

Nicolaitism: The Thing I Hate

This file is from Michael K. Gabrieli*. He is a former Independent Baptist working on a book about problems within the church, and he sent me this file summarizing some of the chapters of the upcoming book.

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"... Every mature Christian should be expected to have a personal walk with God, live a moral life, endeavor to spread the gospel, search the Scriptures, and find God's will through prayer, without the controlling oversight of a domineering leader. Peter made it clear in I Peter 5:3 that the leader of the church should be one who leads by example. He should be an encourager, an edifier, and one who leads the flock to greater spiritual maturity. But if the pastor leads by lording over the flock, then the flock begins to think that as long as they keep themselves right with their pastor, they are equally in good standing with God. If their morals are the pastor's morals, and their service, commitment, and choices are approved by the pastor, then they believe that all must also be well with the Lord. No deep relationship with God is required under a nicolaitan leader. All that is required is to maintain a good standing with the man in charge of the flock. This creates a dependency relationship, for the Christian then gets most of his spiritual identity and beliefs from the man in charge, and not from the Lord. Furthermore, if that pastor leaves the church to move on, the Christians left behind are not mature, and their dependency pattern will often cause them to seek another man whom they can blindly follow and who fulfills their need of spiritual identity."

Chapter 5 of my book deals with the issue of the priesthood of the believer, which is based on Rev. 1:6, 5:10, I Peter 2:9, 2:5, and others. The priesthood of the believer is the doctrine that every believer is ultimately responsible for himself before God, and that every believer has the privilege and duty to have a personal relationship directly with God, with no human mediator. The title of chapter 5 is simply, "The Priesthood Of The Believer". I have only heard this doctrine mentioned once in 15 years at an IBC, and that was just in passing, and probably no one but myself know what it meant. This Baptist doctrine is a threat to all power-hungry preachers. An excerpt from this chapter follows:

"...The terms "man of God" and "anointed" are frequently used by many pastors in reference to the pastoral position which they and others hold. They give grave warnings to any who would oppose or even question their "divine" position and authority by quoting verses such as "Touch not mine anointed, and do my prophets no harm." (I Chron. 16:22) Other Old Testament passages and examples are frequently given to support the notion that preachers have a special anointing, and thus have an exalted position between God and the brethren. However, this is a serious error, for II Cor. 1:21-22 teaches, "Now He which establisheth us with you in Christ, and hath anointed us, is God; who hath also sealed us, and given us the earnest of the Spirit in our hearts." (See also I Jn. 2:27) This passage teaches us that under the New Testament, all believers are anointed and have been given the Holy Spirit to minister in their hearts. Under the Old Testament, only a few select men were occasionally chosen by God to have a special anointing of the Holy Spirit and direct communion with Him, for Christ had not yet come and paid the price to become the High Priest for all believers. But now that Jesus has been exalted and is sitting at the right hand of the Father, we all have direct access to God, and pardon for sins, through Jesus Christ who was our sacrifice and is our mediator. There is no longer any need for God to select a few chosen men to have His Spirit to fill them, for the Spirit now fills all believers. Thus, the claim by some to be chosen "men of God," or the claim to have a special anointing, is again a usurpation of the Priesthood of Jesus Christ.

"There are only two mentions of the phrase "man of God" in the entire New Testament, and they both apply to all believers, for through Christ, all believers are now men of God."

Chapter 6 in my book is entitled "Christian Cults?", and deals with the fact that cults are defined not only by false doctrine, but can also be defined by the exalting of the words of, and loyalty to a pastor, above our loyalty to the Scriptures.

"...Is it possible to have a church where the leader believes in the correct basic doctrines of the faith, and yet the church is a cult? The answer depends, not on the core doctrines, but on whether or not the church has placed the leader's words, or their loyalty and service to him, on an equal basis with the Scriptures. In other words, if the members of the church are blindly believing what they are taught, and would have believed false doctrine if that is what the leader had taught them, then you have the same conditions as a cult. If a church is so enamored with its leader that it is willing to believe whatever he teaches, without question, then it has the same exact cultic behavior as any other cult, with the only exception that the leader just happens to believe in the correct doctrines. "When all the teaching is under the control of one man, and those being taught are expected to believe what they are told, without question, all the ingredients of a cult are in place, regardless of the truth or error of the teaching.....this fosters an environment where those being taught learn to be passively led, ...which makes them more vulnerable to believing false doctrine than if they were encouraged to search and study the Scriptures on their own.

"A natural outgrowth of placing a leader's words equal to the Scriptures (in practice, if not actually being taught to do so) is a great degree of control by that leader over the church. After all, if the leader is not to be questioned, is the guardian of all truth, and has a more exalted position than the rest of the church, then he should naturally have a great degree of authority. ...The leader often takes the position that he has the authority to lay down the law regarding not only what is taught, but also in how the believers in the church live their daily lives, how much and what kind of Christian service is expected, what opinions they are allowed to express (they must be compatible with his, of course), and even how the brethren are to have fellowship with each other.

"Once the leader is given control over the church, arrogance takes root in his heart, and he begins to insist and demand further control. Tactics of fear, intimidation, and bullying become acceptable and appropriate behavior. After all, he is the leader, the "great one" in whom God has entrusted the truth (or so he believes). All believers are expected to bow in submission before him, or leave the church with their tails tucked between their legs, and their heads hanging in shame for their treason.

"Loyalty becomes a frequently used word in these nicolaitan churches. Loyalty, that is, not to God (although that is what their words may say) but to the great man in charge.... (the word "loyalty" is never mentioned in the Bible)

"Some characteristics of cults are as follows:

1. the leader has assumed the role of holding an exalted position, which gives him a higher standing before God than what is available to the followers,
2. the leader considers himself to be the primary and most reliable source of Scriptural interpretation, and is not to be questioned nor openly disagreed with, regarding his interpretation,
3. the leader insists on having control over the lives and decisions of the followers (for their own good, of course)
4. the teachings of the leader are to be considered nearly equal to the Word of God,
5. the leader insists on having great loyalty toward himself,
6. the leader leads by oppressive methods, including fear, intimidation, bullying, humiliation, and ridicule,
7. most of the followers would follow the leader if he began to err in doctrine, due to their loyalty to the leader, or ignorance of true doctrine,
8. in practice, the leader considers the church to be his church,
9. the leader promotes himself as a hero, and
10. the leader takes upon himself, for others, any function of the priesthood.

"...The reader should be reminded that although this text is primarily directed toward the leaders who are in error, the errors also apply to the followers as well. The leaders may be guilty of exalting themselves, but the followers are guilty of having exalted the leader, thus sharing in the wrong."

Although what I have written here may give the impression that the book is intended to tear preachers down, such is not the case. My intent is to put preachers in their proper place, and to encourage the brethren to grow to spiritual maturity, and not live a spiritual life that is dependent on strong human-centered leadership.

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