

Peer-Pressure

A challenge for the young and the rest of us

I would like to tell you two short stories. Both of them are true.

The first event happened to me a few years ago when I was on a training course with eleven fellow engineering technicians at our employer's training school. We were there to learn about some of the latest telecommunications equipment, and part of the training involved a one-day field trip to see some of this equipment in operation. The morning of the field trip had been quite warm and when the instructor announced that we would go to a nearby pub for lunch, I joined the other students in thinking what a good idea that was!

The instructor seemed quite familiar with the directions to the pub; but as our car turned into its parking lot, I received my first clue that something wasn't quite right. This was no nice neighbourhood pub, as I had anticipated. This place looked as though it was long overdue for an encounter with a wrecking ball!

Clue number two came when our instructor looked at his watch and said, "Oh good! We're early; we should be in time to get ring-side seats!" As we walked from the car to the side door of the pub, I was puzzling over possible interpretations of his unusual statement when I was jolted into full realization of his meaning by clue number three: a series of posters in the porch displaying photos of scantily-clad young women. While I was frantically wondering how I was going to get out of this fix, we were already inside the dimly-lit tavern and walking around clue number four: a gold and black elevating stage encircled with small lights. Happily for me, it wasn't yet occupied. There I was - a member of God's church - in a strip-bar surrounded by a dozen colleagues all rubbing their hands together as though it was a freezing cold day!

For my second story, we must travel back in time to the early morning hours of Nisan 14, 31 A.D. in the city of Jerusalem. For the narrative of this story, I can't do better than hand over the floor to God's holy Word:

Then took they Him, and led Him, and brought Him into the high priest's house. And Peter followed afar off. And when they had kindled a fire in the midst of the hall, and were set down together, Peter sat down among them. But a certain maid beheld him as he sat by the fire, and earnestly looked upon him, and said, "This man was also with him." And he denied him, saying, "Woman, I know him not." And after a little while another saw him, and said, "Thou art also of them." And Peter said, "Man, I am not." And about the space of one hour after another confidently affirmed, saying, "Of a truth this fellow also was with him: for he is a Galilaeen." And Peter said, "Man, I know not what thou sayest." And immediately, while he yet spake, the cock crew. And the Lord turned, and looked upon Peter. And Peter remembered the word of the Lord, how he had said unto him, "Before the cock crow, thou shalt deny me thrice." And Peter went out, and wept bitterly. (Luke 22:54-62 KJV)

What does Peter's denial of Jesus Christ have to do with my experience at the pub? The link between the two stories is the problem of *peer-pressure*! Peter, in his ordeal in Jerusalem and I in mine were both experiencing pressure from "peers" with whom we had been thrown together by circumstance.

In this article I would like to examine the subject of peer-pressure and show you just a few words that God has to say on the subject.

What is peer-pressure?

The words do not appear together in any of my dictionaries or encyclopædias; so please bear with me as I define them separately from Webster's Dictionary:

Peer: One that is of equal standing with another. Equal; especially one belonging to the same societal group and especially based on age, grade, or status. Companion.

Pressure: The burden of physical or mental distress. The constraint of circumstance. The weight of social or economic imposition. The stress or urgency of matters demanding attention.

In our everyday usage, peer-pressure is generally understood to be the pressure that a person feels to conform to the standards of the group he or she is with at any given time -- pressure to be the same as them, to talk the same as them, to dress the same as them, and to enjoy the same kind of entertainment as they do. Such pressure is often perceived rather than real. If you think about it, very few people actually pressure others to be the same as themselves. But it is quite natural for us to *want* to conform or to belong. Not many people enjoy standing out in a group, or being rejected as appearing to be different or weird.

Peer-pressure is not always necessarily a bad thing. It can be positive or negative. Which of these it turns out to be depends very much on the morals, character and personality of the members of the peer group and hence, the nature of the activities one feels that he is being pressured to participate in. It is not the perception of peer-pressure that is wrong, but rather, the giving in to it -- especially if it leads one to compromise with God's standards or, worse still, to deny Him. As in Peter's case, compromise may be due to fear; but in most cases in today's western *laissez-faire*, anything-goes, whatever-turns-you-on societies, such fear is unfounded.

So again, what is a simple definition of peer-pressure? It is the perceived or real pressure to conform to the group one is with.

Who are our peers?

Peers fit into two main categories. Firstly, we all have our own regular peer groups with whom we spend much of our time: for example: in church, school, work, sports activities, etc. Secondly, we can make a peer group out of an assembly of people with whom we are thrown together on a temporary basis, often by circumstance. This was Peter's case with the soldiers and servants in the High Priest's house; and this was my case every time I took a training course.

Whichever of these two categories we find ourselves in at any time, it is important for us to find and choose *good* friends amongst our peers. Now when I use the word "good" here, I haven't forgotten what Jesus said in Matthew 19:17: "There is none good but One, that is, God." I mean the kind of friends who don't have obvious swearing, drinking, smoking, drug or immorality problems. Despite the odds against it, you still can find such people in most schools and workplaces.

The ideal, of course, would be to have other friends from God's church attending the same school or workplace as ourselves. If you are blessed with such a situation, you should make every effort to spend time with and give support to each other -- even if there is an age difference (which, for young people, may not be considered *cool*). If there are no other people from your church at your school or workplace, you might feel comfortable with a friend who attends another church -- as long as he or she is not the proselyting type. Although I hesitate to make such a recommendation, we all need companionship and the chances are that such a person has higher moral standards than the norm. In my office, my closest friend was a highly-principled Mormon. That friendship has lasted beyond our retirement from the telecommunications work force.

Peer-pressure in all age groups

We often think of peer-pressure as being the exclusive domain of our teenage sons and daughters. Perhaps our teens think so too. In reality this is not the case. Both of my introductory stories are instances of *adult* peer-pressure. Most adults who are working or studying in group environments would likely agree that they frequently experience peer-pressure. Like teens, church adults also must decline sports, parties and social occasions on Sabbaths and Holy Days. Like teens, church adults must decline and work around festivities such as Christmas and Halloween. Like teens, church adults must ask for time off to attend God's feasts. Yes, adults face all of these challenges along with the associated explanations to peers who do not and cannot really understand.

In some respects peer-pressure can actually be worse for adults than it is for young people. Certainly the dangers and penalties for compromise are more severe for a baptized adult Christian because God considers such a person to be more accountable. Learning to resist negative peer-pressure in our early years can prepare us to effectively resist more severe peer-pressure in our adult years.

What does God say about peer-pressure?

If we desire to be God's children we must choose His way of life. The same goes for young people. If they desire to be part of and reap the benefits of being part of a Christian family, they too must choose God's standards. Church teens are rapidly approaching their "age of decision" when they will decide whether they will stay in the church and do it God's way, or leave it and try out the world's way. Although I was not brought up in a Church of God family, I was seventeen years old when I arrived at my "age of decision" which, due to my age and the lack of a local congregation, led to me being on the outside chomping at the bit to get in. I hope that few -- preferably none -- of our teens are on the inside chomping at the bit to get out!

As mentioned earlier, we could not find the term peer-pressure in our dictionaries or encyclopædias. Neither can we find the term in our Bibles or our concordances. The associated Bible words that deal with this subject are "conform" and "separate." What then should we conform to? What should we not conform to? And what should we separate ourselves from?

And be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God. (Romans 12:2)

And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to His purpose. For whom He did foreknow, He also did predestinate to be conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the Firstborn among many brethren. (Romans 8:28-29)

These verses speak for themselves. We all must resist the pressure of conforming to the standards of the world. God the Father has predestined us to be conformed to the image and standards of His firstborn Son, Jesus Christ! But if we do this, some of our friends might reject us and separate themselves from us. What then?

Blessed are ye, when men shall hate you, and when they shall separate you from their company, and shall reproach you, and cast out your name as evil, for the Son of man's sake. Rejoice ye in that day, and leap for joy: for, behold, your reward is great in heaven: for in the like manner did their fathers unto the prophets. (Luke 6:22-23)

Rejoice? Leap for joy? Now that's a tall order for most young people! Such rejection and separation can be tough for a young person. But what if we are trying to do what is right and our old friends do not cut us off, but hang on to us while they continue to do wrong? This can be an even worse problem because then it becomes our responsibility to act:

Be ye not unequally yoked together with unbelievers: for what fellowship hath righteousness with unrighteousness? And what communion hath light with darkness? And what concord hath Christ with Belial? Or what part hath he that believeth with an infidel? And what agreement hath the temple of God with idols? For ye are the temple of the living God; as God hath said, I will dwell in them, and walk in them; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. Wherefore come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord, and touch not the unclean thing; and I will receive you, and will be a Father unto you, and ye shall be my sons and daughters, saith the Lord Almighty. (II Corinthians 6:14-17)

Let me clarify something here -- at the risk of repeating myself. God is not telling you to cut off your friendships with "good" kids (or adults). But if they're into alcohol, drugs, immorality, swearing, and they continue to hang on to your friendship, it is a safe bet that, rather than you restoring them with your good example, they will drag you down with their bad one. Hard though it may be, it is up to you to sever the relationship. If you do, God promises to reward you. Do not think that you'll be lonely and friendless if you have to take such action. God promises that He will replace your old associates with real, true, good friends:

And Jesus answered and said, "Verily I say unto you, There is no man that hath left house, or brethren, or sisters, or father, or mother, or wife, or children, or lands, for my sake, and the gospel's, but he shall receive an hundredfold now in this time, houses, and brethren, and sisters, and mothers, and children, and lands, with persecutions; and in the world to come eternal life." (Mark 10:29-30)

In addition, if you separate from those you *should* separate from and if you conform to those who you *should* conform to, God promises to put you in Jesus Christ's peer group when He starts doing some separating of His own:

When the Son of man shall come in His glory, and all the holy angels with Him, then shall He sit upon the throne of His glory: and before Him shall be gathered all nations: and He shall separate them one from another, as a shepherd divideth his sheep from the goats: and He shall set the sheep on His right hand, but the goats on the left. Then shall the King say unto them on His right hand, "Come, ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world:"... Then shall He say also unto them on the left hand, "Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels"... And these shall go away into everlasting punishment: but the righteous into life eternal. (Matthew 25:31-34 & 41 & 46)

It is not my purpose to frighten you with "fear religion" but, as mentioned above, many of you young people are now approaching your *age of decision* and soon you will be asking yourselves the very important question, "Should I stay or should I leave?" We care about you young people. We really do. We want that which is best for you. We want to be in God's Kingdom with you. God's Kingdom is real and we believe that it is coming soon.

In summary then, in this article we have examined the subject of peer-pressure: what it is, who our peers are, its effect on various age groups and, of primary importance, what God has to say about it.

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P.S. Just in case you were wondering: I left that pub and had lunch on my own!

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