

# *hipster christianity*

WHEN CHURCH AND *cool* COLLIDE

**brett mccracken**



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# introduction

I have some definite views about the de-Christianizing of the church. I believe that there are many accommodating preachers, and too many practitioners in the church who are not believers. Jesus Christ did not say “Go into all the world and tell the world that it is quite right.” The Gospel is something completely different. In fact, it is directly opposed to the world.<sup>1</sup>

C. S. Lewis

**A**s I write this, I’m sitting at a table in the dining room of the Kilns—the home of C. S. Lewis in the outskirts of Oxford, England, where Lewis lived from 1930 until his death in 1963. I’ve written a few chapters of this book while staying here, and I offer my deepest gratitude to the C. S. Lewis Foundation for allowing me the opportunity to be a “writer in residence” here for a time.

C. S. Lewis is a man I’ve always admired for many reasons, but perhaps chiefly because he embodies for me the type of Christian writer I’ve always aspired to be—one that speaks to the culture of the day with both confidence and humility, logical clarity and literary flair, whimsy and gravitas. He was never afraid to tell it like it is, even when this ensured he’d have his fair share of critics and naysayers.

The quote I opened with—from a 1963 interview Lewis did in the final months of his life—reflects exactly the sort of firm, to-the-point rhetoric that makes Lewis so relevant and beloved even today.

And it's the sort of strong word the church needs more of today, at a time when the one thing most of us agree on is that Christianity is facing something of an identity crisis. Who are we to be to the twenty-first-century world? How should the church position itself in the postmodern culture? Through what cultural languages will the gospel be best communicated in this turbulent time? Is the gospel "directly opposed to the world" as Lewis declares, and what might this mean for hipster Christianity?

These big, background questions inform the work you have before you. But this book is about a more specific question—though a crucial, far-reaching question—that has come up time and time again for the church, especially in recent years. It is the question of cool; of whether or not Christianity can be, should be, or is, in fact, cool. This book is about an emerging category of Christians I've called "Christian hipsters" and an analysis of what they're about, why they exist, and what it all means for Christianity and the question of cool.

The title *Hipster Christianity* refers to the fact that this is a book about the culture and paradoxes of cool Christianity, but the title is also a slight nod to *Mere Christianity* by C. S. Lewis. Lewis's book was about what Christianity is at the core—the meat and potatoes of our faith. It attempted to make the case for Christianity based on rational arguments and substantive insights. By contrast, "hipster Christianity"—what I'm describing in this book—is a faith more concerned with its image and presentation and ancillary appeal. It assumes that mere Christianity isn't enough or isn't as important as how Christianity looks and is perceived by the outside world.

As I have blogged about the phenomenon of cool Christianity and Christian hipsters, the polarizing nature of this topic has become clear. Whether through the conversations I've had at the various churches I've visited throughout the country, on the blog boards that deal with my book topic, or just with my friends with whom I've talked through these issues, I have become more and more aware that the things I'm looking at are extremely complicated and deserve a fair, thoughtful, thorough treatment.

Yes, you heard that right. This is a serious exploration of hipster Christianity. It's not a joke, and though it is humorous at times and occasionally ironic, it is by no means an exercise in sarcasm (as in, say, Robert Lanham's *Hipster Handbook*).

And this book is not just about hipsters; it's not even just about *Christian* hipsters. Rather, the book explores the whole concept of

“cool” as it pertains to Christianity. It looks at the way that—since the 1970s—contemporary Christianity has prioritized ideas like “cool,” “relevant,” and “countercultural,” largely failing on an institutional level to achieve those things and yet succeeding in pockets and parts via individuals and otherwise organic incarnations of what you might call “hip Christianity.”

The book is not an advertisement or rallying cry for hip Christianity, nor is it an outright chastisement. It’s a critical analysis. It’s about the contradictions inherent in the phenomenon of Christian cool and the questions Christians should be asking of themselves if they find themselves within this milieu. Are the purposes and/or effects of cool compatible with those of Christianity? If we assume that *cool* necessarily connotes the notion of being elite, privileged, and somehow better than the masses, how can we reconcile the idea with that of Christianity, which seems to beckon us away from self-aggrandizement or pride of any kind?

Whatever criticism I end up putting forward in the book, I hope that readers recognize that it is all for the ultimate refinement of the church and its mission in the world.

It has been very popular in recent years for Christians to bash on other Christians, to criticize the church and basically engage in a sort of “the church is totally f—d up and we know it” self-flagellation. A litany of books by Christian authors with titles like *Death by Church* and *They Like Jesus But Not the Church* have emphasized this point: it’s *en vogue* for Christians to hate on Christianity in all of its mainstream forms.

But I love Christians, and I love the church. I even love hipsters, and I recognize why the label might offend some of them.

I’m writing this book not to position myself as some sort of expert on any of this or to make some audacious claim about anything, but because—like C. S. Lewis and countless others before and after him—I love Christianity and I love the church. She is the bride of Christ. I want to see her thrive, expand, and be all that she can be for the world. I want to see the cause of Christ advanced and not muddled up. And this topic—the relationship of the church to the notion of “cool”—strikes me as a vitally important issue that needs to be addressed with tenderness, nuance, and when appropriate, constructive rebuke.

The book is divided into three parts. Part One, “The History and Collision of Cool and Christianity,” lays the foundation for what we’re talking about—the history of the idea of “cool” (chapter 2), the

meaning of the term *hipster* (chapter 3), the history of the development of hip Christianity (chapter 4), and the emergence of the Christian hipster (chapter 5). Part Two, “Hipster Christianity in Practice” looks at the specific qualities and attitudes of Christian hipsters, including what their churches are like (chapter 6), how they think about theology (chapter 7), where they line up politically (chapter 8), and how they approach art and culture (chapter 9). Finally, Part Three, “Problems and Solutions,” gets into more critical and evaluative questions. What does it mean when churches bend over backward to be hip (chapter 10)? What are the conflicts and paradoxes between Christianity and cool (chapter 11)? Under what circumstances might hipster Christianity be a positive thing (chapter 12)? How can Christianity stop its skid to the periphery of culture (chapter 13)? And finally, what does it mean to be truly relevant in a culture so driven by evanescent trends (chapter 14)?

By the end of the book, my hope is not that readers will have learned how to be hip. Rather, I hope they will have been provoked into some necessary conversations, discourse, and soul-searching about the meaning of *cool* for their lives and their faith.

## **Am I a Christian Hipster?**

One more thing. The question will inevitably arise (and has been asked of me countless times already), “Are you yourself a Christian hipster? Are you a part of the subject you’re studying?”

The short answer is yes. I think by my own classifications (see chapters 3, 4, and 5) I would fit the category. But the last thing I want this book to be is some sort of how-to instructional or classification manual about whether someone is or isn’t a hipster. Whatever categories and taxonomies of hipster that I might use in this book are not meant to be definitive introductions to some new type of people group; rather, they are meant to serve as examples of the larger questions at stake—the questions of what happens when Christianity becomes cool and whether or not a fashionable, edgy, countercultural Christianity is a good thing for the church.

*part one*

**the history and collision  
of cool and christianity**



# *one*

## is christianity cool?

**F**or most of my young life, I was afraid to let anyone know I was a Christian. It just wasn't cool to be a Bible-toting, churchgoing, penny-loafing goody-goody. I knew I was supposed to be proud of my faith in God and my devotion to Christianity, but in the midst of the "indie nineties"—when Kurt Cobain, computers, and Quentin Tarantino mainstreamed "alternative culture"—Christianity was (in my mind) about as far from countercultural coolness as Sandi Patty was from Madonna.

Still, I *was* a Christian; and not just a cultural, dragged-to-church type. I loved Jesus and prayed a lot, and not just because things like the rapture scared the hell (literally) out of me, though that was probably part of it. Thus, because I was devoted to Christianity, and cool was so evil (or so I was told), I had to resign myself to a life of less-than-nerd status. I wasn't a total nerd, mind you, but I wasn't the hippest kid in school either—because to be so was to take the broad path, the slippery slope, toward you-know-where. Being cool and Christian were not synonymous.

At times I struggled to keep secret my fascination with cool culture—a fascination I suspect everyone has to some extent or another. I remember watching MTV in the basement of my grandma's house because it was the only place I knew that had cable. I nervously kept one ear tuned to *The Real World* and the other to the possible sound

of parents on the stairs. The same thing happened while watching such “racy” fare as *Beverly Hills 90210* or *The Simpsons*. I felt so icky, so worldly, but I couldn’t turn my eyes away.

The battle between fundamentalist guilt and worldly desire that played out in my developing soul was quite frequently sickening, because to a rural Baptist reared on apocalyptic boogeyman preaching, *any* hint that my salvation was in jeopardy was a punch to the gut. I understood that exposure to the temptations of the world was just too big a risk, so I gave up all pretense of being in on the cultural lexicon and just retreated to my fourth-pew cherub status.

I became a Bible-memory superstar in Sunday school, one of those idolized youth group leaders that the Awana kids looked up to; because if I wasn’t getting respect in the oh-so-cool secular sphere, at least I had the Baptist crowd. It’s funny—the overcompensation that happens when one denies an instinct in one way only to fulfill it in another. And looking back, this only proves to me just how instinctual and natural the drive for cool is in humanity. We want recognition and elite status; we want to occupy places of invidious distinction. Quite simply: we want to be the people everyone else wants to be.

Soon I was introduced to Christian rock music—specifically Audio Adrenaline, dc Talk, and later Jars of Clay—and I began to think that this thing called “cool” . . . by God, it could exist within the proper parameters of Christianity! I devoured Christian alternative music, went to concerts and festivals, and became a bona fide Jesus Freak. I became an authority on Christian music and rejoiced when, in the late nineties, some Christian bands (P.O.D., Switchfoot) began to cross over. Christianity was becoming so cool that MTV was paying attention—finally! Why didn’t anyone see it before? Jesus is the bomb! Look at my awesome WWJD bracelet, my blue hair, and—gasp!—my fake earring! I’m so rad, and I don’t even drink or smoke or cuss! Those were the golden days.

I’m not sure just when it happened, but in the midst of this Edenic phase in which I finally felt comfortable—almost legitimately cool—expressing myself as a Christian, I started to feel a little bit grossed out by it all. Christianity was definitely not the intimidating, “Gabriel’s mouth is close to the horn,” fundamentalist hideaway of my early childhood, which was good. But it had almost become *too* accepted. Christian clubs at my school drew hundreds of kids—even tons of the cool kids, the drinking jocks, the party girls, etc. What was up with this? Was Christianity really something so easy and mainstream and amenable to the popular crowd?

And in church itself, services were becoming completely different from the hymn-via-organ styles I grew up with. We started having guitars, drums, wireless mics, and bongos, and people began to dress like they were at a pool party. Church became *entertaining*, and people I once thought to be the world's worst sinners were increasingly welcomed with open arms. This was both a good and bad thing. People coming to church out of their own free will? Always a good thing. But what was it about church that was suddenly so appealing? This was what troubled me.

And it troubles me still, more than ever. Cool doesn't seem quite as cool to me as it once did, because I've borne witness to how distasteful it can be as a widespread economic philosophy—especially when fused with the sacred. The problem has not gone away, and in a culture that has increasingly co-opted cool and made rebellion and dissent the vernacular of any appealing movement, the body of Christ faces some difficult decisions. Will Christianity cower to the crown of cool, and at what cost? Is there really any other way to preach the gospel in the postmodern era—especially to young audiences—than to dress it up in chic?

As a longtime contributing writer for *Relevant* magazine, I've seen the tensions between cool and Christianity especially clearly. *Relevant*, after all, is the boundary-pushing, edgy-hip magazine that bends over backward to stylize Christianity and reframe it as “not your Grandma's Christianity.” Their tagline is “God. Life. Progressive Culture.” Keyword: *progressive* . . . hip, forward-thinking, trendy, current, *relevant*. The magazine traffics in the lingo and patterns of contemporary fashion to an extent that perhaps no Christian organization or product ever has before. But what are we to make of this new brand of “cool Christianity”?

Recognizing the extent to which the masses are entranced by the mystique of style and the temptation of trend, should Christian leaders resign themselves to the notion that “cool is necessary”? Or are there alternative means to reaching the culture for Christ than through the avenues of hip? And what does it mean to be a cool Christian anyway? Can or should such a category even exist?

## The Question of Cool

Is Christianity cool? This question of whether Christianity can or should be comfortable with the image and labels that go along with

cool culture lies at the heart of this book. And it seems to be the question of the moment for a large number of evangelicals desperately trying to keep their faith relevant in a changing culture.

But people rarely ask or discuss this question explicitly, because to ask if something is cool automatically negates its coolness. Everyone who is or has ever been hip knows that coolness is never analyzed or spoken of in any obvious way by those who possess it. Coolness is understood. It is *mystery*. It is *contagious*, *viral*. And this knowledge is the key for many—especially those looking to sell something or monetize hip potential. Bridled cool is an economic cash cow and can magically turn any idea, product, or personality into the next big thing. Pastors and twentysomethings-starved churches are increasingly the first in line to tap into a piece of that. Suddenly cool isn't a worldly indulgence from which Christians recoil; on the contrary, it is increasingly the chosen means of message delivery.

But as with all things cool, no one in Christianity is really talking about this in any sort of direct way. The talk is usually about “contextualization” or “postmodernity” or “meeting the culture where it's at.” But it all really boils down to one simple desire: the desire to make Christianity cool. And this desire is bigger and stranger and more difficult than we'd like to admit. It comes with implications, baggage, and inherent problems that need to be discussed. The question of cool is loaded, and it's time we stopped dancing around it.

This book is about exploring, analyzing, and critiquing this desire for Christianity to be cool—but it also analyzes the already-existing cultures of Christian hip. The book addresses, in part, the phenomenon of Christian hipsters. I've observed this phenomenon firsthand for many years now, through writing for *Relevant* but also by being an evangelical youth group alumnus and a student and now employee at Christian colleges. I've observed the world of Christian hipsterdom at conferences and events from Michigan to Massachusetts, Oxford to Paris. I've seen it in the dozens of churches I've visited in preparation for this book—from a massive megachurch in Las Vegas to a tiny Anglican gathering in a centuries-old church in London. I've heard it from the mouths of pastors and in the ironic jargon and nomenclature of the specific hipster communities I've observed. It's fascinating to see these communities of Christian hip emerging, but it's also confusing and a tad bit troubling. What does it mean that Christians are suddenly

becoming just as cool as the cool elites in secular culture? This is another question that drives the writing of this book.

This may be an odd book to write, I suppose, because as mentioned above, talking about cool in any sort of academic or serious manner is thoroughly uncool. There is a supreme dearth of meta-discussion of hip by those who *are* hip, though there are definitely a few caveats here: (1) Hip people, more so today than ever, do allow for hip self-reference in a postmodern sort of detached way. Talking about and making fun of hipsters is rather fashionable these days.<sup>1</sup> (2) Hipsters also allow for earnest self-referential discussion when in academic settings; say, a rhetoric class or a book discussion of *Nation of Rebels* or something.<sup>2</sup> But even this is partially involuntary, because when hipsters talk about hipsters, they are referencing entities they see as totally separate, totally bourgeois, totally manufactured phenomena—nothing like themselves. As *Adbusters* writer Douglas Haddow points out in his essay, “Hipster: The Dead End of Western Civilization,” it is rare—if not impossible—to find a person who proudly labels himself or herself a hipster. “It’s an odd dance of self-identity—adamantly denying your existence while wearing clearly defined symbols that proclaim it,” he writes.<sup>3</sup> To label oneself a “hipster,” then, is either a fun exercise in irony or just a misguided platitude that exacerbates our increasing inability to understand language, labels, and ourselves.

So on that note, why am I writing about the subject of cool? Obviously it must mean I am not in the inner circle of hip. I’m fine with that. But I know that I’ve *tried* to be cool, and that to an extent, everyone aims for this, struggles, fights the good fight of fashion. We seek cool because we understand it to be the capital of our culture—the holy grail, Gatsby’s green light, the American dream—and that to ignore or write it off as “just how the kids are today” probably won’t do anyone any good.

No, I’m writing about cool because I see its force, not only in the world at large, but in the church. To write a book examining the culture of cool and its tyrannous control of modern society from an economic or political standpoint would suffice, but there are already scads of books on this topic. What I want to know is, given the ubiquity of “cool is king” thinking, how are sacred realms—which seemingly teach and believe and survive on notions antithetical to coolness—coping? Specifically, how is Christianity dealing with a culture so driven by style? Is content taking a backseat?

## The Essence of Cool

In examining this question of the coolness of Christianity, it behooves us to begin by examining coolness in general. In the next chapter I'll explore the historical roots of hip and the process by which this beast has morphed over the centuries.

But before that, I want to explore the basic meaning of cool—the *being* of it. I realize this is an inquiry that to many probably seems unnecessarily cerebral or even pedantic, but nevertheless, I think it is an important question: What does it mean to be cool? From where do we get this idea or notion of “cool”? First of all, the word itself

### *Definitions*

#### **Cool**

**My definition:** An attractive attribute that embodies the existential strains to be independent, enviable, one-of-a-kind, and trailblazing.

**Merriam-Webster:** Fashionable, hip.

**Urban Dictionary:** The best way to say something is neat-o, awesome, or swell. The phrase *cool* is very relaxed, never goes out of style, and people will never laugh at you for using it; very convenient for people like me who don't care about what's “in.”

#### **Hip**

**My definition:** Same as *cool*.

**Merriam-Webster:** Having or showing awareness of or involvement in the newest developments or styles; very fashionable.

**Urban Dictionary:** Cooler than cool, the pinnacle of what is “it.” Beyond all trends and conventional coolness; the state of being in-the-know, including, but not limited to, being stylish or fashionable.

#### **Hipster**

**My definition:** Fashionable, young, independent-minded contrarian.

**Merriam-Webster:** A person who is unusually aware of and interested in new and unconventional patterns (as in jazz or fashion).

**Urban Dictionary:** People in their teens to twenties who generally listen to indie rock, hang out in coffee shops, shop at the thrift store, and talk about things like books, music, films, and art.

means nothing. In fact, in the language of hip, *cool* is probably way outdated as a descriptor of something fashionable, trendy, or hot (*hot* as in the way Paris Hilton uses it). But I don't want to get into a deconstructionist loop-de-loop here. The word *cool* indicates something that we can all—at this point in time—generally understand. So bear with me: *cool* and *hip*, whatever they may really mean, are the words I will be using (pretty much interchangeably) in this study.

And so, back to the topic at hand: defining *cool*. The word is often defined solely in terms of mere synonyms (trendy, fashionable, chic), which is unfortunate for a word that is infinitely more complex than people think. *Hip* is taken for granted in our culture—people presume its meaning with little deep thought as to why it exists. Why are certain things cooler or hipper than others? Who determines it? What is the appeal of it? What drives us to want to be the cool kid in class? These are questions we must ask if we seek to truly understand just where coolness comes from and why.

The following metaphors might help us in this pursuit of understanding the ontology of cool.

### *The Marathon Metaphor: Being Ahead of the Pack*

Why do people race? Why is running in a marathon such an ancient rite of passage? What makes man compete? These questions, when taken to their logical end, allude to something within the human soul that spurs us toward winning, or at least to being ahead of others on the journey of life. We possess an existential drive to be in front, or at least not in the tail end. As anyone who has ever walked through a dark haunted house with a group of friends can testify, bringing up the rear is the place you *do not* want to be.

And this instinct—to be one step ahead, with an advantage and not at the mercy of anyone—speaks to the existence of cool. Any time you have a culture where everyone tries to be a leader rather than a follower, or a “head” rather than a “tail,” you will naturally find that those who rise above and move ahead of the pack become the idolized. They are worshiped, esteemed, imitated. Everyone wants to be that, and thus the possessors of “that” become prized possessions themselves. People start to pay attention to these people: what they do, what they like, how they act, etc. In this process of esteeming the front-runners, however subliminally, a codification of cool begins to take shape.

### *The Divergent Path Metaphor: The Road Less Traveled*

Robert Frost wasn't just anticipating inspirational office landscapes, Hallmark shelf life, or *Dead Poets' Society* cheesiness when he wrote "The Road Not Taken." He recognized an existential truth: we are drawn toward the unexplored, the unfound, the unexpected. The key line for me in Frost's famous poem is not "I took the one less traveled by," but rather, the line that follows: "And that has made all the difference."<sup>4</sup> What is "the difference"? How appropriate that we don't know, because Frost didn't know either when he took that lonely path. All he knew was that "the difference," whatever it might be, excited him and spurred him on.

Humanity, under the strain of mortality and danger on all sides, seeks comfort but also risk. To survive is one thing, but to really *thrive* on earth requires trailblazing ventures that might be fearful but are ultimately desirable. We sense that a glorious inheritance, an imminent difference that will put us ahead in the struggle, is waiting just beyond the borders of where we are. And with everyone looking for it, we have to be creative and sometimes stealthy in our pursuits. We have to forge new paths and circumvent the highways. While hordes of people are stuck on the thoroughfares—too afraid or else mired in traffic to get free—there are those who veer off and take a different route. Though everyone in life is in motion and keenly aware of the percussive rhythm of time passing and mortality coming, a select group of people chooses to march to a different drummer, hoping that in so doing they might control a bit more of the tempo.

### *The Darwin Metaphor: Survival of the Hippest*

In any situation in which society is stratified (with cultural leaders, a conditioning elite), our instincts tell us that survival means playing by the rules of the ruling party. If we are not the marathon leaders in the cultural rat race, or the pavers of a less-traveled road, we can still hold some power if we simply pay close attention and follow the right people. We adhere to a rudimentary survival mechanism: if you can't beat 'em, join 'em.

As critical theorist Theodor Adorno writes in "The Schema of Mass Culture," we fear being outside of the cultural dialogue: "Today anyone who is incapable of talking in the prescribed fashion . . . of effortlessly reproducing the formulas, conventions and judgments of



mass culture as if they were his own, is threatened in his very existence, suspected of being an idiot or an intellectual.”<sup>5</sup>

We sense the power of the merchants of cool, and we overcome our impotence by identifying ourselves with the hot ticket items. When something like *Jersey Shore* seems all the rage, or when “Vote for Pedro” becomes a buzzword, we jump onboard. We feel powerful if we are a part of the winning cultural trend. How else do you explain our need to acquire extraordinarily unnecessary things like iPhones? They satiate nothing in our lives, but the drive to possess them is unbelievably strong. Why? Because trends—however short-lived—fuel a successful economy, and our cultural survival comes from keeping abreast of these things and not falling too far behind the fast-moving train.

Dave Hickey puts it nicely in his essay “Romancing the Looky-Loos,” when he describes the differences between cultural spectators (those on the outside looking in) and cultural participants (basically, hipsters):

Spectators invariably align themselves with authority. . . . They just love the winning side—the side with the chic building, the gaudy doctorates, and the star-studded cast. They seek out spectacles whose value is confirmed by the normative blessing of institutions and corporations. In these venues they derive sanctioned pleasure or virtue from an accredited source, and this makes them feel secure, more a part of things.

But this is where hipsters distinguish themselves from the pack, because they are not satisfied to just feel “secure” or “a part of things.” They want to find things for themselves, discover the new frontier, and uncover unknown wonders on no one else’s terms but their own. Hickey continues:

Participants, on the other hand . . . lose interest at the moment of accreditation, always assuming there is something better out there, something brighter and more desirable, something more in tune with their own agendas. . . . Thus, while spectators must be lured, participants just appear, looking for that new thing—the thing they always wanted to see—or the old thing that might be seen anew—and having seen it, they seek to invest that thing with new value. They do this simply by *showing up*.<sup>6</sup>

So while it is true that hipsters, like anyone else, feel the pressure of keeping up and playing by the established rules, they are also the first group to break the rules and move on to the next, marginally accepted thing—thereby pushing the whole imitative circus forward. The hipsters are the mavens; they are the early adopters who—once they show up and adopt a thing as their own and pronounce it fashionable—set the course for the rest of us. But don't be fooled. Even hipsters are subject to following a prescribed and accredited course. For them, it's the self-imposed regimen of constant stylistic evolution. And it's crucial for their survival.

*The Declaration of Independence Metaphor: Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Individuality*

The idea of “hip” really came of age in the United States of America (much more on this in the next chapter). A multitude of factors birthed this concept, not the least of which are America's founding principles of independence, autonomy, and inalienable rights.

The beauty of the American experiment was that it tapped into such a basic human drive for independence and freedom from an oppressive tyrant (socialists would disagree, but that's neither here nor there). But the spirit of independence that took hold in the early years of the United States stemmed from a desire for freedom not only from England or otherwise oppressive political forces, but also from the tyranny of imposed *ideas* or *worldviews*. As John Stuart Mill wrote in *On Liberty*, protection against a tyrant is not enough for liberty to succeed: “There needs protection also against the prevailing opinion and feeling; against the tendency of society to impose, by other means than civil penalties, its own ideas and practices . . . and compel all characters to fashion themselves upon the model of its own.”<sup>7</sup>

Mill is keen to recognize that people generally reject any sort of imposition—whether the force-fed, assembly-line fashion of the moment, the current trend in philosophy, or whatever the case may be. We much prefer the freedom of choice, however illusory, in matters of life, liberty, and happiness. And this idea—of rebelling against the prevailing opinions and practices solely for some semblance of existential autonomy and choice—is central to the understanding of the existence of hip.

Hipster historian John Leland addresses this in his book *Hip: The History*. He argues that the inherent desire of hip is not for wealth but for autonomy:

It is a common folk's grab at rich folks' freedom—the purest form of which is freedom from the demands of money. It is an equalizer, available to outsiders as to insiders. Anyone can be hip, even if *everyone* can't. In a nation that does not believe in delayed gratification, hip is an instant payoff.<sup>8</sup>

Indeed, for this and other reasons, Leland situates the concept of “hip” inextricably within the concept of America itself. We are a nation built on freedom and beholden to no one. He who risks the most gains the most, and so it goes also in the world of hip.

### *The “Class Clown” Metaphor: Affirmation through Attention*

I realize that not everyone is extroverted or strives to be the center of attention, but even the shyest person cannot survive without some sort of external affirmation. It's a basic human need. On Abraham Maslow's famous hierarchy of needs, just above meeting basic survival and safety needs is the need to belong, to be loved and accepted. And once we find acceptance, our next pursuit is usually to be affirmed, respected, and regarded in a way that builds our self-esteem.

To put it simply, humans act in large part for the acceptance of their peers. This fits perfectly in the context of cool, where the ultimate pursuit—in being different, standing out, or leading the pack—is to be noticed. Humans are an image-conscious creation. Once our basic needs are met, we become increasingly concerned not just with ourselves, but ourselves through the eyes of others. It's quite pitiful, really, but it's just who we are. And don't think that the übercool folks who seem so ambivalent toward the affirmation of the larger culture are any different. They just hide it better and make their style seem completely *ex nihilo* and personal. In truth, all cool is basically a perception of others—it can't exist as anything intrinsic or detached from public perception.



I hope these metaphors help us a bit in creating at least a moderately operational definition of *cool*. As we have seen, the ideas behind the term predate the word, as we know it, by a long shot. *Hip* probably originated—in waves—starting at the dawn of the Renaissance in Italy (more on this in chapter 2), though certainly the concept of “fashion” in civilized culture goes back indefinitely. But as a word, *cool* is perhaps more common now—indeed, ubiquitous—than ever.

So then, if I had to succinctly define *cool*, it might, again, be something like this:

Cool: An attractive attribute that embodies the existential strains to be independent, enviable, one-of-a-kind, and trailblazing.

For now, that will do. As mentioned earlier, the essence and existence of *cool*—while important and vastly complex—is not my primary focus in writing this book. It is enormously interesting to me that we are so attracted to and desirous of this thing called “cool” (and I will explore this in later chapters), but what is more vital and intriguing to me is how exactly the search and adoption of coolness affects our lives. Is our desire to be fashionable, hip, stylish, and ahead of our peers benign? Or, if not, how does it affect our personhood for good or ill?

The relative goodness or badness in the nature of *cool* is of utmost importance. I think we can all agree that, essentially, our society is one that is driven by style and trend. It is the currency of our culture, no doubt, but the question is whether we can survive in this market without compromising our core. Or, is compromise even necessary? Can we sustain integrity and substance in a world so driven by packaging? Must every work, every person, every message that seeks mass acceptance be formfitted to the hieroglyphics of hip?

And thus we come back to the question of Christianity and *cool*. Are the purposes and/or effects of *cool* compatible with those of Christianity? Such a question only raises many more.

If it is true that our culture today is most effectively reached through the channels of *cool*, does this mean Christianity’s message must be styled as such? What does this look like, and are any alternatives available? How does the Christian navigate in this climate of *cool*? How can followers of Christ be significant or relevant in this culture without reducing the faith to an easy-to-swallow, hip-friendly phenomenon? Is the church’s future helped or hindered by assimilation to cultural whims and fads? Do non-Christians find Christianity more relevant or less relevant when it looks pretty much the same as the secular culture?

We can probably all agree that the ultimate task of the church on earth is, as C. S. Lewis writes in *Mere Christianity*, “nothing else but to draw men into Christ.”<sup>9</sup> But the challenging question is this: to what extent are humans drawn to Christ by the way or style in which Christ is presented to them? And to what extent does our answer

to that question fuel our various allocated energies with respect to spreading the gospel? In other words, as the messengers of Christ, are we to let the message speak for itself or must we adapt and package it for a specific context?

It is certainly appropriate that packaging is at the forefront of the minds of many church leaders today. In a world so obviously obsessed with style as a gateway to substance, we are right in viewing this as an important issue.

But as with any issue, hasty actions and unstudied assumptions are a dangerous threat. Before we jump on the wagon and harness the horses of hip, we must be careful to examine the wagon itself. How has it traveled in the past? How has it lasted two millennia? Will it look any different if driven by hip?

I should make clear that there are really two distinct categories of hip in today's world: (1) the naturally hip and (2) the marketed hip. What I am speaking of above—about Christianity harnessing the horses of hip to help spread the message—is definitely the latter. If Christianity is *naturally* hip, well, that's a horse of a different color (and something this book will consider in later chapters).

And that *is* the question we must wrestle with: *Is Christianity cool in today's culture?* And I mean *naturally* cool. As in—are people attracted to and desirous of it on its own accord? Or must it be cool in the marketed, presentational sense? Or perhaps there is a third option—a much more insidious, countercultural idea: perhaps Christianity is hopelessly unhip, maybe even the anticool. What if it turns out that Christianity's endurance comes from the fact that it is, has been, and continues to be the antithesis and antidote to the intoxicating and exhausting drive in our human nature for cool (for independence, for survival, for leadership, for hipness)? I'm not saying this is the right answer; just that this book is about weighing the options.