

Dr. Kevin E. Frederick, Waldensians, Lecture 8, Joining the Reform Movement, An Ongoing Testimony

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This is Dr. Kevin Frederick in his teaching on the history of the Waldensians. This is session 8, Joining the Reform Movement, An Ongoing Testimony.

Our sermon today is entitled, A Continuing Witness, and it looks at the theme of the Waldensians as they merged with the Reformed tradition out of Geneva, Switzerland.

But as a basis for this study, let us turn first to the Gospels, or to the Scriptures, and particularly to Paul's letter to the people of Thessalonica, and the second letter, starting with the first chapter and the first verse. Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy, to the Church of the Thessalonians, in God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. We must always give thanks to God for you, brothers and sisters, as is right, because your faith is growing abundantly, and the love of every one of you for one another is increasing.

Therefore, we ourselves boast of you among the churches of God for your steadfastness and faith during all your persecutions and the afflictions that you are enduring. This is evidence of the righteous judgment of God, and it is intended to make you worthy of the kingdom of God for which you also are suffering. For it is indeed just of God to repay with affliction those who afflict you and to give relief to the afflicted as well as to us, when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus.

These will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, separated from the presence of the Lord from the glory of his might, when he comes to be glorified by his saints, to be marveled at on that day among all who have believed because our testimony to you was believed. To this end, we always pray for you, asking that our God will make you worthy of his call, will fulfill by his power every good resolve and work of faith so that the name of our Lord Jesus may be glorified in you, and you in him, according to the grace of God and the Lord Jesus Christ. This is the word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God. William Faulkner is a consummate Southern writer of the 20th century. In his stories, he deeply minds the pathos of the antebellum South and its impact on Southern identity as he explores many generations of white, black, and Native American peoples.

In his novel *Requiem for a Nun*, published towards the end of his career in 1951, Faulkner writes accurately and eloquently that the past is never dead; it is not even past. Those words ring true today as much as they did when Faulkner penned them 65 years ago, especially this day as we celebrate Reformation Sunday. In writing to the Christian community of Thessalonica, the Apostle Paul describes them as being a faithful and abiding community, even as they persevered in the face of a significant threat of persecution.

Paul was writing to them to help them understand how to interpret their sufferings as a people of faith. But Paul was also trying to present the bigger picture of how God would not only provide them comfort in their afflictions, and Paul told them God would also enact retribution against those who were causing the faith community to suffer so. Persecution is also a prominent theme at work in the 850-year history of the Waldensians.

In learning from our past as Waldensian Presbyterians, we form our identity in the present and understand our call as servant leaders in our own day and time. On this Reformation Sunday, there are some important historical and theological parallels that we should explore as Waldensians and Presbyterians, for we have been wed together in the Reformed tradition of Christianity and this congregation. Two prominent historians who have written extensively about Waldensian history are Ewan Cameron and Gabriel Odisio.

They have identified the onset of the Reformation of the 16th century and the decision of the Waldensian pastors, leaders they called the Barbas or Uncles, to join the Reformation in 1532 as signaling the end of the Waldensian movement. Their reasoning is based on the decision made at that synod meeting of the Waldensian Barba in 1532 to abandon many of the practices and organizations as a religious community in order to join the Reformed movement. The characteristics they discarded from their ancient past at that time included the following:

Their practice of itinerant preaching was done by the Barba, who traveled in pairs, translating, interpreting, and preaching the gospel in the language of the people. The Barba's practice of adopting a vow of poverty and celibacy. Their adherence to a literal interpretation of scripture.

Their clandestine gatherings in the homes of members. Their theological positions on various matters, such as oath-taking, the death penalty, and their belief in the seven Roman Catholic sacraments. Their practice of each Waldensian follower annually confessing their sins to the Barbas rather than to the Catholic priest.

Each of these pre-Reformation characteristics defined the Waldensians as a community of Christians more focused on the practice of ministry than on their adherence to a well-developed doctrinal system of beliefs. But in aligning themselves

with the Reformed Church of Switzerland in the 16th century, all but one of these defining characteristics were discarded by the majority of the Waldensian Barbas at Chanforan in 1532 and were replaced by an adherence to a systematic form of Reformed doctrine along with the Reformed organizational structure of what it meant to be church. The one characteristic that continued after joining the Reformation was a translation, interpretation, and proclamation of the gospel in the language of the people.

In contrast, the new Reformed Waldensian Church was built on the following concepts. Worshiping communities gather together in fixed church buildings. Assigning locally established pastors to particular communities rather than an itinerant pastorate.

Electing ruling elders from each congregation who made decisions regarding the local church and its ministry. Abandoning an exclusive focus on the literal interpretation of the Holy Scriptures and adopting a means of interpreting both Old and New Testament passages through the lens of God's witness through Jesus Christ and through other more complex forms of literary and historical criticisms that began to be developed during the Reformation. Although a majority of the Waldensian Barbas had voted in favor of joining the Reformation in 1532, there was a substantial minority, mostly of the older Barbas who had opposed the vote to join with the Swiss Reformers.

In the years immediately following Chanforan, when the Barba began to share the news of their decision with their followers, they were met with stubborn opposition to these radical changes within their communities. The identity of the Waldensian people had been deeply defined by the itinerant leadership of their celibate leaders for 350 years, and they were not open to the radical changes that the Barbas had adopted. It took the Waldensian people decades for the majority of the members to embrace Reform theology and ecclesiology.

It was not until 1555 that the first Waldensian church building was erected in the village of Pralegigu, and it was not until the 1560s that Reform catechetical studies were introduced to educate the membership of the churches. Clearly, there was a radical shift in practice and belief that would forever change the Waldensian descent from a unique alternative to the Roman Catholic Church to one that mirrored the doctrines and practices of the Reform Church. From a theological and ecclesial perspective, those qualities that made the Waldensian descent so unique prior to the Reformation ceased to exist.

In that regard, I would concur with both Cameron and Ardicio that the unique contribution that the pre-Reformed Waldensians offered to Christianity had come to an end. However, that does not mean that the unique Waldensian witness came to a

conclusion in 1532. I believe that the persecutions they faced continued to define the Waldensians in ways different from other Reform church groups.

The belief that the Waldensian witness ceased to exist after they joined the Reformation fails to consider the role of the ongoing persecutions of the Waldensians by the Roman Catholic Church during the Counter-Reformation, which started as early as the 1540s in Marendal, France, and continued in Calabria, Italy on through to the dawn of the 18th century. Across Europe, the impact of the Catholic Counter-Reformation was often concentrated on Waldensian communities more than any other Protestant group. Throughout the Counter-Reformation, the Waldensians located in the Cottian Alps remained the most organized and tenacious Waldensian witness as they faced wave after wave of persecution.

As a source of strength and perseverance, they would look back and call upon the faithful witness of their ancestors long ago, believing in the righteousness and faithfulness of their calling as God's faithful remnant in the face of evil. Despite repeated and well-organized assaults by the Roman Church in cooperation with the French and Savoyard troops to destroy them in their mountain homelands in the 17th century, they were never completely wiped out. Several factors led to their survival, including the remoteness of the Waldensian homelands, combined with their defensive advantage geographically in the higher elevations of the Alps, their homegrown guerrilla war tactics, and their faith in God's presence with them to guide them to the future.

These elements combined made it virtually impossible for even the strongest armies of Europe to eradicate them completely. Repeated edicts restricting their movement reinforced their isolation as a people for hundreds of years and limited the ability of all but a few Waldensians to have access to higher education. This came to be known as the Ghettoization of the Waldensians and did not really change until the middle of the 19th century.

Centuries of persecution and isolation drove them into clandestine expressions of their faith, forcing them to hide and worship in secret for fear of being discovered and tortured. This constant threat made them very suspicious of outsiders, and over the centuries, they became more and more inwardly focused. Positively stated, though, this isolation had the effect of creating a very tightly knit, unified, and self-sufficient community of believers who clung to their faith and their customs with fierce tenacity.

There is no appreciable evidence that the Barbas continued in their ministry by becoming pastors after joining the reform movement in 1532. No documents have been found to determine whether the Barbas were reassigned to serve geographically defined congregations. What is more discernible is the impact of a strong effort to reshape the Waldensians by the reformed church in Switzerland in

the 1540s, which began sending significant numbers of non-Waldensian pastors trained at the seminary in Geneva to lead the Waldensian people.

The early reformers viewed the Waldensians as the true church that maintained its apostolic purity in the roots of the reform movement. According to Gabriel Odissio, in a period of 30 years, the reformed churches of Geneva sent 60 pastors to the relatively small number of Waldensian churches in the Cottian Alps, while at the same time during that same period, sending a total of 80 pastors to Protestant congregations throughout the entire nation of France. This concentration of effort demonstrates the importance of the Waldensians in the eyes of the leaders of the reform movement.

In subsequent generations, an increasing number of Waldensian men went to be trained in Geneva to serve in their own churches, but despite these changes in leadership, one thing remained constant. Strong pastoral leadership against wave after wave of persecution of the Waldensian faith community is the primary force that kept the movement's coherence and durability together. This source of continuity reaches back to the pre-reformation Waldensians and continues down to the modern era.

The most prominent example is Waldensian pastor Henri Arnault. During its darkest days in the late 17th century, Arnault organized the Waldensian men during their exile into Geneva in 1686, becoming a small but fiercely effective fighting force. Arnault led his small army of 900 exiled men on a campaign from Geneva, Switzerland in 1689 to reclaim their homelands in what would be known as a glorious return, the result of which the Waldensians would prevail over the combined armies of 20,000 troops from France and the Savoy.

Despite their success, 10 years later, the King of France forced 3,000 Waldensians from the Chisone Valley into exile into Protestant Germany. Arnault led these people in exile once again and helped many of them settle into 10 neighboring communities in the Darmstadt-Hesse region of Germany. Arnault's leadership was critical to the success of this migration and the continuation of the Waldensian faith.

Ministers like Arnault were very often the glue that held the Waldensian people together in the face of great persecution. One cannot overstate the importance of the continuity of the organizational structure of the Waldensians in assuring their identity and survival. The annual Waldensian Synod meetings, during which pastors of each Waldensian faith community gathered to discuss church business, were a significant factor that helped them to keep their identity and connections with their pre-Reformed ancestors vibrant.

The structural leadership of the Waldensian church was already in existence in the 13th century, starting with the Council of Bergamo in 1218, and was reinforced each

year at the Synod meetings. Its organization served as a strong source of continuity that ties the Reformed Waldensian witness with its pre-Reformed roots. It was during the Counter-Reformation of the late 16th through the 17th century that their leaders began to draw comfort by lifting up regularly the scriptural parallels identifying with the sufferings and exile of the Hebrew people of the Old Testament and the early church in the New Testament calling themselves the Israel of the Alps.

Finding spiritual strength by claiming an affinity with the persecuted faith communities of ancient times gave the persecuted Waldensians of the 17th century an identity that aligned itself not only with ancient Israel and the early church but with the very God who had lovingly lifted his persecuted people guiding them forward for thousands of years. The Waldensians grew great spiritual and moral strength in the assurance that they, as God's covenant people, would prevail over the injustices done against them and fulfill their faithful witnesses in ways that could not be anticipated. This underlying core belief behind the identity of being God's faithful people was passed on from generation to generation from the rise of the persecutions in the latter half of the 13th century down through the Reformation until the dawn of the modern era.

The identity of the Waldensians as a people of faith did not cease when they joined the reform movement but continued to evolve and adapt to meet the persecutions and challenges they faced at every age down to the present. The past is never dead. It is not even past.

This tenacity of spirit and steadfast belief in Jesus Christ has been passed down to the Waldensians in this congregation this morning. The strength of the Waldensian resolve, perseverance, endurance, and fierce commitment to community are the strengths that accompanied and guided the first ten families of Waldensians who stepped off the train of Aldi's North Carolina on May 29, 1893, with a deed of land for 10,000 acres and a mountain of debt to repay. These are the strengths that led those early settlers for a period of 40 years to create a town of thriving industry and a source of financial stability for thousands of regional citizens through the Great Depression.

These are the strengths that can be seen today in a congregation marked by its dedication to serving Christ and Christ's people, not only within the doors of our congregation but beyond our doors to God's people both near and far. How can we maintain the integrity of our heritage of faith? That is the very challenge that we face today. We are not as likely to be persecuted for our beliefs, but the need to be guided by our good heritage as we boldly serve as Christ's faithful witness remains our constant calling for the past is never dead.

It is not even past. In the name of the Father and the Son of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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