

## “The Age of Accountability”

What happens when a child dies? The *Baptist Confession of Faith* says, “Elect infants dying in infancy are regenerated and saved by Christ through the Spirit, Who works when and where and how He pleases. The same is true of all elect persons who are incapable of being outwardly called through the preaching of the Gospel”.

What constitutes an ‘elect infant’? Are there ‘*non-elect*’ infants? Or, are *all* infants elect ... will *all* infants be saved? ... Will the little foetuses and embryos destroyed during abortion ... or who die through miscarriages or stillbirths be saved? ... And when does a child reach ‘the age of accountability’, if there is such a thing? ... What about the slaying of the Amalekite infants? ... **I Sam. 15:2** Thus saith the LORD of hosts ... **3** Now go and smite Amalek, and utterly destroy all that they have, and spare them not; but slay both man and woman, infant and suckling.

The term “age of accountability” relates to children not being held accountable by God for their sins until they reach a certain age, and that if a child dies before reaching that certain age, the child will, by the grace and mercy of God, be granted entrance into Heaven. Is the concept of an age of accountability Biblical? Is there such a thing as an “age of innocence”?

Starkly staring at us is the Biblical teaching that **Rom. 3:23** *all have sinned ... 10 ... There is none righteous, no, not one: 11 ... there is none that seeketh after God. 12 ... there is none that doeth good, no, not one ... Ps. 51:5* Behold, I was shapen in iniquity; and in sin did my mother conceive me. ... As a baby, even in the mother’s womb, we have ‘inherited’ sin for sin has been ‘imputed’ to us, **Rom. 5:12** *as by one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin; and so death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned.* ... Therefore, every person, infant or adult, is a sinner and is guilty before God of offending His holiness. The only way God can be consistent in His justice and at the same time declare a person righteous is for that person to have received forgiveness by faith through Jesus Christ alone.

How, then, is that achieved in relation to an infant? At what age does God consider an infant accountable for their sin? ... Some believe it is the age of thirteen, based upon the Jewish *Bar-mitzvah* when a child becomes an adult. ... Another suggestion comes from **Num. 32:11** *Surely none of the men that came up out of Egypt, from twenty years old and upward, shall see the land which I swore unto Abraham, unto Isaac, and unto Jacob; because they have not wholly followed me: 12* Save Caleb the son of Jephunneh the Kenezite, and Joshua the son of Nun: for they have wholly followed the LORD. ... Anyone twenty years or older were held responsible for their sin and were *not* allowed to enter Canaan, whereas anyone

less than twenty years *was* allowed because they *weren't* held accountable. Therefore, some would suggest the 'age of accountability' should continue up until the age of 19.

To some others this subject is related to the issue of infant baptism. They present it like this (e.g. <http://www.fpchurch.org.uk/about-us/what-we-contend-for/baptism/>)

1. What does Baptism Signify? The *Shorter Catechism* has a masterful and comprehensive answer: "Baptism is a sacrament, wherein the washing with water in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, doth signify and seal our ingrafting into Christ, and partaking of the benefits of the covenant of grace, and our engagement to be the Lord's" (Ans. 94).

2. Concerning the Subjects of Baptism: Who should be Baptised?

The *Shorter Catechism* again rightly and succinctly states the Biblical position: "Baptism is not to be administered to any that are out of the visible church, till they profess their faith in Christ, and obedience to Him; but the infants of such as are members of the visible church are to be baptised".

3. Concerning the Mode of Baptism: How should Baptism be Administered? The *Westminster Confession of Faith* summarises the teaching of Scripture: "Dipping of the person into the water is not necessary; but Baptism is rightly administered by pouring, or sprinkling water upon the person" (28:3).

... *Leading on from this ...*

<http://www.fpchurch.org.uk/about-us/what-we-contend-for/baptism/should-infants-be-baptised/>

Paedobaptists like ourselves [*i.e. Presbyterians*] assert that certain infants may and should be baptised. In the succinct words of the *Shorter Catechism*, "The infants of such as are members of the visible church are to be baptised". The *Westminster Confession* gives an equally definite answer: "Not only those that do actually profess faith in and obedience unto Christ, but also the infants of one or both believing parents are to be baptised".

In other words, they believe baptism is a 'sacrament' ('a means of grace confirming spiritual truths and promises') which signifies and seals "our ingrafting into Christ, and partaking of the benefits of the covenant of grace, and our engagement to be the Lord's" - "is not to be administered to any that are out of the visible church, till they profess their faith in Christ, and obedience to Him", *i.e.* baptism is for believers ("rightly administered by pouring, or sprinkling water upon the person" ... "Dipping of the person into the water is not necessary") ... Baptism is for professing believers, *but also*, "the infants of

such as are members of the visible church are to be baptized”. This means baptised infants are as those who “profess their faith in Christ”.

Again, we need to ask: (1) What constitutes an infant ... and when is a child no longer an infant? (2) What about infants belonging to *unsaved* parents? Are such infants destined to Hell, i.e. not elected to go to Heaven?

Well, God’s Word does not identify “the age of accountability”. Indeed, individual children mature spiritually and become ‘accountable’ at different stages in their early development. For example, there are testimonies of children being saved as young as four years old, - that *is* young, but if the Lord opens the heart of a four-year-old to understand they have sinned and they need Jesus as their Saviour, that is a work of grace! On the other hand, many four-year-olds have absolutely no concept of sin and grace.

Therefore, God in His wisdom does not identify a specific ‘age’. However, Paul sheds a certain light on the subject when he explains, **Rom. 1:20** *the invisible things of him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even his eternal power and Godhead; so that they are without excuse.* In this verse a person’s guilt is based upon having the ability to ‘clearly see’ their sin and their need of the Saviour so this would not refer to a child in the womb, to a little baby, or to a young infant for they don’t have the capability to ‘clearly see’ and understand their sin and their need of salvation. They are in that ‘age of innocence’.

So, where does this leave us? ... Personally, I believe babies in the womb up to young infants are covered by God’s grace. I would caution towards the age extending to 13, or to 19 ... and the Presbyterian conclusion is of spurious origin. Concerning the upper limit of a child’s age, I would relate to Abraham’s words, **Gen. 18:25** *Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?* ... We simply do not know ... and we do not *need* to know.

Indeed, while children in Christian families are privileged to be in early contact with the Gospel, their own personal state is no different to any other for all need to have a personal salvation through Christ ... However, when a young child does say, “I want to invite Jesus into my life”, we have a responsibility to encourage them to do that. They might not understand every theological aspect but, nevertheless, we must be confident in the Holy Spirit to lead them, and that He will achieve His purpose of salvation for them to be genuinely saved, *and God will know it.* ... And that is how David understood when he spoke about

his little son who died, **II Sam. 12:23** But now he is dead ... can I bring him back again? I shall go to him, but he shall not return to me ... David was referring to ... **Ps. 23:6** I will dwell in the house of the LORD for ever.

Also ... in the Old Testament young children who die are described as ‘innocents’, from the Hebrew *naqiy* meaning ‘clean’, ‘free from guilt and punishment’, ‘guiltless’, ‘blameless’, for example, **Ps. 106:37** *Yea, they sacrificed their sons and their daughters unto devils,* <sup>38</sup> *And shed innocent blood, even the blood of their sons and of their daughters, whom they sacrificed unto the idols of Canaan. ...* Is this an indication as to how God views babies/children who die in infancy ... not *some* children, but *all* children? It doesn’t mean they haven’t sinned, for they *are* sinners by birth ... but it simply means God mercifully renders them as ‘innocent’, and He is pleased to exercise saving grace towards them.

Ultimately, in all things God *will* have the pre-eminence (Col. 1:18). The Bible does not say exactly how He will do this and, therefore, we should not be adamant or dogmatic. Salvation is through His grace alone, **Rom. 9:18** *Therefore hath he mercy on whom he will have mercy ...* He *does* have specific plans for children for He said, **Mt. 19:14** *Suffer little children, and forbid them not, to come unto me: for of such is the kingdom of heaven. ...* And of this we are certain: God is loving, holy, merciful, just, and gracious ... and whatever He does is always right and good, and He loves the little children even more than we do.