

4.13 - Nicolaitans

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Surprisingly little of substance is known concerning the [Nicolaitans](#) only mentioned in Scripture in the book of Revelation. The Lord commends the Ephesian church for hating the deeds of the Nicolaitans, whereas He has against the church in Pergamos, those who hold to the Nicolaitan teachings which He hates. There are two main views concerning the identity of the Nicolaitans. The first view holds that they are an early cult which followed or perverted the teachings of Nicolas, one of the seven men chosen by the congregation in Acts 6:5. The second view discounts this historical witness¹ in favor of understanding the designation "Nicolaitan" as denoting the error of their practice which asserted authority over the people in an unnatural distinction between clergy and laity (and which continues to be a distortion of biblical teaching to our own time).² In favor of the first view is the mention of a cult purportedly related to Nicolas by early members of the church.

Irenaeus (Haer. 1.26.3) basically repeats the biblical material, adding the assertion that the Nicolaitans were heretical followers of Nicolaus, the proselyte of Antioch who was chosen to be one of The Seven (Acts 6:5). Hippolytus (Haer. 7.24) underscores Irenaeus, adding that Nicolaus departed from true doctrine. Clement of Alexandria (Str. 2.20) claims that Nicolaus was an ascetic, and then current Nicolaitans were not his true followers because they perverted his teaching that it was necessary to abuse the flesh.³

The importance of these early citations has been questioned because they include precious little about the sect. Yet there is no evidence in the early church of alternate explanations or a challenge to the statements of these men, except to say that the Nicolaitans misrepresented the true teachings of Nicolas.⁴ Perhaps the Nicolaitans distorted the teachings of Nicolas in a similar way that antinomian sects throughout history have distorted Paul's teaching on liberty?⁵ The relationship which may exist between the mention of the Nicolaitans (Rev. 2:15+) in close association with Balaam (Rev. 2:14+) has also been noted. The two names (Nicolaitans, Balaam) have very similar meanings in their respective languages: "*Balaam* is derived from two Hebrew words, [בָּלַע](#) [bāla'] ('he swallows') and [עַם](#) ['ām] ('people'). Interestingly, according to the derivative meanings of the names, the two groups troubling this church [Pergamos] were 'swallowers of the people' (i.e., the Balaamites) and 'conquerors of the people' (i.e., the Nicolaitans).⁶ If the similar meaning of their names is significant and their mention in adjoining verses in the letter to Pergamos is intended to show a relationship, then it is thought that the licentious tendencies of the Nicolaitans might be understood in light of the doctrine of Balaam.

Was there, in the first place, any sect existing at the time when these words were uttered, which actually bore this name? I believe not. . . . the key to the right understanding of it is given us at Rev. 2:14-15+; where those "*that hold the doctrine of Balaam*" (Rev. 2:14+) are evidently identical with those "*that hold the doctrine of the Nicolaitans*" (Rev. 2:15+). we are here set upon the right track. . . it may be observed that his name [Balaam], according to the best etymology, signifies "Destroyer of the people" (. . . from [בָּלַע](#) [bēla'] and [עַם](#) ['ām]; and [Νικόλαος](#) [Nikolaos] ([νικῶ τὸν λαόν](#) [nikan ton laon]) is no more than a Grecizing of this name . . . The Nicolaitans . . . are the Balaamites . . . those who in the New Dispensation repeated the sin of Balaam in the Old, and sought to overcome or destroy the people of God by the same temptations whereby Balaam had sought to overcome them before.⁷

After Balaam, who was hired by the Moabite King Balaak (Num. 22:5, Deu. 23:4) to curse Israel failed in his task (Num. 24), he evidently counseled that Israel could be drawn into God's disfavor by luring them into sexual relationship with the women of Moab (Num. 25:1; 31:16) which would also entice them to worship foreign gods (Num. 25:2). If the Nicolaitan doctrine is a reflection of the doctrine of Balaam, the key may be intermarriage with the heathen leading to compromise and idolatrous worship.⁸ Peter mentions false teachers who are "following the way of Balaam" (2Pe. 2:15). It is said that "by covetousness" these teachers will exploit the church (2Pe. 2:3). They are said to be walking "according to the flesh in the lust of uncleanness" (2Pe. 2:10) and having "eyes full of adultery" (2Pe. 2:14). This would accord with the libertine aspect of the Nicolaitans mentioned by the early witnesses. It is said that Balaam taught Balaak to influence the Israelites "to eat things sacrificed to idols, and to commit sexual immorality" (Rev. 2:14+). How similar this is to the warning given the Gentiles by the Jerusalem council:

Therefore I judge that we should not trouble those from among the Gentiles who are turning to God, but that we write to them to abstain from things polluted by idols, *from* sexual immorality, *from* things strangled, and *from* blood. (Acts 15:19-20)

In both passages a connection is made between *eating meat sacrificed to idols* and *sexual immorality*.

The Jerusalem conference had in its decree brought into juxtaposition the eating of [εἰδωλόθυτα](#) [eidōlothyta] and indulgence in sexual impurity (Acts 15:20, 27) and John had not lived in a Greek city without becoming aware that the two things were in fact closely bound up together. Pagan festivities were too often occasions of immoralities from which Gentile converts had been rescued

with the greatest difficulty.⁹

If the Nicolaitans taught a similar doctrine to Balaam, it most likely urged believers to make *apractical compromise* with the society within which they found themselves. “They taught that Christians ought to remain members of the pagan clubs, and that they might do so without disloyalty to their faith.”¹⁰ How doubly-dangerous is such compromise with the surrounding culture: eroding the sanctification of the believer while simultaneously denigrating the witness of the Church.¹¹ However, the view that this was the doctrine of the Nicolaitans supposes that the mention of the Nicolaitans adjacent to Balaam (Rev. 2:14-15⁺) indicates a similarity of teaching. If this is not the case, then we know virtually nothing specific from Scripture about Nicolaitan practice and beliefs. Those who discount the historic witness to an actual sect known as the Nicolaitans¹² see the meaning of the name as being a key to understanding their errant teaching.

The meaning of the Greek is “rulers of the people.” This meaning may imply that this was an attempt to divide and make an unnatural distinction between the clergy and laity, creating a division in which the clergy exercised rulership over the laity. Certainly, elders have the biblical authority to determine the policy of the local church. But the authority described here probably went much further than the issues in the local church and may have extended to the personal lives of the members.¹³

If this is the Nicolaitan error, then one only need look at the top-heavy ecclesiastical structures which characterize much of Christendom throughout history to see the sour fruit of such teaching. This is one of many reasons why the doctrine of the priesthood of the believer (2Cor. 3:6; 6:4; 1Pe. 2:5, 9; Rev. 1:6⁺; 5:10⁺; 20:6⁺) is so important for the saints of every age.¹⁴

Notes

¹“In church history there is no record or mention of this group, so clues as to its identity need to be sought elsewhere.”—Arnold G. Fruchtenbaum, [*The Footsteps of Messiah*](#), rev ed (Tustin, CA: Ariel Ministries, 2003), 51.

²“Some have interpreted their name as meaning ‘conquering the people’ from nikaō, meaning ‘to conquer’ and *laos*, meaning ‘the people.’ This view considers the Nicolaitans as the forerunners of the clerical hierarchy superimposed upon the laity and robbing them of spiritual freedom.”—John F. Walvoord, [*The Revelation of Jesus Christ*](#) (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1966), 58.

³Duane F. Watson, “Nicolaitans,” in David Noel Freeman, ed., [*The Anchor Bible Dictionary*](#) (New York, NY: Doubleday, 1996, c1992), 4:1106.

⁴“The explanation that takes the Nicolaitans to be composed of followers of Nicolaus of Antioch has strong support in the early church. Added to Irenaeus are the testimonies of Tertullian, Hippolytus, Dorotheus of Tyre, Jerome, Augustine, Eusebius and others. They all say this was a sect of licentious antinomian Gnostics who lapsed into their antinomian license because of an overstrained asceticism. Hippolytus adds that Nicolaus was the forerunner of Hymenaeus and Philetus who are condemned in 2Ti. 2:17. . . . The few ancient voices that defend Nicolaus against charges of apostasy raise some questions, but are not sufficient to negate the strain of tradition that traces this sect back to Nicolaus.”—Robert L. Thomas, [*Revelation 1-7*](#) (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1992), 148-149.

⁵“We conclude that Nicolaitanism was an antinomian movement whose antecedents can be traced in the misrepresentation of Pauline liberty, and whose incidence may be connected with the special pressures of emperor worship and pagan society.”—Colin J. Hemer, [*The Letters to the Seven Churches of Asia in Their Local Setting*](#) (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1989), 94.

⁶Thomas, [*Revelation 1-7*](#), 189.

⁷Richard Chenevix Trench, [*Commentary on the Epistles to the Seven Churches in Asia*](#) (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1861), 82-83.

⁸“The doctrine relevant to the downfall resulting from Balaam’s counsel advocates that the people of God commit sexual immorality or intermarry with the heathen and compromise in the matter of idolatrous worship.”—Walvoord, [*The Revelation of Jesus Christ*](#), 68.

⁹Henry Barclay Swete, [*The Apocalypse of St. John*](#) (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1998, 1906), lxxii.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, lxxi.

¹¹A similar example of compromise of relevance to our own day is found in Christians who continue to participate in Masonic orders.

¹²“The value of Irenaeus’s references to the Nicolaitans is doubtful. The primary passage (*adv. Haer.* 1.26.3) tells us that they followed Nicolaus, one of the seven deacons of Acts 6:5, but adds nothing which might not have been inferred from the Revelation. In a passing remark in 3.11.7 he treats them as the earliest representative of the error of Cerinthus and ascribes to them a Gnostic

cosmology. That however might be an inference from a tradition connecting John's opponents with the '*gnosis* falsely so called' of 1Ti. 6:20, to which Irenaeus here appears to refer."—Hemer, [The Letters to the Seven Churches of Asia in Their Local Setting](#) s.v. "Irenaeus Questionable on Nicolaitans."

¹³Fruchtenbaum, [The Footsteps of Messiah](#), 51.

¹⁴Old Testament priests *were Levites*. New Testament priests *wear levis*!

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(Content generated on Thu Apr 30 16:37:50 2020)

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