

A Guide for Inquirers – Learning More about Grace Presbyterian Church

The following is an overview of Grace Presbyterian Church for anyone interested in learning more about the church or becoming a member. If you have been attending Grace we encourage you to follow this guide to learn more about who we are as a congregation and as a community of believers in Jesus Christ.

This guide will cover four main topics:

1. What is a Christian?
2. What is the Church?
3. What is the Presbyterian Church?
4. What is Grace Presbyterian Church?

The written text that accompanies this guide is the short book, *Presbyterians: People of the Middle Way* by Harry S. Hassall. Copies of this book are available free of charge through the church office (973-744-2565) or e-mail office@gracemontclair.org. Please contact us and we will see that you receive a copy. You will also need a Bible. If you don't already have one you can receive a copy through the church office.

I. What is a Christian?

(Please read Lessons 1 and 2 in the Harry Hassall book)

Dr. Hassall rightly points out that being a Christian is not primarily based on one's beliefs. One can believe many true things about God, Jesus Christ and the Bible and not be a Christian. Still less is being a Christian defined by one's family or social background ("I grew up attending church"). To be a Christian is to be in a relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ. As the first lesson indicates, there is an important difference between believing something to be true and believing *in* something (or someone). If I say that I believe that Barak Obama is President of the United States I am simply stating a fact. That fact happens to be true. However if I say I believe *in* Barak Obama as President I am saying something different. I am making a statement of trust (see the illustration of the man asked to get into the wheelbarrow on page 11).

To be a Christian is to trust in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. To do this we first have to acknowledge that we need a savior. Scripture makes it

abundantly clear that “all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23). “Sin” cannot simply be defined as doing bad or immoral things (it does include that). Sin is falling short. It is missing the mark. It is not being what God intended us to be. Human beings were created in the image of God, “crowned with glory and honor” (Psalm 8:3-5). Yet each of us, in our own way, have chosen to be selfish, to ignore those in need and, more seriously, we have ignored God and disregarded his will. No matter how many times we try to be better in our own strength, to be what God has called us to be, we end up failing. Again in the words of Scripture, “All we like sheep have gone astray. We have all turned to our own way” (Isaiah 53:6).

God however did not leave us in this dilemma. He sent his own Son into the world to free us from the cycles of sin whether in the form of selfishness, addiction, indifference, failure or guilt.

“God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world but in order that the world might be saved through him” (John 3:17).

Jesus took upon himself all of our sin, the consequences of our failures, our selfishness, our faithlessness. He was the only perfect person who ever lived but he was falsely accused by the religious leaders, denounced by the crowds, abandoned by his own disciples and finally crucified by a Roman governor. Yet in his death he took upon himself the very power of evil itself and conquered it. He endured the consequences of all of our failure and wrongdoing. He appeared to die abandoned and humiliated. Yet this was not the case. In Jesus’ death “captivity itself is taken captive” (Eph. 4:8). Jesus wins for the world true freedom. He triumphs over death and hell, sin and Satan (Colossians. 2:13-15; I John 3:8; Revelation 1:17-18). He demonstrates this by being raised from the dead on the third day.

To be a Christian is to believe in this Jesus, to acknowledge that he takes away our failure, our guilt, all our sin and that he has done all this because he loves us (John 15:9). To be a Christian is to follow Jesus as Lord in the freedom that can only come from him (Galatians 5:1). To believe in this Jesus is to have life at its best now and forever (John 10:10; Romans 5:21).

Questions for Reflection –

1. Why do you think the distinction between “believing” and “believing in” is so important?
2. Think of some of the ways you have experienced the reality of sin in your own life.
3. Have you personally acknowledged Jesus Christ as your savior from sin and Lord of your life? Do you know what it means to take this step?

(If you have questions at this point please contact one of the pastors through the church office, 973-744-2565 or e-mail the church office at office@gracemontclair.org.)

II. . What is the Church?

(Please read Lesson 3 in the Harry Hassall book)

Jesus said, "I will build my church and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it" (Matthew 16:18). According to Scripture the church is the Body of Christ. It comes into being on the Day of Pentecost when the Holy Spirit is poured out on a diverse group of believers. The church is the presence of Jesus Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit in a world where Satan has been defeated but is still active and powerful.

The church throughout history lives in a three part world. First, the church belongs to Jesus Christ and it exists under his authority. That authority is defined for us in the Bible which is God's Word. Jesus is the Word made flesh (John 1:14). Secondly, the church is called to witness to Christ in a world where Satan, the personification of evil, is present and active. Third, the church itself is made up of sinners saved by grace. The church, then, its members and its leaders are never perfect. We should never expect them to be. In the early history of the church, recorded in the New Testament, we see conflicts over everything from doctrine to personalities. Yet because the church depends on Christ alone it grows in power and influence.

In spite of severe persecution at times, the church grew into a major force in the Roman Empire. The Emperor Constantine who came to power in the year 312 A.D. declared himself a Christian and eventually helped make Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire. While the church had spread extensively by that time it was still in many ways undefined. Basic questions of doctrine regarding the nature of God, the divinity of Christ and salvation itself were debated back and forth. Constantine, functioning more as an administrator than anything else, called a church council at Nicea in the year 325. This eventually led to the formation of the Nicene Creed which defined the trinity and the two natures of Christ along with basic affirmations about salvation and baptism. This Creed throughout the centuries has represented the basic belief of all orthodox (right believing) Christians.

After the fall of the Roman Empire the church continued to exist but in a less centralized way. The church attempted to unify itself around the Bishop of Rome who became known as the Pope. This however was never completely successful. In the year 1054 the church split into two factions, one Western

under the Roman Pope, the other Eastern centered in Constantinople. The Western Church throughout the Middle Ages went through various reforms but all of them limited in one way or another. By the sixteenth century the church was in decline, both in its doctrine and practice. In 1517 a German monk, Martin Luther, posted a series of theses calling for the reform of the church. This resulted in another church split which became known as the Protestant Reformation. Following up Luther's reform efforts was a young French scholar and leader, John Calvin, whose center of influence was in Geneva, Switzerland.

The Western Church was strongly related to the political and social structures of its time. There was persecution and even war among the various church factions. The end result was a very divided church including various Protestant bodies (who had "protested" against the church based in Rome) and what became known as the Roman Catholic Church.

In the eighteenth century the churches of Western Europe faced another challenge with the rise of secular views which questioned the supernatural aspects of Christian faith. These views were also tied to the growth of science in this period. During this time the church became less of a cultural force than it had been during the Middle Ages and the Reformation period. This trend was offset in the nineteenth century by the growth of a vigorous missionary movement. The church spread to Africa, Asia and Latin America. In many cases it saw remarkable growth in those continents.

The church in the twentieth century faced more upheaval confronted with two world wars and enormous changes in society and technology. New church groups emerged with a strong emphasis on the Holy Spirit (Pentecostalism). By the end of the century the center of Christianity was shifting toward Asia, Africa and Latin America. At the same time the Roman Catholic Church and the Protestants led by the Lutheran church resolved the key differences that had caused the split of the sixteenth century. There was in many respects greater cooperation among the various Christian churches. The church also struggled with many divisive issues ranging from civil rights to political conflicts to Biblical interpretation and sexual ethics.

In the twenty first century the church faces new challenges arising from upheavals in the Middle East (the birth place of the church), the growth of non-Christian religions and dramatically influential forms of technology such as the internet in its multiple forms. Yet Jesus Christ remains the same, yesterday, today and tomorrow. Christ alone is Lord of the church. The church continues to serve him as it awaits his return in power and glory.

Questions for Discussion –

1. Given that the church is “one body” in Christ (Romans 12:5), why do you think there have been so many church divisions throughout history. How does it help to reflect on the fact that Christians continue to be sinners in this life (see Acts 15:36-41).
2. What do you think are some ways that Christians from different churches could cooperate more?

III. What is the Presbyterian Church?

(Please read Lessons 4 and 5 in the Harry Hassall book)

The Presbyterian Church is born in the Protestant Reformation of sixteenth century Europe. Its origins go back to the Swiss Reformer, Huldreich Zwingli, a contemporary of Martin Luther's. Its leading figure was the French Reformer, John Calvin (1509-1564). Calvin was influenced heavily by his predecessors as reformers. However he was a scholar and a teacher in his own right. Trained as a lawyer, he wrote one of the greatest summaries of Christian belief of all time in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. This work went through successive editions until shortly before Calvin's death. Calvin established a center in Geneva, Switzerland to which refugees seeking religious freedom came from all over Europe. Calvin's thought went beyond religion and impacted social and political topics as well. The central focus of Calvin's view of Christianity was his understanding of the sovereignty of God. Everything ultimately is in God's hands and God's will finally determines all that happens. Calvin did not see this as a threat to human freedom since human activity and God's actions in effect took place on different levels. Calvin's source of authority was the Bible but he also believed that each individual had the right to read and interpret the Scriptures for themselves. Calvin's view of God relativized all human authority. No human figure, religious or political, could claim absolute authority. In sixteenth century Europe this was a radical view and it met with strong opposition, even persecution.

Calvin believed that church leaders could not be appointed by authorities outside the local congregation, religious or secular. He believed that church leaders should be elected by majority vote, thereby establishing one of the foundations of modern democracy. He also felt that the clergy had exercised too much authority in the church. For Calvin the governing authority in a local church should be shared by elders and ministers together, both being elected by the congregation. Queen Elizabeth, seeing the events in Switzerland and noting their influence on the Church of England, said that the churches of Switzerland were more “reformed” than those in Germany and England. As a

result, the churches following Calvin's model became known as "Reformed Protestants" or the "Reformed Church". Various reformed church bodies spread all over Europe. The Presbyterian Church is one form of this Reformed Church and actually has its origin in a young Scottish reformer who came to Geneva escaping persecution in his native country.

This Reformer's name was John Knox (1514-1571). Knox encountered Calvin's teachings as a Scottish refugee to Geneva. He returned to Scotland and established the first Presbyterian Church which officially became the Church of Scotland. Knox's reform was, if anything, even more dramatic than Calvin's. Calvin's Reformed system for example could allow for bishops who would have oversight over regional groups of churches. Knox rejected this possibility. He appealed to the New Testament word for "elder" which is "presbyter" and this is where the word, "Presbyterian" comes from, a church system based on lay leaders elected by the congregation. Knox also provided for the ministers but their authority was to be spiritual primarily. Ministers moderated the meeting of elders in stated session. Ministers, however, were not members of local congregations and could not vote in church elections. Knox ultimately envisioned a church that was more than just a local congregation. He described a central governing unit which would oversee all the congregations in a given area. These became known as presbyteries. Ministers were members of the local presbytery. Half of the voting members of a presbytery were to be elders elected by their local church body of elders (known as "sessions" or "consistories").

Under both Calvin and Knox the Reformed and Presbyterian churches spread to England, throughout Europe and finally to America. The United States form of government with its checks and balances clearly derives from the Presbyterian form of government. Just as ministers do not choose the elders and the elders do not elect the minister, but both are chosen by the congregation, so the president does not choose the congress nor does the congress elect the president. Both are elected by the citizens.

The Presbyterian Church existed in colonial America alongside other Reformed bodies such as the Puritan Congregationalists in New England, the French Huguenots in Pennsylvania and the German Reformed in New York, New Jersey and elsewhere. Presbyterians were enormously influential in the early years of American history. John Witherspoon (1723-1794), a Scottish Presbyterian minister, was president of what later became Princeton University and was the only clergy person to sign the Declaration of Independence.

Presbyterians place a high priority on independence recognizing Scripture alone as the sole authority for faith and life (see Dr. Hassall's "Rank of Spiritual Authorities" on p. 64). Unfortunately this has also led to numerous divisions over the past several hundred years including a split into northern and southern Presbyterian churches during the Civil War. This split endured for many years afterward. We at Grace are members of what is presently the largest Presbyterian Church body in the United States, the Presbyterian Church USA.

Questions for reflection –

1. What do you think are some of the advantages of a democratically constructed church? What could be some of the disadvantages?
2. Why do you think the Reformed and Presbyterian church tradition has so emphasized the authority of the Bible? How have you experienced reading and studying the Bible in your own life?

IV. What is Grace Presbyterian Church?

Grace Presbyterian Church actually began in 1890 as a mission project of two other Presbyterian churches which at that time were in downtown Montclair. The coming of the railroad, particularly the Walnut Street Station (which still exists today) led to a population growth in this part of Montclair. In an era before automobiles this area was too far away from the downtown churches. Those churches then began to take special offerings for both a church and a hospital to meet the needs of the growing area. We are the church and Mountainside is the hospital. The church actually began as a Sunday School in the Walnut Street Train Station. They met on Sunday afternoons because there were no trains at that time.

Two years later what had begun as a Sunday School had become a small church congregation. The church was officially established by Newark Presbytery in April 1892. At the time the church met in a building on Chestnut Street. In its early years the church was pastored by a series of students from Princeton Theological Seminary. Following the First World War, as cars became more common, the area grew further. In 1924 the church relocated to its present site on the corner of Grove Street and Tuxedo Road. At the time the church consisted of what is now the Fellowship Room. Further growth led to the erection of the present sanctuary in 1926.

Another major growth occurred in 1949 when Grace merged with South Presbyterian Church on High Street in Montclair. For a time the two pastors of the merging churches served as co-pastors. South Church had an active

Missions program and this helped fuel the first Missions Conference in 1952. Over the course of the decades Grace has sent many of its own members both into the ministry and into full time missionary work. This trend continues to this day. Grace Presbyterian Church has also had a major emphasis on Bible study and youth work over the years.

At the present time Grace Presbyterian Church is an active, diverse congregation drawing people not only from Montclair but throughout North Jersey. It is a multi-cultural, multi-ethnic congregation of about six hundred which includes members and those who list themselves as regular and occasional visitors. Grace Church draws heavily on its Reformed and Presbyterian heritage which continues to include close ties with Princeton Theological Seminary and seeks to call people to be effective disciples of Jesus Christ in the dynamic and rapidly changing world of the twenty first century.

When you have completed this study please contact the church office or either Pastor Paul Leggett or Pastor Rachel Brown at 973-744-2565 or by e-mail at office@gracemontclair.org.