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The Nevius Methods

A Study and an Appraisal of Indigenous Mission Methods

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The Nevius Methods derive their name from the Rev. Dr. John L. Nevius, a Presbyterian missionary to China. Nevius first arrived in Ningpo, China, as he wrote: "My first home in China was in the city of Ningpo, in the province of Che-Kiang, which place we reached in the spring of 1854."¹ Later (in 1861) Nevius moved to Shantung province, and he became a prominent missionary there.² The Rev. Dr. Charles A. Clark called Nevius a prophet of new mission methods.³ Nevius' views on missions and mission methods first appeared in a series of articles published in the *Chinese Recorder* in 1885, and in book form they were published by the Presbyterian Press in Shanghai in 1886.⁴

¹ John L. Nevius, *Demon Possession and Allied Themes* (New York: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1892), p. iii.

² Kenneth S. Latourette, *A History of Christian Missions in China* (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1929), p. 367.

³ Charles A. Clark, *The Korean Church and the Nevius Methods* (New York: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1930), p. 12.

⁴ John L. Nevius, *The Planting and Development of Missionary Churches* (Philadelphia: Reformed and Presbyterian Publ. Co., 1958), p. 3. Hereafter cited as Nevius, *Pl.*

Nevius' articles and books appealed to many missionaries and aroused great interest. Young missionaries in Korea just beginning their mission work were no exception. They read Nevius' articles and books and wanted to learn more directly from him. In 1890 seven Presbyterian missionaries in Korea invited Nevius to come over to Korea and give some instructions on his mission methods. Nevius and his wife visited Korea and spent two weeks discussing and studying the mission methods with missionaries there.⁵ Missionaries in Korea then adopted Nevius' suggestions as the main mission policy for their work. Nevius' methods became so important in the Korean mission enterprise that new missionaries appointed to work in Korea were required to read Nevius' book and pass an examination on it.⁶

The content of the Nevius Methods has been explained and discussed in many books and articles and I need not explain it here in detail. Missionary Underwood summarized the methods in these words:

First, to let each man "abide in the calling wherein he was found," teaching that each was to be an individual worker for Christ, and to live Christ in his own neighborhood, supporting himself by his trade. Secondly, to develop Church method and machinery only so far as the native Church

⁵ Horace G. Underwood, *The Call of Korea* (New York: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1908), p. 109.

⁶ Bruce F. Hunt, "Preface to the Fourth Edition" of Nevius, *Pl.*, p. 1.

was able to take care of and manage the same. Third, as far as the Church itself was able to provide the men and the means, to set aside those who seemed the better qualified, to do evangelistic work among their neighbors. Fourth, to let the natives provide their own church buildings, which were to be native in architecture and of such style as the local church could afford to put up.⁷

The purpose of the Nevius Methods was to establish self-propagating, self-supporting, and self-governing indigenous churches from the very beginning. For that purpose Nevius emphasized extensive traveling for missionaries, personal evangelism by all believers, systematic Bible studies, strict discipline, education for native leadership, cooperation and union with other church bodies, and noninterference in lawsuits, or any such matters.⁸

The missionaries in Korea carefully followed the suggestions of Nevius and practiced them. Many believe that Korean Protestant work, especially by the Presbyterians, was successful largely because of the adoption of the Nevius Methods. Clark wrote:

Many workers on the field in Korea and members of the board which have backed the work there believe that, from a human standpoint, the Nevius Methods have been one of the most vital factors in the results that have been attained there. . . .⁹

In 1927 Dr. W. M. Baird, a prominent Presbyterian leader who had visited Korea, said:

His [Nevius'] idea had a large influence in determining the methods and principles of our mission during its early years. I be-

lieve that if missionaries faithfully and prayerfully and with united hearts employ these methods, their work will be crowned with success.¹⁰

After the adoption of the Nevius Methods in 1890 the Presbyterian Church in Korea grew rapidly. While in 1890 there were only 100 communicant members, the church grew until there are about 800,000 members now.¹¹ The Protestant work in Korea made a great impact on Korean society, and it made many contributions in education, medicine, arts, sports, and other areas of Korean life.

The Nevius Methods were also practiced in other parts of the world, beginning in Shantung Province of China, where Nevius was a missionary. The lack of lasting success in Shantung can be explained in part by the failure of Nevius' successors to follow through patiently and consistently on the foundations he had laid. It must be conceded that in other parts of the world the methods made their contribution to successful indigenous mission efforts. One example that can be adduced here is the Evangelical Lutheran Church of New Guinea, now numbering over a quarter million members. Bishop John Kuder of the ELCONG testifies that Christian Friedrich Keysser was influenced by the work of Nevius and applied his principles. At the same time, we believe, there were also unique conditions in Korea that helped the success of the methods.

Nevius' emphasis on self-propagation, self-support, and self-government appealed

¹⁰ Quoted in L. George Paik, *The History of Protestant Missions in Korea, 1832—1910* (Pyeng Yang, Korea: Union Christian College Press, 1929), p. 217.

¹¹ Nevius, *Pl.*, p. 1.

⁷ Underwood, *Call of Korea*, pp. 109, 110.

⁸ Nevius, *Pl.*, pp. 19—29, 30—54, 74—87.

⁹ Clark, *Ibid.*, p. 13.

tremendously to the Korean mind. The emphasis on "self" aroused the Korean spirit of independence which had been repressed for so long under the influence of Confucian thought. Confucianism, which became the national religion of Korea in 1392, made some positive contributions to Korean society, such as the high ethical teachings on family and personal relationships, and the teachings on the value of man and dignity of life.¹² However, Confucianism also created political factions and castes which represented differing interpretations of the teachings of Confucius and their application to society. Worst of all, it created the spirit of subjection to China, the mother country of Confucianism. Korean officials, who were practically all Confucianists, believed that China was the world's only civilized country, situated in the center of the world. They also believed that China was a big brother to Korea and the Korean had to respect the big brother according to Confucius' teachings. The Korean government sent annual envoys to China to pay tribute to emperors of China. Although Korea was a sovereign and independent kingdom she subjected herself to China in accord with this Confucian teaching.¹³

When the Korean government was weak and political unrest existed in the latter part of the 19th century, foreign powers infiltrated the government. This resulted in the Sino-Japanese War of 1894 and the Russo-Japanese War of 1904. The factional struggle increased and brought the bloody *coup d'état* of 1884 and the Tonghak rebellion of 1894. In this time of unrest and

political chaos some of the people of Korea sought peace and security in Christianity. Leaders like Kim Okkiun and So Jaipil saw a source of Korean unity and stability in Christianity.¹⁴ The mass of the Korean people looked to Christian missionaries and Christian leaders in their search for a new life. Through the emphasis on "self" in the mission work the people tried to be independent and tried to find values in their cultural heritage and history. When missionaries began to use the long-forgotten Korean alphabet, *hankol*, instead of Chinese characters, as the main means of literary communication, Korean nationalist leaders turned their respect and love to Christian missionaries and churches. This favored position aroused the zeal of Korean Christians to participate in active personal evangelism, that self-propagation which was one of Nevius' essential emphases.

From the very beginning of Presbyterian work self-propagation was accepted as a normal part of Christian living. A candidate for church membership was expected to bring at least one other convert to the church. If any Christian lacked the spirit of self-propagation even his fitness as a candidate for Baptism was doubted.¹⁵ With this evangelistic zeal Korean Christians used their own homes for church services or for Bible studies. They established mission stations of their own and even erected new church buildings. The evangelists and leaders were not paid by missionaries, but they supported themselves by remaining in their own calling as Nevius suggested.

¹⁴ Paik, *Ibid.*, p. 285.

¹² Hyon Sangyun, *Chosen Yuhaksa* (Seoul: Minjung Sokwan, 1954), pp. 4, 5.

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 6—9.

¹⁵ S. A. Moffett, "Policy and Methods in the Evangelization of Korea," *The Korea Mission Field* (Nov. 1904), p. 196.

Concerning the "abiding in the old calling" Nevius wrote:

The command of I Cor. vii:20: "Let each man abide in that calling wherein he was called," is repeated in a different form in the twenty-fourth verse of the same chapter, "Brethren, let each man, wherein he was called, therein abide with God." This Apostolic injunction, we are further told, was ordained "for all the Churches."

It teaches most emphatically that Christianity should not disturb the social relations of its adherents, but requires them to be content with their lot, and to illustrate the Gospel in the spheres of life in which they are called. How many of us have given these passages of Scripture that weight of authority which they deserve? How many of us have realized that in taking untried Christians out of the positions in which God has called them and making evangelists of them, we may be literally, though unconsciously, opposing a divine purpose? Such a course directly tends to unsettle the minds of new converts and excites the very feelings of restlessness and discontent which this command seems specially designed to prevent.¹⁶

Advocating this "new mission method" of self-propagation, Nevius attacked the "old method" of mission work which included hiring native agents and paying for their evangelistic work. Nevius raised the following objections:

1. Making paid agents of new converts affects injuriously the stations with which they are connected.
2. Making a paid agent of a new convert often proves an injury to him personally.
3. The Old System makes it difficult to judge between the true and false,

whether as preachers or as church members.

4. The Employment System tends to excite a mercenary spirit and to increase the number of mercenary Christians.
5. The Employment System tends to stop the voluntary work of unpaid agents.
6. The Old System tends to lower the character and lessen the influence of the missionary enterprise, both in the eyes of foreigners and natives.¹⁷

However, Nevius did not say that it was wrong to call professional church workers and ministers. He said:

This passage I Cor. vii:20 does not determine whether a man is to abide where he is called permanently or only temporarily. This is a question to be left to the future. Special providences afterward may indicate a further and different divine purpose no less clearly. So Paul did not hesitate, when the proper time had come, to remove Timothy from Lystra, and there was no inconsistency in his doing so.¹⁸

Not long after they began their mission work missionaries in Korea called consecrated young men and trained them as professional ministers and evangelists.

Together with self-propagation Nevius emphasized self-support, and missionaries in Korea practiced it. The first ordained Protestant clerical missionary in Korea, Horace G. Underwood, wrote:

It was after our second trip to Sorai that a company of Christians from this village waited on us in the spring of 1890, and, telling about the progress of their work, said that they were so numerous that they needed a chapel, and asked whether the Mission would not provide one for them. Not being acquainted with the fact that

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 12—18.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

¹⁶ Nevius, *Pl.*, p. 19.

this was customary in some other lands, I replied at once, "Why, no. You will build your own chapel," and when they, in surprise, expressed their inability to do so, I replied, "You have plenty of trees, stones, straw, as materials for tiles and bricks, if you want to use them, and if you will only let me know when you are ready to build your chapel, I will gladly help by coming down to assist in cutting down the trees, and in the erection."¹⁹

If the converts were unable to erect a church building, Nevius suggested that they have Sunday services and Bible studies at the home of a Christian. Referring to his work in Shantung, Nevius wrote:

On the main points of mission policy we are happily nearly of one mind. All these stations provide their own houses of worship; none of them are cared for by a resident paid preacher; but in each of them one or more of its own members voluntarily conducts services on Sunday, and attends to the general spiritual interests of the little company of believers with whom he is connected, under the superintendence of the foreign missionary in charge. In all these stations great prominence is given to catechetical teaching, and also to affording special instruction to the leaders, with a view to their teaching others. These form the distinguishing features of our work, and our main points of agreement.²⁰

The practice of self-support was noticed by Secretary A. J. Brown of the Board of Foreign Missions of the Presbyterian Church in the United States after visiting Korea. Brown reported:

In proportion to the results achieved, less money has been spent in developing the native work than in any other field in the world. From the beginning, Korean Chris-

tians have not been allowed to expect paid employment from the missionaries, nor have they received it, except in comparatively few and clearly exceptional cases. They have been taught to live the Gospel, and to spread it without pay among their countrymen.²¹

The natural outgrowth from the emphasis on self-propagation and self-support was self-government. However, self-government presented the most serious difficulties in Korean mission work. The sense of self-government was something Korean people had lacked for a long time. Korea then was mainly rural, even as it is now. Feudal lords and bureaucrats from the same family clans and social classes ruled the country. The majority of the people were ignorant about the government and its administration. Early missionaries traveled widely and opened many important mission stations. When the people were converted the missionaries encouraged them to build their own churches and to govern themselves. However, the self-government of the Korean churches was not developed as thoroughly as self-propagation and self-support. Koreans were not well trained to govern their churches and own affairs. Brown reported in 1902:

From the viewpoint of ecclesiastical organization the Korean church is an anomaly. In some other fields churches have formally organized as soon as there were a very few Christians. In Korea, on the contrary, ecclesiastical organization has been placed last. Not only is there no Presbytery, the missionaries all retaining their membership in their home Pres-

¹⁹ Underwood, *Call of Korea*, pp. 108, 109.

²⁰ Nevius, *Pl.*, p. 31.

²¹ Arthur J. Brown, *Report of a Visitation of the Korea Mission of the Presbyterian Board of Foreign Missions* (New York: The Board of Foreign Missions of the Presbyterian Church in the U. S. A., 1902), p. 9.

byteries, but there is not an ordained native Protestant minister in all Korea.²²

Efforts at self-government were made in the 1890s, but they did not materialize until 1907, when the Presbyterian Church in Korea was organized.²³

One of the important causes of the inability to form a self-governing church was the lack of leaders among Koreans. This prompted the education of Korean young people for leadership. As Theodore Soltau wrote, the main objective of Christian education in Korea was to prepare young people "for positions of leadership within the church, so that the latter may become all the sooner a self-governing and self-propagating body."²⁴ Nevius strongly emphasized the training of young converts "before they are advanced to positions of prominence and responsibility."²⁵ However, Nevius' method of training for "positions of prominence and responsibility" was not through theological or academic schooling. Nevius applied his favorite Bible passage, "Let every man abide in the calling wherein he was called," also to the education of the leaders. He wrote:

Nothing else can supply the place of God's providential training in the school of ordinary life and practical experience.

This training includes not only study, but work, trial, and perhaps suffering. It should be such as will fit a man to endure hardness as a good soldier of Jesus Christ. A man may be carried through a course of theological training, freed from the

²² *Ibid.*, p. 13.

²³ Paik, *Ibid.*, pp. 292—324.

²⁴ Theodore S. Soltau, *Korea, the Hermit Nation, and Its Response to Christianity* (London: World Dominion Press, 1932), p. 47.

²⁵ Nevius, *Pl.*, p. 27.

struggle of ordinary life by having all his wants provided for, and yet get very little of this disciplinary training which is so important. We may think we are helping a man by relieving him of burdens when we are in fact injuring him by interfering with this training.²⁶

The time-consuming nature of the training which kept students in daily tasks of living and "calling" Nevius defended in these words:

After the Apostle Paul was chosen and called, he was kept waiting nearly ten years before he was commanded to enter upon his special life work. Who will say that those ten years were not as important as any other period of his life, or that his after usefulness did not depend on them? Timothy also, by years of active and successful labor at home, obtained a good report of the brethren in Lystra and Derbe, after which he accompanied Paul as a helper; and when many years of proving and training were passed, he became Paul's colaborer and successor in the work of evangelization and the founding of churches.²⁷

The missionaries in Korea accepted the principle of Nevius in the training of leaders for the indigenous church, but the missionaries did not follow the suggestions of Nevius exactly. The missionaries opened fine educational institutions and developed systematic training in the context of modern education. In 1907 the Union Christian College was opened in Pyongyang, and in 1915 the Chosen Christian College was opened in Seoul. Students in these schools did not remain in their "old calling" but stayed in school dormitories or in boarding houses near schools. Some of the finest

²⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 27, 28.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

buildings in these mission schools are early dormitory buildings.

The success of the Protestant work in Korea is, therefore, not due in its entirety to the Nevius Methods, but rather to their adaptation to the Korean situation. Any method of mission work dare not be defended on the basis of principle alone but must also be judged with relationship to results. For the good result of mission work any principle must be flexible and adaptable to given situations. Fortunately Nevius Methods were adapted and adjusted by Korean missionaries. The methods also appealed to the Korean people, and this helped the success of the Protestant work. The emphasis on the indigenous church by Nevius was never intended to forbid the use of foreign money in paying native workers for effective mission work.²⁸

I occasionally encounter friends who misunderstand the indigenous church methods of Nevius. They are under the impression that indigenous church methods mean that the work depends entirely on the support of native people while the missionaries refuse to have anything to do with the economic life of native people. But Nevius never failed to include in his mission method the improvement of the temporal as well as the spiritual condition of native people. When Nevius arrived in Shantung he noticed the poverty of the Chinese people, and he wanted to help their economic life. There he introduced new fruit trees to the province and developed good orchards. Clark wrote: "Most of the fruit orchards of Shantung Province today are lineal descendants of the trees in that orchard (Nevius' orchard), and living conditions in the province are much

happier because of his efforts."²⁹ Nevius was always ready to lend helping hands to his fellow Christians in their time of need and thus encourage them to develop self-support. In 1877 and 1878, when Shantung Province was struck with a great famine, Nevius and other missionaries sought means of assistance, introducing farm improvements, bringing in new seeds and new fruits.³⁰ Missionaries in Korea also followed Nevius' example. The Korean missionaries adopted the principle of self-support, but when financial aid for Korean workers was necessary the missionaries did not hesitate to pay them, as Brown reported:

The missionaries do not go to the extremes in their refusal to pay native helpers, but use them whenever the interests of the work seem to make it necessary. Twenty evangelists, nine colporteurs and nine Bible women in all are paid this year (1902) from Mission funds.³¹

Like Nevius in Shantung, early Korean missionaries also tried to help Korean farmers. The missionary W. L. Swallen helped Korean farmers to raise apples, S. A. Moffett had a farm which demonstrated new methods, and W. B. Hunt had a dairy farm and even taught some Koreans to drink milk.³²

Christian missionaries are not divorced from the welfare and ordinary life of their fellow Christians in mission fields. Christian missionaries should always struggle to win the confidence and trust of the people. To do so the missionaries must express

²⁹ Ibid., p. 32.

³⁰ Latourette, *A History of Christian Missions in China* (New York: Macmillan, 1929), pp. 464, 465.

³¹ Brown, p. 9.

³² Nevius, *Pl.*, p. 3.

²⁸ Clark, *Ibid.*, p. 16.

their love and sympathy to their fellowmen. We are also commanded by God to love our brethren not only with words and speech but in deeds and truth. When we see our brethren in need we should not close our "hearts of compassion."³³ Bishop F. E. Lesslie Newbigin of the Church of South India also recognizes the necessity of economic help, providing jobs, introducing better methods of farming, etc., if the self-supporting indigenous church is to be successful.³⁴

The principles of self-propagation, self-support, and self-government must be kept and practiced in all mission fields. However, a principle exists to aid mission work. Mission work can never be used to defend a principle. The principle must be adapted and adjusted to the conditions in the mission fields. The Nevius Methods are not an exception.

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- . ³³ 1 John 3:14-18.
- ³⁴ He expressed this view in a private conversation when he was at Concordia Seminary in St. Louis in 1960.
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