

## Waldensians

There is a catechism that was written in the Middle Ages that has this question, “Do you believe in the holy catholic church?” And the answer given in this catechism is, “No, for it is a creature, but I believe that it exists.” And then the next question is, “What do you believe regarding the holy church?” And the answer in this catechism is, “The holy catholic church is made up of all God’s elect, from the beginning to the end, who according to the grace of God, by the merits of Christ have been gathered together by the Holy Spirit and previously ordained to eternal life, their number and names being known only to the One having chosen them.” What is going on here? This is obviously not a Roman Catholic catechism. It sounds more like Saint Augustine or actually the Westminster Confession of Faith than the typical sacramental theology of the Middle Ages. What we have in this catechism is a catechism from the Waldensians. In this lesson I am going to try to answer the question, “Who were the Waldensians?” This is a lesson I do look forward to giving. I said last time that I never was very happy when I had to come to the Crusades, but I am always happy when I can talk about the Waldensians. This is because with this group of believers we see something of a steady light shining in the darkness. Actually that is the motto in Latin that the Waldensians use often. *Lux lucid in tenebrous*—the light shines in the darkness. There is a drawing by a modern Waldensian with a light, a candle. It is illuminating the Word of God, which is so important to Waldensian faith and Waldensian history. And that light shines in the darkness. As we pray today we are going to pray together the Lord’s Prayer. The Waldensians, as other Christians, used the Lord’s Prayer in their worship. As we pray together in the words of the Lord’s Prayer we can remember that we are joining with these ancient believers. They were sometimes called the first Protestants or the first evangelicals. So let us pray the Lord’s Prayer as we begin.

*Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name. Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For Thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.*

The Waldensians liked to talk about what they call the first reformation. That took place 300 years before what we Protestants who are not Waldensians usually call the Reformation of the 16th century of Luther and Calvin. But the Waldensians are rightly proud of the fact that a long time before Luther and Calvin there was an earlier reformation in the church. We need to go back to the 12th century for a moment and talk about that period. The 12th century was a time of great activity in the Roman church. It was a time of religious reform and all sorts of unrest and new movements. It was the time of the Crusades, as we saw last time. The Crusades were still going on, although not producing very much in the 12th century. It was also a time in which the papacy had for some time tried to improve the teaching and morals of the Catholic Church without too much success. The Gregorian Reforms of the 11th century came and went and made some mark on the church, but many of the problems persisted. Saint Bernard of Clairvaux died in the middle of the 12th century. A little bit later in that century Dominique was born, the founder of the Dominicans. Then just a little later, Francis, the founder of the Franciscans, was born. So much is going on, a lot of ferment, a lot of turmoil, in the Catholic Church. It is also a time of the churches having to deal with a very serious heretical movement in the south of France. It was the movement of the Cathars or the Albigensians, as they are sometimes called. It was a Medieval sect that reached back to the ancient gnostic or manichian dualism. It taught that the created world was all evil, it could not have consequently been made by a good God. There were many Cathars in southern France, and the Roman church organized itself against these people. They produced a crusade, not against the Muslims this time, but against Christian heretics in southern France. Before too many years they wiped out that entire movement, largely by putting to death many of the people who belonged to the

Albigensian heresy. That all took place in southern France from Toulouse over to Lyon. This was an area of concentration of the Cathars. That movement was obliterated. Nothing remained of it. But in a similar geographical area, between Lyon and Turin, between this town in modern France and this town in modern Italy, in this part of the Alps, another movement arose. It was the Waldensian movement. The Waldensians are the only Medieval sect (we could use the word “sect” to mean a group not part of the Catholic Church) that survived the persecution of the Middle Ages. Actually the Waldensians have survived all the way down to the present.

Let us talk about how these people came into being and what they believed. Sometimes scholars have argued that the Waldensians have their own particular heritage, their line of descent, all the way back to the New Testament. They say there was an underground church, secret church, or trail of blood that was separate from the Roman Catholic Church. You can read some books in church history that argue that; I do not think they are successful. I do not think we can find a separate pure church from the New Testament down to the Waldensians down to the present. Certainly we have not been studying that church in this class. Most of the time we have been talking about the Roman Catholic Church. I think it is more accurate historically, as modern Waldensian scholars admit, that the Waldensian movement was a movement that came out of the Catholic Church. It did not have its own separate history back to the New Testament period. It began with a man named Waldo. He lived in the city of Lyon in France. He was a wealthy merchant. It is interesting to see this emerging social class. They were neither the aristocracy, the elite, nor the peasants, but a new class of merchants. They were of some means, and Waldo represented this particular new class in society. He became convinced that God was calling him to give away his money and take up preaching. He was not a priest, of course, he was a layman. He followed that leading and was converted to a life of apostolic poverty. This happened about the year 1170, which would have been about 10 years before Saint Francis was born. So before Francis is doing something very similar down in Italy further south, Waldo has adopted a lifestyle of poverty in Lyon. Pretty soon people began to be gathered around him. He not only gave away his money to the poor, but he also memorized portions of Scripture in the vernacular language of the people. He also memorized portions of some of the writings of the church fathers such as Augustine. Waldo would go out and preach, mainly reciting the Scripture and quoting the church fathers. People joined him in this venture, called the Poor Men of Lyon. That was the first name that they used, not the Waldensians but the Poor.

As the movement began to grow a little bit they did what every movement in the Middle Ages eventually had to do. They sent somebody to Rome to tell the Pope about it and to get papal permission to exist as a movement or an order within the Catholic Church. Some of these Waldensians went down to Rome. The pope was Alexander III. The popes were always quite reluctant to endorse a new movement like this. Some movements got approval, like the Franciscans and the Dominicans. Other movements were turned down because the popes did not want too many movements like this around. This kind of movement could gather its own momentum and actually challenge the authority of the church in some ways. So it was not automatic that a movement like this would be approved by the pope. There would be some lengthy questioning and examination of the views of the people who were proposing to begin a new movement. We have a very interesting account of what happened when those Waldensians arrived in Rome because different people were appointed to question them in the delegation of the doctors and scholars of the Roman Catholic Church. It was one English bishop whose name was Walter Map who was asked to question the Waldensians. Map said, “I was actually quite nervous because this was my big chance to put down these heretics and to establish my reputation as a theologian and an inquisitor.” So he wanted to make the best impression that he could on everybody who was listening. So he said, “I knew these people were very simple and illiterate.” They really were not; that was his description of them. They had memorized large portions of Scripture, and they were using those Scriptures in their preaching. But thinking them to be untutored, at least in the ways of

theology in the church, he set out to question them. He said, "First I proposed the very simplest question: Do you believe in God the Father?" They replied, "We believe." And then he said, "Do you believe in God the Son?" Again, "We believe." "Do you believe in the Holy Spirit?" "Yes, we believe." "And do you believe in the mother of Christ?" And once more they said, "We believe," where upon everyone present broke out into a roar of laughter. And they retired in confusion, as well they might. They had fallen into a trap. Perhaps you can identify the trap that they fell into. "Do you believe in the mother of Christ?" What would a good orthodox Roman Catholic answer to that question? "No, I believe in the mother of God." To say I believe in the mother of Christ indicated something of the taint of the Nestorian heresy that we have already talked about.

So the Waldensians, according to Walter Map, with Map's own brilliance in questioning them in this way, failed the test. They were not approved as an order in the Catholic Church. The pope did not care if they wanted to be poor. They could give away everything that they had if they wanted to. But the pope did not permit them to carry on preaching. That is really what they had come to Rome to ask permission to do. He said they could not do that unless the local clergy would allow them to do that. So they went back home to Lyon, disappointed in that verdict. But they did not hesitate to begin preaching again when they got back to France. They believed that the authority to preach did not come from the pope or from the bishops but from Christ. The local archbishop refused to give them permission, but Waldo replied, "It is better to obey God than man." He chose a very good text for his answer because those were the words of Peter when he and the apostles in Jerusalem were forbidden to preach. Waldo is later called Peter Waldo. We think that he gets the name Peter because he often used this text. He was quoting Peter, "It is better to obey God than man." Peter was not his original name. Later Waldensians called him Peter Waldo, probably in reference to his frequent use of that text.

Waldo and his followers were then expelled from Lyon by the archbishop. Like those early Christians in Jerusalem when they were scattered by persecution, they went everywhere preaching the Gospel. It was not long before Waldensians were all over Europe. They had to move and act in secrecy, but they turn up in many places. The English monk, Walter Map, who had questioned them in Rome said, "Their beginnings are humble in the extreme for they have not yet much of a following. But if we should leave them to their devices, they will end by turning all of us out." So the Roman church, even though this was a very small, seemingly insignificant movement, had some fear that a movement like this could grow and could become a very great movement. They feared it would oppose the teaching of the Catholic Church.

Early in their history the Waldensians did not form a separate church. They did not build their own church buildings until the middle of the 16th century. The first Waldensian church building was in about 1555, we think. Formerly they were still part of the Catholic Church. They had their children baptized in the Catholic Church. They took communion (or mass) once a year in the Catholic Church, as was the custom of the time. Within the Catholic Church in southern France and northern Italy, there were these groups of Bible-based Christians who were led by people. They called the leaders Barbers; it is the Italian word for "uncle." Perhaps because the Catholic Church used "father" for their priests, the Waldensians used "uncle" for their leaders. Little groups of people in different places, but mainly in the mountains, in the Alps between France and Italy, were meeting with their leaders. They met for the study of the Bible and for the discipline of their Christian lives.

The Waldensians were persecuted. Even though the Roman Catholic Church recognized that the Waldensians had not formed a separate church, they realized that this was really a church within a church. The Catholics did everything they could to exterminate these Waldensian believers. As I have already said, they were not only able to survive by hiding in the Alps and in the valleys there in northern

Italy and southern France, but they also moved into Europe where they had great influence in preparing for the later Reformation. We will study John Hus a little bit later. He was the reformer of Bohemia. There is a 1558 confession of faith of the Bohemian brethren, and on the title page of that 1558 confession of faith, Hus' followers are called Waldensians. They probably were not really Waldensians, but they had come to view the Christian faith so much like the Waldensians that the word "Waldensian" had become a general word for Christians or evangelicals by the time we come to John Hus.

Now let us think a little bit about the theology of these people and their practice. What did they really believe? There is some diversity in this movement, but we can summarize the movement in a number of major points. One point is poverty, which I have already mentioned. The Waldensians gave away their money in order to follow Christ. This was not an unusual occurrence at this time. Steven Ozment, in one of his books, says large numbers of laity and clergy were gripped by the biblical ideal of apostolic poverty. There were some people who were gripped by the ideal of going on a crusade. There were others who were gripped by the ideal of trying to live as Jesus and the apostles lived. The Waldensians were very much part of that second ideal. Peter Waldo said, "We have decided to live by the words of the Gospel, essentially that of the Sermon on the Mount and the commandments. That is to live in poverty without concern for tomorrow. But we hold that also those who continue to live their lives in the world doing good will be saved." So Waldo does not say it is necessary for everybody to give up everything like we have. People can continue to live in the world—that is, without moving out into a special community or order like the Waldensians—and can be saved as well. But the Waldensians felt called to give up their possessions. They were described by Walter Map this way (and this was a common way that the Waldensians were spoken of), "Naked, following the naked Christ." Map did not use that as a compliment for the Waldensians, but they viewed it as a testimony to their faithfulness to Christ. That statement, "Naked, following the naked Christ," a kind of startling way of describing these people, probably had two meanings. One is that they were materially poor. As Christ had nothing, so they had given away all that they had to follow Him. But it can also mean, as it probably did, that they were stripped of religious trappings and followed Jesus and Jesus alone.

The Waldensians focused their understanding of what it meant to be Christians on a very strict and literal interpretation of the Sermon on the Mount. And they attempted to put all of that into practice in their everyday lives. And so that meant poverty, giving away what they had. It meant a repudiation of violence in every form. The Waldensians were totally opposed to the Crusades and would not support that movement at all. They would not take oaths because they said that the Sermon on the Mount did not allow them to do this. So this kind of lifestyle would have made them stand out as unusual in the area in which they lived. There is a story about a man who was suspected of being a Waldensian. He was brought before the bishop for a trial. In his defense, he said of himself that he was not a Waldensian. He said, "Everybody here knows that I am not because I swear and lie and drink like any good Catholic! I could not then be accused of being a Waldensian."

Poverty, a literal following of the Sermon on the Mount, and the many statements of Scripture, not only there but elsewhere, mark the Waldensian movement. A very strong commitment to the Bible certainly is part of the Waldensian movement. The Waldensians turned directly to the Bible, placed it in the hands of the people, translated it, and preached it in order that people might hear it for salvation and discipleship. We know that one method that the early Waldensians used in getting the Bible out was to go about as merchants. They sold things, like precious jewels, books, or cloth, and this helped them make a living. But they really were more concerned to distribute the Scriptures as they were traveling from town to town as merchants selling their wares. John Greenleaf Whittier has a beautiful poem about this, which I have included in the syllabus. The old merchant is selling this pearl of great price to a noble lady. When she purchases the pearl, he tells her he has something even greater than that pearl, even

more beautiful, more wonderful. He brings out a little copy of the Bible, and she wants to pay him. He says, no, this is free. "Here lady fair is the pearl of price / May it prove as such to thee / Nay keep thy gold / I ask it not / For the Word of God is free." And Whittier captures in that beautiful poem something of the spirit of these early Waldensians who spread the Bible far and wide. We know, too, that as the persecution came to the valleys of the Waldensians often Roman Catholics, troops, and soldiers would move into the valleys. Many of the Waldensians were killed, and the Scriptures were taken away from them. Some few would be able to escape to the higher mountains in the Cottian Alps, on the border of Italy and France. According to this tradition, and I expect it is true, Waldensians had memorized the entire Bible. Different families were responsible for different books. So when they were stripped of all their Bibles, they would come together again and recite the whole Bible. By memory as a community they had the Bible, and they were able to write it again as a result of their having memorized it.

Another emphasis of the Waldensian movement, and you would expect this from their history, was an emphasis on lay preaching. These people preached—all of them preached. They were lay people, but they believed that every Christian should both know the Bible and be able to preach it. So wherever they went they preached. They were simple sermons but sermons that included the message of the Bible. The modern Waldensian movement in Italy and South America, which we will talk about in a few minutes, is true to this heritage in that it still allows lay people to preach and to administer the sacraments even though the Waldensians have ordained clergy today.

Let us talk about the Waldensian view of the sacraments. That will bring us into some understanding of how the Waldensians view salvation. The Waldensians rejected the Roman Catholic sacramental theology. We are going to go through all of that in more detail a little bit later. As we think of how a Roman Catholic person in the Medieval world thought that he or she could be saved, we call that the sacramental system or sacramental theology. The Waldensians did not accept this. Some sources indicate that the Waldensians held to only two sacraments: baptism and the Lord's Supper. This would bring the Waldensian movement right in line with later Protestant belief. It is probably true, as people have often pointed out, that the 16th century reformation stressed more justification by faith that may not have been as central to the Waldensians as their emphasis on the Bible alone. They certainly wanted to stress the fact that it is the Bible—not the church and not tradition—that is the source of our faith. You can find in reading Waldensian source documents some emphasis, too, on justification by faith. For instance, one of the early Waldensian poems puts it this way, "It is God alone who pardons and no one else." If you take that in a very strong sense as I think it was intended, then it is clear that salvation is not going to come through the sacraments of the church. But it will come through God's pardoning grace, which is received by faith alone.

What did the Waldensians think about the church? We have already seen that early on this group did not formerly break with the church. But with spirit and in temper the Waldensians were far from being in accord with the contemporary standards and understanding of the Catholic Church. I have a book written by a modern Waldensian called *A Challenge to Constantinianism: The Waldensian Theology in the Middle Ages*. The Waldensians opposed the idea of Constantinianism. They did not accept what was called the donation of Constantine. We have already passed that in our study. You might remember that one of the popes, Pope Sylvester, is supposed to have received from Constantine, the emperor, a document. The emperor, while in the process of moving from Rome to the new capital in Constantinople, turned over the whole of Italy to the pope and some other territory as well. That is called the Donation of Constantine. Later that was proven to be a forgery. It was written in the 8th or 9th century when the popes were in a bitter dispute with the Carolingian rulers of the old Roman Empire as to who was actually going to have temporal power and control over what used to be the old Roman

Empire. The Donation of Constantine was drawn up to give some support to the popes who said they owned all of it because the emperor Constantine gave it to them. In the 15th century that document was proven to be a forgery, but the Waldensians did not know that in their earlier history. They rejected it anyway. They said, "This is not the way a pope ought to act, to receive power and earthly dominion from an earthly ruler. Sylvester's acceptance of worldly political power is a denial of the humility and poverty fundamental to obedient Christians who are followers of Christ and the Apostles. We must reject all forms of compromise of the church with the world."

So we have, created by God's Spirit and power, a small group of faithful believers who impact not only their time but later history as well. Before I end this lesson on the Waldensians, let me trace that history briefly. At the time of the Reformation, the Waldensians realized that what was going on in places like Geneva represented much of what they had already accepted and believed. In 1532 representatives of the reformed part of the Reformation, including William Farrell, went down to the Italian Alps and met with Waldensian leaders. The Waldensian church then formerly became part of the Protestant church, and particularly of the reformed Protestant church. From that time on the Waldensians separated themselves from the Catholics. They built their own church buildings and had their own life independent of the church of Rome. This did not introduce a peaceful period. As you know the Reformation was followed by at least a century and a half of what we call the Wars of Religion. As Catholics and Protestants fought each other throughout Europe the Waldensians suffered greatly during this time. You have John Milton's great poem written in defense of the Waldensians. Milton was Cromwell's Secretary of State. Cromwell tried to do what he could in order to protect fellow Protestant Christians from the great suffering that the Waldensians were experiencing at the hands of the leaders of Savoy and Italian Catholics. The situation got so bad that surviving Waldensians finally had to flee their beloved mountains and valleys. They went for a few years to Geneva, where the Waldensian church was a church in exile. In 1689 they returned in what is called a glorious return in Waldensian history. This is the return of the few Waldensians who still existed from Geneva back to the valleys. The church was able to exist there, not without persecution, but with some measure of peace from time to time.

Like so many of the Protestant churches, during the time of the Enlightenment, the Waldensians were influenced by liberal, rational thought. And then there was a period of revival coming out of England through Geneva in the days of Robert and James Haldain. The evangelical revival in Switzerland reached down into the valleys and renewed the old Waldensian church and brought life to it once again.

Then in the 19th century, not so much due to religious persecution but to lack of economic opportunities in the valleys, many Waldensians migrated to South America and to the United States. The Waldensian church today that exists in Italy also has a strong part of that church in Uruguay. The Waldensians settled along the river plate between Uruguay and Argentina. That forms the province of the Waldensian church in South America. The Waldensians who came to the United States settled in various places but have not maintained a separate Waldensian church. Most of those Waldensians became Presbyterians. There is a little town in North Carolina called Valdese, North Carolina. You can tell from the name that Valdese is a Waldensian settlement. There is a Waldensian Presbyterian church in Valdese and a museum of Waldensian history. In the summer time there is an historical drama that is given by the local people. It tells the history of the Waldensians from the early beginnings in Italy to the migration from the piedmont of Italy to the piedmont of North Carolina in the early 20th century. There is also a settlement of Waldensians in Missouri in a town called Monett. And there are Waldensians in other places as well.

The Waldensian church in Italy in 1979 merged with the Italian Methodist Church. That did not help the Waldensians much because the Methodists did not represent the reformed history and theology of the

Waldensian movement. They also brought in much more of an emphasis on social activity as the core and heart of Waldensian life in Italy. But within that ancient church there are still Bible believing people. We can pray that there might be a renewal of this church, which has such a significant and wonderful history. Therefore, seeing that we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us run with perseverance the race that is marked out for us.

In some ways I have simplified the Waldensian theology for the sake of the lecture. I have tried to make it accurate. But you can probably get different expressions of theology as you read Waldensians. Some are going to sound more Catholic, some are going to sound more Protestant. The weight, I think, is toward the later Protestant position. They are very much in line with Augustine and with Calvinism as that develops later. It is right to say there is some difference there on the church. The Waldensians formerly stay within the church, but there is more of an emphasis on the sacraments in Augustine than you will find in the later reformers. Certainly the Waldensians are going to be more on the side of the reformers there.

It is a great story. You would not find this much emphasis given to the Waldensians in a general history of the church. Gonzalez does not say a whole lot about the Waldensians, but since I get to choose the topics that I am going to lecture on, I can spend a whole period on the Waldensians. I think it is important because these people are part of the movement that we will call the pre-reformers or the forerunners of the Reformation. We have got John Wycliffe to go, John Hus, and the Italian Gerolamo Servanarola. With Peter Waldo, you have got the four great pre-reformers. But we will talk about those others later.