

THE EVANGELISTIC
MISSIONARY'S ROLE
IN CHURCH GROWTH
IN KOREA

BY ROY E. SHEARER



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The foreign missionary ranks not first, not second, but only third in his influence on the growth of the Church in Korea. In the past, when reasons for the tremendous, fast growth of the Korean Church were sought, writers often implied that missionaries and their methods were primary causes of this miracle of growth.

On the contrary, missionaries were the first to admit that it was not their direct personal witness, but rather the urgent speaking of one Korean to another, which struck a responsive note and sparked the turning of great numbers of Korean citizens to Christ. This word of mouth testimony quickly paved the way for the preaching of the missionaries.

When Horace G. Underwood first visited the village of Sorai, he found Christianity well spoken of, both in Sorai and in its surrounding neighborhood. This advance knowledge of Christianity was due to the testimony of one of the village men who first believed the message of Christ in Manchuria.

Even after these first beginnings, the Church grew because of the witnessing activity of Korean Christians. Dr. A.J. Brown, former Far East Secretary of the Presbyterian Board of Foreign Missions, when on a visit to Korea, saw that distances made impossible frequent missionary visits to each new preaching place, and he was forced to conclude that the constant stream of new believers was due to the work of native Christians rather than the foreigners in charge.¹ C. Darby Fulton, Southern Presbyterian Mission Executive, saw a striking difference between the missionary work of Korea and that of other Far Eastern fields. He said, "in China and Japan the evangelist...uses street preaching and such pioneer work, seeking to awaken a spiritual response to find an entrance for the gospel. In Korea, on the other hand, the spread of the gospel has usually outrun the missionary. Groups of believers have come

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On the contrary, missionaries were the first to admit that it was not their direct personal witness, but rather the rapid spreading of the Gospel to another, which struck a responsive note and sparked the turning of great numbers of Korean citizens to Christ. This word of mouth testimony quickly paved the way for the preaching of the missionaries.

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preaching and such pioneer work, seeking to awaken a spiritual response to find an entrance for the Gospel. In Korea, on the other hand, the spread of the Gospel has usually outstripped the missionary. Groups of believers have come

together in distant villages and are sending delegations to the mission stations, pleading for spiritual oversight and leadership."² Arch Campbell in The Christ of the Korean Heart puts it simply by saying, "The million that have come to the Savior and received Him into their hearts have not been won by foreign missionaries. Only a few of them. Nearly all have heard the good news from the lips of their own countrymen. The story goes from mouth to ear and from heart to heart."³

These words of missionaries and missionary leaders testify that more important to the growth of the Korean Church than the witness of missionaries, is the simple testimony of a Korean Christian to his neighbors and relatives. The gospel message flowed unimpeded along the web of family relationships, often bringing people to Christ in a multi-individual decision, where individuals came to their decisions of faith in the context of the unbroken social unit. Dr. Chun Sung Chun says that since the family was the basic unit in Korean society, it was not unusual for all the members of a family group to adopt Christianity at the same time.⁴ But this rapid spread of the gospel by the agency of new Christians bringing those around them into the Church is only the second most important factor in the growth of our Korean Church.

Such eager response and spread of the gospel out ahead of the missionary was not found in any other nearby Asian nation, and even in Korea, great response occurred only in certain sections of the land. In searching out reasons for the great turning to Christ in those sections, I am continually compelled to affirm that the top ranking factor in the rapid growth of the Church in Korea is nothing less than the mysterious preparation by the Holy Spirit of great numbers of people in this land, who longed for something better than their animistic practices and their slavery to the bonds of government, economy and tradition. When they heard the message of the Church, they were entirely

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 great numbers of people in this land, who longed for sweeping reform from
 their antislavery practices and their slavery to the bonds of government, economy
 and tradition. When they heard the message of the Gospel, they were eagerly

ready to embrace Jesus as their Savior. The first Christian Church was established on the day of Pentecost because the men were filled with the Holy Spirit. Men and women who joined the thousands turning to the Church in Korea, also turned primarily because of the moving of the Holy Spirit in their lives. Not because the idea is new, but because we need to reaffirm central Christian truth, we must say that the Holy Spirit has first importance in the famous growth of our Korean Church. The second most important factor influencing this wildfire spread of the good news is the personal witness of new Korean Christians, and only third in ranking order can be placed the missionary's part in the numerical growth of the Church in Korea.

Since we cannot control the movement of the Spirit or the responsiveness of the people, let us study the factor over which we have been given control, namely, the methods of the evangelistic missionary. Early missionaries in Korea went about their work as did missionaries in other lands, generally using methods directed toward so-called "widespread seed scattering." The letters of a number of the early Presbyterians show this clearly. In 1895 William Baird writes that he sold thousands of books and gave away many tracts, thus scattering the gospel seed.⁵ With the same objective, Cyril Ross and William Hunt both advocated street preaching as being a good method. But while satisfying to him, Hunt was forced to admit that he could not show any churches established through market preaching, nor could he speak of any special development in the church as a result of this method. Neither man pointed to any significant growth caused by street preaching.⁶

Most missionaries found that large-scale meetings as well as street preaching, soon were not necessary to win a hearing in this country. In 1894 when Samuel A. Moffett first took up permanent residence in Pyongyang, he did not have to travel far and wide to get a hearing but remained in his guest room

ready to receive them as they appear. The first business done was to establish
 on the list of persons names for the first time with the Holy Spirit. The
 and women who joined the movement during the first year, also women
 primarily because of the power of the Holy Spirit in their lives. The reason
 the idea is new, but because we need to realize that spiritual gifts, as well
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 good news is the personal witness of the Holy Spirit, and only that in
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 Church in power.

There are several reasons for the success of the Holy Spirit in the Church of our day
 the people, for the study of the Holy Spirit has been given more attention, more
 the methods of the spiritualistic ministry. Early spiritualists in their work
 about their work as that of a prophet in other lands, generally being
 directed toward so-called "unseen" and "invisible" powers. The factors of a modern
 of the early Christians was this spirit. In 1908 William James wrote that
 he said thousands of people are now being cured, this is a new thing (the power)
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 street preaching we have a good witness. But while referring to this, that we
 forced to admit that he would not now be a person established through
 preaching, but could be made of any social development in the Church as a
 result of this method. Further we should be very careful to avoid any
 street preaching.

Just as important as the fact that Jesus' disciples as well as street
 preaching, soon were not necessary to win a hearing in this country. In 1908
 when General A. Wolffert first came to permanent residence in Hongkong, he did
 not have to travel far and wide to get a hearing but preached in his quiet room

where a constant stream of inquirers came to him asking about this new Jesus doctrine. Our predecessors believed that the best way to produce a growing church in such responsive areas was to teach the eager, prospective believers how to study the Bible, how to pray, how to take on spiritual nourishment, and to feel a personal responsibility for evangelism. Their teaching so succeeded that these foreign missionaries, instead of winning souls one by one to Christ through eloquent preaching, actually multiplied the church constituency many times by training new Christians to be competent evangelists.

From about 1900 on, the "evangelistic missionary," actually a teaching missionary, spent his energy examining applicants for the catechumenate and for baptism. Underwood in 1901 says that, "In one place there were over fifty applicants for baptism. The place I go tomorrow there are 140 desiring to come into the Church."⁷ In 1905, a missionary who had been in Korea only four years baptized in one day 92 people in the Sunchun area. In that same year he baptized a total of 1,000 adults, who made their public confession of Christ.

Missionaries held week-long Bible classes in both city and country. Attendance ranged from a medium-sized class of 200 to large classes of 1,000 as in Pyongyang. In one year the total attendance at these classes was usually more than the communicant membership of the church. Where the people were particularly responsive, missionaries put their best efforts into helping new Christians understand enough of their faith to share it with others. This is the way the church grew, particularly in northwest Korea, that is, North and South Pyongan and Whangheh Provinces. Prior to World War II, northwest Korea contained 75% of the Christian population.

Missionaries in the northwest were able to teach the throngs of new Christians there because the Board of Foreign Missions of the Presbyterian Church U.S.A. responded to the pleas of its Korea Mission in 1896 for new

where a constant stream of inquiries came to the office about this new course doctrine. Our professors believed that the best way to produce a fruitful church in each responsive area was to teach the word, progressive believers how to study the Bible, how to pray, how to take on spiritual nourishment, and to feel a personal responsibility for evangelism. Their teaching so suggested that these foreign missionaries, instead of waiting until one by one to depart through eloquent preaching, actually multiplied the church constituency many times by training new Christians to be competent evangelists.

From about 1900 on, the "evangelistic missionary," actually a teacher missionary, spent his energy examining applicants for the missionaries and for baptisms. Underwood in 1901 says that, "in one place there were over fifty applicants for baptism. The first I remember there are two deaths, so soon into the church." In 1907, a missionary who had been in Korea only four years baptized in one day 95 people in the Japanese area. In that same year he baptized a total of 1,000 adults, who were their public confession of Christ.

Missionaries have been doing Bible classes in both city and country. All distances ranged from a medium-sized class of 500 to large classes of 1,000 in attendance. In one year the total attendance at these classes was nearly more than the combined membership of the church. Where the people were particularly responsive, missionaries put their best efforts into helping new Christians understand enough of their faith to share it with others. This is the way the church grew, particularly in northwest Korea, that is, north and South Pyongan and Kangwon Provinces. From 1901 to 1911, northwest Korea contained 75% of the Korean population.

Established in the northwest were also to teach the language of the Christians there because the word of foreign missions of the missionaries which U.S.A. responded to the plea of its Korean mission in 1892 for new

missionaries to help with the task of evangelism. Many of these new missionaries were sent to Pyongyang Station, which was right in the center of the northwest territory. Soon Pyongyang Station, whose missionaries concentrated on the follow-up of new Christians, became the largest Presbyterian mission station, in terms of both missionaries and Christians, in the entire world. Let us make no mistake, had the great number of missionaries not been able to do the extensive follow-up work, the Christward movement might have evaporated. A similar plea for more missionaries by the Methodists went unheeded so an opportunity was lost and the Methodist Church did not grow.

Other areas of the Korean Presbyterian Church did not have as great church growth as the northwest, so missionaries outside the responsive northwest did not want their areas slighted when new missionary personnel was being passed out. In 1898, Horace Underwood, while rejoicing in the fact that the church was growing in the northwest, concluded that the only reason the church was not growing any faster in the south, particularly around Seoul, was because there was less effort being put forth there. He says, "I have seen that wherever we have put forth effort, growth has always followed."⁸ More missionaries, he meant, would produce more growth. But here Underwood was mistaken.

Thirty-six years later Harry Rhodes said that in Seoul, "more missionaries have resided, more effort has been put forth, more money spent than any other section of Korea. And yet, in the evangelization of the country, districts around the capital, the results have been somewhat disappointing."⁹ This is putting it mildly. At the time of Rhodes' writing, there were about 5,000 communicant members in Kyunggi and North Choongchung Provinces compared with 50,000 communicant members in an equal number population in the northwest. Missionary effort alone is obviously not the answer to church growth. However, a great number of missionaries, all involved in an intensive follow-up teaching of new

missionaries to help with the task of evangelism. Many of these new missionaries were sent to Pyongyang station, which was ripe in the center of the northwest territory. Soon Pyongyang station, whose missionaries concentrated on the follow-up of new Christians, became the largest Presbyterian mission station, in terms of both missionaries and Christians, in the entire world. But an early mistake, had the great number of missionaries not been able to do the extensive follow-up work, the Christian movement might have evaporated. A similar plea for more missionaries by the Methodists went unheeded as an opportunity was lost and the Methodist Church did not grow.

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Thirty-six years later Harry Rhodes said that in Seoul, "more missionaries have resided, more effort has been put forth, more money spent than any other section of Korea. And yet, in the evangelization of the country, districts around the capital, the results have been somewhat disappointing."⁹ This is untrue if mildly. At the time of Rhodes' writing, there were about 2,000 American missionaries in Korea and North China. Provinces compared with Seoul, distant and in an equal water position in the northwest. Effort alone is obviously not the answer to church growth. However, a great number of missionaries, all involved in an intensive follow-up training of new

believers in the responsive northwest proved to be the right combination for good, in fact, amazing growth.

The wide difference in growth illustrated by the Pyongyang and Seoul areas makes one curious. Was there a difference in the quality of the missionaries? The answer is no. Then was there a difference in policy in the various areas? Again the answer is no. Through the writings of Dr. C.A. Clark, such as The Korean Church and the Nevius Methods, all students of missions are familiar with the famous Nevius Method and with Korea's adaptation of this method of planting churches. Its principles of self-government, self-support and self-propagation were not only expressed as theories but were eventually codified and put into the Presbyterian Mission's rules and by-laws. The mission had a uniform policy for action in all areas. Control of the missionaries, and particularly, strict control of the use of foreign funds was maintained. Without a doubt, the Nevius policy was the best policy for growth in the northwest of Korea. It allowed the spreading church to be free of the shackles of foreign money. When a new church was put up, New York did not have to be consulted for building funds.

The Methodists, working the same northwest area, were reported by William Hunt in 1909 to be using American funds for building and for paying helpers. But he reports that this use of American church funds caused all kinds of trouble.¹⁰ The Methodist Church could only grow as fast as buildings and pastors' salaries could be paid by the missionaries, while the adjacent Presbyterian Church, free of foreign control and funds but with plenty of working assistance given by dedicated foreigners, grew rapidly. Stated simply, the Nevius Method worked in the northwest.

But when we look at the Kyunggi-Choonpook area in central Korea, we find that the story is different. The same Nevius principles are reported to have been followed rigidly by the Presbyterians, and many missionaries staffed the

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the capital city, but the church did not grow. Obviously, then, it is incorrect to say that the church will grow wherever the Nevius method is used.

The previously mentioned Dr. Brown writes that the Nevius principles are excellent, but not peculiar to Korea. He says, "These principles do not explain why results were more quickly achieved in Korea than in any other place. Other factors must be found."¹¹ I believe the peculiar responsiveness of the people in northwest Korea to be the factor he was looking for. A young missionary recorded an overheard conversation between an early Seoul and an early Pyongyang missionary that illustrates the difference in response in the two areas. The Pyongyang missionary said, "Boy, the Koreans are sure hungry for the gospel." And the Seoul missionary replied, "Huh, I've never seen any Korean hungry for anything except rice."¹²

Some voices were raised criticizing the Nevius method. Pieters, in 1920, expresses his feeling that the principle of self-support should be set aside for a time in order to keep some desperately economically weak churches from closing their doors. Chun Sung Chun and George Adams both write that the Nevius method of self-support not only did not fit well with the poverty-ridden tenant farmer population in the south, but actually retarded growth there. In his history of the Presbyterian Mission, Rhodes expresses doubt as to the omnipotence of the Nevius method as follows: "Whether the church flourishes because of the system or the system is possible because of the flourishing condition of the Church is a question that might be argued. But at any rate in point of time, the system came first."¹³ I am forced to take the position that the Nevius missionary plan worked well where Korean people were responsive, but actually retarded church growth by its rigid use in less responsive areas of Korea.

One reason for making the above statement is an examination of the results brought about by the Adams Evangelistic Fund in southeast Korea, which was a

the capital city, but the church did not grow. Obviously, then, it is incorrect to say that the church will grow wherever the Wesleyan method is used.

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Presbyterian Mission, Jones expresses doubt as to the omni-potency of the Wesleyan method as follows: "Whether the church flourished because of the system or the

system is possible because of the historical situation of the Church is a question that might be argued. But at any rate in terms of time, the system can't fit."¹³

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use in less responsive areas of Korea. One reason for asking the above statement is an examination of the results

produced about by the above evangelistic team in southeast Korea, which was a

departure from the Nevius plan. Edward and Ben Adams were trustees of the fund, which was used to send Bible women and evangelists into the country around Taegu with the express purpose of winning people to Christ, teaching the Bible and Christian doctrine, and building a church. The worker usually left at the end of a six-month period, leaving behind him a church able to call its own leader and no longer dependent on a Western-supported preacher. Surprisingly, this judicious use of American money produced results. By 1930, 73 churches had been established through this fund. This represents 25% of all the churches in Kyungpook Presbytery, and these 73 churches were founded in the ten years between 1920 and 1930.¹⁴ A deliberate departure from the codified policy of the Korea Mission produced results.

Our missionary methods did affect church growth for better or worse. In addition the missionaries themselves influenced the growth of the church in Korea. When a good biography of Samuel A. Moffett is produced, it will undoubtedly show that he was the missionary who had more to do with the rapid growth of the Korean Church than anyone else. It seems that the right man was in the right place at the right time. Dr. Moffett exercised a single-minded adherence to the goal of winning men to Christ and planting churches. Young Moffett went to Province Pyongan/in northwest Korea at a time when Korean people were most hungry for the Christian faith. He diligently followed the principles outlined by Nevius and I suspect he kept his fellow missionaries toeing the Nevius line. I would judge from the writing of his contemporaries that Moffett kept Pyongyang Station's goal fixed on making Christ known and establishing a growing Church. There were men of equal stature in other stations, but some of the elements for great growth must have been missing.

The personality and attitudes of missionaries not only affected church growth in a positive way, but also in a negative way. The controversy over

departure from the Korean plan. Adams and Ben Adams were trustees of the Board,

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The personality and attitudes of missionaries had only a limited effect

growth in a positive way, but also in a negative way. The missionary's

educational policy which raged in the Northern Presbyterian Mission from 1912 to 1920 was taken to the General Assembly of the parent American Church. This dispute ended in a draw but the personality struggles of its duration seem to have affected church growth in its communicant membership. We should give consideration to Harriet Pollard who says, "So much time and thought were given to this question and so much vitality was consumed that spiritual loss to the native Church was inevitable. The mental strain undoubtedly shortened the lives of some of the most devoted men in the Mission and injured the health of others as the number of deaths and resignations of this period indicate."¹⁵

Is it mere coincidence that during this period of bitter controversy, the growth of the Korean Church changed from an abrupt rise to a small, slow growth from 1914 until 1920? The Mission fight must have had its effect. We can hope that there will never again be any mission controversy so serious as to take our minds off the central purpose of mission - or the reason for being of an evangelistic missionary.

There is another possible way for missionaries to slow down the growth and enthusiasm of the Church. I will use the words of a man whom I have come to respect for his common sense and good writing, a man who would not write anything without careful thought. Listen to Harry Rhodes as he gives a reason for the slowing of the growth of the Church in his 1926 personal report: "As I see it, one reason why there has been a let-up in the growth of the Korean Church the last few years is because the missionaries have more and more been withdrawn from direct evangelistic work into institutional and other forms of work. I am one of those who have been so withdrawn."¹⁶ I wonder, was he speaking to the year 1926 only?

We missionaries can assist church growth if we will. It takes definite will power to be discontent with anything less than making evangelistic progress.

educational policy which found in the Southern Presbyterian Mission from 1842 to 1852 was based on the general assumption of the general American Church. This was quite similar in a way and the educational character of the churches was to have affected church growth in the Southern Presbyterian Church. We should give consideration to Harriet Pollock and her work. It was not until the late 1840s that this question and so much vitality was concerned that attention was given to the native Church was inevitable. The results of this movement were the first of some of the most notable work in the history and inspired the growth of other as the number of churches and membership of this period indicate.

It is worth considering that during this period of church controversy, the growth of the Western Church showed an annual rise to a well, slow growth from 1845 until 1850. The situation then was not as bleak as it can be seen that there will never again be any serious controversy as serious as to take our minds off the central purpose of mission - or the reason for being of an evangelistic mission.

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We missionaries can carry on our work if we will. It is our duty and will power to be consistent with spiritual laws when evangelistic programs.

It is necessary to battle the tendency to snift into neutral because of the pressures and demands that all our institutions and that our personal comforts place on each of us.

Maybe what we need is the courage of Horace Grant Underwood. In fact of the fact that twenty years previously there had been a massacre of Catholics, both nationals and foreign priests, and in face of the direct opposition of the first missionary, Horace Allen, Underwood stuck to and pressed on with the job of making Christ known. His fellow missionaries advised caution and wanted Underwood to be quiet for awhile, but he openly taught and baptized. If Underwood had not had the courage to close his ears to the soothing voices around him, who knows whether the Church in Korea today would still be a small, groping Church rather than the strong body of Christ that it is today.

Missionaries, therefore, have influenced church growth in the past. Can they still do so? I am convinced they can if some of the lessons from the past are taken to heart. May I suggest that in the light of this study of one field, Korea, we can draw the following conclusions as guiding principles for today's evangelistic missionaries.

First, commitment to church growth is essential. With so many different areas of service calling a missionary, only single-minded allegiance to making a church grow gives any hope for church growth. Second, training new Christians to be fully-equipped evangelists produces more church growth than the foreign missionary's preaching to non-believers. New Christians with some understanding of their faith will speak to their friends and relatives about Christ more convincingly than any outsider can.

Third, missionaries should be assigned primarily to responsive areas where the church is growing. Missionaries in non-growing areas should be "thinned out." These areas should not be left without a witness, but we must

remember that God is not honored by a piece of geography that is "occupied" but is honored by large numbers of men and women believing in Christ as their Savior. The responsive northwest area of Korea could have had more church growth if some personnel from other areas in Korea had been assigned there. In the 1920's, other denominations sent personnel to northwest Korea and got growth.

Fourth, an evangelistic method producing church growth in one area is not necessarily the best method for producing growth in other nations, or even in all sections of one nation. The acid test for any method is simply, "Is it producing church growth here?" If so, it is good. If not, a method should be sought that will produce growth.

1. Horace G. Underwood, The Call of Korea. (New York: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1908) p. 107.
2. C. Darby Fulton, Star in the East. (Richmond, Virginia: Presbyterian Committee of Publication, 1938), p. 174.
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whether that God is not limited by a place of geography that is "bounded" but
a number of large numbers of men and women working in order to reach
the responsive movement of those who have had their eyes opened in the
personal from other ways in order to be seen as a sign. In the 1950's

her organizations sent personnel to northern Korea and for growth.
Fourth, an evangelistic method produced church growth in one area is not
necessarily the best method for producing growth in other nations. or even in all
sections of one nation. The fact that one method is simply "it is understood
church growth here" is not, it is good. If that, a method would be sought that
it produce growth.

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Roy E. Shearer

