

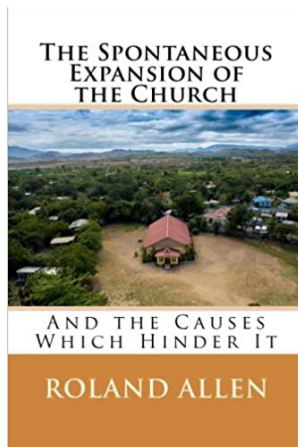
The Spontaneous Expansion of the Church: And the Causes that Hinder It

By Roland Allen

Jawbone Digital, 2011. 170 pages.
Kindle edition. (Originally published 1927.)

Reviewed by Howard Bell

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One of my favorite authors once wrote that he prays every day that God will help him write books that last beyond his generation. How many one-hundred-year-old books on church planting and frontier missions are still being widely read and recommended? Roland Allen's *The Spontaneous Expansion of the Church* is a seminal work in missiology and has been discussed since its original publication in 1927. Allen was a high church Anglican who served as a missionary in both China and Kenya. He is most remembered for his writing in missiology, including his earlier "*Missionary Methods: St. Paul's or Ours?*" which has had ongoing relevance for around a century. His writing represented a paradigm shift in his day and still does for many today. Contexts have changed, but *The*

Spontaneous Expansion of the Church still functions as an urgent, clarion call to go back to biblical principles, release our man-made traditions, surrender control to the Holy Spirit, and believe in God's work through a self-supporting, self-extending, and self-governing church.

Summary of Content

Allen writes with a prophetic urgency and frustration, giving the book a confrontational edge though many of the organizations and practices he describes are long gone. His concern and the thesis of the book is that mission organizations, missionaries, and churches restrain and prevent the spontaneous expansion of the church through western and nonbiblical practices. Allen defines "spontaneous expansion" as "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" (108).¹ As this quotation demonstrates, Allen believed that the Christian church and life has a power of its own to both attract and expand. He does not emphasize the need to promote the expansion of the church as much as to stop hindering it through bad practices and what I would describe as an insufficient recognition of the priesthood of all believers.

Allen is quick to condemn the desire to control church growth and expansion, writing, "Many of our missionaries' welcome spontaneous zeal, provided there is not too much of it for their restrictions Such missionaries pray for the wind of the Spirit but not for a rushing mighty wind. I am writing because I believe in a rushing mighty wind and desire

1 All page numbers refer to Kindle locations, as the digital edition reviewed does not include normal pagination.

its presence at all costs to our restrictions” (196). This kind of statement is difficult to disagree with, and Allen’s writing is saturated with this kind of earnest urgency. The diction is somewhat dated (few would use the word “charm” for the power of the gospel today), and the style adheres to an era when precision was valued over simplicity; but this is a very well-written book, and remains highly quotable because of its style.

Allen challenges us to ask whether our methods will accomplish the Great Commission task and vision. He argues that the methods of his day would not, but instead “would inevitably alienate native populations who would see in it the growth of the denomination of a foreign people” (298). He argues that the fear of disorder and doctrinal impurity results in a demand that new believers spend years in formal education and attain the status of professional clergy before they are allowed to participate in ministry. He emphasizes experience with the Holy Spirit as the necessary preparation for ministry and as the safeguard against both disorder and doctrinal impurity, arguing that the Holy Spirit promotes neither.

I sympathize greatly with Allen’s views. When I describe the multiplication of small, networked churches that meet in homes and discuss the Scriptures without the presence of a formally educated “pastor,” I am inevitably asked, “What about false teaching?” I have learned to respond with three questions, “Did the churches in the New Testament ever have false teaching? What did the New Testament church leaders do to deal with it? What did the New Testament church leaders do to prevent it?” I can trace this kind of thinking back to Roland Allen who may not have used the same tactics to answer his critics but was urging his readers and interlocutors in the same direction.

Perhaps the most controversial of Allen’s points in the whole book is his insistence in not imposing the requirement of any biblical or extrabiblical moral code for new believers aside from love of God and neighbor. Allen does not appear to believe that the moral law of the Old Testament is binding on New Covenant believers, a view espoused today by

adherents of “New Covenant Theology” or “Progressive Covenantalism.”² Furthermore, Allen was passionate about not applying western moral standards to local believers on the mission field or requiring adherence to any “law” in order to be admitted to the church. Using polygamy as an example, Allen argues that requiring monogamy in order to become a part of the church is a western idea and that the only moral code one must accept to enter the church is to love God and neighbor. While Allen’s broader view may be controversial, his main contention is that the reception of the gospel and grace is the requirement for entrance into the Christian community, and this comes without any lawbook or moral code (89).

Allen was passionate about self-supporting, self-extending, and self-governing churches, and this passion frequently brings him into conflict with mission agency and denominational policy and use of money. He cautions against the use of foreign funded schools, hospitals, programs, and laborers, and much of the book critiques the use of foreign money and control. Allen concludes with a positive prescription for leaders to equip new believers by (1) giving them the “tradition” represented in the Apostle’s Creed, (2) training them in the Gospel in such a way that men revere it and know it, (3) training the churches to observe the sacraments, (4) ordaining ministers, and (5) making sure that new converts “understand the use of the Apostle’s Creed, the Gospels, the Sacraments and the Ministry, and then send word to the bishop” (2443).

Evaluation

Low-church readers will recognize the high church language and emphasis in the above prescription and will wonder how Allen’s Anglicanism impacted his view of church and spontaneous expansion. It’s difficult to say, and one of my few criticisms of the book is that Allen’s ecclesiol-

2 Parker, Brent E. and Richard James Lucas. 2022. Pg. 31,92-94. *Covenantal and Dispensational Theologies* (Spectrum Multiview Book Series). Illinois: InterVarsity Press. Kindle.

ogy is difficult to grasp. He clearly had a high view of the sacraments and believed that Paul would not have imagined a church that did not have their observance (468). Most would agree that practicing baptism and communion would have been in the apostolic mind and example, though Allen may have been reluctant to call a gathering a church unless those elements were present. However, his own emphases on the priesthood of all believers, freedom from all law except the love of God and neighbor, and on the sufficiency and perspicuity of Scripture to guide new believers in right doctrine without the presence of professional clergy clashed with the denominational values of his day. Many modern readers may still struggle with these emphases, though I find myself in broad agreement with most of the more debated aspects of Allen's theology. The power of his critique comes with his own passionate appeal to Scripture and prophetic rebuke of those who disregard Scripture to maintain their own traditions or control.

The debate over church-planting movement methodology is ongoing and Allen's contribution stands the test of time. One of the great advantages of Allen's work is that while it is polemical, it is based on Scripture and principle rather than methodology. It also predates the modern shift towards church-planting movements, and he is still recommended reading and widely admired in CPM circles. I can only remember hearing Allen criticized once, and that was a church planter who believed that movements are not merely "spontaneous" but rather "inevitable" if one practiced the proper principles. I am glad that Allen refers to spontaneity instead, as it's a good reminder that this is God's work and that movement is not just a matter of doing the right things the right way.

Allen was not an advocate of Discovery Bible Study or any other specific "tool" or method. He does not critique expository preaching, traditional worship services, or meeting in a dedicated church building. I think these aspects of Allen's work make it a good introduction to CPM ideas for those from a more "proclamational" model of church planting and can help the skeptical focus on core principles rather than on any specific movement, method, or case study.

I found myself encouraged by Allen's work. Almost any passionate advocacy for self-supporting, self-extending, and self-governing churches would resonate with me. I also found myself empathizing with Allen's frustrations. The issues Allen was addressing were not identical to the issues of our day, but I grieve with him when he laments the state of dependence on foreign funds and laborers. I find myself reflecting on the ministry culture and environment where I live and minister and the expectations created using foreign funding and foreign workers. Allen's book challenges me to continue to ask how we can move away from that faulty foundation and to hold firm to my own principles and not compromise my commitment to self-supporting work. *The Spontaneous Expansion of the Church* is a seminal work precisely because it still speaks with power and persuasion today.

Recommendation

I would recommend *The Spontaneous Expansion of the Church* to anyone interested in classic works on missiology, the historical foundations of Church-Planting Movements methodologies, or in works on "spontaneous" multiplication of churches. While overtly about overseas missions, I learned and practiced these principles in the West as well, and I can recommend the book heartily to all contexts, though those working in more frontier work in developing nations may find it most relevant. Allen has plenty of inspiration to share even for those already familiar with the principles taught in his works. While I prefer his earlier work *Missionary Methods: St. Paul's or Ours?* as a book with more practical help, *The Spontaneous Expansion of the Church* has a polemical fire that may challenge and inspire in a way that *Missionary Methods* does not. I find myself unable to read these works without great emotion, and in this season, great turmoil, as I weep and pray for self-supporting, self-extending, and self-governing churches among the people group I love.

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