

TO WHAT EXTENT DOES ROLAND ALLEN ACCURATELY REPRESENT NEW TESTAMENT MISSION, AND OFFER US A MODEL FOR MISSION TODAY?

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1 Introduction

Roland Allen has been widely seen as ahead of his time in criticising the traditional approach to mission in the colonial era, with heavy Western involvement and little confidence in the ability of the local community to develop an indigenous church. In this essay we outline Allen's views on mission and their compatibility with the New Testament, before assessing some missing elements and considering the applicability of his approach to the current situation.

2 The validity of Allen's view of New Testament mission - principles

A core view of Allen is that mission today should follow the New Testament in being led by the Spirit and not the law.¹ In respect of a newly planted church, Allen sees the "law" as implying fixed rules for external obedience, numbers to measure achievement and missionary-controlled hierarchies. The "Spirit" implies allowing the Holy Spirit to save, seal and protect the congregation till Jesus returns.² Howell notes that this is precisely what Paul did in Thessalonica, where the Holy Spirit brought conviction in response to preaching, holiness, joy and good deeds, and exercise of spiritual gifts, which Paul was keen not to quench.³ Allen gives an example of the spirit-law distinction in church discipline, where the missionaries are to help the local church discern and submit themselves to the Spirit as for example Paul does in respect of sexual conduct (1 Thess 4:1-6), and not administer laws. The sanctified church that results from following such guidelines would attract converts.⁴

¹ Allen, *Missionary*, 196-8.

² Payne, 'Legacy', 324.

³ Howell, 'Mission', 83.

⁴ Bosch, *Transforming*, 137.

The Spirit should also lead the church to mission, producing a spontaneous expansion of the church. Underlying this, Allen argues that the Spirit that came at Pentecost and changes the heart of believers was one that both empowered and motivated believers to spread the Gospel (Acts 1:8). It is clear that Paul's churches did evangelise their local area, thus validating his approach of setting up groups of believers in the main local centres, as in 1 Thessalonians 1:8.

The second, complementary, principle is for the missionary to plant churches then retire from converts as rapidly as possible, giving scope for the Holy Spirit to work among the believers. The missionary moves on, guided by the Spirit, albeit with some strategy such as establishment in provincial centres. But Allen also notes that Paul did not practice abandonment, keeping in touch with his churches by various means.

This description is broadly consistent with the New Testament. It is true Paul stays for relatively short periods in most centres, often because he was forcibly ejected. This enabled him to cover many more centres than would be possible had he stayed for years in one place. The onward movement was not mechanistic and pre determined but Spirit led, as in Acts 16:7. But equally, Paul did not merely evangelise but sought explicitly to build communities of believers (1 Corinthians 3:10). Paul's ongoing contacts includes writing pastoral letters, and returning either himself or via a deputy to deal with major problems (1 Corinthians 4:17), even leaving the mission field to do so (1 Thessalonians 2:17-3:13). On the other hand, contrary to Allen, Paul's visits were not in fact all short. Acts 19:10 has Paul staying 2 years in Ephesus, for example.

3 The validity of Allen's view of New Testament mission - practice

Various practical suggestions for mission – many still relevant today - flow from the above principles. For example, when bringing the Gospel message, Allen highlights that although Paul sought not to impose law, he was an exclusivist in his preaching, and told people to leave their idolatry rather than allow syncretism (1 Corinthians 10:14). He required a moral response from his hearers rather than going on preaching when the moral response is refused, as for the Corinthian Jews in Acts 18:6. Missionaries should act likewise.

Allen's advice for the missionary starting a church was to give the church the Bible, sacraments, a concept of the ministry and creeds but not teach them the history of theology. He suggests that churches need in a sense to grow through the development stages of the Western church and not omit them.⁵ A related point is that he feared that extensive training of potential ordinands in Western seminaries would have a Western bias and lead to alienation from the culture. Certainly, it is clear that simple teaching of the Old Testament (2 Timothy 3:16) and the Gospel message was all that was available at the time of the Early Church, and ministers underwent "on the job training".

Allen also urges the missions must prioritise evangelism and not to seek to develop schools and hospitals as a primary aim. Besides diverting effort, these are seen as distracting from the evangelisation and – in the case of schools - bringing in Western culture, which may again hinder the spread of the Gospel (e.g. due to resentment of colonial rule). They also can be seen as material inducements to accept Christian teaching and again likely to be counter productive.⁶ Even sincere converts may become dependent, as they cannot supply what the mission station can from abroad.

⁵ Allen, *Missionary*, 195.

⁶ Allen, *Missionary*, 60.

It is clear that Paul does not establish anything but churches, while urging them to look after their members themselves (such as widows, 1 Timothy 2:16). Equally, Paul is keen to not bring an alien culture to the communities where he seeks to set up churches (1 Corinthians 9:19-23), for example not insisting on the law to non Jews (1 Corinthians 9:19-23) and choosing contextually appropriate language as in the discourse of ideas in Athens (Acts 17:15-34) versus confronting occultism in Ephesus (Acts 19:11-19) by miracles - without sacrificing his core message.

In this context, Paul was seen by Allen to promote the freedom of churches to adapt to local conditions, as for example in defending the Gentile churches against the demand of Judaisers that they follow the law of Moses (Acts 15:4-29). In contrast, Allen notes that Western missionaries confuse the tradition of the Gospel with the traditions of a particular denomination, and partly as a consequence lack confidence in the abilities of the local believers to form a viable church. They “go abroad and Judaize”.⁷ Relatedly, Allen argues there can be too much professionalism and organisation to the mission process, which can reduce the success of mission.

Once the missionaries have appointed an initial group of local leaders, Allen argues that the church should be set free to recognise its own leaders and members, and not have them chosen by the missionaries. This links again to confidence in the power of the Holy Spirit, overcoming prejudice. And here it is true that Paul appointed local leaders then left the churches to develop themselves (Acts 14:23).

Allen also very much favoured a shift to lay leadership away from paid and professional clerical positions, considering the latter to lead to a culture of dependency on the missionary.

⁷ Allen, *Missionary*, 182.

Locally chosen lay leaders are a clear feature of the New Testament church (Acts 6), and lay leadership is consistent with the gifts of the Spirit being distributed across the congregation as the body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12), including gifts of apostles, prophets and teachers. There was indeed no clergy-laity distinction in the New Testament, and ministry as an “order” can be argued to be more consistent with the Old Testament priesthood.

Allen suggests that the local church should be self-financing and not supported from outside. The indigenous ministers in the church should be self supporting, carrying on their existing work in their local community, thus easing the need for finance. And missionaries should not seek to control the funds due to lack of confidence in the local people. It is clear that the New Testament churches were self-supporting.⁸ Self-financing ministers are consistent with Paul as a tentmaker (Acts 18:3) although we note elsewhere in Acts the ministers were at times financed by the church (1 Timothy 5:18).

Aiding financial independence, Allen maintains that church could justifiably take place in homes, as lavish church buildings can be seen as indicating foreign domination, and showing church as an institution not a way of life.⁹ It leads to a “mission compound” mentality whereby converts withdraw from society physically when they should withdraw only spiritually and be “salt and light” attracting neighbours to Christ (1 Peter 2:12). And it makes missionaries immobile and difficult for local people to replace. This advice is highly consistent with the types of house church directed by the laity in the New Testament, such as Priscilla and Aquila (Acts 16:5).

4 Some omitted elements

⁸ It can be argued that the gift to Jerusalem was a “special case” where Paul was seeking to enact the Old Testament prophecy of the Gentiles coming to Jerusalem from Isaiah 66:19-23.

⁹ Allen, *Missionary*, 79.

In my view, Allen is accurate in depicting the Pauline mission for the topics he chooses to highlight, subject to the caveats set out above. There remain some areas where Allen is silent. Notably, Paul's prayer life led him to constant intercession for his churches. This is an element Allen omits. For example, Paul prays for the Colossians to have a fuller knowledge and understanding of God's will, lives pleasing to him, growth in the knowledge of God and inner strengthening (Colossians 1:3, 9-11). Paul also asks the churches to pray for him and his ministry, as in 1 Thessalonians 5:25. And he instructs them in prayer, for example that the Holy Spirit sustains incoherent prayers of Christians (Romans 8:26-27).

The eschatological element in Paul's missionary activity is absent from Allen's views of mission. The hope of the return of Christ gave a most powerful influence to early mission, as in 1 Thessalonians 1:10. But equally, Paul stresses that the date and time is unknown (1 Thess 5:2) and people should not give up their jobs to wait for the return (1 Thessalonians 3:11). A key issue is whether the urgency of mission has been lost in the light of the Second Coming being still delayed. Against this, one can argue that the church already has its "first instalment" in the gift of the Holy Spirit and world mission itself to motivate itself.¹⁰ Indeed, Jesus can be interpreted as saying that the end will only come when world mission is itself complete (Matthew 24:14), and God's redemptive purposes will be achieved (Acts 2:19-21).

More could be made by Allen of the New Testament concept of the Apostle, that the missionary is sent by Jesus. This is most strongly typified by the Apostles themselves following the Great Commission. The elements of the apostolic commission are the authority of Jesus, the universality of the mission and the command to preach the Gospel. In Romans 16:7 even those who do church planting in unreached frontiers are called apostles; and Paul was always working in teams rather than alone, with 36 co-workers listed in his letters.¹¹ In

¹⁰ Green, *Evangelism*, 270.

¹¹ Howell, 'Mission', 86.

Paul the counterpart of the high office of apostle is the humble view of being a bond slave of Jesus, again an important attitude of a missionary (Romans 1:1), and acceptance of suffering as a corollary.¹²

Finally, Allen tends to leave aside New Testament mission other than Paul's. For example, in the Gospels he omits the sending out by Jesus of the 12 and the 72, as well as the Great Commissions. After Pentecost he could have highlighted the attraction of the Jerusalem church to outsiders, and the ministries of Peter, Stephen and Philip as well as the anonymous believers who began to spread the Gospel to the Gentiles and established the church in Antioch (Acts 11:19-21).

5 Allen's relevance for today

Although the "mission station" tradition of lavish churches and naked prejudice from the colonial era has receded, I contend that Allen is highly relevant for today's mission practice, notably his principles of allowing the spirit rather than the law to be a guide, thus developing independent communities guided by the Holy Spirit, and moving on at an early stage, to allow the church to mature but also for the missionary to spread the Gospel more widely. In modern parlance, local leaders can with the Spirit's aid inculcate the Gospel (1 Corinthians 2:12) better than the missionaries, and missionaries need to humbly accept this.¹³ Missionaries should equally move on when response is adverse, as Paul did rather than remaining fruitlessly in a place of rejection, although the decision at what point to do this requires careful judgement. And like Paul, they should contextualise evangelism to fit local culture but not at the expense of the core Gospel message, and not tolerate syncretism.

¹² Bosch, *Transforming*, 177.

¹³ Lausanne, *Willowbank*, 322

The Charismatic revival has brought the role of the Holy Spirit back to the fore in the churches of the West, and increased the acceptability of Allen's message. The role of the Spirit in Paul that Allen highlights is a critique of plan- and strategy driven evangelism such as the "managerial approach". It is also a challenge to the territorial spirits approach, which again tends to be very systematic. The role of Spirit highlights that indigenous mission must be encouraged. Again, Allen points to the inability of Western missionaries in his day (and mostly to date) to perform miracles by the Holy Spirit, because their mind-set is that miracles are impossible, although these would be likely to be convincing, and are readily undertaken by developing-country missionaries.¹⁴ On the other hand, it is worth noting from the Bible that churches left to be led by the Spirit at times became disorderly, as in the case of Corinth, underlining the case for ongoing nurture.

Today, as in Allen's day, missionaries can focus too much on organisation and professionalism and not enough on the Holy Spirit. They can also be too wealthy for contact with the local community, especially if they live in compounds – tentmaking as for Paul is seen as the best approach. Indeed, Allen poses an ongoing challenge to the Missionary Societies' role with the suggestion that the church in its entirety should be a missionary body. On the other hand, there are problems with changing established practices, in employing Allen's model. In the 1950s attempts were made to apply Allen's approach in rural American Episcopalian congregations, but there was resistance by the congregations used to being dependent on clergy. Abrupt closure of schools could be devastating. Allen himself however advises how the process of handing control to the congregation can be made gradual.¹⁵

¹⁴ Allen, *Missionary*, 65, but see Baker, *Enough*, 52.

¹⁵ Allen, *Missionary*, 223-231.

It is clear that a Western bias to the church, which may be imparted by theological education to local leaders,¹⁶ could still lead the church today to be seen as a Western enclave, as Allen feared. This may equally arise from financial dependence and Western control over ordination. In this context, local churches need “in the Spirit” to develop their own theological approach to local issues such as polygamy rather than having it imposed from outside. However, the risk in following Allen is to omit the contribution of those such as Augustine and Calvin and their views on key issues such as the Eucharist, perseverance and grace. The local church might hence make doctrinal errors.

Furthermore, Paul’s circumstances as highlighted by Allen may not parallel those of churches in the current global situation. So for example the early church was set up in places with Jewish enclaves, often accompanied by “God fearing” Greeks who could readily be persuaded of the Christian reinterpretation of the Scripture. This contrasts with countries that have no pre Christian tradition, which may require longer and more concentrated mission work. But this is arguably a question of listening to the spirit rather than a negation of Pauline principles.

The best justification for taking Allen seriously today is the success of churches following his approach. In China, missionaries were forcibly excluded, thus fulfilling the Allen/Paul methodology by different means. The indigenous believers continued to grow the national church, both under the control of the state (Bishop Ting) and by lay leaders in illegal house churches (Watchman Nee and his successors), giving rise to “spontaneous expansion” with now perhaps 80 million believers, now seeking to evangelise Central Asia. Also underlying growth is that exclusion of missionaries meant it is no longer tenable for the Chinese people to see the Christian message as a foreign religion. On the other hand heresies have been a

¹⁶ Lausanne, *Willowbank*, 329

danger to the local church in China, such as the Eastern Lightning cult (present in 17 provinces), that claims Jesus has already returned and is reincarnated as the head of the cult.

Heidi and Rolland Baker in Mozambique have catalysed a major revival by following Allen's Pauline principles, notably allowing free expression of gifts of the Holy Spirit, and giving locally trained pastors the leading role in developing the church, which has grown to 5,000 churches. The basis of their mission was homes for destitute orphans, which shows that ancillary activities need not be harmful to mission – the distinction with schools and hospitals of the traditional type may be that orphanages follow the Christian mission of care for the poor (as Galatians 2:10) which itself conveys the Gospel in a way that usually fee-paying schools and hospitals may not.¹⁷

On the other hand, Vincent Donovan sought to introduce elements of the Allen method for the Masai in Africa, but their faith in the end was weak. It can be argued that Donovan failed to implement a number of Pauline principles, notably in going it alone, not giving follow up nurture and not giving the Bible to the Masai. He also did not challenge existing culture with a risk of syncretism.

6 Conclusion

Roland Allen has in my view well captured the spirit of Pauline mission, although he does play down or omit some key elements, notably prayer and the hope of Jesus' return, which we neglect in mission today at our peril. While not providing a complete blueprint for mission today, his approach nevertheless highlights many of the pitfalls to which contemporary mission is as vulnerable to as in his day, as well as many positive suggestions. Furthermore, a

¹⁷ Baker, *Enough*, 72-73.

number of successful cases of rapid church growth in recent years can be linked to explicit or implicit adoption of his methods.

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