



# SEEDS

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## Cooler Than Thou

by Nate Macy

In the last month I've spent two weeks at camp, hanging out with youth. I've enjoyed their energy and passion, fresh insight and perspective. But it also put me back in touch with that pervasive notion in youth ministry, the one that says "You can be a Christian and be cool at the same time" or that "Christians have fun too."

It's not that I disagree with either of these statements at face value. I believe that Jesus frees us to deeper joy and contentment. I believe that this equates to some extent with having fun and being "cool." However, it seems that these seemingly harmless mantras have worked their way deeper into our subconscious.

Inherent in these notions is an acceptance of what the prevailing culture dictates as "cool" or "fun." This suggestion presupposes that culture does indeed mediate what is "cool" or "fun" and that we as God-people compare our "cool" and "fun" against that standard.

Possibly this was a decent measure when it was applied only to youth culture. Youth are, of course, people who are painfully aware of their own peer's judgment of them and who need, at least at times, to know that they are OK. They need a sense of belonging. The temptation to forsake God in the face of the monumental hipness of society is strong. So, to offer an alternate take of youth culture is perhaps helpful. Where this model falls apart is when that alternative is a weak parody of the existing youth culture. Alternative culture should have an entirety to its difference, not just subtle substitutions of style.

This watered-down imitation becomes particularly problematic when alternative culture carries onto adulthood. The concept that "Christians are cool too" has taken shape in a seemingly endless parallel parody of adult American culture. We have Christian bookstores, Christian

coffee shops, Christian concerts, Christian movies, Christian music, and even Christian breath-mints. Our churches are called to look like corporations; the mainstream Christian media dictates what is acceptable dress, worship, reading, viewing, etc., etc., etc. American Christianity has become a place where “Christians are cool too” but not a place where Christians are creatively engaged in the world in transformative ways. Being “cool” has become our test of faithfulness. Will this new outreach program appeal to people? How can I “package” my faith in ways that will be easily accessible? Can we imagine Martin Luther King Jr. thinking or acting this way? How about George Fox? Bernard of Clairvaux? Mother Theresa? Jesus?



In order to be faithful we cannot continue to accept what mainstream culture (Christian or secular) feeds us. There may well be many ways in that faithfulness will look like what is happening in mainstream culture. But assuming that the cultural infrastructure that we have been handed is a safe model which we can safely emulate is not faithfulness.

The Amish are an easy community to mock. Their refusal to enter into “modernity” with its dependence on and addiction to electricity, busy-ness, fossil fuels, and information separates them from the rest of us in obvious ways. They are by most standards “uncool.” But as gas and electricity prices rise, as the sub-prime mortgage crisis hits, and Amish communities are still easily able to provide for their communal needs well, maybe the “uncool” has an upside to it. The Amish are who they are because of their sense of faithful action. This is not to say that we should all become Amish, but to point to a group that has not succumbed to being “cool” and have instead given us something to ponder. What does radical faithfulness look like in our lives? Are there cultural ideals that we accept as normative that are in fact blocks to our faithfulness?

What does it mean to be faithful? What does it mean to have contentment, to live into the call of God even against the tide of the culture we live in? In the words of Jesus how can we be “in the world but not of it?” In a time when our culture is at a precipice, when the fault lines and untruth’s are particularly clear (e.g. military might = positive influence in the world, excess and consumption = the good life, consumerism = happiness and good citizenry, bigger = better, etc.), how are we called to a new way of existence? There are not easy answers; it is a difficult question and an even harder road to travel. But, as we are faithful to listen and faithful to act we can live into these answers. Now *that* would be cool.



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