

# The Waldensians and the Seventh-day Sabbath

by Darrell W. Conder

In January 1996 Mr. Joseph Tkach Jr., the current Pastor General of the Worldwide Church of God (WCG), was a guest on *The Bible Answer Man* program that airs across the United States. This program is sponsored by the Christian Research Institute (CRI), which was founded by the late Walter Martin.

It should be noted here that Martin's purpose for organizing CRI was simply to brutally attack any religious organization that he considered "unorthodox." To this end he wrote a book in the 1960's entitled *The Kingdom of the Cults*.<sup>1</sup> The Worldwide Church of God figured prominently in this work and Martin's caustic attacks specifically singled out the then leader of the WCG, Herbert W. Armstrong.

Why Mr. Tkach Jr. was a guest on a program that had been from its founding an avowed enemy of the WCG is simply because under the direction of his late father, Joseph Tkach Sr., the WCG leadership had dismantled most of the once strongly held doctrines that separated them from "mainstream" Christianity.<sup>2</sup>

Another reason Mr. Tkach Jr. was on this program can be seen in the public boast by the leadership of the Christian Research Institute, now under the direction of Walter Martin's hand-picked successor, Hank Hanegraff. Hanegraff makes no secret of CRI's many closed-door meetings with the current leadership of the WCG and the part they played in the destruction of "Armstrongism," i.e., the "doctrines" taught and defended for over fifty years by Herbert W. Armstrong. Chief among these destroyed beliefs was the eternal seventh-day Sabbath commanded by Almighty God.<sup>3</sup> Joseph

Tkach Jr. was on *The Bible Answer Man* as a trophy of CRI!

Although the attack on the Sabbath had been an ongoing process within the post-Armstrong leadership of the WCG, the January interview with Pastor General Joseph Tkach Jr. raised immediate controversy because of the assertion that the WCG and Mr. Armstrong had taught the Sabbath using faulty history combined with faulty Scriptural reasoning.

The object of Tkach's historical scorn was the past WCG assertion that the famous Waldensians of the Middle Ages were seventh-day Sabbath-keepers. This, Mr. Tkach declared, simply was not true. Of course even assuming he is correct, Mr. Tkach failed to explain why he rejects and teaches others to reject the eternal command of our Creator regarding the Holy Sabbath!

Those who have conducted even the most superficial research on the Sabbath will know that the Sunday-keeping advocates have nothing to stand on except Catholic tradition.<sup>4</sup> This being the case, the defenders of the Sunday apostasy have tried over the years to find clever ways around the truth, and surely to the delight of his Sunday-keeping host, Mr. Tkach deliberately chose a technicality to attack the Sabbath command.

But we shall skip over the biblical evidence of the Sabbath, as conveniently as did Mr. Tkach, and deal directly with history.

To answer the charge that the Waldensians didn't keep the seventh-day Sabbath, we must, above all else, be willing to accept the truth no matter how much it may go against the grain of what we have believed in the past. And the truth in this matter is that Mr. Tkach, in a technical sense, is mostly correct. This statement, however, will need some clarification because it isn't a simple "yes or no" situation. In fact, the whole Waldensian question was presented by Mr. Tkach in a completely misleading way - which wasn't surprising when we consider that he and the WCG leadership have been desperately looking for straws to hold up their abandonment of the truth.

<sup>4</sup>See Cardinal Gibbons' *Faith of Our Fathers*, and the reprint of *The Catholic Mirror* articles offered by Commonwealth Publishing.

<sup>1</sup>The book is still in print!

<sup>2</sup>Joseph Tkach Sr. succeeded Mr. Armstrong (who died in January 1986) as Pastor General. His son, Joseph Tkach Jr., succeeded his father who died in 1995.

<sup>3</sup>Hanegraff writes: "Since their founder's demise, the leadership of the 92,000-member denomination has abandoned virtually every heretical doctrinal distinctive of 'Armstrongism' and embraced such core Christian tenets as the Trinity . . ." *Christian Research Newsletter*, Vol. 9, Issue 1, Winter/Spring 1996, p. 13.

### *The Historical Sabbath-keeping Christians*

To understand the history of the Waldensians and why the WCG had in the past claimed for them a relation to the true Sabbath, we need to go back to the first century Christian Church. Many reputable ecclesiastical historians will admit that the Christian Church during this time was little more than an extension of what they term Judaism. The only difference being that the primitive Christians, who were mostly Jewish and attended Sabbath worship in the local synagogue, believed that Jesus was the Messiah. This meant that the Sabbath, Holy Days, unclean meats, and all the laws of God were strictly upheld in the first century Church.

This situation, however, began to gradually change as more Gentile converts started to embrace Christianity. Although the early Gentile converts followed the Christian Jews in the correct observance of the Sabbath and the Holy Days, as any good ecclesiastical history will admit, tremendous corruption was soon to overwhelm these truths. In fact, corruption came almost immediately when Simon Magus and his Roman Catholic Church infiltrated Christianity and began to wage war on God Himself.

Dr. Augustus Neander, the famous church historian, writes: "Opposition to Judaism introduced the particular festival of Sunday very early, indeed, into the place of the Sabbath . . . The festival of Sunday, like all other festivals, was always only a human ordinance, and it was far from the intentions of the apostles to establish a divine command in this respect, far from them, and from the early apostolic church to transfer the laws of the Sabbath to Sunday."<sup>5</sup> Even the "celebrated" Protestant, John Calvin, among many others, admitted that, "The old fathers put in the place of the Sabbath the day which we call Sunday. King Charles I declares that the celebration of the feast of Easter was instituted by the same authority that changed the Sabbath into the Lord's day, or Sunday; for it will not be found in Scripture where Saturday is discharged to be kept, or turned into Sunday. Therefore, my opinion is, that those who will not keep this feast [Easter] may as well return to the observation of Saturday, and refuse the weekly Sunday, since it was the Church's authority that changed the one and instituted the other."<sup>6</sup>

*The Universal Jewish Encyclopedia*, in affirming the vast number of Christians observing what the world now calls "Jewish" religious customs,

<sup>5</sup>Neander, *Neander's church History*, Rose's translation, p. 186, as quoted in *Bible Readings*, p. 443.

<sup>6</sup>Davis, *The General History of the Sabbatarian Churches*, p. 73.

says, "A substantial proportion, perhaps the majority, of early Christians continued to observe the Biblical Sabbath until they were definitely released from all obligation in this regard by the Council of Laodicea."<sup>7</sup>

A few centuries after the deaths of the original Christians, the Roman Empire adopted Simon Magus' Catholicism as its official religion. At that time the war on God's truth seemed to triumph. But, for anyone who has even a slight understanding of prophecy - which clearly the current leadership of the WCG and other so-called orthodox Christian Churches do not - there was no triumph. Satan simply succeeded in driving the Sabbath from the general view of history! Interestingly enough, and as an aside, this fact ties into the prophecy of the Lost Ten Tribes of Israel, who, as Scripture clearly shows, will be caught up in Sunday-keeping Baalism and Sabbath-breaking in the end time.

But all of this is way over the head of Mr. Tkach, who, in addition to being a declared enemy of God's Holy Sabbath, has repeatedly stated that he, and the ministry of the WCG, no longer believes in the Anglo-Saxon identity of the House of Israel.

Although there are few if any historical accounts of the remnant Sabbath-keeping Christian Church in early Christian history, they did continue as a body. We mainly know of their existence because of the negative attention they received from the Catholic Church.

For centuries laws would come out of Rome trying to force certain Christians to accept Sunday and to stop "Judaizing" by observing the Sabbath. The fact that such laws were a necessity, and the term "Judaizing" was used in conjunction with them, tells us at once that the seventh-day Sabbath was still being observed by some Christians within the confines of the Roman Empire. Another thing it tells us is that there were sufficient numbers of these Christians to cause concern at the highest levels of both church and state.

### *Constantine the Great*

The most famous of all Sunday promoters and Sabbath persecutors was the Emperor Constantine (A.D. 274-337) His hatred of the Jews and their Sabbath and Holy Days is infamous. Additionally, his devotion to the pagan Sun deity Mithra and the day of the venerable Sun left little doubt as to the future of Christian Sabbath-keeping within the "Holy" Roman Empire. One need only go to a history of Constantine's life to read of the anti-Sabbath, pro-Sunday legislation passed by his authority.

The Council of Laodicea in A.D. 364 made this pronouncement: "**Christians SHALL NOT**

<sup>7</sup>Vol. 9, p. 298.

**JUDAIZE and be IDLE ON SATURDAY, but shall work on that day; but the Lord's day they shall especially honor.**<sup>8</sup> However, despite the formidable opposition of the empire and widespread persecution, the seventh day continued to be kept holy by a small, but significant number of people. One man, bishop Chrysostom, living in the early fifth century in Asia Minor, complained that Catholics were beginning to keep the Sabbath and the Feast of Tabernacles, the Feast of Trumpets, and the Feast of Great Expiation.<sup>9</sup>

That the true Sabbath was still "a thorn in the flesh" of Catholicism in the seventh century can be seen by the fact that it received notice from no less a personage than Pope Gregory the Great. In 603 this pope attacked the Sabbath of God by declaring that when the anti-Christ came "he would be keeping Saturday as the Sabbath."<sup>10</sup>

Gregory's attacks, however, did little to scare off the adherents of God's sacred truth, for in the next century we meet with another notice by the Catholic Church of Sabbath-keeping. In 791 the church lodged this complaint against the city of Friaul in Northern Italy: "Further, when speaking of that Sabbath which the Jews observe, the last day of the week, which also all peasants observe."<sup>11</sup> An interesting notice considering that many historians consider Friaul as a "nest" of "Waldensian" heretics!

With the brief outline above, a good deal of history has necessarily been skipped over. But it takes us from the first century Sabbath-keeping Christian Church into a time and place in which the Waldensians, so-called, were flourishing: and it is these people who are the subject of this paper.

### **The Waldensians**

The historical title Waldensian has become, over the centuries, little more than a generic term that has caused considerable misinformation and confusion. Actually, the word Waldensian now has

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<sup>8</sup>Charles Joseph Hefele, *A History of the councils of the Church*, Volume II, p. 316, citing Canon 29, and Lyman Coleman, *Ancient Christianity Exemplified*, chap. 26, sec. 2, cited in *Bible Readings*, p. 461. See also Conder, *Mystery Babylon the Great*, p. 117.

<sup>9</sup>Bingham, *Antiquities Of The Christian Church*, bk XVI, ch vi.

<sup>10</sup>*Epistles of Gregory I*, b. 13, epistle I, cited in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*.

<sup>11</sup>Mansi, *Sacrorum Conciliorum Nova et Amplessima Collectio*, vol. 13, p. 852, quoted from Wilkinson, *Truth Triumphant*, p. 259.

no more meaning than Protestant.<sup>12</sup> For an example, all seventh-day Sabbatarian Churches are classified by the Catholic Church as Protestant although most of these Churches themselves reject the label: but Catholicism makes absolutely no distinction between Sunday-keeping and seventh-day observing churches! This, simply stated, amply describes the word Waldensian.

Interestingly, history reveals that the people in question rarely called themselves Waldensians. The reason for this was clear: they were not all Waldensians! Here are some names, or labels, applied by historians to the "heretics" of Catholicism: Pasaginians, Albigenses, Waldenses, Josephists, Cathari, Arnoldists, Henricians, Paulicians, Bogomils, Insabbatati, Berengarians, Subalpini, Patarines, Petrobrusians, and Vallenses.<sup>13</sup>

With such an array one can understand why that even the origin of the term Waldensian is disputed. Most authorities agree, however, that it originated from the Italian word Valdesi, or French Vaudois (Latin Vallis), which meant "valleys" and denoted the regions in which the Waldensians and many of the aforementioned people lived.

Whether this is the origin or not, one fact is clear in Waldensian history, and that is a man by the name of Peter Waldo seems to be synonymous with the people. In fact, the Catholic Church, in order to ignore their ancient history, put forward that the Waldensians - religion, name and all - originated with Peter Waldo: a claim that all reputable historians ignore.

Seventh-day Adventist historian LeRoy Froom writes: "Thus in France the followers of Waldo were no older than he, but the stock of which they were a continuation reaches back to earlier times." "Doubtless some of the older local names persisted, and that is why their contemporaries used different names in describing them. Nevertheless, the name Waldensians has been rather broadly used by some writers to designate widely separated groups. Historians of a century or so ago were inclined to extend the coverage - sometimes correctly, sometimes not - much farther than more modern writers. Often it is difficult to know whether an apparently farfetched identification is the result of an error, a linguistic corruption of names, a local popular usage, a term of ridicule applied by enemies, or even an isolated case of genuine contact between minor groups of which source evidence is now lost." "We cannot say, for example, that in a given place there were not some cases of Waldenses and

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<sup>12</sup>Davis, *A General History of the Sabbatarian Churches*, p. 63.

<sup>13</sup>Davis, *op. cit.*, pp. 69-70. See also, Wilkinson, *Truth Triumphant*, pp. 217-221.

Albigenses mingling or worshipping together, and that sometimes Cathari were not absorbed into the Waldensian movement."<sup>14</sup> The obvious question here is just who was Peter Waldo?

Peter Waldo was a rich merchant of Lyons, France, who, in 1170, had something of a religious experience. He founded a movement, some say a religious order, that came to be known as the Poor Men of Lyons which soon infiltrated and overshadowed some of the groups mentioned above. The reason that Waldo and his "Poor Men" (or ministers) came to overshadow the groups just mentioned is because they received recognition from the Catholic Church.<sup>15</sup> It was this notoriety that not only cemented Waldo to the Waldensian history as a whole, but has caused him to become synonymous with the name.

As to Waldo himself, one point should be made clear: there is no evidence that Peter Waldo ever accepted or worshipped on the seventh-day Sabbath. From the very beginning of his ministry Waldo stayed within the framework of Catholicism, which led, as noted above, to the movement being tolerated by the Catholic Church. In fact, the Poor Men of Lyons were so well known within Catholicism that Pope Alexander III approved their doctrine of poverty and gave his consent, with restrictions, for their preaching. It was only later when Waldo went against some of these restrictions and began to denounce certain Catholic customs that he was excommunicated.<sup>16</sup>

The doctrinal state of the Waldensians as a whole - specifically regarding the Sabbath question - might be clarified by noting that when they were finally condemned by the Catholic Church, the Inquisitor Sacconi (Sacco) levied many charges against them. The heresies were outlined against both the Waldensians of the Alps and those of Lombardy, but mention absolutely nothing about the Sabbath!<sup>17</sup> Despite this, the fact remains that there were during this time seventh-day Sabbath-keepers in many parts of Europe. What's more, they were to be partly found in the aforementioned groups. It is even possible that some of these groups, as a whole, and at specific times, may have been true Sabbatarians. LeRoy Froom writes of the Waldensians:

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<sup>14</sup>Froom, *The Prophetic Faith of Our Fathers*, Vol. I, pp. 834-835.

<sup>15</sup>See *The Encyclopedia Britannica*, 14th ed., article "Waldensians." Some historians claim that Peter of Lyons took the surname Waldo when he began to live and preach among the Waldensians.

<sup>16</sup>In 1184 by Pope Lucius III.

<sup>17</sup>*The Encyclopedia Britannica*, 11th ed. Vol. 28, p. 256.

"On the other hand, most of them kept Sunday because they regarded it as based on the fourth commandment. And there were those classed as Waldenses in the broader sense - the Passagii and some among the 'Waldensian Brethren,' or Picards, of Bohemia - *who took that commandment quite literally and observed the seventh day of the week.*"<sup>18</sup>

In defense of Peter Waldo, it can be said that despite a lack of understanding his efforts did have an impact on the truth of God. Perhaps we can understand Waldo's part in the furtherance of the Sabbath by looking at William Miller.

Many Sabbath-keepers are familiar with the famous "Millerites" of the last century. "Millerism," called by some the Advent movement, began with a Protestant minister, William Miller, who had worked out the date of 1844 as the return of Jesus. His movement attracted thousands of adherents, all of whom were Sunday-keeping people. After Jesus failed to return in 1844, the predictable occurred, but, in the aftermath, was born the Seventh-day Adventist Church, the Church of God (Seventh-day)<sup>19</sup>, the Worldwide Church of God, and a large number of related churches. Yet William Miller never accepted the seventh-day Sabbath! He was a Sunday-keeper to the end of his life - even though he set in motion a movement that saw the birth of the above named Sabbatarian Churches.

This situation can be somewhat applied to Peter Waldo. Waldo's twelfth century effort led to a brief period in history when Sabbath-keeping came into the daylight. For the first time in centuries those who kept the true Sabbath could practice their religion in the open. We learn, thanks to the efforts of Peter Waldo and the Poor Men of Lyons, that true Sabbatarians were still in existence and had long been underground: they had been hiding in fear of their lives so that they could obey the eternal command of God!

We should not however, forget (as does the Catholic Church) the Pasaginians, Albigenses, Josephists, Arnoldists, Henricians, Paulicians, Bogomils, Insabbatati, Berengarians, Subalpini, Cathari, Patarines, Petrobrusians, and Vallenses, who predated Waldo by centuries. It was the history and Sabbath-keeping traditions of some of these Christians that were absorbed by Waldo and the later Waldensians.

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<sup>18</sup>*ibid.*, Vol. I, p. 836, citing Dollinger, Johann, *Beitrag zur Sektengeschichte des Mittelalters*, Munchen: C.H. Beck'sche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1890, Vol. 2, pp. 327, 662.

<sup>19</sup>Actually, at its founding the Church of God, Seventh-day, was called the Church of God, Adventist, and was so called until the 1920's.