

What Korean Christians Might Learn From The History Of American Evangelicals?

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Introduction

Mark A. Noll's question about what Korean Christians might learn from American evangelical history is most useful when it encourages comparison rather than imitation. Korean Protestantism developed through contact with North American missionaries, indigenous Bible translation, revival movements, education, medical work, Japanese colonial rule, national division, war, authoritarian politics, democratization, rapid industrialization, and global mission. American evangelicalism followed a different path shaped by voluntary religion, revival, denominational competition, slavery, racial segregation, immigration, mass media, and partisan politics. The histories overlap, but neither is a copy of the other. The strongest lesson is therefore methodological: churches should study how convictions interact with power, culture, institutions, and national identity, preserving constructive inheritances while recognizing the harm produced when religious certainty becomes resistant to criticism (Noll; Lee).

Learning from Historical Parallels without Treating America as the Model

Noll identifies similarities that make comparison possible, including voluntary church organization, strong biblical commitment, revival, modernization, conflict, and missionary activity. Yet these similarities exist within unequal transpacific relationships. American missionaries supplied institutions, money, theological education, and denominational forms, while Korean Christians translated, adapted, contested, and expanded what they received. Recent scholarship describes this process as reinvention rather than one-way transplantation. Korean churches became agents with their own priorities, and South Korean evangelical networks later influenced American evangelicalism in return. The lesson is that imported religious forms always acquire local meanings. Korean Christians can examine American experience as a warning and resource, but they should not assume that American theological, political, or organizational patterns possess universal authority simply because they arrived with influential missionaries (Kirsteen Kim; Helen Jin Kim).

Self-Support, Self-Government, and Self-Propagation

One constructive similarity is the importance of congregational initiative. American churches developed in a setting where denominations and voluntary societies raised funds, trained leaders, founded institutions, and competed for adherents without an established national church. In Korea, missionary strategy also encouraged churches to become self-supporting, self-governing, and self-propagating. Korean believers contributed money, organized congregations, served as colporteurs and evangelists, and carried Christianity beyond missionary stations. This local responsibility helped produce rapid growth and durable institutions. However, autonomy should not be confused with lack of accountability. American history shows how independent congregations and ministries can become dominated by charismatic leaders, donors, family succession, or opaque boards. Korean churches can preserve initiative while strengthening financial transparency, shared governance, safeguarding, and meaningful participation by lay members (Noll; Kim and Kim).

Vernacular Scripture, Literacy, and the Discipline of Interpretation

Both traditions placed extraordinary weight on the Bible, but Korean Protestantism's relationship with vernacular Scripture had distinctive consequences. Portions of the Bible circulated in Korean before many resident missionaries arrived, and translation into accessible language contributed to literacy, study groups, preaching, and the participation of people outside elite classical education. Strong biblicism can energize discipleship and give ordinary believers confidence to read and teach. It can also produce fragmentation when private certainty replaces historical, linguistic, and theological study. American evangelical history contains repeated controversies over literalism, science, prophecy, race, gender, and politics in which competing groups all claimed biblical authority. The lesson is not to weaken Scripture but to pair devotion with responsible interpretation, intellectual humility, and attention to the church's historical diversity (Hwang and Hwang; Noll, *Scandal*).

Education, Medicine, and Modernization

Protestant institutions contributed to modern education, health care, publishing, women's education, and new forms of civic organization in Korea. These achievements should be understood alongside Korean agency and the broader reform movements of the period, not attributed solely to foreign missionaries. American evangelical institutions likewise founded colleges, hospitals, charities, and voluntary associations that expanded public participation. Yet modernization can create dependence on prestige, scale, and managerial success. Churches may begin to measure faithfulness through buildings, enrollment, media reach, or political access rather than through service and integrity.

Korean Christians can learn from both the achievements and institutional failures of American evangelicalism by asking whether schools, hospitals, and social programs remain accountable to their stated mission and accessible to people with limited power or income (Kim and Kim; Noll).

Revival, Emotion, and the Need for Durable Formation

Revivalism is another shared feature. American evangelical history includes the Great Awakenings, camp meetings, urban campaigns, Pentecostal expansion, and mass evangelism. Korean Protestant history includes early revivals, dawn prayer, public confession, intensive Bible study, and large evangelistic gatherings. Revival can renew communities, motivate mission, and make faith personally meaningful. Its weakness appears when dramatic conversion, attendance, or emotional intensity is treated as sufficient evidence of mature discipleship. American movements repeatedly struggled to sustain reform after a campaign ended, and celebrity revivalists sometimes became less accountable as their influence grew. Korean churches can preserve fervor while investing in long-term theological education, ethical formation, pastoral care, local service, and structures that do not depend on one exceptional personality (Noll; Kim and Kim).

Missionary Energy and the Danger of Cultural Superiority

Korean Protestantism has become a major missionary-sending movement, reversing the older image of Korea as only a mission field. American evangelical missions offer valuable examples of sacrifice, institution-building, translation, and international cooperation. They also reveal paternalism, racial hierarchy, political entanglement, and the tendency to confuse Christianity with American culture. Korean missionaries can learn from these failures by treating local Christians as theological partners rather than assistants, prioritizing language and historical knowledge, supporting local leadership, and avoiding the export of Korean church culture as though it were the gospel itself. Mission should be evaluated not only by numbers sent or churches planted but by mutuality, sustainability, safeguarding, and the ability of local communities to shape their own Christian institutions (Walls; Sanneh; Helen Jin Kim).

War, Nationalism, and Anticommunism

Conflict shaped both traditions, but in different ways. American churches were divided by the Civil War, influenced by two world wars, and later organized around Cold War anticommunism. Korean Christianity experienced Japanese colonial rule, liberation, national division, the Korean War, dictatorship, and continuing security tensions. Anticommunism helped some South Korean churches

interpret persecution and national survival, but it could also narrow Christian identity into loyalty to a political order. American evangelical history shows a similar risk when patriotism, military power, or a party platform is treated as an unquestionable expression of faith. Korean Christians can honor national suffering and democratic responsibility while maintaining the church's freedom to criticize injustice committed by allies as well as enemies (Noll, *Civil War*; Helen Jin Kim).

Race as a Central American Evangelical Lesson

No comparison with American evangelical history is adequate without slavery, segregation, Indigenous dispossession, and racial inequality. White Christians often defended slavery or tolerated segregation while appealing to Scripture, order, and local custom. Other Christians participated in abolition, civil rights, and racial reconciliation, but reform was repeatedly delayed by institutional self-protection. This history warns Korean churches against assuming that doctrinal orthodoxy automatically produces social justice. It also matters for Korean Christians engaging American churches, because evangelical identity in the United States has been shaped by racial categories and unequal access to power. The lesson is to listen to marginalized Christian traditions, examine discriminatory structures, and resist using unity language to avoid truthful discussion of harm (Emerson and Smith; Noll, *Civil War*).

Political Influence and the Cost of Partisan Captivity

American evangelicals have participated in abolition, temperance, labor reform, civil rights, antiwar activism, conservative mobilization, and many other political projects. Political engagement is therefore not a single ideology. The danger arises when a church's identity becomes fused with a party, candidate, or national myth, making disagreement appear equivalent to unfaithfulness. Such fusion can produce short-term access while weakening moral credibility and internal diversity. South Korean Protestantism has also experienced close relationships with governments, democratization movements, conservative parties, and mass political demonstrations. American history suggests that churches should articulate principles, protect open discussion, disclose political relationships, and preserve the capacity to criticize every coalition. Civic participation can be vigorous without allowing electoral strategy to define the gospel (FitzGerald; Marsden).

Religious Liberty in a Plural Society

The original essay refers to American disputes over same-sex marriage and presents a narrative in which Christians are primarily victims of expanding rights. A fuller historical approach recognizes genuine conflicts of conscience while also considering the rights and dignity of people affected by religious practices. American religious liberty developed through negotiation among groups that

disagreed deeply, and no community has unlimited freedom to impose its rules on others. Korean Christians can learn to defend worship, belief, speech, and institutional integrity without treating every legal disagreement as persecution. This requires distinguishing coercion from criticism, inconvenience from exclusion, and internal church discipline from public services governed by general law. Religious liberty is strongest when it is defended consistently for minorities and opponents as well as for one's own community (Noll; Marsden).

Compassion, Sexuality, and the Responsibility to Listen

Noll's comparative framework can also encourage churches to examine how moral teaching is communicated to people whose lives are debated publicly. American evangelical discussions of sexuality have sometimes been dominated by political slogans, while the experiences of gay Christians, families, and young people received less attention. Churches may hold traditional or revisionist theological positions, but neither position excuses humiliation, misinformation, coercion, or refusal to provide pastoral care. Korean Christians can learn from American polarization by creating settings where difficult questions are discussed without reducing people to symbols of cultural decline. Compassion is not merely a public-relations strategy; it requires listening, protection from abuse, truthful teaching, and acknowledgment that congregations include people directly affected by the issues being debated (Noll; FitzGerald).

Gender, Authority, and the Examination of Patriarchy

American and Korean Protestant histories both include women whose evangelism, education, prayer, teaching, fundraising, and social work sustained churches even when formal authority remained male. Institutional growth can conceal unequal recognition, barriers to leadership, and inadequate responses to harassment or domestic abuse. American evangelical debates show how appeals to family order may protect valuable commitments but can also be used to silence women or avoid accountability. Korean churches should study how Confucian social patterns, missionary theology, modern corporate leadership, and biblical interpretation have interacted rather than attributing every practice to one source. A historically informed approach asks whether authority is exercised transparently, whether women's gifts are recognized, and whether pastoral systems protect vulnerable people before protecting institutional reputation (Kim and Kim; Chong).

Intellectual Life and the Problem of Anti-Intellectualism

Noll's critique of the "evangelical mind" remains one of the clearest American warnings. Revival, activism, and practical ministry can become detached from sustained scholarship, leaving churches vulnerable to conspiracy claims, historical myths, weak science, and confident misinformation. Korean Protestantism has built universities, seminaries, publishing networks, and highly educated congregations, yet institutional education does not guarantee intellectual openness. Churches can learn from American conflicts by supporting rigorous biblical studies, history, science, social research, and public theology without demanding that scholarship merely confirm predetermined conclusions. Intellectual humility is not a surrender of conviction. It is a discipline that distinguishes evidence from rumor, recognizes expertise, and allows correction when inherited explanations prove inaccurate (Noll, *Scandal*).

From Numerical Growth to Institutional Accountability

American evangelical organizations became skilled at measuring attendance, donations, media audiences, conversions, and political influence. Korean megachurches and mission agencies have likewise demonstrated extraordinary organizational capacity. Numerical growth can represent genuine service, but it can also conceal debt, leader-centered governance, competition, or neglect of smaller communities. American scandals involving financial misconduct, sexual abuse, and celebrity leadership show the cost of treating criticism as an attack on ministry. Korean churches can learn to separate the reputation of the gospel from the reputation of a particular leader or institution. Independent audits, safeguarding procedures, term limits, transparent succession, and channels for complaints are spiritual as well as administrative responsibilities because they protect people from concentrated power (FitzGerald; Noll).

A Two-Way Transpacific Learning Process

The comparison should not end with Korea learning from the United States. Korean Christianity has developed practices of prayer, congregational participation, missionary commitment, endurance under national crisis, and integration of faith with communal life that have influenced Christians abroad. Scholarship on Cold War evangelical networks shows that Koreans were not passive recipients; they used transpacific relationships to pursue their own religious and national visions. American churches can therefore learn from Korean experiences, including both achievements and failures. A mature relationship replaces the old missionary hierarchy with reciprocal study. Each tradition should ask how the other reveals blind spots in its assumptions about race, nation, wealth,

leadership, family, mission, and public responsibility (Helen Jin Kim; Lee).

Conclusion

Korean Christians can learn from American evangelical history by studying consequences rather than copying forms. Voluntary organization, Bible translation, education, revival, and missionary initiative helped both traditions grow, but growth also produced temptations toward cultural superiority, anti-intellectualism, racial blindness, patriarchy, partisan captivity, and leader-centered institutions. American history demonstrates that sincere belief does not prevent churches from supporting unjust systems or confusing national power with Christian faith. Korean history demonstrates that imported Christianity can be translated, reinvented, and sent outward through local agency. The most valuable lesson is therefore a practice of critical memory: honor faithful work, name harm honestly, strengthen accountability, listen to marginalized believers, and preserve enough institutional independence to serve the public without becoming captive to political or cultural power.

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