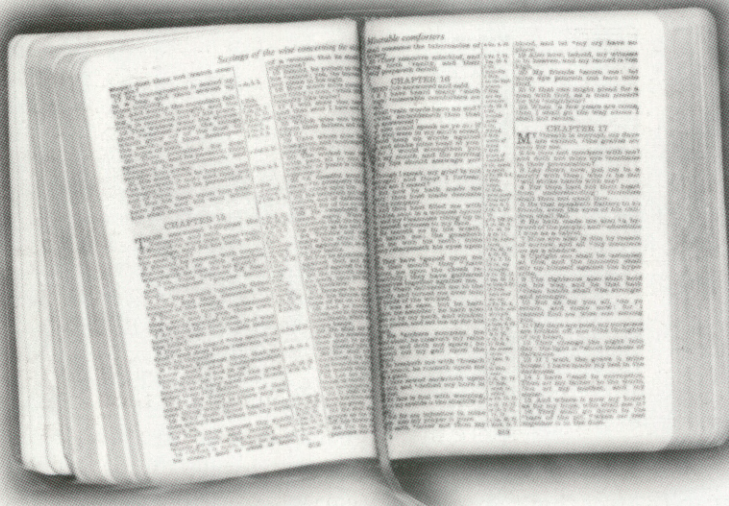


WHAT THE CHURCH TODAY CAN LEARN FROM THE BOOK OF ACTS



by Sakae Kubo

The book of Acts is the story of a provincial church that became worldwide, a national church that became international. It is the story about a church searching for answers to new situations that arose as it stretched out into the world. It is the story about a church that waited for and received the Spirit to empower it to grow beyond its borders and to guide it step-by-step forward in its goal to reach the capital of the Roman Empire.

Unlike the church in Acts, the Seventh-day Adventist Church is not a young church as it meets in its 2000 General Conference session. One hundred thirty-seven years have passed since its organization in 1863. During its development into an international church, the Adventist Church has encountered growing pains. As it faces the twenty-first century, it can learn from the book of Acts how to proceed through new situations and problems that arise because of its tremendous growth overseas.

What impresses the reader first and foremost about the book of Acts is the great difference between the behavior of the apostles before and after the resurrection. The Gospels relate how Christ first appeared to them after the resurrection. According to Acts, Christ was with them forty days. We do not know exactly what he taught them during that time, but we do know that the dominant theme was the fact that they would receive power to become witnesses when the Holy Spirit came upon them—not only in Jerusalem and Judea, but also in Samaria and even to the ends of the earth.

True to Christ's promise, the Holy Spirit came upon them at the appointed time and the apostles received power to become witnesses. What happened was a paradigmatic shift. The cowardly, fearful, Lord-denying apostles became bold, fearless, aggressive, and willing to witness publicly. People at first were astonished that they understood the apostles in their own languages and that the apostles did wonders and signs. The authorities were amazed at the apostles' change of attitude, their boldness and courage in place of fear and shame. "Now when they saw the boldness of Peter and John and realized that they were uneducated and ordinary men, they were amazed and recognized them as companions of Jesus" (4:13).¹ The authorities would not attribute the change to what had really happened. The apostles had been companions of Jesus before the resurrection, when they had been fearful and cowardly.

The difference was due to the fact that they knew Jesus had risen. They had spent forty glorious days with him. There was no doubt in their minds. Jesus had overcome death, which meant in effect that the Devil and the forces of evil were defeated. Christ and his teachings had triumphed. The forces of evil would continue temporarily, but their destiny was sealed. The apostles could face any opposition without fear because, even though evil was still alive, it had received a mortal blow and was a defeated foe.

That is why, when ordered not to speak about what they had seen and heard, the apostles could reply: "Whether it is right in God's sight to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge, for we cannot keep from speaking about what we have seen and heard" (4:19). When the high priest said, "We gave you strict orders not to teach in this name, yet here you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and you are determined to bring this man's blood on us," Peter replied, "We must obey God rather than any human authority" (5:28-29). These were men who had seen their risen Lord. These were men who knew that the

forces of evil are on borrowed time. These were men who had heard Jesus say, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. . . . And remember, I am with you always, to the end of this age" (Matt. 28:19-20).

The Church of today must recapture the reality of the resurrection. The resurrection was not a public event; Jesus appeared only to believers. Those outside the circle of faith rejected the resurrection and its claims. So, too, we live today in a world that does not know it is a defeated foe. Two contrary views of reality clash against each other. Like many Japanese soldiers who have been found hiding in jungles thinking that the war with the United States is still being fought—fighting for a country defeated but not knowing it—the world continues its battle against righteousness unaware that it fights a war it has already lost. But the forces of righteousness should have no doubt about the outcome. They can go forth like the enlightened apostles with courage and boldness to witness for the Lord.

When the cloud took Jesus up toward heaven, angels said to the disciples, "This Jesus who has been taken up into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven." (1:11). Although this reality encouraged them, it is obvious and understandable that the reality of the resurrection was more dominant at this stage in their experience. The book of Acts refers to signs before the coming of the Lord's great day (2:17) and the time of restoration (3:21), but it is the resurrection of Jesus to which the disciples were to be witnesses (1:22), and that was the theme of their preaching (2:24-36; 3:14-15; 4:10, 20, 33; 5:31; 13:32-37; 17:31-32; 26:23).

The Pentecostal church came into existence days after the resurrection, but the church of today lives on the opposite spectrum of time. Although faith in the second coming was real, the reality of the resurrection was the more immediate and vital reality in the life of the church. Today, although the reality of the second coming should be more relevant, it is the reality of the resurrection that should give courage and boldness to the witness of Jesus and affirm and confirm the certainty of the second coming. Although for us the second coming is more of a present truth, the eternal truth of the resurrection must undergird and strengthen us to finish the witnessing that the early church began.

Closely connected to the resurrection was the reception of the Spirit. Through the Spirit, the apostles were empowered to proclaim the Word and to witness. Through the Spirit, they were able to

speak in tongues so that everyone could hear the preaching of the Word in his own language. Through the Spirit, thousands were converted (2:41, 47; 4:4; 5:14; 6:7; 9:31; 16:5, 21, 20). The many things that the apostles accomplished were done through the Spirit, even though it may not be specifically mentioned. Many were healed (2:43; 4:30; 5:12, 16; 9:34; 19:40-41; 14:8-10; 19:11-16; 28:8-9). Paul exorcised a woman at Philippi (16:18); Peter raised Tabitha and Paul raised Eutychus from the dead (9:40-41; 20:9-10); Paul was delivered from prison (Acts 5:19) and suffered no harm from a viper (28:3-6). The presence of the Spirit empowered the apostles to preach, heal, raise the dead, and perform many other extraordinary things.

Not only was the early church empowered by the Spirit, it was also guided by the Spirit. The Spirit guided Philip to the Ethiopian eunuch, guided the encounter between Peter and Cornelius, led to the setting aside of Paul and Barnabas for the work to the Gentiles, guided the apostolic leaders in the decision made at Jerusalem, and guided in Paul's missionary journeys.

The church at its inauguration waited for the Spirit and received it to witness in Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. The church at its conclusion must wait for the Spirit that it may proclaim the good news of the kingdom throughout the world, as a testimony to all the nations, so that the end will come (Matt. 24:14). The barrier between the unseen world and the seen world was frequently penetrated in the early church. Not only was the Spirit a constant presence and guide, God's guidance led to the selection of a replacement for Judas, the Spirit snatched Philip away after his meeting with the Ethiopian, God granted visions to Peter and Cornelius, the Spirit spoke to Peter about Cornelius, the angel released Peter from prison and struck Herod down, Paul received a vision of the man from Macedonia, and the Lord stood by Paul during his trial in Jerusalem and told him he would bear witness also in Rome. The church lived in the presence of God.

The apostles recognized that they were mere instruments in the hand of God. They spoke with power and many people were converted. They performed great miracles that amazed the people, but they never thought the miracles came because of their own human talent or ability. The apostles recognized that it was only through the power that came from Jesus that they could do what they did. When the crippled beggar asked for alms from Peter and John, Peter said to him, "I have no silver or gold, but what I have I give you; in the name of Jesus Christ of

Nazareth, stand up and walk" (3:6). Naturally the people were impressed and amazed. They recognized this man because he had been lame from birth and was daily at the Beautiful Gate begging for alms. So the people ran to the apostles utterly astonished and ready to bring them great honor. But Peter saw what was happening and said to them, "You Israelites, why do you wonder at this, or why do you stare at us, as though by our own power or piety we had made him walk? The God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, the God of our ancestors has glorified his servant Jesus. . . . And by faith in his name, his name itself has made this man strong, whom you see and know; and the faith that is through Jesus has given him this perfect health in the presence of all of you" (3:12, 13). They knew whence their power had come.

Commenting about this miracle, F. F. Bruce writes: "Cornelius a Lapide tells us how Thomas Aquinas called upon Pope Innocent II once when the latter was counting a large sum of money. 'You see, Thomas,' said the pope, 'the church can no longer say, "Silver and gold have I none."' 'True, holy father,' said Thomas, 'and neither can she now say, "Arise and walk."' As churches grow in size and wealth, sometimes they come to rely upon human wisdom and ability. The church ever needs to learn that power comes from God, not human wealth, wisdom, or strength.

The presence of the Spirit in the book of Acts means that God's guidance and leadership is not always predictable. He speaks through his appointed leaders as in the days of Peter and James, but he may speak also through prophets. He used Agabus to forecast a famine and to speak to Paul about his imprisonment (21:10). Prophets are mentioned at Antioch (13:1) in a general way, but others named specifically as prophets are Philip and his four unmarried daughters (21:9) and Judas and Silas (15:32). The Adventist Church is familiar with the presence of a prophet in the person of Ellen White and how she stood up against leaders of the Church to rebuke or correct them. Though we do not have such a living prophet today, the Church must be open continually to prophetic voices that speak against beliefs and actions of the Church that are not in harmony with God's principles and values. The bureaucracy of the Church must not stifle the spontaneity of the Spirit because it may lead in unexpected ways.

The Church must be always open to guidance from the Spirit. It was instructed to preach the gospel beyond the borders of Judea and to include Samaria

and the ends of the earth. Yet how difficult it was to think outside the box for people living within it. Within the box, the thinking was that the church should be Jewish, all males were to be circumcised on the eighth day, worship should center on the temple with its daily sacrifices, and evangelism outside of Judea was to be among the Diaspora Jews. All of these “doctrines” were biblically based. Israel was God’s elect. God had established the rite of circumcision as a sign of the covenant with Abraham. The temple sacrifices were specified and commanded in Leviticus. The Jews could only think of Gentiles becoming Jews before they could become baptized. Evangelism meant making Gentiles into Jews. How could God lead the church outside the box? On one hand it was to preach the gospel to all the world; but on the other it was encased in a box. How could it accomplish its task while still there?

It is not easy to move people steeped in one way of thinking to adopt another. Such change cannot be done overnight. Probably the first step was the appointment of the seven Hellenistic “deacons” to assist the apostles with care for neglected widows among the Hellenists. Because of their exposure to out-of-the-box thinking, these Greek-speaking Jews pushed the door open a bit. This is hinted at, first, in the charge against Stephen that he “never stops saying things against this holy place and the law” (6:13). Stephen was probably spelling out the implication of Christ’s death with respect to the law of Moses and the temple. Stephen’s theology and his martyrdom led to persecution in Jerusalem, especially of the Hellenistic wing, which led to the scattering of members into the surrounding regions. The apostles were spared probably because they were apparently considered good Jews (8:1).

At any rate, this persecution led to the second step. First, Philip was forced into Samaria and began to preach to the Samaritans, quite an event considering the hostile relationship that existed between the Jews and the Samaritans. When the Jerusalem brethren heard about the success in Samaria, they sent Peter and John to investigate. This led to their preaching among the many Samaritan villages. Remember, it was John and his brother James who had asked the Lord to command fire to come down from heaven to destroy the Samaritans when they did not receive him (Luke 9:54). This was a major breakthrough considering past relationships

between Jews and Samaritans. The apostles were beginning to break out of their provincial box.

The next advance was Philip’s preaching to the Ethiopian eunuch and his baptism. This was the first time a Jewish Christian approached a Gentile, a Gentile who was a eunuch, no less. According to Bruce: “It is questionable whether a eunuch could have been admitted to the commonwealth of Israel as a full proselyte; at an earlier time eunuchs were excluded from religious privileges in Israel (Deut. 23:1), although Isa. 56:3 ff. foreshadows the removal of this ban.”³ In this case, the apostles took two major steps forward: baptizing a Gentile and bringing a eunuch into membership.

The next major advance toward the goal of preaching to the Gentiles was the conversion of Paul. Later events in Acts demonstrate the significance of this event. At his conversion, he was told that he was chosen to take Jesus to the Gentiles (9:15).

THE CHURCH EVER NEEDS TO LEARN THAT POWER COMES FROM GOD, NOT HUMAN WEALTH, WISDOM, OR STRENGTH.

The following step was very significant because Peter was involved with Gentiles. We usually think about Paul when we recall the relationship of the apostles to the Gentiles. We have gotten the impression that Peter was limited to service among the Jews. But in this particular experience, he was the first of the apostles to go to the home of a true Gentile. Notice how cautiously Peter approached this situation. The first thing he told Cornelius and his friends was, “You yourselves know that it is unlawful for a Jew to associate with or to visit a Gentile” (10:28). He knew that what he was doing was unprecedented, so he took with him six others as witnesses (11:12). The brethren at Jerusalem heard that the Gentiles had accepted the gospel and how it was done. “So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticized him, saying, ‘Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them?’” (11:1-3).


Peter truly realized the significance of this event. The providential events—his vision and that of Cornelius timed so his visitors would come just when Peter was puzzled about the meaning of the vision—and the implication of Peter’s vision impressed him profoundly. He could only say, “I see the light. Everything is falling into place.” “I truly

ANDREWS UNIVERSITY



Photo: Violetta Walker, Art/TESL Design: Heidi Vega, Graphic Design/French

body CORPUS
mind MENS
spirit SPIRITUS

Andrews  University
www.andrews.edu
1 - 800 - 253 - 2874

understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him" (10:34-35). Final confirmation came to him when the Holy Spirit fell upon all those who heard the Word. With such a signal manifestation of God's blessing, he could only say, "Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?" (10:47). Peter was a reluctant pioneer in the proclamation of the gospel to the Gentiles.

The believers were scattered to new areas "as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch, and they spoke the word to no one except Jews" (11:19). Before long, they were preaching to the Gentiles, who became believers (11:21). When the headquarters church in Jerusalem heard about this, it sent Barnabas to investigate and when he saw the grace of God, he rejoiced, and he exhorted them all to remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast devotion. . . . And a great many people were brought to the Lord" (11:23). Barnabas remembered Paul, sought him out, and brought him back to Antioch, and together they labored among the Gentiles for a year. Here the Holy Spirit directed the setting aside of both men for the special work among the Gentiles.

And so they began the first missionary journey, which took them to Cyprus and parts of Asia Minor, and they made many believers. "When they arrived, they called the church together and related all that God had done with them, and how he had opened a door of faith for the Gentiles" (14:27). But after a while some came down from Judea and taught the members in Antioch that they cannot be saved unless they were circumcised according to the custom of Moses. Paul and Barnabas could sense immediately the significance of the issue. All their work would be for naught if these Judaizers' view prevailed. The

debate must have been fierce; it could not be resolved. The Judaizers also sensed the significance of the issue, which meant that the law of Moses would be abandoned. This debate was the tip of the iceberg. So it was decided that Paul and Barnabas would go to Jerusalem to discuss this issue with the apostles and elders.

A similar problem appeared in Galatia, probably after the Jerusalem Council. Paul had preached justification by faith alone. However, Judaizers came in and upset the faith of the Galatians. They must have quoted Genesis 17:10-11, 14: "This is my covenant, which you shall keep, between me and you and your offspring after you. Every male among you shall be circumcised. . . . Any uncircumcised male who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin shall be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant." Moses also confirmed this rule in his law.

The Judaizers must have been quite convincing. Paul must have had his gospel wrong. So the converts went with the Judaizers and became circumcised. But when Paul heard what had happened, he quoted Genesis 15:6: "And he believed the LORD;

and the LORD reckoned it to him as righteousness." Abraham himself was justified by faith. Circumcision came later, but he was already justified. Abraham did not need to be circumcised to be justified. A covenant cannot be altered after it is made, so the law of Moses coming 430 years later could not annul the promise made to Abraham. What the law did was to make transgressions evident so that people would look for the offspring to deliver them from this bondage to the power of sin. "And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise" (Gal. 3:29).

We can imagine the debate by listening in. The Judaizers had Scripture on their side, but so did Paul. Paul had a slight disadvantage because the Judaizers could quote Scripture directly without any interpretation. They had Genesis and the law of Moses on their side. They had tradition also, the practice of circumcision for two thousand years. Peter stood up to defend Paul and Barnabas. He told about his experience with Cornelius and how the Spirit had fallen upon them without being circumcised. We both, he said, will be saved through grace. Then Barnabas and Paul told about their experience among the Gentiles, how God had wonderfully brought them to conversion and

helped them through the Spirit to live moral and upright lives without being circumcised. Surely the Spirit was leading and guiding in this whole experience. Then James having heard from Peter, Barnabas, and Paul felt compelled as Peter did from his experience with Cornelius that God was moving the church in a new direction and concluded that the Gentiles need not be circumcised to become Christians.

What a momentous decision! Christianity was moving from a provincial to a universal religion. No one would be favored because of his nationality. No one would have an advantage over anyone else because faith, not circumcision, was the basis for entrance into God's family. No longer was the male gender the determining factor for the sign of the covenant. This action transformed Christianity from a national sect to an international faith. As circumcision was eliminated as a necessity, it became crystal clear that no works whatever were necessary for salvation. The grace of

THE JEWS COULD ONLY THINK OF GENTILES BECOMING JEWS BEFORE THEY COULD BECOME BAPTIZED. EVANGELISM MEANT MAKING GENTILES INTO JEWS. HOW COULD GOD LEAD THEM OUTSIDE OF THE BOX?

God and faith in Jesus Christ alone brought salvation.

Can the Church of today, led by the Holy Spirit, move and advance with God to make such momentous decisions? As the twenty-first century starts, can the Adventist Church move out of the box into new ways of thought and action? When we understand the background and thinking of the early apostles, we can hardly believe that they advanced so far so quickly. Yet they did. How about us? We need to think outside the box in matters that deal with church organization, church financing, the role of women in the church, the role of third-world Christians in the leadership of the Church, the structure of our educational work on the academy and college/university levels, the need for a gracious transition for those who were previously in the majority. There is much where thinking God's thoughts after him, following the guidance of the Holy Spirit, needs to be done.

By studying the church in the book of Acts we learn also about tensions that existed, yet through it all the church advanced as it followed God's leadership. There was tension about the distribution of food to the widows, Ananias and Sapphira holding back part of what

they had promised, the more open Hellenistic theology of Stephen, preaching to the Samaritans, the baptism of the Ethiopian eunuch, Saul's conversion, Peter's visit to Cornelius and his baptism, the preaching to the Gentiles at Antioch, the dispute between Barnabas and Paul over Mark, the Jerusalem Council debate over whether the Gentiles should enter the church without being circumcised, the question of rebaptism for those who had received John's baptism, Paul's return to Jerusalem, and James's taking the Nazirite vow.

Through all of this, God guided the early church, yet it remained united and effective in its ministry. There obviously was no uniformity in the early church, but there was unity brought about because of loyalty to the Lord Jesus Christ. The early Christians were filled with the Spirit so that "all who believed were together and had all things in common" (2:44). This experiment of a common sharing of all things did not continue, probably because of the weakness and selfishness of human nature, as seen in the behavior of Ananias and Sapphira. However, many of the points of tension mentioned above—especially the issue of Gentile circumcision—could easily have split the church badly. Instead, the tensions demonstrated the strength of the church's unity. We today can learn from the early church a lesson on unity even amid genuine tensions.

The early church period was crucial for development and growth. The church could easily have stultified into a provincial sect, but it accepted the challenge to grow and advance as the Lord led it. In such a time, there will always be, as there is in any organization, a spectrum of opinions. The most significant issue then was the question of whether or not Gentiles should be circumcised. There were ultraconservatives, conservatives, moderates, liberals, and ultra liberals. This is not unusual, but typical. The Judaizers were the ultraconservatives. They insisted that the Gentiles must be circumcised if they would be saved. James would have been among the conservatives. He would have maintained the practice among Jewish Christians and sought to bring harmony by trying to keep Jewish practices in his sphere of authority. He tried to have Paul conform to Jewish customs by having him take part in the Nazirite vow so that Paul would not be considered a radical among the Judaizers, or even among non-Christian Jews. Peter represented the moderates. He had his encounter with God in the case of Cornelius, which opened his eyes. Though he worked among the Jews, Peter was more sympathetic toward the mission to the Gentiles.

Even though he did not have a singular experience, Peter was eating with the Gentiles in Galatia (Gal. 2:12), at least at first. The liberals were those like Barnabas and Paul who worked among the Gentiles and insisted that they become Christians without circumcision. Paul would apparently insist that, where Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians came together, they should integrate on Gentile terms rather than Jewish (Gal. 2:11-14). The ultraliberals were those who would have used their Christian freedom "as an opportunity for self-indulgence" (Gal. 5:13) and would have had as their motto "All things are lawful for me" (1 Cor. 6:12).

What is interesting as we observe events in the book of Acts, is that, in this case, God's plan corresponded with the liberals'. This may not always be the case, but for God's cause to advance it cannot be conservative. By definition, conservatives do not look forward. This does not mean that with every issue the liberal view is correct, but it does mean that the liberal view can be correct. It means that, for the Church to advance, it must take a liberal view. The Church guided by the Spirit must make the right decision.

As we look to the future, we need to keep in mind that the book of Acts is only a prologue. Even now, we write a chapter of that book, but the climax is ahead. The final chapter of the book of Acts remains to be written. The Church must await its final Pentecost. The objective in Acts was that the gospel should be proclaimed in the capital of the Roman Empire—Rome. Our Rome is truly the ends of the world.

Notes and References

1. All references are taken from the New Revised Standard Version and, unless otherwise indicated, from the book of Acts.
2. *The New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1955), 84.
3. *Ibid.*, 187.

Sakae Kubo lives in Chico, California. During his forty-two years of service to Adventist education he has held positions as professor of New Testament at Andrews University, librarian of the SDA Theological Seminary, dean of the Walla Walla School of Theology, president of Newbold College, and vice president for Academic Affairs and dean of the college at Atlantic Union College. He is the author of eighteen books and over fifty articles.
skubo@cmc.net