

# Who are the Nicolaitans?

Numbers 25:1-8

Introduction: The Lord told the church in Ephesus, “*You hate the deeds of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate*” (Rev. 2:6). He reiterates His disgust for the Nicolaitans by telling the church in Pergamos, “*You also have those who hold the doctrine of the Nicolaitans, which thing I hate*” (Rev. 2:15). The Bible does not reveal much concerning the Nicolaitans or their false doctrine. However, history provides some insight into this group and their false beliefs.

## I. Nicolas of Antioch

A. “Irenaeus said that they were followers of Nicolaus of Antioch, a proselyte who was among the seven men chosen to serve the Jerusalem congregation (Acts 6:5), who had forsaken true Christian doctrine; he said they lived in unrestrained indulgence (*Against Heresies I;26:3*). Hippolytus confirmed this by noting that Nicolaus left correct doctrine and had the habit of indifference as to what a man ate and as to how he lived (Refutation of Heresies 7:24)... Clement of Alexandria... observed that the Nicolaitans abandoned themselves to pleasures like goats in a life of shameless self-indulgence (*The Miscellianes 2:20*).”<sup>1</sup>

B. Perhaps from Nicolaus’ close ties to the early Church and his prominent standing among the brethren that he and his followers may have promoted themselves more as apostles; not counted among the twelve but ones that were sent forth from Christ like Barnabas (Acts 14:14) or Epaphroditus (Phil. 2:25; in the original Greek he is called an apostle). A true apostle of Christ would not lie nor indulge in wicked pleasures. “*Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits, whether they are of God; because many false prophets have gone out into the world*” (1 Jn. 4:1).

## II. Balaam compared (Rev. 2:14-15)

A. “The Nicolaitans were associated closely with those people who held the teaching of Balaam. This may have been a play on words. “Nicolaitans” could have been derived from two Greek words, *nikan*, which meant “to Conquer” and *laos*, which meant “people.” Likewise Balaam could be derived from two Hebrew words, *bela* which meant “to conquer” and *ha’am*, which meant “people.”

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<sup>1</sup> The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible, Merrill C. Tenney, ed., Zondervan, 1975. Vol 4, pg. 435.

Nicolaus and Balaam would then be the Greek and Hebrew forms of the same name, descriptive in each instance of an evil teacher who had influence over the people and brought them into bondage to heresy.”<sup>2</sup>

B. Before the children of Israel left Balak’s Acacia Grove “*in the plains of Moab on the side of the Jordan across from Jericho*” (Num. 22:1), they were invited to participate in sacrifices to Moab’s gods and to commit harlotry (Num. 25:1-2). This passage says Balaam taught Balak to put this “*stumbling block before the children of Israel.*”

C. “The letter to the church at Pergamum specifically charged them with having seduced people into eating meat offered to idols and into acts of fornication. The decree of the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15:28, 29) had laid down also two specific conditions upon which Gentiles were to be admitted into Christian fellowship: they were to abstain from things offered to idols and from fornication. These were the very regulations which the Nicolaitans violated.”<sup>3</sup>

D. The Nicolaitans “probably reasoned that the human body was evil anyway and only the spirit was good. A Christian, therefore, could do whatever he desired with his body because it had no importance. The spirit, on the other hand, was the recipient of grace which meant that grace and forgiveness were his no matter what he did. They were those ready to compromise with the world.”<sup>4</sup> Yet, the most disturbing thing was the Lord’s recognition that the church in Pergamos had some within their membership that held to this false doctrine.

### III. Application:

A. Any concept that allows a Christian to sin without repentance would be a false doctrine. The concepts of “once saved, always saved” and “continual cleansing” are false doctrines that promote the Nicolaitan’s way of thinking. If repentance is not required for sin but a person believes they are still saved, then giving oneself over to the pleasures of this world would make little difference in their minds.

B. It appears the faithful were not doing anything constructive to prevent the leaven from spreading within their congregation. Repentance would require the congregation to withdraw themselves from those who endorse that false doctrine (Rom. 16:17-18; 1 Cor. 5:1-13; 2 Thess. 3:6-15; Titus 3:10-11). Failure to repent and take responsibility for their error will only cause the Lord to punish the

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, pgs. 435-436.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, pg. 436.

congregation and take up the *“fight against them with the sword of His mouth”* (Rev. 2:16).

Conclusion: The Apostle Paul said, *“There must also be factions (heresies) among you, that those who are approved may be recognized among you”* (1 Cor. 11:19). The Nicolaitans provided the false doctrine that produced one such heresy in the early church. They taught a doctrine of licentiousness, decadence, and self-indulgence in sin without regard to repentance. This is the thing Christ says He hates.