



**P**eer pressure? Of course we're not affected by it, are we?

I mean, when those immediately around you accent to one idea or opinion, and yet you're still not convinced, where does that leave you?

Have you never yielded to or been held captive by the opinions and prevailing mood of those around? We all, to varying degrees, have experienced peer pressure. There's good peer influence, and equally, not-so-good peer pressure.

And, it's not just a "youth" thing either. Many adults have based their decisions on peer pressure, with results that they too have come to regret. It's a subtle kind of social pressure that influences and dictates, for example, what we wear, how we talk, and what we do. Do changing fashion trends, for example, affect your purchasing habits? Are you tempted to try drugs because "others are doing it"? Are you afraid of your friends finding out, for example, that for the first time in your life you're asking questions about Jesus?

Maybe you're quite the opposite, a resourceful individual whose life's course has allowed you to think independently? Peer ideas have had little effect on you. You don't need religion – to be told what's morally right or wrong. The last thing you need now is Jesus – or do you?

You're not alone – there are a lot of people on both sides of the fence.

Stay with us. We'll look at two very intelligent but different men who privately wrestled with those very same issues.

### **By night**

A man called Nicodemus came to Jesus by the cover of night. You can read what happened in John chapter 3.

Nicodemus was a part of the influential Jewish sect called the Pharisees, who according to the gospel accounts, opposed Jesus on almost everything He did. It was really a power struggle that played itself out in their almost daily confrontations.

The Pharisees' role as ruling council in Jewish society dictated almost every facet of their daily lives, from ritual washings, fastidious observance of trivial matters, to the oral traditions surrounding Sabbath observance. You can read of their frequent confrontations

with Jesus; it's no wonder Nicodemus didn't want to be seen fraternising with Him. It would have been politically incorrect, risking his standing among his fellow Pharisees.

John gives us some insight into really what was happening when he wrote about those events:

*"Yet at the same time many even among the leaders believed in him. But because of the Pharisees they would not confess their faith for fear they would be put out of the synagogue; for they loved praise from men more than praise from God." (John 12:42-43)*

Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus' that night is a subject all by itself. Nicodemus asked Jesus about His identity, and Jesus discusses rebirth. And later that night as the two men would have parted, it's anyone's guess the turmoil that may have been going on in Nicodemus' heart.

Sometime later, when Jesus was again hunted by the Pharisees, Nicodemus' ambivalence is reflected by his question, *"Does our law condemn anyone without first hearing him to find out what he is doing?"* (John 7:51)

Thankfully, there's more to the story. After Jesus had been crucified, Nicodemus appears together with a Joseph of Arimathea, and they courageously ask the Roman governor Pilate for the body of Jesus. Together they buried Jesus according to Jewish custom.

This of course raises the question: Did it take the brutal death of Jesus for Nicodemus to finally break free from his peers? Perhaps. The evidence certainly suggests as such.

## Different Pharisees

Not all Pharisees were of the same ilk because we read later of yet another very different Pharisee, Saul. Saul's experience was quite different from Nicodemus' in that he really "kicked against" the very notion of Jesus being the Messiah. It seems that Saul's burning ambition was to destroy any Christians he could find. In his opinion, they defiled the traditions that were overseen by the Pharisees.

And so, as recorded in the Book of Acts, Saul the Pharisee determined to travel to the distant city of Damascus in Syria, with a letter of authority from the ruling council, in order to imprison and punish any Christians he found there.

There is no doubt that Saul was a deeply entrenched Pharisee of his time, and thoroughly schooled in their traditions. So too was Nicodemus whom Jesus noted was a "teacher in Israel". To what degree Saul was affected by peer pressure is open to conjecture; perhaps his mis-guided vigour was dictated more by his individualism than peer consent?

Both men, however, were teachers in the tradition of the Pharisees; both were well schooled in the scriptures, and both it seems were troubled by this "Messiah" business. The differences are worth exploring as both men were troubled and confronted with who Jesus really is.

Whereas Nicodemus came to Jesus by the cover of night, Jesus came to Saul in a blinding light on the road to Damascus. You see, not only did Jesus not meet their world-view of the Messiah; He didn't adhere to the Jewish oral "traditions of the elders"; besides the impact of Jesus on the lives of common people, let alone His perceived threat to their priestly standing in society, was too great to ignore.

## Finally confronted

Nicodemus' curiosity was stymied by peer pressure; he didn't want to be "seen" being true to what his inner convictions may have been.

Saul, however, while of the same religious tradition, is contrasted by a rugged individualism – his wasn't a secret investigation into Jesus' identity but rather a determined, albeit misguided mission, to destroy "Christ".

So Jesus didn't mince His words when He confronted Saul: *"Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?... I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting."* (Acts 26:15-16)

In the end, both Nicodemus and Saul, in their different ways and with their own stories, when confronted by Jesus, made a complete turnaround. Both repented: Nicodemus was no longer afraid of what his peers may have thought. It no longer mattered to him that he "defiled himself" by handling the corpse of Jesus. (As a Pharisee he was not permitted to touch a dead body).

Saul, now renamed Paul, spent the rest of his life preaching "Christ and him crucified" – the very message for which he himself was persecuted and died for.

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**It no longer mattered to him that he "defiled himself" by handling the corpse of Jesus.**

## Today

So, the question remains, comparing the parallels of what we've just covered, where are you on your journey?

Are you perhaps a bit like Nicodemus, or can you relate better to Paul? Is peer influence holding you back from coming to a covenant relationship with Jesus Christ? Are you worried about what your friends or family might say, or how it might affect your corporate or political status?

Perhaps you are more like Saul, who didn't know what he didn't know. See, Saul's intellect and education didn't allow him to admit that he may just be wrong!

It's time to take an honest look at where you are in relation to Jesus. It's time to examine what the scriptures really say. It's time to put God to the test, and coming to Him, to really finally find Him.

Nicodemus took the first tentative step by going to Jesus; and when Jesus confronted Paul on the road to Damascus, both men could finally no longer deny the overwhelming evidence.

What about you?

Jesus wants you to follow Him. The next step, however, is yours for the taking.



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