

Bringing the Gospel to an Entire Country in Two Weeks

BY DEREK SEIPP

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In 1890 Korea was still an unreached peninsula, with only about 100 Christians. A small group of missionaries had heard about John Nevius' radical ideas, and invited him to come and teach them about his untraditional church-planting and evangelism methods. The two-week trip changed history, and Nevius' methods became the guiding principles for Korean missions for the next 50 years. In fact, many church historians believe Nevius' two-week trip to Korea could have been the two most influential weeks in the history of modern missions.

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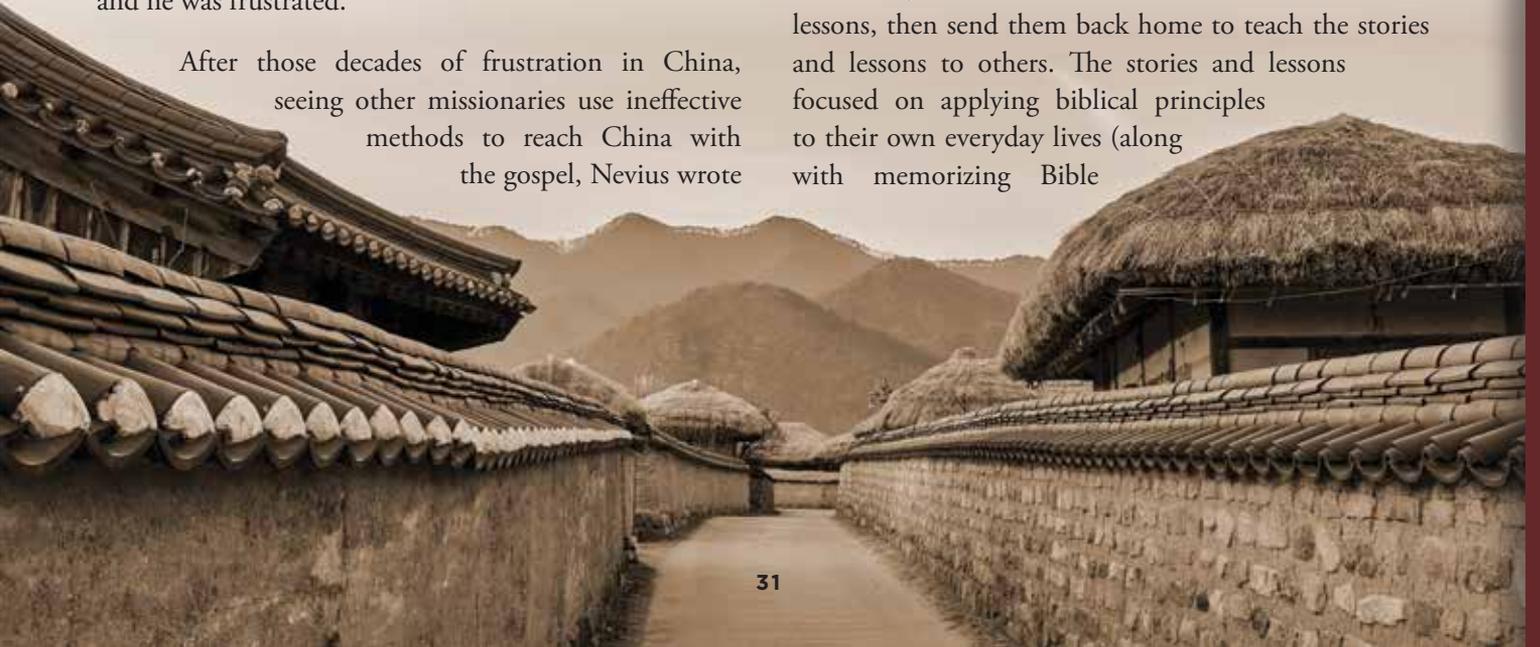
Nevius parted with his peers by insisting that local workers be self-supported, self-led and self-propagating from the very beginning. Although many later applauded Nevius in hindsight, Nevius was marked as a dangerous radical in his day. He had spent almost 30 years of missionary work trying to get others to apply his methods, and he was frustrated.

After those decades of frustration in China, seeing other missionaries use ineffective methods to reach China with the gospel, Nevius wrote

several articles about his methods. They were published in 1890 in the missionary journal *Chinese Recorder* (Shanghai, China). In 1899, they were republished under the title *Planting and Development of Missionary Churches*.

One of his radical ideas was that “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.” Additionally, he did not want to develop leaders who would focus on preaching. It took too long, he felt, to produce preachers who could speak correctly and clearly for long periods of time and 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. So Nevius focused instead on reproducing teachers—but these teachers were different from the traditional view of a teacher.

Many consider Nevius' method for systematic Bible study to be his most important principle, especially the way he mobilized lay leaders to multiply these Bible studies everywhere. He would bring believers to a location for a few weeks, teach them a series of Bible stories and basic lessons, then send them back home to teach the stories and lessons to others. The stories and lessons focused on applying biblical principles to their own everyday lives (along with memorizing Bible



verses, memorizing of the Apostles' Creed and a few other items).

These individuals (teachers, or more accurately, disciples) would go back to the *sarangbang*—the “welcoming room” of their houses—and invite their friends over. They would retell the stories and lessons to others, and get them to memorize the same things. Anyone attending the *sarangbang* lesson was expected to go and share these Bible stories and lessons with their neighbors as well. Everyone was a learner, and at the same time everyone was expected to be a teacher, immediately passing on to others what they had learned.

Nevius didn't focus on planting churches in the traditional sense. He focused on multiplying his discipleship training, in which he brought people together and taught them the stories which they were to go and multiply with others.

Nevius found his ideas difficult to implement in China. He attributed this difficulty 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.

However, when Nevius went to Korea, he didn't face that problem, as the work in Korea was still in its infancy. There weren't any traditional structures to compete against his methods. The “Nevius Method” was simply seen as the way to do ministry. He only spent two weeks there, training others. Unfortunately, just three short years later, Nevius died; and he never knew the impact his two-week trip had on the peninsula.

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Comparing the work in Korea to the work in China, the “Old System” 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. After 100 years of ministry, Christians of all denominations in China numbered about 178,000. This might seem like a significant number, but compare it to what happened in Korea.

Korea, where the Nevius Plan was put into practice almost from the very beginning, saw a dramatic difference. By about 1930 (after just 46 years of Protestant missionary work, Korea had over 200,000 Christian converts (as compared to 350 in China after 46 years). By that time, *the number of Korean Christians already exceeded the number of Christians in all of China*, even though the mission effort in China had begun much, much earlier. While the first 100 years of missionary work in China had produced 178,000 Christians, the first 100 years of missionary work in Korea (1984) yielded 6,000,000 Christians!

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Of course we know that the church in China later exploded. Yet this happened largely after 1945, when foreign missionaries had left China. This forced Chinese churches to adopt many of Nevius' ideals, because they had no other option.

Missionaries and church leaders in Korea largely agree that Nevius' principles provided the key to the evangelism of Korea. This explosive growth of the gospel led Pyongyang to be called the Jerusalem of the East.

Remember: Nevius only ever spent two weeks in Korea!

For discussion: *What movement principles do you see in this story?* MF

