

# Waldensians

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The Waldensians were a movement founded by Peter Waldo in Lyon around 1170. Seventh-day Adventists have historically connected Waldensians to fulfillment of eschatological prophecy.

## The Medieval Period

Due to the scarcity of historical sources (mainly Catholic inquisitorial prosecution reports) there are different hypotheses as to the origin of the Waldensians.<sup>1</sup> The one that has most supporters connects the Waldensians to a rich merchant from the city of Lyon<sup>2</sup> named Valdès (Waldo in English),<sup>3</sup> who around 1170 had a life-changing spiritual experience.<sup>4</sup> In response to this experience, Valdès commissioned a vernacular translation of large portions of the Bible, abandoned his business, and gave his possessions to the poor. His life and words attracted a group of followers, “the Poor Men of Lyon.” They adopted humble attire, went around two-by-two like the apostles, and invited their fellow citizens to repentance and a consistent Christian life. They did not follow existing monastic practices but remained in the city as lay people and organized themselves as *asocietas* or *fraternitas* (association or brotherhood) in which there were also female preachers.<sup>5</sup>

Their activities gave rise to suspicion, and Guichard, archbishop of Lyon, ordered them not to preach, since they were neither monks nor clerics. They had no intention of creating an antagonist movement and a delegation of the “Poor Men” traveled with safe conduct to the Third Lateran Council of 1179 to reassure the pope of their loyalty. After a hearing in which they were ridiculed for their ignorance of theology,<sup>6</sup> they were sent back to their bishop.<sup>7</sup> In 1180 the papal legate Henry of Marcy asked Valdès to sign a declaration of adherence to the Catholic faith,<sup>8</sup> which he did. Nevertheless, they were expelled from the city in 1182 because of their refusal to stop preaching. In 1184 in the bull *Ad abolendam* the Synod of Verona included “the Humbled, or Poor of Lyons,”<sup>9</sup> in its list of banned movements.

The Waldensians, as they came to be known, were scattered in different regions: France (mainly Provence and Dauphiné), Italy (Piedmont, Lombardy, Calabria, and Apulia), Germany,<sup>10</sup> Switzerland, Austria, Bohemia, Hungary, and Poland.<sup>11</sup> In 1208 some of these groups returned to the Catholic Church as “Pauperes Catholici.”<sup>12</sup> Others came into contact with dissident groups, like those mentioned in *Ad Abolendam*. The French, with Valdès as their leader, and the Lombards were the leading groups. While the French remained similar to a monastic

group and sought reconciliation with the official Church, the Lombards became an independent community and considered the Catholic Church “the church of the wrongdoers, and the beast and the prostitute mentioned in Revelation.”<sup>13</sup> In 1218 the two groups unsuccessfully tried to reconcile at a synod they organized at Bergamo, Lombardy.

The different groups had many features in common. The members of the *fraternitas* were the *perfect ones*, who took the three traditional vows of chastity, poverty, and obedience, and were ordained after a probation period. They were divided into three orders: *maiores* or *maiores* (bishops), presbyters, and deacons. Itinerant preachers were sent on missionary endeavors two-by-two (normally a presbyter and a deacon) and brought along portions of the Bible and religious tracts, such as *La Nobla Leiczon* (*The Noble Lesson*). Though initially women were accepted as full members, their role was later limited.<sup>14</sup> The followers of the movement were not members of the *fraternitas* and frequently lived as Nicodemites.<sup>15</sup> The Waldensians held the Bible as their supreme authority and considered unscriptural, and thus rejected, purgatory, indulgences, prayers for the dead, the veneration of Mary, saints, and relics. They opposed the union of Church and State, bloodshed, and the taking of oaths. They periodically celebrated the Holy Supper with bread and wine.<sup>16</sup>

From the time of *Ad Abolendam* (confirmed at the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215), the Waldensians were persecuted, tortured, and burned alive as heretics. At the beginning of the 16th century, a large number of those residing north of the Alps had been exterminated.<sup>17</sup>

## The Reformation

In the 1520s the reformer Guillaume Farel (1489-1565) preached to the Waldensians who lived in the regions close to the Alps. In 1530 the Waldensian Synod of Mérindol (Provence) sent the *barba* (“uncle” in the vernacular, but the title for Waldensian pastors) Morel and Masson to visit the Reformers and obtain more systematic information on their faith. They visited Farel in Neuchâtel, Haller in Bern, Oecolampadius in Basel, and Bucer in Strasburg. On his way back, Masson was arrested in Dijon and burned alive, though Morel returned and was able to give his report. Beginning September 12, 1532, the Waldensians held a general synod at Chanforan (Piedmont). The *barba* of the Italian *diaspora* and Farel and Antoine Saulnier were also in attendance at the synod. The Waldensians deliberated on whether to join the Reformation, celebrate public worship, and have trained parochial pastors (all of the same rank and not itinerant preachers, taught in the *barba* schools and divided into different ranks). They also renounced Nicodemism, thus rejecting participation in the Catholic sacraments. They accepted the doctrine of predestination, the swearing of oaths, the reformed form of the sacraments (i.e. baptism and Holy Supper), and rejected auricular confession, which they had previously practiced.<sup>18</sup> The synod also deliberated on whether to have a French translation of the Bible, subsequently carried out by Robert Olivetan and published in Neuchâtel in 1535.

The Bohemian Brothers sent a letter of rebuke to the Waldensians, considering their new faith a betrayal of their communal understanding of biblical truths.<sup>19</sup> Nonetheless, in 1533 the Synod of Prali (Piedmont) confirmed the decision taken the year before.

Now that the Waldensians were more visible, persecution broke out again. In 1545 Mérindol and around 20 Waldensian villages of Provence were destroyed.<sup>20</sup> In 1560 the Inquisition and the viceroy troops destroyed the Waldensian villages of Calabria and massacred their inhabitants.<sup>21</sup>

In Piedmont, after the Treaty of Cateau-Cambrésis of 1559, reinstated Prince Emanuele Filiberto of Savoy began the destruction of all Reformed congregations in the country, including the Waldensians. They responded with a Pact of Union (1561) and began to engage in guerrilla warfare. This led to the Peace of Cavour of June 5, 1561: the Waldensians would be tolerated as long as they remained in the mountains, avoiding the plains.<sup>22</sup>

In 1655 a Savoian army destroyed the Pellice Valley, killing all the Waldensians it was able to find, and then it moved to the nearby valleys to continue the massacre. The Waldensians resisted and sent a request for help to the Protestant countries, who protested against this attack. Prominent in this protest was Cromwell, Lord Protector of the Commonwealth, who sent a threatening letter to the Duke of Savoy and an ambassador to Turin. Finally, the Duke decided to “forgive” his Waldensians subjects by issuing the *Patenti di grazia* (Letters of grace) on August 18, 1655.<sup>23</sup>

In 1686 the Waldensians of Piedmont were attacked again and forced to seek refuge in Switzerland, being able to reenter only in 1689.<sup>24</sup> In 1698-99 the French Waldensians were forced to leave their villages and to seek refuge in Germany.<sup>25</sup>

## The Emancipation and the Awakening

During the French Revolutionary wars, Piedmont ceased to be under the Savoy dynasty rule and was included as a sister republic of the French Republic. Therefore, the Waldensians were free to enjoy religious freedom according to the *Declaration of the Rights of the Man and the Citizen* of 1789. At the same time, their church was organized and financed according to the rules established for French Protestantism and their internal rules and organs (Synod, Table) were abolished.<sup>26</sup> When the Savoy dynasty was reestablished in 1815, once again the Waldensians were put under the restrictive laws of the past but could recreate their ecclesiastic institutions.<sup>27</sup>

In the early decades of the 1800s, some Protestant travelers from England, the Netherlands, and Prussia, attracted by the story of resistance of the Waldensians, visited the Waldensian Valleys. They were moved by the poverty of the inhabitants and so raised funds for the creation of hospitals and schools. Two of these visitors are particularly important. Felix Neff, a revivalist Protestant missionary from Geneva, visited the Waldensians Valleys in 1825. He introduced house meetings centered on prayer and Bible study, and a revival movement was begun.

<sup>28</sup> Charles Beckwith, an English General, moved to the Waldensians Valleys in 1827. He encouraged the rebirth of

the Waldensian people by promoting missionary and educational reform. He helped build countless schools in the small villages and favored the education of young pastors and teachers in Swiss universities.<sup>29</sup> His famous charge to the Waldensians was: "From now on you are missionaries or you are nothing."<sup>30</sup>

In the period of political upheavals of 1848, the Waldensians sent a petition to King Carlo Alberto of Savoy, who issued the *Lettere Patenti* of February 17, 1848. This was a decree which granted full citizens' rights, but not full religious freedom. Soon thereafter religious limitations were relaxed and in 1853 the Waldensians built their temple (a church building) in the center of Turin, the capital of Piedmont.<sup>31</sup> In 1855 they opened their Theology School at Torre Pellice. Subsequently this school was transferred to Florence (1860-1921) and finally to Rome (1922 to today). In the 1850s, because of emigration, the Waldensians began a Uruguayan-Argentinian branch.<sup>32</sup>

From the period of the unification of Italy (1861-1870) onward, the Waldensians and other Evangelical denominations enjoyed religious freedom. Thus, they evangelized and opened new churches throughout Italy.<sup>33</sup> During Fascism (1922-1945), the Waldensians, as many other non-Catholic denominations, experienced repression.<sup>34</sup>

Since 1948 the Waldensians have been active in the ecumenical movement: in 1967 they participated in the constitution of the Federation of the Evangelical Churches in Italy; in 1975 the Evangelical Waldensian Church signed an "integration pact" with the Italian Methodist Church.<sup>35</sup> In 1984 the Waldensian Evangelical Church was the first denomination to sign an agreement with the Italian state, according to Article 8 of the Constitution.

## Waldensians and Adventists

Like most of the Protestants of that period, Millerites were interested in the Waldensians.<sup>36</sup> This was true also for Sabbatarian Adventists.<sup>37</sup> Since 1850 they considered the Waldensians to be among the Sabbath-keepers during the Middle Ages;<sup>38</sup> since 1857 they connected them to the fulfilment of eschatological prophecies.<sup>39</sup> In his *History of the Sabbath and the First Day of the Week*, John N. Andrews collected many sources on Waldensians as Sabbath-keepers.<sup>40</sup>

For this reason, the actions of Michael B. Czechowski, the first non-official Sabbatarian Adventist missionary to Europe, come as no surprise. In 1864, in his first missionary attempt, Czechowski went to Torre Pellice in the Waldensian Valleys and there organized a group of believers.<sup>41</sup> In 1877 John N. Andrews, the first official Seventh-day Adventist missionary to Europe, visited the Waldensian Valleys.<sup>42</sup> In 1884-1885 Daniel T. Bourdeau, relieved a few months later by his brother Augustin, revived interest in the Adventist message in Torre Pellice and established a church there. In 1885-1887, during her time in Europe, on three separate occasions Ellen G. White visited the Waldensians Valleys and conducted evangelistic work.<sup>43</sup>

The first mention of the Waldensians in Ellen G. White's writings can be found in *Spiritual Gifts* (1864), where they are commended because they "conscientiously studied the word of God and lived up to the light which shone

upon them," resisting harsh persecutions, because they "prized the love and favor of God far higher than earthly ease, or worldly riches."<sup>44</sup> In *The Spirit of Prophecy* (1884)<sup>45</sup> the history of the Waldensians was enlarged, including a reference to some "Waldenses who denied the supremacy of Rome, who rejected image worship as idolatry, and who kept the true Sabbath."<sup>46</sup>

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## NOTES

1. See W. F. Adeney, "Waldenses," in *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, 12 vols., ed. J. Hastings, (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1967), 12:663-672.  
Among Seventh-day Adventist scholars, L. E. Froom devoted many pages to the origin and history of the Waldensians in *The Prophetic Faith of Our Fathers*, 4 vols. (Washington D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1950), 1:826-886.
2. C. Papini, *Valdo di Lione e i "poveri nello spirito."* *I primi secoli del movimento valdese (1170-1270)* (Torino: Claudiana, 2001); J. Gonnet and A. Molnar, *Les vaudois au moyen âge* (Torino: Claudiana, 1974); A. Molnar, *Storia dei Valdesi/1, Dalle origini all'adesione alla Riforma* (Torino: Claudiana, 1974); G. Audisio, *The Waldensian Dissent: Persecution and Survival, c. 1170-c. 1570* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).
3. This was probably the French form of the name Valdesius, or Valdius, that appears in the first sources. See G. Tourn, *I valdesi. La singolare vicenda di un popolo-chiesa (1170-1999)* (Torino: Claudiana, 1999), 12-13.
4. There are different narratives about the conversion of Valdès. See *I Valdesi*, 12-13.
5. *I valdesi*, 14-16; "Waldenses," 68.
6. See Walther Map, *De nugis curialium*, *Anecdota Oxoniensia*, ed. M. R. James, Medieval and Modern Series XVI (Oxford: 1914), quoted in G. Gonnet, *Enchiridion Fontium Valdensium/1. Dalle origini alla conferenza di Bergamo* (Torre Pellice: Claudiana, 1958), 122 ss.
7. *I valdesi*, 17.
8. "Professione di fede di Valdès," Biblioteca Nazionale di Madrid, ms. 114, ed. A. Dondaine, *Archivium Fratrum Praedicatorum*, XVI (1946), quoted in *Enchiridion Fontium Valdensium/1*, 32 ss.
9. *Ad abolendam*, November 4, 1184, accessed June 2018, <http://professor-moriarty.com/info/files/resources/verona1184.txt>.
10. R. E. Lerner, "A Case of Religious Counter-Culture. The German Waldensians," *The American Scholar*, Spring 1986, 234-247.
11. V. Vinay, "Valdesi," in *Enciclopedia delle Religioni*, 6 vols. (Firenze: Vallecchi, 1976), 6:68-76; *Storia dei Valdesi/1*, 75-119.
12. "Valdesi," 69.

13. Sacconi (about 1250), quoted in *Ibid.*, 69.
14. "Valdesi," 70.
15. *Ibid.*, 70-71.
16. *Ibid.*, 71. "Nicodemites" is a term used by John Calvin in his *Excuse à messieurs les Nicodemites* (1544), where he refers to reformed believers living in a Roman Catholic country setting not ready to openly profess their faith, as Nicodemus, who initially went to Jesus by night (John 3:1-2). See W. de Greef, *The Writings of John Calvin: An Introductory Guide* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 122, 123.
17. *Ibid.*, 72; G. Audisio, *Preachers by Night: The Waldensian Barbes (15<sup>th</sup>-16<sup>th</sup> Centuries)* (Leiden: Brill, 2007). In the final decades of the 15th century, persecution led the German Waldensians to seek refuge in Bohemia and Moravia, where they met up with the Bohemian Brothers and later merged with them.
18. *Ibid.*, 72-73.
19. *Storia dei Valdesi/1*, 205-235.
20. A. Armand Hugon, *Storia dei Valdesi/2. Dal sinodo di Chanforan all'Emancipazione* (Torino: Claudiana, 1974), 33-50.
21. *Valdismo e Valdesi di Calabria* (n.p.: Edizioni Brueghel, 1988).
22. *Storia dei valdesi/2*, 21-32.
23. *Ibid.*, 73-102.
24. *Ibid.*, 129-185.
25. *Ibid.*, 207-224.
26. *Ibid.*, 257-266; *I Valdesi*, 205.
27. *Storia dei Valdesi/2*, 267-276.
28. *Ibid.*, 277-283.
29. *Ibid.*, 277-283; *I valdesi*, 214-218.
30. Letter of Charles Beckwith to Pastor Lantaret, January 4, 1848, quoted in *I Valdesi*, 219-220.
31. *Ibid.*, 226.



32. V. Vinay, *Storia dei Valdesi/3. Dal movimento evangelico italiano al movimento ecumenico (1848-1978)*, (Torino: Claudiana, 1980), 205-221.
33. Ibid., 11-179.
34. G. Rochat, *Regime fascista e chiese evangeliche* (Torino: Claudiana, 1990); J.P. Viallet, *La Chiesa Valdese di fronte allo Stato fascista* (Torino: Claudiana, 1985).
35. *Storia dei Valdesi/3*, 421-468.
36. For instance, "Illustration of Prophecy. Literal Interpretation. Criticism on Rev. XI. 8.—True Principles of Bible Interpretation—By a Bible Reader," *Signs of the Times of the Second Coming of Christ*, October 1, 1840, 98; I.P. Labagh, "The Two Witnesses," *Signs of the Times of the Second Coming of Christ*, February 1, 1841, 162-164; February 15, 1841, 171-172; March 1, 1841, 178.
37. For instance, both the Review and Herald and the Pacific Press, and Hartland Publications, run by an independent ministry, in the recent decades reprinted the book of J. A. Wylie, *History of the Waldenses* (London: Cassel & Company, 1860).
38. John N. Andrews, "History of the Sabbath. The Sabbath from the Time of Constantin to the Reformation," *ARH*, December 1850, 17-20. Andrews mainly relies on R. Robinson, *History of Baptism* (Boston, MS: Lincoln & Edmands, 1817), who says that "'they were called Sabbati and Sabbatati; so named from the Hebrew word Sabbath, because they kept the Saturday for the Lord's day.' They were also called Insabbatati, because they rejected all the festivals, or Sabbaths, in the low Latin sense of the word." According to many contemporary scholars, these names are connected with their habit to wear wooden sabots. See *I Valdesi*, 16; A. L. Hoose, "The *Sabatati*: The Significance of Early Waldensians Shoes, c. 1184-c. 1300," *Speculum*, April 2016, 356-373; "Valdesi", 70; "Waldenses," 666. *Contra* P. G. Damsteegt, "Decoding Ancient Waldensian Name: New Discoveries," *Andrews University Seminary Studies*, Autumn 2016, 237-258.
39. John N. Loughborough, "A Letter to a Friend, On the Seven Churches," *ARH*, March 19, 1857, 153-155; March 26, 1857, 161-163.
40. John N. Andrews, *The History of the Sabbath and the First Day of the Week* (Battle Creek, MI: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1873), 398-417, 467-469. In the 1859 edition of the book the Waldenses were not mentioned.
41. See G. De Meo, "*Granel di sale.*" *Un secolo di storia della Chiesa Cristiana Avventista del 7° giorno in Italia, 1864-1964* (Torino: Claudiana, 1980), 60-71.
42. See *Historical Sketches of the Foreign Missions of the Seventh-day Adventists* (Basle: Imprimerie Polyglotte, 1886), 31.
43. Ibid., 226-249; D.A. Delafield, *Ellen G. White in Europe 1885-1887* (Washington D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1975).
44. Ellen G. White, *Spiritual Gifts*, 4 vols. (Battle Creek, MI: Seventh-day Adventist Publishing Association, 1864), 4b:117.
45. Ellen G. White, *The Spirit of Prophecy*, 4 vols. (Battle Creek, MI: Seventh-day Adventist Publishing Association, 1864).

46. *The Spirit of Prophecy*, 4:66. While in Europe, Ellen White began revising and enlarging the fourth volume, including the chapter on the Waldensians, which was published as *The Great Controversy Between Christ and Satan* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1888). That some Waldensians were Sabbath-keepers has never been mentioned by the Waldensians themselves nor by the most accredited academics, and in recent decades it has been doubted by some Seventh-day Adventists scholars who believe that Ellen White “referred to historical facts now thought to be inaccurate” (Denis Fortin, “*Great Controversy Between Christ and Satan, The*,” in *The Ellen G. White Encyclopedia*, eds. Denis Fortin and Jerry Moon, (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 2013), 849. See Daniel Augsburg, “The Sabbath and Lord’s Day During the Middle Ages,” in *The Sabbath in Scripture and History*, ed. Kenneth A. Strand (Washington D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1982), 207-209; R.W. Coffen, “‘Thy Word is a light unto my feet’ Part 2,” *Ministry*, February 2000, 20-23; Samuel Bacchiocchi, “A Reply To Criticism: Part I The Use of E. G. White’s Writings in Interpreting Scripture,” *Endtime Issues*, August 1, 2002, accessed July 2018, [http://www.biblicalpherspectives.com/endtimeissues/eti\\_87.html](http://www.biblicalpherspectives.com/endtimeissues/eti_87.html). *Contra* J. Zurcher, “A Vindication of Ellen White as Historian,” *Spectrum*, August 1985, 21-31; J. Voerman, “Errors in Inspired Writings Part 1—How Ancient Were the Waldenses?” *Adventist Affirm*, Spring 2001, 25-35; P.G. Damsteegt, “Were the Waldensians Sabbath keepers?” *Adventist World*, September 2017, 14-15.

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