

Parenthood (18): The Age of Accountability

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The question of when a child is ready to become a Christian is one with which every parent will wrestle. As important and troubling as this issue can be, we might wish that God had set a minimum age for baptism.

Of course, this is not reasonable since different children mature at different rates. The sense of guilt is so powerful that a child afflicted by it before reaching some arbitrary age would suffer without the possibility of relief.

So when is a child “ready”? Parents have occasionally asked my advice on this subject, and we have struggled through it with our oldest daughter (who was baptized at ten after two years of periodic conversation about it). I still don’t know the answer to my complete satisfaction.

The decision to become a Christian is not merely an intellectual one. In other words, it requires more than simply supplying rote answers to leading questions. Little Bobby or Susie need to understand more than just that baptism is for the forgiveness of sin.

To the opposite extreme, becoming a Christian must rest on more than a feeling of having done wrong. Even little toddlers who have been properly trained know when they have done something wrong and feel a sense of guilt or shame.

True conviction of sin, it seems to me, must rest on an awareness that God has been wronged and the penalty for such is eternal condemnation. One question I try to ask smaller children is, “*If Jesus came back right now, would you go to heaven or hell?*” If the answer to that is “heaven,” then I would not judge the child to have a mature sense of having mortally violated God’s law. But a child can be astute enough to pick up the answer “hell” from preaching and Bible class. Does that mean they should be baptized?

Another consideration is that God expects Christians to be fruitful. It is one thing for a child to know *wrong*; it is quite another to understand God’s expectations of worship and service. Can the child focus enough on the singing to actually worship? What about the Lord’s supper? Does their understanding go beyond “I get to drink grape juice out of those little cups just like the adults”?

If all else fails, I would rather err on the side of allowing a child to be baptized early. They can always be rebaptized if they later doubt the validity of their conversion. The bottom line is that it is very difficult to judge another’s heart – even the heart of our own child.