

The Age of Accountability: Fact or Fiction

Where do infants who die spend eternity? This perennial question perplexes everyone at some point, and it becomes the question of all questions when a young child dies before maturing enough to decide to follow or not follow Christ.

Some preliminaries must be established to answer this question. First, the Bible is unequivocally lucid concerning the sinfulness of all human beings, including sinning and original sin (Rom 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 are unable to understand the difference between right and wrong. Thus, explanations concerning children who die before accepting or rejecting Christ are developed from tradition, inferences, and logic.

There are three primary explanations.¹ First is Ecclesiastical, meaning a child comes into a covenant relationship with God through baptism—christening. Thus, the child is in a safe relationship with God if he should die before he can 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. A belief that the sacrament of baptism conveyed to the infant all the benefits of grace solved the logical problem of what to do with original sin. It remained for another rite, confirmation, to emerge. Confirmation conveyed the intent of personalizing faith and entrance to the church as an active member.”²

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.”³ This coincides 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.”⁴ Churches that practice pedobaptism, e.g., Roman Catholicism, generally hold to some form of baptismal regeneration.

Second is the Grace position, which says that salvation is brought about by God, apart from an individual’s faith. Thus, the “elect” child would go to heaven, but if not elect, she would perish in hell. This is consistent with five-point Calvinism, which bases salvation

¹ 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) 411–44.

² Dallas Theological Seminary, *Bibliotheca Sacra*, 132:254 (Dallas Theological Seminary, 1975; 2002).

³ 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), 29.

⁴ Dallas Theological Seminary, *Bibliotheca Sacra*, 132:253 (Dallas Theological Seminary, 1975; 2002).

on God's grace working in the life of the lost, monergistically believing that regeneration precedes faith.⁵

Third, the Humanitarian position, which sees faith and election working synergistically in salvation, requires a particular mental capacity, i.e., "age of accountability," for faith to be exercised. This position holds that those who die before the "age of accountability" are covered by the sufficient sacrifice of Christ and the rich grace of God. Therefore, all infants who die would go to heaven.⁶

The age of accountability is not an "age," but a certain level of mental development that would vary between individuals based on natural endowments and environmental factors.⁷ Following are Scriptures and accompanying reasons for believing if a child dies in infancy, they are 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" (Rom 14:12, emphasis added). Note the requirement of "giving an 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). The sin remains because they can see, understand. This is not to say that everyone, including infants, according to God's justice is not a sinner, but rather that by his grace, sin does not remain with the "blind" 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" (Isa 7:15). Scripture mentions a distinction between when he will not be able to distinguish between evil and good and when he will.

David's infant son became very sick, and David fasted and prayed for God to restore his son's health, but in time, the child died. Those who watched him intercede for his son asked why now, after the death, he had 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;

⁵ 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."

⁶ Although some would hold that all infants who die go to heaven and not hold to the Humanitarian view or "Age of Accountability," 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*, vol 27, 27:459 (The Evangelical Theological Society, 1984; 2002).

⁷ 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.

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”’ (2 Sam 12:20–23, emphasis added). David seemed quite confident that he would see his son in eternity.

In Matthew 18:2–5, Jesus uses a small child as an object lesson for believers. Believers are spiritual children and, as such, share characteristics like dependence and weakness. Jesus says that one must become like a small child to become a spiritual child. This would surely include recognizing one’s dependence on others, a lack of understanding, and being helpless and innocent. While a child is not truly innocent since everyone is born a sinner, they are not pretentious or intentionally evil as adults are. Since Christ uses a child to illustrate what salvation requires, one may be on somewhat solid ground when concluding that children, by the grace of God, are placed 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.⁸

Finally, it seems that if God laid out 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 rather as unnecessary on the child’s part. Do we really suppose that we have thought of out of love what God’s love did not provide?

We can be sure of the following:

- 1 Everyone has sinned and fallen short of what is required to merit or work their way into the presence of God (Rom 3:23).
- 2 Hell is a real place of torment where everyone who does not accept Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior before they die will spend eternity (Mark 9:43ff).
- 3 God genuinely loves everyone and desires everyone to be saved and not suffer for their sin for all eternity (1 Tim 2:4; 2 Pet 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).

⁸Dallas Theological Seminary, *Bibliotheca Sacra Volume 132*, 132:255 (Dallas Theological Seminary, 1975; 2002). From 9, Strong, “The Conversion of Children,” 584–85.

- 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 world to tell people about the love of Christ before they die in their sins (Matt 28:18–20).
- 7 If God is merciful to the most wretched of sinners and provides sufficient mercy for them, he will also do this for children (2 Sam 12:15–23).