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THE WALDENSIANS: A STORY OF FAITH AND SURVIVAL

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by

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The history of the Waldensians is a long and complicated story of faith and survival. Today I hope to simplify it by highlighting the more important parts of their story. I have studied Waldensian history for over 17 years. In the beginning, materials from the James White Library (JWL) were the foundation upon which I began to build my research. After I had exhausted the books and materials in JWL, I began to consider other places to research. I have been privileged to go to Cambridge, England, and be accepted as a Biblical research scholar at Tyndale House. This provided me with access to all the prestigious libraries in Cambridge. I have also had access to the materials in the Geneva, Switzerland University library and the rare book room in the British Library in London. Both Cambridge and Geneva are key resources for Waldensian research, because in the 15th century many documents were placed there by Samuel Moreland and others traveling from the homeland of the Waldensians. A number of times I have visited mentors in Europe who can read the original languages, and they have confirmed the authenticity of my findings through primary research.

My years of research were inspired by the need for a class in Protestant heritage in conjunction with the new study abroad program for the Division of Architecture, which is now branded the School of Architecture and Interior Design. Originally, the class was designed for 3rd year architecture students. Now we include students and non-students from all disciplines at AU and others around the US.

The architectural and professional experience gained from being in the Waldensian villages allows architecture students to appreciate historical ingenuity. Taking into consideration the severe circumstances of the Waldensians, their ability to build, survive, and develop the land for hundreds of years proves the class study a worthy opportunity. In this class, there is an

emphasis that is analogous with or parallels the built culture and the worldview that embodies faith.

In architectural study, methods, designs, plans and customs are often interrelated to earlier practice and understanding. Teaching and participating in a class such as this allows for a walk through history. All knowledge is connected to history. This walk gives first-hand knowledge of the human experience within the context of architecture and human behavior, connecting with God as Creator. The class unites the intimate encounter with the built and un-built environment with natural settings that are responsive to human needs, committing students to a stronger faith in God.

There is a place of magnificent grandeur situated in the Cottian Alps of Northern Italy, virtually unknown today except to those who have an interest in its ancient history. The Piedmont valleys are pristine in their beauty. All the ancient roads from Italy, France and Britain ran through the Cottian Alps and Mount Genevre.¹

“No other spot in Europe was so adapted to their protection as this mountain home of the Waldenses. Strongholds and inaccessible glens, through which no stranger could find his way, formed an asylum fortified by the God of nature. The entrance to each is guarded by mountain ranges, perpendicular rocks, mountain peaks, and frightful precipices, and escape is provided through a labyrinth of paths, forests, rocky beds of torrents, and caverns...amid the impregnable rocks and eternal snows. ‘The Supreme Architect formed it, sinking its foundations deep in the earth and rearing high its mountain peaks.’”²

¹ Blair, Adam. *History of the Waldensians*, p. 4.

² Froom, Le Roy. *The Prophetic Faith of Our Fathers, Vol. 1*, pp. 849, 852.

“And the woman fled into the wilderness, where she hath a place prepared of God...” (Rev. 12:6). The people we call the Waldenses today began to flee to the mountain bulwarks of the Italian Alps soon after Nero began persecuting Christians in Rome. The Romans did not care who or what god’s people worshiped, just as long as they worshiped Nero and the other Caesars as gods. This posed a problem for Christians, since they worshiped only one God. After the time of Christ, Christianity spread throughout the world, but since it was so difficult to worship in the way that Jesus taught, many people left Rome. The bishops Irenaeus and Pothinus preached in the Alps with considerable success, and churches thrived on both sides of the Alps in France and Italy.”³

In spite of historians and church fathers who have tried to destroy the records of their true and ancient origins, the record of the Waldenses stands as a witness to us today. Repeatedly the enemies of the Waldensians sought to eradicate them forever from the earth. They also diligently searched for Waldensian books, histories, and records, committing them to the flames; thus making it difficult to piece together an accurate account of their ancient history. Nevertheless, through records kept by the inquisitors and other sources, we are able to confirm what has been passed down to us.

When I first began researching the Waldenses, one of the foremost questions on my mind was that of their origins. I discovered that two different histories persist to the present day, so I determined to study both to find out, which was accurate. The more popular history by far asserts that the Waldenses originated with their leader, Peter Waldo. My research, however, ultimately led me away from this perspective.

³ Wilkerson, B. G. *Truth Triumphant*, p. 18.

To find the truth of the ancient apostolic church one must not follow "the old beaten paths used by almost all the writers of church history."⁴ We cannot begin to understand the present without a correct understanding of past history. With persistence, the truth can be found in the writings of the early church fathers and leaders, along with the careful records of the inquisitors regarding the origin of these faithful people who made Scripture central to their lives.

“The enemies of this branch of the Church in the Wilderness have endeavored to confuse their history by tracing to a wrong source the origin of the name, Waldenses. They seek to connect its beginnings with Peter Waldo, an opulent merchant of Lyon, France, who came into notice about 1175. The story of this remarkable man commands a worthy niche in the temple of events. However, there is nothing in the original or the earliest documents of the Waldenses—their histories, poems, and confessions of faith—which can be traced to him or which make any mention of him.”⁵

According to their own records, the Waldenses believed themselves descendants of the apostles themselves, carrying the torch passed on to them by the first-century Christian church. In the Noble Lesson, a Waldensian manuscript dated to the 12th century C.E., they identified themselves as teachers descended from the tradition of the apostles. In the words of Benjamin Wilkinson, "The church in the wilderness is the connecting link between apostolic Christianity and God's people today."

"The Waldenses themselves, both before and after the destruction of their records, their friends of the reformation and their adversaries, have been convinced of their existence since the age in which the apostles lived ... the lamp which shone in the valleys

⁴ Wilkerson, *Truth Triumphant*, 9-10.

⁵ Wilkerson, *Truth Triumphant*, p. 209.

during the darkness of the Middle Ages was lighted by the hand of the first preachers of Christianity."⁶

The Waldenses hold a special place in church history and stand foremost among all other Christian groups as the “People of the Book.” They were among the first to obtain a translation of the entire Bible in their own language, which they preserved and passed on to the Reformers. Scripture was digested into their very souls as food is to the body. They memorized, to a great extent, the Gospels, epistles, psalms, and the accounts of Job, along with other chapters and books of the Bible. Their lives were immersed in Scripture; it was taught in the homes; little children learned Scripture at the mother’s knee and with the father out in the fields. For them Scripture held a deeper meaning—it kept them faithful, not fearful, ready to sacrifice anything to remain loyal to their Saviour and Redeemer.

The Waldenses held the following scriptures to their very core. They took the promises of Jesus literally: “You shall be my witness, by the power of the Spirit, to the extremities of the earth” (Acts 1:8). “You are a letter of Christ, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God—not on tables of stone but on the pages of the human heart ... Our sufficiency is from God, who has qualified us to be ministers of a new covenant, not a written code but in the Spirit which gives life. The Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom ... having this ministry, therefore, by the mercy of God, we do not lose heart. It is not ourselves that we preach: we preach Jesus Christ as Lord for the same God who said, ‘light, shine out of darkness!’ has caused light to shine in our hearts, to radiate the light of the knowledge of God’s glory, shining in the face of Jesus.” (2 Cor. 3:4).

⁶ Blair, Adam. *History of the Waldenses*, p. 17.

“ ... The Scriptures were not merely a record of God’s dealings with men in the past, and a revelation of the responsibilities and duties of the present, but an unfolding of the perils and glories of the future. They believed that the end of all things was not far distant; and as they studied the Bible with prayer and tears, they were the more deeply impressed with its precious utterances, and with their duty to make known to others, its saving truths. They saw the plan of salvation clearly revealed in the word of God, and they found comfort, hope, and peace in believing in Jesus. As the light illuminated their understanding and made glad their hearts, they longed to shed its beams upon those who were in the darkness of papal error.”⁷

The gospel commission was very clear to the Waldenses and they were not content to keep the scriptures to themselves, hidden away in their Alpine ark. Trusting in the almighty power of God and seeing the importance of education, they organized themselves and built a small stone “college,” hidden away high in the valley of Angronga and under the shadow of the Pra Del Tor, for the purpose of learning and study.

Though it was built hundreds of years ago, a typical Waldensian stone construction, it still stands today as a testimony to these early missionaries. Known as the *College of the Barbas*, this complex consists of three small-attached buildings. The two upper cottages were used for students’ sleeping quarters and their classroom. The lower cottage housed animals. In the center of the classroom still stands a very large, round stone table. A Bible sits in the center of that table and set into the wall there are some stone bookshelves. It is a thrilling experience to enter this small, dark room and realize that, from this place, the *Barbes* or *Barba* (meaning “uncle” or “pastor”) laboriously copied Scripture by hand, using only candlelight, with the older men training the

⁷ White, Ellen G. *The Great Controversy*, p. 72.

younger. These were, by no means, illiterate and ignorant people. When visiting this ancient stone room with its two small windows, one has a sense of its sacredness.

During the long Alpine winters, when the snows covered this secluded “seminary,” scholars studied there in peace and safety. Not only was Scripture studied, but also the young men prepared religious tracts, wrote poetry, and translated the works of the Bible scholars of the day into their language. French, Italian, mathematics, botany, and some basic medical skills were also taught. They learned trades or a profession in order to provide an income. Thus, they were equipped to travel in disguise as they journeyed throughout Europe as missionaries.

The scripture of the Waldenses came from the Latin manuscripts of the Textus Receptus type or Received Text or the Italia. The Vulgate was not the Bible of the Waldenses; though they may have had copies of the Vulgate, they did not use that translation. They translated much of the Scriptures into the ancient dialect of the Waldenses, known as the Romaunt language. Today the older descendants of the Waldenses use Patois among themselves. The Patois language proves their antiquity—for it is much older than that of Italian and French and even the Romaunt language.

The *Barbas* traveled just as Jesus had sent the apostles of old, by twos—a younger man with an older *Barb*—proclaiming the Gospel through Europe and beyond. Some went as peddlers, selling fine merchandise, such as fabrics or jewels. Others as physicians and still others as troubadours. These faithful travelers traversed all of Europe, making followers for their master everywhere they went.

History tells that the Waldensians suffered thirty-three invasions into their valleys with the purpose of wiping even their memory from the face of the earth. However, the inquisitors kept faithful records of these people, noting their early historical roots. From these records, we know something of the horrors and tortures they endured. In one instance, the secretary to the inquisitor

himself, in recording the events taking place, said he could no longer endure to write any more of what he was witnessing. On this particular day, faithful Waldenses were being led as lambs to the slaughter, to be beheaded.

J. A. Wylie wrote in his book, *History of the Waldenses*:

“These cruelties form a scene that is unparalleled and unique in the history of at least civilized countries. There have been tragedies in which more blood was spilt, and more life sacrificed, but none in which the actors were so completely dehumanized, and the forms of suffering so monstrously disgusting, so unutterably cruel and revolting. The ‘Piedmontese Massacres’ in this respect stand alone. They are more fiendish than all the atrocities and murders before or since.”⁸

The survivors of such atrocities often sang the words of the seventy-ninth psalm, which accurately describes their condition:

O God, the heathen are come into thine inheritances,

Thy holy temple have they defiled;

They have laid Jerusalem on heaps.

The dead bodies of thy servants have they given

To be meat unto the fowls of heaven,

The flesh of thy saints unto the beasts of the earth,

Their blood have they shed like water;

And there was none to bury them.

(Psalms 79:1–3 KJV)

⁸ Wylie, J. A. *History of the Waldenses*, p. 142.

I can no longer pick up my Bible to read without thinking what its words meant to those ancient people so long ago, nor can I forget the blood that was shed so that today we have the freedom to read the Sacred Word of God. Indeed, many of the reformers themselves gave all in order to translate and publish the Scriptures.

Ellen White visited the Waldensian valleys three times during her travels in Europe. The first time was on her fifty-eighth birthday, November 26, 1885. She kept the most descriptive diaries each day she was there. She was impressed with the explicit beauty of the Valleys and spoke there on a number of occasions during her visits. Her heart went out to the local people who had lost much of their early fervor and beliefs. Of this, she wrote:

“These mountains and caverns and clefts of the rock, which we behold, have a history. Martyrs have perished here, and these places will never reveal their sacred trust until the Life-giver shall call them with the voice of the Archangel and the trump of God from the rocky caverns, the dungeons, the caves, and the clefts of the rocks. They died in exile, some by starvation, and others by the cruel hand of man. They walked with God, and will walk with Him in white because they are found worthy.”⁹

In April 1655 during the so-called famous April massacre, 3000 people on a mountaintop called Castelluzzo were cast to their deaths. There are no records as to how many people courageously gave their lives over the years. Some estimate that there were at least 60,000 lives sacrificed. What a glory that will be to see thousands raised from their hidden graves.

⁹ White, Ellen G. “Second Visit to Italy.” In Ms62—1886, paragraph 105. April 29, 1886.

Many times, Ellen White expressed her desire to witness the resurrection in the valleys when Jesus comes. Thousands of martyrs will be raised from the dead to glorious eternal life.

“In their lonely retreats they often met their Redeemer and conversed with Him, as did the two disciples on the way to Emmaus. He would there open to them the sublime truths of his word, and strengthen them in their determination not to put confidence in false guides, but to obey and worship Him only who made and governs the world. ‘He sees and knows everything,’ they continually repeated to themselves.”¹⁰

There is so much more that can be said of such a people—a people who put scripture first and foremost in their lives. Their story covers centuries of time and is full of faith and courage. It is said that if we forget history it is bound to be repeated. Theirs is a story that must be told over and over as a witness to us today.

The Waldenses were isolated in a place where they cultivated a relational faith as their foundation, as opposed to a behavioral faith. The challenge that comes to us today is presented by their example—to have so strong a relation-based faith that as children of the Heavenly Father, we would sacrifice our very lives for Him. This requires us to spiritually set our lives apart, remembering how Paul exhorted Christians to be in the world but not of the world. We must ensure that our daily relationship with God includes time humbly spent in our own Piedmont Valleys, diligently pursuing our own faith and a genuine walk with our Heavenly Father.

“We will not be able to meet the trials of this time without God. We are not to have the courage and fortitude of martyrs of old until brought into the position they were in.”¹¹

¹⁰ White, Ellen G. “Visit to Northern Italy.” In *Historical Sketches of the Foreign Missions of the Seventh-Day Adventists*, 243. Switzerland: Imprimerie Polyglotte, 1886.

¹¹ White, Ellen G. “Strength for Today, April 19.” In *Our High Calling*, 125. Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald, 1961.

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