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ROLAND ALLEN'S

# THE MINISTRY OF EXPANSION

## THE PRIESTHOOD OF THE LAITY

*Roland Allen's The Ministry of Expansion: The Priesthood of the Laity*
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Published by William Carey Library, an imprint of William Carey Publishing
10 W. Dry Creek Circle
Littleton, CO 80120 | www.missionbooks.org

Melissa Hughes, editor
Joanne Liang, graphic design

William Carey Library is a ministry of Frontier Ventures
Pasadena, CA 91104 | www.frontierventures.org

23 22 21 20 19 Printed for Worldwide Distribution

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Allen, Roland, 1869-1947, author. | Payne, Jervis David, 1974- editor.
Title: Roland Allen's the ministry of expansion : the priesthood of the laity / J.D. Payne, editor.
Other titles: Ministry of expansion
Description: Pasadena, CA : William Carey Library, 2017. | Includes bibliographical references. |
Identifiers: LCCN 2017015722 (print) | LCCN 2017018826 (ebook) | ISBN 9780878086764 (eBook) | ISBN 9780878083008 (pbk.) | ISBN 0878083006 (pbk.)
Subjects: LCSH: Laity. | Lay ministry. | Clergy--Supply and demand. | Church growth. | Missions--Theory. | Allen, Roland, 1869-1947. Ministry of expansion.
Classification: LCC BV687 (ebook) | LCC BV687 .A45 2017 (print) | DDC 266--dc23
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2017015722

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# ROLAND ALLEN

## Missiology and *The Ministry of Expansion*

J. D. Payne

I am frequently asked to give lectures on Roland Allen to seminary classes. Before I begin, I often ask the class if they have read any of Allen's writings. My general observations reveal that about 10 percent of a class will have read one of Allen's books, usually *Missionary Methods: St. Paul's or Ours?*. A second question, related to the first, is how many of the students have heard of Roland Allen before enrolling in the class. Usually, the only students who have heard of him are those who have read his writings.[1]

And, truth be told, I also was a seminary student when first exposed to Allen through *Missionary Methods: St. Paul's or Ours?*.

Irony is found in this scarcity of familiarity with Roland Allen. For Allen was one of the most influential individuals in missionary circles during the twentieth century. And his influence, at least among evangelicals, is even stronger in the twenty-first century and continues to grow. His writings shaped the thoughts and practices of individuals such as Lesslie Newbigin, Donald McGavran, and Ralph Winter. He is well respected among many leaders of mission agencies and networks. Allen's name is often referenced and revered in church planting conversations.

His influence has not been limited to missiologists. Many New Testament scholars reference him in their bibliographies as a result of his studies of the Apostle Paul. However, among those serving in pastoral and missionary roles, Allen remains largely unknown.

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1. I have observed that there is even a lack of familiarity among young, evangelical Anglicans.

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A few years ago, I wrote a blog post that included the following characteristics of the potential Roland Allen aficionado:

- you are interested in church planting movements
- you think about church multiplication
- you have strong convictions about the role of the Holy Spirit in missions
- you prefer contextualized church planting over paternalism
- you believe in raising up leaders from the harvest
- you believe that the New Testament has something to say regarding how we should be doing missionary work today

The point of this post was to help readers understand that while few of them had any knowledge about Allen, his influence had shaped their thoughts, lives, and ministries. Just as the sun provides a gravitational pull on the earth even when not seen during the night, Allen's influence is present and active even if they were not aware of him. From the grave, he speaks!

## MISSIOLOGY OF ROLAND ALLEN

While space will not permit a detailed explanation of Allen's missiological views, it is important the reader have some familiarity with his thinking about missions.[2] His thoughts were often consumed with what he described as the spontaneous expansion of the church—a potential reality he claimed missionaries feared. He wrote that it would be a "delight to think that a Christian travelling on his business, or fleeing from persecution, could preach Christ, and a church spring up as the results of his preaching."[3] Such a

2. For a detailed discussion of Allen's missiology, see my book *Roland Allen: Pioneer of Spontaneous Expansion* (n.p.: CreateSpace, 2012).

3. Roland Allen, *The Spontaneous Expansion of the Church and the Causes which Hinder It* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1962), 7.

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modern-day, Antioch disciple making movement (Acts 11:19-21), uncontrolled by the church, was the "terror of missionaries."[4] While Allen was not opposed to order and heritage, he was quick to speak against the traditions, legalism, and control that interfered with disciple making, growth in Christ, leadership development, and church planting in the Majority World. Upon comparing the church's present-day missionary organizations and structures to those in the New Testament, he believed Western culture and tradition had trumped biblical necessities. And it was these contemporary developments that hindered the expansion of the church.

Disciple making that resulted in the birth of contextualized (*indigenous* was the common parlance in Allen's day) churches was a simple process that could lead to exponential church growth. He wrote:

> This then is what I mean by spontaneous expansion. I mean the expansion which follows the unexhorted and unorganized activity of individual members of the Church explaining to others the Gospel which they have found for themselves; I mean the expansion which follows the irresistible attraction of the Christian Church for men who see its ordered life, and are drawn to it by desire to discover the secret of a life which they instinctively desire to share; I mean also the expansion of the Church by the addition of new churches.[5]

Missionaries who brought a heavy amount of paternalism to the field, were missionaries who hindered such gospel advancement. Allen often wrote of Western missionaries who feared what

4. Roland Allen, "Spontaneous Expansion: The Terror of Missionaries." *World Dominion* 4 (1926): 218–24.

5. Ibid.

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might happen if they were not governing and dictating all matters related to Majority World believers. He would argue against this fear and would call missionaries to orient their perspective to Christ and the power of his gospel. A missionary faith, not fear, was needed:

> We fear corruption and degeneration; when shall we cease to fear them? The roots of that fear are in us, and when shall we eradicate them, and how? There will always be cause for that fear, if we look at men. If we look at Christ then we may escape; but then why should we not escape now? He does not change. When we talk of a day when we shall be able to trust our converts in non-Christian lands, we are looking at them. So long as we look at them we shall be afraid.[6]

## THE WAY OF CHRIST

Though much of Allen's writings focused on the Apostle Paul, he understood that some members of the apostolic church had been discipled by Jesus and had been taught not to fear the possible outcome of their labors, but walk by faith. "He trained them in the work," Allen wrote, "not outside of it; in the world, not in a hothouse."[7]

And this training was to prepare them for his departure and the ongoing mission. The apostolic approach to disciple making and church multiplication originated with Jesus, not the Twelve or the Apostle Paul. According to Allen:

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6. Roland Allen, "The Place of 'Faith' in Missionary Evangelism," *World Dominion* 8 (1930): 238.

7. Roland Allen, "New Testament Missionary Methods," *The Missionary Review of the World* 52 (1929): 21.

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> The Apostles followed Christ in this; they established a society, a spiritual society on earth. The establishment of this society is most clearly seen in the work and writing of the Apostle Paul. He recognized a Church; he established churches.[8]

This Christological (and thoroughly Trinitarian) understanding was also explained in his work *Pentecost and the World*. Reflecting on the Holy Spirit, he wrote:

> The same Holy Spirit which descended upon Christ was to descend upon them [apostles]. . . . Thus the work of the apostles with which this book is concerned is linked with the work of Jesus Christ as the carrying on of that which He began on earth under the impulse of the same Spirit through whom He acted and spoke.[9]

## PNEUMATOLOGY AND ECCLESIOLOGY

Understanding Allen's missiology requires grasping his thoughts regarding the Holy Spirit and the local church. John Branner was correct when he wrote that "the gift of the Holy Spirit to believers was something which was to govern Allen's entire concept of mission, particularly that of the indigenous church."[10] Charles Chaney suggested that Allen's understanding of the Spirit was

8. Ibid., 22.

9. Roland Allen, "*Pentecost and the World: the Revelation of the Holy Spirit in the Acts of the Apostles,*" in *The Ministry of the Spirit: Selected Writings of Roland Allen*, American ed., edited by David M. Paton, (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1962), 6.

10. John E. Branner, "Roland Allen: Pioneer in a Spirit-Centered Theology of Mission," *Missiology* 5 (1977): 181.

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