

Peer-Pressure: A Challenge For All

by Staff

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A few years ago, I was on a training course with eleven other 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 was not quite right. This was no nice neighborhood pub, as I had anticipated. This place looked as though it was long overdue for an encounter with the wrecker's 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 was not 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 if it were a freezing-cold day!

Another incident, familiar to us all, occurred during the early hours of Nisan 14, AD 31, in the city of Jerusalem. God's Word supplies the narrative of this story:

Having arrested Him, they led Him and brought Him into the high priest's house. But Peter followed at a distance. Now when they had kindled a fire in the midst of the courtyard and sat down together, Peter sat among them. And a certain servant girl, seeing him as he sat by the fire, looked intently at him and said, "This man was also with Him." But he denied Him, saying, "Woman, I do not know Him." And after a little while, another saw him and said, "You also are of them." But Peter said, "Man, I am not!" Then after about an hour had passed, another confidently affirmed, saying, "Surely this fellow also was with Him, for he is a Galilean." But Peter said, "Man, I do not know what you are saying!" Immediately, while he was still speaking, the rooster crowed. And the Lord turned and looked at Peter. Then Peter remembered the word of the Lord, how He had said to him, "Before the rooster crows, you will deny Me three times." So Peter went out and wept bitterly. (Luke 22:54-62)

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. This article will examine the few words that God has to say on the subject.

What Is Peer-Pressure?

The term *peer-pressure* does not normally appear in dictionaries or encyclopedias, so we will define the words 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 everyday usage, peer-pressure is generally understood to be the constraint that a person feels to conform to the standards of the group he or she is with at any given time. When this occurs, a person feels pressured to be the same as the others in the group, to talk as they do, to dress as they do, to enjoy the same kind of entertainment as they do. Such pressure is often perceived rather than real. In actuality, very few people 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 and thus being rejected as 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 heavily on the morals, character, and personality of the members of the peer group, and hence, the nature of the activities one feels he is being pressured to participate in. It is not the perception of negative 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 usually unfounded.

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

Who Are Our Peers?

Peers fit into two main categories. Firstly, we all have our 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 put 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 attended a training course.

Whichever of these categories we find ourselves in at any time, it is important for us to find and choose *good* friends amongst our peers. This is not forgetting what Jesus says about who is "good" in Matthew 19:17: "No one is good but One, that is, God." No, "good" friends are those who do not have obvious swearing, drinking, smoking, drug, or immorality problems. Despite the odds against it, such people can still be found 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 one is blessed with such a situation, he or she should make every effort to spend time with and give support to the other person, even if there is an age difference (which, for young people, may not be considered *cool*). If there are no other people from church at one's school or workplace, one might feel comfortable with a friend who attends another church, as long as he or she is not the aggressive, proselytizing type. Although one hesitates to make such a recommendation,

we all need companionship, and the chances are that such a person has higher moral standards than the norm.

Peer-Pressure at All Ages

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 this article's 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 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 resist more severe peer-pressure effectively in our adult years.

What Does God Say?

If we desire to be God's children, we must choose His way of life. The same goes for young people. If we desire to be part of and reap the benefits of being part of a Christian family, we too must choose God's standards. Many teens are rapidly approaching their "age of decision" when they will have to decide whether to stay in the church and do it God's way, or leave it and try their hands at 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. It is hoped that few—preferably none—of our teens are on the inside chomping at the bit to get out!

We could not find the term peer-pressure in our dictionaries or encyclopedias, nor can we find the term in our Bibles or 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? What should we separate ourselves from?

» And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you 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 those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose. For whom He foreknew, He also predestined 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! However, if we do this, some of our friends will probably reject us and separate themselves from us. What then?

Blessed are you when men hate you, and when they exclude you, and revile you, and cast out your name as evil, for the Son of Man's sake. Rejoice in that day and leap for joy! For indeed your reward is great in heaven. For in like manner their fathers did to the prophets. (Luke 6:22-23)

Such rejection and separation can be tough for a young person. It is not easy to face rebuff and exclusion from those we consider friends. 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 it then becomes our responsibility to act:

Do not be unequally yoked together with unbelievers. For what fellowship has righteousness with lawlessness? And what communion has light with darkness? And what accord has Christ with Belial? Or what part has a believer with an unbeliever? And what agreement has the temple of God with idols? For you are the temple of the living God. As God has said, "I will dwell in them and walk among them. I will be their God, and they shall be My people." Therefore "Come out from among them and be separate, says the Lord. Do not touch what is unclean, and I will receive you." "I will be a Father to you, and you shall be My sons and daughters, says the Lord Almighty." (II Corinthians 6:14-18)

To clarify—at the risk of being repetitive—God is not telling us to cut off our friendships with "good" kids (or adults). However, if they are into alcohol, drugs, immorality, swearing, and they continue to hang on to our friendship, it is a safe bet that, rather than our restoring them with our good example, they will drag us down with their bad one. Hard though it may be, it is up to us to sever the relationship. If we do, God promises to reward us. We should not think that we will be lonely and friendless if we have to take such action. God promises that He will replace our old associates with real, true, good friends:

So Jesus answered and said, "Assuredly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or father or mother or wife or children or lands, for My sake and the gospel's, who shall not receive an hundredfold now in this time—houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands, with persecutions—and in the age to come, eternal life." (Mark 10:29-30)

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

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

This is not meant to frighten anyone with "fear religion," but as mentioned before, many young people are approaching the age of decision, and they will soon be asking themselves the vital question, "Should I stay in the church or should I leave?" The ministry and members really care about the young people in the church and want what is best for them. We all want to be in God's Kingdom together. The Kingdom of God is real, and we believe that it is coming soon. Thus, the window of opportunity to choose God's way narrows with every day that passes (Romans 13:11).

The choice is huge, but God has put it into very simple terms—terms that are especially relevant to today's world:

. . . I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing; therefore choose life, that both you and your descendants may live; that you may love the Lord your God, that you may obey His voice, and that you may cling to Him, for He is your life and the length of your days; and that you may dwell in the land [of promise]. (Deuteronomy 30:19-20)

God sees matters in these stark terms: There is the path He offers us, which is good for us in every way, and there are all other avenues, all of which lead to curses and death. Most of our peers have not been offered this choice—yet—so they have no inkling of the better way found in God's Word. But we have had it revealed to us, and God urges us to rise above the demands of our worldly peers to seize what He offers with both hands.