

Apostasy's Accomplice

***The Great Apostasy, after the First Century, is a well documented Event.
But, when We focus JUST on its Doctrinal Component,
We overlook the Phenomenon that facilitated the Errant Drift!***

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When researching the history of God's Church, we find numerous occasions where faulty theological ideas made inroads into the belief system that we appreciate as "The Truth". The Apostles of the first century were already aware of dangerous errors that were on the periphery of the Body of Christ just waiting for the unsuspecting to let down their guard.

Prominent mention is given in the New Testament to destructive doctrines, such as the doctrine of antichrist,¹ doctrines of demons,² perverted grace,³ among other corrupting teachings. Besides these, we need to consider the ever present contaminations that had already impacted Jewish theologies of the time, including Gnosticism, Hellenism, Mysticism as well as theological distortions⁴ that were 'home grown' within Judaism's various sects by the first century.

But there's another component involved with apostasy, one that Christ Himself warned about. Besides the tendency toward personal lethargy, so common among believers, on top of the drift into false beliefs that are ever present, there is also a subtle component that can impact God's Church in a less obvious way: One that we have consistently overlooked. One that the more politically inclined types among us often inadvertently embrace, not realizing the full ramifications of where it leads.

"Which Thing I HATE"!

Christ pointedly identified a component operating within His congregations that He says He hates! Are we aware of what that condition is, and what it entails? Reference to it is made repeatedly in the

¹ 1st John 2:22 & 4:3

² 1st Timothy 4:1, Hebrews 13:9

³ Jude 4

⁴ Titus 1:14, Acts 23:8

second chapter of Revelation. Back in the earliest era, we find that the Church as a whole was quite opposed to the phenomenon. But as Church history progressed, and as their Love waned, we find the component had gained a certain comfort level and a degree of accommodation among the unsuspecting. That component was what we today know as "Nicolaitanism". The affection for this condition has caused most to overlook what is being referred to. In practical fact, whole denominations of churches have identified with this component as one of the best ways to *counteract* apostasy, while ignorantly drawing it in and imposing it on themselves and their unsuspecting memberships. What is missed is the realization that the condition itself is a great facilitator of and in many cases guarantor of apostasy, not at all a functional means of its prevention!

First Love Counters Apostasy

Revelation 2:6 has this to say. "*But this thou hast, that thou hatest the deeds of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate.*" They are encouraged to continue with this stance, though being chided for fading zeal. When believers remain fervent, the Truth has its strongest advocacy. It's when that fervency fades that a need arises to preserve and protect the fundamental belief structure by other means. It's under such conditions that a Church becomes vulnerable to assault against its long held truths. Without the believers being the proper pillars and stays of the Truth,⁵ other means are needed to preserve it.

As we progress a few centuries to the time of the Pergamos congregation, we find the God-hated condition had gained a degree of acceptance. Not only is it referred to as "deeds" as in verse 6, but is

⁵ 1st Timothy 3:15 identifies the membership as being such

by now also recognized as a “doctrine”. That being, a doctrine of the Church! Verse 15 has: “*So hast thou also them that hold the doctrine of the Nicolaitans, which thing I hate*”. Notice, it wasn’t yet a universal condition, but those who embraced it were accepted within the Body, but to their unrealized peril. God hates it for a specific reason. You see, when the membership fades in its love of the pure Truth of God, they easily surrender their personal commitment to its preservation to others. They pass the task to an echelon of men, a leadership, if you will, who may or may not have the best interests of the Truth in mind. More likely not. More than likely this echelon has another agenda, namely gaining control over the people,⁶ and what better way than through ecclesiastical organization?

The first thing we need to realize about Nicolaitanism is that it is **political in nature**, not so much doctrinal! Though by the early Middle Ages, as we see, it had become a ‘doctrine’! It wasn’t a doctrine so far as the early Church was concerned, until such time as it had been brought into the Church. There are a lot of varied beliefs in the world, but they aren’t considered doctrines unless and until they’re accepted as part of the theological make-up of the Church.

Nothing New Under the Sun

But we need to recognize that this Nicolaitan phenomenon was not an invention of the late first century. Under various guises, it had been around for centuries. One could even make a case for the Old Testament priesthood having been, to some degree, patterned after the condition. But to hear that Christ so HATED it, we are drawn to conclude that there’s something quite different being in play.

Now, is the mention in Revelation 2:6 the first place where we are introduced to the phenomenon? Or, are there prior mentions? Where His Disciples are cautioned later against embracing the Nicolaitan characteristic, were there instructions, given earlier, of how the Church should be structured? Are we to conclude that the first time the Church had ever been introduced to Nicolaitanism was in Revelation 2? Was the phenomenon something totally new to

⁶ Jude 11 & 16 coveting power, prestige and treasure!

them, OR, were the early Apostles and believers already well aware of what this contemptible ‘doctrine’ was?

Perhaps we should ask ourselves, how did the early Church know to share God’s contempt for the Nicolaitan approach? What were they taught about it? Early on, they were opposed to it. Later, not so much so. How did the early Church, in the fifties AD know to reject Nicolaitanism? Revelation wasn’t written until the mid 90’s, a full generation later. But we see them already polarized against it.

The Name is Revealing!

Nicolaitanism is a word made up of two Greek words: *nico* and *laos*. That combination of words meaning: “*conquerors of the people*” (the laity). Commentaries identify these as “followers of one Nicolas”, whose name may have been derived from his characteristic as much as being his actual name. Who was this Nicolas, and what was his angle? Obviously, there was a subliminal intent to ‘conquer’ the people. In other words, to gain a control over them in some way.

An Early Heretic Enlightens Us

The mid-second century church leader, Marcion, promoted a theological position that was largely unacceptable within God’s true congregations. But, it wasn’t his errant theology so much that is of interest here. An internet site has this to say: “...the views of Marcion spread rapidly over the “whole world,” (to use the usual Patristic phrase for the Graeco-Roman dominions); and as late as the fifth century we hear of Theodoret converting more than a thousand Marcionites. In Italy, Egypt, Palestine, Arabia, Syria, Asia Minor and Persia, Marcionite churches sprang up, **splendidly organised**, with their own bishops and the rest of the ecclesiastical discipline, with a cult and service of the same nature as those of what subsequently became the Catholic Church.”

The fascinating thing about this prominent individual is the use of an organizational form (apparently borrowed from pre-existing cults) to establish churches. His form of organization is recognized as a precursor of what later became the Catholic Church’s organizational model!

But the question was asked earlier, What awareness did the early Church have that predisposed them to hold such a negative regard for what later became identified as “Nicolaitanism”? The answer isn’t obscure. We have these many discourses on how the Church should be structured:

You Shall NOT Be That Way!

The matter of personal prestige and pre-eminence came up early in the game. It’s only natural, considering the natures of men. But a clear foundational base was laid down, which no doubt impressed the Disciples greatly. In Mark 10 we read: **42** *“But Jesus called them to him, and saith unto them, Ye know that they which are accounted to rule over the Gentiles exercise lordship over them; and their great ones exercise authority upon them. 43 But so shall it not be among you: but whosoever will be great among you, shall be your minister: 44 And whosoever of you will be the chiefest, shall be servant of all. 45 For even the Son of man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many.”* Luke relates the same again in chapter 22: **24** *“And there was also a strife among them, which of them should be accounted the greatest. 25 And he said unto them, The kings of the Gentiles exercise lordship over them; and they that exercise authority upon them are called benefactors. 26 But ye shall not be so: but he that is greatest among you, let him be as the younger; and he that is chief, as he that doth serve. 27 For whether is greater, he that sitteth at meat, or he that serveth? is not he that sitteth at meat? but I am among you as he that serveth.”*

Christ specifically prohibited His Disciples from setting themselves up in any kind of ‘pecking order’, such as is common in human organizations. This prohibition was the base from which they would have operated. It was clearly mandated that theirs’ was an obligation to serve, and with and by **service** to show themselves exemplary, but that quite aside from exercising authority over one another in any kind of power structure. Such was the orientation of what is often called ‘the Primitive Church’.

This clearly is not the example we find within most religious organizations!

You Are All Brothers

The above sub-title could be regarded in different ways, but when superimposed upon the context of the power establishment of the accepted religion of their time, it is less flexible as to its point. In Matthew 23, Christ further spelled out how His ministry was NOT to be! *“Saying, The scribes and the Pharisees sit in Moses’ seat: 3 All therefore whatsoever they bid you observe, that observe and do; but do not ye after their works: for they say, and do not. 4 For they bind heavy burdens and grievous to be borne, and lay them on men’s shoulders; but they them-selves will not move them with one of their fingers. 5 But all their works they do for to be seen of men: ... 6 And love the uppermost rooms at feasts, and the chief seats in the synagogues, 7 And greetings in the markets, and to be called of men, Rabbi, Rabbi. 8 But be not ye called Rabbi: for one is your Master, even Christ; and all ye are brethren. 9 And call no man your father upon the earth: for one is your Father, which is in heaven. 10 Neither be ye called masters: for one is your Master, even Christ. 11 But he that is greatest among you shall be your servant. 12 And whosoever shall exalt himself shall be abased; and he that shall humble himself shall be exalted.”* This passage is especially potent! Don’t seek aggrandizement!

We see first, a bad example, that of the scribes and Pharisees. Not only that situation, but where such ‘establishment structuring’ leads. Class-elevation leads to impositions of burdens upon worshippers, (what was pointed out in the previous discourse), but it also creates the distraction of an inappropriate esteem level both from among themselves and from those in subjugation. It creates a two-tier structure, with a leadership over-class separate and distinct from the general worshipper class. That does two things: First, it draws attention from who ultimately is “THE Master”, and secondly, it counters the situation God wants among His people, that all are to be ‘brothers’, despite their service assignments, whether small or great. The very act of creating a ‘master class’ places that ministry into an ‘intermediary’ position. Thus the double-stated emphasis on who IS the Master! No, any true follower of Christ ought to see himself as cast in the lowest (servant) class.

And, such was the orientation of the early New Testament Church: A political climate entirely at odds with the Nicolaitan approach. A situation often referred to as ‘the Primitive Church’, as though the later establishment of a defined religious power structure was a ‘superior’ condition. (It may have been more satisfactory to men, but not to God!)

Super-elevating Leaders is Carnal

Elevation of leaders was not confined to the leaders themselves, nor was it foreign to their followers! The Apostle Paul was frustrated in his ministry by those who persisted in their feral carnality. That frustration was expressed pointedly in the first three chapters of 1st Corinthians. I present here just the conclusion of the matter found in chapter 3: “*And I, brethren, could not speak unto you as unto spiritual, but as unto carnal, even as unto babes in Christ. 2 I have fed you with milk, and not with meat: for hitherto ye were not able to bear it, neither yet now are ye able. 3 For ye are yet carnal: for whereas there is among you envying, and strife, and divisions, are ye not carnal, and walk as men? 4 For while one saith, I am of Paul; and another, I am of Apollos; are ye not carnal? 5 Who then is Paul, and who is Apollos, but ministers by whom ye believed, even as the Lord gave to every man? 6 I have planted, Apollos watered; but God gave the increase. 7 So then neither is he that planteth any thing, neither he that watereth; but God that gives the increase. 8 Now he that planteth and he that watereth are one: and every man shall receive his own reward according to his own labor. 9 For we are laborers together with God: ye are God's husbandry, ye are God's building. 10 According to the grace of God which is given unto me, as a wise masterbuilder, I have laid the foundation, and another buildeth thereon. But let every man take heed how he buildeth thereupon. 11 For other foundation can no man lay than that is laid, which is Jesus Christ.*” This passage, of course, was prompted by their setting up of their personally favored ministers above others, as chapter 1 had explained earlier:

1st Cor. 1:11 “*For it hath been declared unto me of you, my brethren, by them which are of the house of Chloe, that **there are contentions** among you. 12 “Now this I say, that every one of you saith, I am of Paul; and I of Apollos; and I of Cephas; and I of*

Christ... In chapter 3, he continues: “*Who then is Paul, and who is Apollos, but ministers by whom ye believed, even as the Lord gave to every man? 6 I have planted, Apollos watered; but **God gave the increase.** 7 So then neither is he that planteth any thing, neither he that watereth; but **God that giveth the increase.**” As in Matthew 23, the Master focus is directed back to Christ, He being the one who ‘gives the increase’! (Is that referring to numerical increase, or spiritual growth?)*

We can also see in this carnal human proclivity the seeds of division, which is another product of the structure of apostasy! (See verse 1:11.) (Identifying with one prominent minister over another is what accounts for much of the division we find in God’s Church even in the modern era!)

Thinking More Highly than We Ought

Being careful to draw out the intent of a passage in Romans 12, and with the previous in mind, we can see more of why the early Church avoided the Nicolaitan approach. “*I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service.* (Would such a person be inclined to pose as ‘pre-eminent’?) 2 “*And be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God.* (Well, we know already what the will of God is with regard to conforming to the world’s political power structures.)

3 “*For I say, through the grace given unto me, to every man that is among you, not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think; but to think soberly, according as God hath dealt to every man the measure of faith.* (A logical follow-up to the subject of personal elevation.) 4 “*For as we have many members in one body, and all members have not the same office: 5 So we, being many, are one body in Christ, and every one members one of another.* (Another statement illustrating that there should be no class-distinction within and among the membership: All being ‘**brothers**’, to repeat Christ’s admonition in an above presented passage.)

6 “*Having then gifts differing according to the grace that is given to us, whether prophecy, let us prophesy according to the proportion of faith; 7 Or ministry, let us wait on our ministering: or he that*

teacheth, on teaching; **8** Or he that exhorteth, on exhortation: he that giveth, let him do it with simplicity; he that ruleth, with diligence; he that sheweth mercy, with cheerfulness. **9** Let love be without dissimulation. Abhor that which is evil; cleave to that which is good. **10** Be kindly affectioned one to another with brotherly love; in honour preferring one another; (The opposite of imposing ones' self as being 'above' others!)

No Other Intermediaries

Nicolaitanism, which provides structure to the two-class system, with one echelon, the ministry, (the clergy) elevated above the membership (the laity), one class of individuals is automatically drawn into a position of functioning as though in between the individual lay-member and God. Realizing this, we can better understand the negative passion Christ has for it! Paul reminded Timothy in chapter 2 of this essential fact: **5** "For there is one God, and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus; **6** Who gave himself a ransom for all, to be testified in due time. **7** Whereunto I am ordained a preacher, and an apostle, (I speak the truth in Christ, and lie not;) a teacher of the Gentiles in faith and verity." Despite the legitimacy of Paul's 'office', he recognized his subjection to the one Mediator, and that he didn't function in any manner that would resemble being one himself. The same can not be said of those organizations who intercede, taking confessions or disallowing their people open access to the Scriptures, electing instead to interpret them for them.

Coveting Pre-eminence

Arriving at this development, which was not at all an unknown situation in the later era of the Church, we expose the underlying motivation of Nicolaitanism. Though pre-eminence can be the desire and quest, even in one-man ministries, in its more populous venues it provides a hierarchy in which less talented and less emboldened men can function and gain an elevated status. We see one unfortunate example in the late first century, in John's third Epistle, verse 9: "I wrote unto the church: but Diotrephes, who loveth to have the preeminence among them, receiveth us not. **10** Wherefore, if I come, I will remember his deeds which he doeth, prating against us with malicious

words: and not content therewith, neither doth he himself receive the brethren, and forbiddeth them that would, and casteth them out of the church. **11** Beloved, follow not that which is evil, but that which is good. He that doeth good is of God: but he that doeth evil hath not seen God." Unfortunately, this characteristic can be exhibited in any pre-eminence seeking organization, large or small!

So, we can see, even without the mention of the word "Nicolaitanism" how the early Church would have recognized its unacceptability from the start.

Where it Plays Out

We've come a long way with this subject, but now we need to shift back to the original premise: that Nicolaitanism is as much a **facilitator** of apostasy as is the apostasy itself. Churches typically focus in on their theological positions, relying on their organization to uphold their stated positions, and can we say, to enforce them. Church Organization typically is the great **conservator** of whatever degree of apostasy might have been absorbed. It functions to **thwart** any change (once established) essentially functioning to **resist** the reversal of any flawed theological position that is the basis of their belief system.

Though most Christian organizations will readily admit that there was a great apostasy that took root toward the end of the first century, and especially on into the third and fourth centuries, they on the other hand seem disinterested in honestly reviewing those unfortunate divergences from the Truth, thus, their organizational structure functions as the supporting environment to preserve whatever apostate views they've elected to embrace.

So in this we also have a co-component of apostasy, that being, the Nicolaitan 'doctrine', which sets the church clergy as being the staunch protector of 'Doctrine', rather than also those individuals having God's Spirit. (Church organizations don't have God's Spirit, only individuals do.) Ministers within the Nicolaitan systems are each subjected to progressively higher echelon ministers, all the way up to the likes of cardinals and a supreme pontiff, or his functional equivalent. Refinements of doctrine or reversions back to the Faith once delivered, are all but an impossibility, so long as Nicolaitanism remains in place. Any Committee on Doctrine is

sure to intervene, should an issue even get that far, with overwhelming refutation of any challenge to their traditional apostate views.

We can see how doubly intransigent the condition is when we realize that the Nicolaitan structure itself is made one of the ‘Doctrines’ of the church! Restoring the Faith once delivered under those conditions requires a fundamental restructuring of the whole approach to Doctrine! Christ, as He says, hates this phenomenon because of its symbiotic relationship with the Spirit of Apostasy! It locks-in error, frustrating reformation, and puts a barrier between the believer and His Holy Spirit.

This is the prime reason why God hates the phenomenon that men are so prone to embrace in the name of religion. Borrowing from the organizational approach that is everywhere in human cultures: “Lord-it-over type structures” that have formed civil governments from time immemorial. The very way Christ told His Disciples **not** to be!

How Long Will He Be Patient?

What is especially ironic in the modern era, is that the Church of God is not immune to making the same mistakes as have been made in centuries past. The early Church went apostate, and it embraced the Nicolaitan condition. In this generation, the Church drifted into a similar mindset that posed some incredible statements. Some of them were:

“Salvation is all about government.” As threats to the integrity of the Church increased, the organization turned to a ramped-up focus on its Government, not so much that of Christ, but of a hierarchy created below Him. That was founded upon a prior premise, that **“God always works thru just one man”!** Then as the Church fractured, after reprobate men were placed in the ‘chief seats’ of government, many of its ‘splitoff groups’ perpetuated this same claim, but of course shifting reference to their leader.

If that wasn’t sufficiently shocking, it was later alleged that **“The only thing the catholic church had right was government”!** An obvious allusion to the blatantly Nicolaitan structure under which **it** operates! Many looked right at these claims at the time, and saw nothing amiss!

Now, with that, we should have anticipated the next

development: the imposition of an intermediary, or an intermediary structure between the members and God. I have in my archives a 1980 taped message and transcript that makes the statement many times, that **“We relate to Christ thru the Apostle”**, referring to that one man thru whom God worked. Now if that doesn’t place an intermediary between us, then what does? No, we don’t relate to or interface with Christ **through** any man. Our relationship is absolutely direct. God’s Spirit comes to us directly, not through any organization, no matter how much Truth it otherwise has.

So, the developing concept and approach to Church government became subjugated under the old Nicolaitan spirit, except in this case it occurred before the organization apostasized. The apostasy came along later, and the structure then in place prevented faithful members and ministers from doing anything at all about it! Such is the nature of the beast! Those few who held fast to the Truth were obligated to **‘go out’** (but with some still retaining the nature). The Church that then was faded to only a mirage of what it had been, to the everlasting shame of those who failed the test.

But our embracing of our situation-appropriate version of Nicolaitanism first, then it paving the way for apostasy later, we see it doubly demonstrating the inter-relationship between the two.

This living lesson should re-emphasize the corrupt nature of that system, one ‘patterned after the beast’, an ecclesiastical replica of the political structure of ancient Rome. There’s nothing about Nicolaitanism that ever changed to where God would’ve mollified His hatred of it. We should know that! If there is anyone who is still unsure of why God saw need to close down what had been potentially the more effective Commission-bearing entity in the modern era, we have in this an answer.

“I know your works: behold, I have set before you an open door, and no man can shut it: for you have a little strength, and has kept my word, and not denied my name. Behold, I come quickly: hold that fast which thou hast, that no man take thy crown. Him that overcometh will I make a pillar in the temple of my God, and he shall go no more out: ... He that has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says unto the Churches”. 