

Charlemagne and Our Christian Heritage
(Presentation for Brandywine Crucible, May 23, 2004)

I chose to title my presentation: *Charlemagne and Our Christian Heritage*. Therefore, I think it is very fitting that it follows our morning devotional.

Everyone of us present in this room is a product of those ancestors that went before us – not only in our genetic make-up, but we are also a product of the culture and the spiritual values they passed on to us. When Les was writing his book, *We Are the Branches*, I was intrigued by a letter one of his ancestors wrote to a brother. In it he quoted the words to a new song he had just learned. The words he quoted were:

“Through many dangers toils and snares
I have already come.
‘Tis grace hath brought me safe thus far,
and grace will lead me home.”

Most of you recognize that as the third verse of the beloved old hymn “Amazing Grace.”

In many of the presentations I have heard in our reunions, we have seen strong evidence of a rich Christian heritage. Oh, those ancestors were not perfect. Some of them were downright scandalous. But for the most part they were people who trusted in God and faithfully tried to pass their faith on to the next generation. One of your illustrious ancestors was Sir John Hussey, Baron of Sleaford, who was beheaded by Henry VIII, supposedly for failing to send his vassals to fight for the king. But evidence indicates that he acted on principle because he became disillusioned when Henry attempted to have his daughter Mary declared illegitimate by the church.

There were ministers and other Christian leaders in your lineage. They weren’t always paragons of virtue. They suffered from human frailty – just as you and I do. But many of them were people of faith who passed that faith on to us.

But that Christian heritage goes back much further than colonial America and 16th century England. We can trace those Christian roots back twelve hundred years to medieval Germany.

Back in the summer of 1988, Les and I planned a trip to Europe and invited our two young adult children to accompany us while they were both still single and eager to travel with their parents. When it came time to go, Les was unable to get away from his work, but he insisted that the children and I go ahead without him so that the kids would not be disappointed. So Mark, Karen and I made the tour without Les.

One of the stops on our itinerary was to visit a family in Munchengladbach, Germany. Their daughter had lived with us for a year as an exchange student, and her parents visited us when it was time for her to return home. So they were eager to return the hospitality.

A highlight of our visit with them was a private tour of the cathedral built by Charlemagne in the nearby town of Aachen which borders on both the Netherlands and Belgium in western Germany. An old friend of our host was a member and held some position of authority in that church. He had us meet him there just as the last Sunday worship service was ending so that he could take us through the cathedral before it was open for public tours in the afternoon.

In the balcony facing the main altar in the sanctuary was a large marble throne that had been occupied by Charlemagne when he attended worship. Because it was a personal tour, our guide allowed Mark and Karen to sit on the throne where Charlemagne had sat. Little did we know, at

that time, that they had his royal blood flowing in their veins – as do all of you who are descended from Solomon Cox and Naomi Hussey Cox.

When a family has noble strains in their line, there are much better records from which to trace its lineage. Thanks to Eleanor Schoen and Peggy Gordon, we now have links back to Charlemagne, the Holy Roman Emperor. He is undoubtedly your most notable ancestor. In the booklet on the tables there are outlines of the lineage from Charlemagne to Naomi Hussey Cox.

Charlemagne lived from 742-814 AD and was King of the Franks from 768 until his death in 814. Charlemagne means “Charles the Great.” He was unquestionably the most famous of all medieval rulers. In other languages he is called Carlomagno or Karl des Grosse. In every language his name is inseparable from the term “great.”

Charles was descended from a long line of rulers of the Merovingian Franks of Germany and Gaul. The dynasty was founded about 500 AD by Clovis.

Charles’ grandfather, Charles Martel, referred to himself by the title “Mayor of the Palace,” but he had the power of a king.

Charles Martel was succeeded by his son “Pepin the Short.” He, too, used the title “Mayor of the Palace,” but he, too, ruled as king of the Merovingian Franks. Pepin established a friendly and cooperative relationship with the Roman Catholic Church, the only historically recognized church of the day in Western Europe.

After Pepin died on September 24, 768, the kingdom was divided between Charles and his younger brother Carloman. According to Pepin’s carefully laid plans made shortly prior to his death, Carloman was assigned rule of the central and southern portions of the realm, and Charles was given the north and western part of the kingdom that formed a sort of half circle around his brother’s portion. Though we don’t have a clear definition of the lines, Charles portion was primarily made up of the area designated “Austrasia” on this map.

Charles probably felt slighted because his younger brother was given the more desirable part of the kingdom. Carloman’s portion contained the old royal city of Soissons and the royal burial vaults. Also Charles had no territorial access to Italy, so he was cut off from the pope and from Rome.

There was a monumental case of sibling rivalry between Charles and Carloman even before the kingdom was divided, and that rivalry quickly escalated. Both brothers married early, and one rather amusing product of their rivalry is that right after Charles named his firstborn son Pepin after their father, Carloman also named his firstborn son Pepin – each suggesting that their line was the one to perpetuate the dynasty.

Within a year they had begun to disregard their father’s division. Somehow Charles gained possession of Aquitaine, reportedly by drawing lots. Aquitaine was the west-central part of France bordering on the Atlantic Ocean. Possession of it soon became a mixed blessing to Charlemagne. A tribal leader named Hunold led a revolt against the Frankish occupiers. Charles appealed to his brother in vain for help to quell the revolt. Nevertheless, Charlemagne was victorious without his brother’s aide.

About this time Bertrada, widow of Pepin, and mother of both Charles and Carloman, became involved in the conflict between her two sons. She obviously favored Charlemagne. (I can’t say

that I blame her, because Charles seemed to have the much better disposition. We'll say more about his character and personality shortly.)

Bertrada met with Carloman to try to restore peace between the two brothers. When Carloman rejected his mother's efforts, Bertrada suggested to Charles that he form an alliance with the King of Lombardy by asking for the hand of his daughter in marriage. Some historians claim that Charles was never married to Himiltrud the mother of Charles firstborn son. However, records show that Pope Stephen III tried to discourage Charles' marriage to the daughter of the Lombard king by claiming Charles' marriage to Himiltrud had never been annulled. Either way, Charles' earlier relationship with Himiltrud did not pose a serious legal problem, because at this point, the church did not enforce a policy that marriage could not be dissolved. In fact, in his lifetime, Charlemagne had five wives (one at a time) and an additional five concubines. Together they gave him eighteen known children. So Himiltrud was put aside – sent to a convent – and Charlemagne prepared to marry a daughter of Desiderius, the Lombard king.

Because the Lombards were a threat to the pope, Pope Stephen III reacted very harshly to the prospect. Carloman, seeing this as an opportunity to gain an ally, sent an envoy to the pope. Bertrada once again stepped in. She persuaded the Lombard king to make significant concessions to the church; then she visited the pope with these concessions and persuaded him to approve the alliance and the marriage.

But the intrigue was not over. Seeing himself standing alone, Carloman again sent one of his trusted men to Rome to try to convince the pope to change his mind. Carloman was able to influence some important people in papal circles. This so incensed the Lombard king that he sent an army to Rome. In reaction, it was reported that Carloman planned to attack Rome and the pope. However, Carloman died on December 4, 771, at the early age of 20, and Charlemagne became the sole ruler of the Frankish kingdom.

We don't have time to go into all the political details, but following the death of Carloman, there was a major reversal in alliances. The Lombard king, who by then was Charlemagne's father-in-law, sided with the widow of Carloman and her two very young sons. He planned to put one of the toddler boys on the throne. Charles saw this as a hostile act and sent his wife of one year back to her father. However, neither Charlemagne nor King Desiderius of Lombardy took any action against one another at this time.

What did happen soon after is very significant to our family history. Charlemagne needed a new wife from a politically powerful family.

Tassilo, the Duke of Bavaria, was also a son-in-law to the Lombard King. He probably had not been too happy about Charles dismissing his wife and sending her packing back to her father. Charlemagne chose as his new wife a cousin of the powerful Bavarian Duke; thus creating another family tie, which he hoped would cause the duke to remain neutral in any coming struggle.

This third wife was Hildegard, through whom your line descends. The marriage to Hildegard, about 772, was by far Charles' most politically significant one. It was also apparently a true love match. Hildegard bore Charlemagne at least six children before her death in April of 783. Three of Hildegard's sons lived to adulthood. You are descended from Pepin who became King of Italy and Lombardy. I need to clear up one point. Charlemagne sired two sons named Pepin. I mentioned earlier that he named his firstborn Pepin, after his father. The mother of that Pepin was Himiltrud, whom Charles put aside to marry the daughter of the Lombard king. There is some question about whether or not Charles was legally married to Himiltrud. Also the son Pepin born to her had a

physical deformity. He was referred to as Pepin the Hunchback. So it is not too surprising that the name Pepin was given to another son who would have a legal claim to the throne.

Charlemagne was clearly one of the greatest military leaders of the Middle Ages. One of his ongoing military efforts was against the barbaric and pagan Saxons who lived in the northeastern part of the kingdom. The Saxons held trees to be inhabited by gods and thus sacred. The Saxons were a plague to the neighboring Franks because they made frequent raids on the Frank villages. They pillaged and burned them, specifically targeting the churches, taking the church treasures and murdering the priests. This led to eighteen fierce campaigns that lasted 30 years before Charlemagne finally conquered the Saxons. Following one of his early victories, he gave the conquered Saxons a choice between embracing Christianity or death. Though we do not see this as an acceptable way of evangelizing, it did end that conflict. And it afforded those who chose to live, an opportunity to be exposed to the gospel.

This victory over the Saxons in addition to his earlier success over the rebellion in Aquitaine, strengthened Charles' position as king. He also took possession of the vast wealth the Saxons had accumulated through their raids and stored at Irminsul, their center of worship. This enabled Charles to build up the kingdom treasury and to reward the noblemen who had been loyal to his cause.

Meanwhile, in Italy, the Lombards who had invaded and conquered northern Italy in the late 500's, had become a constant source of irritation to the church. While Charles was dealing with the Saxons, King Desiderius had been invading the Papal States. By this time, Pope Stephen III had been replaced by Pope Hadrian II. Hadrian sent an urgent appeal for help to Charles. Charles answered the call, and began his first major war which was waged against the Lombards. Charlemagne besieged and took the Lombard city of Pavia and assumed the crown of Lombardy. The defeat of the Lombards was a blessing to the church. It didn't hurt Charlemagne any either because it added a large area to his realm! He reconfirmed his father's commitment to the pope and accepted the role of protector of the church. He and Pope Hadrian II became close friends, and it is reported that Charlemagne wept at the death of Hadrian.

Charlemagne set as a goal the revival of the Roman Empire, but one that was Christian and European in character. He embarked on a series of more than 50 campaigns designed to Christianize Bavaria and Saxony, and add them to his growing kingdom; and to put an end to the troublesome Avars in the east, to shield Italy against the raiding Saracens from the Middle East and to strengthen France's defenses against the expanding Moors. In doing so he created a vast empire much more extensive than that ruled by the first Christian Roman emperor, Constantine. In one form or another, the empire Charlemagne founded survived for 1,000 years.

Charlemagne's fame is due to far more than his military skill and exploits, however. He took his responsibility as ruler very seriously. War was not Charlemagne's love. He was much more fond of administration. Under his rule, a Europe that had been torn for centuries by conflict between tribe and creed, was united under one government and one faith. Will Durant in his *Story of Civilization* described him this way:

"He could vision large purposes, and could will the means as well as wish the ends. He could lead an army, persuade an assembly, humor the nobility, dominate the clergy..."

How did one man rule such a vast territory? He divided the empire into counties. Each county was governed on spiritual matters by a bishop or archbishop and in secular matters by a count. (I had never before made the connection between the word count and county. But that was the origin of the term county – a political division under the authority of a count.) Charlemagne appointed

emissaries to convey his wishes to the local officials. These emissaries also reviewed the actions of the officials to guard against extortion, bribery and exploitation; and to protect the Church, the poor, widows and orphans. The establishment of these emissaries served as a “Magna Carta” for the common people four hundred years before England’s aristocracy demanded their Magna Carta.

Charlemagne made military service a requirement for owning any significant amount of land. The noblemen were responsible for overseeing the military readiness in their territory. This kept the army strong. Twice a year Charlemagne called these armed property holders together in an assembly. At these assemblies the local officials were to submit to Charlemagne reports on the happenings in their areas. And Charles submitted his proposals for legislation to groups of bishops or noblemen and welcomed their input. This resulted in legislation which he then presented to the whole assembly. Usually it met with their shouted approval. This gave the people a real sense that they were participating in their government. Because of his strength and wisdom, he was able to maintain a considerable degree of law and order in a very troubled age. Charlemagne’s approach did much to transform barbarism into civilization.

Charlemagne also made other great contributions to civilization and to cultural improvement. His favorite residence was in Aachen, therefore it became his capital city and the center of his empire – even though it was not centrally located. That is where he built his palace and the palace chapel that is today’s cathedral. There is a large courtyard separating them.

Aachen was at the time of Charlemagne a resort city. It was noted for its warm mineral springs. Charles took full advantage of the springs by constructing huge Roman type baths in the palace watered by the springs. They were large, indoor swimming pool sized baths – not unlike the one outside this building. They were a great source of pleasure for Charlemagne, his family and his many guests. The spas of Aachen are still a tourist attraction today.

Charlemagne set up a Palace School under the direction of the wise English scholar Alcuin and encouraged interest in education, philosophy and literature. Through his influence a strong unified culture was established which survived centuries of invasions and disorder.

During his reign there was growing rivalry and dissention between the church in Rome and the Byzantine Church in Constantinople. Because Charlemagne repeatedly defended the Roman Church, it made good sense to the church leaders in Rome to firm their alliance with the Franks by proclaiming him emperor. On Christmas Day in the year 800, Pope Leo III crowned Charlemagne “Emperor of the West.” Thus his title “Emperor of the Romans” or “Holy Roman Emperor” was born.

What we know about Charlemagne the man is due almost exclusively from the writings of his secretary and friend, Einhard. In the Frankish culture into which Charlemagne was born, learning was very scarce. Einhard was born in the Frankish realm about 775 AD. He was brought up in the monastery of Fulda, which was the center of learning in the Frankish lands. When Einhard was an adolescent, in 791 or 792, the abbot of Fulda persuaded Charlemagne to take the young man into his court. He proved himself capable and faithful and he served as Charlemagne’s secretary, scribe and kingdom treasurer until Charles death. Einhard was devoted to Charlemagne and Charles often trusted him to undertake important state errands. After Charlemagne’s death, Einhard wrote a biography which serves to give us some personal glimpses of the man Charlemagne.

Einhard described Charles as “large and strong of body, fond of active exercise, genial but dignified, and sensible and moderate in his way of life.” Many scholars assumed the descriptions of the king were exaggerated because Einhard idolized him. One of his physical descriptions of

Charles made him out to be well over six feet tall. This seemed strange for the son of the king referred to as Pepin the Short! Einhard's critics were sure that his estimate of Charles' height was an exaggeration – until measurements were taken of his skeletal remains entombed in the cathedral at Aachen. He was well over six feet tall. That added credence to some of Einhard's other observations.

I found the language in Einhard's biography delightful. I would like to quote just a few comments about Charlemagne's family life in Einhard's own words:

“Thus did Charles defend and increase as well as beautify his kingdom, as is well known; and here let me express my admiration of his great qualities and his extraordinary constancy alike in good and evil fortune. I will now forthwith proceed to give the details of his private and family life.

“After his father's death, while sharing the kingdom with his brother, he bore his unfriendliness and jealousy most patiently, and, to the wonder of all, could not be provoked to be angry with him.

“[He] married Hildegard, a woman of high birth, of Suabian origin. He had three sons by her— Charles, Pepin and Louis— p.45

“The plan that he adopted for his children's education was, first of all, to have both boys and girls instructed in the liberal arts. p.46

“He lost only three of all of his children before his death, two sons and one daughter, Charles who was the eldest, Pepin (*your ancestor*), whom he had made King of Italy, Hruodrud, his oldest daughter, whom he had betrothed to Constantine, Emperor of the Greeks... The King gave a striking proof of his fatherly affection at the time of Pepin's death: he appointed the grandson [Bernard – *again your ancestor*] to succeed Pepin, and had the granddaughters brought up with his own daughters.

“Again, when he was told of the death of Hadrian, the Roman Pontiff, whom he had loved most of all his friends, he wept as much as if he had lost a brother, or a very dear son. p.47

“He was so careful of the training of his sons and daughters that he never took his meals without them when he was at home... p.48

“Charles was large and strong and of lofty stature, though not disproportionately tall (his height is well known to have been seven times the length of his foot); the upper part of his head was round, his eyes very large and animated, nose a little long, hair fair, and face laughing and merry. p.50

“Charles was temperate in eating, and particularly so in drinking, for he abominated drunkenness in anybody, much more in himself and those in his household. p.52

“Charles had the gift of ready and fluent speech, and could express whatever he had to say with the utmost clearness.” (Einhard goes on to say that Charlemagne was as fluent in Latin as in his native language and that he also understood Greek.) p.53

Einhard also says:

“He cherished with the greatest fervor and devotion the principles of the Christian religion which had been instilled in him from infancy. p.54

“He was very forward in succoring the poor... he not only made a point of giving in his own country, but when he discovered that there were Christians living in poverty in Syria, Egypt, and Africa, at Jerusalem, Alexandria and Carthage, he had compassion on their wants, and used to send money over the seas to them.” (End of quotes)

When Charlemagne's health began to fail, he called together a large assembly of officials and friends to witness his intentions. He named Louis, King of Aquitania, his only surviving son by Hildegarde, to succeed him as emperor. He expressed his desires regarding the distribution of his vast estate,

- which assured that the kingdom was financially sound,
- all this children were well provided for,
- and that the poor would continue to be helped.

Einhard made a written, detailed account of his wishes.

I would like to return to Einhard's own words to tell of Charlemagne's passing:

“While wintering there, [near his palace at Aix-la-Chapelle] he was seized in the month of January, with a high fever, and took to his bed. As soon as he was taken sick, he prescribed for himself abstinence from food, as he always used to do in case of fever, thinking that the disease could be driven off, or at least mitigated, by fasting. Besides the fever, he suffered from a pain in the side, which the Greeks call pleurisy; but he still persisted in fasting, and in keeping up his strength only by draughts taken at very long intervals. He died January twenty-eighth, the seventh day from the time he took to his bed, at nine o'clock in the morning, after partaking of the Holy Communion, in the seventy-second year of his age and the forty-seventh of his reign.”

Deuteronomy 7:9 says: ***Know therefore that the Lord your God is God; he is the faithful God, keeping his covenant of love to a thousand generations of those who love him and keep his commands.***

Though we cannot look back a thousand generations, we can look back thirty some generations to an ancestor who, though he was far from perfect, loved God and kept His commands. And there have been countless faithful people in between who have passed on that faith. And we are the beneficiaries of that covenant of love. May we, too, be faithful in passing it on to future generations.