

“Saving the Gospel”

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-it is understandable that, as its founder, the shadow of A. B. Simpson has, historically, been cast large over The Christian and Missionary Alliance

-in the minds of some—such as former Alliance World Fellowship President, Arnold Cook, the C&MA, especially in recent years, has been suffering from “historical drift”—a degrading condition brought about by the diminishing influence of Simpson and other early Alliance voices

-in the minds of others, Simpson’s continuing influence over the theology and practice of the contemporary C&MA has been excessive and has kept us tied to the thought forms and contexts that disappeared into history over 100 years ago

-the denomination, these people would say, have held too closely to Simpson’s thought, in a number of areas, especially in theology (especially in the areas of sanctification and healing) and in missiology

-today, however, voices world-wide—from denominational leaders to invested lay people—are calling for the Alliance to return to and to reassert the historic theology of the early C&MA.

-we would be amiss to think, however, that the continuing influence of A. B. Simpson and his Fourfold Gospel is been the exclusive practice of the Alliance.

-given their own theological and cultural origins, Pentecostals world-wide have consistently displayed an interest in and appreciation for the theology of A. B. Simpson and The Christian and Missionary Alliance

-Donald Dayton’s classic work, *Theological Roots of Pentecostalism*, argues convincingly that the centre of early-classic Pentecostal theology are the various aspects that together form the Fourfold Gospel

-therefore, today, if you were to search the internet for Simpson's writings or even writings about Simpson, as often as not you will find these on Pentecostal sites

-Yet, even within Pentecostalism, the appreciation for and appropriation of Simpson and the Fourfold Gospel has not been without its detractors

-At a recent academic conference, I witnessed a noted Pentecostal theologian critiquing the Fourfold Gospel, describing it as an impoverished Christology.

-He then called on his Pentecostal colleagues to work with him on developing a more contemporary and more fulsome systematic Pentecostal Christology.

-On the one hand, he was right.

-The Fourfold Gospel is an inadequate Christology. It's a terribly inadequate one at that.

-There are all sorts of ways in which the person of Christ is so much more than just our Saviour, Sanctifier, Healer, and Coming King.

-This theologian's fundamental error, and the error of any Alliance person who would bring this same charge—and many have done so and continue to do so—is in asserting that the Fourfold Gospel is a Christology.

-On the contrary, the articulation of a Christology is neither its nature nor was it its intent.

-In the construction of the Fourfold Gospel, the development of a Christology—that is, an all-encompassing theological statement regarding the person and work of Jesus Christ—was not in view.

-Simpson, himself, had a Christology that far out ran the various aspects or tenets of the Fourfold Gospel.

-one need not read very far into Simpson's voluminous writings to discover this.

-For example, in just one book, *The Names of Jesus*—originally published in 1892, when the C&MA was only

five-years old—Simpson devoted entire chapters to such themes as:

- Christ, our Head,
- Christ, Our Passover,
- Christ, Our Prophet,
- Christ, the Living Way,
- Christ, the Key of David,
- Christ, Our Baptizer, etc.¹

-the Christological assertions listed within this particular book are still not exhaustive of Simpson's Christology.

-additional recognitions regarding the person and work of Christ appear through the rest of his voluminous writings.

-Rather than being a systematic Christology, the Fourfold Gospel is, instead, a *contextually-located pastoral soteriology*.

-The Fourfold Gospel does not (nor has it ever intended to) enumerate and investigate all of the various aspects of the person and work of Jesus Christ.

-Instead, the Fourfold Gospel identifies and communicates how Jesus Christ is the *all-sufficient provision for the complexity of human need*.

-As a pastoral soteriology, the Fourfold Gospel is rooted, as is all pastoral theology, in its particular situation and is a biblically-informed and theologically-informed response to that context.

-In particular, as I noted in my previous lecture, the Fourfold Gospel was A. B. Simpson's response to the religious trends of popular late nineteenth-century evangelicalism.

-it was his response to the theological trends in which evangelicals were investing themselves and from which they were taking spiritual direction.

-One the one hand, Simpson and the Fourfold Gospel recognized the relative theological and pastoral value of these popular trends,

¹ A. B. Simpson, *The Names of Jesus*, (New York: Christian Alliance, 1892).

specifically 1) Revivalism, 2) the Holiness Movement, 3) the Divine Healing Movement, and 4) Premillennialism.

-in very many ways, what Simpson and the early Alliance asserted in these various areas was often identical to what was the common teaching in this same area

-On the other hand, it also sought to critique and to correct these trends.

-As I noted previously, fundamentally, the Fourfold Gospel provides a pastoral and theological correction to the tendency of each of these trends to artificially objectify and, consequently, to idolize the consequences or the manifestations of the saving work of indwelling Christ.

-rather than properly placing their emphasis on and, consequently, their hope in, as Simpson would say, “Jesus Only”

-Even today, rather than focussing on regeneration, sanctification, divine healing, and heaven, per se, the Fourfold Gospel, rightly understood, speaks, instead, of two distinct things.

1. The Fourfold Gospel asserts the *centrality of Christ* to each of these areas and to salvation, in general.

-It reminds its hearers that redemption is not grounded in something, even something that may arrive directly from the hand of God.

-Instead, it declares that salvation, in all of its aspects—regeneration, sanctification, healing—is the result of the indwelling of Christ Himself, alone.

-In light of what seems to be the human tendency to focus on the consequences of salvation, Simpson reminded his audience—and he continues to remind those of us who will listen—that salvation, in all of its fullness and in all of its aspects, is rooted in Jesus Christ and in Jesus Christ, alone.

2. However, the Fourfold Gospel also speaks of the *sufficiency of Christ* in human redemption.

-It speaks against the idea that one’s redemption comes from Christ plus something else, whether that be something called regeneration, sanctification, healing, or the Rapture.

-The Fourfold Gospel speaks against the notion that Christ's role in human redemption is merely and exclusively *instrumental*;

-that is, the Fourfold Gospel denies that Jesus saves us by providing something (other than Himself) for us or by applying something (other than Himself) to us.

-Instead, Simpson's Fourfold Gospel asserts that it is Christ—Himself—who is sufficient for the need and the thriving of humanity;

-Christ is not only the necessary agent in the work of human salvation but he is, also, the sufficient content of that salvation.

-He not only supplies what is needed to effect the change that he desires, he is, instead, in-and-of-himself, that which effects the change.

-Consequently, rightly understood, while the four aspects have their places, the Fourfold Gospel, as a gestalt (as a unity), asserts the sufficiency of Christ's saving role beyond these four, understood separately and compartmentally.

-The Fourfold Gospel asserts that in relation to human redemption and thriving, Christ's ability and responsibility extends beyond the ability to regenerate, to sanctify, to heal, and to make all things right.

-He is not merely the agent of human redemption, he is its content, as well.

-This is what the Simpson and the Alliance mean when they boldly proclaim "Jesus Only!"

-It is not, as some have claimed, an unorthodox anti-Trinitarian teaching;

-it is, instead, the assertion that the lone source of human salvation is divine

-that is, we do not save ourselves nor can any other created being contribute to or take any credit for our salvation.

-even this idea is not original to Simpson.

-this is the what the sixteenth-century Reformers meant when they asserted salvation, in addition to being *sola fide* and *sola gratia*, was *solo Christo*

-that is, human salvation, in all of its various manifestations, is secured through the person and work of Jesus Christ and of Jesus Christ alone

-Furthermore, rather than understanding the Fourfold Gospel as a complete and discrete list of those roles that Christ plays in relation to human redemption, it is my contention that it must be understood not only as an amalgamation, not only as a unity, but, indeed, as a *merism*.

-You might well ask, as my students ask all the time, “What on earth is a ‘*merism*?’”

-“Is it yet another of those difficult and esoteric theological terms that theologians insist that we learn?”

-After all, the term is not a word that is often uttered in theological discussions, even among professional theologians like myself.

-simply, a “*merism*” is a literary and rhetorical device whereby a single object is referred to by the enumeration of two or more of its constituent parts.

-Familiar *merisms* in common English include the phrase, “searching high and low”

-this expression communicates the idea that one looked everywhere, not merely at the two extremes.

-*Merisms* are not merely a modern literary device, however; they are also found in the Scriptures.

-For example, when the author of Genesis noted that “God created the heavens and the earth,” Biblical scholars tell us that his intended meaning was not that God created only two things or even two categories of things.

-No; instead, the intended meaning of that phrase in the Bible's opening lines is that God created everything in existence.

-As a "*merism*," the Fourfold Gospel does not primarily or exclusively refer to the enumerated constituent parts—salvation, holiness, healing, and the end times—though those are included.

-Yet, this, I think, is the most common misunderstanding of the Fourfold Gospel that exists—even within and, perhaps, especially within The Christian and Missionary Alliance.

-it is this fundamental misunderstanding that led the Pentecostal scholar that I spoke about earlier to call for a reworking or an outright rejection of the Fourfold Gospel.

-this misunderstanding is why some in the Alliance today are also call for a forsaking of the Alliance's historic theology, Fourfold Gospel.

-this misunderstanding, however, is not an accurate interpretation of the Fourfold Gospel;

-if this were the message of the Fourfold Gospel, then, I think, I would agree with them: we should abandon it and do so quickly and finally!

-I am thoroughly convinced, however, that this is not the case; such a view is, instead, a fundamental confusion, error, and misrepresentation.

-a critique launched in this area, I would suggest, is little more than the demolishing of a straw-man!

-Let me say this as strongly as I can: rightly understood, the Fourfold Gospel does not primarily refer to four distinct offices!

-Instead, the Fourfold Gospel points to one person, Jesus Christ.

-In the Fourfold Gospel, the one being referred to is not only Jesus, the Christ, but, more particularly, to Christ's sufficiency both to provide and to be the provision for the whole of human need and thriving.

-Those who critique the Fourfold Gospel as an inadequate Christology commit not just one but two significant theological errors.

1. First, they make the mistake of incorrect theological categorization—confusing systematic Christology with practical soteriology (as I stated earlier).
2. Second, they err by not recognizing, overlooking, or ignoring the presence of literary and rhetorical idiom.

-The *meristic* nature of the Fourfold Gospel operates on two related but distinct planes.

-After literally decades of investigation and study, I have observed that within the Fourfold Gospel, there exists two natural theological pairings;

-these are easily identified by observing the recent logo of The Christian and Missionary Alliance.

-First, if we look at the vertical axis, we see the couplet of “Christ, our Savior” and “Christ, our Coming King/Lord.”

-Second, if we look at the horizontal axis, we have the pairing of “Christ, our Sanctifier” and “Christ, our Healer.”

-Let’s take a look at the second couplet first.

-The meristic operation of the second pairing testifies to the sufficiency of Christ Himself for the breadth of human need.

-In asserting that Christ is the *Sanctifier*, the Fourfold Gospel asserts that Christ Himself is the all-sufficient provision for the restitution and the whole of the “inner man,” the spiritual self.

-In asserting that Christ is the *Healer*, the Fourfold Gospel proclaims that Christ Himself is the all-sufficient provision for the needs of the “outer man,” the physical man.

-Together, as a *merism*, these two aspects assert that Christ is the all-sufficient source and supply, not merely for our bodies or for our souls as discrete entities;

-rather, they profess that Christ is the all-sufficient source and supply for the totality of the human constitution.

-That is, in his redeeming work, Christ addresses the fullness of human being and not, merely, two distinct parts.

-Not only is Christ sufficient for some human needs, he is, indeed, sufficient to provide for all human needs, spiritual and physical alike.

-in this way, the gospel, the “good news,” is that the scope of Christ saving work—the Atonement—is as far-reaching as the consequences of sin are

-that is, the work of Christ addresses the effects of sin wherever they may be found or to quote the oft-sung Christmas carol, “Joy to the World,” “He comes to make His blessings flow far as the curse is found”

-The first couplet, understood as a *merism*, refers to the time-span during which Christ is the all-sufficient supply of human need.

-In asserting that Christ is our Savior, the Fourfold Gospel suggests the sufficiency of the ministry of Christ to restore someone to spiritual life and, therefore, relation with Him, providing him with the first-fruits of redemption.

-In asserting that Christ is the Coming King, the Fourfold Gospel asserts that Christ is one who is sufficient to provide for the Christian the fullness of the blessings of the heavenly existence.

-Together, as a *merism*, these two aspects assert that Christ is our all-sufficient source and supply, not only on occasion, not only for our past, not only for our present, and not only for our future, but for the whole of life and relation with Him.

-While the four aspects assert more in their detailed treatments of their various aspects, as a *merism*, the Fourfold Gospel is an affirmation of this: that Jesus Christ, and that Jesus only, is the all-sufficient source and supply for human redemption and thriving.

-The question that we are left with, then, I guess, may be, “Is the Fourfold Gospel accurate? Is it true?”

-the answer to this question, I think, is two-fold

-If we understand it as a Christology—an all-encompassing theological statement regarding the person and work of Jesus Christ—

-it is accurate: what it says is not errant, it is not heretical

-it is true: in what it asserts regarding the person of Jesus Christ, it does so correctly

-Is it, however, adequate?

-The answer here is, “No.”

-While it reflects accurately much regarding the person and work of Jesus Christ, it is silent in a number of areas.

-Let me remind us all, however, that the Fourfold Gospel is not systematic theology—it is not a systematic Christology.

-That does not, however, render it an inaccurate one; it notes, instead, that it is something else.

-If we understand it, however, as a pastoral soteriology—a statement regarding how the person and work of Jesus Christ meets humanity in regard to its need—the answer is completely different.

-I would suggest that the answer is, instead, a resounding “Yes!”

-No less importantly, however, is the question, “Is it relevant?” “Does it speak to the pain, suffering, and lostness in which our people find themselves?”

The answer here, too, a resounding “Yes!” just as it was 130 years ago.