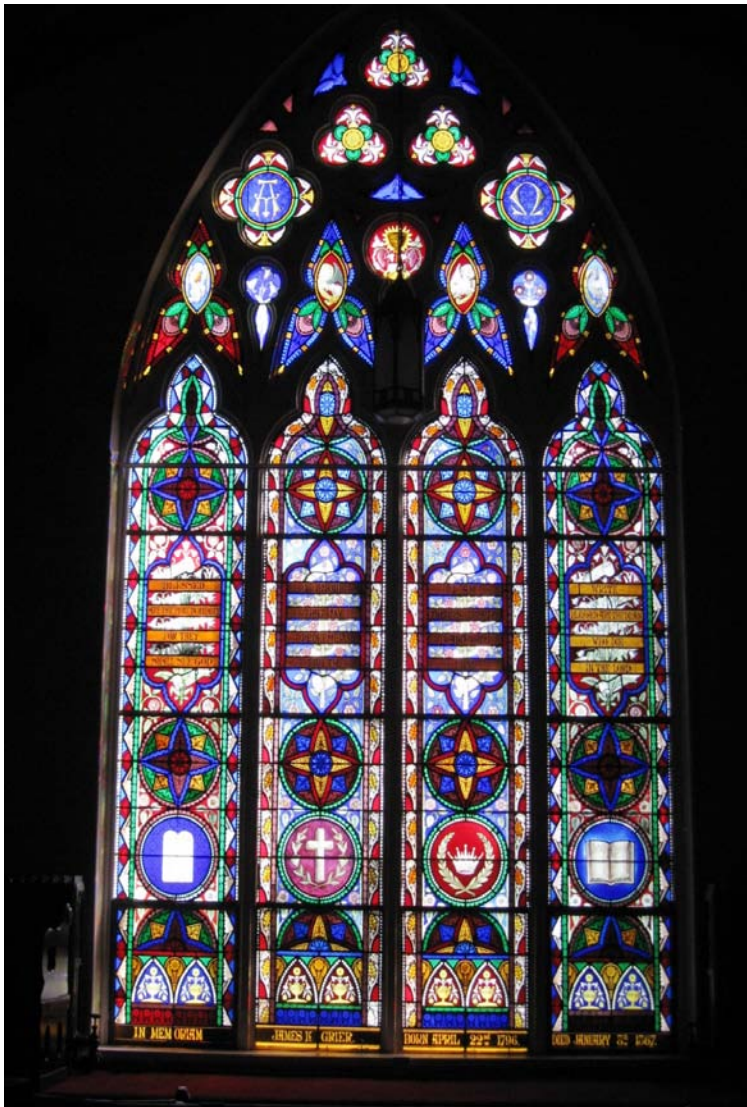


Forks of the Brandywine Evangelical Presbyterian Church Stain Glass Window in Memoriam of James K Grier



SERMON for 275th Anniversary

Forks of the Brandywine Evangelical Presbyterian Church
Based on large, stained glass window behind the Choir Loft
Rev. Benjamin E. Sheldon

The Grier Memorial Window in the Forks Fourth “Meeting House”

Scripture: Psalm 103:8-19 and Revelation 14:12-13

The name “Grier” should be familiar to members of the Forks family. It appears prominently on a number of the gravestones in the Manor Cemetery, and portraits of two of the pastors who bore that name are displayed on the wall where worshippers Sunday after Sunday see them as they mount the steps to enter the sanctuary. I refer of course to the portraits of **Rev. Nathan Grier** and **Rev. John Nathan Caldwell Grier**. The former came in 1786 as a young, 26 year old licentiate from Philadelphia Presbytery as a supply preacher to fill the pulpit, so recently vacated by the death of the beloved, John Carmichael, the pastor during the Revolutionary War. Young Nathan Grier so impressed the elders and the congregation that they petitioned the Presbytery of New Castle to let him come to the Forks and in August of 1787 the Presbytery met at the Forks and ordained and installed Nathan as the pastor.

“*Young Nathan Grier,*” to quote James McClune his biographer, “*was in the full vigor of his powers*” and quickly followed the example of his predecessor, John Carmichael, in several important ways:

- He preached boldly and faithfully the pure, saving Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ, and
- He regularly visited in the homes of the parishioners, and

- He carefully instructed the children as well as admonishing their parents to be faithful to their baptismal vows, and often on Sunday afternoons, as a faithful under-shepherd and evangelist,
- He visited the homebound elderly and infirm, bringing the good news of Jesus to them.

Besides his faithful attention to his pastoral duties, early on Nathan Grier began to gather young men around him as he carefully instructed them in Scripture, Ecclesiastical History, and Theology. A total of 20 young men completed his course of study, and eighteen of them served pastorates in Presbyterian churches. Much to the sorrow of the Congregation, Rev. Grier fell ill in March of 1814 and died shortly thereafter. He was only 53 years old.

Among the young men Nathan Grier trained was his own son, John Nathan Caldwell Grier and it was only fitting that the congregation would want him to be their pastor, so on November 24, 1814 he was ordained and installed as pastor of the Forks Church. He was a mere 22 years old when he donned the mantle his godly father had so recently laid down and he began a pastorate that lasted 55 years, until at age 77, John Nathan Grier reluctantly asked the Presbytery to dissolve the pastoral relationship because of his failing health.

His pastorate was marked by a number of great outpourings of grace and power from God. In 1822, 41 new believers were added to the rolls, and again, in 1831, there was a "*copious outpouring of the Spirit*" (to quote James McClune again) and 127 were added that year. In the 6 years following, 233 more new believers were received. This led to an overcrowding of the church which in turn led to the decision in 1833 to ask some members to voluntarily withdraw to form the Presbyterian Church in Coatesville. But, by 1835, the crowded Sanctuary on the Lord's Day made it necessary again to spin off the people who lived west of the church and the Honeybrook Presbyterian church came into being, followed in 1839 by the formation of the Fairview Church. Under John Nathan

Grier's leadership, over 1300 new members were received by the Session and added to the church and three separate congregations were formed. Besides this, the Central Church in Downingtown also traces its beginnings to the Forks of the Brandywine. Dr. Grier preached a total of 5,000 sermons and baptized over 1,000 persons. McClune says that *"his manner in the pulpit was earnest and solemn and his plain but practical discourses, decidedly evangelical and pervaded by a tone of unaffected piety were blessed by the conversion of many."* When John Nathan Grier finally died in 1880 at age 88, he was the last surviving minister whom his father had trained.

But there is another Grier to be reckoned with. It is **James King Grier** who served the Forks congregation as an Elder for many years. The earliest I could find any record of his being an elder was 1853 when he spurred the Session on in a project to enlarge the cemetery and repair the wall as well as to install a new gate on the southwestern side. But James had started early to serve his Lord and Savior. The records reveal that he was among the first to teach in the Sabbath school after it was organized in 1821, and as a Trustee in 1839, he was involved in the enlargement of the Sanctuary when the crowds on the Lord's Day made that necessary.

There were many Griers associated with the Forks Church as well as a great number who exerted a profound influence on not a few of the early Presbyterian churches in this general area. They were all descended from John Grier I and his brother Matthew who came over from Scotland prior to 1750. Originally they settled and lived at Deep Run, about 8 miles from Doylestown. However, about 1790, they moved to Chester County and lived on farm near the Brandywine Manor Church. (Which most likely they attended.) So when the fourth meeting house was planned and constructed in 1875, the magnificent window behind the balcony was dedicated in memory of Elder James King Grier. His father, John Grier I, was an older brother of Nathan Grier, so James K. Grier, nephew to

Nathan and 1st Cousin of John Nathan Caldwell, served as elder, under the pastoral leadership of his first cousin, John Nathan Caldwell Grier. His record as a member of the Session must have been exemplary and very notable because it is in his memory that the large stained glass window behind the balcony was created and installed. The design for the Forks new building was drawn by the prominent Philadelphia architect, Samuel Sloan, and whether he also designed the window or whether James K. Grier's family specified the details of the window is not clear. His widow continued to serve Forks Church, especially as choir director, for another 15 years, and it is clear is that this magnificent window illustrates in a profound way the history and the impact of the Forks Church over the 2 and $\frac{3}{4}$ centuries of its history.

At the very top of the window are the two Greek letters which represent the Lord Jesus Christ's own description of himself in Revelation 1:8, *"I am the Alpha and the Omega, says the Lord God."* For the sainted men who stood behind the sacred desk, as historically the pulpit was called in our Reformed and Presbyterian tradition, Jesus Christ was indeed the **Alpha** and the **Omega**, the **beginning** and the **end** of all their endeavors. *"To know Christ and to make him known"* is an old slogan which certainly has characterized the impact of the Forks Church over the years since the earliest pastors preached here two and three quarters centuries ago. Christo-centric is another way of expressing it. Christ has been the sum and the substance, the center and the circumference of the message heralded from this pulpit, and nothing is more important than that. Hence in symbolic form, just as he occupies the prominent position as the head of the Church, so Christ stands at the very zenith of the artwork that makes up the Grier Memorial Window.

And, between these two symbols, the **Alpha** and the **Omega**, is a communion chalice, which represents the shed blood of the Lamb of God, and the only hope for the salvation of all mankind. Communion is and always has been a high point in the worship that has been offered to God within these hallowed walls. James

McClune in his history describes those who remembered Nathan Grier's observances of the sacrament with tears in their eyes as they recalled ***his touching appeals*** to the members of his flock at the close of each communion to live consistently with their profession and the ***melting tenderness*** with which he besought those who "*were strangers to the covenant of Grace to flee from the wrath to come.*" Perhaps it was the memory of those fervent appeals that led the window's designers to place the communion cup in such a prominent place.

Directly under the items just mentioned, in a straight line, are the symbols representing the four Gospel writers. This symbolism has appeared in Christian art and in stained glass windows such as this one for many centuries and it is based on the description of the four living creatures that surround the throne of God found in the 4th chapter of the book of Revelation. St Matthew is depicted as a divine man, St Mark as a winged lion, St Luke as a winged bull or calf, and finally St. John as a rising eagle. The early church fathers, Irenaeus, Augustine, and Jerome all applied the description of the living creatures in this passage in Revelation 4 as well as the one found in the 1st chapter of the prophecy of Ezekiel to the four Evangelists who were the Gospel writers. Without going into detail as to why each symbol is used to represent that particular Gospel, let me say that the 3 synoptic gospels, Matthew, Mark, and Luke along with the Gospel of John received an important place in the design of this window, consistent with the historical understanding of the Scriptures as dominant and vital in the life and witness of the Christian church in general and of the Forks Church in particular. Not only Christo-centric but also Biblio-centric is the word that describes the dedicated ministers and people of the Forks. No doubt, James K. Grier himself, as an elder took the ordination vows that were for 178 years required of all ordained ministers and elders in the Presbyterian Church. Doubtless he had pledged his loyalty and obedience to the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments as the Word of God, the only infallible rule of faith and practice. I am

sure he would have been pleased to see the Gospels placed in such an important place in the window's design.

[Incidentally, it was the abandonment of those classic ordination vows and everything that accompanied that change back in 1967 that led to the ultimate decision of the Forks congregation to disaffiliate from the Presbyterian Church (USA)].

The next row of items contains 4 important quotations from the Scriptures: First, from Matthew and the Sermon on the Mount, "*Blessed are the pure in heart for they shall see God*" (Matt 5:8); next, a verse from the Old Testament book of Job, that ancient patriarch's rock-solid confession, "*I know that my Redeemer liveth.*" (Job 19:25); then we see the Lord Jesus' inspiring affirmation from John's Gospel at the tomb of Lazarus, "*I am the Resurrection and the Life*" (John. 11:25); and finally, from the book of Revelation, there is the wonderful word "*Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord*" (Rev. 14:13) Each one of these verses doubtless applied to James K. Grier in whose memory the window is dedicated, but in a larger sense they can be applied to the great host of men and women who have worshipped the Lord Jesus Christ within the walls of the Forks Church over the past 275 years.

The final row of symbols also fits the life and history of this church, and doubtless was also intended to be a tribute to James K. Grier. There is the tablet of the Ten Commandments, followed by the Cross and next to it, the Crown and then the symbol for the Holy Bible. At the heart and soul of the Gospel is the Decalogue, the Ten Commandments, which is the perfect guide for Christian life and action. Then next we see the Cross, the symbol of our Lord's atoning sacrifice, where he shed his precious blood for the redemption of all who accept him by faith. The Cross is the only hope of salvation for all mankind. Next to the Cross is the crown that is laid up for all who have put their hope and trust in Jesus' shed blood. Surely it represents the glorious hope of heaven that belongs to all believers, and reminds us of Jesus' words to the Church at Smyrna found in Revelation 2:10, "*Be faithful unto*

death and I will give thee the crown of life.” And also we recall the words of the Apostle Paul in II Timothy 4:8, *“Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness which the Lord, the righteous judge will award to me on that day, and not only to me but also to all those who have loved his appearing.”* This is a promise and expectation we can rely on, just as doubtless James Grier also relied on it. Finally we see the symbol for the Word of God, an open Bible, which in its inspired pages we find the source of all knowledge of our faith. This strongly emphasizes the important, indeed the indispensable, place the written Word of God, inspired and infallible, occupies in the life of the Forks of the Brandywine Presbyterian Church.

The over-flow crowd of believers who were present at the dedication of this sanctuary on Thursday, December 14, 1876 must have been thrilled to hear Dr. Charles A. Dickey, the well-known pastor of Calvary Church in Philadelphia, preach on II Corinthians 3:18, *“But we all, with open face beholding as in a glass the glory of the Lord, are changed into the same image from glory to glory, even as by the Spirit of the Lord.”* Surely Elder James Grier was among the “cloud of witnesses” in heaven who rejoiced to see his beloved church making such great strides forward. The worshippers that day, as they looked around them, were able to view one of the striking features that Architect Samuel Sloan had incorporated into the new church. I am referring to all the beautiful stained glass commemorative windows, which we can see ourselves today. That great multitude who had gathered to dedicate their new building, the fourth one to stand on this very spot, must have thought back over the almost 150 years of the Forks’ history up to that day and were reminded of the godly men and women who laid the foundation of their church. There are no less than nine windows that commemorate Pastors John Carmichael, Nathan Grier, and John Nathan Caldwell Grier, along with Elders James K. Grier and James Ralston. Also Joseph Mackelduff and Benjamin and Agnes McClure are included and finally the Manor Sunday school and the Sunday school at

Rockville are commemorated. . But overarching them all is the Grier window with its unmistakable symbolism that testifies to the marvelous work of God in this historic place. Sometime we will endeavor to point out the symbols in the other windows also.

For every one of us here today, these windows are a beacon of hope and a signpost pointing us all to be faithful to our blessed Lord and to his incomparable Gospel of our salvation, for the years ahead until our Lord Jesus comes again and forever. In this 275th year since the founding of this congregation, let us all renew our own faith and commitment to the Lord Jesus Christ and rededicate ourselves to carrying on his mission in this county and municipality and to the ends of the earth. **And to our Triune God be the glory and praise forever!**

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,
AMEN.