



THE BEREIA PAGE

“Examining . . . to see if these things are so” ~ Acts 17.11

Is Jesus “Cool”?

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During the 2004 U. S. presidential campaign, I read a column in which the author presented a checklist of items he used to determine who was the “cooler” candidate. Since his list amounted to a series of snapshots of American culture in 2004, I found it notable that one of his criteria was, “It’s cool to love Jesus. It’s not cool to shove religion down the throat of a secular nation” (Scotti 2004).

New Testament Christians will want to push back against the second sentence. While Christ commissioned us to proclaim repentance for forgiveness of sins to every nation (Luke 24.47), we seek to *persuade* people about Jesus and his way (cf. Acts 17.4; 18.4; 19.8; 26.28), not “shove it down their throats.” Since so many equate evangelism with attempts to coerce, that’s an important distinction we should take every opportunity to stress, while also demonstrating the truth in our lives and proclamation.

For a different reason, we should also push back against the notion many have of Jesus’ “coolness.” Of course, the word “cool” has several meanings and nuances—the Merriam-Webster online dictionary lists seven primary meanings with twelve sub-meanings—one of which, “calmness and control,” comports well with Jesus’ character (think Mark 4.35–41). But the typical intent of the statement, “Jesus is cool” reflects the informal meaning that refers to what is “fashionable . . . or appealing in a way generally approved by young people”; notably, at the top of Merriam-Webster’s synonym lists are the words, “stylish, fashionable, happening,” and “chic.”

Use of that standard with reference to Jesus has seen several iterations. Within my lifetime, for example, I recall a time when many in our nation’s counterculture found aspects of Jesus’ life and teaching worth emulating but wanted nothing to do with his body, the church. I also remember when the fish symbol, first used by persecuted Christians to identify themselves to one another, was ubiquitous. Through the 1990s and 2000s, it was fashionable for news magazines, documentaries, and other media to purport to uncover “the real Jesus.” Bookstore chains featured shelves with an array of books (and views) on Jesus. It wasn’t hard to discern at least part of the reason for all the attention: Jesus was marketable and people were ready to buy. So we saw bracelets (WWJD), posters, and other items featuring Jesus’ name everywhere. Jesus became an icon, big news, a hot property.

But are these depictions truly representative of Jesus or a caricature? In all its efforts to capitalize on Jesus’ “coolness,” has society missed something important about his complete character? Have some in the church done the same?

Stop and think. Jesus began his public ministry with the word, “Repent” (Matt 4.17) and told a woman caught in adultery to stop committing her sin (the “cool Jesus” doesn’t really like the sin word) (John 8.11). He said we are not to give people who mistreat us what they deserve, but instead are to love our enemies and forgive those we would rather despise (Matt 5.38–48; Luke 6.27–38). He said the true measure of success is not privilege and power, but get-your-hands-dirty service (Matt 20.20–28). And when a crowd of adoring followers wanted to celebrate his celebrity and crown him king, he bluntly told them the real reason they were following him was because of what they hoped to get from him. That began a series of hard sayings that led many of his *disciples* to walk away (John 6.15, 26, 66).

Then there’s the time he castigated the scribes and Pharisees. “Their teaching’s right,” he said, “but don’t do what they do. They just want to be noticed and acclaimed” (Matt 23.1–12). “Well, that’s just what that bunch of hypocrites deserved!” we think. Yes, they were hypocrites—and Jesus said that, too. But, my, how he said it! “Woe to you, ... hypocrites!” was repeated in a blistering series of denunciations aimed at them. Over, and over, and over—seven times in all—like repeated punches to their spiritual solar plexuses (Matt 23.13, 15–16, 23, 25, 27, 29), he called them out in no uncertain terms. The word “woe” (ὀύαι, *ouai*) means disaster or horror and, as used by Jesus in Matthew 23, amounts to a wish for judgment on another. Deserved or not, and regardless of the hypocrisy level, most don’t think that’s “cool.” Is that really who Jesus was?

Well, yes, yes it is. But then again, no, it’s not. And that’s the point. To define Jesus solely by his denunciations of the hypocritical Pharisees is just as much a caricature as defining him solely by the traits that attract us and make us think he is ... “cool.”

That matters, for only if we begin to understand the varied aspects of Jesus’ nature, imperfect as our understanding will be, can we begin to fully trust him as our Lord.

Works Cited

Scotti, Ciro. 2004. “Who’s the Cool Guy This Year?” October 28. <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2004-10-28/whos-the-cool-guy-this-year>. Archived version retrieved May 1, 2026.
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