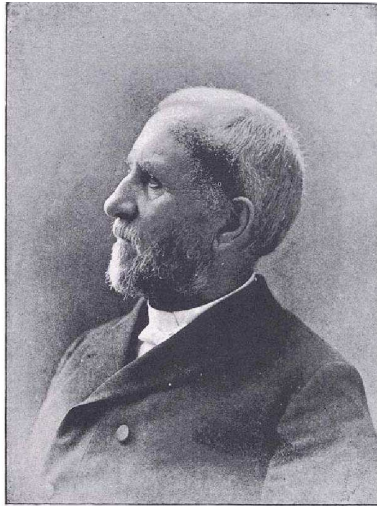


REGENT UNIVERSITY

NEVIUS AND NORTH KOREA: A NEW LOOK AT AN OLD STRATEGY



John L. Nevius

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BY
THOMAS J. BELKE

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NEVIUS AND NORTH KOREA: A NEW LOOK AT AN OLD STRATEGY

Introduction

In 1890, when there were only 100 Christian converts in all of Korea, five young missionaries¹ invited a missionary with 36 years experience in China to come to Korea to teach them. His name was Dr. John Livingston Nevius. What Nevius taught them, during his two-week stay in Korea, changed history. Nevius' principles (or "the Nevius Plan") became the guiding principles for Korean missions for the next 50 years. In fact, many have claimed that Nevius' two-weeks of teaching in Korea may well have been the two most influential weeks in the history of modern missions.² In light of the success of these idea's, Today's missionaries are now looking, once again, to Nevius' ideas for applicability to the re-evangelization of North Korea. Just how applicable are Nevius' century-old ideas today?

John Livingston Nevius (1829-1893) was born on March 4, 1829 in Seneca County, New York State.³ He grew up with a rich Christian heritage in a young America that was yearning to grow Westward. John graduated from Princeton Theological Seminary in 1853, married and set off for missionary work with his new bride. In later years, both John and his four-year-older brother, Rueben Denton Nevius, earned their doctorates of divinity. Rueben set his sights on the American Northwest and became one of the early pioneer missionary-evangelists to what is now

¹ The missionaries included Horace G. Underwood (age 31), Samuel H. Moffet (age 26), Charles Allen Clark, and H. G. Appenzeller. The fifth missionary was possibly either Dr. William Scranton or Dr. John W. Heron.

² George Thompson Brown, *Mission to Korea* (Nashville, Tennessee: Board of World Missions, Presbyterian Church (US), 1962), 79.

³ Coincidentally, Nevius' birthplace is not far from that of this writer in nearby Onondaga County, New York.

Oregon. His younger brother John set his sights even further West – so far West, that he ended up in the Far East: China.⁴

Nevius' Forerunners & Contemporaries

Though Nevius is often lauded by many to have originated the "three-self" concept of the indigenous Christian church, such assessments often neglect those who preceded Nevius as pioneers of these missionary methods. These pioneer-predecessors include Josiah Pratt, Henry Venn, and Rufus Anderson. It is also fitting to mention Robert Elliott Speer, who started having a significant impact on missions as Nevius' career was coming to a close. Lest we view Nevius in isolation, it is important to note the contributions of these men and the rich missionary heritage Nevius inherited. In this way, we may view *The Nevius Plan* as a strategic step in the development of modern missionary strategies.⁵

One of Nevius' key forerunner's was Rev. Josiah Pratt (1770-1844), a Puritan American clergyman. Pratt served in the influential post of Secretary of the Church Missionary Society from 1802 to 1824. His Puritan roots and studied zeal combined to enable him to promote a comprehensive view of missions. From his writings, one can find the seeds and roots of the three-self concept that Nevius later articulated. For example, in the 1817 *Mission Register*, Pratt wrote:

The Christian church must give the impulse, and must long to continue to send forth her missionaries to maintain and extend that impulse; but, both with respect to Funds and Teachers, a vast portion of the work will doubtless be found ultimately to arise from the heathen themselves; who, by the gracious influence which accompanies the Gospel, will be brought gladly to support, as the Christian Church has ever done, those Evangelists whom God, by His Spirit, will call forth form among them.⁶

⁴ Everett N. Hunt, Jr. "The Legacy of John Livingston Nevius," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* (Pasadena, California: U.S. Center for World Missions, 1991), 120.

⁵ Bahn-Suk Lee, "Rufus Anderson: A Great Missionary Strategist" (Anaheim, California: Fuller Theological Seminary, 1996), 1.

⁶ Wilbert R. Shenk, "Rufus Anderson and Henry Venn: A Special Relationship?," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* (Pasadena, California: U.S. Center for World Missions, 1991), 168.

From the above, it is clear that Pratt sensed that the Holy Spirit's agenda was for the Gospel to be extended primarily through the efforts of the indigenous church.

British missionary leader, Henry Venn (1796-1873) along with his American contemporary counterpart, Rufus Anderson (discussed later) are generally credited with formulating the "three self" concept: self-supporting, self-governing, self-propagating.⁷ Venn and Anderson actually met on three occasions in London. In addition, their records reveal that they exchanged at least 16 transatlantic letters.⁸ Venn is generally regarded as one of (if not "the") leading British missions administrators of the 19th century.⁹ Venn's writings reveal that he was quite an innovator regarding missionary methods. Venn defied the "Western imperialist" stereotype in an age where we generally might expect a distant British missions administrator to have a poor estimate of true conditions and best methods suitable to far flung mission fields.¹⁰ His writings illustrate his keen insight. For example, in one of his 1854 private letters to Rufus Anderson, Venn wrote:

I have an increasing conviction that missionaries are too backward to trust their native agents of all classes. . . . I have observed in numerous instances that a pressure from home has put the native forward; and that subsequently the missionary has expressed to his surprise and satisfaction at the result.¹¹

Likewise, Venn's American counterpart, Rufus Anderson (1796-1880), is credited with formulating the classic "three self" definition of the indigenous church.¹² Anderson was the leading American missions administrator of the 19th century. Anderson's writings reflected his belief that the three-self concept of the indigenous church is rooted in the Word of God.¹³ For

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid, 169.

⁹ Ibid, 168.

¹⁰ Ibid., 169.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid., 168.

¹³ Ibid., 170.

example, in the following excerpt from the 1841 edition of the ABCFM *Annual Report*, note that all three elements are present:

In the early church, the apostles generally ordained [author: i.e., *self-governing*] “natives of the country.” . . . In this way the gospel soon became indigenous to the soil, and the gospel institutions acquired, through the grace of God, a self-supporting, self-propagating energy.¹⁴

Though he was only 13 years old when John Nevius was presenting his doctoral thesis, Robert Elliott Speer (1867-1947) built on Nevius' ideas. Not only was he, for 46 years, the Secretary of the Board of Foreign Missions of the Presbyterian Church in the USA, Speer was also authored 67 books! Through both his positional authority and influential writings, Speer provided key leadership to international missions efforts by clarifying the purpose of foreign missions.¹⁵ For example, in his 1900 book, *Missionary Principles* (published only seven years after Nevius' death), Speer wrote:

The purpose of foreign missions has to do with implanting the life of Christ in the hearts of men . . . Not the total reorganization of the whole social fabric. I had rather plant one seed of the life of Christ under the crust of heathen life than cover that whole crust over with the veneer of our social habits.¹⁶

Though Pratt, Venn, Anderson, and later, even Speer, all developed missionary methods and guidelines, none of them emphasized that the self-supporting, self-governing and self-propagating aspects of the indigenous church should not be *a notional goal for the distant future*, but emphasized in practice *from the very start*. Additionally, Anderson and Venn defined *indigenous church* to be “a church in which indigenous peoples had become competent to lead an institution that met European standards.” They would have done better not to espouse such a cross-cultural definition.¹⁷ Nevius parted with these predecessors through his insistence on immediacy in self-support, leadership and propagation of the gospel. Thus, while many have

¹⁴ Shenk, “Rufus Anderson and Henry Venn,” 170.

¹⁵ Denton Lotz, “The Watchword for World Evangelization,” *International Review of Mission* (April, 1979), 181.

¹⁶ Robert E. Speer, *Missionary Principles and Practice* (New York, 1902), 37.

¹⁷ Shenk, “Rufus Anderson and Henry Venn,” 170.

applauded Nevius in hindsight, Nevius' zeal to implement these principals marked him as a dangerous *radical* among his contemporaries and colleagues.¹⁸ Since Nevius died only three years after his historic teaching trip to Korea, only in heaven would he truly know what a large tree resulted from the small mustard seed that he planted during his two weeks teaching trip to Korea.

The “Old System”

Nevius inherited the "Western imperialist" missions paradigm when he arrived in China as a young missionary. He affectionately called the then-status quo, the *Old System* in his book.¹⁹ This system tended to merge many aspects of Western culture with the Gospel with the view that they were inseparable. The Old System approach combined the prevailing arrogance of Western cultural, economic and military supremacy with the bona fide desire of missionaries to propagate the Gospel.²⁰ The combination yielded a form of religious arrogance that resulted in the tendency to view the missionary in, at least in practice (if not in theory), as a de facto permanent leadership role in new churches in largely of unevangelized lands.²¹ Another aspect of this *Old System* paradigm was the sheer relative magnitude of wealth available for missions from western nations. Funds flowing forth from the industrial revolution in Europe and America meant that the notion of Western support for indigenous churches took on a benevolent air of unquestioned acceptance.²²

There were, of course, very positive aspects to the *Old System*. For example, the emphasis by early Protestant missionaries to translate the Bible into the major indigenous languages was a key cornerstone for those that missionaries that followed. Additionally, we

¹⁸ Brown, *Mission to Korea*, 81.

¹⁹ John L. Nevius, *The Planting and Development of Missionary Churches* (1885) (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: Presbyterian & Reform Publishing, 1958), 2.

²⁰ David Paton, *Christian Missions and the Judgement of God* (London, 1953), passim.

might also note that if one is making *any effort* in missions, that is a definitely *good*. However, Nevius documents how many of these genuine attempts “to do *good*,” were done *very very badly*.²³

One of the specific pitfalls in the *Old System* was the common practice of making paid agents of new converts. Over several decades of missionary work in China, Nevius observed that immediately taking a new convert out of his normal work and putting him on the mission payroll almost always did more harm than good. This practice injured the mission station by creating the opportunity for envy, jealousy and dissatisfaction -- both within and without the mission.²⁴ Moreover, making a paid agent of new converts injured the individual converts themselves. Their new positions often resulted in them developing a spirit of pride, self-conceit, arrogance -- along with a general deterioration of character. The practice of paying new converts also made it difficult for both the missionaries and the surrounding unbelievers to judge between the true and false believers -- whether they were indigenous preachers or members.²⁵

This practice of employing new converts also tended to stop evangelism by unpaid witnesses. Nevius noted that those that were not on the mission payroll typically reasoned, "I will leave the work of spreading Christianity to those who are paid for it."²⁶ Thus, under this "Western imperialist" *Old System*, the overall character of the missionary enterprise tended to be lowered in the eyes of foreigners and natives alike. The few indigenous converts that did exist were often regarded as *Rice Christians*, indigenous preachers (on the foreign payroll) as *mercenaries*, and Christianity as a *foreign religion*.²⁷ Though specific statistics for evangelism in China will be provided later, for now, it is sufficient to state that the Old System both *failed in*

²¹ Brown, *Mission to Korea*, 81.

²² *Ibid.*, 83.

²³ Nevius, *The Planting and Development of Missionary Churches*, 2, 95.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 9.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 10.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 11.

practice and represented a *recurring pattern of failure* for missions in the latter half of the 19th Century.

“The Nevius Plan”

John Nevius considered the “primary and ultimate work of the missionary” to be “that of preaching the Gospel,” while also acknowledging the need to meet physical needs. Nevius defined *preaching* to be “every possible mode of presenting Christian truth.” While in China, Nevius, like other Christian missionaries, found progress slow and converts scarce.²⁸ In 1880, Nevius presented his doctoral thesis at the University of Chicago on new methods of launching indigenous churches. His ideas, which will be discussed later at greater length, included the *Bible Class system* of discipleship, and the three-fold notion of planting indigenous churches that were, *from their very start*, self-supporting, self-propagating and self-governing. After several decades, of frustration in China, Nevius wrote a series of articles between 1883 and 1885 in the *Chinese Recorder* missionary journal (Shanghai, China) about his methods. In 1890, as Nevius prepared to visit Korea for a two-week teaching engagement, he compiled these articles in a small booklet entitled, *Methods of Mission Work* (1890). Later, six years after his death, this small book was reprinted under the title, *Planting and Development of Missionary Churches* (1899).²⁹

Highlights

Nevius' *New System*, which we will call *The Nevius Plan*, differed markedly from the Old System that was popular among his contemporaries. As previously noted, the three main elements of The Nevius Plan were that the indigenous church should be *self-propagating*, *self-supporting* and *self-governing*. If left as a general principle, this would not have been particularly

²⁷ Ibid., 12.

²⁸ Hunt, “The Legacy of John Livingston Nevius,” 122.

²⁹ Brown, *Mission to Korea*, 79.

controversial. However, Nevius insisted that these three principles should be immediately implemented -- *all the very beginning!* The Nevius' plan was thought to be *too radical* in China.³⁰

Self-propagation, the first of these three concepts, simply meant that native evangelists would evangelize their own people. New converts would, in turn, be commissioned as unpaid missionaries to their own people. Nevius commented:

Churches should be encouraged to grow by throwing out shoots in the same manner as the strawberry plant. Whenever a believer was converted, he should become an active agent for reaching someone else.³¹

Self-support, the second of these three concepts, had a few more associated rules. These rules included:

- No ordained pastor of a local church would receive payment from mission funds. When the church was ready to call a pastor, it should be ready to support him.
- If a congregation was not ready to pay the full salary of a pastor, it had to either: use a volunteer minister or become a subcharge of a large congregation.
- No church building should be built with mission funds. Private buildings/homes should be used until the group of believers could build their own facility with their own time/labor/tithes and offerings.
- Scriptures should be sold, not given away.³²

Nevius regarded *self-government*, the third of these three concepts, as vital to an indigenous church gaining a sense of self-respect, self-confidence and independence of spirit.

Nevius comments:

Temporary officers would be appointed by the missionary for each congregation. But as soon as possible, local churches should choose their own deacons and elders.³³

³⁰ Ibid., 81.

³¹ Nevius, *The Planting and Development of Missionary Churches*, 41.

³² Ibid., 42.

³³ Ibid., 58-60.

Additionally, Nevius taught that it is best not to superimpose upon an infant church a highly complex system of church government. Instead, Nevius encouraged church organizations to develop only as far as the church was able to manage/support it.³⁴

The Nevius Plan included much more than these three self-propagation/support/government principles. In fact, many have erred in presenting the Nevius Plan to the exclusion of his other mission strategy principles. The most important of these other principles was the *Bible Class System*. The Bible Class System was a training system to train unpaid leaders of local congregations. Only by developing trained lay leadership could the pitfall of the mission's paying local church pastors be avoided. Systematic Bible study included *The Manual for Inquirers*, the *Catechism* and the Gospels for all. Success of self-support depended upon the Bible Class System.³⁵

In addition to the Bible Class System, Nevius taught that missionary-evangelists were supposed to travel (“itinerate”) as much as possible in an Apostolic capacity. In his view, not having them remain in one place, avoided the dangers of missionaries becoming over-centralized and institutionalized as a permanent part of the local churches.³⁶ Part of this emphasis on missionary travel was Nevius’ teaching on comity. Nevius taught that missions were to confine their work to set geographic areas to avoid competition with other denominations and wasted energy.³⁷ Under the Bible Class System, new believers were required to receive teaching/instruction *prior to baptism*. In addition, Nevius emphasized strict adherence/enforcement of Sabbath observance, and prohibition of ancestor worship/plural marriages.³⁸

Within these geographical areas, believers were to be organized in little groups and instructed/taught by a helper who was responsible for a circuit of churches. In this circuit-

³⁴ Ibid., 62-63.

³⁵ Ibid., 38.

³⁶ Ibid., 79, 80.

³⁷ Brown, *Mission to Korea*, 84.

concept, Nevius had simply adapted the early 1800s Methodist circuit-rider-preacher concept that worked so well on the American frontier to his situation. Initially, the mission was to support the instructor/helper. Then, as time went on, his support was to come from the churches on his circuit. As for the churches on his circuit, their local church leaders would be unpaid until the church could afford its own full-time worker.³⁹

A Bible-based Strategy

Nevius strongly believed that *his* system was based on the Bible, whereas the *Old System* was both flawed in practice and inherently unbiblical. For example, Nevius stated:

I can find no authority in the Scriptures, either in specific teaching or Apostolic example, for the practice so common nowadays, of seeking out and employing paid agents as preachers.⁴⁰

One of John Nevius' favorite verses of Scripture that he used as a basis for not putting new indigenous converts on the mission payroll was I Corinthians 7:20: "Each one should remain in the situation which he was in when God called him."⁴¹ Though the verse does not state whether a convert should remain in his original profession permanently or temporarily, Nevius strong position on this particular point minimized the number of people who professed belief in Jesus Christ out of hope of financial gain.⁴²

Nevius also placed a strong emphasis on Sabbath observance. He wanted people illustrating Christianity during six days of secular work, as well as by one day of Sabbath observance. In Nevius' view, such men and women present Christianity in the concrete. They are "cities set on a hill," "epistles known and read of all men."⁴³ Nevius' strict guidelines on these matters also helped guard against the development of any sort of

³⁸ Ibid., 16.

³⁹ Nevius, *The Planting and Development of Missionary Churches*, 57-60.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 16, 17.

⁴¹ Ibid., 17.

⁴² Ibid., 12.

stigma that Christianity was a foreign religion promoted by foreign money.⁴⁴ Other related Bible verses that Nevius cited are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Various Bible references used by Rev. John L. Nevius⁴⁵

| Topic | Nevius' Bible reference |
|--|---|
| Indigenous church leaders. | "He must not be a recent convert, or he may become conceited and fall under the same judgment as the devil" I Timothy 3:6. |
| Indigenous church leaders. | "Not many of you should presume to be teachers, my brothers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly" James 3:1. |
| Indigenous church leaders . | "Do not be hasty in the laying on of hands, and do not share in the sins of others. Keep yourself pure" I Timothy 5:22. |
| New converts remaining in their existing professions. | . . . follow our example. We were not idle . . . we worked night and day, laboring and toiling so that we would not be a burden to any of you. We did this, not because we do not have the right to such help, but in order to make ourselves a model for you to follow. . . we gave you this rule: "If a man will not work, he shall not eat." We hear that some among you are idle. They are not busy; they are busybodies. Such people we command and urge in the Lord Jesus Christ to settle down and earn the bread they eat" II Thessalonians 3:7-12. |
| Criteria for new indigenous leaders. | "They must first be tested ...[before being deacons]" I Timothy 3:10. |
| Converts remaining as diligent workers in their existing professions result in a strong testimony. | "You yourselves know that these hands of mine have supplied my own needs and the needs of my companions. In everything I did, I showed you that by this kind of hard work we must help the weak, remembering the words the Lord Jesus himself said: 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'" Acts 20:34-35. |
| Criteria for spotting false teachers | "By their fruit you shall know them" (e.g., Luke 6:43-44). |
| Importance of prayer to missions | "Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field" Luke 10:2. |

An Experience-based Strategy

When John Nevius went to Korea in 1890 to teach his missions principles, he did not present untested ideas. Nevius had already tested his ideas in China. For example, in 1870, Nevius wrote from Yantai, China to his mission board secretary in New York, "I am trying to

⁴³ Ibid., 44.

⁴⁴ Brown, *Mission to Korea*, 81.

⁴⁵ Nevius, *The Planting and Development of Missionary Churches*, 17-27.

make the *work independent and self supporting from the first.*"⁴⁶ Yet, Nevius found his ideas difficult to implement in China. This was so because Nevius was trying to implement his policies of restricting the employ of indigenous church workers in a region where this practice was already commonplace among many western missionaries and mission boards. Once such subsidies were begun with foreign money, it became difficult for the churches not to keep on depending on foreign aid. As long as some were getting paid to do evangelistic work, it was difficult to get anyone to do it on a volunteer basis. For example, why should a Christian convert do volunteer work for the church, when he could do the same work a short distance away for an attractive salary?⁴⁷ When Nevius' principles were uniformly introduced into Korea, missionaries did not face this problem since there were no competing missions who were subsidizing converts with foreign money.

Nevius Strategy in Practice

The Presbyterians and Methodists successfully implemented the Nevius Plan in Korea. Nevius' methods were so successful in practice, that Presbyterian missionaries put them into practice for the first 50 years of Korea mission.⁴⁸ From the early 1880's, when the first Protestant missionaries arrived to 1890, there were only about 100 Korean converts to Christianity. After 1890, when Dr. John Nevius taught his mission strategy to the first Christian missionaries to Korea, church growth started increasing at a geometric rate. Throughout the 20th century, the Korean church essentially doubled in size every ten years. For this reason, the church in Korea is sometimes referred to as *the miracle of modern missions.*⁴⁹

Use of Nevius' plan required the rapid implementation of steps toward the self-governance of the indigenous Korean church. Key milestones in this process included:

⁴⁶ Brown, *Mission to Korea*, 80.

⁴⁷ Nevius, *The Planting and Development of Missionary Churches*, 12.

⁴⁸ Brown, *Mission to Korea*, 16.

- September 1907: Independent jurisdiction over its own affairs.
- September 1912, Fully organized as a national church.
- September 1922, Wrote and adopted its own constitution for self-governance.

These steps occurred even under Japanese occupation and amidst growing anti-Christian persecution by the Japanese. Through the church, Koreans became aware of their ability to govern their own country.⁵⁰

By comparison, the growth of the church under the *Old System* in China was

painstakingly slow. After the first 46 years of Protestant missionary work in China (1883), there were approximately 350 converts to Christianity. After the first 100 years of Protestant missionary work in China (1937), there were 178,000 Christians. By 1927, Robert E. Speer lamented that, there were only 32 self-supporting Presbyterian churches in all of China. And by 1949, there were 659,000 Christians – less than one quarter of one percent of the population.⁵¹

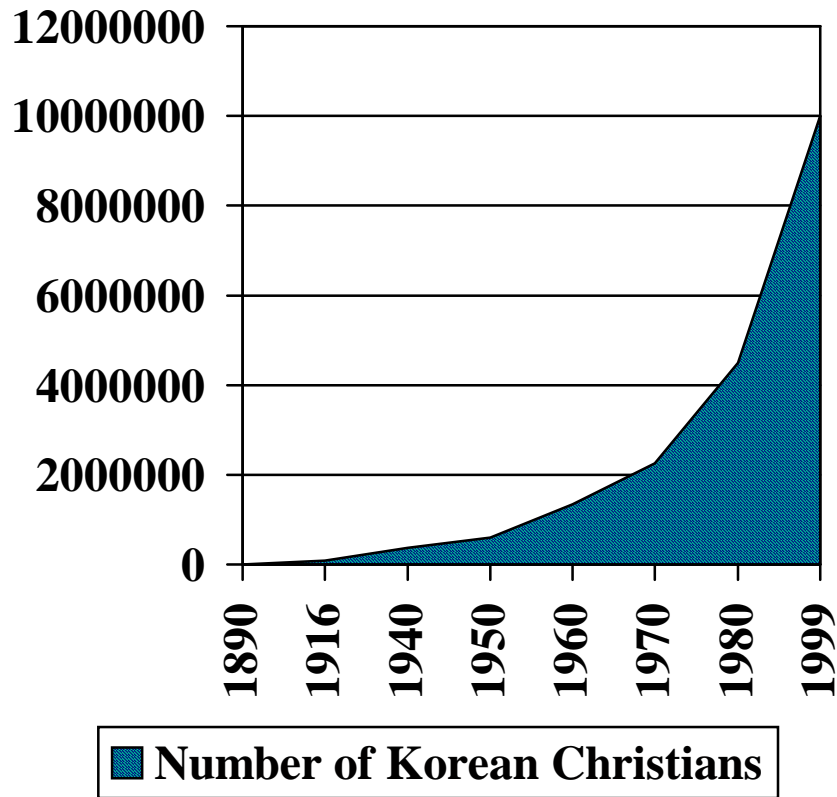


Figure 1. Growth of the Korean church between 1890 and 1999.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 77.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 16.

⁵¹ Ibid., 78.

In Korea, where the Nevius Plan was put into practice, the difference was dramatic. After the first 46 years of Protestant missionary work (1930) there were over 200,000 Christian converts. After the first 100 years of Protestant missionary work (1984) there were about six million Christians. By 1927, Speer remarked that Nevius' principles had something to do with the fact that there were 547 self-supporting Presbyterian churches in Korea.⁵² During the 1930s and 1940s, the number of Korean Christians actually exceeded the total number of Christians in all of China – even though the mission effort in China had begun 47 years prior to that in Korea!⁵³

Of course, there were non-Nevius factors that also helped the Korean church grow more rapidly than the Chinese church. Some of these non-Nevius factors included:

- Shorter distances made missionary travel easier in Korea than in China
- Less control from the church in America toward Korea than toward China
- More unity of coordination in Korea. For example, Korea had only 6 mission boards in 1919, while China had 130 mission boards in 1919.
- Early translation of Scriptures to people's vernacular (Hankul)
- Ardent Great Commission character of Korean church
- Persecution by nationals, Japanese and Communists
- More emphasis on teaching than on public preaching in Korea
- Strong emphasis on prayer with the Korean church⁵⁴

However, the general consensus among former missionaries to Korea and mission leaders alike was that the implementation of Nevius' principles was the key to the development of the strong indigenous church in Korea. Nevius' principles were thought to be so critical to success, that for

⁵² Ibid., 82.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 84, 85.

over 50 years, each missionary had to pass a test on the Nevius Plan before he could serve in the field.⁵⁵

Is Nevius relevant today?

Is Nevius relevant today? Clearly, the *Nevius Plan* had a significant impact on the success of the rapid growth of the early Korean church. Yet, how are these ideas relevant to the missionary effort toward today's largely unevangelized North Korea, where, due to anti-Christian totalitarian rule, most have not heard the Gospel of Jesus Christ?

Certainly, Nevius' ideas highlight the critical importance to having a strategy, rather than an ad hoc approach to missions. Viggo Sogaard comments:

. . . a strategy is an overall approach plan or way of describing how we will go about reaching our goal as solving our problem. Strategy is a way to reach an objective, a kind of map of the territory to be covered in order to "reach from here to there."⁵⁶

As Christians, defining a particular strategy for missions is a statement of faith in how we hear from God regarding that future He wants to bring about. By faith we, are seeking to partake in God's strategy for our particular mission situation. A global strategy, such as Dr. David Barrett's Kaleidoscope Global Action Plan (KGAP) is generally not specific enough to implement on a national, regional or local level.⁵⁷ However, a strategy such as that espoused by John Nevius gets into sufficient detail to have a guiding role in the development of an indigenous church. Consequently, our evaluation of the Nevius Plan does not have to be in an all-or-nothing sense. Rather, we should consider what aspects of Nevius' strategy remain applicable and which ones do not.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 79.

⁵⁶ Viggo Sogaard, *Media in Church and Mission* (Pasadena, California: William Carey Library, 1993), 56.

⁵⁷ David B. Barrett, *Our globe and how to reach it: seeing the world* (Birmingham, Alabama: New Hope, 1990), 108-112, passim. KGAP is a global-level, not a national-level strategy.

Today, it is clear that many still consider Nevius' methods worthy of application in contemporary ministry settings. For example, Nevius' principles have been implemented both in contemporary church settings, (e.g., the Sa Rang Presbyterian Church of Southern California),⁵⁸ and in contemporary missions settings (e.g., Westminster Biblical Missions).⁵⁹ In particular, many still view the Nevius' ideas as particularly applicable to mission settings. This is especially true for areas where believers are not asking for more missionaries, but rather seek training for themselves so that they might finish the work of reaching their countrymen for Christ. To accomplish this, believers must be trained to teach their own people of Christ and his truth. This approach views the role of the foreign missionary as one that comes alongside national workers to impart vital knowledge.⁶⁰ Missionaries train indigenous Christian leaders to stand in, defend, and spread the Faith. Nevius' approach is also incredibly cost-effective, because it keeps national churches from depending on foreign aid. With this emphasis on training national believers in the Word, Nevius' approach is certain to have far greater results than anything a foreign missionary force might accomplish on its own. Another strength of the Nevius approach is that, in the eventuality the door should close to foreigners, the work will go on.⁶¹

To what extent is the Nevius Plan applicable toward evangelizing North Korea? Certainly, any answer to such a question requires one to be sensitive to God's vision and the leading of the Holy Spirit. At present, the vast majority of evangelism is accomplished through

⁵⁸ Kun Park, *The Impact of the Nevius Method on the Sa Rang Presbyterian Church of Southern California* (Ann Arbor Michigan: University of Michigan, 1993), The general goal of this study is to stimulate Korean and Korean American pastors, missionaries, and mission agencies to reflect on their ministries in Korean immigrant churches.

⁵⁹ Dennis Roe, "Introducing Westminster Biblical Missions" (Carbondale, Pennsylvania: The Chalcedon Foundation, 1997), <http://www.chalcedon.edu/report/97sep/s11.htm>.

⁶⁰ Bahn-suk Lee, "Cornerstone Ministries International" [website] (Anaheim, California: Cornerstone Ministries International, 1997), <http://www.bibles.org>.

⁶¹ Jung Young Lee, "The American missionary movement in Korea, 1882-1945: its contributions and American diplomacy" *Missiology* (November 1983), 395.

one-on-one witnessing within an anti-Christian totalitarian cultural setting. Yet, we should also consider ask, “What will the post-Juche⁶² church look?” and “How fast will it change?”

Should Nevius’ principles be implemented in entirety, here are some notable risks. For example, Nevius argued for unity at the expense of comity. Dr. David Barrett emphasizes the importance of unity in his book, *Our Globe*:

The diversity of the Church provides a pool of resources that must be coordinated to maximum benefit by eliminating the problems associated with competition, redundancy and waste.⁶³

Yet, comity has its attendant risks. One such risk was unnecessarily restricting evangelism in certain areas.

"Comity" arrangements were attempted in the early decades of this century. Through comity agreements, mission agencies and denominations essentially divided up the world into ecclesiastical fiefdoms, being careful, for example, not to interject Baptist witness into expressly Lutheran territory, and vice versa. The goal of minimizing proselytization and maximizing limited resources was laudatory, but when one denominational group failed to achieve its commitment to evangelize its designated assignments, the big losers, again and again, were the many individuals without any understanding about Jesus.⁶⁴

Comity also creates the risk of creating an attitude of religious exclusion against certain groups (e.g., Charismatic, Pentecostal and Full Gospel groups) in the name of “unity.”

Some critics of the Nevius Plan also note concerns that Nevius’ principles will not fit all situations the Church may face today. For example, they note that the plan was designed to work in the pioneer stages of the development of Christianity within a predominantly rural society. Thus, the rigid prohibition against the use of foreign capital may not fit an urban setting where the high cost of land, high-rises, apartment complexes and education are significant considerations associated with planting a church. Thus, they maintain that missionaries should not attempt to replicate the Nevius Plan exactly, but rather focus on relating the gospel to the

⁶² Juche is North Korea’s dictator-worship state religion. Juche literally means “self sufficiency” or “self reliance.”

⁶³ Barrett, *Our globe and how to reach it*, 2.

⁶⁴ V. David Garrison, *The Nonresidential Missionary* (Monrovia, California: World Vision International, 1992), 41.

local cultural context.⁶⁵ However, since Koreans under the Nevius Plan, provided for their own places of worship – usually through the use of a large room in a private home – this writer does not see the urban versus rural distinction as a compelling argument for an exception to Nevius’ core ideas.⁶⁶

Another issue associated with the Nevius Plan is the wise application of control. The Nevius Plan adds structure to missionary efforts through fairly rigid guidelines. However, the benefits of such a structured approach has the attendant risk of over-control.

Nevius had many critics in his day – particularly among his contemporary missionary colleagues in China who viewed him to be a well-meaning radical. Nevius’ most severe contemporary critic was Dr. Calvin Mateer. Mateer did not agree with Nevius’ concept of workers supported by local congregations instead of receiving a salary from the mission. Mateer had the reputation of being a very stubborn man who resented Nevius for trying to alter the status quo that existed in China during the latter half of the 19th century.⁶⁷ Mateer, actually published a small book in an attempt to refute Nevius’ ideas. Mateer’s book argued that Nevius’ plan would never work in Shantung.⁶⁸

Even with the application of Nevius’ principles, other strategic decisions remain. For example, what is “the right mix” of *front door* (government-sanctioned) versus *back door* (non-government-sanctioned) outreach? Generally speaking, as long as North Korea is under a totalitarian state, the *front-door* approach will likely be limited to humanitarian aid. Thus, a *back-door* approach is necessary to build up the church. Timing is another factor. Is this the right *kairos* time for to adopt a particular strategy? Such matters require considerable prayer. Nevertheless, though risks exist, the historic success of John Nevius’ principles remains a

⁶⁵ Brown, *Mission to Korea*, 86.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 80.

⁶⁷ Hunt, “The Legacy of John Livingston Nevius,” 124.

⁶⁸ Jung Young Lee, “The American missionary movement in Korea, 1882,” 393.

compelling argument in favor of their adaptation to the contemporary task of re-evangelizing North Korea. Implementation of a Nevius-like approach allows for achieving areas of agreement among missions organizations of diverse denominations.

Non-Nevius Factors

There were other factors that contributed to the rapid growth of the Korean church during the 20th Century besides the *Nevius Plan*. For example, American missionaries benefited from anti-Japanese nationalistic sentiment. Also, that there were only a few denominations (mostly Presbyterian and Methodists) in Korea that allowed for achieving consensus more easily.⁶⁹

However other factors worked against the missionary effort. For example, not only were there few indigenous Korean Christians in the 1880s, but strong traditions of spiritism existed in Korea from other religious traditions (e.g., Buddhism, Taoism and Ch'ondokyo). A low basic rate of literacy and xenophobia (fear of foreigners) also limited the speed that the gospel could be transmitted. Persecution was also a factor. However, though the persecution of Korean Christians was not sought, it probably worked more in favor of spreading Christianity than against it.⁷⁰

Today, Korea has changed considerably from the Korea of a century ago. For example, American missionaries are likely to face radical anti-American nationalistic sentiment from North Koreans. North Koreans, under the compulsory Juche education system, have been taught to hate Americans from their youth. Also, today there are many denominations, including Pentecostals and charismatics. Today, though xenophobia still exists, the prevalent belief in North Korea, under Juche ideology, is that the supernatural realm does not exist. Though strong persecution restricts evangelism, the fact the existence of millions of Koreans in South Korea and many underground believers in North Korea means that evangelism has a *hot* start (i.e.,

significant numbers of existing converts), rather than a *cold* one (i.e., few pre-existing converts), as occurred a century ago. A high general rate of literacy in contemporary North Korea also means that there is greater potential for the gospel to be rapidly transmitted once the open proclamation of the gospel becomes possible.

Critically, we should remember that, unlike in Nevius' day, today there already *are* North Korean pastors. There already *is* a North Korean church. Though these pastors may not have seminary or bible school training or education, but they *are* pastors nonetheless. Nor, is formal training the only Bible-based norm.⁷¹ This is not to say that there is no role for the missionary. Missionaries are still required to work for the building of the church and the perfecting of the saints.⁷² For example, missionaries currently serve a vital role in training North Korean underground church leaders at secret sites.⁷³

A Common Thread

If Nevius' ideas remain applicable to the situation in contemporary North Korea, there must be a common thread that connects the past with the present. That connection is the timeless importance of the indigenous church. God's plan for evangelism continues to be to work through the Church to proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ (e.g., Matthew 28:18-20). Since North Korea already has an established church, and Nevius' three-fold notion emphasizes the indigenous church, his ideas must be considered seriously. This is especially true because Nevius emphasized that the church should, *from the very start*, be self-supporting, self-propagating and self-governing. Thus, the North Koreans do not need a missionary paradigm where foreign believers aim, either intentionally or unintentionally, to lead or control the North Korean church.

⁶⁹ Brown, *Mission to Korea*, 84.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 83.

⁷¹ Bah-Suk Lee, author interview, 19 Sep 1999. Virginia Beach, Virginia.

⁷² *Ibid.*

⁷³ Bahn-suk Lee, "Cornerstone Ministries International" [website].

Instead, a Nevius-like concept is needed where the role of the missionary is one who partners with the indigenous church to disciple both new leaders and members in the faith.

Conclusion

Today's missionaries to North Korea are thinking about Nevius' approach.⁷⁴ Nevius' biblical emphasis on the indigenous church, unity and discipleship are preferable to either the *Old System* or an ad hoc approach. In addition to his indigenous church emphasis, Nevius' Bible Class system gives prominence to core biblical instruction for new believers. In this way, new believers are more fully taught their Great Commission responsibility to be witnesses for Jesus Christ – a responsibility that rests upon all Christians, not solely with missionaries and paid clergy. Since Bible schools and seminary are not available within the anti-Christian North Korean totalitarian state, the missionary retains an important role in discipling and teaching North Korea's indigenous underground church leaders.⁷⁵

In the final analysis, North Korea's indigenous church, through the grace of God, has and will continue to endure and prevail apart from foreign control, leaders and money (e.g., Matthew 16:18). Even so, Bible-based knowledge, wisdom and instruction are in high demand. Such impartation of core biblical teachings is vital to the life of the heavily persecuted North Korean church. Even though the world has changed a lot in over a century since Rev. John L. Nevius first taught his methods, the biblical basis of the *Nevius Plan* has not. Thus, this *New Look at an Old Strategy* concludes that Nevius' solid biblical foundation gives his plan enduring value. Though a continuing emphasis on strengthening the indigenous church, once again, the Kingdom of God looks to make significant inroads into the present spiritual darkness in North Korea.

⁷⁴ Bah-Suk Lee, author interview.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

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Matthew 16:18; 28:18-20.

Luke 6:43-44; 10:2.

Acts 20:34-35.

I Corinthians 7:20.

II Thessalonians 3:7-12.

I Timothy 3:6, 10; 5:22.

James 3:1.