

The Age of Accountability

By Paul R. Blake

Introduction:

- A. The scriptures teach the principle of accountability - Acts 10:34-35
- B. Accountability does not occur at birth - Ez. 18:20
- C. When does one become accountable? Is there a certain chronological age?
 - 1. If there is no certain age, how can one know when one is held responsible for their sins?

I. UNDERSTANDING GOOD AND EVIL

- A. Deut. 1:39
 - 1. There is a time in the development of a child that they do not know to choose good and refuse evil - Isa. 7:16
 - 2. A state of innocence like that of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden before eating the forbidden fruit - Matt. 18:3

II. CAPABLE OF OBEYING THE GOSPEL

- A. Belief requires intellectual and volitional abilities - John 8:24; Acts 8:36-37
 - 1. Rom. 6:17, 10:9-10
 - 2. This implies several things:
 - a. Sufficient maturity to comprehend the Bible
 - b. Sufficient maturity to understand himself
 - c. Sufficient maturity to understand and distinguish between spiritual and mythological matters
- B. Repentance, confession, and baptism require development and abilities which small children do not possess.
- C. Belief, repentance, confession, and baptism are all equally essential to exercising accountability.

III. MEN AND WOMEN RESPONDED DURING THE FIRST CENTURY

- A. Acts 5:14, 8:12 - Implying that the respondents were mature enough; this is not a function of age

IV. WELL MEANING, BUT MISGUIDED, SOLUTIONS

- A. Some say when a child reaches twelve years of age, they are accountable
 - 1. Arbitrary - based on our recognition of the beginning of the teen years, the general start of puberty, and even the Jewish bar mitzvah
 - 2. Individuals reach the age of accountability at different ages, as each mature differently.
 - 3. Accountability is a function of responsibility, not age
- B. "If a young person can answer and explain the facts of salvation, they have reached the age of accountability."
 - 1. Nearly anyone can recite a list (a digital recorder, a parrot). Listing the facts no more indicates one has reached the age of accountability than reciting a recipe makes one a chef

- C. There is no scripturally stated age when one becomes responsible; each person must be considered on an individual basis. Parents, class teachers, preachers and elders can be of great help in arriving at such a judgment of their own children, as long as they are objective and have the young person's best interest at heart.

V. WHAT CAN BE STATED WITH CERTAINTY?

- A. One must be able to obey the doctrine from the heart, every part of it.
- B. Hearing - Do you listen attentively to the sermons and prepare your Bible class lessons diligently? Or do you make several trips to the restroom and water fountain during services? Write notes, send text messages, sleep, play with toys, coloring books, etc.? If you cannot practice hearing, you will not be able to advance to the next steps.
- C. Believing - Do you believe in God like you do Superman or Spiderman? Is Jesus at the same level as Santa Claus or the Easter Bunny? In your mind, they must as real, more real, than the things you encounter with your five senses. Do you believe you have sinned or do you believe you have upset your parents?
- D. Repenting - How strongly do you want to change your life? Are you willing to give up all things that are sinful?
- E. Confession - Do you want your friends at school and in the neighborhood to know your confession? Would you be willing to say it to them and not just in the church building?
- F. Baptism - How much do you know about what baptism does for you? How much do you understand about what it took to make baptism effective?

VI. STAGES OF SPIRITUAL DEVELOPMENT OF CHILDREN

- A. Interest - Young children (5-7) see that there is a larger collectivity than their family. They are aware it is a group to which it is good, honorable, and reward to belong. They are also aware that they are not a part of it. They can intellectually grasp and repeat the steps to becoming a part of the group.
- B. Desire - Children (7-8) over time increase in interest to the point that it becomes consuming. They no longer want to be outside and strongly desire to belong, even to the point of being insistent. Beginning to have a more mature sense guilt for sin.
- C. Understanding - Children (9-10) have an understanding of the kingdom, the requirements for entrance, the reasons why one should become a Christian, and a have a stronger sense of personal guilt, fear of perdition, and desire to be saved.
- D. Commitment - No person, child or adult, should obey the gospel until they reach this point. They realize that this is a lifetime decision and are aware that they can never walk away from this choice. It is more than just intellectually acknowledging that it is for life, it is being fully convinced that they cannot escape this decision.

VII. WHAT SHOULD YOU DO OR SAY?

A. When they are in the early stages:

1. Praise their interest and encourage them to continue to grow
2. Be more proactive in helping them learn, not just the facts
3. Let them see your example as a faithful, happy Christian
4. Help them develop responsibility

B. When they are ready

1. When they are really ready, get out of the way.

C. Do not:

1. Pressure them or deliver ultimatums
2. Use their desire to become a Christian as a disciplinary tool
3. Talk to them about what they will be missing as a Christian
4. Act in such a way as to discourage them
5. Set a bad example - lying, backbiting, etc
6. Tell them no

D. If you do ought that prevents your child from ever becoming a Christian, prepare to spend eternity in hell.

1. Matt. 18:2-6