

Being an Overcomer #5 – The Doctrine of the Nicolaitanes

Church #3: Pergamos – the Penetrated Church Rev. 2:12-17 (continued)

The Doctrine of the Nicolaitanes – Rev. 2:15

We have no clear historical evidence of what the doctrine of the Nicolaitanes was, but it was especially hateful to God, as He states twice (2:6 and 2:15). There are no other Biblical references to it, and even in Rev. 2, there is no definition or description, just the statements that God hated their deeds (2:6) and their doctrine (2:15).

Because of this, there are (not surprisingly) many theories on the Nicolaitanes.

- a. One person equates Nicholas and Nimrod (from Genesis), the founder of Babylon and all the false religion arising therefrom.
- b. The followers of St. Nicholas (Christmas).
- c. Some people have suggested that they were followers of the “Nicolas a proselyte of Antioch” who was one of the deacons in Ac. 6. This is conceivable but wholly without evidence, and is an unnecessary slander of one who was considered “of honest report, full of the Holy Ghost and wisdom”.
- d. Perhaps it was from another “Nicolaus”, presumably a heretic in Ephesus.
- e. Many consider it to be synonymous with the doctrine of Balaam (licentious behavior and open idolatry, those who think grace gives us a license to sin). But 2:15 says “So hast thou also them that hold the doctrine of the Nicolaitanes”. This seems to show a distinction from what went before, not sameness.
- f. Some believe it was an early form of gnosticism (a serious type of heresy in the second and third centuries).

None of these theories are supported by any evidence, so there is no good reason to believe them. Yet it is unreasonable that God would twice specify their deeds and doctrine by name, both times saying that it is something He hates, and give no indication of what it was. In the absence of historical or scriptural evidence, the only remaining means of interpretation is in the word itself.

“Nicolaitanes” comes from two Greek words, “nikao” (to conquer) and “laos” (people). Together, it would mean a doctrine which tends to “conquer the people”. Actually this is quite similar to the name Balaam, which means “to destroy the people”. So whereas the doctrine of Balaam is for the destruction of God’s people by immorality and spiritual whoredom (seeking other gods), the doctrine of the Nicolaitanes was for the conquest of God’s people in an ecclesiastical sense.

This view sees Nicolaitanism to be the rise of an unscriptural distinction between the “clergy” and the “laity”, that began rising in the church at that time, and has prevailed in the church even to today. While especially strong in Roman Catholicism, the Eastern Orthodox, and Anglicanism, it exists in lesser forms in many Protestant churches.

What is meant by clergy and laity?

“Clergy” is from the Greek kleros, which speaks of inheritance, or heritage. “Laity” simply means the people. So over time, the term clergy came to be applied to those “special” ones in the church who are “over” the regular people, as if they are God’s heritage. Clergy are those who are ordained by the organizational church to function in “official ministry”, and are often seen as some form of intermediaries between God and normal people (the “laity”). They may even be authorized to receive people’s confessions, and grant or deny forgiveness. They are the only ones who may officiate in church service and governance, and are usually in a hierarchy (priests, bishops, archbishops, cardinals, popes, etc., like a pyramid). None of these offices are even named in the Bible except bishop, and the NT bishop is simply a pastor, not what it is in today’s hierarchical churches.

Clergy maintain a superior and often ornate form of dress (robes, collars, mitres, furs, neck pendants, or even scepters, etc.) to show that they are above the ordinary mass of people. They must be addressed with special titles (father, reverend, your holiness, vicar, etc.) They are in all respects considered “special” and are the privileged class within the church.

The laity on the other hand, are just the normal nobodies of the church, who submit to the direction and “ministrations” of the clergy, who listen to the sermons and put the money in the plate. Their place is not to be students of the Bible themselves, nor to question the teachings and practices of the church, but to leave all that to the “professionals” (the clergy). Some churches have condescended to recognize “lay ministries” that are unordained people who are allowed to perform some types of “almost-ministry”.

It is ironic that the roles of **clergy and laity are really the reverse of what we see in 1 P. 5:3** – Addressing himself to the elders (5:1) who are pastors/bishops (5:2), he warns them not to be lords over God’s heritage (kleron). So it is the **people** who are God’s kleron (clergy), not the elders.

So what DOES the Bible say about the church and its ministries? The Bible must be our only guide, not unsupportable church traditions.

The “Five-Fold Ministry”

Eph. 4:11-16 shows the various types of ministries that God has set in the church. “And he gave some, **apostles**, and some, **prophets**, and some, **evangelists**, and some, **pastors** and **teachers**.” While this is not the time to describe and define each of these ministry gifts, we should hold to what the Bible says about them, and hold firmly to any stated requirements or qualifications. What is important in this lesson’s context is that these are all functional gifts, not ecclesiastical or hierarchical levels.

Notice that there is no “priest” in Eph. 4:11. The NT knows nothing about a separate class of men called priests. On the contrary, we all, as NT saints, are “a royal priesthood” (1 P. 2:5, 9-10). This is commonly referred to as “the priesthood of believers”. Christ alone is our great high priest.

What is the purpose of these “office” gifts? They are gifts of leadership

1. **Body Ministry** (4:12) – “**For the perfecting of the saints for the work of the ministry**” EVERY ONE in the church has a God-given set of abilities and gifts, and a place of functioning. We are not all the same, but each has a place and a function. The purpose of the “five-fold ministry” is to instruct and govern the church in a godly way so that each member is functioning in their own special way, and so that together, the church is all that God intends it to be. Those in the five-fold ministry do not minister on behalf of the people, but unto them. They are to teach, encourage, and exhort in such a way that every member of Christ’s body is able to function according to their own calling.
2. **Edification** (4:12, 16) – “for the edifying of the body of Christ. ... unto the edifying of itself in love.”
3. **Unity of the Faith** (4:13) – “Till we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God”
4. **Maturity** (4:13, 15) – “unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ ... But speaking the truth in love, may grow up into him in all things, which is the head, even Christ.”
5. **Protection against deceivers** (4:14) – “That we henceforth be no more children, tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine by the sleight of men, and cunning craftiness, whereby they lie in wait to deceive”
6. **Effective Functioning** (4:16) – ‘From whom the whole body fitly joined together and compacted by that which every joint supplieth, according to the effectual working in the measure of every part”
7. **Growth** (4:16) – “Maketh increase of the body”

Warning (2:16):

1. “Repent; or else I will come unto thee quickly, and will fight against them with the sword of my mouth.”

Promises to overcomers (2:17):

1. “To him that overcometh will I give to eat of the hidden manna”
2. “and will give him a white stone, and in the stone a new name written, which no man knoweth saving he that receiveth it.”