



Truth

On Tough Texts

WWW.THESCRPTUREALONE.COM

A MINISTRY OF GRACE BIBLE CHURCH

ISSUE 54 (January 2010)

Is There an “Age” of Accountability?

Selected Scriptures

A PASTOR FRIEND RECENTLY DROPPED ME an email asking my position on the “age of accountability.” This term refers to the concept that those who die before reaching an age at which time they can understand sin and salvation are automatically saved by God’s grace and mercy. As I shared with my pastor friend, this question is, indeed, one of those that opens the proverbial “can of worms,” but it is one that arises often and one of great importance.

A typical argument against this concept is: “The only ones under the blood of Christ are those whom God has chosen before the foundation of the world. (Eph. 1:4.)” While that is most certainly true, applying that here is little more than a straw man argument. How do we know, for example, that the more than one million babies murdered in this country every year by abortion are not elect?

On the other hand, we should also point out that Scripture does not explicitly state such an age by number. In other words, Scripture nowhere says, for example, “Each person is responsible at the age of 12.” It is interesting that the age of 12 or 13 (Jewish sources are not unanimous) was the age at which the Jews identified a child as being “an adult.” The consensus of opinion is that at 13 a boy become *bar mitzvah* (son of the Law), that is, he was now mature enough and responsible to keep God’s Law. It is, in fact, in keeping with that tradition we find the Lord Jesus in the Temple at the age of 12 (Lk. 2:42). All males of a mature age were required to appear in the Temple three times a year.

All this, however, is just that—tradition. There is no Scripture that states a specific age that a child is now

mature. While an argument can be made for “puberty” as being this age—as a child is now self aware and conscious of impulses, motives, drives, attitudes, and so forth, and probably capable of discerning sinfulness—Scripture does not say that. Besides, every child matures differently, so one child will be accountable earlier or later than another.

It is because of just such ambiguity that I personally do not like the term “age of accountability,” simply because there is no explicit age. I would submit, however, that there *is* a “point of accountability” and that point is different for each child. I do believe there is biblical precedent for this principle for four reasons.

David and His Son

The classic illustration, of course, is David in 2 Samuel 12:13–23. This passage recounts the death of the son born from David’s adultery with Bathsheba. In mental agony David pleaded with God to spare the child, but God’s judgment was final. No one could console or comfort him. He couldn’t eat, sleep, or even get up. The lessons in this are, of course, numerous.

Like turning on a light switch, however, David’s response to the child’s death changed from inconsolable despair to joyful expectation. He knew that while that child could not come to him, he would one day go to that child. In other words, David knew he was going to heaven and knew that his child was there as well.

What made David’s reaction even more significant was how surprised his attendants were at it. Why? Because it was the custom in the East to mourn and not

even leave the deceased for three or even four day (cf. Jn. 11:17), and relatives and friends would bring food and clothing. But David didn't act that way. There was an obvious assurance that "to be absent from the body [is] to be present with the Lord" (2 Cor. 5:8).

I have not read a single compelling reason to doubt this obvious, unambiguous meaning. In fact, one writer who disagrees with the position presented in this paper is really puzzling when he says that verse 23 simply means "David will someday die as his child did. The child will not return to him but he will go to the child. He is united with the child in the fact of death, which all humans must face." But we must remember that David is rejoicing in all this. Why would he be rejoicing in future death if he wasn't assured of heaven? More puzzling is that while the same writer goes on to say of verse 23, "The child was saved and went to be with the Lord and David would someday follow him as he goes into the presence of Christ upon the moment of his physical death," he then denies that this passage is a precedent for all other children. But we must ask, How did David know the child was saved? We would submit that it was because the child was, in fact, "innocent"—a term we will detail later—and that other parents can have the same assurance.

The beloved Puritan Matthew Henry, therefore, well brings out the comfort of verse 23:

Godly parents have great reason to hope concerning their children that die in infancy that it is well with their souls in the other world; for the promise is to us and to our seed, which shall be performed to those that do not put a bar in their own door, as infants do not. *Favores sunt ampliandi—Favours received should produce the hope of more.* God calls those his children that are born unto him; and, if they be his, he will save them. This may comfort us when our children are removed from us by death, they are better provided for, both in work and wealth, than they could have been in this world. We shall be with them shortly, to part no more.

We would also submit that David's rejoicing came from his deep theological understanding of God's mercy and grace. It is insisted by some that no person (including an infant) can go to heaven without receiving the message of Christ in the Gospel. But does not David's reaction indicate that he understood God's character in showing mercy to an "innocent" child? Is it not probable that God does, indeed, look upon an "innocent" infant with a special mercy and grace?

An Understanding of Sin

"Where there is no law there is no transgression" (Rom. 4:15), and "sin is not imputed when there is no law" (5:13). Therefore, how can a small child, especially

an infant, understand sin? And if they cannot understand sin, it is not imputed to them, and they are therefore innocent. This is what is meant by "the point of accountability." If one has not reached the point of understanding sin, he cannot be held accountable for it. Some might object, "Ignorance is no excuse," but we are not implying that it is. As we will see in a moment, there is a great difference between *ignorance* and *innocence*. This leads to a related principle.

Hearing by Faith

Paul clearly proclaims that a key truth of salvation is that "faith cometh by *hearing* and *hearing* by the word of God" (Rom. 10:17, emphasis added). *Hearing* is the noun form of the Greek verb *akouō*, from which we get such words as *acoustics* (the science of sound). It not only means to hear in general (e.g., Matt. 2:3), but also to hear with attention (e.g., Mark 4:3, "hearken"), understanding (e.g., Mark 4:33), and even obedience (Lk. 6:47; 8:21; 11:28; Jas 1:21–25). In the Septuagint, for example, *akouō* is used to translate the Hebrew *sāma*, as in Genesis 3:17, where God said Adam "hearkened unto the voice of thy wife" (cf. Isa. 6:9–10).

A graphic example of this word appears in the Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19–31); when the rich man asked Abraham to send Lazarus back from the dead to tell his five brothers about the torment of hell, Abraham answered, "They have Moses and the prophets; let them hear them" (v. 29). His point was piercing. As he goes on to explain, if they would not hear (obey) God's Law as revealed, they would not be convinced by someone who rose from the dead. That truth is proven every day as people reject the resurrected Lord Jesus.

We, therefore, submit, that since an infant cannot hear in this capacity, faith cannot come. As we know, even faith is a gift of God (Eph. 2:8; cf. Jn. 6:65; Acts 18:27; Phil. 1:29; see TOTT #15), but a gift that cannot be received is a gift that cannot be used. This leads us to one final key word.

The Meaning of "Innocent"

A word that is often overlooked, and even more often misunderstood, is the word *innocent*, which we've mentioned already. For example, Jeremiah 19:4 refers to how Judah had been drawn into pagan worship, including the practice of child sacrifice, having "filled this place [Valley of Hinnom] with the blood of innocents." The word *innocents* translates *nāqiy*, which means blameless, innocent, guiltless, free, exempted, clean (of hands), and even carries a judicial connotation. It is often attached to *blood*, as in Proverbs 6:17, where one of the seven abominations God hates are "hands that shed innocent blood" (the Hebrew *dām* refers to literal blood, whether animal or human, and is synonymous with "life"; Gen.

9:4). This paints the picture of an innocent person, a life that is clean and free from guilt. *Nāqiy* is, in fact, also used several times of someone being taken to court and found not guilty. We would submit, then, that this is a strong indication that such children, while not *unfallen*, are indeed *innocent*, that is, not guilty.

This should make it clear that there is a difference between *ignorance* and *innocence*. Ignorance is a choice, innocence is not. Ignorance is a lack of desire to know, innocence is an incapacity to know. It's, therefore, not a

child's ignorance that is the issue, but rather their innocence.

We would submit then that there are, indeed, more than valid reasons to rest in the thought that children who die before a point where they can hear and understand the Gospel are under God's special mercy and grace.

Dr. J. D. Watson
Pastor-Teacher
Grace Bible Church

Book Review: *The Church Effeminate and Other Essays*

By: John W. Robbins, et. al.

The instant I saw the title of this book, *The Church Effeminate and Other Essays* (Trinity Foundation, 2001), I was immediately *curious*. The cover art quickly gets your attention; it is the painting, *Mary Queen of Heaven*, by the unidentified Early Netherlandish painter Master of the Legend of Saint Lucy (fl. 1480–1510), who worked in Bruges, now a city in Belgium. When I then read the book description, I was *charmed*:

This anthology of the best that has been written on the purpose, structure, and function of the Christian church in the past five centuries is an indispensable resource for the twenty-first century Christian. The authors analyze and refute the errors of feminism, popery, clericalism, Episcopalianism, Erastianism, ecumenism, experientialism, revivalism, aestheticism, fundamentalism, and irrationalism; and they sketch a revolutionary blueprint for a Christian church modeled according to the Scriptures.

But when I then started reading this book, I was *captivated*. Here is a no holds barred examination of today's church from some of the greatest pens in her history.

Several books have been written in the last twenty years or so that address what their authors feel is the steady decline of the church. The "problem" with these (in the minds of critics, that is) is that they are just coming from the pens of men who are narrow-minded, intolerant, change-phobic, or just simply curmudgeonly in their old age. Such critics, however, refuse to take their heads out of the sand long enough to look honestly at what is happening today, which in turn in the result of the past. That's what this book is about. As the back cover describes with unflinching bravery:

The churches at the dawn of the new millennium bear little resemblance to the model institution authorized by Jesus Christ and founded by the

Apostles and Prophets. Its doctrine has been corrupted and perverted; its function, distorted; its government, subverted; so that today's churches hardly deserve the name "Christian" at all.

These 39 essays all call the Christian church back to its pristine purity and power—to be the spotless bride of Christ. The work of the Reformation was not completed in the Sixteenth Century, and the churches of the Twenty-first Century require an even more thorough Reformation. Far from being the Church Militant, today's church is the Church Effeminate.

Part 1, "The Church Belonging to Jesus Christ," consists of three chapters: "The Church" (Robbins); "The Apostolic Church" (Thomas Witherow); and "The True Church" (J.C. Ryle). While you might disagree with some points in these chapters because of your denominational distinctives and polity, the need for such foundation cannot be ignored, and that is the point to glean here.

Part 2, "The Purpose of the Church," begins with an article by Martyn Lloyd-Jones, whose book, *Preaching and Preachers*, changed my ministry some 26 years ago; in my personal opinion, this is one of the most important books a man can read in preparation for biblical ministry. The article from that work reprinted here is, "The Primacy of Preaching," a mandate that has all but vanished in our day. Following this article is a wonderful one by Jay Adams, "Preaching to the Heart," which examines the false notions of what "heart" refers to in Scripture and then challenges us to preach to what it really is. Other articles include: "The Fallibility of Ministers" (Ryle), "Scripture and the Ordering of Worship" (The Geneva Service Book of 1556), and others.

Part 3, "The Officers of the Church," was the heart of the book for me. Its first four chapters—"The Teachers

of the Church” (John Calvin); “The Presbyterian Doctrine of Ordination” (Gordon Clark); “Paul on Women Speaking in Church” (B. B. Warfield); and “The Ordination of Women” (Clark)—slowly build to the article from which the book title is taken: “The Church Effeminate,” by the book’s compiler (Robbins).

I will warn the reader upfront that this chapter might knock you for a loop. Most of what it says I had already discovered in my own study, but I have never read anything that puts it as succinctly and as articulately as does this essay. Much of my own study would have been rendered repetitive had I read this first. Robbins first documents the rise of Mary in Catholicism and the resulting feminizing of the church (not to mention the blasphemy of Christ). He then goes on to recount that “during the nineteenth century, there were three major movements in American Protestant churches that began the process of feminizing their leadership” (p. 238): the Sunday School Movement; the Foreign Missions Movement, and the Deaconess Movement (see TOTT #21). While Robbins’s discussion will definitely upset some readers, his history and arguments are unimpeachable. These movements, he insists, blatantly disregarded the clear biblical precedent of male leadership and have slowly eroded the leadership of the church.

The last two articles in Part 3 are: “On the Councils and the Church” (Luther) and “The Relation of Church and State” (Charles Hodge).

Part 4, “Autocrats in the Church,” includes articles such as: “The Roman Church-State” (Calvin); “The New Babylonian Captivity of the Church” (Godwell A. Chan); “The Reconstructionist Road to Rome” (Robbins); and others.

Part 5, “The Growth of the Church,” will also rattle some cages and challenge some of the sacred cows that have been venerated in supposedly orthodox Christian-

ity. The essence of these articles is again based on history and Scripture, challenging the so-called idea of “revival” and even what biblical evangelism is. These articles include: “Ought the Church to Pray for Revival?” (Herman Hanko); “The Great Revival of Religion, 1740-1745” (Charles Hodge); “The Power of the Word” (Luther); “What is Evangelism?” (Clark); and “Art and the Gospel” (Clark). I strongly urge the reader to read these before jumping to any conclusion, such as, “I already know what they’re going to say.”

The last section, Part 6, “The Purity and Peace of the Church,” includes the final 10 essays: “The Necessity of Reforming the Church” (John Calvin); “Idolatry” (Ryle); “Pharisees and Sadducees” (Ryle); “The Good Fight of Faith” (J. Gresham Machen); “Apostolic Fears” (Ryle); “The Separateness of the Church” (Machen); “The Sin of Signing Ecumenical Declarations” (Robbins); “Fundamentalism and Ecumenism” (Thomas M’Crie); “The Unity of the Church” (Calvin); and “The Church Irrational” (Robbins). The latter, for example, is another critical call to discernment, a steadily vanishing attribute of today’s church. As Robbins writes:

To fail to object when error is being taught and truth denied is to condone error by treating error and truth as if they were the same. If Christ is under attack and a Christian keeps silent, he has not maintained neutrality; he has denied Christ. (p. 660)

I simply cannot recommend this book highly enough. I have never seen a compendium on the church that equals it. It should be required reading, if not part of the core curriculum, in every Bible college and seminary that claims to care about the church, both its history and its contemporary meltdown. For those already in ministry, if you care at all about our Lord’s Church, you will get this book and devour it.

As Christ hath His saints in Nero’s court; so the devil his servants in the outer court of the visible Church. —William Gurnall

We read not that Christ ever exercised force but once, and that was to drive profane ones out of His Temple, and not to force them in. —John Milton

Like many ministries, TOTT is feeling the impact of these tough economic times. We would like to ask our readers for their prayer support in meeting these needs so that this ministry can continue.