

When Does One Become “Accountable” to God?

Before this question can be properly answered, some “groundwork” principles need to be understood:

1. **The Need for salvation.** Our need for salvation is not because we “inherit Adam’s sin,” as some erroneously teach from Rom.5. We inherit the *physical consequence* of death as a result of Adam’s sin. We get the consequence of *spiritual death* from our own sins, Rom.5:12b. Thus, we are not “*born in sin*”- cf. Luke 18:16-17; Matt.18:3; Ezk.18:20. We become sinners when we “*live in the lusts of our flesh*” and “*indulge the desires of the flesh and of the mind*” by “*walking according to the course of this world*” as Eph.2:1-3 indicates. Thus, we become spiritually separated from God by our sins, Isa.59:2ff.
2. **The Source of salvation.** This one is easy, Acts 4:10-12.
3. **The Way of salvation.** That is, how do we attain salvation *from sin in Jesus Christ*? This too is easy if we will listen honestly, openly, and without prejudice to the scriptures, Mark 16:15-16; Acts 2:22-41. Salvation was **not** attained by what was *felt, thought, or even experienced*. It **was** attained by *believing* the right things about Jesus Christ (Son of God, v.22; He lived and was crucified as a man for our sins, vv.23,36; and He was raised and exalted by God, vv.24,32-33), and *doing* the right things in response to those beliefs (*repenting* and being *baptized* for the remission of sins), vv.37-38).

Now, the big question: **At what point does one become accountable to God for their sins, and therefore accountable for doing what He commands to procure salvation?** Or put another way, **When does one cease being a “child” and become an “adult” who is responsible for themselves to God?** It is an important question, Rom14:12; 2Cor.5:10! But it does not have a specific answer- at least not years (unless Num.14:29 is it?). The Bible does not say at what specific age one becomes accountable. It does not do this because the age at which one becomes accountable to God is different from person to person, based on maturity.

Considerations for Accountability:

- **Accountability involves the mental maturity to understand God’s will and the disposition of heart to choose between good and evil based on that understanding.** In Neh.8:1-3,8 > 9-12, those who were able to be “*attentive*” and “*understand*” the Law when it was read, were changed by it- not their parents, friends, or even the preacher, Rom.1:16-17; 10:17.
- **Spiritual maturity** (especially relative to accountability) **is not directly linked to physical maturity, but there is a relationship.** While one does not have to be “21 and legal” (or even “20” again from Num.14:29) to be accountable to God, Christianity comes with adult responsibilities. If the candidate only views baptism as a means to avoid the horrors of hell, rather than understanding it as putting us into a relationship with Christ that has obligations and responsibilities, then perhaps he/she is not yet “mature” enough in their understanding, cf. Luke 14:25-33; Acts 2:41ff. Further, Acts 8:12 says that “*men and women*” were baptized. While this does not mean those of a “legal age” to be considered “men” and “women” by civic standards, it does emphasize that becoming a Christian is an “adult” thing to do. It is not therefore for the immature of thought or action. Hint: “children” color, play or daydream during services- young adults are active participants in worship because of their interest in and understanding of the things of God.

- **Accountability must include the ability to *think, reason, and decide* for one's self based on Truth.** To properly obey the gospel, one has to be able to grasp why such is necessary for them, and how it happens. If the candidate doesn't know that baptism is "*for the remission*" of his/her sins (and that such is necessary in their specific case- that he/she is a sinner because of specific sins against God) and why it remits sins (by coming in contact with the saving power of Christ's blood, Eph.1:7; Rom.6:3-4), then they're not ready. They haven't *thought, reasoned, and decided* for themselves- they're just doing it because they know "it's the right thing to do / you can't go to heaven when you die unless you're baptized," or because Mom and Dad (or Granddad or Grandmother) wants them to, or because their friends are doing it. For one to be truly "ready" for baptism, they must have decided to do so for the right reasons, rather than just feelings of obligation, or to be pleasing to someone else.

OK, so how do I know when is the right time? Again there are some considerations that should help:

- **Who is the real source of authority in the life?** Is it still Mom and Dad, or has it become God and His Word? Children still recognize parents as the ultimate authority- young adults recognize God's sovereignty and are willing to obey Him, even if it means disobeying parents, cf. Acts 5:29.
- **Who is feared?** Children fear punishment from their parents- young adults experience *guilt* and *shame* toward God for their transgressions of His law. Likewise and related, children quickly forget the guilt of their deeds either when punishment is escaped or rendered- young adults remember their iniquities because they know they have disappointed God.
- **If you have doubts about your child's *readiness* for baptism, tell them "No, you're not ready." If they accept your answer without objection, they probably aren't ready.** But if they contend with you and thereby demonstrate their understanding of its necessity as part of the plan of salvation....well that's a different matter then isn't it? Children can be told "no" and will accept it from their parents with regard to be being baptized- young adults understand that they have a higher responsibility to God that no one can inhibit.

Conclusions:

The question of "accountability" causes great consternation for concerned and godly parents. We fear two extremes:

- a) Waiting too long and allowing the interest in, or enthusiasm for, baptism to evaporate- perhaps forever.
- b) Starting too early and the child not really understanding what they're doing or why- then a false sense of security being established based on a baptism that wasn't genuine.

These are legitimate concerns that lack the specific answers we prefer. Perhaps the things given here will help. Just continue to pray for and teach your children the ways to God and the "right time" will become evident to you....and more importantly, them.

But let's also be careful that we don't set the bar of accountability "too high." A person does not have to know every detail of every aspect of New Testament Christianity before becoming one. Notice carefully from Matt.28:19-20 that becoming *disciples* and *baptism* come before "*teaching them to observe all that I commanded you...*" The candidate certainly does not have to be a "mature Christian" before being baptized, just mature enough to understand what they're doing and why they're doing it.