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by: [Isaac Zimmerman](#) [2]

// Neighbor Circles // Cousin Circles // Common Interest Circles //

I love the young people in our church and I am one of them. While we as a church have very few youth-only activities, as young people we still have many enjoyable times together. We sing together, we wash dishes together after fellowship meals, and we have many fulfilling times of just sharing with each other. Also, our church families frequently invite each other over for a meal or to spend an evening singing together.

We are blessed with a lot of youth who have a zeal for the Lord and are committed to following Him. These things are a blessing and we are thankful for our close-knit youth group. However, having a close-knit youth group also brings challenges. One of these challenges is avoiding the problem of circles.

The problem

Among the young people of many churches, there seems to be what I will call circles—age circles, cousin circles, neighbor circles, common-interest circles, etc. While these circles (cliques) are not necessarily all bad, the main problem is that not everyone is included in these circles. Usually, there are some who are outside of any specific circle. While the rest of us are busy with our conversations and projects, they are left by themselves. Maybe they are sitting alone, watching, many times in the back or in a corner. Most likely they are wishing to be included, but they are not sure how. Perhaps they are not sure if they are welcome or even invited to join in. Or worse yet, maybe someone has privately told them to stay away from the rest of the group.

Not only do we have circles, but we also have attitudes. Sometimes people are looked down upon—secretly of course. Perhaps we do not appreciate them. In our minds, we tend to place them on the social ladder a few rungs below us. Usually, they are not a part of the in group. They are often not included in the normal activities and conversations. Perhaps they are not popular. Maybe they feel rejected and hurt because they do not seem to fit in or are not accepted as being a part of the group.

Why does this seem to be such a common problem? What is the cause for this kind of struggle among Christian teenagers and young adults? Why are some not being accepted? While there could be a number of reasons for this, let us consider some that are the most likely.

Some Reasons

1. They are newcomers.

Perhaps their family just moved to our church or community. We already have a close circle of friends. Maybe the rest of the youth in our church have already found their place in the group

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and have settled into a comfortable normal routine. Maybe the circle seems full enough. Newcomers may seem scary or disruptive, so we tend to keep them outside of our circle. Finally, it can be challenging and make us weary to start from scratch making new friends repeatedly, with each new arrival.

2. They are “poor”.

Perhaps there are youth in our congregations or in our circle of friends who are not accepted because they are struggling financially. Their clothes may seem to be ill-fitting and shabby, their house may appear to be in poor condition, and their vehicles may sound like they are squeaking out their last miles. Their family cannot afford to go to the places others go and do the things others do. They are “poor”, so those of us who consider ourselves “rich”, do not want to risk our social standing by befriending them.

3. They are “different”.

Perhaps we think they look different, talk different, dress different, or eat different. They do not do things the “normal” way, and since we do not want others to possibly think of us as being “different”, we hold them at arm’s length. We do not want to be identified with the “different” crowd...

4. Their convictions do not match ours.

Perhaps there are youth in our congregations who dress more plainly than we do. Maybe there are those whose parents do not allow them to participate in some of the activities that the others take part in. Should they then automatically be considered as self-righteous? Or, maybe there are those who are less conservative than we are. Does this then, make them less spiritual than we are?

5. They are quiet and shy.

Perhaps they find socializing to be very difficult. They do not say much and when they do, they make blunders. They do not seem to be making any moves towards becoming more friendly, so since it is “their own fault”, the rest of us tend to mostly ignore them.

These are just a few possible reasons. There may well be more, but are these good reasons? Is it okay for us as Christians to have these attitudes? What does the Bible have to say about this?

The apostle James writes very bluntly in James 2:9, “But if ye have respect to persons, ye commit sin, and are convinced of the law as transgressors.” Ye commit sin! Do we understand that? Or do we just overlook this clear statement and shrug our shoulders?

How does the scripture define respect of persons? In this same passage of scripture, James gives a very practical illustration that is easy to understand. He gives the example of an

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assembly, or church service, where two men come in. The one is dressed in nice clothes and the other is dressed in vile (disgusting) raiment. This scripture says that if we give the man with nice clothes a better seat than the other one, we are guilty. "Are ye not then partial in yourselves, and are become judges of evil thoughts?" James 2:4

Now, let us consider how these same five reasons look in light of God's Word, remembering the previous portion of Scripture, "If ye have respect to persons ye commit sin."

The reasons again

1. They are newcomers.

Are we not glad that Jesus accepts newcomers? If he did not, we would have been left out in the cold. To not receive newcomers into our churches and into our friendships is to ignore the heart of God.

2. They are poor.

The Bible gives us many glimpses into the heart of God concerning the poor, and there are dire warnings for those who oppress or take advantage of them. Jesus blessed the poor and said "But woe unto you that are rich! for ye have received your consolation," Luke 6:24. We are believing a lie if we think that being well-to-do puts us on a higher level than those who are struggling financially.

3. They are "different".

So are you. Your way of doing things may not be any better than their way. God created each person to be different from every other person. Beware of lifting yourself above someone else. Philippians 2:3, tells us "...In lowliness of mind let each esteem other better than themselves."

4. Their convictions do not match ours.

Many of us are members in congregations where there is some variation in dress and other areas of life-style. When we look down on someone who is faithfully obeying their parents or who is conscientiously living out their convictions, we are actually looking down on Godliness. To reject others who are sincerely walking with the Lord, but are less conservative than we are, can be the result of a proud heart. "Who art thou that judgest another man's servant?" (Romans 14:4)

5. They are quiet and shy.

Perhaps they are not doing their part to be friendly. Did Jesus wait for us to do our part before He reached out to us? Did He say, "It's their own fault"? Sometimes people are very shy by nature. The people around them can do a lot to help them overcome their shyness. Philippians 2:4 tells us, "Look not every man on his own things but every man also on the things of others".

What shall we do?

First of all, I think some of us need to repent. Even as I wrote this, I was personally convicted, and needed to repent of some wrong attitudes. Remember, “If ye have respect to persons, ye commit sin.” We need God. We need Him to show us that we are all on the same level in His sight. We need Him to give us a heart of love for all men. It is only in sacrificial love that true Christian friendships can happen.

It is not God’s will that there would be young people in our churches who are rejected and left out. It is time we get out of our circles (cliques) and start befriending ALL those who God has brought into our lives. It is time we lay down our own rights to a good time with our favorite friends and start living unselfishly, with everyone God has placed in our lives.

As we do this, it is important that we do it with a right heart. We are not at the top of some social ladder, reaching down a grudging hand to a poor individual several steps below us. Not at all. Rather, we do it because we understand that we need each other and that God has commanded it. That young person in the corner most likely has something you need, and maybe you have something he or she needs. In 1 Corinthians 12:18, Paul tells us that God has placed the members in the body as it has pleased Him, and we need each one.

It is God's will that our churches would be places where people of all ages are loved and accepted, encouraged and admonished. God did not design us to function by ourselves; we need each other. God wants grace to flow between us all, as children in God’s family.

Let us move forward with courage and a sense of opportunity—not out of duty, but in cheerful obedience. God is a God of relationships and when we exercise Godly friendships it brings a blessing to us, to our friends, and to our churches.

What an opportunity!

But it will not all be easy:

- It may hurt our reputation. Remember, Jesus made himself of no reputation for us.
- It may cause some of our existing friends to reject us. If they do, we are better off spending less time with them anyway. If that is all it takes to cause them to no longer be our friends, then they were weak friends at best.
- It may mean talking about things that are not our interest, since we will be talking about the other person’s interest. Or, it may mean giving up an activity we enjoy, in order to spend time with others in their activity. But that is okay—Jesus gave up everything to reach you and me.
- It may mean losing our popularity and becoming a nobody, since we are choosing to associate with those who others may think of as nobodies. That is okay too; when we choose the possibility of losing our reputation for the sake of obeying the Lord, then He can make us a somebody in his kingdom.

Let us be brutally honest and admit that sometimes we are very wimpy and lack the courage

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to respond to others like Jesus, no matter what. We are afraid of what our friends might think. We are afraid of being rejected. We are afraid of being thought of as different or strange. We are afraid to be the first one in our clique to step forward, to repent of having respect towards persons, and start loving Jesus by loving the least of His. Afraid? Yes, afraid. I'll be the first one to acknowledge it.

It is not my intention to send all of us young people on a guilt trip with no return. If we have wrong attitudes, let us repent, and move forward.

Be encouraged, take little, practical steps, and the Lord will enrich your life with friends like you have never had before.

In conclusion

I love our youth group. I am thankful for their godly example in facing the challenge of circles. By God's grace I will join their endeavors to follow the example of Jesus, who without partiality, was willing to love and receive us all.

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