

Outline of Waldensian History

NOTE: We must discard the "romantic" ideas handed down about Waldensian history. Waldensian historians themselves no longer accept such ideas as the apostolic tradition, no immorality among the people, etc. Early this century, Comba and Gay studied original documents and found that they did **not** support such notions, often being misquoted.

I. Setting

- A. Saracen pirates invaded southeastern France about 916 A.D., launching raids on the trade routes through the Alps about 921. By 936 they had advanced into what is now northeastern Switzerland. Ten raids in the Alps are recorded between 921-942, and there were undoubtedly others, not recorded. The political scene was complicated (Carolingian succession wars), and Burgundians who had moved in to control Provence made a treaty with the Saracens to keep rivals from interfering. The Saracens finally turned against these "allies" in the mid-to-late 920s. By about 961, the Saracens had teamed with "brigands," cruel robbers and murderers called "marrons." Finally in 972 Saracen power was destroyed by the new counts of Provence. (J-P. Poly, *La Provence et la societe feodale*, 1976.)
- B. Saracen control of the passes and surrounding area for over 50 years clearly establishes that **all** prior inhabitants of the alpine valleys fled or were destroyed. Thus, there could be no "followers of Bishop Claude of Turin" who continued apostolic succession. (This myth was established much later, when the Inquisition raised the question of **authority**: The Pope claimed to be the successor of Peter; what authority did the Waldensians have?)

II. Beginnings

- A. The Waldensian movement in **no** way predates Valdesius (Valdes, usually Waldo in English; died probably abt. 1217 in Bohemia). And his name wasn't "Peter," a name **never** used for him until 1573! (Again, under pressure about authority.)
 - 1. Valdesius undoubtedly gained some adherents from relatives or friends of earlier dissidents who followed Arnold of Brescia and Peter of Bruys, both of which movements had been ruthlessly crushed.
 - 2. Surviving statements by Valdesius himself show that he **did not** intend to form a new church; rather, like Luther much later, he accepted Catholic rites and worship, merely wanting to reform the church **from within**. In 1179, he went to Rome for the Third Lateran Council. He didn't leave the Catholic church, but was excommunicated (1184). Recent research (Audisio, *Les Vaudois du Luberon*) shows that, centuries later, the Waldensians still availed themselves of regular Catholic rites.

3. The first mention of Waldensians in the Alpine valleys is in 1210, when Otto IV issued an edict against Waldensians in the diocese of Turin.

B. Changes

1. Because of persecution, the Waldensians voted in 1532 to join the Reformation ("safety in numbers"). The heaviest influence was from Geneva; thus, the Waldensian church adopted some Calvinistic ideas. The reformers insisted that they change certain ideas: They gave up the use of itinerant "barbas," who had been unmarried, and moved to the Reformed notion of married clergy assigned to one locality. And they quit meeting in secret, began building temples (the first was completed in 1555), and became more overt in missionary work. This substantially increased their numbers (several Alpine valleys were "entirely converted"), but also substantially increased persecution. Thus, Waldensianism changed **fundamentally** in the period after 1532; it maintained the name, but was in many important respects different.
2. In 1979, the Waldensian Church joined with the Methodist Church.

C. The people

1. Linguistic analysis of early documents clearly suggests that the early Waldensians spoke Provençal, meaning they came from southeastern France. (For centuries, inhabitants of southeastern France considered themselves Provençal, not French.)
2. Missionary work added other nationalities. But, until the 1532 vote to join the Reformation, the Waldensian emphasis was on establishing local enclaves—they expected to convert the world for the Second Coming. However, as persecution periodically raged, there were some who fled to the Waldensian heartland; some of this is documented, and there was undoubtedly more than is shown by surviving documents.
3. The indigenous people (those who settled after the Saracen threat was safely past) would not have considered themselves either "French" or "Italian." They would have considered themselves Provençal. Over time, they would have been joined by refugees and converts from France, Italy (some clearly Italian surnames surface), and other localities; some came from occupying armies (French, Spanish). But Waldensian identity was essentially religious (Waldensian) rather than political.

Recommended reading: Giorgio Tourn. *You Are My Witnesses: The Waldensians across 800 Years* (1989). Friendship Press, P.O. Box 37844, Cincinnati OH 45222; (513) 948-8733; ISBN 88-7016-089-0.