

What ‘Cool’ Churches Could Learn From Abercrombie & Fitch

If you’ve ever wandered into an Abercrombie & Fitch store, you know about coolness. The retailer markets its line of sweaters, hoodies and overpriced T-shirts using dim lighting, funky music and wall-sized photos of buff models wearing \$98 jeans. But the store began losing customers this year when it became known that CEO Mike Jeffries only wanted thin, popular teens to wear his clothes.

“A lot of people don’t belong [in our clothes],” Jeffries said in an interview, adding that he only wanted “cool, good-looking people” wearing the A&F label. His policy has now officially backfired. Upset parents threw out tons of the retailer’s clothes, activist teens staged a boycott, and a guy from California launched a video campaign urging people to give the uber-cool A&F duds to homeless people in protest.

All this proved that sometimes being cool is, in fact, not cool—especially when cool becomes exclusionary.

When I read about the demise of Abercrombie & Fitch, I couldn’t help but compare the store with some churches I know. I’ve never heard a pastor say from the pulpit that he “only wanted the cool people,” but sometimes we send this message subliminally. In today’s market-driven church culture, cool is the goal. We pursue it in several ways:

Cool music. I love high-energy worship as much as anyone, and I try to keep my playlists updated. But I hope we aren’t using trendiness as the gauge to measure the depth of our worship. Cool music can sometimes turn out to be a shallow performance. Sometimes it might be best to dig out a 30-year-old chorus or a 200-year-old hymn just to remind ourselves that our

generation isn't the center of the universe. And speaking of age: It might not look cool to include older people in the worship team, but I have a feeling God would prefer to affirm every age group.

Cool technology. I knew a young man who attended a popular worship school for six months. When he came back to his home church, he complained that leaders "didn't know how to do church" because they didn't follow the latest rules about PowerPoint, lighting and Internet broadcasting. He was bitten by the cool bug—which can sometimes turn people into jerks. I have no problem with technology, but I fear we are using it as a substitute for the anointing of the Spirit. If God shows up in one of our services and everyone hits the floor, I doubt we will care too much about what we had planned to project on our 72-foot-wide screens.

Cool people. I used to be part of a ministry that targeted university students with the gospel. It was a great strategy, but it had its downside. Since we were trying to reach young people, the old people were not cool. This also applied to blue-collar types, single moms and homeless folks who occasionally wandered into meetings. It got so bad that one woman was asked to get off the worship team because she was overweight. Yet Jesus didn't judge people based on body type, ethnicity or age. He reached out to widows, dying children, blind beggars, soldiers, lepers and even demoniacs. And sometimes the really cool people—like the rich young ruler—walked away from Him.

Cool crowds. We often define coolness in our culture by the size of the audience. We get an adrenaline rush when we jump on the bandwagon with everyone else. Crowds can be great (it would have been cool to be an eyewitness at the feeding of the 5,000), yet many people in the Bible defined courage by standing alone in defiance of the crowd. I have spoken to large and small audiences and everything in between, and I've learned that the Holy Spirit is just as willing to move among

a group of 25 as He is in the biggest church in town.

Cool theology. This is where we really need to be careful. Today it's cool to preach safe, seeker-sensitive messages about love and grace just to get people in the door of the church. To avoid offending anyone, we stay away from certain topics that our culture has deemed off-limits. It's definitely not cool today to preach about (1) the consequences of sin and the need for repentance, (2) why sexual sin is still unhealthy or (3) the fact that Jesus Christ is the only way to salvation.

Abercrombie & Fitch made a huge marketing mistake by pursuing coolness. If we use a similar strategy to grow churches, it will backfire. Jesus never said, "Follow Me, and everyone will think you are cool." Rather He told us, "If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you" (John 15:20, NASB). We are called to make faithful disciples—and that will never be cool in the eyes of the world. At some point, we have to leave the adolescent realm of cool to reach spiritual maturity.

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