

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *Reformation & Revival* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_ref-rev-01.php



Reformation
& REVIVAL

A Quarterly Journal for Church Leadership
Volume 10 • Number 4 • Fall 2001

CALVIN'S MINISTRY TO THE WALDENSIANS

Chris Accardy

American evangelicals are waking up to the fact that something is amiss in our movement. Reformation movements have been springing up in nearly every tradition with roots in the Protestant Reformation. If we are to follow the model of our forefathers in the original Reformation we must look beyond waging a war in print, hoping those in need of reform will read our books and magazines and even attend our conferences. The Reformers did produce volumes of literature and the Word of God thundered from untold numbers of pulpits. Yet, the Reformers were also men of action. They went beyond publishing and preaching. John Calvin was one of the most activist Reformers of his day. He did not spend his days sitting in a corner office somewhere in Geneva doing nothing but writing books and composing sermons. If we believe this myth, we miss much of Calvin's ministry as a pastor.

Calvin fought the battle for reformation, not only with words, but also as an activist. He exerted tremendous influence on many strands of the Reformation. Unfortunately, his work, and the work of the other Reformers in the practical sphere, has given way to analysis of their theological insights. Thus, we often are left with the impression that the Reformation was simply a battle of ideas. It was not. The Reformation was also about action—practical action that made a real impact on the lives of people.

The following is a report describing some of the practi-

cal work of the Reformers, particularly John Calvin, in the midst of the Protestant Reformation. It is the story of the Waldensians, and how they were brought into the Reformation cause. It is a story of John Calvin as an activist pastor, who put his convictions into action. Most of all, it is a lesson for us today, if we are to be Reformers in our own day and age.

THE WALDENSIANS

The Waldensian church began as a non-conformist movement toward the end of the twelfth century. Peter Waldo founded the movement when he sought to gain heaven through evangelical poverty. He paid his debts, provided for his family, gave the rest of his wealth away to the poor, and began begging daily bread. Inspired by a vernacular translation of the New Testament, Waldo sought to imitate Christ in both his life and message.¹

Soon Waldo amassed followers who, like him, took up evangelical poverty and began preaching from a vernacular translation of the Bible. Despite their high esteem of the Scriptures, they did not initially oppose official Roman Catholic teaching. However, this did not prevent the Archbishop of Lyons from seeing them as a threat to the church. He opposed their activities. When Waldo appealed to Rome, he and his followers were treated harshly.

Waldo and his disciples rejected the edict forbidding them to preach choosing to "obey God rather than men."² The following persecution led them to hide in the valleys of the Alps. The Waldensians did not see themselves as a reform movement, but soon found themselves in that role due to the tactical errors of the Archbishop of Lyons and the Pope.

From the beginning the Waldensians emphasized memorization of Scripture, lay preaching, pacifism, honesty and poverty. They reacted strongly against papal

authority, prayers for the dead, purgatory, oaths and sacraments performed by immoral priests.³ It has been popular to call this movement a proto-Protestant group. It is true that they came to protest the Roman Catholic Church in time. However, it might be more accurate to describe them as non-conformists. While they were not in the good graces of the Roman Catholic Church they still embraced much of the doctrine and piety of medieval Catholicism. From the start, they were not protesting Roman Catholic doctrine and piety like the early Reformers.

Throughout their history the Waldensians were no strangers to persecution. The Roman Catholic Church and many Roman Catholic kings treated them harshly. At one point twenty-two Waldensian villages were decimated.⁴

As a movement the Waldensians had always emphasized the Scriptures. This love led them into a friendship with John Hus and the Bohemian Brethren. Some of the first Bohemian priests sought ordination from a Waldensian bishop.⁵ Waldensian confessional statements soon reflected the influence of Hus and the Bohemian Brethren.⁶

The Waldensians of the sixteenth century were ripe for reformation and their leaders were even in regular contact with Martin Luther. Mistakenly, Luther thought they were synonymous with the Bohemian Brethren.⁷ Waldensian *barba*⁸ also began exploring the Reformation first-hand.⁹

The Waldensians had their foot in the door of the Reformation in many ways; yet, they still held on to some vestiges of medieval Catholic doctrine and piety. However, the Waldensian love for Scripture endeared them to the Reformers. Eventually, John Calvin's pastoral heart would be known through his ministry to them in troubled times. Calvin's relationship with the Waldensians began indirectly when the church held a council in the valley of Angrogna. They invited some Reformers to come and present their case.¹⁰

THE SYNOD OF CHANFORAN

The Synod of Chanforan was expressly held with the intent of reforming the Waldensian Church.¹¹ It began September 12, 1532. The Reformers Guillaume Farel, Antoine Saunier, and Pierre Robert Olivetan were in attendance as guests of Martin Gronin, George Morel, and other reform minded barba.¹² Both Johannes Oecolampadius and Martin Bucer sent along several propositions for the barba to consider.¹³ The older, more conservative barba and the younger, more progressive barba soon developed a theological consensus and rallied around the Reformation cause.¹⁴ Waldensian pastor and historian Gorgio Tourn writes: "Wherever Waldensian medieval theology and spirituality showed any remaining traces of Catholic piety, these were brought into line with thought based clearly on the Bible."¹⁵

Tourn sees this moment as decisive to the future evangelical mission of the church. He writes:

The Synod's readiness to embark on a quite new course was also revealed in a decision to raise money to provide for the translation and publication of the Bible in the French language. It was evident that Waldensians were thus ready to seek a wider audience for their witness than was possible with their old Bible in Provençal and to take advantage of the most recent textual studies.¹⁶

John Calvin's cousin, Robert Olivetan, was charged with producing this new translation.¹⁷ Just a few years before this, in 1527 or 1528, Olivetan had met Calvin in Paris.¹⁸ Olivetan and Farel would prove to be bridges between Calvin and the Waldensians.

At the time of the Synod of Chanforan, John Calvin was also rushing headlong into the Reformation. In 1532 he published his first book, *de Clementia*, and was finishing

his law studies at Orleans. Less than a year after the Synod, Calvin was fleeing Paris. The Roman Catholic authorities believed that Calvin was a co-conspirator in Nicolas Cop's "Lutheran Address."¹⁹ Thus, the Waldensians joined the Reformation and Calvin became a Reformer on the run at about the same time.

THE OLIVETAN BIBLE

Robert Olivetan worked diligently on his translation of the Bible into the French vernacular.²⁰ Just as Luther had done a decade earlier for the Germans, Olivetan completed his translation in breath-taking time.²¹ It was dedicated February 12, 1535. Saunier and Olivetan presented the Bible to the Waldensians at the second Synod of Chanforan held on September 16, 1535.²² The preface to this new translation was written by a young convert who had recently embraced the Reformation.

The young convert's name was John Calvin. He wrote the preface to the Bible translated by his cousin and funded by the Waldensians. While not mentioning them by name, Calvin defends them in the preface:

But the ungodly voices of some are heard, shouting that it is a shameful thing to publish these divine mysteries among the simple common people. For among those who have spent their entire life [studying the mysteries], in general aided by the considerable support of innate ability and learning—yet in mid-life often failed—few or perhaps none at all, are to be found who have attained their ultimate goal. How then, they ask, can these poor illiterates comprehend these things, untutored as they are in all liberal arts, and . . . ignorant of all things? . . . But since the Lord has chosen prophets for Himself from the ranks of shepherds, apostles from the boats of fisherman, why should He not even now deign to choose like disciples?²³

One has to wonder how much Calvin knew of Waldensian history or how much Olivetan told him about the first Synod of Chanforan. Regardless, Calvin shared the zeal of the Waldensians to get the Scriptures into the hands of common folk.

The Synod of Chanforan served as a bridge from the Waldensians to Calvin through his cousin Robert Olivetan. Through Farel another bridge was established when Calvin entered pastoral ministry in Geneva. During Calvin's second tour in Geneva we see his direct ministry to the Waldensians. Through this we get a glimpse of Calvin's pastoral heart.

A HEART FOR THE WALDENSIANS

One of the greatest tragedies in the history of the Reformation occurred in 1545. Baron d'Opped, Governor of Provençal, and Cardinal Tournon, the Archbishop of Lyons, massacred around four thousand Waldensians in twenty-two villages on April 28 of that year. Nineteenth-century Waldensian historian Alexis Muston, in a moving description of the massacre, writes:

The heads of those unfortunate men were carried about on pikes. . . . Some women, shut up in a barn, which was set on fire, sought to save themselves by leaping from its walls. They were received upon the point of partizans and swords. Others had retired into the castle. "Their death! Their blood!" cried D'Oppede, and pointed out to his soldiers the way to their place of refuge. . . . But how shall I describe the scene that took place in the church? It was the most horrible and sacrilegious scene of all; for it was there that a great number of the women and the young girls of the palace had taken refuge. The soldiers rushed upon them, stripped them, committed the most shocking outrages against them, and then some were thrown down from the steeple; others were taken away to be still further abused. Pregnant women might

be seen with their bellies ripped up, and the bloody fruit of their womb fallen from them.²⁴

The Waldensians fled and found refuge in Carpentras with Cardinal Sadolet, a friendly opponent of Calvin, and in Geneva with Calvin.²⁵ John Calvin was outraged by reports of these horrendous crimes. While one may question whether the initial reports were embellished, they were, nonetheless, the window through which Calvin viewed the situation.

In a letter to Guillaume Farel dated May 4, 1545, less than a week after the slaughter, one can see that Calvin was deeply moved by the plight of the Waldensians. He writes to Farel:

After those two brothers about whom I had written, on my suggestion were returned to their friends, the one of them has returned to us with the melancholy intelligence, that several villages have been consumed by fire, that most of the old men had been burned to death, that some had been put to the sword, others having been carried off to abide their doom; and that such was the savage cruelty of these persecutors, that neither young girls, nor pregnant women, nor infants, were spared. So great is the atrocious cruelty of this proceeding, that I grew bewildered when I reflect upon it. How, then, shall I express it in words?²⁶

What was far beyond words for Calvin was not far beyond his action. In his letter to Farel, he goes on to tell him that in consultation with the Genevan Council he had decided to go personally to the Swiss Churches and plead the case of the Waldensians.²⁷ We see the emotional side of Calvin when he writes to Farel: "I write, worn out with sadness, and not without tears, which so burst forth, that every now and then they interrupt my words."²⁸ He shows him-

self to be far from the detached, hard-hearted scholar as he is often popularly portrayed in our time. John Calvin had a pastor's heart.

Calvin continued to stir up support for the persecuted Waldensians in France. He zealously fought for justice in their behalf. Wulfert de Greef comments on Calvin's activities in May 1545:

After visiting various cities, including Strasbourg, Calvin went to Aarau, where at Zurich's initiative a conference of a large number of Protestant cities was being held to deal with the plight of the Waldenses. It was decided to address a written plea to Francis I in behalf of those being persecuted, and if the king responded, to send a legation. The cities agreed to keep in contact about the matter.²⁹

Calvin brought the issue to the forefront and kept working on their behalf. In July Calvin wrote to Bullinger insisting that he and the pastors of Bern and Basle to do something about the Waldensian plight.³⁰ The same day Calvin also wrote to the pastors of Schaffhausen and Oswald Myconius of Basle.

Calvin warns the pastors of Schaffhausen not to relax on the Waldensian issue. Certain political intrigues made the responses of Francis I suspect. Therefore, Calvin urges the pastors to continue the pressure to get something done in the political sphere.³¹

In a similar manner he writes to Myconius and challenges him to persevere. Calvin writes:

Now is the time for vigorous measures, so that we may not have expended in vain so much labour in behalf of our unfortunate brethren; and now, if never before, they themselves, though silent, implore our aid.³²

In this letter, as with the ones to Bullinger and the pastors of Schaffhausen, Calvin demonstrates an understanding of the political and cultural climate in his day. He grasps the delicate nature of diplomacy and the complexity that marks diplomatic efforts.

The effects of Calvin's labors, along with other Swiss pastors who joined to meet with him, was the production of a Swiss legation that did meet with Francis I. In a remarkable feat of diplomacy, the Swiss pastors, led by Calvin, won the freedom of the Waldensians who had been put in prison during the affair. It was these grateful Waldensians that made their way to Switzerland, and eventually, to the Academy in Geneva.³³

Throughout the whole sordid affair Calvin showed that he was more than a detached scholar fighting the war for reformation from an ivory tower in Geneva. He was active and involved in the practical affairs of the whole church. He demonstrated a tender heart for those Christians who shared his love for the Scriptures and the gospel. His zealous defense of the Waldensians during this time of intense persecution opened the door for him to have a great impact on the doctrine and life of the Waldensian church. We find that by the late 1550's Calvin's influence was being codified in the official doctrinal standards of the Waldensian church.

John Calvin and the Genevan Academy exerted a tremendous influence on the Waldensian church through the training of Waldensian barba. Tourn comments: "An early contingent of Waldensian students who completed their training and received approbation from the 'Venerable Company of Pastors' was sent to Calabria, to the Valleys and to Piedmont."³⁴ By zealously defending the Waldensian church, Calvin and the Swiss Reformers actually won the right to train its pastors!

As these pastors went out from Geneva they took with

them Bibles and the writings of John Calvin. Javelle comments:

Calvin also provided the Italian Mission with several teachers and colporteurs who contributed to the diffusion of the Bible and the works of Calvin namely, his Catechism, the Christian Institutes, and his Commentary on the Holy Scriptures which with the Confession were soon divulged and became the practice of the Waldensian church.³⁵

Javelle goes on to comment on the competency of these young Waldensian barba who were "all men of culture and deep piety who in public could easily confute Monks and Priests of the Catholic reactionary mission."³⁶ Much is made of the movement of the Reformed faith northward into the Netherlands and Scotland. However, it is also true, that the Reformed faith was carried by the Waldensians southward into southern France and northern Italy.

When the Waldensians' faith was challenged they responded by professing the Christian faith that Calvin and the other Swiss Reformers fought long and hard to promote. Alexis Muston comments on the fervor of the Waldensian faith when challenged by Roman Catholic authorities:

The Vaudois [Waldensians] replied [to Roman Catholic challenges] by a profession of faith, founded upon the Bible, in the spirit of which they resolved to persevere, like their forefathers, until it should be proved to them that they were in error. "And as for human traditions," they added, "we willingly receive those which serve to promote order, decency, and the dignity of holy ministry: but also for those that are recommended in order to the acquiring of merit, and to bind and oblige consciences, contrary to the word of God,

we absolutely reject them, and would not accept them even from the hand of an angel."³⁷

One can imagine such an utterance coming from John Calvin himself. The Waldensians were quite able spokesmen of the Reformed faith as they carried it southward.

About one hundred years after Calvin's death his understanding of Scripture became the official creed of the Waldensian church. In 1655, Jean Leger, moderator of the Waldensian churches in Piedmont, was instrumental in writing a confession of faith for the church. It was patterned after the *Gallican Confession of 1559*.³⁸ The *Gallican Confession* was prepared by John Calvin and one of his students for the French Huguenots.³⁹ Thus, Calvin's legacy was assured in the life of the Waldensian church. The Waldensians finally achieved freedom of worship in Italy in 1848. The Waldensian church exists to this day, but, to our dismay, the effects of liberalism can be seen in their ranks.

MODERN REFORMATION AND THE LETTER OF JAMES

What can we, as modern reformers, take from all this? Our words must be accompanied by concrete action when it comes to the reformation of the American church. The words of James come to mind:

If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, "Go in peace, keep warm and eat your fill," and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead (James 2:15-17 NRSV).

Calvin did not look at the needs of the Waldensian church and assume all that was required of him was a theological treatise on religious persecution. He did not simply say, "Keep warm and eat your fill." Rather, he did all he

could to ensure their safety and well-being. He acted personally and within his sphere of influence. By such personal and practical action, he furthered the cause of the Reformation. How often do we inform religious leaders we know of their errors and say, "Go in peace, confess your error and be reformed"? How often do we win debates with our misguided evangelical friends because Scripture is on our side, and then scratch our heads when they act as if we had convinced them of nothing? Do they not care about faithfulness to God's Word?

God will bless our reformation as we heed his whole counsel. The whole counsel of God requires action as well as proclamation. American evangelicals need more than information to move toward reformation. American evangelicals not only need to be taught sound theology but they need help in putting sound theology into practice. In my experience, many pastors and churches in need of reform might well be persuaded by the theological arguments of the modern reformation. Yet, with all the information gathered there is frustration. How does one begin to put reformation into practice when unbiblical beliefs and methods are all the congregation has ever known? After ten years of impoverished music and therapeutic skits in the Sunday morning worship service, how do we move toward more biblically sound worship without losing half the congregation? American evangelicals need more than our lectures, they need our help in resolving these and any other roadblocks to reform in their congregations. Let us not be reformers who are good at telling people what to do, yet are unwilling to help them do it. Reformation will not come by our words alone. Let us also be willing to back up those words with action.

Author

Chris Accardy (M.Div., Covenant Theological Semi-

nary), is pastor of Calvary Presbyterian Church in Volga, South Dakota, a growing congregation of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church. Prior to joining the OPC, he also served congregations in Missouri and Vermont, and worked for the New England Fellowship of Evangelicals. Chris and his wife Shelley have been married for eight years and have three children, Hannah, Beth, and Matthew. Chris has previously written an article, "Neo-Liberalism: The Liberal Ethos in Rick Warren's *The Purpose Driven Church*," for the *Reformation and Revival Journal* (Spring 1998).

Notes

1. Kenneth Scott Latourette, *A History of Christianity*, Volume 1: *Beginnings to 1500* (Peabody, Massachusetts: Prince Press, 1997 reprint), 451.
2. Justo Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity*, Volume 1: *The Early Church to the Dawn of the Reformation* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1984), 302.
3. *History of Christianity*, 452.
4. Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, Volume 5: *The Middle Ages* (Peabody, Massachusetts: 1996 reprint), 567.
5. Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom*, Volume 1: *The History of Creeds* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker, 1996), 567.
6. *Creeds*, 569.
7. Adam Blair, *History of the Waldenses*, Volume 2 (Edinburgh: Adam and Charles Black, 1833), 173-86.
8. *Barba* is the Waldensian term for a minister.
9. Gorgio Tourn, *The Waldensians* (Torino, Italy: Claudiana, 1980), 69.
10. Alfred Janavel, *The Waldensians and the Reformation* (New York: Self-published, 1961), 37.
11. Tourn, *Waldensians*, 72.
12. Tourn, *Waldensians*, 72-73; and Javanel, *Waldensians*, 37.
13. Javanel, *Waldensians*, 37.
14. Javanel, *Waldensians*, 38.
15. Tourn, *Waldensians*, 73.
16. Tourn, *Waldensians*, 73.
17. Tourn, *Waldensians*, 73.
18. Wulfert de Greef, *The Writings of John Calvin: An Introductory Guide*.

Translated by Lyle Bierma (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker, 1993), 20-21.

19. Gwenfair Walters, "John Calvin and the Swiss Reformation" lecture notes (Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, Spring, 1998).
20. S. L. Greenslade, editor, *The Cambridge History of the Bible* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 117-21.
21. Javanel, *Waldensians*, 44.
22. Javanel, *Waldensians*, 46.
23. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (1536 edition). Translated and annotated by Ford Lewis Battles (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), 374.
24. Alexis Muston, *Israel of the Alps: A History of the Waldenses*, Volume 1 (London: Blackie and Sons, 1860), 68.
25. Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, Volume 8: *The Swiss Reformation 1519-1605* (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 1996 [1892 reprint]), 810.
26. John Calvin, *Letters of John Calvin*, Volume 1. Translated by David Constable and edited by Jules Bonnet (Edinburgh: Thomas Constable and Co., 1860), 434.
27. *Letters of John Calvin*, 435.
28. *Letters of John Calvin*, 435.
29. *Writings of John Calvin: Introductory Guide*, 66.
30. *Letters of John Calvin*, 445-47.
31. *Letters of John Calvin*, 448.
32. *Letters of John Calvin*, 449-50.
33. *Writings of John Calvin: Introductory Guide*, 66.
34. Tourn, *Waldensians*, 83.
35. Javanel, *Waldensians*, 60.
36. Javanel, *Waldensians*, 60.
37. *Israel of the Alps*, Volume 1, 238.
38. *History of the Christian Church*, Volume 8, 810; *Creeds of Christendom*, Volume 3, 757.
39. *Creeds of Christendom*, Volume 3, 356.

The gospel contains nothing else than repentance and faith.

JOHN CALVIN

The gospel cannot be published without instantly driving the world to rage.

JOHN CALVIN

Calvin's doctrine [of divine revelation] must not be confused with any autonomous subjectivism. He vigorously refutes any notion which suggests that the Christian ever receives a revelation by the Spirit which is beyond or contradictory to the Bible. There is an "inviolable union," a "mutual connection" which God has established between his word and his Spirit.

JOHN CALVIN'S DOCTRINE OF THE
CHRISTIAN LIFE (63), JOHN H. LEITH