

Dr. Kevin E. Frederick, Waldensians, Lecture 5, Addressing the Heresy of Catharism

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This is Dr. Kevin Frederick in his teaching on the history of the Waldensians. This is session 5, Addressing the Heresy of Catharism.

Our sermon this time is on Addressing the Heresy of Catharism.

To start out with, I'd like to reflect on 1st Corinthians 1 from verses 18 to 20. In addressing the church of Corinth around the middle of the 1st century AD, Paul faced the challenge of preaching to a congregation that had become fractured by confusing faith with prideful logic. Some early Christians had come to believe that human wisdom was a path toward salvation.

In this passage of scripture, Paul challenges early Christians to reject the notion that the attainment of human wisdom would bring about personal salvation. In contrast to that perspective, Paul encourages them to embrace the wisdom of God, revealed in the death of Jesus on the cross, as a means toward attaining salvation. On the one hand, human wisdom is perceived by humanity as a smart choice and the means to personal salvation, whereas divine wisdom, the wisdom of the cross and suffering, appears to be foolish in human eyes, for it embraces weakness and vulnerability as the very means by which God brings about salvation to humanity.

Those who emphasize human wisdom as a means toward attaining salvation tend to focus on the notion that through the intellectual mastery of divine wisdom, they can arrive at salvation, whereas those who embrace the cross discover that trust in Christ's victory over death and the grace He reveals about God is the only means to salvation. As early as the first generation of Christianity, during the time of Paul, some Christians emphasized a personal attainment of wisdom about God as a means toward salvation, thus creating the early church heresy of Gnosticism. The very structure of this belief system was built on the concept of dualism, that the God of the Old Testament was a God of a fallen and deeply flawed world, who was full of wrath and condemnation towards the world and its inhabitants, whereas the God of the New Testament was a God of divine righteousness and salvation.

Dualism perceives that the physical world, with all its imperfections, is sinful, condemned, and unredeemable, whereas the spiritual world, which is completely separate from the physical world, is spiritually attainable through the acquisition of knowledge and wisdom of God. Everything physical was rejected by Gnostic believers, whereas a life centered on knowledge about the spiritual realm was a true means of salvation. But if one believes in a dualistic mindset that the physical realm

is sinful and only the spiritual realm is the means to salvation, how does one reconcile that Jesus Christ was a living, breathing human being? This belief system creates irreconcilable problems for the orthodox doctrine of Jesus Christ as being both fully human and fully divine.

In order to support a dualistic framework of faith, Gnosticism maintains that Jesus only appeared to be human and that he really did not suffer on the cross. Gnostics believe that in Jesus, God conveys to humanity the divine gift of wisdom through his teachings and through his life. According to Gnostic belief, because God is all-powerful, God could not possibly suffer and die and still be God.

This rejection of the suffering of Jesus created a distorted view of humanity and creation, whereby both creation and humanity were perceived as something to be rejected and transcended. Because salvation was achievable only through the attainment of spiritual knowledge, this construct made it easier to condemn all of humanity that had not been privy to learning the divine knowledge of Gnosticism. In Gnosticism, the door to heaven was very narrow and only accessible through the mind and knowledge of a believer.

A faith based on the grace of God as revealed in Jesus Christ and given freely to humanity was totally absent from the Gnostic belief system. The early medieval ages saw the renewal of interest in Gnostic beliefs in the Eastern European region of the Byzantine Empire in a movement called Bogomilism. The early Bogomils were moderate dualists with ancient roots in Gnosticism, and accordingly, many of their beliefs ran counter to the Roman and Eastern Orthodox Church.

They rejected the liturgy of the Mass and the sacrament of the Eucharist, the use of the Old Testament as Holy Scripture, belief in the miracles of Jesus, the sacrament of baptism, and the priesthood of the Catholic Church. Because of their rejection of all that belonged to the physical realm, they also rejected marriage. Cathar leaders were celibate and went so far as to reject all food that had anything to do with animal procreation, including meat, dairy products, and eggs.

Before we explore the re-emergence of Gnosticism in medieval Europe, we need to establish a basic understanding of the historical context. The cataclysmic schism between the Roman Catholic Church in the West and the Eastern Orthodox Church in the East in 1054 and the subsequent establishment of the Gregorian reforms within the Roman Catholic Church contributed to substantial changes in church and society in the mid to late 11th century. Pope Gregory sought to purify the Roman Church through a variety of reforms, including establishing tighter controls over the appointment of officers within the Church, disavowing the practice of simony, the practice of selling ordained officers of the Church, and requiring all ordained Church leaders to be celibate.

Pope Gregory not only encouraged morally upright Church officials to be critical of any ordained leaders who engaged in drunken, licentious behavior, but he also instructed a laity to hold the priests and bishops accountable. Gregory encouraged a Catholic laity to stay away from the sacraments administered by married and or simoniac priests. This was intended by Gregory to be a weapon to force a reform upon recalcitrant clergy, but it was a dangerous weapon to use, for from there, it was not a long step toward dispensing with the priests altogether, as later popes and canon lawyers of Paris realized.

By the year 1100, substantial changes were underway in society, especially within the Roman Catholic Church. The 12th century was a time of religious turmoil in which the laity were trying to find their place in a great renewal of religious life. However, the Roman Catholic leadership missed a great opportunity to respond to the heartfelt need of the Catholic laity in their search for meaning and did not address the need to educate the laity as part of their ordained duties.

Instead, they believed that the Church and its religious intelligentsia were called to be protectors and keepers of a sacred truth, which they believed was too sacred to trust in the hands of the laity. So, they kept it discernible only to those who were properly educated and ordained in the Church. The fact that all religious texts of the Church, including the Bible, were written in Latin meant that less than 2% of the population was functionally literate.

The lack of education for almost anyone outside of a monastery, convent, or university made it impossible for the common person to understand the differences between heretical doctrine and orthodox belief. As a result of the Church's policy of maintaining a firm grip on who gained scriptural and ecclesial knowledge, thereby cloaking the faith with religious secrecy, by the first half of the 12th century, there were many wandering preachers of heresy who were able to reach many thousands of ordinary people and convert them to new ways of thinking. During this same period of time within society, feudalism, an economic system of property ownership and wealth, was controlled by a small class of vassals and maintained by a much larger class of peasants whose work sustained the property owners.

This societal and economic structure became more highly organized throughout Western Europe. With the growth of militarized city-states, a new class of professional militia, known as knights, began to emerge. They were hired and trained to build and arm the widespread development of castles and fortified towns and cities throughout Europe. The rise of secure cities also saw the growth of a middle class of artisans and small business owners.

Wealthy landowners were often titled princes and became the ruling class in these communities. In France, these princes developed political loyalties with the King of France and supported their allegiance by raising armies to support in the support of

the King. There were no reports of heretical dualism in the West up to the time of the year 1114.

Throughout the 11th century, Bogomilism was spreading further east throughout the Byzantine Empire. By the beginning of the 12th century, the Bogomils began to send missionaries into Western Europe. As early as the middle of the 12th century, Cathar priests in France, known as the Perfecti, all shared an identical service book to Bogomil worship service manuals found in Bulgaria and Constantinople.

It is universally agreed that Catharism was firmly rooted in Western Europe when a Catholic bishop and his companion were brought to trial in 1143 in the city of Cologne. Cathars were present in the Languedoc region of southern France around the city of Toulouse as early as 1145. By the 1160s, Catharism had spread to northern France, Holland, and parts of Italy.

Records reveal that the standard worship language of Catharism of the 12th century was Latin, which meant that their primary audiences were the educated elite of the church and society. Those Cathar missionaries from the Byzantine Empire would have brought with them their Latin translation of the Cathar ritual, which allowed for a rapid spread of Catharism in Western Europe. These manuals were then copied by French priests and monks who had converted to Catharism.

It was a task of the educated Cathar laity in each community to share with their family and members the basic concepts of Catharism. Catharism emerged as a faith from Christianity, but its emphasis on the dualistic nature of God and its denial of the humanity of Jesus made Catharism a theological heresy as perceived by the Orthodox Christian faith. Unlike the relationship between the Waldensians and the Catholic Church, Catharism had its own written materials and its formal structure apart from the Catholic faith.

Into this context, we come to understand the clash between the Cathars and the Waldensians. Before 1184, the issue of Valdes was a pastoral one, the conflict between a very potent intercall to missionary poverty and the ritual legal rights of an institutional clergy. Valdes and his followers were expected to submit their zeal to the jurisdiction of a hierarchy that did not share their fervent aspiration to apostolic poverty or their reborn sense of mission.

Valdes was branded as schismatic by the Pope, was excommunicated by the Roman Catholic Church, and was soon banished by the local bishop from Lyon. As a result of this exile, the followers of Valdes adopted the gospel motto of being sent out in pairs to preach and teach the gospel. Valdes and his followers, in an effort to demonstrate their loyalty to the Roman Mother Church and in their own recognition of the heresy of Catharism, sent pairs of missionaries into the Languedoc region of France to

preach against Catharism and to educate the public regarding the differences of belief between Orthodox Catholicism and the heretical teachings of the Cathars.

The term Languedoc literally means language of the people, and in this region of France, the common language spoken was Provençal, which was the same regional language spoken in Lyon. By the late 12th century, the followers of Waldo, known as the Poor of Lyon, made substantial inroads with the middle and peasant classes in this region largely because of their ability to teach the Christian faith from the Bible and the vernacular. They also embodied a spirit of humility and gentleness, demonstrating an integration of the teachings and lifestyle of Jesus.

The Waldensians effectively used this methodology to point out the nature of the heresy of the Cathars to the laity throughout the Languedoc and made significant inroads in slowing the spreading influence of the Cathars. As a result of the effectiveness of the Waldensians in winning the hearts of the common folk, the Cathars, by the early 13th century, relied increasingly on the use of the language of the people to expand their influence. During these early decades of the existence of the Poor of Lyon, another French Catholic scholar who was well versed in the use of Latin joined the Poor of Lyon, providing the movement with the intellectual integrity and the deep theological grounding it needed.

This scholar's name was Durand of Huesca. His greatest contribution, the document called *Liber Antiheresis*, worked to address the heretical Cathars and their beliefs. Durand provided a highly developed theological outline and set of instructions to effectively counter the errant beliefs of the Cathars and win the populace to the Mother Church.

Liber Antehiresis was Durand's greatest contribution to the Waldensian movement, even recognized by the Roman Catholic bishops as an effective tool against the heresy of Catharism. Because of the effectiveness of the Waldensians in addressing the heresy of Catharisms, many bishops were slow to condemn the followers of Waldo, and even with the condemning brand of heresy by the papacy, many bishops continued to turn a blind eye, so content were they with their anti-Cathar preaching, which was effective because local people hearkened unto it. Waldo and his friends were thus favored by the people and relatively well thought of by the regional Catholic hierarchy.

The only contention with them came in the Waldensian practice of preaching. With the rapidly growing influence of Catharism in a region that had been previously almost exclusively Roman Catholic, the Pope responded with full fury against the heresy by declaring a crusade against the Cathar movement. A crusade is a war that can only be called by the Pope on behalf of the defense of the Christian world against attack by the infidels.

A crusade could also be called to retrieve lands and property taken by infidels and is given allegiance by Catholic believers who are called crusaders. A holy crusader was a soldier who took up arms against an enemy which was identified by the Pope, but was distinguished from mercenary and conscripted soldiers in the following ways. The motivation of the crusader was not by payment in money or property; rather, he was offered an indulgence which grants a full remission of his sins committed to date, with his action as a soldier in the crusade counting as his penance.

Finally, the crusader makes a vow to God, publicly binding the soldier to conscience, in conscience to carry out the vow. The crusades against the Cathars were the first call by the church against Western Europeans who had broken from Catholic Christianity. In 1205, the first major act of destruction against Cathars occurred in the community of Béziers in the Languedoc.

In their unbridled passion and fury, the crusaders overtook the entire community of Béziers. The city was quickly overrun by their attackers, and the citizens rushed to the Catholic cathedral for protection. Both church and town were looted, the total inhabitants were massacred, with clerics, women, and children being killed inside the churches.

When the leaders of the army confiscated booty from the camp followers, the town was fired and burned, and at the beginning of the campaign, the crusades military commander, Arnold Amalric is said to have been asked how the attackers should distinguish between heretic and Catholic. He's said to have replied, kill them all, God will know his own. About 10,000 people had lived in Béziers at the time of the massacre, and very few, if any, escaped to survive.

Never again would such indiscriminate destruction be waged against an entire city, but Cathar communities were suppressed in many other towns and cities until gradually by the year 1229, the crusade against the Cathars began to fade. Once the Cathar heresy was firmly contained, the fury of the papacy began to be redirected in the early 1230s against the Waldensians. By 1250, the papacy had created and had widely distributed a standardized and systematic manual of operations for use by all inquisitors as they tried and convicted heretics all across the Holy Roman Empire.

To summarize, first, the Cathars and, later, the Waldensians sought to fill a recognized void by addressing the middle class's search for meaning and understanding of the spiritual relationship between God and humanity. Both movements had adopted a vow of poverty and began preaching in the vernacular. Cathar beliefs ran counter to those of the Roman Catholic Church. However, the Waldensian practice of preaching the word of God in the language of the people proved to be too much of a great threat to the church.

The Cathars were relatively easy to dismiss and brand as heretical because of their dualistic thinking. They believed, like the Manichaeists of the early church, that the God of the Old Testament was not the God of the New Testament and that Jesus was not fully human because God could not suffer. That thinking today might be easy to dismiss as heretical for mainline Christians, but it was a tempting alternative to a very controlled understanding of Christian faith that remained veiled in an incomprehensible language and whose beliefs were never effectively taught to the majority of the people.

The Roman Catholic Church was threatened by the Cathar movement because it had century, but the greater threat to the Catholic Church would emerge by a group who was largely Catholic in their beliefs but who dared to send out humble and poor missionaries in pairs to spread the word of God in a language the people could understand. This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

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