

DR. WILSON GREATBATCH

Many years ago Dr. Greatbatch spoke at a Scripture Science Forum in Joplin, Mo. Because I am unable, at this time, to put my hands on a copy of his remarks on that occasion, the following is a condensation of an excellent article, “Man of the Millennium” by Joseph Radder.

There is a reason why Dr. Greatbatch’s name is not as familiar as that of Jonas Salk, Thomas Edison, and Alexander Graham Bell. That’s the way he wanted it. As the inventor of the “implantable pacemaker” he could have been both rich and famous, but chose instead to live a modest life in the obscure town of Clarence, N.Y. His home is a small, red brick, 19th century school house. His garage workshop features his “desk” which is merely a door resting on two filing cabinets. His book shelves are wooden planks on piles of bricks. Wilson is a deeply religious man and is quick to credit God for all of his successes. He holds over 150 patents and numerous other honors.

During W.W. II his military career exposed him to many dangers. While others died around him, he concluded that God had spared him for a purpose. As an electronic genius he helped develop the instrumentation that would accompany monkeys in outer space. While working as an assistant professor of electrical engineering at the University of Buffalo he “accidentally” discovered the way to make an implantable pacemaker. In retrospect, of course, he knows this discovery was not an accident at all. God was orchestrating his life for a purpose.

Greatbatch describes the event this way: *“The oscillator required a 10,000 ohm resistor at the transistor base. I reached into my resistor box for one, but I misread the color coding and got a 1 megaohm resistor by mistake.”* When he plugged in the resistor, the circuit started to “squeg” with a 1.8 millisecond pulse followed by a 1 second interval during which the transistor was cut off and drew practically no current. *‘I stared at the thing in disbelief,’ he said. Wilson Greatbatch immediately realized he had discovered the way to drive a human heart.”*

It wasn’t easy to find a heart surgeon willing to try Greatbatch’s idea. Finally, Dr. William Chardack, chief of surgery at Buffalo’s Veteran’s Hospital, agreed to help. On May 7, 1958 the remarkable pacemaker was successfully implanted in a dog. After two years of extensive trials it was deemed ready to be implanted in humans. The year was 1960. It was successful!

When faced with uncertainties, Dr. Greatbatch would always take his problems to the Lord in prayer. He smiles: *“and I always got the answer”*. At the time of this amazing discovery, Greatbatch was an employee of the Taber Instrument Corp. They were enthusiastic, but balked at investing in the project as no one would sell them insurance. With only \$3,000 in savings, Greatbatch launched out on his own. Working alone with God allowed him to make faster progress because he didn’t have a bureaucracy to fight.

Early in the 1960s Greatbatch entered into a licensing agreement with Medtronic. They would manufacture the pacemakers, and Greatbatch himself would provide the batteries. The battery business itself grew to include three large plants and research facilities on Wehrle Drive in Clarence. Wilson Greatbatch Ltd. is a unique corporation. It fully funds college tuition and books for all employees and their children. He doesn’t believe in retirement and developed a solar powered canoe in 1991. His philosophy is summed up in these excerpts from his 1987 commencement address at Clarkson University: *“Success and failure are relatively unimportant in living a happy life.... I don’t think the Good Lord really cares if you succeed or fail. But he does care that you try and try hard...I should not crave success...The reward is not in the results, the reward is in the doing.... No one in the world has anything that I want badly enough to take it away from them...Don’t fear failure, don’t crave success...Things will work out. You will find true happiness and the Lord will smile on your efforts.”* Dr. Greatbatch died on September 27, 2011 at the age of 92.