

## **Age of accountability**

This article has been written with caution and with the acknowledgement that there are things only God knows: the age of accountability of each child is one of them.

What do we mean by the age of accountability? In essence, it is the age at which a child becomes accountable to God and answerable to Him for his or her sin - see Matthew 12:36.

We may draw conclusions from the Bible and, based on those, come to some understanding of the factors that come into play, but there are no absolutes to indicate at which point during the formative years of a child the transition to spiritual accountability takes place.

The concept of the age of accountability is based on the belief that a young child is covered by God's grace until he becomes spiritually aware that he is either defying or resisting God.

This means that children will not be judged for their sin until they reach an age where their conscience has developed to the extent that they have a conviction of being sinful. Children get to know right from wrong by being taught (trained). Consequently, they start to understand the difference between being obedient and disobedient—being good or naughty. But that understanding is different from being aware that they are sinful and spiritually separated from God. A general sense of guilt and conviction of sin only starts to develop in the pre-adolescent years.

When a child has done something wrong, the uncomfortable feeling inside is that of fear rather than guilt. A child is afraid of being found out because of the unpleasant consequences that follow. However, after the matter is dealt with, there is no lingering feeling of guilt, and all is well again.

To see the heart of a child as Jesus sees it, we should heed His words; "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. I tell you the truth, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it."

Jesus was not implying that children are sinless, for, as descendants of Adam, everyone is born in sin<sup>(1)</sup>. Perhaps it is rather that the heart of a young child does not have the capacity to discern good from evil<sup>(2)</sup>—in some way like the hearts of Adam and Eve before they ate from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil—for by God's grace, a young heart is cocooned for a time in the simplicity and innocence of childhood.

<sup>(1)</sup> Psalm 51:5, <sup>(2)</sup> Deuteronomy 1:39, Isaiah 7:15

The Bible does not identify a specific age at which children become responsible to God for their actions. The Lord has made us unique and knows us better than we know ourselves. He who knows our hearts, knows at what stage each of us is ready to receive the freedom to choose our eternal destiny.

God is holy, but He is also gracious and fair. On that basis, the parents of a child that has died can take comfort in the fact that they will be with their child again one day, even as David stated when his child died (2 Samuel 12:23). This same grace would undoubtedly include those who, through a developmental disability, remain childlike and are unable to understand their sinful state and their need for a Savior.

We may ask, then, "How important is it for young children to receive Christ into their lives?" Children need to hear the Gospel. They need to know that they are sinners and that their sin displeases God. They need to be told that God loves them; that He sent Jesus to earth to take away our sin, and that we should ask Him for forgiveness. Regarding a child's commitment, we should understand that although the hearts of children may be good, spiritual maturity only develops as they grow older. A preschool child may

want Jesus to be her best friend. A few years later, she may understand more about what it means to follow Jesus and formally commit her life to Christ. As a teenager, she may recommit her life to the Lord as the Spirit convicts her of her rebellious attitude. These are stages of growth in faith and understanding, and we should encourage children to respond to the Lord's call whenever the Spirit touches their hearts (1 Samuel 2:26, 3:4).

Although a child may not fully understand what it means to follow the Lord, and perhaps get the words of the prayer wrong, we can leave the issue of their Salvation to the Lord's infinite wisdom; for ultimately, the simplicity of a child's relationship with the Lord can be summed up in the words of Peter; "Lord, you know all things; you know that I love you."

To summarize; the Lord will graciously include young children in His family until they reach a point where they have the ability to choose their own destiny. The responsibility of parents is to teach their children about the Lord and to pray with them, and when they reach a point where they want to commit their lives to the Lord, help them to do so (see Deuteronomy 11:18-19).