

MATT FRIEDMAN

*A Macarian-Wesleyan Theology of Mission*

**Abstract**<sup>1</sup>

In this paper, I will begin by providing an outline of the development of the theology of union with God, or *theosis*. I will have a particular focus on fourth-century Syrian monk Macarius-Symeon, whose *Fifty Spiritual Homilies* had an influence on early Pietism and early Methodism. From there, I will seek to demonstrate how John and Charles Wesley, as well as their colleagues such as John Fletcher in the first generation of Methodist leadership, sought to critically fold this understanding into their own teaching regarding justification, sanctification and the ultimate goal of those who walk in union with God in Christ. Finally, this is integrated into a theology of mission in which this union with God is meant to be lived out individually and in community in a manner in which the *missio Dei* is extended in witness to the entire world.<sup>2</sup>

**Key words:** Macarius, Wesley, theosis, union, sanctification, mission

**Matt Friedman** is a Ph.D. student in Intercultural Studies at Asbury Theological Seminary in Wilmore, Kentucky.

And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory into another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.

2 Corinthians 3:18 (ESV)

### Theosis in the Patristic Period

In his landmark work, *On the Incarnation of the Word of God*, Athanasius of Alexandria famously wrote that, “through the Incarnation of the Word the Mind whence all things proceed has been declared, and its Agent and Ordainer, the Word of God Himself. He, indeed, assumed humanity that we might become God.”<sup>3</sup> Although it sounds somewhat startling to many modern Christians, the doctrine of *theosis* to which this refers was rather widespread in particularly (though not exclusively) the Eastern Church,<sup>4</sup> and such ideas are found expressed clearly in post-biblical Christianity as early as the late second century. Writing in his *Against Heresies*, Irenaeus declares, “following the only true and steadfast Teacher, the Word of God, our Lord Jesus Christ, who did, through His transcendent love, become what we are, that He might bring us to be even what He is Himself!”<sup>5</sup>

Based upon texts such as 2 Peter 1:4, at its heart it is meant to express a transformational relationship with God in which the believer is inhabited and empowered by God in a relationship of love. In addition to the 2 Peter passage cited above, other Scripture passages often referred to in connection with *theosis* include Galatians 2:20, Psalm 82:1 (along with the connected passage in John 10:34-35, where Jesus is quoting this), 2 Corinthians 3:7-4:6 and 1 John 3:2. Indeed, one of the strengths of a properly understood concept of *theosis* is that it is rooted in the Scriptures.

The image in the passage above quoted from 2 Corinthians, part of the broader passage in 2 Corinthians 3:7-4:6, has had powerfully moved many, in particular a Syrian monk who scholars now refer to as Macarius-Symeon.<sup>6</sup> Alexander Golitzen goes so far as to suggest that the “whole Macarian corpus is like an extended meditation on this scriptural passage,” bringing together “all the essentials of what he wants to say to his monks.”<sup>7</sup> Golitzen goes on to demonstrate how this passage contains so many of the classic contrasts relating to themes of “change, alteration, or transfiguration...which occurs in the Christian soul through the indwelling Spirit, and of the glory (*daxa*) of God in which the soul and ultimately the body are called to share.”<sup>8</sup>

In the eighteenth of his *Homilies*, addressing those who have “this treasure in earthen vessels” in 2 Cor. 4:7, he speaks of “the treasure which they were

deemed worthy to possess in this material life within themselves, the sanctifying power of the Spirit,” and going on to exclaim that this is “in order that we may be empowered to walk in all of his commands without blame.”<sup>9</sup> The homily continues with increasing vitality with each section, until it reaches a crescendo of sorts towards the end, describing one who has been enveloped in God in the fulfillment of *theosis*,

Finally, when a person reaches the perfection of the Spirit, completely purified of all passions and united to and interpenetrated by the Paraclete Spirit in an ineffable communion, and is deemed worthy to become spirit in a mutual interpenetration with the Spirit, then it becomes all light, all eye, all spirit, all joy, all repose, all happiness, all love, all compassion, all goodness and kindness. As in the bottom of the sea, a stone is everywhere surrounded by water, so such persons as these are totally penetrated by the Holy Spirit. They become like to Christ, putting on the virtues of the power of the Spirit with a constancy. They interiorly become faultless and spotless and pure.<sup>10</sup>

Especially for many Western Christians, the most surprising language in this passage is that of *interpenetration* (*perechoreisis*), which is most frequently used to describe the relationship between the *hypostases* within the Godhead one with another<sup>11</sup> as well as of Christ’s human and divine natures.<sup>12</sup> This is *participation* in God; not a confusion or intermingling of natures, but rather the “human nature is transfigured by being permeated with the loving, self-giving action of God.”<sup>13</sup>

Another enlightening aspect of Golitzen’s essay is the connection between the idea of *theosis* not only with Hellenic Christian faith, as is usually emphasized, but also to traditions and emphases which point to Syrian and Jewish influences in the development of understanding of *theosis* generally, and in particular in the writing and thought of Macarius-Symeon.<sup>14</sup>

Golitzen is not the first scholar to notice this, however. A century ago one scholar noted the similarities in Macarius-Symeon and that of the mystical tradition of the *Merkabah* speculation on Ezekiel’s vision,<sup>15</sup> describing how the first of Macarius-Symeon’s *Homilies* opens with a description of Ezekiel’s vision and “reads like a programme of his mystical faith.”<sup>16</sup> Following the overview of Ezekiel’s vision, Macarius-Symeon begins seeking to explain it in the language of *theosis* which one finds again and again throughout the *Homilies*. Here he says,

For the prophet was viewing the mystery of the human soul that would receive its Lord and would become his throne of glory. For the soul that is deemed to be judged worthy to participate in the light of the Holy Spirit by becoming his

throne and habitation, and is covered with the beauty of ineffable glory of the Spirit, becomes all light, all face, all eye. There is no part of his soul that is not full of the spiritual eyes of light. For the soul has no imperfect part but is in every part on all sides facing forward and covered with the beauty of the light of Christ...

Thus the soul is completely illumined with the unspeakable beauty of the glory of the light of the face of Christ and is perfectly made a participator of the Holy Spirit. (Pseudo-Macarius 1992, 37-38).<sup>17</sup>

Notice here how Macarius-Symeon is connecting the *Merkabah* tradition with an explanatory principle of sorts in the form of the aforementioned passage in 2 Corinthians, in this case particularly 4:6. Indeed, the connections are strong enough that Golitzen feels confident enough to write that, “the soteriology of deification also emerges in a light at once more “Jewish,” and so more in obvious continuity with the revelation accorded Israel.”<sup>18</sup>

I want to continue with Golitzen’s explanation of the Semitic elements in the Macarian *Homilies*, as an understanding of this background deepens an already rich vault of spiritual insight. Golitzen continues to pursue the theme of God’s glorious presence, and which has echoes in other Patristic writers of the era:

I should like, though, to underline what I take to be the *Homilies’* particular emphasis on the Old Testamental motifs of the promised land and holy city, Jerusalem, and of the tabernacle and temple as the place of God’s abiding. Christ is the reality of these images. He is the heavenly fatherland and the celestial city, the place of God’s presence and — to borrow an expression from the *Targumim*, since I think the traditions the latter represent are close to Macarius’ own heart — the “glory of the *Shekinah*” which dwells there and fills all with light. This presence or abiding, the literal sense of *Shekinah*, which comes to the Christian through baptism and the gift of the Holy Spirit, renders the soul in its turn the city and temple of God, at least in potential.<sup>19</sup>

This *Shekinah* imagery of God’s glorious presence is a concept which began in the Jewish *Targumim* and rabbinic writings, and, Golitzen says, was absorbed into Christian writing in Syriac, such as in Ephrem the Syrian’s *Paradise Hymns*, in which the *Shekinah* is “identified with the Presence enthroned at the Tree of Life and visible atop Sinai.”<sup>20</sup> Though he was not unique among early Christian writers in this, Golitzen finds particular significance in Macarius-Symeon’s use of the word *doxa* to express this “glory” of God: “What is surely more significant about Macarius’ use of

*daxa* is that term's long-standing use in Greek-speaking Jewish and Christian traditions as the translation of the Hebrew *kavod* YHWH... *Kavod* and its Greek equivalent are, put simply, the biblical terms of choice for theophany. What is at work in Macarius' use of *daxa* is therefore a persistent and conscious interiorization of the biblical glory tradition, of theophany,<sup>21</sup> in a manner similar to what was observed in Macarius-Symeon's use of 2 Corinthians 3:7-4:6 as an interpretive passage of sorts for the *Merkabah* passage in Ezekiel.

How does this relate to a theology of *mission*? It seems to me that what Macarius-Symeon was doing here was developing a contextual theology, engaging the context of both Jewish and Hellenic mysticism by connecting the language and spiritual understanding expressed in these contexts with a response which engages this spirituality with a Christ-centered solution. These ancient adepts desired to encounter God, and to be drawn into intimate relationship with Him. Macarius-Symeon took these aspirations seriously enough to demonstrate that they were ultimately met only in a transformative relationship with God in Christ.

One example of how this tradition was critically utilized and furthered can be found in the writing and ministry of John Wesley and the early Methodist tradition. The degree and manner to which some of the distinctive teaching of the early Methodist tradition have been influenced by the theology of the early Church, and in particular its teaching of *theosis*, has been a topic of sometimes heated discussion in the past 45 years, and it is to the practical elements of this discussion that I will now turn.

### **Theosis and Sanctification in the Writings of the Early Methodists**

It has been noted that, in common with many Christian leaders of their own day, both John and Charles Wesley were conversant with and influenced by the writings of early Christianity.<sup>22</sup> There are a innumerable other more contemporary sources, too, including Anglican, Catholic and Pietist writings, which also seem to had an influence on these developments, and through which the Wesley's and John Fletcher often received many of the same ideas regarding *theosis* in second-hand form.<sup>23</sup>

Beginning with Albert C. Outler, a number of writers in the past forty-five years have sought to examine how the writings of some of these ancient figures in antiquity may have had an influence on the views of the leaders of early Methodism on this topic, and how the concept of *theosis* may have contributed to the Wesleyan idea of sanctification.<sup>24</sup> In addition to receiving the influence of these writers, however, it will be important to note how, in line with the prevailing practice in England at the time, they sought to cite these ancient writers as a source of validation of their own teaching. I will also briefly examine how the Wesley's and John Fletcher interacted critically with this material.

Outler wrote in the introduction to his *John Wesley* that he believed that Wesley had acquired his concept of devotion and perfection from Gregory of Nyssa by way of “Macarius the Egyptian.”<sup>25</sup> As Ted Campbell has traced the conversation,<sup>26</sup> it began slowly, but gained momentum as more scholars joined the discussion, including Campbell himself. Outler, Campbell’s friend and mentor, hoped that Campbell would be able to “confirm his suspicion that Wesley’s doctrine of sanctification was in essence that of ancient Eastern Christian asceticism.”<sup>27</sup> Campbell confessed his inability to do so, concluding that, “What I discovered about Wesley’s use of Christian antiquity (it should have come as no surprise) was the selectivity *he* employed in choosing (and editing) historical materials as he saw their relevance to the eighteenth-century Revival.”<sup>28</sup> Perhaps this is a case in which Wesley was correctly engaging in the work of discernment in sifting the “gold from the dross” of ancient traditions,<sup>29</sup> attempting to extract what he considered to be helpful to his people while taking care as to what got passed on. Randy Maddox also notes that as positive as Wesley’s view was regarding these early writers, he was not naïve, and became “increasingly aware that there were problems in both doctrine and life from almost the beginning of the Church.”<sup>30</sup>

Perhaps what Howard Snyder offers is a balanced perspective on Wesley’s interaction with Macarius-Symeon, one that takes into account the other influences in Wesley’s own studies:

I do not claim that Wesley simply “took over” this set of ideas from Macarius. Some of them he encountered elsewhere; some undoubtedly came to him through his own extensive study of Scripture; some were already present in the Anglican tradition; some were points of emphasis in the Pietist writings Wesley read (e.g., Arndt’s *True Christianity* with its emphasis on the restoration of the image of God and the priority of love). But it is clear that the complex ideas on perfection Wesley taught were at key points strikingly similar to those taught by[...] Macarius and that these ideas had a particularly strong appeal to Wesley and therefore made a distinctive contribution to his doctrine of perfection.<sup>31</sup>

In fact, there are some strong streams of thought on this theme of union with God in John Wesley’s writings, in the hymnology of his brother Charles, and as well in the writings of Wesley’s influential colleague John Fletcher. It is particularly interesting that, although Campbell suggested that Wesley actually omitted “references to the ascetic life and the notion of *theosis*,”<sup>32</sup> when we read Wesley’s own edition of Homily XIX in the Macarian corpus, we can observe that here, at least, he retained a rather clear reference to it:

It behooveth- therefore the soul that truly believeth in CHRIST, to be changed from her present nature into another nature, which is Divine, and to be wrought new herself through the power of the Holy Spirit. And to obtain this, will be allowed to us who believe and love him in truth, and walk in all his holy commandments.<sup>33</sup>

Significantly, another area which has relevance for applying the understanding of *theosis* as sanctification and perfection to the work of discipleship is the idea of salvation having a soul-healing, therapeutic dimension.<sup>34</sup> Randy Maddox points out that the dominant understanding of salvation in the Christian East is therapeutic rather than juridical, but, importantly, Wesley seems to have been able to *integrate* these in his own approach.<sup>35</sup> Wesley understood grace as referring to *both* the deifying, empowering, uncreated presence of the Holy Spirit *and* pardon from sin and justification.<sup>36</sup>

This theme of Christ as the healer of the soul is also found in Macarius-Symeon. In fact, he integrates the Incarnation, the Crucifixion and Christ as healer at once in at least one place,

The Lord Himself, who is the Way and is God, after he came not on his own behalf but for you so that he might be an example for you of everything good, see, he came in such humility, taking the “form of a slave” (Phil. 2:7), he, who is God, the Son of God, King, the Son of the King He himself gave healing medicines and he healed all the wounded when he appeared externally as one among “the wounded” (Is. 53:5).<sup>37</sup>

Wesley and his colleagues read and interacted with the fathers’ writings critically, correcting concepts where they felt they were unclear, and using terminology which was less likely to lead to confusion. When Wesley read in Clement of Alexandria’s *Stromata* regarding *theosis* and the character of a “true gnostic” (in the sense that Clement was seeking to speak to *his* Alexandrian context), Wesley adjusted that with which he was interacting in Clement. Michael J. Christensen affirms that,

For Wesley, we are justified and sanctified by “faith filled with the energy of love” (not by works nor by gnosis). We enjoy *communion* with God as creatures, but not *union* with God as equals. We may become *like* God, Wesley hopes and prays, but we do not become divine! Thus, when Wesley appropriates Clement’s gnostic vision, he “corrects” the assertion of *gnosis* as the means to perfection.<sup>38</sup>

These ideas contributed to the distinctly Wesleyan teaching of sanctification. Christensen notes that “what Wesley envisioned as Christian

perfection, holiness, or entire sanctification is theologically dependent upon earlier versions of *theosis*.”<sup>39</sup>

In the same manner, John Wesley and his colleagues sought to distinguish between a healthy, Scripturally-based idea of union with God and an unhealthy, speculative mysticism. John Fletcher, considered John Wesley’s heir apparent until his untimely death from tuberculosis, wrote on this crucial distinction in an essay entitled, “An Evangelical Mysticism.” Here he presents what he calls a “wise mysticism,” which Fletcher describes as “glowing with Divine wisdom, and shedding luminous rays on the most profound truths . . . and which cautiously penetrates the bark or veil of religion to sound its depths.” He then contrasts this with an “extravagant” or “frivolous” mysticism, “by which violence is done to sound criticism, in quitting, without reason, the literal sense of the Scriptures.”<sup>40</sup>

It seems to me that the distinction which Fletcher was seeking to describe is related to the kind of pantheistic mysticism in which individuality is lost and we “dissolve into oneness with God,” and an idea in which the personality continues and the distinction between the Creator and the creature is maintained. A beautiful picture of the latter was provided many years ago by Sadhu Sundar Singh:

We have been created in the image of God. Our destiny is to be restored into that image. God came to us in the Master to restore us to God’s divine nature. In this way, the Master transforms us into flames of spiritual fire. To become spiritual fire means to become like God. Even the smallest flame of fire is fire and has all the qualities of fire. This does not mean that our spirit is God’s spirit, as some pantheists and philosophers suppose. We are not fragments of God’s spirit. We are not God. God is distinct from us, but our souls can only find peace in oneness with God.

A sponge lies in the water and the water fills the sponge, but the water is not the sponge and the sponge is not the water. It is the same when I immerse myself in God. God fills my heart and I am in complete union with God, but I am not God and God is not I. We are distinct though not separate.<sup>41</sup>

While we can and should take seriously the refinements made to the tradition of *theosis* by John Wesley and John Fletcher, I believe that Christensen is correct when he exhorts us (in an echo of Outler) to “read Wesley *with his sources*, and not simply read back into ancient sources Wesley’s distinctive eighteenth-century vision of perfection or programmatic agenda of reform.”<sup>42</sup> Christensen goes beyond this, however, and exhorts his reader to seek to interact with these sources in a manner which will be effective in our modern context,

Such a reformulation would incorporate the best of John Wesley's theological refinements and improvements on the ancient doctrine of *theosis* (i.e., appropriation by faith not by works or knowledge, inward assurance over perpetual seeking, accessibility in this earthly life), while fully appreciating the Eastern emphasis on "therapeutic" soteriology with its biblical affirmation of original humanity and original blessing. In so doing, we may arrive at a [...] vision of *theosis* as part of the essential quest for human wholeness and completion of the new creation in Christ.<sup>43</sup>

One of Wesley's important contributions to the discussion was his ability to hold in tension issues such as the importance of sanctification and a healing model of salvation without abandoning the reality of justification by grace through faith which is so clearly rooted in the Scriptural witness.

### On Theosis and Mission

In one of his earlier sermons, "The Image of God," John Wesley wrote the following, connecting the idea of union with God and that of *mission*. He wrote,

We, lastly, have daily opportunities of knowing, if Christianity be of God, then of how glorious a privilege are they thought worthy who persuade others to accept its benefits. Seeing when the author of it "cometh in the clouds of heaven", they who have saved others from sin and its attendant death "shall shine as the brightness of the firmament"; they who have *reprinted the image of God on many souls* "as the stars for ever!"<sup>44</sup>

How can this understanding of *theosis* contribute to a robust theology of *mission*? I believe it is here as well that John Wesley offers some wisdom in terms of his theological emphases, as well as in the manner in which these emphases are meant to have an impact not only on the individual believer and the believing community, but on the world.

Howard Snyder, in a presentation on what he termed a "Wesleyan Theology of Mission," focused on four particular elements which he observed in Wesley's writings that he understood as being related to mission. These were the image of God in humankind, reflected less directly throughout creation, a therapeutic view of salvation as healing (though without denying other elements of justification), God's prevenient grace which draws all people to himself, and the Holy Spirit empowered process of Christian perfecting, often referred to as sanctification.<sup>45</sup> All of these elements spill over into one another, and all can ultimately be related to the theme of *theosis*. Thus, the therapeutic theme is frequently expressed in terms of the healing and restoration of the image of God, empowered by

his grace, and ultimately moving towards further realization in the process of Holy Spirit-empowered perfecting

Wesley (and Fletcher) clearly believed that there would be an effect on the evangelization of humankind based on the state of Christians' lives and communities. If the nations were going to be impacted by the Gospel, it would be because they saw it being lived out and could observe the *glory* of God among Christian people—that is to say, if they could see a God-empowered *theosis* bringing healing and restoration to those who claimed to follow Jesus, walking in the fullness of the image of God, they would respond to the drawing of the prevenient grace of God and joyfully come to faith in Jesus. Thus, in his sermon on “The General Spread of the Gospel,”<sup>46</sup> Wesley begins with what is essentially an account of the lost state of the peoples and nations of the world, beginning with those he considers to be the farthest from God, exemplified for him among the tribal peoples of the South Pacific islands.<sup>47</sup> From there he moves on to the Muslims, and from there to the state of the Christian community in non-Western lands,<sup>48</sup> to describe even the failings of those who consider themselves Christian in the West among both Roman Catholics as well as Protestants.<sup>49</sup>

Wesley describes what he sees as the “problem” of the unevangelized, and, crucially, made it clear that a key element of the problem is the terrible example of the lives of those who claim to be Christians. For example, he refers to the complaints of the Native Americans concerning the encroaching Colonial settlers; they ask in what manner is it that the Christians' lives are better than theirs. Wesley also refers to the complaints of the Hindu people of what he refers to of what would now be of one part of south India. He quotes them as listing the sins of the Christians in their area, concluding with “Christians are devils! I will not become a Christian!”<sup>50</sup>

He then begins to set out the solution, which Wesley sees as the global spread of the revival of the gospel which has occurred under the course of Methodism — that as the revival spreads across the Christian world, and as those who have been “Christian” for generations actually begin to live out the faith which they claim, it will have an effect on others.<sup>51</sup> Interestingly, he presents this spread in precisely the reverse order in which he had earlier discussed the state of the world. Wesley perceives that the *primary* element preventing Muslims, “heathens” and others from coming to Christ is the corrupt lifestyle of Christians. Thus, as Christians begin actually to live as Christ meant for them to live, Muslims and others will begin coming to faith in Jesus. Wesley writes,

The grand stumbling-block being thus happily removed out of the way, namely, the lives of the Christians, the Mahometans (*sic*) will look upon them with other eyes, and begin to give attention to their words. And as their words will be clothed

with divine energy, attended with the demonstration of the Spirit and of power, those of them that fear God will soon take knowledge of the Spirit whereby Christians speak. They will “receive with meekness the engrafted word,” and will bring forth fruit with patience.<sup>52</sup>

He goes on to express a hope in the gospel’s spread to those he refers to as “heathen,”<sup>53</sup> and finally, ultimately one might say, to the Jewish people, who must wait until the “fullness of the Gentiles be come in.”<sup>54</sup> For Wesley, then, the evangelization of the nations of the world depends upon Christian holiness and sanctification. If Christians are living as they are meant to, and indeed, scripturally speaking, empowered to, those outside the community of Christ will be drawn in.

John Fletcher clearly also saw the light which had been received by, for example, the Muslims, to be a kind of *preparatio evangelii*, preparatory for them, as well as perhaps for others in the lands of other religious traditions in which Islam had spread. For example, having described some of the exalted statements in the Qur’ân and Sunnah concerning Jesus, he goes on to assert that, in spite of the distortions of the Qur’ân concerning Christian faith,

yet it admits enough of our doctrines to overthrow idolatry, and the external empire of Satan upon earth; insomuch that in Africa and India, Mohammedanism prepares idolaters for the reception of Christianity: and secondly to nourish our hope, that the Mohammedans, who have already such exalted notions of Jesus Christ, will embrace the Gospel, when the great scandals of the Christian Churches shall be done away...  
(*ibid.*)<sup>55</sup>

Thus Fletcher seems ultimately to lean in the direction of seeing the light which the nations have as yet received as being *preparatory* to their receiving the gospel in its fullness, and echoes Wesley’s sentiments in “The General Spread of the Gospel” that this may be connected with the spread of the revival in the churches, that is, that they would be demonstratively walking in the fullness of what is relationship with God.

It is in the second of Fletcher’s essays on this topic, “Remarks on the Trinity,” that this seems to touch more directly on several of the themes of mission which I am examining here. The main thrust of the essay was in answering some of the arguments of Deism. An important eighteenth-century Deist spokesman, Joseph Priestly, had questioned the practical benefits of the doctrine of the Trinity. How did this understanding help to promote “morality and piety”?<sup>56</sup> Fletcher’s response here connects the doctrine of the Trinity with some of the key elements of a Wesleyan understanding of mission:

But things are soon changed, when the creating God reveals himself as Immanuel in believers; as soon as God, by the manifestation of his sanctifying Spirit, has re-established his image in their souls. Then the Trinity being clearly revealed, God is adored in spirit and in truth, with a zeal like that which burned in the bosoms of the primitive Christians; then men begin to love and help each other with a charity which the world never saw before....

[...] the sacred doctrine of Father, Son and Holy Spirit, which includes repentance toward God the Father, faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, and love shed abroad in the heart by the Holy Spirit: love the mother of good works, and the distinguishing badge of true Christians. From hence it follows, that Christian virtues flourish or decay, in proportion as the doctrine of the Trinity is rendered clear or obscured among men; for it is the foundation that the Gospel becomes the power of God to salvation to all who believe. And it should be remembered, that faith in the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, of which we speak, is the gift of God, Eph. ii, 8, and not the word of a nurse, or the dictate of a catechist. It is a Divine energy, which is “the substance of things hoped for, a cordial demonstration of things not seen;” for we believe with the heart unto righteousness, before we can make confession with the mouth unto salvation.<sup>57</sup>

John Fletcher took Wesley’s understanding of the Trinity<sup>58</sup> and expanded upon it, extrapolating it into the practical application of life in connection with God in Christ, and empowered by the Holy Spirit. Here we see the themes of the image of God in humans, the path of Christian sanctification, and prevenient grace integrated with an essential of the faith.<sup>59</sup> This connection between renewal in the image of God and sanctification was also expressed more concisely in Wesley’s *Plain Account of Christian Perfection*, when the answer to the catechetical question, “What does it mean to be *sanctified*?” is given as “To be renewed in the image of God, in “righteousness and true holiness.”<sup>60</sup>

How does Wesley expand upon the “Macarian” model which we examined earlier? Wesley takes the contextual and transformational elements of this model, and emphasizes that a Spirit-empowered life will not only have an impact upon those around us, and outwardly to the very ends of the earth, but those thus filled and empowered will be intentional in their proclamation and service in the midst of those in the wider world. In his sermon on “Scriptural Christianity,”<sup>61</sup> after a brief introduction comparing the gifts and fruit of the Spirit, he begins by describing the Spirit filled life of personal holiness.<sup>62</sup> From there he continues, however, and more than

once noting the example of Christians “in ancient days,”<sup>63</sup> and going on to note that, “the Christians of old. . . labored, having opportunity, to ‘do good unto all men,’ warning them to ‘flee from the wrath to come.’”<sup>64</sup> Here, we see that the Spirit-filled, transformed life will necessarily spill over into a life of both service and proclamation, of *witness*, an inward reality which is expressed in outward action.

In the Indian context, this idea of a deeply devotional, incarnational expression of the gospel is not something new. Indeed, it was perhaps best demonstrated in the life of the earlier quoted Sadhu Sundar Singh, who in many ways exemplified a life of union with God in Christ in a strikingly contextual manner. His life was integrated with his proclamation and service in such a manner as to draw many thousands to consider the Jesus who was the source of everything he sought to do. Indeed, quite a number of days ago, I met an elderly Brahmin gentleman who was living on the premises of a guest house in which I stayed for a few days. Although he had expressed significant antagonism toward the gospel message, when I asked him if he had ever heard of Sadhu Sundar Singh, he became quiet. Slowly, he told me that, as a boy, he had seen and heard him as he came through his town. This memory clearly still had an impact upon him.

For Wesley and his colleagues, and indeed, in many ways for Sundar Singh, too, mission is connected with this idea of *theosis* and this, in turn, has a Trinitarian expression to it in its more fully developed sense. The incarnation itself, including the death and resurrection of Jesus as the Word and Son of God, are understood as bringing us into the life of the Trinity as we are brought to faith, and he fills us with the life of the Holy Spirit. Thus empowered, we are free to be united to one another, empowered to go out into the world, and to enter truly into an incarnational *missio Dei* in which the incarnation is our empowering and unifying life, but is also our model.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> This article will also be published under the same title as a chapter in the forthcoming volume, *Witnessing to Christ in Diverse Contexts: Papers from the 17th annual Centre for Mission Studies Consultation, Union Biblical Seminary, Pune*, ed. F. Frampton Fox (Bangalore: Asian Trading Corporation, 2012).

<sup>2</sup> Other recent writings which have explored a Patristic and/or Wesleyan approach utilizing the theme of union with God include Peter J. Bellini, *Participation: Epistemology and Mission Theology* (Lexington, KY: Emeth Press, 2010), focused more on a philosophical level and dealing with the postmodern context, and James Greear, "Theosis and Muslim Evangelism: How the Recovery of a Patristic Understanding of Salvation Can Aid Evangelical Missionaries in the Evangelization of Islamic Peoples" (PhD diss., Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2003), focused on using theosis in an evangelistic presentation.

<sup>3</sup> St. Athanasius, *On the Incarnation of the Word of God*. Tr. Penelope Lawson (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1996 [Orig. 1944]), 93. Daniel Clendenin rather beautifully paraphrased Athanasius on this point, interpreting his words as, "when God descended, assumed humanity, and was 'incarnated,' he opened the way for people to ascend to him, assume divinity, and become 'in-godded'" (Daniel B. Clendenin, "Partakers of Divinity: The Orthodox Doctrine of Theosis," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 37:3 [September 1994], 366).

<sup>4</sup> Robert V. Rakestraw, "Becoming Like God: An Evangelical Doctrine of Theosis," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 40:2 (June 1997), 257

<sup>5</sup> Irenaeus. *Against Heresies*. In *The Apostolic Fathers, With Justin Martyr and Irenaeus*, Tr. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. 1 (Buffalo: The Christian Literature Publishing Company, 1885), 526.

<sup>6</sup> As his writings were circulated pseudonymously under the name of the desert Father Macarius of Egypt, and the most likely identity of the author is considered to be Symeon of Mesopotamia. See Marcus Plested, *The Macarian Legacy: The Place of Macarius-Symeon in the Eastern Christian Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 12-16.

<sup>7</sup> Alexander Golitzen, "A Testimony to Christianity as Transfiguration: The Macarian Homilies and Orthodox Spirituality," in *Orthodox and Wesleyan Spirituality*. Edited by S. T. Kimbrough, Jr. (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2002), 133.

<sup>8</sup> Golitzen, "Christianity as Transfiguration," 133.

<sup>9</sup> Pseudo-Macarius. *The Fifty Spiritual Homilies and the Great Letter*. Tr. George A. Maloney (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1992), 142.

<sup>10</sup> Pseudo-Macarius, Homilies, 145.

<sup>11</sup> Vladimir Lossky, *Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* (London: James Clarke & Co., Ltd., 1957), 53-54.

<sup>12</sup> Lossky, *Mystical Theology*, 145-146.

<sup>13</sup> Rowan Williams, "Deification," *The Westminster Dictionary of Christian Spirituality* (ed. G. S. Wakefeld; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1983), 107; quoted in Rakestraw, "Becoming Like God," 260.

<sup>14</sup> Marcus Plested has, however, suggested that Macarius-Symeon demonstrates what he refers to as a "double-inheritance," drawing from both Semitic and Hellenic wells; he notes that in the passage on Ezekiel's vision described above, apart from the "obvious link with the Jewish Merkabah tradition," Macarius-Symeon also "draws on the chariot image from Plato's Phaedrus" (Plested, *Macarian Legacy*, 31). Golitzen recognizes the reference to Phaedrus, but also notes that this is "Platonism with a difference," with Christ holding the reigns and guiding the soul by the Holy Spirit,

rather than the intellect being in the driver's seat (Golitzen "Christianity as Transfiguration," 140).

<sup>15</sup> The Merkabah is "God's throne-chariot" in the opening chapter of Ezekiel, and was the subject of significant mystical speculation in Jewish antiquity (see Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York: Schocken Books, 1995 [orig. 1946]), 42).

<sup>16</sup> Joseph Stoffels, *Die Mystische Theologie Makarius des Aegypters* (Bonn: Peter Hanstein, 1908), 79; cited in Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends*, 79.

<sup>17</sup> Pseudo-Macarius, *Homilies*, 37-38.

<sup>18</sup> Alexander Golitzen, "Review of Holiness: Rabbinic Judaism and the Greco-Roman World, by Hannah K. Harrington," *St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 43 (January 2003), 462.

<sup>19</sup> Golitzen, "Christianity as Transfiguration," 133.

<sup>20</sup> Golitzen, "Christianity as Transfiguration," 150-151, n. 29.

<sup>21</sup> Golitzen, "Christianity as Transfiguration," 138.

<sup>22</sup> This is in no way to imply that the Patristic writings were the sole or even primary influence on the development of the Wesleyan theology, including their distinctive understanding of sanctification. Apart from figures in the Patristic East such as Macarius-Symeon on whom I have focused here, there have been other Patristic figures from the West, such as Augustine, whose writings had an influence on Wesley.

<sup>23</sup> Richard P. Heinzenrater, "John Wesley's Reading of, and References to, the Early Church Fathers," *Orthodox and Wesleyan Spirituality*. Edited by S. T. Kimbrough, Jr. (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2002), 30-31.

<sup>24</sup> Albert C. Outler, *Introduction to John Wesley* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), 9-10.

<sup>25</sup> Outler, "Introduction," 9 n. 26.

<sup>26</sup> Ted Campbell, "Back to the Future: Wesleyan Quest for Ancient Roots: the 1980's," *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 32:1 (Spring 1997): 5-16.

<sup>27</sup> Ted A. Campbell, *John Wesley and Christian Antiquity* (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1991), x.

<sup>28</sup> Campbell, "Back to the Future," 15. Of course, it has also been noted that Wesley edited virtually everything from any source; see See Michael J. Christensen, "John Wesley: Christian Perfection as Faith Filled with the Energy of Love", in *Partakers of the Divine Nature: The History and Development of Deification in the Christian Traditions*. Ed. Michael J. Christensen and Jeffrey A. Wittung (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 221.

<sup>29</sup> Robert G. Tuttle, *Mysticism in the Wesleyan Tradition* (Grand Rapids, MI: Francis Asbury Press, 1989), 126.

<sup>30</sup> Randy L. Maddox, *Responsible Grace* (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1994), 43.

<sup>31</sup> Howard Snyder, "John Wesley and Macarius the Egyptian," *Asbury Theological Journal* 45, No. 2 (Fall 1990), 59.

<sup>32</sup> Campbell, *John Wesley and Christian Antiquity*, x.

<sup>33</sup> "Macarius." *The Homilies of Macarius*. A Christian Library 1, ed. John Wesley. (London: T. Cordeux, 1819); [http://wesley.nnu.edu/john\\_wesley/](http://wesley.nnu.edu/john_wesley/)

christian\_library/vol1/CL1Part2.htm. (Accessed December 22, 2010), XIX.4, emphasis mine. Note that homily XIX in Wesley's revised Macarian corpus is the equivalent of Homily XLIV in the original Macarian corpus. See Hoo-Jung Lee, "The Doctrine of New Creation in the Theology of John Wesley" (PhD diss., Emory University, 1991), 235 n. 99 for this particular homily, and numerous notes from 230-240.

<sup>34</sup> Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, 229.

<sup>35</sup> Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, 67.

<sup>36</sup> Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, 199.

<sup>37</sup> Pseudo-Macarius, *Homilies*, 173.

<sup>38</sup> Christensen, *Christian Perfection*, 222.

<sup>39</sup> Christensen, *Christian Perfection*, 226.

<sup>40</sup> John Fletcher, *The Works of the Rev. John Fletcher* (New York: T. Mason and G. Lane, 1836), 4:9.

<sup>41</sup> Sundar Singh, *Wisdom of the Sadhu: Teachings of Sundar Singh*. Edited by Kim Comer (Farmington, PA: Plough Publishing House, 2007), 112-113.

<sup>42</sup> Christensen, *Christian Perfection*, 223.

<sup>43</sup> Christensen, *Christian Perfection*, 227.

<sup>44</sup> John Wesley, *John Wesley's Sermons: An Anthology*. Ed. Albert C. Outler and Richard P. Heinzenrater (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1991), 21.

<sup>45</sup> Howard Snyder, "What's Unique about a Wesleyan Theology of Mission? A Wesleyan Perspective on Free Methodist Missions" (Presentation, FM Missions Consultation, Indianapolis, IN, October 11-13, 2002), 3.

<sup>46</sup> Other recent writings which cite this sermon in a missional context include Terry C. Muck, "The Third Moment of Muslim Witness: John Wesley Had It Right," *The Asbury Journal* 61, No. 1 (2006), 83-95; idem, "John Wesley's Eighteenth-Century Contributions to the Twenty-First-Century Theology of Religions," in *World Mission in the Wesleyan Spirit*. Edited by Darrell L. Whiteman and Gerald H. Anderson (Franklin, TN: Providence House Publishers, 2009), 93-101; and Andrew F. Walls, "World Parish to World Church: John and Charles Wesley on Home and Overseas Mission," in *World Mission in the Wesleyan Spirit*. Edited by Darrell L. Whiteman and Gerald H. Anderson (Franklin, TN: Providence House Publishers, 2009), 138-150.

<sup>47</sup> *John Wesley, The Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley: Sermons* (4 Vols.). Ed. Albert C. Outler (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1985), 2.486. The actual quote in Wesley's sermon is, "Christian man take my wife: Christian man much drunk: Christian man kill man! Devil-Christian! Me no Christian."

<sup>48</sup> John Wesley, *WJW*, 2.487.

<sup>49</sup> John Wesley, *WJW*, 2.487-488.

<sup>50</sup> John Wesley, *WJW*, 2.496.

<sup>51</sup> John Wesley, *WJW*, 2.493-495.

<sup>52</sup> John Wesley, *WJW*, 2.495.

<sup>53</sup> John Wesley, *WJW*, 2.496-497.

<sup>54</sup> John Wesley, *WJW*, 2.498.

<sup>55</sup> Fletcher, *Works*, 4.227.

<sup>56</sup> Fletcher, *Works*, 4.44.

<sup>57</sup> Fletcher, *Works*, 4.45-46.

<sup>58</sup> Expressed in particular in Wesley's "On the Trinity," John Wesley, *WJW* 2.377-386.

<sup>59</sup> John Wesley, *WJW*, 2.386.

<sup>60</sup> *John Wesley, A Plain Account of Christian Perfection* (New York: G. Lane and P. P. Sandford, 1844), 10.

<sup>61</sup> John Wesley, *WJW* 1.159-180.

<sup>62</sup> John Wesley, *WJW* 1.161-165.

<sup>63</sup> John Wesley, *WJW* 1.165.

<sup>64</sup> John Wesley, *WJW* 1.166.