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Are Children Born Sinners?

By Edyta Jankiewicz, Ph.D. cand.*



Although Adventists reject a purely Augustinian conception of original sin, the official teaching of the church affirms that Adam's sin "resulted in the condition of estrangement from God in which every human being is born. This estrangement involves an inherent tendency to commit sin."^[1] This must, of necessity, include children. Despite much discussion regarding the nature of humanity, however, little of the contemporary Adventist debate has pertained directly to children; thus, Adventism does not have a complete or systematic theology of the nature of children.

Early Adventists had diverse views on the innocence vs. sinfulness of infants. James White maintained that Adventists had "no settled faith on this point,"^[2] and that, given that the Scriptures were silent on this topic, "no possible good" could come from such discussions.^[3] White's counsel did not, however, deter others from commenting on this subject. Uriah Smith suggested that the law had "no claim on infants; for they never transgressed it,"^[4] and thus, he believed that infants would be saved even though they "[died] in Adam" like the rest of humanity.^[5] Similarly, G. W. Morse suggested that children who died prior to reaching the age of accountability would be saved, as they had no sins for which they were personally accountable.^[6] A significant contribution to the discussion on the nature of children transpired within the debate about infant baptism. In a similar vein to the Anabaptists of the sixteenth century, J. H. Waggoner suggested that infants, who had committed no sin, did not need baptism for the purpose of washing away original sin, and were saved through "the Gospel."^[7] He wrote, "The death of Christ avails for them without conditions, because they have committed no sin."^[8] This teaching appears to have been affirmed by Ellen White who seems to suggest that even the infants of unsaved parents might be saved:

"As the little infants come forth immortal from their dusty beds, they immediately wing their way to their mothers' arms. They meet again nevermore to part. But many of the little ones have no mother there. We listen in vain for the rapturous song of triumph from the mother. The angels receive the motherless infants and conduct them to the tree of life."^[9]

The Seventh-day Adventist Church has traditionally heeded James White's advice, and has adopted no official position on the innocence of infants and children; however, although on the one hand Adventists affirm that every human being is born with an innate tendency to evil, on the other hand, they reject a purely Augustinian notion of original sin. This potentially presents Adventist with two theological challenges. First, if children are not guilty of original sin and thus not baptized as infants, what is their status in the church? Should they "be considered simply as pagans, until they make a positive voluntary commitment?"[10] Should unbaptized children be just spectators during worship services, or should they be taught alongside the adults and occasionally called on to serve, as was the practice in the early church? Should they partake in the celebration of the Lord's Supper, or should they be excluded on the basis that "that which is holy" should not be given "to the dogs"? [11] This lack of theological clarity regarding the status of unbaptized SDA children has resulted in their exclusion from participation in the Lord's Supper, despite the assertion that Adventists practice "open Communion." [12]

Second, if children are born with "tendencies to evil"[13] but are not morally responsible until some later age when they are considered accountable for actual sin, "one is left with the conundrum of discovering what that age is." [14] Although this poses a theological challenge for Adventists, the concept of an age of accountability does appear to be grounded in the Scriptures, which teach that "[r]egarding matters of salvation," children are different from adults.[15] The apostle Paul recognized this differentiation when he wrote: "When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became a man, I put childish ways behind me" (1 Cor. 13: 11). Several Old Testament passages also make a distinction between children and adults, based on developmental differences in moral reasoning and discernment. Moses speaks of children as those "who today do not yet know right from wrong" (Deut. 1:39).[16] Similarly, Isaiah speaks of a time in children's lives when they do not yet know "enough to reject the wrong and choose the right" (Isaiah 7:16).

Early Adventists also referred to a "time of [. . .] personal accountability"[17] or "years of accountability." [18] Although they did not identify an exact age, Ellen White did suggest that "[c]hildren of eight, ten or twelve years" were "old enough to be addressed on the subject of personal religion." [19] Although it may not be possible to identify an exact age of accountability for all children, it is evident that, as they grow, children are increasingly capable of self-centered actions that are hurtful to others, as well as to themselves. Often, even Christian parents see these actions only within a context of the psycho-social and developmental limitations of children; however, it is important that adults be aware of children's capacity for sin, and, in developmentally appropriate ways, "help them to understand the impact of their actions," and, over time, to "accept growing [moral] responsibility for them." [20] Ellen White concurs, stating that even "very young children may have correct views of their state as sinners and of the way of salvation through Christ." [21] Within this context, however, it is also important to remember that the sinfulness of children cannot be equated with the sinfulness of adults. Children "do not need as much help to love God and neighbor." Neither have they yet "developed [the] negative thoughts and feelings that reinforce [the] destructive behaviors" of adults. Thus, children should be treated gently. [22]

[1] *SDA Encyclopedia*, 1966 ed., s.v "Sin;" cf., John M. Fowler, "Sin," in *Handbook of Seventh-day Adventist Theology*, ed. Raoul Dederen (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 2000), 265; Aecio E. Cairus, "The Doctrine of Man," in *Handbook of Seventh-day Adventist Theology*, ed. Raoul Dederen (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 2000), 216-217, 226.

[2] James White, "Questions and Answers," *Review and Herald* 21, No. 4 (Dec. 23, 1862), 29.

[3] James White, "Matthew 18:1-6," *Review and Herald* 18, No. 21 (Oct 22, 1861), 164.

[4] Uriah Smith, "The Resurrection," *Review and Herald* 62, No. 3 (Jan 20, 1885), 48.

[5] Uriah Smith, "To Correspondents," *Review and Herald* 47, No. 17 (April 27, 1876), 133.

[6] G. W. Morse, "Scripture Questions," *Review and Herald* 65, No. 32 (Aug 7, 1888), 506.

[7] J. H. Waggoner, "Thoughts on Baptism," *Review and Herald* 51, No.12 (March 21, 1878), 89.

[8] J. H. Waggoner, "Infantile Logic," *Signs of the Times* 5, No. 15 (April 10, 1879), 116.

[9] E. G. White, *Selected Messages 2* (Hagerstown: Review and Herald Publishing Association), 260.

[10] G. Vandervelde, "Believers Church Ecclesiology as Ecumenical Challenge," in *The Believers Church: A Voluntary Church*, ed. W. H. Brackney (Kitchener, ON: Pandora), 213, quoted in Holly Catterton Allen, "Theological Perspectives on Children in the Church: Anabaptist/Believers Church," in *Nurturing Children's Spirituality* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2008), 118.

[11] The earliest surviving church manual, dating from early in the second century AD says, "(And) let no one eat or drink from your eucharist [sic] except those baptized in the name of [the] Lord, for the Lord has likewise said concerning this: 'Do not give what is holy to the dogs.'" *Didache 9:5* in *The Didache: Text, Translation, Analysis, and Commentary*, tr. and ed. Aaron Milavec (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2004), 23. [Note from Web Editor: See also several English translations of the *Didache* [here](#).]

[12] *Seventh-day Adventist Church Manual* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Assn., 2005), 85. A discussion was initiated in 2007 on the pages of *Ministry* magazine regarding children's participation in the Lord's Supper. Two opposing views were presented and the editors left readers to draw their own conclusions. See Darius Jankiewicz, "The Lord's Supper and Children's Participation," *Ministry*, June 2007, 11-15, and Robert Johnston, "Unbaptized Children and Communion," *Ministry*, June 2007, 15.

[13] E. G. White, *The Ministry of Healing* (Mountain View: Pacific Press Publishing Association), 373.

[14] Allen, 118.

[15] Klaus Issler, "Biblical Perspectives on Developmental Grace for Nurturing Children's Spirituality," in *Children's Spirituality: Christian Perspectives, Research, and Applications*, ed., Donald Ratcliff (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2004), 54.

[16] Moses spoke these words to the Israelites when predicting that, with the exception of their children, as well as Joshua and Caleb, they would all die in the wilderness. Interestingly, *Numbers 14:28-31* confirms that all those twenty years and older did indeed die without entering the Promised Land, which would seem to imply that those below the age of twenty were considered those who "did not yet know right from wrong" (*Deut. 1:39*).

[17] G. W. Morse, "Scripture Questions," *Review and Herald* 65, No. 32 (Aug. 7, 1888), 506.

[18] Ellen White, *Early Writings* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1945), 278.

[19] Ellen White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol.1 (Mountain View: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1948), 400.

[20] Catherine Stonehouse and Scottie May, *Listening to Children on the Spiritual Journey: Guidance for Those Who Teach and Nurture* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010), 17.

[21] Ellen White, *Child Guidance* (Hagerstown: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1982), 491.

[22] Bunge, "Historical Perspectives on Children in the Church," 47.



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