WHEN DOES AN INTELLECTUALLY IMPAIRED CHILD BECOME ACCOUNTABLE?

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Twelve-year-old Missy watched as her younger sister Becky walked exuberantly down the steps into the baptismal font. She saw the shiver of excitement that possessed her at the first touch of the water. She listened to her father pronounce the words of the baptismal prayer. And then as eight-year-old Becky came up from the water "in newness of life," Missy turned to her mother and said, "I want to be baptized."

From Missy, in whom the ability to use vocal language was almost totally lacking, the statement was miraculous. And it broke her mother's heart. Missy's parents had already discussed the matter with their bishop. And he had told them that he could not recommend her for baptism. Missy was retarded and did not need baptism — or so the bishop asserted.

But how do you tell a child who wants to be like others that it is unnecessary for her? No matter how you put it, it will sound like a punishment. If baptism is a blessing for Becky, then it must be just as much a blessing for Missy. But Missy can't have it. Missy must not be worthy. It must be that the Lord does not love Missy.

This true story is being reenacted in many places throughout the Church.

But just as frequently children who are as handicapped as Missy are being baptized, either as a matter of course when they turn eight or later at the discretion of the parents. The bishops who make these decisions are honest men acting in good conscience, according to the dictates of their own understanding.

The reason for the discrepancy in treatment is that the instructions regarding the baptism of handicapped children are not clear enough for a bishop to be certain how to proceed. So he is forced to place his own interpretation upon those instructions. Since bishops come to their jobs from a variety of vocational and educational backgrounds, it is not surprising that their opinions should differ markedly.

Nor is it difficult to understand why the Church has failed to develop a clear-cut policy regarding the baptism of these children. The question is not an easy one to resolve.

How do we determine when a child becomes accountable?

The Scriptures speak of a child arriving "unto the years of accountability" (D.&C. 20:71). And parents are instructed to see that their children are baptized "when eight years old" (D.&C. 68:25). Obviously not all eight-year-olds are equal in their capabilities. Some mature more slowly and others more rapidly. There is nothing magical about the child's eighth birthday which suddenly makes him accountable, except according to the law as defined by the Lord.

Still, the nagging question plagues us: If a child is severely retarded, is he accountable at the age of eight? And if we were to baptize him, and he were not accountable, would the Lord condemn him for his mistakes?

More to the point, what is accountability?

The few brief scriptural passages which refer to accountability speak of our responsibility to control our own behavior and to repent of any mistakes which we may make (D.&C. 20:71, 29:47, 101:78; Moroni 8:10). They do not suggest any need for an elaborate understanding of the gospel, but only a willingness to rectify unacceptable behavior. This concept is further substantiated in the following scriptural instructions given to the missionaries:

> And of tenets thou shalt not talk, but thou shalt declare repentance and faith on the Savior, and remission of sins by baptism, and by fire yea, even the Holy Ghost. (D.&C. 19:31; see also D.&C. 11:9 and 18:14)

Clearly the prospective convert may be baptized with a minimum of knowledge concerning gospel principles. He does not have to be a scholar or a student of the Scriptures. He needs no knowledge of Church history. He does not even have to know how to pronounce the name of the prophet. All of these understandings enhance one's position in the Church and make membership more meaningful, but they are not necessary prerequisites for baptism.

The Scriptures make it plain that a certain amount of understanding and self-control are required, but anyone who has had any association with retarded children knows that they frequently understand things which they

cannot communicate through language. This is suggested in their behavior, not through their having answered specific questions that may be put to them. And only after an extensive observation of the child's behavior can we begin to get an idea of his ability to govern his own actions, to alter his course if it proves to be in error, and to avoid sin or show remorse and repentance if he fails to avoid it. Probably no one other than the parents, or in rare instances a perceptive teacher, has the time to make this kind of in-depth study of the child's behavior.

The usual method of determining a child's worthiness for baptism, the bishop's interview, is of little value with these children. It places them at an unfair disadvantage, because almost universally they are severely handicapped in verbal ability. They simply cannot answer the questions, even though they may understand them.

If only there were some simple test that could be employed to measure accountability. Unfortunately, an intelligence test wouldn't work. Whatever it is that intelligence tests measure, it has little to do with accountability (or the ability to be responsible for one's own actions). Indeed, some of the most irresponsible of people are highly intelligent mentally ill individuals. These tests were designed to measure the academic skills required for success in school. Most intelligence tests are highly language-oriented. And a variety of abilities, including various types of creativity, social aptitude, and moral maturity are not touched by most intelligence tests.

In an article entitled "The Dynamics of Mental Retardation" (Public Health Service Publication No. 1267, 1964), Dr. Gunner Dybwad lists as a major source of confusion the tendency to think of a child with a particular mental age — determined by an intelligence test — as if he were "just like a child of that chronological age." There are a multitude of differences. Among other things, the adult retarded person with a mental age of five will be vastly more responsible for his own actions than will the normal five-year-old. This is particularly true if the retarded person has been to school.

The validity of the test scores themselves is considerably in doubt at the lower levels because the test items require skills other than those which are supposedly being measured. Many brain damaged children cannot be tested due to language and motor problems which invalidate the results. Not infrequently, IQs below 50 will be reported more in the nature of estimates than as absolute scores.

Another factor which is often overlooked is that two retarded children with identical IQ scores can be as different as any two children chosen at random from the general population, even in the skills which are measured by the test. A mongoloid child, for example, may have a generally low level of performance on all of the abilities tested. A brain damaged child, on the other hand, may demonstrate surprisingly high ability in some isolated areas, such as memory for numbers, and be profoundly retarded in others. The IQ score is based on the total number of items passed, with no regard for which skills they measure. Some experts feel that the "spread" of the scores is more significant than the overall IQ.

But the most valid argument against the use of intelligence tests as a determiner of accountability is that they simply were not designed to measure moral responsibility.

If the intelligence test will not work, then what shall we use? The limitations of the interview have already been discussed.

Extended observation of the child's behavior seems to be the only reasonable answer. But there are dangers even in this. Neurological damage can cause a multitude of behavior problems which are totally beyond the control of the child, and which ought not to be scored against him in our appraisal of his accountability. The grand mal attacks of the epileptic are well known. Less well known are the similar seizures which occur in many brain damaged children. The behavior of these children is typically cyclical. And there will be times when the disease takes over. This may come on suddenly, just as it does for the epileptic. The child will appear to be fully conscious. He may go through a "fit" of crying. He may strike out blindly at whatever happens to be in his way. He may kick and scream. He may bite himself or bang his head against the wall. The lay observer would call it a tantrum. But it is a product of forces within the child's impaired nervous system and is not subject to his control.

We do not deny baptism to the blind because they cannot see, nor to the deaf because they cannot hear. We should not deny it to the language impaired merely because they cannot communicate their understanding vocally. And we should not deny baptism to the brain damaged individual who may be fidgety or noisy or unresponsive to certain kinds of stimuli on the basis of this behavior alone. For this is as much a physiological problem as is blindness or lameness.

Accountability is the power of the person to govern his behavior within the framework of his own world of experience and limited by his physiological handicaps.

Within that range of behavior which is not dictated by the brain damage, the child will be able to choose between right and wrong and to alter his course through repentance. To that extent he will be accountable. And it is this area of behavior which the observer must learn to appraise in order to determine the child's readiness for baptism.

It has already been suggested that the parents are in the best position to do this.

Still there are those who seem to feel that they are doing the parents a favor by taking the decision out of their hands and passing the buck — so to speak — to the bishop. Such reasoning fails to take into account the peculiar psychological attachment which the majority of these parents have for their handicapped children. The need to be responsible is so deep-seated in their personalities that it is psychologically impossible for them to abdicate from it.

The intense resentment which can build up in the mind of a parent when the choice is removed from him can lead to acts of rebellion and even apostasy. One such example came to my attention several years ago when

the president of my local seventies quorum approached me after learning that I had a retarded child in my home. "The Church won't let me baptize my son," he said, with tears in his eyes. Later he confided to me that he had seriously considered taking the boy to a secluded place in the mountains, where he could perform the ordinance in secret.

Now, was this man deluded? Was he lacking in testimony? Was he ready to run off half-cocked for no good reason? No. He was a man whose keen sense of responsibility for his handicapped son would not let him rest. And because he believed the gospel ordinances to be efficacious, he could not find peace until his son had the blessing of baptism.

From my own experience both as a parent and as a teacher of retarded children, I am forced to the conclusion that the dangers of baptizing these children too early and of giving them too much responsibility too soon are vastly outweighed by the dangers of waiting too long. This is particularly true of the child who is living at home and who is in contact with other children of baptismal age. People have traditionally expected too little of these children.

The children who are most frequently denied baptism fall into the group who for educational purposes have been classified as "trainable." These are children with IQs below 55. Dr. Dybwad (quoted earlier) says of them, "It is this group which has astonished even the most experienced mental retardation practitioners by their capacity for achievement." Recent trends in education demonstrate unequivocally that they can accomplish things that were formerly considered to be impossible for them. Indeed, they can do almost anything we *expect* them to do. Educators today are recommending that we place them under considerable pressure to achieve. This is not to say that we will ask them to compete with so-called "normal" children in academic things. But we will expect them to compete with themselves and to be responsible for their own actions. Isn't that, after all, what accountability is all about?

By far the most important consideration in all of this is the mental and moral health of the child. The handicapped child who is forced to sit back and watch younger children enter the Church through baptism while he is denied membership can only conclude that he is somehow not wanted. He is somehow not worthy. He is somehow not of value in the sight of the Lord.

Only through the kind of identification which comes through membership can these children feel a part of the Church. We must learn to trust them . . . for if we do not, we may lose them. Perhaps, after all, the wishes of the child ought to be the deciding factor. What right do we have to place a ceiling on his progress or to damn him to a life of infancy and dependency?

My feeling is that if a child is physically able to be baptized, we ought to bring him into full fellowship with us in the Church when he reaches the age of eight, or soon thereafter. Certainly if he expresses a desire for baptism, we ought to give it to him. If a delay is justified, it should come about only with the consent of the parents. It is true that the bishop must sanction the decision. He must fill out the recommend. But difficult as the ultimate de-

cision about baptism may be, it will be more palatable to the parents if they make the choice themselves. Bishops who try to ease the blow with their own arbitrary decisions may find that they are making enemies rather than friends.

And the tendency to hesitate, to shelter these children too long, is certainly no act of kindness. Progress is an eternal principle, for the handicapped as well as the so-called "normal."