

What is the "Age of Accountability"?

Is there a certain point in the life of an individual when he becomes fully responsible to God for his action?

There are many opinions as to when the moment of accountability is reached. One person believes it is around the age of twelve, others believe that one is not held accountable until around the age of twenty, still others suggest that a child six years old is accountable.

Which answer is correct and how can one know for sure?

It is important for parents - [and those who work with children] - to know the answer to this question because we are concerned with the eternal welfare of every individual. The answer to this question will determine how we teach and train children

God's Word is the final authority in all matters, therefore, we must lay aside all preconceived ideas and search its pages to see what God teaches concerning this question.

First of all, God's Word tells us that in the beginning, God created man in His Own image, meaning that man was created, [unlike any of God's other created creatures], a "*moral being*" - one with the free-will to choose to do right or wrong. And that man, given a fair test of obedience, disobeyed God. Adam and Eve, our first parents, choose their own way instead of God's way. In doing so, they lost fellowship with God and began to die.

Scripture teaches that if man confesses his sin and, by faith, receives the promises of God, he will gain back the spiritual fellowship which Adam and Eve lost. However, the consequences of man's sin remains. God's Word and the history of mankind, certainly testify clearly to this truth.

David, the Psalmist, states, "*Behold I was shapen in iniquity and in sin did my mother conceive me*" (Psalm 51:5). Another translation of this verse states, "*Behold in a sinful state was I born.*" **Scripture teaches that man has a sinful nature from birth.** The outworking of that sinful nature is sin!

One "*wanting to have his own way*" is the very essence of sin! Adam and Eve "*wanting to have their own way*" was the reason for their sinning and our "*wanting to have our own way*" is sin!

A little baby arrives in the world so sweet and innocent, however, he shows, while very tiny, his nature of "*wanting his own way.*"

Ephesians 2:3 states, "*We are **by nature** children of wrath.*"

We will never be able to understand how to teach, or train, children until we know the basic fact that "*they are born with a sinful nature*" and that every child needs to be "*born-again.*" We need to work for the salvation of infants!

The question, "*What is the Age of Accountability?*" is asked more often concerning a child who dies in infancy or, as Isaiah 7:16 states, "*Before the child shall know to refuse the evil and choose the good.*" Are they lost because of their sinful nature?

Matthew 18:1-3 states, "*The disciples came unto Jesus, saying, Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven? And Jesus called **a little child** unto Him, and set him in the midst of them, And said, Verily I say unto you, Except you be converted and become as little children, you shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven.*" Verse 10 goes on to state, "*Take heed that you despise not one of these little ones [these little children]; for I say unto you, That in heaven their angels do always behold the face of My Father which is in heaven.* Verse fourteen states, "*Even so it is not the will of your Father which is in heaven, that one of these little ones [little children] should perish.*"

This passage refers to a particular, privileged, class . . . "*little children*" . . . and states, "*let them come unto Me, for of such is the kingdom of heaven* [Another translation states, "*for such belongs to the kingdom of heaven.*"]

Whether we can fully understand it all or not,
we are to simply believe what Jesus said.

God is able to make a child, even though he is still small, a recipient of His grace!

When David's baby died, as an infant, he states . . . [concerning the time when he, himself, would someday die] . . . "*I shall go to him,*" referring to the fact that both he and the tiny infant would go to heaven.

Ezekiel 18:20 states, "*The son shall **NOT** bear the iniquity of the father,*" meaning that the son will not be held responsible for the sinful nature passed on by his father, should he die before the age of accountability.

While "*the child is not held responsible for his sinful nature,*" it is inevitable that he at once will begin to sin. He has no choice in the matter because it is his nature to sin. And this "*sinful nature*" continues through out his life time, unless he accepts God's forgiveness and new life in Christ Jesus.

Somewhere along the way, in his living, he comes to the point where he is held responsible to God for his sin nature. This brings us back to the question, "*What is the Age of Accountability?*" When does a person's sin nature become sin, for which he is answerable?

Those who believe the age of accountability is somewhere around the age of twenty, evidently get their idea from the fact that, under Jewish law, a person was considered a "*full fledged*" adult, at the age of twenty. However, "*moral*" responsibility is certainly different than the "*legal*" responsibility spoken of under the law. Therefore, the age of accountability, or "*moral responsibility,*" must, certainly, be a lot earlier than the age of twenty.

The person who holds that the age of accountability is around the age of twelve or thirteen probably get their idea from Galatians 4:1-2, which teaches that one is a "*minor, under*

control of guardians until he reaches the age prescribed by his father." Jewish history tells us that this "age" was around the age of twelve or thirteen. However, again, it is here referring to "legal responsibility," and "moral responsibility" is quite another thing.

Some believe that as soon as a child is aware of right and wrong that they have reached the "Age of Accountability." However, while it is true that children can be keenly conscious of sin even at the age of three and four years old, it surely does not mean that they have reached the age where they are held accountable to God for their actions.

God's Word does not give one direct word stating "*the age of accountability!*" You cannot find the term "age of accountability," or any equivalent to this phrase, anywhere in the Bible!

Perhaps the clearest scripture on the subject would be James 4:17, which states, simply, "*To him that knows to do good and does it not, to him it is sin.*" In other words, a child's sinful acts are accounted as sin to him, **when** he is able to clearly understand the difference between right from wrong. A child reaches the age of accountability **when** he is old enough to choose between what he ought to do and what he ought not to do. He is held responsible for his sin **when** he knows he should obey, and yet he chooses to disobey.

How old is a child when this occurs? ***I don't know - no one does!***

To help you to understand the problem of the question, "*What is the age of accountability?*" - let me ask, "What time did the sun rise this morning?" Was it 5:53, 5:45, or maybe 6:01?

Do we set the time of the beginning of morning the moment the sun's rays first begin to dispel the night's darkness, or is it when the first glimpse of that brilliant golden circle that breaks the horizon to give birth to a new day? Maybe, the beginning of the morning isn't until the sun has stretched itself into full view and blanketed the ground with its warmth. Do you see how difficult a question this is?

So it is with the conversion of a child. Do we set the time of conversion to match the child's first inquiry about, "*What is heaven like?*" Perhaps it would seem better to single out a child conversion to a specific crisis experience when forgiveness has followed an overt act of disobedience. Maybe we should ask for a public confessing of faith in response to an altar call?

The sun has a lesson for us. Within the "*sun-rising-process*" is hidden all those fascinating sequences which combine to make it an event of great beauty and intrigue. So too the "*spiritual-birth*" of a child holds within itself a composite of spiritual experiences and influences which finally culminate in an experience of salvation.

There are adult Christians who cannot remember a time when they were not a Christian. The Christian home in which they grew up provided both the materials and the motivation to bring them to saving faith. They remember times of prayer at the altar, receiving forgiveness from parents and from God following an act of disobedience, and a variety of treasured spiritual experiences. Yet none of these experiences taken alone can be isolated as the "*time-of-conversion.*" Still they know that at an early age they experienced the saving grace of Christ and knew they were a child of God.

What is the Age of Accountability?

It is fitting to ask, "*At what point does a child become aware of his need for Christ as Savior?*" "*At what age does he bear the responsibility for his eternal destiny?*"

It becomes our solemn responsibility to provide both the teaching and the example whereby our children can, like the rising of the sun, move from one level of spiritual awareness to the next until they know that the light has dispelled the darkness and they are children of God!

Let me offer some suggestions:

1. Children must be allowed to be children - to pass from one level of spiritual awareness to another. Let a 4-year-old child enjoy a 4-year-old's kind of relationship with God. Remember, the ability to conceptualize belongs to the adult world.
2. Children must be given the raw materials for the construction of their faith. This demands the best in curriculum, learning technique, and teacher example. When they are able to believe, they must already have the support system [Bible knowledge and Christian example] for that faith.
3. Children must be led into a positive relationship which is not motivated by fear or threat. Too often children are exposed to Biblical concepts which are inappropriately presented and become for them an obstacle of fear instead of a wall of faith.
4. Children must be encouraged to affirm this faith in a way that is consistent with their ability. [A 3-year-old is quite able to express a love for God].

Sometimes children are kept "*on the outside*" until they are able to penetrate the spiritual communication system of the adult. ***This ought not to be!*** Children are able to understand the things of God a lot earlier than many adults believe they can.

Please don't misunderstand, it is not my intention to minimize the importance of a child's *personal encounter* with Jesus Christ, nor to suggest in any way that children must not be confronted with the fact of sin and the necessity of repentance.

This study is an attempt to give to children their rightful place in the kingdom of God and to place the matter of accountability squarely on the shoulders of adults.

When we cradle a child in the truths of God's Word and provide a living example of Christian faith, it may be expected that a child will enjoy each level of spiritual development and at the proper time will be able to accurately verbalize his personal faith in Christ.

There is little need for constraining efforts to force a child into a spiritual experience, nor need there be anxiety over the inability of a child to verbalize or conceptualize his faith.

Each child's development will move at a different rate. For some, the mental, emotional, and spiritual development leads to an early confession of faith; for others, it is later. In either case, we can expect the Holy Spirit will be faithful to do His work.

The question of the age of accountability must be considered in a positive context. It is that thrilling moment when a child, under the influence of the Holy Spirit, is able to conceptualize his faith in Christ in a way that personalizes and individualizes God's plan of salvation. The child is now in the community of faith through his own decision. He is a child of God by his specific choice.

The writer of Proverbs understood it this way: "*Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not depart from it.*" May we, as the church of Jesus Christ, be available to the Holy Spirit to make that truth inevitable!

Does it seem strange that Scripture does not state the age of accountability? The Bible seems to be indefinite concerning what seems to be so important to us. A possible reason for Scriptural silence on this matter, is the fact that "*the age of accountability*" varies considerably in different individuals. The age of accountability would certainly be according to different rates of mental development and training.

Another reason God has not told us what the age of accountability is could be that, if we knew the exact age which a child becomes responsible, we would likely wait until that time before giving him the gospel of Jesus Christ.

For more important than knowing the age of accountability is the fact that God wants every child to get the gospel at the earliest possible moment. We need to ask ourself the question, "*What is the earliest age can my child accept Christ?*"

We must realize the importance of early spiritual training of children and where they will spend eternity.

The Bible is very clear concerning our responsibility to children. No where will you find a distinction made between our responsibility of teaching those children who have reached the age of accountability and those who have not yet reached that age. It is utterly impossible to make such a distinction, because we cannot know when that age is reached.

The children of Israel were told in Exodus 12:26-27 that the chief reason for keeping the Passover was that in response to children's questions, they could tell the story of redemption by blood once again. Obviously this message was given to the "*little children*." Every parent knows how little pre-school children ask many, many, questions. God made them inquisitive!

Deuteronomy 31:33 teaches, "*That their children, which have not known any thing, may hear, and learn to fear...[have a reverence for]...the Lord your God, as long as you live in the land whither you go over Jordan to possess it.*"

Matthew 19:14 states, "*Jesus said, "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these."*

Mark 10:13 states, "*People were bringing little children to Jesus to have him touch them, but the disciples rebuked them.*"

Luke 18:15 states, "*People were also bringing babies to Jesus to have him touch them. When the disciples saw this, they rebuked them.*"

Matthew 18:6 states, "*But if anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a large millstone hung around his neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea.*"

God's Word has one answer for all ages and that is, "*All have sinned and come short of the glory of God*" [Romans 3:23]. God's Word also teaches that, "*the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Jesus Christ our Lord*" [Romans 6:23].

Jesus teaches, "*You [referring to every person] must be born again*" [John 3:3]

John taught, "*But as many as received Him . . . Jesus Christ] . . . to them gave He power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on His name.*" [John 1:12].

Satan is doing his very best to confuse mankind to these truths and he is especially concerned that children do not hear the gospel of Jesus Christ because he knows they will readily respond.

Satan, in a subtle way, would have us think that all children are innocent, not needing salvation, and that parents do not need to teach them about Jesus Christ. He would have us believe that, "*Children do not need to be saved! Just tell them to be good, obey their parents, and that will be enough.*"

However, by so doing, children's impressionable minds are being taught that salvation comes by works. The New Testament book Ephesians, addressed to "*saints and faithful ones*," commands **children** to "*obey their parents*" [6:1]. The very fact that they have to be taught to obey, proves that they have a sinful nature.

One cannot presume that a child four or five, or even two, has not reached the age of accountability. If they are old enough to be taught, it is our responsibility to teach them about Jesus Christ. God's perfect plan is for each child, beginning at the cradle, hear the Word of God.

It is known today that even *before* a child can grasp facts, he will form definite attitudes. We can help them to form correct attitudes concerning God, sin, and salvation.

Since attitudes can be formed from the earliest infancy, we can make it easier for a child to receive Christ as soon as he is able to understand just exactly what God's Word teaches concerning salvation.

Are you concerned about the age of accountability? You never need to fear that your child stands in a place of danger! Before your child reaches the age of accountability, he can be lead to trust in Jesus Christ as his Savior.

Jesus said, simply, "***LET*** the little ones come unto Me!"

He did not say, "***Plead*** with them to come unto Me."

. . . They will come, if we let them!