

Dr. Kevin E. Frederick, Waldensians, Lecture 1A, The Roots of Waldo's Conversion (1172-1207 AD)

© 2024 Kevin Frederick and Ted Hildebrandt

Good morning. My name is Kevin Frederick. I am the pastor of the Waldensian Presbyterian Church. I have served this congregation for now almost ten years, and as part of my role with this congregation, when I came here, I realized that there was a real sense of the need to develop the history of the Waldensian people because of the great, rich heritage that this congregation draws from in its background.

More than 50% of the members of this church are of Waldensian descent. From that perspective, I have developed a number of sermons on Waldensian history, and we're going to start out with the founder of the Waldensian movement, Peter Waldo. We actually call him Waldo. Valdez was his name in French, and he is a man who was instrumental in the formation of this movement.

But I'd first like to start out by reading the scriptures from Luke 18. This is one of about three important pivotal scriptures that Waldo drew from. From Luke 18, a certain ruler asked him, good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life? Jesus said to him, why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone.

You know the commandments: you shall not commit adultery, you shall not murder, you shall not steal, you shall not bear false witness, and you honor your father and your mother. He replied I have kept all these since my youth. When Jesus heard this, he said to him, there is still one thing lacking: sell all you own and distribute the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven.

Then come and follow me. But when he heard this, he became sad because he was very rich. Jesus looked at him and said how hard it is for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God.

Indeed, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone rich to enter the kingdom of God. This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life? Christians down through the ages have been asking that question of themselves as they pondered their relationship with God. And very often, the way they chose to live their lives was quite different from the answer that Jesus offered that day to the rich young man. The rich young man was unsatisfied with simply applying the biblical instruction to fulfill the commandments of the Torah and was seeking a greater depth of meaning in his life.

In response, Jesus challenged the rich young man to sell your possessions, give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come and follow me. Not many people in this or any age have ever followed this instruction to the letter.

It is so total and demanding that it requires complete obedience. This is a story describing the origins of the movement started by a 12th-century man named Waldo, who, upon being confronted with the biblical mandate, strived to live to the letter of the instruction of Jesus Christ. A wealthy merchant who made his fortune in the mercantile trade of Lyon, France, in the late 12th century, Waldo, Valdez in French, was also a religious man devoted to the Catholic Church.

As a well-to-do citizen, a business leader, and a devout Christian, Waldo was well-connected with the leader of the Roman Church. Some records indicate he may have played a lay leadership role in the church at Lyon. The growing city of Lyon was a cultural and prosperous business community in 12th-century France.

It was also a regional center of the Roman Church with its own bishop. In the years leading up to Waldo's conversion of faith to live a life of poverty, Waldo had commissioned two of the church leaders, who were well-versed in Latin, to translate parts of the Bible for him in the common language of the region, so that he would be able to read and study the scriptures for himself. Such a request in the 12th century was uncommon, and because of its relative obscurity, it did not draw the attention of the Catholic hierarchy.

Therefore, Waldo's request for parts of the Bible to be translated into the vernacular flew under the radar of the church hierarchy and was not deemed to be illegal. Waldo studied these translated scriptures and discussed them with the religious leaders. He then interpreted their meaning literally as they applied to his own life.

It would be incorrect for us to make the assumption that it would have been much easier for Waldo in the 12th century to sell his wealth, give away all possessions and the poor, and adopt a life of poverty than it would be for someone in our century. In the 12th century, there was no such thing as a social safety net other than almsgiving, whereas today, a combination of governmental and non-profit services are provided for the poor. It should be recognized that for Waldo to make the decision he did was absolutely a great leap of faith for a person living at any age.

Sketchy historical documentation about Waldo's life and conversion is available. However, some facts emerge that provide historical reference points. Historical records indicate that in the year 1172, there was a severe drought that affected both France and Germany.

The weather conditions created a devastating famine, which was particularly hard on the poor of the region. Waldo had made his fortune in the mercantile trade and was

a considerably wealthy man. Valdez, Waldo, between May 27th and August 1st of 1072, gave regular doles three days a week of bread, soup, and meat to whoever asked for it.

On August 15th of that year, on the feast of the Assumption, he scattered money around to the poor in the streets, saying that no one can serve God and mammon from Matthew 6. Bystanders and friends who had observed the strange behavior of this wealthy merchant began to question his sanity. Nevertheless, he reportedly justified his actions as a vengeance on his enemies, who had enslaved him to money and to create things, and he also said that he had done this to teach his hearers to trust God rather than riches. Increasingly, his friends and business contacts, including his own wife, thought he had gone utterly mad.

His wife, who greatly valued her wealthy lifestyle and manner of living, desperately tried to persuade him to change his mind and elicited the help of his closest friends to reason with him, but Waldo had his mind fixed. This created a great rift between Waldo and his family, especially when Waldo began to make legal arrangements to allocate a significant portion of his wealth and property holdings to provide for his wife and two daughters. To follow the scriptural mandate to give away and to follow Christ, Waldo distanced himself from his own family, effectively divorcing himself.

They could not understand this sudden change in his life, and yet he cared deeply for them. His calling to discipleship now became his primary focus. In a society that was largely illiterate, oral tradition played a key role in the preservation and teaching of its history.

Europe in the twelfth century was more than 90 percent illiterate. Only the wealthy and the ruling class could afford the luxury of education. In such a cultural setting, storytelling, poetry, and lengthy ballads became the primary means of passing on knowledge and information within the society.

Waldo and his followers brought an increased focus on the importance of oral communication by proclaiming and teaching the words of scripture in the language of the people. This was a radical change in the Roman Catholic Church, which believed the language of scripture should be limited to Latin, a language understood by little more than one percent of the population. Waldo's proclamation of the word of God in the language of the people was initially wildly popular and well-received.

The effectiveness of Waldo's ministry was perceived to be a threat, however, by the Roman Catholic hierarchy, who condemned the followers of Waldo and their public proclamation of scripture. He and his followers, who were called the Poor of Lyon, were excommunicated in 1184. Later, in 1215, they were condemned as heretics.

Persecution of the Poor of Lyon became increasingly organized by the church, and by the fourteenth century, a crusade was mounted by the Roman Catholics to destroy the heresy and all its followers. Over this period of several hundred years, three separate myths surrounding the conversion of Waldo emerged within the Waldensian communities that supplanted the factual data surrounding the famine that impacted France and Germany in 1172. The facts had been largely forgotten with the passage of time, and yet the myths that emerged across Western Europe in Waldensian communities interpreted and preserved memories of the response of Waldo to the suffering created by the famine for the poor of the city of Lyon in 1172.

Historian and Waldensian Giorgio Turin, author of *The Waldensians, the First Eight Hundred Years*, written in 1980, himself a Waldensian pastor and historian.