Sunday, February 27, 1977
THE ENGLISH CONNECTION (No. 2 in a Series: Our Tradition and How It Speaks to Us)
Exodus 3:1-6; II Corinthians 4:1-7

Two weeks ago, in a sermon entitled “The German Connection” we looked at some of the roots of the United Church of Christ, the denominational family of which this congregation is a part. Today we want to look back at our English roots.

As I noted two weeks ago, if we wanted to begin as far back as possible, we would need to begin with Abraham in the Old Testament and God’s covenant with him. That is the beginning of the Hebrew religion which is the cradle for Christianity. Jesus Christ came out of this background. The Christian Church began as an off shoot of the Jewish religion.

We also noted in the sermon two weeks ago that since its beginning the Christian Church has branched out in a number of directions. The chart which is included with your order of service this morning illustrates this. You will also note on the chart that those of us who think of ourselves as Protestants trace our roots to Martin Luther who was the great initiator of the Protestant Reformation in the 1500s.

Our own local congregation here has the name — “First-Plymouth Congregational Church,“ which tells us that this congregation traces its roots specifically to the congregational part of our denomination which had its beginning in England.

Let’s look at that! By the latter half of the 16th century, the Reformation which Luther had begun in Germany, had reached England in full force. The Anglican church was officially established by an act of the English Parliament in 1571, and with this act, all clergymen were compelled to subscribe to the Articles of Religion. However, a strong minority of the clergy and lay people still wanted more reforms than were present in the Anglican Church. They thought it was still too much like the church of Rome. Many of these leaders had come under the influence of Zwingli and John Calvin.

So, while the Reformation had come to England, many people felt that it had not gone far enough in reforming the church. There were two basic groups who wanted more reform.

There were the Puritans who would have awaited purification of the church by the constituted authorities. And there were the Separatists who said that reform couldn’t wait such slow processes and they were afraid it wouldn’t happen.

Thus, it was that the Separatists soon formed their own congregations and were in fact separated from the Church of England. Each congregation expressed in its own covenant what its members did and believed. Though independently organized, most of the Separatist churches agreed on the basic essentials regarding the Scriptures, conduct, prayer and leadership.

Some of the early leaders and members of these Separatist congregations found themselves harassed so much that as early as 1582, some fled to Holland to find freedom of faith and worship. At the same time other Separatist congregations were formed and survived in England.

While Holland offered a measure of security from prison or being killed, the exiles were not happy. They grew restive under the Dutch language and the cultural influence on their English children and so they began looking eagerly toward America.

When these people left for these shores, their leader Robinson, who stayed in Holland, warned them not to just stay where Luther and Calvin left them, for he was very confident that the Lord had more truth and light yet to break forth.

These were the people who came over on the Mayflower in 1620 and landed at Plymouth. Their story — including the establishment of the Mayflower Compact while in passage, the hazards of the first winter, and the celebration of the first Thanksgiving — has become part of the American saga.

The Plymouth Colony grew slowly. Meanwhile in 1630, a group of Puritans trying to steer a way which would not completely separate them from the established church, settled in Salem, Massachusetts. It wasn't long after this, however, that the Separatists and Puritans were working together in a number of ways. This combination is the real beginning of American Congregationalism.

One characteristic of these early congregational churches was the drafting by each congregation of its own covenant. For example, the covenant of the Salem Church read: "We covenant with the Lord and with one another and do bind ourselves in the presence of God to walk together in all his ways, according as He is pleased to reveal himself to us in his blessed word of truth."

These early American Congregational Churches knew nothing of the separation of religion and politics or of church and state. In the original New England towns, the local government had considerable responsibilities for and authority over the church; and only church members voted in the town elections. But the local churches objected fiercely to any domination by hierarchies or outside authorities; and in an increasingly pluralistic America the logic of their position eventually led them to become champions of religious liberty.

It is particularly interesting to note that early in the history of this country, the Congregationalists had close relationships with the Presbyterians. In the 1800s there was cooperation on the frontier in mission work between the Presbyterians and the Congregationalists. A plan of union was at one time proposed, but it was later dropped because of a number of problems.

The early Congregationalists also had a strong interest in social problems, in the anti-slavery movement and in all forms of social injustice.

Our early forefathers and mothers in the Congregational Churches were also greatly interested in good education. Colleges and seminaries were started wherever they settled. Harvard, Yale, Dartmouth, Amherst, Oberlin, Beloit, Carleton, Drury, Grinnell, and Doane are the names of just a few of the colleges and Universities started by the Congregationalists. They also started a number of special schools to serve the American Indians and hundreds of schools to help educate the blacks following the civil war. Some of these schools have now become well established colleges and universities, Howard University, Fisk, Tougaloo, Huston-Tillotson, and more.

By the year 1852, Congregationalists began to feel the need from some kind of national organization. Thus in 1852, the first national convention was held, and it dealt with such problems as building church buildings in the west, the operation of the American Home Missionary Society, and the local work and responsibility of Congregational Churches.

The next major national meeting was held in Boston in 1865, just one year before First Congregational Church here in Lincoln was begun. Out of these meetings there emerged a wider congregational fellowship. The autonomy of the local church was maintained, but at the same time the voluntary cooperation of local churches provided a unity to carry on the common interests of the church.

Throughout the years, the Congregational Churches participated in various programs of church unity. Like the Evangelical and Reformed Church, the Congregationalists merged with a number of other groups prior to the formation of the United Church of Christ in 1957.

In 1925, the Congregationalists united with the Evangelical Protestant Churches which was composed mostly of Gerrr1ans and German Swiss. Previous to that merger, in 1892, the Congregational Methodists merged with the Congregationalists. Most significant of all was the union in 1931 with the Christian Church, which in 1820 had brought together North Carolina Methodists, Vermont Baptists, and Kentucky Presbyterians.

This union established the General Council of Congregational Christian Churches, which eventually entered into merger with the Evangelical and Reformed Church to form the United Church of Christ.

So, we in the United Church of Christ see in our roots the influence of a number of different Protestant heritages — the Lutheran, the Reformed, Calvinists and others and all modified to emphasize the significance of the local congre-gation as the basic form of the Christian church.

But what does this brief look at our English connection tell us? What are some of the important emphases to remember?

1. First, from the very beginning, there was an emphasis on the people of God in a local congregation as being the church. The church is not the hierarchy, but simply the people of God who remember Jesus and covenant to live in his spirit.

2. Secondly there was from the beginning an emphasis on an educated clergy. Harvard and. Yale were started for this reason. There was also an emphasis on education for all people. Public education was not yet a fact. These were people who were not afraid of knowledge, and they knew the importance of knowing the past if they were to live meaning-fully in the present. They were also not afraid that new knowledge would destroy their basic faith.

3. Thirdly, our forefathers and mothers knew the importance of seeing the Christian faith as related to all of life. Therefore, they had a concern, as does the Bible, for social justice and liberty. They knew that justice is a form of love and that our faith is not a separate compartment of our lives which we open only on Sundays.

Remember it was Robinson who told our Pilgrim fathers and mothers, “Do not stick just to where Calvin and. Luther left you.” He was confident that the Lord has more truth and light yet to break forth. We never know it all. Our ancestors in the faith knew how dangerous it is when we become rigid or static.

We often forget that our ancestors in the faith were the revolutionaries in their time, in religion, in politics, and in economics. They were not afraid to think new thoughts and were not afraid to face the future in an un- known and new country to them. Those who were afraid stayed in England. The same is true of our ancestors of the German connection.

Our forefathers and mothers in the faith were people like Abraham in the Old Testament. They left the security of their homes to go to a far country. Our congregational ancestors were often called “Pilgrims.” The word, “Pilgrim” describes an attitude toward life. A pilgrim is one who because of his or her faith in God has an openness to God and to others. A Pilgrim is a person who has a vision of what life can be, and a person who has a vision is willing to undergo untold hardships and sacrifices for that vision. Where there is no vision, the people perish. To the person of vision, however, life is a pilgrimage of joy and hope.

Pilgrims are also those who know that on this earth we have no abiding place and that our ultimate trust is to be in God only. In some deep sense we are just passing through. Pilgrimage is not on the side of putting ultimate trust in any institutional forms, codes, or systems. Intellectually as well as spiritually, we are to be mobile. We know as did our ancestors that God has more truth and’ light yet to break forth out of his Holy Word. Amen.