

Reflections on the Waldensian

By Jim Hohnberger

"For there is one God, and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus." I Timothy 2:5 This was the Bible verse written above the door of the 16th century Waldensian church I visited in the alps of Italy. In every age there have been men and women willing to suffer extreme hardship and privation in order to maintain the simple Bible faith in it's purity. The grand offense of these Waldensians was that they would not worship God according to the will of the church of Rome. They would not accept a "Thus saith the church" for a "Thus saith the Lord." For this they were branded as heretics, their motives

impugned, their characters maligned, their writings suppressed, misrepresented, and mutilated. Persecuted and oppressed for hundreds of years they found refuge behind the lofty bulwarks of the mountains in northern Italy. Here they maintained, at great peril and hardship, the ancient faith of the apostles. It was largely in fleeing from the power of the church of Rome that they preserved their freedom to worship God in the liberty of their individual consciences.

The church of Rome wanted to usurp the position as mediator between God and these simple people. She wanted them to look

to **her**, to follow **her** man made guidelines, rules and regulations. **She** wanted to be conscience for these people, to raise **her** authority above the authority of God's Word. But the Waldensians, in their purity and simplicity rejected the supremacy of the church of Rome and held to the Bible as the only supreme infallible authority and the rule of life and faith.

The Waldensians were determined to maintain their allegiance to God and to preserve the right of their individual liberty of conscience, thus an inevitable separation took place. But I ask you, who was the schismatic? Was it the Waldensians who continued to worship God in spirit and truth? Or was it the church of Rome with all her man made guidelines, rules and regulations? Who, I ask you was the most dependent on God? and who was the most independent from God? Friends, it was the proud hierarchal church of Rome that was the schismatic and not "The Church in the wilderness." It was the church of Rome that left off her dependence upon God and His Word and became the most independent of all.

I was raised in this church of Rome, was taught from the catechism rather than the Bible, confessed my sins to a priest rather than to God, prayed to Mary rather than to Christ, attended church on Sunday instead of Sabbath, refrained from eating meat on Fridays, used holy water to sanctify myself, paid money to get souls out of purgatory, got absolution

from a priest to break what I thought was the law of God, prayed hail Mary's for the forgiveness of sins, and kissed the bishops ring on my confirmation day. In short, I grew up with the understanding, belief and practice that the authority of the church superseded that of the scriptures. Thus my religion was made up of externals, there was no real heart conver-

sion, no true trusting in Christ as my daily mediator and His Word as a sure path unto my feet.

Friends, this church, the church of my youth, had in reality stole the place of Christ in my life. She had become my mediator, her man made rules and guidelines had become the basis for my religious experience. But when I was about 30

years of age God sent Paul and Ethel into Sally's and my life. They introduced us to God's infallible Word. After thorough study for over 18 months, we decided to join God's remnant church. No longer would it be necessary to blindly follow the counsels and decrees of man, or to substitute the church for my mediator. Everything would be put to the test of God's word. "Solo Scriptura" would be our rule of faith. Even in our vows in joining the remnant church, we confirmed that, "We believe that the Bible is God's inspired Word, and that **it** constitutes the **only** rule of faith and practice for the Christian." We also vowed that we, "Accept by faith the righteousness of Christ recognizing Him as our intercessor."

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One might ask, why we didn't join the Waldensian church, the church that maintained the ancient faith for a thousand years? The church that longer than any other church lived out the simple pure faith of Christ and held the Bible as the only supreme, infallible authority, for it's life and faith. It grieves my heart to tell you this but this, "church in the wilderness" left off Christ as her only mediator and agreed to accept man made guidelines from the church of Rome in order to secure peace, falsely so called. But friends, these concessions could not be substantiated from the word of God. Thus the Waldensians allowed the church of Rome to become the mediator between them and God. It is thus the pure church fell and today, if you would visit a Waldensian church, you would find a nominal profession and a dry formality. How terribly sad have been the results of that one unfavorable moment and decision. Today, she has lost that purity and simplicity that she held, against all odds for a thousand years. She fell in one day, the day she allowed the church of Rome to become her mediator and accepted her man made guidelines for the promise of peace, falsely so called. For a thousand years the Waldensians preferred to submit to the loss of their properties and even their lives and children's lives, than to sanction the mingling of human requirements with divine precepts. But now, they were tired, the church of Rome offered them a favor, one which was in reality

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What was this favor granted them? Namely, the liberty of Protestant worship within **their territorial** limits. What was it that the Waldensians had to concede to, for this favor, falsely so called? They had to among others agree to banish Henri Arnaud, their faithful leader as well as other faithful shepherds and men of strength and virtue into exile forever.

They were forbidden to evangelize, or make converts. They were forbidden to have a printing press. And they were forbidden to sell or even lend their books to a Roman Catholic. (See "history of the Waldenses" By J.A. Wylie) In short, many of the duties, rights and privileges that constitute the Christian life were denied them. Thus the spiritual condition of the Waldensians languished. Though the hand of bloody persecution could no more be placed on them, they were now more captives, then when they were hunted and treated as animals.

The principles of freedom of conscience - the root of all liberty - they traded for peace, falsely so called. Friends, they abjured their God given inalienable rights. They allowed themselves to be put under exactions not prescribed in the Word of God. Whenever any of us do this, either as individuals or as a church body, we will surely fall as they did. We must all choose to be God's separate, peculiar people, regardless of the cost and what others may think or say.

Since my days of membership in the church of Rome, I've come to cast off that **blind** submission to the teachings of mere human authority, unsubstantiated from the authority of God's Word, for it always and inevitably brings bondage. I have also come to see that the Bible is a sufficient and all perfect rule, and that every man, woman and child has an inalienable right to follow the Word of God for his own guidance, practice and faith. Even Jesus, "acted independently of the rabbinical laws ... They urged Him to receive the maxims and traditions that had been handed down from the ancient rabbis, but He asked for their authority in Holy Writ. He would hear every word that proceeds from the mouth of God; but He could not obey the inventions of men." Ellen G. White, *Desire of Ages* pgs. 84-85. So it was with the apostles when they were commanded not to preach their doctrine of Christ, they answered the leaders of the Jewish church and said, "We ought to obey God rather than man." Acts 5:29

Protestantism sets the power of conscience above the magistrate, and the authority of the Word of God above the visible church.

The two great issues of all time, **authority and liberty**. These are the two necessities wanting to be rightly restored in the church today. Authority, in the infallible Guide, and liberty, freedom to follow that Guide, which is Christ. These two must ever go together, the one cannot exist without the other. Liberty without authority is anarchy. Authority without

liberty is bondage. These two great necessities must together flourish or together die.

We owe much to the Waldensians they planted the seeds of the Reformation that began in the time of Wycliffe, grew broad and deep in the days of Luther, and is to be carried forward to the close of time by those of us who also are willing to suffer all things for, "the word of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ." Revelation 1:9 These 20th century Waldensians are called the 144,000 and will be made up of every nation, kindred, tongue and people who will hold to Jesus as their only Mediator and the Word of God as their only rule of life and faith. Will you be one of them? or will you, with the vast majority of Christians past, as well as present, bow your neck to another?

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