

The Genius of Roland Allen

Martin Goldsmith

We welcome a contribution to our Historical Theology series edited by David F. Wright, of New College, Edinburgh, from the Revd Martin Goldsmith, of All Nations College

[p.11]

Roland Allen (1868-1947) worked as a missionary in China with the S.P.G. from 1895 to 1903. As a result of broken health he returned to England and became vicar of Chalfont St Peter for three years before resigning from parochial ministry in protest against 'baptismal rigorism'. Later, he went to Kenya where he eventually died. In China, Chalfont St Peter, and in Kenya, he observed the structures, message and mission of the church with critical eyes. In East Africa he commented, 'I gravely doubt whether missions sent out by Christian societies are not really doing in Africa destructive work.... Their message is more intellectual than religious if they have any message at all. How many, I ask have definitely in view the building up of a "Christian Church"? ... Mission methods are the main obstacle, and the message is too negative. Finance seems to dominate most situations'. These words might have applied equally to his experience of Anglican ministry in England and in China – and, sadly, they are not irrelevant to us today in our practice of ministry and mission in Britain and overseas. Roland Allen spoke with prophetic insight. His words have gained increasing respect with the passing of the years.

Roland Allen wrote prodigiously, his best-known books being *Missionary Methods – St Paul's or Ours?* (1912), *Voluntary Clergy* (1923), and *The Spontaneous Expansion of the Church and the Causes which Hinder It* (1927). *Missionary Methods - St Paul's or Ours?* And the *Spontaneous Expansion of the Church* have been reprinted more recently by Eerdmans, and are still available. The influence of these books has been considerable in the theory of mission practice and they are still commonly quoted today.

1. Indigenous Policies

Perhaps the most significant emphasis in Allen's thought is his teaching on the development of indigenous churches. He strongly supported the three 'self' principles of church-planting whereby indigenous churches should, from their outset, be self-governing, self-supporting, and self-propagating. In his High Church Anglican mission circles in China and East Africa he noted that the missions dominated national church life by their finance and by the attitudes of their expatriate clergy.

(a) *Clergy*. Overseas missions have learned considerable lessons since Allen's time. It is now rare that national churches will allow foreign clergy or missionaries to dominate the life of the church, although, regrettably, this can still happen in social projects. We need to learn to submit our expertise and efficiency to national leadership, even if we happen to be more highly trained. Mission societies today are extremely aware of the need to have their workers under the leadership of national Christians in the life of the church. Of course we can all point to current failures in this respect but, generally, missions have at least learned the theory. Sadly, the church in Britain has generally failed to apply these mission principles to church life here. In almost all churches, the ordained ministry still dominates the life of the congregation, leading to considerable failure to develop leadership amongst local people.

(b) *Finance*. We all know how influential financial considerations can be. The church in Britain spends much of its energies and committee time on money matters. Foreign finance overseas frequently leads to economic imperialism in the church. National Christians occupy the positions of leadership, but their hands are tied because they depend on overseas finance and, therefore, the need to build ecclesiastical structures which could be maintained through local money, as well as being run by local Christian leadership. Churches should not be saddled with large buildings, institutions or ecclesiastical structures which cannot be run and financed by local Christians.

Allen enunciates three principles which governed the apostle Paul's financial policy:

- i. Although Paul received financial gifts from his converts and from the churches he founded, he did not seek money for himself. And when he felt it better for the churches, he would support himself by his own labours.
- ii. Paul did not take financial support to his converts. This precluded any possibility of paternalism in the mission enterprise. Of course, in Paul's day mission was from the relatively poor and unsophisticated Israel to the wealthy cultural centres of Corinth, Athens and Rome. Paternalism was not a possibility. We, however, in our history have turned the tables and made the missionary enterprise

[p.12]

dependent on wealth and sophistication. as a result it is the West and wealthy Asian nations like the Chinese, Japan and Korea which can send missionaries all over the world. Poorer churches in Africa cannot engage in mission beyond their own continent because they lack the necessary finance, although many of the African churches are large, dynamic and spiritually vibrant.

- iii . Paul did not administer funds of his churches. Allen rightly asks the question whether we distrust national Christians' honesty. Maturity develops through experience. By keeping financial control in our own hands we rob national churches of the opportunity to make mistakes, grow in true Christian responsibility and this also in spiritual maturity. They remain babes in Christ who will not take initiative in responsibility because the church does not really belong to them.

(c) *Modern Developments*. Roland Allen's emphasis on indigenous policies seems somewhat dated today, although still essential reading for any Christian worker. Today we have moved further on questions of the indigenous church. In Allen's day strategies centred on the three self-pattern of church planting. Then we began to assume that and talk more about culturally relevant patterns of worship, church government and architecture. Both in Britain and overseas many of us are still at this stage and struggle with the issue of how to prevent our churches from being or remaining what Allen called 'exotic'.

But today we have progressed into further questions which Allen hardly could think of. Questions of hermeneutics contextualization force us to rethink our understanding of God's revelation. We have come to see that our biblical exposition and theological expression are determined by our cultural and philosophical contexts. While the Word of God in Christ and in the scriptures is an unchanging absolute, our understanding of the Word, our theology and

our communication of the Gospel are all fallible. We must, therefore, encourage national churches to develop their own biblical and theological understanding rather than impose on them our views like western theological imperialists.

2. *Trust God's Spirit.* Allen accuses western missionaries of failure to trust the work of the Holy Spirit in sanctifying and maturing new believers in China or Africa. He reminds his readers that the same Holy Spirit indwells these new national Christians and us. If God is at work in them, then we must assume that they, too, have all the necessary gifts for the leadership and life of the church. There is no need for us to remain in charge of everything. Allen notes that the apostle Paul did not stay unduly long in any one place, but quickly trained and taught new believers, appointed leaders and moved on. He trusted the Holy Spirit to use them and lead them, so that the church flourished and grew. Allen contrasts this apostolic pattern with contemporary systems in which many missionaries remain for many years in one place, dominate the national church and thus prevent natural development under the Spirit of God. Allen seems to be a prophet before his time, for in more recent years the charismatic renewal has taught us that all Christians have gifts for the edification of the church and, therefore, we do not need to be mere pew-dusters saying 'amen' to a dominant minister.

In *The Spontaneous Expansion of the Church* Allen points out that our failure to hand over leadership to national believers may stem from our fear that doctrinal and ethical standards will be compromised. But again we have to ask ourselves whether we are the guardians of doctrine and morals. Or can we trust God's Holy Spirit to lead his church into all truth and to sanctify his people?

In the context of the life of the emerging church, Allen betrays his High Church Anglicanism. Although he does not stress the need for long-term or extensive teaching by missionaries, he does emphasise the vital importance of the proper practice of the sacraments. He claims that the sacraments of baptism and holy communion were fundamental to the missionary teaching of the apostle Paul. Some evangelicals might query the central position of the sacraments, particularly the holy communion, in Pauline teaching.

3. *Paul's times and ours.* In order to underline the significance of Paul's apostolic practice as a model for us today, Allen argues that the situation in the first century was no more conducive to the gospel than is ours today. In this he is followed by Michael Green in his *Evangelism in the Early Church*, which has been clearly influenced by Roland Allen. Allen shows the fearful problems and opposition which faced the evangelistic endeavours of the early church. He, therefore, concludes that mission in China ought to be able to achieve at least as much as Paul and the other apostles. We cannot today plead that the first century was particularly ripe for the good news of Jesus Christ. If Paul could plant churches, teach them and train leaders with such rapidity and success, we ought to be able to do the same. He, therefore, attacks the ease with which his contemporary missionaries settled down in their compounds, expecting that the church would need their ministry for many long years.

Likewise, Allen examines the place of miracles in the apostolic mission of the apostle, for the important role of miracles in Paul's ministry 'is one of the grounds on which is based the argument that his methods can have little or no bearing upon our work in the present day'. He shows that miracles 'were not a necessary part of his mission preaching' and he quotes W. M. Ramsay's *St Paul, the Traveller and Roman Citizen* to the effect that

miracles were not 'efficacious in spreading the new religion'. In fact, on some occasions, he points out, Paul's miracles were actually 'the immediate cause of serious obstruction'. And yet, at the same time, Allen admits that generally Luke seems to imply that miracles do tend 'to further the cause of the Gospel'. In this question of the role of the miraculous in Paul's mission, one does suspect that Allen has an axe to grind – and many today would question his apparent assumption that missionaries today will not have the power of God to work miracles.

4. *Blueprint or principles?* Allen is arguing that modern missionaries should follow the patterns of the great apostle in his missionary activities. He analyses Paul's strategies in concentrating on urban and cultural centres which would then radiate out to surrounding areas with the newly received message of the gospel. He further studies the apostolic sermons to see the style and content of Paul's preaching both to Jews and to Gentiles.

But Allen does not adequately struggle with the underlying problem. How far is the New Testament giving us a clear blueprint which we should follow? Or does it give us principles which need to be reapplied to very new age and situation?

These questions go to the heart of Allen's whole thesis. If Paul went largely to population centres are we wrong if we go to outlying villages or tribes? If Paul went first to Jewish synagogues and preached first to Jews, are we wrong to go straight to Gentiles? If Paul planted churches and then moved on quickly after some basic teaching and the appointment of leaders, is it unbiblical if we stay somewhere for several years? Such questions must then apply further to the issues of church government and worship also. Do we look to the New Testament for a blueprint in such matters? If there is no blue-print, are there principles? If so, what are they? Or are we free to develop patterns which fit our times as long as they are consonant with Scripture? Indeed, is it a biblical pattern that we should be relevant in such matters to the prevailing culture?

Allen is particularly opposing the western domination which results in the church remaining a foreign institution with no roots in indigenous life. This is surely a lesson for the British church today as well as for our overseas mission. The gospel must be incarnated and should never be 'an exotic' either because it is foreign or because it is old-fashioned, or because it relates to a different class, race or generation.

© 1989 Martin Goldsmith. Reproduced by permission of the author.

Prepared for the Web in May 2009 by Robert I. Bradshaw.

<http://www.missiology.org.uk/>
