

Early Korean Mission Strategy and Structure 1880-1940: Bridging the Gap Between Traditional Mission Methods and Church Movements

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Published in *Global Missiology*, www.globalmissiology.org, July 2022

Abstract

The early Korean Protestant church experienced growth and expansion to such a degree that one of its cities, Pyongyang, became known as “The Jerusalem of the East.” Many missiologists look to the Korean Revival of 1907 as the spark of the rapid increase, when in fact the church had already been growing exponentially before that point. This article explores the underlying strategies and methods used by the missionaries and indigenous believers which allowed the church to grow quickly. The amount of evangelism and Bible distribution performed by untrained believers was exceptional and undoubtedly connected to the rapid expansion.

Key Words: church planting, discipleship, evangelism, indigenous, multiplication, movement

The Beginning of the Protestant Church in Korea

The early Protestant church in Korea experienced a revival of deep significance with widespread impact. Christianity was growing so fast in Pyongyang, now the capital of North Korea, that it became known as “The Jerusalem of the East.” Many people look to the Revival of 1907 as the spark that fueled church growth, when in fact the Korean church had already been growing exponentially by that point. In 1889, Presbyterian missionary Horace Underwood stated, “A revival is now in progress in the native church” (Underwood 1889, 289). In another letter that same year he wrote, “In the past year alone, the church in Korea has multiplied over fivefold” (Missionary Review of the World 1889, 457). So when the revival of 1907 came, the effect was like throwing gas on an already blazing fire. The foundation of the Korean Protestant church was laid in a way which launched it onto an arc for growth.

During his time in Manchuria in the late 1800’s, missionary John Ross developed a cohesive overarching mission strategy. That strategy was later improved upon by John Nevius. Ross and Nevius were contemporaries, and they often corresponded with each other about mission strategy.

It should be noted that mission strategists Henry Venn and Rufus Anderson are the fathers of the theory used by Ross and Nevius. Venn and Anderson independently but simultaneously developed the strategy, despite serving in different areas of the world in the 1800’s. Their work became known as “Indigenous Church Theory,” which became the guiding principle of Protestant missions for the next 100 years.

The core of “Indigenous Church Theory” states that the indigenous church should, from the start, be capable of, and have a vision for, growing and expanding to reach their entire population and bring them under the Lordship of Christ. In order to do this, the indigenous church must be self-propagating (Anderson 1869, 109).

Venn and Anderson believed that the church must be structured to expand without outside finance, thus making it sustainable, scalable, and self-supporting. Underwood noted that self-support instilled a deep sense of “sacrificial dedication” within the indigenous believers (Underwood 1889, 289). Local workers were also expected to pay for their own personal books, transportation, and shared costs of education.

And finally, to be healthy, the indigenous church must be empowered to find solutions to local issues as it grows and reaches its entire population. Outside answers to indigenous issues usually do not address the true core issues through which local churches are struggling. Therefore, the church must be able to make its own theological interpretations as it pertains to orthopraxy. Thus, the indigenous church must be self-governing as well.

Put together, the “Indigenous Church Theory” has been summarized as establishing indigenous churches which are self-governing, self-supporting, and self-propagating. The main point, however, was to develop “a scriptural, selfpropagating Christianity” (Anderson 1994, 549).

Other principles of the “Indigenous Church Theory” upon which Ross and Nevius built their methods were:

- **Systematic Reproducible Bible Studies:** Efforts were focused on learning from the Word and doing so in simple reproducible ways. Whether individually or in a group, study of the Bible was seen as the central pathway to spiritual maturity.
- **Evangelism of Families and Groups:** Decisions within Korean society were made communally, within groups. Therefore, the focus was primarily on evangelizing groups rather than individuals. Ross and Nevius paid special attention to the heads of these groups, often the leaders of families and villages.
- **Lay Leadership and Volunteerism:** First believers and new believers were immediately tasked with bringing others to Christ and helping them grow. Training was ongoing, but believers were sent into the fields with very little training. Every member of the church was regarded as an evangelist for the gospel. A commonly used phrase was, “Everyone is a learner, and everyone is a teacher.”
- **Mobilization of the Whole Body of Christ into All the Work of Christ:** In the early years of the church in Korea, prospective church members who had never tried to lead others to Christ were refused baptism and membership into the church. When this requirement was removed, the rate of growth slowed significantly.

- Just-in-Time Learning: Local lay volunteers and lay leaders were given training throughout the year. Each training focused on simple, specific tasks for obedience. They were not given complicated, comprehensive training, all at once, at one time.

In order to fulfill the ideals of Indigenous Church Theory, Ross and Nevius structured the mission engagement in Korea with a developmental approach to church growth (Clark 1937). The ideal was to start simple and gradually build towards maturity. Each training built upon the previous training and focused on simple tasks for obedience. Over several years, new leaders would be brought to maturity. Mistakes made by volunteers and lay leaders along the way were seen as opportunities for learning and growth.

Ross and Nevius's developmental approach was for new believers, house churches, and new leaders. Roland Allen wrote about how these methods followed the methods used by the Apostle Paul. Paul would enter a new area, convert new believers, and then give these new believers the task of reaching their villages and towns for Christ. Within a very short time, Paul would have shown them how to meet together, then Paul would leave and move on to the next location. Paul would continue to develop both the local leaders, as well as the local groups, by writing letters and the sending back of mature disciples like Timothy and Priscilla and Aquila (Allen 1912).

Over time, these simple Bible study groups would add tithing, worship, care for needs, and eventually elders. These elements of church, however, were not added all at once. There was a tolerant attitude toward indigenous culture and religions. Ross and Nevius advocated for adapting methods to meet local circumstances and did not impose completely organized local churches when entering new villages and areas.

When church buildings were eventually constructed (most groups met in homes), the missionaries insisted that any buildings be financed by the local village and that the house of worship be constructed in the same style as those of the houses in that village. Self-support became the "cornerstone of indigenization" per missionary Horace Underwood (Underwood 1889, 289).

In February 1891, the Korean Mission of the PCUSA adopted the "Nevius Method" as their "Standing Rules and By-Laws" (Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. Korean Mission 1891). There was an emphasis on local leaders, un-ordained ministers, and Bible Women, all of whom were empowered to lead Bible studies—which grew in number. These methods fueled the Presbyterian church into becoming the overwhelmingly dominant Christian tradition on the peninsula.

The Korean Mission officially declared that Presbyterian missionaries should follow the Nevius Method with a primary aim to win souls and disciple them, believing that individual change would bring about social change (Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. Korean Mission 1891). This decision is noteworthy in that the Nevius Method was very

different from other denominational mission societies operating in Asia at the time. Nevius lamented that much of the work in China “left the impression that foreigners have money in abundance, and are ready to give it to those in need” (Nevius 1885, 11). Nevius watched as the effective indigenous workers he raised up “were hired away, one by one mission, another by another, and the interest in Christianity in and about their homes ceased” (Nevius 1885, 12). He continues, “The religious interest which passed like a wave over the neighborhood, gives place to another wave of excitement, and the topics of conversation are now place and pay” (Nevius 1885, 13).

Other missionaries in China had become outspoken skeptics of the Nevius Method being employed in Korea, critical of the resulting rapid growth of the church. One missionary in Korea, Dr. Alfred Sharrocks, invited those skeptics to come and evaluate a growing church in Sonchon, north of Pyongyang. The critics claimed the growth was a “bubble” of “reckless mass conversion.” Sharrocks responded by showing how “from the first, the Koreans were made to believe that the spread of the Gospel and growth of the church was their work rather than ours” (Oak 2013, 10). He then showed how 15 locally supported evangelists diligently worked with local congregations who collectively donated 8000 days for evangelism per year. The results of local empowerment and ownership of the task grew the body of Christ in one small town, from 75 people to over 1400, in just five years. Believers in another town grew from just 50 in 1899 to 2500 in 1909.

Developing Churches

The various other components of the Nevius-Ross method, explained below, can be described in terms of non-formal, informal, and formal training of local leaders. The overriding question guiding the training was, “What are the means calculated most quickly and effectively to bring the message of the gospel within reach of every individual of the race?” All mission activity took place within a cohesive mission strategy. Most of this activity was completed by minimally trained laity who were taught to follow simple, reproducible actions. Even so, due to the cohesive strategy and on the job training, their collective work was robust and comprehensive.

Preparing the Fields for Harvest: Bible Readers

Even before setting out to evangelize Koreans, the missionaries knew that two matters were of the utmost importance. First was *prayer*. Early missionaries mobilized countless Korean Christians into prayer. Early morning prayer meetings were started in 1898, and these gatherings became a movement that spread across the country well before the revival of 1907.

The second essential element was that of the *Word of God*. The Bible was seen as the most important tool for evangelism and the spiritual development of individuals. As

such, the missionaries believed that making the Word of God available to all people within each and every community was essential.

Ross and Nevius made use of men and women whose sole role was to find a way into existing relational groups within a community and read to them stories from the Scriptures. These men and women were often called “Bible Readers.” They would go wherever people would gather: beside a busy intersection, under a spreading tree, or in homes. Women often made it their priority to get into the *anbang*, the women’s quarters, where women often gathered for gossip and story-telling. Once these Bible Readers entered a location, they simply started reading stories from the Bible. After a story was done, they would discuss the story informally. Finally, they would tell everyone about the book from which they were reading, explaining that this book contained many more fascinating stories. Their goal was to encourage as many people as possible to purchase a Bible for themselves and continue reading it within the group (Strawn 2012).

Early on, the Bible Readers did not have the complete Scriptures translated into Korean, so they would sell whatever portions of the Bible they had. If the people in the group were not interested in a Bible, the Bible Readers would leave pamphlets which explained the essentials of the gospel.

The express two-fold goal was for massive numbers of people to begin reading the Bible in their existing community and to make Bibles accessible to the entire Korean population. The thought was that this would prepare people’s hearts for evangelism. It is important to note that these Bible Readers were unordained individuals sent out simply to read Bible stories with people and sell copies of the Scriptures.

A few of the very first Bible Readers were unsaved individuals—but quite often they did not stay “unsaved” for long. Many became believers as they read the Scriptures daily to others. By 1910, after Christianity in Korea had significantly grown and there were more Christians from which to mobilize Bible Readers, it was determined that all Bible readers must be saved individuals (Bae 2001, 134-140).

It is important to note as well that the Bible Readers were sent out by themselves. Even with only minimal training, they sought to mobilize as many people as possible. Therefore, the methods they used had to be simple.

Because many Bible Readers were new believers, they often made mistakes, lost their tempers, or caused other problems. Some quit and left in the middle of a journey. These issues, however, did not diminish the profound impact these Bible Readers made in countless un-evangelized towns and villages, particularly across the northern part of Korea (Clark 1921).

Bible Readers reportedly sold “enormous numbers” of Bibles and Christian literature. Perhaps most notable were the women. From 1888 to 1945 there were a

recorded 1200 women who became renown in Korean church history as the “Bible women.” Most of the women’s names were carefully recorded, while most of the men remained nameless. In the beginning, they were simply seen as Bible salesmen. The strategic importance of the role those men played was not realized until much later (Strawn 2012, 121, 161, 175).

During the year 1909, one team of 19 Bible Women read the Bible to over 5900 people, selling 4280 copies of the Scriptures while also teaching 127 people to read. On average, over the course of a year one Bible Woman would read the Bible to 310 different people, selling Bibles to about 225 of them. Their collective action was tremendous in sowing the seeds of the gospel. In 1913, for instance, all Bible Women were recorded as having read the Bible to over 43,000 individuals (Strawn 2012).

Bible Women are described as going from “house to house” as the weather permitted. As with the original Bible sellers, they were particularly good at either finding gatherings of people or drawing a small crowd of people as they read from the Scriptures. They were noted as not caring what other people thought of them. They had a way of entering into other people’s community and simply begin to read Bible stories. The astounding result was the massive numbers of people and communities in which they were able to do this (Strawn 2012).

As they went, these Bible Readers also spread other kinds of help to communities, training them in proper hygiene and other basic health needs. If individuals could not read, the Bible Readers would take some time to teach them the Korean script, *Hangul*, and how to start reading. In these and other ways, Bible Readers had a tremendous impact on society. The number of Bible Women grew as stories of their deeds were passed on to others. Stories of their courage and devotion motivated countless others to follow the same path.

The early missionaries were equally committed to getting “massive amounts” of the gospel into the hands of ordinary Koreans. Many missionaries were recorded as regularly having 100 or more Koreans come through their own house. Some were reported as being in contact with as many as 1500 Koreans over the course of a year.

With the Korean churches putting such a large amount of energy into getting the Word of God into the hands of so many individuals, it is not surprising that revival broke out. Moreover, because a process had been modeled whereby the Bible was to be read in community, communities of Christians reading the Bible together emerged wherever these “Bible Readers” went.

Stories of the exploits of these Bible Readers passed orally from church to church across the countryside and through the many early morning prayer meetings. The tales inspired others to go and do the same. Because their actions were simple and reproducible, it was easy for others to get involved.

Gathering the Harvest: Evangelists

When the Bible Readers returned from their excursions, they handed in the names of individuals who had purchased Bibles, as well as those to whom they given pamphlets, to an Evangelist. Evangelists would then travel from town to town to meet those who had purchased or expressed interest in the Scriptures. Evangelists often sought to meet with heads of families or heads of villages. As already noted, Evangelists often found small groups of new believers already gathering together, a direct result of the work of the Bible Readers (Clark 1921).

As soon as people were converted, the Evangelist would explain how these new believers' names were written in the Book of Life, as well as about the security of their decision to follow Christ. "This is a wonderful thing," they were told (Clark 1921).

Next, the new believers were shown, in the Scriptures, how it was their responsibility to bring the gospel to everyone else in their household as well as the village. "Tomorrow," they were told, "you will bring everyone from your family and your village here, to your house. You will tell the story of what God has done for you. I will help you. Then I will explain to them, the story of Jesus and what God has done and why everyone must believe." These new believers were then sent out to invite everyone from their village to their home (Clark 1921).

The next day, during the meeting the entire village was told that a new Bible study would be held in the house of this new believer, and all were welcome to attend. Over a couple of days, the Evangelist would teach this new believer how to hold a simple Bible study (although many were already doing this, following the example of the Bible Readers). They would simply read a Scripture passage, then discuss what they had read. It was a very simple format with a specific set of stories to help these new believers become grounded in their faith. The Evangelist would give the new believer a list of passages or Bible stories to study in his home with the group (Clark 1921).

Evangelists also told these new believers that they were obligated to send monthly letters, reporting on their progress with the study happening in their home. They were to report any problems and ask any questions that might come up. The Evangelist would keep in touch with them through letters as well. Notice how this correspondence pattern resembles Paul's methods, as he quickly moved from place to place, while sending letters back to the churches of the Galatians, Ephesians, Philipppines, Colossians.

The Evangelist promised to cycle back through the villages, when he had time, just like Paul did. What was more important, however, was that the new believer make preparations to attend the quarterly (or semi-annual) training to be held in the provincial capital. They were told to ask for traveling money from this new Bible study, enough to also cover meals and lodging during the training.

Until the training, the new converts were to diligently search the Scriptures themselves and to devote themselves to the new Bible study, to prayer, and to sharing their faith with others in the village.

By the time the Evangelist left, there was an “unorganized church” established in the village. They did not yet have elders, nor did they do everything an “organized church” was expected to do. In time, they would grow into organized churches and do everything a church needed to do. Some missionaries referred to these groups as “infant churches”—what today many would simply call “Bible studies.” Initially these focused on Bible study and prayer, perhaps with some simple worship. Knowing the ultimate goal for each of these groups, the early missionaries had no problem calling them “unorganized churches.”

Maturing the Fruit: Regional Trainings

Regional trainings were utilized to strengthen these new Bible study leaders (“unorganized church” leaders) and help them develop their Bible study into an “organized church,” while they continued to evangelize their village as well as the nearby villages. These regional training sessions were normally ten days in length.

Each Bible study leader would report on the status of the work, including how many people were attending Bible Study and how many people in the village/neighborhood had accepted Christ. Quite understandably, some of the leaders often felt peer pressure to continue to evangelize when they heard the successes of others bringing their villages to Christ.

Furthermore, Bible study leaders were given more Bible studies to use until the next regional training. All the studies were systematic, enabling learning directly from Scripture. Also, the Bible study leaders were taught basic doctrines of the faith as well as introductions to the Old Testament and the New Testament. They would also be taught to memorize Scripture, as well as the Apostles Creed and a few other similar items.

It should be noted that Nevius and others did not focus on developing leaders who would focus on preaching (Nevius 1885, 36). It took too long, they felt, to produce preachers who could speak correctly and clearly for long periods of time. Also, Korean culture at that time did not include listening to long speeches. Therefore, it was nearly impossible for a preacher to hold listeners’ attention for any significant length of time (Nevius 1885, 37). Instead, the missionaries focused on reproducing systematic Bible studies and mobilizing lay leaders to multiply these Bible studies everywhere.

The Bible study leaders were also taught a few of the basic functions of the church. They were not taught everything all at once so as not to overwhelm them. During each successive training, the leaders would learn a few aspects of church life, with a focus

on implement those aspects well. Matters that the Bible study leaders would learn included evangelizing neighbors, tithing, care, baptism, and election of elders.

Missions and reaching the surrounding villages were also taught. These Bible Study leaders were taught to do the same things they had been shown: bring new Bibles to a new village and read it in community, establish a new Bible Study, and invite the first believers to come with them to the future regional trainings. Each leader would pledge to give a certain number of days and weeks to evangelize neighboring unsaved villages. The motto of the Nevius Method was “maximum natives and minimum missionaries” (Oak 2013, 8). The missionaries aimed for all church members to be trained in and participate in evangelism.

The goal of this regional training is to mature these Bible studies into house churches and to train up the Bible study leaders into house church leaders. The missionaries did not desire to impose a completely organized church, all at once. Through time and training these infant churches were gradually developed to fulfill all the functions of “organized” churches, including having elected elders.

Over time, some of these house churches would decide to build their own church building, but they knew there were no centralized funds available for them to do so. All funds for the church building must come from their own community. Samuel Moffett stated that the "two seed thoughts" of their work, was their “Bible Training” system, and principle of “self-support” (Rhodes 1909, 19).

Maturing Established Leaders: Seminary Education

If an individual had been active in Christian life and ministry for seven years, shown that they were an accomplished soul winner, started and led many Bible Studies, and helped these develop into organized churches, that person was then considered a candidate for seminary education. In order to be accepted, candidates had to be recommended and provide a statement that soul-winning was their main purpose in life and ministry. Each year they had to recommit to soul-winning as their primary objective. If their main focus ever shifted away from soul-winning, they would lose their certification to continue in seminary studies.

The early seminary education was five years long. Three months per year involved residential study, with nine months of actual field work required. The students would take charge of several churches as helpers and local leaders. Their focus was to aid the local churches under their care to continue to develop and expand (Clark 1937).

Effectiveness of the Nevius-Ross Method

The Nevius-Ross method served as the guiding principle for the Korean Protestant church from the 1890s to the 1940s. Although many later applauded Nevius in hindsight, *Nevius was marked as a dangerous radical in his day*. He had spent almost

30 years of missionary work trying to get others to apply his methods, and he was frustrated. Nevius found his ideas were difficult to implement in China, something he attributed to the fact that traditional methods (the “Old System” as he called it) were commonplace among the many missionaries and churches already planted all over China. Once churches had begun in traditional ways, they found it difficult to change, especially when there was foreign assistance involved (Nevius 1885).

However, when Nevius’s plan was implemented in Korea there was no problem of resistance to change, since missions work in Korea was still in its infancy. There were no traditional church structures to compete against the methods. The “Nevius-Ross Method” was simply seen as the way to do ministry.

Compared to the work in Korea, the “Old System” used in China was painstakingly slow. Some 46 years after the first missionaries came there were only about 350 converts. In 1927 (after about 120 years of missionary presence), missionary Robert Speer lamented that the Presbyterians had only 32 self-supporting Presbyterian churches in all of China (Speer and Kerr 1927). After 100 years of ministry, Christians of all Protestant denominations in China numbered about 178,000. This might seem like a significant number, but it pales in comparison to what happened in Korea.

The Nevius-Ross plan was put into practice from the very beginning of the Korean Protestant church. By about 1930 (after just 46 years of Protestant missionary work), Korea already had over 200,000 Christian converts (as compared to only 350 in China after 46 years). *In fact, by that time, the number of Protestant Korean Christians already exceeded the number of Protestant Christians in all of China*, even though the mission effort in China had begun much earlier (Brown 1962, 82, Belke 1999, 12, 13, 14). While the first 100 years of missionary work in China had produced 178,000 Christians, the first 100 years of missionary work in Korea (beginning in 1984) yielded *6,000,000 Christians!* (Belke 1999, 13).

Of course, the church in China later exploded. Yet this happened largely after 1945, when foreign missionaries had left China. This expulsion of missionaries forced Chinese churches to adopt many of the same strategies of self-support, self-propagation and self-governance, simply because there was no longer any other option.

Points for Further Evaluation

Both missionary letters and Presbyterian mission reports from Korea often record how hospitals, schools and other projects gradually took individuals and resources away from evangelism (Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. Korean Mission 1909). As schools and hospitals grew, evangelists and church leaders were often targeted as primary candidates to manage such projects. As evangelists and effective leaders were taken out of the harvest fields and into these positions, growth slowed. More discussion and research are needed to explore how pioneering church movements can continue to

expand—and specifically if those movements in Korea could have continued to expand—while concurrently building the infrastructure of hospitals and educational institutions.

Throughout the early history of the Korean Protestant church movement, it was only foreign missionaries who held the right to baptize new converts. When missionaries were away on furlough, or when missionaries had to fulfill other duties such as teach in local seminaries or schools, they were not able to administer baptism. This unwillingness to confer the authority to baptize seems to have been a significant hindrance to the expansion of the indigenous Korean church. More discussion is needed on the topic of indigenization of local empowerment through the lay priesthood of the believer. Could some of these early practices have influenced the later high power distance between today's church leadership and laity?

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