

# **THE LEGACY OF ROLAND ALLEN: Part Two—His Philosophy of Missions**

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 second part of a look at this missionary pioneer will examine his missiology.

## **THE MISSIOLOGY**

Much of Allen's writings were in response to the problems that accompanied the mission station approach to missionary work. As Allen returned to the Scriptures, he recognized a discrepancy between the faith and practice of the Apostolic Church and that of the Contemporary Church. What Allen observed and experienced during his time in Peking, Yung Ch'ing, and Chalfont St. Peter, appeared to be contra-mission as he understood mission in the New Testament. The remainder of this article is a brief description of Allen's missiology. Four primary areas of interest will be addressed: 1) The Issue of Theology 2) The Issue of Devolution; 3) The Role of the Missionary; and 4) The Concept of Spontaneous Expansion.

### **The Issue of Theology**

It is impossible to dichotomize Allen's missiology and his theology. Harry R. Boer noted that "the methods which Allen advocated become quite meaningless apart from the theology out of which they arose." Though Allen never clearly delineated his theological views, as a Calvin or a Barth, nevertheless, from his writings one can begin to understand the foundation behind his notion of the spontaneous expansion of the church.

As the researcher examines Allen's writings which expound upon his understanding of the Apostolic Church's missionary methods, two vital theological areas are constantly addressed over and over: 1) ecclesiology and 2) pneumatology. Concerning the former, Allen's views regarding the Eucharist and indigenous churches are prevalent in his writings. Concerning the latter, Allen's views regarding the role of

the Holy Spirit in the life of new churches also consume much of his writings. Since Allen's theology and missiology are intertwined like the threads of a tapestry, both his ecclesiological and pneumatological views will be highlighted in the sections to follow.

### **The Issue of Devolution**

Allen saw the missionaries of his day practicing devolution, the notion of gradually delegating rights, authority, power, and privileges to native churches over an arbitrary period of time. Those holding to this practice thought that the new believers of a given area were incapable of functioning as a church until the missionaries saw that they were ready to function on their own without any outside resources. With a voice of protest, Allen wrote: "St. Paul, for instance, established a Church when he organized converts with their own proper officers, but he did not organize a Church and then later, and piece by piece, devolve an authority which at first the Church did not possess."

Allen believed that control of all monetary funds, responsibility for evangelization, and responsibility for the care of the churches should be placed into the hands of the new congregations as soon as they became congregations.

Concerning his understanding of the Church, both local and universal, Allen wrote: In the New Testament the idea of a Church is simple. It is an organized body of Christians in a place with its officers . . . . That Church is the visible Body of Christ in the place, and it has all the rights and privileges and duties of the Body of Christ. Above it is the Universal Church, composed of all the Churches in the world, and of all the redeemed in heaven and on earth.

For a congregation to be a church, they had to be able to participate in the divine rites of the Church while simultaneously, existing in an indigenous state of being. It must be remembered that in Allen's day, in the Anglican tradition, a minister was needed for the proper administration of the Eucharist. If the Church did not have enough money to provide a minister for a group of believers located in some remote part of a country or if no minister could be found, then those believers could not participate in the Eucharist. For Allen, to prevent a body of believers from participating in this rite was tantamount to heresy.

It was within his understanding of spontaneous expansion that Allen primarily saw the local church being indigenous. He wrote that "this is what I understand by an indigenous Church: I understand a

Church which possesses as inherent in itself everything which is essential to the existence of a Church, and is able to multiply itself without any necessary reference to any external authority.”

For Allen, the church never became the church, but was the church from its inception; for the missionaries, devolution was the only answer. Their mission stations, leadership training, Christian education, evangelistic ministries, etc., were based on a paradigm that required a specialization and education that could only be found in, and learned from, the Western world.

### **The Role of the Missionary**

Allen’s solution to the problem of devolution was to understand and apply the biblical concept of the role of the missionary. His understanding of this role can be summarized into four categories:

- 1) Prioritize Evangelism
- 2) Practice an Apostolic Approach
- 3) Maintain the Ministration of the Spirit
- 4) Manifest Missionary Faith.

#### *1) Prioritize Evangelism*

Though Allen noted there were many activities (e.g., medical and educational work) to which the missionary could devote his or her life, nevertheless, he saw evangelism as the priority. Allen was supportive of other missionary practices, but other missionary practices were not to be divorced from or dominate over evangelism.

In an article, Allen noted that the need that evangelistic missions meet in people’s lives was “the supreme need,” and then he asked the question: “May I, then, take it as agreed that evangelization is the supreme end of missions?” Allen believed that when the missionary made evangelism the priority (i.e., reveal Christ, proclaim the good news to people), then secondary issues (e.g., social improvement) would fall into the proper perspective.

#### *2) Practice an Apostolic Approach.*

Just as the Apostolic teams entered into an area, evangelized and congregationalized some of the people, and then moved on to repeat the process, Allen believed that missionaries should retire from their fields to

begin their work anew in another location. Just as the Apostle did not abandon the new congregations but visited, wrote, and sent others to them, likewise, contemporary missionaries were not to practice abandonment.

Before the missionary departed from a particular region, Allen believed that four things needed to be conveyed to the new believers.

First, the new believers were to receive the Creed, not a formal creed, but rather a teaching containing the “simple Gospel” involving a doctrine of God the Father, the Creator, Jesus, the Son, the Redeemer, the Savior, and a doctrine of the Holy Spirit, the indwelling source of strength. In conjunction with these teachings was the reliance on an oral tradition of the fundamental facts behind the death and resurrection of Jesus.

Second, the new believers were to receive the “Sacraments.” Just as Paul taught his congregations about the Lord’s Supper and baptism, likewise, contemporary missionaries were to teach the importance of these practices. Allen believed that the Pauline writings reflected the assumption that all the believers had been baptized and gathered regularly for communion.

Third, the Orders (i.e., church ministers) were conveyed to the new believers. Since the Apostle or those closely connected to the Apostle appointed leaders over the new churches, Allen believed that missionaries should do likewise. He noted: “Just as he [Paul] baptized three or four and then committed the responsibility for admitting others to those whom he had baptized; so he ordained three or four and committed the authority for ordaining others into their hands.”

Finally, the new believers were to receive the Holy Scriptures. The Apostle conveyed to the new church the value of the Old Testament. Allen believed that the Apostle taught the converts how to understand and apply the Scriptures to their lives. Likewise, contemporary missionaries were to convey a high view of the Scriptures (i.e., New and Old Testament) to their converts.

### *3) Maintain the Ministration of the Spirit.*

Before the missionary could practice an Apostolic Approach, he had to maintain the ministration of the Spirit. In summary, the ministration of the Spirit was the act whereby the missionary relied on the power of the Holy Spirit to save, seal, protect, and guide the new congregation until the return of the Lord. It was by

maintaining the ministration of the Spirit that the missionary was able to avoid the practice of devolution. Allen referred to the ministration of the Spirit as the “goal” for missionaries and the “sole work of the missionary of the Gospel.”

When the missionary maintained the ministration of the Spirit, the new believers were taught to remain dependent upon the Spirit and not the missionaries or the mission station.

As long as the missionaries practiced devolution and trusted in their strength to oversee, protect, and guide the new congregations, they were hindering the spontaneous expansion of the churches. Allen believed that the missionaries needed to move out of the way of the Holy Spirit to grow His churches. The churches had to be set free.

#### *4) Manifest Missionary Faith.*

Encompassing each of the three aforementioned categories of the role of the missionary was what Allen referred to as missionary faith. Before a missionary could practice prioritizing evangelism, practicing an apostolic approach, and maintaining the ministration of the Spirit, the missionary had to manifest a biblical understanding of the person and work of the Holy Spirit. Many missionaries feared that if they removed themselves from control over the new congregations, then corruption and degeneration would soon become commonplace. Allen’s response was that to focus on the possible problems meant that the missionaries were placing the focus on the people and not on Christ and his power. Without a proper missionary faith, devolution was the option, and spontaneous expansion an impossibility.

### **The Concept of Spontaneous Expansion**

All of Allen’s missiological views related to spontaneous expansion in some fashion. Certain concepts, such as native education, voluntary clergy, and non-professional missionaries were important in his overall understanding of spontaneous expansion, but were secondary in nature. These secondary concepts derived themselves out of a context whereby a proper biblical and theological foundation had been established, the missionary’s role was clearly understood, and a healthy understanding of indigenous churches and the Holy Spirit was present. Allen’s understanding of the spontaneous expansion of the church was a simple

paradigm to grasp: When the concept of indigenous churches was united with the proper understanding of the Holy Spirit and missionary faith was encompassing the role of the missionary, then the result was to be the spontaneous expansion of the Church.

#### CONCLUSION

Allen's legacy is incredible. Though he has been gone for several years and the majority of his writings are out-of-print, his missiology continues to impact missionaries in both Western and non-Western contexts. For example, Allen's thinking was a major influence on Donald McGavran, the father of the contemporary Church Growth Movement. Also, throughout much of the world, the Church is experiencing church planting movements. These movements that consist of rapid church growth via the evangelization of different peoples and then congregationalizing those peoples into local churches, primarily rest upon the missiological foundation advocated by Allen years ago. Just as Hubert J. B. Allen noted in the subtitle of his work, Roland Allen was a "pioneer, priest, and prophet," both during his day and ours.

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