

Just how does one adequately follow Cindy's uplifting series on "The Fruits of the Spirit"? But with a sermon on *God and Hatred*, of course! As Dietrich Bonhoeffer once stated, "absolute seriousness is never without a dash of humor."

Now, we could jump right into our text from Proverbs and the Seven Deadly Sins to see just what exactly God hates, but that would prove both overkill and besides today's point. So let us instead focus our short attentions on the fascinating and never-preached-on text from Revelation 2. What makes this text so fascinating is that in a way, it kind of makes for a choose-your-own-adventure sermon, as it elicits two separate exegetical paths both holding considerable merit to our question at hand: is God capable of hatred? So let's have some fun then and venture down each, and after playing Devil's Advocate, see in the end which one we prefer.¹

Path 1 goes like this: If we believe in the complete authority of scripture and the divine ordinance of every word that is contained within, even down to the very roots of their etymologies, one could conclude that yes, God *is* capable of harboring hatred against certain people. For when we break down this mysterious word, Nicolaitan (the group you'll remember that God is said to hate in Revelation 2:6), we get two smaller Greek words, *viko*² (*niko*) meaning "conquer/overthrow" and *λαός* (*laos*) meaning "people/laity". Thus, the logic of our first path thereby suggesting that the word Nicolaitan came into existence so to directly express God's overarching view of hating all those who are conquerors of lay people.

Well, what exactly does that even mean; conquerors of lay people? I'm glad you asked. Some historians write that within the early church, a certain sect of pious folk sought to establish a holy order of men, who fashioned themselves into lofty positions of theological authority claiming to be the Word's ultimate and only vessel to the people. It is said that these early "leaders" attempted, and in many ways succeeded, at stripping the individual relationship with Christ from the common man, replacing the image of Jesus of Nazareth with the mirror of themselves. And more, that they achieved this by preying on the *have-nots*: the uneducated, weak, and uninformed, falsely declaring that the mystery of Christ was too grand to understand and therefore was beholden only to them and that only they were capable of intelligibly disseminating it. And thus, it was because of this great sin, for redirecting people away from the personal revelation of Christ and toward the corporate fabrication of their own self-appointment that they became forever linked to the title, Nicolaitans: the conquerors of the lay people, the group hated by God.

Somewhat tangentially then but similar in meaning, I think this is also why Bonhoeffer later wrote of a "Religionless Christianity" in his final letters from his German prison cell. For he had watched the German evangelical church fall out of God's jurisdiction and into Nazi control, appointed with a bishop of Hitler's own choice. Bonhoeffer looked on as self-proclaimed righteous people looked the other way or worse, became the very chaplains for the war machines of evil. He saw the church bend over to the whims of corruptible men who then used their hijacked positions to mislead their congregations. What then was the purpose of religion, especially when the mystery of its metaphysical nature could be so easily co-opted into any agenda one sought fit? Perhaps then it was the totality of thoughts like these and those connected that ultimately compelled Bonhoeffer to join in an attempt to assassinate Hitler? But there, for now, I digress.

Surely then, if this first path is true and God were to be found capable of hating anything or anyone, it would certainly be these Nicolaitan types who have existed throughout the age of time, right up unto our present day. Be it behind the mask of red or blue candidacy, or Presbyterian or catholic leadership, or anyone who distracts the people from the Truth by diluting revelation seems ripe for God's wrath.

Now if we're to be philosophically honest, this first path does not come to its end without having its share of sinkholes along the way. For if we ascribe absolute authoritative value to Revelation 2, arguing that God had an expressed intent behind the etymology of the word Nicolaitan so to better articulate the range of divine hatred, then we must also open the floodgates to every other Biblical text that directly or indirectly affirms God's vitriol in so many words. For how can we line-veto our way through scripture and maintain our intellectual and spiritual integrity? Are we then truly ready to put all of the Levitical Laws back on the table? Are we sure we want resurrect Timothy and silence women in church once more or remove from them their earrings?

Perhaps then it would be prudent to also consider our second path this morning even if perhaps its premise is more uncomfortable than our first. For this second path asserts that God is *not* capable of hatred, for hatred is a human construct; and that scripture itself is an untrustworthy resource when considering divine emotion as it is but the work of mankind, a species who cannot function outside of their own mortal intents and human agendas.

Now in order to see this path through, to discern if it's an adequate answer to our question of divine hatred, we must yet look again to the Nicolaitans. Besides having an intriguing etymology later linked to a group of self-serving leaders, nothing of great significance is known about the group that apparently existed during the time of John's vision. The immediate historical record is rather wavering and somewhat miniscule, and even our own text certainly doesn't spell anything out concretely. All we get is that God hates them and that we too should hate them merely because some people in Pergamum are listening to them. But that seems like a rather flimsy premise to stake such a strong and divisive emotion on, doesn't it? (Oh you there, with your poor taste in music and questionable lyrics, your content is objectionable, and thus as a byproduct, God and I now hate you!)

¹ This by the way is the kind of thing we do over free beers at Theology at Tap, beginning October 16th at Campbell's Place on Germantown Avenue at 7:30pm. Don't miss it! (End shameless plug).

² Accents may not be exact. Or perhaps they are. I've just started learning Greek. Cut me some slack.

Therefore, several commentaries suggest that there must have been more going on here behind the scenes. And what they think they've uncovered is that the Nicolaitans were actually early Christians made up of a compromising/co-existing folk who advocated for tolerance with their pagan/non-Christian other. That not only did they exist with them, but that they also spoke to them, ate meals with them, and even participated in their celebrations and festivals. They go on to note that in Pergamum, a large pagan city rich with diverse people and customs, this kind of ecumenical communion would have been a natural course of action for those seeking to spread the word of the relatively new historical savior of Jesus "Son of God." For preaching Christ in a vacuum would have been both pointless and inefficient as the word would have died on the street amongst themselves; more so, it would have been even un-Christ like for lest they forgot, Christ himself ate dinner with tax collectors, women and sinners – the outcasts of Jewish society.

So what exactly was the problem then; how did they incur the divine hatred of Revelation 2; and just why would God's word here be in direct opposition to what his very own son sought to accomplish in the gospels? Well, you see, that's precisely where path two distinguishes itself from path one, for it suggests that this discrepancy exists principally because Revelation 2 is *not* the word of God, but rather just that of John of Patmos. A man on an island roughly 60 miles away from the mainland and the churches to whom he was writing. A man who believed that official persecution was at the church's every doorstep even though almost all uncovered evidence is to the contrary. A man who believed that he was living in the apocalyptic end-times and that in end it was going to be Christianity versus the beast of Rome and everyone else who associated with her. John therefore, and not God, was the author behind the Us vs. Them mentality that we find in Revelation 2. And thus it was John's hatred, not divine hatred, which condemned this "spiritual adultery" of the Nicolaitans, these Christians who dared to associate with non-Christians.

Now let me just set the record straight here, I actually kind of like John and adore Revelation, so before we let path 2 defame his name too much, let us consider the possibility that John perhaps suffered from what all of our biology shares: the Binary Instinct. Rush Dozier Jr., in his landmark book, "Why We Hate" diagrams this instinct and describes it as such: *"We [humans] have an innate tendency, called the binary instinct, to divide the world into us and them. It is a way for us to create order in a world otherwise overwhelming in flux and detail. The combination of generalization and us-them mentality interferes with our ability to empathize with those in the 'them' group. And this lack of empathy is one of the most surprising and disturbing aspects of hate."*

Furthermore, *"It is meaning rather than instinct is so overwhelmingly important to our species... that our limbic system has evolved a powerful tendency to blindly interpret any meaning system that we deeply believe in as substantially enhancing our survival... The immense significance of meaning to human beings and its distinctive link in our species to the primitive emotional centers of the brain lay the groundwork for a primary source of hatred: fanaticism and intolerance. Lacking specific instincts, humans have no innate identity. It is meaning systems then that provide us with our personal sense of purpose. And the tremendous emotional commitment we tend to make to these systems leaves us vulnerable to interpreting differences in meaning as threats to our survival."*

Well that just about nails it doesn't it? For John's entire life-meaning was completely tied into this vision of his; as he truly believed that the survival of the early church hinged on winning the war between us and them, between the righteous exclusive Christian and the evil fraternizing other. And because John was unable to share empathy toward his other, or even his brothers in Christ who sought to associate with their differing neighbor, the mortal pen met the human hand and John, not God, hurled hatred down upon the Nicolaitans and all of those who listened to them.

What lesson then can we glean from all of this, from this second uncomfortable path now laid out before us? For starters, you might be thinking, well I'll never take this second path ever again. That's the lesson right there, Brian! For who wants to believe in a Word that in the end is just a word. And to that I say: that's both fine and fair. But for me, a lesson that can still be gleaned, rather a lesson that ought to be learned from this particular path is this: in this day and age when the world is ever shrinking into a global village, it is imperative that we learn how to recognize our other's worth. To seek dialogue instead of war; to seek harmony instead of division; to seek truth instead of falsehoods; and to seek love instead of hate. For as Bonhoeffer himself once offered in one of his earlier theological visions: *The followers of Christ have been called to peace. And they must not only have peace but also make it. And to that end they renounce all violence and tumult. In the cause of Christ nothing is to be gained by such methods. His disciples keep the peace by choosing to endure suffering themselves rather than inflict it on others. They maintain fellowship where others would break it off. They renounce hatred and wrong. In so doing they over-come evil with good, and establish the peace of God in the midst of a world of war and hate.*

Now, in closing, one might argue that I've given you two contradictory paths as well as two contradictory shades of Bonhoeffer, and that in the end I have left you more confused and frustrated about this question of divine hatred than from whence we started. You might also hold it against me that the idea of a "Religiousless Christianity" as espoused at the end of our first path does not meet and agree with the quote from which we just read at the end of our second, which advocates for the maintenance of our Christian fellowship; nor might you say does *renouncing all violence and tumult* fully compute with Bonhoeffer's ulterior plan to assassinate Hitler, which I had alluded to earlier in support of a differing point -- and to all of that I confess that I am guilty as charged and consciously so.

But might I just offer this last witness into testimony: so far, in my rather short but somewhat full thirty years, I've come to learn that most of what we have in this existence are shades and apparitions of clarity. There are simply things about us and life that will always be rendered contradictory and in need of reconciliation and the attribution of meaning. And in similar unyielding frequency, there are those things that we will never come to fully know or understand; especially and perhaps greatest of which, the full range and scope of God's emotions. All then that we are given are several paths and if we're lucky, several answers toward illumination but not of Illumination, thereby forever eliciting the need for further research into which path and answer we'll be able to say just might have been best.

And to that I finally say, amen.