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Roland Allen: The Man Who Understood New Testament Missionary Principles

K. G. Hyland

In 1921 four remarkable men were regularly meeting in London. Alexander McLeish, on his third furlough from India, wrote: 'On that occasion I had been asked to stay over in London for talks with Sidney Clark and Thomas Cochrane. I found Roland Allen daily present . . . These men formed a unique group and had very different backgrounds. Sydney Clark had been a successful business man and was a Congregationalist. Dr. Cochrane had been a missionary of the London Missionary Society in Mongolia and was a Presbyterian. Roland Allen was an Anglican and had been a missionary of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel (SPG) in China. There was no doubt as to the bond which united such different men'.¹ McLeish describes this bond as 'the conviction that a revolution was overdue in missionary work, not only in methods and principles, but also in the objective itself'. As to the source from which such a stream of prophetic thinking and writing came, he says that it was 'under the stimulus of what is called Biblical Theology we have begun to learn again to subject customary church and missionary practice to the scrutiny of the New Testament'.

Sidney Clark was the subject of Roland Allen's last book, published in 1937. He wrote, 'In 1907 the general managing partner of Bradley's of Chester resigned his office, in order to devote himself entirely to foreign missions'. He was forty-five. Thenceforward he travelled the world, surveyed mission fields, rethought mission principles, wrote on these extensively, founded the Survey Application Trust and the World Dominion Movement'.²

These two men worked together much and fertilised each other's thinking.

Roland Allen was born in 1868, went from Bristol Grammar School to Oxford and was ordained in 1892. He went to the North China mission of the SPG in 1895. After a furlough in 1901-2 at Christmas 1902 he wrote in pencil a quarterly report which survives in the archives of the SPG. It is evident that thus early he had already arrived at some of the conclusions which were to dominate the rest of his working life. 'But here I must say that the continued presence of the foreigner seems to produce an evil effect. The native genius is cramped by his presence, and cannot work with him. The Christians tend to sit still and let him do everything for them, and to deny all responsibility . . . A visit of two or three months stirs up the Church; long continued residence stifles it'.

In 1903 his health broke down, in 1904 he became Vicar of Chalfont St. Peter until in 1907 when he resigned. The general ground of this was

About the author. K. G. Hyland is a retired dental surgeon and an elder in his local church in Poole, Dorset. He has been active in the ministry of the Word for many years.

the Erastianism of the Establishment. He wrote in his letter to his parishioners: 'In consequence we see the strange and painful sight of men and women who habitually neglect their religious duties, or who openly deny the truth of the creeds, or who by the immorality of their lives openly defy the laws of God, standing up as sponsors in a Christian Church . . . and as representatives of the Church on behalf of a new-born child, solemnly professing their desire for Holy Baptism . . . their steadfast faith in the creeds, their willingness to obey God's will, whilst they know, and everyone in the Church knows, that they themselves neither do, nor intend to do, any of these things . . . One form of protest, and only one, remains open to me; that is to decline to hold an office in which I am liable to be called upon to do what I feel to be wrong. I have chosen that. I have resigned'.³

From then on Allen never again held any formal ecclesiastical office, but 'tried to live as nearly the life of a voluntary priest as a man may who was not ordained as a voluntary cleric'.⁴ This was not by the force of circumstances, for in his earliest major book, *Missionary Methods*, he stressed the non-stipendiary nature of Paul's service, and those he trained to be his companions and the elders of the churches he founded. In a paper, '*Non-Professional Missionaries*',⁵ and his formal treatment of the theme in *The Case for Voluntary Clergy*⁶ (1930) he stated the Biblical grounds for this major decision.

From about 1920 till his death in 1947 he lived in East Africa. In *The Case for Voluntary Clergy* published in 1930 he wrote: 'I have been a stipendiary missionary in China, where I tried to prepare young men for the work of catechists with a view to Holy Orders; and there I first learnt that we cannot establish the Church widely by that method. Then I was in charge of a country district in China; and there I learnt that the guidance of old experienced men in the Church, even if they were illiterate, was of immense value. Then I held a benefice in England; and there I learnt the waste of spiritual power which our restrictions involve at home'. These experiences, and his constant reference of every question to the New Testament, were the fountain from which all his thinking was drawn. These conclusions he published in the form of some major works, a series of pamphlets, and many articles.

The plan behind this paper is now to take chronologically the more considerable writings as they came from his pen and it may be seen how his vision of missionary matters was developed as the years passed.

In 1912 was published the volume of some 230 pages '*Missionary Methods: St. Paul's or Ours?*' The sub-title was 'A Study of the Church in the Four Provinces'. According to Charles Chaney, 'This has been his most influential work, and, though it is really not the most mature expression of his thought, it was fundamental to all that he later wrote'.⁷

Allen stated his thesis thus: 'It is impossible but that the account so carefully given by St. Luke . . . should have something more than a mere archaeological and historical interest. Like the rest of the Holy Scriptures it was certainly "written for our learning". It was certainly meant to be something more than a story from which ordinary people of

a later age can get no more instruction for practical missionary work than they receive from the history of the Cid or from the exploits of King Arthur. It was really intended to throw light on the path of those who should come after'.⁸ Paul established churches; we start missions. Paul's churches were complete churches; he left behind him instructed societies, adequately officered, with the sacraments and a tradition, and that in a very short time. 'In a very few years he built the church on so firm a basis that it could live and grow in faith and practice, that it could work out its own problems, and overcome all dangers and hindrances both from within and without. I propose in this book to attempt to set forth the methods which he used to produce this amazing result'.⁹ He then proceeds to deal with such matters as—did Paul have especially favourable conditions, or an influential class of convert either morally or socially? how did Paul present his message? and the place of miracle. He opens up the matter of how Paul handled finance, how he trained converts, for baptism and ordination.

With regard to church organisation he shows that Paul appointed elders very soon and gave them authority to administer the sacraments. (It is perhaps wise at this point to point out that the terms being used are Allen's, who was a convinced High Anglican.) Paul only stayed long enough to do this and then, on principle, left them, allowing the Holy Spirit to develop the churches. He kept in touch by letters and visits. Allen pointed out that Paul did not trust his converts, but he trusted the Holy Spirit in his converts.

All this naturally raises the problem of discipline and highlights the different approach to this problem of Paul on the one hand and the Judaizers¹⁰ on the other. This leads further to the matter of how Paul maintained unity. It is amazing how relevant this chapter is to current problems of unity:—

He refused to transplant the law and the customs.

He refused to acknowledge a central administrative body.

He declined to establish *a priori* tests of orthodoxy.

He refused to allow universal application of particular precedents.

Nowhere did Roland Allen so convincingly demonstrate that he was expounding the New Testament—thinking and writing far ahead of his time—than in his treatment of the moral conditions of the mission field. 'In the mission field we need to revise our ideas of the meaning of the Christian life. A Christian life is a life lived in Christ: it does not depend upon conditions. I mean that the life of a slave-girl, the concubine of a savage heathen, amidst the most cruel and barbarous surroundings, herself the instrument of the most vicious and immoral practices, may be a truly Christian life. Christ transcends all conditions'.¹¹

In Part 5 he contrasts St. Paul's results with the fact that everywhere in our day Christianity is still exotic, dependent. The pattern is the same however different the cultures of the various countries are. It is a disturbing and just criticism.

He concludes by applying the lessons to missionary work to-day.

In 1913 came *Essential Missionary Principles*. In this work Allen goes far below the surface of men and methods to the underlying impulse to missionary work; to the hope before missionary work; and the means by which the impulse is worked out.

Perhaps the chapter on the impulse of missionary outreach is as fine an exposition of the Biblical contrast between Law and Spirit as can anywhere be found. Under the Old Testament it is command applied; under the New Testament it is the Spirit communicated. Under the Old Testament the letter is the standard; under the Gospel we have an ideal with no fixed point. 'The Father sent the Son by a command, but the command was a Procession of the Holy Spirit. So Christ sends his people not by external command only; but by a giving of the same Spirit'.¹²

As to 'the hope': we are not working for something, but toward the revelation of a Person, Jesus Christ. The revelation is seen in the conversion of individuals, in the growth of the Church. 'We need to take pains to keep clearly before our minds that the hope before us is not the perfecting of the church, but the Revelation of Christ in the perfecting of the Church'.¹³

The means is the expression of the missionary Spirit in activity. It is the Spirit of the Incarnation. It therefore must take material form; but only by spiritual means can spiritual results be obtained. For this reason it makes a great difference to us if we realise that the Spirit is the effective force. It makes a great difference to others to whom we appeal for prayer and money. It makes a great difference to those to whom we go, because they seek to assess the motive behind our going, and will inevitably discover its quality.

It has now become clear that the two dominating factors in Allen's thinking are the doctrine of the Church and the doctrine of the Spirit. So in 1917 followed his book, *Pentecost and the World*. This is a study designed to show that the Acts first record the fulfilment of the Promise of the Spirit, and thereafter the results of the receiving of that Promise. These results are wholly along the line of missionary activity, and all the events are recorded solely because of their bearing upon that activity.

Allen shows that there was an inner, inescapable impulse to spread the Gospel, and that the Gospel by the Spirit revealed the need of men for forgiveness and power to live anew.

He goes on to show that the apostles saw to it that the Spirit was ministered to all who believed (2 Cor. 3: 7, 8) and that those who were later set apart for special tasks were men who were already filled with the Holy Spirit.

He shows that it was the giving of the Spirit which authenticated new forms of missionary activity. It was Peter's argument as to his action in the household of Cornelius. It was the activity of the Spirit among Gentiles which silenced the critics at the Council of Jerusalem. They acted upon the supremacy of the Spirit. Allen's comment is: 'This is the danger which besets judgments based upon expediency, or upon anticipation of the results. Such judgments close the way to revelation of new

truth. The unknown is too fearful, the untried too dangerous. It is safer to refuse than to admit. So the possibility of progress is lost, and the opportunity. From this the apostles were saved by their recognition of the supremacy of the Spirit'.¹⁴

Lastly, the gift of the Spirit was the sole test of communion. On this ground they received uncircumcised Gentiles. 'If the Holy Spirit is given, those to whom He is given are certainly accepted of God in Christ'.¹⁵

This supremacy of the work of the Spirit led Allen to consider the ancillary activities of missions, and in 1919 he wrote a pamphlet entitled *Educational Principles and Missionary Methods*. Then in 1926 came *Missionary Activities in Relation to the Manifestation of the Spirit*. He shows that missionary activities—e.g., education, medicine—very often have been substituted for the 'Spirit in activity'. The activities of local churches are overshadowed by them; national believers may take little interest in them; they stamp the church as a foreign institution; means are put in the place of the Spirit; national believers are taught to rely upon them; and the manifestation of the Spirit in the national church is obscured. The remedy is truly indigenous churches.

In 1927, came his most mature work on missionary principles, *The Spontaneous Expansion of the Church, and the Causes which hinder it*. In this he pleads for the freedom of the Spirit in the converts and in the Churches. He notes the modern movements towards national and ecclesiastical liberty. It is interesting to speculate what benefit might have accrued to the work of missions in the content of nationalism if Allen's forward vision had been heeded. In Madagascar for twenty-five years all missionaries were driven from the island and a severe persecution instituted. Yet in that time the Church multiplied ten-fold.

Spontaneous testimony must be voluntary. If a witness is a paid agent, both he and the hearer are affected by it. Christian witness cannot be controlled, and we ought to rejoice that we cannot control it. The wind bloweth where it listeth.

Allen then posed the questions relating to doctrine and morals and shows that Paul relied upon teaching and exposition rather than upon an authoritarian control from outside the local church.

He then turns to organization and shows that missionary work today is presented as the work of societies rather than the work of the church. It leads us to attempt to organize spiritual forces; it immobilises missionaries. Mission implies movement; station implies stopping. Missionaries are a professional class, and lead the nationals to regarding money as the criterion of their own efficiency in the work of mission.

In 1930 came *The Case for Voluntary Clergy* in which the fruit of previous thinking becomes clear. 'My contention in this book is that the traditions we hold, forbidding the ordination of men engaged in earning their living by what we call secular occupations makes void the word of Christ . . . The stipendiary system grew up in settled churches and is only suitable for some settled churches at some periods; for expansion, for the establishment of new churches, it is the greatest possible hindrance'.¹⁶

Later in a quite devastating manner he contrasts the qualifications Paul lays down for the elders of a local church and the requirements for a young ordinand. He shows they are quite incompatible.

It differentiates clergy from laity, thereby creating a division in the Body of Christ; it hinders those who could develop to the full their life in the church. In *Missionary Methods* he has this to say: 'The meetings of the church were meetings for mutual instruction. Anyone who had been reading the Book and had discovered a passage which seemed to point to Christ, or an exhortation which seemed applicable to the circumstances of their life, or a promise which encouraged him with hope for this life or the next produced it, and explained it for the benefit of all. That is better than sending a catechist to instruct a congregation. The catechist conducts the service—the others listen, or get into the habit of not listening. The local prophet is silent. 'St. Paul did not send Catechists; he took them away'.¹⁷ The stipendiary system puts over the church a man who is imported and not one of themselves as were St. Paul's elders. On the contrary the image of wholly disinterested service on the part of those closely in touch with ordinary life is needed.

Since World War II Allen's thought has begun to come into its own. He pleaded for churches that were self-governed, self-supported, self-propagating plus the manifestation of its own indigenous nature, and by that he meant something 'at home' to the country, not imposed from outside. There has been a spate of studies on Allen and his principles. Donald McGavran's books, *The Bridges of God* and *How Churches Grow* have voiced Allen's thesis. Allen himself felt his ideas would come into their own around 1968.

In 1932 Allen wrote from Kenya 'I hold that truth must win its own way and I stand aside when I have pointed to the truth—all I can say is "This is the way of Christ and His Apostles".'

'One day I shall know that I have nothing more to do here, no word to say more, and then I shall withdraw, as I came, silently. Whether I have done anything at all, or shall do anything at all is known only to God. The day will declare it'.

- 1 Biographical memoir in Roland Allen, *The Ministry of the Spirit* (World Dominion Press, 1965), p. ix.
- 2 S. J. W. Clarke: *The Man who Saw the Truth about Foreign Missions* (World Dominion Press, 1937).
- 3 'To the Parishioners of Chalfont St. Peter', *The Ministry of the Spirit* (World Dominion Press, 1965), pp. 193ff.
- 4 *The Case for Voluntary Clergy* (Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1930), p. 8.
- 5 'The work of Non-Professional Missionaries', *World Dominion* (July 1928), pp. 298-304.
- 6 *The Case for Voluntary Clergy*. (Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1930), p. 8.
- 7 Charles Chaney, 'Roland Allen: The Basis of His Missionary Principles and His Influence Today', *Occasional Bulletin* (Missionary Research Library, 3041 Broadway, New York, N.Y. 10027, U.S.A.), May 1963.
- 8 *Missionary Methods: St. Paul's or Ours?* (Rpr. Eerdmans and World Dominion, 1962), p. 4.
- 9 *Ibid.*, p. 8.

- 10 See 'St. Paul and the Judaizers: A Dialogue', repr. in *The Ministry of The Spirit*.
- 11 *The Spontaneous Expansion of the Church* (World Dominion Press, 1960), p. 82.
- 12 *Missionary Principles* (World Dominion Press, 1964), p. 21.
- 13 *Ibid.*, p. 90.
- 14 *The Ministry of the Spirit*, p. 50.
- 15 *Ibid.*, p. 57.
- 16 *Ibid.*, p. 137.
- 17 *Missionary Methods: St. Paul's or Ours?*, p. 120.

Bibliographical Note

Roland Allen's major works have been reprinted in recent years by World Dominion Press in the U.K. and Eerdmans Publishing Company in the U.S.A. and are listed in the Select Bibliography of Christian Missions contained in this issue of the *Journal*. For a complete bibliography see Charles Chaney, 'Roland Allen: The Basis of his Missionary Principles and his Influence Today', *Occasional Bulletin* of the Missionary Research Library (3041 Broadway, New York, N.Y. 10027, U.S.A.), May 1963.

Review

CHRISTIAN MISSIONARIES AND THE CREATION OF NORTHERN RHODESIA, 1880-1924. By R. I. ROTBERG. (Princeton University Press; Oxford University Press, 1965). Pp. xi, 240. \$6.50, 52/-

Reviewed by J. K. Howard

The influence of the Christian Church upon the various countries in which its Gospel has been proclaimed has proved, over the centuries, incalculable. In this new book Mr. Rotberg attempts to assess this influence with relation to Northern Rhodesia (or, as it is today, the Republic of Zambia) from the period of earliest European contact with the Bantu peoples of the area until the British South Africa Company relinquished its rule and the territory became a British Protectorate under direct rule from Whitehall in 1924. The field of such a survey is immense, and as a professional historian the author should have been well aware of the impossibility of doing justice to such a task in less than 150 pages of text. The overall impression of the book is 'bitty'; it tends to make one feel that it is little more than a hasty compilation of facts; quotation is piled upon quotation, and his judgments—and especially the religious insights—are consistently superficial. Nonetheless, there is much of value in the book, especially his chapters on 'Christian Authority and Secular Power' and 'The Growth of Secular Initiative'.

A well-known and respected missionary once remarked to me that more money and man-power had been spent by the Church on Northern

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