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Still vs. Palmer: A Remembrance of the Famous Debate

By L. Ted Frigard, DC, PhC

Dr. Bartlett Joshua (B.J.) Palmer finished his lecture and was relaxing in a leather chair, smoking a cigar. I approached him for an autograph on my copy of his latest book, *Fame and Fortune*. He was my first hero, at a time when I desperately needed one. I studied the face of the man who helped shape our history as he scrawled "B.J. - Baltimore - 4/17/55" on the inside of the first page, before handing the book back to me. With trepidation, I asked, "B.J., is it true that Dr. D.D. Palmer stole chiropractic from Dr. A.T. Still, the founder of osteopathy?"

B.J.'s eyes flashed with anger: "Dr. Still must not have been short of cash, because he never collected the \$10,000 that my father offered if he could prove it (that chiropractic had been 'stolen')." Then he looked kindly at me and smiled. "Sit down, son. You are the future of chiropractic; perhaps you should know more about its past."

I sat down as B.J. laid his cigar aside. "Father often attended the annual Mississippi Valley Spiritualists Camp Meeting at Clinton, Iowa," he began. "That is where he first received messages from Dr. Jim Atkinson on the principles of chiropractic. We attended some of the meetings at Spiritualist Camp with father. We can recall vividly, even now, the heated argument between Dr. Andrew T. Still and Dr. D.D. Palmer on the merits of chiropractic and osteopathy. Dr. Andrew Still argued the rule of the artery was supreme, and my father took the position that nerve impulses are the prime movers of all function. Both men were well-known characters and they attracted a large crowd, which gathered around them on the lawn.

"Andrew Taylor Still was a medical doctor in the Civil War, and then he developed the principles of osteopathy. He was a tall, big-boned, rough-hewn man; a strong-willed, rugged individualist. His gray beard was cropped about four inches from his chin. He was an imposing man. Our job was to distribute copies of *The Chiropractor* to everyone in the crowd and then we could listen to the debate."

Taking a puff from his cigar, B. J. described the debate:

"You're a thief!" shouted an angry Dr. Still, as D.D. Palmer confronted him. "You stole my work and labeled it 'chiropractic.'"

"How could I steal that which you never owned?" retorted the elder Palmer.

"I founded osteopathy in 1874," Dr. Still noted. "It is based on the manipulation of the bones of the spine to allow the blood to flow smoothly and without interruption."

"I founded chiropractic in 1895," replied Dr. Palmer. "It is based on the fundamental of the specific adjustment of the subluxated bones of the spine to free impinged nerves and allow nerve impulses to flow to the body without interruption."

"I am a physician!" shouted Dr. Still.

"I am not a physician!" Dr. Palmer countered.

Dr. Still retaliated: "I was a medical doctor long before I founded osteopathy. About 30 years ago, I began to realize the power of nature to cure after a skillful manipulation of conditions to allow pure and healthy blood to flow into the diseased area. With this faith and by this method of reasoning, I began to treat diseases by osteopathic means - and obtained good results."

"I was not a medical doctor before I founded chiropractic," contended Dr. Palmer. "Therefore, my mind was not burdened with medical theories to conflict with the pureness of the chiropractic principle. Chiropractic had no previous theories to wrestle with. It deals with the life force which flows over the nervous system. This power flows from the brain over the nerves as an impulse. This is the primary source of life and health."

"I hesitated years before proclaiming my new discovery," decried Dr. Still. "I finally took my stand on this rock upon which the science of osteopathy was built, where I have stood and fought mighty battles!"

Dr. Palmer seized the moment: "Perhaps you waited because your education was medical, and it is difficult to get away from those ideas which were thoroughly instilled in your mind. The circulation of blood is simply a channel by means of which food in liquid form is carried to all tissues. Blood is secondary and under the control of the nervous system."

Dr. Still persisted, "The source of energy within the body is the dark red fluid called blood. Pure blood is essential to good health. A disturbed artery marks the moment when disease begins to sow its seeds of destruction in the human body."

"The source of energy is the vital force which flows over the nervous system," countered Dr. Palmer.

"Nerves control all function, including the musculature of the arterial walls, which controls the force and flow of blood by contracting and relaxing. The moment disease starts in the human body is when the vertebra slips into a position of misalignment called 'subluxation.' This narrows the opening between the vertebrae and impinges the nerve, causing its expression to become abnormal, resulting in disease. The body is controlled by nerves, not blood!"

"The rule of the artery is absolute!" claimed Dr. Still, only to be met with an impassioned Dr. Palmer: "The nerve system is supreme!"

Dr. Still argued: "I discovered that health is the result of free and uninterrupted flow of blood through the arteries and veins. Disease results from the obstruction to the free flow of blood. An osteopathic manipulation releases adhesions of the muscles and joints, which permits normal blood flow to the diseased area, resulting in health. As a means of relieving human suffering, allopathy, homeopathy - and now, osteopathy - has each improved upon its predecessor."

"If you combine osteopathy with other therapeutical methods, the world will believe that osteopathy is insufficient," Dr. Palmer avowed. He asked, "What of the practitioners? They are not satisfied with osteopathy, so they combine it with drugs and surgery. In the future, without your influence, they will become physicians and surgeons. Eventually, your fundamentals will be lost in the practice of medicine. Doesn't that 'jar your mother's preserves?'"

"Osteopathy is a pure and drugless science," Dr. Still insisted. "It will survive as such!"

"It is a drugless science in definition only," Dr. Palmer vehemently protested. "It is well-known you frequently prescribe drugs and perform surgery. Your school in Kirksville has a hospital where surgery is the last osteopathic manipulation!"

"It is true that we use the best therapies of all therapeutical systems," answered Dr. Still, in a roundabout manner. "But the practice of osteopathy is pure and drugless."

"And there is a difference!" exclaimed Dr. Palmer. "Chiropractic is not a therapeutical system. It deals exclusively with the cause of disease. It is a separate and distinct science based on giving a spinal adjustment for the cause of disease!"

Queried Dr. Still, "What is your position on microorganisms? Germs are the cause of many diseases, and healthy blood is the greatest germicide!"

Dr. Palmer stood firm: "Germs are scavengers which feed on dead and dying tissue. Return the tissue to a state of good health and there is no food for the scavengers!"

"The chiropractor is a limited mechanical manipulator, while the osteopath is an all-around physician," Dr. Still challenged. "The osteopath treats the body and all its ailments!"

"The chiropractor treats the cause of those ailments," Dr. Palmer contested. "The subluxation of the vertebrae as the cause of disease was an original principle. No other science has ever taught it before! From this foundation, step by step, I have evolved the original and distinct science of chiropractic!"

"I maintain that chiropractic is a child of osteopathy," Dr. Still sustained.

"Of all the known therapeutic systems, osteopathy is the only one which bears any similarity, because both work on the spine," acknowledged Dr. Palmer. "If related, they would be distant cousins."

"Bull dribble! Chiropractors have usurped part of osteopathy and are faking it shamelessly!"

"The practitioners of massage and Swedish movements have made the same claim about osteopathy!"

"The general osteopathic treatment is far more than a combination of massage and Swedish movements," pointed out Dr. Still. "It includes rib stretching, modified spinal column stretching and spinal manipulation."

"Why not include chiropractic, as well?" questioned Dr. Palmer. "The world benefits all the more when osteopathy advances toward chiropractic principles."

"The human race is in need of the benefits of pure osteopathy," declared Dr. Still.

Just as forthright, Dr. Palmer conveyed: "Humanity cries out for chiropractic care. The premise of chiropractic is simple, as all the great truths are simple." He mused, "It may be too simple for your complex mind to understand."

"Osteopathy is only complex when practiced by some, other than the founder," said Dr. Still. "Because they often dilute it from its original premise!"

Dr. Palmer agreed: "The same can be said about the practice of chiropractic. It is when you drink from the fountainhead of each system that the difference becomes very noticeable." To this, Dr. Still added, "If the fundamental principles of chiropractic and osteopathy are different, time will tell which is correct and will survive."

"Time always has and always will perpetuate those methods which better serve mankind," echoed Dr. Palmer. "Only time will prove which is superior and will survive."

Taking another puff of his cigar, B.J. remarked: "After this debate, my father wrote that he was more than pleased to read that our cousins, the osteopaths, were adopting chiropractic methods and advancing along scientific and philosophical lines." Rising from his chair, he commented, "There were giants in those days," before walking away.

I reflected upon his words; I felt I had been privileged to hear about a great moment in history. Years later, I tried to locate this debate. It was nowhere in written literature. It made me realize that historical occurrences are not always as important as writing and relating what has happened in history.

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