

The Age of Accountability Concerning Children

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Growing up in church buildings, I heard the phrase "age of accountability" in passing when it concerned the death of a child, but never once did I hear any kind of teaching about what the Bible said concerning this matter, so I had no idea whether to take it as doctrine, or just something a pastor would say to make people feel better. As it turns out, there is Biblical authority for this doctrine, but because I have received so many letters over the years with people asking about it, I would conclude that most church buildings still aren't teaching properly on it, or their teachers don't know enough to do so.

The Lord Jesus Christ gave us a fairly good example of how swiftly and harshly he will judge those who harm children who believe on Him, and that we would need to, in our hearts, become humbled as little children to enter the kingdom of heaven.

At the same time came the disciples 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 ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven. Whosoever therefore shall humble himself as this little child, the same is greatest in the kingdom of heaven. And whoso shall receive one such little child in my name receiveth me. But whoso shall offend one of these little ones which believe in me, it were better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and that he were drowned in the depth of the sea. -Matthew 18:1-6

Contextually, though Christ was demonstrating the young children standing with them at the moment, he was using the children as a metaphor to reference to those born again in Christ, who have been humbled to repentance (i.e. grief and sorrow of wrongdoing against God) and received His grace. Children are generally quick to humility, open to learning, and do not hold bitterness, grudges, or malice.

Brethren, be not children in understanding: howbeit in malice be ye children, but in understanding be men.
-1 Corinthians 14:20

This is why Christ treasured the children, and because He treasured them so, it just never made any Scriptural sense to me that he would sentence babies to hell if they died. What we need to understand is that **the "Age of Accountability" should really be called the "Age of Knowledge of Good and Evil,"** because that is the determining factor between little children who go to heaven and older children who go to hell if they reject Christ.

And the LORD God planted a garden eastward in Eden; and there he put the man whom he had formed. And out of the ground made the LORD God to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight, and good for food; the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of knowledge of good and evil. -Genesis 2:8-9

And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, Of every tree of the garden thou mayest freely eat: But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it: for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die. -Genesis 2:16-17

I find this interesting because of all the time growing up in church buildings, I never heard a teacher connect sin to the knowledge of good and evil. This is likely the reason why so many Christians don't know where to look for information concerning an age of accountability.

For since by man came death, by man came also the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive. -1 Corinthians 15:21-22

Wherefore, 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: -Romans 5:12

Eating of the tree of knowledge of good and evil brought sin into the world, and because of that sin, mankind, including children, must die. Hell is reserved for sinners, and heaven is reserved for the righteous, but this creates a problem because, after eating of the tree, no man can be righteous of himself. (i.e. Righteousness can only come through faith, which is taught throughout the Bible.)

As it is written, There is none righteous, no, not one: There is none that understandeth, there is none that seeketh after God. They are all gone out of the way, they are together become unprofitable; there is none that doeth good, no, not one. -Romans 3:10-12

For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God; -Romans 3:23

There is a connection between sin and the knowledge of good and evil because the Bible tells us that sin brought death into the world, and likewise, gaining the knowledge of good and evil brought death into the world; thus the gaining of the knowledge of good and evil has a direct correlation to sin.

Though children inherit the sin of the flesh from their parents, they are not born with the knowledge of good and evil because their mind and reasoning process has not been developed enough to know good and evil, which is why they sometimes do wicked things, while having no knowledge it is wicked, and often not even understanding why they did it.

For when for the time ye ought to be teachers, ye have need that one teach you again which be the first principles of the oracles [i.e. prophets] of God; and are become such as have need of milk, and not of strong meat. For every one that useth milk is unskilful in the word of righteousness: for he is a babe. But strong meat belongeth to them that are of full age, even those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil. -Hebrews 5:12-14

This verse as an allusion (i.e. indirect reference) to the knowledge of good and evil concerning the age of accountability. Adults have their senses exercised, but children do not, and this is why God has given children an exceptional pass from lawful judgments passed on adults. (Even our government reflects this, which is why we don't see toddlers in handcuffs being arrested by police when they do something unlawful, like shoplifting for example.)

Moreover your little ones, which ye said should be a prey, and your children, which in that day had no knowledge between good and evil, they shall go in thither, and unto them will I give it, and they shall possess it. -Deuteronomy 1:39

The Lord God was not giving the same punishment to those who were too young to have the knowledge of good and evil. This is why I believe this phrase "age of accountability" has been so named because God is not holding them accountable for their lack of knowledge.

So then every one of us shall give account of himself to God. -Romans 14:12

All of us must give an account of everything we have said, thought, or done, but what about a little child who has no knowledge of good or evil? How are they supposed to give an account for things they did not know?

No Excuse For The Unbelievers

I don't want anyone reading this to think that this exception God gives to babies and small children will apply to just anyone in general. Infamous atheist Richard Dawkins was interviewed in *Expelled: No Intelligence Allowed* by Ben Stein:

STEIN: "What if after you died you ran into God, and he says, what have you been doing, Richard? I mean what have you been doing? I've been trying to be nice to you. I gave you a multi-million dollar paycheck, over and over again with your book, and look what you did."

DAWKINS: "Bertrand Russell had that point put to him, and he said something like: *sir, why did you take such pains to hide yourself?*"

-Ben Stein, *Expelled: No Intelligence Allowed*, IMDB Quotes, retrieved Aug 20, 2016, [imdb.com/title/tt1091617/quotes]

What we have here is a typical atheist response in which they will claim ignorance as their defense. This will *NOT* work when standing before the Judgment Seat of God. Whereas a little child has true ignorance of the knowledge of good and evil, atheists like Dawkins are not ignorant; they only feign it to create an excuse as a last resort to justify themselves and their sinful lifestyles.

(Read "[Everything You Need to Know About Atheism](#)" here at creationliberty.com for more details.)

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who hold the truth in unrighteousness; Because that which may be known of God is manifest in them; for God hath shewed it unto them. -Romans 1:18-19

The Lord God is telling us that they know of Him. They may not know of all the specific details, but they know of God because He's already revealed himself unto all of them simply by the things they can see, smell, taste, touch, and hear around them.

For 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: Because that, when they knew God, they glorified him not as God, neither were thankful; but became vain in their imaginations, and their foolish heart was darkened. -Romans 1:20-21

The Bible tells us that those very atheists do know God, but they reject Him for the express purpose of enjoying the pleasures of their sin. They will worship beasts before the Lord God because they hate the truth.

Professing themselves to be wise, they became fools, And changed the glory of the uncorruptible God into an image made like to corruptible man, and to birds, and fourfooted beasts, and creeping things. Wherefore God also gave them up to uncleanness through the lusts of their own hearts, to dishonour their own bodies between themselves: Who changed the truth of God into a lie, and worshipped and served the creature more than the Creator, who is blessed for ever. Amen. For this cause God gave them up unto vile affections: for even their women did change the natural use into that which is against nature: -Romans 1:22-26

For pride, idolatry, fornication, homosexuality, and more, they reject the True Living God who created them. They profess themselves to be wise, to be the elite scholars of society, which pride themselves above other men, looking down on us feeble-minded Christians as a stone in their path, but this is all a show of vanity because they are rejecting the truth of the Word of God because they are filled with the lusts of the flesh, and seek only those things that fulfill that lust.

And even as they did not like to retain God in their knowledge, God gave them over to a reprobate mind, to do those things which are not convenient; Being filled with all unrighteousness, fornication, wickedness, covetousness, maliciousness; full of envy, murder, debate, deceit, malignity; whisperers, Backbiters, haters of God, spiteful, proud, boasters, inventors of evil things, disobedient to parents, Without understanding, covenantbreakers, without natural affection, implacable, unmerciful: Who knowing the judgment of God, that they which commit such things are worthy of death, not only do the same, but have pleasure in them that do them. -Romans 1:28-32

I didn't say that these people are wicked, murderous, fornicating, backbiting, haters of God; God Himself said they are, and it is for this reason they don't like to think about Him. Nonetheless, they know of Him, and the evidence of that knowledge is demonstrated by their conscience.

For as many as have sinned without law shall also perish without law: and as many as have sinned in the law shall be judged by the law; (For not the hearers of the law are just before God, but the doers of the law shall be justified. For when the Gentiles, which have not the law, do by nature the things contained in the law, these, having not the law, are a law unto themselves: Which shew the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness, and their thoughts the mean while accusing or else excusing one another;) In the day when God shall judge the secrets of men by Jesus Christ according to my gospel.
-Romans 2:12-16

Many scoffers and Christians alike have asked how a loving God would allow, for example, an African tribe of people (who have never heard of the Bible) to perish without the knowledge of God's Law and Christ the Savior. The Bible says their conscience bears witness to the truth, and so until they have the knowledge of the law and Christ, then they are judged by their conscience, which is a reflection of the law of God written on their hearts.

The bottom line is those who are looking for the truth will find the Savior, and those who aren't will not.

I love them that love me; and those that seek me early shall find me. -Proverbs 8:17

And I say unto you, Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you. -Luke 11:9

The atheist sits back and arrogantly claims he has sought and did not find, but the Bible tells us he was never looking in the first place. His pride has blinded him, and the Lord resists him, refusing to grant him grace unless he is humbled.

Likewise, ye younger, submit yourselves unto the elder. Yea, all of you [i.e. Christians] be subject one to another, and be clothed with humility: for God resisteth the proud, and giveth grace to the humble. -1 Peter 5:5

The little children are generally humbled automatically, being in subjection to their parents, but every now and again, due to the lack of knowledge, they must be spanked when they get a rebellious spirit in them. The spanking is not to harm them, but to cause pain that humbles them, as God often has to cause us pain to humble us. The problem is that spanking adults does more than nothing; it causes hatred and strife, and so until they are humbled as a child, they will not turn to the foot of the cross.



The unbeliever has no excuse; feigning ignorance will not save them.

They have the knowledge of good and evil, and they choose the evil, so they will be held accountable to the Lord God when Judgment Day comes.

I was investigating some other people teaching on this subject, and the most commonly quoted verse was this:

Then said his servants unto him, What thing is this that thou hast done? thou didst fast and weep for the child, while it was alive; but when the child was dead, thou didst rise and eat bread. And he said, While the child was yet alive, I fasted and wept: for I said, Who can tell whether GOD will be gracious to me, that the child may live? But now he is dead, wherefore should I fast? can I bring him back again? I shall go to him, but he shall not return to me. -2 Samuel 12:21-23

For some reason, many preachers out there claim this proves the "age of accountability" doctrine, but I don't see that it does. When King David he says, "I shall go to him," the typical preacher automatically assumes this is talking of heaven, claiming that the child is with God, and though I would agree with that, it doesn't directly say that in this passage, so we need to go to other Scripture to provide more evidence.

Take heed that ye despise not one of these little ones; for I say unto you, That in heaven their angels do always behold the face of my Father which is in heaven. For the Son of man is come to save that which was lost. -Matthew 18:10-11

By the words "their angels," we can determine that little children have angels that watch over them. Although, it does not say that every man or woman has an angel watching over them, but the little children specifically, which is why the song by Amy Grant "Angels Watching Over Me" is so deceptive in leading many false converts to think they're being protected, when they are not.

(Read "[Wolves in Costume: Amy Grant](#)" here at creationliberty.com for more details.)

But to which of the angels said he at any time, Sit on my right hand, until I make thine enemies thy footstool? Are they not all ministering spirits, sent forth to minister for them who shall be heirs of salvation? -Hebrews 1:13-14

The heirs of salvation are those born-again in Christ, who are redeemed by His blood and saving grace, but that grace is extended to those little children who do not have the knowledge of good and evil yet. The angels specifically minister to those little children, which Christ told us have angels to protect them.

All this will certainly bring up the question: At what age does a little child enter into an age of knowledge of good and evil? I have no idea, and I don't believe it's the same age for every child because there are many circumstances that need to be considered.

There are some little children that are very wise and intelligent that may enter the age of accountability very early, and others who take much longer. There are also cases of mental retardation that need to be considered, in which case a child may grow into an adult and still not reach an age of accountability because they do not possess the mental reasoning to understand knowledge of good and evil.

It's because there is no set age that it is a very good idea to start children early on a Biblical foundation.

Train up a child in the way he should go: and when he is old, he will not depart from it. -Proverbs 22:6

This is not saying that a child trained in righteousness will always do what's right when he's older; it's saying that if you generally teach a child good foundational principles when they're young, they will generally adhere to those principles, and it will take quite a bit to steer him away from them. For example, if you teach your child that sex before marriage is wrong, they will experience varying degrees of nervousness and guilt that will steer them away from sex before marriage, but it also works the other way, meaning if you teach them sex before marriage is acceptable, they will likely do whatever they feel without any remorse.

Building up a solid Biblical philosophy (i.e. way of thinking) into a child is key for their understanding as they grow. When the child hears the message that all have sinned and come short of the glory of God, one day, the child will wake up with the understanding that he is part of those sinners. When the child is prepped with the understanding that the Lord Jesus Christ saves the lost, when they realize they're lost, they'll know where to turn; it's not a guarantee, but the chances are greater when they get the proper education early on.

To give an example, I gave a presentation at a church in which I reminded everyone that we were all going to die someday, and that we were not guaranteed to make it home. I said this posing the question, "If you died today, where would you end up?"

An eight-year-old girl came up to me afterwards, told me that she realized she was not guaranteed another day in this world, and asked me how she could be saved. She believed on Christ was a saved, but after finding out some of her background, I realized that, although she was involved with Christian groups, she didn't have that basic understanding of the Gospel given to her, and once she was presented with the proper knowledge, she could make a clear decision.

Again, there is no specific age for accountability, and some situational factors need to be taken into consideration, but the good rule of thumb for most children is when they start asking about something, it's a good time to teach them. If you don't know when they will gain the knowledge of good and evil, then teach them about it beforehand, so when the time comes, they will know what to do.

Once again, I'd like to quote this verse:

*Brethren, be not children in understanding: howbeit in malice be ye children, but in understanding be men.
-1 Corinthians 14:20*

We want children to grow and maintain their child-like nature in humility, lacking malice without holding grudges, but mature in understanding the truth. Let's all do the same, repenting of our sin and turning to God in all matters of faith and practice, which will automatically teach our children as we lead by example. Let's also not presume knowledge because we were told it by a "pastor," but seek to gain the knowledge of God's Word and understand it for ourselves so we can then teach others and our children properly.