

ROLAND ALLEN
MISSIONARY METHODS: ST. PAUL'S OR OURS?
(Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1962)

BOOK REVIEW BY ÁDÁM SZABADOS

Roland Allen's *Missionary Methods: St. Paul's and Ours* made a lasting impact on the missiological principles of the second half of the twentieth century. There were numerous missionaries – including both Protestants and Roman Catholics – who attempted to apply Allen's ideas in their missionary works, and countless missiologists who used these ideas for further studies and discussions of relevant missionary methods. Allen investigates the causes of Paul's apparent success in preaching the gospel and planting churches. He examines the antecedent conditions, Paul's presentation of the gospel, his teaching of converts, and his methods of dealing with organized churches. While presenting Paul's methods, Allen is highly critical of the Western missionary methods of his time, and makes constant appeals to his contemporary missionaries and mission agencies to re-examine their policies in the light of the New Testament evidence. It is probably because some of the criticised methods still persist in our Western missionary methods today that Allen's book has an increasing popularity since the 1960s.

First, Allen examines if there were *antecedent conditions* that determined or facilitated Paul's success in his mission. He raises the question if Paul's success was due, first of all, "to the position or character of the places in which he preached". His answer is affirmative. It seems that Paul deliberately selected certain strategic points at which to plant churches. He focused on the cities of the Roman Empire, especially the ones that were regional, commercial or cultural centres. On the other hand, there doesn't seem to be any evidence that Paul would have aimed at a particular class of people. It is true that his primary focus were the people of the synagogue, but he then turned to the Gentiles, and drew many pagan converts from the middle and lower classes. The social and moral conditions of the four provinces where Paul preached the gospel were not any better than the conditions missionaries face today around the world. "It is impossible to argue that St. Paul's converts had any exceptional advantages, in the moral character of the society in which they were brought up, which are not given to our converts today."¹

Second, Allen discusses Paul's *presentation of the gospel*. Were there any special virtues in the way the apostle preached the good news? The first question is the *miracles* Paul performed in the context of preaching the gospel. Some of Allen's contemporaries argued that since Paul used miracles in his evangelism, we cannot imitate his methods and cannot have the same success

¹ Allen, p. 37.

he had. But, Allen replied, Paul's success was not due to the miracles themselves, but to what the miracles emphasised, and since we have the same Spirit that inspired Paul, we can have similar results even without the miracles. Paul's principles of *finances*, however, were (and are) absolutely crucial to success. According to Allen the three principles that guided Paul's practise were: 1. He did not seek financial help for himself, 2. He did not take financial support to his converts, 3. He observed the rule that every church should administer its own funds. Besides miracles and finances, the third factor of Paul's presentation of the gospel was his *preaching*. It was – among others – simple, sympathetic with the hearers, courageous, uncompromising, and emphasized community and decision. The main message was repentance and faith. "Repentance and faith are the keynotes of his preaching."² In Allen's opinion we have to follow Paul's methods if we want to see the same results in our mission.

After examining the antecedent conditions and Paul's ways of presenting the gospel, Allen turns to Paul's *training of his converts*. He writes, first of all, about the teaching that Paul gave to the people who believed. The striking fact of Paul's teaching methods is the shortness of time he spent at a place. Allen sees a big contrast here between the "mission stations", as the characteristic missionary method of his time, and Paul's incredibly flexible and speedy ways of equipping the converts. "The question before us is, how he could so train his converts as to be able to leave them after so short a time with any security that they would be able to stand and grow... How could he prepare men for Holy Orders in so brief a time? How could he even prepare them for holy baptism? What could he have taught them in five or six months?"³ In Allen's opinion the answer is that Paul only taught them the most essential, simple facts of the Christian faith. He left his newly-found churches with the simple gospel, the two sacraments (without determining the details of the liturgy), a tradition of the main facts of Jesus's coming (especially his death and resurrection), and the Old Testament. Paul's early leave was not a hindrance, rather, an important contribution for the growth of these churches, because it gave the new converts many opportunities to use their gifts, even if they were young and inexperienced Christians.

Even more important was, probably, the fact that this teaching did not precede but *followed* baptism. Paul required very little knowledge from his converts as a condition for *baptism*. "He was satisfied that a spiritual change had taken place; there was some sign of repentance, some profession of faith, and that sufficed." Another important principle was that Paul shared the responsibility of judging the spiritual condition of people before baptising them. This principle was even more important in the *appointment of elders*. Paul did appoint elders, but he gradually gave more and more responsibility to the local congregations in the process. The elected elders were themselves members of the churches, and were appointed together with other elders. The primary conditions of being an elder were not intellectual but moral,

² Ibid, p. 76.

³ Ibid, p. 85.

they did not need long years of education in theology. Paul wanted the local people to learn themselves, and by his leaving he facilitated this process.

Finally, Allen focuses on Paul's method of *dealing with organized churches*. He emphasizes that Paul's aim was to establish the churches as independent bodies, and there were only few occasions where he exercised his apostolic authority. He did not want these congregations to depend on him. This was evident in the way he expected these churches to exercise church discipline themselves. Paul believed that the Holy Spirit will strengthen and guide these fellowships. Unity for Paul was an essential goal, but his views of unity were different from the ones often practised in the history of the church. 1. "He refused to transplant the law and the customs of the Church in Judea into the Four Provinces." 2. "He refused to set up any central administrative authority from which the whole Church was to receive directions." 3. "He declined to establish a priori tests of orthodoxy." 4. He refused to allow the universal application of precedents."

Allen ends his study by listing some practical implications of these principles in his contemporary situation, including a case study from the mission field.

I find Allen's thesis very convincing and challenging. The way the Roman Catholic missionary, Vincent J. Donovan applied some of these principles among the Masai in East-Africa is a proof of the practical value of Allen's thesis.⁴ And probably there are many-many other examples, most of them never documented. There is a kind of freshness in these methods and a great expectancy about the reality and power of the Holy Spirit. It challenged me and encouraged me to rely more on the Spirit and less on human resources.

The idea that I struggle with the most is the supposedly speedy way Paul left these churches to deal with their own church affairs by themselves. I am not entirely convinced that this was the case. In a letter to Timothy Paul warns him not to lay hands on anyone too quickly. What could "too quickly" possibly mean if Paul laid hands on new converts after maybe two or three months? How could he apply his own standards in deciding if these converts really produced the fruits of the Spirit, let alone appointing some of them as elders? In my pastoral ministry I came to appreciate the value of processes more and more, and I saw too many examples of speedy advance and tragic falling apart of new churches to unhesitatingly accept Allen's thesis at this point. But it is still a warning to me not to hinder the growth of people by unnecessary control and too much dependence.

⁴ Vincent J. Donovan: *Christianity Rediscovered*. SMC Press, 1982.