



# READING MACARIUS: ON BEING HUMAN, ON BEING HOLY

*Posted on December 1, 2021 by Michael A.G. Haykin*



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In one of John Wesley's (1703–1791) most frequently preached sermons, "The Scripture-way of salvation," the Methodist leader sought to address misunderstanding of his teaching about the way of salvation. Wesley was concerned to stress that in the overwhelming experience of conversion it was natural for those who go through

*such a change [to] imagine that all sin is gone! That it is utterly rooted out of their heart, and has no more any place therein! How easily do they draw that inference, "I feel no sin; therefore I have none." ... But it is seldom long before they are undeceived, finding sin was only suspended, not destroyed. Temptations return and sin revives, showing that it was but stunned before, not dead. They now feel two principles in themselves, plainly contrary to each other: "the flesh lusting against the spirit," nature opposing the grace of God.*

To reinforce the point, Wesley turned to an obscure fourth-century monastic author whom he referred to as "Macarius" — an individual known to modern scholars as Pseudo-Macarius or Macarius-Symeon. "How exactly," he considered, "did Macarius, fourteen hundred years ago, describe the present experience of the children of God!": The unskillful (or unexperienced), when grace operates, presently imagine they have no more sin. Whereas they that have discretion cannot deny that even we who have the grace of God may be molested again.

During his sole sojourn in America, at the close of July 1736, Wesley had been introduced to a German Pietist translation of Macarius' homilies by some Moravian friends in the colony of Georgia. Wesley so appreciated these homilies that he would later edit and reprint some of them in the first volume of *A Christian Library*, a collection of edifying literature that he published for the benefit of lay preachers.

The major themes of these texts did indeed dovetail with Wesley's interests, for in them Macarius set forth the biblical dimensions and theological implications of the work of the Holy Spirit in salvation, and explored the experience of the believer, who, though indwelt by the Spirit, nevertheless battles indwelling sin. In what follows, these major themes of theology and spirituality are explored as they are found in one collection of Macarian texts, the *Fifty Spiritual Homilies* (also known as "Collection II"), which has exercised a significant influence upon both Eastern and Western Christianity.



While there is much that is unclear about Macarius, the author of these works, he appears to have been active between the 380s and the first decade of the fifth century. He had strong ties to Syrian Christianity, although his mother tongue was most likely Greek. He would thus have been very comfortable with the theological ambience of Greek Christian life and piety. His ministry seems to have been situated on the frontier of the Roman Empire in upper Syria and in southern Asia Minor, where he was the spiritual mentor of a number of monastic communities.

Four collections of his homilies are extant. They have been historically linked to Messalianism, an ascetic movement that was condemned at various councils, including the ecumenical Council of Ephesus in 431 as well as the earlier Synod of Side in Pamphylia (c.395), which was presided over by Amphilochius of Iconium (c.340–c.400), the protégé and close friend of Basil of Caesarea (c.330–79), one of the leading theologians of that era.

According to those who condemned them, the Messalians argued that there was an indwelling demonic power in each human soul, and that only intense and ceaseless prayer could break the power that this demonic power held over the soul. Consequently, they were said to refuse to work so that they could devote their entire time to prayer. They were also said to affirm physical experiences of the Spirit, and to make light of the sacraments of the church as well as the ministry of those in official positions of power. Although there are a number of clear points of contact between the Messalians and Macarius, especially with regard to Macarius' deep interest in the Spirit, the burden of current scholarly opinion is that Macarius cannot be regarded as a Messalian.

Confirmation of this perspective of recent scholarship on Macarius is found in his strong connections to the Cappadocian theologians, in particular, to Basil and his brother Gregory of Nyssa (c.335–c.394). For example, in Nyssen's *On His Ordination*, preached at the induction of Gregory of Nazianzus

(c.330–389/90) as bishop of Constantinople, he mentioned various ascetics at the ordination, who have been identified plausibly as Macarius and some of his followers. Gregory had a deep admiration for these men, who had, he said,

*"like Abraham left their own country, their family and the world at large. They look to heaven; they cut themselves off, so to say, from human life; they are superior to the passions of nature ... They do not struggle with words, they do not study rhetoric; but they have such power over the spirits that they expel demons not through syllogistic arts but through the power of faith."*

This deep admiration of Gregory of Nyssa for Macarius, as well as Macarius' concern that he shared with the Cappadocians to defend the deity of the Spirit, were key factors that helped to preserve his writings.



Macarius was deeply impressed by the awful devastation caused by the fall of Adam and the experiential reality of the tyranny of sin that ensued for his progeny as a result of his disobedience. Prior to the fall, Adam had been clothed with the glory of the Holy Spirit, and thus knew the Spirit's personal instruction as well as that of the Word of God — for the "Word was everything to him." He lived in total purity, was pleasing to God in all areas of his life and had sovereign control over his thoughts and actions.

Nevertheless, when through his own free will he disobeyed God's Word, his disobedience became the doorway through which all kinds of evil were sown in the world, as well as being the vehicle for the entrance of "tumult, confusion, and battle" into the inner being of men and women.

After the fall, Adam and his descendants lost both God and their God-given beauty. God, ever "the Lover of mankind," wept over his fallen creation, for human beings were now marred by corruption, spiritual ugliness, and the "great stench" that emanated from their souls.

Fallen men and women were now, in one of Macarius' most trenchant descriptions, like "houses of prostitution and ill-fame in which all sorts of immoral debaucheries go on." Dominating their lives was a love of this age and its passions and concerns. Instead of their Maker being their Lord, Satan had

become their prince and ruler, and had filled their hearts with spiritual darkness.

Ever true to his nature as a wicked tyrant, Satan did not spare any area of human existence from his deadly touch and control. The "evil prince corrupted" the human frame "completely, not sparing any of its members from its slavery, not its thoughts, neither the mind nor the body."

When men and women act under the impulse of these evils, they think that they are doing so on the basis of their "own determination." But the reality is that they are controlled by the power of sin. From Macarius' vantage-point, every fallen human being is so under sin's dominion that he or she can "no longer see freely but sees evilly, hears evilly, and has swift feet to perpetrate evil acts."

Although this extremely realistic view of the Fall and its impact would appear to commit Macarius to a strongly determinist perspective with regard to the human condition, Macarius vehemently maintained that men and women ultimately commit evil of their own free will.

As he asserted on one occasion: "Our nature ... is capable of both good and evil, either of divine grace or of the opposing power, but never through compulsion." However, this ability to choose appears to extend solely to individual sinful acts. What human beings cannot do is remove the deeply-rooted interiority of sin itself. Its dominion within the human heart is far too strong to be defeated by human energy alone. It is "impossible," Macarius insisted, "to separate the soul from sin unless God should calm and turn back this evil wind, inhabiting both the soul and body." Again, as he put it elsewhere: "without the Lord Jesus and the working of divine power," that is, the Holy Spirit, "no one can ... be a Christian."



Macarius believed that this situation could only be changed for the better as an individual cried out to God to be transformed from "bitterness to sweetness." Macarius could argue that "even the man confirmed in evil, or the one completely immersed in sin and making himself a vessel of the devil ... still has freedom to become a chosen vessel." Given Macarius' views about the devastation that has resulted from the Fall, some of which has been detailed above, this statement must be taken to mean that Macarius believes that human beings have enough freedom to cry out to God for salvation.

Macarius argued that without God's aid through the gift of the Spirit, no-one will ever "return to their

senses from their intoxication with the material realm." Without the life-giving power of the Spirit, one is dead "as far as the kingdom goes, being unable to do any of the things of God," for "the Spirit is the life of the soul." And so great is the plague of sin in the human heart, healing is only found through the medicine of the Holy Spirit.

Macarius also likens the conversion of a person to the taming of a horse. Before being tamed, an unconverted person is "wild and indomitable." But once "he hears the Word of God and believes, he is bridled by the Spirit. He puts away his wild habits and carnal thoughts, being now guided by Christ, his rider."

Paul, for Macarius, was a prime example of such conversion. He had been living under the "tyrannical spirit of sin," and as a persecutor of the Church he can be rightly described as being "steeped in evil and turned back to a wild state." But Christ arrested his progress in sin, and "flooding him with ineffable light," liberated him from sin's domination. Here, Macarius stated, we see Christ's "goodness ... and his power to change." From another angle, the Spirit comes into the entirety of a person's being to put it in order and beautify it just as "a house that has its master at home shows forth an abundance of orderliness, and beauty and harmony."

This gift of the Spirit in conversion, though, is only the beginning of what formed a major aspect of Macarius' theological reflections, namely, the remarkable nature of life in the Spirit. Sometimes the believer's life is flooded with the joy of the Spirit and he is like "a spouse who enjoys conjugal union with her bridegroom."

On other occasions, he finds himself overwhelmed by grief as he prays in accordance with the "love of the Spirit towards mankind." Other times there is "a burning of the Spirit" which enflames the heart with regard to the things of God. Then, just as "deep, conjugal love" between man and a woman lead them to marry and leave father and mother and all other earthly loves, so "true fellowship with the Holy Spirit, the heavenly and loving Spirit" ultimately brings freedom from the loves of this age.

It bears noting that the gift of the Spirit is dependent on the cross-work of Christ. Likening the cross to the work of a gardener, Macarius argued that through the cross Christ, "the heavenly and true gardener," removed from the barren soul "the thorns and thistles of evil spirits" as well as uprooting and burning with fire "the weeds of sin." With the removal of these, he can now plant in the soul "the most beautiful paradise of the Spirit." The gift of the Spirit is a fruit of the death of Christ.

Macarius thinks about the cross in primarily two ways. On the one hand, the cross is a place of healing and Christ is "the true physician" who has come to heal "everyone afflicted by the incurable wound of sin." Then, the cross is conceived of as a place of ransom, where Christ's life is given in payment for those of sinners. Thus, Macarius argued that Christ's blood was poured out on the cross so that there would be "life and deliverance for humanity." Again, he could state that Christ came to earth to "suffer on behalf of all and to buy them back with his blood."



The gift of the indwelling Spirit, though, does not mean that the one whom he indwells is now exempt from spiritual warfare, for, "where the Holy Spirit is, there follows ... persecution and struggle." As Marcus Plested has noted, Macarius argued for "a profoundly militant Christianity." There is persecution of the Church by the powers of this age. The faithful believer is "nailed to the cross of Christ" and knows what it is to experience "the stigmata and wounds of the Lord."

And there is struggle within the heart of the Christian, such that even the most mature Christian can fall back into a life of sin. In part, Macarius argued, this is because of the malice of Satan, who is "without mercy and hates humans," and thus never hesitates to attack Christians. In part, though, it is because Christians, even "those who are intoxicated with God" and "bound by the Holy Spirit," are not under constraint to do that which pleases God, for they still have their free will. Thus Macarius read Ephesians 4:30 to mean that it was up to Christians' "will and freedom of choice to honour the Holy Spirit and not to grieve him" through sin.

Macarius personally knew men who seemed to be making great progress in the Christian life and then, through yielding to sin, lost everything. One man, who was a Roman aristocrat, seeking to follow Christ, sold his possessions and freed all of his slaves. He soon gained a reputation for being a holy man. But he grew proud, and eventually "fell completely into debaucheries and a thousand evils."

Another individual suffered as a confessor in what was probably the last great imperial Roman persecution of the Church, namely, that of Diocletian. He was horribly tortured. While in prison, a Christian woman sought to minister to him, but, tempted by lust, they "fell into fornication." The Christian experience of life in the Spirit in this world was thus one of great struggle against evil powers, whom, in a memorable turn of phrase, Macarius likened to "rivers of dragons and mouths of lions and dark forces."

Ultimately, though, it is not the human will that is the determinant factor in perseverance. It is "the power of the divine Spirit" that is the critical necessity for a person to attain to eternal life. True to the pneumatological emphasis of his thought, Macarius thus concluded: "if [a person] thinks he can effect a perfect work by himself without the help of the Spirit, he is totally in error. Such an attitude is unbecoming one who strives for heavenly places, for the kingdom."



Macarius' vision of the Christian life is one of victorious liberation from the tyranny of sin by the power of the Spirit of Christ. The experience of salvation begins with a heart dominated by evil, due to Adam's disobedience. Conversion brings liberty from this dreadful state of affairs, but plunges the believer into a warfare with indwelling sin and external spiritual enemies. Although the human will is now truly free to follow Christ or return to a life of sin, ultimately it is the grace of the Spirit that ensures victory in this war.

In many ways, Macarius' homilies are not marked by the deep theological sophistication of his contemporary Gregory of Nyssa, whom he influenced and who shared his interest in theological anthropology and pneumatology. Nevertheless, Macarius' deeply realistic approach to the human condition, his emphasis on the vital necessity of the Holy Spirit to effect eternal transformation, and his desire to take seriously human responsibility reveal him to be a thinker worthy of attention in our day, a day that is also marked by a fascination with spirituality and a passionate interest in what it means to be truly human.

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*The [featured image](#) shows an icon of Macarius the Great.*



