

Age of Accountability (2)

In this issue we continue our answer to the question: “What do people mean when they talk about an age of accountability?”

We have already seen that the idea of an age of accountability is contrary to the Biblical doctrines of original sin. Children as well as adults are guilty before God for the sin of Adam when they come into the world. This David teaches in Psalm 51:5, “Behold, I was shapen in iniquity and in sin did my mother conceive me.”

We do not deny that there may be different levels of accountability. A child, because of youth and inexperience, and because of a lack of knowledge is not accountable to the same degree as is an adult, not is a mentally handicapped person, nor a person who sins in ignorance, though even that does not fully excuse a person.

The Westminster Larger Catechism teaches this with numerous Scripture references in Q& A 151, “What are those aggravations that make some sins more heinous than others? Sins receive their aggravations, 1. From the persons offending; if they be of riper age, greater experience or grace, eminent for profession, gifts, place, office, guides to others, and whose example is likely to followed by others....”

This is what Deuteronomy 1:39, a passage often quoted to prove the “innocence” of children, means, “Moreover your little ones.....which in that day had no knowledge between good and evil...” The verse is only referring to the fact that the children were not the ones who were responsible for the decision not to enter the land of Canaan, who were in fact, incapable of understanding all that was involved in that wicked decision.

But to conclude from such a passage that they were not accountable to God at all flies in the face of such passages as Proverbs 20:11, Psalm 58:3-5 and II Kings 2:23, 24.

The passage from Proverbs not only teaches that a child’s doings are either pure and right or impure and wrong, but that we can discern something of the spiritual character of the child from them: “Even a child is known by his doings, whether his work be pure, and whether it be right.” It is worth noting as well that the word translated “child” in this verse refers to children from infancy to adulthood and makes no distinction between those who have reached an age of accountability and those who have not.

Psalm 58:3-5 is even stronger. It shows that children can be and are guilty of gross evil from their youngest days and we must understand that if they were not able to be accountable to God because of their youth there would be no point in describing the wickedness they are capable of. These verse say: “The wicked are estranged from the womb: they go astray as soon as they be born, speaking lies. Their poison is like the poison of a serpent: they are like the deaf adder that stoppeth her ear; which will not hearken tot he voice of charmers, charming never so wisely.”

II Kings 2:23-25 tells the story of the “little children” who mocked Elisha the prophet. What happened to those children is clear proof that they and all children are accountable to God for their deeds and words. The idea that there is an age of accountability, therefore, is clearly unbiblical.

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