

The Nicolaitan Factor

Identified in the Book of Revelation, this Party of 'Progressive' Individuals is pointedly identified as Promoting a Culture within God's Church that Christ specifically says, "He HATES!" The question is, Do We?

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We would have to wonder, that when Jesus Christ specifically goes on record, more than once, as despising a certain party of individuals acting to influence the overall direction of His Church, why would anyone be casual about identifying the particular characteristics of those individuals, and not being careful of inadvertently embracing their theology? Then again, was it their theology, per se, or another component that they brought in?

While the name "Nicolaitan" is fairly well known in religious circles, have our various denominations ever put sufficient effort toward identifying exactly who these individuals were, (or are) and what activity it was that they promoted that was clearly so objectionable to Christ?

Do We do What?

The sub-title asks, "Do we?" Do we know what Nicolaitanism is, and do we have the mind of Christ and hate it as Christ does? And, if we in fact don't know, then might we inadvertently accommodate it? Might we even promote it? It would be hard to be sure that we hate it as Christ does, if we're unclear as to its true manifestation.

One thing we do know is that the early Church **knew** who these Nicolaitans were and what they advocated. We also know that **deeds** as well as **doctrines** were factors in their doings. Though perhaps the true definition has been purposely obscured over time, especially by those who practice what they advocated, we're given much by which to understand the phenomenon, preserved in the composite Greek name itself!

The following is a word study, published on-line by BibleStudy.org, from an article by J. H. Allen. You ask, why do we need to consider the opinions of 'outsiders'? Well, it seems the old adage is true, that even *"the children of this world are in their generation wiser than the children of light"*!

(Luke 16:8) They, at least, are free to speak openly about this matter. The reason for a reluctance to do so on the part of any modern Nicolaitan church should be obvious once we consider its true identification!

Greek Construction of the word Nicolaitans

"The word Nicolaitan (Greek: Νικολαίτης or Nikolaitēs, Strong's Concordance Number #G3531) is a compound word which is composed of THREE Greek words. Because of it being a proper noun, the word Nicolaitan is TRANSFERRED instead of being translated into English. Thus, it is subject to the laws of Greek construction in regard to ellipsis, contraction and phonetics.

The three Greek words used in the construction of the word Nicolaitan are:

❶ NIKOS, of which we use the English equivalents instead of the Greek letters, as we shall also of the other two. Nikos is defined as "a conquest; victory; triumph; the conquered; and by implication, dominancy over the defeated." Another transferred name in which this term is used is "Nicolopolis," which is composed of Niko, which means conquest and polis, which means city. Hence, the city of conquest, or city of victory.

❷ LAOS, which means people. Another use of this word is found in NICOLAS, which is transferred and is composed of Nikos-laos and means one who is "victorious over the people," the letter "s" being in both words the nominative case ending, which is retained only at the end of the word to denote the case, while "a" short and "o" short are contracted into "a" long.

A still further transferred use of LAOS is found in the name Lao(s)diceans (Greek: Λαοδικεύς or Laodikeus, Strong's Concordance Number #G2994), compounded with DIKE or DICE as the Greek "k" is the equivalent English "c." Thus, in the name Laodiceans, we have LAOS, meaning the people, and DICE, meaning judgment or vengeance, i.e., the people of my judgment, or of my vengeance. Also the Greek word la(ic)os, which means "laymen," of which LA-OS is the root and stem, which selfsame word, with the "o" short contracted to "i", to which root and stem the plural definite article TON is

joined to form LAITON, which is a Greek phrase meaning "the laity."

③ TON is the third and last word entering into the construction of the proper name Nicolaitans. TON, in which Omega, the long "o", is contracted into long "a", thus making the word TAN which is the genitive case plural in all the genders of the definite article 'the.'

We therefore have, without the legal Greek construction, the English hyphenated word NIKOS-LAOS-TON, but which, with its lawful grammatical elisions and contractions, becomes the English name: Nicolaitans."

A Leadership Class

Another on-line contributor, Jay Atkinson, having a Methodist affiliation, in his "Latter Rains" page offers this on the subject:

"The doctrine of the Nicolaitans... is a symbolic name of a party that represents the **hierarchy of a ruling class** over the rest of the people, developing a pecking order of fleshly leadership. Jesus hates this and warns the people to repent or else *"I will come upon you quickly and will fight against them with the sword of my mouth."* The same warning illustration is applied to those that abused grace, which led to licentiousness from the example of Balaam, seducing Christians to fornication and tampering with idolatry. The individual overcomer is allowed to eat of the hidden manna and given a white stone with a new name written in it.

The Early church father Irenaeus, identified the Nicolaitans in his treatise "Against Heresies" in the second century as they who are an "offshoot of the knowledge which is falsely so-called," mentioning that they "lead lives of unrestrained indulgence." (This suggesting a Gnostic characteristic.) There is no absolute proof that the heretic Nicolas was the Deacon of the same name from Antioch of the seven deacons in the book of Acts, but Irenaeus supposed him to be so. Nicolas the deacon was perhaps confused with another Nicolas, the bishop Nicolas of Samaria who **was** a heretic in the company of Simon Magus. Ignatius mentions the Nicoaitans also, so there was in fact a heretical group existing at that time.

The root of the word Nicolaitans comes from Greek nikao, to conquer or overcome, and laos, which means people and which the word laity comes from. The two words together especially means the destruction of the people and refers to the earliest form of what we call a priestly order or clergy which later on in church history **divided people** (creating a clergy / laity) and allowed for leadership other than those led by the spirit of the risen Lord. A good translation of Nicolaitan would be "those who prevail over the people." This clerical system later developed into the papal hierarchy of priests and clergy **lording over the flock**.

The Council of Trent stated, *"If anyone shall say that there is not in the Catholic Church a hierarchy established by the divine ordination, consisting of bishops, presbyters and ministers, let him be anathema."* **It is not the question of the ministries but rather in the separation of them into a hierarchy over the people.** This very idea was taken over by the Protestants with their own corruption of leadership roles and coverings. The Church of Ephesus was commended for hating the deeds of the Nicolaitans. The wrong separation of the clergy from the laity is a great evil in God's sight and He hates the lust for religious power over others. There is an ungodly spiritual authority in the Church today, which is nothing more than the prideful spirit of control, manipulation, domination and intimidation and a rebellion of the **rightful authority** of God."

It can be interesting to observe how far the various organizations who practice Nicolaitanism will go to deflect attention from the word's true meaning and thus to the practices it refers to. Either they won't research the matter, or they deflect awareness by alleging that it's something other than what it really is. I know of one group who claims that this reference is to the followers of one Saint Nicolas, attempting by that to allege that their 'offense' was of observing Christmas. The theological shallowness of such a conclusion should be obvious, in that the observance of Christmas didn't emerge onto the world scene until centuries later in history. (Keep in mind Revelation was written in the mid 90's AD) Had anyone been 'observing' December 25th that early, they would have easily recognized it as having direct connection with the pagan Saturnalia and the date of the pagan god Mithras' birth. Nor did the early Church identify only a select few individuals as 'saints', realizing rather that all true Christians are Saints!

To What Effect?

It's one thing to know **that** God hates something, and quite another to appreciate exactly **why**.

Our question at this point needs to be, what's so bad about a church having ecclesiastical structure? After all, aren't most religious establishments organized in some way? Don't all churches have some kind of internal political establishment, to authorize and direct what is done and by whom? Doesn't it work better that way? While in certain situations, it may be commendable, there are other negative factors that Christ was very aware of and warned us of.

On the flip side of that record, do we find in the pages of the New Testament any account showing the early Church being organized in a manner as is common today? There are scriptures which have long been put forward as though authorizing such structures as though it is what God wanted, but only with considerable interpretation. Two in particular: Ephesians 4:11 and 1st Corinthians 12:28. Let's look at them.

Eph 4:11-12 *"And he gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers; For the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ:"* (Note: The stated purpose of these service positions is to edify the body of Christ, which is the membership as much as it is the ministry.) But does it actually say these are a ruling hierarchy?

1st Cor. 12:28-30 *"And God hath set some in the church, first apostles, secondarily prophets, thirdly teachers, after that miracles, then gifts of healings, helps, governments, diversities of tongues. Are all apostles? are all prophets? are all teachers? are all workers of miracles? Have all the gifts of healing? do all speak with tongues? do all interpret?"*

This passage seems to work for those who seek to justify a chain-of-command type authority structure. Reading it casually, that idea might have purchase, but looking at it more analytically, we're left with major questions. It presents 1) apostles, 2) prophets, 3) teachers, miracle workers, healers, assistants, governments, tongues speakers, then interpreter in that order, even numbering the first few. (Of note in this second passage, pastor is absent as are evangelist and deacon!)

Now if this **were** a chain-of-command authority ladder, must one work his way up from first being a tongues interpreter, then tongues speaker? Is the next level of service a healer? Must one be a certified prophet before he can be deemed an apostle? These 'offices', if we are to see them as that, are given of God. Men should recognize these 'Gifts', not envisioning themselves as being the exclusive awarders of the same. (It's interesting, that when a pastor opts to resign, he's quick to proclaim that his ordination is of God, not of men!)

If 'teachers' is third (and apostles / prophets first and second) then evangelists and pastors can not

be above teacher! That's IF this truly authorizes a chain-of-command structure, as some represent.

If it really IS "all about Government" as some so adamantly allege, why then is 'governments' so far down on the list, and why is it shown as a plural?

The above passage is preceded by a definition that the membership is the Church, not its organizational structure. [v. 27] *"Now ye are the body of Christ, and members in particular."* The 'you' there is not the ministry! That brings us to the question, what happens when the organization throws ministers (and members) out of 'the Church'? This exposes the effect of the errant definition brought to us under the Nicolaitan culture. To a certain degree, it brings us back around to the Diotrephes situation we read of in 3rd John 9, who effectively threw the Apostle John's followers out!

The above is followed by: [v.31] *"But covet earnestly the best gifts: and yet shew I unto you a more excellent way."* which leads us on into the love chapter: 1st Corinthians 13. Those who are urged to 'covet earnestly the best gifts', is that being said to the ministry only?

(As a side note, Paul faulted an inattentive general membership in Hebrews 5:12, chiding them for their spiritual immaturities, stating, *"For when for the time ye ought to be teachers, ye have need that one teach you again..."* These members, after all the time they were in the Church, were not up to where they ought to have been! They were woefully deficient in their spiritual development, specifically of being capable teachers, which he emphatically says they **ought to have been**. Now, was their 'elevation' to teacher status strictly a function of organizational promotion? The tenor of Paul's complaint would suggest it was not!)

The major negative in this area of operation can be when ecclesiastical structure inhibits the conduct of the Commission as God intended. That can come to bear in a number of ways.

An Environment for Abuses

As 1st Peter 5:1-3 suggests, human governmental configurations can, and more often do, present opportunities for authorizing one group to impress their rule upon the other group. Separating out a special echelon of 'clergy' forces that class to

protect its own interests first before serving the interests of the 'laity'. Peter recognized the potential: *"The elders who are among you I exhort, I who am a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, and also a partaker of the glory that will be revealed: Shepherd the flock of God which is among you, serving as overseers, not by compulsion but willingly, not for dishonest gain but eagerly; nor as being lords over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock;"* (1st Peter 5:1-3) Overseeing without overlording, that is the all-important key!

It is this aspiration on the part of men to become **lords** over God's heritage that lays the groundwork for the situation that God says He HATES. But why? Aren't these people doing good? Aren't they also serving the interests of the membership, even if the system might promote a 'bad apple' on occasion? It's a mixed bag at best. Here are some of the dangers that can inhibit the development of and the expression of Faith in God's elect:

Climate of Oppressiveness

Accounts such as the Diotrephes situation we read of in the epistle of 3rd John illustrates what happens when a minister assumes an inappropriately elevated self regard. Romans 12:3 and 1st Timothy 3:6 caution against what can happen, even among God's true ministry. But when a top down system involving ranks within the ministry comes into being, the phenomenon of elevated self-opinion is facilitated more than it's discouraged. It generates a positive feedback onto itself, amplifying the phenomenon. That very political environment provides a climate in which Nicolaitanism can take root and thrive. History bears this out!

What occurred in the Diotrephes congregation is something that can broaden out to encompass whole institutions. To some degree, the 'need' for there to be a structured hierarchy is embedded deeply within the human psyche. People fund the organizations and then their organizations turn it around and impose control over them, and the people seem quite pleased to have it so! (Jer. 5:31) Christ presented us with a very different kind of establishment, where all of His followers were to be **servants** and **brethren**.¹ Their 'offices' place

them in positions of responsible under-support of the brethren, not being their overlords. This was an approach quite new! Yet, it remains one of the most overlooked and disregarded operational instructions in the entire New Testament.

Basic Nicolaitanism (to whatever degree it is implemented) works to elevate a leadership class in a way Christ never intended, and it magnifies the very structure of leadership. (In other words, we must respect 'the office', even if it's occupied by a reprobate. Revelation 2:2 speaks to that! (Where is the line of respect for the office drawn when identifying certain 'apostles' as liars!?!)) With its inherent 'control' over the process of 'establishing doctrine', a closed ecclesiastical structure can compromise doctrinal fidelity. (The political structure of the day is what doomed the emerging early Church to apostasy!) The activity of preaching the Gospel can become confined and restricted when held under tight organizational control. Personal growth and its resulting expression of faith is dampened, even at risk of becoming extinguished. An atmosphere that can quench the Spirit, if the member is duly compliant.

Even within ministerial rank structures, ministerial exceptionalism can be severely stifled. Scholarly pursuits, expanding understandings and the solidifying of Faith that comes with it, is dampened. One **must not** out produce his rank's job description, as it would upset less talented elders above him, exposing their closeted jealousies.

There are two important situations in all of this: It places an authority echelon between the individual Saint and his God, and it creates a discord between brethren (strains between them and their ministry, if not also strains between one another). Just look at the indignant reaction that occurred among Christ's Disciples when a misguided few attempted to rank themselves among themselves! (Mt. 20:20-24 & Mk. 10:37-41)

Political Favoritisms

If the above isn't sufficiently negative, under the Nicolaitan system service opportunities (and the positions that come with them) can be used as political plums for the favored few. They being the ones who 'play the game', polishing the luster of their elevated administrators: Being respecters

¹ Mark 10:42-45, Matt. 23:8-12 & Luke 22:25-27

of persons, in other words, a perversion of love if there ever was one. **Favoritisms** and its resultant convenient (feigned?) love is another reason why God hates Nicolaitanism in whatever form it emerges. Service opportunities aren't for the minister to deny one and to award to another just to enhance his own authority stature.

Trust is another casualty of Nicolaitanism. The ministry can come to have little real trust of the membership, though the membership may trust their minister, (at times perhaps more than they should). Diotrephes was an early poster boy of the Nicolaitan spirit. His congregation maintained allegiance to him personally, and any who didn't, faced expulsion from fellowship. Even someone with as prominent a stature as the beloved Apostle John couldn't gain entrance among them without creating political turmoil! The fear of being disciplined by their pre-eminence loving leader kept his members in line.

Exclusivism is another negative condition that develops within Nicolaitan cultures. There is an internal reaction against any whose love of the brethren extends out beyond just the 'approved' organizational circle. The fact that another member, with another organization, (or possibly one even having no affiliation), has God's Spirit is rendered immaterial. Having God's Spirit isn't the basis of fellowship that it should be.

Detriment to Spiritual Growth

Suppression of spiritual Gifts is the typical organizational response. Only those gifts that the Church first approves of, and only those evident within certain 'approved' individuals are allowed to be exercised or developed. The idea that gifts are not given to members primarily to enhance the prestige of the leader isn't usually well received.

What we then have is a situation where God can't give a spiritual Gift to those members who are bound within certain organizational environments. IF He were to, the ministry would require them to stifle that Gift, not allowing them to produce any fruit with it. These then would become like that entrusted servant, who folded his talent in a napkin, ultimately putting his salvation in serious jeopardy. (Lk. 19:20-27) A Nicolaitan environment effectively makes it so that God can't give talents


to those under its control, as doing so could put the recipient's salvation at risk. Thus, He doesn't give such Gifts to those He knows will not use them because they'll be prevented from using them. Thus, the Church is effectively deprived of a growth dynamic that it otherwise could have!

Rank DESTROYS the Church

Mr. Allen continues: "The approbation of "ordinary elders" demands a set of elders who are extra special, thus creating "ranks" (caste) in the otherwise Divine brotherhood, all of which DESTROYS holy fellowship, creates division and strife, and fosters envy. No marvel that our Lord should **hate** a thing like that, condemn it, and demand that those who are guilty **repent**."

"But will they? (We can hope that some will.)... Others, however, will stick to their ecclesiastical crowd, vainly imagining that their boasted "superiority" will carry them through...into God's Kingdom.

"And yet, one of the most unfortunate features of all this is that there are those in the Church who do not hold the **doctrine** of the Nicolaitans, but who practice "their **deeds**" of dominating the laity by lording it over the Church of Jesus Christ, which should be subject only to **one Divine Master**. It is often true that these have assumed this lordship because they are esteemed very highly in love for their work's sake, but have become vainly puffed up in their fleshly mind. Beloved, "Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees." (Matthew 16:6).

The Church in this generation is being presented with its greatest opportunity for pursuing "true Servant Leadership". It remains to be seen how many will wake-up and follow Christ's instructions in this important regard. 

■ Recommended additional topics:

- "I Am of Paul, I Am of Apollos" # 45*
- "In Perils Among Brethren" #114*
- "Behind the Curtain of Exclusivism" #129*
- "AUTHORITY and submission" #158*
- "Breaking with Diotrephes" #133*
- "Oh, For the Love of God!" #94*
- "Woe Be to the Shepherds" #161*
- "I See Napkin People" #173*
- "Apostasy's Accomplice" #180*
- "The Great Commission" #137*