

## The Age of Accountability: Fact or Fiction

Where do infants who die spend eternity? This is one of those perennial questions, which perplexes everyone at one time or another, and it becomes the question of all questions when a young child dies before maturing enough to make a decision to follow or not to follow Christ.

In order to answer this question some preliminaries need to be stated. First, the Bible is unequivocally lucid concerning the sinfulness of all human beings including both sinful acts and original sin (Romans 3:9, 23, 5:12-14). Second, the Scripture is equally clear concerning how to obtain salvation as an adult, and that is only by faith in Jesus Christ (John 1:4, 14:6; Acts 16:27-31).

However, the Bible does not offer a concise, definitive declaration concerning the eternal state of infants or those who for some reason never possess the ability to understand between right and wrong. Thus, explanations concerning where children who die before accepting or rejecting Christ spend eternity are developed either out of tradition and/or inferences and logic.

This results in three primary explanations<sup>1</sup>: first, Ecclesiastical, which means one is brought into covenant relationship with God through baptism—christening. This places the child in a safe relationship with God if he should die before he is able to choose to follow Christ. “Advocates of infant baptism assume a covenant relationship between the child and the family of God. They argue from the silence of the New Testament on the issue, not from any direct teaching. The “unsafe” status of the child propounded by Augustine introduced the emergence of the concept of baptismal regeneration. Belief that the sacrament of baptism conveyed to the infant all the benefits of grace solved the logical problem, at least, of what to do with original sin. It remained for another rite, confirmation, to emerge. Confirmation conveyed the intent of personalization of faith and entrance to the church as an active member.”<sup>2</sup>

Adolf Harnack notes that the practice of pedobaptism “begins after this period (the end of the second century). At least, we cannot verify it earlier.”<sup>3</sup> This would coincide with the view that original sin condemns a person who has not exercised faith. Edward Hays says, “The view that original sin condemns the infant became prevalent after the controversies of Augustine with the Pelagians.”<sup>4</sup> Churches that practice pedobaptism generally hold to some form of baptismal regeneration e.g. Roman Catholicism.

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<sup>1</sup> I am borrowing Warfield’s three labels but not all of his content. His general categories were Ecclesiastical, Gracious, and Humanitarian, B. B. Warfield, “The Development of the Doctrine of Infant Salvation,” in *Studies in Theology* (New York: Oxford University, 1932) 411-444.

<sup>2</sup> Dallas Theological Seminary, *Bibliotheca Sacra Volume 132*, 132:254 (Dallas Theological Seminary, 1975; 2002).

<sup>3</sup> Adolph Harnack, *Die Mission und Ausbreitung des Christentums in den ersten drei Jahrhunderten*, 1:399, quoted in Kurt Aland, *Did the Early Church Baptize Infants?* trans. G. R. Beasley-Murray (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1963), p. 29.

<sup>4</sup> Dallas Theological Seminary, *Bibliotheca Sacra Volume 132*, 132:253 (Dallas Theological Seminary, 1975; 2002).

Second is the Grace position, which says that salvation is brought about in the lives of individuals who are chosen by God apart from their faith. Thus, concerning children, they would conclude that if the child was “elect” she would go to heaven, but if she was not elect, she would perish in hell. This is consistent with Five point Calvinism, which bases salvation not on faith and God’s elective purposes working synergistically but rather on God’s grace working in the life of the lost monergistically believing that regeneration precedes faith.<sup>5</sup>

Third, the Humanitarian position, which sees faith and election working synergistically in salvation, requiring a certain mental capacity i.e. “age of accountability” for faith to be exercised. This position would simply say that those who die prior to the “age of accountability” are covered based upon the sufficient sacrifice of Christ and the rich grace of God. Therefore, all infants who die would go to heaven.<sup>6</sup>

The age of accountability is not really an “age” but rather a certain level of mental development. The age could vary between individuals based upon natural endowments and environmental factors.<sup>7</sup> The following are some of the Scriptures and reasons for believing in the age of accountability.

Three verses lend support to the reality of a place of accountability that an infant comes to if they mature, but if they die in infancy, they never experience and are therefore under the provision of the death of Christ by the grace of God apart from exercising faith.

Paul said, "So then each one of us will *give an account* of himself to God" (*italics added*), (*Romans 14:12*). This verse is noted for the requirement of “giving account” which implies an ability to do so.

"Jesus said to them, **“If you were blind, you would have no sin; but since you say, ‘We see,’ your sin remains”** (*John 9:41*). Again this verse indicates that sin remaining is due to being able to see—understand. This is not to say that everyone, including infants, according to God’s justice are not sinners, but rather that by His grace, the “blind” do not have their sin remaining in the same way as those who see.

Speaking of Jesus, the prophet Isaiah said, "“He will eat curds and honey at the time He knows *enough* to refuse evil and choose good” (*Isaiah 7:15*).

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<sup>5</sup> Not all Calvinists would explain it exactly the same. David Clark says of Warfield’s position concerning the Humanitarian view, “Though Warfield does not affirm this view explicitly, he implies that he takes this as the correct position.”

<sup>6</sup> Although some would hold that all infants who die go to heaven and not hold to the Humanitarian view or “Age of Accountability” e.g. David Clark says of Warfield, “Warfield does seem to hold that all infants who die will be saved.” The Evangelical Theological Society, *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society Volume 27*, 27:459 (The Evangelical Theological Society, 1984; 2002); moreover, there are substantial differences in the explanation of the synergism involved in salvation.

<sup>7</sup> This would include things like being reared in a Christian home where a child would be explicitly taught about sin, salvation and faith or being reared in a home where the intellectual abilities of the child might be encouraged or retarded.

Here again the Scripture mentions a distinction between a time when He will not be able to distinguish between evil and good and a time that He will *choose*....

Another Scripture that seems to indicate God's grace assures children go to heaven concerns David. David's infant son became very sick, and David fasted and prayed for God to restore his son's health, but after a period of time the child died; and David was asked by those who watched him intercede for his son, why now, after the death, had he changed completely. The story concludes, "So David arose from the ground, washed, anointed *himself*, and changed his clothes; and he came into the house of the LORD and worshiped. Then he came to his own house, and when he requested, they set food before him and he ate. Then his servants said to him, "What is this thing that you have done? While the child was alive, you fasted and wept; but when the child died, you arose and ate food." He said, "While the child was *still* alive, I fasted and wept; for I said, 'Who knows, the LORD may be gracious to me, that the child may live.' "But now he has died; why should I fast? Can I bring him back again? *I will go to him*, but he will not return to me" (*italics added*) (2 Samuel 12:20-23). David seemed quite confident that his son was ok, and he would see his son in eternity. The only way to conclude that the small child did not go to heaven is to conclude that David was not a true believer, which is without warrant.

In Matthew 18:2-5, Jesus uses a small child as an object lesson for believers. Believers are spiritual children, and have many of the same characteristics as a small child like, vulnerability, dependence and weakness. Here, Jesus tells His listeners, one must become like a small child in order to become a spiritual child. This would surely include things like recognizing one's dependence on others, lack of understanding, helpless and innocent in a certain manner of speaking. While a child is not truly innocent since everyone is born a sinner, they are innocent in the sense they are not cognitively or intentionally evil in the same way as adults are. Hence, since Christ uses a child to illustrate what salvation requires, and since it would be strange to use a lost person to picture what one must do to be saved, one may be on somewhat solid ground to conclude that children are placed, by the grace of God, in such a state, which assures them a place in heaven if they die before the age of accountability.

Strong urged those who worked with children to heed several propositions: (1) the age of possible conversion begins with the first moment of moral consciousness; (2) the natural possibilities for good are greatest at the moment of that first unfolding and are less and less every moment thereafter; and (3) a character changed in early years is more promising of growth and power in the world than one dragged for years through the mire of sin.<sup>8</sup>

Moreover, it seems to me that if God laid out the clear instructions of how the vilest, most wretched and nefarious of all human beings can become His child and live forever in heaven, His lack of instruction regarding how to redeem children, whom he uses as an example of how to get saved, should not be viewed as an oversight on God's part but

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<sup>8</sup>Dallas Theological Seminary, *Bibliotheca Sacra Volume 132*, 132:255 (Dallas Theological Seminary, 1975; 2002). From 9, Strong, "The Conversion of Children," pp. 584-85.

rather unnecessary on the child's part. Do we really suppose that out of our love for children we have thought of what God's love failed to discern and provide for? Finally, even the vilest of criminals has almost always avoided harming small children, and to even consider the possibility that God would do less seems to me to be irreverently wrong.

Here are some things we can be sure of:

- 1 Everyone has sinned and fallen short of what is required to merit or work their way into the presence of God (Romans 3:23).
- 2 Hell is a real place of torment where everyone that does not accept Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior before they die will spend eternity (Mark 9:43ff).
- 3 God genuinely loves everyone, desires that everyone be saved, and not have to suffer for his or her sin for all eternity (1 Timothy 2:4; 2 Peter 3:9).
- 4 God sufficiently provided for everyone to be able to respond to the gospel of Jesus Christ by faith, which results in salvation from the judgment and penalty for their sins (John 16:8; 1 John 2:2).
- 5 No one who has reached the age of accountability can be saved apart from faith in Jesus Christ and being born again (John 3:3).
- 6 We are commanded to go into the entire world in order to tell people about the love of Christ before they die in their sin (Matthew 28:18-20).
- 7 If God is merciful to the most wretched of sinners, and provides sufficient mercy for them, He does for children as well (2 Samuel 12:15-23).