

Seventh-day Adventists have traditionally held a special affinity for the Waldensians, who, during a time of religious oppression, preserved and shared the Scriptures despite grim consequences. Adventists share a sense of comradeship with this group for another reason, too. Ellen White shares “Through ages of darkness and apostasy there were Waldenses . . . who kept the true Sabbath.”¹

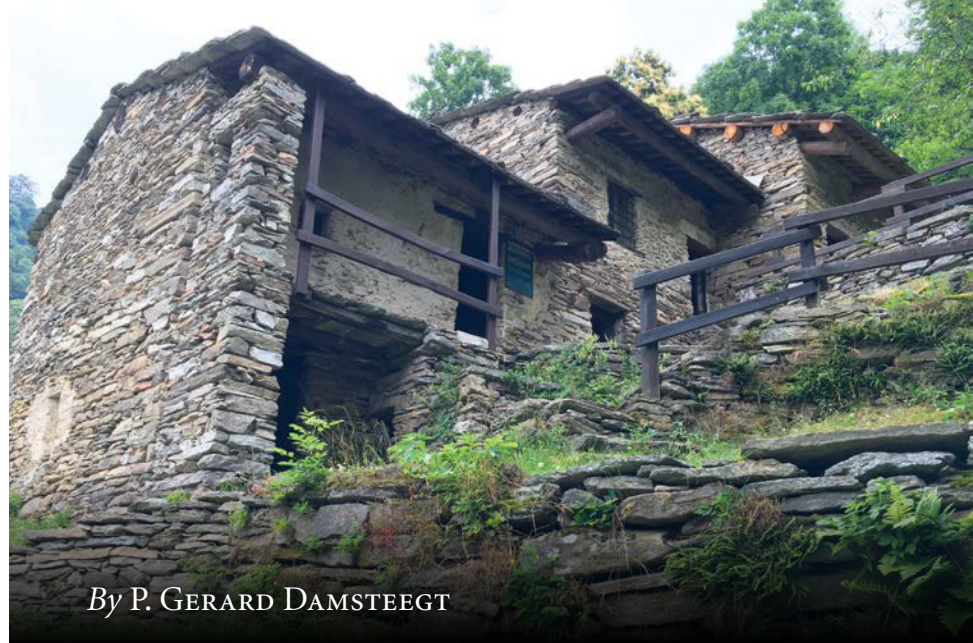
While touring Torre Pellice, one of the group’s major centers in the foothills of the northern Italian Alps, Adventists often ask about Waldensian Sabbathkeeping practices. They are disappointed to hear that early Waldensians always observed Sunday; that there is no proof of them worshipping on Sabbath. Recently, however, new evidence has come to light.

Who Are the Waldensians?

Early Waldensians were members of a reformation movement in Europe, specifically the Alpine regions of Spain, France, and Italy, during the high Middle Ages. Considered forerunners of the Protestant Reformation by various historians,² the Waldensians stressed the importance of adhering strictly to the teachings of the Bible as the only rule of faith.

Finding that many teachings and practices of the Roman Church were based more on tradition than Scripture, they rejected these doctrines and rituals, calling believers to return to the simplicity of the New Testament lifestyle and the teachings of Jesus and the apostles.

The church investigated the Waldensians’ teachings at the Third Lateran Council (1179) and condemned the believers as heretics.³ Subsequent councils repeated this condemnation of heresy, bringing severe persecution, and causing them to flee to more hospitable locations. As a result, their teachings spread to far-flung regions of Europe. Unlike



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Were the Waldensians Sabbathkeepers?

other reform-minded groups, the Waldensians did not disappear, nor were they absorbed into other movements, but have continued their presence until today.

Sabbath Observance Among Waldensians

Seventh-day Adventists have been particularly interested in this movement, because many Protestants see them as a connecting link between the early church and the Protestant Reformation. Of special interest to Adventists is their practice of Sabbathkeeping, as already noted. Based on Ellen White’s statement in *The Great Controversy*, Adventists have believed that *some* Waldensians kept the Sabbath, but not necessarily a sizable group.

In response, the Waldensians, and even some Adventists, have said that Ellen White was not a historian. One Adventist historian has even gone so far as to suggest that *The Great Controversy* needs to be revised and brought up-to-date with present scholarship, because there is no pri-

mary source evidence for Waldensian Sabbath observance.

A Quest for Evidence

For several years I have researched, with the help of graduate students, archaic sources from European libraries for evidence of Sabbathkeeping among the Waldensians. Such research is challenging because Waldensian documents themselves have been burned or otherwise destroyed through centuries of persecution.⁴ The only evidence one finds comes from the mouths of their inquisitors, who often portray them as a heretical movement.

One of the primary sources of evidence of Waldensian Sabbathkeeping during the first half of the thirteenth century comes from a collection of five books written against the Cathars and Waldensians about 1241-1244 by Dominican inquisitor Father Moneta of Cremona in northern Italy.

Moneta passionately defended himself against criticism from Waldensians and Cathars that Catholics were transgressors of the Sabbath commandment. In the chapter *De*

Left: The College of the Barbes (Waldensian itinerant preachers) in Pra del Torno.

Below: The entrance to a cave in the Valley of Angrogna used by the Waldensians to hide to escape religious persecution.



Sabbato, et De Die Dominico he discussed the significance of the seventh-day Sabbath of Exodus 20:8, “Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy,” and contrasted it with the value of the Lord’s day, his term for the first day of the week.⁵

Anti-Sabbath Arguments Against Waldensians

Moneta claimed that the Sabbath was for the Jews, pointing out that it was a memorial of Creation and of their liberation from Egypt. The Jewish Sabbath, he said, 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 continued his dispute by referring to Galatians 4:10, 11, stating, “It is sin to observe days.” He continued by pointing out that circumcision “will be of no benefit to you” (Gal. 5:2,

3, NASB),⁶ and neither would Sabbathkeeping. Moneta concluded by quoting Colossians 2:16, commenting that “days related to Jewish festivals are not observed, on the contrary, the days instituted by the Church, and that is it.”⁷

Moneta’s treatise clearly shows that a sizable group of Waldensians and Cathars in northern Italy and southern France during the thirteenth century were worshipping on a day other than Sunday, namely, the seventh-day Sabbath. Ironically, Moneta’s Catholic arguments against Sabbathkeeping were used by Waldensians toward

Adventists after Adventists began sharing the long-forgotten Sabbath truth with them.

Sizable Sabbathkeeping Group

Sabbathkeeping among Waldensians was most widespread in Bohemia and Moravia, places to which they fled during papal persecution. A fifteenth-century manuscript, published by church historian Johann Döllinger in *History of the Sects*, reports that Waldensians 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.”⁸

These evidences from such primary sources clearly show that Sabbathkeeping was a practice among a good segment of Waldensians in the thirteenth century, continuing into the fifteenth century. They also confirm the validity of *The Great Controversy*’s account of Sabbathkeeping among early Waldensians.

What led the Waldensians of northern Italy to give up Sabbathkeeping? The answer goes back to the time of the Reformation. In 1532, at a meeting between Waldensians and

representatives of the French Reformation, held in the Valley of Angrogna, most of the Waldensians voted to join the French Reformation.

Consequently, they stopped training their itinerant preachers, or “barbes,” at the College of the Barbes in Pra del Torno and instead sent their pastoral candidates to Geneva, Switzerland, to be educated by John Calvin and his associates. Calvin believed that the Sabbath still had spiritual significance, but that the literal seventh day was ceremonial and a shadow, basing his view on the same scriptural passages as the inquisitor had used against the Waldensians.⁹ The new generation of pastors educated under Calvin no longer taught the seventh-day Sabbath, but Sunday, as the day of worship.

These significant findings of Waldensian Sabbathkeeping invite further investigation into manuscripts prior to the twelfth century that may bring to light even more evidence about Sabbathkeeping among early Protestants in Italy and France. ■

¹ Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1911), p. 65.

² See, e.g., Earle E. Cairns, *Christianity Through the Centuries: A History of the Christian Church*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), p. 221.

³ <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/09017b.htm> (accessed Jan. 23, 2017); <http://www.catholic.org/encyclopedia/view.php?id=6882> (accessed Jan. 23, 2017).

⁴ See James Hastings, *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1954), Vol. XII, p. 665.

⁵ Moneta and Tommaso Agostino Ricchini, *Venerabilis Patris Monetae Cremonensis ordinis praedicatorum S. P. Dominico Aequalis adversus Catharos et Valdenses libri quinque: Quos ex manuscriptis codd. Vaticanis, Bononiensibus, ac Neapolitanis* (Rome: 1743; reprinted, Ridgewood, N.J.: 1964), pp. 475–477.

⁶ Scripture quotations marked NASB are from the *New American Standard Bible*, copyright © 1960, 1962, 1963, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1995 by The Lockman Foundation. Used by permission.

⁷ Moneta and Ricchini, pp. 476, 477.

⁸ Johann Döllinger, *Beiträge zur Sektengeschichte des Mittelalters* (Munich: Beck, 1890), Vol. II, p. 662.

⁹ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (1536), trans. Ford L. Battles (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), p. 23.



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