

Dr. Kevin E. Frederick, Waldensians, Lecture 9, Moved by the Spirit, the Plague and the Huguenots

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This is Dr. Kevin Frederick in his teaching on the history of the Waldensians. This is session 9, Moved by the Spirit, the Plague and the Huguenots.

This sermon this morning is called Moved by the Spirit.

Our scripture text for the sermon is 2 Peter 1, verses 16 to 21. For we did not follow cleverly devised myths when we were made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we have been eyewitnesses of his majesty. For he received honor and glory from God the Father when the voice was conveyed to him by the majestic glory, saying, This is my son, my beloved, with whom I am well pleased.

We heard this voice from heaven whilst we were with him on the holy mountain. So, we have the prophetic message more fully confirmed. You will do well to be attentive to this as to a lamp shining in a dark place until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts.

First of all, you must understand that no prophecy of scripture is a matter of one's own interpretation because no prophecy ever came by human will, but men and women moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God. This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

The edict of the emancipation of the Waldensian community in the Cottian Alps was granted by the Duke of Savoy, also called the King of Sardinia, Carlos Alberto, on February 17th, 1848. This edict granted freedom of religion to the Waldensians from nearly 700 years of political, religious, and economic oppression, along with numerous campaigns of destruction, torture, and death. From the start of the 13th century to the middle of the 19th century, there were 33 separate campaigns of persecution directed towards the Waldensians, either by the Roman Catholic Church, the French King, or the Duke of Savoy.

On various occasions, all three of these powers worked in concert to completely destroy or try to the existence of the Waldensian communities and to annihilate every single Waldensian believer in France and Italy. Their survival and triumph of endurance as a faith community is what we live this day as a witness to the power of faith. We celebrate the fierce dedication of these, our people, to the word of God and the spreading of the gospel of Jesus Christ throughout Central Europe long before the Reformation was ever conceived.

In preparation for this day, I have read extensively about both the Waldensians and the Huguenots. You will note on the front cover of our bulletin the Huguenot Cross. Several months ago, I began to ask what the connection between the Waldensians and the Huguenot people was, and why the Huguenot Cross was the adopted symbol of the Waldensian people. There is no easy answer to this, nor is this question ever directly addressed.

However, an overview of the history of the Waldensians and the direct connections they had with the Huguenots will provide us with the answers to this question. I have chosen to weave together the answers with the text from 1 Peter that was read just a few moments ago for a number of reasons. This letter was written by the Apostle Peter and addresses accusations made against him as being a false teacher of the gospel.

The Waldensians, because of their belief in the twelfth century of knowing and proclaiming the word of God, were accused of being heretics by the Roman Catholic Church. What Peter points to is not his own interpretation of events but the glory of God revealed in the transfiguration of Jesus Christ on top of the mountain. The Waldensians focused on the illuminated image of Christ as a central emphasis of scripture long before the Roman Catholic Church reaffirmed this emphasis, and they were very clear in identifying Christ as the sole head of the Church.

Also, they were mountain people of the Cottian Alps, and the mountains and hiding in those mountains and fighting from them played a key role in their survival. Here, in this epistle, Peter reflects upon the relevance of this text and of the event in the authority in his life. The argument that Peter reflects upon or constructs and points to in this text is that false teachers claim that they can interpret biblical prophecy, while true teachers and followers of Christ do not speak their own words but simply focus on the proclamation of the word of God.

This is exactly the focus of the Waldensian Barba, who preached in pairs throughout medieval Europe. Peter emphasizes this focus on proclamation by using the metaphor of a lamp shining in the dark place until, he says, a day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts. It sounds familiar to any Waldensian who knows the age-old motto, *Lux Lucet in Tenebris*, where the light shines in the darkness.

This passage provides a perfect framework for us to explore the history of the Waldensians. A review of the history of the Waldensians in their first decades of existence reveals that the primary reason the Roman Catholic Church initially persecuted Waldensians was primarily because they were memorizing whole sections of the gospel and preaching the word of God on the streets without any official sanctioning by the church. They were also traveling in teams of two, proclaiming the gospel to people all around Europe.

And in less than a hundred years, there were more than 800,000 Christians who called themselves Waldensians in Europe. From south-central France through northern Italy to Germany and parts of central Europe, the Waldensian influence was widespread and very appealing. The missionary influence of the Waldensians in France expanded its widespread impact in Provence, Languedoc, Dauphine, Lyonnais, and Avernese.

By the 14th and 15th centuries, the reaction of the Roman Catholic Church had hardened, and many attempts were initiated to destroy the Waldensian faith. It was branded as heretical for its rejection of the authority of the Roman Church, and its adherents were hunted down and made to renounce their faith and return to the Roman Church or face execution. A series of French kings enforced the intolerant stand of the Church and sought to openly destroy the French Waldensians in the 15th century and in the 16th century.

In the decades following the Protestant Reformation, thinning out the influence of the Waldensian Church in all but the French side of the Cottian Alps. But throughout much of central and southern France, the seeds of Reformed theological thinking lay dormant, but ready to grow again. With the influence of John Calvin and the Reformed Church movement launched in Geneva and across Switzerland, the impact exploded across much of France with the establishment of the French Calvinists, who were known as Huguenots.

In 1559, there were 70 Huguenot churches in France, and a mere three years later, there were 2,000 congregations. Because the parallels in faith and theology of the Reformed movement and the Waldensian Church were so similar, most of the Waldensians who had gone underground in France during the persecution by the king's troops decades before now emerged as Huguenots. By the early 1670s, there were more than two million Huguenots in France, and their influence was a grave threat to royal power and authority.

There are a number of parallels between the Waldensians and the Huguenots, and there are also a number of differences worth noting. The theological beliefs of both traditions had numerous parallels. In fact, since a Waldensian creedal statement existed in the 12th century, many of the major theological points and practices constructed in the Reformation have parallels with the pre-existing Waldensian movement, including the authority of scripture, two sacraments, the lordship of Jesus Christ as head of the church, the simplicity of living, and devotion derived from the relationships between the disciples of Jesus and his teachings.

Waldensian pastors played a dominant role in the community of faith, and the same was true of the Huguenot pastors. Both groups used the Bible translated in French, authorized by the Waldensians at the time of the Reformation, and written by Robert Olivetan, the cousin of John Calvin. Both groups emphasized the priesthood of all

believers and taught their children to read and write so that they could study the Bible for themselves.

There were, however, some important differences between the two groups. The Huguenots attracted many noblemen and the middle class in France, away from the Roman Catholic Church, whereas a subsistence agricultural economy of the Cottian Alps meant that though most Waldensians could read and write, they had very little access to wealth. In fact, their homeland was referred to as an economic ghetto.

The Waldensians were structured in their governance with a Presbyterian type of connectional government, gathering annually for synod meetings in which each of the churches was represented by pastors and elders. The Huguenot churches were more congregationally based on their authority, and although the Huguenot church synods met every third year, the majority of the decisions were made locally by each autonomous church. As a Roman Catholic belief monarchy, most of the French kings of the mid to late 16th and 17th centuries viewed the Huguenot church as a major religious and economic threat to the monarchy and the church.

As the Waldensian communities had been targeted for oppression and annihilation long before the Reformation, the French Huguenot church during this time frame was frequently targeted for annihilation by the kings of France. In 1572, an event known as the Saint Bartholomew Day Massacre began a wave of violence against the two million French Huguenots. That resulted in thousands of deaths and a mandate to either convert to Catholicism or suffer death.

Later, with the enthronement of Henry IV as King of France in the late 16th century, who had himself been a Huguenot before becoming king, the Huguenots entered a time period when they were tolerated. However, after Henry IV was assassinated and the rise of Cardinal Richelieu in the 1620s to 1640s, the restrictions against the Huguenots of France saw the Cottian Alps as an avenue of invasion. Excuse me.

Let me go back there. During this time frame, King Louis XII of France saw the Cottian Alps as an avenue of invasion as a means of expanding the French Empire to include the Alpine and Piedmont regions of Italy under his control. He sent thousands of troops in the Cesena Valley of Italy and they occupied Pinerolo and the Waldensian Valleys, requiring the residents there to house the troops.

But with the army came the rats and the bubonic plague, and it devastated more than half the Waldensian population in the valleys, including fourteen of the sixteen Waldensian ministers. This occurred in the 1630s. The Waldensians joined the Reformation at Chanforan in 1532.

They started with a group of ministers trained at Geneva and, over the next half a century, recruited and maintained the Waldensian ministers from the population in

the valleys. Until the onset of the plague, the language used during worship was Italian or patois. But with the sudden loss of all but two of the seminary-trained pastors at the time of the plague, there was nowhere to turn for new ministers than the Geneva and the French Huguenots.

Twelve new ministers were provided by Geneva, who sent Huguenots to guide them, with the French being the spoken language during the sermon and the worship service. From 1630 forward, the worship service was communicated in French, establishing a tradition that would continue in the valleys well into the 19th century. Interestingly enough, sermons in this congregation were preached regularly in French until the 1920s.

According to Prescott Stevens in his book *The Waldensian Story*, even in the valleys today, the sermon is preached in Italian, and the hymns are sung in French. One of the significant outcomes of the Emancipation of 1848 was a decision by the Waldensian churches to evangelize the people who lived in the region around them. Now, having been over there in Italy for several years, I know they have a new hymnal, and they are singing all in Italian.

Their first new congregation outside of the valleys was in Turin, and the ministers had agreed that they needed to preach in the language of the people, which was, for non-Waldensians, Italian. From that point forward, the church began sending pastors to Tuscany to learn Italian well enough to preach, but this proved to be a major challenge. That is why the sermons in many Waldensian churches in Italy are spoken in Italian rather than French.

You may have noted that there is no traditional cross in this sanctuary. That is because, from the establishment of church buildings in the Waldensian communities, any symbolism that was used by the Roman Catholic Church in worship was outwardly rejected by the Waldensians as an ostentatious display and a distraction to the message of the gospel. The Huguenot cross was embraced as the only legitimate symbol of the resurrection by Waldensians from the time after the plague under the leadership of the Huguenot pastors.

In fact, for hundreds of years, the only jewelry allowed to be worn by Waldensian women, other than a wedding band, was the Huguenot cross. The coming of the reign of Louis XIV, called the Sun King by many in France, was the coming of a period of great darkness for both the Huguenots and the Waldensians. In 1685, all privileges of religious tolerance towards the Huguenots were revoked, and a massive campaign of extermination was waged against the Huguenots, resulting in the destruction of hundreds of churches, the death of many tens of thousands of Huguenots, and the exile of hundreds of thousands of French Huguenots to many countries throughout Europe and to the Americas.

Just two years later, the King focused his attention on the Waldensian Valley, seeking to do away with the Waldensian influence once and for all. This resulted in the death of hundreds of Waldensians in the valleys, the burning of churches, schools, and homes, and the exile of some 3,000 remaining Waldensians to Geneva under the leadership of Henri Arnault. While in Geneva, Arnault and many of his male followers hooked up with Huguenots and together prepared for a counter-assault in the Cottian Alps called the Glorious Return in 1689.

The tenacity of the Waldensians and the Huguenots during these days resulted in a remnant of settlers returning to the valleys, who would become the ancestors of every one of the Waldensians present in this room and who grew up in this church. Again, in the Epistle of Peter, he himself, the writer of the Epistle, we just read, and the right-hand man of our Lord Jesus Christ writes words of truth that ring to the hearts of every Waldensians. So, we have this prophetic message more fully confirmed.

You will do well to be attentive to this as a lamp shining in the dark place until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts. Waldensians and Huguenots have known, as Peter himself knew, that the word of God, along with our witness to that word, is the light shining in the dark places of this world. And it was a defiant faith and testimony grounded in truth and in the shedding of the blood of our spiritual forebears, who themselves served as living witnesses of hope even in the face of strong persecution, that we lift up this day in celebration and praise.

And like them, we point beyond ourselves and our trials, which pale in comparison to the second coming of Christ, who remains the morning star rising in our hearts. So, we remember the words of Martin Luther at the time of the Reformation, who said we were all Waldensians without knowing it. 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 nine, Moved by the Spirit, the Plague and the Huguenots.