

THE LEGACY OF ROLAND ALLEN: Part One—His Life

By J. D. Payne

One of the most controversial, yet most influential missionary thinkers in Church history, was Roland Allen. An examination of his missionary experience reveals nothing too impressive from a humanistic perspective. Rather, it was Allen's insights into the expansion of the Church that sometimes equated him as being a prophet, a revolutionary, a radical, or a troublemaker. This is the first part of a two part examination of this pioneer in missionary endeavor.

THE MAN

Roland Allen was born to Charles Fletcher (1835-1873) and Priscilla (1839-1935) Allen in England on 29 December, 1868. He was the sixth of seven children. At four weeks of age, he was baptized in St. Werburgh's Church. Charles, graduated from Christ's College (Cambridge) in 1858, and served as a clergyman in the Church of England. While away from his family in 1873 in the colony of British Honduras, Charles died at the age of thirty-eight. Allen was not even five years of age.

As a young man, Allen won a scholarship to St. John's College (Oxford), and later won the university's Lothain prize for an essay regarding Pope Silvester II. While pursuing his studies, he was highly influenced by the Anglo-Catholic faculty at Pusey House near St. John's. Following college, Allen attended the High Anglican clergy training school in Leeds. Allen had a very simple motive for attending clergy school. He once noted: "When I was ordained, I was a child. My idea was to serve God in His Temple. Chiefly that, with a conviction that to be ignorant of God's Love revealed in Christ was to be in a most miserable state." His principal described him as being "a refined intellectual man, small not vigorous, in no way burly or muscular. . . academic and fastidious rather. . . learning and civilization are more to him than most men."

In 1892, Allen was ordained a deacon, and one year later became a priest and served his curacy in the Durham diocese in the parish of St. John the Evangelist, Darlington. Within a short period of time, Allen applied to the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel to serve as a missionary. Due to a certain heart condition, however, the Society refused to send him out as a missionary. Determined to begin missionary service as soon as possible, Allen, applied to the Society's associated mission, the independent Church of England to North China. Though his physical condition quickly became an issue which would appear to thwart his opportunity to serve in China, Allen was able to convince his physician that he would not die in China any sooner than he would die in England. In 1894, Allen was accepted by the Mission and left for China after he completed his curacy in 1895.

After arriving in China, Allen opened a clergy school for a diocese in the Northern part of the country; he was involved in training boys to work as catechists. While serving in this school in Peking, Allen's views on education and leadership development were still status quo. While in China, he quickly learned Mandarin, and within a few years became a "3000-character man." Later, he began to oversee both a day school for non-Christians and a printing press, and began a chaplaincy at the nearby Legation. Though he was involved in many roles, he nevertheless found time to write for the Mission's quarterly journal, *The Land of Sinim*.

1900 was a dark time for Christians in China. Thousands of believers and many missionaries were killed due to the rebellions. Allen and his companions at the mission survived, but found themselves in the middle of the Boxer uprising and the ensuing siege that befell the Legation. Allen kept a diary while in China, and his detailed record of the problems he experienced taking place at the turn of the twentieth century were published in 1901 under the title *The Siege of the Peking Legations* (London: Smith Elder and Company).

Following the conflict in Peking, Allen returned to England for furlough. While at home, he served as a chaplain to the Bishop and represented his mission in China, which included raising funds for the mission stations that had been devastated. It was during this furlough in 1901, that Allen married Mary Beatrice Tarleton (1863-1960). They would eventually have two children: Priscilla Mary (1903-1987) and John Willoughby Tarleton (1904-1979).

Allen and his wife departed to China in 1902. Allen's new service was to be at a mission station in Yung Ch'ing. It was during this time in China that Allen attempted to apply some of his missionary principles that were contra-traditional missionary paternalism. He helped local believers to elect church councils and take more responsibility for finances, evangelism, and church leadership. Though his work was going well, after nine months in China, his health deteriorated and he and his family were required to return to England. Though Allen wished to return to China, the Society did not grant that desire.

Having returned to England in 1903 and having recovered his health, Allen began serving as a vicar in the rural Buckinghamshire parish of Chalfont St. Peter in 1904. It was during this time that the writings of the Apostle Paul made a dynamic impact on his thinking. He wrote: "I was ill, and came home for two years, and began to study the methods of the Apostle St. Paul. From that day forward I began to see light."

Though Allen's wife thoroughly enjoyed her time at Chalfont St. Peter, in 1907 Allen resigned from his position, for theological reasons. This resignation revolved around the fact that Allen refused to carry out his duties of baptisms, marriages, and burial services to nonbelievers, practices that the Church of England required all priests to perform regardless of the nature of the person. Following this resignation, Allen did some deputation work for an overseas mission, occasionally assisted other clergy when they became ill, and spent much time thinking and writing.

In 1912, Allen published his classic work *Missionary Methods: St. Paul's or Ours?* The title of the text revealed much about the book's content. Allen advocated that the missionary methods of the Apostle were not antiquated but rather to be applied to missionary endeavors in any day and time. Allen stated that "I myself am more convinced than ever that in the careful examination of his [St. Paul's] work, above all in the understanding and appreciation of his principles, we shall find the solution of most of our present difficulties." Toward the end of the work, Allen poignantly wrote that "at any rate this much is certain, that the Apostle's methods succeeded exactly where ours have failed."

The following year saw Allen's publication of *Missionary Principles*. In this work Allen advocated that the indwelling Holy Spirit provides the missionary zeal. For Allen, the end of all missionary desire is a worldwide "Revelation of Christ." It was his desire to discuss principles not only related to foreign missionary work, but principles that "could be applied to any work anywhere."

By 1914, many of Allen's missiological thoughts had been circulated via his writings. Two individuals that were sympathetic to his views were Sidney James Wells Clark, a wealthy Congregationalist layman, and Thomas Cochran, a Presbyterian Scotsman, missionary physician. Both men saw the value in Allen's thoughts as well as the importance of conducting surveys and other quantitative research to determine the needs of mission fields throughout the world. In 1914, Allen seemed to find kindred spirits with Clark and Cochran.

Though the three men came from different denominational backgrounds, they all shared a desire to see contemporary missiological problems alleviated, and they all had a strong passion for the role of the Holy Spirit in the life of the Church and mission. Though Allen was not too fond of surveys and research, nevertheless, he joined forces with Clark and Cochran to become part of establishing the World Dominion Movement in 1917. Hubert J. B. Allen noted the individual strengths of each man: "Their abilities complimented one another's: Clark's business acumen made him an excellent manager for the project; Cochran's charm and sensitivity made him the team's diplomat; and Roland with his trained analytic mind and wide learning was their philosopher and theologian." The following year, each man became involved in the Survey Application Trust and its publishing arm, the World Dominion Press.

When World War I began in 1914, Allen served as a Naval chaplain onboard the Royal Fleet Auxiliary H.M.S. Rohilla. Allen's service, however, was very brief due to an unfortunate violent shipwreck in which some of the crew died; Allen survived a death-defying swim to shore. After the War, Clark provided the Allen family with a house called Amenbury in Beaconsfield, West of London. He also provided the family with an honorarium of £200 so Allen could study foreign missions.

Allen believed that he published his best work in 1917, a small pamphlet entitled *Pentecost and the World*. It was in this work that Allen attempted to address the missional nature of the Holy Spirit. He showed that the Holy Spirit Who came at Pentecost, was a Spirit Who both empowered and motivated believers to propagate the gospel.

Allen's work *Educational Principles and Missionary Methods* was published in 1919. In his preface to the second edition of *Missionary Methods*, he noted that *Educational Principles and Missionary Methods* was written to address some of the criticisms against his thoughts in *Missionary Methods*. Allen also noted that *Educational Principles and Missionary Methods* advocated that the greater the cultural/world-view distances between contemporary missionaries and the people to whom they minister, the greater the value of the apostolic method.

During the 1920s, the Survey Application Trust issued a quarterly journal, *World Dominion*. Allen was a principal contributor to the periodical during this decade. Though Allen used the Trust's money to travel abroad for research, his heart was never in survey work. Allen believed that the Trust should be about the promotion of indigenous church principles.

It was during the 1920s that he wrote booklets and pamphlets such as *Voluntary Clergy* (1923), *Voluntary Clergy Overseas—an Answer to the Fifth World Call* (1928), and *Non Professional Missionaries* (1929). Another major moment in the 1920s occurred in 1927 when Allen published his book *The Spontaneous Expansion of the Church and the Causes Which Hinder It*. As the title suggested, this work included a discussion of the contemporary missiological barriers that prevented the natural expansion of the Church. For Allen, spontaneous expansion was a simple notion: "If we want to see spontaneous expansion we must establish native churches free from our control."

Allen was emotionally depressed in his latter years. If his depression was due to the fact that many did not widely accept his views, at least he acknowledged that he would probably never live to see his missiology implemented on a global scale. His grandson, Hubert J. B. Allen, noted that his grandfather predicted that few would understand his views until ten years after his death.

By 1930, Allen published *The Case for Voluntary Clergy*. David M. Paton noted that this work was the incorporation in revised form, of Allen's earlier works *Voluntary Clergy* and

Voluntary Clergy Overseas. Hubert Allen wrote that The Case “brought together and elaborated all Roland’s principal arguments on this theme, at home and overseas.”

During the early 1930s, Allen and his wife desired to live closer to their children in Africa, so they moved from Amenbury to Nairobi. While in Africa, Allen conducted some survey work regarding the Anglican Church in Kenya and occasionally preached to different congregations. It was also during this decade that Allen decided to assist with the services at St. Mark’s Church in Nairobi’s Parklands suburb, from time to time. Though Allen desired to see a regular clergyman appointed from within the people of St. Mark’s Church, his desire soon turned to frustration. Hubert Allen noted that “after a while he began to express exasperation that the church members kept expecting him to ‘fill gaps’, instead of persuading the Bishop to appoint the ‘voluntary clergy’ that he advocated.” Since Allen believed he was hindering the congregation by keeping them content in the status quo, he withdrew himself from St. Mark’s Church, exactly thirty-two years after his resignation from Chalfont St. Peter. While in Kenya, Allen continued to write. In 1937, he published a biography about Sidney James Wells Clark entitled, *S.J.W. Clark: A Vision of Missions*. He also decided to learn Swahili, and translated and published several Swahili writings into English.

At seventy-nine years of age, Allen was very ill. Despite his health, Priscilla Allen wrote: “His mind remained clear and alert until the morning before his death, and he died without pain.” On 9 June, 1947, Allen died. His funeral was conducted by the Bishop of Mombasa. Allen’s gravestone can be found in Nairobi’s City Park. A simple stone cross with the inscription on the pedestal reads:

ROLAND ALLEN

CLERK IN HOLY ORDERS

1868-1947

I AM THE RESURRECTION AND THE LIFE SAITH THE LORD