

Age of Accountability (1)

Our question for this issue is: “What do people mean when they talk about an age of accountability?”

This idea is very popular today among Roman Catholics, Baptists, and many evangelicals. It is used in support of so-called “believers’ baptism.” It is part of a denial of the doctrine of original sin. It is often cited in defense of the idea that children are “innocent.” It is not Biblical.

The idea of this “age of accountability” is that there is a certain age at which a child becomes responsible for his or her sins. Before that time, because a child is supposed to be incapable of understanding, the child is supposed not to be responsible for what would be sin in an adult. Some would hold that this age varies from one child to another, others say that 7 (Romanism), 12, or 13 (Judaism) years is the age at which a child become accountable for his deeds.

In Baptist theology this age of accountability is the age at which a child can be baptized. One Baptist writer says: “The age of accountability is when one understands, is capable of believing, repenting, confessing Jesus’ deity, and being baptized. Sin is lawlessness (I Jn. 3: 4). Belief requires certain intellectual and volitional abilities (Jn. 8: 24). Repentance, confession, and baptism entail abilities which small children do not possess. Belief, repentance, confession, and baptism are all equally essential to initial salvation or, put another way, exercising accountability.”

Many Baptists as well as others believe that before this age of accountability a child goes automatically to heaven. The same Baptist writer quotes Matthew 18:3 in defense of this idea: “Involved in spiritual accountability is a knowledge of good and evil. Relative to some of the children of the Israelites we read, “Moreover your little ones.....which in that day had no knowledge between good and evil.....” (Deut. 1: 39). There is a time in the absence of a certain level of development in a child’s life that they do not know to choose good and refuse evil (cf. Isa. 7: 16). It is obvious that Jesus had such children in mind when he said, “Except ye be converted and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven” (Matt. 18: 3).”

In Roman Catholic theology, this is the age at which a person is admitted to the other sacraments, since having become responsible for his actual sins, that person is in need of the grace that is automatically given through the sacraments. In Romanism, the sacrament of confirmation at age 7 marks this coming of age.

The whole idea of an age of accountability is unbiblical as is the related idea that children are “innocent” and that all who die before an age of accountability are saved. The doctrine of original sin as taught in Psalm 51:5-7 makes it clear that children are born in sin and are not innocent. I Corinthians 7 makes it clear that not all children are holy - that some are “unclean.” Passages such as Proverbs 20:11, Psalm 58:3-5 and II Kings 2:23, 24 show us that children can be held accountable and are accountable to God for their deeds. These passages and others we will examine next time.

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