

It's the System

Let your character be free from the love of money, being content with what you have; for He Himself has said, "I will never desert you, nor will I ever forsake you," so that we confidently say,

"The Lord is my helper, I will not be afraid.

What shall man do to me?"

Remember those who led you, who spoke the word of God to you; and considering the result of their conduct, imitate their faith. Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today, yes and forever. (Heb 13:4-8)

Let no one look down on your youthfulness, but rather in speech, conduct, love, faith and purity, show yourself an example of those who believe. (1 Tim 4:12)

Therefore, I exhort the elders among you, as your fellow elder and witness of the sufferings of Christ, and a partaker also of the glory that is to be revealed, shepherd the flock of God among you, exercising oversight not under compulsion, but voluntarily, according to the will of God; and not for sordid gain, but with eagerness; nor yet as lording it over those allotted to your charge, but proving to be examples to the flock. (1 Peter 5:1-3)

And calling them to Himself, Jesus said to them, "You know that those who are recognized as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them; and their great men exercise authority over them. But it is not so among you, but whoever wishes to become great among you shall be your servant; and whoever wishes to be first among you shall be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many." (Mark 10:42-45)

I hear about it all too often; committed Christians who are being treated shabbily by the very people who would be their shepherds, councilors and teachers. It's happened to me, and to my family; to people I know, and to people they know. Maybe your experience has been different. I certainly hope so. Maybe you have been discipled and guided by wise leaders, honest, upright and true, who have been your servants and led by example. Maybe you've never encountered an elder or pastor who would lord it over you, manipulate you, or lie to you. Again, I certainly hope so. Others have written about "spiritual abuse" in the churches¹ and, having left the Institutional Church a year ago, I didn't think I had much to add, but recent events have changed my opinion. I can't tell you how sad that makes me.

My own conviction is that these things arise out of the sinful nature, encouraged and allowed to grow because most of professing Christianity has forgotten what the church really is, and what Jesus said about leaders among us. We have forgotten that the Church is a bunch of

¹ See Alan Morrison's articles [<http://www.diakrisis.org/>] "The New Diaspora", "Nehemiah: Role Model for 2001", "The Necessity of the Maverick in the Church", and "The Scandal Of Spiritual Abuse In Churches" - Parts One and Two.

sinner, called out of the world and the world system by the grace of God alone, through faith in Christ alone. We have forgotten that this ragtag assortment of unrighteous rebels has all been given The Spirit to teach every one of us “all things” (John 14:26, 1 John 2:27) guide us into all truth (John 16:13-14.) Instead, we’ve come to view the church as a building we gather in, or as an institution or organization that we belong to. The church has become a business, incorporated by the state, with a board of directors, officers, employees, assets, liabilities and investments. The care of souls has given way to psychology and professional counselors, and professionals (authors, television and radio personalities, and professors at prominent Seminaries) have become the management consultants, gurus, and arbiters of “orthodoxy.”

Can you imagine a first century church suing an insurance company, alleging, “bodily injury due to emotional stress?” How does that kind of action compare with, “...we have renounced the things hidden because of shame, not walking in craftiness or adulterating the Word of God, but by the manifestation of truth commending ourselves to every man’s conscience in the sight of God.” (2 Cor. 4:2)? How does it sound when a “Chairman of the Elder Board” tells you that, while the literal words you are reading in your Church constitution say precisely and plainly what you tell him they do, they don’t necessarily mean what they say? Don’t you expect a “yes” to mean yes and a “no” to mean no, especially when dealing with so-called elders? What would you say about elders who regularly wrangle over words (2 Tim. 2:14), or use rhetorical tricks and faulty logic to make their points (Eph. 4:14-15)?

Church leaders, those who the opening verses are especially applicable to, are abusing their positions, and bringing the Church and the name of Christ into disrepute. The modern system itself almost guarantees it will happen. If you were to look for the current church structure and practice in Scripture, you’d have to bring your pre-conceived notions with you in order to find it.² Likewise, Church leaders, even in Fundamentalist congregations, have become lawmakers and executives rather than brothers. They have exalted themselves above the people, and are using their positions to render often-harsh judgments from personal or business perspectives rather than from a Biblical perspective. Yes, I know that I am painting with a very broad brush, but for every individual exception there are likely twenty, if not a thousand leaders who fit the pattern. It is a pattern that the Lord hates. The pattern encompasses the doctrine and the deeds of the Nicolaitans; those who place themselves over the people, set up hierarchies of authority from which positions they lord it over the “laity.”

Yet this you do have, that you hate the deeds of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate. (Rev 2:6)

Thus you also have some who in the same way hold the teaching of the Nicolaitans. (Rev 2:15)

Then Jesus spoke to the multitudes and to His disciples, saying, "The scribes and the Pharisees have seated themselves in the chair of Moses; therefore all that they tell you, do and observe, but do not do according to their deeds; for they say things, and do not do them. And they tie up heavy loads, and lay them on men's shoulders; but they themselves are unwilling to move them with so much as a finger. But they do all their deeds to be noticed by men; for they broaden their phylacteries, and lengthen the tassels of their

² See, “Towards a House Church Theology” [http://home.wnm.net/~derekg/house_church/] for excellent studies in how the Church is meant to run, the role of elders, and other issues.

garments. And they love the place of honor at banquets, and the chief seats in the synagogues, and respectful greetings in the market places, and being called by men, Rabbi. But do not be called Rabbi; for One is your Teacher, and you are all brothers. And do not call anyone on earth your father; for One is your Father, He who is in heaven. And do not be called leaders; for One is your Leader, that is, Christ. But the greatest among you shall be your servant. And whoever exalts himself shall be humbled; and whoever humbles himself shall be exalted. (Matt 23:1-12)

I love the Revelations, and do not, personally, find it to be an especially difficult book to understand *if you read it plainly*, like you would read a newspaper. If you understand simile and metaphor, and understand that John is writing about things as he saw them, using the language of appearance, you should do fine. Yet, although I have studied Revelations on my own, I continually skimmed past some things because I thought I already knew them. They had been taught a certain way, and that teaching became a fundamental assumption. Now, this is slightly embarrassing to admit because for years I have been trying to drive home the point that we need to check everything against the Word; compare every doctrine, every practice, and every assumption to Scripture, and throw out anything that doesn't measure up. I know I shouldn't be embarrassed, because I have also said that even the most diligent and discerning person is going to have errors and other peoples' opinions slip by his defenses and become part of his storehouse of "knowledge." This is why I believe we must separate ourselves from known false teaching: we may think we are filtering out the dross, but how can we know what we are missing?

The two things that I know slipped by for a long time (Who knows what else has?) still bother me. The first one can be found in Revelation 1:20 and then often in chapters two and three. The verse reads:

As for the mystery of the seven stars which you saw in My right hand, and the seven golden lampstands: the seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are the seven churches. (Rev 1:20)

Virtually every time I heard teachers address this verse they would say that the "angels" referred to are, in reality, the "pastors" of the churches. Here is what Strong's says, for instance:

NT:32

aggelos (ang'-el-os); from aggelos [probably derived from NT:71; compare NT:34] (to bring tidings); a messenger; especially an "angel"; by implication, a pastor:

KJV - angel, messenger.

So, by implication, the angels referred to are pastors, right? Why? It has been explained to me that since the word means "messenger" and the pastor is the messenger to the church, then the interpretation is logical. Fine, except that I don't see any other place in Scripture where the pastor (and there are NO "The Pastor" positions in Scripture either) is referred to as a messenger. So what's up? What's up is a traditional interpretation that supports a position not found in the plane text of the Word. How could I miss that for so long?

The second place I kept passing over was the two verses quoted above (2:6 and 2: 15.) Again, virtually every teacher offered the same explanation:

NT:3531 Nikolaitees, Nikolaitou, ho,
a follower of Nicolaus, a Nicolaitan:

plural, Rev 2:6,15 -- a name which, it can scarcely be doubted, refers symbolically to the same persons who in Rev 2:14 are charged with holding teen didacheen Balaam, i. e., after the example of Balaam, casting a stumblingblock before the church of God (Num 24:1-3) by upholding the liberty of eating things sacrificed unto idols as well as of committing fornication; for the Greek name Nikolaos coincides with the Hebrew Bil'aam according to the interpretation of the latter which regards it as signifying

destruction of the people.

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Notice, that this word is said to mean a follower of Nicolaus, and that "it can scarcely be doubted" that it refers symbolically... There are a some problems with this.

The two instances of its use are different. In the first instance, Jesus condemns the *deeds* of the Nicolaitans. "Yet this you do have, that you hate the deeds of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate." (Rev 2:6) In the second He condemns their teaching, "Thus you also have some who in the same way hold the teaching of the Nicolaitans." (Rev 2:15-16) He does this without specifically referring to *what* their deeds or their doctrines are, as if they should be self-evident. Now look at the reference Thayer refers to about Balaam: "But I have a few things against you, because you have there some who hold the teaching of Balaam, who kept teaching Balak to put a stumbling block before the sons of Israel, to eat things sacrificed to idols, and to commit acts of immorality." (Rev 2:14-15) Notice that He not only references Balaam's teaching, but also recounts the events and explains the deeds that result from that teaching. Scholars assume that the Nicolaitans did the same things because of a tenuous connection between the meanings of the names. Well, also according to Thayer, Balaam is from Bal and 'aam (he adds "perhaps"), meaning "non" and "populous," thus a foreigner. Nicolaitan is from "nikos" (after Nike, the Greek goddess of victory) and "laos," meaning people or laity. The compound word would mean "victory over the people," or conquest over the people (Conquerors of the People), etc. This is supposed to have the same meaning as Balaam! In fact, the connection is hardly self-evident. In addition, Balaam is an Old Testament reference that the audience would be aware of (and yet He still explains the reference,) so why doesn't the Lord explain a reference to the followers of a heretic, the memory of whom could not be expected to last (for the common Christian) beyond the first century? The answer appears simple enough: it is not a reference to anyone named Nicolaus, but rather, a compound proper noun that has been transliterated rather than translated.

This dovetails with a second point, so I'll make them together. If I were to say that I can't stand the Spammakers, you might think I bore a grudge for a German family. If, on the other hand, I told you that I disliked the Makers of Spam, you would get a different impression. In the first case, if I wanted posterity to understand the reference it would require further explaining. In the second, no further explanation would be necessary (assuming one expected Spam to continue to be marketed.) In the same way, especially considering the way the Lord explains Balaam, if the Nicolaitans were a short-lived and obscure heretical sect, isn't it reasonable to expect an explanation? If Jesus actually commended the Ephesians for hating the deeds of those who conquer the people, and condemned those at Pergamum for tolerating those who "lord it over" the people, no further explanation would be necessary. The second point in this is the understanding that the Scripture provides a complete revelation³ that is not dependant upon

³ See 2 Peter 2:1 (He has provided EVERYTHING for life and Godliness and a true knowledge of Him), 2 Tim. 3:16, Deuteronomy 4:2 and Rev 22:18-19 (we are not to add or take from the the Scripture)

human histories for interpretation. Only the Word of God is inspired (2 Tim 3:16.) Only the Word of God is reliable. Histories are constantly re-written, depending on which scholarly theory is currently in vogue, so is it at all logical that God would require that his servants have a knowledge of history in order to understand His Book? The Greek New Testament was written in Koine Greek, the language of the common man, and not the Classical Greek of scholars. It was written to be understood, so why would the Lord express such fervency in praise and condemnation (with assemblies that were to serve as examples for us all) if we would require a further study of unreliable history to understand it? Growing in the Truth as a young believer, I was continually reminded that it was necessary to interpret Scripture historically and grammatically. I accepted this then, but must question it now. The Word provides ample history and ample explanation of the conditions of the times to interpret the plain teachings found within its pages. In fact, the only times I can recall teachers making appeals to history have been those times when they have needed such appeals to justify traditions that were not spelled out in Scripture, or worse, that contradicted the Word.

Another thing is the connection scholars see between verses fourteen and fifteen: it is not a one-to-one connection. Literally, verse fifteen might read, "In this same vein (tolerating false teaching) you even (also) have some...the teachings of the Nicolaitans." The word here translated "even" (also) is "kai" (and), and in context, it would have a copulative or cumulative function. In other words, it is more like, "you tolerate the followers of Balaam, and worse than that, you have those who teach that leaders should lord it over the people!"

If that weren't enough, just look back at the verses in Matthew 23. These are plain as day, aren't they? Don't call anyone Father (hello to the Catholics out there.) Don't call anyone Rabbi (or Teacher.) Don't call anyone (or allow yourself to be called) among the brethren a LEADER! Imagine that, a Church whose only leader is Christ, where every believer is a priest, where those who have more experience (and whose lives reflect it) are honored because of their clear wisdom and understanding of the Word, where these literal "elders" provide an example that the younger Christians follow, and the church allows itself to be persuaded by them because of it when they have no clear teaching from the Word. There would be no professional Christians, no rulers like the Gentiles have, no employers and employees. Of course, that's impractical in this day and age, right? And while that is exactly how the apostles set the Church up by Divine inspiration, it was not the ideal (that's sarcasm, if you didn't know, but I have heard this exact claim on many occasions.) This is what they must teach if they are to retain their jobs, their authority, and their esteemed positions in the community.

This hierarchical system of professional, scholar Christian minister-priests, started in the first century, was perpetuated and embellished by so-called Church Fathers (call no man father?) and was ultimately enforced by the power of the state with the embracing of "Christianity" by Constantine. There have always been pockets of resistance, but even here the delight that sinful man holds for systematizing everything, and the rebelliousness of man towards God's way of doing things, has only with difficulty allowed a few to cling to some of the simplicity of God's original plan for the Church. Rome, and her daughter churches have continued to promote and defend the Nicolaitan model of the Church. They will defend their turf fiercely, no matter what the cost, so if you question why things are done the way they are, you might find yourself under attack. Of course, when they attack you, your ideas, your character, your qualifications or your reputation, it is always a loving admonishment. When you insist on the supremacy of the Word over the traditions and scholarship of men, you are pugnacious.

This Nicolaitan spirit is alive and well virtually everywhere. It permeates nearly every aspect of professing Christianity today. If you would feel comfortable saying any of the following things, you're being affected by the Nicolaitan system:

The Church burned down.
Meet me at the Church.
The Church needs a coat of paint.
This is a lovely Church!
Look at that Church on the hill!
Church lighting... Church sound system...

The **Church** IS A GATHERING OF **PEOPLE** WHO ARE **ONE** IN CHRIST! NO ONE IS "MORE SAVED" THAN ANOTHER! **ALL** ARE PRIESTS, SONS, AND POSSESSORS OF THE SPIRIT.

NT:1577 ekkleesia, ekklesias, hee

a gathering of citizens called out from their homes into some public place; an assembly

1. an assembly of the people convened at the public place of council for the purpose of deliberating: Acts 19:39

2. the assembly of the Israelites, Acts 7:38; Heb 2:12

3. any gathering or throng of men assembled by chance or tumultuously: Acts 19:32,41

4. in the Christian sense,

a. an assembly of Christians gathered for worship: 1 Cor 14:19,35

b. a company of Christians,

aa. those who anywhere, in city or village, constitute such a company and are united into one body: Acts 5:11

bb. the whole body of Christians scattered throughout the earth; Matt 16:18

cc. the name is transferred to the assembly of faithful Christians already dead and received into heaven: Heb 12:23

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This goes along with my premise that wrong-headedness concerning the nature of the Church and of the overseer/shepherd/teacher in the assembly, empowered by the sinful nature, is what causes the abuses we see all around us. Those who would be leaders among us, and sit in the seats of honor, want us to believe that they somehow have more of the Spirit than the average Christian. Even when they don't use the word "laity" and claim that they do not believe in a clergy/laity split, when you dig a little deeper, or when you observe their actions, you find that in practice there are tiers of Christianity, based on qualifications, and you are invariably on a lower tier than they are.

I have seen this in practice again and again, and have been on the short end of some very hurtful, pompous, not to mention ridiculously stupid rhetoric. Pious men of God have been manipulative, hypocritical, deceptive, evasive, indignant, imperious, and ungracious in their speech and manner regarding me, all the while telling me that everything was my fault. They have lashed out in rage, swore, lied, fled, made a scene at my place of business, talked about me behind my back, and then called me pugnacious and confrontational. Maybe I don't bring out the best in people. It's amazing how often this sort of thing happens when you stand for the Word alone against traditions, so-called scholarship, pet doctrines and the authoritative pronouncements of these same pious men of God. Sadly, I've also seen men who once stood for

the Word alone become assimilated into “leadership” positions, who immediately began to spout the party line like good Communists. Is this the way it is supposed to be?

The Nicolaitans are desperate to protect the Institution, the system and their positions. To achieve these goals they must retain power over the people. Dissension must be put down, and leadership positions must be filled either with fellow Nicolaitans or men they can count on to go along. But aren't we supposed to obey our leaders (notwithstanding what Jesus said about calling anyone a leader)? Look at what Steve Atkerson says about that:

In Heb 13:17, believers are encouraged to “obey” church leaders. Interestingly, the Greek behind “obey” is not the regular Greek word for “obey.” Instead, peitho is used, which literally means “to persuade” or “to convince.” Thus, Heb 13:17 should be rendered “let yourselves be persuaded by.” This same verse also instructs believers to “submit” to the authority of their church leaders. As with “obey,” the common Greek word for “submit” is not used. Instead, hupeiko was chosen by the author, a word meaning “to give in, to yield.”

Thus, God's flock is to be open to being “persuaded by” (peitho) its shepherds. In the course of on-going discussion and teaching the flock is to be “convinced by” (peitho) its leaders. Mindless military obedience is not the relationship pictured in the NT between elders and the church. Of course, there will be those times when some in the flock can't be completely persuaded of something and an impasse will arise. When necessary to break the gridlock, the congregation is to “give in to, to yield to” (hupeiko) the wisdom of its leaders.⁴

One can't imagine Dr. Genghis Kahn of the “Tradition is King Institutional Seminary” saying anything like that.

Often, once a man is accepted into the Nicolaitan leadership fraternity, he can count on fellow leaders and the majority of the congregation, to justify almost anything he does, even if his actions or the actions of members of his immediate family, would tend to disqualify him Biblically. If his children are unruly (we all know about “pastors' kids), if they become unequally yoked, even if it becomes abundantly clear that the man is unable to manage his own household⁵, what does it matter? If he lies, deal treacherously with people or shows other character flaws⁶, he is only human. I once sat with a pastor for over an hour, providing dozens of verses in context for why something that he practiced was very wrong, and people that he was supposed to care for were being hurt because of his actions. At the end of that time, when he admitted that he could not dispute my assertion, did he repent? No, on the contrary, he shrugged his shoulders and said, “I guess your pastor has feet of clay.” He didn't change a thing.

A congregation had a constitution that spelled out the rule that an elder was to serve no more than two consecutive years unless no qualified person could be found to take his place. One prominent elder **remained in office for over twenty years without ever taking time off**. Of course, it's a constitution, not Scripture, but when people ask how church business is conducted, this is the document they are given. Once you become a Nicolaitan, you are apparently free from

⁴ “NT Church Leadership”, Steve Atkerson; New Testament Restoration Foundation (<http://www.ntmf.org/elders.html>)

⁵ 1 Tim. 3:4-5

⁶ 1 Tim 3:2,7; Titus 1:6-7 See verse 10!

any obligation to be honest and forthright in you dealings with people.⁷ If something is clear, but you don't like what it says, obfuscate. I have seen it so often, and from so many different elders, that from their actions I could conclude that it is right for elders to wrangle over words, use manipulation to achieve hidden agendas, and use rhetorical tricks and logical fallacy to win their points.⁸

I have listened, dumbstruck, while a preacher insisted what he was doing was right. He claimed that this was how he learned to do sermons in seminary! He was talking about the systematic plagiarism of entire chapters of a popular commentary, which he presented week after week as his own sermons (without the least acknowledgement of the source material, and presented after praying that "the Spirit would guide my words.) When people who were reading along word-for-word while he spoke caught him, he attacked their character! A couple of these people met with him and asked him to repent; he tried to make a deal with them that would insure he kept his job⁹. "The job" is what concerned him. I know of a good man who fought the good fight for the Word. He stood up to his official on many occasions when he had Biblical concerns about their activities. Being fair-minded, he also accepted their counseling, which began his slow, but steady indoctrination. While he was taking them to task for questionable or false teaching and actions, they always could find reasons in his life and character why he wasn't qualified to be one of them. Today he agrees with them, speaks like them, and justifies their actions. Of course, he is now one of them. On at least one occasion has straight-up lied to protect himself and another board member. He spoke about some people behind their backs, saying some things that were not very nice. The issues were later brought before the people being talked about, and when they called to ask him about it he denied everything. He also said that it was an elder's duty to share information about the flock among themselves, in order to minister to them. How this was relevant, considering that the people he spread his gossip to were not elders, is beyond me. I have heard this on several occasions: active, but mundane Christians pointing out to elders that the leadership doesn't know anything about them and their spiritual condition. The elder replies: "It's your responsibility to let the board know what your spiritual condition is." Imagine a shepherd saying that to a flock of sheep. Real sheep are not particularly bright, and are hardly likely to know what their condition is. It's the shepherd's responsibility to watch out for them, get to know each one, and care for them. This is not true where the Nicolaitans rule.

These kinds of things happen all over. They happen every day. They happen because so-called leaders separate themselves from everyone else, and take upon themselves responsibilities and powers that have their origins in traditions rather than in Scripture. The Biblical church, called-out people, meeting in homes for a meal, remembrance, and edification, involved in each others' lives, with the older and experienced men providing an example rather than giving orders, would make these kinds of abuses of power more difficult.

Believe me, it's the system.

⁷ 2 Cor. 4:2,

⁸ 2 Tim. 2:14, Eph. 4:14-15

⁹ 1 Tim. 3:4