

Dr. Kevin E. Frederick, Waldensians, Lecture 3, A Transformational Witness, The Role of Preaching.

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This is Dr. Kevin Frederick in his teaching on the history of the Waldensians. This is session 3, A Transformational Witness, The Role of Preaching.

The sermon title is called A Transformational Witness, and we're starting with Matthew 28, starting with verse 16 and going through the 20th verse.

Throughout the ages, Christians have recognized the central importance of the gospel's good news in this commandment from Jesus, which was given at the conclusion of his earthly ministry. In Matthew 28, which we call the Great Commission, Go therefore and make disciples of all nations. No Christian group took this command to heart more than followers in the 12th century of the man named Valdez, Waldo, from the city of Lyon, France.

In this sermon, we will be examining how Valdez interpreted and applied the Great Commission in his own life and how the witness of this one man launched a Christian movement that began in the 12th century and continues down to this day. As you hear this story, I invite you to give thanks for this witness of faith and to ask yourselves, what can we do today to take the word and witness of the gospel more seriously in our lives? What would eventually become known as the Waldensian movement or the Waldensian descent started rather innocently when a wealthy man named Valdez in the year 1172 felt convicted by scripture to renounce his wealth and take up the calling to proclaim the word of God in the common language of the laity. Valdez was a business leader in Lyon, France, and a lay leader of the Roman Catholic Church.

Sensing a desire to learn more about God by studying scripture in his own language, Waldo paid two church officials to translate whole sections of the New Testament for him. After study and prayer, he felt convicted by Matthew 19:16 to 21, and Matthew 28, 18 to 20 to sell his possessions and to begin preaching the gospel to his neighbors in Lyon. In the late 12th century across Western Europe, there was an increasingly urgent desire amongst the laity to learn the deeper meaning of the Christian faith.

People turned to the church for direction and education, but teaching the faith was not what the Roman Catholic Church understood its primary calling to be. In fact, the church hierarchy and its desire to control knowledge actively worked against addressing this identified need of the laity. In the early medieval church, only the bishops, archbishops, and pope preached the word of God.

So, for any Christian to hear a sermon preached in one's own parish was truly a rare event. It was a common experience in those days for most Christians to have never heard even one sermon or maybe to have heard only a single sermon in one's lifetime. But even when the bishop did preach, the sermon was delivered in Latin.

Only the most learned 1% of the Christian community could understand the message that was delivered in the sermon. The obscurity of the meaning of the word of God helped the church hierarchy to maintain the status quo, which was cloaked in their own secrecy. Church leaders believed that most of the word of God was intended to be understood only by the privileged few church leaders and scholars who had extensive knowledge of Latin.

The rarity of a sermon preached, combined with the laity's lack of understanding of Latin, meant that the meaning of the word of God as it applied to one's life played little to no relevant role in the lives of the common people. The primary role of the parish priest in the Roman Catholic Church of the 12th century was limited to performing the seven sacraments. The official sacraments of the church of that day included three pastoral sacraments: one of penance, of anointing the sick and last rites, two sacraments of holy service, which included the holy orders, which is the ordination to ministry, and the sacrament added in the early 12th century of matrimony, and two elemental scriptural sacraments of baptism and the Eucharist, the Lord's Supper.

During the time of Waldo, every member of the church who attended worship each Sunday received from the officiating priest the sacrament of the Lord's Supper, in bread form only, while the wine was reserved for the clergy and other church officials. The liturgy of the mass surrounding the Lord's Supper was conducted in Latin, so the people had no idea what the priest was saying and only had a vague notion that at the celebration of mass, the bread and wine somehow mysteriously became the physical body and blood of Jesus. The lack of understanding of what was being said at the Lord's table led to the development of a popularized phrase used down through the ages by magicians and children, still recognized today as a magical incantation, Hocus Pocus Dominocus, and it derives from the Latin phrase Hocus Corpus Maum Domini.

This is a Latin translation quoting Jesus from the Gospel of Luke used in the Roman Catholic Mass, which translates, this is my body, Domini meaning Lord. Because of the church's belief that most knowledge about the Christian faith was to be held in secret trust by theologically trained servants of the church, there was no real effort made by church leaders to educate the laity on the meaning of the celebration of the Eucharist. Before 1184, the issue of Valdes for the Catholic church hierarchy was a pastoral one, the conflict between a very potent inner call to missionary poverty and the ritual legal rights of the institutional church.

Valdes and his followers were expected to submit their zeal to the jurisdiction of the hierarchy, which did not share their fervent aspiration to apostolic poverty or their reborn sense of mission. Valdes' twofold ministry of embracing a vow of poverty and proclaiming the gospel to the public in the vernacular struck a nerve in the populace of the city of Lyon, and soon, increasing numbers of townspeople began flocking to his preaching. Over the next several years, he had gathered a group of men and women followers, a *Societas Valdesiana*, a society of poor itinerant preachers who followed Waldo and proclaimed the holy scriptures around the city of Lyon.

Waldo's preaching also struck a sharp nerve in the Roman Catholic hierarchy. Because of strong opposition by the Bishop of Lyon to the preaching of Waldo and his followers, Waldo appealed to Pope Alexander III in 1179 to be given permission to preach. The Pope was so taken by Waldo's sincerity and sense of call that he blessed and kissed Waldo.

However, Waldo and his followers were instructed by the Pope to preach only at the express invitation of the bishops. This authorization was not forthcoming. The Bishop of Lyon was adamant and would not allow the followers of Waldo to preach.

In exploring the gospels and the role that women played in the life of Jesus, Waldo and his followers recognized that Jesus called Mary Magdalene to go and witness to the male disciples the news of the resurrection. They also cited several other examples of women who proclaimed good news in the gospels and the letters of Paul. The most glaring challenge launched by the Waldensians against canon law was the preaching of the Waldensian *Sorores*, the sisters.

Even if women preachers were far less numerous than the brothers, sexual equality in the first Waldensian community was more than a principle in itself. It was a part of their underlying value system. All were equal in the mission that had been conferred upon them.

Considering these violations against the mother church, Waldo and his followers were excommunicated from the church by the newly installed Pope Lucius in 1184. The Waldensians created a deep crisis of purpose and direction within the church precisely because Waldo and his followers had not themselves broken from the Roman Catholic Church. Waldo's followers, known at this stage as the Poor of Lyon, still maintained allegiance to the Roman Catholic belief system.

They adhered to the essential tenets of the faith, the Holy Trinity, and the authority of the word of God. They believed in the fully human, fully divine nature of Jesus Christ and used the ancient apostolic creed in their worship. The Poor of Lyon did not question belief in the seven sacraments or the worship of saints.

The two distinctions Waldo was trying to get the Roman church to acknowledge as valid expressions of ministry, including preaching in the native language of the people and the insistence that every lay person, male and female, had the right to proclaim the word of God. In ancient times, Judaism established the sacred language of Hebrew as the language in which the Hebrew Bible was written, by which all conversation to and about God was communicated within the faith community. Islam accomplished the same within its faith community through the use of Arabic.

By creating very formal languages within the sacred text of Judaism and Islam, the sacredness of faith and all things holy were set apart from the everyday profane. The impact over time of the use of these sacred languages tended to alienate the common people of both faiths from any type of personal relationship with God and the hierarchy of the faith community. Jesus lived in a world where the public reading of the Bible was communicated only in Hebrew, but the laity around him spoke the common tongue of Aramaic, rendering the depth of meaning and nuance of the holy scriptures available only to the educated elite.

Although Jesus could use and speak Hebrew when working with the Hebrew Bible, when teaching his disciples, he taught them in Aramaic, using everyday parables, short sermons, and easy-to-remember prayers in Aramaic, the common language of the people. Jesus' communication about God with the common people of his day in the vernacular made faith and a personal relationship with God once again accessible to each person, regardless of one's level of education. It seems ironic today that the Roman Catholic Church would overlook this essential component of the ministry of Jesus Christ.

But by the time of Waldo and his followers, the Roman Church had firmly reinstated a formal religious language, Latin, in all communication to and about God. By establishing Latin as a sacred language in Christendom, by which the word of God was communicated, and worship was instituted, the Roman Church hierarchy once again erected barriers to a personal relationship with God that Jesus had broken down so long before. As with the Hebrew language in Jesus' day, the formality of Latin separated the message of Scripture from the Languedoc, which was the language of the people in the region around Lyon, making the Scriptures inaccessible to all but the educated elite.

In fact, the Roman Church labeled anyone who could not read and write in Latin as being illiterate, whether they could read and write in the vernacular. As a result, all but a very few of the formally trained Waldensian preachers were rejected by the Church as being illiterate. By interpreting the Bible in the vernacular of his day, Waldo was reinstating one of the essential principles at work in the ministry of Jesus Christ, which is to proclaim the good news of God in the language of the listening audience.

Waldo's return to communicating holy Scriptures in the language of the people was a gift of profound implications for medieval Christianity. Faith, once again, became something more intensely personal and at the same time, intensely communal in nature because it could be communicated and expressed in terms discernible by all. By having the Scriptures interpreted from the Roman Church's sacred language of Latin into the common language of Provençal, throughout the Alpine region surrounding Lyon, southeastern France, and northwestern Italy, known locally at the time as a region called Occitania, he opened the doors to understanding the Bible or the populace.

It is worth noting that the flag of Occitania with the gold French cross centered on a red field is still displayed today by many descendants who are proud of their Waldensian and regional roots. Waldo proclaimed the literal interpretation of the teachings of Jesus, which were to be modeled by the Waldensian preachers in the life of poverty and humble servanthood. In contrast, the Roman Catholic Church's wealthy clergy were not nearly as ready to take up a vow of poverty nor preach in the language of the people.

As opposed to the Waldensians' literal interpretation of the teachings of Jesus in the vernacular, the bishops more commonly preach allegorical sermons in Latin. They did not feel compelled to model the teachings of Jesus nor to promote those teachings to the laity. In contrast, the followers of Waldo stressed the adoption of Jesus' teaching in the life of each disciple as a primary emphasis of their preaching and called the teachings of Jesus the precepts of the Lord.

They also believed the word proclaimed had to be enacted by the preacher and that the precepts of Jesus should be modeled by their followers through a life of humility and poverty. This created a very clear contrast between the poor of Lyon and the lavish lifestyles of many Roman Catholic bishops who were among the wealthiest people of their day. Bishops, along with many priests, often indulged in drunken and licentious behaviors unbefitting that of a religious leader.

As a result, neither the message of the bishops nor their demonstrated lifestyle took root in the hearts of the people. Waldo emphasized that preaching itself was a holy call that came from God. He believed that the person called to preach was to be set apart for that duty alone.

This focused sense of call had its precedent in the monastic evangelism of the Roman church. However, the poor of Lyon were the first to direct their preaching not to fellow monks or church officials but to the general public. By the time of the excommunication by the Pope in 1182, Waldo's companions had already felt called to preaching not only in spite of but precisely because of the absence of official preaching.

As a result, the excommunication only emboldened Waldo's followers to adhere to their calling. When tried by the papacy, Waldo himself answered the official church condemnation of the preaching of the poor of Lyon by quoting from Acts 5, 27-30 to justify their obedience to God. We must obey God rather than any human authority, it said.

But citing that biblical response further drove a wedge between the Roman church and Waldo's followers. Quoting scripture as a defense against the papal decision to excommunicate the poor of Lyon had the suggested effect of completely nullifying the authority of the Pope as the vicar of Christ, who, according to the Roman Catholic Church, was the one and only true spokesperson of Christ. It is important to acknowledge that Waldo did not try to usurp the authority of the Pope.

All along, his primary intent was to faithfully follow his call and to seek a more important role for the laity to play in the life of the church. The poor of Lyon were banished from Lyon, France, as a result of their excommunication in 1184. Consequently, they began to travel in pairs throughout an ever-widening range in Europe, preaching over the next 30 years across the broad region from southern France through Austria and into parts of Germany.

To be excommunicated meant that the Waldensians were banned from worship and participation within the community of faith until they publicly recanted the error of their ways. But the divisions continued to grow between the Roman Church and the Waldensians. In 1215, at the Fourth Lateran Council, the church led by Pope Innocent III condemned all Waldensians as being heretics.

This officially made the followers of Waldo enemies of the church. In the view of the Roman Catholic hierarchy, their heretical beliefs were to be rooted out and completely eliminated, and they were to renounce their heresy or face persecution and death. From 1215 to 1230, the Catholic bishops and the monks of the Cistercian Order of Catholic monasteries were first charged with addressing the issues surrounding the poor of Lyon.

After two decades, however, the bishops and the Cistercian monks had proven themselves to be soft on the heretics. As a consequence, in 1231, in response to the threat of the Waldensians, the Roman Catholic Church appointed a priest named Dominic to serve as a leader of a newly established Dominican order, the *Ordo Predicatorum*, also called the Preaching Order. The Dominicans were first empowered by the Roman Catholic hierarchy to engage the Waldensian heretics in public debate or preaching.

This was an effort to win the heretics back into the fold by espousing in public the logic and reasoning that guided the theology of the Roman Catholic Church. However, this strategy, when directed against the poor of Lyon, proved to be

completely ineffective. The public recognized the Dominicans were communicating a biblical message without compassion.

The public perceived them as strident religious messengers without any demonstration of love. The average person recognized the contrast exemplified by the Waldensians, whom the laity identified as being orthodox in faith and belief while at the same time having the qualities of basic human goodness and love in their hearts, which they saw as truly expressing that of Christ. The laity also recognized that the message of the Waldensian pastors communicating compassion was much more clearly integrated into their lives and expressed through the humility and compassion that the Roman Church, with its rich and pious bishops and punitive Dominicans, had offered to society.

With the failure of the approach of debating the Waldensians to win them back to membership in the Catholic Church, the Dominicans were soon ordered by the Pope to carry out the persecution of the Waldensian heretics. The Church had authorized the Catholic Church possession of all Waldensian property in 1199 and often sentenced to death those identified as being a heretic. By the 1250s, the Dominicans' primary role was to prosecute and destroy all heretics, and they were organized by Rome to carry out the Ruthless Inquisition.

The papacy provided all inquisitors with extensive manuals of operations that standardized and categorized all types of heretics. This was the most concerted and far-reaching effort yet developed to rid society of identified enemies of the Church. Thus began a tragic and shameful persecution of the Waldensian believers, which would continue to varying degrees over the next 600 years.

Yet, had it not been for the rise of Waldensians and their efforts to effectively communicate the teachings of Christ, the Roman Catholic Church would not likely have been forced in the Middle Ages to change how it preached. The integration of the poor of Lyons' teaching combined with their Christ-like actions forced the Roman Catholics to adopt major changes in the way they functioned in the Church. A newly heightened attention to preaching in the language of the people by the Catholics resulted in the establishment of the Order Predicatorium in 1215, authorizing not only the Dominicans but also the Franciscans and the Benedictine Ordinance to preach in the language of the people.

This response created a new standard for the whole Roman Catholic Church in its relationship with the laity, thereby transforming the Roman Catholic Church. Today, we take for granted the opportunity to hear and understand the Word of God preached in our own language, but we owe much to the Waldensians and their clear message and faithful witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ. The followers of Waldo integrated the call to proclaim the faith as part of the discipleship of every adherent.

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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