

# Nicolaitans Today

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*Rev 2:6 (Church at Ephesus) But this thou hast, that thou hatest the **deeds of the Nicolaitans**, which I also hate. ... 14 (Church at Smyrna) But I have a few things against thee, because thou hast there them that hold the doctrine of Balaam, who taught Balac to cast a stumblingblock before the children of Israel, to eat things sacrificed unto idols, and to commit fornication. 15 So hast thou also them that hold the **doctrine of the Nicolaitans**, which thing I hate.*

Who were, or are, the “Nicolaitans”?

The only detail upon which all commentators agree is the meaning of the name: “conquerors of the people”. It is a compound name: “nico” means ruler or conqueror. “Laitans” means people – it is the same word from which we get the name “laity”, or “laymen”.

Can you think of a theology, or doctrine, which God hates, which has something to do with people who have “conquered” laymen – or who “lord it over” laymen, which Christians believe and practice? Nah. Of course not.

*1 Peter 5:1 The elders which are among you I exhort, who am also an elder, and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, and also a partaker of the glory that shall be revealed: 2 Feed the flock of God which is among you, taking the oversight thereof, not by constraint, but willingly; [not to command others, but to inspire others] not for filthy lucre, but of a ready mind; 3 Neither as being lords [Gr. control, overcome] over God's heritage, but being ensamples to the flock. [Leading by example, not by use of authority.] 4 And when the chief Shepherd shall appear, ye shall receive a crown of glory that fadeth not away. 5 Likewise, ye younger, submit yourselves unto the elder. Yea, all of you be subject one to another, and be clothed with humility: for God resisteth the proud, and giveth grace to the humble. [Technical note: John Gill says “not by constraint, but willingly” means both “the elder should not be forced to rule” and “the elder should not rule by force”.]*

Of the 16 Bible commentaries on my computer, 8 think they know who the Nicolaitans were and what they believed and did. Most of them accept at face value the statements of early church writers who describe the Nicolaitans’ abominations as hedonism (unbridled satisfaction of physical desires), including wife swapping.

The other 8 Bible commentators reject such opinions. They say no one knows anything about any such historical group, if there even was such a group, which one of the 8 emphatically denies. They don’t accept early church writings on the subject, because there is no evidence any of them knew anything about Nicolaitans other than what any of us might deduce from reading Revelation 2. The Catholic Encyclopedia explains:

Nicolaites (Also called Nicolaitans), a sect mentioned in the Apocalypse (ii,6,15) as existing in Ephesus, Pergamus, and other cities of Asia Minor, about the character and existence of which there is little certainty. Irenaeus (Adv. haer., I, xxvi, 3; III, xi, 1) discusses them but [adds nothing to the Apocalypse except](#) that “they lead lives of unrestrained indulgence.” Tertullian refers to them, but [apparently knows only what is found in St. John](#) (De Praescrip. xxxiii; Adv. Marc., I, xxix; De Pud., xvii). [Hippolytus based his narrative on Irenaeus](#), though he states that the deacon Nicholas was the author of the heresy and the sect (Philosph., VII, xxvi). Clement of Alexandria (Strom., III, iv) exonerates Nicholas, and attributes the doctrine of promiscuity, which the sect claimed to have derived from him, to a

malicious distortion of words harmless in themselves. With the exception of the statement in Eusebius (H. E., III, xxix) that the sect was short-lived, [none of the references in Epiphanius, Theodoret etc. deserve mention, as they are taken from Irenaeus.](#) The common statement, that the Nicolaites held the antinomian heresy of Corinth, has not been proved. Another opinion, favoured by a number of authors, is that, because of the allegorical character of the Apocalypse, the reference to the Nicolaitans is [merely a symbolic manner of reference, based on the identical meaning of the names, to the Bileamites or Balaamites](#) Apoc., ii, 14) who are mentioned just before them as professing the same doctrines. (P.J. HEALY Transcribed by Fr. Rick Losch The Catholic Encyclopedia, Volume XI Copyright © 1911 by Robert Appleton Company Online Edition Copyright © 2002 by Kevin Knight)

The statement that they “led lives of unrestrained indulgence” would be their logical deduction from assuming the Nicolaitans and Balaamites were the same group. The statement that they were short-lived would be their logical deduction from never having heard of such a group! To say it another way, the assumption that they were short lived does not prove the author had any evidence that such a group ever existed; his meaning might have been “they sure must not have lasted long, because I’VE sure never heard of them!” The story about people misrepresenting the deacon Nicolas doesn’t give enough detail to indicate any cohesive group ever formed around that misrepresentation.

Presumably such observations as these led 8 of 16 Bible commentators to conclude we don’t know anything about any historical group called “Nicolaitans”.

But as I said, the other 8 say we definitely know what the Nicolaitans historically believed and did! 5 of the 8 further assume the Nicolaitans were the same group as the Balaamites mentioned in Revelation 2:14, which is enough to identify their abomination as hedonism since we know that was the abomination of Balaam.

(Background: Balaam means “destroyer of the people”. He schemed to destroy Israel by sending them thousands of prostitutes, hoping Israel’s fornication would remove from them the protection of God. Num 31:16 and Neh 13:2, also Num 22-24, Deut 23:4-5, Josh 24:9-10, Mic 6:5, Jude 11. Balaam “loved the wages of unrighteousness”, 2 Peter 2:15, but had little time to enjoy them before he he died “by the sword” in the war between Israel and Midian, Joshua 13:22.)

The 8 Bible commentators who reject the Balaamite connection offer two reasons: Rev 2:14-15 treats them as 2 separate groups, and they have separate names with different meanings.

**(1) Rev 2:14-15 Treats Nicolaitans and Balaamites as 2 Separate Groups.** the Nicolaitans couldn’t have been the same group as the Balaamites, because after talking about the Balaamites in Rev 2:14, verse 15 says “*So hast thou also them that hold the doctrine of the Nicolaitans*”, treating the Nicolaitans as a separate group. (None of the 8 who equate Nicolaitans and Balaamites address the problem that Revelation 2:15 grammar – “so hast thou also them” – distinguishes between the two groups. See Appendix C, under “Barnes”, for a technical discussion of a translation by 1 of the 16 Bible commentators and 2 of the 20 translations on my computer.)

**(2) They Have Different Names with Different Meanings.** The Nicolaitans and Balaamites have two different names, with two distinct meanings. One “workaround” among the 5 Bible commentators (of the 16) who say the two names referred to the same single group is that the Greek “Nicolaitans”, meaning “conqueror of the people”, is a pretty good Greek translation of one of the possible choices for the Hebrew word “Balaam”, which means “Lord of the people”. (In 1828, Daniel Webster defined “Baal” as meaning “also Lord, or commander”.) One objection to this theory, raised among the 9 Bible commentators who say the Nicolaitans and Balaamites were different groups, is that the correct translation of “Balaam” is “destroyer of the people”. Which is clearly a different meaning than “conqueror of the people”.

I see an additional problem.

**(3) God Never Misnames Anybody.** If Balaamites means *Lord* of the people, then their name suggests a different heresy than we know they had. Hedonism doesn’t conquer: it destroys. This theory

requires us to believe God has misnamed this group! That is very hard to believe, for us who have followed a bit of the awesome record God has for naming people appropriately, and using meaningful names to embed additional lessons in stories.

And not only are we to believe God has defined the name “Balaamites” in a way that has no connection to their known heresy, but we must believe that God has also connected the accepted meaning of the name “Nicolaitans” with a heresy with no connection to the name.

Of those who say our understanding of Jesus’ warning must come from the *meaning* of the name “Nicolaitans”, the explanation how that interpretation is faithful to the Bible is that the name was never meant to be a capitalized Proper Noun, specifying a particular body of people, but rather as an uncapitalized common noun which simply *describes* a certain kind of thinking.

An example of the difference: in “May I borrow the car keys, Dad?” “dad” is capitalized, and is a Proper Noun, because a specific dad is meant. But in “We give discounts to dads on Father’s Day”, no specific dad is meant, so “dad” is an uncapitalized, common noun.

A modern example of using a descriptive common noun in a way that makes it also a pejorative (derogatory) is the way some proliferators today call abortionists and all their enablers “babykillers”. Not that there is any group of people who fellowship together under that name.

Notice that Revelation never actually calls the “Nicolaitans” any kind of group. It never says anyone ever fellowshiped together under that name. It says, rather, that some of you, in your church,

If we permit ourselves to take the name “Nicolaitans” seriously, we face a scenario like that articulated by Wiersbe:

He commends them for hating the deeds of the Nicolaitans. The Gk. name “Nicolaus” means “to conquer the people.” It refers to the development of a priestly caste (clergy) in the church that throws aside the common believers. While there must be pastoral leadership in the church, there must not be a distinct “clergy” and “laity” in which the former lords it over the latter.

*C. The doctrine of the Nicolaitanes (v. 15, see also v. 6).*

What began as “deeds” in one church is now a settled doctrine in another. We now have this church divided into “priests” and “people.”

...Ephesian Christians separated themselves not only from false doctrine but also from false deeds (Rev. 2:6). The word *Nicolaitan* means “to conquer the people.” Some Bible students believe this was a sect who “lorded it over” the church and robbed the people of their liberty in Christ (see 3 John 9–11). They initiated what we know today as “clergy” and “laity,” a false division that is taught nowhere in the New Testament. All God’s people are “kings and priests” (1 Peter 2:9; Rev. 1:6) and have equal access to the Father through the blood of Christ (Heb. 10:19ff). We shall meet this dangerous sect again when we study the message to the church at Pergamos.

...These infiltrators are called “Nicolaitans,” whom we met already at Ephesus (Rev. 2:6). The name means “to rule the people.” What they taught is called “the doctrine of Balaam” (Rev. 2:14). The Hebrew name *Balaam* also means “lord of the people” and is probably synonymous with *Nicolaitans*. Sadly, this group of professed believers “lorded it over” the people and led them astray. [Wiersbe, W. W. (1997, c1992). *Wiersbe's expository outlines on the New Testament* (803). Wheaton, Ill.: Victor Books.]

(Notice how Wiersbe’s opening paragraphs construct a definition of “Nicolaitans” from the meaning of the name, but his final paragraph equates them with the Balaamites, whose known heresy had nothing to do with perverting authority, but was about hedonism! He even turns the name “Balaam” to mean perversion of authority, which conveniently makes it equal in meaning to “Nicolaitans” but inconveniently makes it a poor name for people following in the footsteps of Balaam. This illustrates how hard it is to sort these 16 Bible commentators into neat categories.)

I suppose I should answer the question foremost on many readers' minds: no, not one of the 16 Bible commentators refutes (or even suggests) the theory that, based on the assumption that the Nicolaitans were followers of Nicolas, the Doctrine of the Nicolaitans was belief in Santa Claus.

## Reasons to Take Jesus' Warning Seriously.

If we take the position that "Nicolaitans" refers to an obscure group that left no clear history and was "short lived", not having existed for centuries, leaving nothing in Jesus' warning clear enough for us to know what to look for in churches today, we have a suspiciously convenient excuse for dismissing this warning from the Book of Revelation, of what God hates.

It is remarkable that only two commentators associated the name Nicolaitans with church hierarchy which divides clergy from laity, even though (Nico)laitan (people) is where we get our word "laity", or "laymen"!

But perhaps even more remarkable, than that 14 of 16 Bible commentators did not make the connection, is that 2 dared to! What were their publishers thinking of, to allow such statements in print? What clergyman wants to open up a Bible commentary and read that God hates the system that ordained him, elevating him from a layman into a clergyman?

No wonder Bible commentators can't recognize the Nicolaitan heresy! They are looking for a sect – a splinter group off the main log. How are they going to recognize a heresy when the heresy is the main log?

But in all fairness, I can appreciate if Pastor's collective eyes glaze over reading Wiersbe's description of the division between clergy and laity as *the* heresy of Nicolaitans. Doesn't the Bible establish elders and deacons, presbyters and pastors? There is plenty of legitimate debate over how many of these titles duplicate each other as opposed to being distinct offices, and exactly what responsibilities go with each, but doesn't the Bible establish ecclesiastical authority of *some* kind?

It is generous that Wiersbe allows that "there must be pastoral leadership in the church", and begs only that "there must not be a distinct 'clergy' and 'laity' in which the former lords it over the latter." But will someone tell me the difference? Will someone tell me what marks the line between the two? Will someone tell me exactly what manner of exercise of authority identifies "lording it over" subjects?

To say the heresy is any distinction at all between church leaders and others is just too general! Wiersbe would be more persuasive if he could find something related to abuse of authority that is more specific, which he can document from Scripture that God hates.

That is why I believe it is impossible to understand the Doctrine or Deeds of the Nicolaitans without considering the Scriptural case for vigorous verbal interaction in worship services. Because then we can line up God's heavily documented desire for worshipers to be free to question, challenge, or change the subject, next to Jesus' statement about how much he hates a system that sounds suspiciously like the opposite of that Freedom of Religious Expression. God's general warning therefore reinforces His specific instructions, and furthermore does so in a book about the future, in which we live. Furthermore, in this age of apostasy in which we live, we can look to 1 Corinthians 14:24-25 and learn that the other system, which we have cast aside, is the key to revival, which might explain why ours is not an age of revival but of apostasy.

Do you think we are safe to ignore Jesus' warning to us about the doctrines and deeds of the Nicolaitans, on the ground that we know nothing of such a group except their name, and their name surely can have no significance?

I don't.

We all agree the name means "conqueror of the people".

We see the evidence staring us in the face that God has no interest in our uninterrupted, fellowship-censoring sermons where only one man per assembly speaks for all and there is not even freedom of religious expression in a worship service.

We see the evidence that *never* in the Bible does God express any interest in letting one person speak where others are not free to **question, correct, and/or change the subject** as God may lead.

I don't think we are safe to discount the evidence that God desires bold verbal interaction from us, on the ground that if that is what He meant, there would be some prophecy somewhere that foretold the wholesale ritual of "sermons" that engulfs most of Christendom today.

I think we have a match.

I think "conquerers of the people" is a pretty fair description of clergy which insists they, and those they pre-approve, be the only ones allowed to speak when congregations gather as one.

Don't you?

Several pastors to whom I have presented these Scriptures have dismissed their importance with, not, "brother, here is where you misunderstand these verses", but something like "Well, I know the Holy Spirit moves through the worship service we have."

I am not going to be rude and suggest their Spirit may not have been that holy, because I know they are right. God is merciful, and is willing to come to us to whatever degree we will permit Him.

The Holy Spirit blessed the extent to which the Pharisees were willing to obey God. They were stewards of "the oracles of God"! Romans 3:2. They sat "in Moses' seat"! Matthew 23:2. They faithfully preserved the memory of God's recorded communications with man! So diligently that over 40 centuries interrupted by a worldwide Flood, not a single word of it was in doubt! They both preserved it, and taught it to the people! The fact that they did not, themselves, live by it, living instead as the "child of Hell", Matthew 23:15, does not take away from the fact that they faithfully transmitted the Word of God, their schools training up such great scholars as Paul, and yes even of Jesus!

God lived among them, and not among the Mayans, Aztecs, aborigines, etc., because it was upon that foundation of the Revelation of God – that Rock – that Jesus was able to build His Church. Matthew 16:18.

Many of them are presumably in Hell because they couldn't stand God coming that much closer to them – so how could they possibly stand Heaven? But surely God blessed every tentative, reluctant step they took towards the door of their hard hearts, as they considered whether to let Him in!

Their bottom line was that they would rather kill God than be near Him, but God was with them as far as they would permit.

Later, the Catholic church received *some* blessing through the Holy Spirit, even while they were burning God's Prophets at the stake. If you doubt that God came as near them as they could stand, compare life under their rule with life under barbarian cultures of the time in Africa, Norway, and America. They were stewards of the Word of God! Who else preserved the thousands of precious ancient manuscripts, and subsidized scholars who devoted their lives to copying them and understanding them? What would we have today without their work? They created the great medieval universities which trained up such theological giants as John Huss, Wycliff, and Martin Luther! Where would the Reformation have gone without those Roman Catholic universities which made it possible?!

As vigorously as Rome murdered God's Prophets for trying to show them how to come still closer to God, it is hard to imagine how they could stand Heaven, where God is there up close all the time! Since God doesn't force anybody to be in Heaven, so far as I can determine, I think it is clear where much of the medieval Roman Catholic leadership is now; but while they were here, it would be incorrect to deny that the Holy Spirit flowed through their work!

So today, I can't deny that the Holy Spirit is in the worship services of the most dedicated Nicolaitans. I have attended them for decades. I know He is there.

They trained me! Their publishing houses sold me my Bibles, taught me Greek, and preserved

our great Bible commentators down the centuries. Their seminaries train millions of theologians, send missionaries around the world to mitigate tyranny and ignorance at personal risk of life and limb, and staff radio and TV stations to reach masses with the Word of God. Their churches match up trained theologians with congregations of untrained laymen with open minds. Their training is systematic and fairly consistent. In America they are willing to follow the personal liberty introduced by the Pilgrims – not to the extent of the complete Freedom of Religious Expression enjoyed in their afternoon “Prophesying Services”, but at least to the extent of ending physical torture for the “crimes” of sincere theological disagreement with their pastors, so that today we in America and many other places may study the Word of God in physical peace and safety. More personally, *I* can openly criticize my teachers without fear of stocks, whippings, dunkings, or imprisonment, much less of burnings at the stake, Iron Maidens, etc.!

Shall I deny the Gift of the Word of God which they have given me?

How could I stand here, appealing to my fellow Christians to take the next step closer to God, without the training they have freely given me that enables me to understand God’s invitation? How can I not be grateful to my fellow Nicolaitans?

But I also know many pastors and their laymen are not satisfied. They yearn for more. They talk of Revival, as if acknowledging they do not yet experience it.

I also know God is merciful. God “winks” at our stumbles, just as parents wink at their baby’s first steps and stumbles. Acts 17:30. But after we hear God’s call to repent – to reach for the Revival He offers us, and then if we reject it, I fear for the souls of those who refuse Him.

I have presented these Scriptures to hundreds of pastors and laymen, who typically make no attempt to refute my interpretation of these Scriptures, but rather they simply will not change their comfortable human-invented rituals in order to obey God. It is hard to picture any of them going to Hell; they are good-hearted people, every one.

But the thought troubles me: if the prospect of Revival, as offered in 1 Corinthians 14:24-25, stinks that much in their nostrils, *how will they be able to stand to sit right next to God in His Throne for all eternity?* (Revelation 3:21)

*Matthew 23:37 O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, thou that killest the prophets, and stonest them which are sent unto thee, how often would I have gathered thy children together, even as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings, and ye would not? 38 Behold, your house is left unto you desolate. 39 For I say unto you, Ye shall not see me henceforth, till ye shall say, Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord.*

Yes, the Holy Spirit flows as freely as He is permitted, through the worship services of the most hard hearted Nicolaitans. But because they censor all but 1% of their brainpower, not allowing discussion of points of disagreement so that they might stand together in a vision for their community, and because voices are silenced who long to show them how to apply the Biblical principles they are studying together to their families, neighborhoods, businesses, media, and public forums, we witness the most strident call for Mark of the Beast national tracking technology coming from Christian, Bible-believing Moral Conservatives in the name of identifying and deporting all of our 12 million “illegal” *strangers* whom Jesus calls, in Matthew 25, “the least of these my brethren”, warning us that if we cannot love Him, in the person of these “strangers”, how are we going to be able to stand Heaven?

**Letter to a pastor friend** (*who rejected my proposal, saying “You may be right, but it is not something that I am interested in at this point...I’m of course afraid you will think I’m way off base or something but I just don’t have the time....”*):

...Definitely I will appreciate any fellowship with you that you have time for. I have always found your family easy to like.

I hope you understood that were you open to the Scriptures that burden me, I would be willing

to become involved in your church in a way that my proposals would not increase the strain on you.

But in any case, I'll just continue my 15 year search for a fellowship open to the vision in the Scriptures which have become my burden, or for a pastor willing to take the time to show me where I misunderstand these Scriptures, and that American worship services are already doing fine by God's standards, and God doesn't yearn for anything better. This news would be a great relief to me. Instead of spending hours a day in fruitless Bible study pursuing insights which only seem to annoy people, I could catch up on all the TV I've been missing all these years. I might even learn to like sports. I have another interview scheduled Thursday with a poor unsuspecting pastor whose church I visited Sunday. Pray for him.

Below I have added a little from what I have added to my prophesying presentation which I showed you. I am under Acts 28:19 pressure to make it available to you, but I will put you under no pressure to read it. Please forgive me for it.

## Appendix 1: Summary of Bible Commentators' Reasoning

Other than what the name "Nicolaitans" means, Bible commentators are all over the theological map on every other detail of the Nicolaitans question. On several details of the issue, they line up about equally on opposite sides.

Jamieson & Fausset say there was no such group of people who actually self-identified themselves as "Nicolaitans". Jesus' warning to us is in the meaning of the name itself: "conquerers of the people". This meaning is perhaps the only detail upon which all commentators agree! Jamieson & Fausset say the name describes Christians of any age whose "false freedom" of hedonism is the opposite extreme of Jewish legalism.

But the Nicolaitans *were* an historical group in the opinion of Vincent's Word Studies, Robertson's Word Pictures, Adam Clarke, Geneva Bible Notes, John Gill, John Wesley, Albert Barnes, and Wiersbe. (8)

And who were they? Roman Catholics, whose official celibacy leads to practical scandalous debauchery, according to John Gill; the Roman Catholic "priestly caste" which distinguishes "clergy" from "laity", according to Wiersbe. A hedonistic sect of the Gnostics who wife-swapped, says Adam Clarke. (3)

But we have no idea what they believed or did, according to Wilmington, Henry, Waalvord & Zuck, Richards, Robertson Word Pictures, Hughes & Laney (Tyndale Concise Bible Commentary), and the Catholic Encyclopedia. (7)

Commentators can't even agree on whether the Nicolaitans named in Revelation 2:15 are the same group as the Baalamites named in v. 14. Barnes says they are not the same, but the same Barnes seems to agree, that they are the same, with Jamieson & Fausset, Geneva Bible Notes, the Catholic Encyclopedia, and Wiersbe. (5)

Hedonism was the sin of Balaam: he schemed to destroy Israel through sexual temptation, which would destroy them by removing them from God's protection. The preceding 5 commentators thought the Nicolaitans shared the same perversion because they were the same people; but in addition to them, John Gill and Adam Clarke, who did not say whether they thought there were two different groups, described the heresies of the Nicolaitans and Balaamites in a way that I can't tell the difference. Even Vincent, who said they were definitely two different groups, described their respective heresies in a way that I can't tell the difference.

Hughes & Laney couldn't decide what to believe about who the Nicolaitans were, but their reasoning suggests that if the Nicolaitans' name means anything, their sin was not hedonism – at least not primarily. But if the name means nothing, and they were a historical group, we have no reason to think they were anything but hedonists.

In other words, the consensus of all commentators is that only by examining the meaning of the

name, do we have any basis for concluding the sin of the Nicolaitans was something other than hedonism.

“Nicolaitans”, all agree, means “conqueror of the people”, while Balaam means, depending on the commentator, “Lord of the people” (pretty close in meaning) or “destroyer of the people”. Barnes and Wiersbe say the former; the remainder say the latter.

Of those who say the Nicolaitans were an historical group, John Wesley and Vincent’s Word Studies say it was started by the Deacon Nicolas, mentioned in Acts, who turned apostate. But Jamieson & Fausset say there is no connection. John Gill said there was a connection, but Nicolas never apostacized. Rather, some of his innocent statements were twisted into a license for wickedness.

### **Timeline of Bible Commentators:**

1599 - Geneva Bible Notes

1710 – Matthew Henry Matthew Henry’s Commentary on the Whole Bible

1746-1766 – John Gill John Gill's Exposition of the Entire Bible

1754-1765 – John Wesley John Wesley's Explanatory Notes on the Whole Bible

1847 – Albert Barnes

1870? Synopsis of the Old and New Testaments

John Nelson Darby (1800 – 1882)

1872 – Jamieson, Fausset & Brown

1880? Keil & Delitzsch Commentary on the Old Testament

Johann (C.F.) Keil (1807-1888) & Franz Delitzsch (1813-1890)

1889 – Boring & Craddock

1891 The People's New Testament (1891) by B. W. Johnson

1914 – Albert Clark

1933 Robertson

1992 Wiersbe

Wilmington ?

### **Summary of Commentaries, By Commentator**

Wilmington: The meaning is unknown.

Matthew Henry: All we know about the doctrine of the Nicolaitans is that they were “hateful”.

Vincent Word Studies: The better theory is that the deacon Nicholas started a sect of hedonism. That is Alford’s position, and it makes sense. Nicolaitans, “conquers of the people”, should not be taken as the Greek version of Balaam, which means “destroyers of the people”. They are very different meanings.

Waalvord & Zuck, Bible Knowledge Commentary: Unknown. You can listen to Alford, but we don’t buy it. Beyond the general assumption that it must be some sort of “compromise with pagan morality”, we haven’t a clue.

Richards, Bible Reader’s Companion: Little is known.

Jamieson & Fausset: Nicolaos, “conqueror of the people”, is the Greek version of the Hebrew Balaam, “destroyer of the people”. It is not a particular sect, but it describes Christians of any age, in any church, who go to the opposite extreme of Jewish legalism and tolerate hedonism in the name of false “freedom”. The early church fathers, Irenaeus, Tertullian, Clement of Alexandria, and Epiphanius, mistakenly confuse the Nicolaitans mentioned in Revelation with the followers of the deacon Nicolas.

Robertson, Word Pictures: Don’t know anything about this sect’s doctrines, and aren’t sure if they have any connection to Nicholas the Deacon

Hughes & Laney, Tyndale Concise Bible Commentary: No opinion who is right: the early

church fathers who thought it meant followers of the deacon Nicolas, or those who think it means usurpers of authority, based on the meaning of the name. Whatever their doctrine was, or is, it has something to do with conforming to society.

Adam Clarke: Clarke “supposes” several details about the Nicolaitans without any historical documentation. Such as a “community of wives”, and that they were “a sect of the Gnostics”.

Geneva Bible notes: The Nicolaitans and Balaamites were the same, since Revelation treats them as in the same category of wickedness, and Ireneus suggests they are the same.

John Gill: Gill explains how the misunderstanding about the “community of wives” arose, and shows that to whatever extent Nicholas the deacon was the inspiration for wickedness, it was through a twisting of his words.

“This seems to design the doctrines of the church of Rome, which in this period took place; which forbid marriage to the priests, and recommended celibacy and virginity to others also; which were the source of all uncleanness and abominable lusts; for which pardons and indulgences were given, and, in process of time, brothel houses were set up, and licensed and encouraged by authority,”

VWS: The “better” explanation is that the Nicolaitans were out-of-the-closet hedonists led by Nicholas the deacon. The worse explanation is that Nicolaitans is the Greek version of Balaam, though no group actually adopted that name openly, but it meant people who perpetuate the sins of Balaam. It is a worse explanation because conqueror of the people is a different meaning than corrupter of the people. Also because Rev 2:14 distinguishes between two groups.

Wesley: they were hedonists probably inspired by the deacon Nicolas.

Barnes: It can't be that the name is the key to its meaning; it has to be a reference to a long ago sect whose existence was never documented and about whose doctrines we today know nothing. A sect which, by the way, had nothing to do with Nicholas the deacon. **Certainly Revelation describes Nicolaitans and the doctrine of Balaam as two distinct heresies.**

Vitringa supposes that the word is derived from νίκος nikos, “victory,” and λαός laos, “people,” and that thus it corresponds with the name Balaam, as meaning either **בַּאֲלָאִם** bàal am, “lord of the people,” or **בַּלְעָאִם** baalà`am, “he destroyed the people”;

is to suppose that the speaker means to say that **the Nicolaitanes taught the same things which Balaam did** - to wit, that they led the people into corrupt and licentious practices. This interpretation seems to be demanded by the proper use of the word “so” - οὕτως houtōs - meaning, “in this manner on this wise, thus”; and usually referring to what precedes. If this be the correct interpretation, then we have, in fact, a description of what the Nicolaitanes held, agreeing with all the accounts given of them by the ancient fathers.

Barnes' conclusion rests on one of those rare times when the Greek versions used by King James translators, called the Textus Receptus, has one word different from Greek versions used for modern translations. Barnes sides with the Greek version mostly used now.

Catholic Encyclopedia: Nicolaites (Also called Nicolaitans), a sect mentioned in the Apocalypse (ii,6,15) as existing in Ephesus, Pergamus, and other cities of Asia Minor, about the character and existence of which there is little certainty. Irenaeus (Adv. haer., I, xxvi, 3; III, xi, 1) discusses them but **adds nothing to the Apocalypse except** that "they lead lives of unrestrained indulgence." Tertullian refers to them, but **apparently knows only what is found in St. John** (De Praescrip. xxxiii; Adv. Marc., I, xxix; De Pud., xvii). Hippolytus **based his narrative on Irenaeus**, though he states that the deacon Nicholas was the author of the heresy and the sect (Philosph., VII, xxvi). Clement of Alexandria (Strom., III, iv) exonerates Nicholas, and attributes the doctrine of promiscuity, which the sect claimed to have derived from him, to a malicious distortion of words harmless in themselves. With the exception of the statement in Eusebius (H. E., III, xxix) that the sect was short-lived, **none of the**

references in Epiphanius, Theodoret etc. deserve mention, as they are taken from Irenaeus. The common statement, that the Nicolaites held the antinomian heresy of Corinth, has not been proved. Another opinion, favoured by a number of authors, is that, because of the allegorical character of the Apocalypse, the reference to the Nicolaitans is merely a symbolic manner of reference, based on the identical meaning of the names, to the Bileamites or Balaamites (Apoc., ii, 14) who are mentioned just before them as professing the same doctrines. P.J. HEALY Transcribed by Fr. Rick Losch The Catholic Encyclopedia, Volume XI Copyright © 1911 by Robert Appleton Company Online Edition Copyright © 2002 by Kevin Knight

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He commends them for hating the deeds of the Nicolaitans. The Gk. name “Nicolaus” means “to conquer the people.” It refers to the development of a priestly caste (clergy) in the church that throws aside the common believers. While there must be pastoral leadership in the church, there must not be a distinct “clergy” and “laity” in which the former lords it over the latter. [Wiersbe, W. W. (1997, c1992). *Wiersbe's expository outlines on the New Testament* (801). Wheaton, Ill.: Victor Books.]

*B. The doctrine of Balaam (v. 14; see also Num. 22–25).*

Balaam was a hireling prophet who led the people of Israel into sin in return for the wealth and prestige he received. He encouraged Israel to worship heathen idols and indulge in fornication. At Pergamos the church was wedded to the world in order to get worldly advantages.

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What began as “deeds” in one church is now a settled doctrine in another. We now have this church divided into “priests” and “people.” [Wiersbe, W. W. (1997, c1992). *Wiersbe's expository outlines on the New Testament* (803). Wheaton, Ill.: Victor Books.]

Wiersbe: Ephesian Christians separated themselves not only from false doctrine but also from false deeds (Rev. 2:6). The word *Nicolaitan* means “to conquer the people.” Some Bible students believe this was a sect who “lorded it over” the church and robbed the people of their liberty in Christ (see 3 John 9–11). They initiated what we know today as “clergy” and “laity,” a false division that is taught nowhere in the New Testament. All God’s people are “kings and priests” (1 Peter 2:9; Rev. 1:6) and have equal access to the Father through the blood of Christ (Heb. 10:19ff). We shall meet this dangerous sect again when we study the message to the church at Pergamos. ...These infiltrators are called “Nicolaitans,” whom we met already at Ephesus (Rev. 2:6). The name means “to rule the people.” What they taught is called “the doctrine of Balaam” (Rev. 2:14). The Hebrew name *Balaam* also means “lord of the people” and is probably synonymous with *Nicolaitans*. Sadly, this group of professed believers “lorded it over” the people and led them astray.

Understanding the story of Balaam helps us interpret this insidious group more accurately (see Num. 22–25). Balaam was a true prophet who prostituted his gifts in order to earn money from King Balak, who hired him to curse the people of Israel. God prevented Balaam from actually cursing the nation—in fact, God turned the curses into blessings!—but Balak still got his money’s worth. How? By following Balaam’s advice and making friends with Israel, and then inviting the Jews to worship and feast at the pagan altars. “If you can’t beat ’em, join ’em!”

The Jewish men fell right into the trap and many of them became “good neighbors.” They ate meat from idolatrous altars and committed fornication as part of heathen religious rites. Twenty-four thousand people died because of this disobedient act of compromise (Num. 25:1–9).

Why did this bit of ancient history apply to the believers at Pergamos? Because a group in that church said, “There is nothing wrong with being friendly to Rome. What harm is there in putting a pinch of incense on the altar and affirming your loyalty to Caesar?” Antipas refused to compromise and was martyred; but others took the “easy way” and cooperated with Rome. ...

## Appendix 2: Unedited Reasoning of 16 Commentators

**Vincent’s Word Studies: The Nicolaitans.** From νικᾶν *to conquer*, and λαός *the people*. There are two principal explanations of the term. The first and better one historical. A sect springing, according to credible tradition, from Nicholas a proselyte of Antioch, one of the seven deacons of Jerusalem (Acts 6:5), who apostatized from the truth, and became the founder of an Antinomian

Gnostic sect. They appear to have been characterized by sensuality, seducing Christians to participate in the idolatrous feasts of pagans, and to unchastity. Hence they are denoted by the names of Balaam and Jezebel, two leading agents of moral contamination under the Old Testament dispensation. Balaam enticed the Israelites, through the daughters of Moab and Midian, to idolatry and fornication (Num. 25; 31:16). Jezebel murdered the Lord's prophets, and set up idolatry in Israel. The Nicolaitans taught that, in order to master sensuality, one must know the whole range of it by experience; and that he should therefore abandon himself without reserve to the lusts of the body, since they concerned only the body and did not touch the spirit. These heretics were hated and expelled by the Church of Ephesus (Apoc. 2:6), but were tolerated by the Church of Pergamum (Apoc. 2:15). The other view regards the name as symbolic, and Nicholas as the Greek rendering of Balaam, whose name signifies *destroyer* or *corrupter of the people*. This view is adopted by Trench ("Seven Churches"), who says: "The Nicolaitans are the Balaamites; no sect bearing the one name or the other; but 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." The names, however, are by no means parallel: *conqueror of the people* not being the same as *corrupter of the people*. Besides, in ver. 14, the Balaamites are evidently distinguished from the Nicolaitans.

Alford remarks: "There is no sort of reason for interpreting the name otherwise than historically. It occurs in a passage indicating simple matters of historical fact, just as the name Antipas does in ver. 13." [Vincent, M. R. (2002). *Word studies in the New Testament* (2:439-440). Bellingham, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc.]

**Wilmington:** The identity of the Nicolaitans (2:6, 15) is unknown. [Willmington, H. L. (1997). *Wilmington's Bible handbook* (795). Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale House Publishers.]

**Waalvord & Zuck:** One additional word of commendation was inserted. They were commended because they hated **the practices of the Nicolaitans**. There has been much speculation concerning the identity of the Nicolaitans, but the Scriptures do not specify who they were. They apparently were a sect wrong in practice and in doctrine (for further information see Henry Alford, *The Greek Testament*, 4: 563-65; Merrill C. Tenney, *Interpreting Revelation*, pp. 60-1; Walvoord, *Revelation*, p. 58).

5. PROMISE (2:7). [Walvoord, J. F., Zuck, R. B., & Dallas Theological Seminary. (1983-c1985). *The Bible knowledge commentary : An exposition of the scriptures* (2:934). Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.]

**2:14-15.** They had been guilty of severe compromise by holding **the teaching of Balaam and the teaching of the Nicolaitans**. Balaam had been guilty of counseling King **Balak** to cause Israel to **sin** through intermarriage with heathen women and through idol-worship (cf. Num. 22-25; 31:15-16). Intermarriage with heathen women was a problem in Pergamum where any social contact with the world also involved worship of idols. Usually meat in the marketplace had been offered to idols earlier (cf. 1 Cor. 8).

They were also condemned for following the Nicolaitans' teaching. Earlier the Ephesian church had been commended for rejecting what appears to be a moral departure (cf. Rev. 2:6). Some Greek manuscripts add here that God hates the teaching of the Nicolaitans, as also stated in v. 6. Compromise with worldly morality and pagan doctrine was prevalent in the church, especially in the third century when Christianity became popular. So compromise with pagan morality and departure from biblical faith soon corrupted the church. [Walvoord, J. F., Zuck, R. B., & Dallas Theological Seminary. (1983-c1985). *The Bible knowledge commentary : An exposition of the scriptures* (2:936). Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.]

**Richards:** "**The Nicolaitans**" (2:6). The name means "conquerers of the people." But little today is known of this group or movement. [Richards, L. O. (1991; Published in electronic form by Logos Research Systems, 1996). *The Bible readers companion* (electronic ed.) (908). Wheaton: Victor Books.]

**Jamieson & Fausset: Nicolaitanes**—IRENÆUS [*Against Heresies*, 1.26.3] and TERTULLIAN [*Prescription against Heretics*, 46] make these followers of Nicolas, one of *the seven* (honorably mentioned, Ac 6:3, 5). They (CLEMENT OF ALEXANDRIA [*Miscellanies*, 2.20 3.4] and EPIPHANIUS [*Heresies*, 25]) evidently confound the latter Gnostic Nicolaitanes, or followers of one Nicolaos, with those of Revelation. MICHAELIS' view is probable: Nicolaos (*conqueror of the people*) is the *Greek* version of Balaam, from *Hebrew* “*Belang Am*,” “Destroyer of the people.” Revelation abounds in such duplicate *Hebrew* and *Greek* names: as Apollyon, Abaddon: Devil, Satan: Yea (*Greek*, “*Nai*”), Amen. The name, like other names, Egypt, Babylon, Sodom, is symbolic. Compare Rev 2:14, 15, which shows the true sense of Nicolaitanes; they are not a sect, but professing Christians who, like Balaam of old, tried to introduce into the Church a false freedom, that is, licentiousness; this was a reaction in the opposite direction from Judaism, the first danger to the Church combated in the council of Jerusalem, and by Paul in the Epistle to Galatians. These symbolical Nicolaitanes, or followers of Balaam, abused Paul's doctrine of the grace of God into a plea for lasciviousness (2Pe 2:15, 16, 19; 2Pe 2:15, 16, 19, Jud 1:4, 11 who both describe the same sort of seducers as followers of *Balaam*). The difficulty that they should appropriate a name branded with infamy in Scripture is met by TRENCH: The Antinomian Gnostics were so opposed to John as a Judaizing apostle that they would assume as a name of chiefest honor one which John branded with dishonor. [Jamieson, R., Fausset, A. R., Fausset, A. R., Brown, D., & Brown, D. (1997). *A commentary, critical and explanatory, on the Old and New Testaments*. On spine: Critical and explanatory commentary. (Re 2:6). Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc.]

**15. thou**—emphatic: “So THOU also hast,” As Balak and the Moabites of old had Balaam and his followers literally, *so hast thou also them that hold the same Balaamite or Nicolaitane doctrine* spiritually or symbolically. Literal eating of idol-meats and fornication in Pergamos were accompanied by spiritual idolatry and fornication. So TRENCH explains. But I prefer taking it, “THOU *also*,” as well as Ephesus (“in like manner” as Ephesus; see below the oldest reading), hast ... Nicolaitanes, with this important difference, Ephesus, as a Church, *hates them* and casts them out, but thou “*hast them*,” namely, in the Church.

**doctrine**—teaching (see on Rev 2:6): namely, to tempt God's people to idolatry.

**which thing I hate**—It is sin not to hate what God hates. The Ephesian Church (Rev 2:6) had this point of superiority to Pergamos. But the three oldest manuscripts, and *Vulgate* and *Syriac*, read instead of “which I hate,” “IN LIKE MANNER.” [Jamieson, R., Fausset, A. R., Fausset, A. R., Brown, D., & Brown, D. (1997). *A commentary, critical and explanatory, on the Old and New Testaments*. On spine: Critical and explanatory commentary. (Re 2:15). Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc.]

### **Matthew Henry:**

(2.) By an encouraging mention that is made of what was yet good among them: *This thou hast, that thou hatest the deeds of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate*, v. 6. “Though thou hast declined in thy love to what is good, yet thou retainest thy hatred to what is evil, especially to what is grossly so.” The Nicolaitans were a loose sect who sheltered themselves under the name of Christianity. They held hateful doctrines, and they were guilty of hateful deeds, hateful to Christ and to all true Christians; and it is mentioned to the praise of the church of Ephesus that they had a just zeal and abhorrence of those wicked doctrines and practices. An indifference of spirit between truth and error, good and evil, may be called *charity* and *meekness*, but it is not pleasing to Christ. Our Saviour subjoins this kind commendation to his severe threatening, to make the advice more effectual. [Henry, M. (1996, c1991). *Matthew Henry's commentary on the whole Bible : Complete and unabridged in one volume* (Re 2:1). Peabody: Hendrickson.]

3. He reproves them for their sinful failures (v. 14): *But I have a few things against thee, because thou hast there those that hold the doctrine of Balaam*, etc., and *those that hold the doctrine of the Nicolaitans, which thing I hate*. There were some who taught that it was lawful to eat things sacrificed to idols, and that simple fornication was no sin; they, by an impure worship, drew men into impure practices, as Balaam did the Israelites. Observe, (1.) The filthiness of the spirit and the filthiness of the flesh often go together. Corrupt doctrines and a corrupt worship often lead to a corrupt

conversation. (2.) It is very lawful to fix the name of the leaders of any heresy upon those who follow them. It is the shortest way of telling whom we mean. (3.) To continue in communion with persons of corrupt principles and practices is displeasing to God, draws a guilt and blemish upon the whole society: they become *partakers of other men's sins*. Though the church, as such, has no power to punish the persons of men, either for heresy or immorality, with corporal penalties, yet it has power to exclude them from its communion; and, if it do not so, Christ, the head and lawgiver of the church, will be displeased with it. [Henry, M. (1996, c1991). *Matthew Henry's commentary on the whole Bible : Complete and unabridged in one volume* (Re 2:12). Peabody: Hendrickson.]

**Hughes & Laney:** According to the early church fathers, the Nicolaitans were the followers of Nicolas (cf. Acts 6:5). Others understand the name etymologically to refer to those who “conquer the people,” that is, those who usurped authority and dominated the people. In context, their problem is linked to the teaching of Balaam (2:14–15) and may also be related to the works of 2:20–21 concerning food and idols. This also relates to the Jerusalem council’s decrees in Acts 15:29. These exhortations to the churches of Asia Minor (2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22) are applicable to all churches and to individual believers as well (cf. Matt. 11:5). “Victorious” (2:7) is a combination of doctrinal purity, faithful witness, and vital love for Christ. Those who are “victorious” are not a special group of Christians but true believers who persevere faithfully to the end (21:7; 2:7, 11, 17, 26; 3:5, 12, 21; cf. 1 John 5:4–5). [Hughes, R. B., & Laney, J. C. (2001). *Tyndale concise Bible commentary*. Rev. ed. of: *New Bible companion*. 1990.; Includes index. The Tyndale reference library (736). Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale House Publishers.]

Revelation 2:15 links the above sin to the teachings of the Nicolaitans and sheds light on the teachings of this basically unknown group. The center of their problem was that they were conforming to the ungodly activities of the surrounding society. “Come” (2:16) refers to Christ’s second coming (cf. 3:11; 22:7, 12, 20).

#### *THE SEVEN CHURCHES: REAL OR SYMBOLIC?*

*Some have viewed these churches as picturing seven successive periods of church history. But this view involves considerable speculation and subjectivity. As with any of the letters in the New Testament addressed to particular churches, the churches in Revelation should be understood as real first-century churches, but modern interpreters must also realize that the message is to all of Christ’s churches throughout time. To defend the timelessness of the message is not to withhold the original historical reality of the seven churches. The churches are like those addressed in Romans, Ephesians, Philippians, and so forth.*

*In addition, emphasis needs to be placed on the prophetic nature of the messages to the churches in Revelation. They are more like oracles than letters, and the command to write (repeated in 2:1, 8, 12, 18; 3:1, 7, 14) is used in the Greek Old Testament to announce prophetic messages. Thus, the letters are prophetic messages written to real churches with timeless messages to Christ’s church throughout the centuries.* [Hughes, R. B., & Laney, J. C. (2001). *Tyndale concise Bible commentary*. Rev. ed. of: *New Bible companion*. 1990.; Includes index. The Tyndale reference library (737). Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale House Publishers.]

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Understanding the story of Balaam helps us interpret this insidious group more accurately (see Num. 22–25). Balaam was a true prophet who prostituted his gifts in order to earn money from King Balak, who hired him to curse the people of Israel. God prevented Balaam from actually cursing the nation—in fact, God turned the curses into blessings!—but Balak still got his money’s worth. How? By following Balaam’s advice and making friends with Israel, and then inviting the Jews to worship and feast at the pagan altars. “If you can’t beat ’em, join ’em!”

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Why did this bit of ancient history apply to the believers at Pergamos? Because a group in that church said, “There is nothing wrong with being friendly to Rome. What harm is there in putting a pinch of incense on the altar and affirming your loyalty to Caesar?” Antipas refused to compromise and was martyred; but others took the “easy way” and cooperated with Rome.

It is unlikely that “things sacrificed to idols” is the same problem Paul dealt with in 1 Corinthians 8 and 10. The accusation here left no room for personal choice as did Paul. The Lord accused the Christians in Pergamos of sinning, of committing “spiritual fornication” by saying, “Caesar is Lord.” Of course, this compromise made them welcome in the Roman guilds and protected them from Roman persecution, but it cost them their testimony and their crown.

Believers today also face the temptation to achieve personal advancement by ungodly compromise. The name *Pergamos* means “married,” reminding us that each local church is “engaged to Christ” and must be kept pure (2 Cor. 11:1–4). We shall see later in Revelation that this present world system is pictured as a defiled harlot, while the church is presented as a pure bride. The congregation or the individual Christian that compromises with the world just to avoid suffering or achieve success is committing “spiritual adultery” and being unfaithful to the Lord. [Wiersbe, W. W. (1996, c1989). *The Bible exposition commentary*. "An exposition of the New Testament comprising the entire 'BE' series"--Jkt. (Re 2:12). Wheaton, Ill.: Victor Books.]

**Robertson: That thou hatest** (ὅτι μισεῖς [*hoti miseis*]). Accusative object clause in apposition with τούτο [*touto*] (this). Trench tells of the words used in ancient Greek for hatred of evil (μισοπονηρία [*misoponēria*]) and μισοπονηρός [*misoponēros*] (hater of evil), neither of which occurs in the N.T., but which accurately describe the angel of the church in Ephesus. **Of the Nicolaitans** (των

Νικολαιτων [*tōn Nikolaitōn*]). Mentioned again in verse 15 and really meant in verse 2. Irenaeus and Hippolytus take this sect to be followers of Nicolaus of Antioch, one of the seven deacons (Acts 6:5), a Jewish proselyte, who is said to have apostatized. There was such a sect in the second century (Tertullian), but whether descended from Nicolaus of Antioch is not certain, though possible (Lightfoot). It is even possible that the Balaamites of verse 14 were a variety of this same sect (verse 15). **Which I also hate** (ἃ καγω μισω [*ha kagō misō*]). Christ himself hates the teachings and deeds of the Nicolaitans (ἃ [*ha*], not οὓς [*hous*], deeds, not people), but the church in Pergamum tolerated them. [Robertson, A. (1997). *Word Pictures in the New Testament*. Vol.V c1932, Vol.VI c1933 by Sunday School Board of the Southern Baptist Convention. (Re 2:6). Oak Harbor: Logos Research Systems.]

**So thou also** (οὕτως και συ [*houtōs kai su*]). Thou and the church at Pergamum as Israel had the wiles of Balaam. **The teaching of the Nicolaitans likewise** (την διδαχην των Νικολαιτων ὁμοιωσ [*tēn didachēn tōn Nikolaitōn homoiōs*]). See on 1:6 for the Nicolaitans. The use of ὁμοιωσ [*homoiōs*] (likewise) here shows that they followed Balaam in not obeying the decision of the Conference at Jerusalem (Acts 15:20, 29) about idolatry and fornication, with the result that they encouraged a return to pagan laxity of morals (Swete). Some wrongly hold that these Nicolaitans were Pauline Christians in the face of Col. 3:5–8; Eph. 5:3–6. [Robertson, A. (1997). *Word Pictures in the New Testament*. Vol.V c1932, Vol.VI c1933 by Sunday School Board of the Southern Baptist Convention. (Re 2:15). Oak Harbor: Logos Research Systems.]

Barnes: from neither place can anything now be inferred in regard to the nature of their doctrines or their practices, unless it be supposed that they held the same doctrine that was taught by Balaam.

Barnes: **That thou hatest the deeds of the Nicolaitans** - Greek, “works” (τὰ ἔργα *ta erga*). The word “Nicolaitanes” occurs only in this place, and in the [Rev 2:15](#) verse of this chapter. From the reference in the latter place it is clear that the doctrines which they held prevailed at Pergamos as well as at Ephesus; but from neither place can anything now be inferred in regard to the nature of their doctrines or their practices, unless it be supposed that they held the same doctrine that was taught by Balaam. See the notes on [Rev 2:15](#). From the two passages, compared with each other, it would seem that they were alike corrupt in doctrine and in practice, for in the passage before us their deeds are mentioned, and in [Rev 2:15](#) their doctrine. Various conjectures, however, have been formed respecting this class of people, and the reasons why the name was given to them:

I. In regard to the origin of the name, there have been three opinions:

(1) That mentioned by Irenaeus, and by some of the other fathers, that the name was derived from Nicolas, one of the deacons ordained at Antioch, [Act 6:5](#). Of those who have held this opinion, some have supposed that it was given to them because he became apostate and was the founder of the sect, and others because they assumed his name, in order to give the greater credit to their doctrine. But neither of these suppositions rests on any certain evidence, and both are destitute of probability. **There is no proof whatever that Nicolas the deacon ever apostatized from the faith, and became the founder of a sect; and if a name had been assumed, in order to give credit to a sect and extend its influence, it is much more probable that the name of an apostle would have been chosen, or of some other prominent man, than the name of an obscure deacon of Antioch.**

(2) Vitranga, and most commentators since his time, have supposed that the name Nicolaitanes was intended to be symbolical, and was not designed to designate any sect of people, but to denote those who resembled Balaam, and that this word is used in the same manner as the word “Jezebel” in [Rev 2:20](#), which is supposed to be symbolical there. Vitranga supposes that the word is derived from νίκωσ *nikos*, “victory,” and λαός *laos*, “people,” and that thus it corresponds with the name Balaam, as

meaning either **בַּאֵל עַם** bàal`am, “lord of the people,” or **בַּלְעַם** baalà`am, “he destroyed the people”; and that, as the same effect was produced by their doctrines as by those of Balaam, that the people were led to commit fornication and to join in idolatrous worship, they might be called “Balaamites” or “Nicolaitanes,” that is, corrupters of the people. But to this it may be replied:

- (a) That it is far-fetched, and is adopted only to remove a difficulty;
- (b) That there is every reason to suppose that the word used here refers to a class of people who bore that name, and who were well known in the two churches specified;
- (c) That in [Rev\\_2:15](#) they are expressly distinguished from those who held the doctrine of Balaam, [Rev\\_2:14](#), “So hast thou also (**καὶ** kai) those that hold the doctrine of the Nicolaitanes.”

(3) It has been supposed that **some person now unknown, probably of the name Nicolas, or Nicolaus, was their leader, and laid the foundation of the sect. This is by far the most probable opinion,** and to this there can be no objection. It is in accordance with what usually occurs in regard to sects, orthodox or heretical, that they derive their origin from some person whose name they continue to bear; and as there is no evidence that this sect prevailed extensively, or was indeed known beyond the limits of these churches, and as it soon disappeared, it is easily accounted for that the character and history of the founder were so soon forgotten.

II. In regard to the opinions which they held, there is as little certainty. Irenaeus (Adv. Haeres. i., 26) says that their characteristic tenets were the lawfulness of promiscuous sexual intercourse with women, and of eating things offered to idols. Eusebius (Hist. Eccl. iii., 29) states substantially the same thing, and refers to a tradition respecting Nicolaus, that he had a beautiful wife, and was jealous of her, and being reproached with this, renounced all intercourse with her, and made use of an expression which was misunderstood, as implying that illicit pleasure was proper. Tertullian speaks of the Nicolaitanes as a branch of the Gnostic family, and as, in his time, extinct. Mosheim (De Rebus Christian Ante. Con. section 69) says that “the questions about the Nicolaitanes have difficulties which cannot be solved.” Neander (History of the Christian Religion, as translated by Torrey, vol. i, pp. 452, 453) numbers them with Antinomians; though he expresses some doubt whether the actual existence of such a sect can be proved, and rather inclines to an opinion noticed above, that the name is symbolical, and that it is used in a mystical sense, according to the usual style of the Book of Revelation, to denote corrupters or seducers of the people, like Balaam. He supposes that the passage relates simply to a class of persons who were in the practice of seducing Christians to participate in the sacrificial feasts of the pagans, and in the excesses which attended them - just as the Jews were led astray of old by the Moabites, Num. 25.

What was the origin of the name, however, Neander does not profess to be able to determine, but suggests that it was the custom of such sects to attach themselves to some celebrated name of antiquity, in the choice of which they were often determined by circumstances quite accidental. He supposes also that the sect may have possessed a life of Nicolas of Antioch, drawn up by themselves or others from fabulous accounts and traditions, in which what had been imputed to Nicolas was embodied. Everything, however, in regard to the origin of this sect, and the reason of the name given to it, and the opinions which they held, is involved in great obscurity, and there is no hope of throwing light on the subject. It is generally agreed, among the writers of antiquity who have mentioned them, that they were distinguished for holding opinions which countenanced gross social indulgences. This is all that is really necessary to be known in regard to the passage before us, for this will explain the strong language of aversion and condemnation used by the Saviour respecting the sect in the epistles to the Churches of Ephesus and Pergamos.

**Which I also hate** - If the view above taken of the opinions and practices of this people is correct, the reasons why he hated them are obvious. Nothing can be more opposed to the personal character of the Saviour, or to his religion, than such doctrines and deeds.

## Rev 2:15

**So hast thou also them ...** - That is, there are those among you who hold those doctrines. The meaning here may be, either that, in addition to those who held the doctrine of Balaam, they had also another class who held the doctrine of the Nicolaitanes; or that the Nicolaitanes held the same doctrine, and taught the same thing as Balaam. If but one class is referred to, and it is meant that the Nicolaitanes held the doctrines of Balaam, then we know what constituted their teaching; if two classes of false teachers are referred to, then we have no means of knowing what was the uniqueness of the teaching of the Nicolaitanes. The more natural and obvious construction, it seems to me, is to suppose that the speaker means to say that the Nicolaitanes taught the same things which Balaam did - to wit, that they led the people into corrupt and licentious practices. This interpretation seems to be demanded by the proper use of the word “so” - οὕτως houtōs - meaning, “in this manner on this wise, thus”; and usually referring to what precedes. If this be the correct interpretation, then we have, in fact, a description of what the Nicolaitanes held, agreeing with all the accounts given of them by the ancient fathers. See the notes on [Rev 2:6](#). If this is so, also, then it is clear that the same kind of doctrines was held at Smyrna, at Pergamos, and at Thyatira [Rev 2:20](#), though mentioned in somewhat different forms. It is not quite certain, however, that this is the correct interpretation, or that the writer does not mean to say that, in addition to those who held the doctrine of Balaam, they had also another class of errorists who held the doctrine of the Nicolaitanes.

**Which thing I hate** - So the common Greek text - ὁ μισῶ ho misō. But the best-supported reading, and the one adopted by Griesbach, Tittmann, and Hahn, is ὁμοίως homoiōs - “in like manner”; that is, “as Balak retained a false prophet who misled the Hebrews, so thou retainest those who teach things like to those which Balaam taught.”

**(Technical note: Where Greek Manuscripts Disagree!** Verse 15 says “so also thou hast (Nicolaitans)”, indicating they are a distinct group from the Balaamites. Barnes cancels that pesky evidence for distinctness between the Nicolaitans and Balaamites by drawing upon one of those rare times where a single Greek word is actually different in some Greek manuscripts from the Textus Receptus used by King James Version translators. Where the Textus Receptus ends the verse with “which thing I hate”, manuscripts trusted by modern translators conclude with “which things are alike”. Barnes does not then explain how to get other than nonsense out of the resulting translation: “Not only do you have Balaamite doctrine, but you also have Nicolaitan doctrine, which are the same doctrines.”

(This problem raises the intriguing question: how do modern translations deal with this pesky problem? Of the 20 translations on my computer, 10 leave the pesky concluding phrase out entirely! (ESV, ISV, NET, NCV, Nlrv, NIV, NRSV, NRSV, NRSV NT Rev. Int., RSV, TNIV!) 3 are faithful to the Textus Receptus so they translate “which thing I hate”. (NKJV, KJV, YLT)

(That leaves 7 brave enough to struggle with it. They insert the phrase sometimes at the end, sometimes at the beginning, sometimes in the middle of the verse. They translate sometimes “similar” and sometimes “the same”. The result is a Buyer’s Choice whether to apply “in like manner” to the doctrines of the two groups being alike, or to the comparable gullibility of Pergamos in buying into either heresy.

(NASB95 does the best job of translating the pesky phrase in a way that avoids a contradiction: “So you also have some who in the same way hold the teaching of the Nicolaitans.” In other words, there are two distinct doctrines which are foolishly affirmed “in the same way”, or with the same blind gullibility. Darby and ASV follow in the same direction: “in like manner”. HCSB begins the verse, “in the same way, you have also...” WUESTNT agrees, though a little awkwardly: “you also have men who are holding the teaching likewise of the Nicolaitanes.”

(That leaves only 2 of the 20 which conclude the doctrines of the two groups were identical, and they do so clearly, without apology. The Message ends the sentence, “...who do the same thing.” NLT

concludes, “who follow the same teaching.”

(Here is verse 15 in the Textus Receptus: 15 ουτως εχεις και συ κρατουντας την διδαχην των νικολαιτων ο μισω [*Stephen's 1550 Textus Receptus*] The last phrase is “ο μισω”, which means “I hate”.

(Even if you don't read Greek, you can compare it with the Greek version mostly trusted now and notice almost the only difference is the last word: 15 οϋτως εχεις και συ κρατου̐ντας τήν διδαχὴν [τῶν] Νικολαῖτῶν ὁμοίως. [Aland, K., Black, M., Martini, C. M., Metzger, B. M., Robinson, M., & Wikgren, A. (1993; 2006). *The Greek New Testament, Fourth Revised Edition (with Morphology)* (Re 2:15). Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft.] The last phrase is ὁμοίως which means “in like manner”.

(Here is another Greek version which agrees with the Textus Receptus: ουτως εχεις και συ κρατουντας την διδαχην των Νικολαῖτων ο μισω [Newberry, T., & Berry, G. R. (2004). *The interlinear literal translation of the Greek New Testament* (Re 2:15). Bellingham, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc.]

(And here is another Greek version like the one mostly used today: Rev 2:15 οϋτως εχεις και συ κρατου̐ντας τήν διδαχὴν [τῶν] Νικολαῖτῶν ὁμοίως. [Nestle-Aland Greek New Testament, 27th Edition with McReynolds English Interlinear])

Adam Clarke: **The deeds of the Nicolaitanes** - These were, as is commonly supposed, a sect of the Gnostics, who taught the most impure doctrines, and followed the most impure practices. They are also supposed to have derived their origin from Nicolas, one of the seven deacons mentioned [Act 6:5](#) (note). The Nicolaitanes taught the community of wives, that adultery and fornication were things indifferent, that eating meats offered to idols was quite lawful; and mixed several pagan rites with the Christian ceremonies. Augustine, Irenaeus, Clemens Alexandrinus, and Tertullian, have spoken largely concerning them. See more in my preface to 2d Peter, where are several particulars concerning these heretics.

**Geneva: Rev 2:15** So hast thou also them that hold the doctrine of the <sup>(13)</sup> Nicolaitans, which thing I hate. <sup>(13)</sup> Which follow the footsteps of Balaam, and such as are abandoned to all filthiness, as he showed in the verse before, and is here signified by a note of similarity, and thus also must ([Rev 2:6](#)) be understood. For this matter especially Irenaeus must be consulted as well.

John Gill: **Rev 2:6 But this thou hast, that thou hatest the deeds of the Nicolaitans,....** Though these Christians had left their first love, yet they bore an hatred to the filthy and impure practices of some men, who were called "Nicolaitans"; who committed fornication, adultery, and all uncleanness, and had their wives in common, and also ate things offered to idols; who were so called, as some think (c), from Nicolas of Antioch, one of the seven deacons in [Act 6:5](#); though as to Nicolas himself, it is said (d), that he lived with his own lawful married wife, and no other, and that his daughters continued virgins all their days, and his son incorrupt; and that these men, so called, only shrouded themselves under his name, and abused a saying or action of his, or both, to patronize their wicked deeds: he had used to advise *παραχρησθαι τη σαρκι*, by which he meant a restraining of all carnal and unlawful lusts; but these men interpreted it of an indulgence in them, and so gave themselves up to all uncleanness; and whereas, he having a beautiful wife, and being charged with jealousy, in order to clear himself of it, he brought her forth, and gave free liberty to any person to marry her as would; which indiscreet action of his these men chose to understand as allowing of community of wives. Dr. Lightfoot conjectures, that these Nicolaitans were not called so from any man, but from the word *נבילה*, "Nicolah", "let us eat", which they often used to encourage each other to eat things offered to idols. However this be, it is certain that there were such a set of men, whose deeds

were hateful; but neither their principles nor their practices obtained [*were received as customary practice established*] much in this period of time, though they afterwards did; see [Rev 2:15](#). Professors of the Christian religion in general abhorred such impure notions and deeds, as they were by Christ:

**which also I hate**; all sin is hateful to Christ, being contrary to his nature, to his will, and to his Gospel; and whatever is hateful to him should be to his people; and where grace is, sin will be hateful, both in themselves and others; and men's deeds may be hated when their persons are not; and hatred of sin is taken notice of by Christ, with a commendation,

(c) Vid. Irenaeum adv. Haeres, l. 1. c. 27. & Tertull. de Praescript. Haeret. c. 46, 47. (d) Clement. Alex. Strom. l. 3. p. 436. & Euseb, Hist. Eccl. l. 2. c. 29.

**Rev 2:15 So hast thou also them that hold the doctrine of the Nicolaitans,....** These impure heretics sprung up in the time of the apostolic church, but their doctrines were not received, and their deeds were hated, see [Rev 2:6](#). This seems to design the doctrines of the church of Rome, which in this period took place; which forbid marriage to the priests, and recommended celibacy and virginity to others also; which were the source of all uncleanness and abominable lusts; for which pardons and indulgences were given, and, in process of time, brothel houses were set up, and licensed and encouraged by authority,

**Which thing I hate**; the doctrine of these men, as well as their deeds.

People's New Testament: **But this thou hast**. There is another ground of commendation. They hate the **deeds of the Nicolaitanes**. Opinions are not agreed concerning this sect, but it is probable that the followers of a Nicolaus are meant who taught that Christian liberty meant license to commit sensual sins.

### Vincent's Word Studies: The Nicolaitans

From *νικᾶν* to *conquer*, and *λαός* the *people*. There are two principal explanations of the term. The first and better one historical. A sect springing, according to credible tradition, from Nicholas a proselyte of Antioch, one of the seven deacons of Jerusalem ([Act 6:5](#)), who apostatized from the truth, and became the founder of an Antinomian Gnostic sect. They appear to have been characterized by sensuality, seducing Christians to participate in the idolatrous feasts of pagans, and to unchastity. Hence they are denoted by the names of Balaam and Jezebel, two leading agents of moral contamination under the Old Testament dispensation. Balaam enticed the Israelites, through the daughters of Moab and Midian, to idolatry and fornication (Numbers 25; [Num 31:16](#)). Jezebel murdered the Lord's prophets, and set up idolatry in Israel. The Nicolaitans taught that, in order to master sensuality, one must know the whole range of it by experience; and that he should therefore abandon himself without reserve to the lusts of the body, since they concerned only the body and did not touch the spirit. These heretics were hated and expelled by the Church of Ephesus ([Rev 2:6](#)), but were tolerated by the Church of Pergamum ([Rev 2:15](#)). The other view regards the name as symbolic, and Nicholas as the Greek rendering of Balaam, whose name signifies *destroyer* or *corrupter of the people*. This view is adopted by Trench ("Seven Churches"), who says: "The Nicolaitans are the Balaamites; no sect bearing the one name or the other; but 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." The names, however, are by no means parallel: *Conqueror of the people* not being the same as *corrupter of the people*. Besides, in [Rev 2:14](#), the Balaamites are evidently distinguished from the Nicolaitans.

Alford remarks: "There is no sort of reason for interpreting the name otherwise than historically. It occurs in a passage indicating simple matters of historical fact, just as the name Antipas does in [Rev 2:13](#)."

**Wesley: Rev 2:6** But thou hast this - Divine grace seeks whatever may help him that is fallen to recover his standing. That thou hatest the works of the Nicolaitans - Probably so called from Nicolas, one of the seven deacons, [Act 6:5](#). Their doctrines and lives were equally corrupt. They allowed the most abominable lewdness and adulteries, as well as sacrificing to idols; all which they placed among things indifferent, and pleaded for as branches of Christian liberty.