they decide yes or no, pro or con.

These kinds of theories are intriguing, but they do not rise from the Bible so much as from our curiosity. The biblical view expresses the life of man as it exists. Individually men differ—yet, as a group and as individuals, they share a common lot. Man is sinful because he chooses to be. Two things are certain in the biblical picture of man: (1) He inevitably does sin. (2) He, as an individual in sin, must respond to God's grace in Christ for full redemptive relationship. The Bible simply does not say ultimately why man is a sinner. It does state unrelentingly that he is a sinner.

In ancient Israel it was felt that children were covered by the covenant of God within the elected community. This meant that individual children were considered under the protection of God until, by personal rebellion, they failed to obey him or refused to become a son of the covenant.

Evangelical Christians of the modern world share unusual and sometimes unwarranted anxiety about their young children and their status as individuals. This will be explored more fully in the next section. Ancient Israel assumed a covenant mercy of God to apply to their children. Jesus indicated his love for children and used their implicit trust as a model for what is required in biblical faith (Matt. 18:2-6). It would be unwise for us to become unduly anxious about the individual young child. We could do this to such an extent that we would not see him as part of humanity which is not yet capable of coping with grace.

We must keep the biblical balance of the individual and the corporate. Each child is born into a sinful humanity. All individuals eventually confirm themselves as sinners. It is God's purpose to save all. It is his manner to relate to humanity individually. This twofold biblical insight must be maintained. It must be maintained before conversion. We must say children are sinful because of their humanness but sinners because of their own choice. We must also maintain a perspective of the individual and the group at the time of conversion and after. One meets God individually because of the witness of the gospel borne by the community of faith—the church. The community proclaims the witness and the individual bears his witness in this larger framework. This is an indispensable insight to biblical thought. To place the individual in isolation from his common

lot with humanity or from his place in the community of faith is not biblical.

The Shape of Things Since Bible Days

It is impossible to get "back to the Bible" without taking some of our own current concerns and interests with us. All men wear the glasses of their day and the outlook of their time. Several developments have risen since Bible days which complicate our view of children and their religious experience and expression.

Humanism. — Humanism arose in western Europe in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Humanism is a way of looking at life which says that man is the measure of all things. There are certain similarities between humanism beliefs and the Christian faith. Both emphasize the individual. Both place high value on man and his abilities. However, the differences between humanism and traditional Christian belief are more pronounced than the similarities. Christianity sees man as the crown of creation but not as the measure of all things. The Christian view of man assesses his worth, but is also very aware of his weaknesses. For the humanist, man himself is the reference point for all value. For the Christian, God is the reference point for value.

Modern Western man is very much influenced, formally and informally, by the idea that man is the measure of all things. From this conviction have grown the modern sciences dealing with man and his distinctiveness: psychology, anthropology, sociology. Sometimes these studies and the ultimate concern with things human have so stressed the individual and his development that the corporate idea of humanity as a unit has been lost.

Psychology. — With the rise of modern psychology, the age of introspection began. Man has been studied from the view of the development of the self, the rise of his consciousness, and of the sources of his guilt. Complexes and neuroses are diagnosed and dissipated by those competent in helping man understand himself. Modern churches and parents reflect these insights when viewing their children's development. This is not necessarily wrong. However, caution must be taken lest we forget the broader biblical concerns of the whole of mankind, man's relation to the rest of creation, and man's obligation to God. Christians feel man's deepest obligations come objectively from outside a man—from God. They are not merely the product of man's inner reflection of guilt or anxiety.

More rapid maturation of children. — In recent times we hear of "the technological

revolution" and the "knowledge explosion." Accelerated methods of transmitting vast amounts of factual materials are being perfected in education. Machines designed to teach and entertain are opening the universe and human nature before the eyes of children. One need look no further than the television set to find a reason today's youngsters are better informed about life at an earlier age than ever before.

Churches have been wise in using these perfected educational methods and devices. Children *are* maturing at a younger age today than formerly. Tests of children's alertness and ability are illustrating that children mature at different ages and according to their individual capacity. This fact does away with all attempts to establish a given and fixed chronological age as the time of accountability.

However, some problems also arise from this technological maturation. Are religious value and understanding given adequate exposure? Does the child see enough "value-building" programing on television? Are we forcing guilt on the young which is a guilt born from breaking the rules of our particular society rather than actually rejecting God in Christ? Are the "sins" children confess born of their despair in estrangement from God or are they born from the fear of displeasing those who demand a certain culturally conditioned way of life?

The above developments have all risen since biblical days. This does not mean that these concerns are not correct. Nor is it to imply that they do not have merit. However, it must be admitted, for example, that the meticulous searching of the "conscience" of a very young child has no biblical precedent. An abiding biblical insight is that God speaks to man at man's own level and in terms of a given man's own time. However, there is a core of belief which is essential to salvation in any age. The New Testament itself gives indication of this.

Requirements for Biblical Faith

Legalism is an abiding danger to biblical faith. The Pharisees of the New Testament evidence this. An equal danger to biblical faith is uncertainty or lack of belief. It is impossible to have saving faith in the fullest sense without certain minimal beliefs and awareness of those definitive acts which brought Christianity into being. Faith implies confidence in the object of faith. For Christians this means trusting God. Faith includes: the depth-level giving of oneself to God—the

heart; the full willingness to pattern one's life according to the will of God—the *hands*; and a knowledge of who God is, what he has done for us, and what he requires of us—the *head*.

In the New Testament there is a basic, simple message (*kerygma*—the proclaimed truth). It was first delivered when the Holy Spirit came to complete God's revelation of himself and honor the work of Christ. Acts 2:14-36; 3:12-26; 4:8-12; 5:30-32; 10:36-43 contain, in embryo, what the remainder of the New Testament clarifies.

The basic points of the message of the early church are as follows: (1) Jesus came from God, the God of Israel who made heaven and earth. (2) Men killed Christ. The idea is later broadened to assert that all men and man as a unit in his sinfulness is responsible for Christ's death. (3) Yet, Christ's death was according to God's plan. That is, God was acting through Christ's death to bring man to himself. (4) Christ is raised. God in Christ has conquered even man's last enemy, death. (5) God through Christ has sent the Holy Spirit to bear witness to what God in Christ has done for man.

Without these facts the Christian faith is unintelligible. In these simple facts lies profundity which none has fully explained. This basic Christian gospel has been expanded; even in the New Testament itself further interpretation is given. This author feels that the message (*kerygma*) outlined in the early chapters of Acts may not be reduced. In other words, this is the heart of the Christian gospel. Men—all men—children as well, must have some awareness as to what this basic Christian message means to man.

In addition to hearing and affirming these facts man must do one other thing in salvation. That is, he must have faith—faith in the God who brought these things to pass. This faith in God is accompanied by despair of oneself and all other created things. This despair is evidenced by repentance. Repentance involves sorrow for sin. It is sorrow for having trusted in oneself, for having rejected God as alone worthy of our confidence, and for having sought all things for our own gain and desires. Contrast this notion of repentance for sin with the above threefold definition of sin.

I must be asked whether a child can understand, believe, and accept these things. This of course depends. It depends upon the child, his ability, his age, his capacity to grasp thoughts and make decisions. It depends on the language used to

express these ideas and the illustrations used to clarify them. It depends on the family in which the child is reared and the interest of the parents in his education in things religious. Does a ten-year-old child understand and conceptualize these acts of God as he might at twenty or thirty? The answer is no. Can a child express the Christian gospel in adult terms and experiences? Again, the answer is no.

A further question should be explored: Are there perhaps two ways of relating to God, one for children and one for adults? Here we must give an emphatic no. An ancient heresy, gnosticism, taught that there were two types of salvation—one for those who were given holy knowledge (*gnosis*) and one for common men. It is perennially the temptation of the learned to ask that too much be believed.

The converse mistake is for men of good faith to suggest that one doesn't "have to believe anything to be saved." Trust God, it is enough! But what is trust, who is God, what has he done that man should trust him? Even the simple expression trust God or love Jesus implies some understanding. It is a Christian presupposition that no man can "understand" the Christian faith except that God by his Spirit aids him to do so. It is also a way of God with man that God aids man to the extent of man's ability.

Therefore, the matter returns once again to what God requires. He requires the proclamation of the gospel and its acceptance by man, by any man whom he enables to trust. The requirement is not less for children; there is only one essential gospel. The age of accountability must be related to the ability to grasp and accept the basic truths of the gospel.

What the Bible Says About Children

Children are for real. They are people, even if people in the miniature. If there is but one way to God, they too will come by the message of Christ. It is instructive, and somewhat surprising to discover exactly what the Bible says about children. Most of the biblical references to children are descriptive of some particular child. References are found to the child Moses, Ishmael, David's son who died in infancy, and Samuel. There are children in the Gospels, largely unnamed, whom Jesus calls attention to for purpose of teaching and in illustrating his own compassion. A few general instructions about the training of children are found in the Old Testament wisdom literature. References to Jesus as a child are present in the

Scriptures, but there are not many.

An interpretation of biblical references to children would reveal the following conclusions. The childhood of important biblical figures is noted. Instruction of children by precept and example is commanded. There is a great compassion for the young displayed in biblical literature. As a whole, Bible references to children are descriptive rather than theological.

Questions We Should Ask

In the light of these larger questions there are many practices among Southern Baptists we need to explore more fully and evaluate carefully. Baptists have historically insisted on believer's baptism and regenerate church membership. Baptists today, in some ways, are more sensitive to the needs and capacities of children than were our forefathers at the turn of the century. We are definitely lowering the age at which children are baptized.

In 1966 there were 1,146 children five years of age and under baptized in Southern Baptist churches. In that same year we baptized 34,026 children ages six to eight, 139,211 children ages nine to twelve, and 59,569 children ages thirteen to sixteen (*The Quarterly Review*, Oct., 1967). However, it must be asked if there is not serious tension between our historic principle of believer's baptism and our radical lowering of the age of those baptized. In the light of the above discussion there are other probing questions we should ask.

Are we holding our children responsible to God beyond their capacity of belief and before the age of life commitment is possible? It is entirely possible that many expect the adult religious expressions and technical terms of the Christian faith to be meaningful to children. A young child would have much difficulty in comprehending words like: propitiation, atonement, repentance, or even faith. Full comprehension of these terms is often never reached by adults. Careful explanation and clear illustration should be given our children to aid them in grasping the "vocabulary of faith."

It may well be asked if a life kind of commitment to God can be made by children who are not accustomed to making significant and lasting decisions of any sort. Much of our theological anxiety about very young children is a projection of our own concern for them. There is no biblical reason one should not trust the compassion and mercy of God to extend to children until they can make

meaningful and depth-level decisions for themselves. In fact the covenant of grace between God and mankind expressed in Christ gives us every reason to presume that the young are kept by God in his compassionate concern.

The shape of things arising since Bible days poses other serious questions for us. Do we heighten the guilt of a child by our serious disapproval or rejection of him before he is able to comprehend why we feel he is wrong? Often parents commit serious errors by equating their cultural and social desires and values with the will of God. It is neither good procedure nor good theology to tell children God will not love them if they do thus and so. Is not the heart of the gospel God's love for sinners? Often we leave confused and uncertain minds by giving contradictory views of God. It is unfortunate some teach children only of God's goodness and love. When these children become a bit older, God is immediately portrayed as wrathful and angry. This is quite a confusing change in one week's time—the week of promotion. What is needed is accurate and balanced presentations of God to all age levels in our churches.

If the minimal requirements of faith are the basic demands of the gospel, are we insuring that those who express faith in Christ Jesus are aware of these requirements? In some way any regenerate person must be able to express and to relate them in a meaningful way to such notions as: who Jesus is; what he has done on our behalf; that his death for men is followed by resurrection; that God's Spirit honors the work of the Son in drawing men to God.

We must ask if our concern for children will permit us to have two ways of salvation, one for adults and one for children. Is it not possible we will price salvation so cheap that it will neither change our children nor sustain them through the troubled days of adolescence?

These questions and like concerns must occupy Southern Baptists as we look at the demands of biblical faith and the rising percent of our members who are unrelated to local congregations where they live.

Some Tentative Guidelines

To these complex problems there are no simple answers. However, some suggestions of a very practical nature may be steps in the right direction.

We must place more emphasis on a serious view of accountability than on the concept of age.—In the light of the demands of biblical faith we must present the

one gospel as simply as possible. However, we must not reduce the full biblical expression of what is needed in salvation. It is highly doubtful that many children below the age of nine can express or have experienced despair for sin as radical separation from God. One cannot be "saved" until he is aware he is "lost."

It is a mistake to set an arbitrary age for conversion. It is likewise a mistake to ignore the capacity of given age levels.— Children do mature at different ages according to ability and background. God's Spirit does work with the individual in conversion. These considerations make it impossible to set any arbitrary age of accountability. Likewise, studies of age groups and their experiences show that abstract concepts cannot be grasped before a certain level of understanding is attained. It is also one of God's ways with man that he does not remove a person from his circumstances and ability in his work of grace. Both age and accountability must be considered. This is our perennial dilemma. We should seek to be more responsible in every way toward our proclamation of the gospel and in our guiding children toward conversion.

However, it must be stressed that if we continue to "invade the Preschool and Children's departments" for evangelistic prospects, we are risking serious problems for the future. In doing this, we are also moving away from an adequate perspective of believer's baptism.

Better and more intensive counseling programs should be provided for children.— Conversion experiences, like all of God's ways with men, are highly individualistic. We must nurture children more carefully in their experiences of grace. There are incipient expressions of sin which are signs of a growing awareness of estrangement from God. We must not force these first feelers of conviction into a traumatic crisis for which the child is unprepared. In other words, children learn most things gradually by experience and over an extended length of time. The moment of guilt, acceptance, and conversion is some specific moment. However, to attempt to force that moment by confronting a child with an experience he has not had and a full understanding of the gospel which he cannot comprehend is disastrous.

It is disastrous because of later doubts he will have about the reality of his conversion. It is disastrous because many parents and churches will consider him "safe" and press on to other "prospects," leaving the child without further guidance or exploration of his experiences. It is particularly disastrous because this kind of

pressure often disallows the indispensable role of the Holy Spirit in the conversion experience. More time spent with each child in preparation, conversion, and Christian growth is one effective means to correcting our noninvolved membership in Baptist churches.

Baptists must stress a theological awareness of the covenant mercy of God toward children to help allay the extraordinary concern of parents of very young children.—In many cases parents of very young children become anxious beyond the reason of biblical teaching for their children's salvation. In turn, they convey this anxiety to their children, who, eager to please, respond to what is expected regardless of the child's own comprehension. Baptist pastors are put under enormous pressure by some parents to insure the spiritual birth of their children. How is a pastor to respond to a parent who says: "I live with Johnny and know him well. I know he is ready for salvation, but I wish you would have a little talk with him"?

Such "little talks" are often less than ten minutes in duration. If a pastor is hesitant about the child's experience, many parents are outraged. If a pastor confirms this experience, it is taken as an external assurance for the parents' own feelings. Baptist pastors should preach specifically about children, their status before God, and what is the minimum requirement for salvation. If both child and parent hear these particular issues discussed from the pulpit and the biblical basis for all conversion taught carefully, they will have better grounds for making decisions.

We must have dialogue among pastors, evangelists, children's workers, and theologians.—In every walk of life there is a tension between the ideal and the practical, the theoretical and the actual. This is no less true among Baptist leaders who work with children. The deep emotional problems of adolescents about their religious experience are forcing Southern Baptists to explore what it means to be saved and to evaluate the age levels and experiences of those converted in early childhood.

It would prove very helpful to have statistics showing ages of conversion of those now active in Baptist churches. What percent of early experiences were followed by serious doubts and subsequent conversion experiences? This is not to suggest we should change the biblical norms because of our experiences. In reality all such changes should move in the other direction.

One thing we can and should do is to explore the idea of "age of accountability"

with concerned and experienced people. Pastors, evangelists, children's workers, and Baptist theologians need to talk together candidly and with mutual appreciation concerning this problem.

Conclusion

The idea "age of accountability" has no definitive, biblical answer because it is not specifically a biblical question. Biblical materials do provide norms for what is required in salvation. A wise course is to correct our practices which do not preserve the full biblical meaning of salvation. The time of accountability is the moment of grace when one is brought to a decision for or against Christ by the Spirit. This moment requires the proclamation of the Word, the drawing of the Spirit, and the yielding of the individual to God. Until this moment is possible, one may leave children in the hands of God. Evidences are that we are holding very young children accountable for too much and not holding adults, who have professed Christ, accountable for enough.