



THE LEGACY OF THE WALDENSANS FOR CHRISTIAN EDUCATION: RESILIENCE LESSONS IN TURBULENT DAYS

Karla A. C. Oliveira, Elon Gomes de Souza, and Jean de Jesus da Silva

This qualitative study, grounded in bibliographic and documentary research, explores the educational legacy of the Waldensian movement as a historical exemplar of faith and leadership formation amid persecution. Drawing from their experiences in hostile contexts, it identifies core pedagogical principles and practices that sustained a resilient Christian community and its leaders. Key findings reveal an approach centered on the primacy of Scripture, holistic and missionary-oriented formation, communal solidarity and resistance, and ethical integrity in living out faith. These principles were embodied in practices such as Scripture-based teaching and memorization, practical training for leadership, clandestine educational networks, and consistent witness between belief and daily conduct. The study concludes that the Waldensian legacy offers a valuable biblical-historical model for contemporary Christian education and emerging leadership development, equipping believers with persevering faith and adaptive resilience to resist adversity and endure in turbulent or hostile environments.

In a context marked by rapid transformations and social instability, resilience has emerged as one of the most relevant competencies for human development. In this study, the definition proposed by Cyrulnik (2004) is adopted, where resilience corresponds to the capacity to face adversity, adapt to change, and reorganize oneself positively after critical experiences—an ability considered essential in the 21st century. In this sense, this competence promotes the development of coping strategies and personal strengthening in the face of the challenges imposed by the complexity of the contemporary world (Stover et al., 2024).

According to Luthar, Cicchetti, and Becker (2000), the development of resilience is strongly influenced by protective contexts, such as the school and family environments. The school, in this regard, represents a privileged space for the formation

of resilient individuals, as it provides structured experiences, socioemotional support, and opportunities for the reconstruction of meaning. Nevertheless, it is within the family that the deepest foundations for the development of resilience are established through stable affective bonds, balanced discipline, spiritual values, and the daily practice of ethical living.

Despite this, intolerance to frustration—defined as the difficulty in accepting the discrepancy between desire and reality—has recently been identified as a factor that contributes to giving up in the face of obstacles (Ruiz-Ortega & Berrios-Martos, 2025). As said by Andrade and Romanholi (2023), this condition may lead to emotional fragility, compromising both personal development and collective coexistence. In a contemporary scenario marked by emotional instability and the loss of ethical references, the formation of resilient individuals has become an urgent challenge for education.

In this context, education constitutes an essential instrument in promoting individuals capable of dealing with contemporary challenges in a critical, emotionally balanced, and ethically grounded manner. Christian pedagogy, by valuing integral formation—intellectual, emotional, social, and spiritual—offers an approach that favors the development of resilience. The American writer Ellen G. White (2021), in the book *Education*, affirmed that the challenges of life, when faced with faith and purpose, are essential instruments in the educational and formative process. From this perspective, it becomes vital to teach future generations that:

This world is not a parade ground, but a battlefield. All are called to endure hardness, as good soldiers. They are to be strong and quit themselves like men. Let them be taught that the true test of character is found in the willingness to bear burdens, to take the hard place, to do the work that needs to be done, though it brings no earthly recognition or reward. (White, 2021, p. 295)

Among the examples recorded in history, the Waldensians emerged as a resilient group that preserved the truth of the Bible during the Middle Ages, facing persecution and resisting the influence of the Roman Catholic Church (White, 2017). According to Wylie (1860), the Waldensians, who arose in the 12th century, constituted a Christian movement with a strong pedagogical orientation, whose commitment to the teaching of the Scriptures and to the moral formation of their members made them a historical example of resistance and faithfulness. Even in the face of the most severe persecutions, the Waldensians preserved the practice of education by maintaining schools and cultivating biblical reading as the foundation for the formation of their children.

Although studies exist on the historical trajectory of the Waldensians and their religious resistance, research that systematically analyzes the contribution of this group to Christian education and to the formation of resilient individuals in contexts of persecution remains limited. This lack of investigation reveals an academic gap regarding the understanding of the pedagogical elements that sustained the continuity and religious identity of this movement over time. Considering this, the following research problem emerges: what was the contribution of the Waldensians to Christian

education in the formation of resilient individuals capable of resisting persecution without renouncing their religious convictions?

The purpose of this study, grounded in bibliographic and documentary research, is to analyze the legacy of the Waldensians for Christian education, with particular attention to the principles that sustained faithful leadership under persecution, to identify educational practices that may inspire the formation of resilient individuals in contemporary contexts of instability and crisis. To achieve this objective, three specific goals are proposed: (1) to describe the origin and development of the Waldensians, considering the historical circumstances that shaped their trajectory; (2) to examine the educational practices that contributed to the formation and continuity of the Waldensian Christian community, especially during periods of persecution; and (3) to analyze the lessons drawn from the Waldensian experience for contemporary Christian education, highlighting strategies that promote the formation of faithful and resilient individuals in the face of the challenges of secularization.

The relevance of this theme lies in the recovery of this model of resistance and faith, proposing an educational reflection on how historical experiences may offer insights for confronting contemporary challenges. Furthermore, this research enables the articulation between education, theology, history, and psychology, fostering interdisciplinary approaches to human and collective resilience in contexts of oppression. A study of this nature contributes to enriching educational, historical, and ethical debates by highlighting a tradition that expresses resilience through faith, education, and community life. In addition, it may offer the academic literature new perspectives on alternative pedagogies and provide readers with elements for a deeper reflection on dignified and hopeful resistance in the face of adversity. Finally, it is expected that the results will contribute to strengthening Christian pedagogical practice by inspiring educational initiatives that promote not only the acquisition of knowledge but also the consolidation of principles and values in turbulent times.

ORIGINS AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE WALDENSIAN MOVEMENT

In the 12th century, a period marked by profound social and religious transformations in medieval Europe, the Roman Church consolidated itself as the hegemonic institution in the West, holding political, spiritual, and economic power. Within this context, movements of dissent emerged in search of a more authentic spirituality aligned with the Scriptures. Among them, the Waldensians stood out, advocating a Christian practice that differed from the ostentatious practices of the institutionalized Church. As Sofia V. Bompiani (1897) reported in *A Short History of the Italian Waldenses*,

In the valleys of the Cottian Alps, between Mount Cenis and Mount Viso, a Bible-loving people have lived from "time immemorial." They have been persecuted and exiled by the Bible-hating power which has its seat in Rome. . . . They refused to acknowledge the Roman pontiff as the Vicar of Christ; to bow down to the wafer and believe it the body of Christ; to confess to priests, or to give up the Bible. (p. 1–2)

There is historical debate regarding when and how the Waldensians first emerged. Early Protestant historians believed that the movement began as early as the apostolic period—that is, in the first centuries of Christianity—which would grant the Waldensians a very ancient origin independent of the Roman Church. The Protestant historian Antoine Monastier (1859) argued that Peter Waldo was not the founder of the Waldensian movement but rather someone who joined an already existing Christian group. He bases this claim on three main points: first, Waldo's preaching began only around 1180, while there are records of the movement predating this period; second, documents such as the poem "The Noble Lesson," dated approximately to the year 1100, indicate that Waldensian doctrine was already established prior to Waldo's activity; and finally, sources from the 12th century refer to these Christians as "Waldensians" not because of Peter Waldo, but because they lived in mountainous valleys. These indications suggest that the movement originated before Waldo, although he later became one of its most prominent figures.

Consistent with Collins (1996), the various names used throughout history to designate the Waldensians—such as *Vaudois*, *Valdesi*, and *Waldenses*—reflect linguistic and cultural variations. During the Middle Ages, names often indicated geographic origin or occupation rather than family lineage. For this reason, it is possible that the name "Waldo" arose from Peter's association with the "men of the valleys," rather than the valleys being named after him, which strengthens the idea that the Waldensian movement existed before his involvement.

Catholic historians, on the other hand, maintain that the Waldensians were founded by Peter Waldo, a wealthy merchant from Lyon who converted during the 12th century (Lambert, 1992). Waldo lived in a city in southern France and experienced his conversion around 1173 after a profound awareness of the vanity of wealth. Devoting himself to the reading of the Scriptures, he made a firm decision that transformed not only his own life but also the lives of many who chose to follow his example. He dedicated himself to preaching in favor of evangelical simplicity, renouncing material possessions and financing the translation of the Scriptures into the vernacular—the language of the common people—specifically the Romaunt dialect (Audisio, 1999; Monastier, 1859).

Although spiritually transformative, this initiative was perceived by the Catholic hierarchy as subversive since the reading of the Bible in commonly spoken language was considered a threat to ecclesiastical authority. As Kienzle (1998) observed, the mere act of laypeople preaching publicly was interpreted as a direct challenge to the clerical monopoly over the sacred. Consequently, ecclesiastical authorities expressed discomfort with the fact that Waldo lacked formal theological training and, especially, that he used a translation of the Bible in the vernacular rather than the traditional Latin version (the Vulgate), which was reserved for the clergy.

In 1179, Waldo participated in the Third Lateran Council in Rome, where his vow of poverty was acknowledged by Pope Alexander III. On that occasion, he presented his *Profession of Faith*, a document affirming his adherence to the principles of Christian orthodoxy, like those required from individuals accused of heresy. Despite this, Waldo did not obtain ecclesiastical authorization to continue preaching. Nevertheless, he and his followers—known as *Pauperes* ("the Poor")—continued their evangelistic activities. In response, the Archbishop of Lyon condemned him, and later Pope Lucius III issued

the bull *Ad abolendam* during the Synod of Verona in 1184, officially prohibiting the activities of the Waldensians (Encyclopaedia Britannica, n.d.).

The crucial point of Waldensian theology was evangelical simplicity. Waldo argued that the true Church was not identified by pomp, but by faithfulness to the Word of God. Thus, the practice of itinerant preaching, discipleship, and the refusal to swear oaths or resort to violence marked their identity (Stephens, 1998). In Audisio's (1999) view, this ascetic ideal—understood as the exercise of faith and commitment to spiritual life—represented not only a protest against clerical luxury, but also an attempt to reconstruct the experience of the early Christian church, referring to the example of the apostles. Nevertheless, the movement quickly came into conflict with the Church, leading to various actions of persecution and repression. The Waldensians were classified as heretics, and their refusal to submit to ecclesiastical authority and the official dogmas of the Roman Church motivated campaigns of marginalization and condemnation, often resulting in social exclusion, physical violence, and even death.

In Luke 21:12–17, Jesus declares: “But before all these things, they will lay their hands on you and persecute you . . . You will be hated by all for My name's sake” (*New King James Version*, 1982). Before describing the eschatological events, Jesus prepares His disciples for the reality of persecution that will accompany their mission.

In this text, opposition is presented not as a sign of divine abandonment but as the context in which faithful witness is rendered. Jesus assures His followers that persecution will provide opportunities to testify before rulers and authorities (Luke 21:13) and promises to grant them wisdom that their adversaries will be unable to withstand (Luke 21:15). As Bruce explains, the emphasis is not on escape from suffering but on God's sustaining presence and sovereign care, even when persecution results in imprisonment or death (Bruce, 1990).

Biblical scholars have observed that Luke's description intentionally echoes Old Testament passages such as Micah 7:6, Zechariah 13:3, and Daniel 11–12, placing the disciples' experience within the broader biblical pattern of the faithful remnant who endures hostility while remaining loyal to God (Pao & Schnabel, 2014). Read against this biblical background, the Waldensians' commitment to preserving and proclaiming Scripture despite persecution reflects a historical experience that resonates with the pattern of faithful witness described by Luke.

This biblical perspective provides an interpretive framework for understanding Waldensian leadership. Like the disciples described in Luke 21, Waldensian leaders conducted their ministry in contexts of persecution, relying on Scripture and remaining faithful despite social exclusion, imprisonment, and the threat of death.

The Waldensians eventually separated from the Roman Church and came to follow the Bible alone as the authority for faith and practice (Collins, 1996). As said by Charles Beard (1883),

The Waldensians were among the earliest biblical Christians. They translated the Holy Scriptures into their own language and explained them according to their natural sense. They defended the universal priesthood of believers. They delivered a second blow to sacerdotal doctrine by denying the validity of sacraments administered by an impious priest. Their only sacraments were Baptism and the Eucharist; they rejected purgatory, indulgences, prayers for the

dead, and the invocation of saints. Their moral conduct was considered irreproachable. (p. 24)

In 1184, the Waldensians were condemned as heretics by the Council of Verona. Brooke (1975) emphasized that, despite persecution, the Waldensians were not extinguished but instead developed a resilient communal structure, spreading throughout France, Italy, and regions within the Alpine valleys of Piedmont—a remote area that favored the preservation of their faith in secrecy and isolation. This resistance was possible because, as Kaelber (1995) perceived, the movement not only rejected clerical hierarchy but also established its own discipline based on communal life and asceticism.

Persecution against the Waldensians was intense. Wylie (1860) recounted episodes in which entire communities were massacred in the Alpine mountains. Muston (1866) referred to the Waldensians as the “Israel of the Alps,” highlighting the parallel between the resistance of a persecuted people and the biblical narrative of Israel’s survival. Mitchell (1853) and Monastier (1859) added that, despite human and material losses, the Waldensians maintained their faith firmly, sustained by the conviction that the Bible was the only rule of faith and practice.

Waldensian theology also engaged with the medieval context. Pita (2014), in a comparative study, demonstrated that between the 12th and 14th centuries the Waldensians developed a view of history as a struggle between the true Church—an invisible body faithful to the Scriptures—and the institutionalized Church, corrupted by power. This understanding later influenced Protestant theology by anticipating ideas concerning apostasy and the restoration of biblical faith.

White (1883) described the Waldensians as guardians of truth during times of spiritual darkness, emphasizing their fidelity to the Scriptures and their commitment to preaching. For Tourn (1999), although this perspective is confessional, it coincides with historical analyses that recognize the Waldensians as a unique movement of biblical preservation and spiritual resistance.

Thus, the Waldensian legacy is multifaceted: at once a form of religious resistance, a social protest, and a testimony of faith. Stephens (1998) observed that their history reveals a people who, despite marginalization and persecution, survived through communal cohesion and their trust in the Scriptures. From a sociological perspective, Kaelber (1995) suggested that their asceticism was not merely renunciation but a means of redefining identity within a society marked by clerical centralization and violence.

As Lambert (1992) pointed out, the Waldensians constituted one of the most remarkable medieval lay movements that, inspired by the reading of the Scriptures, challenged ecclesiastical authority by claiming the centrality of preaching and a life modeled after the apostles. Other scholars, such as Gabriel Audisio (1999), also recognized the Waldensians as precursors of the Protestant Reformation, since centuries before Luther they were already defending principles such as the use of the Bible in the vernacular, criticism of clerical hierarchy, and a return to evangelical simplicity. Euan Cameron (2000) reinforced this perspective by interpreting the Waldensians as an expression of reformist rejection prior to the formal Reformation.

Led by Peter Waldo in the 12th century, the Waldensians translated significant portions of the New Testament into the Romaunt dialect, a form of vernacular language derived from Vulgar Latin and spoken in southern Europe. This initiative aimed to make the Scriptures accessible to the common people, thereby challenging the Church's exclusive control over the reading and interpretation of the Bible. The translation and preaching in the vernacular were viewed as subversive by ecclesiastical authorities, leading to the official prohibition of such texts at the Council of Toulouse (1299). Despite persecution, manuscripts of this translation survived and were preserved in locations such as Lyon, Zurich, and the University of Cambridge, thanks to the collection conducted by Sir Samuel Morland in the 17th century (Froom, 1946).

At the beginning of the 13th century, part of the Waldensian movement began to reintegrate into Catholic orthodoxy, drawing closer again to the doctrines and practices of the Roman Church. At the same time, persecutions against the movement became increasingly severe, to the point that in many regions the group was nearly extinguished by the end of that century. To ensure survival, the remaining Waldensians adopted strategies of concealment, such as abandoning their distinctive clothing—such as the *sabots*—to avoid identification by ecclesiastical or civil authorities. Historical records indicate that during conferences held in 1207 some Waldensian leaders, including Durand of Huesca, reconciled with the Church and founded the order of the “Poor Catholics,” whose purpose was to convert Waldensians who still resisted returning to the official faith (Encyclopaedia Britannica, n.d.).

A new chapter in Waldensian history began in 1526, when the French reformer Guillaume Farel presented the teachings of the Protestant Reformation to their leaders (called *barbes*). During a conference held in Cianforan, the Waldensians accepted important doctrinal changes: they recognized only two sacraments (baptism and the Lord's Supper), adopted the doctrine of predestination, and allowed voluntary celibacy for their ministers (Audisio, 1999; Stephens, 1998). By drawing closer to the Reformed tradition of Geneva, they came to be regarded as a Protestant church.

Nevertheless, persecutions continued for centuries, and only in 1848 did the Waldensians obtain civil recognition and religious freedom. During this long period, they endured severe persecutions and massacres due to the opposition of religious and political authorities, who viewed their doctrine and practices as a threat to the control of the Roman Church.

According to Froom (1946), the Waldensians reentered the broader European Christian scene through the Protestant Reformation. Rather than remaining isolated, they sought theological and practical alliances with the Reformers, recognizing in them the same search for a faith grounded in the Scriptures and in apostolic simplicity. Monastier (1859) clarified that by the end of the 15th century, the Waldensians were mainly confined to the Alpine valleys between France and Italy.

In the 16th century, however, the Waldensian movement faced several difficulties. As Johann Lorenz von Mosheim observed in *Institutes of Ecclesiastical History* (1841), although they adhered to the Protestant Reformation, they preserved many of their traditional practices for more than a century. Nevertheless, the devastating plague of 1630 caused great losses, including among their religious leaders, which required internal reorganization. As a result, they began to adopt more systematically the models of the French Reformed Church. According to Lemmo (2011),

after joining the Protestant Reformation, the Waldensians adopted many of its virtues but also fell into the same doctrinal conformism that affected Lutherans and Calvinists. Over time, they became attached to fixed interpretations of the Reformers, ceasing to pursue new understandings of the faith, even though they had historically been characterized by openness and resistance.

In the 17th century, the Waldensians living in the Piedmont Alps were harshly persecuted by local rulers who sought to force them to abandon their Protestant faith, bringing them close to total extermination. In 1655 they suffered a brutal massacre known as the “Piedmontese Easter,” which provoked international outrage and attracted the attention of writers such as John Milton. After this attack, they received support from European Protestant countries, which helped restore some of their rights. Toward the end of the century, in 1686, they were expelled once again, but in 1689, led by Pastor Henri Arnaud, they managed to return secretly to their valleys, reclaiming their lands through courage and armed resistance. Throughout the 18th century, the Waldensians continued to suffer persecution but preserved their traditions and were influenced by the ideas of the Enlightenment (Stephens, 1998).

At the beginning of the 19th century, with the French Revolution, they gained temporary freedom but later faced renewed repression. This context stimulated a religious revival supported by European reform movements. In 1848, through liberal reforms, the Waldensians obtained civil recognition and religious freedom in the Kingdom of Sardinia—an essential milestone for their institutional reorganization and missionary expansion. Between the 19th and 20th centuries, this new status enabled migrations to other regions such as the Americas and Australia, promoting the global expansion of the Waldensian movement (Cameron, 2000; Knight, 1983). According to Audisio (1999), the Waldensian case reveals the persistence of minority religious communities capable of resisting repression and preserving their traditions.

In brief, since their origin, the Waldensians faced intense persecution and massacres, particularly during the periods of religious wars in Europe. Despite this, they preserved their faith and gradually restored their communities. The Waldensian movement was not merely a peripheral episode in the history of medieval Christianity. On the contrary, it represented an experience that anticipated central issues of the Protestant Reformation, such as the authority of Scripture, the centrality of personal faith, and criticism of the opulence of the institutional Church.

EDUCATIONAL PRINCIPLES AND PRACTICES OF THE WALDENSIAINS AMID ADVERSITY

Bible-Centered Instruction

One of the central pillars of Waldensian pedagogy was the strong emphasis on the reading and memorization of the Bible. From the earliest centuries of their history, they translated the Scriptures and other Christian texts into local languages, promoting direct access to biblical content for everyone, including children. Many of them memorized the Gospels, the Psalms, the Epistles, and other significant portions of the Bible—a practice that proved vital, especially in times when books were confiscated or destroyed (Broadbent, 1931; Knight, 1983). They taught their children to read the Bible for themselves (Bompiani, 1897), something profoundly countercultural at the time. This

biblical instruction stood at the center of the formation of new generations, not only to preserve religious identity, but also to prepare them to face hostile contexts (Audisio, 1999). This practice was considered a fundamental requirement, and Waldensian children and youth, according to White (2021):

Were able to repeat large portions of both the Old and the New Testament. Thoughts of God were associated alike with the sublime scenery of nature and with the humble blessings of daily life. Little children learned to look with gratitude to God as the giver of every favor and every comfort. (p. 68)

Wylie (1860) supported this argument with the following statement:

The youth who here sat at the feet of the more venerable and learned of their barbes used as their textbook 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. (p. 10)

The Waldensian faith did not represent a doctrinal rupture but rather the preservation of a Christian tradition that dates to the apostolic era. According to White (2021), this spiritual legacy was characterized by simplicity, fervor, and unwavering fidelity to the Scriptures, even under persecution. Within a medieval context marked by the clerical monopoly over the Bible, the Waldensians carried out a countercultural act by translating the sacred text into the vernacular, challenging ecclesiastical authority and democratizing access to the Word of God.

This initiative represented a genuine “spiritual revolution,” insofar as it placed direct access to the Scriptures into the hands of the common people, thereby subverting the interpretative monopoly exercised by the Catholic clergy. By allowing individuals to learn from God through personal Bible reading, the Waldensians broke with the dominant hierarchical structure, fostering a spirituality grounded in the autonomy of faith and in individual responsibility before the Word of God.

More than merely teaching these truths, the Waldensians lived them faithfully, which earned them such a remarkable moral reputation that, at the time, any person known for honesty and piety could be accused of being a Waldensian. Wylie (1860), in his description of “The Noble Lesson” (*La Nobla Leyçon*), presented the following statement regarding the perception of the Waldensians:

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. (p. 8)

Wylie (1860) further explained that Waldensian theology, developed in the Alpine valleys between the 12th and 15th centuries, was firmly grounded in the Bible, with the atoning death of Christ and justification by faith as its central points. This doctrine, clearly expressed in documents such as the poem “The Noble Lesson,” also encompassed fundamental Christian beliefs such as the Trinity, the Fall of humanity,

the incarnation of Christ, the enduring validity of the Ten Commandments, the necessity of divine grace for the practice of good, holiness of life, the institution of the ministry, the resurrection of the body, and eternal life. In this poem, dated approximately to the 12th century and attributed to the Waldensians, it is stated:

O brothers, listen to a noble lesson:
 We must always watch and pray,
 For we see this world approaching its end.
 We must strive to perform good works,
 Seeing the end of this world drawing near.
 One thousand and four hundred years have now fully passed
 Since it was written thus: we are in the last times.
 We must desire little, for we are at the final extremity.
 We see daily the signs that must be fulfilled
 In the increase of evil and the decrease of good.
 These are the dangers that the Scripture mentions:
 In the Gospels and in the writings of Saint Paul.
 No living person can know the end.
 Therefore, we must fear all the more, since we are not certain
 Whether we shall die today or tomorrow.
 (Montet, 1888, pp. 42–43)

This Waldensian poem reveals a profound awareness of the moral and spiritual urgency arising from a world perceived as approaching its end, emphasizing vigilance, prayer, the practice of good works, and humility in the face of uncertainty about the final time. Its message resonates with contemporary concerns, in which social and political crises intensify the sense of global instability and ethical urgency.

Emphasis on the Formation of Missionary Leaders

The educational formation of the Waldensians was also mission-oriented; in other words, mission constituted the central axis of Waldensian identity and education (Wylie, 1860). The preachers, known as *barbes*, were trained for years in clandestine schools located in the Alpine valleys. Their leadership training included biblical doctrine, interpretation of the Scriptures, communication skills, and the defense of the faith, as well as strategies for resistance under pressure. Many also learned medicine and manual trades, which allowed them to travel in disguise, provide useful services to communities, and avoid raising suspicion. This combination of deep biblical education and practical training made them truly resilient missionaries (Audisio, 1999; Beard, 1883).

Wylie (1860) emphasized that, for the Waldensians, education was an act of missiological resistance: the formation of new generations aimed not only to preserve religious identity but also to equip them to operate in hostile contexts with discernment and faithfulness. As part of this preparation, according to White (2022), every candidate for ministry was required to dedicate three years to missionary service before assuming any position in the church.

To evangelize amid hostility, Waldensian missionaries traveled disguised as merchants, carrying portions of the New Testament translated into the vernacular language (*Romaunt*), often copied by hand. This approach combined profound biblical education with contextualized ministerial practice, making the *barbes* resilient and effective missionaries, even under the threat of imprisonment or death. Their objective went beyond merely preserving the faith in the Alpine valleys; it was a proactive movement of evangelization throughout Europe—from France to Poland, from Germany to Rome itself—driven by a biblical theology and a comprehensive commitment to the gospel (Beard, 1883; Wylie, 1860).

According to White (2022), the Waldensian missionaries were required to “serve three years in some mission field before taking charge of a church at home” (p. 70). This indicates that practical work preceded the leadership of a church. Pastoral ministry in that period required sacrifice, dedication, and a willingness to face dangers. Missionaries were sent out in pairs, usually with a more experienced mentor guiding a younger worker, fostering a process of leadership formation. They also met regularly for prayer and counsel, strengthening one another in the faith. Such a requirement reveals the dedication and preparation of these missionaries, who demonstrated total commitment to the cause of God. As the author further described:

They secretly carried about with them copies of the Bible, in whole or in part; and whenever an opportunity was presented, they called the attention of their customers to these manuscripts. Often an interest to read God’s word was thus awakened, and some portion was gladly left with those who desired to receive it. (White, 2022, p. 71)

The formation of Waldensian missionaries was therefore a rigorous, clandestine, and deeply spiritual process that combined biblical instruction, practical training, and real missionary experience. Inserted within a context of persecution, this training aimed not only to preserve the faith but also to advance it with courage, humility, and wisdom. It was a model that united theological conviction, emotional preparation, and practical resilience—forming leaders capable of evangelizing amid opposition without compromising the integrity of their faith.

Community Actions and Family Education

Mitchell (1853) also observed that the Waldensian educational structure was guided by principles of simplicity, discipline, and fidelity to faith—factors that contributed to its longevity and cultural resilience. Waldensian education was not individualistic in nature but lived out in fraternity. There was a clear centrality of family education, reinforced by a strong communal network. In the Alpine villages and refuges, entire families participated in the transmission of the faith.

The Waldensian community functioned as a cohesive system of spiritual and material support. Families shared common values, lived in proximity, and received itinerant preachers with hospitality, providing shelter and logistical assistance (Cameron, 1984; Cameron, 2000).

In addition, the Waldensians developed rudimentary and secret schools—the so-called “forest schools” or “mountain schools”—hidden in regions such as the Angrogna

Valley. In these clandestine centers, children were taught, preachers were trained, and theological knowledge was preserved. Oral tradition also played an essential role: narratives, hymns, and oral traditions transmitted the values and doctrines of the movement, keeping the faith alive even when access to written texts was impossible. Thus, spiritual formation was not limited to doctrinal instruction but was integrated into everyday life, characterized by discipline, fraternity, and commitment to education (Audisio, 1999; Bompiani, 1897).

Strategies of Resistance

The survival of the Waldensians throughout centuries of persecution was made possible by a set of practical strategies for survival. In practical terms, they created secret routes through the Alps that allowed the movement of people and the circulation of biblical manuscripts. These routes connected villages and refuges, sustaining the network of teaching and preserving the faith. Geography itself became an ally: valleys, caves, and mountains served as natural refuges against the armies of the crusades. This geographical resistance, combined with spiritual strength, explains why the Waldensians managed to survive while many other dissident movements were eliminated (Monastier, 1859; Wylie, 1860).

Even under constant threats, the Waldensians continued copying portions of the Bible by hand and training new generations of believers prepared to endure suffering. As Mitchell (1853) observed, the maintenance of clandestine schools and the dissemination of the Scriptures, even under intense persecution, reveal that for the Waldensians teaching went beyond mere religious instruction—it was a form of active resistance against oppression and an essential element for the survival of the movement. In this context, education assumed both a strategic and spiritual character, functioning as a means of preserving identity, faith, and communal cohesion.

In this regard, Pita (2014) explained that:

The Waldensians had an articulated and complex theological system that hinged around a self-appraisal as a chosen remnant, a peculiar conception of eschatology, the dismissal of Fathers' writings as authoritative, and the prophetic role assigned to the Roman Church as becomes apparent from juxtaposing the surviving documents. By necessity the Waldensian theology in general and of history in particular was not a mere speculative construct but rather a source of meaning and endurance to resist the persecutions throughout centuries. (p. 66)

Spiritually, the Waldensians cultivated hope in divine providence and viewed obedience to Christ as superior to obedience to the institutional Church. This conviction was expressed in their hymns, sermons, and teaching rituals, which conveyed courage and consolation to persecuted communities (White, 2021). Even in the face of massacres such as that of Mérindol (1545) and the "Piedmontese Easter" (1655), in which entire villages were destroyed, the Waldensians persevered. Faith was experienced as communal support, in which each person sustained the other through prayer, discipleship, and encouragement. Waldensian spirituality, therefore, was not merely theoretical but intensely lived in times of crisis and persecution.

In short, the spiritual resilience of the Waldensians was firmly grounded in the conviction that the Scriptures constituted the sole rule of faith and practice. This certainty provided not only spiritual direction but also a profound sense of mission, sustaining the belief that they possessed a divinely appointed purpose in the world. Even amid severe persecution, this Bible-centered faith motivated them to persevere—teaching, preaching, and living according to evangelical principles with courage and fidelity. This commitment placed them in direct opposition to the Roman Church, particularly because they promoted the reading of the Scriptures in the common language, thereby challenging the clerical monopoly over religious knowledge.

IMPLICATIONS OF THE WALDENSIAN EXPERIENCE FOR CONTEMPORARY CHRISTIAN EDUCATION

Although contemporary Western society does not face physical persecution as intense as that experienced by the Waldensians during the Middle Ages—when they endured extreme and violent repression for religious reasons—the growing process of secularization poses significant challenges to confessional Christian education. In the present context, this marginalization occurs in more subtle ways, assuming cultural and institutional forms, particularly within academic environments marked by the predominance of secular perspectives (Glanzer, Carpenter, & Lantinga, 2011; Jacobsen & Jacobsen, 2012).

This phenomenon does not manifest through coercion but through social and normative pressures that weaken the public expression of faith. For example, Fosnacht and Broderick (2020) demonstrated that students from minority religious traditions experience higher levels of discrimination on university campuses, indicating a form of concealed marginalization rooted in cultural perceptions. Similarly, Dalziel (2022) showed that secular-oriented universities often neglect theological reflection, demonstrating limited appreciation for academic contributions grounded in religious perspectives. Such attitudes constitute a less explicit but effective form of institutional exclusion that contributes to the marginalization of confessional thought within contemporary academic spaces.

These findings resonate with a statement attributed to Martin Luther, who warned:

I fear much that the universities will be found to be great gates leading down to hell, unless they take diligent care to explain the Holy Scriptures, and to engrave them in the hearts of our youth. I would not advise anyone to place his child where the Holy Scriptures are not regarded as the rule of life. Every institution where the word of God is not diligently studied, must become corrupt. (White, 1883, p. 3)

As Benne (2001) emphasized, higher education institutions that succeed in maintaining their religious identity authentically and consistently do so through three fundamental pillars. The first is the adoption of a comprehensive theological vision that understands faith as a complete interpretive narrative of reality, permeating all areas of knowledge. The second is the presence of a coherent institutional ethos, in which practices, symbols, and structures reflect and reinforce the confessional identity of the

university. The third and essential pillar is the presence of a representative group of members—faculty, students, and administrators—committed to practicing a biblical worldview. This model provides a practical and inspiring response to the contemporary challenges faced by confessional education within a pluralistic and secular environment.

The spiritual and intellectual heritage of the Waldensians offers valuable insights. Their emphasis on the centrality of Scripture and on direct engagement with the Bible highlights the necessity of solid, accessible, and personal biblical formation. Such formation enables Christians to ground and defend their faith critically and consciously, even in the face of cultural and ideological pressures prevalent in academic contexts. Contemporary apologetics (Frame, 2015; Mamosey & Maramis, 2025) likewise emphasizes that the defense of Christian faith must be grounded in divine revelation and provide a coherent framework for responding to intellectual challenges to Christianity.

It is important to note that within secular critical thought, reason, experience, and empiricism are the primary sources used to evaluate truth, often adopting a naturalistic and skeptical approach that does not depend on religious presuppositions. Christian critical thought, by contrast, also values reason, experience, and empirical evidence, but always in subordination to biblical revelation and the Christian tradition. In this framework, the Bible is considered a normative source of truth that guides and interprets the understanding of reality (Knight, 2010).

Contemporary studies have also identified the reading and study of Scripture as important facilitators of emotional and psychological resilience. Krause and Pargament (2018), for example, demonstrated that frequent engagement with the Bible—whether through individual reading or group study—acts as a coping strategy during crises. It promotes mental well-being by providing transcendent meaning to suffering, moderates the relationship between stressful events and hope, encourages benevolent forms of religious coping, and contributes to higher levels of hope in the face of adversity.

Moreover, the Waldensian emphasis on family and community education reaffirms that the transmission of faith cannot be delegated exclusively to institutions but must be lived out within the daily life of families and small communities. Such practices ensure the continuity and vitality of belief in the face of the spiritual emptiness often produced by secularization. George Knight (2010), a recognized scholar of the history of Christian education, emphasized the importance of family and community education as foundational to spiritual formation. He argued that effective confessional education transcends formal institutions and must be rooted in the home and the local community.

This perspective closely aligns with Waldensian practices, which viewed family and community as the primary agents of transmitting faith. Knight (2010) also noted that in times of increasing secularization, such community networks are essential for cultivating resilient spirituality by fostering mutual discipleship and continuous support—characteristics that ensured the survival and vitality of the Waldensian movement.

The educational practices developed by the Waldensians in contexts of persecution and institutional exclusion remain relevant for contemporary Christian formation, particularly in environments where faith is marginalized or relegated to the private sphere. Strategies such as home education, Bible study groups, and contextualized missionary training represent approaches that strengthen the lived experience of faith outside traditional institutional structures. According to Wang et al.

(2023), spiritual formation plays a central role in the development of emotional and vocational resilience among theology students, being strengthened by intentional practices such as prayer, biblical meditation, and collective discipleship.

In a contemporary context characterized by fragmented attention, excessive digital stimuli, and social instability, such practices reemerge as indispensable tools for strengthening both spiritual and mental resilience, creating solid foundations capable of sustaining Christian witness in times of crisis.

The Christian home is not merely an environment for instruction but the primary center of spiritual and moral formation, where character is shaped by considering the Scriptures and communion with God. Practices such as family worship, intentional biblical instruction throughout daily life, and family involvement in mission constitute strategies that not only strengthen faith but also cultivate spiritual resilience in the face of adversity. White (2013) highlighted that families firmly grounded in Christian principles are equipped to resist the pressures and corruptions of the world, preserving a faithful witness even in contexts of apostasy and opposition—realities that have marked and will continue to mark the journey of the true Christian.

Another study conducted by Dolcos et al. (2021) involving more than 200 participants demonstrated that religion provides important cognitive tools that help individuals become stronger when facing challenging situations. Stressful contexts may affect cognitive processes, leading to feelings of deep sadness, lack of motivation, or even emotional crises. Religious practice and involvement help individuals reinterpret such problems, regulate emotions more effectively, employ coping strategies, and strengthen self-confidence. In practical terms, this underscores the importance of prioritizing a solid biblical education that encourages both individual and communal study of Scripture, enabling students to ground their faith with critical and profound understanding.

In this regard, Roszak et al. (2025) noted that during crises and periods of profound instability, religion frequently serves as a resource that helps individuals remain connected to what is most crucial. Their findings also indicate that religiosity contributes to greater resilience by allowing individuals to adapt more effectively to stressful conditions. As the authors stated,

This enhanced resilience is achieved through a unique cognitive position rooted in faith, which serves as both its fruit and outcome. Such resilience highlights religion's pivotal role not merely as a coping mechanism but also as a source of profound psychological and existential stability in the face of adversity. (Roszak et al., 2025, p. 7)

Waldensian education was not restricted to formal institutions; the transmission of faith occurred in the daily life of families and small communities. For the contemporary context, this suggests that Christian education should actively involve and strengthen families and local communities, creating networks of spiritual support that promote the daily practice of faith. In this regard, the perspective of White (2007) is particularly illuminating:

Restoring and uplifting humanity begins in the home. The work of parents underlies every other. Society is composed of families and is what the heads of families make it. Out of the heart “spring the issues of life” (Proverbs 4:23). The heart of the community, of the church, and of the nation is the household. The well-being of society, the success of the church, and the prosperity of the nation depend upon home influences. (p. 197)

From this perspective, White (2007) argued that the home is not merely a component of Christian education but its fundamental foundation. By positioning the family as the “heart of the community, the church, and the nation,” it becomes evident that the spiritual vitality and success of any faith community depend directly on the quality of spiritual life cultivated daily within households. Thus, the Waldensian model is validated as a timeless principle: a robust faith within the community reflects a faith authentically lived in the home.

Another relevant aspect concerns pedagogical practices that encourage autonomy and critical thinking. By translating the Bible into the language of the people, the Waldensians fostered a responsible and autonomous faith. This implies that contemporary Christian education should promote critical thinking and research as essential tools for expanding human understanding of the natural world and, consequently, of God. Such an approach helps students develop a conscious and well-grounded faith. Research, therefore, should be conducted with the awareness that ultimate truth is revealed by God and that human reason must remain in harmony with this divine revelation (Taylor V, 2020).

Figure 1 summarizes the main educational principles of the Waldensian movement and their corresponding pedagogical practices, highlighting the relationship between formative values and concrete actions that contributed to the preservation of faith, community identity, and resilience in contexts of persecution.

Figure 1
Summary of the Waldensian Pedagogical Legacy



Although the Bible is now widely accessible in many languages and formats—something the Waldensians longed for and for which many of them risked their lives—many contemporary Christians do not actively make use of this privilege. While the Waldensians copied the Scriptures by hand and concealed them within their garments to distribute them in secret, many today neglect the regular reading of the Bible, even though it is readily available on their phones, bookshelves, and digital platforms. This reveals a historical paradox: what was once scarce and precious is now abundant yet often ignored. Encouraging the intentional reading of the Bible in the common language, both as a personal and communal practice, remains an essential formative act—not only for preserving faith but also for strengthening spiritual resilience in times of crisis and moral confusion.

CONCLUSIONS

In revisiting the course of this research, we return to the question that guided the study: would it be possible to find, within Christian history, a formative model capable of inspiring the development of resilience in times of spiritual and moral instability? The analysis of the Waldensian movement demonstrates that this experience represented not merely an episode of religious resistance, but an ongoing educational process through which faith, life, and daily practice became inseparable.

The historical trajectory examined reveals that the Waldensians anticipated debates that would later shape the Protestant Reformation, particularly by affirming the authority of Scripture and questioning the growing distance between religious institutions and authentic Christian life. Their resistance was sustained not merely through external opposition but, above all, through a consistent internal formation in which access to Scripture, communal life, and missionary commitment nurtured a spirituality capable of surviving even under constant persecution.

The contrast with the present reality becomes inevitable. While Waldensian communities risked their very lives to preserve and transmit the biblical text, today the abundance of resources and translations does not necessarily guarantee a consistent practice of reading and spiritual formation. Ease of access paradoxically coexists with indifference, revealing that the mere availability of the text cannot replace intentional commitment to its lived practice. In this sense, the Waldensian legacy reminds us that Christian formation requires discipline, communal commitment, and coherence between professed faith and daily life.

The contribution of this study, therefore, lies in demonstrating that the strength of the Waldensian movement did not reside solely in resistance to persecution but was grounded in a pedagogy that integrated biblical knowledge, moral formation, and practical mission. The resilience demonstrated by these communities cannot be reduced to a psychological capacity to endure hardship; rather, it emerged as a spiritual virtue cultivated through an education guided by Scripture and sustained by communal life. Because the Waldensian experience unfolded under persistent persecution, this study also considers Luke 21:12–19 as a biblical framework for understanding faithful witness under adversity.

It must be acknowledged, however, that this investigation presents limitations inherent to its scope. The focus on the period prior to the Waldensians' more intense contact with the Protestant Reformation does not allow for a full observation of the later transformations of the movement. Furthermore, the bibliographic nature of the research limits the analysis to available sources, without including direct examination of original historical documents. These limitations, however, also point to relevant avenues for future studies—whether through comparisons with other pre-Reformation movements, investigations into the pedagogical transformations of the Waldensians over the centuries, or the practical application of their educational principles in contemporary Christian contexts.

In conclusion, the Waldensian experience demonstrates that a faith sustained by intentional formation and coherent communal life can endure even in hostile environments. The pedagogy developed by this movement, forged amid persecution and clandestinity, does not belong solely to the past; rather, it casts a light of hope and issues a call to courage for the formation of a resilient faith and persevering practice—qualities that remain profoundly necessary for the challenges of the present and the future.

About the Authors

Karla Adriane Corrêa Oliveira, Ph.D., is a researcher and assistant professor in the Education Program at Amazonia Adventist College (FAAMA), Brazil. Her research focuses on implicit leadership theories (ILTs), developmental psychology, teacher education, and educational practices in Christian educational settings.

Elon Gomes de Souza holds a degree in Pedagogy from Amazonia Adventist College (FAAMA), Brazil. He currently serves as a staff member at FAAMA K–12 School and is affiliated with the *Innovative Practices and Integral Development* Research Group at the same institution. His research interests include the history of education, financial education, resilience, and the foundations of Christian education.

Jean de Jesus da Silva is an undergraduate student in the Pedagogy program at Amazonia Adventist College (FAAMA), Brazil. He is a member of the *Innovative Practices and Integral Development* Research Group, where he participates in studies on Christian leadership, early childhood education, active learning methodologies, and inclusive education.

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