



The SPC Post

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Denominational Update What Happened to My Church?

By Alan Hager

In light of the action of the church Session to request our Presbytery to begin the dismissal process to potentially release SPC from the Presbyterian Church (USA) denomination, I have heard some comments about the challenge of leaving a church many have been connected to for a long time. I share some of the concerns and sadness of possibly leaving the mainline Presbyterian denomination. But this has caused me to dig a little deeper and reflect on why I feel the way I do.

I was baptized into the Presbyterian Church as an infant, confirmed in it as a youth, attended Presbyterian college and seminary, and was ordained over 20 years ago as a Presbyterian minister. But what is the Presbyterian denomination? Our current denomination, the PCUSA, is obviously a significant expression of Presbyterianism, but it does not hold exclusive title to Presbyterianism today any more than it has in the past.

The PCUSA was formed in 1983, which makes it less than 30 years old. There are much older Presbyterian denominations in America. But many still feel that the PCUSA is the real Presbyterian Church or “my Presbyterian church”. That may be because the church where we grew up was part of a denomination that merged into the PCUSA. But if change took place at that time, why can’t change take place now? Not only was there a merger to form the PCUSA in 1983, but there was a merger in 1958 to form the denominations that later merged in 1983 as well. If you are over 50 years old, you have likely been a part of three different Presbyterian denominations already. If you were a part of a Presbyterian Church that is over 150 years old, your church may well have been a member of five or more different Presbyterian denominations. More importantly, if the people who were pillars of your Presbyterian Church when you were a child knew what was taking place in the PCUSA today, would they still remain in it and encourage their church to be a part of it?

For myself, I still want to be Presbyterian. But for me, that is not defined by the changing organizations that are mistakenly referred to as “THE Presbyterian Church” or worse, “THE Church.” Instead, it means being part of the legacy of ministry, doctrinal teaching, and church government that has characterized Presbyterianism throughout history. I want to be part of the Presbyterian Church that has remained true to the teachings of people like John Calvin, John Knox, and the like. I want to be part of the tradition that has carried on the clear witness to Jesus Christ in world missions, and the church denomination that honors and adheres to the Westminster Confession of Faith.

That is the Presbyterian Church in which I grew up and in which I hope to serve as a minister of the gospel of Jesus Christ for as long as God gives me breath. It is not the denomination defined by initials or various combinations of the words Presbyterian, America, United, and so on. If you were raised in the mainline Presbyterian Church, I suspect that is the legacy you want to cherish and be faithful to as well. And it is precisely this legacy that our Session is seeking to honor and to build upon as we prepare for potential changes in our current denominational affiliation.