

Book Review

Student: June Raymo Student email: Raymoj@nyack.edu

Program: Masters of Divinity

Alliance Theological Seminary

Date:10/08/2019

Introduction to Book Review

This book review will be covering two books. The first book is *The Spontaneous Expansion of the Church and the Causes that Hinder It*, by Roland Allen. The second book is *The Hole in Our Gospel*, by Richard Stearns. Both books examines the issues with the methods used to spread the gospel. By understanding this, the church will be able to accomplish the call that God has put before us.

“Book 1” Summary

In the book titled “*The Spontaneous Expansion of the Church and the Causes that Hinder It*”, the author believes that all members of the church, whether you are indigenous or a foreigner, should take an active role in its creation and current functions. He states that while in China, he realized the only way they would be able to establish a church there, that might spread over six regions, which then formed the diocese of North China, would be to allow the first Christians who were converted by them, to clearly understand what they could on their own, without any handholding. This way they would be so strong in their beliefs that they would be able to plant churches without any references to the ones who taught them (Allen, 1962).

This book is broken up into nine short chapters. Chapter one, the author displays his views on missions. The second chapter, he argues that spontaneous expression, in regard to the individual and of the church, is the key to expansion and states that restriction due to fear is catastrophic. The third chapter, Allen focuses on modern movements towards liberty by comparing two theories of missions and denying the theory that focuses on the establishment of a church by the process of devolution or transference.

Chapter four examines the fears which hinder us from the apostolic practices as well as the fear of not maintaining our standard doctrine. The author believes that our concept of standard doctrine as well as our method of maintaining our doctrine is false. In chapter 5, Allen

talks about the Christian standard of Morals. He states that there are 2 ways of maintaining a standard of morals: We can trust in the Spirit given to lead them toward that divine standard of morality or trust in our powers of control and direction.

Chapter six addresses civilization and enlightenment. The author states that you should not establish the church and they assist in its education. The education and civilization must come before the establishment of the church. In chapter seven, it covers missionary organization. The author believes that our missionary society organization is full of dangers and it produces significant impediments at home and abroad by making all progress dependent on money. He states that this represents the exact opposite of spontaneous expansion (Allen, 1962).

Chapter eight covers Ecclesiastical organization. Allen states that in the beginning the church was a missionary society. The Church added to its numbers through speech and the lifestyle of its members. Today, members of the church are spread throughout the world and they show no signs of carrying the church with them through their lifestyle. Summarize the findings of the first book. Highlight key theories the author proposes as you understand them and evidence from the book to support your ideas. Chapter nine, Allen covers the way of spontaneous expansion. He explains that Creed and Gospel, Sacraments and Ministry should be delivered to the whole church instead of to individuals. He further explains that when looking at long established destitute congregations, change will come as they see examples of other non-destitute churches embracing their independence.

Strengths of the author's ideas

The author made some valuable points through out his book. Allen states "If the Church is to be indigenous it must spring up in the soil from the very first seeds planted (Allen, 1962)." If you get a group of non-believers and teach them the gospel, then allow them to strengthen themselves on what they have learned they would then be able to go out and start their own groups without waiting for direction from their teacher. I believe that the church would be more

effective locally and abroad if they followed this and other methods that the author has discussed in his book. Allen says that faith is necessary in missions, not money. The kind of faith that would set a person on fire and cause him to believe that anyone believing in Christ would be set on fire also. That is what establishes church expansion.

Potential weaknesses in the author's ideas

The only weakness observed in the author's ideas is the fact that most Pastors would not be in support of Allen's ideas. This is because if the congregation started going out church planting, it would take the focus off the Pastors and put it where it belongs. It would also take money away from the church house as well. Most leaders don't want their congregation to be independent thinkers. They would rather have control over them.

"Book 2" Summary

The book titled: *The Hole in Our Gospel*, by Richard Stearns, the author talks about his story of being a corporate CEO who laid down his search for wealth and success for following Christ and helping the less fortunate. In the beginning, Stearns believed that his success was the only thing that was important. He believed that he was responsible for his own success and was not focused on being a true follower of God. However, God, grabbed his attention and redirected his focus.

Stearns enlightens us on how God changed his focus around and the fear he felt. He explains that he was so sure that God had made a mistake and chosen the wrong person. However, he knew that God makes no mistakes. Stearns also talks about his experience with the poverty-stricken individuals around the world, as well as people who were suffering from the AIDS epidemic, and how it affected him.

Stearns talks about the power of the whole. He states that "proclaiming the Gospel means much more than evangelism in the hopes that people will hear and respond to the good

news of salvation by faith in Christ. It also involves actual compassion for the sick and the poor, as well as biblical justice, efforts to right the wrongs that are so prevalent in our world (Stearns, 2014)”

In this book, Stearns makes a persuasive argument that the American church has lost focus of the marginalized and the oppressed. He uses several scriptural references to make the Biblical case for how much God cares about the marginalized, including Isaiah 58. He argues that there is a hole in our gospel. He uses the story of his friend Jim who did an experiment by underlining every passage in the bible regarding poverty, wealth, justice and oppression. Then they cut those passages out of the bible, leaving the bible full of holes, literally. Whenever his friend would speak about those issues, he would shout to the people and say that the American bible is full of holes (Stearns, 2014).

Stearns helps us to understand that the American Evangelical vision for Christianity is not the same vision that God has for those who are marginalized. Part of what puts the hole in our gospel is that western civilization has forgotten/neglected the poor. All we focus on is having fancy Sunday services, obeying the rules of the church other man pleasing activities. This author wants Christians and the American church to start doing more for the poor and less fortunate, and make that a priority as God instructed us to do. It should be at the top of our lists of things to do when we gather together as Christians.

Strengths of the author's ideas

When reading this book, you get a sense of how urgent the western church needs to change its methods or evangelism. Western Christians have to stop thinking that it is not our first

priority to reach the poor. We need to allow the love of God to reflect through our actions on to others. It is through our actions that people will see God even more than our preaching.

Potential weaknesses in the author's ideas

I am not too sure that I see any weaknesses in this author's ideas. The author seems to be on point with everything that he has said. If I had to look for weaknesses I would say that not too many Christians would be willing to let go of the financial life that they were used to living so that they could serve the less fortunate. Western civilization is more focused on the materialistic things and it is difficult to change unless forced.

Book Comparison

What do the two authors have in common?

Both authors agree that there is a great need for change in the way the western church views evangelism and church planting. They believe that everyone should take an active role in helping the lost as well as the poor. Also, it comes across in both books that you can spread the gospel, not just with words but with your actions as well. When you feed the hungry, or provide shelter for the homeless, etc., that is ministry. That shows the love of God.

On what issues do the authors differ?

I believe that the authors differ slightly. *Allen* focuses on giving individuals the knowledge of God so that they can stand on the word on their own. Once they become self-sufficient they can spread the knowledge to others through actions and words, without having to rely on the one who taught them. *Stearns* focuses also on providing knowledge though word and actions. However, his approach is more of a handholding method. He talks about caring for the poor and less fortunate and showing the love of God though our actions, but he doesn't talk about helping those people become self-sufficient so that they can assist others.

Application

How could the author's ideas impact you as a pastor or leader of a church?

What I take away from Allen's ideas is that I know see the importance of helping people know the Gospel through word and actions. Then once they are knowledgeable enough, encourage them to start a small group so that they can teach them what they have learned. I would also encourage them to tell each member in their group to do the same once they have learned as well. I will use the each one, teach one method.

I would also incorporate Stearns ideas of reaching out to the poor. However, I would show them ways of becoming self-sufficient while sharing the gospel with them. I would encourage them to help others in the way that they were helped. Allowing them to feel and see the love of God in my actions. Also teach them that helping others is just as important as being helped. I believe that by doing this we can reach more people and the Gospel would have a chance to spread more effectively.

How could the author's ideas impact your church?

I believe that both books would be effective in revamping the way my church currently functions. Unfortunately, my church thinks that having a bunch of programs is an effective way of ministering to the community. This method has not been effective at all. I truly believe that if leaders were open to change, these two books would be an amazing start to that change. Maybe if I can see if my pastor would read the books to see what his views are.

Conclusion

In closing, I enjoyed reading both books. I can't believe that Allan's book was written over 100 years ago. His book is so relevant for today's society. When you look at the church today you see that the church as strayed so far away from what Jesus displayed during his walk

on this earth. Congregations are under such control and are forced to act out the leader's vision instead of God's vision. This hinders the growth of the Gospel.

Stearns book shows you that the community has always been important to God and Western church need to get refocused on God's plan for his community. We have to focus less on living our best life and having fun and focus more on helping others learn about God's love. It is a must that we focus on the poor because they are God's people too.

References:

Allen, R., (1962). *The Spontaneous Expansion of the Church and the Causes that Hinder It.*

Eugene, OR: Lutterworth