

# NEVIUS MISSION STRATEGY

By Shp. Samuel Lee

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*“Now I commit you to God and to the word of his grace, ...” (Ac20:32)*

## **I. Introduction**

A Korean missionary theologian, Dr. Hojin Jeon, analyzed how the Korean church has had unprecedented growth in world-wide church history. Of course, it was the work of the Holy Spirit but there were several outward causes as well. However, Dr. Jeon thinks it is largely because early American missionaries to Korea adopted the American missionary John L. Nevius' three-self formula—the 'three selves' of self-supporting, self-propagating and self-governing churches. Through this formula, Korea was changed from a closed nation to a nation open to foreigners. The Korean church history expert, Dr. Nakchoon Baik, also has the same opinion. The American Presbyterian missionary, Floyd E. Hamilton, (Korean name—Ham Ildon) also wrote in a missionary magazine called World Dominion that the secret of the growing Korean church was the adoption of Nevius' theory and its application of it. In addition, the general secretary of the Presbyterian USA (Northern) Overseas Missions and world-wide evangelist Dr. Robert Spear wrote, “Dr. Nevius is known world-wide as insisting on person-to-person evangelization. He will be remembered as one who changed mission into the simplest New Testament form.” Many other people have attributed the fast growth of the Korean church (which now consists of one-fourth of the entire Korean population) to Nevius' mission strategy. Actually, Nevius' mission strategy came from St. Paul's mission method, thus Nevius' method is quite biblical.

## **II. Nevius' Life and Missiology**

John L. Nevius was born on March 4, 1829 in New Jersey, USA, and came from a Dutch ancestry. He graduated high school from Obid Academy and entered Union University at the age of 16. Following graduation from the university in 1850, he then majored in theology at Princeton University. As a young man of 24 years-old he applied to the Presbyterian Church USA Overseas Mission Board in 1853 in order to be a missionary abroad. In the same year, he married Helen Sanford from New York and they were appointed as missionaries to China. The China Mission of the Presbyterian Church sent Nevius to Nangpo, which was exactly what he wished for. When he arrived in China, he worked near the Yangja River and in the Sandong Province and went to heaven after 40 years of missionary life. We can say Dr. Nevius' faith and theology is a mix of reformed theology and evangelistic faith.

At the beginning of his ministry in China, Nevius was not successful with the first method of missionary work that he used. He called this first method an "old method" as compared to the new method he used later, in which he applied the three-self formula. What was the "old method" that he and many other American missionaries had practiced for many years? The missionary would employ native evangelists, paying a salary. He did the witnessing and preaching. This allowed the missionary to send regular reports to his sending Mission Board. This method had several unreasonable aspects. The foreign mission board demanded results right

away. But the foreign missionaries didn't know how to speak the native language of the mission field. They could produce visible fruit right away only by using such means.

Anyway, Nevius returned to the U.S. for his sabbatical year full of disappointment. Then he learned about the "three-self" formula on how to build a native church. It was introduced by an English missionary Henry Venn and an American missionary Rufus Anderson. They used St. Paul's missionary methods as a basis for their mission strategy.

There was some historical background which casts light on why these two men devised this mission strategy. William Carey had developed the method of using a mission station as a base for approaching the indigenous people. In a mission station there was a missionaries' compound, a church and a westernized school and even printing facilities. Missionaries lived on these compounds. They helped new converts to leave their own culture and adopt western culture. As a result, converts began to depend on western missionaries socially, culturally and economically. They had no chance to exercise their own leadership among the nationals in their country. This did not seem to be really effective in planting the gospel in another culture.

Furthermore, from the beginning of the 19th century, China faced severe economic problems. Christians who were employed by missionaries received much material assistance. This produced 'rice Christians' (Nevius' expression). Rice Christians were those who lived a life of faith when they received material benefits, but left the church when they did not receive material benefits. In short, rice Christians were opportunists.

Against this background, Henry Venn and Rufus Anderson pioneered a new church planting strategy. They recognized the problems of the mission station approach. They wanted to build an indigenous church. The core of the idea of planting an indigenous church was based on the three-self formula—a self-supporting, self-propagating and self-governing church. Here, self-supporting means that an indigenous church should be run using their own finances, without depending on missionaries' material help. Self-propagating means that nationals should take responsibility of preaching the gospel to their own people. Missionaries are there to teach them and to back them up. Self-governing means that the national church should be run by national leadership, not by missionary leadership.

The three-self formula is well recognized now, but at that time it was a revolutionary idea. At that time, when the Church of England pioneered Africa they did not appoint priests among African natives. It was unthinkable to appoint African priests who had no education and no Christian background. However, through Henry Venn's influence, African priests were established. Through Anderson's influence, the idea of financially supporting a native church 100% began to be changed. Nowadays, this three-self formula is followed on many mission fields where healthy, growing indigenous churches are planted.

When Nevius learned about this three-self formula, he could see clearly why his ministry in China was not successful. He threw his old method away. He went back to China with new vision and applied this new three-self formula in his mission work in the Shandong Province. The result was that he could now see fruit from his labor. He began to write in the Chinese Recorder

(a missionary magazine) about his newly discovered mission strategy. Later, collecting all his articles, he wrote a book entitled The Planting and Development of Missionary Churches.

According to Nevius, natives must be changed through thorough Bible study. For this, missionaries in a foreign country must master the native language and understand the culture of that country (emphasis on language study). In addition, native leaders must be established as the ultimate main characters for revival of fellow natives. In order to raise native leaders, missionaries must use native educational methods.

### **III. The Nevius' Principle in Korean Missions**

In the 32nd year of Nevius' missionary life in China, Missionary Horace G. Underwood was sent from the American Presbyterian Church to Korea on April 5, 1885. He had been waiting for the Korean government to recall the law of prohibiting foreign missions. During this waiting period, he learned Korean and was trying to figure out how to evangelize Korea and plant churches. Once in Korea, he happened to read the mission strategy of Nevius. He was fascinated by it and invited Nevius to Korea to give a lecture on this subject to himself and the young American missionaries. At that time, the American missionaries in Korea were in their 20's. They needed the counseling of a well-experienced senior missionary. After five years, in 1890, Nevius came to Seoul through Inchon right before his return to the U.S. for his sabbatical. He stayed there for ten days discussing his new mission strategy. Underwood changed Nevius' strategy into a somewhat more acceptable strategy for the Korean environment and adopted it as a mission strategy for the Korean Presbyterian Church.

#### **1. The Revised Korean Nevius Mission Strategy**

##### **(1) The principle of self-support**

Underwood summarized the entire Nevius' mission strategy into four parts. First, when a missionary leads one person to Christ, he should raise him until he begins to evangelize his neighbors (1:1 disciple-making ministry, self-propagating). Second, the missionary should help the new believers to organize and manage the church within their own ability (self-governing). Third, when he finds proper evangelists or persons who can support the church financially, to raise them as church leaders (leadership training, self-support). Fourth, the church building should be built and financed by the national members. Its style must follow a traditional Korean-style building structure. (self-supporting).

Underwood began to practice this revised Nevius method. He wrote about the situation of pioneering the Korean church as follows: "In the Spring of 1890, on our second mission journey, the Sorae village Christians were waiting for us. They reported about their work and emphasized the necessity of building their church. They asked for our financial support and explained their impossible situation. I answered them, "If you want, you can build your own church. You have enough wood, stones and building materials. If you begin to build it, I will be glad to help you to cut the wood and build the pillars."

From the very beginning, the Korean churches were founded with the self-support principle. Dr. Nakchoon Baik also wrote, "The Sorae and Inchon churches were built by Korean

Christians.” Most Korean churches were built by Korean Christians without any foreign assistance. A report written on the 25-year anniversary of the beginning of mission work in Korea said that there were 1052 full-time pastors/evangelists serving the church in Korea. 94% were supported by the Korean church. There were 800 church buildings, and only 20 were built with foreign help. 780 were built by Korean Christians.

The self-supporting principle was also applied in building hospitals, schools and in distributing Bibles. Foreign help was used at a rate of only one out of 20 situations. Dr. Nakchoon Baik reported that foreign missions let Koreans build elementary schools as well as secondary education schools themselves. From the beginning the most emphasized motto was, “The self-supporting principle should be the foundation of the Korean church.” Self-support did not only pertain to financial aspects but also in preaching the gospel. Nevius criticized the old method of hiring native evangelists saying that the result of this old method was to produce rice Christians.

#### (2) The self-propagating principle

The self-propagating principle of the Korean church was deeply related to the self-supporting principle. First, believers established a church and evangelized other people, and in turn, these people established another pioneering church. There were many kinds of self-propagating methods, such as, inviting people to Bible study (fishing), group Bible studies, visiting dormitories, distributing manuscripts, Summer conferences, and Bible schools. The Presbyterian Church emphasized self-support in building churches, education and medical care. But what they thought was most important was the self-propagating principle in preaching the gospel. The main characteristic of the Korean church was that all the churches and Christians felt that every Christian should be an evangelist. Every Christian should preach the gospel.

#### (3) The self-governing principle

The self-governing principle is also deeply related to the self-supporting and self-propagating principles. In some sense, it is the product of the self-supporting and self-propagating principles. From the very beginning, Korean churches were run by Korean Christians. According to Nevius' method, national leaders should be appointed or elected by the church and these native lay leaders should run the church. He emphasized that native Christians should be the ones who bring true spiritual revolution in the setting of their own culture. Therefore, Nevius himself selected natives, not missionaries, to be church leaders. At the beginning, the leaders were laymen and were not supported by the church financially. When the size of churches grew, some evangelists were paid by churches. In 1904, at the nation-wide Pyongyang great revival meeting, the Presbyterian General Assembly was established. This assembly consisted of 40 Korean elders and 38 American missionaries. Koreans already made up more than half of the Assembly.

#### (4) Systematic Bible study

Nevius emphasized Bible study the most. In contrast to modern days, most people of that time were farmers. So they usually met during the middle of the week and had evening Bible studies. All Christians thought that learning the Bible was their duty. Sometimes they had regional Bible schools. In these Bible schools there were not many messages but rather, Bible lectures. In this way, they had intensive Bible studies.

Nevius' self-supporting principle is more related to Bible study than to financial aspects. One verse he held on to was Acts 20:32, "Now I commit you to God and to the word of his grace..." This was Paul's farewell message to the Ephesian elders. Through this verse, Nevius built the spiritual foundation of his self-supporting principle. Through this principle, from the beginning, the Korean church had a firm foundation of reading the Bible. The evangelist John R. Mott made an interesting comment about the emphasis of Bible reading in the Korean church. He said, "If all the published Bibles are destroyed by a natural disaster, we have nothing to worry about. We can be fully restored simply by calling some Korean Church Christians and letting them recite the Bible by memory."

The pioneering Korean Christians and churches had no hint of doubt or criticism about the authority or inspiration of the Bible. In this sense, Korean Christianity was totally different from Chinese or Japanese Christianity where liberal theology prevailed from the very beginning. Dr. Allen Clark said that the secret of success in Nevius' three-self formula was in Bible study: "Therefore I think the secret of success in the Korean church is in their Bible study. If Christians have faithful Bible study we don't have to worry about the three-self formula. The Bible itself will raise them up. Maybe someone may ask me, 'How, then, can we find people who want to study the Bible in this way?' My answer is simple, 'Just open the Bible; then sheep will swarm in.'"

The second spiritual foundation of the three-self formula next to Bible study was faith in the work of the Holy Spirit. Nevius had simple faith like that of St. Paul—that missionaries should commit their young sheep to the word of God and to the Holy Spirit. He firmly believed that the Holy Spirit called all kinds of church workers, and raised and protected them. He said, "We should with faith and confidence commit young converts 'to the Lord on whom they have believed.' This was the course unhesitatingly adopted by Apostle Paul, and I know of no reason why we should not follow his example. Our Savior has promised to always be with His people unto the end of the world, and to send the blessed Spirit of all grace to abide with them forever. He will give them by conferring special graces of His Spirit, prophets, teachers, exhorters, helps, and governments, as they are required." (The Planting and Development of Missionary Churches, Nevius, p.38) Nevius could preach the three-self formula because he believed in the work of the Holy Spirit in the churches.

Nevius' self-governing principle is drawn from the Bible. Many people of that time thought if they trained native Christians and established them as leaders, the church might be weakened or destroyed. Nevius said to abandon such worries and instead boldly commit churches to the native Christians. He commented, "When Paul departed from the places he had made converts, he often left Timothy or Silas or others in charge to spend days or weeks in instructing, exhorting, and comforting them, and also sent special messengers to individual churches to correct abuses and furnish help as each occasion required. In the book of Acts, we read of no case in which he left someone to stay in the new churches as a permanent resident minister. I believe that in failing to follow this apostolic example we have often checked the development of individual gifts, and self-reliance, and aggressive power in our churches, making them weak, inefficient and dependent from the beginning." (Nevius, p.39)

(5) Language training

Since Nevius emphasized preaching the word of God through natives, intensive language training of missionaries was very necessary.

#### (6) Laymen movement

From the beginning, Nevius taught missionaries to establish churches where laymen, not ordained ministers, were very active in the church. However, he did not deny the importance of pastors nor their authority. The revolutionary theologian, Barbink also agreed with Nevius' three-self formula and said that growth of churches happen where many laymen work voluntarily, not where many paid evangelists work. He said the best example of this is in India and Korea.

In addition to these six aspects of the revised Korean Nevius mission strategy, Nevius' mission strategy includes the importance of strict rules based on the Bible, co-working with other churches, legal problems, the principle of unnecessary involvement, and cooperation between missionaries.

The success of Nevius' mission strategy in Korea was evident. In Missionary N.C. Whittmore's report written on February 23, 1900, we see his thankfulness toward the results of the winter Bible classes and how successfully Nevius' method had been applied. On August 10, 1906, Missionary C.A. Keams' reported on the success of Samuel H. Moffet's ministry in Pyongyang by putting Nevius' method into practice. In this way Moffat became a great missionary in Korea. Dr. Sungtae Park said the main reason why Nevius' mission strategy was so successful in Korea was because of the missionaries' confidence in Nevius' method as well as Korean Christians' voluntary and positive participation.

### **IV. Nevius' Mission Strategy and UBF Mission in the 21st Century**

#### (1) General thoughts

1. We must devote ourselves to systematic and organized Bible studies. While I was studying about Nevius' mission strategy I realized how blessed we have been to have ancestors in UBF who devoted themselves to Bible study from the pioneering stages. We must continue this heritage. We must continue to study the 66 books of the Bible so that we may see "the woods and the forests" of the Bible with spiritual insight.
2. It is a great blessing that our ministry has been a laymen ministry from the very beginning. If we keep our campus disciple-making and self-supporting lay men ministry we will stay on the right track.
3. Among the principles of the three-self formula, we have kept the self-supporting principle very well. God granted a self-supporting spirit to our ancestors in the ministry through thorough Bible study. It is a great blessing to inherit this self-supporting spirit as a spiritual heritage from them. I wish that not only our missionaries, but also our native sheep in the mission fields may also have this self-supporting spirit.
4. In UBF, the self-propagating is also practiced very well.

The UBF ministry has reached its 40th anniversary. This is the time we should seriously study Nevius' self-governing principle. We must establish native leadership. Not only should we study the self-governing principle, but put it into practice. Otherwise, our world mission ministry might be end up as a first-generation missionary generation only. However, it is encouraging to see that Pastor. Ron Ward in Chicago is delivering Sunday messages as well as native shepherds

in Cologne and Bonn in Germany. This is the proof that God is fulfilling Nevius' self-governing principle. Pastor Ron Ward not only delivers the message on Sundays but also undertakes responsibility for all of Chicago UBF. This is the best example of self-governing in our ministry. Also in America many chapters have been pioneered by American house-churches and half of the UBF staff consist of American shepherds.

(2) Suggestions for establishing the self-governing principle in our UBF mission field—a study of practical examples

If we want to see our UBF work continue on to many generations, we must boldly exercise Nevius' self-governing principle. I have a few suggestions on doing this through showing several practical examples.

*Case A:* One missionary gave charge of his mission field to a native shepherd whom he had raised. He himself went to pioneer a new chapter. Of course, he maintains a spiritual relationship with the native shepherd, but he gave all the authority and responsibility of the ministry to the native shepherd. By doing this, he became a good example.

*Case B:* A native shepherd is the director of one chapter. There are two native house churches and two missionary house churches. Native shepherds are feeding sheep very positively. Missionaries have had longer lives of faith and are more mature spiritually than the native shepherds, but this has not become a problem because the missionaries pray that the native leaders may grow in the mission field. This case is very ideal.

*Case C:* There are 30 times more natives than Korean missionaries. The number of house churches among the natives are also ten times more than the house churches of the Korean missionaries. When they form a spiritual community, it is easy for the natives to stop growing. This ministry must train the native leaders and send them to pioneer other chapters.

*Case D:* Korean missionaries number more than native shepherds. It is easy to have a Korean atmosphere and the natives might feel uncomfortable. The missionaries must raise the native leaders and send out missionaries to pioneer other chapters just as St. Paul did, so that native shepherds may grow as leaders.

*Case E:* When three missionary house churches worked together, there was a great work of God. But as the number of missionaries increased, the work of God became stagnant. Now the number of missionaries to natives is 5.5:4.5.

*Case F:* There is the problem of second-gens who are born in the native land and are like native shepherds. We must plant a missionary identity in the second-gen's hearts. Even when they become college students and shepherds, we must plant a clear identity in their hearts as missionaries. Even though both their culture and language are same as that of native shepherds, second-gens need clear identity as missionaries so that they can be shepherds and missionaries at the same time. When they are ready, they can pioneer a chapter and become the director.

*Case G:* There is a need to establish one power station (headquarters) where many missionaries can gather together and co-work together. In most cases, one headquarters chapter is enough for one nation.

### (3) Preparation for practicing these suggestions

First, missionaries must have a clear identity as missionaries from the very beginning of their ministries. Through constant spiritual struggle, they must empty themselves and only seek God's glory. We must consider pioneering missionaries most precious and have a sense of history.

Missionaries must pioneer the Christian community with all their hearts and the strength of their youth. However, when they establish native shepherds and hand over responsibility to them, their identity may be shaken. That is why missionaries should establish their identity as a missionary from the very beginning of their ministry. Missionaries must go through the following three stages.

First, the stage of being parents. In the pioneering stage, natives are like infants and missionaries are like spiritual parents. Being a parent means to give necessary help to their children. They carry out the fishing, preaching, raising, training, delivering messages and serving the Sunday worship services. However, in doing all this they must find potential native leaders and raise them as leaders. They need a blue print to raise native shepherds from the beginning. To work with a blueprint or not makes a big difference in one's ministry. Without a blueprint, the mission field cannot grow as a native church.

Second, the co-working stage. When native shepherds grow, missionaries must change their position from being parents to being coworkers of the native shepherds. This means having an equal relationship with them. Each portion of mission must be the same for both missionaries and native shepherds, and they have to participate in the decision-making process equally. This is also a time of struggle. Being a parent is difficult, but it makes one feel meaningful. If missionaries try to remain as parents, problems will arise. Even if they devote their entire lives in the mission field, if they have an awkward relationship with natives, they cannot glorify God. It is not graceful and hurts themselves and others. Even if it is painful, we must raise native shepherds.

Third, the stage of being a sponsor. Missionaries have raised the native shepherds, so they know all about their weaknesses and spiritual immaturity. But they have to obey the native shepherd whom they have raised. They must draw back and be a sponsor. The earlier the better. They must not miss the right timing. This is hard to do with joy unless one has true humility and a mature heart. This is the true life as a missionary.

Missionaries must realize it is sin to take away work that the native can do. They must hand over the work to the natives. They must draw back and do something natives cannot do, such as teaching the Bible, Bible study, or publishing books. This is their chance to give good influence. The best way to do this is to pioneer a new region as St. Paul did. It is good to pioneer a different chapter in a region that has the same language.

St. Paul pioneered Asia Minor and Europe through his first to third mission journeys during his 20 years of missionary life. He established native leaders and then left those places. Even in a Roman prison, he laid the foundation of pioneering Rome and went to heaven as a martyr. At the end of his life, all he had was a scroll of Scripture. He lived as a self-supporting missionary. The model of his life of faith was Jesus who gave his own life unconditionally for sinners. He wanted to know Christ, imitate him and experience him.

For the last 32 years of my shepherd life, I have received much grace, especially when I had to move my pasture three times. Shepherd life is all about the shepherd and sheep relationship. But when one moves his pasture, it takes five years to establish a new shepherd and sheep relationship. One has to start all over again. Six years after I poured out my strength for the Hangyang Chapter, the work of the Holy Spirit began to burn there. Then I received the direction to move to Chongro Chapter. After one week of prayer, I received one word of God, “Hallowed be your name” and was able to obey. However, I died to myself. Eleven years later, at the age of 50, when I had to go back to the Hanyang Chapter because of storms of life blowing there, I died to myself once again. God gave me Mark 10:45, “...to give his life as ransom for many.” So I obeyed saying, “Your will be done...” I was like Jacob and had so many weaknesses that God could not use me unless he trained me by moving three times. Through this training, I could die to myself and empty myself in God. I believe all UBF missionaries have had a similar experience.

Missionaries are not pastors but pioneers. They pioneer churches and establish native leaders and then pioneer again. Before beginning a new pioneering work, it is good idea for missionaries to stay in Korea or the mission headquarters for one year and recharge in order to have new spirit. In our ministry, we must establish this kind of system for missionaries. If we want to do missionary work, our life purpose must be pure. As in the Lord’s prayer, our first prayer topic should be “Hallowed be your name, your kingdom come.”

## **V. Conclusion**

God used the lives of Dr. Samuel Lee and Mother Barry and established UBF as a campus disciple-making ministry, and has raised self-supporting missionaries. God called so many of his people and used them for his world redemptive history. When we look back at God’s history, We see that God raised up and used a national leader, Dr. Samuel Lee, to pioneer and build up UBF in Korea. Mother Barry was an American missionary, but she did not try to run the ministry. She co-worked with Dr. Samuel Lee and prayed for him. God established him as a leader in UBF and in Korea. In this way, God blessed UBF so much. We could say that our ancestors of faith were the ones who put Nevius' three-self formula into practice.

I pray that God may send 100,000 missionaries to 233 nations by the year 2041. May God's kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven. May God use UBF as his instrument for thorough Bible study and campus disciple-making and raise self-supporting missionaries for world mission until our Lord Jesus comes. For this, we must put Nevius' three-self formula—self-supporting, self-propagating and self-governing—into practice on the mission fields of the world.

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