

# Nicolaitanism Today

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The Christmas season has passed—thankfully—for another year. The colorful, twinkling lights have come down, dying evergreens grace the curbs awaiting trash collection, lines at stores have dwindled to manageable size, and the cheerful, too-sweet tunes of the season no longer clog the airwaves. People have quit the annoying "Merry Christmas!" sendoff, the Salvation Army's bell ringers have gone on to quieter things, and Rudolph, the elves and jolly Saint Nick have disappeared from sight.

Is it not ironic that "Christians" celebrate Christmas? Christians are by name followers of Christ, and He says nothing in His Word about memorializing His birth year after year. The Bible is quite clear that the day of one's death is more important (Ecclesiastes 7:1), and certainly, Christ's death is particularly more important for our salvation and the fulfillment of God's plan than His birth (Romans 5:6-21). So how did Christians come to believe that God approves of them celebrating Christmas?

The answer is not as simple as one might think. It involves a minor controversy within today's scattered church of God: Who are the Nicolaitans? Believe it or not, the Nicolaitans are in part responsible for "Christianity's" acceptance of Christmas, Easter, Halloween and other unbiblical practices. More importantly, Nicolaitanism, representative of a much broader philosophy, can be blamed for the organized and systematic removal of God's law as a central pillar of the Christian way of life. These things happened because of an attitude, an approach to the truth, found in the Nicolaitan heresy.

Interestingly, Jesus mentions Nicolaitanism in a few of His letters to the seven churches in Revelation 2. This fact brings in a prophetic angle—that is, it makes Nicolaitanism not only a historical movement but also a current and future trend within the church of God. Knowing what Nicolaitanism is and how it works may be important to our spiritual survival!

## The Controversy

Although prior studies on this phenomenon had been done, the church's interest in Nicolaitanism coincided with the breakup and scattering of the church in the early 1990s. Papers on the subject, often linked with ideas about the heresy of Balaam, circulated from hand to hand and across the Internet. One can even argue that these papers' definitions of Nicolaitanism spurred and intensified the scattering of the brethren.

In the main, these papers defined Nicolaitanism as the belief and practice of hierarchical government, the scapegoat for all the church's problems, with an emphasis on tithing and using a paid ministry. This definition derives from the meaning of the word *Nicolaos* in Greek: "conqueror of the people" ( *Balaam* in Hebrew has a similar meaning). The authors of these papers on Nicolaitanism assumed that, since God names things what they are, the title "Nicolaitan" must therefore refer to a practice of abusive and dictatorial government and administration, which they assumed to be hierarchy. This assumption is based entirely on the authors' emotional reactions to their circumstances at the time—not upon biblical or even logical reasoning.

First, *Nicolaos* may have nothing to do with Nicolaitan doctrine. Not every name in the Bible is significant spiritually. For instance, *Luke* means "white," and any spiritual connotation it has to him or his work is pure conjecture. Many biblical names are simple common names within the culture and time in which the person lived.

Second, the meaning of *Nicolaos* is not necessarily negative. Although its natural connotation is "one who conquers the people," it can have a positive, possessive sense: "the people's conqueror," that is, a champion of the people, one who fights for the people's best interests. It may refer to a tyrant or despot, but it can just as easily speak of a popular hero.

Third, the name has a military association, not a governmental one. It primarily suggests conquering by might and strategy on the field of battle. Granted, such conquerors usually also governed as kings or emperors, but ruling is a separate activity from conquering, occurring as its consequence.

Fourth, this means that *Nicolaos* nowhere suggests any form of government. Those who believe the word to refer to hierarchy assume that a conqueror would rule as a tyrant or dictator, whether he is called king, emperor, president, chancellor or first citizen. While this may be the rule, a few historical exceptions (for example, American military-heroes-turned-rulers George Washington, Andrew Jackson, Ulysses Grant, Dwight Eisenhower, etc.) prove this assumption faulty.

Finally, people can be conquered in ways other than "abusive and dictatorial" hierarchy. Socialist democracy in America and Europe has by mostly "benevolent" means cowed millions into a complacent and controllable herd. Populaces have been overcome by trickery, disease, famine, natural disaster and their own sheer stupidity. Limiting Nicolaitanism to hierarchical government is arbitrary and subjective.

The Bible itself does not define Nicolaitanism. Revelation 2:6 declares, "But this you [the Ephesian church] have, that you hate the deeds of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate." Jesus later says to the Pergamos church, "Thus you also have those who hold the doctrine of the Nicolaitans, which thing I hate" (verse 15). While these verses provide no definition, they tell us three things:

1. Nicolaitanism is a belief system, like a religion or a philosophy.
2. Nicolaitanism results in ungodly behavior.
3. Christ hates it vehemently.

## Nicolas

The only other clue to Nicolaitanism available within the New Testament is the lone occurrence of the name "Nicolas" in Acts 6:5. It appears in the section describing the dispute between the Hebrews and the Hellenists over the neglect of the latter's widows. To solve this problem, the church chooses seven deacons to oversee the physical work of distributing food to the needy brethren, and one of these is "Nicolas, a proselyte from Antioch."

Again, this description provides the most meager of hints about the man but enough to propose some conclusions. Nicolas is a Hellenist, meaning primarily that he spoke Greek, but probably also suggesting that he possessed a Greek education. As such, "they [the 'Hellenists'] maintained a more liberal outlook than the 'Hebrews,' including the apostles" (F.F. Bruce, *New Testament History*, p. 219), especially regarding keeping the law. This "liberal outlook" toward the law later formed the heart of the debate at the Council of Jerusalem in AD 49 (Acts 15).

That Luke calls him a proselyte tells us that he is a Gentile who converted to Judaism before his calling to Christianity. Becoming a proselyte required a Gentile to keep Jewish law in its entirety, undergo circumcision, be baptized and make a special sacrifice at the Temple. This rigorous process indicates that Nicolas must also have been quite devout and dedicated in his beliefs. The church's choice of him as one of the first deacons reveals he likely possessed standout natural abilities and leadership qualities, as well as fulfilling the apostles' qualifications of being "of good reputation, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom" (Acts 6:3).

The last tidbit of information is that he is from Antioch, the largest city and capital of the Roman province of Syria. The city's residents—Greeks, Macedonians, Syrians, Jews, Romans and others—brought to it their own languages, cultures, philosophies and religions. F.F. Bruce writes, "Its cosmopolitan population and material wealth provided an apt setting for cultural exchange and religious syncretism" (*ibid.*, p. 264). This urban, multicultural, religious mélange formed Nicolas' background.

Unfortunately, it is in the context of syncretism that Nicolas is last mentioned in the post-biblical, historical record. Both Irenaeus (*Against Heresies* 1.26.3; 3.10.6) and Clement of Alexandria (*Miscellanies*, 3.4.25f) consider Nicolas of Antioch to be the founder of the Gnostic sect known as the Nicolaitans. Another early writer, Hippolytus, adds that Nicolas "departed from sound doctrine, and was in the habit of inculcating indifference of both life and food" (*Refutation of All Heresies*, 7.24), meaning he taught the Gnostic belief of the irrelevance of physical things. This reinforces Clement's claim that Nicolas became an ascetic and that his followers later perverted his teachings to encompass idolatry and immorality (2.20.12), becoming what we know as Nicolaitans.

From this information, we can hypothesize the evolution of Nicolaitanism. Roman church historian Eusebius writes that Nicolas himself was a moral man (*Ecclesiastical History*, 3.29). Though sincere and devout, he came to believe that the only way to grow spiritually was to consider his body and its desires as unimportant. In this way, he could ignore them in favor of spiritual pursuits. His fundamental doctrine appears to have been "the flesh must be treated with contempt."

Over the years, however, this teaching took on a more Gnostic spin: Since the flesh is unimportant, even contemptible, what one does in the flesh is of no consequence. Spiritual life, growth and ultimately salvation occur in the soul, and since God is spirit, He has no regard for the flesh. Therefore, Nicolaitans reasoned, what does it matter if one satisfies the flesh's desires? At some point in its early history, then, Nicolaitanism evolved from an ascetic philosophy to a licentious one—one that Christ says He hates.

## **Idolatry and Sex**

What was the doctrine and practice of Nicolaitanism that Christ hates so much? The context of Revelation 2:12-16, the letter to the church in Pergamos, confirms the claims of these early church writers that the Nicolaitans were antinomian (literally, "against law"). Notice the flow of verses 14-15:

But I have a few things against you, because you have there those who hold the doctrine of Balaam, who taught Balak to put a stumbling block before the children of Israel, to eat things sacrificed to idols, and to commit sexual immorality. Thus you also have those who hold the doctrine of the Nicolaitans, which thing I hate.

The structure of this paragraph ties together the doctrine of Balaam, the sins of eating things sacrificed to idols and committing sexual immorality, and the doctrine of the Nicolaitans. Christ implies that all three are the same basic heresy under different guises. This antinomian teaching affected the church in Thyatira as well (verses 20-21).

Moses records Balaam's story in Numbers 22-25, 31. Balak, king of Moab, hires Balaam to curse the Israelites, but every time he tries, Balaam instead blesses them. He then counsels Balak to send Moabite and Midianite women into the camp of Israel to seduce the men and invite them to the sacrifices of their god (Numbers 25:1-2; 31:16). Clearly, Balaam's instruction included getting the Israelites to commit idolatry and sexual immorality.

Interestingly, these two practices arise in the Jerusalem Council in AD 49. Paul and Barnabas, with Peter's help, convince the assembled elders that Gentile converts to Christianity should not be required to be circumcised and keep the law of Moses, Judaism's rigorous "yoke" of picayune laws (Acts 15:10). However, the Council enjoins the Gentiles on four points of typical Gentile religious practice:

For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit, and to us, to lay upon you no greater burden than these necessary things: that you abstain from things offered to idols, from blood, from things strangled, and from sexual immorality. If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well. Farewell. (verses 28-29)

Obviously, the Council's decree does not exempt Gentiles from keeping the Ten Commandments, for it is clear from many New Testament passages that Jesus and the apostles taught them to both Jews and Gentiles (e.g., Matthew 19:17-19; Romans 13:9; etc.). These two issues—idolatry and sexual immorality—became a flashpoint in the conflict between true Christianity and Hellenistic Gnosticism, and a person's stance on them exposed which side he favored. Thus, Nicolaitanism and Balaamism are biblical symbols or representatives of the larger Gnostic, antinomian influence on Christianity.

## **Dire Warnings**

Is Nicolaitanism passé? Evidently not, for Jesus' admonitions in Revelation 2 indicate that this antinomian influence will remain until His return. Notice His warnings to Pergamos and Thyatira:

Repent, or else I will come to you quickly and will fight against them with the sword of My mouth. . . . But to you I say, and to the rest in Thyatira, as many as do not have this doctrine, and who have not known the depths of Satan [another allusion to antinomianism], as they call them, I will put on you no other burden. But hold fast what you have till I come. (verses 16, 24-25)

This does not mean that the particular sins of eating meat sacrificed to idols and sexual license will pervade the church until the end, although idolatry and sexual sins will certainly exist in it. He is more concerned about the antinomian spirit, the attitude of lawlessness, that allows these sins to infest the church. When members of the church teach and practice that they are not obliged to keep the laws of God, sin will inevitably break out vigorously. When this occurs, Christians are no longer under grace but under the penalty of the law and the wrath of the Judge (Romans 6:11-23; Hebrews 10:26-31; 12:25).

Jesus, Paul, Peter, Jude and John warn against the encroachment of antinomianism or lawlessness. In His Olivet Prophecy, Jesus says: "Then many false prophets will rise up and deceive many. And because lawlessness will abound, the love of many will grow cold" (Matthew 24:11-12). What will happen to such lawless people? Jesus Himself answers:

Many will say to Me in that day, "Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?" And then I will declare to them, "I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!" (Matthew 7:22-23)

Among Paul's end-time prophecies is his prediction of a great apostasy that results from the unrestrained assault of "the mystery of lawlessness" (II Thessalonians 2:1-7). This comes

with all unrighteous deception among those who perish, because they did not receive the love of the truth, that they might be saved. And for this reason God will send them strong delusion, that they should believe the lie, that they all may be condemned who did not believe the truth but had pleasure in unrighteousness. . . . Therefore, brethren, stand fast and hold the traditions which you were taught. . . . (verses 10-12, 15)

Peter and Jude use similar language in their books to counter the antinomian teaching extant in their congregations. Peter writes:

[T]he Lord knows how to . . . reserve the unjust under punishment for the day of judgment, and especially those who walk according to the flesh in the lust of uncleanness and despise authority. . . .

But these, like natural brute beasts made to be caught and destroyed, speak evil of things they do not understand [such as God's law], and will utterly perish in their own corruption, and will receive the wages of unrighteousness. . . . They have forsaken the right way and gone astray, following the way of Balaam the son of Beor, who loved the wages of unrighteousness. . . .

For when they speak great swelling words of emptiness, they allure through the lusts of the flesh, through licentiousness, the ones who have actually escaped from those who live in error. While they promise them liberty, they themselves are slaves of corruption; for by whom a person is overcome, by him also he is brought into bondage. . . .

You therefore, beloved, since you know these things beforehand, beware lest you also fall from your own steadfastness, being led away with the error of the wicked; but grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. (II Peter 2:9-10, 12-13, 15, 18-19; 3:17-18)

Jude adds:

[C]ontend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints. For certain men have crept in unnoticed, who long ago were marked out for this condemnation, ungodly men, who turn the grace of our God into licentiousness and deny the only Lord God and our Lord Jesus Christ. (verses 3-4)

John's epistles are full of warnings against antinomian heresies. For instance, notice these passages:

» Now by this we know that we know Him, if we keep His commandments. He who says, "I know Him," and does not keep His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him. (I John 2:3-4)

» Whoever commits sin also commits lawlessness, and sin is lawlessness. (I John 3:4)

» In this the children of God and the children of the devil are manifest: Whoever does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor is he who does not love his brother. (I John 3:10)

» By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and keep His commandments. For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments. And His commandments are not burdensome. (I John 5:2-3)

» This is love, that we walk according to His commandments. . . . Whoever transgresses and does not abide in the doctrine of Christ does not have God. . . . If anyone comes to you and does not bring this doctrine, do not receive him into your house nor greet him; for he who greets him shares in his evil deeds. (II John 6, 9-11)

» Beloved, do not imitate what is evil, but what is good. He who does good is of God, but he who does evil has not seen God. (III John 11)

In addition, the gospel of John uses Jesus' own words during His ministry to attack antinomian heresies in the church. This much scriptural attention along with its prophetic implications warrants our taking careful notice.

## **Still With Us**

Of all people, we who have left the Worldwide Church of God (WCG) in the past decade should be most aware of the antinomian spirit working in the church of God. The doctrinal changes that began to be instituted mere months after the death of Herbert W. Armstrong had as their goal the removal of God's law, particularly the Sabbath, from the church's beliefs. WCG's subsequent heavy emphasis on "grace" and "love," along with its renunciation of "legalism" exposed its antinomian position. Because of these changes, it has joined evangelical Protestant "Christianity" to the point that it now worships on Sunday, encourages celebration of Christmas and Easter, and permits the use of crucifixes and images of "Jesus" by its ministry and membership and in its publications.

The "Christian" churches of this world are predominantly antinomian to some extent. Both Roman Catholicism and Protestantism belong to what can be termed Hellenistic Christianity, that is, a form of Christianity heavily influenced by Greek philosophies, particularly Gnosticism. Catholicism is the more moderate of the two, having retained obedience to the Church and its traditions as well as requiring certain works for salvation. However, its belief of the afterlife, with its levels of heaven, limbo, purgatory and beatific vision—not to mention its belief in an immortal soul—brand it as Gnostic.

Protestantism is more antinomian, having rejected Catholicism's works during the Reformation. Martin Luther's doctrine of salvation by grace "through faith alone" removes God's law from the

equation altogether. Pure Protestant theology is so antinomian that it claims that lawkeeping in any form—which it terms "legalism"—is detrimental to the soul's growth in spirituality. This form of Christianity also champions the doctrine of eternal security, the idea that, once one accepts Jesus, he can never lose his salvation, no matter what sins he commits ("once saved, always saved"). This doctrine knocks out law and judgment for sin in one blow.

Of course, the world itself is antinomian because it is under the sway of Satan the Devil, who despises God's law (Ephesians 2:2; I John 5:19). He even tried his antinomian tricks on Jesus, who countered with quotations from the law (Matthew 4:1-10)! Certainly, our adversary will tempt us similarly, trying to get us to put God's law aside so we can fulfill our desires.

Jesus, however, in his prayer in John 17, asks God to help us in this, and He also gives us the antidote to antinomianism:

I do not pray that You should take them out of the world, but that You should keep [guard, protect] them from the evil one. They are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. Sanctify them by Your truth. Your word is truth. (verses 15-17)

Knowing God's truth and practicing it to become holy will protect us from the rampant antinomianism of this world, this age that is soon to end. Still to come are the Beast and his False Prophet, who will exemplify this anti-God, anti-Christ, anti-law spirit. To endure to the end, to survive the mystery of lawlessness that will mark the end time, we must hold fast to God's Word and seek His righteousness. "Blessed are those who do His commandments, that they may have the right to the tree of life, and may enter through the gates into the [New Jerusalem]" (Revelation 22:14).