

Dr. Kevin E. Frederick, Waldensians, Lecture 6, Out of the Shadows of History, Dispelling Myths

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This is Dr. Kevin Frederick in his teaching on the history of the Waldensians. This is session number six, Out of the Shadows of History, Dispelling Myths.

The scripture for this sermon is from 1 Timothy 1, verses 3 to 5. Listen for the word of God. I urge you there, as I did when I was on my way to Macedonia, to remain in Ephesus so that you may instruct certain people not to teach any different doctrine and not to occupy themselves with myths and endless genealogies that promote speculations rather than the divine training that is known by faith. But the aim of such instruction is love that comes from a pure heart, a good conscience, and sincere faith.

The word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Paul wrote these words to his protege Timothy to warn him and other new converts of the faith in Christ about the importance of remaining focused on one's relationship with Christ rather than getting caught up in the mindset of emphasizing one's own genealogy or mythic stories of origin that were unfounded in faith in Christ.

To do so was to try to establish one's credibility based on pedigree or feats of accomplishment rather than on a faith grounded in the love of a triune God revealed through the grace and mercy of Jesus Christ. In exploring the origins of the Waldensian movement, there are essentially two alternative accounts of the primary historical narrative that are grounded in the life of Valdez. In addition, there are several variations within each alternate narrative, which tend to confuse history students.

The establishment of the Waldensian movement is overlaid with stories of origin that include reference to the teaching of a maverick Catholic bishop from Turin in the 9th century named Claude. There is also a more ancient account dating as far back as the story of Constantine in the 4th century AD. It is to the story of Constantine's gift to the church that we first turn.

At the time of his death, Constantine is said to have willed half of the Roman Empire to Pope Sylvester in the early 4th century AD. It is worth noting that historical scholarship has determined that the story of the donation of Constantine was itself a myth. Originally created by the Roman Catholic Church in the 8th century AD as a means of the church justifying its sizable acquisition of wealth and property to critics from both within and beyond the Roman Church.

This narrative myth, originally crafted in the 8th century, was then embellished hundreds of years later by Waldensian believers to emphasize the origins of what was defined by the Waldensians as an ancient division within the early church in opposition to the Roman Catholic Church, which had accepted and benefited from the attainment of great wealth and power. And so they say the Roman Pontiffs are not the successors of the Apostle Peter but of Constantine. The myth of the donation of Constantine was further modified to suggest the existence of a lesser-known, smaller, but faithful remnant of the church, which emphasized the importance of a focus on Christ's servant ministry marked by vows of poverty and humility.

The modified myth of the donation of Constantine was widely communicated orally by Waldensian followers starting in the late 13th century. It is illustrated as follows. The church was holy until Constantine's donation when Sylvester I accepted the donation while a companion of Sylvester's refused and left him.

Slowly, the greater part of the church fell into evil while a smaller part of the church stayed in the truth. This is the first stage of the explanation of the opposition to Rome, the historical origin of the split of the smaller holy church at the time of the donation. And the later stage is to be spearheaded by the Waldensians, though not necessarily coterminous with them.

Those who point to this story of origin adhere to the belief that an uninterrupted witness of the true church continued from the apostolic age down to the faithful witness of a relatively small group of Christians who themselves were the true followers of Christ, the forebears of the Waldensians. The earliest date in recorded history of this myth is found in a source called the Book of the Elect, written in 1367. The epistle of 1367 elaborated on a split in the Roman church at the time of the donation when half of the wealth of the Roman Empire given by Constantine in 325 was given to the Roman church.

The split was alleged to have occurred within the church between Sylvester I, who had accepted the wealth and land from Emperor Constantine, and those faithful few who held steadfast to avow poverty and desired to remain the pure church. The Book of the Elect recounted the deeds of those who were in the place of the apostles, and this is underlined by deliberate echoes from the Acts of the Apostles. For hundreds of years, the story of the origins of the Waldensian people has been difficult to accurately pinpoint.

This is partly due to the fact that so much of the recorded history of the Waldensians was used by the Roman church as evidence of their heresy and was later burned by the inquisitors once the trial had concluded. We turn to an exploration of the historical facts that surround the origins of the Waldensian story. It has long been recognized that Valdez, Waldo of Lyon, in 1172, was the originator of the Waldensian movement.

There is sufficient historical data to support his existence and the ministry he started, which emerged out of a famine that impacted the region surrounding Lyon. There is also evidence to suggest the possibility of a source of theological grounding between the followers of Waldo and the teachings of Claude of Turin, who was appointed as Bishop of Turin in the year 817 in the Roman Catholic Church. Claude was an outspoken evangelical Christian leader who was an astute and discerning student of the Bible.

Based on his interpretation of scripture from both testaments, Claude opposed the worship of holy images in Catholicism. He sought to have them removed from all the churches within his diocese. He preached the doctrine, the justification of faith.

Claude also disclaimed purgatory and the worship of relics and rejected the efficacy of pilgrimages as a means of penance. As Claude threw out the venerated holy images in churches within the diocese, he said if people wished to adore a cross because Christ hung on it, they ought also to adore mangers because he lay in one or asses because he rode on one. There is no historical evidence or documents in existence that provide a direct historical connection between Claude's teachings and the emergence of Waldo and the poor of Lyon in the 12th century.

It is plausible that Roman Catholics within the Piedmont region of northern Italy may have passed down Claude's unorthodox but biblically accurate beliefs from one generation to the next. However, without any historical documents that bridge the parallels of belief and practice held by Claude and later by Waldo and Arnold of Brescia, it cannot be readily deduced that Claude directly influenced Waldo and Arnold. The parallels in belief were as likely to be derived by studying the same source of belief, primarily the New Testament gospels and the letters of Paul.

More than 300 years after Claude, Arnold of Brescia began gathering small communities in the region of Lombardy around Milan, adjoining the Diocese of Turin. Arnold had studied with Peter Abelard and began constructing the model of Christian faith and community based on becoming a disciple of Christ and sharing one's property with one's neighbors. Arnold carefully studied the teachings of the early church, as revealed in the Book of Acts.

From his studies, he organized an alternative faith community to that of the wealthy Roman Catholic Church and its beliefs and practices. Although Bishop Claude cannot be classified as a Waldensian, the parallel deductions of his proclamations as a Roman Catholic bishop with the Christian beliefs of the Waldensians is undeniable, and it remains a possibility that the beliefs of Claude influenced Arnold and his followers as they developed their own faith communities. Incidentally, it is worth noting that during the 20th century, the Waldensian Church in Italy named its official

publication house Claudiana Press in recognition of the biblical witness of Bishop Claude of Turin.

This is a connection of faith deeply valued today by contemporary Waldensians. At the very least, one can surmise that several principles of Waldensian belief have parallels with the ministry of the teachings of the 8th century Bishop Claude. It remains to be a completely unfounded premise, however, to assert that there was an organized community of believers that began at the time of Bishop Claude and remained intact, distinct, and separated from the Catholic Church from the 9th century down to the 12th century, when Waldo began his ministry.

We now turn our attention to why these myths were created. There are indications that the anonymous author of the Book of the Elect recognized the need within a society that was still heavily focused on oral communication for a written text of Waldensian history. It was composed in such a way as to make it easy to memorize and orally convey as an instructive educational tool to those Waldensians who, by this time, were scattered across Western Europe.

They needed a history that was easily recited without reliance upon a written text. Routinely throughout its history, the Roman Catholic inquisitors destroyed Waldensian records, writings, and books, making oral tradition even more important to the preservation of the origins of the Waldensians. As generations passed, there was an increasing opportunity to allow for greater freedom in reconstructing the past.

This approach led to the insertion of numerous revisions to the myths as subsequent generations tried to read backward the point of the origins of their faith. The Book of the Elect was a very short, poetic document. Some of it is written in staccato rhythmic phrases, sharpest during the count of Valdez's life.

Both textual brevity and rhythm suggest a text produced deliberately for memorization. The narrative found in the Book of the Elect was essentially a useful tool to justify the adoption of a vow of poverty and chastity along with the call to preach and how they were instrumental in the life of the Waldensian itinerant preacher. This book is also instructive in its efforts to encourage all followers to remain steadfast in the face of persecution by the Roman Catholic Church, as the early Church of the Apostles had faced persecution by the Roman Empire, thereby validating the legitimacy of the Waldensians' perception of seeing themselves as being the faithful remnant of the true Church in contrast to the wealthy Roman Catholic Church.

From the establishment of the Inquisition in the 13th century and throughout wave after wave of Church-sanctioned persecutions, the narrative that described itself as being the true remnant of the Church sustained their faithful witness. Later

modifications of the myth of the donation of Constantine to Sylvester can be traced by observing the changes in subsequent editions of the Book of the Elect. Valdes in the 12th century, and yet not until the 14th century is there any record of a first name attributed to Valdes.

In the first edition of the Book of the Elect in 1367, Valdes of the 12th century is introduced for the first time with the apostolic name Peter. By 1420, in a later revision of the Book of the Elect, a man named Peter Valdes was introduced for the first time as a contemporary of 14th-century Pope Sylvester. In that edition, it is claimed that Peter Valdes was not the founder of the Waldensian movement but was identified as one of Sylvester's companions, who at the time of the donation became the preserver of the true Church, effectively suggesting a tie between Valdes and his followers all the way back to the founding of the Acts of the Apostles.

Also, in the early 15th century, another Waldensian manuscript was composed, which attributed some homiletic writing to a certain Roman Catholic cardinal named Peter Valdes. From each of these examples of revisionist history, it becomes readily apparent that the stories communicating the origins of the Waldensians were repeatedly revised throughout the 14th and 15th centuries. But to understand more deeply the reasons for these revisions to the history of the Waldensian witness, we need to take another look at the role the persecution played for hundreds of years.

Within a generation, after the Waldensian movement and its followers were branded by the Catholic Church as being heretics in 1215, the Church directed its anger against the Waldensians through an extremely well-organized prosecutorial ecclesial court system called the Inquisition, which had been initially constructed to destroy the dualistic heresy of Catharism and was henceforth directing its full fury against the followers of Waldo. Over the next 30 years, the Inquisition extensively organized and standardized the creation of written manuals of instruction distributed by the papacy to all inquisitors. In an effort to unify the effective prosecution of the Inquisition, the Inquisition was eventually assigned exclusively to the Catholic Order of Saint Dominic.

Under the Dominicans, the Catholic Church had a most effective tool to bring all heretics to trial. The Dominicans coordinated the Church's efforts with the civil magistrates to punish heretics, most often by execution and being burned at the stake. During the 1480s, the reigning Pope Innocent VIII, who had himself served as an inquisitor prior to becoming Pope, called for a holy crusade against the Waldensians.

In doing so, he exercised the full fury of the Church towards the total eradication of every Waldensian believer. The Waldensian Crusade, under the leadership of Archdeacon Cattaneo, concentrated its focus on the Waldensian communities in the region of the Cottian Alps and proved to be only partially successful. However, it had

devastating consequences on the thousands of Waldensian victims who faced its cruel and inhumane persecutions.

From the time the organization of the Inquisition under the authority of the Dominicans, starting in the mid-13th century onwards, not only were the properties of thousands of Waldensians confiscated and sold to Roman Catholics but many Waldensians were tortured, often executed by being burned at stake for their beliefs. The Catholic Church believed that by burning the bodies of the heretics, there would be no physical body to resurrect when Christ returned for the Second Coming. In the early days of the Inquisition, they even burned the corpses of those who were identified as Waldensians after their death.

Waldensian children were often stolen from their families by Roman Catholic priests and Church leaders and raised by the Church to embrace Roman Catholic doctrine. The persecutions put great strain on the whole Waldensian movement and upon the lives of every Waldensian believer for hundreds of years. As a means of strengthening the faith of the leaders and believers in the Great Persecution, the Book of the Elect served to undergird the enduring legacy of the Waldensian movement with its direct connections to the teachings of Jesus and the early apostolic faith communities.

In reflecting on the mythic understanding of the Waldensian history, Peter Biller writes that history could be remembered quite sharply, but it also could be simplified and conflated through the passage of time and tricks of the memory and colored and angled in a multiplicity of ways while passing through the prism of the mind of the individual friend. All these derivations suggest finally the widespread use of history in that era to console believers during the suffering and hopelessness of the persecution. The stalwart nature of the Waldensian preachers, the Barba, and their scattered communities of faith withstood not only the relentless persecution of the Roman Catholic Church but later survived the concerted military assaults organized by the King of Savoy, the nation of France, for more than 500 years, surviving 33 organized persecutions.

Throughout that period of time, it was Barba's emphasis on integrating humility exemplified by Christ and faith centered on the grace of God and Jesus Christ that guided the Waldensian people in their efforts to remain true to their faith. The ancient myths evolved under such tremendously adverse conditions and became essential for the Waldensian preachers and their followers to have a strong and tangible faith they could cling to even at the point of death. Without belief in the sacredness of their cause and without a sense of direct connection with Christ and his original disciples, the Waldensian movement, under generations of relentless pressure, would have gone the way of every other movement of the Middle Ages, which was branded as heretical by the Roman Catholic Church.

During the first decades of the Protestant Reformation, as Protestantism was establishing its credibility and legitimacy, a substantial number of Protestant scholars pointed to the Waldensians as being their religious forebears, picking up on the myths surrounding their origins. Protestants looked to the Waldensians as pioneers of their own faith and identified them as preservers of the true church. Early Waldensian historians John Léger and Samuel Moreland made reference in their compilations of Waldensian history in the early 17th century to the many myths surrounding their origins.

Using the tools of the science of historiography as understood in their day and time, they developed the first major works of history of the Waldensian community that had been recorded. Both historians had heavily relied on oral history as passed down from previous generations as they sought to preserve a credible history. It was an acceptable method of historiography at that time to blend historical accuracy with long-held and yet unsupported historical beliefs regarding self-identity, which emerged in the case of clandestinity, geographical isolation, and persecution.

Today, history serves as a credible witness that the Waldensian movement was the only Christian movement deemed heretical by the Roman Catholic Church, and it has survived into modern times. It was the Waldensian people led by their preachers, the Barba, who focused most effectively and accurately on communicating the teachings of Jesus and the impact of his life, death, and resurrection to the Christian laity prior to the Protestant Reformation. Throughout that era, the Waldensians reflected a faithful biblical witness to the teachings of Jesus and the instructions of the Apostle Paul when he wrote to Timothy.

The aim of such instruction is love that comes from a pure heart, a good conscience, and sincere faith. The essence of such beliefs and practices remains at the core of a faithful Christian witness today, as it has been in every age. In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

Amen. This is Dr. Kevin Frederick in his teaching on the history of the Waldensians. This is session number six, Out of the Shadows of History, Dispelling Myths.