



Piotr WALDO

Courtesy of Biblestudentarchives.com

The Waldensians

A Spark of Reformation and a Recapturing of the
Authority of Scripture

Gary Nelson
Professor Nathan Busenitz
TH507 Historical Theology 1
Final Project
Nov 16, 2012

Table of Contents

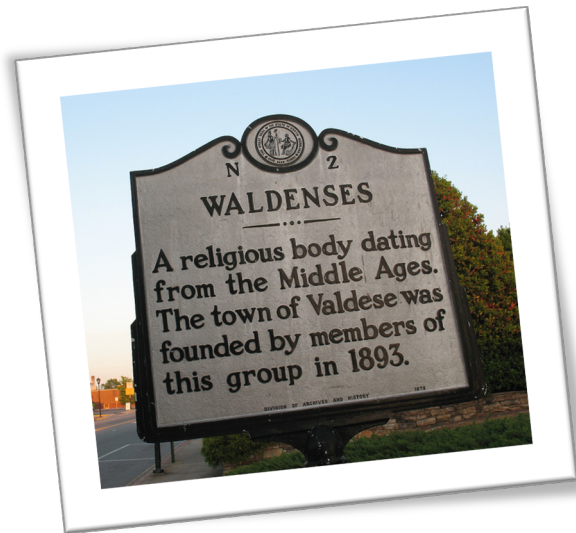
The Waldensians	1
Introduction.....	1
Their Leader	2
His Life before Christ.....	2
His Conversion.....	2
His Life Post Conversion	3
Their People	5
Before Waldo	5
The Bible.....	6
Poverty	7
Preaching	7
From Their Articles of Faith	8
Their Excommunication	9
Words of Walter Map on the Waldensians	10
The Persecution Rises.....	11
Their Relationship to the Reformers	14
Their Relevance for Today	15

The Waldensians

A Spark of Reformation and a Recapturing of the Authority of Scripture

Introduction

- The rise of the Waldensians came at a time when a movement was brewing of bringing about reform to the Church. They are considered to be “the most important sectarian religious movement of the later Middle Ages” by the Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia.
- Every since the time that Constantine legalized Christianity in the 4th century to the time of the Waldensians (~1184) the Church was on a slippery slope of going away from sound theology to trusting more in the traditions of the Church over the Sufficiency of Scripture.
- There had already been others who were refuting doctrines that the Church of Rome had come to adopt. In the 9th century there were protest against the rigidity and want of spirituality of a purely sacerdotal church. Men such as Berengar of Tours (999-1088) “upheld the symbolic character of the Eucharist and the superiority of the Bible over Tradition.”¹ Others raised protest against simony and other abuses of the clergy.
- By the time the group that came to be known as the Waldensians came onto the scene, the stage was already set for a “reform” to begin that would eventually lead to a full protest and abandonment of the Roman Catholic System in the Reformation under Martin Luther and John Calvin in the 16th century.



Courtesy of Lance Taylor from Flickr

¹ "Waldensians," in *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 11th ed., s.v.

Their Leader

His Life before Christ

- The man who is credited with the stir in the 12th century who gathered many followers was a man named Peter Waldo, also known as Pierre Vaudès. There is not much known about his life before entering into the commercial business in the city of Lyons, France, as merchant other than the year of his birth is believed to be around 1140 and that he came from the valleys of the Alps.
- He was a wealthy merchant who made his wealth through handling business investments for the archbishopric and he delighted himself with prestigious company the likes of heads of government, leaders in the church, knights, nobles, and businessmen. He lived in a way that had no concern for religion or problems of the like.



Statue of Peter Waldo at the Luther Memorial in Worms, Germany.

Courtesy of Wikipedia

His Conversion

- Peter Waldo's conversion story is quite dramatic like others who had a radical event that shook them down to their souls, such as Saul of Tarsus, Martin Luther, and Adoniram Judson.
 - There were two major events that happen in Waldo's life in the year of 1160 that caused to really consider eternal matters.
1. While having a conversation with friends after a supper on evening, one of his fellow men dropped dead which alarmed all who were in attendance. Being greatly affected,

Waldo began to be concerned with his own mortality being of great concern asking himself, “Am I prepared to die?”²

2. Not long after Waldo witnessed the death of his friend he was walking through the town square and heard someone singing a ballad about St. Alexis who gave up all of his riches to seek God and serve the poor.³ The details of the story that had this radical impact is that St. Alexis, son of a rich noble Roman prefect, on his wedding night decided to give up his life of ease and fled to Asia and distributed all of his goods to the poor and joined the poor. Later he would return to his father’s house where he would die.
- These two events led him to the scriptures where he soon found repentance and salvation.

His Life Post Conversion

- After Waldo embraced the realities of the Christian faith and his own study of God’s word, he made some radical decisions in which he chose to sell all of his possessions and give to the poor after Christ’s own request to the Young Rich Ruler in Matthew 19:21.
- He gave his real estate to his wife and sold off all of his other possession, of which he had much, and vowed to a life of the simplest and purest sense, that of poverty.
- While giving out alms to the poor he answered a man who thought he had lost his mind saying, *“My fellow-citizens and friends, I am not insane, as you think, but I am avenging myself on my enemies, who made me a slave, so that I was always more careful of money than of God, and served the creature rather than the Creator. I know that many will blame me that I act thus openly. But I do it both on my own account and on yours; on my own, so that those who see me*

² Richard M. Hannula, *Trial and Triumph: Stories from Church History*, 8th ed. (Moscow, Idaho: Canon Press, 1999), 89.

³ There are numerous accounts that are slightly varied in the description of how Peter Waldo became familiar with the story of St. Alexis. Some say he heard it in song and some say that it was told to him and others say it is folklore. Majority of the sources from this research agree that it was through song.

henceforth possessing any money may say that I am mad, and on yours, that you may learn to place hope in God and not in riches."⁴

- Since the Roman Church had a protective grip on the study of the bible, not translating into the common language, Waldo hired some scholars to translate the Gospels into his language in order for him to study. And because he had strong convictions that the Word of God should be in everyone's hands, he began to have many copies made and would give them away to those who couldn't afford to buy.
- He is credited with giving Europe its first translation into the modern tongue outside of Latin.
- He became so enthralled with the word of God and he believed that all men should be able to study that he began to ridicule the Roman Church for its use of Latin, which was no longer understood.

Peter Waldo, a citizen of Lyons, appeared most courageous in opposition to that unholy invention [Roman Catholic practice of the Eucharist].

He also attacked several other corruptions which had been adopted by the Roman priesthood, for he asserted that—

The papists had forsaken the faith of Jesus Christ—

The Church of Rome is the Babylonish harlot, and like the barren fig-tree which the Lord formerly cursed—

The Pope is not to be obeyed, forasmuch as he is not head of the Church—

Monkery is an abominable thing—

Vows are the character and mark of the great beast—

*Purgatory, masses, dedications of temples, worship of Saints, and commemoration of the dead, are only the inventions of devils, and engines of avarice.*⁵

- He began to preach the Gospel to the poor and he began to have a good group of followers that were known as the Poor of Lyons because of their vow to poverty.
- While he would preach the Gospel to people he would feed them. Delivering his messages in a very soft and subtle voice people were attracted to him and were coming in crowds to hear what he had to share.

⁴ Robinson, James H. *Readings in European History*, (Boston: Gin & Company, 1906), 171.

⁵ Perrin, Jean P. *History of the old Waldenses, Anterior to the Reformation*, (New York: Mason & Co., 1843), 22.

- Because of his preaching as an untrained man he began to bring about ridicule on himself from the powers of the Roman Church. He preached as a layman from about 1170 to about 1176 before the ecclesiastical authorities began to come down on him.
- The Bishop of Lyon expelled him from the city and diocese in 1176. Wanting to gain obedience to the Vatican he was invited by Pope Alexander III to come to Rome. He and some of his followers attended the Third Lateran Council where they appealed to have their expulsion from Lyons removed.
- It was at this council where Waldo signed a profession of faith that all heretics had to sign. In it was some sound doctrinal statements intermingled with some developed false doctrines of a works based salvation. Seeking to appeal in order to preach he signed it.
- It was also at this Council where their triple vow of poverty, chastity, and obedience was approved but their preaching of the Gospel was denounced.
- Since his conversion, Waldo had a strong conviction about obeying God rather than man so he continued to preach and sent out his people to preach the Gospel.
- Driven away from Lyons, he and his followers settled in the valleys of Piedmont.

Their People

Before Waldo

- There are three creeds of faith with the latest dating back to year 1120.
- There is much debate about the origin of the Waldensian people. Some say that Waldo was in fact named after the people instead of the people being named



after him. But according to the historical records that are present, it seems that the people became known by their leader.

- The Waldensian people were the people who followed their leader faithfully. They weren't initially Waldensians but were part of preexisting churches but what Peter Waldo did for them was ignite a passion for the Gospel and God's word.
- Before Peter Waldo began his public preaching ministry, the soon to be Waldensians lived a secluded life apart from the public view, but when Waldo began to preach and live out the example of giving with a willful life of poverty before them, they were compelled to go.
- When Waldo's fortune was gone it had a great effect on the people. *"It created a great desire to carry the gospel to others. Even in the times of persecution, we would leave their families in the care of their friends, and with a shovel, a pick or an axe upon their shoulders, to hide their real purpose, travel great distances to preach the gospel to others. So effective were these evangelistic efforts that in little more than half a century after Waldo's death one could walk from Belgium to Rome and lodge with those of his own faith every night."*⁶
- The people were originally known as the Poor of Lyons but were deemed the name Waldensians as a derogatory title by the ones who persecuted them calling them after their leader.
- These followers of Waldo were known by three main distinctives: The Bible, Poverty, and Preaching.

The Bible

- The Bible, more specifically the Gospels, was the fundamental basis for everything that Waldo and his followers were to believe. Their attitude was that it should be heard precisely and wholly and that it was the authority, not the Church, on faith and practice.
- The Scriptures to the Waldensians were the sole source of all religious knowledge and a Christian's reliance on faith to justify the contents of the Bible was far superior to any

⁶ Hartzler, Jonas and Daniel Kauffman. *Mennonite Church History*, (Scottsdale, Pa: Mennonite Book and Tract Society, 1905), 66.

logic, tradition, or authority of the Church. The words spoken by Christ and the Apostles were clear enough for the Waldensians that they felt they didn't need someone to give them their interpretation. To hypothesize, speculate or investigate didn't have a place in their practice. They took the Word at face value.

- They were known to have a strict adherence to the Bible and a strong desire to live it out in their daily lives, seeking to be above reproach. Over time as they continued to study the Scriptures they began to draw a distance between them and the Catholic Church on major doctrines. By the end of the 14th century they had developed a creed and a set of moral teachings that differed significantly from the Church.
- They also developed their own exegesis of the New Testament with a literal approach to bible study. This was considered a forerunner to men like John Calvin and Martin Luther.

Poverty

- From the onset of the influence of Waldo, it is clearly seen that there is a close connection of being a Waldensian meant that you made a vow to poverty. Waldo taking the text in Matthew 19:21 literally influenced all that would follow after him to do so as well even though Waldo taught that salvation was not restricted to those who would do so.

Preaching

- This was the stickiest issue for the Waldensian people. They believed, since the Bible belonged to the people, that it was right for the people to preach the Bible. The final word of Jesus was to "Go and teach" and since they had a strict adherence to the Bible, they were under conscience to obey this passage.
- This was a thorn for the ecclesiastical authorities who believed that if someone wasn't trained by the Church and commissioned to preach, that they weren't qualified to do so. And since they wanted to protect the Church from "error", they did not allow the Waldensian people to preach.

- This did not stop them from doing so which would eventually lead to them not only being considered heretics, but also eventually be persecuted by the Church.
- The early Waldensians did not differ from Roman Catholicism doctrinally, but when some of them were refused preaching licenses, they seceded and formed an independent church. They came to reject the Catholic priesthood and the Eucharist-centered worship. Instead, they held services devoted to preaching, prayer, and the reading of Scripture. It was at this point that the medieval Catholic church began considering the Waldensians heretics.⁷
- According to Reinerius Saccho in his work “Of the Sects of Modern Heretics”, he explains that the Waldensian people were divided into three types of activities:
 1. *Sandaliati*, who were to study the scriptures to find and correct the 'errors' of the Catholic church and hierarchy.
 2. *Doctores*, who instructed and trained missionaries.
 3. *Novellani*, who preached to the general population.
- As one can see that preaching was held high in their faith and it was for anyone who bore the name of Christ.

From Their Articles of Faith

The following taken from the Martyr's Mirror, shows the attitude of the Waldenses toward the practices of the Catholic Church. "Infant baptism is wrong." "Men ought not to swear at all, not even to the truth." "No judge who would be a Christian may put to death any one not even a malefactor." "An ungodly priest can not consecrate." "We are not subject, neither intend to be, to the pope or to other prelates." "In matters of salvation we must believe only the Holy Scriptures, and in no wise depend on men. Said scriptures contain everything that is necessary to salvation, and nothing is to be received but what is commanded of God." "There is but one Mediator (Christ) consequently saints ought not to be invoked." "There is no purgatory but all who are

⁷ Hamilton, Bernard. "Orthodoxy Wasn't Always Good Enough." *Christian History Magazine* 15, no. 1 (1996): 44.

justified in Christ enter into everlasting life and those who do not believe shall be cast into everlasting death, thus denying that there is still a third and fourth place." "All masses, particularly those for the dead, should be rejected." "They admitted no other degrees in Church offices than bishops, teachers (then called priests) and deacons; all are on the same level before the Lord." "Popes and bishops who carry on wars are murderers." "Inmates of monasteries ought not be allowed judicial power, nor should they be promised support." "Repentance and conversion are necessary to eternal life, and bowing to images is idolatry."⁸

- The teachings of the Waldensians began to convince them that they were the True Church and they were the ones with an unbroken lineage that goes all the way back to the Apostles. In a certain light they are right as they held onto the authority of the Word of God handed down through the Apostles, even today there is the unbroken lineage due to the Canon of Scripture.

Their Excommunication



- When the Waldensians stood before the Third Lateral Council they were not granted the authority to preach the Word but they continued to do so against the ruling of the Church.

- Their disregard of the prohibition of preaching by laymen issued in 1179 by the pope led to their persecution in many places for centuries, but did not result in their formal withdrawal from the Catholic Church. Most of them continued to observe the Mass and baptize their infants in the church. Although they suffered greatly they were never totally wiped out except in certain regions.

Numerous martyrdoms were recorded; e.g., in Strasbourg some 80 were burned at the stake in 1211.

- Then in 1182 the new Archbishop of Lyons, Jean de Belles Mains, expelled the Waldensians forever.

⁸ Hartzler and Kauffman, *Mennonite Church History*. 66.

- Then in 1184, Pope Lucius III excommunicated Waldo during the Synod held at Verona.
- Then in 1215 at the Fourth Lateran Council, they were condemned as heretics. The Council stated that the group's significant error was contempt for ecclesiastical power.
- Later generations the Waldensians would come under heavy persecution but would not waiver in their convictions to preach the Word of God.
- There exist about 20,000 members of them today.

Words of Walter Map on the Waldensians

“... We saw the Waldensians at the council celebrated at Rome under pope Alexander III. They were simple and illiterate men, named after their leader, Waldo, who was a citizen of Lyons on the Rhone: and they presented to the lord pope a book written in the French tongue, in which were contained a text and gloss on the psalter, and on very many other books of both testaments. These besought with great urgency that authority to preach should be confirmed to them, for they thought themselves expert, when they were scarcely learned at all.... For in every small point of the sacred page, so many meanings fly on the wings of virtue, such stores of wealth are accumulated, that only he can fully exhaust them whom God has inspired. Shall not therefore the Word be given to the unlearned as pearls before swine, when we know them to be fitted neither to receive it, nor to give out what they have received? Away with this idea, and let it be rooted out. The ointment ran down from the head, even to the skirts of his clothing: waters flow from the spring, not from the mud of public ways...”⁹

⁹ Walter Map, ‘Walter Map’s Account of the Waldenses in *De nugis curialium* (1179),’ in *Heresies of the High Middle Ages*, ed. Walter L. Wakefield and Austin P. Evans (New York, 1969), 203.

The Persecution Rises

- By the 12th century the Church had a strong political power that it was able to punish ones that were considered to be heretics. By this time there had arisen some strong movements that the Catholic Church had declared as heresies. Under Pope Innocent III were the growth of these groups and it gave him much problems.
- There was a group called the Cathars that had arose teaching some form of Gnosticism in the 13th century and they very strong that if they went unchecked would have been unwise.
- So the Pope began to formulate a type military “Crusade” against the Cathars and others who stood as a threat to the Catholic powers. But before launching an all out attack the ones deemed as heretics, he would give them an opportunity to be restored to the Church. But was unsuccessful through peaceful acts he declared an all out war on the Cathars that lasted until 1213.
- Then in 1215 at the Fourth Lateran Council the Pope and Bishops were resolved to stamp out all forms of heresy in Europe once and for all and the Waldensians at this point were anathematized.
- This resolve by the papacy brought some real intense persecution upon the Waldensian people to the point where they began to retreat and by 1230 they no longer were preaching publically.

Rather than going after new sheep who had wandered from the flock, they devoted themselves to looking after the converted, maintaining them in their faith in the face of outside pressure and persecution. The 13th century marks a new approach for the Poor of Lyons.¹⁰

- Then finally in the year 1487 under Pope Innocent VIII issued a bull for the extermination of the Waldensians.

¹⁰ Audisio, Gabriel. *The Waldensian Dissent: Persecution and Survival, C. 1170-C. 1570*. (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 36.

The bull from Pope Innocent VIII to the Nuncio

"Innocent, Bishop, servant of the servants of God, to our beloved son, Albert Catanee, Archdeacon of the Church of Cremona, our Nuncio and Commissary of the Apostolic See for the Seignories of our dear Son, the noble Charles, Duke of Savoy, both on this and the other side of the mountains, and Vienne in Dauphiny, and the City of Zion, comprising the diocese and neighbouring localities, greeting and apostolic benediction.

"The desires of our heart induce us, with vigilant solicitude, to look for some means of extricating from the abyss of error, those for the salvation of whom the Sovereign Creator of all things was himself pleased to endure the sufferings of human nature, and to seek their salvation by the help of Divine grace; we, to whom he has committed the charge and government of his flock, have at heart the triumph of the Catholic faith during our reign, and the extirpation of the wickedness of heresy from the midst of the faithful. Now we have been informed, greatly to our displeasure, that several sons of iniquity, inhabitants of the province of Embrun, adherents of that very pernicious and abominable sect of wicked men, called Poor of Lyons or Waldenses, which has unfortunately raised itself up for a long time in Piedmont and in the neighbouring places⁴³⁰ by virtue of the evil one, who endeavours with fatal sagacity to ensnare by artful and circuitous ways, and in the darkness of precipices the sheep consecrated to the Lord, and to lead them finally to the perdition of their souls, causing them to wander, under a certain false appearance of sanctity, rejected by their own sense, hold the following of the path of truth in great abhorrence, and observe superstitious and heretical practices, say, do, and commit many things contrary to the orthodox faith, offensive in the eyes of his Divine Majesty, and very dangerous in themselves to the salvation of souls. Our beloved Son, Blaise de Mont-Royal, of the Order of Preachers, Professor of Theology and General Inquisitor of those localities, has therefore betaken himself there to induce them to abjure the above-mentioned errors and profess the true faith in Christ, and to extirpate from among them all sorts of evil, having been previously destined for that purpose by the Master-General of the said Order, and afterwards by our beloved Son, Dominic, Cardinal Priest of the title of St. Clement, Legate of the Apostolic See in those regions, and finally by Pope Sixtus IV. of blessed memory, our immediate predecessor. These people, far from abandoning their very wicked and perverse errors, stopping their ears like the deaf adder, and adding to the evils already committed, still greater ones, have not feared to preach them publicly, and have drawn by this means to these same errors, others of Christ's faithful, to vilify excommunications, interdicts and other censures of this same Inquisitor; to throw down his house and to take away or alienate his goods, as also those of several other faithful men; to kill his servant, to make open war, to resist their temporal Lords, to ravage their properties, to drive them with

their families out of their parishes, to burn or destroy their houses, to prevent them from receiving their revenues, and to do them all possible harm; as also to commit an infinite number of other iniquities likewise execrable and abominable."¹¹

- Shortly after this letter the Pope died bringing an end to the persecution of the Waldensian People who were under the protection of Charles I, Duke of Savoy, but the damage had been done.

A Waldensian encounter with Inquisitor Moneta

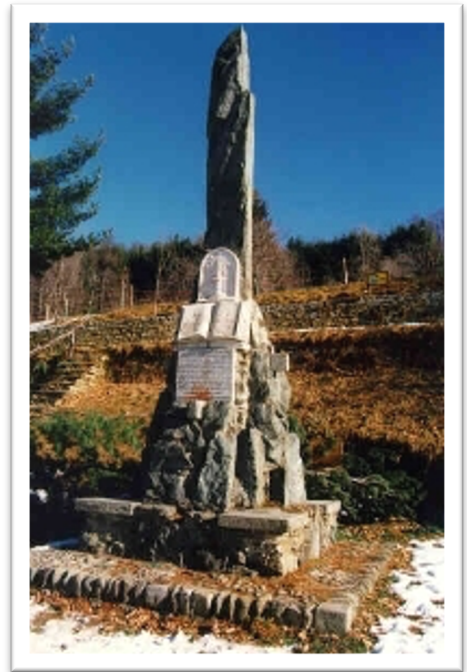
"We shall plainly see, if we inquire into their origin, that they are not the Church of God. Indeed, their existence dates but a little way back; because, according to every evidence, their origin goes back to Waldo, a citizen of Lyons, who opened the way for them some eighty years ago. Therefore, they are not the successors of the primitive Church; therefore, they are not the Church of God. Will they attempt to assert that their mode of thought is of a date prior to Waldo? If so, let them prove it by some testimony. But that is impossible. If they be descendants of Waldo let them tell us whence he himself was descended. If they say that they are begotten of God, of the Apostles, and of the Gospel, we answer: God is merciful only through his minister, according to these words, 'Whosoever sins ye remit, they are remitted unto them.' Therefore, they can have been remitted to Waldo only through the instrumentality of a minister. Who may that minister be? Have they the three ecclesiastic orders? They reply that they have. Then I ask: From whom do they hold them? Who is their bishop? If they answer: Such an one, I ask: By whom was he ordained? If they say: He was ordained by a certain person, I ask again: Who ordained this certain person? Following them up in this way, they are compelled to go back to Waldo. Then we ask: From whom did he hold orders? If they say that he took them unto himself, it is clear that they are at variance with the Apostle, who writes:— 'And no man taketh this honour unto himself, but he that was called of God, as was Aaron.' Will they say that Waldo holds orders directly from God? If they do, they will not be able to prove it by the testimony of the Scriptures. Some have claimed that Waldo was ordained by the community of his brethren, and the first to reason in this way was a certain heresiarch, belonging to the order of the 'Poor of Lombardy'—a pervert doctor called Thomas. They may say, perhaps, that their congregation and that of the Roman Church are one, both Holy and Catholic; although divided into two sections, one of which, the Roman Church is that of the wicked; and the other, the Waldensian community, that of the righteous. But this is contradicted by the fact that the existence of such a community, from the time of Sylvester to that of Waldo, cannot

¹¹ Comba, Emilio. *History of the Waldenses: From Their Origen to Reformation*. (London: Truslove & Shirley, 1889), 126.

be demonstrated. They say that the Church of God declined in the days of the blessed Sylvester. Let us see: How do they know that to be the case? It cannot be proved by any testimony, and therefore they are obliged to be silent. A wicked life does not prevent a minister from being efficacious in his office; and even though Sylvester had been sinful and wicked, are we bound to conclude that in him the Church had fallen?¹²

Their Relationship to the Reformers

- The influence of the Waldensians of the 12th and 13th century did not die with them but carried forward into the Reformation movement with Martin Luther and John Calvin. As their doctrines were developing and they themselves were cut off from the Church in 1215, they found themselves discussing whether or not to take part in the Reformation.
- In 1532 the Waldensian Church assembled at the Synod of Chanforan, consecrated their own solidarity with the Churches of the Reformation, and offered them a gift which was a pledge of funds to have the first translation of the entire Bible into the French language called the Olivetan Bible.



¹² Ibid., 7.

Their Relevance for Today

- Looking at the history of the Waldensian people reminds us that the one authority for life is God and His word being the transmission of His communication to us today. His word speak loud and if we will heed to it we to can be used by Him like those of the Waldensians.
- The Waldensians serve as a great reminder of the power of the Word of God.
- Looking back at this faithful group who took the word of God serious helps the next generation see that the Scripture is sufficient for all faith and practice and people should fear God over man.
- The Waldensians commitment to Scripture and following Christ in the midst of persecution rivals that of any group in history. They have been called the oldest evangelical church, and we may draw courage from their example.

Bibliography

Audisio, Gabriel. *The Waldensian Dissent: Persecution and Survival, C. 1170-C. 1570*. Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1999.

The Catholic Encyclopedia, 15th ed., s.v. "Waldenses." New York: The Encyclopedia Press, 1913.

Comba, Emilio. *History of the Waldenses: From Their Origen to Reformation*. London: Truslove & Shirley, 1889.

Cornish, Dr. Rick. *5 Minute Church Historian*. Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2005.

Encyclopaedia Britannica, 11th ed., s.v. "Waldenses." New York: Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1911.

Froom, Le Roy E. *The Prophetic Faith of Our Fathers*, Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1950.

Hamilton, Bernard. "Orthodoxy Wasn't Always Good Enough." *Christian History Magazine* 15, no. 1 (1996): 43-46.

Hannula, Richard M. *Trial and Triumph: Stories from Church History*. 8th ed. Moscow, Idaho: Canon Press, 1999.

Hartzler, Jonas and Daniel Kauffman. *Mennonite Church History*. Scottdale, Pennsylvania: Mennonite Book & Tract Society, 1905.

Robinson, James H. *Readings in European History*. Boston: Gin & Company, 1906.

Roland, Albert. "The Waldensians – Their Heroic Story." *Mennonite Life* 50, no. 2 (1950): 16-17.

Visconti, Joseph *The Waldensian Way to God*. Maitland, Florida: Xulon Press, 2003.