

The Doctor Who Attended His Own Funeral

By

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Alongside Pastor Suzuki, our doctor friend was on the train platform to meet us several weeks ago when our family exited the bullet train that had taken us from Tokyo to Kyoto. My wife Gertrude, daughter Sheryl and I were back in Kyoto as guests of the Kyoto Evangelical Church for the dedication of their new church building. Our son, Dr Ronald Hesselgrave, was also there as the guest of our friend Dr. Hiroshi Sakakida who had generously provided funds so that he could begin missionary work with Compassion in Rockford. Dr. Sakakida is the only man I have ever known who not only arranged, but also attended, his own funeral!

Of course, this requires an explanation. So travel with me back to the 1950's.

How much can a man of medicine be required to believe?

Mission reports often make “finding Jesus” sound like a very easy thing. It was not so in the case of one Dr. Hiroshi Sakakida of Kyoto, Japan. As a medical student he began to read the Bible. He found it to be the source of many “good lessons.” But he certainly could not accept it all. As far as he was concerned it was not the Bible but science that would solve the riddles of the universe . . . if they were to be solved at all.

Months and even years flew by. Then, in October of 1958, Dr. Sakakida joined our English Bible class in order to learn—what else?—English! In his case, however, learning what the Bible teaches became more important than learning the English language. As he now testifies, his “eyes were opened to Christianity.” But believing the Bible did not come easily. Dr. Sakakida had questions that were very much his own.

“Do you have to believe in the virgin birth of Christ to become a Christian? he queried one Sunday morning.

“Why do you ask?” I said.

“Because, if you do, I can never become a Christian. As a medical man I could never believe in the virgin birth.”

Now that was a Catch 22 question before “Catch 22” was even part of our vocabulary! Were I to answer “Yes, you do” he had already decided he could not accept the Gospel. If I answered “No,” very likely he would become the kind of “Christian” that believed what he wanted to believe and rejected the rest. Japan already had a sufficient number of that kind of “Christians.”

So I said, “*Sensei*, please continue to study the Bible. If the Holy Spirit ever reveals to you who Jesus really was and is, the virgin birth will not be a problem.”

Dr. Sakakida continued in the class and the more he studied the more impressed he was, not only with who Jesus' real identity but also with his own—as he now puts it, “a selfish, disobedient and unbelieving sinner.” He also came to realize that “science could never rule my life.”

A question for the doctor

In 1959 we celebrated one hundred years of Protestant missions in Japan, and, as a sovereign God would have it, we were also to celebrate Dr. Sakakida's spiritual

birthday! We had invited Dr. Oswald J. Smith of Toronto, Canada, to speak at a centennial evangelistic service in Kyoto. Perhaps 200 people or so were in attendance that night—among them though unnoticed by me, was my friend, Dr. Sakakida.

Given the university and classical culture setting, Smith's message must have seemed so simple to some as to be unworthy of a hearing. But it was the Gospel. And as he concluded the message Smith posed an even more simple but thought-provoking question. "Suppose a certain man is deathly ill. His doctor says, 'There is one remedy for your illness. Take this medicine and you will live. Refuse to take it and you will die.' Now suppose that man refuses to take the medicine and dies. Tell me, did he die because he was sick? Or did he die because he refused to take the medicine?"

The evangelist spoke a few more words and started to give an invitation. But before he could complete the invitation, I felt a hand on my shoulder. It was the hand of Dr. Sakakida. His eyes were moistened but his words unwavering: "I will become a Christian tonight. Will you go forward with me?"

My doctor friend had discovered who Jesus was and is. The virgin birth and similar questions were problems no more. His testimony was crystal clear. Before long Mrs. Sakakida came to Christ. Over the years that followed, numerous colleagues and patients have accepted his invitation to visit our church and a number of them have become followers of Jesus.

Japan's most unusual funeral

Please fast-forward to a day sometime in early 2002. Dr. Sakakida must have been thinking about his advancing age, the state of his health, some books he hoped to finish, the needs of the church, and so on. How it all came together, I cannot be sure. But, as he explains it, he realized that if he lived until his 77th birthday in November he would have lived seven years longer than his threescore and ten. A unique plan gradually took shape. He would not await his death to have a funeral! He would will his body to the university medical school, schedule a *seigen sogi* (which he translates as a "funeral service" and "farewell party" rolled into one!), and devote his remaining days and energies primarily to serving Christ and the church.

My inquiries have yielded no knowledge of any such "funeral" ever being held in Japan (or elsewhere, for that matter) but this is what happened. At Dr. Sakakida's personal invitation and expense, on November 16, 2003 some 220 people gathered at the Regal Hotel in central Kyoto for his *seigen sogi*. Included were five government leaders, eight executives of the Kyoto Medical Society, five representatives of publishing houses, 27 officers of the Kyoto Dietician Society, 23 staff members of the hospital of which Dr. Sakakida was superintendent, 24 of his diabetic patients, and 19 members of his extended family. Three-fourths of those attending were not yet Christians. All heard Dr. Sakakida's pastor, Rev. Yoshio Suzuki, speak about Christ and who he is; about life and living; and death and dying. Three new books authored by Sakakida were announced and made available: I Love to Tell the Story of Jesus (241 pages!), The Influence of Christians on Medical Science, and How to Treat Diabetes Mellitus. Following the service all were invited to a full course dinner in the Regal Dining Room.

What is one's reaction when meeting someone whose funeral service had already taken place? I'm not sure about others. And I have had but one such experience. But on the train platform that day last June my thought was, "Praise the Lord! You're still here

my friend and brother!” And it occurs to me that many others will similarly praise God for his presence before the Lord finally takes him home!