

THE EARLIEST NAME GIVEN TO THE CHURCH
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And Saul, yet breathing out threatenings and slaughter against the disciples of the Lord, went unto the high priest. And desired of him letters to Damascus to the synagogues, that if he found any of this way, whether they were men or women, he might bring them bound unto Jerusalem (Acts 9:1-2).

The names given to the early church provide a most interesting Bible study. The followers of Christ were first called disciples (Greek, mattheetes, because they were pupils or scholars, who, according to the custom of those times, followed their Teacher as He walked and talked along the highways and byways of Palestine. Later, in Antioch, where the disciples had become Christlike, the name was changed to Christians (Acts 11:26). As increasing numbers of converts accepted the new faith, they rejected worldly practices and became members of Christian assemblies. The name "Church" (or The Ecclesia), meant "The Called Out Ones." Afterward, the local gatherings of believers were given various names such as the bride, the building, the body (Rev. 21:9; Eph. 2:21; I Cor. 12:27). From time to time New Testament writers added other names such as "The general assembly and church of the first born, which are written in heaven" (Heb. 12:23). Luke, the beloved physician, was attracted to a special definition. He called the church "the way" (Acts 9:1-2). He described how the men in the synagogue at Ephesus spoke evil of that way, and later, when Demetrius, the silversmith, caused trouble for Paul, it was said: "There was no small stir about that way." When Paul addressed the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem he said: "And I persecuted this way unto the death" (Acts 22:4). Later he testified before the governor, saying, "But this I confess unto thee, that after the way, which they call heresy, so worship I the God of my fathers, believing all things which are written in the law and in the prophets" (Acts 24:14). A way is a highway always led somewhere, and those who used it knew their destination. Like Abraham, they sought a city! (Heb. 11:8-10).

The Way in Prophecy.. Encouraging

Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf shall be unstopped. Then shall the lame man leap as an

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hart, and the tongue of the dumb sing: for in the wilderness shall waters break out, and streams in the desert... And an highway shall be there, and a way, and it shall be called The Way of Holiness: the unclean shall not pass over it: but it shall be for those: the wayfaring men, though fools, shall not err therein. No lion shall be there, nor any ravenous beast shall go up thereon, it shall not be found there: but the redeemed shall walk there: And the ransomed of the Lord shall return, and come to Zion with songs and everlasting joy upon their heads: they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away (Isa. 35:5-10).

During the lifetime of Isaiah the Hebrews resembled the Israel of today. Determined people were endeavoring to establish and strengthen their homeland, while on every side they were confronted by hostile neighbors. The lions and dragons mentioned in the text were synonyms for the kings of adjacent nations. The word picture drawn by Isaiah depicted a land filled with problems where hard-working people, filled with fear and hope, struggled to make a wilderness productive. The thirty-fifth chapter of Isaiah resembles a glorious spring morning after a desolate, unpleasant winter. The prophet

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looked ahead to the time when the blessings of the Almighty would transform a wilderness into a national paradise. He predicted "the parched ground shall become a pool, and the thirsty land springs of water. The weary people could hardly believe what they heard.

"Say to them, that are of a fearful heart. Be strong, fear not: behold, your God shall come with vengeance, even God with a recompense: He will come and save you" (Isa. 35:4).

Today Israel is struggling to survive. Surrounded by hostility, the people face the constant threat of terrorism. Bombs explode, officials are assassinated, and attempts to restore peace appear to be futile. If a modern prophet stood in Jerusalem to repeat the words of Isaiah, he would either be scorned and ridiculed or promoted to the highest level in the legislative assembly of the nation. Yet God's servant was so convinced of the accuracy of his statements that he repeated his prediction. "Therefore the redeemed of the LORD shall return, and come with singing unto Zion: and everlasting joy shall be upon their head: they shall obtain gladness and joy; sorrow and mourning shall flee away" (Isa. 51:11).

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It seemed remarkable that in the midst of these promises Isaiah predicted: "And a highway shall be there, and a way, and it shall be called The Way of Holiness." That could hardly be a man-made thoroughfare. It was a way of life, a practice, a system accepted by many people who would embrace holiness. The prophet said this would be evident throughout the restored nation. The way would be used by those people who desired communion with God. That promise has only been partially fulfilled. The future of Israel is bright with prospect and hope. The present outlook may be depressing, but the darkest hour always precedes the dawn.

Nearer and nearer draws the time,
The time that shall surely be:
When the earth shall be filled
With the glory of God.
As the waters cover the sea.

The Way in Person... Enthralling

Thomas saith unto him, Lord, we know not whither thou goest:
and how can we know the way? Jesus saith unto him, I am the
way. the truth, and the life: No man cometh unto the Father
but by me (John 14:5-6).

The disciples were confused. They anticipated a kingdom in which Jesus would be the King of Kings. But apparently the Savior had other ideas. He spoke of building many mansions and indicated He was about to accept an assignment in which He would be a Master-Builder. He said.

"Let not your heart be troubled: ye believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house are many mansions: if it were not so. I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you unto myself: that where I am, there ye may be also. And whither I go ye know, and the way ye know. Thomas saith unto him. Lord, we know not whither thou goest: and how can we know the way?" (John 14:1-5).

The idea of owning a home in God's country was attractive, but how to reach and inhabit that property presented problems.

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"Master, how may we reach that heavenly location?" Jesus replied. "Through Me: I am the way." When the Lord made that statement. He probably remembered the words spoken by Isaiah: "And an highway shall be there and a way, and it shall be called The Way of Holiness: the unclean shall not pass over it, but it shall be for those: the wayfaring men, though fools, shall not err therein." The Savior was the fulfillment of that prediction. He was the highway along which sinners would reach their eternal abode. Isaiah 35:8-10 is filled with promises concerning the Messiah. There are nine informative milestones along the royal highway.

The Special Way

"And an highway shall be there and a way." That these terms should be coupled together is most suggestive. A way in olden days was used by everyone. A highway was a special road made for and used by a king. Such roads were made at the ruler's command and reserved for the royal chariots. Isaiah predicted God would create a special highway that would be open for all travelers.

The Saintly Way

"And it shall be called the way of holiness." The statement "the unclean could not pass over it," suggests that nothing that defiled would be permitted to contaminate the highway. The royal Builder of the thoroughfare would welcome sinners and do for them what others could not do. His precious blood would remove their sins.

The Separated Way

"The unclean shall not pass over it." The highway automatically separated people into two communities. Those who complied with and others who ignored the regulations. The unclean who sought cleansing would be permitted to travel on the road to glory. Others who preferred to remain unclean would travel another road, in another direction, to disaster. During the ministry of the Lord Jesus the separating influence of His message became increasingly apparent. He said those who were not for Him were against Him.

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The Simple Way

"It shall be for those the wayfaring men." Even peasants, farm laborers, and other ordinary folk would be permitted to use the highway. Academic degrees, social greatness, eminence of any kind would not be necessary for travelers. Children, hoboos, all who so desired could enter, for in assessing greatness, God was more concerned with purity of heart than social distinction.

The Sure Way

"Fools shall not err therein." These travelers, unable to distinguish themselves in other walks of life, could cover themselves with glory on the road to heaven. God does not always choose the great, the mighty. Sometimes He chooses the foolish things of this world to confound the wise.

The Safe Way

"No lion shall be there, nor any ravenous beast shall go up thereon." The lion in ancient times was considered to be the most ravenous and ferocious of all animals. Its presence in any vicinity threatened travelers with death. The royal highway would be protected by soldiers. Every enemy would be chased away to guarantee the protection of the king's friends.

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The Salvation Way

"The redeemed shall walk there." Redemption was an experience known by people who had been sold into slavery and later redeemed. The Prince of glory came to earth to save sinners, to emancipate those who had been in bondage. Paul said, "In whom we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of his grace" (Eph. 1:7).

The Singing Way

"And the ransomed of the Lord shall return and come to Zion with songs and everlasting joy upon their heads." Happy people sing. The forgiveness of sins is the forerunner of increasing happiness. The breaking of the chains of bondage is a cause for praise. The opening of the doors of a prison is a prelude to a shout of victory. Heaven will be filled with choirs singing the song of Moses and the Lamb (Rev. 5:9).

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The Sublime Way

"They shall obtain joy and gladness and sorrow and sighing shall flee away." Thus will eternity begin for travelers reaching their destination. Isaiah looked ahead to the highway which God would make possible: we look back to Jesus, the fulfillment of every prediction, the joy of His people, the consummation of our greatest hopes.

The Way in Practice ... Enriching

It should not be a cause for amazement that the members of the early church were called "followers of the Way." They believed the Savior was the divinely appointed path by which men and women obtained access to God. They loved the Lord, who had volunteered to be their Companion and Guide as they continued their journey toward heaven. It was a very appropriate definition, for the Lord had said, "No man cometh unto the Father, but by me" (John 14:6). The writer to the Hebrews said, "Having therefore, brethren, boldness to enter into the holiest by the blood of Jesus. By a new and living way, which he hath consecrated for us, through the veil, that is to say, his flesh: And having an high priest over the house of God; Let us draw near with a true heart" (Heb. 10:19-22).

When Paul sought authorization for his mission to Damascus, it was not easy to define the limits of his search. The name "Christian" had not been given to any people. The church was in its infancy. He could only ask about folk who subscribed to The Way. Any person who knew about the whereabouts of such men or women must have some knowledge of the Nazarene. Throughout Paul's stay in Ephesus, the enemies of the faith constantly denounced The Way (Acts 19:9, 23). His teaching offended both Jews and Gentiles. The Hebrews recognized only Jehovah, but the Gentiles worshiped many gods. The new doctrines contradicted the faith of everybody outside of the Christian church. Jesus said access to the Almighty was only possible through Him, and therefore the Jews believed the Lord to be a blasphemer worthy of death. They said to Pilate, "We have a law, and by our law he ought to die, because he made himself the Son of God" (John 19:7).

Everything Jesus did and said appeared to contradict the traditions of the elders. In more senses than one, old things were

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passing away, and everything was becoming new. He opened the way for all men to pray and not to be dependent upon a high priest who could only approach God once every year. Christ

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opened a highway which welcomed Samaritans and Gentiles of all races. The Hebrews believed all non-Jews were outcasts, dogs, undesirable. The Lord also created a way by which even women were recognized for their true worth. They were daughters of Jehovah, not objects of passion to be exploited by men. Jesus also opened the minds of people, for He taught that all men, however significant their academic excellence, needed to be as little children in order to enter the kingdom of God. He taught that humility was better than pride, virtue superseded vice, and to be a doorkeeper in the house of the Lord was more to be desired than riches. To belong to The Way indicated a traveler subscribed to those ideas. Today people speak of Baptists. Methodists. Anglicans. Presbyterians, and Catholics, yet long ago there was only one church - it was called The Way. Its members believed and obeyed the commandments of their Master. Unfortunately, with the passing of time theologians argued about doctrine, and branch roads were made from the main highway. These led to confusion, heresy, and failure. Someday there will be but one road again. Perhaps it will be called The Way - it will lead to the Lamb.

I. Ivor Powell, *John's Wonderful Gospel* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications. 1987), 297-300.

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