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# The ancient Waldenses: Did the Reformation predate Luther? <sup>1</sup>

In 2017, as many Protestants celebrate the five hundredth year of Martin Luther's nailing of the Ninety-Five Theses to the church door in Wittenberg, Germany, it is appropriate to ask, Did the Reformation really begin with Luther?

While significant attempts to reform the Roman Catholic Church had taken place before Martin Luther, Luther with his 1517 work, the Ninety-Five Theses, is widely acknowledged to have started the Reformation. But there were others, before Luther, who preached similar reforms but did not succeed in changing the Roman Church of their time. To the names of Jan Hus, Peter Waldo, and John Wycliffe we may also add a nearly forgotten group of reformers—the ancient Waldenses.

## Peter Waldo

The Waldenses lived throughout Europe, especially in the Alpine regions of Spain, France, and Italy. Many historians date their origin to the twelfth century and to a rich merchant, Peter Waldo of Lyon, who, after his conversion, shared his wealth with the poor. He and his followers were called the “Poor of Lyon.” They wore simple clothing and shared the teachings of the Bible in the common language of the people, a practice outlawed by the Roman Catholic Church. While this is a popular scholarly view, others believe Waldo's followers joined with the “Vaudois” (Waldenses), people who had similar convictions and

had already inhabited the Alpine valleys from earlier times.

These Waldenses opposed many teachings and worship practices of the Catholic Church that were not biblical. They rejected the doctrine of purgatory, the Mass, the use of holy water, ashes, candles, kissing of relics, and the celebration of papal holy days, or festivals. They shared the Scriptures, or portions of them, in the common language of the people and were known for insisting on the Bible as their only rule of doctrine and life, calling on fellow Christians to reform and embrace the teachings and simplicity of the New Testament.

As a result of the Waldenses' call for reformation, from the twelfth century onward, Catholic councils condemned them as heretics,<sup>2</sup> resulting in severe persecution. Consequently, they fled to more hospitable regions, further spreading their biblical teachings to countries as far-flung as England, Germany, Switzerland, Austria, Poland, and Bohemia. This underlines why several Protestant historians consider the ancient Waldenses precursors of the Protestant Reformation.<sup>3</sup> Unlike other reform-minded groups of the Middle Ages, the Waldenses were not annihilated or absorbed into other movements but continue until today.

## The *insabbatati* or *sabbatati*

From the end of the twelfth century, opponents of the Waldenses began

calling them *insabbatati*, *sabbatati*, or similar names. Throughout the centuries two major streams of interpretation have been proposed for the meaning of these names.

One interpretation considers the Waldenses a new heretical movement whose members distinguished themselves by wearing a peculiar type of shoes. It identifies Peter Waldo of Lyon as the originator of this movement, which broke away from the Roman Catholic Church. It assumes that the Waldenses had adopted this unique style of dress to impress upon people that they were a religious order intent on restoring the simplicity of the New Testament gospel of Christ, with their simple style of footwear distinguishing them from other Catholic orders and giving them the appearance of being genuine apostles of Christ.

The other interpretation holds that these names describe the Waldensian faith as a movement that rejected all nonbiblical traditions, festivals, and holy days designated as sabbaths that the Roman Catholic Church had instituted. This view argues that the Waldenses were not a new movement and that their presence was already known before Waldo, and their teachings were based on the Bible and the Bible only.

The first time the word *insabbatati* was used for Waldenses was in an 1192 edict against heretics by King Alfonso II of Aragon (1152–1196). This identified them as “*Insabbatatos*” and “the Poor

of Lyon.<sup>24</sup> The edict did not explain why the Waldenses were called *Insabbatatos*.

The next source was an 1197 edict against heretics by the son of King Alfonso, called King Peter II of Aragon (1174–1213). This time the Waldenses were called “*Sabbatati*.”<sup>25</sup> This edict also did not give any explanation of *sabbatati* or why the prefix *in* is absent. The fact that neither edict explains these names indicates that people must have known their meanings at that time.

The second, and more plausible, interpretation of *insabbatati* and *sabbatati* comes from historians who associate these words with the Waldenses’ persistent refusal to observe Catholic traditions, festivals, and holy days, or sabbaths.

During the time that Ebrardus introduced the shoe theory, another explanation was in use that has not caught the attention of historians. At the Council of Tarragon (1242), *insabbatati* was mentioned in connection with the “Waldensian sect” in Spain. The council defined the term as those “who refused to swear an oath, or to obey ecclesiastical or secular powers, or denied that a corporal punishment could be inflicted in any case.”<sup>26</sup>

Instead of referring to the wearing of unique shoes, *insabbatati* pointed to the Waldensian faith and rejection of nonbiblical Catholic practices and teachings. The fact that this term was first used in Spain a decade and a half before the shoe controversy’s short life and continued to be used to describe Waldenses after that period until the Reformation suggests that *insabbatati* must have another meaning than the wearers of unique shoes. The following arguments support this theory.

## Sabbath keepers?

Because their earliest records were destroyed during times of persecution,<sup>7</sup> the first Waldensian testimony about the designation *insabbatati* comes from the Waldensian pastor and historian Jean Perrin (1580–1648). In 1618 Perrin wrote, “The Waldenses rejected the Romish festivals, and observed no other day of rest than Sunday; whence they were

named ‘Insabbathas,’ regards not of the Sabbaths.”<sup>8</sup>

Perrin’s explanation showed that the prefix *in* of the word *insabbatati* expresses a negation of the root word *sabbat*, indicating that the Waldenses rejected Catholic holy, or rest, days, called sabbaths.<sup>9</sup> Perrin’s explanation reflected the historic Waldensian self-image of being followers of the simple apostolic teachings.<sup>10</sup>

Prior to Perrin, the Huguenot historian Nicolas Vignier wrote in his *Bibliothèque Historiale* (1588) that Waldenses “were called Insabathaires, because they despised the [Catholic] feasts.”<sup>11</sup> Dutch Reformed historian Balthasar Lydius (1577–1629), following Vignier and Perrin, argued that since Waldenses “observed no other day of rest or holiday, than Sunday, they were styled *Insabbathi* or *Insabbathas*, that is, *Sabbathless*, for not observing [Catholic] Sabbaths.”<sup>12</sup> Even some Catholic authorities mentioned Waldensian rejection of Catholic holy days. Several nineteenth-century historians also maintained this view.<sup>13</sup>

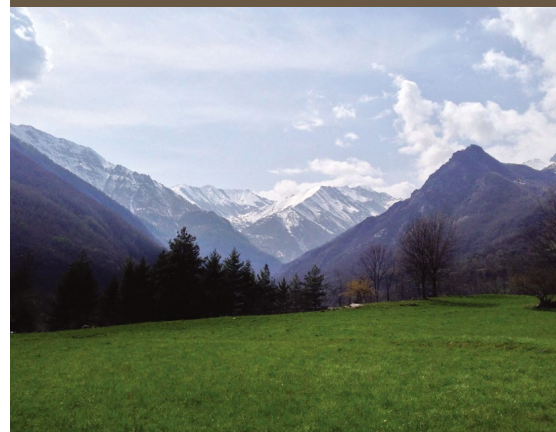
With few exceptions, Waldensians today deny that the ancient Waldenses kept the seventh-day Sabbath. However, historical evidence indicates that many did observe Sabbath during the Middle Ages. During the early part of the seventeenth century, the Swiss historian Melchior Goldastus (1576–1635) commented on Emperor Frederic II’s Constitution of 1220 against heretics. He reasoned that the label *insabbatati* was used to describe heretics during the thirteenth century “because they judaize on the Sabbath,” that is, they kept the Sabbath like the Jews. He mentioned that the “Valdenses” were often called “*Insabbatati*,”<sup>14</sup> indicating that during that time there were Waldenses who kept the seventh-day Sabbath (Saturday) as a day of rest.

## A Sunday defense

One of the most significant primary source evidences for the presence of a substantial group of Waldensian Sabbath keepers during the first half of the thirteenth century was brought



The rugged Alpine mountains, a place of refuge for the Waldenses



The Alpine meadows in spring against the snow capped mountains. The mountain on the right is the Barion near the village of Bobbio Pellice, where Catholics pursued Waldenses during times of persecution, throwing them from the top of that mountain.



The entrance of a cave in the Valley of Angronia near Torre Pellice, where Waldenses worshiped during times of persecution. It could contain about 200 persons. When discovered they were smoked out and died of suffocation.

out in a polemic of five books written about 1241–1244 by the Inquisitor Father Moneta of Cremona, Northern Italy. Moneta defended himself against the criticism of the Cathars (Albigenses) and Waldenses that Catholics transgressed the Sabbath commandment. In a chapter entitled “De Sabbato, & de die Dominico,” he discussed the significance of the seventh-day Sabbath of Exodus 20:8 in contrast to the Lord’s day, by which he meant the first day.<sup>15</sup>

In defending himself against their criticism, Moneta asserted that the Sabbath was for the Jews a memorial of Creation and their liberation from Egypt. He argued that this Jewish Sabbath was “a sign and figure of the spiritual sabbath of the Christian people. . . . It must be understood, however, that as the Jews observed the sabbath, so also, we observe the Lord’s day.” He added, “This day we observe as an ordinance of the Church, and it is in reverence to Christ who was born on that day, who rose on that day, who sent the Holy Spirit on that day.”

Moneta defended the observance of the Lord’s day as an ordinance of the Church with the question, “If the Jews declared that we have to keep the sabbath as a memorial of the benefit of their liberation, to honor their liberator, why is the church not allowed to institute a festive day in honor of Christ, in remembrance of the spiritual freedom from the bondage of the devil, accomplished by Christ?”<sup>16</sup>

Moneta’s charges against these heretics clearly show that there was a significant group of Waldenses and Cathars in Northern Italy and Southern France during the thirteenth century that was worshiping on another day than Sunday, namely, the seventh-day Sabbath.

Sabbath keeping among the Waldenses was most widespread in Bohemia and Moravia. An inquisitor’s manuscript from the fifteenth century reported that Waldenses in Bohemia “do not celebrate the feasts of the blessed virgin Mary and the Apostles, except the Lord’s day. Not a few celebrate the Sabbath with the Jews.”<sup>17</sup>

## The Waldenses today

This research about the names of the ancient Waldenses resulted from my yearly church history study tours to the Waldensian communities in the Alpine valleys of Northern Italy since 1994. These tours included the Waldensian Cultural Center, where Waldensian guides recited the history of this unique people. These presentations revealed the stark contrast between the ancient faith of the Waldenses and their descendants today. The ancient Waldenses had a great burden to share their faith in the teachings of the Bible and the prophecies of Daniel and Revelation to reform the church, at the cost of their lives. Waldensians today are still proud of their heritage, but they are quick to tell you that they are now part of the wider ecumenical, evangelical community. Today their major contribution is their involvement in noble humanitarian work, but absent is the ancient burden to share the truths and prophecies of the Bible, which will bring reformation in the lives of fellow Christians.

When asked about the meaning of the ancient labels of *insabbatati* and *sabbatati* given by their Catholic persecutors, the Waldensian guides replied that these names described their unique ancient character as displayed by their special shoes. This understanding results from their accepting the opinions of Catholic persecutors—but without investigating the reasons why Catholics called the Waldenses by these names. The continued characterizing of Waldenses as wearing unique shoes has relegated their role in the history of the Christian church to that of an insignificant, late heretical offshoot of the Roman Catholic Church, limited to the Alpine regions of Italy and France.

## Conclusion

The analysis of the second major interpretation of *insabbatati* and *sabbatati* as characteristic of the Waldensian faith has led to the following significant findings:

1. Primary sources confirm the Waldenses as a reformation movement that opposed nonbiblical Catholic

practices and holy days, or sabbaths, throughout the centuries.


2. The view in the first finding was the prevalent view in the earliest Waldensian literature and describes the ancient Waldensian custom of refusing to observe Catholic holy days.

3. From a linguistic viewpoint, it is the best explanation for the meaning of the prefix *in* in *insabbatati*, describing the Waldensian mission of reform, of calling people away from the nonbiblical teachings of the Roman Catholic Church to the simple biblical teachings of the New Testament Christians.

4. Primary sources show that, in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, there were two groups of Waldenses—one group that observed Sunday as the Lord’s day, the other that kept the seventh-day Sabbath of the Bible. Our research reveals that the title *insabbatati* could apply to (1) Waldenses who rejected Catholic festivals and holy days, or sabbaths, and observed only Sunday as the Lord’s day and (2) Waldenses who, in addition, rejected Sunday as a Catholic institution and kept the seventh-day Sabbath of the Bible. The title *sabbatati*, as applied to heretics, was used to characterize Waldenses who stood out because of their observance of the seventh-day Sabbath.

5. This research confirms the correctness of Ellen G. White’s statement that “Through ages of darkness and apostasy there were Waldenses who denied the supremacy of Rome, who rejected image worship as idolatry, and who kept the true Sabbath.”<sup>18</sup>

6. As for the role of the Waldenses in the history of the Christian church, research shows that they saw themselves as an ancient movement that remained true to the New Testament. Their mission was to reform the Church and to call Christians back to faithfulness to the Bible, in spite of bloody persecutions and massacres that nearly exterminated them. They traveled extensively through Europe and were sowing the seeds that contributed to the coming Protestant Reformation. Their work influenced Wycliffe and his followers and Hus and Jerome and their followers, and

their influence came to full fruition in the time of the Anabaptists, Luther, Zwingli, and Calvin. They have given Protestants an inspiring example of faithfulness to the Word of God in times of great apostasy and ruthless persecution. Their role in the history of the Christian church is a worthy example for Christians to continue the arrested Reformation, which Luther started five hundred years ago, calling people back to the Bible so that they are ready for the soon return of Christ. 

- 1 This article is based on the author's research published as P. Gerard Damsteegt, "Decoding Ancient Waldensian Names: New Discoveries," *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 54, no. 2 (Autumn 2016), 237–258.
- 2 Gabriel Audisio, *The Waldensian Dissent: Persecution and Survival c. 1170–c. 1570* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 15–17.
- 3 Earle E. Cairns, *Christianity Through the Centuries: A History of the Christian Church*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996), 221; Peter Biller, *The Waldenses, 1170–1530: Between a Religious Order and a Church* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2002), 191.
- 4 King Alfonso II of Aragon, "Edictum contra Haereticos," quoted in Giovanni Gonnet, *Enchiridion*

*fontium Valdensium: Recueil critique de sources concernant les Vaudois au moyen age du IIe concile de Lateran au synode de Chanforan (1179–1532)* (Torre Pellice, Italy: Claudiana 1958), 92.

- 5 *Ibid.*, 94.
- 6 C. Baraut, "Els inicis de la inquisició a Catalunya i les seves actuacions al bisbat d'Urgell (segles XII–XIII)," *Urgellia*, 13 (1996–1997), quoted in Damian J. Smith, *Crusade, Heresy and Inquisition in the Lands of the Crown of Aragon (c. 1167–1276)* (Boston: Brill, 2010), 197.
- 7 Because theirs was viewed as a heretical movement, all Waldensian documents were destroyed during the repeated persecutions, leaving no primary sources for the movement from the Middle Ages. See James Hastings, *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, vol. 12 (Edinburgh: T and T Clark, 1954), 665; Henry Charles Lea, *The Inquisition of the Middle Ages: Its Organization and Operation* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1993), 250, 251.
- 8 Jean Paul Perrin, Robert Baird, and Samuel Miller, *History of the Ancient Christians Inhabiting the Valleys of the Alps* (Philadelphia, PA: Griffith and Simon, 1847), 25. His original work was published in 1618 as *Histoire des Vaudois* (Genève, 1618), 9.
- 9 In this instance the word *sabbath* meant a festival instituted by the Catholic Church, which the Waldenses rejected because the Bible did not mandate them. In the medieval literature, *sabbatum*, in the sense of rest, was sometimes used for Sunday and at other times for Catholic holy days such as Passover Sabbath (*Sabbatum Magnum*)

and Palm Sunday (*Sabbatum Vacat*). See Du Cange, *Glossarium*, vol. 4, 718.

- 10 Studies such as Peter Biller, "The Oral and the Written: The Case of the Alpine Waldensians," in *Bulletin of the Society for Renaissance Studies* 4 (1986), 19–28, and Audisio, *The Waldensian Dissent*, 143–160, have addressed the validity of Waldensian oral tradition, of which Perrin is one of the earliest representatives.
- 11 Nicolas Vignier, *Bibliothèque Historiale* [...], vol. 3 (Paris: L'Angleir, 1588), 130.
- 12 D. Balthasar Lydius, *Waldensia, id est, conservatio verae ecclesiae*, vol. 1 (Rotherdam: n.p., 1622), 4, 5, quoted in Thielemann J. van Braght, *The Bloody Theater, or Martyrs Mirror of the Defenseless Christians* (1660), trans. Joseph F. Sohm (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1886; repr. 2002), 277.
- 13 See Damsteegt, "Ancient Waldensian Names," 250.
- 14 Goldastus, *Rationale Constitutionum Imperialium* (Frankfurt am Main: n.p., 1607), 78.
- 15 Moneta of Cremona, and Tommaso Agostino Ricchini, *Venerabilis patris Monetæ Cremonensis ordinis prædicatorum s. p. dominico æqualis Adversus Catharos et Valdenses libri quinque: quos ex manuscriptis codd. Vaticano, Bononiensi, ac Neapolitano* (Rome: 1743; reprinted, Ridgewood, NJ: Gregg Press, 1964), 475.
- 16 Moneta and Ricchini, *Venerabilis patris*, 475.
- 17 Johann Döllinger, *Beiträge zur Sektengeschichte des Mittelalters*, vol. 2 (München: Beck, 1890), 662.
- 18 Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Pub. Assoc., 1911), 65.

## DATELINE

### ► After 500 years of schism, will the rift of the Reformation finally be healed?



An ecumenical service in October 2016, led by Pope Francis at Lund Cathedral in southern Sweden, heralded a year of events running up to the 500th anniversary (October 31, 2017) of the Reformation that resulted in the greatest schism in western Christianity and a string of religious wars.

Christian leaders and congregations spent the next 12 months consolidating moves towards greater cooperation and dialogue after centuries of division. In the first papal visit to Sweden in more than 25 years, Francis led prayers asking "forgiveness for divisions perpetuated by Christians from the two traditions."

In Germany, leaders of the Catholic and main Protestant churches issued

a joint text calling for a "healing of memories" of past divisions. The commemorations are the latest step in a slow rapprochement between the Catholic and Protestant traditions pursued by Francis, who has put ecumenicalism and healing past wounds at the heart of his papacy.

A recent document signed by dozens of Protestant evangelicals and entitled "Is the Reformation Over?" says that although cooperation between the two traditions should be encouraged

in areas of common concern, "the issues that gave birth to the Reformation 500 years ago are still very much alive in the 21st century for the whole church." [Harriet Sherwood | *The Guardian*, Oct. 29, 2016]



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