

CHAPTER 2

The Waldenses—Their Missions and Martyrdoms

Their Synod and College—Their Theological Tenets—Romaunt Version of the New Testament—The Constitution of their Church—Their Missionary Labours—Wide Diffusion of their Tenets—The Stone Smiting the Image.

One would like to have a near view of the barbes or pastors, who presided over the school of early Protestant theology that existed in the valleys, and to know how it fared with evangelical Christianity in the ages that preceded the Reformation. But the time is remote, and the events are dim. We can but doubtfully glean from a variety of sources the facts necessary to form a picture of this venerable Church, and even then the picture is not complete. The theology of which this was one of the fountain-heads was not the clear, well-defined, and comprehensive system which the sixteenth century gave us; it was only what the faithful men of the Lombard Churches had been able to save from the wreck of primitive Christianity. True religion, being a revelation, was from the beginning complete and perfect; nevertheless, in this as in every other branch of knowledge, it is only by patient labour that man is able to extricate and arrange all its parts, and to come into the full possession of truth. The theology taught in former ages in the peak-environed valley in which we have in imagination placed ourselves was drawn from the Bible. The atoning death and justifying righteousness of Christ was its cardinal truth. This, the Nobla Leycon [Noble Lesson] and other ancient documents abundantly testify. The Nobla Leycon sets forth with tolerable clearness the doctrine of the Trinity, the fall of man, the incarnation of the Son, the perpetual authority of the Decalogue as given by God [this disproves the charge of Manicheism brought against them by their enemies], the need of Divine grace in order to good works, the necessity of holiness, the institution of the ministry, the resurrection of the body, and the eternal bliss of heaven. [Sir Samuel Morland gives the Nobla Leycon in full in his History of the Churches of the Waldenses. Allix (chap. 18) gives a summary of it.] This creed its professors exemplified in lives of evangelical virtue. The blamelessness of the Waldenses passed into a proverb, so that one more than ordinarily exempt from the vices of his time was sure to be

suspected of being a Vaudes. [The Nobla Leycon has the following passage: -
-"If there be an honest man, who desires to love God and fear Jesus Christ, who will neither slander, nor swear, nor lie, nor commit adultery, nor kill, nor steal, nor avenge himself of his enemies, they presently say of such a one he is a Vaudes, and worthy of death."]

If doubt there were regarding the tenets of the Waldenses, the charges which their enemies have preferred against them would set that doubt at rest, and make it tolerably certain that they held substantially what the apostles before their day, and the Reformers after it, taught. The indictment against the Waldenses included a formidable list of "heresies." They held that there had been no true Pope since the days of Sylvester; that temporal offices and dignities were not meet for preachers of the Gospel; that the Pope's pardons were a cheat; that purgatory was a fable; that relics were simply rotten bones which had belonged to one knew not whom; that to go on pilgrimage served no end, save to empty one's purse; that flesh might be eaten any day if one's appetite served him; that holy water was not a whit more efficacious than rain-water; and that prayer in a barn was just as effectual as if offered in a church. They were accused, moreover, of having scoffed at the doctrine of transubstantiation, and of having spoken blasphemously of Rome as the harlot of the Apocalypse. [See a list of numerous heresies and blasphemies charged upon the Waldenses by the Inquisitor-Reynerius, who wrote about the year 1250, and extracted by Allix (chap. 22).]

There is reason to believe, from recent historical researches, that the Waldenses possessed the New Testament in the vernacular. The "Lingua Romana," or Romaunt tongue, was the common language of the south of Europe from the eighth to the fourteenth century. It was the language of the troubadours and of men of letters in the Dark Ages. Into this tongue—the Romaunt—was the first translation of the whole of the New Testament made so early as the twelfth century. This fact Dr. Gilly has been at great pains to prove in his work, *The Romaunt Version of the Gospel according to John*. [The Romaunt Version of the Gospel according to John, from MS. preserved in Trinity College, Dublin, and in the Bibliotheque du Roi, Paris. By William Stephen Gilly, D.D., Canon of Durham, and Vicar of Norham. Lond., 1848.] The sum of what Dr. Gilly, by a patient investigation into facts, and a great array of historic documents, maintains, is that all the books of the New Testament were translated from the Latin Vulgate into the Romaunt, that this was the first literal version since the fall of the empire, that it was made

in the twelfth century, and was the first translation available for popular use. There were numerous earlier translations, but only of parts of the Word of God, and many of these were rather paraphrases or digests of Scripture than translations, and, moreover, they were so bulky, and by consequence so costly, as to be utterly beyond the reach of the common people. This Romaunt version was the first complete and literal translation of the New Testament of Holy Scripture; it was made, as Dr. Gilly, by a chain of proofs, shows, most probably under the superintendence and at the expense of Peter Waldo of Lyons, not later than 1180, and so is older than any complete version in German, French, Italian, Spanish, or English. This version was widely spread in the south of France, and in the cities of Lombardy. It was in common use among the Waldenses of Piedmont, and it was no small part, doubtless, of the testimony borne to truth by these mountaineers to preserve and circulate it. Of the Romaunt New Testament six copies have come down to our day. A copy is preserved at each of the four following places: Lyons, Grenoble, Zurich, Dublin; and two copies at Paris. These are small, plain, and portable volumes, contrasting with those splendid and ponderous folios of the Latin Vulgate, penned in characters of gold and silver, richly illuminated, their bindings decorated with gems, inviting admiration rather than study, and unfitted by their size and splendour for the use of the people.

The Church of the Alps, in the simplicity of its constitution, may be held to have been a reflection of the Church of the first centuries. The entire territory included in the Waldensian limits was divided into parishes. In each parish was placed a pastor, who led his flock to the living waters of the Word of God. He preached, he dispensed the Sacraments, he visited the sick, and catechised the young. With him was associated in the government of his congregation a consistory of laymen. The synod met once a year. It was composed of all the pastors, with an equal number of laymen, and its most frequent place of meeting was the secluded mountain-engirdled valley at the head of Angrogna. Sometimes as many as a hundred and fifty barbes, with the same number of lay members, would assemble. We can imagine them seated—it may be on the grassy slopes of the valley—a venerable company of humble, learned, earnest men, presided over by a simple moderator (for higher office or authority was unknown amongst them), and suspending their deliberations respecting the affairs of their Churches, and the condition of their flocks, only to offer their prayers and praises to the Eternal, while the majestic snow-clad peaks looked down upon them from the silent

firmament. There needed, verily, no magnificent fane, no blazonry of mystic rites to make their assembly august.

The youth who here sat at the feet of the more venerable and learned of their barbes used as their text-book the Holy Scriptures. And not only did they study the sacred volume; they were required to commit to memory, and be able accurately to recite, whole Gospels and Epistles. This was a necessary accomplishment on the part of public instructors in those ages when printing was unknown, and copies of the Word of God were rare. Part of their time was occupied in transcribing the Holy Scriptures, or portions of them, which they were to distribute when they went forth as missionaries. By this, and by other agencies, the seed of the Divine Word was scattered throughout Europe more widely than is commonly supposed. To this a variety of causes contributed. There was then a general impression that the world was soon to end. Men thought that they saw the prognostications of its dissolution in the disorder into which all things had fallen. The pride, luxury, and profligacy of the clergy, led not a few laymen to ask if better and more certain guides were not to be had. Many of the troubadours were religious men, whose lays were sermons. The hour of deep and universal slumber had passed; the serf was contending with his seigneur for personal freedom, and the city was waging war with the baronial castle for civic and corporate independence. The New Testament—and, as we learn from incidental notices, portions of the Old—coming at this juncture in a language understood alike in the court as in the camp, in the city as in the rural hamlet, was welcome to many, and its truths obtained a wider promulgation than perhaps had taken place since the publication of the Vulgate by Jerome.

After passing a certain time in the school of the barbes, it was not uncommon for the Waldensian youth to proceed to the seminaries in the great cities of Lombardy, or to the Sorbonne at Paris. There they saw other customs, were initiated into other studies, and had a wider horizon around them than in the seclusion of their native valleys. Many of them became expert dialecticians, and often made converts of the rich merchants with whom they traded, and the landlords in whose houses they lodged. The priests seldom cared to meet in argument the Waldensian missionary.

To maintain the truth in their own mountains was not the only object of this people. They felt their relations to the rest of Christendom. They sought to drive back the darkness, and re-conquer the kingdom which Rome had

overwhelmed. They were an evangelistic as well as an evangelical Church. It was an old law among them that all who took orders in their Church should, before being eligible to a home charge, serve three years in the mission field. The youth on whose head the assembled barbes laid their hands saw in prospect not a rich benefice, but a possible martyrdom. The ocean they did not cross. Their mission field was the realms that lay outspread at the foot of their own mountains. They went forth two and two, concealing their real character under the guise of a secular profession, most commonly that of merchants or pedlars. They carried silks, jewellery, and other articles, at that time not easily purchasable save at distant mart, and they were welcomed as merchants where they would have been spurned as missionaries. The door of the cottage and the portal of the baron's castle stood equally open to them. But their address was mainly shown in selling, without money and without price, rarer and more valuable merchandise than the gems and silks which had procured them entrance. They took care to carry with them, concealed among their wares or about their persons, portions of the Word of God, their own transcription commonly, and to this they would draw the attention of the inmates. When they saw a desire to possess it, they would freely make a gift of it where the means of purchase were absent.

There was no kingdom of Southern and Central Europe to which these missionaries did not find their way, and where they did not leave traces of their visit in the disciples whom they made. On the west they penetrated into Spain. In Southern France they found congenial fellow-labourers in the Albigenses, by whom the seeds of truth were plentifully scattered over Dauphine and Languedoc. On the east, descending the Rhine and the Danube, they leavened Germany, Bohemia, and Poland with their doctrines, their track being marked with the edifices for worship and the stakes of martyrdom that arose around their steps. [Stranski, apud, Lenfant's Concile de Constance, quoted by Count Valerian Krasinski in his History of the Rise, Progress, and Decline of the Reformation in Poland, vol. i., p. 53; Lond., 1838. Illyricus Flaccius, in his Catalogus Testium Veritatis (Amstelodami, 1679), says: "Pars Valdensium in Germaniam transiit atque apud Bohemos in Polonia ac Livonia sedem fixit." Leger says that the Waldenses had, about the year 1210, Churches in Slavonia, Sarmatia, and Livonia. (Histoire Generale des Eglises Evangeliques des Vallees du Piedmont ou Vaudois, vol. ii., pp. 336,337; 1669.)] Even the Seven-hilled City they feared not to enter, scattering the seed on ungenial soil, if perchance some of it might take root and grow. Their naked feet and coarse woollen garments made them

somewhat marked figures, in the streets of a city that clothed itself in purple and fine linen; and when their real errand was discovered, as sometimes chanced, the rulers of Christendom took care to further, in their own way, the springing of the seed, by watering it with the blood of the men who had sowed it [McCrie, Hist. Ref. in Italy, p. 4].

Thus did the Bible in those ages, veiling its majesty and its mission, travel silently through Christendom, entering homes and hearts, and there making its abode. From her lofty seat Rome looked down with contempt upon the Book and its humble bearers. She aimed at bowing the necks of kings, thinking if they were obedient meaner men would not dare revolt, and so she took little heed of a power which, weak as it seemed, was destined at a future day to break in pieces the fabric of her dominion. By-and-by she began to be uneasy, and to have a boding of calamity. The penetrating eye of Innocent III. detected the quarter whence danger was to arise. He saw in the labours of these humble men the beginning of a movement which, if permitted to go on and gather strength, would one day sweep away all that it had taken the toils and intrigues of centuries to achieve. He straightway commenced those terrible crusades which wasted the sowers but watered the seed, and helped to bring on, at its appointed hour, the catastrophe which he sought to avert.