

CONQUERING THE LAITY

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"But this thou hast, that thou hatest the deeds of the Nicolaitans, which also I hate."
Revelation 2:6

"So hast thou them that hold the doctrine of the Nicolaitans, which thing I hate."
Revelation 2:15

"The prophets prophesy falsely, and the priests bear rule by their means; and my people love to have it so." Jeremiah 5:31

How fascinating it would be if Jesus Christ Himself sent a letter, addressed specifically to your local church! Oh, what an honor, and oh, what joy! What compliments would He give? Has He noticed what you are doing for Him? Would He praise your sacrifices, your boldness, and your zeal? Would He mention some of the church leaders by name, and speak of them with great admiration? How wonderful it would be to receive such a letter. Yet, after a time of reflection you may wonder about the faults and flaws of the church - would He have to point out those, too? What would Jesus really have to say about your church?

In the book of Revelation we have seven churches which actually received a personal letter from the Lord Himself. These letters are found in Revelation chapters two and three, and in each letter Christ analyzed the church and gave His compliments, comforts, and complaints. Christ mentioned to these churches that He was aware of their works, labors, faithfulness, and patience. He comforted the churches which were enduring persecution, telling them to be patient, for persecution is only temporary. He also had uplifting words of encouragement and hope. But Jesus didn't stop there. He listed a variety of complaints against five of the seven churches. Some of the churches had left their first love and were serving Him out of duty. Others were rebuked for tolerating false doctrine, immorality, apathy, and the nicolaitans.

We would all agree that Christ had good cause for disappointment and concern over the loss of love, false doctrine, immorality, and apathy. But wait - Jesus mentioned something else, called "the doctrine of the nicolaitans." What is that? We all know what false doctrine is, and we know what immorality and apathy are, but what is nicolaitism?

Nicolaitism is a term that has been ignored and is virtually forgotten. Yet Jesus Christ Himself said twice in the same chapter that it is something that He hates. Notice that Jesus did not say that He hates false doctrine, immorality, and apathy (although it is clear from other Scriptures that He does hate those things). But instead of re-enforcing His hatred for these obvious faults, He chose to say that He hates the deeds and the doctrine of the nicolaitans. In fact, if you search the Scriptures, you will find that in the entire New Testament, Jesus only twice specifically said that He "hates" something, and both times were when He dealt with the doctrine of the nicolaitans! Evidently Jesus has a special

hatred for this doctrine, for no where else in the Scripture does He address any false teaching with such strong language. Obviously, our Lord was trying to make this point very clear, yet most Christians have never once heard of this hated doctrine.

Conquering the People

So, what is this hated doctrine of the nicolaitans, and why did it anger Jesus enough to take special care in stating emphatically and repeatedly that He "hates" it? A simple look at the Greek shows that the word "nicolaitan" is actually a union of two Greek words, "niko" and "laos." The prefix "niko" means "to conquer, overcome, prevail, or have victory over something or somebody." The suffix "laos" simply means "people." Thus, the union of the two words means, "to conquer, prevail, or have victory over the people."

You may ask, "Who is doing the conquering, and who are the people?" The answer to that should be clear from the context, for Jesus was sending these letters to the church assemblies, and these assemblies are composed of individual believers, who are the people. But who is doing the conquering? The obvious answer is that some individual, or a group of individuals within the church, were exercising personal powers over the believers. Their powers exceeded those authorized by the Head of the church (Jesus Christ), and these powers were causing damage to the people and to the gospel of Christ.

Nicolaitism is, therefore, a doctrine of man which has the effect of exalting one believer over another, leading to the control of another (usually "inferior") believer's beliefs, actions, or choices. Nicolaitism, as Jesus pointed out in Rev. 2:15, is a doctrine. This dangerous doctrine applies equally to those who are doing the conquering, as to those who are willingly allowing themselves to be conquered.

There is a tendency among many church leaders to have a feeling of superiority. This leads them to seek a position which is either functionally or positionally superior to that of the rest of the brethren in the church. Yet, the Scriptures reveal that this philosophy of superiority is a grave violation of the teachings of Christ. Such tendencies come from two beliefs. One belief is that the leader is more intelligent, more skilled or highly trained, or closer to God. (In comparison to a new believer, the leader may be all of these. But it is the duty of the leader to gently lead and inspire the new believer to have the same or a better knowledge, skill, and spiritual relationship than he has, and not to lord over the believer in the process.) The second superiority belief is that of a positional superiority, which many leaders have come to believe has been assigned to them by virtue of their holding an office. This view of positional superiority is based on a twisting of Scripture, as well as a convenient ignorance of other Scriptures, which teach the contrary.

Much of this article will be directed toward the error of the leaders of the churches who are practicing nicolaitism. But the article applies equally to the followers who have given in to those nicolaitan leaders, and are reluctant to exercise their role proper in Christ by preferring to be led by a man instead of the Holy Spirit. Therefore, this article is intended as a gentle, loving rebuke to all believers who have been living without the joy of the fullness which is in Christ, by placing a man in His place. Its intent is also to be an encouragement to those faithful Christians who are struggling to live Christ-centered

lives.

Nicolaitism leads to a degree of dictatorship and control in spiritual matters, church matters, the family, and even social custom. In a nicolaitan environment, the "inferior" believer's level of spirituality, and even their personal identity, is often determined, not on the fact that the believer has a personal walk with God, but rather on the basis of how close he or she conforms to the leader's ideals, practices, and methods. Nicolaitism results in minimizing, and virtually eliminating, the individual believer's responsibility before God to personally search and follow the Scriptures, to have a personal illumination regarding God's will, and to be personally accountable to God, and not to man.

Some people may claim that nicolaitism is not applicable to the modern Christian church, claiming that nicolaitism had to do with the ecclesiastical office of a priest in the church, who thereby held an office of superiority over the people. It is true that the office of a priest would fall under the category of nicolaitism, but notice that at the time this letter was written in church history, there were no churches which had a designated office of a priest. Furthermore, as Rev. 2:15 points out, nicolaitism is a "doctrine," which therefore could apply to any church that has a leader who is exercising excessive authority.

In order to be fair, it should be mentioned that some Bible teachers claim that the Nicolaitans were a sect which believed in using sexual perversion and idols as part of the act of worship. However, the basis for this seems to be the verse in Rev. 2:14, where Jesus deals with the "doctrine of Balaam," which, according to this verse, teaches "to eat things sacrificed to idols, and to commit fornication." Then, in verse 15, Jesus brings up another doctrine, that of the Nicolaitans, when He says, "So thou hast also them that hold the doctrine of the Nicolaitans..." Therefore we see that the presumption should be that these are two separate doctrines, with two separate names, dealing with two separate issues. It seems that those who believe in a powerful church leader, or priest, have conveniently confused the meaning of the doctrine of the nicolaitans, for the breakdown of this word clearly means "to conquer, prevail, or have victory over the people."

Every church must certainly have those who are in some position of leadership in that local assembly, and this article in no way is implying that there should be no leadership. However, the Scriptures make clear that church leadership has great limits, and not great powers. One of Christ's constant preaching themes was to stand against the abuses of the religious leaders of His day. In Matthew chapter 23, Christ preached against the hypocrisy and control of the religious leaders, and said in verse 8, "...one is your Master, even Christ, and all ye are brethren." Then, in verse 10 He gave His teaching on who is the greatest, by saying, "... he that is greatest among you shall be your servant." Note that Christ did not say, "...he that is greatest among you shall be your ruler." Based on the frequent and harsh remarks that Jesus made toward the status and powers of religious leaders, we can clearly see that the attitudes and doctrines of those who exercised spiritual control, and even abused others, were the object of His special hatred. Furthermore, as Jesus pointed out, a leader's greatness is not determined by how many people he controls, but in how many people he serves.

Peter's View of Church Leadership

Peter was a great preacher and had a strong personality with great charisma. He stated clearly that church leadership does not mean dictatorship over the people. In I Peter chapter 5, verses 3 and 4, Peter addresses the church leaders regarding their leadership methods by stating, "Neither as lords over God's heritage, but being examples to the flock. And when the chief Shepherd shall appear, ye shall receive a crown of glory..." Thus we see that Peter did not consider himself to be "the one in charge around here," nor the great "man of God," nor "the anointed one," or any other such arrogant title. He saw himself, rather, as a minor shepherd who was under the same authority of the chief Shepherd as everyone else. Peter was not lord and master over the church, but instead he led, as he tells others to lead, by being a good example to the local flock of Christians.

Harmful Effects on New Believers

Nicolaitism has several very negative and harmful effects which are detrimental to the spread of the gospel and the maturity of the spiritual lives of the followers. First of all it is harmful to the new believer because the believer quickly learns that in order to be considered spiritual and be fully accepted in the local assembly, he must conform to the expectations of the authority figure or figures. This conformity may include certain dress, hairstyle, language, unusual social or family structure, and passively accepting everything that is taught, without asking questions. As the new convert conforms to these outward expectations, he is accepted as being spiritual due to his compliance with the desires of the local church's authority figure, or figures, regardless of his true internal spiritual condition and love for the Lord. However, this acceptance is an external acceptance of man, and not necessarily of God.

It is true that Christians should have a higher standard of conduct, dress, language, and manners than the world. However, outward conformity to all the highest standards does not in itself confer the slightest degree of spiritual growth. The higher standard should be a by-product of what is in the heart, due to a personal relationship with God, and not an outward conformity upon which to base a person's degree of spirituality, nor a requirement in order to be accepted by Christian peers.

In a church which operates according to the doctrine of the nicolaitans, a person's external facade of spiritual growth, and therefore his level of acceptance, actually has little or nothing to do with his personal walk with the Lord. Instead, his appearance of external spirituality has much to do with conforming to the teachings of the man in charge of the church, and the social structure of the church.

The great emphasis on the external effects of Christianity, instead of an emphasis on the internal personal walk with God, can easily overwhelm the new Christian. Many new believers, on seeing the great external change and conformity that is expected of them, decide they cannot live that way, and they never return to the church again. The total outward change is often intimidating to a new Christian, and the new believer decides that he feels out of place, looks out of place, his questions will be ignorant, and others will look down on him for being different. So, he is never seen again. If the emphasis was

on the desire to follow Christ and to develop a personal walk with Him, then the new believer would be more likely to seek such a relationship, and then gradually change as the Holy Spirit (not man) convicts, comforts, and guides.

Harmful Effects on Seasoned Believers

Nicolaitism also affects the more seasoned Christians as well. Depending on the degree of control over his life, a Christian in a ministry that is operated according to the nicolaitan doctrine will find that he is told many things, such as: what to believe or what not to believe, what to listen to, or not listen to, how much time is required weekly in service for the Lord, how many services he must attend, what God's will is in personal decisions, what ministry to join, how to serve, how much money to give, what clothing to wear, direction in relationships, degrees of personal morality, as well as many other things. Please note that all these matters are important, but Christians should be able to handle all of these without having them dictated by another man.

Every mature Christian should be expected to have a personal walk with God, live a moral life, endeavor to spread the gospel, search the Scriptures, and find God's will through prayer, without the controlling oversight of a domineering leader or system. God made clear in I Peter 5:3 that the leaders of the church should lead by example. They should be encouragers and edifiers, and must lead the flock to greater spiritual maturity. But if the pastors lead by lording over the flock, then the flock begins to think that as long as they maintain themselves in line with the church leaders, they are equally in good standing with God. If their morals are the pastors' morals, and their service, commitment, and choices are approved by the pastor, then they believe that all must also be well with the Lord. No personal relationship with God is required under a nicolaitan leader or system. All that is required is to maintain a good standing with the authority in charge of the flock, thereby gaining his acceptance. This creates a dependency relationship, for the Christian learns to get most of his spiritual identity and beliefs from the man or men in charge, and not from the Lord and the Bible. Furthermore, if the leadership leaves the church to move on to another ministry, the Christians left behind are not mature, and their dependency pattern will often cause them to seek another man whom they can equally follow and who fulfills their need of spiritual identity.

Harmful Effects on Leadership

The doctrine of nicolaitism is also harmful to the leader who practices it. When a man finds himself in a position of control over other people's lives and spiritual choices, he is in a dangerous position. He has become a master over their lives, and will be held by God to a higher accountability (James 3:1). Furthermore, the high position to which he has been elevated often leads to pride and an environment of unaccountability. Far from being the pastor's friend, nicolaitism is so often his downfall, because he generally develops a superiority complex, and he ceases to have a servant's heart. Yes, such a pastor may continue serving as the leader of the local church organization, and the church may even grow in size. But his relationship with Christ suffers, and the church never achieves the level of individual spiritual maturity that it would have otherwise achieved, because its eyes are too much on the great man in charge, instead of on the One who gave

His all for the church.

In all fairness, it should be pointed out that most Bible colleges teach that the pastor is to be the man in charge, and little mention is made of what limits there are to his authority, much less the dangers of nicolaitism. Therefore, the pastor may be a nicolaitan, not by deliberate choice, but due to the fact that this is all that he has ever known. Pastors are taught that churches are to be organizations, and organizations by their nature require strong leadership. But churches are to be assemblies of believers, and not organizations centered around the leadership, style, charisma, and views of a fleshly leader. Pastors need to understand that Christ, and Christ alone, is the head of the church. Pastors, elders, bishops, and all other persons in leadership are to assist the believers in their growth and service, as the Spirit of God, and not the man or the organization, leads in each of those believers' lives.

An Old Problem

Excessive authority demanded by spiritual leadership is nothing new. God complained about this problem hundreds of years before Christ in the book of Ezekiel, chapter 34:4 when He said, in reference to the oppressive shepherds of that day, "...with force and with cruelty have ye ruled them."

How do spiritual leaders obtain the power to conquer the people and then rule with force and cruelty? They do it by spiritualizing their claims, teachings, and methods, so that the followers who sincerely desire to please God, fail to realize that they are actually following a man. (The followers are also at fault, because they fail to exercise their responsibility to inquire into the whole counsel of God by searching the Scriptures and abiding by the plain truth therein.) In short, nicolaitism is a form of spiritual bondage to an authority that is not God. The leaders emphasize obedience and submission to them or their system, in the name of God. This obedience often leads to an overwhelming level of service on the part of the follower, resulting in emotional frustration and abuse of the follower and the follower's loved ones.

Jesus made very clear that He hates the doctrine of the nicolaitans. This doctrine shifts the focus of His flock from pleasing and following God, to pleasing and following a man. It causes Christians to measure their service and spirituality according to the approval of that man. It often leads to spiritual abuse, emotional turmoil, and may eventually even lead to physical and psychological ailments. Nicolaitism makes individual Christians dependent and accountable to man, and tempts the leaders to exalt themselves, instead of the Lord of lords.