

# We Should Revisit Pre-Adolescent Baptism

*Edited by - David Lee Burris*

## **WHEN DOES THE AGE ACCOUNTABILITY WINDOW OPEN?**

- A. Sin exists in my life when my human will becomes awareness and defiance.
  - 1. When I am aware of the significance of my choices and actions, and with understanding, I intentionally rebel against God, sin exists within me.
    - a. I realize that I am talking about children and adults who have a basic knowledge of God and understand that good and evil exist.
    - b. I also understand that sin exists in adults even when the adult does not know that God exists and has a distorted sense of good and evil.
    - c. However, that is not our children's situation, and they are our focus.
    - d. No child who has zero awareness of God and no awareness of the existence of good and evil has asked me about being baptized.
  - 2. That moment when sin comes to life in our lives is inseparably connected to the awakening and the exercise of our will.
    - a. That moment involves much more than making a choice.

- b. A child can perform an evil act at a time when they aren't capable of understanding the significance of the act.
  - c. As an example, that is the cruel, horrible, continuing consequence of child abuse.
    - i. The child has a sexual experience and that makes him or her sexually aware of realities that are not a part of childhood knowledge.
    - ii. But the child does not understand the significance of the experience.
    - iii. Because of the experience, the child can "act out" parts of the experience with no awareness of the significance of what he or she is doing.
- B. This illustrates a devastating situation we face in today's society.
1. Consider another example.
  2. For many reasons, children today are exposed to many forms of violence.
  3. A child can be very knowledgeable in the "how" & "what" of violence and have no comprehension of the significance of violence.
  4. He or she factually can understand acts of violence, but have no comprehension of the impact and consequence of violence on relationships or futures.
  5. In our society some children perform often unthinkable acts of violence.

6. Yet, laws are an ineffective deterrent because children do not comprehend the significance or long-term consequence of the violent act.
7. What is an eight-year-old's comprehension of ten years in prison?

II. **A child begins to comprehend significance as the child develops the ability to do abstract thinking.**

- A. Abstract thinking is thinking that understands concepts, the significance of concepts, and the interaction of concepts.
- B. For years a child's thoughts are based on the oversimplified examination of facts, but not on abstract considerations.
- C. A child thinks in factual terms long before he or she has the ability to think in abstract terms.
  1. *A child can respond to facts long before he or she can commit to concepts.*
  2. He or she is capable of making a serious, short-term commitment long before he or she is capable of making a significant, long-term commitment.
  3. **Aside from baptism, can you think of a long-term or life-time commitment that we leave up to the personal choice of an eight-year-old?**
    - a. Even when parents divorce, an eight year old is not permitted to chose the parent he or she will live with.
    - b. Why do we withhold such decisions from eight-year-olds?
    - c. We know that they cannot comprehend the significance of long-term commitments.

### III. **There are several reasons for baptism.**

- A. When John baptized, baptism was:
  - 1. Based on repentance (Matthew 3:1-2,6; Mark 1:4; Luke 3:3).
  - 2. For the forgiveness of sin (Mark 1:4; Luke 3:3).
- B. Jesus himself, who had no sin, was baptized to "fulfill all righteousness" (Matthew 3:13-15).
- C. After Jesus' death and resurrection, those who were converted were baptized:
  - 1. As a declaration of life-redirecting faith in Jesus as the Christ and/or life-redirecting faith in the kingdom of God (Acts 8:12,13; 18:8).
  - 2. As an expression of repentance (there was a powerful emphasis on repentance: Luke 24:47; Acts 2:38; 3:19; 5:31; 20:18-21).
  - 3. For the forgiveness or the washing away of sin (Acts 2:38; 10:43; 22:16).
  - 4. To save a person (Acts 16:31-33; 1 Peter 3:21)
  - 5. To place a person in Christ (Romans 6:3; Galatians 3:27).
  - 6. To let a person participate in the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ (Romans 6:3-5; Colossians 2:12).
  - 7. To place a person in the body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12:12,13).
  - 8. To clothe a person in Christ (Galatians 3:27).
  - 9. It appears to me that all of those reasons are more than facts to be recognized; all require the comprehension of abstract thinking.



The relation shown in Table 5 is quite weak, although statistically significant. As you go across the row for those who are still faithful, notice how the numbers in the cells get larger and larger as the age of baptism increases and notice how the reverse is true with those who dropped out of the church.

Results of a test comparing those who were rebaptized and those who were not rebaptized on the variable of the age at which they were baptized originally are presented in Table 6. Notice how the younger the subject was at the time of his original baptism, the more likely he was to be rebaptized.

TABLE 6  
RE-BAPTISM AND AGE  
AT THE TIME OF THE ORIGINAL BAPTISM

Subject Categories	Age at which Subject was Baptized Originally								TOTALS
	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	
Re-Baptized	7	8	7	7	4	3	0	0	36
Not Re-Baptized	0	1	4	5	11	12	16	17	66
TOTALS	7	9	11	12	15	15	16	17	102

One final test was done with these data. In this test, the subjects who were eventually rebaptized were grouped with those who dropped out and this group was compared with those subjects who were not rebaptized and did not drop out. Results of that test are shown in Table 7.

**TABLE 7**  
**PRESENT STATUS AND AGE**  
**AT THE TIME OF ORIGINAL BAPTISM**

Subject Categories	Age at which Subject was Baptized Originally								TOTALS
	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	
Still Faithful, Not Re-Baptized	0	1	4	5	11	12	16	17	66
Re-Baptized or Dropped Out	25	24	21	20	14	13	9	8	134
TOTALS	25	25	25	25	25	25	25	25	200

The data reported in Table 7 make it very clear that age at the time of baptism is an important factor. Only 2 percent of those who were baptized before the age of 10 remained faithful and were satisfied with their original baptism.

**The two most common reasons given are, "I did not know what I was doing," or, "I was baptized because a friend was baptized." Today, those children who are baptized before they develop the ability to use abstract thinking are more likely to drop out when he or she later experiences serious temptation or a sin crisis.**

- V. Today, more adolescents who were baptized prior to entering adolescence seem to decide the following when he or she encounters crisis temptation or sin:

"If my baptism had the power to make me a Christian, I would not experience this temptation or sin crisis."

"If my baptism was significant, God would protect me from this sin or temptation."

"Something was wrong; something was false; baptism would prevent these experiences if baptism were real."

**VI. This is one of the great dangers of baptizing a child for the remission of sins before he or she comprehends sin, experiences sin, or has sin.**

There is an additional factor that makes this matter even more confusing. The book of Acts deals only with the conversion of first-generation Christians, all of whom are adults. Most of the epistles are written to first generation Christians. The New Testament contains no information about the conversion of the children of those first Christians.

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# Discipleship and the Age of Accountability

Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit” (Matt. 28:19, NASB).

The Greek word that we translate “disciple” (mathetes) derives from the Greek verb “to learn” (manthano). A disciple, then, is a person who is a pupil, and often in the ancient world the pupil had a special relationship with his teacher. To be a disciple of Christ is to have a special relationship with him in which we learn from him. Consequently, when Jesus instructed his apostles to “make disciples” (matheteuo), he was commanding them to lead people to a relationship with him in which they could be students of Christ.

When Jesus gave this Great Commission, he did not tell his apostles to “convert people” or to “make Christians,” though that is certainly the ultimate goal of preaching the gospel to every creature (Mk. 16:15). Rather, Jesus instructed them to “make disciples.” In Jesus’ view, becoming Christians and becoming disciples were one and the same event. Souls truly converted to Christ become his disciples at the point of conversion. Thus, Christians, disciples, and converts are all the same thing.

Rarely did Jesus implore people to “be saved.” Jesus did invite people to become his disciples, provided they were willing to pay the price:

If anyone comes to Me, and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple. Whoever does not carry his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple (Lk. 14:26-27).

When the apostles obeyed the Savior and took the gospel to “all creation” we never read of them “converting people” or “making Christians” out of some people. Rather, Luke tells us this about Paul and Barnabas’ work in Derbe: “And after they had preached the gospel to that city and had made many disciples, they returned to Lystra and to Iconium and to Antioch” (Acts 14:21, emphasis added).

In fact, as Luke narrates the spread of the gospel in the world, only twice does he refer to converts as “Christians” (Acts 11:26; 26:28). In contrast, Luke uses the term “disciple” or “disciples” twenty-nine times to describe those in Christ. Individuals of note were not identified as “certain Christians” but as “certain disciples,” such as Ananias (9:10), Tabitha (9:36), and Timothy (16:1).

I am afraid we have lost sight of the basic link between conversion and discipleship. We have focused on baptizing people, converting them, saving them, etc. and rightly so (Acts 2:38). But if we fail to emphasize to prospects that they must become disciples, i.e. dedicated followers who will be students of Christ, we have told them only half of the story. If we do not ask prospects to “count the cost” before baptism, we are unfair to them and unfaithful to the gospel Christ wants us to preach (Lk. 14:27-33).

I think the matter of discipleship also directly bears on what we call the “age of accountability.” If discipleship is an integral part of becoming as a Christian, then those who are not mature enough to understand discipleship are not mature enough to become Christians and are not accountable. When we emphasize to young people that they need to be baptized and neglect to discuss what it means to be a disciple, we end up producing “converts” who have no idea what it means to abide in the word of Christ, love brethren, and bear fruit, all of which are marks of true disciples – true converts (John 8:31; 13:35; 15:8).

Certainly, individual children radically differ in stages of development, and for some the age at which they become mature enough to realize the commitment necessary to be a disciple will be much earlier than it will be for others. But we are making a mistake to baptize young people without being sure they understand what Christ will expect of them as disciples.

Brethren, in our haste to spread the gospel and win souls to Christ, let us be sure we approach our work with the words of the Savior in mind and devote ourselves to making disciples. To do less is to fill our local church congregations with everything but Christians.  
– *Guardian of Truth Magazine*

# The Age of Accountability

by [Dave Miller](#), Ph.D.

Since all people are the “offspring of God” (Acts 17:29), they come into this world innocent of sin. That is why Paul, in pointing out that God preplanned to bring Christ into the world through Jacob rather than Esau, stated that the decision was made prior to the birth of the boys: “[F]or the children not yet being born, **nor having done any good or evil**” (Rom 9:11, emp. added). Likewise, God declared that the King of Tyre, like everyone else, had come into the world guiltless, but had become sinful due to his own choices: “You were perfect in your ways from the day you were created, till iniquity was found in you” (Ezekiel 28:15). If, at conception, God “forms the spirit of man within him” (Zechariah 12:1), why would anyone wish to insist that man’s spirit is, nevertheless, corrupt?

Another interesting realization is gleaned from Paul’s argument in Romans—a book unquestionably designed to expound the foundational premise of salvation available in Christ through the Gospel. Chapter seven, Paul contrasts the pre-Christian condition of the sinner with the post-cross availability of full forgiveness. The Law of Moses was a **tremendous** law. It was authored by God Himself. It was specifically designed for the perpetual **good** of the people to whom it was addressed, i.e., the Israelites (Deuteronomy 6:24; 10:13). Like all law from God, it enabled people to recognize sin as sin (Romans 3:20; 7:7). In short, the law was “holy, and the commandment holy and just and good” (Romans 7:12). However, law did/does not contain within itself the ability to absolve those who violate its precepts. An outside force, one that is above and beyond the law, is necessary to rectify the effects of law infractions (i.e., sin). The Bible refers to this force as “propitiation” (Rom 3:25; Heb 2:17; 1Jn 2:2; 4:10). Of course, this propitiation/atonement is the blood of Jesus.

As Paul expounded these spectacular spiritual realities, he imparted a significant truth regarding the innocence of children, i.e., their non-depraved status. Paul stated: "For apart from the law sin was dead" (Romans 7:8). He meant that prior to him becoming subject to the law, he was not guilty of any sin. He continued: "I was alive once without the law, but when the commandment came, sin revived and I died" (Romans 7:9). When was Paul "alive once without the law"? The only time in a person's life when he or she is spiritually **alive** in the **absence of law** is before he or she is a responsible, accountable adult. A person is not subject to the law of God until he or she is mature enough to understand and to be responsible for behavior. **Here is the "age of accountability"** to which so many have made reference over the years. Paul was saying that at the time he was a child he was "alive," i.e., spiritually safe. But when he reached adulthood, and had to face the law's assessment of his adult decision-making, sin "revived," i.e., it sprang into existence in his life (see Arndt and Gingrich, 1957, p. 53), "began to live and flourish" (Alford, 1852, 2:380), and he "died," i.e., he became spiritually dead in sin. This "age of accountability" is not pinpointed in Scripture as a specific age—for obvious reasons: it naturally differs from person to person since it depends upon a variety of social and environmental factors. Children mature at different rates and ages as their spirits are fashioned, shaped, and molded by parents, teachers, and life's experiences.

It is imperative that every person of an accountable mind and age realize the responsibility that exists. Current culture is characterized by a tendency to evade responsibility for one's action. Lawbreakers blame parents, genes, and society for their actions. But if the Bible teaches anything, it teaches that every single accountable human being will one day stand before God and give account for his or her **own** actions. "For we shall all stand before the judgment seat of Christ" and "each of us shall give account of himself to God" (Romans 14:10,12).

# **When Are They Ready?**

## **The Age of Accountability**

**By Keith Greer**

**Whenever a congregation is blessed by having some young people obey the gospel, questions come up. While we rejoice at the decision of young men and women to turn to the Lord, some voice a concern by asking the question: "What is the age of accountability?"**

**Some desire to know at what age "must" one obey the gospel? These questions have been raised by brethren over the years, and varied answers have been given. The only way to come to an acceptable conclusion is to examine what the scriptures teach.**

**Many are of the belief that the "magic age" for one's obedience is "twelve." Luke 2:40-47, is the place they use for their answer. Jesus, at the age of twelve, sat in the temple among the doctors, both learning and answering their questions. Many who use this passage tell us Jesus was at the "age of accountability" when he began going to the temple. Therefore, one must be at "least" twelve before he can be baptized into Christ.**

**But are these conclusions correctly applying these pas-sages? If there has not been any specific age given by God, then the age of Jesus when he was in the temple is irrelevant. How do you know this was the child's first time in the temple? Can you determine such by the text? If this was the age, Jesus sinned since he was not baptized for some eighteen years later by John! For others to "set" a particular age, is to do so without divine authority. God has not given us a particular "age" that men must abide by. If one waits until fourteen, has he sinned? What about if one comes to him at eleven? Is his obedience invalid?**

**When Jesus sent the apostles out into the world, he commanded them to "Go ye into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature. He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved" (Mark 16:15,16). In Acts 8:36,37, the eunuch asked Philip, ". . . see here is water, what doth hinder me to be baptized? And Philip said, If thou believeth with all thine heart, thou mayest." In either of these passages, is the age of the believer an issue? If the apostles and early teachers made no issue, why should we!**

**A person who is desiring to be baptized must have the capacity to be able to believe & to understand what they are being baptized for. This is also why infant baptism isn't according to God's divine will.**

**How can infants believe or to understand what baptism is? "And they shall all be taught of God " (John 6:45). Look at all the conversions in the book of Acts. What took place before baptism? In every account teaching! Why? Faith has to be [rooted] in something! It is in God's word!**

**In Acts 2:38, the Jews were told, ". . . repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins." A person must have the capacity to repent and have sins to repent of. Therefore, we have another reason why infants do not need to be baptized. What sin do they need to repent of? In 2 Corinthians 7:9, 10, we are taught that we must have "godly sorrow" towards repentance. A person must be able to be truly sorry to God because he has sinned against him, to understand what sin has done to his soul, and the need to have it cleansed from sin. One who cannot repent, cannot be baptized!**

**When Philip told the eunuch that he could be baptized if he believed, the eunuch answered and said, "I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God" (Acts 8:37). Also, in Romans 10:9,10, we read that confession with the mouth is to be made towards salvation. In order to become obedient to the gospel, one must be able to confess Christ and to understand what the confession means. It is an awesome step to take. One has now committed his life to God.**



**Like the conversions that we read about in the book of Acts, those who obeyed the gospel of Christ were willing to be immersed into water (Romans 6: 3,4; Galatians 3:27). One must come to understand what baptism does and why it must be accomplished. Does one now understand that by rendering obedience to the gospel, the Lord adds him to the church (Acts 2:47)? Does he presently understand that this is where he comes in contact with the blood of Christ (Col. 2:12,13)? Does he understand his or her responsibility after baptism to "walk in newness of life" (Rom. 6:4; 2 Cor. 5:17)?**

### **Responsibility**

**When is a person ready to accept responsibility? At what age does this occur? There is no fixed or set time that can possibly fit everybody. All people are different, all from different backgrounds, and they will reach the life decision to obey God at different times. Some reach it much sooner than others. So, how can we tell if they are ready?**

**We must remember that becoming a child of God is a personal decision. Obedience to the plan of God must be done by the individual. If a person will humbly submit himself to God's word and obey the gospel, then he is ready!**

**While it might be necessary in some cases to question the young person as to why he is desiring to be baptized, very often his background will give you a hint as to whether or not he has sufficient knowledge and is ready to obey the gospel. I may ask: "What is baptism for?" "Why do you feel you need to be baptized?" "What takes away the sin?" "Are you willing to commit your life to the Lord?"**

**We need to remember Felix in Acts 24: 25, when he said, "Go thy way for this time; when I have a more convenient season, I will call for thee." On some occasions when we discourage the zeal and yearning one may have to obey the gospel, that zeal is never manifested again. One by being told he is "too young" may go in another direction in his life. We never want to tell a person "not to obey God," especially when he has a desire to do so!**

**Remember, that Timothy was taught as a child by his mother and grandmother (2<sup>nd</sup> Tim. 1:5; 3:15). He knew about God and his duty to God from a very early age. Many of our children are brought up with the knowledge of God and his word from the pre-school years and up. I believe they learn more than we give them credit for! If the parents bring up their child in the "nurture & admonition of the Lord," this child hopefully has the greater knowledge than one who does not have this benefit.**

**But parents, please do not rush your children into being baptized. Let them hear the gospel, believe the gospel, repent of their sins, confess faith in Christ, and then be baptized for the remission of sins. Only by doing so in this manner and for these reasons, will they be true children of God.**

**"But God be thanked, that ye were the servants of sin, but ye have obeyed from the heart that form of doctrine " (Rom. 6:17). When they have done that, they've met the Lord's requirements for salvation, whatever age they might be. "Can any forbid water, that these should not be baptized?" (Acts 10:47) My friends, if God would not, can we?**