

**A Brief History and Analysis
of the Early Waldensian Movement**

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The Waldensian Movement's Origin & Beliefs

Pietro Valdes (or Peter Waldo), founder of the Waldensian movement, was a wealthy merchant in Lyons.¹ In about 1176, Valdes underwent a dramatic conversion experience which prompted him to give up all his property and wealth (save provision for his wife and an endowment for his daughters) and to devote his life to preaching the Gospel.² The historical data concerning the circumstances that led to Valdes' conversion vary somewhat. Some attribute it to a jongleur's recitation of the life of St. Alexis who, in deep penitence, permanently renounced both marriage and wealth.³ Touched by the story, Valdes later discussed the matter with a clergyman who apparently encouraged him to follow St. Alexis' example.⁴ Others assert that Valdes' conversion came after he obtained a translation of the New Testament (NT); thus it was the claims of Christ that elicited such a profound and sweeping response from Valdes.⁵

While these accounts of Valdes' conversion differ, they need not be mutually exclusive. He was an untrained layman, and therefore he could not read the Latin Bible used in ecclesiastical circles.⁶ He did ask friends who were clergymen to translate portions of Scripture into the vernacular of southern France, so it is possible that his visit

¹ Harold O. J. Brown, *Heresies: Heresy and Orthodoxy in the History of the Church* (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 1998), 262.

² M. D. Lambert, *Medieval Heresy: Popular Movements from Bogomil to Hus* (London: Edward Arnold Publishers, 1977), 67-68.

³ *Ibid.*, 67.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 68.

⁵ Earle E. Cairns, *Christianity Through the Centuries: A History of the Christian Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981), 227.

⁶ Brown, 262.

with clergy to discuss the story of St. Alexis coincided with his initial encounter with the New Testament.⁷

The vital role Scripture played in Valdes' conversion gave rise to his concern that laymen be "[self-instructed] through vernacular translations of Scripture...."⁸ He proceeded to commission further translations of the New Testament and made them available to the public.⁹ Soon he was surrounded by like-minded men and women who were "inspired by the model of apostolic ministry in the New Testament (Matthew 10 and Luke 10)...."¹⁰ When the disciples were commissioned to preach the good news of the kingdom, Jesus instructed them to carry neither scrip nor staff on their journey (Mt 10:9). The Waldensians reasoned that one must follow Jesus' instructions to the letter in order to "fulfill the dominical commission and imitate the apostolic example."¹¹ Thus Valdes' colleagues followed his example by laying down their riches and property in order to pursue Christianity in a more primitive and pure form. In addition to their self-induced poverty, they travelled together in pairs (just as Christ sent the disciples by twos), preaching the gospel to the poor in the vernacular.¹² In this way, the "Poor Men of Lyons"—a sort of mendicant order comprised entirely of laymen—was born.

Chief among the Waldensians' accomplishments was an emphasis on the primacy of Scripture, along with a literal hermeneutic. As demonstrated by their lifestyle, fidelity

⁷ Ibid., 262.

⁸ Lambert, 68.

⁹ Brown, 262.

¹⁰ J. K. Zeman, "Restitution and Dissent in the Late Medieval Renewal Movements: the Waldensians, the Hussites, and the Bohemian Brethren," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, March, 1976: 7-27. Database online: ATLA Religion Database [December 10, 2001], 12.

¹¹ Ibid., 13.

¹² Cairns, 227.

to the commands of God demanded that every man actively apply Biblical standards to their own lives in a direct and radical manner. Consequently, it was necessary for every man to “have [his own] Bible in his own tongue.”¹³ By attempting to meet this need, the Waldensians succeeded in distributing hundreds of copies of the Bible that could be read by the masses; each of these translations was “as accurate and reliable as the [Latin] Vulgate, on which they were based.”¹⁴ In an age of sacerdotalism where the Church authorized the clergy alone to disseminate and explicate of Scripture, this was a revolutionary feat.¹⁵ The Waldensian trademark of preaching and evangelism was an outflow of their view of Scripture. Jesus’ command to preach the gospel to every creature extended to *all* Christians—laity and clergy alike. In the practices of the Waldensians, one can hear echoes of the Reformation’s insistence upon the priesthood of all believers. For this reason, they are often labeled as “precursors of the Reformation.”¹⁶ This is certainly true, but we must be careful to appreciate the meaningfulness of the Waldensian movement in its own time. For the Poor Men of Lyons, “the Kingdom of God was at hand to be won or lost in the twelfth century, not realized in the person of a future Luther.”¹⁷

It should also be noted that the Waldensians maintained orthodox doctrine in an age when radical heresy was a problem for the Roman Catholic Church. Catharism, which had gained a strong foothold in northern and central Italy (despite the best efforts of the

¹³ Cairns, 227.

¹⁴ Brown, 263.

¹⁵ If there had not been clerical elements who were sympathetic to Valdes, it is doubtful that this would have been possible.

¹⁶ Jeffrey Burton Russell, *Dissent and Reform in the Early Middle Ages* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1965), 6.

Church to put it down), promulgated a dualistic view of the universe that was reminiscent of Gnosticism.¹⁸ For the Cathars, all matter was evil; this led to a denial of the hypostatic union of Christ's divine and human natures.¹⁹ By contrast, the Waldensians believed in the full deity of Jesus Christ.

Conflict with the Church

The popularity of the Waldensian movement soon aroused “both the fears and the jealousies of the local clergy.”²⁰ By Church tradition, the “right of preaching and of the cure of souls” was solely the domain of the established clergy.²¹ Church leaders lauded the Waldensians’ life of poverty, but suspiciously viewed their direct and literal preaching from Scripture as a potential “breach of [the clergy's] exclusive position.”²² After prolonged controversy with the local clergy, Valdes sought formal ecclesiastical authorization for his group by sending representatives to the Third Lateran Council in 1179.²³ At the council, the Waldensians showed their translations of the Latin Vulgate and asked that the Church officially grant them the authority to preach.²⁴ Valdes himself met with Pope Alexander III, who stipulated that the Waldensians could preach as long as the local priests welcomed it.²⁵ However, since they *did not* welcome the preaching of

¹⁷ Ibid., 6.

¹⁸ Lambert, 67.

¹⁹ Cairns, 227.

²⁰ Lambert, 68.

²¹ Ibid., 68.

²² Ibid., 69.

²³ Ibid., 68.

²⁴ Ibid., 68.

²⁵ Ibid., 69.

the Waldensians, the Pope's edict was tantamount to complete refusal. In spite of the setback, the Waldensian movement continued to grow—and to preach.

Over the course of the following year, as Church authorities observed the Waldensians' expanding popularity, they increasingly feared that the heresy of the Cathars would infiltrate the enthusiastic movement.²⁶ In order to refute this notion, Valdes attended a synod in Lyons in 1180.²⁷ He offered a “thoroughly orthodox confession and denounced all the errors of the Cathars”²⁸ Although this allayed the Church's concerns temporarily, the issue of preaching by laymen continued to foment controversy. To compound matters, the Waldensians began to respond to the ecclesiastical pressure by denouncing the immorality of the priests. While the Waldensians affirmed the teachings of the Church concerning sacraments such as penance and the Eucharist, they refused to accept them from anyone who was not a “godly ministrant”—the ecclesiastical credentials of the ministrant were of tertiary concern.²⁹ For the Waldensians, *any* righteous man (not just clergy) could licitly celebrate the Eucharist or pronounce absolution.³⁰ Ultimately, this led to the establishment of a separate Waldensian clergy.³¹ Consequently, Pope Lucius III condemned the Poor Men

²⁶ Lambert, 69.

²⁷ Brown, 263.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 263.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 263.

³⁰ This is the logical outflow of the Waldensian stance towards preaching (see above discussion on page 3). If laity had a biblical mandate from Christ Himself to preach the truth—something that was limited to the clergy under the erroneous aegis of the Church—then it was only reasonable that laity should also be free take part in administering the sacraments and ordinances of the faith. For the Waldensians, the issue was one of godliness rather than formal Church sanction. Here again the Reformation's assertion of the priesthood of all believers is anticipated by the Waldensians.

³¹ Cairns, 227.

of Lyons as schismatics and heretics along with the Cathars in 1184.³² The Waldensians were soon excommunicated and would later be sorely persecuted in the Inquisition.³³

Clearly, Valdes' original intent was not to be a schismatic or to form a protestant movement. He went to great pains to seek the approval and assent of the established ecclesiastical hierarchy, and he publicly demonstrated his solidarity with the Church in opposing the contemporary heresy of Catharism. Touched by the grace of God, he merely attempted to express his passion for Christ within the confines of the establishment; "what he wanted was nothing more than a [Church sanctioned] lay mendicant order such as that successfully established by Francis of Assisi"³⁴ Over time, however, the Church and the Waldensians were increasingly polarized. Their disobedience stemmed from (1) a commitment to "follow the precepts of the Gospel as commands," and, (2) a sense of divine call which constrained them to resist the Church's demand that they stop preaching.³⁵ It was Christ Himself who had "enjoined the disciples . . . , whom the Waldensians imitated, . . . to preach the Gospel to every creature"³⁶ In the face of opposition from religious leaders, the Waldensians could do nothing less than follow the example of Peter. Before an angry Sanhedrin that sought to silence him, he asserted the absolute priority of his duty and allegiance to God over men (Ac 10:19-20).³⁷

³² Brown., 263.

³³ Ibid., 264.

³⁴ Ibid., 263.

³⁵ Lambert, 70.

³⁶ Ibid., 70.

³⁷ Ibid., 70.

How the Church Could Have Benefited from the Waldensian Movement

Appropriate expression of religious zeal. The century in which the Waldensians appeared was an age of tremendous religious zeal. Great energy and resources were spent building the great European Gothic cathedrals during this time.³⁸ In addition, the Crusades to the Holy Land began in 1099, just before the dawning of the 12th century.³⁹ Some valid practical concerns had motivated the Crusaders—the Turks who controlled Palestine were harshly persecuting European pilgrims to the region, and invading Asiatic Muslims were threatening the security of Constantinople (whose emperor sought the aid of western European Christians in repelling the Muslims).⁴⁰ However, the Crusades were predominantly “a holy war against the enemies of the Cross by the Spiritual forces of Western Christendom.”⁴¹ This spirit of unfettered religious zeal and triumphalism is responsible for over a century of hostility, bloodshed, destruction, and human suffering.⁴²

The misguided zeal of the age also found expression in the heresy of the Cathars, whose Gnostic dualism led to a stringent asceticism that included the avoidance of marriage and certain foods. Since they believed the material order is evil, they also forbade and condemned the use of anything material in worship.⁴³ In the view of the Cathars, such asceticism was necessary in order to obtain salvation.⁴⁴

³⁸ Cairns, 219.

³⁹ Ibid., 221.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 200.

⁴¹ Ibid., 219-220.

⁴² The unqualified religious triumphalism and zeal of the age are epitomized in the Children’s Crusade of 1212. French and German children, led by two young boys named Stephen and Nicholas, attempted to succeed where their forbears had failed. They thought that God would enable them to reclaim the Holy Land by virtue of the purity of their lives. Those who did not die in the trek across southern Europe were sold into slavery in Egypt. See Cairns, 222.

⁴³ Cairns, 227.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 227.

Apart from the monastic reforms of St. Francis and Dominic, the abundant religious zeal of the 12th century rarely found appropriate expression. It is unfortunate that the Church rejected what the Waldensians had to offer. Had they been willing to sanction the Poor Men of Lyons and uphold them as an example of Christian piety and devotion, perhaps the copious zeal of the age could have been channeled towards more productive, godly ends. Imagine the Crusaders taking up the Waldensians' vernacular Bible translations instead of their swords, preaching the Gospel to the Muslims rather than attempting to slaughter them or make them Christians by force. It is not unreasonable to surmise that the political and religious landscape of the modern world would be radically different had this occurred—the Muslim peoples of the Middle East might have been evangelized rather than alienated from and embittered by western Christendom.

Genuine reform of the Church. Religious dissent from groups like the Waldensians was common in medieval times, especially during the 14th and 15th centuries.⁴⁵ In their pursuit of the pure, primitive practice of Christianity, the Waldensians highlighted crises of authority, morality, and spirituality within the Church—these crises would continue to go unresolved in future centuries, making the Protestant Reformation inevitable.⁴⁶

The crisis of *authority* related to the legitimacy of ecclesiastical jurisdiction in matters of faith and practice. While the Waldensians sought at first to maintain solidarity

⁴⁵ Zeman, 25.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 25.

with the Church, their stubborn refusal to heed repeated demands for the cessation of lay preaching is significant. The Waldensians' high view of Scripture was at the root of their tenacity—the Gospel was their standard for faith and practice. As stated previously, they believed that when Christ commanded something, both clergy and laity alike should pay heed. Because of their commitment to Scripture, they questioned the authoritarian system of the Church. From whence did the Church derive its authority if not from Christ Himself, who is the Head of His Bride? Moreover, if the Church and her leaders derived their authority from Christ, on what grounds could they legitimately prevent men from obeying His word? Furthermore, what did it indicate about the condition of the clergy before God when they were actively working to stamp out those who were committed to authentic, biblical Christianity? Had the Church paused to answer these questions prayerfully, honestly, and reflectively, the impasse between the Waldensians and the clergy might have been bridged. Moreover, it might have yielded genuine transformation in the Church that could have staved off the coming Reformation.

Closely related to the crisis of authority is that of *morality*. The resistance of the Church towards those who sought to obey Christ's teachings implied a certain moral laxity within the clergy. The Waldensians made personal holiness a central issue with respect to the legitimacy of ecclesiastical authority.⁴⁷ What right had an immoral priest to administer the holy sacraments? Surely, his title did not confer upon him the right to govern the affairs of the Church without respect to his character. Conversely, a layman

⁴⁷ In this way, the Waldensians echo Paul's requirements for the character of those who aspire to oversight in the Church (1 Tm 3; Tit 1:5-9). Paul demanded that elders have great personal integrity, and that they adhere both to Scripture and to sound doctrine.

of great character surely ought to enjoy the privilege of celebrating and administering the sacraments. The moral crisis in the Church is what led the Waldensians to establish a clerical hierarchy of their own.

Finally, the Waldensians highlighted a growing *spiritual* crisis in the Church. They advocated “‘voluntary primitivism’ in the Franciscan tradition: individual Christians were called upon to choose poverty as one of the marks of Christian discipleship.”⁴⁸ For them, this was the path of self-denial after Christ’s example—the “way of the Cross.”⁴⁹ As a mendicant order, they depended upon the provision of God through the almsgiving of others. At the beginning of the Waldensian movement, this was the sole quality of their order that earned the approval of the Church. It was not until later in the medieval era that reform-minded dissenters made a formal link between the accumulated wealth of the Church and her faults.⁵⁰ As the Reformation approached, the Waldensian lifestyle would have been a continual rebuke against the unrepentant avarice of the Church. It should be noted that wealth itself is not evil—it is the *love of money* that is the “root of all evil” (1 Tm 6:10). For the Waldensians, the renunciation of the pursuit of wealth was a vital and necessary step to actualizing the claims of Christ and expressing one’s devotion to God. Their point to the leaders of the Church was that they should be prepared to do no less.

Lessons for Modern American Christianity

⁴⁸ Zeman, 26.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 26.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 26.

American Christians have much to learn from the Waldensians. Unlike their contemporary Crusaders and Cathars, they are a prime example of genuine, Spirit-endowed zeal in its appropriate expression.

The Crusaders demonstrate that unbridled and untempered zeal can have destructive and long-lasting consequences. In their excitement and passion for God, Christians often do and say things in public arenas that they come to regret later. Jerry Falwell's gaffe on the 700 Club immediately following the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001 is a recent example of this. In his zeal for promoting and establishing righteousness in the nation, Reverend Falwell appeared to blame the acts of sinful people (the homosexual community, secularists, etc.) directly for destruction that terrorist elements willfully caused. In the days immediately following his statement on television, it was clear that his words were counterproductive, and he was forced to appear in the media to apologize for his comments. One wonders how many people who might have responded to the message of the Gospel in the wake of the terrorist attacks and were turned away by Reverend Falwell's comments.⁵¹

The Cathars demonstrate how zeal can be a willing accomplice of false doctrine. The Catharist's asceticism stemmed from Gnostic heresy, but for them it was a means of obtaining the forgiveness of sins. Charismatic circles of today should heed this lesson carefully. An overemphasis on the experience of God's Spirit can sometimes lead to the

⁵¹ I am not attempting to "skewer" Reverend Falwell, but I do believe this incident to be an unfortunate example of zeal untempered by mercy or concern appropriate to the moment. Reverend Falwell is a devoted minister and preacher of the Gospel, and I have great respect for him.

neglect of Scripture, which in turn precipitates the development of errant doctrine. By contrast, the Waldensians were driven to the Word of God by their zeal.

Most importantly, the example of the Waldensians should raise a question in the minds of American Christians about what a “primitivist and restitutionist” movement should look like.⁵² Many lay claim to authentic and pure expressions of Christianity in America today, just as the Waldensians did in their time. Their pursuit of obedience to Christ’s claims led them to renounce the pursuit of wealth as a sign of the total devotion to and dependence upon God—in essence, a “costly dissent” from the morays and lifestyle of their “fallen society.”⁵³ American wealth and its corresponding ethos of materialism undoubtedly present a struggle for American Christians. Speaking specifically to the Charismatic movement: In spite of our openness to the things of the Spirit, can we legitimately lay claim to authentic and primitive expressions of Christianity if the spirit of Mammon has a stranglehold on our churches? This author is not advocating a vow of poverty, but the issue of wealth and its pursuit must be addressed prayerfully and scripturally. Perhaps we must make drastic changes, both individually and corporately, before we can hold our own faith tradition up as an example for others to follow.

⁵² Zeman, 27.

⁵³ Ibid., 27.

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