

Dr. Kevin E. Frederick, Waldensians, Lecture 2, A Synthesis of Purpose, The Arnoldists

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This is Dr. Kevin Frederick in his teaching on the history of the Waldensians. This is session 2, A Synthesis of Purpose, The Arnoldists.

This sermon is entitled A Synthesis of Purpose and draws a connection between the Waldensian movement from the followers of Peter Waldo and another strain that were followers of a man named Arnold of Brescia.

To give the background of this, I want to read from Acts 15. Then, certain individuals came down from Judea and taught the brothers that unless they were circumcised according to the custom of Moses, they could not be saved. After Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and debate with them, Paul and Barnabas and some of the others were appointed to go to Jerusalem to discuss this question with the apostles and the leaders.

So, they were sent on their way by the church. And as they passed through both Phoenicia and Samaria, they reported the conversion of the Gentiles and brought great joy to all the believers. When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church, the apostles, and the elders.

They reported all that God had done with them. But some believers who belonged to the sect of the Pharisees stood up and said it was necessary for them to be circumcised and ordered to keep the law of Moses. The apostles and the elders met together to consider this matter.

After there had been much debate, Peter stood up and said to them, my brothers, you know that in the early days, God made a choice among you that I should be the one through whom the Gentiles would hear the message of the good news and become believers. And God, who knows the human heart, testified to them by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as he did to us. And in cleansing their hearts by faith, he had made no distinction between them and us.

Now, therefore, why are you putting God to the test by placing on the neck of the disciples a yoke that neither our ancestors nor we had been able to bear? On the contrary, we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, just as they will. The whole assembly kept silent and listened to Barnabas and Paul as they told of all the signs and wonders that God had done through them among the Gentiles.

After they finished speaking, James replied, my brothers, listen to me. Simeon has related how God first looked favorably on the Gentiles to take from them amongst the people for his name. This agrees with the words of the prophets as it is written.

After this, I will return and rebuild David's dwelling, which has fallen from its ruins. I will rebuild it, and I will set it up so that all other peoples may see the Lord, even all the Gentiles over whom my name has been called. Thus says the Lord, who has been making these things known for a long time.

Therefore, I have reached the decision that we should not trouble those Gentiles who are turning to God, but we should write to them to abstain only from things polluted by idols, from fornication, and from whatever else has been strangled and from blood. For in every city for generations past, Moses has had those who proclaim him, for he has been read aloud every Sabbath in the synagogues.

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. I want to start with a background quote as I begin this sermon.

The feudal system, in its most tyrannical aspect, began to break down toward the end of the 12th century, weakened by its corruption, by the fight that the church and the common people were unitedly making against it, by the growth of monasticism, and by increasingly frequent crusades, which was killing off the flower of nobility of Europe, the centralization of people and city life, the growth of commerce, the democratic spirit of the republican cities, the fight of the common people and their representatives against feudal and ecclesial authorities, the opening up of large roads from country to country, roads that had fallen into decay since the time of the Roman Empire, and above all, the adoption of the vernacular, the language of the people, to take the place of Latin, used only by the scholars were the social characteristics of the time. That is a quote from a brief history of the Waldensians by a man named Enrico Santorial. We believe we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, Acts 15.11. Disputes over theological differences of opinion and interpretation within the body of Christ have existed throughout the history of the Christian community.

In the book of Acts, we discover that the first major division arose over the role of the ritual of circumcision. Most Jewish Christians believe that the physical sign of the circumcision of a male, which had been an essential covenantal act and sign marking male Jewish believers, was also an essential action for any Gentile convert or for anyone who became a follower of this hybrid of Jewish faith, later to be called Christianity. An alternative interpretation of the essence of faith disputing the role of circumcision was espoused by two early church leaders, Paul and Barnabas, in their ministry to the Gentiles.

The term Gentile was used by Jews to describe anyone who was not a Jew by birth and or by circumcision. Paul distilled the theological essence of faith in Jesus Christ by focusing on the grace of Christ rather than the Jewish covenantal practice of circumcision. After a time of great debate during which those gathered listened to the reasoning of each other and then appealed to the prophetic voice found in the Hebrew scriptures to discern the will of God, the early Christian community came to the agreement that circumcision of the body was not essential to Christian discipleship.

Belief in Christ as Lord and the justification of grace through Christ were the two primary essentials to becoming disciples. Paul and Barnabas and a small band of followers resumed their mission to the Gentiles after this event, with a potential theological rift resolved and the knowledge that they and the Jewish Christian converts led by Peter united in the faith. The followers of Waldo in the late 1170s began to refer to themselves as the poor in spirit or the poor in Leon.

Based on their readings of the Sermon on the Mountain, specifically Matthew 5.3, they were more commonly known as the poor of Leon. Denied the practice of preaching in the public by the Bishop of Leon, Waldo appealed in 1179 to Pope Alexander III for permission to preach in the public setting. The Pope was moved by the humility and devotion of Waldo but deferred to the bishops and their geographical jurisdiction to determine the right to preach within any given community on a case-by-case basis.

But the Bishop of Leon forbade Waldo and his followers the right to preach, which in the church of the late 12th century was an exclusive function of the bishop. At that point in history, the local priest's duties focused on administering the seven sacraments of the local parish and conducting worship around the administration of those sacraments without proclamation and exposition to the Word of God. It was rare in those days for the laity to ever hear a sermon, and even then, it was only proclaimed in Latin.

The proclamation of preaching was a closely guarded role of the office of bishop in the medieval catholic church. This restriction did not block Waldo and his followers from preaching, and by 1184, the poor of Leon were excommunicated by Pope Lucius III for preaching the Word of God in the vernacular. This freed Waldo and his followers to carry the message of the gospel following the practice of Jesus, who sent out disciples in pairs to spread the good news.

By the late 1180s, Waldo and his traveling companion discovered a sect of Christianity in the Lombard region south of Milan. They called themselves the poor of Lombardy, but they were also known as the Arnoldisti. The poor of Lombardy predated the founding of the Waldensians by 40 years and were led by a man named Arnold of Brescia. Speaking of Arnold, Enrico Sartorio writes that there arose in

Lombardy, a man who preached with prophetic fire a return to apostolic purity and poverty in life.

The man was Arnold of Brescia, a student under Peter Abelard who was not satisfied as his master to discuss theological beliefs in a fashion but who carried out the logical religious conclusions of his master into life. A man of action who felt the truth with his heart as well as with his mind who practiced and wanted others to practice a life dominated by the clean, purifying democratic spirit of Christ." Because of the relatively opulent living of the Roman Catholic bishops in 12th-century Europe, bishops had increasingly occupied themselves with amassing their wealth and building castles. As a result, criticism arose from all sectors of society in opposition to the church.

Arnold, who had been a monk in the Roman church after studying with Peter Abelard, called upon the Roman hierarchy to renounce its wealth and to return the church's own lands to the city-state, thereby freeing the church and its leaders from the corrupting power of wealth. Arnold urged the church leaders to return to a purer form of discipleship. Within this context, the fiery words of Arnold of Brescia gathered a large number of people willing to follow him in his attempt to make democratic reforms along political lines and in his effort to introduce moral reforms along religious lines.

This led Arnold to declare the radical belief that clergy who owned property had no power to perform the rites of the sacraments. This critique of the clergy would eventually evolve in Waldensian circles to the theological position of Donatism, a belief that the holy sacraments served by ordained church officials who themselves led immoral lives were, in fact, ineffectual, rendering no spiritual value to anyone partaking in the sacraments officiated by immoral Catholic clergy. Arnold's beliefs were very popular amongst the communities in the Lombardy area.

Fearing his influence over the people of the region, Arnold was branded as a heretic by the church and burned at the stake in 1155. However, the power of his ideas lived on, and he left behind a substantial and well-organized group of followers who were still thriving in the 1180s when Waldo and his traveling companion happened upon them. The Arnoldist's chief belief was the desirability of living a pure evangelical life in a state of basic poverty.

To achieve this end, they organized themselves and their small communities of two to three families, with an elder at the head of each community. The elders and their communities were overseen by a superintendent, also called a bishop, who resided in Milan and governed over the small community groups in the region. In Milan, Lombardy had a seminary where the leaders of each communal group received training in reading and interpreting the Bible.

Their religious guidance was limited to the New Testament, which was read by all in the vernacular and was very often memorized. Religious education of the content and meaning of the Gospels was a key function within each of these communal groups. Both the poor of Lyon and the poor of Lombardy found in each other kindred spirits who embraced a life centered on poverty and in the Gospels.

In the early days of both groups, they called upon Catholic priests and bishops to become more faithful apostles of Jesus Christ in a conscious acceptance of a life of poverty. However, several differences emerged between the poor of Lyon and the poor of Lombardy, especially around Waldo's belief that all the followers of the poor of Lyon were to serve as itinerant preachers of the Gospel. The followers of Waldo, in their poverty, accepted alms to support their preaching, embracing a literal interpretation of Jesus' command to his disciples to take nothing with them.

Waldo believed that the call to preach must remain the sole activity of his followers, and he allowed no other occupation for those who became his followers. As a result, the poor of Lyon relied on the generosity of the listening audience to support their daily needs of food, clothing, and shelter and had no other occupation other than preaching. In contrast, the poor of Lombardy worked in a trade or profession and generously shared their earnings with the community to which they belonged, thereby embracing a less strident opposition to personal property.

The Arnoldists emphasized the importance of living out an overall ethic and principle of discipleship in the community as proclaimed by Christ. They did not interpret their calling to serve as itinerant preachers. Instead, they were comprised of a collection of communities more geographically fixed, organized into clusters of small groups of families, banded together to provide religious and scriptural education to each of the family members in their clusters.

Out of this emphasis on education grew the establishment of schools, which were operated by the Lombard poor. The poor of Lombardy, like the poor of Lyon, emphasized that the followers were to be guided by the ethics of the Bible as they applied to daily life. The Arnoldists were to be self-sufficient, applying Christian principles and the labor of each community member in support of their communal groups.

In short, the Arnoldists focused on the motto and ethics of communal living found in Acts 4 and 5, while the followers of Waldo centered their ministry on the call of Jesus to go and make disciples of all nations from Matthew 28. The question of labor as a spiritual discipline was a major point of disagreement between the two groups, with the poor of Lyon rejecting the role that labor played in the life of a follower of Christ. The issue of manual labor seems to have been symbolic.

It represented one of the many tensions between the pristine legacy of Waldo and the constantly inventive adaptation of the Lombards to different circumstances and influences. The merger between the followers of Waldo and the followers of Arnold required some careful study and negotiations. Nine important theological differences arose between the two groups, and six delegates from each group met together to address the differences and work out a compromise.

The twelve delegates met for days in the town of Bergamo near Milan to address their differences in the year 1218. Seven of those nine differences are reflected in the following questions and were resolved accordingly in a document called the Rescriptum at an event thereafter known as the Council of Bergamo. Number one, should a leader be elected within this movement? The Piemontese sought to elect a leader from within, appointing him as their bishop.

On the other hand, Valdes and his followers kept insisting that Christ alone was the leader of the movement. Number two, should leaders chosen from the newly converted be ordained or not? A process and standard of education emerged that provided training for all who were prepared to be leaders or preachers within the movement in both groups. Number three, could a laboring Piemontese congregation in the Lombard region, which did not commission itinerant preachers, be accepted within the movement called to proclaim the gospel? Valdes himself refused to compromise, stressing his insistence on the primary role of preaching the gospel, but after his death around 1206 or 1207, this position changed moderately.

Incidentally, within three generations, the role of a marketable trade within the movement proved to be a salient component of the identity of every itinerant minister. The occupation or trade of the traveling preachers provided them with a foil, legitimizing their travels under the cloak of secrecy as they journeyed from community to community during the hundreds of years that the Catholic Church persecuted every known Waldensian leader. Was baptism effective and essential for the salvation of an individual? A consensus was reached between both groups that no one who had not received the sacrament could be saved.

Number five, could marriage be dissolved or not? A husband and wife could be allowed to divorce in the case of infidelity or if there was mutual agreement between the husband and wife. This was a significant break with the Roman Catholic Church's position on marriage and reflected the Waldensian recognition that marriage was not a sacrament. Number six, should each believing community engage in the discipline of its members who themselves engage in immoral behavior? An agreement was made to establish a tribunal in every community of faith, which would be empowered to address and judge community members on a case-by-case basis.

And number seven, what role does the Holy Bible play in the life of a community of faith? The poor Lombards believed it was necessary for the church to reject any practice or belief that was not grounded in the scriptures. These two groups agreed unanimously that the Bible was the irrevocable source of reference, serving as a definitive authority on matters of faith and morality. Two unresolved issues remain between the poor of Lyon, which are called the Ultramontanes, or those from the mountains, and the poor of Lombardy, called the Piedmontese.

The first dispute arose over the fate of Waldo and his traveling companion, Vivette, over the following question. When Waldo and Vivette died, was their salvation dependent upon them making a last-minute confession of their sins or not? The Piedmontese insisted on the necessity of a last-minute confession of sins. The Ultramontanes believed that one's confession in Christ as Lord and Savior was all that was necessary for the gift of salvation.

The second dispute arose over the administration of the seven sacraments. Waldo and the Ultramontanes believed the sacraments were valid even if the priests who performed them were not morally upright, whereas the Piedmontese believed the sacraments administered by immoral or unrighteous priests were rendered ineffective by the priest's defiled character. Incidentally, differences of opinion on this issue within the Waldensians' community would remain unresolved until the time the Waldensians joined the Reform Movement in 1532.

At the Council of Bergamo in 1218, the two groups compromised on all but these last two issues. Because these two points were not interpreted as essential tenets of faith, the poor of Leon and the poor of Lombardy merged together, creating a synthesis of the strengths of both expressions of faith without compromising the integrity of either group. Whereas the followers of Waldo presented the passion of preaching as a central emphasis of faith in Christ, the poor of Lombardy brought to the integration of both groups the necessary organization and structure that enabled the Waldensian witness to become an alternative to the Roman Catholic Church.

After the Council of Bergamo in 1218, the poor of Leon and the poor of Lombardy merged to become more inclusively known as the poor of Christ. The public now had a choice between two distinct expressions of Christian faith. The poor of Christ demonstrated a faith witness that was expressed through the love and care of people by Christian leaders who themselves remained focused on humility and servanthood.

They were Christian disciples who made the pastoral care and education of the laity their central mission. In contrast, the Roman Catholic Church and its clergy modeled a faith witness whose primary goal was the support of an institutional church and the administration of its seven sacraments. The institutional Roman Church had power and a highly developed persuasive authority on its side.

As a result, the Roman Catholic Church set out to destroy the Waldensian community through manipulation, coercion, and condemnation, influencing clergy and laity alike in the belief that there was only one true church and that the Waldensians were heretical. The use of the Inquisition, religious crusades, and the preaching of the Dominicans made the case that the Catholic Church was the arbiter of divine justice. Because of the severe punishments directed towards individuals who were branded as Waldensian heretics, including loss of property, torture, and death, the Waldensian movement turned increasingly inward.

By the start of the 14th century, the Waldensian dissent had become a clandestine organization, resorting to secrecy as the only means of survival for both its individuals and followers. In essence, during the early 13th century, the Waldensians encouraged the development of a church in which the laity played a greater role in performing the ministry of the institutional church, while the Roman Catholic clergy resisted their efforts and focused on maintaining their own hierarchy and their privileged positions within a society that was beginning to go through radical changes. It would not be for another 300 years before the full impact of those changes, started by the poor of Christ, would come to bear on Christianity and what we know as the Protestant Reformation.

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