

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

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This is Dr. Kevin Frederick, who teaches the history of the Waldensians. This is session 1, The Roots of Waldo's Conversion.

Good morning. My name is Kevin Frederick. I am the pastor of the Waldensian Presbyterian Church in Valdese, North Carolina.

I have served this congregation for almost 10 years now. 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. We're going to start out with Peter Waldo, the founder of the Waldensian movement. 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 that there was 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, for 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 who is rich to enter into 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 has been 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 and give the money to the poor, and you would 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 twelfth-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 twelfth 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 twelfth-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 twelfth 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 twelfth century to sell his wealth, give away all possessions of the poor, and adopt a life of poverty than it would be for someone in our century.

In the twelfth 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 in 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 12th century was more than 90% 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 1% 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 Lyons, were excommunicated in 1184. Later, in 1215, they were condemned as heretics.

Persecution of the Poor of Lyons became increasingly organized by the church, and by the 14th 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 Lyons 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, has identified three stories surrounding the conversion of Waldo. As a means of preserving and conveying the history of the Waldensian people, it is important for us to consider each of these storylines because they demonstrate a degree of fluidity that surrounds much of the origin and early history of the Waldensian movement. It is imperative for the reader to understand the important role that myths played in the creation of the history of the Waldensians, as we shall see in a subsequent sermon, which addresses the role of myth-making in understanding the origins of the Waldensian movement.

Storytelling played an important role in establishing and strengthening the identity and resolve of faith of the Waldensian people in times of great persecution. It is interesting how all three of these stories serve to enhance the historical facts that have been unearthed in the last century. All three stories offer insight into the cultural context of Waldo's life.

The first story. Stopping to chat with friends after mass one day, Waldo heard a minstrel roaming the streets and singing while he accompanied himself on his lute. The minstrel sang a tale about the life of St. Alexis, a wealthy and spoiled son of a noble family.

On his wedding night, in a wave of guilt over his wealth and opulent lifestyle, Alexis made the sudden decision to leave his bride and head off to do penance by undertaking the pilgrimage to the Holy Land. There, as a result of his life of self-deprivation and suffering, he became so disfigured that years later, no one

recognized him on his return home to his city of origin. Outcast as a homeless reprobate, he was left alone to die under a staircase in town, and no one knew his identity until after his death.

As the legend goes, Waldo was so impressed by the song of this minstrel that he invited the minstrel to come to his own house, eat, and spend the night. Hearing the song again, Waldo began to recognize his own identity in the story and began to undertake changes that renounced his former life of luxury. In the 12th century, traveling minstrels, also called troubadours, were wildly popular in Europe.

As they brought their music and their stories from town to town, they spread new ideas and even new manners of speaking, which influenced the wealthy and merchant classes. One of the predominant themes conveyed in the songs of the troubadours was the concept of courtly love, which elevated the role of publicly ritualized displays of love within relationships and marriage. The concept of courtly love eventually promoted a greater degree of equality between married couples than had ever existed in society to that point, but it also discounted and subordinated the role of the single female.

Sexual innuendo and drama within the male-female relationships were also subjects of the bard's music. Given the popularity of the troubadours in Waldo's lifetime, this story is certainly plausible, but it doesn't take into account the context of the famine that impacted the community at the time of his conversion. Story number two.

Being a wealthy merchant and being surrounded by hordes of poor people every day, Waldo, over time, grew to be troubled in conscience, and he sought out the advice and wisdom of one of his friends who served the church as a priest and theologian. After a very long conversation, the priest grew weary over Waldo's relentless inquiry and suggested that he read Matthew 19, verse 21, in which Jesus tells a rich young ruler to go and sell his possessions and come and follow him. These words had such a powerful impact on Waldo that he followed them to the letter of the law, vowing to literally conform his life to the commands of Jesus.

The second story lifts up the ongoing relationships Waldo had with leaders of the Catholic Church in Lyon. As a wealthy merchant, Waldo was a patron of the church and a lay leader, and such a conversation, or even a series of conversations with priests and other ordained leaders, may very well have occurred while Waldo wrestled with a sense of call in his life. Within this story, the scriptural focuses directly on the very passage that was instrumental in Waldo's decision to convert his life to a more radical expression of Christian faith.

However, it leaves out much of the direct interaction that Waldo had with the poor between May and August of 1172 in addressing the famine which caused so much

suffering in people around him. The third story. Waldo had lost a close personal friend who was a fellow merchant in Lyon.

Waldo's friend was suddenly struck dead at a banquet that they were both attending. Grieving the loss of his friend and considering the meaning of his own mortality, Waldo asked himself, what if death should overtake me in a similar manner? Would my soul be ready for the journey? After weeks of soul searching, he is reported to have made the decision to divest himself of all his wealth and his business ventures. Accordingly, Waldo then made the decision to start a new life unencumbered by the trappings of wealth and personal possessions.

Here in this story, the focus and motivation of Waldo's own mortality is the primary driver influencing his actions, creating a crisis of faith and identity that was driven by a sense of inevitability of divine judgment. Food again is in this story, and it plays an important role in Waldo's conversion because it is a banquet that brings Waldo and his friend together at the very moment when their friend dies. But the story speaks of an existential crisis and leaves out any mention of the role of scripture in guiding Waldo's spiritual conversion.

Each of these stories surrounding the mythic origin of Waldo's conversion and the beginning of the Waldensian movement conveys the importance of storytelling in a culture that was more than 95% illiterate. In a region of influence that ranged from southern France to the Italian peninsula, from north central Germany to Austria and Bohemia, the Waldensian preachers who had memorized whole books of scripture engaged in itinerant ministry, traveling in pairs as they used storytelling to convey the gospel. Varied as these three stories are regarding Waldo's conversion, they each demonstrate an earnest desire to educate subsequent generations as to the origins of their faith so that each believer would understand the distinctive factors that set their interpretation of Christianity apart from Roman Catholics.

In the vast geographical and cultural span of Europe, where followers of this movement lived in a variety of different cultures and spoke different languages, it is no surprise that there will be multiple versions of Waldo's conversion. When assessed for similar themes, they all communicate Waldo's decision to give up a life of wealth and relative luxury, to embrace a life of poverty, and to proclaim the gospel to the public. Each of these three stories indicates a personal conversion away from a lifestyle of serving self and towards a radical new life of embracing poverty, spreading the gospel, and serving the needs of the poor.

When examined against the facts that have emerged regarding the historical context of Lyon in 1172, it is plausible that elements of all three of these stories reflect what happened to bring about the radical transformation in Waldo's life. However, whether communicated in one of the stories cited above or not, this transformation occurs after examining the scriptures and engaging in a period of deep soul-

searching. Out of this process, Waldo came to a new understanding of the living presence and his personal recognition of the calling of Jesus Christ.

George O'Torn points out in his analysis of these stories that there were two very distinct outcomes that came from Waldo's own conversion. First, the gospel that had been spelled out in his own life should be made available to all people, providing them with their own opportunity to respond. Secondly, the call to discipleship as he interpreted the scriptural mandates from Matthew 18 for himself and his followers meant completely divesting himself of wealth and property and reorienting himself to using property and wealth to alleviate the needs of the poor as one also became poor.

Waldo's response reflected the power of resurrection life, which not only impacted his life but also impacted the lives of many people who heard the gospel message for themselves and responded in a vow of poverty and a willingness to engage in the public proclamation of the gospel. In Waldo's life and witness of faith, the beginning of the oldest and continually organized witness of pre-reformed Christian thinking and practice was established and set in motion. Despite the concerted efforts of the Roman Catholic Church to destroy this unique witness of the Christian faith, it would endure and prevail to the dawn of the Protestant Reformation 350 years later.

It is worth noting that the first name Peter, which is often included when referencing Waldo, is not listed as part of Waldo's name in any documents that originated in his lifetime. It is only 200 years later, in the 14th century, that the name Peter is first attributed to Waldo. Historians believe that during the height of the persecution against the Waldensians, it was then that the Waldensians attributed the name Peter, who, by the way, was the first and foremost disciple of Jesus Christ.

By attributing that name to Waldo as a means of legitimizing Waldo and the Waldensian movement, tying them both to the origins of the Christian faith and its first leader, the Apostle Peter, after the ascension of Jesus Christ. This reference to the early church and its suggestion of the movement ties through apostolic succession became an important source of strength and conviction for the persecuted Waldensians when the Roman Catholic Church and the surrounding culture branded them as heretics and sought out their total destruction. In the face of the Inquisition and other forms of persecution by the Roman Church, the Waldensians took comfort in emphasizing the ties with the origin of the Christian church, which was also persecuted by the ruling powers of its day.

The idea of apostolic succession and the origins of the Waldensian faith are explored more fully in a sermon entitled in this series, Out of the Shadows of History.

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