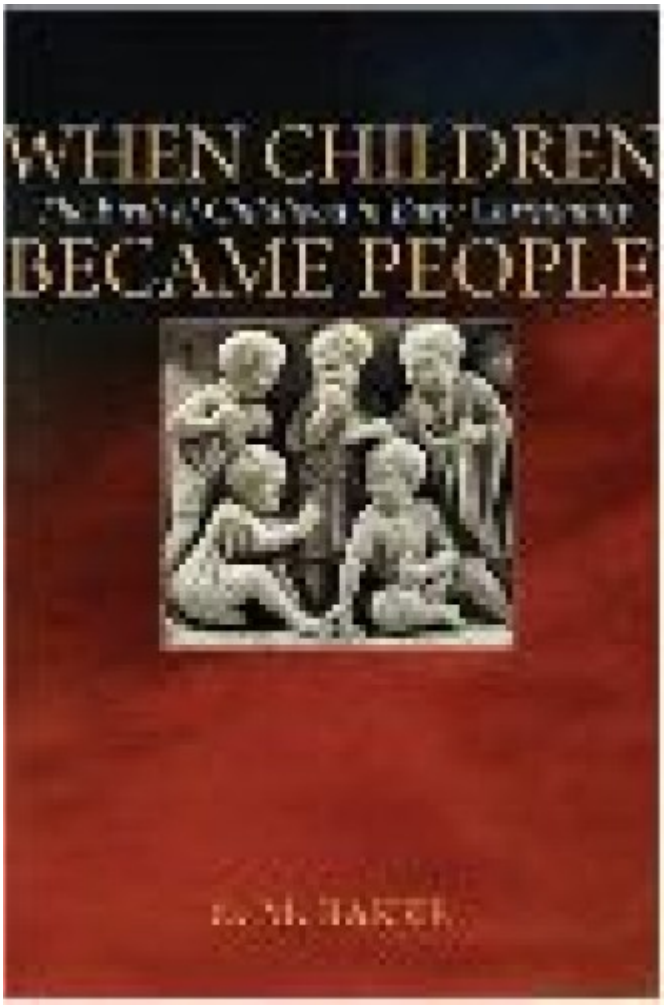
When Children Became People

reviewed by Randy Wood in the August 9, 2005 issue

In Review



When Children Became People: The Birth of Childhood in Early Christianity

O.M. Bakke
Fortress

Abortion. Pederasty. Homosexuality. Christian schools. The sacraments. These pressing issues could fill the agenda of any contemporary Christian congregation or denomination. As O. M. Bakke tells us, they are also of paramount concern to theologians and commentators on the life of children in Christianity's earliest centuries.

Bakke, associate professor of church history at the School of Mission and Theology in Stavanger, Norway, invites us to look back into childhood as it was experienced in the ancient world and to explore what Christians thought about the nature of children and the treatment of them in families and society. *When Children Became People* should be appreciated as both a work of church history and a major contribution to the growing field of family history.

Bakke skillfully leads us through the theological and devotional literature of that earlier age as he argues that Christianity radically challenged traditional Greco-Roman conceptions of children and childhood and profoundly elevated the importance of both. Indeed, when one juxtaposes Cicero's famous dictum that "the thing itself [a child] cannot be praised, only its potential" with Christ's gospel directive to "become like little children," it is easy to see that Bakke might be on to something. Though the book's title overstates Bakke's conclusions, this journey through ancient Christian understandings of childhood, and therefore parenthood, is well worth the trip. Christian parents who occasionally feel as if they are drowning in a secular, individualistic and materialistic culture will find this book spiritually refreshing as well as intellectually stimulating and academically viable.

Bakke's argument that Christianity brought forth a reconceptualization of childhood rests on three propositions set forth by patristic authors. First, until the Pelagian controversy of the fifth century, the patristic writers argued that the New Testament presents small children as exemplars of Christian devotion because of their innocence and purity. John Chrysostom, for example, saw very young children as "uncorrupted by worldly values" and indifferent "toward status, wealth, and poverty." Thus, rather than representing mere potential for worldly success, infants and very young children were models of everything Christ sought in mature disciples.

Second, nearly all the church fathers agreed that by the time children were walking and talking they had developed strong passions and rational faculties. Children

became “moral subjects” at a very early age. As children grew up, they increased in moral understanding until, according to Augustine, they reached full moral responsibility in the teen years.

Third, most of the church fathers discussed the nature and value of children from the perspective of a theology of creation. Because the created order is good, and both children and adults are created in the image of God, children must have as much spiritual dignity as adults. Early Christian thinkers saw children as “individuals with a dignity and a nature that made them (just as much as adults) the recipients of God’s salvation.”

What were the results of this reconceptualization? Weaving his way through three centuries of material, Bakke outlines the Christian rejection of common Greco-Roman practices: abortion, infanticide, *expositio* (abandonment of infants) and pederasty. “From the Didache and Barnabus onward, our Christian sources throughout the pre-Constantinian period reject these phenomena [abortion, infanticide and expositio] and condemn those who practice them.” Interestingly, in the post-Constantinian age Western thinkers presented a moderated view of abortion, clearly considering it “morally reprehensible” but not an act of “killing” until the fetus reached full form. Eastern thinkers offered no such “stage of fetus” qualification. Bakke makes it clear that the Christian critique of these practices did not signify merely a continuation of traditional pagan moralist concerns; rather, the Christian critique was a radical “intensification.” The attack on pederasty was likewise severe.

Just as completely as Christianity rejected abortion, infanticide, expositio and pederasty, it wholeheartedly embraced the importance of the “upbringing” of children. As Bakke summarizes the thought of John Chrysostom: “The definitive goal [of upbringing] is to equip children for the kingdom of God.” Not only were the souls of “morally responsible” children at stake, but parents who failed to equip their children were in jeopardy of losing their salvation as well. Childhood and parenthood were substantively refocused on the family as parents took on the primary task of training, in Chrysostom’s imagery, “athletes of Christ.” It can even be speculated that Christianity increased the “emotional bonds” between parents and children, although this conclusion awaits more hard evidence.

Bakke reminds his readers that Christianity did not radically transform every element of life associated with childhood and that early Christians did make use of

important traditional practices. Despite their own admonitions that contact between pagan children and Christian children should be limited, few patristic authorities advocated wholesale abandonment of classical schooling. Even Tertullian, who famously distinguised between Athens and Jerusalem, admitted that classical schooling could be useful even if it was dangerous. Similarly, since obedience and submission were considered key Christian virtues, the Greco-Roman household codes were maintained. Christian children participated in Christian worship in a way that paralleled the pagan children's participation in pagan worship. Central to Bakke's argument, however, is the contention that children were not just involved in singing and reading during worship but were also included in the core mysteries of the faith by means of infant baptism and participation in the Eucharist. Because children had been baptized and were partakers in Holy Communion, they were full members of the community of believers, not merely potential members.

Bakke's understanding of children's participation in the sacraments is crucial. His clearly presented case for their partaking in communion is convincing, but his case for the practice of infant baptism is less so. He argues that the New Testament texts describing the baptism of entire households are inconclusive with regard to the inclusion of children, but insists that the concept of the household in the New Testament does not exclude children and that those texts therefore do not necessarily exclude children from baptism.

The difficulty is that the first discussions of infant baptism in patristic literature do not appear until the early third century. According to Bakke, these references to infant baptism carry the assumption that it had been a normal practice in the period of the writers' historical memory. Thus when Tertullian argued against infant baptism in about AD 200, he was presumably attempting to persuade an audience that had been practicing it for decades. Bakke concludes that infant baptism was the dominant practice until the early fourth century, when the tradition of postponing baptism emerged. By the middle of the fifth century in the West, and perhaps a few decades later in the East, the church had returned to the "ancient" practice of baptizing infants.

It is unlikely that Bakke will convince all readers that infant baptism was the dominant practice in ancient times, but his overall argument that the church saw Christian children as real subjects with "needs of their own" does not hinge on proving that they engaged in the practice. Whether parents were raising their baptized children to be good Christians or were preparing their unbaptized children

for a future baptism, Bakke’s point is the same: the spiritual development of children was a crucial concern of both parents and the church in the early Christian community.

From beginning to end, Bakke makes his readers aware that his sources are nearly all prescriptive rather than descriptive. He is not necessarily describing the way Christian families and children experienced life but is explaining how commentators thought the upbringing of children was or should be. Bakke successfully delineates the ideals of the early church and carefully and convincingly speculates as to its realities. Perhaps it is too much to say that childhood was born in early Christianity, but Bakke’s account is ultimately satisfying.