



# GOOD HOPE MISSIONARY BAPTIST CHURCH

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## ACCOUNTABLE TO SALVATION

### SOUL COMPETENCY

What does “soul competency” mean? Various terms have been used for this concept, such as soul freedom, freedom of conscience and soul competency. Basically it means the God-given freedom and ability of persons to know and respond to God’s will.

Baptists emphasize that this ability is not a mere human characteristic, but a gift from God. In creation, God gave to persons the freedom to make choices. The Genesis account of creation makes crystal clear that this freedom carried with it awesome responsibility. We are responsible for our choices. God sets forth the consequences of good and bad decisions. If we exercise our freedom to obey him, we have life. If we use our freedom to deny him, the result is death (Genesis 1—2).

### **The Bible and Soul Competency**

The Bible is filled with examples of soul competency. The Bible considers it a fact that people have freedom of choice. The Bible also teaches that people are accountable to God for their choices.

For example, God’s gift of the Ten Commandments assumed the competency of human beings to understand them and the freedom to accept or to reject them. With acceptance came blessing, and with rejection came punishment. But in any case, competency and freedom of choice were assumed (Exodus 20:1-17).

The people of Israel were given choices, indicating a competency to make decisions. Joshua declared, “Choose ye this day whom ye will serve” (Joshua 24:15). This challenge would have been meaningless if the people had no competency or freedom to choose.

The heroes of the faith in the Old Testament, such as Elijah, Jeremiah and Isaiah, refused to give up their freedom of conscience to government rulers.

In various ways, the New Testament affirms soul freedom. Jesus assumed that individuals had a God-given competency to decide to follow him or not. He indicated that persons were free to believe or not to believe but were held accountable for their choice (John 3:16-21). Some believed and followed, but some did not (Matthew 19:16-22).

Jesus never coerced or forced persons to follow him and thus never violated the soul freedom of individuals.

Furthermore, leaders in the New Testament churches modeled soul competency. They never forced anyone to follow Jesus as Lord and Savior. In fact, they resisted religious and governmental authorities who tried to force them not to believe and speak for Jesus (Acts 5:17-42).

### **Ephesians 2:1-7**

Paul emphasized that apart from Christ there is no salvation from sin and death. Paul also stressed that each person possess the capacity to decide whether to follow Jesus or not. He indicated that the Ephesians Christians through faith in Christ had determined to leave the ways of the world (2:2-3), to respond to God's love in Christ, and to live lives worthy of heaven (2:4-7). Throughout this letter Paul indicated that the Ephesians had choices to make, such as his appeal to "live a life worthy of the calling you have received" (4:1).

Therefore a basic Baptist belief is "the doctrine of the soul's competency in religion under God." This belief is not an emphasis on human self-sufficiency. Rather, it stresses that the ability to decide – that is, the competency of the soul – is a gift from God. Thus we have freedom of choice because God has so gifted us. Furthermore the choice cannot be delegated. Each person must decide for herself or himself to follow Jesus or not. No one can make that choice for another. Baptists declare that no one should try to coerce another in a decision for Christ. Neither church nor government, Baptists believe, has any right to attempt to force a religious decision on anyone. Certainly Baptists seek to persuade people to follow Christ, but they realize that such commitment is a voluntary individual decision.

### **Attacks on Soul Competency**

The concept of soul competency has been attacked for various reasons. Some persons contend that such freedom would limit God's sovereignty. A Baptist response to this challenge has been that the sovereign Lord of the universe chose to create human beings with freedom of choice. The Bible clearly supports this view of human creation, holding forth as truth both the sovereignty of God and the soul freedom of humans.

Others have charged that the idea of soul competency leads to human arrogance and pride. It can, of course, but correctly understood, it should lead to humility. All human ability is a gift from God, including freedom of choice.

Another accusation is that the concept of soul competency results in subjectivism and hyper-individualism with the accompanying neglect of the importance of the community of believers. Of course, doctrines have the potential of being carried to an extreme that is harmful. But properly understood, soul freedom is exercised in the context of a community of believers.

### **Soul Competency and Other Baptist Beliefs**

Although soul competency may not be the Baptist distinctive, it is certainly foundational to other Baptist beliefs. The Baptist distinctive is the total of several precious beliefs and practices based solidly on the Bible.

However, soul competency does relate to most of the other beliefs of Baptists and indeed is foundational. For example, in regard to the authority of the Bible, Baptists insist that although Bible scholars, teachers and pastors can provide helpful insights, the individual is competent and responsible to read, interpret and apply the Scriptures for herself or himself under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Baptists believe that the Bible teaches that salvation from sin and death to forgiveness and eternal life comes only by a faith response to God's grace gift of his Son. Baptists further insist that persons are competent to respond to God's grace by faith and that such faith must be a free choice. Therefore, persons ought to be free from attempts by government or church officials to coerce faith or to hinder faith.

Believer's baptism, another major Baptist emphasis, assumes soul competency. Baptism is only for those who have freely responded by faith to God's grace gift of salvation. Baptism should never be forced on a person. Such an action would violate that person's God-given freedom of choice.

### **Baptists: Believer's Baptism**

"Therefore we are buried with him by baptism into death: that like as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life."

(Romans 6:4)

Ask most non-Baptists (and even some Baptists!) what is the Baptist distinctive and they likely will say, "Baptism of adults by immersion." Of course, there is no one Baptist distinctive. Why then do many people regard baptism as practiced by Baptists to be our distinctive? A possible reason is that Baptists are one of the very few denominations which practice believer's baptism by immersion and do so as a symbol of having been saved, not as a requirement for salvation.

In previous centuries, rulers of both state and church launched persecutions against Baptists for this practice. In the face of such harsh resistance, as well as the inconvenience of immersion, why have Baptists stubbornly held to the belief in and practice of believer's immersion? The answer is found in basic Baptist convictions.

### **Baptism Is Only for Believers**

The New Testament records that baptism always followed conversion, never preceded it, and was not necessary for salvation (Acts 2:1-41; 8:36-39; 16:30-33).

Since Baptists look to the Bible as our sole authority for faith and practice, we believe that baptism is only for those who have put their faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior.

Because of these convictions based on the Bible, Baptists do not baptize infants. This refusal has resulted in persecution. For example, Henry Dunster, the first president of Harvard University, was forced not only from his office but banished from Cambridge for refusing to have his infant children baptized in the state-supported church.

### **Infant Baptism**

Infant baptism is the practice of baptizing infants or young children. In theological discussions, the practice is sometimes referred to as paedobaptism or pedobaptism from the Greek *pais* meaning "child." The practice is sometimes contrasted with what is called "believer's baptism", or credobaptism, from the Latin word *credo* meaning "I believe," which is the religious practice of baptizing only individuals who personally confess faith in Jesus, therefore excluding underage children. Infant baptism is also called christening.

### **Age of Accountability**

The concept of the "age of accountability" is that children are not held accountable by God for their sins until they reach a certain age, and that if a child dies before reaching the "age of accountability," that child will, by the grace and mercy of God, be granted entrance into heaven. Is the concept of an age of accountability biblical? Is there such a thing as an "age of innocence"?

Frequently lost in the discussion regarding the age of accountability is the fact that children, no matter how young, are not "innocent" in the sense of being sinless. The Bible tells us that, even if an infant or child has not committed personal sin, all people, including infants and children, are guilty before God because of inherited and imputed sin. Inherited sin is that which is passed on from our parents. In Psalm 51:5, David wrote, "Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me." David recognized that even at conception he was a sinner. The very sad fact that infants sometimes die demonstrates that even infants are impacted by Adam's sin, since physical and spiritual death were the results of Adam's original sin.

What about babies and young children who never attain the ability to make this individual choice? The age of accountability is the concept that those who die before reaching the age of accountability are automatically saved by God's grace and mercy. The age of accountability is the belief that God saves all those who die never having possessed the ability to make a decision for or against Christ. One verse that may speak to this issue is Romans 1:20, "Since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse." According to this, mankind's guilt before God is based, in part, on the fact that people reject what they can "clearly see" of God's existence, eternity, and power. This leads to the question of children who have no faculty for "clearly seeing" or reasoning about God—wouldn't their natural incapacity to observe and reason provide them with an excuse?

Thirteen is the most common age suggested for the age of accountability, based on the Jewish custom that a child becomes an adult at the age of 13. However, the Bible gives no direct support to the age of 13 always being the age of accountability. It likely varies from child to child. A child has passed the age of accountability once he or she is capable of making a faith decision for or against Christ. Charles Spurgeon's opinion was that "a child of five can as truly be saved and regenerated as an adult."

With the above in mind, also consider this: Christ's death is presented as sufficient for all of mankind. First John 2:2 says Jesus is "the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world." This verse is clear that Jesus' death was sufficient for all sins, not just the sins of those who specifically have come to Him in faith. The fact that Christ's death was sufficient for all sin would allow the possibility of God's applying that payment to those who were never capable of believing.

Some see a link between the age of accountability and the covenant relationship between the nation of Israel and the LORD where no requirement was imposed on a male child to be included in the covenant other than circumcision, which was performed on the eighth day after his birth (Exodus 12:48–50; Leviticus 12:3).

The question arises, "Does the inclusive nature of the Old Covenant apply to the church?" On the day of Pentecost, Peter said, "Repent, and each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off, as many as the Lord our God will call to Himself" (Acts 2:38–39, NAS). The word children here (*teknon* in Greek) means "child, daughter, son." Acts 2:39 indicates that forgiveness of sins is available to one and all (cf. Acts 1:8), including future generations. It does not teach family or household salvation. The children of those who repented were also required to repent.

Although it is possible that God applies Christ's payment for sin to those who cannot believe, the Bible does not specifically say that He does this. Therefore, this is a subject about which we should not be adamant or dogmatic. God's applying Christ's death to those who cannot believe would seem consistent with His love and mercy. It is our position that God applies Christ's payment for sin to babies and those who are mentally handicapped, since they are not mentally capable of understanding their sinful state and their need for the Savior, but again we cannot be dogmatic. Of this we are certain: God is loving, holy, merciful, just, and gracious. Whatever God does is always right and good, and He loves children even more than we do.

#### **References:**

The Bible, King James Version and GotQuestions.org