



## The Waldensians

### A story of Bold Revival

When we come to discussing the subject of historical Revival it is critical that we understand the Bible doesn't talk about the subject the way we tend to think of it. This is an important clue.

When we talk of revival we think of it on two levels. Level one is a **Personal Revival** where an individual sees an old truth in a fresh or new way, applies that truth to his walk and is thus revived in God's presence. This is true biblical revival. What is generally understood as revival is the second concept, namely a **Movement** that develops as a result of an individual seeing an old truth in new and fresh ways. Then this individual, due to personal charisma, eloquence, power of personal presence, ability to influence others, or ego creates a "Movement" in connection with other people surrounding this freshly revealed truth. In time it becomes just another sect within Christianity, divides the body from itself, and defines acceptance with God by means of agreement with the beliefs of the sect and its leader, or rejection of those beliefs. To believe is to be O.K with God, to disbelieve is to be a heretic.

Instead of movements of revival the Bible talks of reconciliation between God and man and between man and man, but it doesn't discuss revival as a movement. The reason it doesn't is likely because due to man's fall in the Garden man's tendency with the concept of revival is to make it much more about man than about God. Revivals are characteristically known as "Movements" that men have generated, are led by men, controlled by men, and then killed by men. Movements are never the mind of Christ because they become sectarian and about the control and ego of man. Movements provide men platforms to express their opinions of how the Church and Kingdom should be run, and causes people to do more following of them than of Christ. Man tends to look for a human king to rule over him, and as such when it comes to revivals men are looking for strong charismatic men to tell them the way things should be. When they find such men they want to establish them as the recognized leaders of the "new way" and to grant them hierarchical authority over the "new way." Once men take hold of it it won't be long before the movement develops, runs its course, and dies its own natural death because it wasn't ultimately centered in Christ, about Christ, under His direct headship, and thus loses its focus and edification. This isn't to say that movements won't happen, nor that Christ won't create them, it is when men take hold of them that it becomes ugly. To flow with His river is a wonderful thing. To dam it up, and control it is to kill the power of its flow. Stagnancy is sure to happen.

From the time of Samuel onward, mankind has been determined to have a man rule over them, in spiritual matters, instead of God alone. Unfortunately revivals and revivalists have been largely about this desire, and thus end in frustration.

Under the concept of Reconciliation it is all about Christ. We are first and foremost reconciled to Him, and from that we flow out in reconciliation with man. We look for no

other spiritual leader than Christ, and we make no movement out of such reconciliation that would require complicated administration, or which would require an hierarchical leader to control it. It is a simple thing. It is a relational thing. It is all about Jesus and none about man making it about himself.

Let's take a look at a movement that started well, brought many wonderful changes to the Church, but in the end failed to keep Jesus as the supreme focus of it all.

This is the main body of history relating to the Waldensians:

## **A. The Historical development of the Waldensians.**

### 1. It's founder.

**Roman Catholic polemical writers after about 1180 opposed an ascetic body of preachers whose origin they ascribed to a Lyons merchant named Valdes (Peter Waldo), Valdesius, Valdexius, or Gualdensis.**

**According to the anonymous writer of Laon, Waldo heard, one Sunday in May or April of the famine year (1176), a traveling minstrel singing on the street the last stanzas of the old poem of St. Alexis [who had given away his property and gone on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land, and thereby had won great peace]. He invited him into his house and on the following morning asked a theologian the shortest and best way to God. The answer was that of Christ to the rich young man. Waldo, giving a portion of his property to his wife, sold the remainder, bestowing the greater part of the proceeds on the poor; and later casting the balance upon the street, he begged alms, and soon afterward took a formal vow of poverty.**

#### a. A vow of Poverty.

At this time in Church history, poverty was considered to be a certain evidence of true godliness.

#### b. A vow of Celibacy.

One would have thought the issue of celibacy, and whether it was a sin of moral purity, would have been amply settled by Paul's letter to the Corinthians, chapter 7, but religiosity dies hard.

### 2. His followers of the Poverty Way.

**In the following year he was joined by others at Lyons, and gradually the "poor men " began to castigate the sins of both themselves and others.**

#### a. Apparently brother Waldo had significant powers of influence, because soon he had followers of his new way.

#### b. The birth of Waldensian legalism.

We'll see their castigation of sin led them to some extremes of legalism.

3. The birth of Waldensian persecution.

**In the spring of 1179 Waldo went to the Lateran Council at Rome, where Alexander III. confirmed his vow of poverty, but forbade him and his companions to preach, unless expressly invited by the priests. This was long observed by the Waldenses, but finally they disobeyed the mandate, only to be involved in ruin for their fault.**

a. A No Competition Clause.

The Catholic Church could not tolerate competition - can we? If a part of what killed early church revival was a “no competition” policy, could encouraging the other local Churches in our area be a key to revival?

How do you feel when you hear one of the local Churches begins to flourish? Do we ask our ministerial brethren to go further down the road to start their Church so they won't compete with us? Do we find ourselves jealous over our denominational connections to the point where we bristle when a Church changes denominations or goes non-denominational? What makes us more upset when someone leaves our Church and goes to another - that they are leaving us for a Church that is going to hurt their faith, or that we are losing our tithing members?

Stephen of Bourbon, on the other hand, ascribes Waldo's conversion to his curiosity. **Hearing of the Gospels, he had two priests translate them for him. In like fashion, he later obtained vernacular versions of many other books of the Bible and of the sayings of the saints. He now resolved to practice apostolic poverty, sold his property, threw the money in the mire, and began to preach in the streets. He was soon joined by many uncultured men and women, but all being unlettered, they taught many errors. They were accordingly forbidden to preach by Jean aux Blanches-Mains, archbishop of Lyons, but they persisted and were banned and expelled. In 1179 they were cited to appear at Rome, where, proving obstinate, they were declared to be heretics.**

b. Hunger for God led to the departure.

Isn't it sad there were very few translations in the vernacular of the people in Waldo's day?

c. Hunger for God led to Catholic jealousy.

We must read the above paragraph in light of what the Catholic Church would have defined “many errors” as. For them, anyone who taught a way other than Catholic dogma was involved in “many errors.”

d. Heretics.

What is the definition of “Heretic?” One who doesn't agree with the dogma of the Catholic Church, hmmm.... I hope we are different and have learned from this wrong thinking.

**Many misunderstandings were more than probable; yet, in spite of not**

**always realizing what the text meant, entire books were memorized and orally repeated. Even among the "friends" were some, who, though illiterate, could repeat the words of Christ, the forty Sunday gospels, and even Job and the entire four Gospels.**

4. Waldensians, Lombardian Humiliati - Pauperes spiritu.

While the Waldensians were growing in fame and infamy in 1179 the Lombard Humiliati were trying to find approval with the Catholic leadership but were ultimately turned down. This led to a joining of league with the Waldensians.

The latter recognized Waldo as leader, and assumed the name Pauperes spiritu, and **the customs of apostolic living and preaching abroad, and impressed on their new allies their distinctive custom of uniting those brethren who felt themselves unfitted for preaching and pastoral care into ascetic companies of laborers.**

a. Ascetic laborers.

Note also "Asceticism" is gaining hold. More legalism.

b. Separation of Clergy and Laity.

We now see two classes forming in this movement. Clergy and laity. You would have thought they would have learned their lesson from the Church they were vacating, but nope...old ways die hard

How could one be "unfitted" for preaching? Sin? Nope, to them all it took was believing you were "unfitted." So much for mentoring and equipping.

5. Growth and Development.

**A second branch of Waldenses was thus established in Lombardy, their chief center being Milan, where in 1209 they numbered over a hundred. They were also in Cremona (1210), Bergamo, and, at least as missionaries, in a number of towns in northern and northwestern Italy. They were in Strasburg (1211), Bavaria and Austria (1218), and in the diocese of Trevea and the region surrounding Mainz (1231). The determined effort to suppress heresy, then made throughout middle and southern Germany, was directed primarily against them.**

a. Evidence of a desire for new liberty.

**Here and in Languedoc they were, in all likelihood, most widely spread, numerous, and influential about the close of the twelfth and the beginning of the thirteenth century. They were drawn chiefly from the laity of the bourgeois and peasant classes, though a few priests and men of culture, and even monks, were to be found among them.**

b. Not many mighty, not many noble...

It is so important to remember that Jesus is more after heart than head

knowledge.

6. More Persecution.

**The papal ban (1184) had empowered the authorities of both Church and State to proceed against the Waldenses. In 1194 Alfonso II. of Spain issued an edict that all who should harbor, give food and, drink, or even listen to the Waldenses should be punished by confiscation of property and prosecuted.**

**In 1197 Pedro II. renewed this edict, with the added clause that Waldenses should be burned wherever taken, this forming the first public document in which death by burning was prescribed by the State for heresy. How far the mandate was enforced is uncertain, but in Germany about eighty members of the sect were burned at Strasburg in 1211. In their chief missionary centers, France and Italy, they were treated with more leniency. At Milan Archbishop Philip seems to have contented himself with razing their school, and in Pinerolo a vain effort was made to induce the inhabitants to refuse to receive them. In France only some of the bishops at first proceeded against them, and these with such moderate measures as summoning before the courts or burning their translations.**

Isn't it amazing the how powerful "religious hierarchical control systems" of thinking are? Do we partake of that spirit - at all?

You see, the moment you move towards ANY hierarchical control you are moving right back to this sort of thing. Unless Jesus is the "sole" head of His Church, and "vengeance" belongs to Him alone, we run a great risk and almost sure involvement in a hierarchical control that will persecute the elect and dethrone the Lord Jesus.

This isn't to say that leadership in the body of Christ has no place. But, leadership functions to point the body to Christ, not become a law unto themselves. The most powerful of all leadership isn't a power vested in title, position, or rank. The most powerful leadership resides in the revelation of Christ that leaders bring to the body.

## **B. The Practices and Beliefs of the Waldensians.**

1. A low view of marriage.

**At a very early date dissensions arose. Waldo vainly demanded the dissolution of the associations of laborers. He permitted the dissolution of marriage in case one wished to join his ranks, while the Lombards were of the opinion that the consent of the wife was necessary. The Lombards, because of his insistence, desired to become independent and have a leader of their own. The result was a crisis, which reached its climax about 1210, and a final rupture took place between the two bodies.**

2. Apostolic Poverty.

**That the purpose of Waldo was a return to apostolic poverty, with a general revival of apostolic life based especially on Matt. 10, is firmly established.**

**The " society " of the " poor in spirit " was primarily nothing but an ascetic**

association of men and women who renounced the world, formally vowed to practice apostolic poverty and the apostolic calling, and wore as an outward symbol the apostolic "Habit."

3. Persecution created a Sect and its Authority Structure.

**By the excommunication of the society its character changed long before the schism; and Waldo, who had already claimed recognition as a bishop, and who had asserted the power of consecrating the Eucharist, prepared the way for the transformation of his following into a sect or antichurch, a tendency present already in 1184.**

What Lord Acton said proves very true: "Lord John Edward Emerich Acton was one of the most important British historians of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century and was quoted as saying '*Power tends to corrupt; absolute power tends to corrupt absolutely*'" Sectarianism is "never" the will of God. We are called to be one body, one Bride. In this we see another need for reviving, from a group that was supposed to be reviving the Church.

There is no question their movement brought needed revival to the Church, but because they didn't purge out "all" the old leaven, this leaven of malice and insincerity caused continued to hurt to the Church and challenge to the authority of Christ.

**It is evident that after 1184 and before 1210 the society resolved to create anew the three orders of bishops, presbyters, and deacons. It then recognized Waldo as bishop, and he ordained other " poor men " as presbyters and deacons. The reason for this step was doubtless distrust of the sacramental ministrations of Roman Catholic priests, and these three offices were retained in accordance with the " law of God " in the Bible. Waldo was clearly rector and bishop until the secession.**

Notice the "three" orders - Bishop / Presbyter / Deacon. It didn't take the Church much beyond Polycarp's time (155 AD) to move to this error. Originally there were only two orders, and no such thing as a "Pastor" or "Senior Pastor." These conventions only came much later as men moved away from biblical pattern and revelation, and into the traditions of men.

**The deacon (also called minor; in Germany junior) was simply the servant of the presbyters, bishops, and rectors; and when the " poor men " went out in pairs, one was usually a presbyter and the other a deacon. Originally the deacon also had the right to preach and hear confession. The presbyter was empowered to preach in the district assigned him by the rector, to hear confession, and to pronounce the blessing at meals. Later he could also confer ordination if no bishop were present. In the Lombard-German Waldenses all consciousness of distinction between the orders of bishop and presbyter had vanished in the fifteenth century.**

It is very interesting to note, that when the Lombards and the Waldensians parted ways, evidently the Lombards were of a purer understanding of biblical leadership. It was evidently the strength of Waldo's personality that created this hierarchical

separation.

**The rite of ordination for all three grades was simply confession of sins (lacking among the Lombard-Germans), the Lord's Prayer, and laying on of hands.**

3. Requirements for acceptance.

**The condition for admission to the "society" was, from the first, "conversion," in its monastic sense of renunciation of the worldly state and vocation and personal property, and the dissolution of a previous marriage.**

- a. Conversion.
- b. Giving up job, possessions and marriage.

Wow, no small price to pay for joining these guys ranks!

The legalism mounts.

**This period was devoted especially to committing the New Testament to memory, as well as other books of the Bible; and at its conclusion the neophyte was ceremonially admitted, making at first, probably only among the "brothers and sisters," the following vows: perfect poverty, rigid obedience of the precepts of the Gospel, and the wearing of the apostolic habit. Previous to the schism the vow of celibacy seems also to have been exacted, while later both Lombards and Waldenses admitted only the unmarried. Finally, the novice pledged himself to complete submission to his superiors.**

- c. Memorization of the New Testament.
- d. Poverty.

**the "poor men" roamed, two by two, as wandering preachers from city to city, imitating Luke 10: 1. They were forbidden to earn their living by their own labors, receiving their food and other necessities from their friends (cf. Matt. 10: 10ff ; I Cor. 9: 7ff.), and at first returning alms given in money.**

- e. Rigid obedience.
- f. Wearing the "habit."

**At first the Waldenses went about publicly in their apostolic habit, preaching in the streets, markets, and even churches. These practises they were able to keep up in Languedoc till late in the thirteenth century, but elsewhere persecution soon obliged them to lay aside their habit and to prosecute their activity in secret. (i.e. house Churches?)**

- g. Commitment to Celibacy.
- h. Complete submission to leadership.

And we thought the "Discipleship" movement, that swept the world, had some excesses. These guys make that movement look tame.

Movements are not of God. Reconciliation is of God. There is a huge difference.

i. Fasting.

**From the very first they attached high value to abstinence, fasting on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays.**

j. Praying 7 times a day.

**They were equally devoted to prayer, though, except for the blessing at meals, they used only the Lord's Prayer (in Biblical strictness). At first they utterly disregarded the canonical hours, but later they prayed seven times daily.**

k. Moral rectitude and pacifism.

**They refused every form of oath (cf. Matt. v. 34 aqq.), abhorred every falsehood as a mortal sin, and condemned shedding of blood, even in a righteous war or in capital punishment (cf. Matt. v. 21 sqq., vii. 1 sqq.).**

l. Preaching.

**They held their chief duty to be preaching. The preaching of the " poor men " was very simple, normally consisting only of exhortations to repentance and the recitation of long passages from the Bible in the vernacular.**

From the beginning of the thirteenth century, at latest, they laid special stress on the prohibition of oaths, falsehood, and the shedding of blood.

**For all their doctrines and distinctive usages they at first gave formal proof by reference to the Bible: e.g., for lay preaching to James iv. 17; Rev. xxii. 17; Mark ix. 38-39; Phil. i. 15; Num. xi. 29; for the admission of women as preachers to Titus ii. 3-4, and the example of Anna (Luke ii. 36-38).**

m. Priestly roles.

**After being excommunicated they began to hear confessions and to celebrate the Lord's Supper, as well as to ordain by prayer and laying on of hands. Yet before the schism they had apparently determined to celebrate the Lord's Supper only once a year, on the evening of Maundy Thursday (q.v.), when it should be celebrated by a bishop. In France it was apparently the custom, from an early time, to partake of fish as well as of unleavened bread and wine at this celebration, and the power of healing the sick was soon attributed to all these elements.**

Isn't it interesting that the Lord apparently, as with us, moved in power in their midst "healing" even though their practices and doctrine were less than pure.



No matter where we are in our beliefs of things, our fallenness will always creep in and pollute our best efforts. Fortunately God does not abandon us in our journey to wholeness.

4. Rejection of Catholic authority and ritual.

**The heresies alleged by their opponents to exist among them only served to intensify their emphasis upon the preaching of repentance and the assertion of their undertaking against the hierarchy, holding, namely, that,**

- a. **Masses, alms, and prayers do not avail the dead;**
- b. **Purgatory does not exist;**
- c. **Episcopal indulgences are invalid;**
- d. **Obedience is due only to those good priests who live the apostolic life; and**
- e. **That "merit is more essential to consecrating, blessing, binding, and loosing than office or ordination."**
- f. **The " poor men " doubted the efficacy of sacraments, especially the Eucharist, administered by unworthy Roman Catholic priests; and they held that prayer is more efficacious in the closet than in the church, besides contesting the peculiar sanctity of the sacred places of the Church.**

5. Forced into Secret Community and House Churches.

They were forced to go about disguised as pilgrims, palmers, artizans, or laborers of various kinds, sometimes carrying different costumes with them. Wherever they could find a hearing, they sought to convert some from the world, i.e., to induce them to join them, while their other adherents, or " friends," they urged to hold regular conventicles, and particularly to abstain from oaths and the shedding of blood. In Lombardy the " friends " were at first advised to enter one of the associations of laborers at Milan and elsewhere, and these associations and conventicles, **sometimes erecting their own buildings, formed initially the fixed centers of Waldeneian missionary activity. To these were added in the German-Lombard section, in the thirteenth century, studia or " hospices," in which the "converts" were trained and the preachers entertained.** The laborers' associations, special objects of mistrust, apparently disappeared before 1218, but **the other two institutions of conventicles and studia long lived on.**

Conventicles amount to small and private gatherings that would be less noticed than formal buildings.

When they did erect buildings they were still of a smaller and less conspicuous size known as "studia" or "hospices."

Notice how they developed into a discipleship and equipping fraternity.

### C. The Lombard Waldensians.

The Lombard Waldensians developed their organization from an ascetic band of preachers to an antichurch or sect as quickly as their French brethren.

#### 1. Secret Church.

**As early as 1260 they and their " friends " formed, even in Germany, a loose but practically organized secret church, which considered itself the only Church of Christ, occasionally termed entrance to its number true baptism, and thus implied what it explicitly declared in the fourteenth century, that outside of it there was no salvation.**

Tended to be hidden, house oriented, and small.

#### 2. Harsh rejection of the Catholic Church.

**It accordingly declined all the claims, hierarhy, and worship of the Roman Catholic Church, designating it, as early as about 1240, as the *great beast of the Apocalypse*, and declaring that it had ceased to be the Church of Christ when Pope Silvester, the first antichrist, received the donation from Constantine.**

#### 3. A purer form of Church government.

**The Lombard Waldenses protested against all privileges of rank, clerical prerogatives, the titles of pope and bishop, priestly despotism, all incomes and endowments of churches and monasteries, the division of the land into dioceses and parishes, against councils and synods, the whole system of ecclesiastical courts and penalties and of marriage law, the celibacy of the clergy, and the like.**

#### 4. It's distinctives.

##### a. Rejection of Monasticism.

**They also rejected, at least after the fourteenth century, monasticism in all its forms:**

##### b. Rejected specialized religious instruction for the clergy.

##### c. Rejection of mystical interpretations of Scripture.

##### d. All ordinations and acts of worship not explicitly taught in Scripture.

##### e. All Church fasts and feasts.

**All church fasts and feasts excepting Sundays and sometimes Christmas, Easter, Ascension, Whitsunday, and the feasts of the apostles.**

##### f. Blessing sacred articles.

**The blessing of all articles such as candles, palms, water, and the use of articles thus blessed; the blessing and dedication of churches, cemeteries, pilgrims, and the like; the churching of women; and pilgrimages, processions, organs, bells, spires, canonical hours, the whole Latin liturgy, and all else appertaining to the externals of worship. More emphatic was their condemnation of the cult of images, relics, saints, and the Virgin, but most productive of offense were their severe strictures upon the sacraments of the Church.**

g. Rejection of Catholic Baptisms and Ceremonies.

**Beginning about 1240, with the denial of the efficacy of sacraments administered by evil priests, the radical faction, assuming that all Roman Catholic priests were evil, proceeded to renounce Roman Catholic baptism as unnecessary; infant baptism as worthless; confirmation and extreme unction superfluous; and the Eucharist, ordination, and penance as administered by the Church, futile.**

h. Ultimate Protestant Reformation absorption.

During the 1500's the Waldensians, for all intents and purposes, were absorbed into the Protestant Reformation and lost their individual distinction as a movement.

**They, accordingly, ceased virtually to be Waldenses, and became merged in the Upper German and Swiss faction of the Protestants. As a result, however, the Waldenses became divided into the Protestant and the old-school factions.**

#### **D. Summary and Conclusions.**

As we have considered the role the Waldensians played in Revival of biblical practices, we can see their contribution was no small one indeed. Persecuted for their beliefs yet they refused to yield, and though many of their practices contained confusion and mixture, in the end their overall contribution was a tremendous one which prepared the way ultimately for the Protestant Reformation.

When we think of Revival and the process God used to restore biblical practice to His Church, we must learn from our study of the Waldensians that even when our intentions are good, and even when we have received much revelation about many important things, our best insight is still going to fall short of absolute truth and pure biblical practice. It leads us to a place of humility. While we fight for the restoration of truth we acknowledge with Paul that we see through a darkened mirror. We see in part and we prophesy in part. Only Jesus has it all.

Two sad developments of the Waldensians should serve to awaken us to the dangers of partial revival:

1. Self made religion of man invented legalisms.

- Asceticism
  - Celibacy
  - Vows of Poverty
  - Divorce so as to enter the movement
  - A demand for willingness to be dominated by controlling leadership
  - Renunciation of job and possessions
  - The wearing of a religious garment
  - Rigid obedience to man made rules
  - Over use of Fasting
  - Controls on amount of prayer that is acceptable
2. Failure to rid the Church of hierarchical government which grants power to men based on charisma, title, and position, and leads to harsh controls of God's people, which robs Jesus Christ of His rightful place as Head of the Church.

Three positive developments of the Waldensians providing motion towards the Protestant Reformation:

1. An awakening to religious practices and beliefs that were far more about man than about Jesus. Rejecting the traditions and doctrines of men.
2. A willingness to pay the personal price of persecution to move the Church towards restoration of biblical practices.
3. The value of standing for right, even when powerful religious figures around you oppose you.

All in all the Waldensians were greatly used by the Lord to restore His Church to a state far closer to that which the original Apostles established. The divine lot fell to them to confront some 1050 years of Church detours and errors. May God give to us the same Revolutionary spirit that is unwilling to tolerate an approach to God and His Church that denies Him the joy Jesus was looking at when He endured the cross. For the sake of Christ Jesus may we rise to the call to return and be revived. It is ultimately a call to Reconciliation with God and man. It is happening even now...