PROGRESS NOTES
CHRISTIAN MEDICAL FOUNDATION INTERNATIONAL

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A Surgical Consideration of Christmas “The Beginning of American Abdominal Surgery”

Little is known in American Medical and Surgical writings about the Christmas day in 1809 that began American Abdominal Surgery. It truly has been a wonderful matter of amazing knowledge to me as a surgeon that the first laparotomy in America and possibly in the world was done on Christmas day in 1809 at Danville, Kentucky on the American Frontier. The procedure was done by Doctor Ephraim McDowell who had gone to medical school in Edinburgh, Scotland and had left Scotland for his native America prior to his graduation. At Edinburgh he had witnessed the drainage of a huge ovarian cyst but had not witnessed the excision of an ovarian cyst by celiotomy. That procedure had not been accomplished in America or anywhere in the planet earth.

Dr. McDowell went to visit a patient who was believed by her doctors that she was pregnant with twins and was in her tenth month of gestation. Consultation was obtained with Dr. McDowell who went many miles by horseback to see her. His diagnosis of Mrs. Crawford was that she had developed a very large ovarian tumor which needed to be treated surgically. Mrs. Crawford believed Dr. McDowell and went to Danville on horseback, a trip of many miles, her abdomen resting on the saddle horn. Danville had no hospital so Mrs. Crawford was hospitalized in Dr. McDowell’s home.

The Operation was carried out in the doctor’s home. Anesthesia had not been developed so she was given an alcohol concoction termed “Cherry Bounce”. The operation began with Dr. McDowell praying and asking of God’s help and guidance. She sang hymns during the procedure which was done on Christmas morning with the Doctor’s Episcopal Church praying and petitioning God’s help for doctor and patient.

When the lower abdomen was opened it was found that the cyst was not adherent to the intestines or to the peritoneum. The operation done in Edinburgh which McDowell had observed was only an opening and draining of the huge cyst. Dr. McDowell with God’s direction and help decided to remove the entire cyst which was extremely large but mobile. Ligating and tying bleeding points with thread, the entire cystic tumor was excised. The abdomen was closed with thread sutures. The patient survived and was in several days allowed to return to her home.

It could be said that American abdominal surgery began as a Christmas gift to American surgeons and physicians and their patients 200 years ago. The procedure was done by a young American trained in Virginia and Scotland; a young surgeon who prayed aloud prior to his procedure in the operating area in his home on Christmas day 1809 with his church praying for him and his patient during the operation. Mrs. Crawford lived for over forty years after the procedure and lived in good health. Dr. McDowell received his medical degree from the University of Maryland in the 1820’s. The operation which he instituted was attempted in Scotland and England as well as Germany with the patients not surviving. The technical aspects of the surgery were done as McDowell had done with the exception that they did not begin their procedures with prayer.

After my decision in the 1950’s to become an active Christian rather than just an occasional church goer, I decided to begin my operative procedures praying aloud as McDowell did at the beginning of every procedure. God blessed me and my patients throughout my over fifty years of surgical practice as an American Board Surgery surgeon and a believing, spirit-filled Christian.

Dr. Bill was invited to Regents University to attend an event to celebrate Dr. Yong’s installation as the first J. Rodman Williams Professor of Theology and to see and visit Regents University and Regents Library where Dr. Bill donated his vast library of his and early Charismatic ministry tapes.
Coppi' Encounters

Holidays are joyful and happy days; however, they can be very lonely times too. I have experienced both. Joy and loneliness can not only be during Holidays but every day. I spoke last month of my working at the V.A. Hospital as an “undercover” volunteer where I saw and visited many lonely and sad patients. I would often wonder where were their loved ones as I never saw or seen any evidence that anyone had come to visit them. One particular case I would like to share with you was about a man who had been diagnosis with cancer and I could tell that he did not have long to live if our Lord did not heal him. I would stop by his room and chat each time I was at the V.A. hospital. I never saw anyone visiting nor did I see any evidence that someone had come to see him. He was alone and dying. One day I asked him “Do you have any family or friends that come to visit you”. He looked at me with these very sad-vacant eyes and said “Yes, I have a son but we had a “rift” and he has not spoken to me in years”. Of course, I am aware there are always two sides to every disagreement but as I listened and heard this dying man cry and tell me his side, my heart ached for him. His dying wish was to see his son and make amends and tell him he loved him before he died. I finally said, “If you will give me his name and address, I will write him a letter for you”. He did and I wrote a letter to his son telling him his daddy’s dying wish. He never came but the day his daddy died, I was in his room. I remember vividly his words he spoke as he lifted himself from the bed with his boney arms – “no one loves me – no one loves me”. I stood by his bedside and was able to say to him “Sir, that is not true, Jesus loves you very much. He died for you and He is with you now”. He left this world for a better place hearing that he was indeed loved.

I can remember when I was going through a very difficult time in my life; a friend told me “Coppi, Jesus is with you – lean on Him”. I also remember my reply “but I want to see skin”. Jesus is a spirit – He dwells within us, the body of Christ. We are His “skin” – His hands, feet, eyes, and voice. We are the tabernacle of our Lord.

Acts 7:48 says “Howbeit the most High dwelleth not in temples made with hands”.

John 3:16 says “For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life”.

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