

Dr. Kevin E. Frederick, Waldensians, Lecture 7, Circling Back to Truth, Women Preachers

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This is Dr. Kevin Frederick in his teaching on the history of the Waldensians. This is session 7, Circling Back to Truth, Women Preachers.

Our sermon today is called Circling Back to Truth, and it follows the Waldensian women and the role that they played in the faith.

Certainly, at the very beginning of their ministry, of Waldo's ministry, men and women preached in the twelfth century. Why is that, and where scripturally do we get the basis for an understanding of women taking leadership roles? Even in the very early church, the Waldensians looked at several passages, and I'm going to read two of those to you now. From Mark 16, when the Sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome brought spices so that they might go and anoint him.

Very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb. They had been asking one another who would roll away the stone for us from the entrance of the tomb? When they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had already been rolled back. When they entered the tomb, they saw a young man dressed in a white robe sitting on the right side, and they were alarmed.

But he said to them, do not be alarmed; you're looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised, and he is not here. Look, there is a place they laid him.

But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee. There, you will see him, just as he told you. So, they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them.

And they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid. And all of that had been commanded them, they told briefly, to those around Peter. And afterward, Jesus himself sent out through them from east to west the sacred and imperishable proclamation of eternal salvation.

Now, after he rose early on the first day of the week, he appeared first to Mary Magdalene, from whom he had cast out seven demons. She went out and told those who had been with him while they were mourning and weeping. But when they heard he was alive and had been seen by her, they would not believe it.

So, the focus there in that scripture is on Jesus proclaiming to Mary to go and tell my brothers. And certainly, in the Lucan passage there, we see Jesus exhorting his follower, Mary Magdalene, to go and tell. But then we go to Galatians 3, 23 to 29.

Now, before faith came, we were imprisoned and guarded under the law until faith would be revealed. Therefore, the law was our disciplinarian until Christ came so that we might be justified by faith. But now that faith has come, we are no longer subject to a disciplinarian.

For in Christ Jesus, you are all children of God through faith, as many of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. Therefore, there is no longer Jew or Greek, no longer slave or free, no longer male or female, for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.

And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abram's offspring, heirs according to the promise. This is the word of the Lord. Although Waldensian women openly preached for more than 50 years, by the second half of the 13th century, as a direct result of violent persecutions against Waldensian women by the Roman Church, they began to assume roles that were less visible to the outside world but were every bit as essential to the living of their faith as a community of disciples.

In groups called *sorores* [Latin for sister], from which we recognize the word *sorority*, the focus of female Waldensian discipleship took on significant changes. The *sorores*, what we might call the Waldensian sisterhood, began to refocus their ministry around the establishment of a network of hospices within the Waldensian community. These hospices were run and managed by women for the practice of extending hospitality to the poor, the sick, and to indigent women.

Over time, in many of these hospices, the *sorores* began to provide accommodations for the preparation of the itinerant Waldensian ministers, the *barba*, and began what would become a precursor to Waldensian seminaries and schools. The title *sorores* conveyed the role of the equal partnership of women with the men who were charged with the more visible call of spreading the gospel. This partnership role as embodied in the organization of the *sorores* was indispensable to the witness of the Waldensian community of faith and remained vital for as long as a Waldensian missionary and evangelical system of sending out pastors in teams of two throughout Europe remained.

However, with the coming of the Reformation by the 16th century, the radical changes it brought to Protestant Christianity, and the Waldensians' emphasis on ministry dramatically changed from an itinerant form of evangelism to serving as a pastor to geographically fixed communities of faith and houses of worship. In addition, immediately after joining the Reform movement, Waldensian preachers were no longer trained at a Waldensian seminary but went to school and seminary in

Geneva, Switzerland. As a result, the ministry of the *sorores* and support and training of the Waldensian itinerant preachers, the *barba*, faded in importance.

And yet today we still find the threads of influence of the *sorores* in the current Waldensian focus on the importance of education of its children and citizens, the establishment of the *forestaria*, which are the Waldensian hospitality houses, and their focus on a ministry to the poor and the marginalized in society. All these components of Waldensian ministry can be traced back to the emphasis of the ministry of the *sorores*. In modern terms, what we would call this in the ecclesial church today would be diaconal ministries.

With this background in mind, we now turn to the late 1940s. Shortly after the conclusion of World War II, new and dynamic changes began to impact the Waldensian church. The first was the changing role of women in society, from primarily serving as homemakers to entering the work and professional world and vocations traditionally being defined as men's work.

The second major shift that impacted the Waldensian church was a significant reduction of men interested in serving as pastors. By 1948, these issues became a topic addressed at the Waldensian Synod meeting held every August. As a result, the *Tavola Valdes*, which is the administrative board of the Waldensian church, similar to the General Assembly of the Presbyterian church, was first called upon to study the issue of female vocations in the pastorate.

Documents from these early days of the study reveal a bias of the men doing the research. Their focus was not on the equality of men and women in ministry but on the exploration of particular gifts that females brought to certain types of ministerial functions. Professor Giovanni Miegge, from the Waldensian Seminary in Rome, was appointed to lead the study team of three men who were instructed to address these three particular issues: the auxiliary ministries, women's ministry, and the participation of women in ruling bodies of the Waldensian church.

For the first eleven years of this debate, the focus in the Synod and in the writings tended to emphasize feminine ministries rather than the role of women in ministry. The distinction may seem a bit obscure, but the emphasis tended to reinforce a prejudice that categorized certain lesser functions of ministry, such as overseeing Sunday school, youth activities, women's groups, visitation ministries, and some administration to female church workers. Men, on the other hand, were the ordained clergy, the ones to preach the gospel, to administer the sacraments, and to engage in the major decisions of the church.

Of course, this division of labor could only be possible within the largest of the Waldensian churches. The focus of this row arbitrarily ruled out women serving most Waldensian churches because they were too small to support a second professional

staff member. By 1954, the Waldensian Synod adopted and established the role of church assistants, women who could work in cooperation with male clergy by performing visitation ministry, religious education, and women's ministry.

Because of the cultural bias impacting the role of women in ministry, the focus of the discussion kept shifting away from the role of women in ordained ministry to the more manageable topic of the role of women in the church, as just described, by emphasizing the role of auxiliary female assistants in serving within the larger Waldensian churches. Keep in mind, in the late 1940s and 50s, these same opinions were widely held within mainline Christianity in the U.S. This emphasis shifted all discussion away from the role of women in ordained ministry throughout the 1950s. For ten years, this issue was discussed on the floor of the Synod at Torre Pellicci, Italy, held every August by a group of male clergy and elders.

Frequently, stereotypical arguments about women and against their gifts as ordained ministers were raised and went unchallenged because there were only men speaking, even if there were a rare woman present observing the debate. Towards the end of the 50s, at one Synod meeting, there were eight women in attendance. They came to listen, but after some insistence by the male church leaders that they weigh in on the debate, two of the women spoke hesitantly and timidly.

Caught off guard, it was clear to all present that there were no organized and articulated women's perspectives on the matters being debated. What was needed was a well-developed position on the matter, expressing a commonly agreed upon women's perspective. As early as 1949, Professor Miegge wrote that he recognized Galatians 3:28 and its reference, in Christ there is no longer male or female, as an underlying principle of equality which conveyed the clear enunciation of the spirit of the gospel.

Miegge concluded in his 1949 report that the church has the full right, if not the duty, to adjust our understanding of women's ministry, forwarding the absolute principle of equality in Galatians 3:28. Miegge was correct in seeing this letter of Paul as being central to Paul's theology. In Galatians, Paul communicates a baptismal formula that all receive at the time of their baptism. It is the image of God's new creation in Christ, a new creation where unity transforms social divisions.

In Paul's own words, in Christ, there is neither male nor female, Jew nor Greek, and slave nor free. If you have faith in Christ, then you are rooted in Christ and belong to Christ as children of God, as heirs of the covenant. In Christ's new creation, gender roles no longer pertain.

In Christ's community, faith is the identifying factor. If we are in Christ, then we are each a new creation, and our identity is equal to that of children of the covenant. After a decade of study, by the late 1950s, Professor Miegge had been exploring this

difficult issue of women's ordination from a variety of angles, including biblically, theologically, historically, and based on the experience of a few churches throughout Europe who had women in various roles of leadership.

Miegge finally urged the church to try and experiment and discover the implications of women in ministry based on experience. So in 1959, Tabola, the governing body of the Waldensian Church, entrusted Ms. Carmen Trobia Ceteroni, herself an auxiliary church worker, educated in the seminary in Rome, with full responsibility for a church throughout the summer months. This positive experience for the congregation and for Ms. Trobia served as a baseline to shift the debate to the consideration of women in ordained ministry.

In 1960, a Congress of Waldensian Women's Federation was held in advance of the Synod meeting during August. Days later, when the Synod convened, the Synod heard the first official opinion from the women, effectively advocating for the role of women in ordained ministry. But along with this presentation, that year came a serious debate about whether the Waldensian Church still needed the role of an ordained minister.

The combination of these two issues brought forth a serious discussion about the qualities needed for the pastorate. From 1960 to 1962, the discussion expanded from the floor of the Synod to include the opinions of Waldensians in local churches throughout the denomination in Italy. When the Synod convened in 1962, a variety of objections were raised from the debates in local churches but were addressed by the Tavola.

A significant objection was based on the concern raised that women would gain authority over men in the care of souls. The Tavola, which had been studying these matters for 13 years, addressed this concern, stating that the authority of a minister came from the authority of Scripture and by exercising the office of ministry rather than from one's gender or personality. The objection was nullified.

A second concern raised within the church was that it would be difficult for a woman to take on the heavy responsibilities of the office of minister for social and lifestyle reasons. The Tavola countered that men called to ministry faced the same type of difficulties and choices. Third was the concern of the masculinization of women in performing the roles of pastor, and this was countered by the recognition that churches should not centralize its ministry in the hands of the pastors but should engage the membership of the church more effectively in embodying the priesthood of all believers.

The last objection raised was of an economic nature. Thinking that men and women would be in competition for ordained leadership positions, the response of the

Tavola is particularly interesting. Do not believe that the opening of the pastorate to women will create an inflation of ministers.

We are convinced, they wrote in 1962, that women pastors will always be in the minority. After addressing each of these concerns at the synod meeting, the Waldensian church voted in the majority to open the doors to the ordination of women. In August 1967, the first two seminary-trained female Waldensian pastors were ordained, including Ms. Carmen Trobia, and began serving churches.

In connecting the lines of history that were not articulated in the documents that I read, I began wondering how Professor Miegge did not point to the role of women in the earliest decades of the Waldensian movement as justification for the ordination of women. However, I learned that it was not until 1962 that the first study of the ancient church was conducted. So, the fact that women were preaching at the end of the 12th century and the beginning of the 13th century was apparently unknown by the church leadership until recent decades.

In all likelihood, in 1961, the whole Waldensian community did not know of this proud fact of its heritage. The thematic research on Waldensian women remains today a relatively little explored scholarly study. Reflecting on this relatively unknown history brings two things to mind.

First, how radically guided the first-generation Waldensians were in their adherence and practice of Holy Scripture to the point where they dared to openly challenge the Roman Catholic Church when they had interpreted Scripture for themselves. Secondly, I'm astounded by how long it has taken biblical scholars and church leaders to catch up with the dynamic witness of faith of the first generation of Waldensian men and women. Eight hundred years later, we've adopted the same progressive and faith-based orientation to this message of the gospel that our ancestors in faith recognized so long ago.

In this regard, God's truth has come full circle. In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. This is a continuation of the sermon on women preachers and the medieval church's response to women preachers entitled *Muffled by Contempt*.

As early as the twelfth century, female Waldensians found justification to preach from the gospel, from the biblical witnesses of Mary Magdalene, the prophetess Anna, and other early female disciples like Priscilla and Dorcas. Women were proclaiming the gospel in public places as early as 1180. It is very likely that they were preaching before then, but in 1180 that is the date when Geoffrey of Auxerre, the secretary of the Catholic bishop Bernard of Clairvaux, wrote a report condemning two Waldensian women for preaching within the French city of Clermont, and for publicly hurling insults at the bishop Bernard of Clairvaux.

These two women were denounced as heretics and later were labeled as prostitutes. When male and female Waldensians preached in the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries, their message was straightforward. They often recited scripture that had been translated into the language of the people and publicly exhorted the people to denounce sin and repent of their wrongs.

Even this basic level of proclamation was interpreted as a serious and vital threat by the Roman church, according to the plethora of formal reports written by and for the Roman church beginning in the twelfth century. These reports grew substantially in volume over the next fifty years. Geoffrey of Auxerre caricatured the female preachers within the Waldensian community, equating them with the likes of the false prophet Prostitute Jezebel in the book of Revelation.

That is the same as old Jezebel of the Book of Kings, who married King Ahab, opposed the prophet Elijah, and became an ardent follower of the god Baal. Geoffrey forbade women from speaking or teaching in the church, citing 2 Timothy 3.6, describing them as being wretched little women, burdened with sins, curious and verbose, forward, shameless, and impudent, who enter the houses of other people. He identified Mary, the mother of Jesus, who held everything in silence in her heart, as being the perfect model of womanhood.

Bernard of Fontcaude described Mary as the perfect model of womanhood. From the 1180s to the early 1190s, he wrote extensively against Waldensian women preachers, citing ecclesial law against any unauthorized layperson preaching as being disobedient of the office of the priest. Those offenders, he said, should be treated as the Antichrist and should be shunned publicly.

Numerous scripture passages were cited by the Waldensians as affirming a woman's right to preach, such as Anna the Prophet in Luke 2, 36-38, at the circumcision of Jesus, cited by Waldensians as advocating for women preachers. Bernard writes in rebuttal that Anna was prophesying in the temple and not preaching, and somehow he made a distinction between the two. Persecutions against the Waldensians in the 13th century rose with increasing alacrity.

Traveling in the 13th century was done primarily by tradespeople, troubadours, salesmen, and women, who had no business being on the road. By the mid-13th century, the persecution of women preachers was so common that the pressure forced Waldensian women to express their faith in less public but still equally dynamic forms of ministry. The whole Waldensian community came to the recognition that it was far easier for their men to preach in public settings without instantly arousing suspicion because they could practice a trade as barbers, physicians, peddlers, craftsmen to mask their primary objective of proclaiming the gospel.

As a direct result of violent persecutions against Waldensian women, they began to assume roles that were less visible to the outside world but every bit as essential to their witness as a community of disciples. We've mentioned the role of the sororities just previously. As time progressed in many of these hospices, the sororities also provided accommodations for the preparation of itinerant ministers and began what would become a precursor of Waldensian seminaries and schools.

This partnership role was indispensable to the witness of the Waldensian community of faith and remained vital as long as Waldensians sent out pastors until the 1530s. So that supplements then the sermon that I preached just a few moments ago, and I thought that that might be good to add because it gives more of the historical background to that period of time.

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