Waldensians: A Brief History of Uncompromising Faith in God and Mission

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Abstract

Waldensians, a Christian Church movement, came into existence in the 12th Century AD and, consequently, became the forerunner of the great Protestant Reformation. They embraced the scriptures as the word of God and remained hostile to any teaching not founded in the Holy Book. This understanding brought them into a direct conflict with the Church of Rome. The Waldensians were severely prosecuted, thousands died for their faith. They found refuge in the forest and mountains. Their children were trained as missionaries and sent forth to establish churches and colonies all over Europe. They were very successful in planting scriptural truth among hundreds of thousands. Thus, the Waldensians prepared the way for the great Protestant reformation of the 16th Century. The ministry of the Waldensians soften the ground for many Christians who could not differentiate between truth and error. There steadfastness elicited the compassion of kings. There women were as bold as their men.There children were trained from childhood to imbibe the spirit of self-denial. The fury of the state against the supposed heretics was unrelenting. Nevertheless, they held fast to their faith casting their hope in Christ. They rejected the basic teachings and practices of the Roman Church, and denounced the office of the Roman Pontif.The movement all religio-political persecutions intended to exterminate them. Century after century the Waldensians remained unflinching to their faith on the Bible as the only rule of faith and practice.

Key Words: Waldensians, Valdez, Missionary, Roman Church and King Charles Albert

Introduction

"In 1176 Valdez or Waldo, a rich merchant of Lyons (France), impressed by the song of a wandering minstrel recounting the sacrifices of St. Alexis, asked a master of theology "the best way to God". The Clergyman quoted that golden text of monasticism: "if thou

wouldst be perfect, go, sell that thou hast and give to the poor and thou shalt have treasure in heaven; and come and follow me." Valdez put this counsel literally into practice. Providing modestly for his wife and daughters, he gave the rest of his means to the poor. He determined to fulfill the directions of Christ to the Apostles absolutely. He would wear the raiment there designated. He would live by what was given him. To know his duty better he procured a translation of the New Testament. His actions made a deep impression on his friends. Here, they thought was true "apostolic poverty." By 1177, he was joined by others, men and women, and the little company undertook to carry further Christ's directions by preaching repentance. They called themselves the "Poor in Spirit". (Walker 1970:229). This was the beginning of the Waldensian history and ministry. During the third Lateran Council of the Roman Catholic Church in 1179, a request made by the group to be allowed to preach was turned down. The council did not reject their request on the ground that they were rebellious but assessed them as "ignorant laymen". The Council was chaired by Pope Alexander **III (**Waldenses: New World Encyclopedia). Valdez and his group had not planned to leave the church. Little did the church leaders know about the immovable determination of the little group to stand by their convictions inspired by the Word of God. "Valdez who appears in what is known of his later history as determined, not to say obstinate, felt that this refusal was the voice of man against that of God. He and his associates continued preaching. As disobedient, they were, therefore, excommunicated, in 1184, by Pope Lucius III (1181-1185) at the Synod Verona (Davis:2023).

The excommunication served as a catalyst to their missionary zeal. The scripture was scarce. Many of them committed to memory large portions of the Bible especially the New Testament. According to White (Great Controversy nd:65)

The Waldenses were among the first people of Europe to obtain a translation of the Holy Scriptures. Hundreds of years before the Reformation, they possessed the Bible in manuscript in their native tongue. They had the truth unadulterated, and this rendered them the special objects of hatred and persecution. They declared the Church of Rome to be the apostate Babylon of the Apocalypse, and at the peril of their lives, they stood up to resist her corruptions. While, under pressure of long-continued persecution, some compromised their faith, little by little yielding its distinctive principles, others held fast the truth. Through ages of darkness and apostasy, there were Waldenses who denied the supremacy of Rome, who rejected image worship as idolatry, and who kept the true Sabbath. Under the fiercest tempests of opposition, they maintained their faith.
Though gashed by the Savoyard spear and scorched by the Romish fagot,
they stood unflinchingly for God's Word and His honor.

Strengthened by the Word

The Waldenses were unflinching in their relationship to God. Before them, man and his glory appeared so little, and so weak. Their contact with Jesus made them tough. According to George Rice: "As far as sinners are concerned, the only relationship that God accepts is one of faith in Christ alone." Having said that, we also recognize that this faith relationship will be accompanied by obedience. As Paul says, "For not the hearers of the law are just in the sight of God, but the doers of the law will be justified. Rom. 2:13." (14). From the beginning of history, God has always had a remnant that will preserve eternal truth. As humans we do not have the details of all that have transpired in history. History is replete with men and women of noble characters who kept the lamp of truth burning even in heathen lands. They did this at the peril of their lives. Persecution did not discourage them. The hope of glory in Christ Jesus propelled them to remain faithful to His cause. "Many a time, their enemies were stunned by their steadfastness" (Johnson 2014:679-685).

Waldensians were convinced that Jesus was the One who inspired their ministry. Powered by the Holy Spirit, the Waldenses were driven to many regions of Europe spreading the gospel truth, according to the light available to them. They were shielded by the agencies of heaven.

Pure, simple, and fervent was the piety of these followers of Christ. The principles of truth they valued above houses and lands, friends, kindred, even life itself. These principles they earnestly sought to impress upon the heart of the young. From earliest childhood, the youth were instructed in the Scriptures and taught to regard sacredly the claims of the law of God. Copies of the Bible were rare; therefore its precious Words were committed to memory. Many were able to repeat large portions of both the Old and New Testament. (White *Great Controversy* 64)

The Waldensians did not have theological trainings unlike some of the later reformers who would graduate from theological institutions. They believed God trained them just like Jesus trained the fishermen of Galilee.

Persecuted but not Shaken

They studied the Scriptures to show themselves approved. They were not ashamed to die for Christ. They resisted evil and overcame it. When they left the Catholic communion, they refused to be part of some of the doctrines as practiced by the church.

"The confession of sins was guided by their leaders but did not require a priest; they rejected the use of indulgences. Baptism was to be by full immersion in water and was not

administered to infants. Eventually, the elements of the Eucharist (bread and wine] were understood as symbols only, and the Waldenses denied the doctrine of transubstantiation. They also rejected the notion of purgatory and prayers offered for the dead. Their views were based on a simplified Biblicism, moral rigor, and criticism of abuses in the contemporary church (Editors: Encyclopedia Britannia- Waldensian).

The intensity of persecution compelled them to seek resort in the mountain fortresses. Under the quietness of the ragged rocks they found homes. Their children were born and reared in those fortresses.

Ardent Students of the Bible

The Waldensians were not blind; they studied the Scriptures, felt the impact of truth and lived up to what they had discovered. The living truth in them impacted many thousands all over Europe. They sent out their missionaries armed with the Spirit to villages and towns "The Waldensian missionaries were successful and founded churches or colonies in : Italy, Spain, Germany the Netherlands, Bohemia, Poland. Lithuania, Albania, Lombardy, Milan, Romagn, Vicenza, Florence, Velponetine, Constantinople, Philadelphia, Slavonia, Bulgaria, Diognitia, Livonia, Sarmatia, Dalmatia, Briton, Piedmontand Scotland "

With such an explosive evangelistic thrust in the middle ages, the wrath of the devil would be heated up to the highest level. The machineries of the Church was put in place to eliminate them; but truth cannot be eliminated; it can be suppressed and not destroyed. White commented thus on the situation:

When Rome at one time determined to exterminate the hated sect, a bull was issued by the pope, condemning them as heretics, and delivering them to the slaughter. They were not accused as idlers, or dishonest or disorderly; but it was declared that they had an appearance of piety and sanctity that seduced "the sheep of the fold."

Therefore, the pope ordered "that malicious and abominable sect of malignant." If they "refuse to abjure, to be crushed like venomous snakes." (*Great Controversy, Special Edition nd:*77).

Truth and Error Blended

Unfortunately, hundreds of thousands of Christians, during this period, were not able to differentiate between truth and error. Those who practiced truth were branded "venomous snakes." Murderers and criminals were lauded as children of God. According to Louise Torres (2013:66):

The use of the strategy has been all too successful. The most apparently innocuous poison is the intentionally mislabeled one. The packaging may appear alluring and attractive, familiar, even harmless. Yet, its content stings like the deadly adder's bite. It is like the brain-destroying hallucinations experienced by naive young trick-or- treaters during Halloween's cache.

They unknowingly ingest candy laced with LSD, often resulting in unalterable brain damage. Hence, this blenching of truth with error, the holy with the common, the pure with the profane, has allured many into an inspired and ritualistic religious experience. The Scripture declares that they are "having a form of godliness, but denying the power thereof; from such turn away" 2 Tim. 3:5

This was the strategy used by the church leadership during the dark ages to keep millions of people from embracing the truth in its purity. Truth was blended with error and most times intentionally. The strategies were employed to keep people in darkness. The waldensian Christians believed God raised them to resist falsehood, bringing hope and salvation to thousands of believers.

The Waldensian ministry could be said to soften the ground for the Protestant Reformation. Beginning with Waldo or Valdo in 1176 AD in what appeared to be an ignorant little group, their activities, to a great extent exposed the unbiblical practices of the Roman Church. All the effort made by the Church to exterminate them proved abortive. The power behind the movement was seen to be that of Jesus.

The Waldenses stood by the "faith of our fathers" and were true to it till death (Faber: Faith of our Fathers).

Mission Strategy

The Waldenses built schools in their mountain homes. In those schools students were trained to be missionaries. According to chappell: "This summer I had the opportunity to visit the valleys of piedmont, Italy – home to the Waldensians for centuries…I was humbled as I saw the rough benches around the hewn stone podium where the barba would teach from the center. The eager students were not only risking their lives in attending the school, but they were literally preparing themselves for martyrdom… in secrecy the barbas trained their students to read and write (in multiple languages) and to rightly divide the doctrines of God's word. Additionally, they taught enough about medicine or trade to enable them to travel with the disguise of a physician or merchant." (Chappell: The Spirit and Mission).

Beginning with their founder, Waldo, the Waldensians (or barbas) imbibed the spirit of sacrifice as an instrument in the course of championing the truth as disclosed in the scriptures. "Economy and severe self-denial formed a part of the education which the children received as their only legacy. They were taught that God designs life to be a discipline, and that their wants could be supplied only by personal labour, by forethought, care and faith."(White: *Connecting the World* nd:994).

Persecution

The Waldensians experienced severe and relentless persecutions. The intention of the persecutions orchestrated by the leadership of the Roman Church was to exterminate the sect. Waldensians held on to their firm belief in the Word of God rejec**ting** the mainstream church with its teachings and practices. According to Miene (1953:769-770), "A war of extermination was begun against them by the Duchess of Savoy in 1475 and in 1487 Pope Innocent VIII proclaimed a crusade against them. In Provence, too, they were mercilessly persecuted by the French in 1545. Nevertheless, they stubbornly held their ground, and in 1561 extorted from the Duke of Savoy the right to freedom of worship in certain of the Piedmontese valleys".

Furthermore, Miene states that persecution intensified in the following centuries (ibid). The Waldensees clung to the religious belief and practices which they had observed uncompromisingly for over four hundred years. History indicates that in 1655 French troops massacre of the sect elicited concern among the European nations. Consequently, "Cromwell intervened, while Milton thundered against the persecutors" (ibid); about two hundred years later, precisely, in February 1848, King Charles Albert of Savoy enacted an edict that granted them both political and religious freedom (Worsfold: Vaudois of Piedmont).

The Waldensians of Vaudois (also known as Barbas), through the centuries went through genocidal experience inspired by the Roman Church. The state army which was under the control of the church (Latham: Medieval Geopolitics) carried out the mayhem. What resolutions did the Waldensees make that elicited such hatred from the Roman Church? An excerpt from their beliefs and practices is stated as follows: (Neufeld (1979: 1072-1073). "Concerning the Waldensees of Freyssinieres, a Barbe named Martin, arrested at Oulx, and a woman belonging to the diocese of Valence (the trial records are extant). If we examine them with attention, this is what we find:

"Purgatory is rejected because it does not exist, except in this life, inasmuch as it was invented by the avarice of the Priest. Our fate is decided here below: after death, devotions will be in no way change it. Worship belongs to God alone as to the Creator; Virgin Mary

and the Saints being but creatures have no share in it; besides, is it not doubtful whether they hear our prayers?... the Roman Church has become a Babel, a synogue of Satan; it is the Church of the wicked… The office of the Romish Clergy is therefore an empty formality, its practices are worthless and its holy water very harmless… Clerical censures affect us but little, we are not bound to obey either the Church or her Prelates; not even her Pope, for he is very far from being holy. Emilio Combo, *History of the Waldenses of Italy* (London: Truslove & Shirley, 1889). pp. 284, 285.

Centuries of doctrinal confrontations and persecutions with the established Church did not alter the convictions of the Waldensians. All effort made by the Church to coarse them into joining the universal church proved abortive. They saw the church with its leadership as a religio-political institution. Moreover, they condemned the leading doctrines of the church such as the purgatory and veneration of dead saints.

In conclusion, the paper draws attention to a statement made by Dupertis "that at the heart of liberation theology their is a revolutionary praxis that is regarded as above judgment, a precommitment to change the world, a liberation from any type of oppression that may stand in the way of man's complete humanization" (1982:147). The Waldensians defying persecution sought humility in poverty both physically and spiritually. In 1176 AD Waldo started the movement by accepting poverty as virtue. Gutierrez posits that "poverty is an act of love and liberation. It has a redemptive value" (1990:172). The Religio-Political leaders of the dark ages did not embrace this philosophical thought. Instead history reveals that the Church leaders were immersed in wealth acquisition. The Waldensians, though tortured and persecuted, stood firm in God's Word – undaunting in faith and action.

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