

The Assembly of Eloah

The Nicolaitans

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Who Were They?

The Nicolaitans or Nicolaites are mentioned twice in The Bible. Both occurrences are in the Book of Revelation. The church at Ephesus is praised for hating the doctrines of the Nicolaitans but the church at Pergamos is condemned for allowing those that hold the doctrines of the Nicolaitans to remain in the congregation. These two instances are the only mention of them in scripture. However, they are mentioned by the early church fathers.

Irenaeus (c. 115 – 202 CE) mentions them in two places in his work *Against Heresies*. Once in Book I Chapter XXVI and once in Book III Chapter XI. According to the Catholic Encyclopedia in its article on St. Irenaeus, "it is certain that, while still very young, Irenaeus had seen and heard the holy Bishop Polycarp (d. 155) at Smyrna."

The Nicolaitanes are the followers of that Nicolas who was one of the seven first ordained to the diaconate by the apostles.(1) They lead lives of unrestrained indulgence. The character of these men is very plainly pointed out in the Apocalypse of John, [when they are represented] as teaching that it is a matter of indifference to practise adultery, and to eat things sacrificed to idols. Wherefore the Word has also spoken of them thus: "But this thou hast, that thou hatest the deeds of the Nicolaitanes, which I also hate."¹

John, the disciple of the Lord, preaches this faith, and seeks, by the proclamation of the Gospel, to remove that error which by Cerinthus had been disseminated among men, and a long time previously by those termed Nicolaitans, who are an offset of that "knowledge" falsely so called, that he might confound them, and persuade them that there is but one God, who made all things by His Word; and not, as they allege, that the Creator was one, but the Father of the Lord another; and that the Son of the Creator was, forsooth, one, but the Christ from above another, who also continued impossible, descending upon Jesus, the Son of the Creator, and flew back again into His Pleroma; and that Monogenes was the beginning, but Logos was the true son of Monogenes; and that this creation to which we belong was not made by the primary God, but by some power lying far below Him, and shut off from communion with the things invisible and ineffable. The disciple of the Lord²

Epiphanius (c. 315 – 403 CE) and Theodoret (c. 393 – 460 CE) mention them but these references are taken from Irenaeus.

Tertullian (c. 160 – 225 CE) mentions them in four of his works: *The Prescription Against Heretics*, *The Five Books Against Marcion*, *On Modesty* and the appendix to *Against All Heresies*. He says nothing of them other than what the Apostle John

¹ Irenaeus *Against Heresies*, Book I, Chapter XXVI, Section 3

² Irenaeus *Against Heresies*, Book III, Chapter XI, Section 1

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already said in Revelation with the exception of his comments regarding Nicolas in the appendix to Against All Heresies. He assigns the origins of the Nicolaitans and their doctrines to the deacon Nicolas.

John, however, in the Apocalypse is charged to chastise those "who eat things sacrificed to idols," and "who commit fornication." There are even now another sort of Nicolaitans.³

The flesh is not, according to Marcion, immersed in the water of the sacrament, unless it be in virginity, widowhood, or celibacy, or has purchased by divorce a title to baptism, as if even generative impotents did not all receive their flesh from nuptial union. Now, such a scheme as this must no doubt involve the proscription of marriage. Let us see, then, whether it be a just one: not as if we aimed at destroying the happiness of sanctity, as do certain Nicolaitans in their maintenance of lust and luxury, but as those who have come to the knowledge of sanctity, and pursue it and prefer it, without detriment, however, to marriage; not as if we superseded a bad thing by a good, but only a good thing by a better.⁴

A brother heretic emerged in Nicolaus. He was one of the seven deacons who were appointed in the Acts of the Apostles. He affirms that Darkness was seized with a concupiscence--and, indeed, a foul and obscene one--after Light: out of this permixture it is a shame to say what fetid and unclean (combinations arose). The rest (of his tenets), too, are obscene. For he tells of certain Aeons, sons of turpitude, and of conjunctions of execrable and obscene embraces and per-mixtures, and certain yet baser outcomes of these.

He teaches that there were born, moreover, daemons, and gods, and spirits seven, and other things sufficiently sacrilegious. alike and foul, which we blush to recount, and at once pass them by. Enough it is for us that this heresy of the Nicolaitans has been condemned by the Apocalypse of the Lord with the weightiest authority attaching to a sentence, in saying "Because this thou holdest, thou hatest the doctrine of the Nicolaitans, which I too hate."⁵

For (the angel of the Thyatirene Church) was secretly introducing into the Church, and urging justly to repentance, an heretical woman, who had taken upon herself to teach what she had learnt from the Nicolaitans.⁶

The idea that the Nicolaitans derive their name from Nicolas is refuted by Clement of Alexandria (c. 150 – 215 CE) who, in The Stromata Book II, claims that the teaching of Nicolas was corrupted and evolved into the doctrines of the Nicolaitans.

Such also are those (who say that they follow Nicolaus, quoting an adage of the man, which they pervert, "that the flesh must be abused." But the worthy man showed that it was necessary to check pleasures and lusts, and by such training to waste away the impulses and propensities of the flesh. But they, abandoning themselves to pleasure like goats, as if insulting the body, lead a life of self-indulgence; not knowing that the body is wasted, being by nature subject to dissolution; while their soul is buffed in the mire of vice; following as they do the

³ Tertullian, The Prescription Against Heretics, Chapter XXXIII

⁴ Tertullian, The Five Books Against Marcion, Book I, Chapter XXIX

⁵ Tertullian, Appendix to Against All Heresies, Chapter I

⁶ Tertullian, On Modesty, Chapter XIX

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teaching of pleasure itself, not of the apostolic man. For in what do they differ from Sardanapalus, whose life is shown in the epigram: "I have what I ate -- what I enjoyed wantonly; And the pleasures I felt in love. But those Many objects of happiness are left, For I too am dust, who ruled great Ninus."⁷

He mentions him in Book III as well. He further defends Nicolas' character and that of his family.

But when we spoke about the saying of Nicolaus we omitted to say this. Nicolaus, they say, had a lovely wife. When after the Saviour's ascension he was accused before the apostles of jealousy, he brought his wife into the concourse and allowed anyone who so desired to marry her. For, they say, this action was appropriate to the saying: "One must abuse the flesh." Those who share his heresy follow both his action and his words simply and without qualification by indulging in the gravest enormity.

26. I am informed, however, that Nicolaus never had relations with any woman other than the wife he married, and that of his children his daughters remained virgins to their old age, and his son remained uncorrupted. In view of this it was an act of suppression of passion when he brought before the apostles the wife on whose account he was jealous. He taught what it meant to "abuse the flesh" by restraining the distracting passions. For, as the Lord commanded, he did not wish to serve two masters, pleasure and God. It is said that Matthias also taught that one should fight the flesh and abuse it, never allowing it to give way to licentious pleasure, so that the soul might grow by faith and knowledge.⁸

Eusebius mentions them in his Ecclesiastical History, Book III, Chapter 29. He simply states that they arose for a very short time and they boasted of Nicolaus as their founder. He then quotes what Clement said in the third book of The Stromata.

At this time the so-called sect of the Nicolaitans made its appearance and lasted for a very short time. Mention is made of it in the Apocalypse of John. They boasted that the author of their sect was Nicolaus, one of the deacons who, with Stephen, were appointed by the apostles for the purpose of ministering to the poor. Clement of Alexandria, in the third book of his Stromata, relates the following things concerning him.

2. "They say that he had a beautiful wife, and after the ascension of the Saviour, being accused by the apostles of jealousy, he led her into their midst and gave permission to any one that wished to marry her. For they say that this was in accord with that saying of his, that one ought to abuse the flesh. And those that have followed his heresy, imitating blindly and foolishly that which was done and said, commit fornication without shame.

3. But I understand that Nicolaus had to do with no other woman than her to whom he was married, and that, so far as his children are concerned, his daughters continued in a state of virginity until old age, and his son remained uncorrupt. If this is so, when he brought his wife, whom he jealously loved, into the midst of the apostles, he was evidently renouncing his passion; and when he used the expression, 'to abuse the flesh,' he was inculcating self-control in the face of those pleasures that are eagerly pursued. For I suppose that, in accordance with the

⁷ Clement of Alexandria, The Stromata, Book II, Chapter XX

⁸ Clement of Alexandria, The Stromata, Book III, Chapter IV, Sections 25-26

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command of the Saviour, he did not wish to serve two masters, pleasure and the Lord.⁹

In its article on St. Ignatius the Catholic Encyclopedia says, "It is also believed, and with great probability, that, with his friend Polycarp, he was among the auditors of the Apostle St. John. If we include St. Peter, Ignatius was the third Bishop of Antioch and the immediate successor of Evodius (Eusebius, "Hist. Eccl.", II, iii, 22). Theodoret ("Dial. Immutab.", I, iv, 33a, Paris, 1642) is the authority for the statement that St. Peter appointed Ignatius to the See of Antioch." Ignatius mentions the Nicolaitans in the Epistle to the Philadelphians where he claims that the people called Nicolaitans are done so falsely. Emphasis added.

If any one confesses these things, and that God the Word did dwell in a human body, being within it as the Word, even as the soul also is in the body, because it was God that inhabited it, and not a human soul, but affirms that unlawful unions are a good thing, and places the highest happiness in pleasure, as does the man who is **falsely called** a Nicolaitan, this person can neither be a lover of God, nor a lover of Christ, but is a corrupter of his own flesh, and therefore void of the Holy Spirit, and a stranger to Christ.¹⁰

He mentions them again in his Epistle to the Trallians in chapter XI. Emphasis added.

Flee also the impure Nicolaitanes, **falsely so called**, who are lovers of pleasure, and given to calumnious speeches.¹¹

A calumnious speech is one designed to harm another's reputation through falsehood and misrepresentations.

Hippolytus (d. around 240 CE), in Book VII, chapter XXIV of The Refutation of All Heresies also claims that Nicolas was the founder of the sect called Nicolaitanes.

But Nicolaus has been a cause of the wide-spread combination of these wicked men. He, as one of the seven (that were chosen) for the diaconate, was appointed by the Apostles. (But Nicolaus) departed from correct doctrine, and was in the habit of inculcating indifference of both life and food. And when the disciples (of Nicolaus) continued to offer insult to the Holy Spirit, John reproved them in the Apocalypse as fornicators and eaters of things offered unto idols.¹²

John Cassian (c. 365 – 433) was of the same opinion as we see in his Conference XVIII, chapter XVI.

Finally if we bear in mind that Satan was chosen among the angels, and Judas among the apostles, and Nicholas the author of a detestable heresy among the deacons, it will be no wonder that the basest of men are found among the ranks of the saints. For although some maintain that this Nicholas was not the same man who was chosen for the work of the ministry by the Apostles, nevertheless they cannot deny that he was of the number of the disciples, all of whom were clearly of such a character and so perfect as those few whom we can now with difficulty discover in

⁹ Eusebius' Ecclesiastical History, Book III, Chapter XXIX

¹⁰ Ignatius, Epistle to the Philadelphians, Chapter VI

¹¹ Ignatius, Epistle to the Trallians, Chapter XI

¹² Hippolytus of Rome, The Refutation of All Heresies, Book VII, Chapter XXIV

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the coenobia. Let us then bring forward not the fall of the above-mentioned brother, who fell in the desert with so grievous a collapse, nor that horrible stain which he afterwards wiped out by the copious tears of his penitence, but the example of the blessed Paphnutius; and let us not be destroyed by the ruin of the former, whose ingrained sin of envy was increased and made worse by his affected piety, but let us imitate with all our might the humility of the latter, which in his case was no sudden production of the quiet of the desert, but had been gained among men, and was consummated and perfected by solitude.¹³

While some of the church fathers believe Nicolas to be the founder of the heretical Nicolaitan sect which bears his name one cannot say with all certainty that this is true. Clement obviously didn't believe it to be true as he defends Nicolas in his writings. Ignatius calls those called Nicolaitans imposters. They used Nicolas' name but he had not part with them. Eusebius uses the term "so-called" when referring to the Nicolaitans so he knew that one couldn't say for certain that Nicolas was the founder of the sect. Scripture certainly doesn't state explicitly or implicitly that Nicolas became apostate.

Based on the context of the references to the Nicolaitans by the early church fathers one can deduce that they were more closely related to the anti-nomian, Gnostic sects than to the deacon Nicolas. An anti-nomian is simply one who holds that under the gospel dispensation of grace the moral law is of no use or obligation because faith alone is necessary to salvation. Gnosticism is the thought and practice especially of various cults of late pre-Christian and early Christian centuries distinguished by the conviction that matter is evil and that emancipation comes through gnosis. Gnosis is the esoteric knowledge of spiritual truth held by the ancient Gnostics to be essential to salvation. Esoteric simply means designed for or understood by the specially initiated alone. This will be examined in greater detail below.

They more than likely assumed the name of Nicolas to add credence to their position. They, according to Eusebius did not last long and more than likely gave way to more popular Gnostic groups under different names. Who they were is not as relevant as understanding what they taught and believed.

Their Doctrines

Christians are warned not to adhere to the doctrines of the Nicolaitans or allow those who do to remain within the congregation.

Rev 2:14-16 But I have a few things against you. You have some there who hold to the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to place a stumbling block in front of the sons of Israel: to eat meat sacrificed to idols and to commit sexual immorality. (15) In the same way, you also have those who hold to the teaching of the Nicolaitans. (16) Therefore repent! Otherwise, I will come to you quickly and fight against them with the sword of My mouth.

¹³ John Cassian, Conference XVIII, Chapter XVI

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From scripture we gather that the Nicolaitans were sexually immoral and condoned eating meat sacrificed to idols. Eating meat sacrificed to idols was merely a part of idolatrous worship. The church at Pergamum was chastised for its tolerance of the followers of Balaam and likewise the adherents of Nicolaitan doctrine. The use of the phrase, "in the same way" (οὕτω ἔχω καὶ) creates a relationship between the adherents of Balaam and the Nicolaitans. The two belief systems are similar. The story of Balaam and the doctrines associated will not be developed any deeper in this study but suffice it to say they are closely related to the doctrines of the Nicolaitans.

Insight into the doctrines of the Nicolaitans can be gained from the writings of those early church fathers that mentioned them. Irenaeus associates the doctrines of Cerinthus with that of the Nicolaitans.

John, the disciple of the Lord, preaches this faith, and seeks, by the proclamation of the Gospel, to remove that error which by Cerinthus had been disseminated among men, and a long time previously by those termed Nicolaitans,¹⁴

Cerinthus was a heretic contemporary to the apostle John. He denied the divinity of Christ and the fact that God the Father created the physical creation. Irenaeus calls them Gnostics.

And, according to certain of the Gnostics, this world was made by angels, and not by the Word of God. (ibid)

The Nicolaitans were apparently Gnostics that had perpetuated this false doctrine long before Cerinthus. There are those in the churches of God today that deny the divinity of Christ. They claim Christ had no existence prior to his human birth. This is a Nicolaitan doctrine and blasphemy!

These Gnostics also held that the physical creation was created by a lesser god; a demiurge.

And, according to certain of the Gnostics, this world was made by angels, and not by the Word of God. But according to the followers of Valentinus, the world was not made by Him, but by the Demiurge. For he (Soter) caused such similitudes to be made, after the pattern of things above, as they allege; but the Demiurge accomplished the work of creation. For they say that he, the Lord and Creator of the plan of creation, by whom they hold that this world was made, was produced from the Mother; while the Gospel affirms plainly, that by the Word, which was in the beginning with God, all things were made, which Word, he says, "was made flesh, and dwelt among us." (ibid)

Through a misinterpretation of scripture Christians have been led to believe that Christ was the creator of all things. This is a Gnostic heresy! Irenaeus holds this belief as well. He rightfully points out that these Gnostics assert creation by a lesser god but then makes the mistake of attributing creation to Christ. The subject of creation is an in-depth study and will not be expounded on in this study. For more

¹⁴ Irenaeus Against Heresies, Book III, Chapter XI, Section 1

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information on the subject of creation read [Origin of the Physical Universe](#) by James Dailley. For purposes of this study suffice it to say that God the Father created the physical universe.

Tertullian, in his Five Books Against Marcion, says:

For he tells of certain Aeons, sons of turpitude, and of conjunctions of execrable and obscene embraces and per-mixtures, and certain yet baser outcomes of these.¹⁵

An Aeon in the Gnostic belief system is one of the many emanations of God. We saw above that they believed the physical creation was the work of a lesser god. This would be one of the so-called Aeons. These Aeons, according to Tertullian, were sons of wickedness and vile behavior. He doesn't mention other beliefs and/or behaviors because they are much to vile. This is pretty bad indeed.

Thus far we've seen the Nicolaitans were precursors to the Gnostic sects and held similar beliefs. They were sexually immoral, idolatrous, denied the divinity of Christ and attributed the physical creation to a lesser being as opposed to God the Father. What else can we ascertain of their beliefs from the information available?

Tertullian makes a connection between Marcion and the Nicolaitans.

The flesh is not, according to Marcion, immersed in the water of the sacrament, unless it be in virginity, widowhood, or celibacy, or has purchased by divorce a title to baptism, as if even generative impotents did not all receive their flesh from nuptial union. Now, such a scheme as this must no doubt involve the proscription of marriage. Let us see, then, whether it be a just one: not as if we aimed at destroying the happiness of sanctity, as do certain Nicolaitans in their maintenance of lust and luxury, but as those who have come to the knowledge of sanctity, and pursue it and prefer it, without detriment, however, to marriage; not as if we superseded a bad thing by a good, but only a good thing by a better. (ibid)

Here he says that some Nicolaitans were destroying the happiness of sanctity in marriage by their sexual immorality. Marcion held that one could not be baptized unless they were a virgin, widowed or divorced. It seems obvious that both sects hold marriage in the same disregard. While one cannot say with absolute certainty that the two groups held the same belief there is an apparent connection between the two in this regard. Marriage is a sacred institution designed to bring a man and woman together to the point they become one flesh. It is the only means by which the human species can be perpetuated within the confines of the law of God. This union is not to be destroyed by the followers of Christ. Some churches have policies that forbid marriage to those that serve in the clergy. This is yet another Gnostic heresy!

Ignatius tells us that the Nicolaitans were given to making speeches that impugned others' reputations.

Flee also the impure Nicolaitanes, falsely so called, who are lovers of pleasure, and given to calumnious speeches.¹⁶

¹⁵ Tertullian, The Five Books Against Marcion, Book I, Chapter XXIX

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This is yet another behavior for which the Nicolaitans are condemned. Christians are not to engage in such activity. We don't pass judgment on individuals and we certainly don't engage in slanderous or defamatory activity. This is not Christian and is not to be tolerated in the churches of God. No one, not even the ministry, should be allowed to say anything about anyone that impugns their character without providing ample evidence as to the truth of the statement. False accusation designed to damage an individual is condemned as a doctrine of the Nicolaitans!

From the works of the early church fathers we have revealed the following Nicolaitan doctrines:

1. Sexual immorality and disregard for marriage.
2. Idolatry and false worship
3. Denial of the divinity of Christ
4. Assertion that the physical creation was brought into existence by a lesser god and not God the Father
5. Possible link to celibacy for ministers
6. Links to the Gnostic belief system

Gnosticism

Given the connection to Gnosticism made by the early church fathers it is apropos to briefly cover some Gnostic doctrines. Gnosticism is a group of ancient heresies, stressing escape from this world through the acquisition of esoteric knowledge. It derives its name from the Greek word **gnosis** or knowledge. Because of their belief that this "knowledge" was esoteric in nature they separated themselves from others as a special class. The "knowledge" had been revealed to them and not to everyone at large. This put them in a special group. A separation between the "ministry" and the "laity" is derived from this belief. This is not to exist in the churches of God. There is no barrier between those who serve in the ministry and those who don't. Everyone is on an equal playing field. The ministry is there to serve and teach but we all approach God through Christ as equals.

In addition to what we've already learned about the Gnostic belief system we find the following beliefs:

1. They believe the creation is flawed because it was created in a flawed manner. As we saw above Gnostics believe the physical creation was created by a demiurge or lesser god. The blame for the fallen state of creation lies with God not man. This is blasphemy!
2. They do believe in a supreme god and while this true god did not fashion or create anything, He (or, It) "emanated" or brought forth from within Himself the substance of all there is in all the worlds, visible and invisible.
3. The basic Gnostic myth has many variations, but all of these refer to Aeons, intermediate deific beings who exist between the ultimate, True God and ourselves. They, together with the True God, comprise the realm of Fullness

¹⁶ Ignatius, Epistle to the Trallians, Chapter XI

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(Pleroma) wherein the potency of divinity operates fully. The Fullness stands in contrast to our existential state, which in comparison may be called emptiness.¹⁷

4. Humans contain a perishable physical and psychic component as well as a spiritual component (the divine spark). Death releases the "divine spark" from its physical prison. This is the immortal soul doctrine started by Satan when he told Eve that she would "not surely die". This is heresy! Humans possess no such thing.
5. Humans are generally ignorant of the "divine" spark and are kept in ignorance by the lesser gods responsible for the physical, flawed creation. Anything that ties one to the physical keeps one enslaved to these lesser gods. Gnostics believe the law of God is physical. Therefore it ties them to the earthly things and prevents their spiritual growth. The idea that the law of God is not applicable to Christians is a Gnostic heresy! Gnostics don't look for salvation from sin but from the ignorance of spiritual things. Sin is the consequence of this ignorance.
6. Morality comes from the "divine spark" within and not from any external source. The external rules of morality are said to come from the lesser god(s) and are therefore to be avoided.

This is not a comprehensive list of Gnostic beliefs but is a high level view of the foundational beliefs that make up the Gnostic ideology.

Conclusion

The Nicolaitans were a sect of believers that were extant at the time of the Apostles. We are warned about those who would come in amongst the body of Christ teaching false doctrines and subverting the truth.

Mat 7:15 "Beware of false prophets who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravaging wolves.

Mat 24:11-12 Many false prophets will rise up and deceive many. (12) Because lawlessness will multiply, the love of many will grow cold.

2Pe 2:1-10 But there were also false prophets among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you. They will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them, and will bring swift destruction on themselves. (2) Many will follow their unrestrained ways, and because of them the way of truth will be blasphemed. (3) In their greed they will exploit you with deceptive words. Their condemnation, *pronounced* long ago, is not idle, and their destruction does not sleep. (4) For if God didn't spare the angels who sinned, but threw them down into Tartarus and delivered them to be kept in chains of darkness until judgment; (5) and if He didn't spare the ancient world, but protected Noah, a preacher of righteousness, and seven others, when He brought a flood on the world of the ungodly; (6) and if He reduced the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah to ashes and condemned them to ruin, making them an example to those who were going to be

¹⁷ The Gnostic World View: A Brief Summary of Gnosticism,
<http://www.webcom.com/gnosis/gnintro.htm>

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ungodly; (7) and if He rescued righteous Lot, distressed by the unrestrained behavior of the immoral (8) (for as he lived among them, that righteous man tormented himself day by day with the lawless deeds he saw and heard)-- (9) then the Lord knows how to rescue the godly from trials and to keep the unrighteous under punishment until the day of judgment, (10) especially those who follow the polluting desires of the flesh and despise authority. Bold, arrogant people! They do not tremble when they blaspheme the glorious ones;

They assumed the name of the deacon Nicolas but this cannot be proven. Their origins remain hidden from view but based on the information that is available it seems unlikely that Nicolas was the founder of the sect. It is more likely that they assumed his name to add credence to their heresy.

There are connections between the Nicolaitans and the subsequent Gnostic sects that arose. The early church fathers seem to put them both in the same category. There is also a connection between the Nicolaitan doctrines and those of Balaam. These were not explored here but will be explored in a later study.

While the Nicolaitan doctrines may not be fully expounded upon we do have some details available. God hates these doctrines and so should those who would bear the title of Christian. Christians are duty bound to keep these doctrines from entering the body. If found they must remove them immediately!

Brethren, we need to be follow the example of the Ephesians of whom the angel said,

Rev 2:6 Yet you do have this: you hate the practices of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate.

We must remember:

Rev 2:7 "Anyone who has an ear should listen to what the Spirit says to the churches. I will give the victor the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.