



Adapted from M. Georges Rouault's  
"Head of Christ"

# The Ultimate Truth Is a Person

Honored by his colleagues and students, Sakae Kubo responds by sharing his spiritual journey.

by Sakae Kubo

IT IS A HIGH HONOR TO HAVE SUCH DISTINGUISHED colleagues contribute articles for this occasion. Each of them has gone through their own experience of fire: Leona Running as a pioneering woman seminary professor, facing inexplicable discrimination in our own theological institution; Herold Weiss in his baptism of fire teaching in the seminary; Rick Rice with his book *The Openness of God*; and John Brunt with his article on clean and unclean foods. In spite of it all, each has been loyal to the church. They have maintained the delicate balance John Brunt calls for in his article that appears elsewhere in this issue. It is this delicate balance that I have also sought to maintain, in my 40 years of service for the church.

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*Sakae Kubo writes from Chico, California. After serving as professor of New Testament at Andrews University, Kubo was president of Newbold College, dean of the School of Theology at Walla Walla College, and academic dean of Atlantic Union College. Kubo's Greek grammar for beginners and his Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament (see bibliography, p. 53) have become standard texts for seminaries across North America.*

## From Buddhism to Adventism

I was not born into an Adventist family. I was not even born into a Christian family. My religious transition was from Buddhism to Adventism. The decision to become an Adventist, therefore, was not an easy one. I knew other Buddhist young people who had to leave home or had been beaten when they declared their intention to become Adventists. I was not quite 16 when I was baptized. I faced severe opposition, especially from my father, but my experience was not as rough as I had anticipated.

What consumed me was sports. My brothers all played barefoot football, limited to those weighing 130 pounds or less. That's what I had hoped to do. Besides, listening (no television at the time) to football, baseball, and boxing was a fixed ritual. At the time, becoming an Adventist meant giving all this up. I thought I would no longer be able to attend or listen to athletic events. Next to estrangement



from my family, this was my biggest sacrifice.

But the pursuit of truth made me willing to sacrifice everything. Being an Adventist meant following truth, even if it meant losing one's job to keep the Sabbath, giving up one's family, one's most cherished hopes and dreams, even losing one's life to remain faithful to God. That's what the *Youth's Instructor* articles kept teaching me.

Once within the Adventist orbit, it was almost a given that I should go to college, even though none of my eight brothers and sisters went beyond high school. I enrolled at Emmanuel Missionary College (the West Coast colleges were not a possibility since all Japanese-Americans were evacuated inland), where I took theology and graduated as president of my class.

However, after graduating, I wasn't offered any jobs. It is hard to imagine the disappointment of my parents, brothers, and sisters to have the only one in the family to go off to college return to Hawaii without a job. I canvassed for a few weeks before I was invited to join the ministerial force, but that didn't work out. David Bieber, then the principal of Hawaiian Mission Academy, asked if I was willing to teach on the elementary level. I accepted, but that didn't work out either. Finally, Bieber asked if I would be willing to teach a class of special English to returning students from the Far East. That's what I finally did for one year. I was then asked to serve as a pastor.

## From Hawaii Pastor to Seminary Professor

The conviction had been growing that I should teach in Japan. With this in mind, I decided to sell everything and leave for the seminary to prepare myself for any opening that might develop. In Washington, D.C. I worked 40 hours a week to support my wife

and three children while taking full work at the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary. On schedule, I completed an M.A. and a B.D. I went to the General Conference and offered myself for service in Japan, even if I had to go as a Japanese national rather than as an American. Apparently I was not needed or wanted in Japan. Therefore, in 1955, I accepted a call to join the theology faculty of Emmanuel Missionary College.

Five years later, when the seminary moved to Michigan, I joined the seminary faculty. I was immediately sent to the University of Chicago to complete a doctorate in New Testament. I worked hard the one year that I was totally free, and completed all my language requirements and qualifying examinations. The next year I commuted once a week from Michigan to Chicago to complete my required courses and comprehensive examinations. I then completed my dissertation while teaching full time.

My first year at the University of Chicago was especially difficult since my own presuppositions differed greatly from those of my professors. As I sorted things out, I was rather topsy-turvy and in turmoil. Some peripheral things I shed, but I was more certain than before in the basis of my faith.

The 1960s at the seminary was an exciting time. There was a certain openness in the church. This was also the first time that seminary faculty who had special training in biblical and theological studies were teaching in these fields. Very importantly, at no period did such an array of brilliant students converge at the seminary. Although some dropped out of church employment, and some even left the church, others today hold very responsible positions in the church.

The euphoria of this period did not last through the 1960s. Problems began as a reaction set in. The group of seminary teachers specially trained in their field was targeted. Soon they were all gone—moved into other



positions, or forced out of church work altogether.

I was one of those in the hot seat, because I still had the Adventist idea that had brought me into the church—that we should pursue the truth, no matter what the consequences. Yet it was always my intention to present truth gently and emphatically, conscious of where people were in their experience. I knew what I had gone through, and I was aware of what others would experience when new ideas or thoughts were presented. Also, I always felt that one could not move too far ahead of the community, or else you or the community would leave. Yet one had a responsibility to move the community along. Otherwise, it would petrify.

I also felt a need for theologians within the church to communicate to the whole church, not just to theological students. Though not especially talented in writing, I began to write popular theological work for the church as a whole. I think this kind of writing is very

important for the health of the church. *Spectrum* has done this work well, and John Brunt and Rick Rice have contributed a great deal.

One problem I had was regarding the nature of the inspiration of the Spirit of Prophecy writings. Each year, Arthur White taught the course on prophetic guidance. He put Ellen White on a pedestal so high that it was precarious. I kept objecting that we should face the reality concerning her writings. I felt I was trying to preserve Ellen White, while Arthur White was really setting her up for a great fall. And of course that is what happened. Rather than receiving almost all her information directly from God, critical studies demonstrated her significant dependence on human sources.

I always felt that I would never willingly leave church work. If the church felt my service was not wanted or needed, and they asked me to leave, then there would be no alternative. I loved and cared for the church too much to just abandon it. When I was under

## A BRIEF BIBLIOGRAPHY OF BOOKS BY SAKAE KUBO

### LONGER WORKS

*A Beginner's New Testament Greek Grammar* (Washington, D.C.: University Press of America, 1979).

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*Calculated Goodness* (Nashville: Southern Publishing Association, 1974).

*God Meets Man: A Theology of the Sabbath and the Second Advent* (Nashville: Southern Publishing Association, 1978).

*P72 and the Codex Vaticanus* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1985).

*A Reader's Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and a Beginner's Guide for the Translation of New Testament Greek* (Berrien Springs, Mich.: Andrews University Press, 1975).

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### SHORTER WORKS

*Acquitted! Message From the Cross* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1975).

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*Your Summons to Court* (Nashville: Southern Publishing Association, 1976).



fire there was an opportunity to become the librarian at a non-Adventist seminary. I didn't give it a second thought.

With all the rumors that I heard about me, the only one to talk to me was Richard Hammill, the president of Andrews University. I had questioned where Paul was really the author of Hebrews, and apparently this had caused quite a stir among the "brethren." To me, this was rather a trivial matter, since the content was the important thing and I had never questioned the inspiration of the book. The book of Hebrews said nothing about who the author was, and even conservative churches do not maintain the Pauline authorship. But like so many of the issues we face, this was important to the church because Ellen White affirmed Paul's authorship. Still, after my chat with Dr. Hammill, I was a bit more careful in my presentation.

## From Internal Exile to President

When Earle Hilgert was vice president of academic affairs, he asked me whether I would like to be theological librarian of the seminary. In his position, he heard what the administrators of the church were saying and knew that I was vulnerable. Of course, I loved to collect good books, so becoming a librarian wasn't onerous, but something I enjoyed. Besides, the seminary would be offering a doctorate and needed to have a library to support the research required. I continued to teach quite a bit but my office was in the library. The heat was off a little.

But more and more I felt my future with the seminary and Andrews University was bleak. In 1977, I requested a shift to the undergraduate theology department. The following year, I received invitations to head the theology departments at Atlantic Union College and Walla Walla College. I found out later that W.

J. Hackett, a vice president of the General Conference, had tried to scuttle the call from Walla Walla, but Max Torkelsen, the president of the North Pacific Union and chairman of Walla Walla's board, decided to make his own investigation. He talked to someone he knew and trusted, Carl Coffman, chair of the undergraduate religion department at Andrews. Carl had been a student of mine and apparently cleared me. I was sent the call.

My years at Walla Walla were probably the most enjoyable of my life. Big Brother was not always looking over my shoulder. Walla Walla wasn't a place you visited on the way to somewhere else, and few General Conference representatives needed to visit Walla Walla specifically. Nowhere in the world was there a better group of people to work with than the Walla Walla theological faculty (John Brunt, Ernie Bursey, Jon Dybdahl, Glen Greenwalt, Paul Grove, Lucile Knapp, Henry Lamberton, Gordon Mattison, Charles Scriven, Alden Thompson, Larry Veverka, Gerald Winslow) the two times I was there.

After only two years at Walla Walla, I accepted the presidency of Newbold College in England. I had the specific assignment of establishing a European seminary there. This was a great idea. It was not good for the church to have all theology come from the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary at Andrews University. The Europeans were capable of developing their own theology. After all, many of the faculty at Andrews were from Europe. While I was at Newbold, we began an annual conference of European theology professors to present and study papers we had hoped to publish.

The idea was to unite schools teaching theology—Collonges (France), Marienhoehe (Germany), and Newbold (England), into a European seminary, with the final two years of the Master of Divinity completed at Newbold College. The Northern European Division had invested a great deal financially into building



up the number of books in the library, expanding the library building, adding married student housing, constructing a seminary building, and recruiting qualified faculty. The difficult task of obtaining agreement from Collonges and Marienhoehe had already been achieved. The only thing left was to have Andrews convince the American Theological Association to approve the affiliation arrangement. Andrews had promised that this would not be a problem, and in good faith the Northern European Division had proceeded. Unfortunately, the American Theological Association withheld their approval. I left Newbold greatly disappointed.

I turned down a call to be president of the Far Eastern Seminary and returned to the United States. Walla Walla College made a special arrangement so that I could teach there. I was very happy, and could have stayed longer, but the college was tight financially. Instead of threatening the positions of younger men on the theological faculty, I started to look for a position elsewhere. I had two calls and soon found myself working as academic dean of Atlantic Union College with a newly installed president, Larry Geraty, a former student.

## From Abstract Truth to a Person

As I look back over my career, I have come to the conclusion that what is essential is dealing kindly, justly, and graciously with persons. No matter how orthodox, something is wrong with any doctrine or policy that does not lead us to treat others with respect and concern. For example, in recent years, one of the most obvious ironies is the belligerent spirit and attitude maintained by those on opposite sides of the righteousness by faith debate.

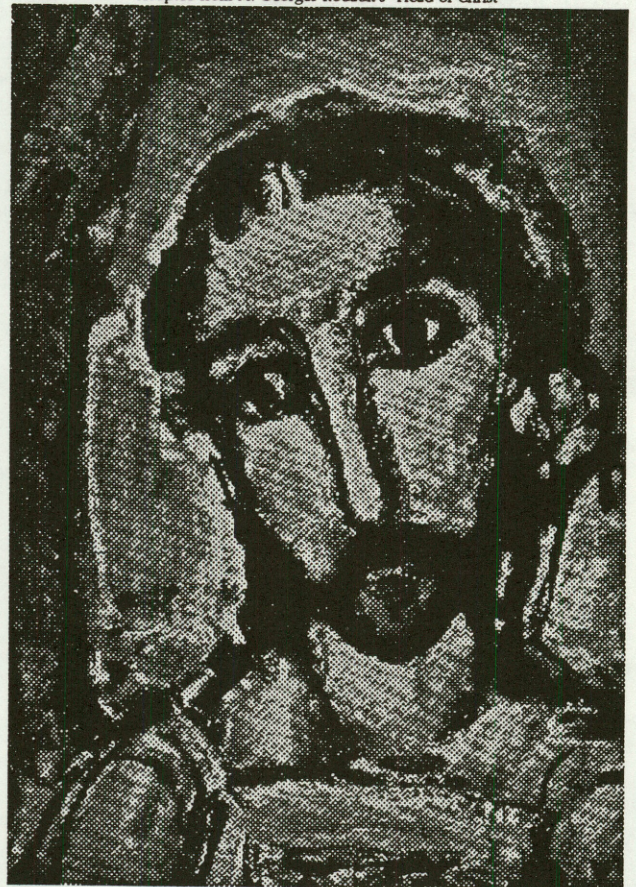
I have also come to the conclusion that truth

is infinite, and therefore we cannot possess all truth. We must be humble enough to recognize that we need everyone's contribution to our fund of truth, including that of non-Christians.

It is easy when we first become Adventist to feel we have found the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. There is no more to be found, and nothing more to learn. We become comfortable within this new framework. It becomes difficult to change. When new information is presented, we find it easier to ignore new truth. Too often we consider new things not as truths, but as heresies from the devil. We insulate ourselves against further truth, rather than respecting it enough to examine it carefully.

John Brunt and Rick Rice emphasize that truth must be sought in community. That means, first, that we need the challenge of others' ideas to test our notions of truth. We

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do not need to naively accept others' ideas, but should welcome the evaluation of our views by others. In community there is strength.

Others also need the challenge of our views. The community should hone its ideas of truth by an open, frank, and supportive exchange of ideas. No one is exempt from human frailty and the possibility of error. A community effort can safeguard an individual from gross error. In this kind of an open debate, a David Koresh cannot emerge.

In this community effort, secondly, we need to recognize that truth is progressive for individuals, as well as for the entire community. We cannot expect that everyone will be at the same level. The church may hold a body of common truth, but individuals within the church may be at different stages in their understanding of that truth. We need to understand, not be condescending toward, those who happen to have studied less. We also need to tolerate those who have taken the time to be more adventurous.

What is really important is not that we all think alike or act alike, but that we all live sincerely by the light that has been presented to us. What is important is that we are con-

stantly growing. More important than unanimity is living by genuine conviction of belief and practice.

Finally, we need to recognize that the purpose of knowing truth is not so that we can have an advantage over others and say, "I have the truth, and, therefore, I am superior to you." In 1 John some boasted that, "We are in the light and you are in darkness." They considered themselves several cuts above the rank and file. Their attitude created divisions and animosities in the church.

Paul said that knowing the truth is not enough. "Knowledge alone puffs up, but love builds up." Truth needs love to balance it.

Jesus said, "I am the truth." The purpose of knowing truth is to become like Jesus Christ—to become more loving, more kind, more gracious, more patient, more humble, more generous, more considerate, and more affirming. We can be sure, therefore, that any one who claims to have truth but lacks the qualities of Jesus Christ cannot really have the truth.

When I left Buddhism as a teenager I sought truth. At this point in my pilgrimage I have discovered that, for a person possessed by Christ, truth is personal.