

The Waldenses and Their Contemporaries

Takend from "The Story of the Baptists, 1887
By Richard B. Cook

We have considered, some of the early Christian sects who held Baptist principles, and refused to acknowledge the authority of the Papal Church. We continue the subject. The early history of the Waldenses is very obscure, but it seems to point to the earliest antiquity as the date of their origin. It is probable that, the Waldensian churches maintained an unbroken line of succession, apart from the papacy, from the days of the apostles.

Some have ascribed their origin to Peter Waldo; but their existence has been traced back many centuries beyond the time when he lived. He belonged to the sect whose history we are considering, so a brief notice of his character and work will not be out of place. Peter Waldo was a wealthy merchant of Lyons, in France. By the careful study of the New Testament, he became convinced that the system of religion taught and exemplified in the Papal Church was totally different from that which was inculcated by Christ and his apostles. Moved with the true missionary spirit,—an intense desire to make known the truths of the gospel, that souls might be saved, he gave up his business, distributed his goods to the poor, and devoted himself to work of making known the way of salvation. This was in 1170. He made great efforts to have the Scriptures translated and circulated among the people. His followers became very numerous, and were called "the Poor Men of Lyons," because they renounced the wealth and vanities of the world, and led a life of poverty and humility. Even their enemies concede that they were good people, of honest and upright lives; and yet they suffered cruel persecutions. Peter Waldo, himself, along with many of his followers, was compelled to escape for his life, and fled to Bohemia where he ended his days.

From the statements of their persecutors, we learn that the Waldenses flourished five hundred years before the time of Peter Waldo. They themselves claimed that their doctrines and discipline had been preserved in all their purity, from the days of the primitive martyrs. Under different names they existed in the earliest ages apart from the established Greek and Latin churches. They were the most celebrated body of dissenters who protested against papal corruption during the Middle Ages. Their churches were found widely dispersed through the countries of Spain, France, Germany, Italy, and especially amongst the valleys of Piedmont. An eminent writer says that "it is an error to suppose, that when Christianity was taken into alliance with the State, by the emperor Constantine, in the beginning of the fourth century, all the orthodox churches were so ignorant of the genius of the Christian religion as to consent to the corruption of a worldly establishment." As we have already seen, there were many who maintained the purity of the church from the beginning of the great apostasy.

In times of persecution they sought refuge among the mountains, and dwelt in large numbers in the valleys of the Alps and Pyrenees, and, hence, received the name of Waldenses, or *the people of the valleys*. This name probably included a number of sects who held different views and practices.

Almost the only account of their early history is derived from the statements of their persecutors, the papists. These are, of course, only partial, but yet when rightly understood they throw a great deal of light on the subject. A Roman Catholic writer says, "their heresy excepted, they generally live a purer life than other Christians." "Their enemies generally bear testimony to the simplicity and excellence of their life and manners. They were particularly distinguished from the papists, by their regard for the Bible, and their disregard for the authority of the Fathers and tradition. They translated the Scriptures into the language of the people, and were noted for committing to memory large portions of them. They were specially familiar with the New Testament, and taught its truths with great earnestness and zeal. The early Waldenses therefore held the principles which now distinguish the Baptists.

Reinerius, a Roman Catholic inquisitor, who was engaged in the persecution of the Waldenses, says, that they affirm these views amongst other things:

"That is the church of Christ which hears the pure doctrine of Christ, and observes the ordinances instituted by him in whatever place it exists." "The sacraments of the church are two, baptism and the Lord's Supper."

[Return to Gallery Writings](#)