

Nicolaitans

There are two speculations regarding the teachings of the Nicolaitans which need to be mentioned.

i. The classic explanation comes from the writings of the ante-Nicene “church father” Irenaeus who accused Nicholas, one of the original seven deacons (Acts 6:5), of teaching unrestrained indulgences and sin. However, Clement of Alexandria said that Nicholas the Deacon was a godly husband and father. That means that we have only one witness bringing a charge against a deacon without a second collaborating testimony.

ii. There is a second view on what constituted the doctrine of the Nicolaitans. The word is a compound Greek word composed of Nikao meaning “conquer” (not necessarily destroy) and Laiton meaning “the people” (we get our word “lay people” or “laity” from this Greek word). What would “conquering the people” mean within the Christian Church?

In the Acts of the Apostles and in the salutations in the Epistles we see clearly a plurality of elders and deacons. As the Church grew further away from the Apostolic form of ecclesiastical government, there arose in each church one dominant bishop (coming from episkopas meaning bishop, overseer.) This accelerated greatly within local churches over the course of 50 to 75 years after the death of the Apostle John. Then what occurred was the preeminence of one bishop over other bishops in Churches so that main bishoprics formed in Antioch, Alexandria, Constantinople, Rome and Carthage. These later consolidated into one or two bishops over the entire Christian Church.

This is not what the Holy Spirit wanted when He created offices of overseer and deacon. There developed in these churches the idea that there were two classes of Christians; clergy & laity. Although elders were taught by Jesus and Paul that minister means servant, these bishops began reigning over their congregations as gentile rulers reigned over their subjects. This was specifically prohibited by Jesus. [Mark 10:44](#) "And whoever of you desires to be first shall be servant of all."

There is a polarity that developed in Christian history from the dictatorial bishop (later pope) to the Evangelical Churches where many pastors have been overly burdened with congregations that expect one man to do everything within the church. The concept of two classes of Christians, clergy & laity, has caused some pastors to suffer nervous breakdowns, divorces by alienated spouses who never see their husbands. This concept has also helped many people to justify their inactivity in serving their local church. The fact that Jesus hated this concept and warned His disciples against it may have more plausibility in the meaning of “the doctrine of the Nicolaitans” than demeaning the reputation of one of the original deacons, Nicholas, on the testimony of one Christian author.