There are many terms used to identify God’s covenant people. The most familiar is

“church”. But there is another term that was used for the early church. In Acts 9:2 it is said

that Paul was looking for anyone belonging to “the Way”, to arrest them. We find additional

references in Acts 19:9,23; 22:4; and 24:14,22.

What is the significance of the name? One aspect is the word itself. A physical “way” as

used throughout the New Testament, is a path or road by which one travels. As a spiritual

metaphor, a “way” is a course of conduct. A physical way is distinct from the rest of the

landscape, where one does not walk. A spiritual way implies that one’s conduct is distinct

from the rest of the world. A physical way leads to some destination; the spiritual way leads

to heaven.

Another significance is that it hearkens back to Jesus’ teachings. In the Sermon on the

Mount He said, “the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life.” (Matt. 7:14) In the

private discourse with the twelve He said, “I am the way, the truth and the life. No one

comes to the Father except through Me.” (John 14:6) A few months prior to Jesus, John the

Baptist had said, “prepare the way of the Lord; make His paths straight.” (Matt. 3:3)

But “the way” invokes even earlier teachings. John was actually quoting from Isaiah 40:3.

Elsewhere Isaiah said, “and a highway shall be there, and it shall be called the Way of

Holiness; the unclean shall not pass over it…but the redeemed shall walk there.” (Isa. 35:8-

9) Jeremiah, bemoaning the unfaithfulness of Israel, referred to their sins as walking on

“side roads, not the highway.” (Jer. 18:15)

One more point is that “the way” is different from “a way”. Admittedly this distinction was not

in the original Greek text since that language did not have articles, but it is significant in

English. The way signifies only one, the correct way. Other “ways” may exist but they lead

somewhere you don’t want to go.

So how is it that the early church came to be called “the Way”? Possibly it was an oblique

reference to Jesus, since He was “the way”. Maybe it was a term the apostles and others

used so frequently in their public teaching that it came to be synonymous with their doctrine.

Perhaps it was a term of derision, mocking Jesus’ followers for thinking they were the only

ones going to heaven. Or was it just Luke’s terminology, since we do not see that exact

term used to describe Christianity outside of Acts? These are questions that will remain un-

answered.

We may not call ourselves “the Way” any more but the church is still the living way (Heb.

10:20), the way of salvation (Acts 16:17), peace (Rom. 3:17), the Spirit (Rom. 7:6), truth (2

Peter 2:2), and righteousness (2 Peter 2:21). May we resist the temptation to venture onto

“side roads” and strive to stay within the narrow way.