

The Doctrine of the Nicolaitans

Rev 2:6 But this thou hast, that thou hatest the deeds of the Nicolaitanes, which I also hate.

Rev 2:15 So hast thou also them that hold the doctrine of the Nicolaitanes, which thing I hate

A topic that many find confusing and fascinating is that of the Nicolaitans. Jesus makes reference to them twice in the book of Revelation. There has been much speculation as to who this group was, their origin, and what they taught. Because there really is so little conclusive evidence as to who this group was (or their founder/s), the focus of this article will be primarily the content of their doctrine. I realize that with so little historical background information, it could prove difficult to be 100 percent dogmatic about this. However, the fact that this group finds themselves mentioned in Holy Scripture gives us motivation to at least know something of their doctrine. Jesus Christ says that he hates their doctrine. I think that we can probably form a very good hypothesis as to what the tenets of their doctrine were by looking at some other clues from the time period. In fact, I would go so far as to say that the doctrine of the Nicolaitans exists still to this day...only under another name (Unconditional Eternal Security).

The early church period was a dynamic time indeed. Some of the apostles were still alive, eyewitnesses to the resurrection of Christ were still alive, and the church was walking in a power that we desperately need in today's world. Despite the enthusiasm and ardent fervor that characterized first century

Christianity, there was also a deadly force at work. Any time you see God moving mightily among the church, you will also see Satan plotting a strategy to destroy the church. Many of the attacks on the church came from the outside. Persecution was a normal experience to the early church. It was not uncommon for them to lose their lives (literally) for the sake of the gospel. Jesus and the apostles warned that the followers of Christ would be brought before rulers and authorities and asked to give a testimony. But as always, sometimes the greatest threat to Christians does not come from "without" but from "within." I find it interesting that we first see mention of the Nicolaitans (in the scripture) when Jesus addresses the church at Ephesus. If you will recall, the apostle Paul had addressed the Ephesian elders about the dangers of apostasy and false teachers that they would soon encounter.

Acts 20:29 For I know this, that after my departing shall grievous wolves enter in among you, not sparing the flock. 20:30 Also of your own selves shall men arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away disciples after them. 20:31 Therefore watch, and remember, that by the space of three years I ceased not to warn every one night and day with tears.

Paul knew what was in store for the Ephesian church. It is very evident that he knew a great threat would arise from among them-not from without. This is Satan's great strategy- he would much rather transform himself as "an angel of light" (II Cor 11:14) or a wolf in "sheep's clothing" (Matt 7:15). That way he can come in undetected, and do everything he can to introduce enough leaven to leaven the whole lump (Gal 5:9). We understand from the parable of the wheat and tares, that not everyone who looks the part of a true Christian, is actually about the Father's business. As always, the greatest strategy of the enemy is not a totally outward anti-christ message, but a mixture of truth and error. Just enough truth to make the

message seem plausible, but enough leaven to poison all who partake. I mentioned earlier that we don't have a detailed "statement of faith" from the Nicolaitans that we can systematically go through and refute point by point. But we are not totally in the dark either. One of the great tools of biblical interpretation is understanding contextual factors. For this particular study, I'm going to look at some of the other heretical teachings of the day and I think you will begin to see some similar themes.

Rev 2:14 But I have a few things against thee, because thou hast there them that hold the doctrine of Balaam, who taught Balac to cast a stumblingblock before the children of Israel, to eat things sacrificed unto idols, and to commit fornication

Here in Pergamum, we see the "doctrine of Balaam" strictly condemned by Christ. It is important that we understand what Balaam's "doctrine" was, so that we may steer clear of it today. What the Old Testament alludes to- Jesus makes very plain - the doctrine of Balaam involved idolatry and sexual immorality. I'm not going to post the whole story of Balaam for the sake of time and space. I encourage you to read about him in Numbers chapters 22-24. To make a long story short, Balak hired Balaam (a prophet of sorts who is called a "southsayer" in Joshua 13:22 KJV) to curse Israel. After numerous attempts at bribing him by Balak, Balaam finally comes to the conclusion that he cannot curse what God has blessed (I could really preach here, but I'm going to resist the urge so that we can stay on track). It's going to take more than some verbal curse to make Israel vulnerable to her enemies. So he comes up with a strategy. This strategy is later revealed in Numbers 31:8,16. What becomes obvious is that Balaam's strategy included getting the children of Israel to commit sexual immorality with the Midianite women. In committing this trespass, the men of Israel were also mingling with the pagan gods worshipped by

these women. This is a perfect example of religious syncretism. That's a big theological word, but it basically means a "mixture" of different belief systems. What makes it so deadly is that it gives the outward appearance of piety and reverence for God, all the while tolerating the things that He has so clearly designated as an abomination to Him. We must beware of this even today-now more than ever!

The doctrine of Balaam is mentioned elsewhere in the New Testament:

II Peter 2:15 Which have forsaken the right way, and are gone astray, following the way of Balaam the son of Bosor, who loved the wages of unrighteousness

I think it's interesting that Peter uses the term "wages" of unrighteousness which indicates to me that these false teachers are motivated by money and power. In their desire to gain more and more followers, they are willing to compromise the message and "tickle the ears" of the masses.

Jude 1:11 Woe unto them! for they have gone in the way of Cain, and ran greedily after the error of Balaam for reward, and perished in the gainsaying of Core

Again, we see that greed and reward seem to be the motivation at the heart of Balaam's doctrine. Paul warned Timothy that "the love of money is the root of all evil."

Next we come to Thyatira where a similar heresy is taking place:

Revelation 2:20 Notwithstanding I have a few things against thee, because thou sufferest that woman Jezebel, which calleth herself a prophetess, to teach and to seduce my servants to commit fornication, and to eat

things sacrificed unto idols.

Though the names keep changing (Nicolatians, Balaam, Jezebel), the message is basically the same. This teaching offers a Christianity which doesn't demand obedience and loyalty to Jesus Christ alone. This is heresy and God hates it- plain and simple! We can clearly see that the aim of these false teachers is to convince Christians (notice Jesus calls them "my servants" in Revelation 2:20) that sexual immorality, ungodly lifestyles, and idolatry can be practiced without affecting one's standing in Christ. Jesus strongly rebukes that notion by saying that judgement is surely coming to those who practice such works. He calls such teachings the "depths things of Satan." (KJV) I think it would be interesting to see how this is translated in various versions for effect. :

Rev 2:24 Now I say to the rest of you in Thyatira, to you who do not hold to her teaching and have not learned Satan's so-called deep secrets (I will not impose any other burden on you): (NIV)

Rev 2:24 But I say to you, the rest who are in Thyatira, who do not hold this teaching, who have not known the deep things of Satan, as they call them--I place no other burden on you. (NASB)

Rev 2:24 "Now to you I say, and to the rest in Thyatira, as many as do not have this doctrine, who have not known the depths of Satan, as they say, I will put on you no other burden (NKJV)

Notice there is a "secret" involved in this whole process. There is something sinister working behind the scenes. The true author of these doctrines is not part of any modern group or seminary- the author is none other than the devil himself. He is the father of lies and he's been preaching this message ever

since the garden of Eden. Remember the "theology" he put forth to Eve in the garden?

Genesis 3:4 And the serpent said unto the woman, Ye shall not surely die:

Isn't this the same message he keeps preaching over and over again-from one generation to the next? Doesn't he always promise "liberty" but never the consequences of sin? His ministers today still proclaim that you can live an immoral lifestyle but as long as you cling to a verbal profession of faith-you have nothing to fear....."ye shall not surely die." We know that the death Adam died was not physical that day....it was spiritual (he physically lived hundreds of years after this- ref: Gen 5:5). So likewise, spiritual death awaits those who follow and teach the doctrines of demons like this one. I also think it's interesting that what was the "deeds" of the Nicolaitans in Rev 2:6 became the "doctrine" of the Nicolaitans in Rev 2:15. The point being that it is important what we believe, because believing and "behaving" are so closely related.

We have a sharp witness from scripture too. Notice in almost every New Testament epistle (whether Pauline, Johannine or otherwise) there are admonitions against sexual immorality and idolatry (which by the way comes in many different forms- in Colossians 3:5 it is linked to covetousness). There are warnings to "be not deceived" and that those "who do such things shall not inherit the kingdom of God."

Though we may never know in this life all the facets of Nicolaitan doctrine, we can be sure of several things. They taught contrary to the revealed commands of God- they taught in a Christian setting- God hated their deeds and their doctrine. These reasons alone are enough to consider their error, lest we follow after the same example. May God bless you as you continue to prayerfully study His Word!

